Part One

Chapter One

It was the 19th of May when I decided to kill myself in the blackhole.

If it all goes to plan, I would not only become the first ever human to die in a blackhole, I would also be the first to willingly do it. I liked the idea. I had lost interest in living at that point. The only thing that keeps me going is the potential to achieve something great, something spectacular. Dying in a blackhole is spectacular.

The longer I think about it, the more brilliant this idea becomes. I got the idea when I was working late well past midnight on the 19th. It was a Wednesday, no, Thursday at that point. It was easy to get my days mixed up when I was too drowned out by work. I am an analyst. My job is to record numbers from a computer reading, then type in those numbers on a different computer. After that, I watch the numbers run and turn into another set of numbers, which are promptly recorded by me again on a third computer to finally send to the real scientists on the floor above to be studied. Of course, that was a massive oversimplification of what I do. I

wouldn't want to bore you with the real science behind it. But as you can see, the monotony of my job has molded me into a computer as well. I may sound cynical, but I used to *love* numbers, you know. I dealt with them everyday for the majority of my life, before I even became an analyst. I used to think that they are the key to unlocking the secrets of the universe. A universe full of mysteries and possibilities. And yet today, these numbers only make me want to die.

I always thought it was quite romantic to die in a blackhole. Imagine it, a total annihilation in the sweet embrace of complete darkness. It reminds me of the first time experiencing darkness in my younger years. Sometimes I turn off the lights at night and shut myself in a closet. That weird but amazing feeling of not seeing anything, even when you know your eyes are suppose to be wide open. Isn't it haunting yet strangely comforting at the same time? That's how I imagined dying in a blackhole will be. A leap into that alluring blackness. A void where nothing but my consciousness will exist. And that's where I want to stay, forever.

#

Monk was discovered 5 years ago out of nowhere. It quickly became the most important discovery of this century. Monk is a tiny, sesame seed sized, stable blackhole orbiting the moon. No one had any idea how it got there.

The nickname Monk started out as a tasteless joke. People online called it Monk because a blackhole is "*hole-y"*. And perhaps more miraculously than the discovery itself, the joke somehow stuck. Monk became the blackhole's official name. I despise that name to this day. I thought it isn't serious enough. The greatest discovery of my century was named after a stupid pun.

Anyways, Monk was discovered by 2 tourists on the lunar city Yu-fu. They were

stargazing out of a cheap telescope that comes with their hotel balcony one day and noticed an oddity passing by. At first they took photos and posted it online. But soon it's gotten enough attention to warrant an expedition by the local Expansion Committee. And that's when they found it. So many unanswered questions were raised immediately. Was it naturally formed? How long has it been there? Some even theorized that Monk had actually been orbiting the moon for more than a millennia, but it had been too small to see until now. Instead of trying to solve any of these mysteries, Yu-fu city's first reaction was to turn the original hotel where Monk was discovered into a tourist attraction. They gave up on the idea 2 hours later in the same meeting, when someone with a little bit of common sense eventually pointed out that the blackhole has long drifted away from its original spot.

Then, the Sol Science Council (SSC) and Interplanetary Astronomical Union (IAU) finally came together to form a plan. The idea of building a station around the blackhole with the help of its own gravity was brought up almost immediately. But it took almost 3 years for the councils to design, fundraise, and finally construct the station. By the time the station Monastery was completed, most of the people had become desensitized by Monk already. As long as Monk isn't eating everything and causing an apocalypse, what's a blackhole above the moon has anything to do with us?

But it had everything to do with me. Being born right at the tail-end of the third space age was both a blessing and a curse. I grew up with stories of the frontier engineers who built cities on Lunar and Mars. I idolized the pioneers who has flown to Europa and back. Like so many of my peers, I dreamed of one day joining the great scientists among the stars. I had a talent for it too. By 7, my parents had already realized that school maths had became too easy for me; by 14,

I'd won two national championships in physics. At university, my professor said to me: "You will become one of the best of the best one day. Your name deserves to be taught in school." I believed her. I liked the idea of having my name in the physics books. But by the time I made it into doctorate, the expansion had slowed down drastically. A few failed missions and the loss of a couple of important lives gave people in charge cold feet. Regulations were made and they stopped sending people beyond Mars. I thought I missed my opportunity. But Monk changed that.

