The CARE and FEEDING of a PET BLACK HOLE

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CHAPTER ONE

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The Mysterious Something That Followed Me Home

This story began on an afternoon the color of comets, with a girl dressed all in black. A sad girl. A girl with a hole in her heart, and darkness on the horizon.

That girl, of course, was me.

"My name is Stella Rodriguez," I told the guard at the gates to NASA. "I'm eleven years old. I'm here to speak with Carl Sagan."

It was late, almost dark, and I was alone. You and Mom would not have approved.

The guard looked up as if he'd heard an annoying mosquito, decided he imagined it, and went back to reading his magazine.

"Actually," I tried again, "I'm Carl Sagan's great-great-great-great-granddaughter, and I'm here at NASA to tell him that in the future we've invented time travel!"

"Please go away," said the guard.

"But I have an appointment . . ."

"No," said the guard, "you definitely don't."

"*Fine*, okay, maybe I don't!" I said, a bit too loudly. "But if you take into consideration chaos theory or the butterfly effect, the very notion of long-term predictions—for example, an *appointment*—becomes an absurd impossibility. Time—"

But before I could continue trying to sound scholarly, an ear-piercing alarm started ringing. Lights began flashing, and I could hear shouts from inside the building.

"Okay," I said, putting up my hands. "Let's all just take it easy. I'll go peacefully. No need for alarms. I'm too bookish for prison!"

But the guard wasn't paying attention to me. He grabbed his phone and started shouting, something about code reds and protocol, and before I knew what was happening he had run inside, leaving the gate wide open.

I wish I were the type of person who would sneak into NASA during a molecular-robot-alien-rocket-invasion-explosion. But you know very well I'm not

that type. Not even close. I'm more of a chicken-liver-jellyfish-fraidy-cat type.

And so I left. I left without seeing Carl Sagan, or giving him the important package I'd come to deliver. Time was of the essence, since the Voyager launch date—August 20, 1977—was mere months away.

Avoiding the alarms at NASA, I went to the bus stop and waited. It was the last moment of light, and I had a strange feeling. Like when you sense a breeze on your ankles in a room with no open windows or doors. Like when you're sure you can see a face in the moon, and it's staring right at you. Like when you're the seeker during hide-and-seek, and you just know you're being watched through a closet keyhole. I darted my eyes from side to side, looking in the bushes and up at the trees. I didn't see anything anywhere but dusk.

And so I was understandably relieved when the bus came around the bend. That is, until I got *on* the bus, and things started to get even stranger, if possible.

"My wallet!" shouted a businesswoman. "Someone stole my wallet!"

Everyone scanned the bus for a shady-looking character.

"And where's my toupee?" asked an elderly man.

This continued for three more stops, shouts of *Where's my lunch?* and *Who took my pet frog?* To get off

the bus, I had to weather an obstacle course of people on their hands and knees searching for something-or-other under their seats.

The stop was only a few minutes from home, but it felt like miles. I mean, what was going on?! The dusk had turned to straight-up gloom, which wasn't good because by that point I had a severe case of the creeps, a heebie-jeebie fever, and a touch of the willies. I'm not afraid of the dark—you know that from all our time spent stargazing—but the minute I started walking, I got goose bumps down my arms and legs and all the way up my neck. I had such a case of the jumps that I'm pretty sure I had goose bumps on my eyeballs, which, by the way, were not helping because in a matter of minutes it had gone from almost-dark-outside-gloom to dark-at-the-bottom-of-a-pocket.

I looked from side to side.

"Who's there?" I asked. No one answered. Has anyone in any scary movie ever answered that question? *Oh, glad you asked, it's me the axe murderer. Dang it! That was actually supposed to be a surprise . . .*

So I did what anyone in my position would do. I started to run. Fast. I ran through the dark-like-the-muck-down-a-drain, I sprinted through the dark-as-the-inside-of-a-whale. I didn't hear footsteps or twigs

breaking behind me, but the feeling was becoming stronger. Someone was lingering just out of view. I was being watched. I was being followed.

But by who?

Or, worse still . . . by *what?*

CHAPTER TWO

★

Hello, Darkness

"WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?! YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO BE WATCHING ME UNTIL MOM GETS HOME. I COULD HAVE EATEN GLUE OR SOMETHING!"

That shrill voice belonged, of course, to Cosmo. A fitting name given that he's a total space cadet of a five-year-old brother.

"Shhhhh!" I said. "Help me batten down the hatches and secure the premises."

I ran around locking doors, closing all the window shades, and turning off the lights. I peered out through a crack in the front curtains. It had begun to rain and it

was hard to see whatever monster had been following me home.

"This is fun," whispered a voice behind me. "What are we doing?"

I looked down at Cosmo. He squeezed his little hands in excitement.

"*Did* you eat glue?"

"No," he replied sheepishly.

"Good," I said, "very mature. Come on, I'll make us some dinner."

After fear-flavored grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup eaten in almost-dark, I told Cosmo I was going to do my homework, but really I just needed some alone time to think. I put on my fuzzy blue robe with the stars on it, and stared out my bedroom window on the second floor, trying to get a better view of the front yard. I tried using my telescope, but it just made me sad. Extra sad. Sadder than my lingering, everyday fog. It had been our father-daughter thing, just you and me, but now you're gone and there are monsters in the yard and everything is wrong.

I sat slumped with my chin on the windowsill. A raindrop slid down the glass like a tiny shooting star.

