

Searching the Stars for Lost Love

*SEARCHING
THE STARS FOR LOST
LOVE*

Boyd Thomas London

*Jace lost beautiful Mira. We are rooting for you, Jace!
Can Jace get her back?*

This story is for everyone who has ever loved across distance, who has fought for love despite obstacles, who has learned that sometimes you have to let go to truly hold on. May you find the courage to become who you need to be, and may you find your way home to the one who loves you for exactly who you are.

Searching the Stars for Lost Love

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CHAPTER 1:

THE EMPTY CHAIR

The observation deck of the *Valoria* stretched before Commander Jace Arden like a cathedral of stars, its curved transparisteel viewport offering an unobstructed view of the Orion Expanse. He was a remarkably handsome man in his early thirties, with short brown hair, an athletic build, and a charismatic confidence that drew the eye. This was heightened by the Star Force uniform he wore, a sleek navy design accented with silver insignia and precision tailoring that marked him as both a protector and a man shaped by the stars. Nebulae swirled in shades of purple and crimson, their galactic dance unchanged by human presence, indifferent to the ache in his chest. He stood alone in the dim light, hands clasped behind his back, watching a distant star cluster slide past as the cruiser maintained its patrol route along the frontier.

It had been three months since Mira Tallis had walked away from everything they'd built together, and Jace still couldn't make sense of it. The memory played on repeat in his mind. She was standing in the cabin on Earth, her beautiful face set in that expression he'd come to recognize

as her “decision made” look. No amount of pleading or reasoning could change it once her mind was set.

“I need to find myself, Jace,” she’d said, her voice steady despite the tears tracking down her cheeks. “I need to know who I am without you, without us. I’m sorry.”

He’d watched her leave, too stunned to follow, too proud to beg. And then he’d returned to the *Valoria* early, throwing himself into his duties with a desperation that his crew had noticed but were too polite to mention. Work was supposed to be the cure, wasn’t it? Keep busy, stay focused, let time do its healing magic.

Except time wasn’t cooperating. Every quiet moment brought her back. He thought about the way she’d laugh at his terrible jokes, how she’d curl up in his captain’s chair when she visited the ship, reading while he worked. The scent of her perfume seemed to linger in the corridors even though she’d never been aboard during this deployment. He heard her voice in the hum of the engines, saw her reflection in every polished surface. He remembered their time together on Earth. Her beautiful red hair blowing in the ocean breeze near the San Francisco Bay. She was in her early thirties and was stunningly gorgeous. Tears came to his eyes.

“Commander?” The voice of Lieutenant Joni Chen broke through his sadness, professional but tinged with concern. “Sir, you’ve been up here for two hours.”

Jace turned to find his communications officer standing at a respectful distance, her expression sad. Chen was a good person. She was efficient, loyal, and perceptive enough to know when her captain was struggling but tactful enough not to say so directly.

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” Jace replied, forcing his voice to sound normal, command-ready. “Just doing some thinking. The expanse has a way of putting things in perspective.”

Chen nodded, but she knew about Mira. The whole crew knew about her. Mira was liked by all, charming everyone from the engine room techs to the senior officers during their last shore leave. They’d all assumed Mira and Jace would marry eventually. Jace had assumed it too.

“Sir, if I may...” Chen hesitated, then pressed forward. “The crew is worried about you. You’ve been pushing yourself hard. Maybe too hard.”

Jace managed a weak smile. “I’m fine, Lieutenant. Just adjusting to some changes in my personal life.”

“With respect, sir, you’re not fine. You barely eat, you don’t sleep, and yesterday you snapped at Ensign

Rodriguez for a minor navigation error that you would normally have corrected with a joke.” Chen’s voice softened. “We care about you, Commander. Whatever you’re going through, you don’t have to go through it alone.”

The kindness in her words threatened to crack Jace’s stern look. He swallowed hard, looking back out at the stars to avoid meeting her eyes. “I appreciate that, Chen. I really do. But some things you just have to work through on your own.”

“Is it about Mira?”

The name hit him like a physical blow. He closed his eyes briefly, then nodded. “She left. Decided she needed to ‘find herself’ or something. I thought we had something real, something worth building a future on. Guess I was wrong.”

Chen was quiet for a moment, then moved to stand beside him at the viewport. “For what it’s worth, sir, I don’t think you were wrong. I saw the way she looked at you. That was real. Sometimes people just need time to figure out what they really want. Don’t give up.”

“Three months feels like plenty of time,” Jace said bitterly. “She hasn’t responded to any of my messages. It’s like I don’t exist anymore. I may sell my cabin by the ocean.”

“Maybe she needs the space and time to think clearly. Maybe hearing from you makes it harder for her to figure

things out.” Chen paused. “Or maybe she’s just as miserable as you are and doesn’t know how to fix it.”

