PROJECT RIFT

REAL WORLDS • OTHER REALITIES



PART IV

THE FROZEN FRONTIER

A NEW WORLD • A HIDDEN THREAT

A CINEMATIC LITERARY EDITION

FL GAMING | FL ECOSYSTEM

PRIVATE CREATIVE WORKING EDITION

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Prologue — THE LIGHT THAT RETURNED

The fourth light appeared again above the ancient city's dimensional map, and this time it remained long enough to be recorded. It hovered beyond every route the Titan had charted, a solitary spark at the edge of an otherwise dark projection. The concealed region did not brighten. No hidden gate opened. The guardians continued their quiet work as though nothing of importance had happened.

On Earth, the Titan compared that small change with months of passive recordings. At first the fourth light seemed unrelated to the third interval. Then a weather station in the far north registered a brief disturbance beneath a bank of ordinary cloud. No Rift opened. There was only a fall in temperature too abrupt for any local storm, followed by a second horizon reflected across the ice.

The Soldier refused to call it an invasion. The Mage refused to call it an invitation. Their last expedition had taught them that a signal could be an echo, a warning, or the accidental consequence of an ancient machine continuing its instructions after the people who built it were gone.

Yet the northern disturbance moved. Three days later it appeared farther inland, where a research aircraft vanished from instruments for eleven seconds and returned with frost on the inside of its windows. The crew survived. Their recordings showed a white plain beneath an unfamiliar moon and, far in the distance, a broken ring rising above the snow.

Project Threshold prepared another limited survey. The Nexus Stone remained in its stabilisation frame. No one would use it to force an opening. This time, before the trio left, the mentor gave them one instruction.

"Remember that a frontier is only a frontier to the people who arrive from somewhere else."

The Soldier checked the team's rescue equipment. The Mage studied the photographs of the ice. The Titan watched the fourth light pulse once, and wondered who had been waiting long enough to need a warning.

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ACT 1

THE WHITE HORIZON

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Chapter 1 — Eleven Seconds

The aircraft crew's report arrived before the medical team had finished examining them. Eleven seconds had disappeared from every clock onboard. The plane had not changed course or altitude, yet all six crew members remembered a second landscape beyond the cockpit glass. One saw towers embedded in snow. Another saw a procession of shadows crossing a ridge. A third remembered only a silence deep enough to make the engines seem distant.

The Titan compared their testimony with instrument logs. The records supported a temporary overlap between horizons, not travel to another world. Nothing aboard could explain the interior frost. A sample melted into ordinary water, leaving no exotic signature for the scientists eager to find one.

"If the instruments can't tell us where it was," the Soldier said, "then we start with where the crew almost died."

They flew north with an authorised Threshold survey team. At the last safe landing site, the pilot refused to cross an invisible line identified by repeated compass errors. The trio continued on foot, following a low ridge under an unremarkable grey sky. For hours there was only ice, wind and the painful light of a sun close to the horizon.

Then the Mage noticed footprints beneath the clear upper layer of the frozen ground. They were not human and not recent; the ice above them had formed in many separate seasons. The prints led away from a place where no doorway or passage could be seen.

"We don't know what made them," the Mage said. "But something lived here."

The Titan placed a passive sensor near the tracks. For one heartbeat the fourth light appeared across its display. The air ahead shivered, revealing a white plain under an enormous blue planet. This was a natural seam; it existed without their help. They watched until it widened on its own, and only then approached.

Chapter 2 — The Crossing Without a Door

The seam admitted them one at a time. There was no sudden pull, no roar, no machine awakening beneath their feet. The world changed with the quiet finality of a page turned in a sealed book. Earth vanished behind a line of trembling air. They stood on a slope of blue-grey ice beneath a sky containing two pale crescents.

A vast, unfinished ring lay half-buried in the snow. It did not resemble the circular archives of the empty city, though some of its joints showed the same deliberate precision. The Titan photographed its surface from a distance, careful not to activate the darker bands running between the broken sections. The Soldier tested the stability of the ridge. The Mage listened for the pressure of damaged barriers and found only a deep, steady cold.

Their first footsteps were erased by a wind carrying brilliant dust. A few hundred metres below them, something moved between the frozen pillars: a large creature with a low body and a crown of narrow, branching horns. It raised its head, considered the strangers, and continued across the valley.

"A living world," the Soldier said.

"A cold one," the Titan answered, watching the oxygen and thermal readings settle.

The crossing behind them narrowed but did not close. They marked it without installing anything that might alter its shape. A rescue beacon would be useless if its signal bounced through a barrier instead of across a sky, so the Soldier laid a physical retreat route using small reflective markers.

Beyond the ring, the landscape descended toward a cluster of ancient structures locked into the glacier. None showed lights. One had collapsed under the ice, and another stood open to the wind. The trio followed the shallow tracks of the horned animal, keeping clear of the dark bands beneath the ring.

