

Lost Arrow

Book I of The Kalelah Series

By
Marshall Ross

Introduction

The abyss hunkers distant and unknown.

Forever untouched by the warmth and illumination of the sun, its residents are monsters drawn in the dark. Nearly blind, they have no need for color or beauty. With spiny whiskers and weakly glowing orbs, they navigate an endless night, a prison of ink. For eons, the miles of water bearing down on the abyss have been the perfect jailer. Should any of its residents attempt escape, their ghostly bodies, held together only by the pressure bearing down upon them, would simply burst.

The abyss lives by its own rules. But it does live. A miracle that has not gone unnoticed.

At the bottom of this underwater canyon where no light can reach, below the silt and sand, an ancient secret sits dark and silent. Waiting . . .

1

Sarah Long crushed her cigarette against the side of the red metal pail hanging on the wall behind her and let the butt fall into the bucket. She stepped back to the rail and into the sun and took in the breeze one last time before returning to her desk two decks below.

She smoothed her hair back and started down the drilled-metal stairs. She hated to leave her spot along the portside rail. If she could get away with it, she'd do nothing more all day than lean against the steel guard, smoke, and look out at the water. She grew up far from any ocean, but now she couldn't imagine a day without it. The smell of it. The size of it. The distance-from-home of it. Despite her work schedule in the decks below, she never failed to steal away several times a day to her spot outside with the breeze, the fearless dive-bombing booby birds, and the endless, swallowing enormity of the water.

People on the ship who noticed her fixation with the sea sometimes asked her why she hadn't become a marine biologist. She would laugh and shrug her shoulders. *They think I'm actually a science geek.* But she knew the idea of marine biology would never have crossed her mind, no more than working as an oil company geologist did two years ago when she had finally, after so many delays, graduated from college. Everything in her life so far had seemed to happen without her consent. She never really said yes to geology. It was just a train she got on her freshman year and then never hopped off.

Even the pull of the ocean had become more of a happy compulsion than a determined choice. Being near the water wasn't on her checklist. Her hometown didn't even have a river. But once under the big water's spell, she never wanted it to break. Looking out over the endless whitecaps, she could find, at least temporarily, a kind of peace. She could fall into that shimmering expanse, drown the part of her that needed choking off, and then make it through another day. She wasn't sure where she was going, but she was grateful it was this big ship on a big ocean taking her there.

She wished she could say it was hard work and excellence that had made it happen. But in truth, she owed it all to an accident of birth, a rare bit of luck, and some good old American political payola. In return for huge amounts of donations to political campaigns, Congress had allowed America's oil companies to practically write America's energy policy. And as cover for the politicians whose coffers they filled, the oil companies did their best to hire American. But given the state of math education in the United States, maintaining this tidy little quid pro quo was getting harder and harder to pull off.

Enter Sarah. It may have taken her seven years to finish a five-year program, but her math scores were decent. And the certificate that listed Lancaster, Ohio, as her place of birth, clinched the deal.

And so, Sarah, with a middling resume and middling academic scores, from a middling branch of a state university, but hailing from a place almost precisely in Middle America got a junior research job on the *Lewis*, a large, fan-shaped, Titan-class survey ship with Honolulu as her port of registry. It was a job she couldn't have even imagined—and literally hadn't even heard of—just a few weeks before she got it.

And it was a job right atop the place she needed most, though that, too, was something she didn't know at the time. A place so far from Lancaster it might as well have been on the moon.

Lucky.

When she got below deck, she poured herself a cup of coffee and woke her computer. Mostly what Sarah did aboard the *Lewis* was set up sonar runs that mapped the seabed below the ship. Pretty boring stuff. She would spend her days below deck analyzing sediment scans for the telltale signs of oil, the dark, irregular spots that looked like bubbles trapped between layers of rock. But for the last several days, the ship had been hunting for something else. What it was exactly, Sarah had no idea. Because the ship was in strange waters. Deep waters.

She tapped in the code to pull up the scan in progress. The system was layered with security protocols. Once she had logged in successfully, there were still several steps to get to the actual scan. She answered the double- and triple-authentication questions and wondered for the thousandth time why all this crazy security mattered. Whatever's down there, she said to herself, is going to stay down there. At least that's what everyone onboard had been telling her.

The image began to load. But it was in no hurry, coming up one scan line at a time.

The *Lewis* had been sent to explore the Mariana Trench in the western Pacific Ocean, an abyss nearly seven miles beneath the surface. A place so deep there was no point in finding oil; you could never pump it out. But the *Lewis*'s real mission on this particular voyage wasn't oil at all. It was to pay off a debt. Allied Oil, the Houston energy company that owned the *Lewis*, had had a nasty spill off the Hawaiian Islands a few years back. In a deal to keep a certain senator with deep ties to environmental lobbies from punishing the company into bankruptcy, Allied agreed to lend its new ocean floor mapping technology to a joint university team of US and Japanese researchers studying the trench.

