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I've never been afraid of the dark. In fact, it's the one place I always feel safe.

I glance up at the stars in the ceiling, the dimmed lights now faint pinpricks against an inky blackness. I remember the very first time Mum and Dad brought me to the cinema. I could only have been about five years old, but I was the biggest *Star Wars* fan in the world, so when they said they'd got tickets for a special anniversary screening of *A New Hope* I was *so* excited. Dad always said it was the very first *Star Wars* film, even though it's called *Episode IV*. We had to sit on the front row as the rest of the seats were taken, and I remember

craning my neck to see the screen.

As the curtains opened, I could see the stars in the ceiling reflecting the light from the screen and there the same stars seemed to stretch into infinity. And as the skull-white hulk of a vast Star Destroyer swooped overhead in a burst of laser fire, the film seemed to expand to fill the cinema. For the next two hours I was lost in a faraway galaxy packed with intergalactic dogfights, lightsaber duels and a planet-destroying Death Star. But sitting between Mum and Dad in the dark of the matinee, I felt like I was in the safest place in the world.

The memory dissolves as I hear the rustle of a crisp packet directly to my right. It sounds like Finn's already breaking his promise to hold off on the snacks. Looking straight ahead, I can see the faint outline of the girls' heads at the bottom edge of my vision, but as I lift my gaze the curtains part to reveal the screen.

It's pitch black.

For a second I hold my breath, waiting for the first clue that will tell me exactly which film is kicking off this Black Hole Cinema Club. Some movies drop you straight into the action before the title sequence rolls, while others start with a studio

logo, like the flipping comic-book pages that let you know you're about to watch a Marvel film. I can sense the presence of the others around me, all trying to do the same. We play this game every time, everyone trying to be the first to shout out the correct name of the film.

But as I stare into the darkness, the cinema screen remains resolutely black. No studio logo, no opening credits, not even a hint of a soundtrack. Absolute silence fills the auditorium and, as this stretches out, I feel the hairs on the back of my neck standing to attention.

Then I see the words appearing at the bottom of the screen, each line of white text shining bright against the dark.

**Everybody wants to be a star.  
To play the hero and save  
the world.  
But there are no more heroes  
left - only you.  
And the end of the world is coming.**

“Looks like another disaster movie,” Ash says as these words scroll up the screen. “I wonder how

the world's going to end this time?"

Inside my head I start to count off the possible ways one by one: alien invasion, robot uprising, zombie apocalypse ... Sometimes it seems like every movie we watch is about the end of the world.

On the cinema screen new lines of text crawl into view as the others recede into the distance.

**Our only hope – this impossible mission.**

**A last chance to change the end  
of everything.**

**We sent you into the darkness,  
but now you need to see the light.**

**You will live so many lives.**

**Keep telling yourself it's only  
a movie.**

**It just might help you to survive.**

**Live like there's no tomorrow.**

**Learn so tomorrow never ends.**

**It's time to start the programme.**

**Prepare to be swept away...**

I watch as these last words fade into the darkness. Somehow the silence seems even louder than before. I keep waiting for the camera to pan down

to reveal the opening scene, but the screen seems frozen in a perfect blackness.

“Is it broken?” Finn asks through a mouthful of crisps.

I shake my head. “I don’t think so.”

There’s a darkness moving in the darkness, a rippling motion that seems to spill from the screen. I feel like I’m staring into an endless ocean, pitch-black waves rolling out of the dark. The sight makes me feel seasick and I force myself to look away from the screen.

Craning my neck, I gaze up at the ceiling, trying to find a fixed point in the roiling emptiness. But as I stare into the rising dark, all I can see are the stars going out one by one.

“Lucas!”

Ash’s muffled shout sounds like it’s coming from a million miles away, even though he’s sitting right beside me. Glancing back, I see his face contort in fear as he points towards the screen.

“It’s coming!”

He’s screaming the words straight into my face, but all I hear is a whisper as I turn my gaze towards the screen.

It looks like a jet-black tidal wave, a tsunami

of darkness surging towards us without a sound. I watch open-mouthed as the front row of cinema seats is torn out by this onrushing dark, the crimson chairs flipped up into the air before a foaming blackness swallows them whole.

Grabbing hold of my shoulder, Finn yells in my ear but I can't hear a sound. I feel like I'm drowning in silence as the darkness crashes through the cinema.

Directly ahead, I see Caitlin and Maya scrambling out of their seats. Through the gloom I glimpse the fear in their eyes as they try to outrace the oncoming tide. Catching my gaze, Caitlin starts to scream out a warning, but the words never reach me as I see a shadow fall across her face. Maya reaches towards her with an outstretched arm and for a split-second their frozen figures are silhouetted against the dark. Then the tidal wave sweeps over them and all I can see is blackness.

It's too late to start running, but that's all there's left to do. The seats flip up behind us and, as I desperately follow in Finn's footsteps, I feel popcorn crunch beneath my feet. Ash is close behind as we race to the end of the row, the darkness gaining with every step.

Dead ahead, the tidal wave crashes against the wall of the auditorium, its surging current doubling back and smearing Finn out of existence. My heart hammers in my chest, but I can't hear a sound. With a despairing glance back over my shoulder, I see Ash clambering on top of a cinema seat. Fists clenched, he screams in the face of the onrushing tide and then he's gone. Lost in the maelstrom.

Silence surrounds me – the void swarming in from all sides.

And I feel myself falling into the dark.