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Acknowledgments

The interdimensional drive array presented in this book is fictional. The journey to the edge of the universe contemplated herein may or may not ever be possible. But if it is—what would the astronauts see? For that part of the tale it was my intent to stick as closely as I could to real cosmological science and astronomy. And in that endeavor, I owe a huge debt of gratitude to Dr. Steve B. Howell, an astrophysicist and project scientist for NASA's Kepler mission who's also been known to dabble in science fiction. It was the depth of knowledge on display in *A Kepler's Dozen*, the short story collection he co-edited and to which he contributed that caused me to contact him and ask him to examine my scribbles from a scientific viewpoint, with the idea of making sure the novel was at least within shouting distance of known facts and established theories. Steve responded enthusiastically to my request. It was very generous of him to lend me his knowledge, expertise and time in this way. I very much appreciate it, and I believe the novel is a better story because of it. I hope you will agree.

Nor public flame, nor private, dares to shine;
Nor human spark is left, nor glimpse divine!
Lo! thy dread empire, Chaos! is restored;
Light dies before thy uncreating word:
Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain fall;
And universal darkness buries all.

— *Alexander Pope*, *The Dunciad*, 1728

PROLOGUE

The darkness lay over Chief Astrogator Lydia Nguyen Jones like a lead-lined blanket, smothering her with almost palpable weight, utterly sealing her off from all visual perception. It was a darkness so profound that no adjectives, similes or metaphors were sufficient to describe it. Never before in the history of human existence had any member of the species ever encountered such utter blackness. It was far darker than a cloudy, moonless night in the desert; darker than the inside of a bank vault; darker than the heart of the deepest cave; darker than the bottom of the most impressive ocean trench. The only photons traversing through the surrounding space were those emitted by the communications device implanted behind her left ear and by the electromagnetism of her body, and those emitted naturally from Nguyen's flesh, her clothes, and the chilly ground and surrounding air as the result of thermal black-body radiation. No light from distant stars and galaxies shined down from above, due to the simple fact there were no distant stars or galaxies. For the same reason, there was no cosmic radiation: no gamma ray bursts, no x-rays, no ultraviolet or infrared light, and no high-energy protons, atomic nuclei, neutrinos, or flitting atomic or subatomic particles of any kind except for a very few emitted from certain naturally occurring radioactive atoms within Nguyen's own body. There wasn't even the omnipresent cosmic microwave background that had always hissed down from the sky surrounding Earth and had watched the life forms that became mankind crawl from the mud. There was nothing.

Nguyen was lying flat on her back on a rocky, gravelly expanse of slightly inclined ground. Her head throbbed with pain, as did her right foot. At first she didn't understand why she was so utterly blind. But then it came rushing back to her—and terror gripped her heart. Something was there in the dark with her. Something terrible.

She had been exploring the lake with engineer Kareem Anwar. The lake was critically important to their survival. The water it held was their only hope of ever seeing home again—assuming the acting chief engineer could first repair the *Santa Maria's* ruptured conversion mass tanks.

Now, lying on the cold ground and wrapped in utter blackness, Nguyen replayed the events of the last few minutes in her mind.

After leaving the ship, to get to the shore she and Anwar had traversed a short stretch of flat, rocky ground, walked up a small rise, and then picked their way down a fairly steep embankment. As they descended toward the shore, the lights of the *Santa Maria* disappeared behind the top of the rise. But the *Santa Maria* was still there; Nguyen was able to see a diffuse, dim glow from its lights slightly lightening the darkness of the still, cool air behind the rise. She and Anwar proceeded on down the slope and quickly reached the lake, where they tested the water and found it to be utterly pure. She reported this finding back to the ship.

Just after she signed off, the slight halo in the air behind the rise blinked out. And at that precise moment, she heard a swirl in the water. Nguyen whipped around and pointed her headlamp beam toward the sound just in time to see something rocket from beneath the surface, step to the shore and grab Anwar, who screamed and kept screaming. The figure was hideous; quite literally, it was a monster from a childhood dream—one of *her* childhood dreams. The thing had the figure of a man. Its body was black; whether it was covered with leather, dried skin or even scales she couldn't tell. But she could see its head clearly illuminated in the beams of Anwar's lamp and hers; twisted black locks fell on either side of a leering face, the black and purple flesh of which was decaying and had rotted away in places, exposing patches of white bone and two rows of yellowish teeth. Before she could utter a sound, in one swift movement the horrendous creature reached up, placed gnarled, taloned hands on either side of Anwar's

head, and gave a sharp twist. Anwar's screaming abruptly stopped, and he collapsed silently into the black water.

The thing then turned its grinning gaze on Nguyen.

Nguyen didn't take time to scream. Instead, she turned and bolted back in the direction of the *Santa Maria*, running as fast as she could. But as she neared the top of the slope, her foot came down in a hole or crack, caught fast, and twisted. Grimacing in pain, but not allowing herself to cry out, Nguyen straightened and tried to pull the foot free. But then her other foot slipped on the loose gravel, and she found herself toppling over backwards. As she fell, the back of her head struck a rock.

There the recollection ended, bringing her back to the present moment.

Her head and ankle throbbed with pain, and she noted that her chest was heaving with panic. Reaching up, she felt for her headlamp. But it wasn't there, apparently having been slung or knocked off when she fell. Making a mighty effort to quiet her breathing, she strained her ears against the deadening, cottony wall of silence. Where was the monster now? The thought that perhaps it had returned to the lake and disappeared back into the water from which it had emerged was too much to hope for. More than likely, it had rushed up the bank in hot pursuit, and was now standing stock still in the darkness, listening for her, waiting for her to betray her position with the slightest sound. Perhaps by now one or more companions from the depths had joined it. She now imagined a whole cadre of grisly figures standing nearby, each one fully alert for any audible hint of motion.

Slowly, careful not to disturb the gravel beneath her, Nguyen raised her head and looked around. She had lost her bearings, and was no longer certain where the *Santa Maria* lay in relation to her. The ground was nearly flat, suggesting that she had rolled down the slope. She could see no glow in the sky anywhere around her. Surely the captain would send a search party, but if she had, there was no evidence of it yet. Not the slightest hint of sound reached her ears from the dead silence and total darkness that surrounded her.

But not all was quiet. Even though she had succeeded in calming her breathing, her heart was pounding with all the muted reserve of a marching band's bass drum, and her pulse thrummed in her ears. If the thing from the lake had any sense of hearing at all, it would certainly find her.

As if in answer to her thoughts, she heard what sounded like a crunch on the gravel nearby. Holding her breath, she strained to listen. There it was again—closer. And then there was another crunch, closer still. There was no mistaking it—something or someone had approached and was now standing there, two or three meters away, listening. Had the thing found her? Should she bolt to her feet and try to outrun it?

Too late. A loud growl sounded from right beside her, and then pain shot up her leg as a bony hand closed hard around her ankle. The creature now screeched in unholy triumph as it lifted Nguyen by her leg. There was no point in keeping quiet now, and even if there had been, reason now abandoned her. Dangling upside down in the pitch black darkness, Nguyen opened her mouth. Her chest convulsed as she emptied her lungs in a scream of utter, panicked terror.