The trench—the deepest place on the planet—had been mapped before. There had even been expeditions that recorded video of giant snails and single-cell amoeba more than four inches around.

But geologically, underneath the floor, the trench was still a mystery. And that's why the *Lewis*'s new scanner had been drafted to the research team. By combining adaptive radar and artificial intelligence, the scanner could see deeper into water and rock than anything before it: past the seafloor, past the oceanic plate, down even as far as the Earth's soft upper mantle—which promised to yield a whole new field of study.

She watched the progress line slowly crawl its way rightward along the bottom of the image load screen. And then it stopped.

“Great,” she said softly.

She watched the pinwheel icon spin as the computer worked to grind through the data. There couldn't be much left to go. She could already see the abyssal ridge, the floor of the crevice, and the first few layers of sediment below. Everything looked like the last two days' worth of scans. Except at the bottom, where the image was still incomplete. That looked different.

What she usually saw were layers of boulders, rocks, sand of various coarseness, the biological remains of dead sea life, silt, and clay. This, whatever it was, wasn't marine sediment. There were long, perfectly straight, horizontal lines that went on for great distances, broken up by small, square shadows at regular intervals.

She took a sip of her coffee and waited for the image to clarify. This had to be some kind of digital dirt in the load. She was sure that once the image was finished, whatever this artifact was would simply disappear. She'd seen squirrely things during loading before. “The AI thinking,” the nerdy guy who trained her on the scanner had told her.

At last, the pinwheel blinked away and the loading continued. Finally, the sluggishness was gone, and the scan lines drew in faster and faster until, after just a few seconds, the image was complete.

But the anomaly wasn't gone. If anything, it'd gotten clearer, more absolutely there and more obviously unlike anything that should be there.

"What the fuck."

She moved to put her coffee down on the desk. Instead, still unable to mentally process what she was seeing—still transfixed by what she couldn't believe she was seeing—she overstretched her arm and the cup fell to the floor with a crash, splashing scalding coffee along with shards of ceramic across her bare left ankle and calf.

She paid no attention to it. Instead she refreshed the screen, gambling the reload would go faster. It did. But the image remained the same.

"Jesus, Sarah, what the hell happened?"

The smash of the mug had brought Scott Bronner out of his closet-sized office. Sarah didn't look away from the screen.

"Nice job," Scott complained, "there's coffee everywhere. You're just gonna sit there?"

"Take a look at this, will you?"

"What? I already saw that video Dalton sent around. It was stupid."

"No. The scan. Something's really strange."

"It's probably the start-up software again. Those asshole consultants—I've emailed them like six times and they never email back."

He was behind her chair and leaning over her to get a look at her screen, a habit that usually made Sarah cringe. *Why always from behind the chair?* But this time she didn't make anything of the creepy move. Something else had her attention. She pointed to the bottom of the image.

"Look at that."

"What is that?"

"I don't know. I refreshed. But it keeps coming up the same."

"These are the right targeting specs?"

"Same we've been using all week. Same depth, same duration, same pulsing."

He traced a forefinger along a section of the image from left to right. “Is this scale correct?”

“Yes.”

“My God.”

Bronner took a few steps back, but Sarah could feel his eyes still trained on the screen. In a reflection on the glass she saw him make the sign of the cross.

But Sarah didn’t feel the need for prayer or protection. She was too fascinated by the thrill of discovery to worry about what the image meant. For the first time in all her studies and the long, dreary routine that had become work, she saw something in a sediment scan that made her heart beat faster. It was a feeling she wasn’t willing to surrender just yet.

Though, days from now, she’d wish the image was just another routine scan, with nothing about it the least bit noteworthy.

And nothing the least bit terrifying.

• • •

The message came on quickly and flared with the colors of emergency. It blinked furiously: red, then yellow, then red, over and over. At the same time, a small metal needle punctured the seal on a round, polymer vial containing a light blue liquid. Another needle pierced through the seal of a second vial, the contents of this one green, almost chartreuse.

Machines tilted the vials to pour their luminous contents into yet a third, empty vial. The two liquids mixed loosely, holding fast to their original hues until the cocktail was sonically blended to a softly transparent cyan. The vial was flash heated and then distilled to a vapor.

The gas was collected and swept up by a miniature fan, which directed it into a larger chamber containing a precise and delicate mix of nitrogen, oxygen, argon, and carbon dioxide. The new element swirled with the older tenants.

The chamber was now another weapon in the arsenal of emergency management. Until the moment the new gas was introduced, the chamber’s contents had kept their human beneficiary in a deep, almost deathlike sleep. But once altered, it took only a few moments for the new gaseous cocktail to trigger in its recipient precisely what the emergency warning system required.

A pair of eyes opened. The blinking message that proclaimed emergency was aligned perfectly to be the first thing the eyes saw and at just the distance to be in perfect focus.

The message was read.

It all happened exactly as programmed, exactly as planned. Except the planners never imagined an emergency quite like this.

