

GRAVITAS




**RECORDED BY
EMILY JEAN-BAPTISTE**

Gravitas

recorded by Emily Jean-Baptiste

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Prologue

On December 19th, 1999, the first black hole appears in in a Long Island suburb: not the typical place black holes are known to form. Unlike the black holes in outer space, this black hole is smaller, and weaker. It only eats chunks of the sidewalk it lands on. And it carried with it a bright orange briefcase.

The black hole and the briefcase are discovered by a the dog of a young woman with pale blue eyes named Emily Baptiste. Quickly and very secretly she is swept away by the FBI, to D.C., where she is questioned incessantly for a period of three days before another black hole appears, this one in San Fransisco, and the FBI gets busy with a different, old-man witness, and so Emily is released. The newspapers report the black hole as THE UNKNOWN PHENOMENA WHICH HAD ROCKED A SMALL LONG ISLAND TOWN: POSSIBLE ATTACK FROM CHINA? Nuclear war is deterred as a black hole appears in Shanghai, and a couple in rural Russia, the Pacific, the Balkans, South Africa and Nigeria. Harmless unless you get close, difficult to remove, disappearing on their volition, moody, irascible: the black holes are a lot like teenagers. Soon the girl's experience is overshadowed. The briefcase is confiscated, and she does not know where it is. All she knows is what she told them: it was empty when she found it.

The girl is a liar.

Chapter 1: 12 Rules for Robbing Gas Stations

I want you to trust me. Trust me when I tell you the time you spend on this godforsaken lump of dirt amounts to fuckall once you bother to get your head out of your ass and look at things objectively. Objectively: you won't pull the trigger first. You won't go to heaven. You won't be remembered fondly. Your life is average and your car is ugly. Why? Because you're a coward. I hope you remember that: you're a coward. Your rotting corpse will be briefly mourned, then quickly swallowed by what nothing that makes up everything, bitch.

I was seventeen, I was robbing a gas station, and I was having a bad night.

"Shit!" I kicked the ATM cover, and pried at the slot. "You really don't have the keys?"

"No, sir." The teller sipped a red bull. "It might be better if you used both hands."

I stuck the vape between my teeth. "Why d'you guyth gotta make thith thit tho tighd?"

"Why did — I make the ATM tight?"

The aerosol was fogging up the ATM screen. I sucked in a breath: "Hold on. I got thith." I put my hands to the cover of the ATM and formed a black hole. It dissolved the cover of the ATM and then also the rest of the ATM. The gravity tugged the Juul from my mouth and I got rid of the black hole real quick but it was too late. "Fuck!"

"Was that a black hole?" He leaned over the ATM innards. "I think you dissolved the money, man. Aw, shit. Owner's gonna be so pissed at me."

"You've got insurance."

"No, we don't."

"All banks got insurance."

The teller stared at me, incredulous. "This is a gas station. We don't get FDIC."

"Shit. Really? How much do you think that thing cost?"

"I dunno. Couple thousand. Plus inside it had, like — 15k, at least."

"But the money inside would be insured."

The teller shook his head.

"Fuck." I tugged at my balaclava. It was my mom's and all embroidered with flowers and shit. The Forever 21 tag itched my neck. "Okay. Okay, one sec." I pulled out my wallet. "This should cover some of it. A thousand?"

"A thousand dollars?" He stared at the money. "Why the fuck are you robbing a gas station?"

"It's yours. Use it on the ATM."

"Sweet." The teller pocketed the cash. "Did you want me to get you cash from the register?"

"Nah — whole thing's ruined. What's that noise?"

"Oh, yeah. Sorry. I called the police on you, when you first came in with that gun. But I appreciate the cash, for sure."

"Shit." Shit. "Goddamnit." I scrambled to my feet, looked around for several moments. Saw the inside of a gas station: not helpful! I ran up to the automatic glass doors, paused as they opened, tore out into the parking lot. The pavement lit red and blue. I sprinted to a neighboring McDonald's drive through and then crouched and ran as quiet as possible. I

pressed my back to the wall beneath the server's window, watched the street. A police car pulled into the gas station parking lot.

"Uh," said a girl. I looked up. "Do you want something?"

I was kind of hungry. "You guys still doing breakfast?"

The police car, silent, pulled up to the drive-through. And then started up its lights again. Shit.

She looked up, at the stars, and then down at me. "It's ten p.m. So—"

I took off. I barreled through a line of low hedges, jumped the fence into a residential area, and landed on the hood of another cop car.

I screamed and rolled off onto the pavement. The car door swung open. I stumbled up and ran in the other direction as the guy got out.

"Stop running!"

You can probably intuit that I was really not enjoying myself at this moment. Actually I was thinking "God I could use an Egg McMuffin right now" but unfortunately God did not deliver, so all I got were three gunshots aimed at my head. I ducked and cursed and almost tripped over a fallen wire fence.

"Stop running, and raise your hands!"

At the end of the block another police car pulled in to block the street. Its driver was eating a burger. I turned back with my hands raised and a black hole formed on the cop car closest to me. That surprised them: because people couldn't make black holes they'd assume it was like every other black hole — freak accident, bad timing. The two cops in the still-intact car got out and ran away from the black hole just their car started to roll forward. The cop who'd been shooting at me lost his footing on the pavement and his hands wheeled around for a second and then he fell back into the point of infinite gravity. I felt a little bit bad for him. Not too bad. He did just try to kill me.

"Need Grav unit reinforcements," shouted the woman, into her radio. "T3."

The other cop — leaving the black hole a wide berth — was walking towards me, gun raised. "Hands in the air!"

I lifted my hands. The black hole slumped on the open road, skittering up sidewalk pebbles and warping a five-foot scoop of pavement into a dark pool. Most darkness was an absence. Black holes were a presence. It pulled on my knees, wanting, desperate to eat. The city was quiet except for the sirens and people and stuff.

"Walk towards me, slowly!"

Let me ask you this, dearest reader. To put things in perspective. How would you have reacted, with a gun pointing at that delicate bone ridge between your eyes, on a street that smelled like McDonalds and trash, faced with 50-something years in jail at the sweet, innocent age of 17? Would you have been an upstanding citizen? Would you have surrendered?

I took a took a step forward.

And then another.

Faster than the cops could lurch to stop it, the black hole ate me. And Thank God for that: I needed to get out of the city. I didn't want to be late for school.

Chapter 2: Girl, Wash Your Face

I'm one of only two people on Earth who can survive a black hole. It's because there's something wrong with me.

I materialize on a tile floor and roll over myself a couple times before I hit a wall. Then roll onto my back, blink back the shock, try to catch my breath. I'm in the break room. AKA, I'm in the black hole, on my way to wherever I want to go. The break room is the inside of the black holes. It's where all of the black holes go before they drop you wherever you're actually trying to end up. At one end is a modest kitchenette, and at the other a spread of plastic tables and chairs. On the fourth wall there is a locked door with a plate of obscured, mirrored glass in its center, which reflects the room's contents, but blurred. Above that is an exit sign in Chinese. The most distinctive feature of the break room is that — unlike reality — it's in the present tense.

I run a hand down my face and the palm comes away wet. I stumble to my feet to take inventory. Part of the cop car's front seat has been dragged along with me, and is spread on the tile like a felled gray faux-leather dove. To my right is the top end of the stick shift and some splintered plastic from the dashboard. I raise my hand and a second black hole forms within the break room and eats the latent car parts plus a little bit of the tile floor. (I may be a car thief, but I'm not a fucking litterer.) I take the gun out of my belt and leave it in the vegetable drawer of the refrigerator, which is where I always keep it. My heart is beating out of my chest. I unzip my sweatshirt pocket and into my hands drops my wallet, a crumpled receipt from King Kullen, and an OMRON portable blood pressure monitor. The wallet is now empty. If you haven't picked up on it yet I'm kind of a shitty bank robber. In the words of my school counselor, "you need to apply yourself, Valentine."

I strap on the monitor, which resembles a chunky digital watch and takes a moment to get a reading. 130 bpm. Okay. Jesus Christ and thank God and etcetera. Reassured by the knowledge that my heart is still beating, I form another black hole on the tile, hands shoved in my pockets pettishly. Then pretty quick I take my hands out of my pockets: it's hard to drop back into reality when you're being pettish.

When I snuck in through the back door my parents were still asleep. I made a cup of coffee with a paper towel because we were out of filters and they slept through that too. It was six-thirty in the morning and the sky was an advertisement for light pollution. I drank the coffee in my Yugo with all the windows rolled down (because the seats smelled like Wendy's) and felt the breeze like cold hands on my neck and stared at the burning horizon.

My parents didn't know about my superpowers. Not the forming of the black holes, not the instant teleportation via black holes, and definitely not the robbery. Maybe I owed it to my mom to tell her. But I had never done what was owed of me anyway. I was scared that if I told her I had black hole superpowers she'd call the cops and I'd be hauled away for some perverted gut-exposing government experiment. So I was going into debt in my truth-telling account, for the purposes of my own survival.

I kicked a spot in the car's driver's side footwell and the cheap plastic flipped down, dropping a black drawstring bag I'd gotten complimentary from some military recruiters onto the dirty floor mat. I didn't need to take the money out to count it. I knew the number by heart: twenty-two thousand, one hundred and eighty-five dollars. One-point-two

years of tuition at the University of Victoria. Plus nothing from tonight except the giant bruise on my back from where I fell on the cop car. And minus twenty dollars.

I finished the coffee and sighed and covered my face with my hands. First period started in fifteen minutes and I had slept two hours last night and I hadn't done the homework because I had a late shift yesterday. My grades were okay but if I missed two more classes I was going to DCA and then go in front of the principle and explain why I still deserved to graduate. Let me tell you a secret: there are two ways to guarantee that a person never ends up where they're supposed to be. The first is to keep them locked up.

The second is to let them go wherever they want.

Chapter 3: The Four Blood Pact Agreements

“You sure you don’t want a drink?”

“I’m good.”

“Why? Going sober?” Kyle laughed.

“Dude. I’m donating blood.” I did that every month on the 17th, after school. The IV snaked from the crook of my elbow to an opaque plastic bag.

He tweaked the IV. “How long does this thing take, again?”

“We’re also, like, in a police station. I don’t think you’re supposed to drink beer in a police station.” He raised his eyebrows. “Another minute.”

“Cool.” Kyle leaned back in his chair. The beer was in a paper bag from Scotto’s pizza, and he was drinking it with a clear straw. The amber pull through the straw lined up with the IV so that it kind of looked like he was drinking my blood. I tilted my head and the image disappeared.

The room was full. There were a lot of little kids, being tugged around by parents and older siblings who were donating. I always got a kick out of watching kids do their shit. Like trip over themselves, cause they didn’t know how to use their body right just yet. Black holes were just barely behind accidents in their leading cause of death — that was a fact, listed on the CDC and everything, and also known by me firsthand, over and over and over again.

“What do you think about this?” Kyle showed me his phone screen. It was an Amazon page for a bulletproof vest with “anti-gravity technology.” If a black hole was shooting at you, you’d be covered. “Sick or what?”

“Totally sick.”

“I know, right?” He stared at the page. Kyle was kind of a fucking idiot. He was only twenty-two but he was already balding. We had overlapping shifts at the town’s Shell gas station. “Totally fucking tactical. Wish they had this shit when I was in college. Girls love military shit.” Also, he was currently my best friend. “I fucking miss those days, dude.”

“I don’t think I’m gonna miss school.”

“College girls. It’s okay, though. I got big plans.”

“You have big plans?” First I was hearing of that.

“I’ve been saving up. Gonna buy a 120 inch. Size of my fucking wall, dude. Valorant is gonna be so fucking sick. Like, immersive.”

Kyle already had an 84 inch tv. “Those are your big plans?”

“You can never shoot too high. Take it from an elder.” He tucked his phone back in his pocket. “How long do you gotta hang around this dump?”

One of the passing nurses gave him a nasty stare. Chief Miller was a few beds down. “Dude, can you keep it down? The police chief is literally right there.”

“Why do you do this every weekend, anyway? You don’t know what they’re doing with that shit. They could be harvesting your DNA. A year from now you’ll be walking around and see someone who looks totally just like you — and you’ll be like, oh my God, holy shit. That’s my fuckin’ clone. Built with all of my blood.”

“I really don’t think you should be drinking in here, dude.”

“Oh, yeah. I got your vape.” He dug around in his ratty backpack for a moment, then handed it to me along with twenty dollars as one of the nurses came and clipped off the

blood bag. Lint balls and little bits of paper clung to the money. I wiped it on the bedspread, then tucked it into my pocket. “Plus your change.”

“Thanks, man.” I hopped out of the cot and stuck the JUUL between my teeth. As I hiked up my sweatpants my phone fell onto the tile floor.

“Take that out of here,” said the nurse to me, as Kyle reached for my phone. I lunged and snatched it up before he could grab it.

“We’re leaving.” I tucked the phone into my sweatshirt pocket. “Have a good one.”

Kyle followed me. “You still going to therapy, dude?”

“No.”

“Oh. I thought — cause your mom was killed by the black holes, and stuff.”

My mom had been killed by the black holes when I was two years old. “I’m not going to therapy.”

“I thought you were. That lady, the therapist — Baptiste. You were always talking shit about her.”

“Yeah, I was going. My parents made me. But she moved to New Jersey. Why do you care so much?”

“No reason. I was just wondering, cause — like, you haven’t been coming to D&D night. And, like. The homies were wondering.”

I wrinkled my face at him as we turned the corner. “I’ve been busy.”

“I was just asking.”

I stopped short. Kyle kept walking, but then stopped, and turned back to me.

“Oh, motherfucker.”

“What?” He followed my eyes. “There’s nothing there.”

“My car was there — I gave you a ride, dipshit.”

“Ohhh. Yo, no way, dude. Did somebody steal it? That’s fucked up.”

I patted down my pockets. “Shit.” I rubbed my forehead. “I must’ve — forgotten to take the keys.”

“That’s majorly fucked up. I’m sorry.”

“It was a fucking Yugo. Who the fuck steals a Yugo?”

Kyle shrugged. “Vintage is popping off right now.”

“Fuck!” I kicked the parking meter. It dinged. “A year of fucking tuition! Motherfucker.”

“Well — I don’t know. A year? I think you might be slightly overestimating the value of your Yugo.”

“Shit.” I turned back to the station. “I gotta go make a report.”

“Do you have the vehicle registration?”

“It was in the car, Liam.”

“Officer Liam. Plate number?”

“EOD-578.”

“And your name and address?”

“Teagan Valentine. 22 State Street, Hampton Bays, New York.”

“Make and model?”

“Zasatava, Yugo GV.”

“Any distinguishing characteristics? Anti-theft devices? Valuables inside of the vehicle?”

I hesitated. “No valuables. It was blue.”

“Alright, you’re all set. I’ll file this. We’ll let you know if we find it.”

“Good,” I said. “Because it was stolen from literally your parking lot. The police station parking lot. So, you know, I hope you guys can find it.”

The bell at the front door chimed. “Tea!”

I turned, and smiled. “Evie.”

Evie’s hair was yellow; not blonde-yellow, but yellow-yellow, wispy from over-dying and pulled back with a neon green hair tie. She was in a white crop-top even though it was like barely sixty degrees. She wrapped her arms around my stomach and squeezed. “Hey, Liam.”

Liam’s pen tapped the counter. “How was your day?”

“Great. I aced my French test.” Evie kissed my cheek.

Liam and Evie were the son and daughter of James Miller, Suffolk Country’s police chief. I draped my arm over Evie’s shoulder. “Thanks for the ride, babe.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Are you trying to pick me up? At a police station?”

“No. I’m trying to get you to pick me up at a police station.” I caught her chin, and smiled, leaning in to kiss her. She laughed. “Your lipstick tastes like shit.”

“Remember we have family dinner tonight, Evie,” said Liam, bitterly. “Mom is driving out. No plus-ones.”

She rolled her eyes, and tugged me to the door. “Yeah, I remember. See you tonight.” The door slammed behind us.

“I can’t believe I’m not invited to your family dinner.” I buried my face in her neck as we walked in-step to her car. “I’m so hurt — I might cry. It’s devastating blow.”

“Shut up.” She opened the door. “You know he hates you.”

“But you love me.”

“Unfortunately. Get in, dumbass — I’ve gotta get home so I can finish my AP Chem homework.”

“Or,” I said. “We could go to the beach and make out.”

“You drive a hard bargain.” She leaned across the dashboard, and kissed me. “Which beach?”

Chapter 4: The Subtle Art of Giving So Many F*cks

American Joy was 17, 5 foot 4, and .5 percentage points BAC over the legal limit when she stole her father's yellow '87 Ford F150 at 10:33 in the evening and took one left from their driveway onto the Long Island Expressway. The speedometer was broken, and would read a constant 30 mph whether you were going 15 or 105. She sped past the exit signs at 30 mph. The car complained with a bashful squirming of its black underbelly. Every time she nudged the gas the car's slavering increased. *Oh, please, American Joy, don't push me there*, the pedal whinged, and American Joy ignored it and instead watched the broken speedometer's needle hover self-assuredly over 30 mph as she crept into the upper 90s. It seemed to her that the wheels were made up of many tiny rubber legs scrabbling to propel her and the rusting truck frame past the KFC and Starbucks and DoubleTree Hotel. It seemed to her that the truck and her body had melded into one, that the balding faux-leather seat whispered to her, *I'm sorry*, that the peeling bumper sticker for Long Island Automotive Repair prostrated before her, flickering delicate bows in the wind, *I'm sorry, I'm sorry*. Conversely, the bottle of Smirnoff in the passenger seat shouted with each bump in the road that it loved her. It was germane for American Joy to personify these things because she felt that her own self needed personification — that is to say, she thought of herself as an object, and thus personify-able. The only thing you cannot personify is a human being.

American Joy took exit 71 off of I-495 into Calverton. The roads were empty. A sign on the side of the road titled ATTRACTIONS advertised the Long Island Aquarium and a laundry-cleaning service. Two identical green signs with grape symbols followed, each pointing in opposite directions: the grapes were ubiquitous. As she passed them, the signs lit reflectively in quick succession, and left American with a headache. The siren and red and blue flashing didn't help. So it was understandable that she missed the next sign, which read "STOP," and instead went barreling across the grass divider and landed inside the event horizon of a cow-sized black hole.

Officer Liam rolled to a stop at the white line and bitterly watched the yellow '87 Ford F150 be consumed. Then he pulled out his radio and called for Gravity Unit back-ups. That's the call I got. Woah, that's right — sudden switch back to first person. You're not getting rid of me that easy, bitches.

It surprised me to hear Liam's voice on the Gravity Unit airwaves. I knew immediately that I was gonna have to take this one. I couldn't let that dude bumble around and get eaten, or something: he was my girlfriend's brother, even if he hated me. I looked up his position on google maps and made a black hole at my feet.

I landed on a small side road leading into the Pine Barrens preserve. Liam's lights bathed the dark road a bright red-blue-red. It was annoying, because otherwise the road didn't have any street lamps. But with his lights going if I got out and made a run at the thing he would definitely see me. I couldn't count on Liam not recognizing me. Another cop, maybe, but not Liam.

Liam climbed out of his car, radio in his palm up by his mouth, all vague silhouette. I leaned against a tree and thought about what to do. If I didn't take this thing out, then the cops weren't going to take it out, and the whole interstate would probably get closed. Which would suck if I wanted to drive someplace.

How the police got rid of black holes was something called matter-aggregation. They detected the black hole with gravity scanners and then drove over to where it was and

shot at it with matter-aggregate guns. The gravity scanners could detect a current black hole, but also an area where a black hole had recently been, or was about to form — that was called “residuals”. The matter-aggregate guns (“matteraggs” colloquially) had been developed by a Chinese lab, and used synth-diamond bullets. The whole operation was complicated and expensive and barely worked. Sometimes a black hole would disappear, sure, but rarely because of whatever bullshit the cops pulled. They always had their budgets filled out of the ass, though, so I guess they could afford to fuck around a bit. And it was good for getting rid of landfills and stuff — transferring trash and dumping it in. The cops complained a lot about how difficult and casualty-heavy it was to stop the black holes, but that was bullshit, because all I had to do to get rid of a black hole was run at it. Here I was, out in the cold at nearly midnight, doing their fucking job for them. Pro-bono. I think that really said something about who was the superior organization here.

While I was thinking about how much better than the cops I was at everything another car pulled up to the black hole. Liam jogged out in front of it, waving it off, and it stopped. A woman stepped out, short hair tugged sideways. Apparently unafraid. For a moment I watched her and Liam talk. Then I straightened: I at least knew an opportunity when it came down my highway. As I reached the event horizon and the lights flipped red I saw her face and I had to do a double take because I was pretty sure I knew who that was. But before I could get a better look the black hole ate me.

I land on one of the break room’s plastic tables.

“Ow,” I say, and when I sit up it kind of tips over and drops me onto the tile floor. “Fuck.”

“Hey,” says Haoyu, without looking up.

“Hey, dude.” I rub my head. Inside of the open refrigerator is a cling-wrapped sandwich labeled “Rex’s” in red sharpie, a few half-eaten cartons of Chinese takeaway, 57 cherry flavor Kool-aid Jammers, and — currently — the head of Haoyu. He’s crouched beside it, waving cool air down the front of his white and purple school uniform. Haoyu is pale, but the stripe of skin that runs from between his ears and over his nose bridge is burnt pink, as if he has spent massive amounts of time being selectively basted. He has dark hair neatly brushed into straight bangs and a long face. He is the only other person in the entire world who has my superpowers. We both land in the break room when we use black holes, so we run into each other pretty often.

I push myself to my feet. “Close the refrigerator, bitch. You’re wasting electricity.”

He opens the door wider. “Freako.”

I’d eaten the black hole Chinese food once, then uneaten it into a toilet bowl the same evening. It was on a bet. We spent months wondering how it tasted, if it was expired, etc. Haoyu offered to play rock-paper-scissors for who (metaphorically) bit the bullet (or, literally, bit the takeaway from two decades ago). Privately, bent over the toilet bowl and wiping egg roll from my chin, I suspected that Haoyu had cheated at the rock-paper-scissors match.

I rest my hand on the top of the fridge. My fingers rap the painted aluminum.

“Where’re you headed?”

“Shanghai.”

“Hot out?”

“I was working out.” His voice is tinny. Haoyu always rolls up the sleeves of his school uniform so that when he picks up stuff, even small things like dropped Chinese food cartons — which, I mean, come on, that’s a very light object, I think a baby could lift something like that — he can flex all the definition in his biceps to everybody in the room. Which is just me, by the way. Nobody else ever comes here.

He leans out of the fridge. “It’s the last workout I’ll be able to do for a while, actually. I’m taking the SATs next month, so I’m going to be studying pretty much all day, every day.” Haoyu goes to school in Shanghai. He gave me his address a few years back, but he doesn’t like me coming over. “I’m the most nervous for my English test. I know I’m still nowhere near as eloquent as a native speaker such as yourself.” He glances up at my tapping fingers. “Can you stop that, please?”

My hand flattens. Jesus. “If you ever need a tutor I’d be happy to help. I’m great at English.”

That gets him really mad. He sticks his head back into the refrigerator, giving me the silent treatment.

“It’s okay. I’d only charge fifty per session.” He ignores me. “There’s a half-off discount if you buy in bulk.”

He still doesn’t reply. I admonish myself in my head for needling him. He was already in a bad mood because the last time I saw him I told him COD was dumb, and that’s his favorite video game. I was only making it worse. Haoyu hates it when I pretend to be smarter than him. He has a superiority complex or something so he can’t stand me ever being better than him: he sees me as beneath him, both mentally and physically. But I’m okay with that, because I see him as an asshole, so I figure we’re even. And he’s sort of right. The only things I have going on Haoyu are that I’m a little bit better at making black holes, and also the fact that his government knows about his powers, while mine still has no idea about me.

The Chinese government and Haoyu are at a complicated and very public standoff: they can’t keep him locked up, because he’ll just teleport away, and never come back. But he can’t run away, because his family lives in China, and he wants to help his country, anyway. So he stays on purpose, and helps them make gravity technology of his own free will, and they pay for his school and stuff. Sometimes he’s in the news. On the news they don’t call him Haoyu, though. They call him H5 and don’t show pictures of his face.

The whole situation actually kind of sucks for him. For most people, the fear that CIA/CCP agents are gonna strap you to a metal table and cut you open for their nefarious experiments is a sign of being an aluminum-hat-wearing moron. For Haoyu and me it’s common sense. I can’t imagine the terror I’d feel if the US government actually knew about me. Maybe that’s the reason he always needs to be so good at everything: he doesn’t want to slip up and give the CCP a reason to cut open his stomach.

At this point my in-depth psychoanalysis of Haoyu has me feeling pretty good about my psychoanalysis capabilities and pretty bad about Haoyu. I start to regret being mean to him. He is kind of an asshole, but how can I blame anyone for being an asshole when the world is full of butts? I decide to offer him an olive branch.

I root around in my sweatshirt pocket for a minute, and return with a bounty of half hard candy, half empty wrappers. “Want a jolly rancher?”

He doesn’t come out of the refrigerator.

“It’s green apple flavor.” I wave it by the door so as to entice him with its scent. “Your favorite.”

“I really shouldn’t be eating sweets,” he says, but pokes his head back out anyway. After a moment of hesitation he takes it, gingerly. “Thanks.”

“No problem.” I pop a watermelon and bite down, then swallow. Haoyu sucks on the jolly rancher balefully, staring with wide, mournful eyes at the staff bulletin board like he wishes he found anyone but me in here those twelve years back.

Haoyu Kuang’s father was an astrophysicist funded by the CCP. Twelve years ago, on April 13th, 2004, he was killed by a black hole. The significant part of that was that he was holding Haoyu when the black hole appeared in his lab: obviously, Haoyu came out of it completely unscathed. The CCP had immediately recognized Haoyu’s scientific significance and sequestered him from the public eye. This is similar to how I found out I was immune except the black hole killed both my mother and sister and I lied and said I wasn’t in the car at the time, and the government didn’t take me, because people’s relatives being killed by black holes happened all the time by then (2011). Nobody knows how the black holes started. Nobody knows how many people might be immune, like Haoyu, because nobody is exactly eager to test it out by jumping into black holes. Nobody even knows about the break room other than me and Haoyu. Haoyu and I are the only ones out of 7 fucking billion unlucky enough to have to think about this place, and our relationship to it, and what all of that means for humanity. When I first found Haoyu in the break room he thought I was God. I thought he was a home intruder.

“Where are you going?” Haoyu asks, through the jolly rancher.

“Just back to Long Island. Don’t feel up to robbing shit.”

“Have fun on Long Island,” he says, sarcastically.

When I landed on the plastic table I’d knocked off some black hole-furnished newspapers and a couple of books. I stack them back on the table: a torn-apart newspaper from 1999, a coffee table book on Jiang Tie Feng, and *Work Smart*. *Work Smart* has a grinning man in a 80’s suit on the cover who I avoid making eye contact with. It’s the kind of book advertised by CEOs and buzzfeed lists. I never read it because I despise on principle both listicles and self-help. I read the Jiang Tie Feng book a couple years ago because it was mostly pictures and Haoyu read the newspaper when his English got good enough but was so disgusted by the stories that he ripped it up.

“Good luck on your PISSATS.”

“Just regular SATs.”

“You know I’m not good at math shit.” By then I’m being pulled away by gravity. “I’ll see you around.”

Just as he raises a hand to wave back I shot out onto a cracked stretch of concrete.

I rolled violently and smacked into a low curb, which shocked a low, pained noise from me. Fuck. I scabbled at the tar and looked up at the dark sky. I wasn’t holding the books. *Get ahold of yourself, Valentine. Self-made millionaires aren’t real. They can’t hurt you.*

I groaned and rolled onto my stomach, then pushed myself to my feet. My hands brushed dirt and sand from my pants automatically as I stumbled away from where the black hole had been. I leaned against a tree and looked back at the street for that woman without thinking about it. Then I started thinking about it very loudly and all at once because there was a person standing next to me.

She clamped her hand over my mouth. “Will you shut up? For God’s sake.”

The woman's patronizing tone was familiar to me. She shifted, slightly, so that a shaft of red siren-light streamed diagonally over the side of her face, filtered into a crosshatch through the trees, pooling in the tear duct over her cheekbone and lighting up one pale blue eye a maudlin fuchsia. The woman who'd distracted Liam: Baptiste, my ex-therapist.

My grip on her arm loosened. She seemed nonplussed. "If you're not going to scream, I can let you go."

I bit down on her palm as hard as I could.

She yelped and jerked away, cursing at me under her breath. The dab of blood that dripped down her wrist flashed alternately purple and scarlet. "What the fuck was that for?"

I wiped blood from my mouth. "Why are you here? I thought you moved to New Jersey."

"I've got a proposition for you." She wiped the blood on her shirt. "I'll drive you home. I can tell you the proposition on the way."

"I'm not driving home with you, dude."

"How else are you gonna get home?" I hesitated. "Unless you'd like Officer Miller over there to find out about your black hole powers — run back through his dashboard cam for today and see you diving into that black hole. You're shit at keeping it a secret, by the way. It's a miracle I was the first to figure it out."

"Shut the fuck up. Seriously."

"Don't worry, I'm not going to tell anybody. You've just gotta let me give you a ride home. I'm doing you a favor, if you think about it." She smiled. "Or you could kill me."

"How did you find out?"

"I'll tell you in the car."

"Fine." Fucking goddamnit. "Let's go."

Baptiste's car was almost as shitty as mine.

"You've done really badly for yourself since quitting the therapy business." I kicked at the footwell, then winced. I was nursing all-new patterns of discolored, yellow-purple splotches. The floor of the car was covered in loose tissues and empty fast food wrappers. In her backseat was a well-read copy of *Work Smart*, which I'd picked up and examined with a certain bewildered reverence, then decided to keep in my lap. In her footwell was a bright orange suitcase. "What's in the suitcase?"

She took a sharp right. The alternative roads to the I-495 were twisty, and Baptiste kept throwing me against the door as she cranked us around — apparently, she navigated a sedan with as little tact as any other topic. I'd turned the radio on when I got in but then she'd turned it off. So the car was silent.

"Nothing." She pulled a to-go mug from the cupholder between us and took a sip of whatever was inside. Her eyes were wide. "Doesn't matter."

"So, what — are you still doing therapy? Like, somewhere with less strict guidelines for who can be a doctor or something?"

"No."

"Right. Great." I stared at the window so I wouldn't have to look at her. The trees were gnarled, and felled, forest cross-hatch. We jolted over a branch, and my forehead smacked the window. "Ow. Christ. You know, this drive is just so nice. Super peaceful."

"I'm not going to tell the government about you, Teagan."

“I was kidding about the drive. This sucks. What were you even doing out here? Taking a midnight drive into Calverton? That’s insane.” I reached up and turned on the radio again. Pop music blared. “Also I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“How’s your mom?”

“What?”

“Your mother.”

That was completely fucking irrelevant. “Dead.”

“I meant Marie.”

“Alive. Why do you care?”

“And the University of Victoria? Have you sent in your application?”

I sunk down into the seat. “Yeah,” I lied. I wasn’t sure why I lied. The application was still open on my laptop, completed. I just hadn’t clicked send. It scared me.

“That’s early. Good.” She caught my eye in the car’s mirror and smiled or something. It was kind of hard to make out. It was dark, and the mirror was very dirty. “I’m sure you’ll be accepted soon. Send me a postcard when you get there.”

That made me a little warm. Not a lot, but a little. I was very easily flattered.

“Sure.”

“I know you’ve been saving money up for it. Your father can’t afford your tuition?”

The good feelings were instantly gone. “Is that a joke?”

“No.” Baptiste turned the radio volume down a little. “Any plans in the meanwhile?”

“In the meanwhile to what?”

She jerked her chin in my direction and then the wheel around a sharp turn. My forehead hit the window a second time. “You moving to Canada. Any plans beforehand?”

I massaged my head with one hand and gripped the dashboard with the other. “Finishing school, I guess. Hanging out with my friends. I’m not flying to Europe or anything, if that’s what you’re asking. Why?”

“I’ve got an employment opportunity for you.” I laughed. What, as a fake therapist’s fake assistant? “What’s your top-off on these little excursions? Ten thousand? Thirty thousand? What did you make today?”

Thirty thousand dollars. Who did she think I was? Jesus. “Try three thousand. And I didn’t rob anywhere today.”

The car slowed. She looked over at me directly, and when not obscured by the mirror it was pretty easy to pick up the fact that she thought I was a fucking idiot.

“I’m tired,” I said, defensively.

“Three thousand dollars?”

“That’s a lot of money.”

“It’s not a lot of money in general, but especially when you’re risking a felony charge for it. Christ, Teagan. I expected better.” Fuck you. Fuck you. She shook her head, and we sped up again. “Is there a reason you do this other than the money?”

She wasn’t picking up on the mental barrage of me cursing her out. “Fuck you, bitch! Three thousand dollars is a lot. Like you’re one to talk when you drive such a piece of shit.”

She tapped her temple. “My car’s shitty because I have a grindset.”

“That’s not a word.”

“It is. It’s a mindset but where you care about making money. On that grind. Grindset. Same reason I reuse my old coffee cups.” Baptiste slung an arm over the back of my seat, steering with the tips of the fingers on her left hand, which did not increase my confidence in her driving abilities. “Teagan. Why do you do it?”

“I do it for the money.”

“Okay. You pull off those elaborate schemes solely for the three thousand dollars — sure.” Suddenly the trees cleared, and she put on the brakes before we could merge onto the highway. The seatbelt dug into the bruises on my hips. “I can guarantee you a seven-figure salary before you move away to college.”

“I get it. You want me to sell genuine healing crystals for your high school bestie Cindy, right? And if I can recruit ten people to my team, then I get a cut of their profits, and —”

“What is the number one affliction this world is facing, Tea?”

“MLMs?”

“Black holes. The world has an unmet demand for black hole solutions and you have a monopoly on the supply. Haven’t you ever wondered why you’ve been given this wonderful gift, or how it works, or — more importantly — how you can exploit it?”

I groaned, and crossed my arms, then uncrossed them to turn up the radio again. Ed Sheeran serenaded me about being thrifty and eating things — a very Hamletian line. I sang along a little. For a few words. Baptiste looked annoyed at me. To be honest I was not that big a fan of a Ed Sheeran, so it was hard singing along, and also the song was starting to grate on me. But I kept the radio on.