Jace wanted to believe that, wanted to imagine Mira somewhere missing him as much as he missed her. He would love to be running his hand through her beautiful hair again and walking in the evenings by the beach, enjoying the heartwarming bay sunsets while holding her hand. But the silence from her end suggested otherwise. If she wanted him, she knew where to find him. The *Valoria*’s position was logged with Fleet Command. One message, one call, and he’d move heaven and earth to get back to her. But that message never came.

“Get some rest, sir,” Chen said gently. “Tomorrow’s a new day, and we’ve got that diplomatic meeting with the Centauri delegation. They’ll need you sharp.”

Jace nodded, forcing himself to straighten his shoulders and adopt the bearing of a Star Force commander. “You’re right. Thank you, Lieutenant. For everything.”

As Chen left, Jace remained a moment longer, his reflection ghosting in the transparisteel against the backdrop of infinite space. Out there, somewhere among those countless stars, was Mira. Living her life, finding herself, moving on without him. The thought should have made him angry, but mostly it just made him sad.

He turned away from the viewport and headed toward his quarters. Outside, the *Valoria* cut an impressive silhouette against the stars. She was a large exploration vessel, her hull gleaming with the distinctive silver-blue plating of the Star Force's finest ships. She was built for deep space missions, elegant and powerful, a ship that commanded respect. The corridors of the *Valoria* were familiar and comforting. The ship had been his home for five years, his command for the last two. He knew every bulkhead, every system, every quirk of her personality. The ship was reliable and everything Mira apparently wasn't. He had bought the cabin on Earth near the San Francisco Bay for them. He wanted to marry her. He had now-shattered dreams of them living by the sea together.

His quarters were sparse, decorated only with a few personal items: a photo of his parents back on Earth, a commendation from his first deep-space mission, and a picture of him and Mira taken at the Lunar Observatory during their last leave together. They were laughing in the photo, his arm around her shoulders, her head tilted toward him in that way that always made his heart skip.

Jace picked up the frame, studying her face. Mira had always been beautiful, but it was more than that. She had this light about her, this energy that made everything seem

possible. When she smiled at him, he felt like he could accomplish anything. When she believed in him, he believed in himself. And now she was gone.

He set the frame face-down on his desk, unable to look at it anymore. The computer terminal blinked with routine reports and messages, but nothing from her. He'd stopped checking obsessively after the first month, but the hope still flickered every time he logged in.

Sleep came slowly, filled with dreams of Mira walking away, always just out of reach no matter how fast he ran. He woke early, feeling more exhausted than when he'd gone to bed.

The bridge was quiet during the early morning watch, staffed by a skeleton crew handling routine operations. Jace took his command chair, reviewing the night's reports. Everything was normal, routine, exactly as it should be. The *Valoria* was performing perfectly, her crew was exemplary, and their missions were being met with accuracy. So why did it all feel so meaningless?

"Commander, incoming transmission from Fleet Command," announced Ensign Park. "Priority Alpha. It's Admiral Hendricks."

Jace straightened, his professional instincts kicking in. Priority Alpha meant something important, possibly a

new assignment or a change in their patrol route. “Put it through to my ready room, Ensign. Commander Voss, you have the bridge.”

His ready room was a small office adjacent to the bridge, dominated by a large viewscreen and a desk that was usually covered in star charts and mission reports. Jace settled into his chair and activated the screen. Admiral Hendricks’s aged face appeared, looking very concerned.

“Commander Arden,” the admiral said, his voice carrying the authority of four decades in the Star Force. “I hope I’m not catching you at a bad time.”

“Not at all, sir. What can I do for you?”

Hendricks leaned back in his chair, his expression thoughtful. “I’ve been reviewing your performance reports, Commander. Exemplary work, as always. The Centauri alliance you brokered last month has opened up three new trade routes and significantly improved our diplomatic standing in the sector.”

“Thank you, sir. The crew deserves most of the credit.”

“Modest as always.” Hendricks smiled briefly, then his expression grew more serious. “Jace, I’m going to be direct with you. Your XO has filed a wellness report suggesting you might benefit from some shore leave. You

should go to Earth and spend some time in your cabin by the ocean. Relax and deal with your heartache.”

Jace felt a little annoyed. “Sir, I assure you I’m perfectly capable of performing my duties.”

“I’m not questioning your capability, Commander. I’m questioning your well-being.” Hendricks held up a hand to forestall further protest. “I know about Mira Tallis. I know she ended your relationship. And I know you’ve been throwing yourself into a heartbroken fit.”

The admiral’s directness left Jace momentarily speechless. Finally, he managed, “With respect, sir, my personal life shouldn’t affect my command.”

“Except it does, Jace. It always does. We’re not machines, no matter how much we might wish we could be sometimes.” Hendricks’s expression softened. “I lost someone once, a long time ago. I tried to bury myself in my work, to convince myself that I was fine. I nearly got my crew killed because I was too distracted to see a precarious situation developing right in front of me.”

Jace swallowed hard. “I would never endanger my crew, sir.”

