

Echoes Beyond Proxima

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The *Starseeker* hung in the silent velvet, a sliver of polished steel against the infinite. Before it, drifting in the lazy orbit of a barren planetesimal, was the monolith.



"Final approach vector locked," ORBIT's voice, a calm baritone, filled the bridge. "No energy signatures. No emissions. Surface temperature matches the ambient background of 3 Kelvin. It is, for all our sensors, a non-object."

Commander Lyra Chen leaned forward in her chair, her resolute expression etched by the console lights. "And yet it's there. Malik, anything from the biological perspective?"

Xenobiologist Malik Rao's fingers danced over his panel, his curiosity a palpable energy. "Nothing

organic. But the composition... it's a perfect alloy unknown to our periodic table. The molecular structure is... it's singing, Commander. A silent, structural song."

"Poetic," Lyra said, a hint of dryness in her tone. "ORBIT, prep the EVA pod. We're going for a tactile introduction."



The pod detached with a soft thump, carrying Lyra and Malik across the gulf. The monolith grew from a geometric shape into a world-wall of absolute blackness, swallowing the distant starlight.

"Cosmic awe is an understatement," Malik whispered, his face pressed to the viewport. "It's like looking into a hole in reality."

They matched its drift. Lyra, tethered, pushed off toward the surface. Her boots made contact with a gentle *clunk*. No magnetic pull, no adhesion. It was just... there.



She ran a gloved hand over it. "Smooth. Unnaturally so. Not a scratch, not a pit." As she said it, a section of the surface beneath her palm shimmered. Geometric lines, glowing a soft cobalt blue, radiated outwards in a complex, fractal pattern.

"It's reacting!" Malik's voice crackled with excitement.

The light coalesced into a form that rose from the very surface, a humanoid silhouette of condensed starlight and dark matter. It stood before Lyra, featureless, enigmatic.



"I am the Sentinel," a voice communicated, not through sound, but directly into their minds. It was neither male nor female, but vast and old. "This is a cradle. A memory of a beginning."

Lyra held her ground. "What beginning? Who built this?"

"The builders are gone. They left seeds. This is one. It waits." The Sentinel's form pulsed gently. "Your species approaches a threshold. The artifact will test your understanding."

Suddenly, the monolith thrummed. A low vibration traveled through Lyra's boots. On the *Starseeker*, ORBIT's calm voice reported an anomaly. "Commander, local spacetime is exhibiting minor curvature. A gravitational lensing effect is forming around the artifact."

Malik, analyzing the new data from the pod, gasped. "It's not a weapon... it's a key. The 'song' I

detected... it's a mathematical constant! A coordinate!"

The Sentinel inclined its head. "Perception is the first key. The second is choice." The blue geometries on the monolith shifted, presenting a schematic-a star map, but of a region unknown, centered on a pulsar with a unique frequency.

"This location holds a library," the Sentinel intoned. "A record of all who encountered the seeds. To go is to join the continuum. To leave is to remain isolated."



