**Chapter One: The Silence Between Stars**

The signal came at 03:17 UTC.

A narrow-band transmission, buried beneath layers of cosmic noise, so faint it almost passed unnoticed. Had it not been for the recalibrated sweep of the Europa Array, Earth might have slept through first contact. Instead, Dr. Elia Voss stared at the repeating pulse with a quiet awe, her breath fogging the inside of her visor, even though she was five kilometers underground.

"This... isn't natural," she whispered, not daring to blink.

Behind her, the control room buzzed with quiet tension. The walls were lined with obsolete equipment—holographic displays flickering like dying stars, processors humming with overdue upgrades—but nothing masked the magnitude of what she was seeing. The pattern repeated every 137 seconds. Always exact. Always intentional.

A pause. Then: *three* tones. *Two* pauses. *Five* more.

3-2-5. Prime numbers.

From space.

Elia tapped the console, fingers trembling. “Run a match against known beacons, military or otherwise.”

“No match,” replied the AI, calmly. “Origin: deep Kuiper Belt. Estimated distance: 98 astronomical units. Signal strength increasing.”

“It's coming closer,” she murmured.

On the surface above them, Earth turned quietly through the void—unaware that something just knocked on the door of the solar system.

Would you like a particular theme, setting, or character focus expanded next?