“I know you wouldn’t intentionally. But grief has a way of clouding judgment, of making us miss things we’d normally catch.” Hendricks paused. “I’m not relieving you

of command, Jace. But I am ordering you to take some personal time. Two weeks, starting immediately. Go back to Earth, see your family, get your head straight. Walk by the ocean.”

“Sir, we have a lot of upcoming missions.”

“Commander Voss is more than capable of handling the patrol routes. The *Valoria* will be fine without you for two weeks.” Hendricks’ tone left no room for argument. “That’s an order, Commander. Use the time wisely.”

The screen went dark, leaving Jace staring at his own reflection in the blank display. Two weeks on Earth. Two weeks of well-meaning friends asking how he was doing, of walking past places that reminded him of Mira.

But orders were orders. Jace stood, straightening his uniform, and returned to the bridge to brief his XO on the temporary change in command. Commander Voss accepted the news professionally, though Jace caught a flash of relief in his eyes. Apparently, the crew’s concern ran deeper than he’d realized.

The shuttle ride back to Earth took three hours, plenty of time for Jace to stare out of the viewport and watch the *Valoria* shrink to a point of light among the stars. His ship, his home, his purpose all felt meaningless as he traveled toward the blue-green sphere of humanity’s birth.

Earth looked the same as always: beautiful, peaceful, utterly indifferent to his personal crisis. The shuttle landed at the San Francisco spaceport, and Jace made his way through the familiar terminals with his duffel bag slung over one shoulder. He could have gone to his parents' place in Colorado, but he wasn't ready for their concerned questions and gentle probing. Instead, he headed for his cabin by the ocean.

He opened the door, revealing a space that looked exactly as he'd left it three months ago. Jace dropped his bag by the door and moved to the window looking out over the bay. There was a lighthouse nearby. He used to walk there with Mira, gazing at her lovely smile. Somewhere out there, Mira was living her life. Maybe she was happy. Maybe she'd already moved on, found someone new, forgotten all about the star-cruiser commander who'd loved her with every part of his being. The thought made his chest ache.

His comm unit chirped, displaying a message from his mother: *Heard you're on leave. Come visit when you're ready. We love you.*

Jace smiled despite his grief. His parents had always been supportive, even when he'd chosen the uncertainty of deep-space exploration over a safer career planetside. They'd loved Mira too, had welcomed her into the family

with open arms. His mother had been planning their wedding before Jace had even proposed.

He should visit them. He should reconnect with friends, explore the city, do all the things people did on shore leave. But the thought of pretending to be okay, of smiling through concerned questions and sympathetic looks, felt exhausting.

Instead, he found himself at his computer terminal, pulling up Mira's last known contact information. Her personal comm was still active, though she never responded to his messages. Her social media accounts had gone dark three months ago. It was like she'd vanished into thin air, leaving only memories and unanswered questions.

Jace's fingers hovered over the keyboard, the urge to send another message almost overwhelming. *I miss you. I love you. Please come back.* But he'd said all that before, and it hadn't made a difference. What could he possibly say now that would change anything?

He closed the terminal and stood, pacing the cabin like a caged animal. This was supposed to help? Being surrounded by memories, drowning in the absence of the woman he loved? Admiral Hendricks had meant well, but shore leave felt more like punishment than relief.

The days blurred together. Jace visited his parents, enduring their gentle concern with as much grace as he could muster. He met up with old Academy friends and sat through dinners where everyone carefully avoided mentioning Mira. He walked the city streets, visited the places they'd loved together, and felt her absence like a physical weight.

On the eighth day of his leave, Jace found himself at the Lunar Observatory, the same place where that photo in his quarters had been taken. The observation deck was quiet, only a handful of tourists gazing up at the stars hanging in the black sky like jewels. He stood at the railing where he and Mira had stood, remembering how she'd pointed out constellations, making up stories about the stars.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" an older, gray-haired woman said beside him.

Jace nodded. "It is."

"You look like a man with something on his mind," she observed, her eyes twinkling with the wisdom from many years of experiences. "Or someone in pain."

He managed a weak smile. "Is it that obvious?"

"I've been married fifty-three years. I know the look of a man missing his love." She patted his arm gently. "Whatever happened between you, whatever drove you

apart, if it's real love, it'll find a way back. The stars have a way of bringing people together when they're meant to be."

"And if they're not meant to be?"

The woman smiled sadly. "Then you'll find peace eventually. But something tells me you're not ready to give up yet."

She moved away, leaving Jace alone with his thoughts. He looked at the stars in the Lunar Observatory. Somewhere out there, among all the stars, was Mira. And suddenly, with a clarity that had eluded him for three months, Jace knew what he had to do.

He couldn't just wait for her to come back. He couldn't just accept her absence as permanent. If she needed space, fine, but he needed answers. He needed to understand why she'd left, what she was looking for, and whether there was any chance of fixing what had broken between them.