For a while, I felt that there were some sort of connection between me and Monk. As if it had always been pulling me in. When it was discovered, I had just begun my doctorate studies. I spent the next 3 years closely following the construction of Monastery. It was apparent from the start that only the most distinguished scientists of the world had a shot of working on it. It was so prestigious that even the janitors have to at least have a Masters degree to be considered. And whether it was out of luck or my strong resume, I was one of the youngest people who was hired at Monastery when it was finally completed.

I had done it. I had become one of the greats - just like my professor predicted, just like how I always wanted. One of the 500-something people living and working on a space station built around a tiny blackhole, orbiting the moon. But there was only one problem: I was an analyst. The lowest tier in the entire research group. Almost the lowest tier in the whole facility (of the people who matters, of course). Turns out, there are way more many smart people in the world than I realized.

From the outside, The Monastery looks to be the moon's own moon. The exterior is a giant sphere covered with 32 million carbon fiber panels painted in yellow. The 4 main floors sit

at the equator. Each floor goes around the circumference like a ring, and each are divided into 4 quadrants. There are 2 hallways that spans the entire floor in a circle, one on the outside and one on the inside. Between the hallways are workspaces. They connect to each other via a big open area housing the elevators at each 90 degree angle, dividing the 4 quadrants. The first floor is for non-researchers. Security, administration, visitor center. The second floor are for those with lower level access. Analysts, technicians, engineers. The third floor is where most of the real study is done. Although with the least staff, it occupies the same space as the 2 floors below. And on the top floor, there was mostly control panels for the equipments. However, the second and fourth quadrants on the top floor are designed to be viewing platforms. An opening is carved out of the interior wall, with 2 exposed observation decks extending into the hollow space in the center.

The center of The Monastery is completely hollowed out. All the inside hallways on each floor has giant glass installed on the side facing the center. In fact most of the walls separating the workspaces are made of glass too. So if you were ever bored at The Monastery, you can simply look towards the center - where Monk is. The interior spherical wall of the center is white. Instead of carbon fiber, these are made of polished granite, giving it an odd, almost brutalist look. There are lights all around the granite walls, illuminating the center from all sides. The lighting was designed by the best lighting artists working in Hollywood, to perfectly illuminate the epic scale of The Monastery's inside wall. These lights also dims periodically everyday to simulate an artificial day-night cycle. It's almost like they care about the glorification of studying Monk than studying Monk itself. Two giant pyramids are installed on the top and bottom and the granite room, these are stabilizers designed to keep the poles stable

by harvesting Monk's gravity and generating a gentle rotation for the entire station.

#

On the 14th month of The Monastery's operation, one of the third floor people dropped a half-empty Coca-Cola can down observation deck 4. His name was Tom, one of the younger quantum physicists. Tom had always been a little extravagant. He had been researching the effects of adding additional matters into Monk for months, and despite the countless simulation data he had presented, his superiors upstairs never allowed him to try eject anything into Monk itself. It was deemed "too dangerous". And one day Tom finally snapped, he bought a can of coke from the vending machine at the elevator, drank half of it in the elevator, and walked straight onto the observation deck and chucked it right over the edge.

And what a throw it was. The can of coke fell right towards the center, towards Monk. At first, everyone looked in horror, not knowing what could happen when it hits Monk. Detecting the object, all the lights on the granite wall started flashing red as Tom himself also looked on anxiously. He later claimed that he felt a sudden rush of immediate regret. But the can kept falling. 30 seconds later, the can was still falling. 2 minutes later, the can was still falling. Only it wasn't really falling in the traditional sense, it kept being pulled in towards the center by Monk. By the 5 minute mark, they have turned off the red flashing lights as it became too annoying to look at. Reports were coming in from all over the station that the can appeared to have stopped. At minute 13, we figured out that the can has passed the event horizon. Even though the matters of the can had long been torn apart and annihilated by the immense gravity, the light reflected from it had stayed behind, being pulled into a tiny orbit around Monk itself, creating a strange twisted afterimage of the original can. This afterimage can be observed from any angle you look

towards Monk, and it's shrinking little by little everyday at a nearly unnoticeable pace. We eventually became so used to it, and some of us started calling it: "Tom's floating tin can".