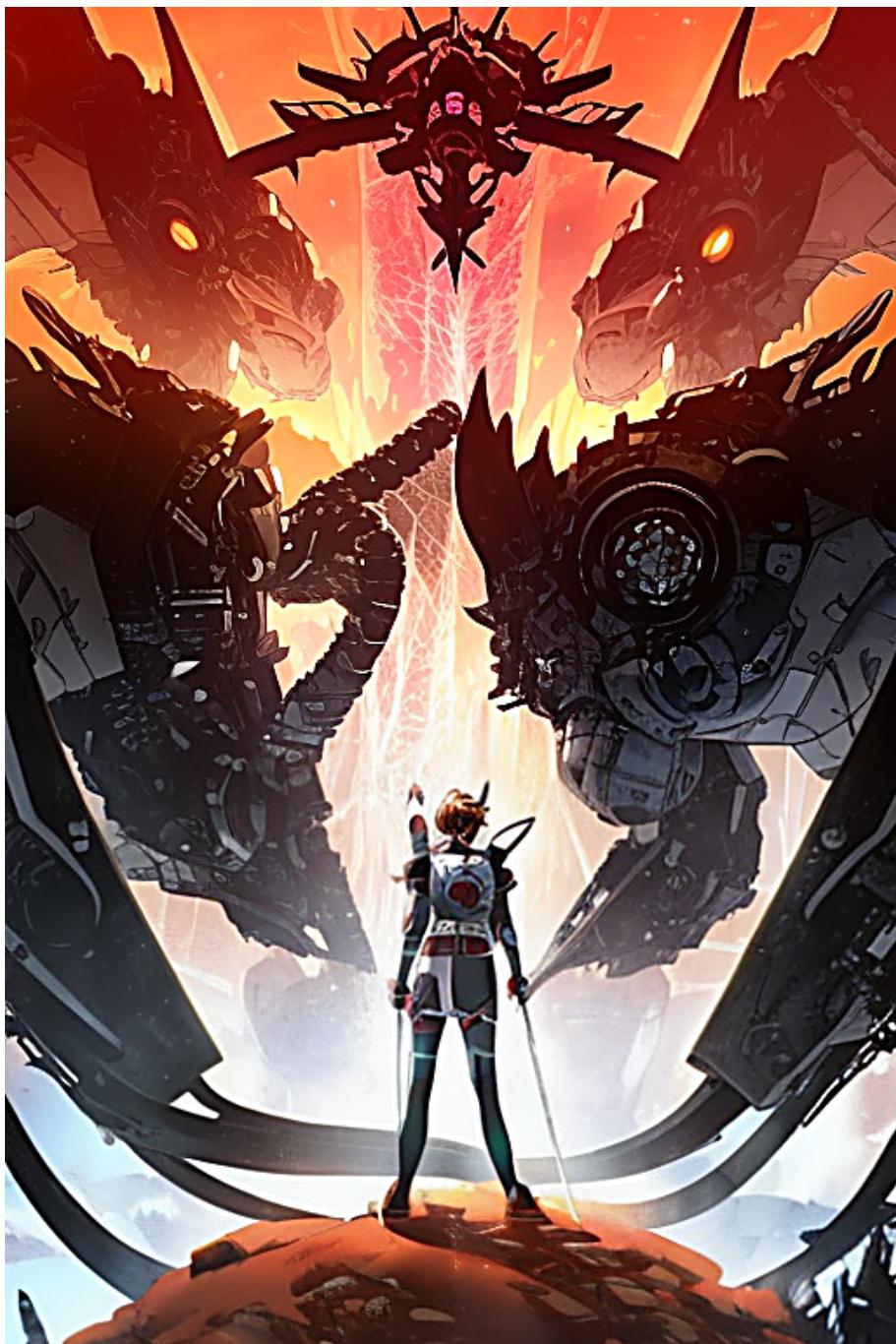
Lyra looked from the map to the Sentinel, then back to the distant, fragile speck of the *Starseeker*. The cosmic awe settled into a heavy, profound responsibility. This was more than discovery; it was

an invitation to a cosmic precipice.

"ORBIT," Lyra said, her voice steady. "Record everything. We're taking the data home."

The Sentinel's light dimmed slightly. "A choice is made. The memory is given. You will be remembered as the cautious ones."

The light patterns faded. The Sentinel dissolved back into the monolith's surface, leaving them once more in the stark blackness, the map seared into their suit recorders and their minds.



As the pod docked, Malik was quiet. "We had the address to the greatest library in the galaxy, Commander. And we're just... going home?"

Lyra removed her helmet, meeting his gaze. "We're not ready, Malik. One ship, one crew, one species doesn't get to make that leap for everyone. We bring the key. Let humanity decide if it wants to turn it."

On the bridge, ORBIT processed the new data. "The pulsar coordinate is verifiable. It is 127 light-years coreward. The artifact has returned to a dormant state." A pause, then the AI added, almost softly, "A profound encounter logged. The awe parameter is... recalibrating."

The **Starseeker** turned its nose away from the silent, dark rectangle, now just a forgotten tombstone or a sleeping seed, carrying within its hull a whisper of an ancient, galactic conversation, and the weight of a choice deferred.