And if she truly didn't want him anymore, if she'd moved on and found happiness without him, then at least he'd know. At least he could start the process of letting go. But first, he had to find her.

Jace pulled out his comm unit and contacted Lieutenant Chen aboard the *Valoria*. "Chen, I need a favor. Can you run a discreet search through Fleet databases? I'm

looking for any record of Mira Tallis: employment, travel, anything that might tell me where she is.”

There was a pause, then Chen’s voice came back, concerned. “Sir, are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“Probably not,” Jace admitted. “But I need to know, Chen. I need to at least try.”

Another pause. “Give me a few hours, sir. I’ll see what I can find.”

Jace spent those hours in a state of anxiety, pacing his home, unable to focus on anything else. When his comm finally chirped with an incoming message, he nearly dropped it in his haste to answer.

“Commander.” Chen’s voice was subdued. “I found something. You’re not going to like it.”

His heart sank. “Tell me.”

“Mira Tallis registered with the Colonial Volunteer Corps. She’s been assigned to a deep-space outpost on the edge of known space, a place called Kepler Station.”

Jace’s blood ran cold. Kepler Station was notorious among Star Force personnel, a research outpost on the absolute frontier, surrounded by uncharted space and potential hostile territory. It was dangerous, isolated, and about as far from Earth as a civilian could get.

“Why would she go there?” he asked.

“I don’t know, sir. But Commander...” Chen hesitated. “Kepler Station has been reporting some unusual activity in their sector. Nothing confirmed, but there have been rumors of unidentified ships, possible hostile contact. Fleet Command is monitoring the situation.”

Jace’s mind raced. Mira was out there, on the edge of the galaxy, possibly in danger. And he was here on Earth, nursing his wounded pride and broken heart.

The decision crystallized in an instant.

“Chen, I’m cutting my leave short. I’ll be back aboard the *Valoria* in twenty-four hours. And I need you to plot a course to Kepler Station.”

“Sir, we don’t have authorization.”

“I’ll get the authorization. One way or another, I’m going to that station.” Jace’s voice was firm, command-ready; he was more certain than he’d felt in months. “If Mira’s in danger, if she needs help, I’m not going to sit here and do nothing.”

“Understood, sir. I’ll have the course ready when you arrive.”

Jace ended the call and stood at his window, looking out at the bay with new purpose. Mira had run to the edge of the galaxy, but he would follow. He would find her, talk to her, understand what had driven her away. And if she truly

didn't want him anymore, if she'd found what she was looking for in the vast emptiness of space, then he would accept it.

But he wouldn't give up without trying. He wouldn't let her disappear into the void without at least fighting for what they'd had. Losing her had been like losing a part of himself. And now, finally, he had a direction, a purpose, a chance to make things right.

The stars beckoned, and Jace Arden was ready to answer their call.

CHAPTER 2:

THE JOURNEY BEGINS

The *Valoria* hummed through space as Jace strode onto the bridge. The crew looked up as he entered, and he caught the mixture of surprise and curiosity in their expressions. Commander Voss rose from the command chair, a slight smile on his stern face.

“Welcome back, Commander. We weren’t expecting you yet.”

“Change of plans,” Jace replied, settling into his command chair with a sense of authority. This was where he belonged, not wallowing in an empty home, but here, in command, with a purpose driving him forward. “Status report?”

Voss handed him a data pad. “All systems nominal. We’ve completed the patrol route and are currently awaiting new orders.”

“Good. I have those orders.” Jace pulled up the authorization he’d spent many hours securing, calling in favors and making promises to various Fleet Command officers. “We’re being reassigned to escort duty. There’s a supply convoy heading to Kepler Station, and given the

recent reports of unusual activity in that sector, Command wants a Star Force presence.”

He watched Voss’s eyebrows rise slightly. Kepler Station was far outside their normal patrol area, and escort duty was typically assigned to smaller, faster ships. But the authorization was legitimate, even if Jace had bent a few rules to get it.

“Kepler Station,” Voss repeated, his tone carefully neutral. “That’s quite a distance, sir. Three weeks at maximum cruise speed.”

“I’m aware, Commander. But those are our orders.” Jace looked at his eyes, seeing understanding. Voss was sharp. He’d probably already figured out why Jace was so eager to take this assignment. “Helm, plot a course to rendezvous with the supply convoy at Waystation Gamma. We depart in two hours.”

The bridge crew sprang into action, and Jace felt the familiar rhythm of command settling over him like a comfortable coat. This was better. This was purpose. He wasn’t running away from his problems. He was running toward a solution.

Lieutenant Chen approached his chair, her tone concerned. “Sir, I did plot the course, and I took the liberty

of pulling up all of the available information on Kepler Station. It's...not good."

Jace took the data pad she offered and scanned the contents. Kepler Station was a research outpost established five years ago to study the unusual stellar phenomena at the edge of known space. It housed approximately two hundred personnel: scientists, support staff, and a small security contingent. The station relied on quarterly supply runs for food supplies, specialized equipment, and personnel rotation.

