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Forgotten Stars

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Introduction

Awareness came slowly, as if surfacing through dark water thick with dreams. Kael Dravan's first sensations were of cold, recycled air and the muted thrum of distant machinery. His eyes opened to unfamiliar metal surfaces, walls scrawled with faded warnings, and flickering console lights stuttering like uncertain memories. Floating weightless on a narrow cot, suspended in the unfamiliar gravity of a derelict starship, Kael didn't know his name—not yet. For a heartbeat, he didn't know anything at all.

But the questions came soon enough, sharp and insistent as old wounds. Who was he? Where was he? And why did everything—down to the very language in his mind—feel worn thin by some vast, invisible erosion? Shadows moved beyond the hatchway, and as Kael forced himself upright, he discovered he wasn't alone. Strangers gathered in the corridor: wary, hollow-eyed, each haunted by that same blankness behind their eyes. Introductions fluttered, names offered with the uneasy weight of half-remembered promises. There were no records of where they had come from, nor of the mission that brought them aboard the ship called Sidera, now orbiting an uncharted, quarantined world none could recall setting eyes upon.

The universe outside the portholes offered no comfort—a swirl of distant stars and the ghostlight of nebulae. Humanity had long since claimed the galaxy, planting its banners on worlds innumerable. Yet civilization thrived atop a paradox: billions lived and died with no recollection of where it all began. History was fractured, their collective memory scattered like cosmic dust. Rumors spoke of a time before the amnesia, of knowledge lost and worlds forgotten. But on Sidera, such stories felt dangerously close to truth.

From the first, it was clear all aboard the Sidera shared a terrible kinship: their pasts were broken, each suffering from unexplained gaps and persistent doubts. Conflicting logs, distorted files, and corrupted AI fragments brought more confusion than reassurance. As strange gravitational anomalies rippled through the hull and cryptic signals reached out from the quarantined planet below, it became evident that the answers they sought would be perilous to find.

For Kael, recollections flickered at the edge of consciousness: dreams of battles fought in battered armor, snatches of forgotten laughter, the grip of some profound loss. There were flashes of a golden age—a world that might have belonged to them all—now lost beyond the farthest star. Driven by a longing he could not name, Kael and his unlikely crew found themselves drawn into a mystery older and vaster than any had imagined, a web of destinies woven into the fabric of the galaxy itself.

Their journey begins with uncertainty and fear, but also with a faint glimmer of hope: that by unearthing the hidden past, they might seize control of their own future. On the edge of oblivion, aboard a ship adrift between memory and darkness, Kael Dravan will uncover secrets that threaten not only their lives, but the fate of every forgotten star in creation.

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CHAPTER ONE: Echoes in the Void

Kael Dravan pushed off the cot, his muscles protesting with a dull ache he couldn't place. The low, guttural hum of the *Sidera* vibrated through the deck plates beneath his bare feet, a constant reminder of their isolation. The medical bay, stark and antiseptic, offered little comfort. Its diagnostic displays, flickering erratically, showed his vitals as stable, yet the blank space where his medical history should have been was a gaping wound. He ran a hand through his short, dark hair, feeling the faint stubble of a recent shave he didn't remember.

He wasn't the only one experiencing this peculiar amnesia. Already, a small cluster of similarly disoriented individuals had gravitated towards the ship's primary common area, their voices a low murmur of confusion and tentative self-introductions. Kael moved towards the hatch, a sense of quiet dread settling in his gut. The ship felt vast and empty, yet strangely alive, as if holding its breath.

The corridor outside was a labyrinth of shadowed conduits and worn plating. Faded markings, indecipherable in his current state, adorned the bulkheads. He passed several sealed hatches, their locking mechanisms showing signs of long disuse. This wasn't a ship recently abandoned; it was a vessel that had been dormant, perhaps for decades, before their sudden, unexplained awakening. The thought sent a shiver down his spine. How long had *they* been dormant?

Reaching the common area, Kael found what appeared to be the rest of the awakened crew. There were seven of them, including himself. A tall, gaunt woman with tightly braided silver hair sat hunched over a comms console, her brow furrowed in concentration. Her name, she'd introduced herself as, was Dr. Aris Thorne. A sharp, almost predatory intelligence shone in her eyes, even through the haze of her own memory loss.

Across from her, a powerfully built man with a scarred cheek and a perpetual scowl was examining a broken data pad. He was Jax, and his gruff demeanor suggested a military background, though he remembered nothing concrete. A younger woman, nervous and prone to fidgeting, was perched on the edge of a bench. Her name was Elara, and her eyes, wide with a mixture of fear and curiosity, kept darting towards the panoramic viewport that dominated one wall.

A stocky, bearded man, whose name Kael vaguely recalled as Rune, was attempting to access the ship's central database through a stubbornly unresponsive terminal. He had an air of pragmatic competence about him, though his frustration was evident. Two others, a quiet, almost spectral woman named Lyra, and a boisterous, red-headed

man with an easy, if somewhat forced, laugh named Finn, completed the group. They all shared the same haunted look, a shared emptiness behind their eyes that spoke volumes without a single word.

“Any luck, Doctor?” Jax grunted, not looking up from the data pad.

Aris sighed, pushing a stray strand of silver hair from her face. “The main diagnostic logs are corrupted. Massive data loss. It’s like a neural wipe, but for a starship. I can access some core functions, power, life support, but anything that might tell us *why* we’re here, or *who* we are... it’s a blank.” She gestured to the console, a holographic display of scrambled code blinking erratically.

