

Prologue: The Last Gift

The Council's End

The Erythians stood in their crystalline chamber, luminous figures aglow against the ship's translucent walls. Earth gleamed below, a primal crucible teeming with prehistoric life, its jungles roaring with megafauna, its oceans churning with ancient leviathans, a world trembling on the edge of birthing humans. T'varis, their leader, raised a trembling hand, his voice cracking like static: "Our gift will outlive us."

Once, they'd ruled the stars, their minds sculpting worlds from quantum threads, glowing cities adrift in the void. They'd conquered biology, energy, time itself, their perfection a crown forged in brilliance. But entropy cared nothing for their triumphs. Genetic mastery bred a flawless, frozen race, immortal, yet stagnant. Their spires dimmed and their future bled into nothingness.

Kaelis, a young scientist, pounded the console, her eyes blazing. "We're too late," she snapped, glaring at the Luminaris, a dodecahedron pulsing in T'varis' grip, its glyphs flaring with alien light. The council had fractured, some called seeding this brutish planet blasphemy, others survival. T'varis clutched the artifact, its hum a desperate pulse. "For them," he whispered, gazing at Earth's raw potential. A shadow rippled, energy crackling. Kaelis spun as a pulse of pure light seared through her, silencing her cry. "They've found us," T'varis rasped, as the ship buckled. "Time's up."

The Seeding

Two million years ago, Antarctica steamed, a tropical rainforest with its canopy alive with mist and primal roars. T'varis' craft blazed through Earth's atmosphere, a fireball crashing into the lush sprawl. He staggered from the wreckage, vines snagging his boots, the Luminaris glowing in his hands, its glyphs igniting like captured stars, a blueprint for minds yet unborn. The Erythians' last hope to preserve their knowledge.

He knelt, pressing the artifact into the warm earth. The ground quaked, roots curling over it, sealing the seed for when humans would walk this world. "For them," T'varis murmured, his light fading, glyphs pulsing one last time. T'varis collapsed, his gaze on the buried Luminaris. The jungle swallowed him, pregnant with secrets for a waiting Earth.

Above, the enemy fleet of dissenters who'd sworn to stop this blasphemy, scanned the crash site for signs of life, but all they saw were scorched trees. "They're gone," their commander rasped, engines flaring as they abandoned the solar system, their cities soon to wink out in the void.

But the gift endured, buried, silent and waiting.

Until now.

Part I: Artifact

Chapter 1: Whiteout

Wind screamed like a dying beast, slamming against the aircraft's frame as it tore through the skies above Antarctica. The plane jolted again in the sharp bone rattling turbulence. Outside, a wall of blinding white swallowed the world.

Blake Edwards gritted his teeth and gripped the overhead handle. The co-pilot's knuckles were pale on the stick, sweat tracing frozen trails down his temple. "Visibility's down to twenty meters," he muttered, eyes scanning the vortex ahead.

Blake barely heard him. His gaze was locked on the void outside. Somewhere beneath that endless maw of ice and fury, an anomaly waited. The satellite images were fuzzy, showing an irregular heat bloom under ancient permafrost, too symmetrical, too deliberate. Something the Earth wasn't supposed to hide.

They told him it was suicide to fly into this storm. Maybe it was.

He'd done worse.

He closed his eyes for half a second, and the hum of the plane faded into memory, another storm, another edge of the world.

Two years ago. Northern Sudan. The dig site had gone quiet just before sundown. No radios. No shouts. Just wind. Blake had stepped into the tomb alone, torchlight bouncing off carved walls. It wasn't the cobra that made him pause, it was the door. A seamless slab with pre-dynastic symbols no one had ever recorded. He'd been a breath away from solving a mystery lost to history, until the explosives went off. Mercenaries. Hired by someone who wanted the tomb to stay buried.

He still heard the screams sometimes.

Back in the cockpit, lightning forked across the sky, and the plane dipped hard. Blake opened his eyes. This time, he'd be ready. This time, no one was getting there first.

"Brace!" the pilot barked. A downdraft slammed them, yanking the plane earthward. Blake's stomach lurched as the instruments went haywire. Altimeter spinning. Compass dead. Static screamed from the radio.

Through the storm, a shadow loomed, dark and jagged, rising like a monolith from the ice.

"There!" Blake shouted, pointing. The base.

A structure carved into the white abyss. Man-made. Isolated. Waiting.