Recent reports mentioned increased sensor anomalies, unidentified ship signatures, and communication disruptions. Nothing concrete, nothing that warranted a full Fleet response, but enough to make Command nervous.

And somewhere in that isolated outpost, surrounded by the unknown dangers of deep space, was Mira. "Thank you, Chen. Keep monitoring all communications from Kepler Station. I want to know immediately if there's any change in their status."

"Aye, sir," Chen said. "Commander, if I may... I hope you find what you're looking for out there."

Jace managed a small smile. "So do I, Lieutenant. So do I."

The two hours before departure for the Kepler Station went by slowly with a lot of preparation and final checks. Jace found himself in his ready room, staring at the star chart that showed their planned route. He had three weeks of travel through increasingly remote space, and three weeks to figure out what he was going to say to Mira when he finally saw her again.

I miss you. I love you. Why did you leave?

None of it seemed adequate. How do you compress three months of pain and confusion into words that might actually make a difference?

A chime at his door interrupted his thoughts. “Come in.”

Dr. Sarah Kim, *Valoria*’s chief medical officer, entered with her usual brisk stride. She was a small, pretty woman with long brown hair and a no-nonsense demeanor that had earned her the crew’s respect and affection.

“Commander, I heard we’re heading to Kepler Station. That’s a long journey into some very remote space. I wanted to make sure you’re up for it.”

Jace leaned back in his chair. “I’m fine, Doctor. Fit for duty.”

“Physically, yes. Mentally?” Kim settled into the chair across from his desk, her expression softening. “Jace,

I've known you for many years. I've seen you handle diplomatic crises, tactical emergencies, and situations that would break most people. But I've never seen you like you've been these past few months."

"I'm dealing with it."

"By running toward the woman who broke your heart?" Kim's tone was gentle but direct. "I'm not judging, Jace. I'm just concerned. What happens if you get to Kepler Station, and she doesn't want to see you? What happens if she's moved on?"

The questions hit harder than Jace wanted to admit. "Then at least I'll know. At least I'll have tried."

Kim studied him for a while and then nodded. "All right. But promise me something. If this doesn't go the way you hope, if you need someone to talk to, my door is always open. And I mean that professionally and as a friend."

"I appreciate that, Sarah. Really."

After Kim left, Jace returned to the star chart, tracing the route with his finger. Three weeks seemed like both an eternity and not nearly enough time to prepare for what might come.

The *Valoria* departed on schedule, her engines propelling her away from the familiar territories and toward the unknown reaches of deep space. They met up with the

supply ships six hours later. The supply convoy they were escorting consisted of three cargo vessels. They were slow, ungainly ships loaded with everything from scientific equipment to food supplies for Kepler Station's personnel.

The first week of the journey was routine, almost boring. The convoy maintained a steady pace, and the *Valoria* ran regular sensor sweeps that showed nothing but empty space and distant stars. Jace threw himself into his duties, reviewing reports, conducting drills, and maintaining the ship's readiness. But at night, alone in his quarters, the doubts crept in.

What if Mira didn't want to see him? What if she'd gone to Kepler Station specifically to get away from him, and his arrival would only make things worse? What if she'd found someone else, moved on, built a new life that didn't include him? The questions haunted him, but he pushed forward. He'd come this far. He couldn't turn back now.

On the eighth day, Lieutenant Chen called him to the bridge with unusual urgency in her voice. "Commander, we're receiving a distress signal. It's faint, but it's definitely there."

Jace was on the bridge in seconds. "Source?"

"The signal is automated, repeating on emergency frequencies." Chen's fingers flew over her console. "Sir, it's

from a supply transport ship. They're reporting engine failure and life support issues."

Jace didn't hesitate. "Helm, alter course to intercept. Maximum speed. Chen, try to raise them on the comm."

The *Valoria* broke away from the convoy, her engines pushing her toward the distress signal. As they drew closer, sensors began painting a clearer picture: a small transport vessel, dead in space, its power systems failing.

"I'm getting a response," Chen announced. "Audio only, signal is weak."

"Put it through."

Static filled the bridge, then a voice, strained, frightened. "This is the transport *Meridian*. We've suffered catastrophic engine failure. Life support is failing. We have fifteen souls aboard. Please, if anyone can hear this. Please help us."

"*Meridian*, this is Commander Jace Arden of the Star Force vessel *Valoria*. We're an hour from your position. Hold on, we're coming to get you."

The responding voice was anxious. "Thank you, Commander, but we don't have an hour. Life support is critical. We're down to emergency oxygen, and it won't last more than thirty minutes."

Jace's mind raced, calculating distances and speeds. One hour at current velocity, but if he pushed the engines beyond recommended limits... "Helm, emergency speed. I don't care if we burn out the engines. You must get us there in thirty minutes."

"Aye, sir!"