“Do you know what started the black holes, Teagan?”

I tapped my ear, and mouthed, “Can’t hear you.”

“I do. It was an experiment gone wrong. The Brookhaven National Lab team were assassinated purposefully to cover up a deeper conspiracy — a secret government branch researching the terrifying effects of gravity.”

“A grand conspiracy within the United States government, shared only with the Chinese? Our biggest international rivals?” I had to shout over Ed Sheeran singing about a woman’s body. “That’s genius! Tell me more about the Jewish cabal and illuminati lizards. Asshole.”

“BNL’s secret branch of researchers left behind an Antidote, which makes the user immune to black holes. And I have it. But I can’t make the black holes. I need your powers — and I want you. I want you to be a part of this. Will you turn that radio off?”

“No.”

“Oh my God.” Baptiste cranked down the radio and then slapped her hand over the dial so I couldn’t counter. I tried pulling her away but she was surprisingly grisly. Her grip had the power of overcooked meat stuck to a grill. “I want you to get in on the ground floor of my company: Gravitas. I want you to help me save the world from the black holes. And I want to make you a lot of money while doing it.”

“Fuck you.” I opened the car door and got out before she could lock it.

“Teagan? Is that a yes?”

I held it open, ducked inside. “It’s a fuck off. I’m never gonna work for your stupid fucking company, dude.”

Baptiste's face screwed up. "I see. Jerking off and playing video games and doing fucking nothing with your life is too appealing to you. We could make a real difference, Teagan — we could save lives."

"You're such a fucking liar! Do you pull that pseudo-psychology shit with whatever mental case you're scamming nowadays? I felt like I was sitting through a fucking — Steve Jobs presentation. But if Steve Jobs was, like, even more evil."

"Stop talking. I don't work with people who don't know where their sentences are going. Got that?"

"Good thing I'm not working with you then, asshole." I slammed the door and flipped her off as I dropped into a black hole at my feet.

Chapter 5: Think and Grow Rich

The bell to the gas station convenience store chimed cheerfully, which was ironic, because people walking into the gas station convenience store was not a cheerful occasion. It mostly meant I had to do my job. My job (cashier) sucked and I got fifteen dollars an hour for it (minimum wage in New York).

“Yo,” said Kyle. He leaned on the counter, having completely abandoned the shelf full of broccoli cheddar soup cans that he was supposed to be restocking. “You good? You look kind of pale.”

Something tugged on my toe, and I looked down. A black hole about the size of a grain of rice had sprung up. Those happened sometimes when I was nervous.

I grimaced and stomped it out before anybody noticed. “I’m cool.”

I knew the guy who had just walked into the store, but not from the gas station: Liam. He tucked his phone in his pocket and looked up at me. “Hello, Teagan.”

“Hey. Officer Liam.”

He pointed to the glass box that we kept the phone cases in, so that people didn’t steal them. “Gonna need one of those.”

“No problem. It’s on the house. I mean, not literally. But whichever one you want, I’ll get it out of the case, for sure.”

“Get me one of the pink ones.” I unlocked the case. “It’s for my girlfriend.”

“Totally, dude. Cool.” I rang him up. “That’s it?”

“How are you doing?”

“I’m good. Working.” Behind me, Kyle blew wads of bubblegum, and turned the same can over in his hands.

“When does your shift end?”

“Uh — like, twenty minutes.” I ran Liam’s credit card. Kyle took the gum from his mouth and stuck it onto the bottom of the soup can.

“I’ll give you a ride.”

“What? You don’t gotta do that.”

Liam flipped the phone case back and forth between his pointer and middle fingers. “We found your car.”

“You found my car?”

“It’s by the reservation. I’m giving you a ride. I don’t mind the wait.”

“Okay. Yeah. Thanks, man.”

“You’re welcome.” He smiled tightly at me, and tapped the pink phone twice once on the counter before stalking off to flip through a farming magazine.

I’d resisted keeping an eye on Liam for the rest of my shift — him scanning the toothpastes while I scanned coke cans, him talking on the phone while I avoided at all costs opening my mouth around the customers. I didn’t want him to be able to tell I was nervous as fuck.

“You good?” asked Kyle, who was now hanging out uselessly behind the counter. “You’ve been watching that guy for, like, twenty minutes.”

“I’m fine.”

“Seriously, dude. Call me if you need any help.” His voice lowered. “I got a black belt from this dude in Remsenburg. It was only, like, 5 bucks. So, like — I’m just saying, if that dude’s bothering you —”

“Thanks Kyle,” I said, and he saluted me as I threw my coat on over my uniform.

When Liam and I left the rain had picked up. I pulled my new JUUL out of my uniform but Liam made a noise so I put it back into my pocket. He got into the driver’s seat of his police car and I waited at the passenger door until I figured out he wanted me to climb in the back.

We pulled onto Montauk Highway. Liam became absorbed with plugging the address into his hugeass phone. I knocked on the wired plate separating us.

“So,” he said. “You’re wondering why I came down to the gas station. Instead of just calling you.”

My fingers drummed my knees. “Not really.”

“Have you ever walked into that gas station and seen an elderly man or woman working the till?”

The question bewildered me. “Have I seen an old person?”

“Working at the gas station.”

“I don’t know. I have a coworker, Bill. He’s, like, forty. He keeps it pretty tight, though. I think he works out or takes supplements or something.”

“Nothing makes me sadder than the Bills of this world. Working the till of a gas station for pennies. Until they die.”

“Okay.” There was an awkward pause. “How far is this drive?”

“I want to give you something,” he said, and reached between his legs to a purse in the footwell. He pulled out a packet of papers, and unlatched the wire plating with a finger. “Take a look?”

I glanced at the top page. “Wow. Internship applications.”

“Evie told me that you don’t really do much, outside of work. No extracurriculars. No hanging out with friends. And I’m thinking — hey, teens need to stay occupied, right? Keeps them out of trouble. So I figured I’d do you a favor. Maybe one or two of those will catch your interest. Lotta people would love the help of a young, able body, such as yourself.”

“Evie told you that I don’t do stuff?”

“Consider it. That’s all I’m asking. Everyone needs a hobby.”

I tried the handle. Locked. “Can you let me out?”

“Are you going to college?”

“Yeah.”

“Evie said you skip all the time. Aren’t you going to DCA?”

I grimaced. That was actually true. I was late to school a lot because of the robberies. If I missed like, three more days, I was gonna DCA, and that would mean I’d have to go in front of administration and argue why I shouldn’t repeat senior year. Which would suck. “None of your business.”

“You’re sabotaging yourself, Teagan. Evie cares about you — nobody wants to see you get into trouble.”

“Am I arrested right now?”

“No. You’re not arrested.”

“Then let me the fuck out of your car.” This time the door unlocked so I did climb out and then ducked behind a telephone pole in case he decided to try to run me over. But he only pulled a U-turn and drove away at a speed way above 10 miles an hour, obnoxiously flexing the virtues of the Jeep Wrangler over my broken/stolen car. I flipped off the back of his car, but when he checked his rear view mirror hid it. What an asshole. I wrapped my coat tighter around my thin uniform, then summoned a black hole beneath my feet, and dropped to the address of the stolen Yugo.

I sat in the driver’s seat, then got out, and opened the back door. I checked beneath the seats for any gross shit but the car looked exactly the same as when I’d left it. I looked in the trunk. My tire iron had been stolen but the spare tire was still intact. Then I walked back to the driver’s seat and took the keys from where they’d been tossed on the passenger seat and started up the car. The engine growled and then settled out to a low hum.

I kicked the footwell, and the plastic dropped down.

The black bag was missing.

My room was small, but it felt even smaller. That was because it was full of trash. There were about 20 empty glasses of water strategically divided between my bed’s headboard and the floor. My dresser bowed under open CD cases, the discs stacked up in a pile. I kicked an empty Coke can and it made a sound like a crunched-up aluminum drum. Then I picked up the can and dropped it in the paper bag I used as a trash can.

In the corner — mostly hidden by loose clothing — was a pile of books. Something I was great at was visualization. Reading books was super-immersive. As a kid I’d get stupidly into it. I didn’t read anything anymore though. It was good that I was good at visualizing, anyway, because if I messed that up the black holes might’ve tried to drop me off in the Indian Ocean or Antarctica or something instead of down the block.

Beside the books, the only clean part of my room was my terrarium. It took up half the wall and had all kinds of high-tech tunnels and colorful wheels and other luxurious shit. I had five mice: Modesty, Martin, Bernard, Lillian, and Crater. The University of Victoria didn’t allow pets in dorms — I was planning on renting a separate apartment to keep them in until I could live off-campus.

I dropped my coat and lifted up the lid of the cage. “How’ve you been holding up, Martin? You guys good?”

Martin watched me scoop food. It was the most expensive type the pet store had, so that must have meant it was good. Like the mouse version of Filet Mignon.

“I just — talked to this dude. You guys probably would fucking hate him. Haha. Yeah. He’s such an asshole. And he was, like — I mean, whatever. It doesn’t matter.” I closed the cage, and a few of the mice scurried over. “You’d never do me like that, would you, Crater? No way. No shot Crater’d be an asshole. You’re too fucking cool. There you go. Yeah, go crazy. Chow down. You want a treat, Martin? Is that what you’re so worked up about? Christ, fucking bend my arm, why don’t you.” They had me anti-pavlovianed: they looked cute, I gave the treat. I pulled a plastic baggie of plain, cooked pasta from my school bag and dropped a few noodles through the bars. I blinked wide at the cage. “Oh yeah. That’s the good stuff. You enjoy yourself, little man.”

A visualization I was good at was mouse terror. I was very empathetic toward the mice and I liked taking care of them, but I won’t pretend that guilt didn’t also play a factor in

what was clearly some over-generosity on my part. See, the mice had always come through my black holes, probably because there'd been an infestation at BNL during the time of the event and they'd gotten the same power as me and Haoyu, except that they were too dumb to use it. No offense to them, but they were pretty dumb mice. They could've teleported into a mice food store and eaten their fill except they were too dumb to do that. When I was younger and the mice would come through my black holes I used to set them free on the Hampton Bays suburban streets. And then once I grew up a little I realized that they were all definitely dying to, like, cars or cats or something out there. I felt very guilty for a while after I made that realization. I was plagued with dreams of mouse terror. Sometimes I was the mouse, being crushed by a Godly rubber wheel. All of my bones breaking and such. Sometimes I was the cat eating the mouse. It got so chronic that I turned to religion and started hallucinating all these old mice dream gods. I started a pre-bedtime ritual of kneeling and praying and beating my fists on my knees and howling and throwing up. Sometimes this took all night and then I wouldn't have the opportunity to dream anyways. I was delusional, sure. Probably in part from sleep deprivation. It culminated in me sculpting a 3 foot tall mouse god statue in pottery class and then sneaking it away to make a blood sacrifice to said statue in the school bathroom. I got the blood by pricking my thumb with a sewing needle and squeezing the skin over the head, except I hadn't really made a big enough wound to make get a good drop because the needle really hurt, so instead I ended up just wiping a tiny smear on the mouse's nose. Which didn't do shit, by the way. It took another two entire years and a twelfth birthday present of a white noise machine for the dreams to stop.

A black hole popped up by my sneaker, and a mouse came scuttling through before I could put it out. I reached down automatically to scoop it up. Then — thinking efficiently — I kicked some of the trash into the black hole. Like, herded it with my shoes, and watched it be eaten. I took Kyle's packet from my back pocket. It had obviously been printed off of some local website because the logo was on the bottom left of every page. I was about to drop it into the black hole when one of the internship names caught my eye.

I stomped out the black hole, then thumbed through the papers until I found the listing.

Gravitas Internship

LI-based company pioneering new gravitational mediation technology. Looking for interns in their junior or senior year of high school. Positions available will be awarded based on merit. Address resumes to Baptiste Soselo at PO Box 2004, Hampton Bays, New York. Inquire at (631) 555-3418.

I sat on the edge of my bed. The line rang once.

"Gravitas, Brenda speaking! How can I help you today?"

"You can drop the Southern accent, Brenda."

Baptiste's voice fell flat. "Teagan." She paused. "You sound terrible. Have you been crying?"

"I saw your advertisement. About the internship."

"And that made you cry?"

"I haven't been crying."

“Then you want to report me to the department of labor, I presume? Let me head you off there: hiring teenagers without work papers is completely legal in New York State when you pay in experience.”

“No, asshole. I want it.”

Chapter 6: Whining and Dying

My phone buzzed. I snuck a look beneath my desk.

Kyle: hey asshole

Me: ?

Kyle: u get paid yet

It had been two weeks since I'd accepted the Gravitas internship. I'd seen Baptiste a total of twice since then, both times to accompany her to city hall while she filed paperwork, and been paid just under 5 dollars, when she gave me money to buy her a coffee from the gas station and "something nice" for myself. So yes, I had been "paid," in the same sense that the 100th caller in a radio contest for free Nickelback tickets is a "winner."

Me: dude fuck off im in shcool

Kyle: wanna go shoot paintball guns

Me: im in school

The dry-erase marker Mr. Haberkern was using ran out of ink. He shook it once and tried again, then tossed it into the trash and chose an orange as a replacement. The orange was a really beautiful hue. It spoke to me. I always paid more attention when teachers used orange. I used to steal the orange expos up until the fifth grade when I got caught sneaking one from Ms. Reilly and she'd flipped over my desk and looked through all my shit. Like, to see if I'd stolen anything else, I guess. She was pretty crazy. She would've been really crazy, except I was also stocking up on charcoal from the art room to draw my rodent icons. So instead she looked only pretty crazy and I got two weeks detention.

Kyle: u owe me 50 dollars btw

Me: for what??

Kyle: paintball guns

Kyle: got a sick discount. figured we'd split the cost

Me: oh my god fuck off

"Teagan?" I looked up. Mr. Haberkern was standing over my desk, holding out an orange plastic basket like he was a bell-ringer by the mall. "Phone?" I dropped it into the basket. "And what would we call the flower-decomposition relationship, Teagan?"

"Decay?"

"Look at the board, please." Haberkern tapped the drawing. He must've put a lot of effort into it, because there was a fucking cornucopia's worth of loops and lines. I couldn't really make out what was happening. "I'm referring to the relationship. As flowers decompose they give nutrients to the soil, which allows more flowers to grow, leading to more dead flowers. The product of the reaction leads to an increase in that reaction. In homeostasis, the process moves a system further away from the target of equilibrium. What do you call that relationship?"

"Good?" I cleared my throat. "Seems like everybody's getting off. Flowers and soil."

Mr. Haberkern pointed the marker at me. "I'm glad you said that. You're wrong. The correct answer is positive feedback."

"Schooled," shouted Ryan, into his hands. Harberkern shot him a look, and he raised his palms meekly.

"Obviously Teagan is under the impression that positive means good. But what if you received a positive result at a doctor's office? Maybe Teagan would be pleased, but I

doubt the rest of us would be very happy.” I rubbed my temples. “There are bad positive feedback loops as well, people. For example, greenhouse gases. As more greenhouse gases are emitted, the atmosphere warms. A warmer atmosphere means more water evaporates. Warmer air holds more water vapor. The water vapor traps heat, warming the atmosphere more, and causing more water to evaporate from the oceans and rivers, which traps more heat, and so on. Climate change, anyone? I hope we know at least that climate change is bad?” The room was silent. A few kids nodded. It was not a very energetic environment so people did not really take the initiative to reply. If Mr. Haberkern had asked that question at a club or party, or any question, really, he definitely would’ve gotten replies. I’m just saying so because not getting answers always made me feel bad for teachers. “Positive feedback loops can be very destructive. In fact, black holes —”

He was interrupted by the school phone. You know, the old beige one on the wall. Who was using their phone in class now, bitch? Some of the kids perked up as he answered, and scanned the class.

“Yes. Okay, right away.” He covered the receiver with one hand. “Teagan? You’re being picked up.”

My parents never pulled me out of class. Maybe somebody in their ginormous fucking family had died from a stroke or something. A great-great-grandfather. Like, speaking statistically-wise, that probably happened every five minutes. Or maybe they’d found out the truth about me and were turning me into the police and my life was fucking over. I’d always imagined that happening with more fanfare, though. Ideally in the middle of a big class, like chorus. The police would break through the doors and windows simultaneously and everybody would scream like crazy and Liam would point a gun at my head and tell me it was over. News cameras would crowd around to take pictures me for the front page. They’d write headlines about all the awesome, rebellious things I’d shout at the cops. (Example: “You have a small dick, Liam. Also, I fucked your mom.”) Everyone would clap. And then I would teleport to Canada or Haoyu’s house and it really would all be over, because I’d never be able to come back here ever again. It would be mysterious and cool and basically a huge moment in America’s cultural consciousness. If I was going down I wanted to leave an impression.

I didn’t have the chance to worry about that for long, though, because the person slouched over the main office’s desk was about the furthest thing from my parents.

“Baptiste.”

Baptiste looked up from her conversation with the guidance officer and her face split into an uncharacteristic beam. Over her left hand was the bright orange suitcase. Her hair was tied back with a pink headscarf, like the women from old movies who drove around in convertibles, and she was in clothes that definitely didn’t suit her — a flouncy floral dress and white heels. They clicked off-beat as she bustled forward. “Teagan! So great to see you!”

I stiffened as she wrapped me in a hug. The guidance officer cleared her throat.

“Your aunt is here to pick you up.” She said it like it was obvious, which it normally would’ve been, except this wasn’t my aunt. “You just need to sign out.”

“Right.” I pried Baptiste off of me. “Sure.”

“Sorry about this,” she hissed in my ear, then smiled and patted my cheek as I signed. “We’re on a tight schedule. I needed you early.” I followed her to her car, where she

selected a plastic hanger from her back seat. On it was a pale pink polo shirt and a pair of white Bermuda shorts.

“What’s with the ugly clothes?”

“They’re for you. To wear to the party.”

“If you make me wear those I’m gonna kill myself.”

“They won’t let you in if you don’t change. There’s a dress code rule against jeans.”

I grabbed the shirt. I kind of wanted to throw up. “What kind of party has a fucking dress code?”

“The potential investors kind of party,” said Baptiste. “We’re going to crash it.”

Chapter 7: Inappropriate Birthday Gifts

“I really don’t think this plan is going to work. They’re just gonna freak out and run.”

Baptiste clapped my back. She had the bright orange briefcase in her other hand. “Relax. You’re so neurotic.”

“I think I am an appropriate amount of neurotic for the situation.” A man in black chinos and a button-down was waiting for us at the door. We were walking up a white-stone path to the Westhampton Beach Country Club: the parking lot was filled with Jeep Wranglers and white Teslas. “Is that Chief Miller?”

“Baptiste,” greeted Chief Miller, and, woah, that was a mind-fuck. To see him out of uniform and stuff I mean. Whenever I picked Evie up from her house him and Liam were still in uniform. I’d kinda started to think those were the only clothes they owned. “It’s great to see you.”

“Thank you for inviting us, James.”

“Of course. Nice to see you again, Valentine.” Chief Miller shook my hand. “I hear my son found your car.”

“Yeah, I’m forever grateful. How do you two know each other?”

“Chief Miller was our first investor,” explained Baptiste. “He’s had a stake for the past year.”

“Why?”

Miller laughed. “You’re funny, Tea,” said Baptiste. “Come along. And tuck in your shirt.”

“I would like to talk to you about Liam, actually,” said Chief Miller. “He said you refused a ride from him. To get your car. Why would you do that?”

“Can I take your coat?” Inside the foyer men shed Canada Goose and women took off wool trench coats with belts that let you see how skinny they were. “Ma’am?”

Baptiste handed him her jacket. He looked at me.

“I’m good, man. Thanks.” I tied my sweatshirt around my hips.

“Liam only wanted to help you,” said Miller.

“Is Evie here?”

“No.”

Well that was probably a good thing given what Baptiste was planning. “I gotta take a leak,” I said, and ducked past him, into the ballroom.

The guy flipped through his photos to another of a group of teenagers in black formalwear. “And that’s my nonprofit organization. We provide discounted diet pills to low-income communities.”

“Cool,” I said. “I work at a gas station.”

“That’s a really unique extracurricular. Are you doing early decision?”

“No.”

“I’m doing early decision to Princeton. I have legacy, since my grandfather and father both went there.”

“Your grandfather is Mr. Close?” This was a birthday party for Mr. Close. The ballroom was decorated with hanging banners reading HAPPY BIRTHDAY MR. CLOSE.

The tables all had white tablecloths and half-finished plates of lobster and filet mignon. The floor-to-ceiling windows let in natural light and outside a gold range stretched to the water.

“Yes, that’s him. How did you know?”

“Lucky guess. You have any idea what kind of companies he tends to invest in?”

“Uh,” said the kid. Another kid in a polo sat down beside us, and leaned across the table, towards me: “Are you dating Evie?”

I ate another cracker. “Yeah.”

“She’s hot. Teagan, right? I’m her cousin, Braedon.” He held out a hand.

I didn’t shake, but stood. “I gotta go take a piss.”

He turned to the first guy as I left. “Aunt Cheryl wants to talk to you, Brandon.”

“Is it about the window? I didn’t break it.”

The crowd was dressed in white and flowery dresses and Bermuda shorts. I blended in except for all the parts of me that didn’t. I pulled on my sweatshirt and found Baptiste by a table talking to a white guy in a blue suit. “Yo, Baptiste. I gotta get outta here, man. I’m going crazy.”

She’d been laughing, and patted me on the back. “Oh, relax. Tea, meet Marcus. We were in law school together.”

“Hello, Teagan.” Marcus held out a hand. He was grinning, which was strange. People usually didn’t react to Baptiste by smiling. “I’m Mr. Close’s attorney.”

I looked at Baptiste. “You went to law school? Why the fuck were you pretending to be a therapist?”

She pulled out a chair. “I was disbarred. Sit, Tea. It’s time.”

“You want me to—”

“In one moment,” she said. A server set a plate of chocolate cake from Tate’s bakery in front of her, and then me. I thanked them. “We’re about to sing happy birthday.”

Mr. Close stood. He was at one of the tables near the front of the room. He didn’t look exceptionally rich — he was old, and wore a sleeveless fleece vest over his button-down shirt, as well as a gold watch. As the room started to sing he waved, but didn’t smile. Baptiste reached over and squeezed my hand:

“Now.”

I looked at Mr. Close. And then looked away, as — right on top of his table’s floral centerpiece — a black hole wove into the fabric of reality.

Chapter 8: Synergize!

Baptiste pulled the syringe from her orange briefcase. “Stand back! I will now use Brookhaven National Lab’s Antidote to immunize myself.”

She didn’t need to tell people to stand back because everyone was already either pressed against the far walls or running out onto the golf course. People were scared to move because generally where one black hole formed others popped up. Also they were not really listening to her. More screaming and staring in horror and calling the cops and stuff.

Baptiste injected the syringe in her arm, then flexed her hand. She shivered lightly. Did I actually believe Baptiste had gotten a black hole Antidote from BNL? No. Obviously not. Baptiste lied about basically everything. When she told me in the car that was how we’d get rid of the black hole I’d rolled my eyes: because she was definitely lying and because I was unwilling to go public about my powers what would probably happen is I’d make a black hole in the country club and then the whole place would get shut down for a couple weeks. Maybe a year. And also she would be dead. Both of those outcomes were fine with me.

I stopped thinking about what a liar Baptiste was when she walked into the black hole and it disappeared.

The crowd — who’d been screaming at her to get back — fell silent. I was so shocked I kind of forgot about the crowd watching and jogged to her side. She looked intact. Her expression was horrified but all her limbs were there.

I shook her shoulder. “Yo, dude. Are you okay?”

She patted my hand, and smiled at the crowd. “Wonderful, Valentine.” They started to clap. Mr. Close walked up to us.

“Well,” he said. “That was quite the show, Baptiste. How did you do it?”

While Baptiste chatted up Close I finished off my piece of cake. The rest of the Close family seemed less happy about seeing a miracle and more pissed off about the black hole. Braedon took the slice of cake from the place beside mine. He took one bite and then set it down and leaned over.

“That was crazy.”

“Yeah.”

“Is she like, your mom, or—”

“No.” I hesitated. “She’s my aunt.”

“You hate the black holes?”

“Obviously.”

“Listen, man. I gotta tell you something.” He leaned closer. “I know who made that black hole.”

I paused. “Who made the black hole?”

“The Chinese.”

I was simultaneously relieved and confused. “The Chinese?”

“It was a black hole sent by China. Since our family is so important — China sends black holes after important people in the US.”

“Right.” I took Baptiste’s slice of cake also, and poured myself another glass of grapefruit juice. Which was kinda gross but whatever.

“I just don’t get what’s wrong with saying that. Like that kid they’ve got who’s immune to the black holes — H5. They hate us.”

I licked icing off my fork. “Don’t talk about him, man.”

“Don’t talk about who?”

“H5.”

“What, are you on their side? They just tried to kill my grandpa. That fucking bastard wants us—”

Well, yeah, so at this point you can probably guess that I punched him in the face.

We fell onto the floor and rolled. Then suddenly Chief Miller was there, and pulled me off, tossed me onto the thin carpet. “Fuck you,” I said to Braedon, as he cupped his nose. “Fucking kill yourself!”

Chief Miller helped Braedon to his feet. “Get out of here, Valentine.”

The Westhampton Beach Country Club had big wooden front doors. I made sure to slam them hard enough that the fancy wine glasses rattled.

About ten minutes later Baptiste’s car door opened. She slid into the driver’s seat and closed the door gently.

“Hey.”

“He started it,” I said. And then: “Hey.” I covered my face with my hands and wiped back speckles of nose-blood into my hair.

“Well, that was a bust,” said Baptiste. “Close doesn’t want to invest.”

“Because I punched his grandkid? That’s stupid.”

“No. He said the business is too risky. Black holes too highly regulated. He doesn’t think the FTC will let us operate long-term, and even if they did he doesn’t think other investors would think that, so the stocks options would be poor.”

I looked at her incredulous. “Black holes are eldritch fucking magic. Who gives a fuck about stocks?”

“Companies, usually.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“Well,” she said. “That’s how it works.”

“So what’s next?”

“I’ll probably take us public. Maybe I’ll start a TikTok. Would you do TikTok dances to promote our company?”

“No.”

“What if I bought you a cheese plate?”

I hesitated. “Maybe.”

There was a knock on Baptiste’s window. She rolled it down. “Marcus?”

“Oh, good. I caught you.” Marcus was a little out a breath, and loosened his tie. He had to crouch slightly to see through the window. “That was quite the battle, Valentine. Kid’s an asshole. He had it coming.”

“Thanks.”

Baptiste cleared her throat — trying to sound disinterested. “Did Close have something else to say?”

“Close? No, no. I don’t work for him anymore.”

For a brief moment Baptiste was caught without something clever to say. “You quit your job?”

“What you did in there was fucking amazing. I don’t know how you did it but it was fucking amazing. And obviously the kid is — well, the American H5, right? Doesn’t take a genius to figure that out.” Marcus stuck his hand through the window. “Nice to meet you, by the way.”

I shook Marcus’s hand. “Sure.”

He wiped his hand on his suit jacket. “I want in.”

“You want to join Gravitass?”

“I want to be your general counsel, I want to invest, and I want to bring everyone I know with me.”

“Close—”

“Close is an idiot. A real estate idiot. Got dirt for brains. You want tech — and I know tech people, okay? Let me be Gravitass’s general counsel. What you did in there was insane — you’ve just gotta do it for the right crowd. The fucking country club is dreaming way too small.”

Baptiste’s hands were on the wheel. “How do we get in front of the right crowd?”

He grinned. “Every kid is posting a video of that stunt to their instagrans as we speak — you already have.”

Chapter 9: Complimentary Breakfast

Baptiste and Marcus had agreed to meet for a more in-depth discussion at some random hotel in Queens the next day — as a middle point, since he lived in the city, and Baptiste lived in Riverhead. Baptiste made me wear a silky black dress shirt with a G on the pocket, for Gravitas.

The Grand Union hotel logo stared down at the street.

“G,” said Baptiste. “For Gravitas.”

“Holy shit.” A man in a suit brushed past me. I hurried to catch up with Baptiste, who was dressed fancier than normal, and was carrying the bright orange briefcase. My eye caught a stack of pajama shirts on the housekeeper’s cart — the same silk as my own.

“Baptiste. You got the Gravitas uniform. From here.”

“Yes. I got them.”

“You stole them? And you came back?”

“I get a frequent customer discount here.”

I crossed my elbows over my chest so that my palms were tucked into my armpits, hiding the hotel’s logo. Returning to the scene of the crime, decked out in the shit you stole. It took balls.

The lobby was beige, kind of like my parents’ house, except rustier. Hard-cushioned teal seats were tucked in a corner. An orange loveseat was occupied by a Jewish couple, the man in a yamaka, woman in a long black dress and synth-diamond earrings. The room smelled like air conditioning. I headed for a counter in the corner which did not currently hold a complimentary breakfast because it wasn’t between the hours of 6 and 9 am. The waffle maker was unplugged, and those tall cereal tubes had their twisty dispenser handles removed. I tried to open the mini-fridge, which — nestled between the plastic utensils and waxy apples — enclosed a tempting array of GoGurts and chocolate milk cartons. The door was tough. I gave it another, harder yank, and the fridge shifted a bit, metal bottom grinding on the cheap counter. Then I realized it was locked.

“Baptiste?”

“Marcus, you bastard. You look as good as ever.”

Marcus laughed and clapped Baptiste on the back. I abandoned the locked fridge and wandered over to join them. “And you haven’t aged a day. Where’s the painting — I’m guessing it’s jaundiced? Missing a few teeth?”

“Flatterer.”

“No, seriously. I’ve got wrinkles now. It’s horrible.” He crouched down next to me, even though we were practically the same height. “Pleasure to see you again, Teagan. You look very nice.”

“Looks can be deceiving. What do you say we take this upstairs?”

In our hotel room Baptiste locked the door, then moved immediately to the window, drawing the curtains and ducking to check beneath the bed for — I don’t know, bugs? People? It was a quiet evening and a small room. Someone a few rooms over had the tv on, and the commercial seeped through the walls like rot, reduced from any discernible words to a uniform hum.

“You’re still working with Lee?” asked Baptiste, shaking the curtain loose from where it was caught on the radiator.

“Aaron or Harvey Oswald?”

“You worked with Lee Harvey Oswald?”

“No.” Marcus set down his briefcase. “He’s fine. Still chasing that class-action suit against the company who sold his mother an irradiated metal straw. Wants to put his slogan on our website — ‘suck them clean.’”

“Good luck with that.”

I sat on the mangy paisley bed. Baptiste pulled out a stack of papers from the briefcase and slid them over to Marcus. He licked his thumb and leafed through the pages systematically. A few times his eyebrows raised. Otherwise he kept a good pokerface. I was busy trying to picture Baptiste at Yale.

“This is incredible. If it works.”

“It will.”

The trouble was that Baptiste was a very vulgar and unpleasant human being. I couldn’t imagine her in a college setting at all. But also I had some pretty big preexisting biases against New Haven which probably weren’t helping me in the imagination department.

“My stake?”

(Medium-rare.) “General Counsel.”

“Stock?”

(Chicken.) “Three percent.”

I managed to conjure Baptiste sitting in an old library, with cobwebs and maybe some skeleton bones. And talking books. Like in Lord of the Rings.

“Three percent? Is that a joke?”

Wait. Actually — I didn’t think there were talking books in Lord of the Rings. Now that I thought about it. I could’ve sworn those movies were ring-centric.

“I’m flexible.”

“You’d better be flexible if you’re trying to fuck me that hard.”

“What would you propose?”

“Twenty.”

I didn’t remember much from the Lord of the Rings because I watched all three movies back to back while zonked on expired candy Kyle had given me in what was ostensibly an assassination attempt. Kyle always saved his Halloween candy super long but he sorted by type not expiration date. And I was pretty indiscriminate when it came to chocolate.

“Five.”

“Fifteen.”

“Ten. Final offer.”

I’d made myself hungry thinking about expired Halloween candy. Shit. I got up and opened up the hotel fridge, but it was empty other than some waters. What kind of idiot bought an entire water bottle from a hotel fridge? There was a drinking fountain right downstairs. I sat down on the floor and leaned my head into the cool air.

“Christ, like I’m a fucking Kulak. What’s next on the five year plan, Father of Nations?”

I was trying to remember the opening to Lord of the Rings. Dah dah dadada dahdah. No. Shit. That was Star Wars.

“Depends. Do you wanna try it out or just watch?”

Marcus scratched the expensive wool of his pants pocket pathologically. When Baptiste raised her eyebrows he laughed nervously. “Of course. Try. Try it.”

A small vial appeared in Baptiste’s palm. She set it down and used a syringe to inject a thumb’s worth in her elbow.

“Wonderful,” said Marcus, pained.

She tossed the syringe, and drew Antidote into a second. “We’ll begin with construction of the wormhole. I’ve found my constitution functions better at a relative proximity to Tea. Linking arms should suffice. Like a valet — this part will work a little differently with actual clients, of course. Imagine it — marble foyer, stained glass, twenty stories. The most exclusive travel agency in the world. The suburbs will get sprawling manufacturing plants. Chief Miller will have his church-sponsored immunity drives. This is a people-pleaser, Marc. Now roll up your sleeve.”

“You haven’t changed.” He tugged up the expensive fabric, and winced when Baptiste pricked skin. “Do you know we used to call her back in college?”

“I literally could not give less of a fuck.” I held out my arms. “Okay. All aboard the infinite gravity tears your atoms apart express.”

Marcus shook his arm out, hesitated, like a doctor unable to make a diagnosis — which was similar to myself, in that moment, because I was also quickly losing patience. “There isn’t actually much risk of death, is there?”

“Salud,” said Baptiste, instead of answering, and the cheap wood beneath our feet bent, and then the spine, and before Bateman could finish his pussy-scream we all dropped down into infinite space.

The break room is empty.

We stumble. The fluorescents are harsh, and so singularly project from overhead that they cast sharp, deep shadows on every wrinkle of my palm and fold of my uniform.

A sheen of cold sweat puckers on Baptiste’s brow. “Welcome to the interim.”

Marcus Bateman looks up at the ceiling, which bulges green, as if nauseous. The air is thick, greasy. It sits in my lungs like heavy cream.