The wheels hit the ice with a bone-jarring crunch. Skidding. The wings rocked dangerously. For a heartbeat, Blake thought they'd flip.

Then... stillness.

The wind howled, but the plane held.

Blake exhaled slowly. His pulse thundered in his ears.

“Welcome to Antarctica,” the pilot muttered, already regretting every second of this flight.

Blake shot him a crooked grin as he slung the pack over his shoulder. “You guys really roll out the red carpet down here.”

Blake grabbed his pack. He didn’t look back.

He stepped into the storm, into the cold teeth of a continent that wanted him gone.

The wind hit like a wall, tearing at his parka and biting through his gloves as he trudged toward the waiting snowcat. The world around him was a kaleidoscope of white, sky and ground fused in the blur of the blizzard. He paused a moment, breathing through his scarf, and looked back at the plane.

He’d been to forgotten ruins and jungle-cloaked pyramids, but this place felt different. Not just ancient. Predatory. As if the very ground remembered being something else. As if it were waiting for him.

He thought of the Sudan tomb again. The blast. The scream of collapsing stone. He still had a scar under his ribs from that day, a jagged reminder that secrets came with a cost. But what he’d glimpsed there, the impossible geometry etched into the walls, the inexplicable magnetic field pulsing from the slab that had led him to a single conclusion: someone had been here before humanity. And they’d left breadcrumbs.

This place was one of them.

Snow crunched beneath his boots as he reached the vehicle. A shadow passed over the landscape, too brief to identify. Blake turned slowly, heart thudding.

Nothing. Just the wind.

But he knew better.

Something was beneath them. Something ancient. Something that had been waiting a very long time.

Beneath his boots, the ice groaned.

Something had woken.

Chapter 2: The Edge of the World

The base loomed like a half-buried relic, its steel siding rimmed with hoarfrost, windows dimmed by a siege of snow. Blake trudged through the gale, ice crystals needling his cheeks, every step a battle against the wind. The world had narrowed to a single truth: cold, sharp, and absolute.

The outer door hissed open. Heat blasted him like a furnace as he walked through the door. He stepped inside, letting the door seal behind him with a hydraulic groan, almost shutting out the howling storm outside.

A figure waited by the inner bulkhead, mid-thirties, stocky, buzz cut, arms crossed tight. “Dr. Blake Edwards?”

Blake nodded, still brushing ice from his hood. “Yes. And you are?”

“Lieutenant Anika Kessler, mission security.” Her handshake was firm, efficient. “We weren’t expecting you until tomorrow.”

“Storm moved in fast,” Blake replied. “Thought it best to beat it.”

Kessler gestured down the corridor. “We’ve secured your quarters. You’ll be debriefed in the briefing room at oh-eight-hundred.”

Blake cracked a dry smile. “And do I get a mint on my pillow as well?”

Kessler didn’t return it. “This isn’t a resort. Something’s down there and we’re under pressure to figure out what it is. No time for pleasantries.”

He followed her down a sterile hallway. LED panels hummed overhead. The air had that recycled tang, metal, ozone, faint bleach. Every few meters, a camera blinked awake.

“So, what’s the story?” Blake asked. “I was flown out here on a classified contract with no prep, no context, and a twelve-hour deadline.”

Kessler didn’t look at him. “All you need to know is that we found something unusual. Buried deep. Perfect symmetry. Emits heat.”

Blake raised a brow. “Artifacts don’t typically self-regulate.”

“That’s why you’re here.”

She stopped outside a door marked RESEARCH MODULE 3. “Dr. Lin will fill you in. She’s lead geophysicist.”

Inside, the lab hummed with low voices and equipment chatter. Maps lined the walls, thermal scans, sonar slices, magnetic overlays. A dozen monitors blinked with data feeds.

A tall woman in a parka stood over a table scattered with printouts and core samples. She looked up as Blake entered.

“Dr. Edwards,” she said, voice calm but tight as she shook his hand, “Ana Lin. I’ve read your work on anomalous strata in sub-Saharan tombs. I hope this isn’t too pedestrian for you.”

Blake smiled faintly. “Anything that disrupts scientific consensus is worth my time.”

She tapped a touchscreen, bringing up a 3D rendering of the anomaly, an angular mass buried two kilometers beneath the ice. It pulsed faintly in red tones. “We call it the Scarab.”

Blake leaned closer. The structure’s shape wasn’t natural. It had twelve sides, near-perfect dodecahedral geometry, and etched lines across its surface, like veins or glyphs.