The *Valoria* surged forward, her engines straining as she pushed past safety margins. Jace stood at the center of the bridge, coordinating the rescue operation with the calmness that had made him one of the Star Force's most respected commanders. But inside, his thoughts were on those fifteen people fighting for their lives in the cold vacuum of space.

Twenty-five minutes later, the *Meridian* appeared on their viewscreen. She was a battered transport floating dead in space, her hull scarred and her running lights flickering. The *Valoria* extended her docking clamps. They docked and created a pathway between the two vessels.

"Medical teams to the docking port," Jace ordered. "Engineering, I want a full assessment of that transport's condition. We need to know if she's salvageable."

The rescue operation was textbook perfect. All fifteen passengers and crew from the *Meridian* were brought aboard the *Valoria*, suffering from oxygen deprivation and

hypothermia but alive. Dr. Kim and her medical team worked quickly, treating the survivors and getting them stabilized.

Jace made his way to sickbay to check on the rescued passengers. Most were resting, receiving treatment, but one woman sat up in her bed, watching him with sharp, intelligent eyes. She was perhaps fifty, with graying hair and the aged look of someone who'd spent years in space.

"Commander Arden?" she asked as he approached. "I'm Captain Elena Vasquez of the *Meridian*. I wanted to thank you personally. You saved our lives."

"Just doing my job, Captain. What happened out there?"

Captain Vasquez's expression darkened. "We were en route to Kepler Station. I'm a supply contractor. About six hours ago, we detected an unusual energy signature. Before we could investigate, our engines just...died. All systems failed simultaneously. It was like something reached out and switched them off."

Jace felt a chill run down his spine. "An energy signature? Can you describe it?"

"Unlike anything I've seen in twenty years of hauling cargo through deep space. It was...wrong, somehow. Made my skin crawl just looking at the sensor readings." Vasquez

leaned forward. “Commander, I’ve made the run to Kepler Station a dozen times. Something’s changed out there. Something’s not right.”

After ensuring Vasquez and her crew were comfortable, Jace returned to the bridge and called a senior staff meeting in his ready room. Voss, Chen, Kim, and Chief Engineer Marcus Torres gathered around the conference table, their expressions grave.

“All right, people, let’s hear it. What do we know about what happened to the *Meridian*?”

Torres, a burly man with grease-stained hands and a brilliant mind, pulled up a holographic display. “Commander, I’ve analyzed the transport’s systems. Every single system failed simultaneously: engines, life support, communications, everything. The only thing that kept working was their emergency beacon, and that’s because it runs on an independent power cell.”

“Sabotage?” Voss asked.

“No evidence of it. It’s more like...something drained their power. Sucked it right out of their systems.” Torres shook his head. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Chen added, “Sir, I’ve been reviewing reports from Kepler Station. Over the past two months, they’ve reported increasing incidents of sensor anomalies and power

fluctuations. Nothing as severe as what happened to the *Meridian*, but the pattern is there.”

“And now we’re heading right into whatever’s causing it,” Kim observed. “Commander, maybe we should report this to Fleet Command, request backup before we proceed.”

Jace considered it. The smart play would be to call for reinforcements, wait for a proper task force to investigate. But that would take weeks, maybe months. And Mira was at Kepler Station, possibly in danger.

“We continue as planned,” he decided. “But we go in ready for anything. Torres, I want all systems at peak readiness. Chen, maintain constant communication with Kepler Station. At the first sign of trouble, we pull back and call for help. Understood?”

The officers nodded, though Jace could see the concern in their eyes. They trusted him, followed his orders without question. He just hoped he wasn’t leading them into something they couldn’t handle.

As the meeting broke up, Voss lingered behind. “Sir, permission to speak freely?”

“Always, Commander.”

“This mission...it’s personal for you, isn’t it? Mira Tallis is at Kepler Station.”

Jace met his eyes steadily. “Yes. But that doesn’t change my duty to this ship and crew. If I thought my personal feelings were compromising my judgment, I’d step aside.”

“I know you would. That’s why I’m not worried.” Voss smiled slightly. “But, Jace, as your XO and your friend, I ask you to please be careful. Whatever’s out there, whatever’s happening at Kepler Station, it’s dangerous. Don’t let your heart make you reckless.”

“I’ll try not to.”

After Voss left, Jace stood alone in his ready room, looking at the star chart that showed their position. They were two weeks from Kepler Station now, two weeks from answers, two weeks from Mira.

He pulled up her file on his personal terminal. He was not viewing the official Colonial Volunteer Corps record but the photos and messages he’d saved from their time together. Mira laughing at some joke he’d made. Mira serious and focused as she worked on a research project. Mira sleeping peacefully in his arms, her face soft and beautiful resting against his chest.

“I’m coming for you,” he whispered to the image. “Whatever’s happening out there, whatever danger you’re in, I’m coming. Just hold on.”