“It’s not called the interim,” I tell her. “It’s the break room.”

“Interim tested better with focus groups.”

“We’re going to bring people here?” His face twists. “It’s — ugly.”

Baptiste makes a hand motion at me — a little spinning thing pointed at the ceiling. I make a face at her that I hope communicates my disgust at this hand motion, even if, yes, I get what she’s saying, I’m not stupid. I drop us onto the bed on the other side of the hotel room, except it wasn’t wide enough, so Marcus landed on the radiator.

He rolled onto the floor, heaving to catch his breath. “Holy shit.” Marcus wiped his mouth and propped himself up on the dresser. He was blotting sweat from his forehead with his tie. “Holy shit.”

“We don’t have to bring people there, right away. We can do the immunity first. Will you—”

“Holy shit.” He laughed, and smacked the floor with his hand. “Holy shit. You can do magic, B. We’re going to be fucking filthy rich.”

Baptiste was relieved. “Absolutely.”

“Miller’s ready, then?”

Her smile dropped. “He’s — mostly.”

“Sometimes you have to be —” Marcus coughed, and cleared his throat — “aggressive with those kinds of people. You know. ‘Murica types.” He straightened his shirt cuffs, running his index finger over his collar and neat line of buttons. His hand moved to smooth down the shirt by his waist, tucking it in where it had been untucked. His face was still bloated and red. “What about the gun?”

I ran my hands down my face, eyes shutting against the overhead lights. I really needed to get some sleep. Fuck.

“‘TASER’ overseas,” she chided. “I’ll have a prototype by the end of the week.”

Fabric shuffled. “And you’re positive about that name? Gravitax? Does middle America know how to spell that?”

Something clicked. Marcus’s briefcase, probably. “If they don’t, they sure as fuck are going to learn.”

Baptiste was at my side, shaking me awake. “Teagan. Get up.”

When I opened my eyes I was lying on the bed. The room had darkened significantly. Marcus was gone.

“You passed out,” said Baptiste, shoving a Cliff bar into my hand before I could freak the fuck out. “I ran down to the vending machine. Your blood sugar is probably low.”

My head dropped back down to the bed. Baptiste watched me lie there for a moment, and then grabbed the granola bar from my hand, unwrapping it for me.

“C’mon. If you die my shares die. Eat.”

“Christ, bitch. I don’t want your fucking Cliff bar.” I sat up, and threw it, but it didn’t go very far. I kind of did want it. But it wasn’t about that — it was about taking a stand. “What the fuck does that even mean? Shares — like, on Facebook or something?”

“No. Money shares. Also, Marcus agreed to be our general counsel.” Baptiste seemed contemplative. “I would’ve been our counsel myself, but I’ve been disbarred for eight years.”

“Awesome. So cool that you’re putting that monetary value on my life. I’m getting out of here.”

“Wait,” said Baptiste, standing, and I didn’t teleport away as she took a water bottle from the mini bar and brought it to me. “How are you feeling?”

I downed half the bottle in one go. The fact that water bottles were stupidly overpriced made me feel a bit better about it. Eat those eight dollars, Baptiste. “I feel like shit.”

“Hm.” She looked like she regretted asking. “Well. I need you to do me a small favor, alright, kiddo? I promised an additional product. Other than the Antidote. Because — and you’ve gotta face this — it isn’t very fair that you’re the only one who can make black holes. What, am I gonna cart you around every time I need one? No. Of course not. And I just happen to have a prototype for a black hole gun. But I need the gun part. The prototype I have is broken.”

I swallowed. The words were flying over my head. Like planes. “I thought you were all like, ‘know where your sentences are going, bitch.’ Sparknotes me.”

“I need you to get me the gun.”

“What?” I rubbed my hand over my eyes. “I don’t own a gun. Do I look like a fucking NRA donor?”

“But you can get one. It’ll be quick. In and out. Just like all your other robberies.” She pulled out a photo. “I need a specific model. The matter-aggregate one used by Gravity Enforcement officers.”

I took the photo, and sighed. I was familiar. “They’re called matteraggs. And I’m not making a black hole into the Gravity Enforcement Headquarters. That’s the worst possible place I could go. I’d get caught, like, a hundred percent of the time.”

“Surely you must know someone in the force,” Baptiste prodded. “Just break into their house.”

“The only cops I know are the regular asshole kind.”

“Think, Tea. Use your brain.” ‘For once’ was the qualifier she didn’t have to add for me to get it. Baptiste the asshole. She totally wanted me dead. At least if I did die I’d cost her ‘shares.’ Everyone else who got eaten by black holes died free-of-charge.

I lowered the water bottle. “Actually. I might have a place.”

“There we go. I knew you could do it.”

“Fuck off.” I grabbed my phone. The screen hurt my eyes. 2:17.

Baptiste watched me, inscrutable. “Also. In terms of a timeframe. I need it by tomorrow morning.”

“Fine. Fucking whatever. I’ll do it tonight.” I groaned and closed my eyes and ran my hands over my face. I thought about Kyle and the paintball guns. “Think you could spot me fifty dollars?”

“I would. I totally would! But money’s kind of tight right now —”

“Oh my God,” I said, and teleported out of there.

Chapter 10: The Long Island Expressway

If you've ever driven on Long Island you know that the people here are just about as stupid as people can get. I was optimistic about humanity until I got behind the wheel on the Long Island Express: everyone driving on the LIE immediately becomes "one nasty sonuva bitch." It's an incurable condition.

And driving at night is leagues worse. Don't get me started on the sonuva bitches who drive on the LIE at night. They're hazy, to begin with — all the cars and the street lights get fuzzy and immaterial, like those fizzy candies on your tongue except they're on your eyes, and you stare and you blink and you think they might slip right off the face of the earth if you tilted your head. I've never felt closer to god than on a highway at night. I could swim in those reds and golds and greens, brilliant and scattered like the crown jewels had taken a spill on the expressway. It's a spiritual experience.

Usually I'm knocked out of the spirituality shit when I get honked at, which is a lot, because — like I've said — Long Island drivers are nasty sonsuv bitches. That was what happened when I veered off the exit to my aunt's house. I got cut off and then honked at. That made me angry, and when I got angry I had a tendency to curse people out in my head while ignoring my speedometer. Me speeding resulted in me being pulled over, which then resulted in the cop discovering my blood alcohol level (.00). Totally legal. That wasn't what got me arrested. What got me arrested was that after I took the breathalyzer out of my mouth and he suggested we do it again just to be sure I kind of said "fuck off," under my breath, and he said, "excuse me?" and I said, "nothing," but when he handed the thing back to me I said "fuck off already," for a second time, and then he decided to take me into the station.

The county jail wasn't spiritual. It was fucking depressing, firstly due to the Long Island cops, who I hated maybe even more than regular Long Islanders, but doubly so cause I figured that sitting sort of pathetically in a pair of handcuffs was probably not the best image for me seeing as how I was intending on actual criminal activities. I thought about using a black hole to teleport out, but decided it was too big of a risk, considering they knew who I was and my family and all. I didn't want resisting arrest to be added to my many crimes.

"Hey."

Aunt Violet sounded tired. "Teagan? Is that you?"

I was slumped over the phone. I propped up my arm on the wall to give us at least some goddamn privacy, but Liam kind of passive-aggressively shouldered me out of the way, then leaned up against the telephone box possessively. Like I was gonna steal the fucking phone from the wall. He probably thought he was the protagonist of some dramatic procedural — jokes on him, cause I was the protagonist here, and this sure as fuck wasn't a cop show.

"Yeah. It's me."

"Where are you?"

"The county jail. They got me for speeding."

"I'll be over in ten." Aunt Violet lived twenty minutes away. I wondered if she'd be driving the speed limit.

I hung up and set the phone back in place, then sat back down on the cold, hard office bench and crossed my arms in front of my chest. The officers didn't move. None of them gave a fuck about me except for Liam, who was special. Liam was probably pissed cause he knew they'd have to let me go with a fine. The reason nobody in the police force

fucked with my Aunt Violet was that she used to be married to one of their officers. He died tragically — right in the line of gravity-enforcement duty — and she went into mourning for a good five years. It wasn't like she had to worry about money, cause she had a job as a secretary, and police pensions are blown out of the ass, but her husband's death still changed her. Like, on the inside. Nobody was gonna arrest her beloved pseudo-progeny for mouthing back at an officer. If I had robbed someone, maybe, but they didn't know about that yet.

"Officers," greeted Aunt Violet at the door. "Teagan." I managed to look up at her. She had thrown on a modest purple paisley dress and she wasn't wearing any makeup, and that meant she looked way more wrinkled and old than she usually does, and I felt kind of bad for waking her up until I remembered that I was trying to rob her house.

"Hey." I looked away from her old face and stood. "Sorry. About all of this."

Liam cleared his throat. "Someone else you should be apologizing to, kiddo? For your disrespect?"

What? Did he want me to suck his dick? "Whatever."

He frowned and grabbed me by the back of my coat, jostling me over to the desk. The secretary slid over a clipboard. "Sign here."

"Hey. I gotta delicate constitution. Leggo." I waved off his hand and scanned the paper. He jostled me again. "Jesus, dude. Are gonna give me a chance to read it, here, or —"

"This is basic paperwork. You don't gotta read it." I signed, reluctantly, mostly so he wouldn't jostle me again, and he snatched it up. "Guilty people read the paperwork."

"I'd rather be guilty than a fucking idiot."

"Get that dirty mouth from your boyfriend?"

"More like your mom."

He flushed. "You're lucky I have so much respect for your aunt."

"I'm so sorry, Liam," said Aunt Violet, her hand moving to my shoulder, as we walked to the door. "We'll pay the speeding ticket."

The door slammed shut behind us. Aunt Violet and I stood in the dark, leaking silence like busted faucets. She was staring at me — something I couldn't return. I was still having trouble looking at her wrinkles.

"Teagan."

"Hey. Look. I'm sorry about — that. I just — they're assholes. Some guy cut me off, then honked at me about it, so I sped up a little, and —"

"I don't want an explanation. I'm taking you home."

She turned, and started to her car.

"Cool. Cool." I hurried a bit to keep up with her. Aunt Violet had a quick stride and a bright red sedan that purred beneath your sneakers. "Like — my home? My parent's house, I mean? Or — your house? 'Home.' What are we talking, here?"

"My house. I'm not leaving you with your parents."

"Cool. Awesome. Totally." I hesitated at the passenger door. "Like, uh — by the way. Thanks. For back there."

"Get in the car, Tea."

Aunt Violet's house was a Victorian. It was warm in the night air, bleeding out a homely yellow glow like someone had shot it in the guts. It even smelled good. Either Aunt Violet baked bread or she bought air fresheners.

“Your clothes are filthy,” she said, herding me into the downstairs bathroom. “Take a shower, then meet me in the kitchen. I won’t have you muddying up my house.”

“Jesus. Okay.” She pushed me inside and closed the door on me, and I fumbled for the light switch. It was more fluorescent than the rest of the house, and I caught my reflection in the mirror over the medicine cabinet, lit unforgivingly.

I looked like shit.

Staring at myself felt voyeuristic. The seventeen year old with stringy hair and bruised ribs wasn’t me. The only thing that me and my reflection had in common was that we occupied the same physical space. When I waved, the mirror waved back — but lots of things would wave back if you waved at them. For example: people. I chose not to believe my reflection so that I didn’t have some sort of mental breakdown when people looked at me and could tell instantly I wasn’t normal. Lying is one of the most self-centered things you can do. It’s the vice of a narcissist. Of course I’d mostly lie to myself, if I was going to do it at all. I was only human, alright?

I peeled off my sweatshirt and draped it over the mirror, then cranked the hot water to scalding.

I’m not gonna lie. It felt pretty fucking good. Like, orgasm-level good. Letting the water knock at my head, watching grime spiral down the drain. I even got behind my ears. Like I was some kind of kid. It didn’t hurt that Aunt Violet’s soaps were all way nicer than mine. Who the fuck would pass up a chance at smelling like vanilla chai? Most of the time I smelled like whatever foreign-country fast food I managed to scrounge up for lunch. And her towels were soft, which made me think she used fabric softener, even though nobody went to the fucking trouble of using fabric softener anymore. Aunt Violet was just like that. She had soft towels and steely eyes.

When I got out of the shower she was in the kitchen, cooking, with an apron wrapped around her thin hips and everything.

I sat down at the counter and lowered my head to rest on my forearms. My voice was muffled against the marble. “Hey.”

“You found the clothes I left you.”

I looked down at my shirt, which was advertising some bowling place and also about three sizes too large on me. I think it must’ve belonged to her husband — it was way different than anything I owned. The fit was alright, though. I usually bought clothes that were too big. I didn’t like fabric to box me in.

“Oh. Yeah.” The boiling sounded good on my ears. “Smells really good.”

“Matzo Ball Soup.”

My throat was suddenly a bit stuffed. “Yeah?”

“That’s your favorite, isn’t it?”

“No — yeah. It is. That’s cool. Of you to make, I mean.”

“I had the matzo already. It would be silly to waste it.”

“Totally.”

The stove clicked off, and she ladled the soup into two porcelain bowls with purple flowers skirting up their edges, like the foliage wanted a taste. No way. That soup was all mine, flower bitches.

“Here.” She slid me a bowl. “Eat.”

“You sure?” I asked, already raising the spoon to my mouth.

“Eat, Teagan.”

I tried not to look too desperate as I inhaled the food.

“Hungry?” remarked Aunt Violet — less of a question and more an observation. I nodded anyway as I tipped back the bowl to drink the broth, and Aunt Violet disappeared behind the china. It made me feel all warm, from head to toe, fuzzy like the street lights. “When was the last time you had an actual meal? Jesus. When was the last time you slept a full night?”

“Dunno.” The fact that Aunt Violet sounded genuinely concerned made me uncomfortable — partly because she was the one who looked all old and tired and shit, not me, and partly because I was planning on robbing her and all. “Probably recently. I dunno exactly.”

“Where have your parents been?”

I slurred around the matzo. “I dunno. Around.”

“You don’t know a lot of things.”

“Fuck yeah I don’t,” I agreed, then swallowed. “Sorry. Frick yeah. I don’t.”

She rubbed her hands over her face. She wasn’t eating — I didn’t get why. She was thin enough already. “You can stay here tonight. But you should talk to them.”

I swallowed a hunk of dough that stuck in my throat. “I don’t want to.”

“Your mom would probably appreciate it.”

No. I washed it down with broth. “She doesn’t like having me around. I’m embarrassing. And I’m not even hers, anyway.”

She raked her hand back through her graying hair. I really hated looking at old people. Old people were the most depressing thing I ever looked at. “Jesus.”

My spoon scraped the bottom of the bowl. My limbs all felt like they were floating, a little. “Are you still in the church?”

“What?” she stared at me, but she was kind of slipping in and out of my own view. “Yes. Occasionally. Why?”

“You keep saying Jesus. Lord’s name in vain.”

“You’re nodding off. Christ. Get upstairs, will you? I don’t want to carry you.”

“Okay,” I said, and then I didn’t remember anything else but a warm hallway and sheets that smelled like fabric softener and someone staring at me from the doorway before my eyes slid shut.

I was woken by my phone.

I’d never changed the ringer from the factory settings, so it was stuck forever on some dumb xylophone jingle. I hated it cause whenever anybody called me all they ever had to say was stupid depressing shit. Cheerful ringtone, stupid depressing shit. The xylophone must’ve caused some kind of allergic reaction in me by now. Like, pavlovian — a sweatiness in my palms, and also a splitting fucking headache. Maybe that was just how I felt all the time.

“Did you do it yet?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose and didn’t open my eyes. The phone was propped up on the pillow. I could probably fall back asleep. “Who is this?”

“Don’t play dumb. Though that probably comes pretty easily to you. Did you get it?”

“I literally just woke up.”

“Stop groaning, for God’s sake. I’m not asking you to kill a man, Teagan, just that you borrow a handgun. How hard could that be?”

“Leave me alone.”

“Get up. It’s past ten in the morning.” I could see Baptiste’s grimace crystal fucking clear. Since when was she in my head like that? “My apartment. Noon. Don’t be late. And stop being such a pussy.”

And then she hung up on me.

Aunt Violet was hunched over a mug on her marble kitchen island. She was the aesthetically coherent sort to know her name and stick with it, and that meant most of her upholstery was a muted purple — drapes and throw pillows and couch cushions. A pale lilac cabinet painted with twining orchids was reserved entirely for teas. Violet was an avid tea enjoyer, at least in terms of the products, if not the person. She’d stocked up on oolong, mango, jasmine, green, cinnamon, sleepytime, crazy shit from every continent except Antarctica, and also Australia. Which wasn’t a particular motion against Australians — they just weren’t known for making awesome tea.

I took a flowered mug (lavenders) from the drying rack and then the seat across from her. She reached to her side and slid me the pot, which was still steaming.

“Thanks.” I poured out a shaky cup. “Um. For letting me crash.”

“Good morning, Teagan.”

I set down the pot. The steam obscured her expression, slightly, giving her old-lady face an ethereal sort of quality. “Your house is — clean.”

“It’s unlive*d* in. Empty.”

“Yeah.” I took too big a gulp and coughed, pounding my chest. “Sorry. Sure. Uh — unlive*d* in, or whatever.”

She looked up at me. She was in a dark purple sweater and I could see how thin she was and it made me afraid. “You need to stop antagonizing these officers. I won’t be there to save you next time.”

I looked down at my cup. “Hey. They’re the ones who were assholes to me, okay? Fucking — acting like I’m the scum of the earth for no reason.”

“We both know it’s not just that.” She slid her drink to the side with her index finger — she was still wearing her wedding ring, polished like new — and leaned across the counter, towards me. “I talked to your parents. They said you’ve been disappearing.”

“Disappearing. What — how. What does that even —”

“Teagan. Last night. Where were you going?”

Wow. That painting on her wall sure was interesting. What was that? A fuckin — dog or something? Creepy. “Uh, actually — you’re probably not gonna believe me, cause I wouldn’t believe me, but I was — uh, coming here. To see you.”

Violet paused, and shook her head. “Really.”

“I know, it’s — Hey! I’m serious. I wanted to — learn more about my family history.”

“Family history.”

“Yeah. Um. Specifically — Sam.”

Violet stilled. Her knuckles whitened on her cup. “You want to talk about Sammy?”

Yeah. That picture was definitely a dog. Baptiste probably hated dogs. I bet she killed dogs for fun or something fucked up like that.

“Yeah. Like his — records. Or, um. Just general history. Personal belongings.”

A click made me jerk back to look at Violet, but she had moved to the door, which she was now unlocking while shrugging on an olive pea coat.

“Shit, wait. What did I —”

“You were such a sweet kid.” The light streaming through the door framed her flat, gray hair like she was a paper cut-out doll. “I don’t know what’s gotten into you. But I don’t like it.”

“Violet, wait. Where are you going?”

“Get your life together,” she said, which was not a location, and closed the door behind herself. By the time I made it outside she was backing her cherry-red sedan out of the driveway.

Shit. I deflated, fiddling with the drawstring of my sweats, and then slapped my hand on the doorframe as I went back inside. Whatever. At least if she was gone I could get the gun.

Chapter 11: Kiwis

“Jesus Christ,” said Kyle, watching me mow down lines of Zombies. “You’re a fucking beast, dude. What is with you today?”

I took another sip from the Red Bull can. I had it propped between my elbows for optimal mid-game consumption. My entire body was vibrating. I hadn’t slept since Baptiste and I had our fight and I was starting to slightly hallucinate.

“I don’t think you should be drinking this,” said Diego (one of Kyle’s friends, super lame) as he prying the can from my arms. It was dumb of him to say because I was very obviously the pinnacle of health. “You’re gonna have a heart attack or something.”

“I can’t die. I’m a god.”

Diego’s lips thinned to a grimace. I killed Kyle onscreen, and he threw the controller on the carpet and cursed me out. A minute later I was shot by a guy with a Cyrillic username.

“Shit.” I set down the controller. “God damnit.”

“My turn.” Ann (Kyle’s other friend and fellow college student) snatched it before my sight could slow down from perceiving new wavelengths of light to just normal human actions. “Can you turn back on the blood settings?”

“Sure,” said Kyle.

Diego was finishing off my soda. I wrinkled my nose at him. “Dude.”

He crushed the finished can between his hands and tossed it at Kyle’s garbage can, but missed. “Sorry, Tea. Needed to cut off your supply.”

My phone buzzed. I pulled it out. It was Evie.

Evie: I saw the video of the black hole

Evie: That was you right?

Me: Yeah it was me

Ann’s character killed mine. “Texting your girlfriend, Tea?”

“Yeah, actually.”

“I don’t blame you, dude. Evie’s hot as fuck.” Kyle trailed off as he traded shots with Ann, then glanced up at me. “Have you seen her ass?”

“Have I seen my girlfriend’s ass?” I shoved him, and he flopped sideways onto the bed before popping back up, laughing. “Don’t talk about her like that, man. This shit is exactly why I didn’t want to tell you morons about us.”

Kyle took a drink of coke and burped. Diego made a face. “It’s fucking true, dude. I’m sorry. Accept the fact that’s you’re dating a fucking goddess.”

“I mean, if you’re going off of physical shit, then sure, Evie’s pretty. But, like, ninety nine percent of girls are hotter than ninety percent of guys already. The thing is that Evie’s also got a great personality. She’s super fucking nice and smart. And that’s ten million times more valuable in a person. In my book.”

Kyle and Diego were both staring at me sourly.

“What?”

Kyle shook his head. “Dude. All girls are definitely not hotter than all guys. Have you seen Ann?”

“So you’re calling men attractive?” Ann shot Kyle on screen. He stopped laughing and backed his guy up behind a crate to hide. “That’s gay. No offense, Diego.”

“Aren’t you, like, in love with Tom Sweeney from AB calc?”

“Yeah, but I’m a girl, dumbass. It’s not gay if a girl is attracted to a guy.”

“This is fucking stupid,” I said, standing. “I gotta go. Diego can play for me.”

“You’re always going places, dude,” said Kyle.

Ann had been the first to see the video. She’d sent it to Kyle and Kyle had freaked out about how I was working for somebody who had, like, superpowers. Kyle was kind of stupid.

I stumbled my way over the piles of dirty laundry and empty pizza boxes on Kyle’s floor. “I promised my mom I’d go to this family dinner thing.”

“Okay,” said Diego. “Stay safe.”

“What are you, a mom? Relax, Diego.” Kyle looked from Diego up at me. “See you, dude. And don’t stay safe.”

“Later.”

“Stop eating all the appetizers. It’s rude.”

“Sorry.” I ate another cheddar cube. I’d taken possession of the cheese tray early on, and now everyone else was too polite to challenge me for it. More brie for me, bitch.

People were slowly filtering in. Aunt Violet’s house was Windex-clean, but that wasn’t unusual. In pots on the mantle and the coffee table and the kitchen counter (it was an open concept living room) purple tulips were bunched in cheerful arrangements. A diminishing stack of red solo cups slumped beside two gallon jugs of Arizona iced tea and mix-it-yourself Bloody Marys. Behind us a set of glass doors led into the garden, which was clean, dry, and brown.

“You should walk around. Say hi to to your cousins.” I swallowed. “Also smile. You seem depressed.”

“I’m not depressed,” I said, depressed.

“It’s rude to finish food that’s meant for everyone.”

I made a face and grabbed a handful of Gouda, shoving it into my mouth.

“Please, Teagan. We’re not animals. When you’re invited to a party —”

She kept talking about table manners after that, but I wasn’t listening anymore, because I was staring at the woman who had just stepped through the front door.

“Baptiste,” I said, through a mouthful of half-chewed Gouda. As I stood the tray of appetizers on the coffee table was knocked askew. “Shit.”

Baptiste glanced up at me from her conversation with my aunt. She looked at me like she didn’t have any idea who the hell I was. She’d abandoned her fancy suit for a fitted, boxy sky-blue dress with no sleeves and a straight neckline. Her hair was pushed back by a pair of turtle-shell sunglasses. Her nails, shaking Aunt Violet’s hand, were long and painted a brownish-red which matched her pumps. I pictured her on the cover of *The Economist* and got angrier.

“Hey!”

Baptiste’s brow creased. A few partygoers oofed as I shouldered through them. “Hello?”

I lowered my voice. “You gotta get out of here, dude. My mom knows who you are. She’s gonna recognize you from therapy.”

“Calm down.”

“Hey, it’s okay. If you leave now I think I can convince her you were just some rando.” I smiled and held my fist out for a fist-bump. She did not bump me. “What?”

“I’m not leaving.”

“Why? Party scene too dope?”

“I’m not joking with you, Valentine. I’m here on business.”

My smile dropped. “Is this something related to Gravitass? You should’ve called me.”

“Come here.” She grabbed my elbow and pulled me into a hallway like this was her house or something.

I shook her off. Violet’s walls were thin, and I could still hear people chatting.

“What’s up?”

“Chief Miller was invited, so I decided to drop by with him.” Baptiste nudged her sunglasses up a little on her forehead. “You know what Marcus talked about — teenagers film things on their phones and then post those videos to social media. I thought we could perform the black hole trick again at this party, to encourage more videos.”

“Is that a joke?” It obviously wasn’t a joke. “You want me to make a black hole in my aunt’s living room?”

“Yes, exactly.”

“I’m not doing that. People could die.”

She seemed surprised. “You weren’t worried about killing people at the country club.”

“That was a huge ballroom. This is — my aunt’s house. I’m not putting my family in danger on purpose. That’s fucked. Is that why you came here? To try and get me to put my family in danger?”

“I honestly didn’t think you’d have a problem with it. You love making black holes.”

“I don’t love making black holes.”

“Did you think your robberies didn’t have a chance of killing somebody?”

“I didn’t— my robberies are totally different.”

“How is it different? You’re making a black hole in a populated area. You can’t see the other end, where you come out — I’d say what you were doing was actually more risky than what I’m suggesting.”

“What is your problem?”

“My problem is that you’re my employee, Teagan. If I assign you a task—”

“An employee? I’m your entire fucking operation, asshole.”

“You’re not my entire fucking operation. I’m my entire fucking operation. The only reason you’re even here is because you have the most valuable commodity on planet Earth sitting in your fucking chest. Do you think cash manifests from thin air? This is what you have to do if you want to make money — you have to take risks. Maybe — if I suggest a safe way to spread publicity — I’m owed a bit of trust.”

“I thought you didn’t do business based off of trust.”

“I thought you wanted this job.” She paced away, down the narrow hall, and began to roll her shoulders. When she turned back she was all stiff-looking. “Now go back in there and do the promotion.”

I looked back at her. I couldn’t quite figure out which muscles she was flexing to achieve that shape. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“I’m holding my frame.” Baptiste seemed proud of her weird fucking posture. “It’s an alpha grindset —”

Sometimes people say that in the heat of the moment they didn't know what they were doing. But I was used to split-seconds. So I knew exactly what I was doing when I closed our distance and punched Baptiste in the face.

"Fuck you! Hold frame now, motherfucker!" She crumpled backwards, wobbling heel-over-heel, hands flying up to her nose. And then she rebounded, slapping me so hard I thought for a moment that she'd knocked out a tooth.

"Fuck!" I spat, recovering, and tried to kick her, but she slammed her fist into my stomach before I could get anything out. I coughed, keeling over. Anger curdled in my gut like spoiled fucking milk. Also bile. I wanted to throw up. I wanted to kill her. I wanted to run away. I opened my eyes and everything was black, and then it was too fucking bright, because she and I were falling through infinite gravity.

"Oh, shit," blubbered Baptiste, and I was kneeling over her in the break room, punching her in the face again and again, and she couldn't move, because if she got an inch further away from me and my magical fucking gravity powers she'd be fucking dead.

"You want a fucking black hole?" I screamed. "Is this what you wanted, asshole? Yeah?"

"Teagan." Her voice was wet with blood, and she raised her hands like she was going to surrender, then locked her bony fingers around my throat.

I wrenched back, wheezing, but her hands were made of fucking steel or something all of a sudden. "Fuck! Let me — fuck! You! Fuckin' — bitch!"

I choked some more, and gasped, then finally managed to wrestle her hands away. I pulled back, panting. In response she sat up a little, preserving the distance between us. She looked pretty bad. I felt like I'd swallowed sandpaper.

"You're a spoiled fucking brat," spat Baptiste. A line of blood ran down her forehead, gathering on eyebrow and pooling over her rapidly blinking right eye. Another traced from her nose. It shone on her split lip like gloss and spilled over her chin in huge, fat, red drops. "And I don't need you."

I was a little taken aback. "Fuck you."

"Insecure bitch."

And then we were falling onto a dirt road in rural New Zealand.

I stood, and lurched away, falling over myself. Baptiste puked on the lush blooms of emerald green grass. It was morning, and the sun was just above the hills, and the sky domed perfect and clear. "Jesus."

Baptiste didn't say anything. She was too busy throwing up.

"Yeah. Fuckin' eat it, bitch." I stumbled until my back hit a rustic fence post. "Hope you like sheep, you motherfucker."

Baptiste coughed and ran her sleeve over her mouth. She looked up at me, and her eyes widened in realization. She pushed herself unsteadily to her feet. "Wait. Teagan, wait. Think about what you're doing. I don't have any money. I don't have —"

"Oh, what? Do you need me, now?" I was shouting by now, over the trees and picturesque farmscape. "Should've fucking thought of that before you choked me out, bitch. Fucking rot in hell!"

And then I teleported back to America, and Baptiste was left on the other side of the world.

Chapter 12: Anticholinergics

I was only in the white room for a split second before I landed on my feet in a familiar bedroom. It felt good to be able to do it again. I felt powerful. I was powerful. I was a powerful person. I was only shaking a little.

“Evie.”

She looked up at me, then down me. The lights were low and I could barely see her. But I was still pretty clearly disheveled. “Dude. You look like shit.”

“You’re probably going to want to wash your sheets after this,” I said, climbing into his bed. “I’m kind of a fucking — crime scene right now. Got in a fight with this old lady. You should see her face. Totally fucked up.”

“Ew.”

My hands fisted the sheets, which stopped the trembling a bit. My arm hurt. “What’re you watching?”

She took a sip of coke, and pushed some brownie bites over to me. “Blade Runner 2049. I’m making my way through the series.”

“Cool.” I held out my less shaky, non-bruised hand, and she sighed and passed me her soda. I took a sip, then cringed. “Orange Vanilla? Fuckin- seriously?”

“Leave me alone.”

I shrugged, and licked the lip, which she wrinkled her nose at.

“Anyway.” I reached for his remote, raising the movie volume until I was confident nobody would hear me. Someone’s guts were coming out of their belly. “Wanna—”

“Sure,” she said, quickly, so I leaned forward and grabbed her face kind of gentle-like and then kissed her.

I missed her a little the first time — more like her cheek — so I had to try again, actually thinking about it this time. And then I didn’t think about anything at all.

When I took a breath she spoke.

“You probably shouldn’t be—” she trailed off. “Are you okay? You look like you’re about to cry. Did you actually get in a fight?”

“Shut the fuck up, dude,” I said, and kissed her again. She was soft, physically, but also in a way that was sort of intangible and poetic. “Shut up.”

“Okay,” she whispered. I shifted so I was kneeling over her and tried my best not to listen to the sound of people dying on the screen behind us.

So, yeah. Evie knew about my black hole abilities. She was super chill about it. That night I watched her sleep for a while and then made a black hole on my side of her mattress. It ate some of her sheets and then myself.

One of the mental effects of being an astronaut was falling. I read that in a book. Up in space, outside of the ship, Earth thousands of miles below. They felt like they were falling. They were hanging in space but falling in their heads. For most people it fucked them up.

For me it was a casual way to spend an evening.

The wind whistled past my ears and up my nose. My stomach ached with the vestiges of instinct, reduced from nausea to a pleasant shiver. I spread my arms and plummeted freefall towards the beastly Atlantic.

You and I both know it isn't fucking mental. The astronauts were falling. Space is relative. They were only still from the perspective of their ship because their ship was plummeting down with them, tumbling eternally, too high to ever land. The human body knew. It sent "holy fuck I'm gonna die" signals to your brain. My holy fuck I'm gonna die signals were all messed up by now. I got them, like, every second of every day, which might as well have been not at all.

I caught myself about 500 feet above the Atlantic Ocean, and then fell through the break room, back into the stratosphere. For a while I kept at it like that until I fell into the break room and see Haoyu. In the split-second our eyes meet he looks expectant and half-pissed. Fuck. Back in reality, I stared at the rapidly expanding ocean, trying to weigh which would be worse: drowning or listening to Haoyu lecture.

The next time I fall through he catches my hand and nearly tears my shoulder out with the change in momentum. But he doesn't stop me from falling — instead he steers my trajectory into his own black hole slightly to the right of mine. His black hole drops me onto a plastic chair, which snaps in two, and dumps me on the tile floor.

"Fuck!" I scramble to my feet. Fucking STEM majors. "Dude."

"You're falling again," he says, shaking out his wrist. "You can't do that. You're gonna get caught."

"I was in the middle of the ocean."

"Satellites exist. Freako."

He stalks over to where I was standing and picks up the broken plastic, gravity-warping it out of existence, then rearranges the chairs to be even. After he's done he stares at the table soberly. I pace back and forth.

"Are you dying again?" He grabs at the wrinkled nylon on my elbow. "Come on."

I shake him off. "Yeah. Can I get a— you know?"

"You want a hit?"

I hated when he said it like that. "Yeah."

At Haoyu's room I spent two seconds looking for a chair and then gave up and sat on the floor. I covered my face with my hands. A sheen of sweat clung to my forehead and cheeks and palms. Pretty much everywhere. I was ubiquitously sweaty. "I think it's happening."

He stifled a smile. "What? The baby's coming?"

"Real fucking funny." I slouched, rubbing my face so I could still be sure I felt something. Everything was fuzzy, like when you breathe too much oxygen and get tingles. "That's a riot, Haoyu. My imminent demise. Laugh it up."

"I will."

"I'm serious, dude." He was not adequately sympathetic. "You gotta help me out here. Please."

"You shouldn't come here unless it's an emergency," he said, as if he wasn't the one who made the black hole into his bedroom.

"This is a goddamn emergency. I'm dying. That's an emergency." I wiped my palms on my shorts with the fervor of someone anticipating an inspection by a judgy mortician. "Nobody's gonna see me. Okay? Where would I go? Am I gonna pay for a bus? Order a bite to eat? Jesus. Oh, fuck. It's perfect. I'm becoming delusional. Don't call me delusional."