Tom himself was first promptly suspended from The Monastery. But after 2 weeks of nothing changing about Monk's status reading, Tom's theory was proven right. He was then invited back by the head of the SSC to speak on his research. His tin can also made him famous overnight, and soon the media started calling. Another 2 weeks after his return to The Monastery, he quit and became a full-time influencer online. Tom's tin can outlived Tom's own presence at The Monastery for about another 4 months. Then, the final bit of red in its lasting afterimage had faded away. The whole station came together and hosted a retirement party for the can, something that Tom himself didn't even get. Tom was invited back again, but this time he had a camera crew with him.

Even though the tin can didn't cause the blackhole to destabilize drastically, it was still observed that it had indeed increased Monk's mass by tiny, tiny fraction. It was a relief to learn, however, that based on Tom's math, it would take more than twice the entire mass of the station to cause the blackhole to even begin to destabilize. So throwing another tin can into Monk would be completely safe for everyone else. Or in my case, an average human body.

Even in suicide the people upstairs are an obstacle for me. After Tom's little experiment, they installed glass panels to the once fully open observation decks. To jump in accurately, I had to find a better way. I can't just make the jump from my floor, or even the third floor. These floors weren't high enough. If I don't have enough space to leap into Monk's gravitation pool, I'd fall straight down and splat on the granite floor below. That would not be ideal, as it would be way less interesting nor intense than actually being annihilated by a blackhole. But I had a

plan in mind already, one that would require a little bit of assistance.

#

Kass is one of the most brilliant people I know. She works on the third floor. I first noticed how beautiful her eyes are during a lunch break in my second week at The Monastery. I used to like taking my lunch by the windows of the inner hallway. That way I can always stare into Monk's dark, mysterious, alluring beauty. But that day I found another obsession. Equally dark, mysterious, but even more alluring. I caught a glimpse of her eyes when I glanced up to the third floor hallway. She was there having her lunch while staring into Monk too. I guess I had a crush on her eyes almost instantly. I had to find out who she was. I looked online, but I could barely find anything about her. She never posts. All I could find was a few published research papers under her name. I did find out her name though. Kass. And Kass is one of the most brilliant people I know.

Our first conversation was at an afterparty for a conference with the IAU. They often host these at quadrant 2 of the fourth floor, transforming the observation deck with a rolled-in minibar. She caught me looking from the corner and walked up to me holding her drink. I still remember it being the longest 4 seconds of my life. I felt ashamed, but I didn't know why. Maybe it was because she caught me looking, or maybe it was because I realized that I was looking.

"Hey, sorry, are you Alex from MIT?", she asked. Those were the first words she ever spoke to me. But my name isn't Alex, nor did I ever went to MIT. She led out a chuckle after realizing she's got the wrong person. "I'm sorry. I thought I knew you. But guess I didn't. What's your name?"

That's how Kass and I became friends. We exchanged our apps, not the work account, but the personal one. She and I talked occasionally, mostly small things about work. We had lunch together from time to time, when she's not with her friends. I never told her how much I loved her eyes, and how they have the same kind of beauty that Monk does. Her eyes have gravity of their own. It would tear the atoms in my heart apart in an instant like Monk did to that tin can if I got too close. So I never got too close. I think this was comfortable. Healthy. I never showed any of my affection towards her beyond as a friend, even though I wanted to. I so wanted to. But I know that would break things. There would be no turning back beyond the event horizon. I'd be torn apart. Instead I used all my energy to hover in that delicate orbit, around that beautiful, dark, alluring mystery.

One day Kass asked me: "Do you ever feel loved by the universe?"

I answered "Yes", not because I thought so, but because I thought she'd like that answer. She paused for a moment, and said:

"I used to think that too. But now I don't. I used to think how lucky I am, being a blessed girl in her wonderful world. Yes, as strange as it sounds, I felt blessed by the universe and her grace. People tell me I have a brilliant mind, and I wanted to live up to it. I wanted to use it to understand her better, the universe. I found comfort and purpose in studying her funny little quirks. And for a while, she did give me answers. But her answers are always cryptic, and only raises more mysteries. But I loved it regardless. I was obsessed with them. But the more questions I solve, the more daunting the mysteries become. Eventually I get tired. I want to give up. And I would begin to question if she ever loved me. The universe. But she never answers.