Boyd Thomas London

The *Valoria* pressed onward through the darkness, carrying Jace toward his destiny and toward the gorgeous woman who still held his heart.

CHAPTER 3:

SHADOWS IN THE DEEP

The second week of the journey took them farther into deep space, where stars grew sparse and the darkness between them felt gloomy. Jace found himself spending more time on the bridge, watching the viewscreen as if he could will them closer to their destination through the sheer force of desire.

The rescued crew of the *Meridian* had integrated well with *Valoria*'s personnel, though Captain Vasquez remained troubled by what had happened to her ship. She visited the bridge a lot, studying the sensor readings and searching for answers.

"Commander," she said one evening, approaching Jace's command chair. "May I show you something?"

Jace gestured for her to continue. Vasquez pulled up a holographic display showing sensor logs from the *Meridian*'s final hours before the power failure.

"Look at this energy signature. I've been comparing it to the data your Lieutenant Chen shared from Kepler Station's reports. They're similar but not identical. It's like..." She paused, searching for the right words. "It's like whatever's out there is getting stronger and evolving."

“Evolving?” Jace leaned forward, studying the patterns. “You think it’s alive?”

“I think it’s intelligent. Whether it’s alive in the way we understand life, I can’t say. But it’s unique, Commander. There’s thought driving these energy signatures.”

Before Jace could respond, alarms blared across the bridge. Chen’s voice cut through the chaos. “Commander, I’m detecting multiple energy signatures. They match the pattern from the *Meridian* incident.”

“Battle stations!” Jace ordered, his experience and skill taking over. “Shields up, weapons hot. Helm, evasive maneuvers.”

The *Valoria* banked hard, her engines straining as she tried to avoid whatever was out there. On the viewscreen, space itself seemed to ripple and distort, as if reality was bending around some invisible presence.

“I’m reading enormous power fluctuations,” Torres reported from engineering. “Whatever it is, it’s trying to drain our systems just like it did to the *Meridian*.”

“Reroute all nonessential power to shields,” Jace commanded. “Chen, can you get a visual on whatever’s causing this?”

“Trying, sir. The distortions are playing havoc with our sensors.” Chen’s fingers flew across her console. “Wait, I’m getting something. Putting it on screen.”

The viewscreen flickered and then resolved into an image that made everyone on the bridge stop breathing. Floating in the void was a presence unlike anything in the Star Force’s databases. It seemed to be made of pure energy, constantly shifting and reforming, its surface rippling with colors that hurt to look at directly.

“What is that?” Voss breathed.

“Unknown,” Chen replied. “It’s not matching any known species or technology. It’s just...there.”

The entity pulsed, and the *Valoria* shuddered as another wave of energy washed over her. Systems flickered, lights dimmed, and for a terrifying moment, Jace thought they were about to suffer the same fate as the *Meridian*.

“Shields holding at forty percent,” Torres reported. “But we can’t take much more of this.”

Jace’s mind raced. They couldn’t fight something they didn’t understand, couldn’t run from something that seemed to exist outside normal space. But they had to do something, or they’d end up dead in the void like so many derelict ships before them.

“Chen, try broadcasting on all frequencies. Maybe it’s trying to communicate.”

“Sir, we don’t even know if it’s sentient!”

“Do it!”

Chen complied, sending out a broad-spectrum signal that included mathematical sequences, musical tones, and basic greetings in a dozen languages. For a long moment, nothing happened. Then the entity pulsed again, but this time the energy wave felt different. It was less aggressive and more curious.

“I’m receiving a response,” Chen said, her voice filled with wonder. “It’s not language, exactly, but there’s definitely intelligence behind it. It’s...asking questions. Trying to understand what we are.”

“Can you communicate back?”

“I’m trying, sir. It’s like learning a completely new way to communicate.”

Over the next hour, Chen worked to establish a basic communication protocol with the entity. It was slow, frustrating work, but gradually a picture emerged. The entity was ancient, possibly millions of years old, and it existed in a state between energy and matter. It had been drawn to this region of space by the unusual stellar phenomena that Kepler Station was studying.

“It’s not hostile,” Chen finally reported. “It’s just...curious. It’s been trying to understand the ships that pass through this region, but its method of investigation of draining power to analyze our technology is dangerous to us.”

“Can you explain that to it? Make it understand that we need our power systems to survive?”

Chen worked her console, sending complex patterns of data to the entity. After a moment, it pulsed again, and the pressure on the *Valoria*’s systems eased. The entity began to drift away, its form becoming less distinct as it moved back into the depths of space.

“It understands,” Chen said softly. “It’s...apologizing, in its way. It didn’t realize it was hurting us.”

As the entity disappeared from their sensors, the bridge crew let out a collective sigh of relief. Jace slumped in his command chair, the adrenaline draining from his system.

“Well,” Voss said with a shaky laugh, “that’s one for the history books. First contact with a non-corporeal intelligence.”