“You’re the only one who says that.” He finally found the container in his desk, which was basically just one huge stack of papers, and brought it over. His hands were steady, like a not-dying-person’s would be.

“I’m nauseous. I think I’m gonna throw up. Can I have some? Please?”

“What do you think I’m doing? Gardening?” He dropped down to kneel beside me. “What’s with your face?”

“You should see the other guy.”

“You beat someone up?”

“Yeah, totally. Can I fucking have some, already? Can I get a fucking hit?”

He shook a pill into my hand. “Calm down, freako.”

I ate the Chinese Tums. For some reason the Chinese version of Tums worked way better on me than American Tums. It had nothing to do with the fact that Haoyu was my only supplier of Chinese Tums.

He placed the Tums bottle on the floor with one hand and lowered himself down to sit against the wall beside me. “Is your heart rate bad again?”

I stared at his ceiling and waited for my stomach to untwist itself. “You gotta get some posters in here, dude. I feel like you’re an ascetic. It’s making me sick.”

“You should see an actual doctor. About your heart.”

“You should shut up.” There was a pause. “I’m sorry. You know I don’t wanna risk being found out.”

He crossed his arms. “My government knows about me. And everything’s fine.”

“Everything’s fine and fucking dandy? Over here in China? The People’s Republic?”

“You’re teasing. I’m genuine.”

“I’m sorry. I’m just – I’m on edge. I can feel it in the tips of my fingers.”

For a moment we both sat there, quiet. I could feel him looking at my hands. I balled them into fists, self-consciously. But then I thought my knuckles looked weird. Too bumpy.

I tucked my hands into my pockets. “Do you wanna do something with me?”

“Which something?”

“I don’t know. Valorant. TF2. Something.”

He pushed himself to his feet and padded over to rummage through a bin of electronics. When he found his second controller he straightened, and tossed it back to me. “Three games. If I win, you don’t go falling anymore.”

“Fine. If I win, I keep the Tums.”

He made a face. “I don’t know, freako. I don’t want you to overdose. Your stomach would probably feel, like, really good.” I laughed, and he cracked a smile. “No more heartburn for the rest of your life.”

“Bad news for you, dumbass. How would you spend your weekends?”

We watched the TV power up, his grin faded. He sat beside me. I was concentrating on the Chinese game instructions, trying to figure out which symbol means start.

“I saw the video,” Haoyu said, casually. “Of the black hole. And the woman getting rid of it.”

“Oh. Yeah.”

“I saw you, in the video. And the woman speaking about ‘Gravitas’ — a start-up in America. Claiming to have the technology to make people immune to black holes.”

“Gravitas. Yeah.” I clicked something. Nothing happened. “Dude, can you—“
When I looked over at him he was staring at me. “You’re doing this.”

“What?”

“You’re involved.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I was.”

“It’s bad. It’s exploitative of you. And dangerous — to commodify something like that, which could save lives. You should quit.”

“I think I already did.”

He looked back at the TV. “Good. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

Chapter 13: The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Murderers

Usually on Halloween I'd teleport into Hollywood Hills and get those really huge king-sized candy bars from the celebrities. Then Kyle and I and some of our friends would hit up the elderly people's houses. Their limited sight prevented us from being clocked as way too old for trick-or-treating. Then, once it was late enough, Evie and I would swing by all of Lincoln Prep's big mansion-house parties before retreating back to her room and binging on cheesy horror movies and candy. She dressed up as the same obscure female superhero from a comic I'd never heard of every year. I got the cheap skeleton bodysuits from Spirit Halloween.

Kyle: dude

Kyle: where r u. its already like 7. old people sleep early bro

The screen was bright.

Kyle: were gonna start without u

I turned off the phone and tucked it in my pocket. I was near the Coast Guards station by Shinnecock bay, on the overgrown old bridge, staring into the dark water. The sun had just set, and you could already barely even see the waves — they were just one big mass of black.

My legs hurt. It was because I had to walk here. My chest hurt, too. That was because I tried to teleport here. And failed, and almost had a heart attack. That was because I was kind of drunk. When I drank too much the alcohol got into my bloodstream and fucked with my powers.

Sometimes I thought I was crazy. Sometimes I really thought I was just making it all up. When I got like this. Totally fucking impotent. I would try to make a black hole and I'd get this clenching feeling in my chest that hurt like a motherfucker and the gravity would dissolve. Like, my black hole penis was a deflated balloon, and my heart functions were viagra. Or something. I secretly suspected it wasn't the alcohol in my bloodstream. That this happened because I was doomed.

I ate another bite sized candy from the snickers bag I'd scored at the local dollar tree. Then I lifted my wrist to check my heart monitor. 105bpm. Goddamnit. At least nobody around me was dying currently, which was a win in my book. Mark one point down for a buzzed, impotent Teagan in emotional turmoil.

The water swelled, gradually, and eventually lapped my shoes.

I looked over my shoulder. The trick-or-treaters were still going strong. The creeping feeling that someone was watching me had followed me all the way from last week, which made me think probably no one had the stamina to be hanging around me for that long and I was just being paranoid. It still made me uncomfortable.

"It sucks out here," I said to nobody, like a crazy person, and then got up and (like a fucking LOSER) started to walk.

I ended up at the school. It was closed, and there was nobody anywhere near it, because who went to school when they didn't have to? Me. I guess. The front door was locked, but the windows weren't.

It was kind of funny that I spent all my time inside of here trying to get away, and now that I didn't have to be here I'd broken in. I laughed a little and fumbled blindly through the halls until I was at the window by the faculty bathroom. I stared out at the trees for a

minute, but it was more boring when nobody was trying to keep me from being here, and there was less to see in the dark anyway. Disgruntled, I crossed the hall to my English classroom instead, and found it unlocked.

In the back of my English classroom was a quote wall. Most of them were about, like, positive thinking and stuff. I didn't often think positive and I was eager to try it. If thinking positive is a lie, then thinking negative is a sit. Here is a positive thinking quote for you to think about:

“You're braver than you believe, and stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think.” — William Shakespeare

Unfortunately before I could properly begin on my positive-thinking journey I turned around. Here is a quote to describe the resulting situation:

“There is someone pointing a gun at me.” — Teagan's brain

“Teagan Valentine,” said the dude with the gun.

“Hey dude, what's up,” I tried to answer, except my mouth wasn't working, so all that came out was “Ahahshgh.” Also I was shaking so badly I was surprised my joints were still holding together. I couldn't really believe what I was seeing mentally, but my body still responded with terror.

“I saw you in that video. Of the woman getting rid of a black hole. And I thought — where did I recognize that kid from?” Sweat was running down his ear, where his ski mask was bunched up, darkening the fabric. A Forever 21 tag stuck out from the neckline. “Oh, right. That's the kid that fucking robbed my grocery store last year. With a black hole. Made me go out of business — everyone was too scared to shop at the Cogro anymore.” His lips were chapped, and pulled taught along his teeth. “Lucky for me they'd tagged you. I hope you're ready to —”

And then his head exploded.

Chapter 14: Team-Bonding Retreats

“Tea.” Baptiste sounded fed up. I felt vaguely like I had done some injustice against her: forgotten to wash the dishes, walked with my muddy boots on the clean floors. “Kid. Valentine. Kiddo, look at me. Breathe.”

Baptiste ducked into my line of vision for me. Her conservative white dress was splattered red like a fucking ugly Pollock painting. AKA every Pollock painting. Did you know that Jackson Pollock lived on Long Island? Just another point against this shithole.

“We gotta go. Alright, kid?”

Alright.

“Okay?”

“Alright,” I choked out, and my voice sounded so small I wasn’t even sure she heard me until she smiled and tucked her gun into her purse.

Walking through the main hallway of my school while covered in another man’s blood was not a strange feeling at all. I felt completely normal leaving a dead man in a classroom where I’d complained about the shitty lunches and stared out of the window for extended periods of time, and now there was a dead man there, and that was great. That was so cool. Baptiste guided me with a hand on my back like this was her school, and I was the stranger, but it didn’t really bother me because I think that’s what I would’ve preferred. If only.

She found the bathroom and wedged the door shut with the doorstop, then stooped in front of the sink and began to wash her face. It was a very gentle motion when you took into account that she had just killed a man. When she was finished she looked back at me and her expression fell.

“Get rid of that.”

“I’m fucking — freaking — like, freaking the fuck out. Dude.” I was crouched against the purple tile wall. My hands were shaking so much that I had trouble fitting in the vape pod. I tried to take a hit but Baptiste snatched it out of my hand. “Hey! Fucking give — shit.”

She dropped my vape onto the tile floor and then crushed it with her heel. Then she pulled out a cigarette and lit it. Dark smoke spiraled towards the low, chipped ceiling like a bad omen that was too late. “That thing is poison.”

“Asshole!” I stood, hands pressed into the wall, to steady myself. “Fuck. Costs me like. Sixty bucks. Shit.”

“Get over it.”

“Fuck off.”

“Are you having a panic attack? Stop that.”

“What the fuck are we going to do with the body?”

She took another drag. “I’m thinking about it.”

I groaned and tried again to catch my breath. My mouth tasted metallic. A long minute passed.

“I mean, you’ve got to use your black hole powers. Like, kneel next to him and hold on. Dump him near the warzone of a third world country. Like Iraq. Or Somalia. Or Germany.” Yellow cigarette ash fell from her shaking hands, dusting her heels. She looked down, and tapped her toe on the tile, then up at me. “What?”

“I can’t.”

“What, do you want me to say I believe in you? Sure you can.”

“No. I can’t. Not because — I can’t make black holes at all.”

“You can’t what?”

“I can’t make them. Okay? Asshole? I can’t.” My hand caught on my bloody hair. “It’s happened before, alright? It’s because I’m — I had a coupla drinks. And I get this feeling — like I’m gonna have a heart attack, it hurts really, really bad —” my hand slipped down to cover my eyes. “And then it won’t let me. Gravity stops working for me.”

“Teagan,” she said, and when I looked back her expression was carefully neutral. “Stop freaking out. It’s fine.”

“It’s not fine! Nothing about this is fine. I mean, we can’t just fucking — leave him here. Do you want to leave him here? Is that what you’re saying? Inside of my fucking school? And I can go to class with a dead dude? You want me to study English with a fucking corpse?”

“We’re not going to leave him here.”

“Then what? What are we going to do?”

“We’re gonna move him. The traditional way.” She dropped her cigarette and stomped it out, then toed it beside the trash can. “C’mon.”

“Move him? I can’t — touch that. I can’t move a dead body. Baptiste. I’m not doing it.”

She patted me, awkwardly. “Hey. Think about the alternative.”

The man was still warm. I couldn’t tell you what he looked like, because every time I caught a glimpse of his blown out head the world went black.

“Christ, he’s heavy. Put down the cheeseburger, am I right? Pretty inconsiderate of him.” Baptiste laughed. We had him slung between us, his arms over our shoulders. “Oh, cheer up, Tea. There’s the door.”

She raised her heel and pushed the crash bar, and the metal hit our knees as we stumbled into the night air, jostling the dead dude so that his head lolled backwards. Baptiste stopped us to reposition it. I closed my eyes and held my breath as his stiff hair brushed my cheek. Montauk Highway whizzed with cars, reduced by the night to a vague red and yellow blur, and though we were out of the residential streets I could still make out kids a few blocks over screaming at parents and each other and fake-halloween-decoration dead people. Down the road the green four-way stop light cast a pallor on the local businesses.

“Wait. Baptiste.” She paused. “What are we doing? Like, are we gonna Weekend at Bernie’s this bitch all the way down Main Street?”

“I was thinking we could head somewhere quiet. An alley or something. Then one of us can watch him while the other gets supplies.”

“Supplies for what?”

Baptiste was quiet for a minute. We rounded the corner.

“Sober you up.” She replied so late that for a second I had no idea what she was talking about. “We’re gonna sober you up. Raise your heart rate. Flush out the bad shit. Then you’ll be able to teleport him out of here.”

I didn’t see how I was going to sober up while toting around a dead dude. That was, like, the most disorienting thing ever. Plus the gun getting pointed at my face. That hadn’t done me any favors. If Baptiste hadn’t been there I’d be dead.

“Baptiste,” I said, as she scrolled through google maps looking for an alley. “How did you know to do that?”

“Fire a gun? I do that all the time. It’s really great, actually. Empowering.” She shut her phone down, nodding to a dumpster out back of Tony’s Asian Fusion. “I’ll teach you some day.”

“No, I mean — like. Why were you there?”

She shrugged. “Good timing?”

“Hey!” shouted a man. My heart skipped a beat. No fucking chance that was directed at us, right? But it came again — “Hey! Valentine! Is that you?”

Baptiste and I both turned around. A police car had pulled to the side of the road.

“Motherfucker,” I said. “No fucking way.”

Liam the asshole leaned out the door, gut bulging on the windowsill. Baptiste and I took a simultaneous step back. “Look at that. It is you.”

Baptiste looked at me. “Hi,” I said, softly.

“What are you doing out here?” A pair of Groucho Marx glasses slipped down his nose. He nudged them back into place. “Looks like your friend’s in pretty bad shape. Should I take you in for underage drinking?”

“He’s old,” I said.

“He’s fine,” added Baptiste. “We’re taking him home. It’s just up the street.”

“I could give you a ride. Swing by the station.”

“I’m good.” My voice was tight. Clipped.

“What did you say to me? Last time we met?” I closed my eyes. Cars rumbled past us like thunder. “Right. I remember. You implied you were having sex with my mother.”

“Teagan is a dumb kid,” said Baptiste, a little too quickly. “I get called an asshole daily. It means nothing.”

“She’s right, Valentine,” he said, eyes still trained on me. “You’re out here on the street, palling around with two clearly inebriated adults. That’s pretty stupid of you. In fact, I think that’s more than stupid. It’s concerning.”

“I’m fine.”

“I don’t know if I believe you. Why aren’t you off egging people’s houses with your little delinquent friends?” The sheer amount of glee radiating from Liam would’ve almost made me happy for him, except that his glee was coming at the expense of me probably going to jail for murder. Also I didn’t like him. “What do you think, Teagan? Would I be right to be worried for your well-being? Maybe I have a responsibility to take you in.”

“I’m sorry, Liam,” I said, slowly. “I’m sorry that I implied I had sex with your mother. Can you please go do your actual job now?”

He wasn’t letting this go. “Why are you spending Halloween with two drunk adults?”

“I’m not drunk, sir,” said Baptiste, who was staring down at her phone, texting furiously. “I’m Tea’s aunt.”

His eyes widened, and I looked down at the sidewalk. Fuck.

“No. You aren’t.”

She didn’t even look up from the screen. “I am.”

“No, you’re not. I know everyone unlucky enough to be related to that kid. Teagan’s family is very lovely. I don’t think they’d appreciate having their identities stolen.”

“It’s by marriage,” I said, and Baptiste shifted, propping the dead guy back up again. My shoulder was starting to ache. “Look. I’m covered in fake blood. It’s gonna get on your upholstery, and, like, never get out. That would suck. So can we just leave, please? Take this guy home?”

“I’m going to have to ask you to get in the back of my car.”

“Liam. Please.”

“It’s Officer Miller.” He was getting kind of mad. He opened his door, and moved to get out. “Car, Teagan. Now.”

I looked over at Baptiste. “Dude. Can you get off your phone?”

“Yeah. Sure.” Baptiste sent one last message and then shut off her phone, brushing her hair back from her face with her shoulder. “Let’s get in the car.”

I stared at her. “Are you insane?”

Baptiste didn’t answer that, instead striding forward with as much gravitas possible while under the arm of a dead person. I hurried to follow, but only because I had to if I didn’t want the “drunk man” to fall in a suspiciously corpse-like way onto the sidewalk. She’d just reached for the door handle when the police radio crackled.

We paused. Asshole Liam raised it to his ear, and listened before responding. “I’m on Montauk, eastbound. Busy taking in —”

He paused, listening.

“Got it. ETA is two minutes.” He hung up with a burst of static. “Okay, Valentine. You got lucky. Duty calls.”

“Aw, shoot,” said Baptiste, taking a step back. I followed. “It’s fine. Go. We’ll wait here for you to get back.”

He looked back at us, and then sighed through his teeth, flipping on his lights and sirens. “Remember — I know where to find you. I’ll charge you with resisting arrest if you run.”

And then he peeled out, and the flow of traffic parted.

“Oh my god.” I said. “Jesus Christ. Dude.”

Baptiste was smiling. “Yeah.”

“You did that.” She grinned a little wider. “How?”

“Marcus is in town. I had him phone one in. C’mon, before he figures out it was bullshit.”

“That was sick,” I said, stumbling a little under the weight of the guy. “That was so fucking sick!”

We dumped the body between the Chinese restaurant and a pawn shop with prom dresses in the window. My back hit the brick wall, and I slid down.

“He’s not actually gonna arrest me for resisting, right?”

Baptiste was rooting through his coat. “Who gives a shit? Better than a murder charge.”

“I don’t wanna be arrested. And you’re the lawyer here.”

She found his wallet, and flipped through it. “No. He’s not going to arrest you, Teagan. You’re fine.”

I looked up at the stars. Some of the cloud cover had cleared.

“And even if you were arrested, we’ve got the best attorney this side of the Sound with every incentive to keep you out of jail.” She stuffed some money in her pocket, and

tossed the wallet aside. “I don’t think you realize how big an operation it is we’re running. You’re a very important person.”

My neck felt a little warm. “Hey. There were no, like, pictures of that guy’s family in there or anything, right?”

“In the wallet?” She looked back at me, hesitating, then turned to something she was scrawling onto a Grand Union Hotel brand notepad. “No. No ID.”

She finished writing, and passed the note to me. I scanned the list. A can of gas. A lighter. Red Bull. Water. Clorox, gloves, sponges. And DXM, along with some other random over-the-counter drugs.

“On the other side of this alley is a CVS,” she said, passing me the money she’d swiped from the dead guy’s wallet. “You get the stuff. I’ll stay here with the body.”

“Baptiste, I’m underage. I can’t buy half of this shit.”

She blinked — her expression was kind of hard to make out in the low light. “I forgot. Okay, I’ll get that stuff, you stay here.”

“Oh, no way. No fucking way.” I pushed off the wall and stood, shakily. “I’m not staying here alone with a dead body.”

“Someone has to guard it.”

“The fuck’s he gonna do? Wander off?”

“I’ll just be five minutes.”

“Doesn’t matter. You’re the one who said I was important. Well, I’m drawing the fucking line, okay? I’m not staying with the dead guy.”

After a moment Baptiste shrugged. “Fine. Let’s both go.”

The store was brightly lit. One of those round, spherical mirrors hung from the corner of the ceiling. I couldn’t look at myself without getting nauseous.

Baptiste loaded our stuff up onto the counter. A few flecks of blood stuck to the handle of our cart. I reached up to rub it off with the hem of my shirt. The cashier, a teenage boy with bad acne and a pair of glow-in-the-dark vampire teeth, stared at us open-mouthed.

“C’mon,” said Baptiste, pushing the gas canister towards him. “We don’t got all day, kid.”

“Your costumes are sick.” He had a slight lisp, from the vampire teeth. I watched him slide the beer under the scanner. “Super sick.”

Baptiste smiled tightly, and shifted to the side a little, popping a hip. “Aren’t you going to card me?”

He flushed, ruining the illusion of vampiress. “Oh. I wasn’t —”

I looked at Baptiste in horror as my brain caught up with her words. “Please don’t give this guy your fucking ID.”

Baptiste waved me off. “It’s just a little rude. I mean, I’m always carded —” She looked down at his nametag. “—Simon. Always. So this really says more about your own job diligence than anything else.”

“Sorry, ma’am.”

“It’s fine,” she said, like it wasn’t fine, and picked up the bag.

I stuffed the CVS plastic bags under my arms and we headed to the sliding glass doors.

“You’re insane.” As soon as we stepped out onto the street I was splashed in the face by an unscrewed water bottle. I dropped the bags, swiping the water off. “What the fuck!”

“I’m calming you. Try now.”

I picked the bags back up. “I’ve been trying this whole fucking time, okay? It’s still not working. And you fucking — throwing water at me doesn’t fucking help.”

We turned the corner of the alley. Baptiste was rooting through the CVS bags, presumably for a wrench to hit me in the head with or something. “Well, I’m sorry that my water bottle offended your delicate —”

“Wait.” I held out my hand. “Baptiste.”

“What?”

“Where’s the body?”

Baptiste looked up at where the dead guy had been lying five minutes ago.

“Oh my god.” She dropped the bag and strode to the head of the alley, then turned, eyes wild, pointing at me with a bony, trembling hand. “I told you. I told you we should have somebody watching him!”

“Did someone — steal him?”

“I have a hard time believing he just *walked off!*”

“Maybe he had a partner.” I joined her at the street. It was empty. “Who, like, came back for him.”

“Chief Miller,” said Baptiste. Her fists clenched, then unclenched. She combed a hand back through her hair and then marched up the stairs to the Chinese place.

The girl behind the counter was wearing a polo shirt and cat ears. “How can I —”

“I need information,” said Baptiste. “Have you seen a large man, passed-out drunk, being carried past this store by a cop? There may have been multiple non-religious figures involved as well.”

The cashier shirked. “What?”

Baptiste pulled out a hundred dollar bill and set it down on the counter. My eyes widened. “It would be a huge favor.”

“Baptiste.” I grabbed back the 100 dollars and tugged her aside. “What side of this building did we come in on?”

“What does that matter?”

“I think —” I looked back at the cashier, who was staring at the money I’d stuffed in my pocket. “I think maybe we got the wrong alley?”

The alley to the right wasn’t empty. I covered my face with my hands and sat against the brick, hitched breath itching my wrists like needles. Baptiste dropped her CVS bags next to the dead guy’s completely stationary head. “This is why you have to think before you act.”

My hands tore down. “You’re the one who stormed into that Chinese place!”

“Only because you went into hysterics about him being missing.”

“Asshole.”

“Okay. Here we go.” She rooted through the bag and pulled out a few boxes of pills. I sat across from the dead dude and watched her struggle to get them out of the child-proof sealant, then crush them up a little in her palm.

She held them out. “Take these.”

“I’m not taking your mystery dirty overdose pills.”

“It’s totally safe. I did this all the time at Yale, to balance out my benders.” She gestured, and I took them. She cracked open one of the Red Bulls. “Here. Wash it down with this.”

“I really don’t think this is a good idea.”

“What did I say? I used to do this all the time. You’ll be flushed out like a motherfucker.” I took the can. Grit and condensation sweated down my knuckles. “The alternative is us going to jail for murder. Trust me. You would not enjoy Juvie.”

“Fucking fine. Jesus.” I cupped my hand to my mouth and then swallowed them down with caffeine. “If I die I’m suing you for ten billion dollars.”

She stared at me, contemplative, then finally spoke. “I just told you earlier you were too important to end up in jail. Do you really think I’d let you die, Tea?”

“Maybe.”

“Well. I wouldn’t. You’d lose the case, anyway.”

My head fell back to the brick. I wasn’t feeling anything. Overhead the sky was a light-pollution bloated gray.

“It might take a second to kick in,” said Baptiste, and when I looked over at her my vision burned.

“Woah.” I raised my hand to my forehead. A cold sweat condensed on my forearms and upper back. “Jesus.”

She smiled. “Try it again. Black hole.”

“Okay.” I rubbed my hands down my face, and sat up a little, focusing on the brick wall. “Okay. Okayyy.”

Baptiste waited.

I laughed. “Wait. Wait. Baptiste, I just thought of — oh my god. What about the black hole gun?”

“It’s being patented,” she said, and I couldn’t tell if she was speaking softly or I just wasn’t listening loud enough.

“Damn. That sucks.” I laughed again. I felt light. Some rigid part of my stupid brain had been smashed, and for a minute there I genuinely believed everything would be alright, and that was how I knew Baptiste had really fucked me over. When I looked down from the stars a black hole was sitting over the dead man’s body.

Before I could step forward Baptiste grabbed my arm and bent it out at the elbow. She looked so pathetic. I smiled. “Stay still.”

Using a knife she’d pulled out of nowhere, she stabbed me in the forearm, and I cursed and jerked away.

“What the. Fuck.” I took a step back as she reached, again, for my arm. “Ow. Shit. What the fuck?”

“You’re so out of it, alright? You’re hallucinating or something. I barely cut you.” She grabbed my arm and pulled the cut to her mouth, and then I was definitely fucking hallucinating, because vampires weren’t real. When she pulled away she patted my arm like someone would pat a reliable car with a female nickname. “Alright. Let’s go.”

“No. Why did you do that?”

“Stop crying. Here.” She fished out a bandaid from the CVS bag and pasted it over the cut. “Better?”

And then she was scooping the dead guy up in her arms and stepping into the portal.

“What the fuck?” I said, out loud to the empty alley, and looked down at my arm to make sure I hadn’t imagined that.

The break room is immediately fucked up. I can’t tell if it’s because my senses are out of whack or if it doesn’t like having a dead person inside of it. Which, relatable. It’s doing a weird kind of recursive effect. The walls warp, I sway a little and my vision of the walls blurs, and then they blur more on their own. Fuckin’ exponential.

“Kid.” Baptiste is shaking my shoulder. “Where does this go?”

“Mid-island.”

She looks more horrified than when she killed a man. “Mid-island?”

On cue we were dumped into the pine barrens.

“Jesus Christ. Long Island — you’re practically giving us away.” I didn’t feel it. “You hear that, Tea? Why didn’t you take us to Somalia?”

“S too far. I’d drop us in the Atlantic.” I watched Baptiste uncork the gasoline and pour it over the dead guy. Glug glug glug. “And I couldn’t take us to British Columbia.”

“You’re making things up now. When did I ask you to take us to British Columbia?”

Baptiste tossed the canister aside and took out a match. I shrugged. “It’s just the only other place I could think of.”

“Why would the only place you could think of to bury a body be British Columbia?”

“Because I’m gonna go there for college.” My head felt sick. I knew that I was following a line of reasoning which at some point had made sense, but the fine points were fuzzy. “That’s why I couldn’t take us there. It would pollute the place.”

“I forgot you wanted to go to college.”

“Asshole.” I swallowed. “Hang on. I need to — Christ.”

I stumbled over to a tree and knelt down, then threw up. Baptiste tossed the match. The dead guy lit up in a fwoom.

Baptiste joined me by the tree.

“I don’t think you need to go to college.”

I wiped my eyes and leaned my head against the bark. “It’s why I started robbery in the first place. Shit’s expensive.”

“You’re going to be rich, though.” Baptiste rubbed my back. “Do you want know how much your first paycheck’s for? I was going to mail it to you this weekend. If you didn’t come back first.”

“I don’t care.” I grit my teeth. “Christ. I feel really bad.”

“Thirty thousand dollars. It’s coming together, Tea. You’re getting the three million.”

“I think I’m gonna throw up,” I said, and then I threw up again.

“I’m almost jealous.” Baptiste sounded wistful. “I paid my own way through college, you know that? Biggest mistake of my life. I’m not even a real lawyer anymore. Or even a fucking psych.”

“You were never a real psych.”

“Yeah.”

The stars in the forest were way better than the Hampton Bays stars. I knew that from experience, but not the current moment, because in the current moment I was kneeling over dirt. The fire from the burning man was hot like raked coals on my back.

“Why Canada?” asked Baptiste. “Is it purely a distance thing? The United States has plenty of colleges. And lots of them are in California. I mean, that’s as far from Long Island as you can get, really.”

“I like the snow.” She didn’t believe me. I was starting to sweat. I straightened, and stumbled away from the puke tree, sliding down to sit against a nearby evergreen. “It’s quiet. I wanna own, like — a little cottage, one day. Go to farmers markets. No tourist seasons. Evie and I would get married. Adopt a dog. Have —”

I couldn’t stop crying. Fucking hell. I wiped my face with my bloody coat sleeve. In the light of the fire I could see Baptiste’s face better — the foundation she’d been using to cover her bruise had mostly rubbed off, exposing the mottled purple-yellow splotch just below her cheekbone. She looked at me, and I looked away. We both stared into the fire as it fumed.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“You don’t have anything to be sorry about. You didn’t kill him.”

“No. I’m sorry for hitting you. You saved my life. And I — I’m sorry.”

Baptiste didn’t react, beyond looking mildly shocked, like I was a static-y wool sweater. The flames made my forehead burn. Also might’ve been the drugs. I closed my eyes.

Boasting over 700,000 square meters of woods and meadow, Beacon Hill Park was the beating ecological heart of Victoria, British Columbia. There were nature reserves, hiking paths, carefully tended flower gardens, areas for pick-up sports, and many more family-friendly attractions. Beacon Hill Park also featured an abundance of federally-protected delicate ecology. The Strait of Juan De Fuca provided an expansive seascape for sailing, paragliding, and more. Additionally, Beacon Hill Park was designated as Mile “0”: the westernmost point of the Trans-Canada Highway. From Victoria, you could get anywhere, and from anywhere, you could get to Victoria.

If I lived in Victoria, BC I would visit Beacon Hill Park every weekend. I would walk my golden retriever Tucker on its over 450 square miles of parkland and then go paragliding on the Strait of Juan De Fuca. I would make friends with the old church ladies at Bingo night and run through tall, green grasses and I would do all of that while never even thinking about heart attacks. I could picture it perfectly.

I stopped picturing me frolicking in Canadian parklands when Baptiste nudged my shoulder. She was sitting beside me, dirt on the soft fabric of her slacks. The body was on fire. “You awake?”

I blinked at her, and rubbed my eyes.

“How are you feeling, Tea?”

“Sick.” My hands moved to scratch clumsily at my temples, nails leaving faint white lines over acne scars. It smelled like when I cooked meat. Maybe I’d become a vegetarian. “Fucking sick.”

“That’s fine.” Her right hand patted my shoulder absentmindedly. Her expression was like wax-paper. “My first job was bussing tables at a restaurant. Did I ever tell you about that?”

“You haven’t told me any parts about yourself.”

“Right. I wouldn’t have.” She spoke so softly I half thought she was talking to herself. “Me and my friend worked weekends at Harry’s. Bussing tables. The owner — Harry — was an asshole, and the food was shitty, and they were probably barely turning a profit. And then in June, we found out — he’d been stealing money from us. Swiping tips off the top of our paychecks.” Her hand curled, nails scratching lightly, subconsciously, at her palm. “My friend, she went and confronted Harry. Threatened him, screamed at him. He fired her.”

“Let me guess.” The light made patterns on my eyes like a branding iron on the hide of a stubborn bull. “You burned the — the fuckin’ building down.”

“No,” she said, softly, and then she didn’t say anything else.

I leaned into Baptiste’s side, head falling to rest on her shoulder. She stiffened, and then relaxed gradually like she had to manually release all of the muscles that had tensed in her shoulders. Her hand squeezed my shoulder, and when she spoke again her voice was a little choked-up, like she wanted to cry.

“You can’t quit. I was serious when I said I needed you.”

“Yeah, sure. In, like, six fuckin’ months I won’t even have superpowers anymore. I’m not serving some great purpose within Gravitax or whatever. I’m just fuckin’ — around.”

“Point five ppm.”

“What?”

“Point five parts per million gallons of water. That’s how much of your blood is needed to make the Antidote.” Her hand was so still on my shoulder. Like she was afraid. “Chief Miller and I’ve been collecting it for eight years, through the police station’s blood drives. Gravitax is you, Teagan. I cannot separate the two.”

My hands fidgeted, smoothing down my shirt. The fire was bright and spitting like a rabid animal, or like me when I chewed gum and it got stuck on my molars, spit pooling in the soft flap of meat where my teeth bump my lips, acrid on the bubblegum. I covered my mouth with my hand. The flames leapt orange, shooting sparks up at the conifers, and a fleeting moment they mirrored the stars before fizzling into a deep, chalky black.

Sparks that outlined the pine leaves.

“Hey. Baptiste.” My tongue was dry. “Did we just — start a forest fire?”

Baptiste looked up at the trees. “Motherfucker.”

“Hoo-lyyy shit.” It was warm. I kind of wanted to fall asleep. “You suck at this.”

She pushed herself to her feet, hovering between doing something and running away. “Shit. Shit.”

I had already settled on inaction, as the blood in my legs was too congealed by now for calisthenics. Every beat of my heart rippled through mud. “They didn’t offer how to get away with murder 101 at Yale?”

She shot me a dirty look, but it was blunted — she seemed surprised that I remembered where she’d gone, even out of my fucking wits. It was clear to me Baptiste thought I was a fucking idiot.

“Oxygen deprivation,” she said.

“No thanks?”

“On the fire, Teagan. Make a black hole above it.” I got what she was saying, and tried to pull the shattered glass of my consciousness back into a window-approximate, so that I could see through, to the physical world. A black hole pulsed once and then expanded over the burning dead guy. “Lower.”

The black hole evaporated, and I tried to steady my vision enough to make one just a few feet lower. The flames died as it bloomed. Also a couple of surrounding trees were pulled in. “Perfect, Tea. That’s great.” The black hole belched. Baptiste stumbled, and anchored a hand on a nearby trunk. As the force of gravity grew she wrapped the tree in a bear hug and shuffled around so she was as far from the black hole as possible. Her hair was all pulled forward and her shirt collar had unfolded. “Great. Okay, Tea. Enough. Shut it down.”

“That’s great. Really cool.” She was relieved. “What if you connect it to the river?”

“What?”

“The river!” She pointed to a paltry little stream a few yards away that I hadn’t even noticed. “Dump the river on it.”

“That’s a great idea.” I connected the two, and immediately the black hole over the dead guy sprayed water like a busted nozzle. Baptiste and I both got doused, and fish landed next to my foot, flopping uselessly on the peatmoss. “Shit.”

The guy sizzled. Baptiste wiped a clump of mud from her hair and grabbed a water bottle from one of the CVS bags, stumbling over to put out the last of the sparks.

“Jesus Christ,” she said, staring down at the dead body. “We really fucked this up.”

Without the fire I was suddenly very, very cold. Wind cut through my damp clothes like the sharp end of a shattered beer bottle.

“I mean, I don’t regret it. He’s a piece of shit who definitely doesn’t deserve proper funeral rights.” Baptiste clasped her hands. “But still. Jesus. Kind of tragic. Here, wait — I’m getting a call.”