Every few steps the Titan glanced behind them. The fourth light was visible on the detector even when the crossing itself could barely be seen.

Chapter 3 — Beneath the Blue Ice

They entered the first intact building through a window level with the glacier. Inside, a long hall sloped gently downward. Frost covered the floor, but the walls retained smooth lines of unfamiliar engraving. Small empty sockets ran the length of a central passage. Whatever had once occupied them was gone, removed deliberately or lost to the same silence that had swallowed the ancient city.

The Soldier found an alcove with blankets made from a stiff fibrous material. The blankets had no discernible age. Nearby stood a table set with three shallow vessels, one overturned by ice that had entered through the wall. The scene felt ordinary enough to be painful.

The Mage brushed loose snow from a panel and saw images of changing seasons: a green valley, a mountain under rain, the same valley beneath advancing white. They could not tell whether the images

were a history, a forecast or a warning. None named the world's people or explained why the building had been abandoned.

At the hall's far end, a transparent roof looked into the body of the glacier. Suspended beyond it were dark shapes, arranged in a line. The Soldier brought up a light and saw that they were machines, not bodies. Their limbs had folded inward as if placed there for storage.

"Guardians?" the Mage asked.

"They share the geometry," the Titan said, "but that's all we can prove."

The first machine moved as they watched. Ice cracked along its shoulder. A narrow blue eye opened and turned toward the deep passage behind them. It did not look at the trio. Instead, it pressed one arm against the glass and held still, a sentry listening for something buried farther down.

The Titan marked the direction on their map, then shut off the brighter lamp. A vibration passed through the floor, strong enough to lift powder from the abandoned vessels. Somewhere beneath the glacier, a mechanism had begun to count.

THE FIRST DISCOVERY Project Rift I Part IV

Chapter 4 — The Slow Avalanche

The sound came again, followed by a crack that travelled through the building like thunder beneath a locked door. The glacier had shifted. Its upper layers moved only a few centimetres, but the Titan's sensors showed a deep fracture accelerating towards the hollow beneath the hall.

The Soldier ordered withdrawal. They were almost at the exit when a burst of white dust filled the passage. The ceiling dropped ahead of them; the Mage held a falling slab long enough for the Soldier to pull the Titan free. Beyond the opening, snow swept across the valley in a slow, terrible wave.

The horned creature they had seen earlier stood trapped beside a collapsed wall, one leg caught beneath a beam. It struggled as the snow advanced. The Soldier changed direction without speaking. The Titan cut the pressure from the beam with a portable tool, while the Mage kept the animal calm with a shield that blocked falling ice but did not touch its skin.

The creature staggered free and disappeared into the storm. The trio reached higher ground behind the broken ring as the wave filled the valley and covered the entrance they had used. Their retreat markers vanished one after another.

"That wasn't a Rift," the Soldier said through the noise. "That was a mountain moving."

The Titan examined the new fracture across the glacier. Its path followed the dark bands of the buried ring, a coincidence too exact to dismiss. There was still no evidence that a machine had caused the avalanche. The wind shifted, and for an instant the narrow seam to Earth appeared above the ridge, then disappeared behind a wall of snow.

They could not cross until the weather settled. The trio built a temporary shelter behind stone, counting their supplies and recording the changes they could measure. Far below, blue lights began to wake beneath the glacier, one after another, not spreading outward but converging on a single point.

Chapter 5 — A Line That Would Not Break

By dawn the storm had weakened. A bright line shone through the newly fractured ice, following a course from the broken ring toward a valley no map had yet recorded. The line pulsed at intervals too slow to be a message, but each pulse coincided with a small shift in the air above the ridge.

The Titan approached a safe overlook and took readings. The ancient system appeared to be responding to the glacier's movement by adjusting something beneath the frozen surface. Whether it had caused the movement or merely survived it remained uncertain.

"If the line is a route," the Mage said, "where does it go?"

"We don't follow it because it exists," the Soldier replied.

A shape emerged from the snow: the same horned animal, limping but alive. It crossed the bright line without incident and headed towards a hollow where dark water steamed between ice walls. The creature was not frightened of the light. It was frightened of something behind it.

The trio watched a second animal appear, then a third. A whole herd moved across the slope, travelling away from the valley. The Soldier scanned the direction they had come from. There were no pursuers. Only an unnatural stillness, as though the snow and wind had agreed to wait.

The Mage felt the first strain between worlds. It was faint but distinct, a note beneath the cold that should not have been there. The Titan compared it with the fourth light and found the same interval, stretched across a far greater distance.

"We came to observe a crossing," the Titan said. "Something here is using the same rhythm."

The Soldier led them toward the safe hollow, not to chase an answer but to keep an escape route open if the glacier shifted again. At the edge of the valley, an ancient marker stood half-buried in snow. On its surface was a symbol they had seen before: a boundary, not an invitation.