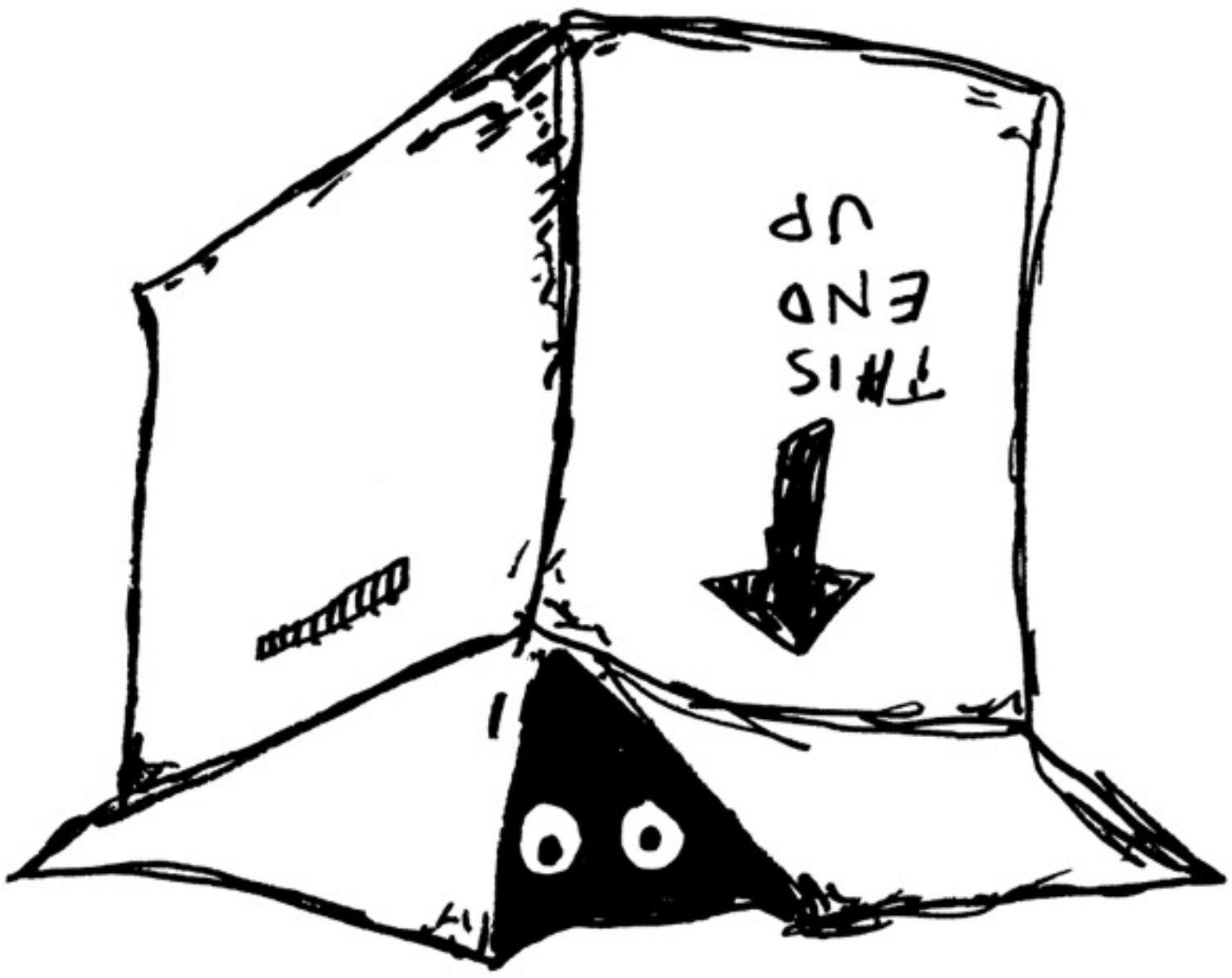
"I wish," I said, closing my eyes, "that I could make everything awful just . . . disappear."

When I opened my eyes, I caught a glimpse of something outside, just for a moment, before it darted into a cardboard box near the trash cans on the curb.

"Huh?" I asked. I used my hand to clear the fog from the glass. Yes, there was definitely something in the box, something small, and dark, and shivering. *A kitten*, I thought, trying to convince myself that I had seen the flash of whiskers and flick of a tail.

Armed with rain boots and a flashlight, I made my way outside. Luckily, Cosmo had gone to his room and wasn't around to bug me.

"It's just a cat or a stray dog," I said to myself as I crept across the yard and through the rain.



"Here, kitty kitty," I said as I got closer. "Please don't be a skunky skunky."

* 8 *

I moved slowly and carefully, trying to see the critter. But when my flashlight lit up the inside of the box, what I saw was not a kitten or pup. It wasn't even a skunk. What it was was . . . *darkness.*

I stumbled back away from the box, tripped on the curb, and dropped the flashlight. When I finally retrieved it, my hands were shaking as I aimed it back at what I thought I'd seen. The thing inside was gone! I flailed the light around wildly, and found the creature, creeping closer and closer toward me. It didn't seem to have legs or arms. It was just a blob of darkness no bigger than a rabbit—but not regular darkness, no. This was dark like the dark inside an old, closed book—except with two eyes. Eyes that shimmered, and seemed to have tiny galaxies inside of them.

"ACK!" I yelled, pointing at the thing. The thing, in response, looked behind it to see what was so scary.

"Stay back!" I said. But every time I took a step away, the creature crept a little closer to me. In fact, from the way it moved and the look in its eyes, I got the craziest feeling: *I think it wants me to pet it.*

But I'm not insane. Instead, I threw my flashlight at it, hoping it would run away. To my shock, though, the flashlight didn't hit the creature; it just disappeared completely *inside* the thing. The flashlight was there one moment, and gone the next, absorbed without a trace.

"What in the world . . . ?" I asked.

And then, in the dim glow of the streetlamp, the creature gave a very unceremonious, light-filled . . . burp.