

The **Stardust Drifter**, a relic of the Old Earth Alliance, drifted silently through the inky blackness of the Kepler-186f system. Its hull, once gleaming chrome, was now pockmarked by micrometeoroids and scarred by interstellar dust, a testament to centuries of autonomous flight. Inside, the emergency lighting cast long, dancing shadows across the derelict bridge. Captain Eva Rostova, her face grim beneath the flickering lights, ran a hand over a dusty control panel. "Lifesupport readings are non-existent, Commander," her AI, designated 'Astra', reported, its synthesized voice devoid of emotion. "Atmosphere is a vacuum. Hull breaches detected on decks three through seven. Power core at 0.001% capacity. There are no signs of biologicals."

"Keep scanning, Astra," Eva commanded, her voice a low murmur in the cavernous space. "And re-check the last known coordinates for the **Orion** distress beacon. It led us here for a reason." The **Orion**, a colossal generation ship carrying the last remnants of humanity's genetic archive, had vanished two centuries ago. Its disappearance had been the galactic equivalent of a silent scream. Finding this wreckage, so far off any established interstellar lanes, sent a shiver down Eva's spine, a chill that had nothing to do with the freezing temperatures of the void. The **Stardust Drifter**, a smaller, faster reconnaissance vessel, had been dispatched on a desperate, generations-long search, chasing phantom signals across nebulae. This felt like the end of that chase, but not in the way they had hoped.

Lieutenant Commander ****Jian Li****, the mission's xeno-archaeologist, moved through the bridge, her tablet held aloft, its internal sensors sweeping the environment. "Captain," she called out, her voice echoing, "there's residual energy output from the navigation console. Faint, but persistent. It's not standard Alliance tech. It's...older." Eva moved to her side, peering at the tablet. A complex lattice of unknown symbols pulsed on the screen, a language of light. "Pre-Alliance?" Eva asked, a note of awe in her voice. "Impossible. Humanity hadn't achieved interstellar travel that far back." ****Jian**** shook her head, her eyes wide with a mixture of fear and fascination. "This isn't human, Captain. And it's broadcasting. A single, repeating burst. A pattern." The pattern was eerily familiar. It was the last known frequency of the **Orion**'s distress beacon, but subtly altered, twisted, like a melody played in a minor key.

Echoes of the Void
Chapter 3 (continued)

The *Orion*'s distress signal, or what they now suspected was a mimicking echo, pulsed from the ancient, non-human console. **Jian Li** isolated the frequency, her fingers flying across her tablet. "It's a data packet," she announced, "encrypted with a layered cipher. Highly sophisticated. Beyond anything we've seen from known alien civilizations." Eva watched the progress bar crawl across the screen, an agonizingly slow testament to the complexity of the alien encryption. "Any idea what it is?" she pressed. "A warning? A message? A trap?" **Jian** paused, her brow furrowed in concentration. "The base layer appears to be a star map. But not of this galaxy. It's a trajectory. To the Andromeda Galaxy."

Astra chimed in. "Captain, I am detecting a large, non-natural object approximately 3.2 light-seconds from our position. It appears to be cloaked. Minimal energy signature detected just now, consistent with a very brief, high-energy burst." Eva's heart hammered against her ribs. "Cloaked? After two centuries, something else is here? What is it?" "Uncertain, Captain," Astra replied. "Its mass signature is inconsistent with any known vessel. It is? vast." The *Stardust Drifter* was a sleek scout ship, 150 meters long. The *Orion* generation ship was 10 kilometers. Whatever Astra was detecting was larger still. **Jian**, meanwhile, made a breakthrough. "I've cracked the second layer, Captain! It's an image sequence." On the main viewscreen, a series of flickering images appeared. Distorted, pixelated, but undeniably recognizable. First, a vast, swirling nebula. Then, a colossal, crystalline structure, impossibly large, shimmering with internal light. Finally, a series of faces. Human faces. From the *Orion*. Their expressions were a blend of wonder and terror.

"They made it," Eva whispered, her voice thick with emotion. "They found something." But the next image sent a jolt of ice through her veins. One of the human faces, that of an old woman, twisted in a silent scream, her eyes wide and staring. And behind her, indistinct but present, a shadow. Not a shadow cast by light, but a deeper, impossibly dark void, an absence that seemed to absorb the light around it. "Captain, the cloaked object is accelerating," Astra warned. "Vector: directly towards us. Evasion recommended." Eva didn't hesitate. "Evasive maneuvers! Full thrust! **Jian**, get that data packet to the *Stardust Drifter*'s core memory! We are not leaving without answers. Not after two hundred years." The *Stardust Drifter* roared to life, its thrusters flaring, propelling it away from the ghostly wreck of the *Orion* and whatever ancient, hungry thing now hunted in its shadow. The echoes in the void were no longer just distress; they were a siren song, luring them deeper into an unfathomable mystery.