She answered the phone. “Hello?”

I turned away from the dead body. “How the fuck are you getting service out here?”

“Yes, that’s me. I remember you — yes.” She paused. “You saw the video? Oh. That’s fantastic. Yes, I’m available — any time this week, any time at all.” Pause. “Thank you. Absolutely. I look forward to our meeting.” She lowered her phone. She was grinning. “That was our first investor, Tea.”

“Chief Miller?”

“No — our first new investor. With, like, actual money.”

“Awesome. Can we leave, now?”

“Yeah. Wait.” Baptiste picked up some loose leaves and sticks from the ground and tossed them onto the body, as camouflage. They rolled off. “Shit. Yeah, whatever. This isn’t working out. Let’s just go.”

A black hole began to form. I felt a familiar tug in my toes, then my chest.

“By the way, Teagan.” Baptiste clapped my back. “I forgive you.”

Chapter 15: Lactose Intolerance

It's 4 am on November 5th when I enter the break room and find it completely destroyed. The chairs are overturned, the tables flipped, the refrigerator askew — as if someone ran at it with their shoulder — the walls chipped and scuffed. It's not a good environment for me to be in, considering it's 4 am. I wouldn't choose to be awake at such a time, but then there are the nightmares and hauntings I'm experiencing when I'm not awake, which give me the motivation to get up early. I'm so tired I half-think I must be dreaming the destruction. Then I see Haoyu slumped in the corner like an especially despondent Cabbage Patch Kid. His head is between his legs.

“Haoyu?”

He looks up. Jesus Christ. He looks bad. His eyes are bloodshot, face irregularly flushed and damp. He wipes snot from his nose with his shirtsleeve.

“Holy shit. Are you okay?”

“I got my SAT score back.”

“Cool?” He cries harder. “Sorry. Not cool?”

“Fuck.” He stumbles to his feet, and kicks the fridge. “Fuck!”

I watch him kick it again. It's dream-like. Like watching a tv. “Did the fridge say something rude? Vegetables call you names?”

He turns on me. “What was your score on the SAT?”

“I don't know. I don't remember.”

“Yes you do.”

“I don't, dude. Genuinely. I took it in the summer.” That seems to placate him, because he turns away and starts kicking the fridge again. It doesn't budge. “Is that why you're beating up the furniture? You got a bad score?”

“I got a 780 math.”

“What? That's great.”

“A 780 math. And a fucking 400 English!” The sobbing makes him slightly off-balance. His next kick whiffs.

“Oh, shit.” He chokes back the tears and resumes going at that fridge, with no sign of slowing down. I walk over. “Dude.”

He doesn't say anything. There's a clear gap for me to say something comforting but I can't really think of what. So I don't.

He falters. “What are you doing?”

“You're asking me? Really?” I throw another punch. “Ow. Shit.” I rub my knuckles and then give it another go. “Oh, fuck. This guy's good. Watch out.” I mime ducking a punch thrown by the fridge, then pretend to knee it in the balls. Haoyu watches, bewildered, as I jerk back and slam my palm over my eye. “Fuck. Right to the face.”

“Freako.”

“You should see the other guy.” I point to the fridge. “There he is. Yeah. Completely unharmed. Oh, shit!” I wave, and roll up my sleeves, miming spitting out a tooth. “Looks like he wants a round two. I'm going back in.”

I go back to pretending to have a fight with the fridge. Evidently I've made Haoyu feel silly because he stops kicking it and instead stands there with his typical judgy expression plus 50% more snot. It ends with me writhing around on the floor like I've been

shot. I forget at what point the fridge got a gun but I think my dramatic reenactment is pretty good anyways.

“Stop it.” I let go of my imaginary organs and sit up. “I get it.”

I wiggle my hands at him. “Take my gun, child. Get revenge on this fridge. It’s totally evil.”

He grabs my hands and pulls me up. “No.”

“Fine. Don’t revenge me. You can be the ring girl for round three, then.” He stares blankly. “You know — the girls in bikinis who hold flags and stuff.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Okay. You can just get shot by the fridge then I guess. That’s cool too.”

“I’m not getting shot. I was just —” His voice is suddenly very small. He seems embarrassed. “I’m stupid.”

“Yeah. No shit. You’re beating up inanimate objects.” I clap his elbow. “C’mon, Haoyu. You’re the smartest guy I know. Plus you’re totally ripped, because you’re insane. You’re the whole package. Who cares about the fucking SAT?” His blushing fades a little bit. He wipes his nose. “I thought you wanted to go to a Chinese university anyways.”

“Yeah.” He pauses. “I don’t even want to be a foreign physicist.”

“Exactly.”

For a moment we’re both silent. One of the thrown chairs slides down the wall, where it has been leaning precariously, and smacks the tile floor. Haoyu is crying again. But I can tell he doesn’t want me to say anything about it. So I don’t.

“Did you eat today? Other than a pre-workout shake, I mean?”

“I missed dinner,” he admits, wiping his face with the hem of his shirt. “I was too busy studying. And then I got my SAT score back and ripped a page out of my textbook.”

“Ouch.” I’m trying to wrestle the fridge back into place. My phone buzzes.

Baptiste: Meeting tonight! Will be out late! *party emoji* We are now valued at 500,000 dolgars

Baptiste: *Dollars!!

Then, a few minutes later:

Baptiste: You staying over tonight?

I type a reply with one hand.

Me: not for a bit

Baptiste: *thumbs up*

The fridge is really heavy. Haoyu watches as I work up a sweat shoving at this thing. It scoots about a nanometer every minute, just enough that I can feel it move and have my hopes raised, but not enough that it makes any material difference. Finally I decide to pop a small gravitational concentration a foot from its right side. The black hole drags back it into place, then dissipates.

I lean on the straightened fridge. I’m only slightly out of breath. “Wanna get food?”

Tap tap. Modesty’s pepto-pink paws were scrabbling at the glass.

“Jesus. Chill, little dude.” I pushed up from where I was crouching, and reached into the cage, gingerly lifting her up to my chest. I felt bad for naming her Modesty. I thought it was funny at the time, but it’s kind of a sucky name. Names that actually mean shit are

dumb in general. Like, what? Am I supposed to be a tea drinker for the rest of my life or something?

She squeaked.

“Aw. It’s okay. I’ve got you.”

Haoyu was behind me, eating lasagna leftovers we’d found in my fridge. His voice was muffled. “Why don’t you want your parents to hear you, again?”

I put my finger over my lips, then turned back to the mice. “I haven’t — been sleeping at my house, exactly. I don’t want them to see me here, cause then they’ll ask me questions and stuff.” Pitbull popped out of the orange cross-container tube, and after him came three more who I hadn’t gotten around to naming yet. My powers had come back with a vengeance after Halloween. I was bleeding gravity like a fucking stuck pig. Whatever a stuck pig even was. “I’ll be done in a minute.”

“Aren’t they worried about you?”

“Nah.”

“What’s this for?”

I glanced back. He was staring at my Victoria tourism pamphlet, which I had spread out like a poster next to my collection of free University of Victoria merchandise. I’d filled out approximately ten million surveys to get that merchandise. I also had 20 alternate free printable pamphlets for various Victoria BC attractions in my desk. “Decoration.”

“Right. And what’s that?”

He was pointed at a collection of mostly-empty pill bottles in the corner of my room.

“Vitamins. Mainly Vitamin C. I don’t want to get scurvy. Also, did you know you can’t overdose on Vitamin C? It’s water-soluble.”

“Water-soluble?” He thought about it. “Wouldn’t that make it easier to overdose on? If it dissolves in your body quickly, and enters the blood stream?”

“No. It’s cause, like —” I realized I’d been taking at least three Vitamin C pills a day over their recommended limit and I didn’t actually know what made them okay to eat a lot of. “It’s water soluble. So it gets — soluble. Like, uh — whatever. Trust me, dude. It’s fine.”

“Okay.”

Modesty squirmed around in my hand. I ran my thumb over her back, but she was sort of scratching my palms up, so I set her back into the terrarium.

“I’m gonna get you guys out of here.” I stared at the cage. “Yeah. I gotta get you guys out of here.”

“Please. Your house is boring.”

“You’re such a bitch.” I found their cage beneath a pile of dirty clothes. Haoyu laughed and took another bite of his lasagna. “Can you hold this for me?”

He glanced down at his hands, holding the food, and swallowed. “No.”

“Right.” I propped it up on my knee. “Okay, cool. I got this.”

“What do you mean you don’t accept mice?”

The woman behind the desk capped her chapstick, and set the tube down on the counter. It rolled towards me. Black cherry. She was staring at Haoyu, who was standing just to my left and carrying our food but in an innocuous plastic bag I had dug out of my kitchen sink because you weren’t allowed to bring food into the animal shelter. Not like they could

kick us out. It was hard enough for animal shelters to stay open, what with all the biases against words “cat” and “cockatoo” nowadays, since those words also meant a size of black hole. “I’m sorry. We’re strictly cats and dogs.”

I picked up my mice crate. “You’re not really much of an animal shelter if you don’t accept all animals.”

She swiped her thumb up her phone screen. It was so greasy that from my perspective the overhead lights left a roadmap of fingertracks. “Try somewhere up island.”

“Shame on you.”

She didn’t look up from her phone, but ran her tongue over her lips subconsciously. “Scuse me?”

I didn’t know why I was suddenly talking like an old white lady. My knuckles whitened on the handle. “Fuck this. I’m leaving. Yeah. I’ll take my business to a different rescue shelter. What do you think about that, huh?” She obviously didn’t think much about it. “I cannot believe you don’t take mice. Mice! A very basic animal! Fuck this place.”

“Tea. Calm down.” The woman behind the counter watched me with vague disgust. Haoyu massaged my shoulders, pulling me back from the counter. “It’s okay. We’re all calm.”

“I am calm! I’m calm.” I pinched my nose bridge, and nodded, taking a deep breath. He patted my back. “Okay. I’m okay.”

“Teagan?”

For a second I was certain that voice was Liam’s, and I was about to be arrested again, but when I turned around it was just Kyle.

“Kyle? Oh, shit.”

“Haven’t seen you in a few weeks, dude.” He clapped my shoulder. Kyle had a green apron tied around his waist and yellow rubber gloves that went up to his elbows. “What’s up?”

“Not much. What’s up with you?”

“Not much.” Kyle looked at Haoyu.

“Hey,” said Haoyu.

“Yo, dude,” said Kyle. “Nice to make your, uh — acquiescence. My name is Kyle.”

“Kyle.” Haoyu offered his non-food-holding hand. “I’m Jack.”

I snorted, then cleared my throat when they both looked at me. “Didn’t know you worked at the animal shelter.”

“Volunteer, bitch.” Kyle stopped shaking Haoyu’s hand and crossed his arms defensively. “I like animals.”

“Cool. I’m trying to donate some mice.”

“We don’t take those.” He peeled off his gloves, tossing them in one of those gray industrial trash cans. “I’m pretty sure the Riverhead shelter has a rodent section.”

“Cool. Thanks.”

There was a moment of silence. Haoyu took a bite of lasagna behind the plastic bag.

Kyle didn’t say anything about the food, which was pretty cool of him. “I hope you feel better.”

I was caught off guard. “What?”

“That’s why you quit, right? Your aunt came in and told our boss that you got sick. Um, like — something chronic?” Baptiste had been making up diseases for me. I wondered what the specific disease was. Or if it was just a general wasting-away. “That fucking sucks.”

“Thanks. Yeah, it’s been, uh — rough.”

There was an awkward pause.

“How do you guys know each other?”

“Church,” I said, as at the same time, Haoyu said, “Online.”

“Online church,” I clarified. Kyle looked confused, but I was on top of that before he could get out another question. “So, uh — we gotta go. It was nice seeing you here, though.”

“Okay. Cool seeing you. Feel better, man.”

“I’ll try!”

“Don’t count on it.” Haoyu pulled me back so that we paused at the door. “Tea’s affliction has a very low survival rate. So I wouldn’t get your hopes up. Actually, death is a very likely possibility.”

“Shut the fuck up.” I shook off his hand and punched him in the chest. He looped his arm around my shoulders.

“And Teagan is definitely not a fighter. I’ll tell you that. The person standing before you has pretty much given up on any possibility of a continued sentient existence.”

Kyle laughed awkwardly. “Is — uh.”

“He’s fucking with you.” I hit Haoyu on the back of the head and walked backwards so the door opened, doing my best to keep up an innocent, possibly-disease-riddled expression. “I’m fine. Really. I’ll see you around, Kyle.”

I rummaged through the freezer aisle for something good. I’d let the mice out out back of a Walmart, and now I was inside the Walmart, doing what people typically do in analogous situations: get as fucked up as possible. Haoyu was keeping watch somewhat maniacally for passing store clerks. I wasn’t sure what he thought was going to happen. I was paying for the stuff. What, were they gonna tell us off for shopping? Plus the place was crowded. Haoyu waved awkwardly at a girl as she moved past us to grab a bag of frozen peas. He leaned over.

“What song is this?”

“What song?”

“The one they’re playing.”

I realized that Walmart was playing a song. I hadn’t noticed. “I don’t know, dude. You think I’m keeping up with music? I’m not keeping up with anything.” The bottles clinked as I sorted through them, scanning labels, then chose the store-brand maraschino cherries. “Just sit tight.”

He crossed his arms and leaned back on the fogged-up glass door. “It feels awkward.”

“Don’t you go shopping?”

“Usually my mom does.” He watched as I selected a pint of Neapolitan and put it in our cart, on top of the gummy bears and snowcaps. “Is that ice cream? I don’t eat ice cream.”

“Who doesn’t eat ice cream?”

“I’m lactose intolerant.”

“That’s a made up disease.” He smacked the back of my head, and I leaned out of the freezer, then hit my head again on the shelf. I ducked, rubbing the bump. “Fuck. Calm your tits, alright? I know you can’t eat ice cream. It’s fro-yo. Okay? Teagan’s looking out for you.”

“Fro-yo has lactose.”

“No it doesn’t. That’s the whole point of fro-yo.” He grimaced, raising his eyebrows at me, as if to say that fro-yo definitely had lactose in it. “Why would anyone eat fro-yo if not for a lactose intolerance? Why would anyone give up ice cream for a worse substitute if not —”

“It’s in the name. Frozen-yoghurt. Fro-yo. Yoghurt has lactose.” He grabbed the Neapolitan and put it back on the shelf. “Get sorbet.”

“That shit is gross. What about gelato?” He crossed his arms. “Fine! Fine. We’ll get gross sorbet. To accommodate your totally real ‘lactose intolerance.’”

“You’re such an asshole.”

“Yeah, well, you shit when you drink milk.” I picked a tropical fruit sorbet and led him past the gun aisle over to the alcohol. “I never even thought about that, though. Fro-yo is frozen yoghurt. That’s crazy.”

“You never thought about that?”

“Why would I think about that? I told you, dude, I don’t eat fro-yo. It’s fucking gross.” I found the brand I was looking for, and reached for the rear of the stack, grabbing the neck of a bottle and teleporting it out to my car on the sly. Okay, so I wasn’t paying for all of the stuff. How could he expect me to pay for alcohol? I wasn’t legal. “I would suck cow tit any fucking day rather than eat stupid yoghurt.”

“Yoghurt is made from — okay. Okay.” He took a deep breath. “Nevermind. It doesn’t matter.”

I picked out another bottle of alcohol. I was trying for the sweetest one, but I couldn’t remember which that was, so we’d have to test them out in the car.

“Do you drink a lot of alcohol?”

I shot Haoyu a look, but he didn’t seem judgmental, which was actually pretty out of character for him. “No. Not really. Unless I’m with people, at a party or something.”

He nodded. “I get invited to a lot of parties. I don’t go to them because I’m scared that the people I get close to will be put in danger.”

“Throw this in the cart, will you?”

“I just ask because I’ve never.”

I was busy sorting through their silly straw selection. “Never what?”

“I’ve never had alcohol.”

That surprised me. I tossed in some boxes of party favors, and wheeled the cart over to the self-checkout lane. He followed. “Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Not even a sip of beer from your uncle?”

“Plenty of people have offered it to me. I just don’t like to put poisons in my body.” I shot him a look. “My body is a temple.”

“First ice cream. Now alcohol. Your home country’s a fucking dystopia.” He pinched my arm. “Kidding! Sensitive.” I finished scanning the stuff and entered my credit card details. “Well. We can just eat ice cream, if you want. I’m not peer pressuring you or anything.”

He shrugged. "I don't care."

"Okay. But I'm not peer pressuring you. To be clear." The machine beeped. I took out my card. "One time when I went over to my girlfriend's house for dinner her parents said I had corrupted her. And that I was a corruptive influence."

"That's mean."

"Yeah."

"Don't worry, Tea." I handed him a paper bag to carry out. "I would never take you to dinner with my parents."

I was sitting in the front seat of the Hugo, pouring Vermouth over a generous portion of 'sorbet' in a large brand-new bowl from the kitchen appliances section at Walmart. I even did a little flourish at the end. You know, when bartenders are serving drinks and they kind of raise and then lower the bottle? I wasn't exactly sure how to describe it. I wasn't sure it did anything. But it looked cool.

"You look cool," Haoyu admitted.

"You like that?" I grinned, and gestured for the alcohol. "This one time a few years back I got stuck in Europe. I couldn't make a black hole off the continent and I had to pay for a plane ticket. So I did a lot of waiting."

"Waiting?"

"No — waitressing? Whatever. Bussing tables. Serving drinks."

"Did you wear a uniform?"

"I guess."

"I can't imagine you in a uniform."

I dumped in the candy. "I bet it makes you mysterious."

"What?"

I was focused on mixing with a rubber spatula until the bowl was a slushy sort of consistency. "Saying no to parties. I bet that only contributes to your problem. Kids love a mystery."

In the supermarket everybody had moved out of Haoyu's way. Which might've been nice now, but it wasn't good for his long-term development. Being able to wriggle and shove the wrong direction through a crowd of angry people was a useful skill of mine. Especially in the city.

"You're not very mysterious, though." I handed him a straw. "Too bad."

"I'm not mysterious?" He seemed disappointed.

"No."

"I thought I was."

"No way." I took a sip from the custom-drink bowl. Haoyu watched, enraptured, and I looked up and made a face at him. It was predictably fucking disgusting. "That's okay. I hate mysteries. I'm done with them. I'm too misanthropic for solving mysteries."

"Your constitution is too delicate?"

"I've got bad fuckin' circulation. Feel my hands. They're fucking freezing." I held my straw in my teeth as he took my hands. His were warmer, but not by much. I snatched them back and took the straw out of my mouth. "Not right now, maybe. I'm drinking. That makes my hands warm. Just trust me, alright? I wouldn't last long in an Agatha Christie."

"I promise I'll fend her off, then."

“That’s funny.” Actually, it was conceivable that Haoyu didn’t know who Agatha Christie was. I wondered if there was a Chinese equivalent. Probably. I thought about explaining the British mystery literature genre, but by then Haoyu had picked up the bowl and was drinking off the edge, having abandoned his yellow heart-shaped crazy straw. So I decided it would actually be too overwhelming.

He was kind of chugging it. I tugged the bowl down. “Dude. Chill. I got the straws for a reason.”

He set the bowl down wiped sorbet from his upper lip. His nose was flushed an angry pink. “There’s a question I got wrong on the math section of the SAT. Because I did not understand the words they were using.”

Oh, shit. Haoyu had better not get upset again. There was no way I was gonna let him beat up my glove compartment. “That sucks.”

“I failed a math question because I didn’t understand the English.” He fiddled with the straw, bending it this way and that, so it looked less like a heart and more like saggy boobs. Then he wound it up and crushed it in his fist. “My dad is dead and I don’t know why. And I’ll never know why. Because I don’t know the English.”

“If there’s something you want me to read —”

“You don’t know the English either.” He dropped the straw. It unfurled on the car floor. “Nobody does. It’s a language we weren’t built to comprehend. Do you know that birds can see colors we can’t? Because they were selected to. By evolution.”

Sun filtered through the blue tint of my windshield. It colored my dashboard green. Haoyu’s strong nose was tinged pink by the light.

“Mice, too,” I said, and he looked up at me. “I get it. Mice can hear ultrasonic frequencies. We can’t. The universe can speak English. We can’t.”

“You understand?”

“Yeah. I get it. We can’t do black hole math because we can’t speak English. The secrets of the universe are inaccessible. Because we’re not talking the right language.”

“I’ve never even visited his grave.” He looked sick. I took another sip. “Have you ever heard of Schrödinger’s cat? The physics idea?”

“The physics idea?” I hoped my expression was incredulous. “I’m stupid, Haoyu.”

“It’s a quantum mechanics idea. So, more than physics. Or — the new physics. If you put a cat in a box —” I could see him trying to work through a translation — “with, uh — a radioactive object that — if an atom decays, the box detects that, and releases a poison which kills the cat. Until you open the box, you can’t tell if the cat’s alive or dead, right?”

“Sounds like animal abuse.”

“So when the box is closed, the cat is both alive and dead, basically. That’s what quantum mechanics said. And I thought — you know, if I didn’t go, if I didn’t see him like that. Well, the same principle, simply. Maybe he’s alive.”

There was an awkward pause. I was hesitant to butt in on Haoyu’s obviously big, vulnerable moment. I also didn’t know what to say. Had I ever gone to my mom’s grave? Yeah. A couple times. But mostly I just didn’t think about that shit. Maybe it helped that my parents never talked about her. If I was living with my dad now, and he missed her, and everything — yeah, I’d probably feel worse about it. Or maybe not. How could I know?

“There’s a phrase in English. Let the cat out of the box. Which is to, like, reveal a secret.” I hoisted my legs up onto the seat. “Just, um — a funny coincidence, right? With the

Schrodinger's cat thing. Like, who keeps putting all these cats in boxes? Stop putting the cats in the boxes already."

"My dad didn't come up with the black hole theory I told you. I did. I made it up. I lied, because I wanted an explanation. But it's really just bullshit. I don't know anything for sure."

Haoyu's reveal didn't really surprise me, to be honest. Even if his dad really had come up with that theory I still didn't think I would really believe it. "Yo, it's okay. Me neither. Like, there are more things in heaven and Earth, Horatio, than dreamt of in your philosophy, right?"

He hesitated. "Thanks."

"For what?"

"Listening. Not hating me, I guess."

"Why would I hate you?"

"Nevermind." He thought about it. "I meant being here. I'm glad you're here, with me. In the black hole."

I shifted so I was drinking a particularly strawberry-heavy part of the tropical slush. My brain freeze doubled but I was too tipsy to feel it. "The feeling is mutual, bitch."

Chapter 16: The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up

Me: yo wya

Me: I thought you wanted to meet

I was at the police station's monthly blood drive except I was the only was donating blood and the blood was for Gravitas, not the police station. I came the the police station's basement to donate blood biweekly now. Gravitas had started selling my blood (Antidote) to the government and various other organizations. So, like, we were finally making money, basically. My paycheck for this past month had been ten thousand dollars — nearly half the money I'd lost when my Yugo was robbed.

Baptiste: im in jail *sad face emoji*

Me: ???

Me: jial???

“Teagan?”

I looked up. Evie was standing at the door to the basement, wearing a fall-appropriate sweater and starched jeans and a deep frown. Oh, shit. I kinda wanted to leave but the IV was still clipped into my elbow. “Evie. What are you doing here?”

“I was stopping by to see Liam and my dad. Liam told me you were down here — donating blood.”

The room was large and mostly clear except for all the blood donating equipment and various other storage materials. It was well-lit, but without windows. It definitely didn't feel claustrophobic.

“Yeah.” I sat up on the blood-donating chair, awkwardly. “How've you been?”

“I guess you wouldn't know. Since you've been dodging my calls for the past month.”

I tore out the IV. “I gotta go.”

“I heard from Kyle that you're missing school.”

“I'm gonna get a GED. It's no big deal.” I tied off the bag of blood and dropped it into the appropriate box.

“Dropping out of high school isn't a big deal?”

“I'm making, like, a hundred thousand dollars a year. More than that, as Gravitas expands. I don't need to go to high school.”

“That's crazy — it's not just about the money, Tea.”

“Easy for you to say. Cause I'm the one who's going to a private school, right? I'm the one who has, like, a million-dollar college fund?”

She flushed. “That's not fair. It's not fair for you to be mean to me. I'm worried about you, and you're acting like nothing's wrong.”

I tried to step around her. I was a little bit dizzy — I definitely needed an apple juice or cookie or something. “Nothing is wrong.”

“Right. You disappeared because nothing happened.” She grabbed my arm. “I went to your house. Your parents said they hadn't seen you come home. That my dad told them you were fine, and that's the only reason they hadn't called the cops.”

I didn't look at her. “That's weird of them.”

“It is weird. Why would he say that? Why would my dad know where you are and not your own parents?”

Probably because Chief Miller was working with Baptiste. And she would've told him to call my parents. I shrugged. "I don't know."

"Great. Awesome — you don't know. Can you tell me where you're staying, if not your house, at least?"

"Europe."

She was caught off-guard. "Really?"

"Yeah. I was in Europe. Paris, mostly. I needed a break." Who the fuck was I kidding. I hadn't left Long Island. My neck was all fucked up from sleeping on Baptiste's couch. "You know it's not a big deal for me. To get around like that. I'm sorry — I should've called you. I was just—" What was I? "Tired. Shit, wait. I'm getting a call."

I tugged my hand from Evie's and raised the phone to my ear.

Baptiste's voice was scratchy. "Tea. Thank God."

"What's up? You were arrested?" I turned away from Evie, who was glaring. "Dude, crazy coincidence. I'm at the police station right now. I could probably just teleport you out."

"I'd rather you bring me bail, and then I'll get the charges dropped."

"Why were you arrested?"

"Don't worry. It's not related to our business. Do you remember Halloween?"

It was such a stupid question I didn't even bother to answer.

"Your cop friend — Chief Miller's son — is accusing me of public intoxication." Not my friend. "I need you to bail me out so I can duck the trial. If I go to trial I'll have to tell them my real name and then I'd be imprisoned for stuff a lot worse than public intoxication."

"Awesome."

"I'd be up against numerous charges. Larceny. Grand theft auto. Arson. Faking a psychiatry degree. Breaking into a high-security prison. Breaking into a morgue. Breaking out of a children's hospital. Extorting \$200,000 in ransom from the Northwest Orient Airlines. Orchestrating the 1971 prison riots. Assassinating a major political figure. Stealing Amazon packages off of the stoops of the elderly. Impersonating an Amazon delivery driver. Sowing general malcontent. Bringing my S&W across state lines. Using my S&W on the line between two states. Murder, recently. And some miscellaneous petty crimes."

"I thought grand theft auto was a video game."

Baptiste sighed. "I'd ask someone else, Teagan, but you can literally teleport."

I debated it in my head. If I bailed Baptiste out, a con would be that Evie would get mad at me. A pro would be that I would be less likely to go to jail for accessory to the murder of that guy on Halloween. A con would be that Baptiste would also be less likely to go to jail for the murder of that guy on Halloween. A pro would be that Baptiste not ending up in jail made it more likely that I'd get paid.

"Fine. I'll bail you out."

"Great," said Baptiste. "It's a thousand dollars. And please — do what you do. I don't want to shell out company revenue for this."

I took a moment to get it. "You want me to steal your bail money?"

"It's going to bring big returns for you."

"Stop being a fucking entrepreneur on my ass for one second. I'll get the money, alright? But not for the big returns. I'll get it because I like you as a person." That was stupid. I didn't like Baptiste as a person. "I'll get it because I owe you one, for you letting me crash at your place."

“Cool,” said Baptiste, and I hung up.

Evie was incredulous. “Crash at her place? I thought you were in Paris.”

“Yeah, I did both.” I avoided making eye contact with Evie. “So — like, I gotta go, I guess.”

“That’s super weird, Tea. You were staying at your boss’s house?”

“For a bit, yeah, and maybe still. Currently. It’s not weird.”

“It’s super weird. Baptiste is really weird.”

My stomach turned. I felt the same foggy chill that I felt when I was arguing with the lady at the animal shelter about getting rid of my mice. “I think we should take a break.”

There was a pointed silence.

“Are you breaking up with me?”

“Maybe.”

I couldn’t look at her. I didn’t want to see that I’d hurt her. Which I had. I just didn’t want to see it. After a few million years she walked over to the stairs, and when I finally did look over at her I could only see the bottom part of her, because of how going up stairs works.

“Fine. We’re done.” And then she walked out the the police station basement for good.

I showed up at the jail a half hour later, which was longer than the ten minutes I’d promised, but at the Southwestern bank I was robbing I’d almost gotten walked in on by a lady trying to deposit her cat. I’d had to do some damage control with the surrounding security cameras. That was the price of doing robbery in the terrible, shady area known as anywhere west of Ohio. All non-East Coast Americans are insane: you couldn’t pay me to live in California.

The Sheriff’s Office was lit up against the night, just an hour from closing time, diffusing gently against the hulking black monolith that was the jail behind it. The lobby had those black seat-belt-like dividers you see at amusement parks leading in a cyclical path to the jail’s spartan front desk, which might’ve been the shittiest Disney World ride possible. I sure as hell didn’t feel like I was at the happiest place on earth. The room was pretty much empty, except for a middle-aged woman with stiff, over-dyed hair slouched on one of the waiting area chairs, flipping through the entertainment section of Newsday. I ducked the belt and headed for the receptionist’s desk.

I knocked on the plastic window divider, and the woman behind the counter looked up. “I’m here to bail out Baptiste.”

She looked down at her computer. “Sorry, who?”

“Baptiste.”

“We don’t have —” she paused. “Do you mean Jacqueline B. Kennedy? Middle name Baptiste?”

I sighed through my teeth. “Yeah.”

“The bail’s set at a thousand dollars.”

I dumped my wad of stolen cash on the desk. “Thanks.”

Just as she accepted the payment and I was ready to leave the door opened behind her. I groaned. Liam.

“Teagan!” he shouted before I could make my escape. “Don’t walk away from me.”

Yeah, I wasn't going to listen to that advice. I made a break for it out of the door, and he followed at a brisk job. "Teagan!"

I got to the door of my car, fumbling with the key. I could feel him huffing and puffing behind me. Blow me, wolf, cause this pig's not gonna squeal.

My hands were shaking so bad from that stupid fucking line that I dropped the key, and ducked to grab it. "Shit."

When I came back up he was right behind me, pulling something from his belt. My hands went so numb I dropped the key again. We were in the middle of a flat, empty, sparsely-lit parking lot. I felt like a prairie mouse under the shadow of a hawk. A stupid hawk, but whatever made adrenaline in my brain was going crazy for it anyway. The low light only made it worse — I couldn't see anything, couldn't calm down, couldn't clear my head. I wanted to run, but my legs wouldn't move— and there was nowhere for me to go, anyway. Nowhere to hide. He was saying something, and raised the object, but I was too scared to hear or even see anything, too far gone to this great fuzzy pounding heart-racing bullshit living in my brain, choking me out, blackening the pavement. I ducked down, hands over my head as he pointed it at me, and screamed for my fucking life.

That lasted for what felt like ten hours. He backed off, and let me get it out of my system. When I shut up and opened my eyes he was two car spaces away from me, staring blankly, phone dangling in his hand.

A phone. No gun.

I struggled to breathe. My hands gripped the coat on my chest. My face felt hot. Probably because of the screaming. A few people in the jail had wandered outside, watching.

Liam raised his hands. "Valentine. Calm down."

"Shut the fuck up," I said, breathy and barely audible. "Fuck. Jesus Christ. You're gonna fucking kill me."

He glanced at the onlookers. "I'm not — I didn't do anything to you. I did not hurt —"

"Shut the fuck up." I said it to the ground as I scrabbled for my keys.

He started to walk towards me. I felt metal, and unlocked the door, then paused. The entire backseat of my Yugo was ripped to fucking shreds by a black hole the size of a fruit bat. I flushed, and it disappeared. Fuck. I'd just gotten that upholstery redone.

He was getting closer. I slid into the slightly-mangled front seat. "Back off!" I shouted as I slammed the door shut.

He moved in front of my car, dirty cop hands on my poor Yugo's hood. "Get out of the car, Teagan! I need to talk to you about Halloween!"

I started up the car. He let go as the engine sputtered violently. I prayed gravity hadn't crapped out my engine, but the crappy quality was in itself pretty typical. "Get out of my way!"

"Get out of the car!" Instead of replying I revved the engine again. This time he slammed his hand on the hood. "I'm pulling you over for a random search!"

"Fuck you!" I backed up, and the crowd at the jail front watched as I peeled around him to the parking lot exit. And I drove until I found somewhere I could teleport.

The break room is empty. I'm glad. It's not like I don't enjoy Haoyu's company. I just don't want to see him at this specific moment. The place is still destroyed, too. Lazy fucking prick.

I restore the chairs that are still intact to their original positions. The ones that are split down the middle or have their aluminum legs bent I get rid of with a quick black hole into deep space. I right the tables, which is hard, because they're heavy and have too weird a center of gravity for me to use a black hole to turn them over. I end up grunting like a madman and falling on my ass a bunch, but they end up all back in place. I neaten the interior of the fridge, wiping up leaked juice pouches with my sweatshirt hem. Then I get around to the chairs stuck in the wall: there are two of them, one lodged in the corner, another with its leg physically piercing through the plaster.

I go after the one wedged in the corner first. It's really in there good. I end up using the same trick I used on the fridge — a small warp that pulled it towards the ceiling — but accidentally overdo it and send it slamming into the ceiling tiles. Shit. It drops with a crash, and I wince — like anyone else is gonna hear it. I set the chair back in its place and go to work on the one lodged in the wall.

That one comes out pretty easily. I don't even have to use a black hole. That isn't the significant part of me pulling it out of the wall, though — the significant part is that the hole left by the chair leg hasn't just punctured the wall. It's passed through it.

I drop the chair. A faint yellow light shines through the coin-sized hole. And there's noise. It's a very recognizable noise to me, but it still takes me a moment to process the fact that there's noise at all. And cold. The air near it is very cold, compared to the break room's usual perfect 70 degrees Fahrenheit. Snow drifts through the hole, spiraling down to cling to the tile and melt in a neat square beneath the ceiling vent. I shiver, then looked through.

Beyond the break room wall rises the New York City skyline.