I sometimes wonder whether or not Monk was part of her answer, or just another mystery

she's thrown my way. I stared at this blackhole for hours a day, 5 days a week. But you know what it feels like to me? It feels like looking through the wrong side of a peephole. Whatever is inside, I guess maybe the universe herself, can see us clearly. But for us on the outside, all we can do is stare. All we can do is wonder. Wonder if there was ever going to be an answer. Wonder if the universe has ever loved me."

Kass is one of the most brilliant people I know. I fell in love with her the same way I, too, once fell in love with the universe. The everlasting mysteries of blackholes and her eyes. She spoke my mind in a way I didn't know was possible. And it was perfect. And about 2 weeks after that conversation, she started dating Alex from MIT. We talk far less now.

#

At the base of the top pyramid, there's a hatch. There's a small control room at the top of Monastery where engineers and technicians monitor the stabilizers. There's a hatch on the roof of the dome, right at the foot of the upside down pyramid. This opens up to the side of the pyramid facing observation deck 4. A set of steel bars are installed on the inverted pyramid slope, going down exactly 273 steps towards Monk. At the end of the descent is where the exposed machinery of the top half of the stabilizers are. This is the maintenance access. There's a similar control room and ladder setup at the bottom pyramid too.

Alex is one of the engineers who works in the top control room. His shift is usually 3 days a week, each day about 4 hours in the afternoon. His job is mainly to monitor the stabilizers, making sure that Monk's spin isn't going out of the ordinary boundaries. Sometimes, upon request, they would also adjust how the stabilizers behave to run experiments. But I don't care about all that. What I need is access to the hatch. I need to scale down the maintenance

ladders on the top pyramid, all 273 steps of it. That would put me within only around a hundred or so meters to Monk itself. I need to jump from there, so I can make sure I get caught precisely in Monk's gravitation field. The viewing platforms, even without its safety windows, would be too far for me to make such a leap. If I miss the gravitational field, I would fall straight to either the bottom pyramid or the curved granite floor of the sphere - killing me, of course, but not in the way I intended. My plan is to die in a blackhole, not near one. So I need Alex's help to get me to that hatch. "Isn't it kind of ironic." I thought to myself, "Turns out, even in the end, you still need the help from Alex - the one who took Kaas."

#

So this was my plan: I will ask Alex for a favor to get into the control room at the top of the station. Then, through the hatch, I will scale down the 273 steps of the maintenance ladder on the side of the upside-down pyramid, to get as close to Monk as possible. Finally, I will make the leap, detaching myself from the safety harness, and jumping straight into the gravitational field of a blackhole. And then… what? I don't know. No one does. But I guess that's the exciting part, isn't it? That's what being a pioneer is all about, isn't it? That's what my life is supposed to be, isn't it?

I don't know.

I spent the rest of that night thinking about the idea. I was excited at first, then nervous, about whether or not my plan would even work. Then, I became confused. Why would I want to die so badly? I don't think it was out of sheer impulse, even if at first it felt like so. It was something that had been built, secretly, in the back of my mind, for months now. Maybe even longer. This dark, moody cloud of unwanted justice fueled by ego, shame, and desperation. This

was what losing meaning feels like, I think.

There are people who are good at numbers, and there are people who are good at words. I never considered myself good at words, so trying to describe my mind is going to be a mess. Maybe my mind was already a mess at that point. Sometimes when I focus, on numbers usually, I can visualize a bundle of strings. These strings are neatly tethered together, lining side by side, sometimes crossing over each other, but never more than twice. They form strands of clean, tightly woven ropes that connects one thing to another. But lately, it's not a rope. It's a net. Not the perfect patterns of a fresh, laid-out net would be, but a ragged, aged, messy one. One that could drag a whole ship down into the ocean. One that's ugly, broken, and unfixable. Too many strings going everywhere and nowhere. They crossover too much, they snap and break, they are all mangled together.

#

* * *