“This was detected five weeks ago during geothermal mapping,” Lin explained. “But last night, it... changed. Emitted a spike of EM radiation. Enough to scramble instruments across the base. And the temperature inside the shaft dropped by nine degrees in less than ten minutes.”

Blake studied the render. “And you’ve ruled out seismic activity?”

“Nothing matches. No tectonic movement. No melt anomalies.”

“What about interference?”

“We’re isolated. No transmissions for over fifty clicks.”

Blake nodded slowly. He’d seen things before, stone carvings in Sudan that shifted in the dark, cave murals in Indonesia that bled pigment during lunar eclipses, but this was different. This wasn’t responding to humans.

This was waiting.

Before he could speak, the lights overhead flickered. Once. Twice.

Then darkness.

A half-second later, red emergency lights snapped on, bathing the room in blood hues.

“Backup system’s live,” someone muttered. “Why the hell did we lose primary?”

A low hum vibrated through the floor, subtle, steady. Like something buried was waking up.

Blake felt it in his chest more than his ears. He met Kessler’s eyes.

“That didn’t feel like a glitch,” he said.

“No,” she replied. “It didn’t.”

Chapter 3: Buried Signals

The emergency lights blinked on with a reluctant buzz, casting the lab in a dull red glow. Shadows stretched long across the room, turning faces into ghostly masks. Someone muttered a curse. Another fumbled with a flashlight, sending its beam jittering across lab equipment and up to the exposed ductwork.

Blake paused in the hallway outside, heart pounding. That hum hadn't been a glitch, it had resonance, like something organic vibrating through the ice itself. He'd heard plenty of weird frequencies in the field about mineral harmonics and tectonic shifts, but nothing like that. This one felt... intentional.

Kessler appeared beside him, her headlamp already on. "What the hell was that?"

"I was hoping you could tell me," Blake said. "That wasn't just power fluctuation. That was..."

"Directional. Rhythmic." She finished the thought for him. Her voice wasn't quite steady.

They moved down the corridor toward the generator room. The metal floor thudded underfoot. Frost crept along the inside edges of the walls, feathering like veins under a microscope. The temperature was dropping.

As they passed the storage bay, Blake caught movement, a silhouette behind the frosted window. He stopped, squinting. Nothing. Just shifting shadows from the emergency lights.

Still, his gut twisted.

"How secure is this station?" he asked.

Kessler frowned. "Locked tight. Unless someone forgot to bolt the loading ramp."

Blake didn't answer. His mind flashed back to Sudan, inside the tomb, the moment he realized the carvings weren't just decorative. They were mathematical. A code, embedded in the stone. Something trying to communicate. He hadn't told anyone that some of those equations weren't like anything ever written, or that he suspected they pre-dated humanity.

In the generator room, two techs were already at work, their breath fogging in the cold. One looked up. "Backup didn't fail. It didn't even try to kick in. Systems are fine. Something bypassed the trigger."

Blake exchanged a look with Kessler. "You saying someone disabled it?"

"No one touched the breakers," the tech replied. "It's like the system just... ignored the outage."

Or was overridden, Blake thought.

"You said the Scarab's emitting electromagnetic surges," he said to Kessler. "Could it have—?"

"We've never recorded one this strong," she said, crossing her arms. "But maybe it's evolving."

They stood in silence for a moment. Even the machines seemed to hesitate, their usual whirring dulled.

A crackling sound broke through the quiet. One of the nearby monitors blinked erratically, static bleeding across the screen. Then it settled on a display Blake hadn't seen before, a feed from a thermal scanner mounted near Borehole Six.

A new signature had appeared.

Elongated. Upright. Moving.

Blake stepped forward. "That's not equipment."

"No," Kessler whispered. "And it's heading toward the ice ridge."

His eyes narrowed. That Scarab was on the other side of the ridge, about five kilometers away.

He stared at the screen, at the faint, heat-blurred figure making its slow, deliberate way toward the ice ridge. It wasn't what he saw that unsettled him. It was what it reminded him of.

Sudan. The tomb. The moment just before the explosion, the silent figure moving through the dust outside, something no one else noticed until it was too late. That had been a warning. A final barrier. Someone, or something, had tried to stop him from reaching the artifact.

And now, halfway across the world, in a frozen wasteland, it was happening again.

Outside, the storm howled like it had been waiting all along.