“Make sure you document everything, Chen. Fleet Command is going to want a full report.” Jace stood, his legs

steadier than he'd expected. "And Captain Vasquez, no more ships should suffer the same fate as the *Meridian*."

Later, in his quarters, Jace found himself unable to sleep despite his exhaustion. The encounter with the entity had shaken him more than he wanted to admit. Out here, on the edge of known space, the universe was full of wonders and terrors beyond human comprehension. And Mira was somewhere in the middle of it all, working at a station that was apparently a beacon for strange phenomena.

He pulled up her file again, studying her face in the photos. She'd always been drawn to the unknown, fascinated by mysteries and questions without easy answers. It was one of the things he'd loved about her. She had that insatiable curiosity and that drive to understand the universe in all its complexity.

But it was also what had driven her away from him. She'd needed to find herself, to understand who she was without him. And she'd chosen to do it in one of the most dangerous, isolated places in known space.

"Why, Mira?" he asked the image. "Why did you have to go so far?"

The photo, of course, didn't answer. But as Jace stared at it, he felt his resolve strengthen. Whatever dangers lay ahead, whatever mysteries surrounded Kepler Station, he

would face them. Because at the end of this journey was Mira, and the chance to understand what had gone wrong between them.

The *Valoria* continued her journey, and the days blended together in a routine of watches and endless star-filled darkness. The crew had settled into the rhythm of deep-space travel, though everyone remained alert after the encounter with the entity.

On the fourteenth day, Chen received a transmission from Kepler Station. It was a standard check-in confirming the supply convoy's expected arrival time. But Jace listened to it three times, hoping to hear Mira's voice in the background, some sign that she was there and safe.

"Commander," Chen said gently, "the transmission was automated. There's no way to know if she was even in the communications center when it was sent."

"I know. I just..." Jace trailed off, unable to articulate the mixture of hope and fear that churned in his gut.

That night, he dreamed of Mira. They were back on Earth, walking along the ocean beach near the San Francisco cabin, and she was laughing at something he'd said. Her gorgeous red hair was being blown around by the cool sea breeze. But when he reached for her hand, she faded like

smoke, and he was left alone in the darkness, calling her name.

He woke with his heart pounding. He had only one more week until they reached Kepler Station, one more week until he saw her again, if she wanted to see him. The thought haunted him through the remaining days of the journey. He threw himself into his duties, ran drills, reviewed reports, did everything he could to keep his mind occupied. But at night, alone in his quarters, the doubts crept in. What if she'd moved on? What if she'd found someone else at Kepler Station, someone who understood her need for independence, who didn't make her feel trapped by expectations and plans for the future? What if she looked at him with indifference, or worse, pity?

"Stop it," he told himself firmly. "You came this far. You don't get to lose your nerve now."

On the twentieth day, the *Valoria* and her convoy crossed into the Kepler Sector. The space around them was strange, filled with unusual stellar phenomena like nebulae that glowed with unique colors and gravitational anomalies that bent light in vivid patterns.

"It's beautiful," Voss murmured, staring at the viewscreen. "No wonder they built a research station out here."

“It’s also dangerous,” Torres added. “These gravitational fields are playing havoc with our navigation systems. We’ll need to proceed carefully.”

Jace nodded, his attention focused on the sensor readings. Somewhere ahead, hidden among the stellar wonders, were Kepler Station and Mira.

“Chen, try to raise the station. Let them know we’re approaching.”

“Aye, sir.” Chen worked her console, then frowned. “Sir, I’m not getting a response. The station’s automated beacon is active, but there’s no answer to our hails.”

A chill ran down Jace’s spine. “Keep trying. And increase sensor sweeps. I want to know what’s happening at that station before we get there.”

As the *Valoria* drew closer, the picture that emerged was troubling. Kepler Station’s power output was fluctuating wildly, and there were signs of damage to its outer hull. Several of the station’s modules appeared to be offline, and the usual traffic of shuttles and research vessels was absent.

“Commander,” Voss said quietly, “something’s wrong. That station should be bustling with activity, but it’s like a ghost town.”

“Battle stations,” Jace ordered. “Prepare for anything. Chen, please keep trying to raise them. Someone on that station has to respond.”

The *Valoria* approached Kepler Station with weapons ready and shields at maximum, her crew tense and alert. The station loomed before them, a sprawling complex of interconnected modules and research platforms, beautiful in its complexity but ominously silent.

“Still no response to our hails,” Chen reported. “But I’m detecting life signs. Approximately one hundred and fifty people aboard, concentrated in the central modules.”

One hundred and fifty. The station was supposed to house two hundred. What had happened to the others? And was Mira among the survivors? “Prepare a boarding party,” Jace ordered. “Full security detail. We’re going over there to find out what happened.”

As the crew scrambled to comply, Jace stood at the center of the bridge, staring at the silent station. He’d come all this way, crossed half the galaxy, faced unknown dangers and his own doubts. And now, finally, he was about to get his answers. Whatever they might be.