The city is blanketed white. It must be very early morning. Yellow taxis and candy-colored cars and humans under spinning black umbrellas weave through the streets below. The break room is hanging at least a few thousand feet above the residential block. I raise my hand, and my pointer finger passes through the opening without any discernible change, except that on the outside it's windier. I squint, following the line of my finger, then shift it to the right, and then back, then to the right again. I stare in silence for several long moments. I'm only half-sure I'm not dreaming. Beyond my fingertip is a significant change to the familiar skyline: beside the empire state building's spire, tucked delicately within the soft yellow cast of surrounding windows, are two fully-intact twin towers.

Chapter 17: Hors D'Oeuvres

“Teagan!” Marcus’s tie was loosened. He might’ve been sort of drunk, I think. Or maybe he was acting. My impression so far of Baptiste’s friends was that everyone was shady as fuck and lied about everything. “Teagan. You have to show — you have to, Amanda, you gotta see this —”

He was leading an Asian woman in a mustard-yellow pant suit. The party was for the opening of the physical Gravitass offices — which was where we were, currently. It was mid-November and Gravitass’s value was one million dollars. Baptiste had already sold the antidote to several private companies, though she had a patent on its formula. Apparently no one knew what it was but her and Chief Miller. And me, now. Because it was my blood.

“What do you want?”

“Watch this,” said Marcus, to Amanda. “Tea. Steal my pen.”

I opened a pinprick black hole in Marcus’s suit pocket. It helped that he had a dose of Antidote: I didn’t need to worry about killing him. The pen was sucked in, along with some threads from his shirt.

“Incredible,” said Amanda. “How did you do that?”

I opened my hand that wasn’t balancing a plate of mini-foods, and another black hole appeared, dropping the pen into my palm.

Marcus laughed. “That’s fucking sick.”

Amanda’s eyes were wide. “That is amazing. That’s really great.”

“Thanks.” I passed Marcus back his pen.

“What did you say your name was?”

“Teagan.” I stuffed a crab cake into my mouth. God, these were the shit.

“And how old are you? Fifteen? Sixteen?”

“I’m turning eighteen this spring.”

“Ah. Fresh blood. How long have you been working for Gravitass? Are you planning on attending college?”

“I dunno.”

“If you need any help — I mean, you’re doing great things, I’m sure you’ll get there on your own — but I did my undergrad at Princeton, so —”

“Lee. Jesus. Stop jerking off about Princeton already.” Marcus shook his head at me. “She brings this up every fucking chance she gets.”

“Marcus is offended because he only went to UPenn.”

“How do you two know each other?”

Marcus and Amanda looked at one another. “Tinder,” said Amanda.

“Right.”

Marcus polished off his wine. “I bet Baptiste’s already talked you out of college anyway, right, Tea?”

“Uh — no. I mean, actually, she did mention something about it. I think.” I racked my brain. “Oh, yeah. Yeah, actually — she said I shouldn’t go. I’m too rich.”

Marcus had turned to Emily. “You know where Baptiste did her undergrad? Suffolk Community College.”

Amanda whistled.

“And now I’m fucking working for her.” Marcus glanced at me. “I mean, all the power to her. She was the craziest bitch in our graduating class.”

“Marcus,” said Baptiste, from behind me. Wrinkling around her elbows and collar was a suit so deep blue you’d think it was black unless the light was just right. Which was dumb, cause, like, just get a black suit at that point, right? Her collared shirt kind of shimmered, but not in a glitter way — in a classy, expensive-material way. Her nails matched. “Are you talking about me? All terrible things, I hope.”

Marcus laughed, and grabbed her hand, pumping it. “Great party.”

Baptiste grinned. “Celebration was in order.”

“Right. The offices are beautiful.”

“Thank you.” Baptiste patted my back. “I see you’ve met Teagan. And you are?”

“Amanda Green. I’m a lawyer.”

Marcus set his empty glass down on the tray of a passing server. “Where’ve you been keeping the kid, Baptiste? The trunk of your car? That overcoat is spilling its fucking guts out. You can’t afford some nice fucking suits?”

“I don’t enforce a dress code.”

Amanda crouched a little next to me, even though I was taller than her. “Teagan, tell me. Does she pay you enough to buy clothing? Or should we be taking this up with the Department of Labor?”

Marcus laughed. “Maybe CPS.”

“Maybe you should unionize,” said Amanda, and Marcus laughed so hard he nearly snorted champagne. Baptiste smiled. “No, I’m serious — get hard with her, Teagan. Squeeze this bitch for all she’s worth. God knows she doesn’t pay her weight in taxes already.”

“I’m going to get more food,” I said, making a quick retreat for the catering table. I hated being used as a prop in other people’s conversations like that. You know what I mean? Especially if it was going to be for Baptiste.

“Oh yeah, bitch.” I grabbed a deviled egg and shoved it into my mouth, then followed with a little crystal cup of lime gelatin. “Tight.”

Gravitas had gotten some actual interns a couple weeks ago. Two girls and a guy, both from elite New York City colleges, neat hair and pantsuits. They watched me eat hors d’oeuvres.

I raised a ritz cracker stacked in caviar. “Yo, you guys wanna get in on this shit? It’s pretty good.”

“That’s okay,” said the girl. “I don’t eat after six. It’s part of my intermittent fasting program.”

“And I’m on a no-fiber diet,” said the other girl.

“No fire? Like, you don’t eat cooked stuff?”

“No-fiber.”

“Oh. I get it. So you don’t shit?” The other two interns cracked a smile. “That’s chill, totally.”

“Teagan?”

I looked to the side and nearly choked. It took me a moment to recover. “What the fuck?”

Haoyu wrinkled his nose at the loose brie in my hand. “We need to talk.”

“Holy shit.” I pounded my chest. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

Haoyu was in his purple school uniform. His bangs were kept back from his eyes with a stretchy rubber headband. “I don’t know, Teagan. I guess I’m wondering why *you’re* here. I thought you’d quit.”

I ate the rest of the cheese. “I didn’t say that.”

“You literally did say that.”

“Well — the situation changed. And maybe I lied to you, a bit. But you were mad.”

“You’re being an idiot.”

People were looking at us. I took Haoyu’s arm and pulled him out into the hallway, then the stairwell, so that the door to the Gravitass offices were several doors behind us. The offices were in Manhattan, and outside of the windows the streets bled red taillights. I made two small black holes on the security cameras I could spot and then pushed him away. “You need to get out of here, *H5*. People are gonna see you. And they’re gonna ask questions.”

“You need to stop working here.”

“What I do is none of your fucking business.”

“It is my business. That woman is — exploiting you. You’re in her videos. You’re right there, on Gravitass’s home page, for anyone to see.”

“And? So what? You know what, I’m fucking tired of you, dude. You’re patronizing. Always telling me what I should be doing, with my life — a fucking patronizing dick. At least I was smart enough to keep America from finding out about me. How long did it take you to get discovered, again, Haoyu? And you’re lecturing me about my fucking indepen—”

Something yanked me down, by the back of my neck, so that I slammed into the floor.

“Fuck!” Haoyu’s hand was extended. I swiped a hand beneath my back, and the black hole dissolved. “You’re lucky I don’t hit you back, asshole.”

“I was threatened.” His face was red. “My family. My future as a physicist. The only thing you had going for you was your anonymity. And you sold it for petty cash. You’re a piece of shit, and you’re also a fucking idiot.”

“I’m not an idiot. What the fuck are you even talking about?”

“Do you know the first thing Baptiste did, Tea? She got a patent. She patented a life-saving drug. The Teagan I know would be enraged by such an action.”

“Maybe you just don’t fucking know me, then, asshole.”

“You’re brainwashed.”

I shoved him. “Fuck you. You’re fucking brainwashed. You think your government doesn’t charge people for what it makes off your powers?”

“I’m not arguing with you like this — not when you’re brainwashed. Don’t buy me things from Walmart ever again. I will not profit from your blood.”

“You’re such an asshole!” I made a black hole beneath his feet that teleported him to the Chinese countryside. A minute later he dropped back into the stairwell. I teleported him away, again — this time to Iceland. Again, he came back. “I bet it drives you fucking crazy that I’m better than you at this. Well you aren’t fucking better than me in general. So get used to it, bitch.”

He cursed at me in Chinese. His eyes were wide and struck-through with thin red lightning bolts, coursing veins, gravity that gathered in the black depths of his pupils. “Stop trying to get rid of me. I didn’t come here to—”

I made another black hole at his feet — but this time he was ready, and lunged at me. We rolled on down the stairs, to the landing.

“Fuck! Get off!” He tried to pin my arms, but I punched him in the gut before he could manage it, and he rolled off of me, coughing. “Always acting like you’re so fucking superior! Who knew you were such a fucking asshole.”

“Sorry —” he coughed — “that I fucking —” hacked — “—care about you!”

I scrambled to my feet. He followed, but slower and with considerably more gasping for air. “Bullshit. I am a fucking individual. And that means I don’t need mommy Haoyu making sure that everybody I talk to is OSHA—”

“They know about you!”

The stairwell went quiet.

“Fuck.” Haoyu rubbed his hands over his face. “Fuck. They know about you.”

I stood there for a moment, catching my breath. “What? Who — knows about me?”

“My government. They know about you.” He looked up, to glare at me.

“Suddenly a company, coming out with a gravity Antidote for the USA, and one of their public-facing employees is a kid the same age as H5? It doesn’t take a fucking genius to figure it out. They know you are powers. And if they know — I’m sure your government knows. You’re not safe here.”

I hesitated. “You’re lying.”

“Why the fuck would I lie about that?”

I stumbled forward, and shoved him. “You’re lying.”

“I’m not lying!”

“Well, then, you’re being ungrammatical. Which is how you get a 400 on the SAT English section.” I watched him grimace. “I don’t know what I expected. You can’t even learn to use the proper demeaning nickname. Freakshow. Not freako. How many times have I fucking told you?”

“I understand you are — feeling bad, Teagan. But you need to leave this job. You need to go to Europe, or the Middle East, I don’t know.”

“I can’t.”

“You’re not safe here.”

“I can’t leave. I’ve fucking tried. Okay? I’ve tried teleporting off Long Island. I can’t. The black holes won’t let me.” I wiped my face. “I don’t know why. I think, maybe — I’m losing my powers.”

“That’s okay. It’s hard, I get it. I can take you.”

It was clear that Haoyu thought the black hole impotence thing was mental and not real. “Sometimes I can’t make the black holes at all. Sometimes it — hurts my chest, like I’m gonna have a heart attack. And I’m only a few months older than you. What if you start losing them soon, too? Then we’d both be fucked.”

“It’s gonna be okay.”

“No, I’m asking — do you expect me to live like that? In a foreign country, without my powers? Trapped? How the fuck am I gonna get money?” I stumbled to the wall,

and slid down to sit on the floor. “I don’t even have a high school degree, man. I’m supposed to just — what, work minimum wage until I’m dead? As an illegal citizen?”

“I can bring you money.”

“Oh, great. That’s so much better. So I’ll be financially relying on a guy who at any moment might be imprisoned for life or experimented on or whatever by the CCP. A guy who fucking hates me, and is already busy — living his life, in China. I don’t want to do that to you. And I definitely don’t want to do that to myself. At least here I have a job.”

“I don’t hate you.”

“Whatever.” I blinked. “I miss my family.” I wiped my hands down my face. My hands clenched into fists on my jaw. “I miss my mom.” I was starting to get choked up. “I think the worst feeling I’ve ever felt in the world is hurting someone. Wasn’t this supposed to feel good? I keep thinking it will feel good and then I only feel worse and worse.”

There was a beat of silence. Haoyu walked to stand over me, then crouched. He reached down awkwardly, so his hands propped up my shoulders, and pulled me up into a tight hug. I didn’t even move while he’s doing it, except to look surprised. I didn’t want to push him away accidentally. But once it was the clear the kind of action he was taking I hugged him back hard, hands spread on his school jacket, wrinkling polyester.

It was a little bit hard to breathe. My face was positioned kind of in his armpit, so I was being smothered by the school jacket. It smelled terrible.

“I love you, Teagan.” He breathed, slow. “I’m not just saying it to make you feel better. I’m saying it because I think a person deserves to know something like that. I love you. And I’ll go with you. We can do it together.”

“You’ll come with me?”

“We’ll go together. I can’t always be there. But I’ll go with you.”

“I love you, too, Haoyu.” I pulled away. “Okay. Okay, I’ll—”

The door slammed open. I looked up — it was Chief Miller, gun raised. Behind him was Marcus’s reporter friend, Amanda.

“Teagan,” said Miller. “Baptiste said you weren’t answering your phone.”

I grappled Haoyu away from me: “Dude. Get out of here.”

But it was too late. “Hello,” called Amanda. “Teagan? Who’s your friend?”

Miller swung around. “Who are you?”

Into the stairwell — after them — walked Baptiste.

“Close the door!” I shouted. “She’s just — some lawyer. Marcus’s date. Think she’s drunk.” I looked back up, at Amanda and Miller, and raised my voice: “He was just leaving.”

“I’m not a lawyer, actually.”

Haoyu sat back on the landing. I pushed myself to my feet. “I thought you said you were a lawyer.”

“Yes, I did say that. I was lying.” She pulled out a press badge. “Amanda Green, with the New York Times. I presume that you’re H5?”

“Uh,” said Haoyu.

“It’s not what it looks like,” I said. “This is — just another, totally random Chinese guy. I think you might be racist.”

“Really? It’s not what it looks like? Because it looks like how Gravitax got its magical Antidote was through foreign collusion. Any comments on the foreign collusion, Teagan?”

“Uh,” I said. “Don’t say anything, Teagan,” said Baptiste. “One minute.” She left the stairwell.

Chief Miller kept his gun raised. “Are there cameras in this stairwell, Teagan?”

“How do you know H5?” Amanda walked down the stairs. “What were you two arguing about? How long have you and H5 known each other?”

“No cameras,” I said. “Why—”

“Put down the weapon!”

Amanda and I both looked back at Miller.

“I said, raise your hands, and put down the weapon!”

“Miller — wait.” Amanda raised her hands. She looked ticked-off. “We can—”

But he did not wait. And actually he shot her.

The sound of the gunshot drew several of the party people to the scene of Miller’s crime and the vast majority of the party people to the elevators. Haoyu screamed and cursed and dropped into the black hole at his knees. Which was pretty much the only thing he could’ve done that 100% confirmed Amanda’s accusation but also she wasn’t alive to see it anyway. The person first to arrive was Baptiste, who went pale, then red.

“Holy shit. What the fuck did you do?”

“It was self defense,” said Miller. “She was reaching for a weapon.”

“She’s dead?”

“I think so.”

“I had it — handled. Why the fuck did you do that?”

“What were you going to do?”

“Bribe her!”

“It was self defense,” Miller insisted.

Baptiste made strangling motions with her hands. “We’re not in fucking Hampton Bays, Miller. You moron. This isn’t your jurisdiction. The fucking NYPD — the FBI’s gonna look into this. Fuck.” Her heels clicked back up the stairs and she tried to lock the door to the stairwell but couldn’t. She opened it. “Marcus!”

His voice replied, muffled.

“Stand here. Don’t let anyone in.” She let the door close, and clicked back down the steps, to where Amanda’s body slumped against the window. She looked at me. “Teagan.”

“Huh,” I said.

“I know you are — probably not feeling well. But I think you know what you need to do.”

Evidently I did not know. Because I didn’t do anything.

Baptiste gave me a hint. And by gave me a hint I mean she told me. “Make a black hole. Destroy the evidence.”

“She was a reporter. She’d seen this Chinese kid and Teagan talking and figured that was H5. Said it was foreign collusion.”

“I knew she was a fucking reporter. I had it under control.”

“You knew? And—”

“Shut up, Miller,” said Baptiste. “You need to leave. I hope it goes without saying that you won’t talk about this to anyone.”

“I’m not a fucking moron.”

“People who aren’t fucking morons don’t kill New York Times reporters.”

He hesitated. “The only other witness was the Chinese kid.”

“You are not killing Teagan’s friend.” Miller started down the stairs. “Not that way — use the elevators.”

“You can’t tell me what to do. I’ll have you arrested.” But he started back up the stairs. He had to move past me and I pressed my back against the wall as he shuffled by.

Once he’d left Baptiste covered her face with her hands and I thought she might’ve been crying but when she combed her hands back up through her hair she only looked exhausted. “Tea.”

“I know. I just—” I closed my eyes. When I opened them a black hole the size of a large coin had eaten Amanda’s body, along with a good amount of concrete floor. I stomped it out and then staggered over to the wall and threw up the jello shots and hors d’oeuvres.

“We need to kick Miller out. It was a mistake to ever take him on in the first place.” Baptiste paced back and forth in the narrow space. “I only worked with him because of his connections — you understand. And the blood drive, which was convenient. But he’s a violent idiot. That’s the worst combination — a man with a gun who’s stupid enough to use it. He’s a disaster waiting to happen. Well, a disaster that’s already happened, I suppose.”

Amanda’s body had been ripped into a million tiny pieces stretched into infinity by infinite gravity. It was nonexistent. Her family would have to bury nothing — wouldn’t even know she was dead. And I couldn’t get it back. “I think I’m going to hell.”

“But I can’t fire him.”

“I really think I might be evil.” I wiped my mouth, then paused. “Why can’t you fire him?”

Baptiste looked up, at the ceiling, then out the window. “Do you remember Halloween?”

“I’ve been living Halloween for the past month.”

“The cops found the body pretty quick. There was a lot of — whatever they call it, black hole residue, I guess. And — fingerprints. Miller’s kept them from investigating. But if he dies or turns against us it won’t be hard for them to track that death back to us.”

This time I only dry-heaved. I sank down to my knees. “Fuck.”

“I know. It’s going to be okay.”

“I don’t think I can live like this, man. I’m—” It had been weeks and I still hadn’t been able to get the guy’s blood out from underneath my fingernails. I’d clipped them down super short and they still felt bloody. “Angry. So angry, and stressed-out, all of the time. Like, I’ve got this thing inside of me, this crazy mix of anger and fear and stress, and I don’t know how to deal with any of it, and I don’t know what — or when—”

“Teagan.” Baptiste’s hand was on my shoulder. “There’s only two options. You need to get rid of the evidence that we killed that man. You do that — and Miller won’t be a problem.”

The other option went unsaid.

Chapter 18: Dear Mary,

The police station was never silent. Baptiste's car was parked a block down the street. She had said my Yugo was too ugly for a getaway car so she'd bought a Cadillac and gag New Jersey license plates (HUF4RTD) that she screwed over the real license plates. It looked really bad. I was worried we were gonna get arrested on the way there or when she stopped for gas or something. Baptiste reassured me that the disguise was perfect, because New Jersey actually existed, so the lie was believable. And I was like yeah I know New Jersey exists? And she got all surprised because apparently she thought that was uncommon knowledge or something. Whatever fuck her. My beautiful Yugo baby was not ugly it was wonderful and beautiful and I loved it when I got a nice fresh breeze through the rusted-out floor.

I landed in the police station bathroom except there was someone else at the sink washing their hands so I flashed out of existence and then back into an empty stall. Shit.

Me: u distracting Miller?

Baptiste: We're in the coroners office

Baptiste: Talking.

Baptiste: He should not be coming to the police station any time soon

The cop turned and stared at my stall door. Then walked over. I couldn't get rid of the security cameras in the building because then the guy watching the camera footage would see it all blank out and call his superiors. But I could make a distraction. In the corner of the bathroom — over the furthest toilet — I formed a small black hole.

The cop looked at the black hole — froze — and then a badge tugged out from their pocket, and flew into the mostly-dissolved toilet. They cursed loudly and ran out of the bathroom, fumbling out a radio. I heard it crackle as the bathroom door swung shut.

I waited two minutes. And then I teleported into the police station basement — specifically, the evidence room.

Now that the cops would be (hopefully) sufficiently distracted I wrecked the security cameras. On the far wall of the evidence room floor-to-ceiling metal shelves were stacked with file boxes. I opened the first of them, and found three large bags of cocaine.

It took me half an hour to find the evidence for my murder. In one plastic bag was an empty water bottle — oh, shit. We must've left it in the woods. In another, larger bag was a gas can, and in the third was a DVD. I opened the second box — inside this one was a plastic CVS bag and some paper-clipped documents.

“Teagan.”

I whipped around — in the doorway stood Chief Miller. What the fuck. Goddamnit, Baptiste.

“Step away from the—”

I grabbed the first box and teleported into the break room instead. I leave it on the floor under one of the tables. When I dropped back into the evidence room to get the other box Miller had closed the door.

He pointed at me. “Teagan! No more black holes. I'm placing you under arrest.”

I picked up the second box. “On what charge, bitch?”

“Breaking into an evidence locker.” Okay I guess that was actually technically illegal. “Get on the floor!”

“I don't think you want to be trapped in here with me, asshole.”

He raised his hand, too, except that in his hand was a gun. My heart stuttered. Before I could summon a black hole his finger pressed the trigger, and I was hit in the face with a stream of something cold.

I dropped the box, gravity dissipating in shock, and raised my hand to my face. I was wet. I was wet and I was hysterical.

“Is that a fucking water gun?” I scrubbed the neckline of my shirt over my face, but as I had my eyes covered he shot me again, in the chest. I tried to batter it away, but hitting water worked about as well as you’d think it would, and it just got all over my clothes instead. “Hey! Knock it off!”

“You deserve this.” His eyes were blazing, hand clenched on the trigger.

“Dude!” I couldn’t move away, being up against the shelves and all, so I crouched and managed to divert most of the splatter with my forearms. “Fucking quit it, man!”

“Chief Miller,” he hissed at me, like a Pokemon.

“Fuck! Whatever!” The water was so cold it almost burned. Apparent to me quicker than the temperature, however, was that it had been dyed a deep blue, like how everybody thinks the ocean’s supposed to look. “Holy shit! Can you fucking — stop! Stop it!”

The stream of water died, sputtering back to the pistol’s mouth. I made a face and then straightened up, wringing some of it out of my sweatshirt while Chief Miller shook the gun around and then tried to spray me again. All that came out was a fine mist.

“Asshole. What the fuck was that for?” I raised my hand again. “You know what? Doesn’t fucking matter. Have fun in deep space.”

(I wouldn’t really send him to deep space. I hadn’t decided where I’d send him. Someplace like Antarctica was too harsh, but he didn’t really deserve Bermuda or Naples, either. Rural Balkans, maybe? Deep space just sounded scarier. I didn’t think anyone would be very frightened if I ran around shouting at people that I was sending them to Slovakia.)

So, yeah. He stood there with a smug little “I have a gun in my belt” grin characteristic of most cops as I made a well of infinite gravity that would drop him beside a picturesque, only slightly decrepit farmhouse in rural Slovakia.

Nothing happened.

I stiffened, and realized, as blue liquid dripped down my temple, that my gravity felt gone.

The liquid started to pool at my feet. “What is this?”

“Ethanol.” He tucked the gun back into his pocket. “It permeates skin to enter your bloodstream directly. You might feel a little bit tipsy — but the main effect should be that it stops your black holes.”

I tried to make another black hole. Nothing happened. “You still don’t want to be trapped down here with me. I’m warning you now — I’m a master of Karate.” I raised my fists. “Let me out before I punch your face off.”

Chief Miller was not taking my martial arts skills seriously. “Not before you tell me why that bitch sent you here.”

“Don’t call her that. I’ll fucking kill you.”

“It’s interesting to me that you care so much about a woman who sent you to rob a police station.”

“She didn’t send me here!”

“She wanted to meet me at the coroner’s office — two blocks over — but her car is parked at the end of this street.” He took a step towards me. I made threatening hand motions which I hoped were reminiscent of Jackie Chan. “Did she tell you to kill me?”

Silence. He took another step. I tried to will my powers back, like in anime, but only succeeded in giving myself a slight headache. Apparently I was lacking in the power of friendship department.

“Answer me, Teagan.”

“Fuck! Get away from me!” He was close enough for me to perform my imaginary karate skills, which was bad, because now every second of my inaction only made it clearer that said imaginary karate skills were, in fact, imaginary. My imaginary karate skills only worked insofar as my opponent was intimidated by my spastic hand motions. “I invoke my right to silence. Get me a lawyer, bitch!”

“She sent you here to kill me. Didn’t she?”

Instead of answering I ducked, dodging back and forth, and tried to move along the wall for a clear path to the door, but he copied. Chief Miller was surprisingly agile.

“Tell me!”

“Baptiste didn’t send me!”

He hit the shelf next to my head, and then made a face of pain and regret quickly doused by rage. “Teagan!”

It was watching him wince at the bad plan of punching the wall that I remembered Chief Miller was pretty old, like at least in his 50s, and I could probably beat him in endurance at least. So I took off for the other side of the evidence room.

“Get back here!” He chased after me, then started to breathe pretty heavy at about his fifth step. “Teagan!”

I pressed my back against the far wall. “Leave me alone!”

He huffed across the basement. As he neared me I dodged back and forth, and he straightened, apparently regaining some energy as he jumped left and right with me. I fainted right, and then made a break for his left, but he anticipated this and managed to grab my arm.

I shrieked, and tripped onto the concrete floor, which was not a super great material to fall onto. “Let go!”

“Bring me back that evidence box!”

I scrambled to my feet and tried to punch his face away. He had an iron grip for an old guy. Finally I managed to knock both of us down and stomp on his arm, which made him gasp, and I took the opportunity to flee in a badass and not scared way. For a minute Chief Miller didn’t get up, but instead lay there and caught his breath. To be honest I was panting pretty hard by now myself. I reached the basement door.

“See you never, asshole!” I sprinted up the steps as he stumbled to his feet behind me. I reached the top of the stairs, now fully illuminated, and broke out into the police station.

I made a beeline for the exit. The rest of the cops were all freaking the fuck out about the black hole in the bathroom.

“Teagan!”

Baptiste was in the police station, running up to me. I grit my teeth and shoved past her. “Good job distracting Miller, asshole.”

“This is — more important. While I was in the coroner’s office, I was looking at the reports — and—”

“I was almost just killed by Miller, by the way, in there. And I only got rid of half of the evidence. He had some crazy water gun bullshit that stopped my powers. I’ll have to go back tomorrow or something.”

“H5 is dead.”

Around us police shouted and ran towards the bathrooms. “He’s— what? Why—” I shook my head. “—would you, uh— think that?”

“I found a coroner’s report for a young Chinese man, shot in the back of the head. I talked to the front desk. It seems that the Chinese consulate swooped in and extradited his body, and — I mean there’s only one kid I can imagine they’d bother to do that for. Not a lot of other Chinese expatriates on Long Island. If H5’s death did get out, it would be devastating to them, economically.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Here.” Baptiste fumbled a packet of papers from her purse. “I took the report. Look for yourself.”

The report was listed for the Gravitas offices. It described a Asian man of about 16 dressed in a school uniform. At the bottom of the last page was a section for Officers at the scene. There was only one name.

Chief James Miller.

Yeah, so. I’d gotten it a week ago. Baptiste had thrown it out but I found it in the trash. Victoria, BC V8P 5C2, Canada. I could see the university logo through the envelope. I stood there for about twenty minutes fiddling with it like I didn’t know how to open a goddamn envelope. I got a paper cut. It was a pretty somber affair. I felt somber, anyways. Then I crumpled it up in my fist super-tight and stuck it at the bottom of the trash can and dumped the rest of the trash I’d taken out on top of it, so it looked like nothing had happened. And I went and took a shower and felt like a completely new person and the same stupid bitch all at once.

The truth was that the unopened letter scared the shit out of me. Or rather my reaction to it did. Because with all the time I spent standing there, staring at, I knew as soon as I laid eyes on the damn thing what I was going to do with it. I’d never never been more sure of anything in my life, and that scared me. I was scared I was going to be stuck here forever.

Baptiste was still talking to me but I wasn’t listening. I dropped the papers and turned and walked into the stairwell. I walked all the way down the stairs and through the open door into the evidence room. Chief Miller was laying on the floor, nursing his arm, but when he saw me he sat up.

“Teagan.”

By then I was standing over him. I grabbed the front of his shirt. “Haoyu.”

He was bewildered. A textbook sign of guilt. “Who?”

“H5. Dead. You killed him.”

His expression twisted. “Why would I do that?”

“Because he witnessed you kill Amanda. He came back for me — and you killed him.”

“Is the person who told you I killed H5 upstairs right now?”

“Shut the fuck up, asshole.”

I pushed him back, onto the ground. I was about to step away and look for a weapon or something when he locked a hand around my ankle and pulled me down after him. I screamed and my hand landed on his stomach. I tried to pull my leg out of his hand but he held tight.

“Let go.” I pulled myself up, one hand on the lowest metal shelf. He crawled on top of me, and I slipped down. “Fuck!”

He fumbled the gun out of his pocket and raised it, then brought it down on my head. The first time I ducked, and it smashed against the metal shelf. The evidence boxes trembled. The second time he hit me I saw stars. My hands flew up to my head, shielding against further blows, which caused me to fall down to sit on the concrete. He tried to hit me again but the shift in angle had confused him. I was eye-level with his knees. My legs kicked out, knocking him backwards, and his next blow hit the floor as he fell beside me.

I hit him and tried to grapple him. He shoved me off of himself easily and stood, grabbed the hood of my sweatshirt and slammed me into the shelves. I choked and scrambled away — he blocked the door to the upstairs so I burst through the side door which connected to the storage room with the blood donation equipment. I ran for the stairs but he’d come in after me slammed me into the wall again. By now I was starting to feel pretty fucking bad. I stumbled back and fumbled along the wall for the door to the spare office I knew was down here somewhere because it was on the security cameras. When I got that open he stopped me from closing it behind me so I stumbled back into the room, further, fell into water.

For a moment my brain was so confused that I blacked out. Also it was pitch black in the office. And it wasn’t water — it was blood, I knew that because I tasted it. Blood in a giant kiddie-pool up to my knees. This had been an office — a desk was pushed into the corner — but the center of the room was taken up by two kiddie pools of blood. I was sitting in it.

I pushed myself to my feet. I was dripping red — Antidote. Miller walked up to the edge of the pool. We were both breathing hard. I raised my hands in surrender and then when he took another step jumped forward and locked my hands around his neck and he fell forward, into the pool with me. His hand reached out to grab me, fumbling my sweatshirt, and I kned his chin. I heaved myself on top of him and dug my fingers into his throat.

My thumbs dug into the granulous meat of his larynx, twisting to chase his racing pulse like I was molding tough clay. His hands moved to thrash ineffectually at my chest, shoving at the fabric. I hunched my body up so he couldn’t reach and his hands flew to mine, tried to pull them off his throat. His head was under the blood and it bubbled as he lost air. He pushed my hands, and I pushed, and pushed, until the strength of my arms won out over the strength of his neck. His head dropped back onto the concrete with an angry snap of skull on stone, fist beating the lip of the pool in a macabre rhythm. I held him underwater as the bubbles tickled the soft skin on my inner forearms, like cold boiling water, a miracle, and the thrashings grew weaker, then eventually stopped. And then I let go and let him bob listlessly to the surface. The room was so dark I couldn’t even see his expression.

For a moment I was frozen. And then I stood, and stumbled over the lip of the pool to drip onto the floor. I leaned over myself and wrapped my arms around my stomach and crouched and tried not to throw up and then threw up a lot. My phone was buzzing. I took a break from being sick to wipe my mouth and check my messages.

Baptiste: DO NOT COME OUT!!!!!!!!!!!!

Baptiste: Sorry if that sounded homophobic. I have a healthy view on homosexuality. I meant DO NOT COM UPSTAIRS

Baptiste: SO MANY COPS. THEY KICKED ME OUT. U WILL NOT BE ABLE TO LEAVE W/OUT BLACK HOLE

Baptiste: I am pulling the car around the block. I will make another pass in a few minutes

Baptiste: More police cars are arriving. Like this day could get any worse!

Baptiste: ahh oh no one of them saw me :|

Baptiste: Haha its ok he just started laughing at the WHO FARTED license plate
thumbs upp

I glanced around the room, pointedly avoiding Chief Miller's body. I was dripping Antidote everywhere. The ethanol had been completely removed from my sweatshirt — blue washed away, diluted. Upstairs I heard police talking on their radios.

It was then that I realized that gravity was, once again, budding at my fingertips.

I teleported out of the room and onto the street. The sirens were louder outside. I stumbled past cops, dribbling red onto the pavement and brown leaves webbed with frost. Baptiste's car made another pass down the road. When she saw me she pulled violently around so that the passenger side door was in front of me, and got out.

"Tea. Jesus." She opened the door for me, and I crawled into the car. She winced. "Not on my — okay. Christ."

I knelt on the floor of the car and rested my head on the seat. Baptiste closed the door behind me and jogged around to the driver's side, then ducked in and started up the engine. We peeled away.

When we'd made it two blocks from the station I screamed.

"There, there." Baptiste reached over and patted my head, then stopped when her hand got stained red, and wiped her palm on her pants instead. "It's okay. It'll be okay."

I screamed again. My throat was stripped and stuffy like someone had shoved cotton into my stomach. I could practically feel fingers dragging up my trachea.

"Hey. Tea. I just bought this car — not inexpensive, but the way — and now it looks like five people were murdered in my passenger seat. So which of us is really worse off, here?" I screamed again, but this time it sputtered out. "Kidding."

My scream had dissolved into a broken sob. My hands lifted, and clutched the edge of the leather seat, sticky nails digging into the upholstery. I wailed, hoarse and wet and with a vulnerability foreign to my vocal cords. I wept with a volume and fervor that I hadn't known I was capable of. I bit down on the leather, muffling the sobs slightly, and my hands moved to clasp above my head.

"That's alright. Cry it out. You can take a shower at my place, yea? How does that sound?" I cried harder. "I think a shower would be good for you. Restorative. Doesn't that sound nice?"

Chapter 19: I yearn for you tragically, R. O. Shipman

“I deeply mourn his loss, and I can — only wish —”

“Hell for his murderer.”

“Right.”

“All at once.”

“I deeply mourn his loss, and I can only wish — hell for the murderer.”

“Again. More emotion. You’re not showing emotion.”

“I deeply mourn his loss, and I can only wish hell for his murder.”

“His murderer.”

“I said that, bitch. I deeply mourn the murder —”

She slapped my ear. “Don’t fuck around.” Her hands held either side of my face.

“Again, Valentine.”

“I deeply mourn his loss, and I can only wish hell for his murderer. I got it.