Chapter 4: Shadow on the Ice

The storm hadn't let up. If anything, it had thickened into a wall of white fury. Wind howled across the compound like a thing alive, rattling the outer walls with every gust.

Blake zipped up his thermal suit, tugging the insulated hood tight around his face. The station's locker room hummed with nervous energy, murmured warnings, the hiss of oxygen tanks, the soft clack of gear being readied. Kessler snapped the seal on her own visor and checked the charge on her sidearm.

"Still think it's nothing?" Blake asked.

She didn't look at him. "I think people panic when they don't understand what they're seeing."

"That's not a 'no.'"

Kessler keyed the outer door. "You coming or not?"

Blake grabbed a flare pack and a handheld EM sensor. The thing was old-school, but he trusted it more than the base's integrated system, especially after what he'd just seen.

The airlock hissed open, and the wind punched through like a freight train. Visibility dropped to maybe ten feet. Beyond that, just swirling snow and shifting shadows.

They moved fast, heads down, footsteps crunching over hard-packed drifts. Blake kept an eye on the EM meter, no spikes yet. Kessler led the way toward Borehole Six, her headlamp cutting a narrow tunnel through the dark.

Blake's mind drifted, unbidden, back to Sudan.

There too, he'd followed signs through hostile terrain. There too, someone, or something, had tried to keep him away from what lay buried. The difference was, in Sudan, they'd waited until he was inside the tomb before triggering the blast. He'd lost two men on that dig. Never found their bodies.

Now, in the middle of a frozen wasteland, the same invisible hand felt present again. Only this time, it wasn't waiting.

Ten minutes in, Blake spotted half-covered tracks, leading away from the borehole perimeter. Long strides. Too clean for drifting snow. Someone had been through here recently.

"Do you see this?" he said, pointing.

Kessler nodded, her voice low over comms. "Not one of ours. No one's logged an EVA in hours."

They followed the trail uphill, boots slipping on wind-swept ice. The ridge ahead was one of the highest points near the dig sites, stable ground with a wide view. And it sat in the general direction of the anomaly Blake had come to investigate.

The wind lulled for a moment, just long enough for Blake to hear it.

A low hum, faint but pulsing. Beneath his feet.

He crouched, pressed a gloved hand to the ice. Vibrations. Subtle, but rhythmic. Like a heartbeat. “Feel that?” he said.

Kessler knelt beside him, palm on the ground. “It’s coming from below.”

Then the sensor chirped.

Blake looked down; the EM spike was climbing fast.

Ahead, nestled in a depression on the ridge, was something new. A shallow cavity, maybe two meters wide. Blackened at the edges. Ice had melted and re-frozen in jagged rings. In the center sat a metal panel half-buried in snow. Scorched, old, and warped by time.

He stepped closer, kneeling beside it. The depression looked unnatural, like the ice had been burned or blasted from within. He brushed away a crust of frost. Faint geometric patterns emerged, etched into the metal like veins or circuitry. Not decorative. Not random.

“This was buried deliberately,” he said, almost to himself. “Whatever this is... it wasn’t meant to be found.”

Kessler circled the cavity, weapon drawn. “You sure it’s not just discarded equipment?”

Blake shook his head. “No. This is old. And someone went to a lot of trouble to hide it.”

Suddenly, the wind shifted, just enough to clear the ridge for a heartbeat.

A figure stood above them.

Blake saw only flashes, white suit, dark visor, something clutched tight in its hand.

“Contact at two o’clock!” Kessler shouted.

The figure bolted.

Blake took off after it. The flare case bounced against his hip, the sensor in his other hand screaming with interference. Snow stung his face as he ran.

The figure moved fast, dodging behind a ridge of fractured ice.

Kessler’s voice barked in his comm. “We need to fall back! This could be a trap!”

Blake ignored her. He reached the rise and skidded down the other side, but there was nothing. Just snow and wind. The tracks were gone.

A trace of heat still shimmered on the thermal sensor. Fresh. Someone had been there seconds ago. But no trail. No prints. Not even disturbed powder.

Too clean. Too fast.

He wasn’t chasing amateurs.

They disappeared the same way the ones in Sudan had, clean and surgical. Like ghosts who’d done this before.

Behind him, Kessler was already scanning the cavity again.

Blake stared at the ice, heart racing.
They weren't alone on this continent.
And whatever else had come here...
It knew exactly where to find them.