“It’s the same with the navigational logs,” Rune chimed in, throwing his hands up in exasperation. “The last coherent entry is over two centuries old, and it’s just a standard warp jump calculation. Nothing about our destination, nothing about *this* system.” He nodded towards the viewport.

Kael finally looked. Beyond the reinforced transparent alloy, the stars were a dizzying tapestry, but foregrounded was a deep, swirling nebula of violet and emerald. And at its heart, a single, verdant world, its surface obscured by a swirling, impenetrable cloud cover. It was the quarantined planet, the one none of them could remember. A sense of wrongness emanated from it, a silent hum that vibrated in Kael’s bones.

“Quarantined?” Elara whispered, her voice barely audible. “Why is it quarantined? Do any of you... feel anything from it?” She hugged herself, her gaze fixed on the obscured world.

Finn attempted a lighthearted chuckle. “Besides a sudden urge to know what’s under those clouds? Not really, kid. Just a whole lot of nothing where my memories should be.” His cheerfulness felt strained, a desperate attempt to inject normalcy into a profoundly abnormal situation.

Jax slammed his data pad down. “This is madness. We’re on a derelict ship, with no idea who we are or where we’re going, orbiting a planet we’re not supposed to be near. Someone put us here. Someone did this to us.” His voice held a dangerous edge, and his gaze swept over the group, lingering on each face as if searching for an answer, or an enemy.

“Perhaps it was ourselves,” Lyra said softly, her voice ethereal, barely more than a breath. She hadn’t spoken much since their awakening, but her few words always carried an unsettling weight. “Perhaps we chose to forget.”

A tense silence descended. The idea was chilling, and yet, somehow, plausible in the face of their inexplicable situation. Was the collective amnesia a cosmic accident, or a

deliberate act?

“That’s a comforting thought,” Finn muttered, running a hand through his red hair. “So we just collectively decided to wipe our own minds and park ourselves here? Seems a bit elaborate for a group therapy session.”

Aris cleared her throat. “Regardless of *how* we lost our memories, the immediate concern is survival. The *Sidera* is stable, but there are power fluctuations in the aft sections. And the ship’s primary objective, or whatever it was, is gone from the logs. We need to find out what triggered our awakening, and if there’s a way to restore our cognitive functions.”

Kael stepped forward. “I found something in the medical bay. A single data chip, unlabeled.” He held up a small, metallic rectangle. “It wasn’t in any terminal, just wedged behind a console.”

All eyes turned to the chip. Aris’s eyes lit up with a flicker of professional interest. “Let me see that, Kael.” She took the chip carefully, inserting it into a portable reader she’d managed to scavenge. The reader whirred, then displayed a single, encrypted file.

“Encrypted,” Aris stated, a hint of frustration in her voice. “And heavily. This isn’t standard Alliance coding.”

“Can you break it?” Rune asked, leaning closer.

Aris tapped a few commands. “It’ll take time. Days, maybe. Weeks. Unless we find a decryption key, or a more powerful processor. This little reader isn’t designed for something this complex.”

Suddenly, the ship shuddered. A low, resonant hum pulsed through the hull, deeper and more insistent than the usual thrum. Lights in the common area flickered, then dimmed. Alarms, mercifully silent until now, began to wail in distant sections of the ship.

“What was that?” Elara cried, pressing herself against the viewport.

“Power fluctuation, or something more,” Jax growled, already moving towards the access panel for ship diagnostics. “Aris, get to the bridge. See what the main systems say.”

The resonant hum intensified, vibrating through their very bones. Then, a low, guttural roar echoed through the ship, not mechanical, but organic. It sounded like something vast, ancient, and very much alive. The roar seemed to emanate from everywhere and nowhere, a disembodied bellow in the void.

Panic began to ripple through the group. Finn's strained cheerfulness vanished, replaced by a pale grimace. Lyra pressed her hands to her ears, her eyes wide with unarticulated terror.

"That... that didn't come from *inside* the ship," Rune breathed, his face ashen. He gestured wildly towards the viewport.

Beyond the glass, the swirling clouds of the quarantined planet pulsed with a faint, internal light. And then, for a fleeting moment, a colossal shadow, impossibly vast, moved within the swirling green and violet, blotting out the light, before vanishing as quickly as it appeared. A new kind of signal began to emanate from the planet, not a hum, but a rhythmic, almost hypnotic pulse. It wasn't a distress call, or a data burst. It was a beckoning.

Kael felt a strange pull, a primal curiosity overriding the fear. The roar, the shadow, the pulsing light—it was all connected. And somewhere, deep within the fractured landscape of his own mind, a faint, almost imperceptible echo stirred. A memory, perhaps, of a time before the emptiness. A faint scent of ozone and dust, and the distant sound of crumbling stone. He shook his head, trying to clear the sensation, but it lingered, a whisper of a lost world.

"We need to get to the bridge," Aris repeated, her voice sharper, more urgent. "Now."

As the ship continued to resonate with the strange, unseen presence from the planet below, Kael realized that their awakening was not just about piecing together their lost pasts. It was about facing a future that seemed inextricably linked to the enigmatic, quarantined world and whatever colossal entity stirred within its shadowed embrace. Their forgotten stars were calling to them, and the echoes in the void were growing louder.

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