Alright? I deeply mourn his loss, and I can only wish hell for his murderer. I deeply mourn his loss, and I can only wish hell —”

“On in five, four,” said a man with with a black mustache, and then Baptiste leaned smoothly back into her chair and the interviewers stopped getting their makeup done and smiled at us. The man stepped back and the lights were so bright I could feel sunspots on the back of my skull.

“A pleasure to be here.”

Baptiste wore a lavender pantsuit the same shade as Gravitass logo. It matched my uniform. The male HORSE host was dirty blond but the female HORSE host was strawberry. All I could see of the stage crew were silhouettes pacing back and forth, like lions prowling at the bars of their cage. I shivered lightly.

“Absolutely, Jan. I’m the founder and CEO, which means I run most of the day-to-day operations. But Teagan here is the real mastermind.”

The hosts smiled. Jan cleared her throat.

“You’re on our show because one of your founders—”

“Initial investors. Not a founder.”

“Sorry. One of Gravitass’s initial investors — and a man close to you, if I understand it correctly — has been murdered. Allegedly murdered. A police chief. A pillar of the local community. I have to ask — has Chief Miller’s murder effected your operations?”

“I’m going to be honest with you, Jan. It’s been tough. Gravitass values are family values. And by that, of course, I mean real, working family values. American family values. A mother and a father and their God-given children and Jesus Christ. Chief Miller was a man who valued Gravitass values, i.e. family values, as in the values given down from a father to the family. It’s devastating to see the effect of Chief Miller’s murder on his wife, daughter, elder son, dog, and two peewee-soccer-active twins. With that said, rest assured — we will not be ceasing operations. I know that Chief Miller wouldn’t want us to let his gruesome murder stop our expansion, even for a day.”

“I’m sure he’s looking down on you two right now. And I’m sure he’s very proud.”

“Thank you, Jan.”

Brett cleared his throat. “And Amir Mikhail — for viewers who are unaware, Mikhail, an expatriate from Iraq, has become the prime suspect in Chief Miller’s murder after

his fingerprints were discovered at the crime scene on Thursday evening. Some suspect that his attack was religiously motivated. Christians are worried that they may be targeted next by these radicals. What are your thoughts on his motivation?"

"Well, I'd say it was absolutely religiously motivated, Brett. Yes, absolutely. Religiously and politically motivated. Some people can't stand what we're doing — because they know, deep down, that Gravitass has it right." Baptiste pointed at the viewers. "But I want to assure every man and woman who uses our product that our great American police officers are working very hard to ensure that this incident is isolated. And I am confident that we will be seeing Chief Miller's killer behind bars very soon."

"Surely such a bigoted act angers you."

"Absolutely." The stage lights dipped up and down on the horizon like the view of a far-off city from a small boat in rough waters. "Absolutely, Brett. It's the reason I open-carry. The murderer is obviously deeply disturbed. I know that on my part, at least, I'm looking forward to seeing him on the other end of the merciless, double-barreled shotgun that is American justice."

"Well said. All of America is standing behind you during this difficult time." Jan turned to me. "My next question is for Teagan. You've been on our Instagram feeds all across the country, every night, working to spread Gravitass's message. And you're only eighteen! How has the death of Chief James Miller effected your grindset outlook, as a young entrepreneur?"

There was a beat of dead air. Air because of the oxygen and dead because I was inside of the room. The stage lights faded into many blurred suns and I was out in the world again, looking up at the open sky. Baptiste's hand clenched on her suit pocket. *I deeply mourn his loss, and I can only wish hell for his murderer. I deeply mourn his loss, and I can only wish hell for his murderer.*

"I think I'm going to hell," I said, and then we were all plunged into darkness as a black hole ate the stage lights.

Chapter 20: How to Win Enemies and Influence Mice

“Has anyone ever told you you’re really hot?”

“No.” I’d finished my drink and I was trying to get another one. Apparently an impossible fucking task when you have no hand-eye coordination. “No. Never.”

“And that’s why the third sequel really —”

“Dude, shut up,” said Andrew. Brad took another gulp of beer. “Sorry,” Andrew yelled-whispered, at me. “He’s so fucking annoying. We’re in LIT 238 together.”

“Cool.”

“All he talks about is fucking — Star Wars. Here —” Andrew took the bottle from me, and added the screw into my driver, generously. “You a student?”

“Definitely.”

“Where do you go?”

“Fordham,” I shouted back, and then downed the content of the paper cup. Did you know that New York City didn’t sell fucking plastic cups anymore? Only paper. Which sucked, because those got all pulpy and gross where I chewed on the edge. The drink tasted like fucking wood pulp. “Shit.”

“Sweet,” said Andrew. Brad was explaining the plot of *The Mandalorian* to his shot glass. “We’re from Columbia.”

“Really? That’s so fucking awesome. British Columbia?”

“What? No, the university. Hey, do you want to —”

“Fuck yes,” I said, and he grinned and handed me the joint and then put his hand over my shoulder and pulled us away from Brad, towards the cubicles. It was a good idea. (Kudos, Columbia!) The whole inside of the Gravitas offices was trashed — bottles everywhere, mostly broken. And the music was so loud. Actually I kind of liked the loud music.

“Christ. Pass it back.” I coughed, and our hands brushed. “You know who’s the host? I don’t want to fuck up their, like, building, or whatever.”

“No,” I said, and then “fuck it up, definitely. They’re an asshole.”

He smiled, then stubbed the last of the roll paper on a desk. “You think they mind?”

I wasn’t sure who he was talking about — Baptiste? — until I realized there were other people in this cubicle. They were lying on the tile floor. Completely on top of each other. Like, sucking face and everything.

“Don’t think so,” I said, and when I turned back to the guy was, like, right up on me, totally in my face. “Yo, dude. Uh. Hello.”

He laughed, then kissed me, and the pointy part of my spine hit the wall. Another emerald jewel of Victoria, British Columbia, is the luscious Butchart Gardens, which have been in bloom for over 100 years. Dubbed a National Historic Site of Canada, visitors can enjoy the rolling, verdant 55 acres of gardens year round. In spring, countless tulips, daffodils and hyacinths provide an abundance of fragrance and color. Come summer, park-goers are wowed by The Rose Garden, Night Illuminations, and evening entertainment. Perennial and Dahlia borders also bloom in stunning majesty at summer’s close. In autumn the Japanese maples will dazzle with rich gold and russet hues. And with the advent of winter, visitors are captivated by the Magic of Christmas complete with decorations, expansive lighting, traditional carolers and festive brass.

“Do you know any Chinese?”

The guy pulled away. “What?”

“Like, the Chinese language. Uh — Mandarin, or whatever. Do you speak any Chinese?”

He made a weird face at me. “No? Are you crying?”

“No,” I said. “Shit. Do you think you could call me a freak?”

He laughed. “That’s so you.” His hand crept up my waist. “I loved you on fucking — yeah. I was like, I have to meet this kid, you know?”

“Right,” I said. “Uh — you had to —” He tried to kiss me again. I turned my head. “Wait.”

“All that stupid shit you say on TV. I knew I had to meet you.”

I laughed. “Yo, dude, I don’t —”

“Shut up, Teagan.”

A couple minutes passed like that, or maybe an hour, not totally sure, but then Andrew jerked up like he’d been shot and went pale. He looked back. “Hey —”

“Get out.”

“Oh my God. Jesus Christ. Sorry.” He backed away. “It’s really great to meet you. I’m actually applying for an internship, with Gravitas — I would hate to make a bad, uh— impression—”

“Now.”

I realized that the music had stopped. Without the guy holding me up I slumped against the desk. I looked around desperately for the couple making out, but they were gone, too.

“Teagan Valentine,” said Baptiste, and then it was me and her, alone in the ugly fucking cubicle. “What the fuck are you doing?”

I lifted myself to my feet. “Fuck off.”

“You missed this week’s blood drive. I called you about fifty times. And you ignored me.” I pushed past her into the office’s reception room. It was empty. I mean of people. Not of amenities. “I guess you’re going to have to donate twice as much next time, instead.”

I scanned the bottles. Baptiste followed me to the reception desk, then took the bottle from my hand.

“Oh, I get it.”

I grabbed for it. “Give that back.”

“I see what you’re doing.” She jerked the bottle around in the air, demonstratively. “You’re poisoning your blood. So it can’t be donated. You’ve been vulgar before, Valentine, but this — this is a new level of petty, even from you.”

“Fuck you. I wasn’t — I don’t even.”

“You didn’t just miss the blood drive. You’re actively sabotaging me, now. Me. Your boss. Who has been extremely understanding over this period of — debauched pseudo-sabbatical.”

“Why does the fucking blood drive even matter? I know why you need me, dude. You’re not trying to hide it anymore. Just ask — yo, Teagan, I, like, desperately need your blood, let’s go grab a knife or something so I can steal it from you.”

“What — you want me to rig up a personal plasma collector in my kitchen? Because that’s not suspicious at all. I need you there. Chief Miller spent years perfecting the church blood drive. I’m not going to throw out those years of his progress on your whim.”

“Oh, fuck you. Fuck you. On my fucking whim? What does that even mean? Like, maybe I wake up tomorrow, and I just don’t want to have my fucking blood sucked out of me. Your entire business goes to shit. All that matters here is my fucking whim.”

“And do what? You quit and do what?”

“Pursue my passions, bitch.”

“You’ll pursue your passions. And what are those, exactly? Getting high in an office building and let strangers feel you up?” She set down the bottle, and took a step towards me. “You want to know what I’d do if you quit, Valentine? Unlike you, I’d work, first. Hard. Chief Miller’s stores would last for at least the next couple of years. I’d fund the research to create a synthetic alternative. Either way, I’d retire fat and happy at age 50. But you — where would you end up, Tea? Begging on the streets? Living out of that fucking Yugo?”

“I’d end up whenever the fuck I wanted to go.”

“Don’t fucking joke — we both know the truth. You’re losing your powers, Teagan.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“Don’t insult yourself by acting ignorant. I saw it, in that alleyway, on Halloween — the fear in your eyes. Did that ‘impotency’ ever happen to you five years ago? What about one year ago? How fast are you losing it, I wonder — I’m losing millions diluting your blood by less and less, by the way. I went from point five ppm to point seven in just the past month. So yeah, sure, you can go wherever you want, for, what — the next couple of months? A year, if you’re lucky? I’m going to love seeing you without your powers, Valentine. I think you’re going to find very quickly that being a normal person isn’t so easy. And then you won’t be teleporting back into my office. You’ll come crawling.”

“I don’t —”

“If you’re not dead by then, that is.”

Without the music Baptiste’s apartment was loud in the way that gasoline smells like a woman’s perfume. I stood there for a moment. Then I grabbed a kitchen stool. It was heavy and a bit awkward but I managed to get it a few inches off the floor. Baptiste grimaced, but followed me as I headed for the building’s maintenance stairwell.

“What are you doing?”

“Fuck off, bitch.”

I tucked the stool under my arm and traced the wall with my left hand so I didn’t fall over. Baptiste trailed at a curious distance. When I reached the ground floor I pushed out of the left metal door into the cold, grimy air of the parking garage. Baptiste watched from the entrance for a moment as I wandered between the rows of cars before she figured out what I had come here to do and hurried down the last of the steps.

“Valentine! Stop it!” I found her black Cadillac with the HUF4RTED license plate still attached. I swung the stool back — my wind-up. “I just got those seats reupholstered! You set that chair down right now. I mean it!”

I launched the stool forward. The metal seat hit the windshield head-on. The sound of glass shattering was interrupted by the car’s alarm going off.

“Fuck!” Baptiste reached me, panting, and jerked me away from the broken car. I stumbled. Too late, though. “You fucking — stupid brat. Goddamnit.”

I stared at the damage and enjoyed the car alarm. I was pretty hard for breath myself. I thought about doing some meditation, but by then Baptiste had fumbled out her keys, and shut off the alarm.

“Fuck,” said Baptiste again. “Goddamnit.”

A chunk of glass fell onto the pavement. “Yeah. That’s right.”

“Goddamnit. Damnit, Tea!” She stalked away, then turned back. “You’ve trashed my house. And now my fucking — Camry — fucking Christ, Valentine! What the fuck is wrong with you?”

There was a beat of silence.

“Okay. Will you — okay.” Her eyes fluttering closed. “Just — will you stop crying? Please?”

“If you hate me I think I’m going to kill myself.”

“What?”

“You heard me, bitch.” I didn’t really get it out because my voice was shaking. I took a breath. “I’m not going to the fucking police station. Ever again. So fuck you and fuck your stupid fucking car. I’m going — back upstairs.”

She grabbed my elbow. “Can I come with you? Together? The elevators.”

“Okay. Whatever. Don’t touch me.” We walked the elevators together, in silence, a foot apart. “I miss my mice.”

Someone drove up the ramp, into this level of parking garage. They parked a couple spaces down from Baptiste. A woman emerged from the double-doors leading into the building and saw the broken glass and gasped.

Baptiste pressed the button for the elevators.

“We can get mice,” she said, as the doors slid open. “I can have Marcus bring you mice.”

Chapter 21: The Secret

I was lying on the couch in Baptiste's apartment, not sleeping. I'd been not sleeping like that for about the past three days. I couldn't stop thinking about what Baptiste had said about me losing my powers. On the other hand I was really eager to stop thinking about the other stuff she'd said: insults, cursing, complaining.

Beneath my back was a black hole. As I thought about whether I was losing my black hole powers it was eating gradually at the cotton and springs of the bedspread. I knew the next time I shifted by even breathing in too hard it was going to eat me. I rolled over, and my heart spasmed, and my chest went cold then hot with pain. I gasp and clutch my shirt as my heart skips another beat before falling back into a normal rhythm. But overall I'm pretty resigned to the feeling. It doesn't scare me as much as annoy me. I open my eyes.

I sit up. The black hole has dropped me in the corner, next to the fridge. Someone is crying.

At first it doesn't register because lately I've gotten very used to the sound of myself crying. I stand, shakily, and look around for the source. I'm tempted to be creeped out — it's cold, and I'm all alone — but I'm more stupidly hopeful that I'm going to see Haoyu.

But I don't see Hayou. Instead, in the fourth wall — lodged halfway inside of the plaster — is a car seat. And buckled inside of that is a baby.

I cooed at Angelica, who was babbling and grabbing her feet in the crib I'd gotten from Home Depot. I dispersed the first black hole sucking up the trash before it could eat the floor. After rescuing Angelica from her car seat (which I'd failed to pull free from the wall) I had changed her (took me five tries and three different youtube tutorials) and dressed her in a cute pink onesie with a butterfly on the front — cause I figured a little girl would totally be into that, right? Not that Angelica was a little girl yet. More like a mini girl. But if I was a little baby girl I think I would totally dig butterflies. Fucking adorable.

While I was distracted thinking about baby clothes the second black hole vacuum sucked up a chair. "Shit."

The stove beeped. I got rid of the rest of the black holes and ran into the kitchen to turn off the stove just before the milk began to steam. I began to sort through the kitchen drawers, looking for a thermometer. I'd had to buy milk because the only food Baptiste had left in the house was a dubiously fresh Chobani yogurt. My trick for eating expired things is this: if you don't look at the expiration date, then you aren't eating something expired. It's Schrodinger's yogurt. Expiration dates are mostly a conspiracy anyway. I had a once-removed uncle who ate moldy strawberries, and his wife liked her prune juice fuzzy, and they were both fine. Well, they were actually dead, but it wasn't because they ate mold. They got an unrelated brain stem infection.

My phone in my pocket buzzed. I fished it out with my non-thermometer-holding hand.

"Hey! Tea." It was Baptiste. "I'm glad I caught you."

I hung up.

The milk was 98.3. Close enough. A moment later my phone rang, again. This time when I answer it was Marcus.

"Teagan," he greeted, breathless.

"Hey, Marcus."

“You sound happy.”

“Yeah. I’m actually —” I trailed off, pouring the milk into the little pink bottle I’d bought. Jesus. Who designed this shit? Half of it spilled onto the counter. “—fuck, yeah. What’s up?”

“Baptiste said — there’s a baby? Uh. In her house. On the security cameras.”

I screwed the top on. “Yeah. Angelica. I found her in the black hole.”

Marcus was silent in a loud way.

“I know that sounds crazy. But that’s what happened.”

“Is it alive?”

“The baby? Yeah. She’s doing good. I changed her and fed her and stuff. And decided on Angelica. For her name, I mean. It was between that and Lily. But if you like Lily more, or have a different idea —”

“I’m coming over, alright? Don’t go anywhere.”

“Okay. Jesus.” And then he hung up on me.

I teleported my phone back to my pocket, and moved back to Angelica’s crib, scooping her up awkwardly in one arm. When I raised the bottle to her mouth she drank. Which was pretty cool, if you thought about it. Like how she knew instinctually to do that even though I wasn’t giving her my boob or anything. Damn, she was hungry. Anyways, there was no way I was sticking around waiting for a lawyer. That was a custody battle waiting to be lost. I had to get out of here.

Once she’d finished the bottle, I brought Angelica to my bed, where I had spread the rest of the clothes I’d bought. I picked out a little blue coat and some fuzzy socks. I was just being overcautious — Angelica probably wouldn’t need them. Victoria was notoriously temperate.

Chapter 22: Grit

The Ronkonkoma train station was not a scenic place. Just one long stretch of concrete and an overpass. Behind the platform was a parking lot so long it made the horizon. At the station's small rest stop two buildings faced one another: on the right a men's bathroom and a newspaper stand, on the left was a women's bathroom and a Dunkin' Donuts. The station was pasted with advertisements for Broadway shows and tech repair companies, and (recently) the Radio City Rockettes' Christmas Spectacular. Next to those was a Gravitas poster, newer than the others, but already peeling. It had Baptiste's face. She was in an eggplant-colored suit, making prayer-hands in front of a black hole. I made a face at her and her face was made-up back at me.

The ride to Penn Station was nearly three hours, and from there the flight to Victoria was ten hours. It was strange to me that travel could take a long time. I didn't want to take a black hole, though, because of my health concerns — specifically, heart-attack concerns. I had been indifferent to the possibility when I went into the black hole and found Angelica but now I was scared because if I did have a heart attack Angelica would be left alone. I'd already decided that in Victoria I wasn't going to use black holes anymore. I was actually kind of excited to learn how to walk again.

Around five minutes into my wait for the 11am train to Penn Station a man joined me.

What was significant about him was that he made me nervous. He was wearing all black plain clothes and sunglasses and he was super old. Like, mid-thirties at least. What made me nervous about him was that his clothes looked way too expensive for someone who rode the LIRR. Not to be rude to the LIRR, but it was not a very high-end train system. The last time I'd been on here (with Evie, on our way to the MET) a man had pissed into the seats two rows down from us, and it had flowed in a thin yellow stream down between my feet and almost gotten my shoes wet. People with expensive clothes usually had expensive cars that they could use to drive into Manhattan. Another thing that made me nervous was that it was the middle of the day, which was not really a time many people took the LIRR, unless you didn't have a job or you were looking to harass Teagan Valentine.

I checked my watch. 10:53. I picked up Angelica's baby carrier and went back to listening to music. The man didn't react. I was relieved until I looked behind myself and saw a second huge dude standing next to a cop car. Not a cop car I mean. But the kind of cars that cops drove. You know, big black SUVs, with metal bars over the grate that implied it could also function as a tank in a pinch. What was significant about him was that he was staring straight at me. He was clearly carrying a gun under his jacket— or maybe he had a huge boner located on the side of his hip, but that wasn't much better as far as options went, in my book.

I looked away from the dude and started to walk very casually (spastically) down the long concrete platform. When I glanced back the man/FBI agent had abandoned the pretense of waiting for the train and had started to follow me. So had the huge dude next to the SUV. Fucking goddamnit. Whatever. I'd have to make a black hole, which kind of sucked on account of my cardiovascular health, but it was better than being killed or kidnapped or arrested or whatever. I held out my hand and summoned gravity to the surface of the train tracks. The rattle of an incoming train grew to a discordant thunder as the first man broke out into a run, and the man vaulted up onto the platform a few yards down from me. I stepped out

onto the bumpy yellow strip of rubber, which was reminding me gently to “mind the gap,” then — bracing the carrier on my side — leapt down into gravity’s fold.

And landed on hard gravel.

I gasped once in pain, and then again in horror. The gravity I’d summoned slipped beneath the rusting rails. Beside me Angelica, who’d been jostled by the sudden landing, started to wail. Also, my chest was eating itself. I doubled over myself, clutching at the front of my shirt. Each breath drove knives into my chest, but I was panicked, hyperventilating, so I gulped air quick and shallow and then every few seconds I would fuck up and take a deep breath, desperate for oxygen, which would send me into another round of choking. I clutched rough stone in tight fists and was suddenly aware of a paralyzing thunder. When I looked up the front end of LIRR’s railcar was bearing down on me.

Then large arms were around my waist, and in one rough motion I was tossed onto the station platform. Moments later the train rushed past, a giant beast of speed and metal that blew dust into my eyes. I blinked up at the sky, feeling generally like the second sudden impact had split my head in half, and then I blinked up at the man in the sunglasses.

“Angelica.” I managed to get onto my hands and knees, and spotted her baby carriage between the large man’s legs. “Bastard.”

“Don’t curse,” said the man in the sunglasses — at least, I was pretty sure it was him. I couldn’t actually see him talking because I was too busy hyperventilating. The guy who had saved me from being run over by the train walked over and picked me up again.

“Ow.” I scrabbled at his arms. “Ow. No. Ow.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“How should I know?”

Fuck. I was dying. I bit the guy’s arm and he yelped, and slapped his hand over my mouth. I bit that too. The hand tasted like roast beef.

“Hey.” Sunglasses picked up Angelica’s baby carrier. “Careful with the kid.” He looked at me. “If you’d just calm down — we’re not gonna hurt you. We’re trying to help you. Okay?” He looked in the train car, which was empty. “Okay. Let’s go.”

I was shoved in the back seat of the car. Sunglasses set Angelica’s carrier in the back and took the driver’s seat. The larger man took the back seat, next to me. In the passenger’s seat was a woman with long blonde hair and a gray suit. We peeled away from the curb.

“You can relax.”

I wrapped my arms around Angelica’s baby carrier. “Please don’t kill me.”

“We’re not going to kill you. Are you Teagan Valentine?”

“Don’t hurt Angelica. And don’t kill me. Or torture me. I feel like you’re gonna do that scene in Marathon Man to me but I’ll talk right away, I’ll say anything. I don’t wanna be tortured.”

“Are you Teagan Valentine?”

That kinda seemed like something he should have known before kidnapping a person. “Yeah. I’m Teagan.”

“My name is Whitman. It’s real nice to meet you, Teagan.” He pulled a badge from his jacket, and showed me in the mirror. “I’m FBI. Don’t freak out — you’re not being arrested. I just wanna have a little chat. Totally friendly, no torture. Does that sound okay, with you? ‘Cause we could let you out of the car if that’s not okay.”

“You kidnapped me.”

“We saved you from getting hit by a train. You need anything? Water? Tissues?”

I sank down in the seat. “I’m fine.”

“Alright. I want this to be good, okay? Everybody’s calm.” He steered the car onto the highway. “I just have some questions for you about Gravitass.”

Oh, fuck. I closed my eyes. “Okay.”

“Do you know Baptiste?”

“Yeah. Obviously.”

“Had she told you anything about an orange briefcase?”

That actually caught me off-guard. “Uh. What. Or— why—”

He pulled an orange briefcase identical to Baptiste’s from his footwell. “Looks like this?”

I hesitated. “She carries it everywhere.”

“And there are paper inside of it?”

“Yeah. Usually.”

“We know about Amanda Green.” He set the briefcase down. “We’re prepared to offer you immunity if you bring us that briefcase.”

I pulled Angelica’s baby carrier closer to my chest. “Baptiste is my, like, boss. I kind of need my job. So I don’t see why I would want to get her in jail.”

“Gravitass won’t end just because Baptiste resigns — it’s too valuable a resource. That’s where Laurent comes in.” He gestured to the woman in the passenger seat. “Teagan Valentine, meet Elle Laurent — she’s the CEO of Gwash.”

“Gwash is my environmentally-positive metal straw company,” said Laurent.

I’d heard of Gwash. “Wasn’t that shut down by the EPA?”

“I chose to temporarily pause sales, at the suggestion of the EPA, of my own free will. Otherwise, Gwash has been hugely successful. Thanks to our investors we turned a nearly 100 grand profit in only six months. My salary alone was over two million. Our demographic? Democrats. College-educated millennials. Young professionals who buy Rosé at Whole Foods. Hillary voters. Artists who wear recycled jeans. Women between the ages of 18 and 40. Gay men under 60. And the DPRK.” She paused. “That last one might have been due to the trace amounts of enriched uranium found in our packaging.”

“Gravitass will be absorbed by Gwash as a subsidiary,” explained Whitman.

“Oh,” I said. “I see. What’s a subsidiary?”

“Gwash will own Gravitass. Laurent will run Gravitass. You’ll be employed by Gravitass.”

“Right.” I thought it over. “If you’re not planning on killing me, how do you know that I’m not gonna go back to Baptiste and tell her you want the briefcase?”

“Have you heard of H5, Teagan?”

I went quiet.

“One month ago an intern at Gravitass posted a video of him and an unknown American fraternizing at a party to their instagram. Captioned ‘look at these chuds at my work party LOL is it just me or is that h5??? Thinking emoji, sticking tongue out emoji.’”

“That’s crazy, man.”

“Do you have any guess as to who the American in that video is?”

I was sweating pretty bad even though it was winter. I didn’t ask them to roll down a window, though. “I don’t know.”

“We have reason to believe you are America’s H5. Which mean we have the opportunity to take back the market from China. We want you to stay on at Gravitass, under

Laurent, where you will be paid very well for your contribution to the domestic economy. All we ask is that you cooperate with our investigation into Baptiste.” He paused. “You do that and you and your — female child, there — will be taken care of. You’ll be safe.”

“And if I don’t?”

“You want any water?”

“No, I don’t want any water.”

“Alright. How I see it is either you get us that briefcase, or else you get to find out the answer to what happens if you don’t cooperate.”

I thought about Angelica. “Okay.”

“Okay, you’ll do it?”

I pressed my forehead to the handle of Angelica’s baby carrier. “Yeah.”

“Awesome. We’re also going to need to bug you, by the way.”

Chapter 23: The Twenty-Four Hour Work Week

“It’s been a while since you’ve been in the office. I’m glad to see you feeling better — taking initiative.”

“Oh, yeah. Totally.” I followed Baptiste down the gray hallway, past large men in black clothes. I’d given the deposition yesterday and then they’d strapped me into a wire and told me to stick close to Baptiste for the next week, because at the end of the week they were going to arrest her. The wire itched my stomach. “I’m feeling — great. What’s with all the big guard dudes?”

“My personal security. I set aside an office for you, but it’s being painted.” We stopped outside of Marcus office. Baptiste knocked, and didn’t wait for an answer before opening the door. “Marcus.”

Marcus’s dress shirt was unbuttoned over a sweat-stained wife beater, and his suit jacket was abandoned, half-draped on the arm of his office chair. His tie curled like a snake on the floor near his expensive dress shoes. He was absorbed in a stack of paperwork. When Baptiste and I walked into the room he startled, and jerked up to sit straight. A thin sheet from an accounting log clung to his cheek. He swiped it off, crumpling it and tossing it into the overflowing bin.

“You look productive.” Baptiste leaned on the doorway. “Busy jerking it to your non-suspended law license?”

He stubbed out his cigarette. “Why is Teagan here?”

“Haven’t you heard? It’s take your kid to work day.” She laughed, and looped an arm around my shoulders, squeezing affectionately. “No, I’m kidding. Tea had a change of heart. Decided to join the grind in person. You missed it, when you consecutively used every one of your sick days after Miller’s death.”

Marcus looked sick. “And the infant?”

“Currently with the hired caretaker and her team of bodyguards.”

He nodded, slowly.

“I’ve got a meeting with the shareholders in fifteen minutes. You get all of this —” Baptiste gestured vaguely— “in order. And don’t use the interns. Teagan is going to help you with your paperwork.” Smiled at me. “How’s that? You mind hanging out with Marcus while your office is being painted?”

“No, it’s cool.” I thought of something. “Could I — sit in? On the shareholder’s meeting?”

She laughed. “Very funny.” Clapped my shoulder. “Alright. I’ve got to get back to it. I’ll see you later, Teagan.”

She closed the door to Marcus’s office behind her. I stood there awkwardly.

“Can I — help you? With work?”

“No, you can’t. You’re a teenager. And I have a law degree from Yale.” He said it mournfully, so that even though it was sort of an insult I only felt bad for him. “Gravitas is really in the shit, Teagan. My job is very hard. The legal pitfalls are near-constant.”

“Oh, yeah?” I cleared my throat, awkwardly. “What kind of — I mean, legal pitfalls, huh? Do you think you could, like, describe those to me? In a loud voice?”

“Mostly FDA regulations. It’s hard because our consumer base isn’t the general public.” He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. “Weren’t you going to go to Canada? I thought that’s where you took the baby yesterday. When you ran away.”

“No. That’s was dumb of me. I mean — I was going to Canada. I didn’t go anywhere else. But running away was a dumb idea. Where would I get money? Working at — whatever the Canadian version of Starbucks is?”

“Just Starbucks, I think.”

“And I would’ve totally fucked up Angelica on my own. It’s way better that Baptiste gets custody and stuff.”

“Yeah, sure — Angelica, the mysteriously-sourced baby. Every company’s got one of those. Where is my goddamn lighter?” Marcus didn’t seem interested in my babysitting adventures. Maybe I should’ve starred in those babysitting club books instead. I could get into wacky hijinks, and learn valuable morals about friendship and loyalty, then sew friendship bracelets with Marcus. Unfortunately Marcus did not currently appear to be in a friendship bracelet mood.

“Is it in your desk?”

“No.” He slammed his drawer shut and moved on to his briefcase, flipping through files with both hands, cigarette dangling from his lips. I watched him sort through the loose post-it-notes. “Goddamnit.”

“Any insider information in there? Bad — stock trades?” The problem with me trying to get Marcus to self-incriminate was that I didn’t know shit about stocks or being a lawyer for a company or pretty much anything.

“No, I keep those at my house. Harder to get a warrant for a house.” Marcus found the lighter, a cheap green zippo which took a couple tries to produce a flame, then raised it to the end of the cigarette before letting it extinguish. He inhaled, and slumped, visibly relieved. Smoke spiraled from his parted lips to the ceiling. The white plaster was stained a faint yellow.

“Yesterday it was supposed to rain.”

Marcus looked at me. “What?”

“I’m telling you a story, asshole.” He grunted. “It was supposed to rain yesterday. Okay? And Baptiste had scheduled her conference outside. I knew it cause I keep track of her calendar, right? Except she wouldn’t let me take her off the fucking roof, into a conference room — she looked into my eyes and swore up and down that it was going to be sunny.”

He took another drag. It really smelled like shit in here. Well, smoke.

“And so I’m in her office, right? Yesterday, around noon. Waiting for the caterers. I keep looking outside, waiting for it to rain. And there’s dark clouds and the air smells like salt. And finally — exactly when the weather report said it was going to happen — there’s a drizzle. When I go up to the roof everyone else has gone inside except her and some fucking bigshot. One of the guys who calls her a psychopath on TV.”

“Davis?” guessed Marcus.

“No. Anyway, he’s —”

“Samons.”

“No, not —”

“Renaldo.”

“Yes. Renaldo.”

“That son of a bitch.” Marcus shook his head.

“Right. Anyway. So she’s standing there, getting soaked — and she looks awful, but she’s laughing, apologizing, grabbing all her fucking presentation materials — and somehow he’s the only guy with an umbrella, and he’s holding it out for her, and when they

both go inside they're best fucking friends for the rest of the meeting. I'm not fucking kidding. They're buddy-buddy. Laughing at each other's jokes and shit. And, like — you can't be on the side against a rain cloud, right? You can't be morally opposed to a humidity level. Weather just happens regardless. It doesn't give a shit. There's only one side you can be on — the side of the rain."

Marcus frowned at me, indulgently. "Renaldo. That bastard."

"I'm not going to college."

Marcus reached into his coat pocket, and pulled out a pack of Marlboros. He flipped the lid with his thumb and held it out.

"Thanks." He tossed me the lighter. "Trying to give me cancer?"

"Hey. Sooner you get out of here, the better, kid."

I exhaled, and stared at the patterns in the smoke. It was mostly smoke-patterned, but occasionally a wisp would look like a cloud, and I would get excited for a second before it dispersed. There was not a lot of variety or thrill in the cigarette smoke watching game. I probably should've been trying to get Marcus to talk more but I was tired. I hadn't slept well the night before. I hadn't slept well since Halloween.

There was a knock in the door, and I jumped. "Come in," called Marcus, taking another puff of his cigarette.

The door opened. "Mr. Low," greeted one of the interns. They'd gotten new uniforms — an ironed black shirt with the Gravitas logo in lavender on the pocket. "Your lunch? We're ordering from *Leaf and Twine* again today."

"The usual." He and the intern both looked at me. "Teagan?"

"I can buy my own lunch."

"Baptiste told me to insist," said the intern, bashfully.

I crossed my arms. "What's *Leaf and Twine*?"

"Gourmet organic restaurant," answered Marcus. Gross. "Makes a mean quinoa salad." Double gross.

"I'll have the most expensive thing on the menu." The intern nodded, and then retreated, shutting the door gently. "I wonder how long she was standing there."

"Who?" Marcus had gone back to staring at the wall.

"The intern."

He laughed, and tapped the shrunken cigarette into an overflowing ivory ash tray. "Who knows? They've got free rein of the place. I think Baptiste has some blacking out information on her confidentials."

"Awesome. Do you know where Baptiste keeps that orange briefcase, by the way?"

He made a face. "I don't know. Back at her house, maybe?"

Shit.

The Gravitas break room fridge had a box of pizza labeled "Mark." I really didn't have any qualms about stealing from "Mark" but when I opened the box the pizza was moldy, so I made a face and stuck it back in the fridge. The most expensive thing on the menu of *Leaf and Twine* turned out to be (predictably?) a salad with a bunch of weird shit in it. It had been totally gross but I'd eaten it anyway except I was still fucking hungry.

