

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.”