It was late in the day — nearly five — and the break room was empty. It wasn't much like the black hole break room. For one, it was spatially and temporally grounded in

reality. Also it was colder. I put up my sweatshirt hood and took an apple from the vegetable drawer. It was kind of mushy but overall o.k. to eat. I ate the mushy apple over the big trash can and it was so gross that started to cry. I kept crying even after I'd finished the apple and washed my hands and then I went and sat on the gray break room couch and stared at the fridge. I stared at the fridge and cried into my sweatshirt sleeves.

When the door opened I jumped and (instinctually) tried to drop into a black hole but then my heart hurt so I got rid of it. In the doorway stood Baptiste.

"Oh. Hey." I stood, and wiped my face. "I was just leaving."

"No, don't." Baptiste was carrying a half-finished salad. She left it in the fridge, and took out the milk. "Hot chocolate?"

"Are you — asking me. If I want hot chocolate?"

"No, Teagan, I simply like to state the words. Of course I'm asking you."

"Ok. Yeah, sure. I'd dig some hot chocolate." I moved to lean on the counter, beside her, and watched as she poured milk into a pot and shook out a Swiss Miss packet from a box in the cabinet above the tiny stove. "How was your shareholder meeting?"

"It went very well."

"Awesome."

"Yes. Gravitax is doing very well — the Antidote is in higher demand than ever."

"I assume you moved it from the police station basement," I joked, badly.

She cracked a smile. Took down two mugs. "It's secure."

For a minute we both watched the milk on the stovetop. Placid.

"Did I ever tell you about Riley?"

I straightened. "No. Who's Riley?"

"My best friend in high school. Riley moved to my town senior year, so we didn't know each other for very long — but we became very close, over that short period of time. Riley was the first person I'd ever met who wasn't from my hometown. I was in love."

"Sounds nice."

"Riley definitely wasn't nice. Riley was — fucking honest, brutally honest. And funny, and smart. So fucking smart. Our first kiss was at prom, to Aerosmith." She laughed, sadly. "We were kids. We didn't know what the fuck we were doing. But we had dreams. We wanted to go to college together somewhere far away, get a place in the city. Start a life together." She turned off the heat before the milk started to boil. "Riley died before graduation. Killed by a black hole."

"I'm sorry."

"So that's why. That's why I founded Gravitax. That's why I'm doing all of this — so one day the Antidote will be widely accessible, and there won't be anymore Rileys."

She handed me the mug of hot chocolate. Her face was wide and honest. I looked down, at the floor. "Thank you, Baptiste."

"I'm sorry about Haoyu. I didn't know — it would effect you so badly. But I should've. Because I've felt the same way."

"It's not like it was your fault. You were the one who saw how dangerous Miller was, after Amanda. That we had to stop him. I just can't stop thinking — if I'd listened to you earlier, if I'd gone and found him sooner. Could I have stopped him?"

"Oh, no, Teagan. None of that was your fault. Miller was a piece of shit — if anything, it was my fault, for working with him. I feel terrible about that whole situation." She put her hands over mine, around the cup. "I take full responsibility for Miller's death — I

should've have called you then, I should've waited. No, I do. I take full responsibility. And that's not even to mention Halloween. I don't regret it, because it saved your life. But that man's death—"

"Okay." I set down the mug. "Maybe you can just, like — stop talking about it, man."

"It just feels like it started us down an awful road. One with tracks deeply grooved, that are very hard to leave. And my involvement was, unavoidably—"

"Stop. Just stop. I don't want to talk about it."

"Okay." She paused. "But I am sorry. For everything."

"Like I said. Not your fault."

"No. I'm sorry for after. I'm sorry for not being empathetic." Baptiste set the pot in the sink. Thumbed the countertop. "I should have known that what happened with Chief Miller would hurt you. I don't want to see you in pain."

For a minute we both sat in mutual silence.

"Like. Why?"

"What?"

I stared down at the gray carpet, as if the patterns of looped wool were going to unknit themselves and reveal some fundamental office building secret. My head was fucked. "Why don't you want me to be in pain? Why? Because you like me?"

She hesitated. "Why else?"

"Cause I don't feel like you like me. Most of the time I feel like you really fucking hate me. So, like — yeah."

She paused, taken aback, and I instantly felt shitty. Then she walked towards me.

"I'm not fucking stupid," I said, as she approached. "I know that I'm annoying to you. You hate me. You need me — and you hate that. You don't like me. You don't care about me."

She paused a step in front of me, and I felt so wound up that I thought I might break. When she reached forward I closed my eyes.

For the first few seconds of Baptiste hugging me I was rigid and hunched over an inch of separation between us. Then I pressed against her so hard I almost fell over. She rocked back and forth.

"I understand," said Baptiste, as I buried my face on the shoulder pad of her suit jacket. "It's okay. I understand."

The fluorescent lights shone a second sun. I cried on her shoulder and held onto her so hard that I almost got away with not thinking about anything. Except that the last person I hugged was Haoyu, so I was thinking about that.

"You're alright, kid." Her hands rubbed circles into my back. "You're gonna be alright."

I breathed in and she smelled like cheap hand soap and dried sweat. Then I really did think about nothing, because I believed her. And belief is a different thing from thought altogether.

Chapter 24: You're the Fucking Problem

The next day, while Baptiste was in another meeting, I teleported into her apartment. I searched very carefully for the briefcase. I went through her clothes and personal items and restored everything to exactly how she'd left it. But it was nowhere.

When I knew she was almost out the meeting I teleported back into my office and snuck two doors down, to her office. Someone inside was laughing. I opened the door without knocking.

Behind the desk sat Baptiste. On the table was the orange briefcase. And at the chair in front of the desk sat Whitman.

My mouth fell open. Then closed. Baptiste leaned back in her chair, and grinned. "Hello, Teagan."

"Yes," agreed Whitman. "Hello, Teagan."

"I thought—" I flushed. "What's going on?"

Whitman cleared his throat, sobering. "There's been a change of plans. Laurent has proved herself incompetent. And — in her absence — Baptiste stepped in, to propose a very good deal. She'll stay on as Gravitas's CEO for now." He took something out of his suit jacket — a tape recorder. "You can have this back."

"Your deposition," explained Baptiste. I held it, awkwardly. "And Whitman said you don't have to keep wearing that wire. Isn't that right, Whitman?"

"Yes. You can take off the wire."

"Um," I said. "Okay. So, like — Whitman, I feel like you are kind of throwing me to the wolves, here. Like I did all that stuff for you and now you are killing me."

He smiled. "Don't worry, Valentine — you're not going to lose your job. Your country needs you. You'll stay on at Gravitas, under Baptiste."

"That's exactly what I'm worried about."

"She's even agreed to give you a promotion. Sorry, did I spoil that?" He laughed. "My mistake. Well, cat's out of the bag, now. Congratulations, Teagan — you're getting a promotion!"

"This is only good news, Teagan," said Baptiste.

Chapter 25: Ajax

I woke up at 6 in the morning on July 4th and there were holiday-appropriate clothes on my dresser. I showered all the parts of myself in my room-adjacent private bathroom, even behind my ears, then I dried myself and dressed in the red cotton button-down and the red denim pants and the white socks and red shoes and the tiny blue diamond earrings. I combed my hair and brushed my teeth and applied a golden-colored perfume that had a brand symbol on the bottle. I did my morning ten-part skincare routine and drank two glasses of water and did my assigned daily yoga and meditation and journaling. And then I inspected my face in the huge three-section mirror with the 50 individual lightbulbs affixed around its edge that had been installed in my room-adjacent private bathroom.

Today was an important day. Firstly it was a holiday. Celebrating the founding of America. Second of all it was Wednesday, which was the day I donated blood, so I was due at the church in half an hour. The third reason today was important was that today I was going to kill myself.

I blinked, and the mirror blinked back. Then I stood up and walked downstairs to get a modest breakfast of two boiled eggs, a kale smoothie, and a grapefruit. And I felt very, very well.

I was dizzy at the party, due to me having just donated blood. There was a spot on the inside elbow of my dress shirt where the bruised wound had seeped through the white gauze. Red on red. It wasn't really noticeable. I'd had to donate more and more blood recently because mine was losing potency — up to two whole liters in this last session. I hadn't been able to enter a black hole in two months, but I'd kept my power to transport objects remotely up to only a week ago. Three days ago I woke up and I couldn't feel any gravity other than the normal kind. Baptiste had put me on blood thinners to help with the heart attack symptoms, so now I was tired all the time and I when I brushed my teeth my gums bled. She hadn't figured out how to fix the bigger problem, which was that the Antidote (AKA my blood) was quickly losing the parts that made it "anti."

Baptiste found me by the hors d'oeuvres, which were actually just entire big, bloody steaks paired with a beer brand called 'Always Remember'. She was in an extremely cheesy suit patterned with the American flag. "Valentine! Meet Robert Perkins. He's running for Congress."

I took Perkins' hand. I was only swaying slightly. "Pleasure."

"You look fantastic." He shook, vigorously. "I heard your birthday is tomorrow. How old are you turning? Let me guess — twenty-seven?"

"Eighteen."

"Eighteen! And an executive of a fortune 500 company. Let me tell you, I respect entrepreneurship. I really do. I think the fact that any citizen can get out there and really make a difference for themselves is what makes this country great. They're trying to replace us. That's a fact of life. But seeing people like you and Baptiste successful warms my heart — real, honest, hard-working Americans."

I wasn't really listening. "Thanks."

"I cannot wait to see what you do next. And I am sure that many others share that same sentiment."

"I also can't wait for what I'm going to do next."

Baptiste hooked her elbow around the back of my neck. “Do you mind if Valentine and I speak privately? Just for a moment?”

“Of course. Don’t let me intrude.”

She towed me away, next to the AC unit, and leaned in to whisper conspiratorially. “I’ve been meaning to speak with you. I’m sorry I wasn’t at the church this morning. I’ve been very busy.” Her eyes shifted from me to the rest of the party, and she sighed tightly. “Actually. That’s not true. I am busy, but — well. No use in trying to disguise it, I suppose. I wasn’t there because it’s painful, for me.” She squeezed her arm around my neck. “To see you losing your powers.”

“I know.”

“I don’t know if this just a natural biological process, or if you’re doing this on purpose —”

“I’m not.” She didn’t look at me. “I wouldn’t. I swear.”

“I know. I know. Sorry, it’s — frustrating, Teagan. It’s frustrating.” I tried to breathe shallowly. Her breath was terrible. Probably from the meat. “But I want to assure you. Even if your blood loses potency completely, you still have a place at this company. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I’ve been trying to subtly familiarize you with a normal employee workload. Introduce you to some big players. You’re not going to be tossed out — you have a place here, always. Always.”

I looked up at her, for the first time. We made eye contact. “Thank you, Baptiste.”

She smiled. “You’re welcome.” She released my shoulders, and jabbed me in the side with her elbow. “And don’t feel guilty! I won’t hear anything of that. Gravitax will do just fine without your blood. In fact — I think you’ll be happy to learn that Angelica has your same exact condition. That gives us at least another eighteen years to produce a synthetic replicate, assuming she progresses similarly to yourself.”

The sun wavered near the horizon, red and yellow and gold, and then, at last, touched down. “That’s fantastic.”

There were five hours left until I turned eighteen. The sun had just set, and the sky was pale blue and starless. Yellow light bled from the tiki torches arranged on Baptiste’s roof. The toe of my converse found the edge. A stray piece of gravel tumbled off the blacktop to the sidewalk 20 stories below, only a foot to the right of the fire escapes, which spiraled down to the ground floor. I moved to my left — I didn’t want to hit those accidentally, that would probably make my dead body look really stupid — then stopped, and shifted back. I looked at the fire escapes and then at the sidewalk and then at the fire escapes again.

There was a black hole on the lowest level of the fire escape.

Baptiste kept a crate of antidote in her bedroom. I jabbed my elbow and returned to the fire escape. When I’d made it to the lowest level the black hole was still there.

I let myself be eaten.

The breakroom is pretty much exactly how I remembered it. It’s crazy to think I hadn’t been here for — seven months? At least since December. The box of evidence tying me and Baptiste to the murder of that guy on Halloween is still shoved under one of the tables. Angelica’s baby carrier remains lodged in the wall. I open the fridge, and check the vegetable drawer — my gun is still there, where I always keep it. I tuck it into my belt.

And something else is there. The *Work Smart* book, with the inside flap of the cover bookmarking the title page. I sit down next to the open fridge and flip to the page and there is a note written in blue pen.

Freako,

Someone has told my government about you and I. They've detained me on espionage charges and will not allow me to continue making the black holes, or public appearances, etc. I will comply with this, for my family, and my future here. Do not try to get me: I am confident things will cool down and they will see I am innocent. Until then it is too risky to see you.

I can only imagine this was due to our fight at the Gravititas office. I still think you are in immanent danger and should quit your job but I'm sorry that things worked out this way. I love you and I don't want you to get killed. So I am asking you to please be careful.

Since I will not be using black holes anymore this will be my last time talking to you for a while. Thank you for being in the black holes with me.

— Haoyu

There's a date at the top: November 17th, 2017.

Three days after H5's time of death. And a full day after I'd killed Miller.

Haoyu is alive.

Chapter 26: Thumbs-Up

Angelica had been put to bed three hours earlier. I picked her up from her crib and shushed her before she could wake up and start crying. Then I grabbed one of those baby carriers and had just gotten it clipped around my waist when someone spoke.

“Teagan?”

I froze, and turned to the door. It was open. Silhouetted by the hall light was Marcus.

“Oh,” I said. “Hey.”

Marcus was in a blue suit, with an American flag pin on his lapel. He was already smoking a cigarette, but he plucked another, fumbling out his lighter. When he went to stick it in his mouth he realized his mistake.

I leaned against the doorway. He was pressed to the opposite wall of the hallway, but held out the cigarette. “Smoke?”

I took it. His hands were shaking bad. “Thanks.”

“Have you been downstairs?”

“Not recently.” I exhaled, and coughed, then passed it back to Marcus. He stuck it in his mouth, beside the first. “Why?”

“It’s pretty busy. A lot of eyes.”

I was taken by surprise. “Okay. Uh — thanks for the tip, I guess.”

I moved to walk past him, but he stopped me. “You said it first, kid. In this place there’s only side you can be on. I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“Is that a threat?”

“It’s a warning. Take it or don’t.” He exhaled smoke from his two cigarettes.

“Okay. I choose not to take it.” I finished putting on the carrier and set up Angelica so she was pressed against my chest. Then stalked to the end of the hallway, and turned back, whispering so I didn’t wake her up again: “You look like an idiot, by the way.”

He smiled. “I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

“Don’t rat me out, asshole. I can still kill you with a gun.”

I’d already stolen a pack of Antidote, which I’d stored in the pocket on Angelica’s carrier. Next I rifled through my Baptiste’s bedroom for her orange briefcase. I found it beneath a stack of printed-out NFTs. When I turned to leave my room Elle Laurent was standing in the doorway.

After Gravitas had absorbed Gwash Baptiste had offered Laurent a position as CWO, where she had remained for the past six months. This was a bad situation for me because she was annoying as fuck and I hated her. “Teagan! It’s great to see you.”

“Move.” I tucked the gun in my back pocket and shoved past her, into the hall.

She laughed like I was a curiosity — a little kid throwing a tantrum or something. Very condescending. “Getting up to some hijinks, are we?”

“Yes. The hijink called revenge.”

“Obviously! Well. You know I can’t —” She’d already pulled out her phone to text Baptiste. I could tell. I headed to the stairs, then remembered the vague allusions Marcus had made to security, and instead decided to continue down the hallway. “—so if you’d just —” she went on like that. Trying to placate me. I wasn’t listening.

“You can drop the gun — she won’t be mad, I promise.” I stepped into the bathroom and slammed the door behind me and double-locked it. “Teagan! I talked to Baptiste, okay? She’s really not happy about this. I don’t think you want to make her angry.”

“I don’t want to make her angry. I want to kill her.”

“Okay. Okay, I see. You’re entitled to your opinion, sweetheart. But maybe you should do some self-care first. Take a nice bubble bath. Draw on some sharp eyeliner. Drink a smoothie.”

I pulled out the gun. “Get away from the door or I’m going to shoot you.”

I heard her back up. “Okay, Teagan. Baptiste is coming. I’m going to leave you two alone to talk this out.” She hesitated. “Deep breaths? An acai bowl?”

“I’ll fucking kill you!”

“Okay. I’m sorry. I’ll leave you two alone.” And then her footsteps retreated.

They were quickly replaced by someone else. At first there was silence. Baptiste and I stood on either side of the door in silence. I thought about her lying about Haoyu and got so angry and sad that it made me dizzy. I leaned my head against the door.

She took the thump as an acknowledgment. “Tea?”

I didn’t answer.

“Tea?” Baptiste rapped her knuckles on the door, lightly. “You alright?”

I held the gun tight to my hip. It was cold. “Go away!”

“I’m not going away. Are you okay?” The knocking got more insistent. “You better not be taking pills. If you try to kill yourself I’ll kill you. Do you know how terrible that would look for me?”

Sweat on my hands left the metal warm and swampy as I struggled to cock the gun. A drop fell from the tip of the barrel, and hit the white tile.

“I’m just kidding.” She stopped knocking. “You want cake, Valentine? We’ve got chocolate. I know you love chocolate.” I pulled back the top, and heard a click. “How’s that for an early birthday present? Let’s go get some cake.”

“I know Haoyu is alive, asshole!”

There was a pause. When she spoke again her voice was cold.

“Open the door.”

“No!” I pounded on the door. “Kill yourself! You motherfucker! Fucking kill yourself!”

“You’re obviously emotional —”

“Why would you lie about that to me? You asshole! You fucking psycho!”

“It wasn’t—why do you think he’s alive?”

“Because he fucking told me. You lied to me! You motherfucker. You told the Chinese about him and me, so they’d detain him — and then you lied about him being dead, so I’d think Miller did it, and kill Miller. That’s it, right? You wanted me to kill Miller, and stop talking to Haoyu, and this killed two birds with one stone? You fucking psychopath. You fucking heartless bitch. You motherfucker.” I leaned against the door. “Why would you do that to me?”

“I didn’t know his death would effect you so badly.”

“You didn’t know the death of my best friend would effect me badly? You didn’t think me killing Miller would effect me badly? Am I fucking robot, to you?”

“Teagan—”

“What about Riley — was all that a lie, too? Have you ever told the fucking truth once in your fucking life?”

She didn't respond. Instead there was a thump. And then another, so hard that the door shook. I jumped back, then stumbled over the lip of the bathtub and pressed myself against the tile. There was a pause, then footsteps, then another thump. She was running into the door. Trying to break it down. I dropped to a crouch, then pulled out my gun and fired at the door. The sound was loud and the recoil hurt my forearms and there was a hole in the nice shiny mahogany. For a moment, the thumps stopped.

Then she returned fire.

The bullets punched through the door and ricocheted off the mirror and the toilet bowl. I fumbled out my phone, and looked up a number, sinking further into the tub. The first and second call he hung up. On the third it rang four times before he answered.

“This is Martin Blau, with the New York Times. How can I help you?”

“Did you know Amanda?”

He hesitated. “This is about Amanda Green?”

“My name is Teagan Valentine. Do you know who I am?”

“Of course.”

“I know who killed Amanda. I am also responsible for the murder of Chief James Miller. You can use that — consider this phone call a confession. If you want the story of a lifetime come to 300 8th Avenue in Chelsea in twenty minutes. I'm taking Gravitas down.” I hung up on him.

I fumbled Angelica around so she was slung across my back, like a knapsack. And then I crawled over and pried up the bathroom window and stuck out my head. Twenty stories below the street was empty. But there was no fucking way I was getting down there — it was a straight drop, save the jutting inch-long window sills. Due to my history of superpowers I wasn't afraid of heights, but that didn't mean I was stupid. With Angelica on my back I would totally 100% fall. I looked up, to the roof. I scooted out to sit on the window ledge, and set the briefcase on the roof. Then I grabbed the edge and pulled.

Five minutes of intense maneuvering later and I was safely on the blacktop. It took me a moment to recover (panting, sweating, etc.). At the other end of the roof the party was full swing — people laughing and drinking and dancing awkwardly to Ke\$ha. None of them had noticed me. I adjusted Angelica so she was on my front again and picked up the briefcase. I gripped the gun at my side so hard I could almost feel the metal flex. I probably looked insane but then again I always looked insane.

“Teagan!” Baptiste had stuck her head out of the window. She looked down, then, having confirmed I hadn't killed myself, looked up. I walked to the edge of the roof and took out my gun and fired at her, but she ducked back inside as I pulled the trigger, and the bullet embedded in the sidewalk below. She didn't stick her head out of the window again, which was smart of her. She was probably on her way up.

The people at the party hadn't noticed the gunfire due to the fireworks. I jogged into their midst, weaving through couples with margaritas and fancy clothes. My best idea was to use the fire escapes, but when I looked over the edge I could see two men in black suits at the bottom. One of them held the kind of walkie-talkie used by the cops. I jerked back before they could see me and instead ducked into the crowd. The door to the roof opened, and Baptiste climbed onto the blacktop. Her gaze scanned the dance floor. I tried to hide behind a server but she spotted me within about two seconds anyway.

“Teagan!” The Perkins dude from earlier grabbed my arm. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you about stock trading — it’s intimidating, sure, but once you get into it —”

“Fuck off.” I shoved him away. Baptiste made a beeline for me. I scrambled back to the edge of the roof, scanning the surrounding buildings. I considered making a jump for one — but Angelica was strapped to my stomach, so I was heavier and more awkward than usual, and I didn’t want to crush her on the landing. Perkins was still following me, prattling on about me being offensive. Baptiste was closing in from his right. I was out of gravity. I couldn’t teleport Angelica or myself, much less the two of us, together — I couldn’t risk hurting her.

I pulled out the gun. Perkins’s eyes blew wide, and he backed away, stuttering. A purple firework went off overhead.

“Teagan,” said Baptiste. She’d slowed, and now advanced in measured, terrifying steps. “Put down the gun.”

“I won’t.” I backed up until my heels hit the ledge, and then raised the gun with shaking hands. “Back off, bitch!”

Her eyes locked on mine. She wanted to do the stupid fucking “holding frame” pose so bad, I could tell — but she held herself back, shoulders sloped, almost casual. Maybe she knew it would make me fucking snap. “You’re betraying me? Really, Teagan? Again?”

“Yes! I fucking betray you!” I pulled the trigger. The bullet ricocheted off of the AC unit at her back as she dove, scrambling towards the crowd. “Motherfucker!”

Baptiste sprinted towards the back door. I fired another bullet, and it embedded itself in the blacktop five feet to her right. The sound was masked by the fireworks so nobody was panicking except for me and, ostensibly, Baptiste. And Perkins, I guess. By now he’d disappeared downstairs. “Come back, motherfucker!”

I shot again, but this time nothing happened. Fuck. I tried to pull out the loading thing to check how many bullets were left but I couldn’t figure it out. While I was struggling with this someone hit me in the face.

The briefcase clattered onto the roof. Stars bloomed at the back of my eyes, and my hands dropped the gun, flying up to clutch my bloody nose. The man who punched me was wearing dark clothes and a wire on his ear. He pulled out a pair of handcuffs and managed to get them around one of my wrists. Baptiste had stopped at the door, and when it became clear I was incapacitated she hurried back up to the edge of the roof. “Stop it! That’s valuable!”

The man paused. Baptiste stopped a few feet short of me. She stared at my broken nose in abject fury. “Goddamnit.”

The back of my tongue tasted metallic. I tried to wrench away, but the man held tight. One of his buddies scooped up the fallen gun. “Baptiste —”

But she wasn’t looking at me. “That’s fucking valuable, you morons!” She snapped her fingers in the face of the man holding the cuffs, pointing at my bloody face. “Can you see that, asshole? What is that? Go on, tell me. What do you see?”

His partner backed away quickly, shaking his head when the first man gave him a glance. He looked at me, then, awkwardly. I felt sick. “A bloody nose?”

“It’s profit! Profit which you fucking lost me!” She waved him away. He hesitated, then dropped my hand and backed off. “Christ. What the fuck am I even paying you for? You get here after two entire fucking shots are fired and then lose me profit.”

He mumbled an apology, but Baptiste wasn't paying attention. She was busy fumbling through her bag. The bodyguards watched as she brought out a plastic communion cup, then held it out, beneath my chin.

"Can you try and bleed into this, Tea?"

I spat in her face.

I was dizzy, and shorter than normal because I was hunched protectively over Angelica, so most of the phlegm landed on her collar. She wiped the specks of blood from her cheek with her suit sleeve, unsurprised. It left little pink dots, like new buds. "Get ahold of yourself."

"Why did you do that to me?"

"Be reasonable."

"No. I'm fucking done being reasonable. For the past six months I've capitulated. I apologized when you yelled at me. I was civilized — I was civilized, I did it, I did the skincare routines and I ate organic and I said please and thank you to assholes — and I was going to kill myself today."

"Because you're weak."

"Sure. I'm weak. I'm fucking weak. I'd rather be weak than whatever you are. You ruined my fucking —"

I was cut off because by then she'd reached me, distance bridged, and shot out a hand to grab my face. Her manicured nails dug into the soft flesh which bunched in the hollow of my cheek. My hands flew up to her wrists. The loose handcuff clanked sadly. Overhead the fireworks blazed red.

"Ow," I said, and then I didn't say anything else, because I physically couldn't. Everything was quiet. It was hard for me to breathe with the heel of her palm digging into my throat.

"You made do it," she said, finally. "You made me do it, Valentine."

Her hand shifted slightly, and I could feel, where her nails had been, the little half-moons of ruptured blood vessels quickly bruise over. "I'm sorry," I rasped, and her expression softened, and she didn't protest when I leaned into her hand. I turned my head so her thumb hovered just above my chin. For a moment we stood off like that. Then, in one, smooth movement, I opened my mouth, bent slightly, and bit it off.

Chapter 27: Star Morality

I escaped down the Gravitas office fire exit while Baptiste screamed about her thumb being detached from her body and the bodyguards searched the gravel rooftop and tried to get her to go to the hospital with them and stuff. I scrambled out into the road and was flagged down by a man driving a chevy double-parked outside Baptiste's apartment building.

He opened his door, and stepped out of the car. "Teagan Valentine? I'm Martin Blau. It's very nice to—"

I jumped into the passenger seat. "Drive."

Two days after I did the New York Times article with Martin I was arrested by the NYPD. I stood out front of Martin's apartment building (where I'd been sleeping) and waited for them. A lot of different news organizations had come out to watch me be arrested. They kept asking me questions and stuff as the cops put me in handcuffs. The cops were doing a bad job of holding them off. "I'm kind of busy," I said, inadvertently into a microphone. I was being called a lot of things: "Teagan Valentine," "defecting from Gravitas," "whistleblower," "Baptiste," "can you comment," "we're live with the famous 30 under 30 former Gravitas executive, Teagan Valentine, pull in on me, please, 3, 2 — we're live," and the cameras were huge, running footage of nice men and women in nice clothes with me lurking unnicely in the background. "I just — yes, everything in that article is true — I'd be happy to give a statement, but —" my forearms were being gripped now by a second cop, and everyone was screaming at me, and it was fucking disorienting even though I thought I was mentally prepared so I blinked at the flashing lights and cursed as Liam and the second cop steered me to a police car.

"Teagan!"

Every part of me went tense. I searched the crowd and found Baptiste, struggling through cops. "What the fuck?" I said, at the CNN reporter's camera. He grimaced.

"Teagan!" Baptiste jabbed the reporters in front of me with her elbow. "Teagan. Stay quiet — I swear to God —" She grabbed my shirt. I may have been hyperventilating a little and trying to back up except I had nowhere to fucking go. "Teagan."

"Get — fuck off! Hey — get this lady fucking off me," I said, and a cop tried to wave Baptiste away, but she wouldn't let go.

"Teagan," she said, again, "you're hysterical. You're not in your right mind. You're —"

She let go of my shirt abruptly, and screamed. Some of the reporters shouted and when I looked over my shoulder the cop's eyes were dead.

He fell and I staggered over his bleeding body, feet planted on either side of his chest, because his hand was still gripping my cuffs. And I couldn't move. My sweatshirt and a bit of my face was splattered red. My head snapped around to where in the crowd Officer Liam held a gun.

He fired again and missed a second time. Baptiste had disappeared into the crowd. The cameras pointed at him now instead of me. Liam flushed red and grit his teeth with lips pulled wide and took another step towards me. He looked girlish. "Teagan Valentine," he said, even though I couldn't hear him over the screaming I could tell that's what he said, I

could read his lips, but I could also tell with my ears. “This is for my dad,” he said again, and steadied the gun. Then Liam was blocked suddenly by Haoyu’s face in front of mine.

“Haoyu!”

“Teagan.” Haoyu attached himself to my shoulder and told me, “It’s okay, I’m here.” The cops had ran for cover behind the vans, shouting into their radios for backup even though there were like twenty guys there already.

Haoyu’s hand found the small of my back, beneath the cuffs. I pressed my face to his shoulder. He looked vaguely jaundiced. “Hold —”

There was a third pop. The black hole Haoyu had been forming beneath our feet snuffed on the breeze.

“Haoyu.” Haoyu’s hands fumbling at the shirt around his chest as it bloomed red, irritated, like the bullet wound was a bad itch. Then he froze. “Fuck.”

He said something in Chinese to me, the only word of which I understood was a soft “freako.” Then he fell onto the pavement, limp. I dropped to the pavement beside him. Fuck. I couldn’t even move my fucking hands. I shouted for someone to help, tie a tourniquet, but realized that I didn’t know how to tie a tourniquet normally, and especially not when I was in handcuffs, and also that I wasn’t sure you could even tourniquet somebody’s chest. I wanted to eat through Liam’s heart with a black hole. But when I looked up instead of a black hole imploding his major arteries his head jerked to the side and blood splattered on the road’s diving yellow line. One of the cops had shot him.

Baptiste’s hand was on my shoulder, and then my ear, which for some reason hurt really bad and made me register her presence.

“Don’t — shoot —” she struggled to get in a breath — “Teagan. Listen to me.”

“Out of the way, ma’am,” said one of the officers, gun out in front of him, where a face should’ve been on a normal person.

Baptiste’s red face matched her suit. “Out of my fucking way, you moron!”

After my second murder attempt (aimed at Baptiste this time) failed again I turned back to Haoyu, who was completely out of it at this point. Bug-eye cameras shuttered on the horizon. I shuddered, and tried to form a black hole beneath my knees, but all that happened was a minute ripple and a sharp pain in my chest. I wanted to cry. I couldn’t focus. There were too many fucking voices shouting at me and hands grabbing at my shoulders tearing me back and forth and Baptiste’s secret service entourage was arguing loudly with the police. My wrists strained at the metal cuffs. I couldn’t feel the weight at the back of my tongue that should’ve been familiar, that was familiar when I was robbing banks for ten bucks, and now was absent that I needed it most. And I couldn’t do jack shit else, because I’d never been good at fucking anything other than stupid fucking gravity, so I stared at Haoyu’s gaunt face and I tried again and again and again until my body was prickling with cold hellfire and my eyes were each looking at a different sides of the field and my head was pounding too hard for me to figure out which chunk of pavement to aim the black hole at. I could feel my heartbeat in my teeth. I was too scared to feel his heart beat because I didn’t want him to be dead.

Baptiste grabbed my elbow and tried to pull me up. “Teagan. Come on. Let’s go.”

My left hand — which had pressed instantly to Haoyu’s chest — stilled. I stopped trying at the black holes, which were getting me fucking nowhere. I knew what I had to do. I knew who was here. I looked up through the barrage of camera lights.

“Baptiste.”

“Come on,” she said. “Get up.”

“Give me the briefcase.”

“I’m not giving you anything. Stand up, we’re leaving.”

“I’m not leaving.” I knew somewhere Haoyu hadn’t been shot. “Not with you.”

“How about you stand up, huh?”

“How about you give me the briefcase?” She met my gaze. I tried my best at unshakable confidence. In reality I was extremely shaky, both mentally and physically. “I know you have it.”

There was a beat where she didn’t move, and I was terrified that I was wrong about her. Then she walked away. When she returned a moment later she had the briefcase in her hand.

“Valentine. Think this through.” She crouched beside me and held it out. I tried to grab it, but she pulled away. “Stop thinking about the cameras for one fucking second, Teagan, and think about your choices. Is this what you want?” Her face was blurry. “My offer still stands. I’ll have him taken to a hospital. You’ll survive.”

“I’m not your bitch, bitch.” This time she didn’t pull away when I took the briefcase. I opened it and took out the black hole gun. “I’ll see you in hell.”

And then I formed a black hole on the bloody tar, and I dropped out of reality.

Chapter 28: Beginnings

I opened the orange briefcase on the floor of the break room. Inside was a stack of papers, dense with text. The top one read:

GRAVITAS

Recorded by Emily Jean-Baptiste

Prologue

On December 19th, 1999, the first black hole appears in in a Long Island

I skimmed ahead a few pages.

I used to steal the orange expos up until the fifth grade when I got caught sneaking one from Ms. Reilly and she'd flipped over my desk and looked through all my shit. Like, to see if I'd stolen anything else, I guess. She was pretty crazy. She would've been really crazy, except I was also

Then to the middle.

Walking through the main hallway of my school while covered in another man's blood was not a strange

Some kind of book? Whatever it was, it was obviously important. I would have more time to read it in 1999. I clicked shut the briefcase with the book and the gun inside. My hands got blood on the blue plastic chair when I wrapped my hands around its seat. When I picked it up and stood my fuzzy reflection in the door's mirror copied. Except in the reflection my hands were empty.

I smashed the foot of the chair into the wall, then stumbled to the side to avoid its downswing as it tugged free of the plaster. It was awkward and unwieldily but by God I knew what I wanted and I was going to get it. On the third hit I broke through to sky. On my twelfth swing a watermelon-sized chunk of wall crumbled. By my twenty-third there was a jagged, human-sized hole in the plaster, if you were a very small human, or else held yourself horizontally. On the other side wasn't New York City, or Shanghai — rather, we were on a grassy, half-dead front lawn in what appeared to be the suburbs. The hole shrunk slightly as insulation re-wove itself along its torn edges like the encroaching webs of a million tiny spiders. Motherfucker. I flailed the pointy end of the chair leg around the rim of the wall, attempting to hold off the destruction of my hard work, then gave up. I took the briefcase and crawled out into the light.