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ACT 2

THE BURIED WARNING

PART IV | RIFT UNIVERSE

PROJECT RIFT CONCEPT ARTWORK · NOT AN IN-GAME SCREENSHOT

Chapter 6 — The Shelter in the Hollow

The hollow offered temporary refuge from the wind. Warm water rose from deep vents and crossed the ice in narrow channels, feeding dark plants that clung to the rocks. Small creatures sheltered beneath them. The valley was inhospitable but not empty, and every living thing seemed to know where to move when the weather turned dangerous.

The Soldier examined the old marker at the entrance. It showed a simple arrangement of shapes: a bright region, a narrow separation, a second region pressed too close. The Titan recognised the geometry from the concealed map but refused to equate the two without evidence. Ancient warnings often looked alike when all they described was distance and danger.

They followed the warm channel to a circular refuge cut into a cliff. Its doors had long since fallen away. Inside were niches large enough for travellers, a reservoir, and a faded diagram of the surrounding slopes. Someone had built this place to keep people alive in the cold.

The Mage found no bodies. A line of small carved figures stood on a shelf. Their forms were unfamiliar; some had long limbs, others wore shapes that might have been clothing or ceremonial coverings. It was impossible to know whether they represented inhabitants, visitors or stories.

The Titan copied the valley diagram without touching it. At its margin was a small mark of four lights, one separated from the other three by a deliberate space. That was the first recognisable connection to the signal that had led them here.

"The fourth light isn't pointing us to a weapon," the Soldier said. "It's on a shelter map."

"Or it's on a warning map beside a shelter," the Titan replied.

Outside, the herd gathered near the warm water. The Mage watched one injured animal lean against another. In a place defined by cold, the first thing the trio had discovered was not an enemy or a secret. It was care.

Chapter 7 — The Hall of Winter Records

Beneath the refuge lay a narrow stair that had been sealed by ice. The Titan could have cut through it, but doing so might have released pressure on the wall. Instead the team waited until sunlight warmed the upper crack and opened a shallow route naturally. They descended with ropes and cameras, leaving the reservoir untouched.

The chamber below contained a wall of records arranged in concentric bands. Light moved under the ice in slow circles, illuminating scenes as the temperature outside changed. A valley in summer became a valley in winter. An ancient ring stood complete in one panel and broken in the next. Several sequences ended in darkness where an image had been deliberately removed.

"A history?" the Mage asked.

"Possibly a maintenance log," the Titan said. "We can't translate the title."

A recording showed a storm arriving across a bright horizon. Figures moved between shelters, guiding smaller silhouettes to safety. Then the picture froze before the storm reached the valley. The same image repeated in every band, each time with a different line highlighted under the landscape.

The Soldier realised the lines were not roads. They were safe boundaries. Whoever had made the record wanted people to know which parts of the valley could survive when the air itself became unstable.

The Titan brought up the current measurements. Three of the highlighted lines remained stable. The fourth, extending toward the buried ring, showed rising strain. The new light on the map had not appeared out of nowhere. Something older had been measuring this danger for longer than any person could remember.

There was no message naming the makers. No promise that the mechanism still worked. When the chamber dimmed, the Titan left a passive recorder and backed away. The team had enough knowledge to choose a safer route without pretending to understand the whole machine.

Chapter 8 — The Long Watch

The next storm did not arrive as weather. It came as silence. Wind ceased across the valley. The water in the warm channels stopped rippling. The animals raised their heads, and the Mage felt the boundary tighten like a thread pulled from both ends.

A second horizon appeared above the broken ring, showing a wide plain with unfamiliar stars. It did not resemble the concealed region. The overlapping image shifted with each pulse, never remaining stable enough to identify. The Titan measured the movement and found it was decreasing, then increasing, then decreasing again.

"A natural oscillation," the Titan said, "unless there's a hidden cause we haven't seen."

The Soldier took the team to a low shelter marked on the winter records. The herd followed the warm-water course uphill, and the trio used their lights to guide the stragglers away from an exposed ridge. They were not equipped to rescue an entire ecosystem. They could at least avoid becoming another danger to it.

The Mage's shield held back the flying ice when the wind returned, but the barrier above the ring brightened each time the shield strengthened. The Mage lowered it and sheltered behind stone instead. The ancient system responded to energy, regardless of good intentions.

As night approached, the fourth light blinked twice on the Titan's reader. The other three marks remained fixed. The interval between the new flashes matched the change in pressure along the dangerous line.

"It isn't telling us to go forward," the Titan said. "It's telling us when not to."

They waited. For hours the distant ring glowed beneath snow while the safest passage remained quiet. The temptation to investigate grew with every unexplained flash, but no one crossed the marked boundary.

When dawn returned, the second horizon had vanished. On the valley floor, a new fissure crossed a path they had almost taken. The warning had saved them from a mistake they might never have understood.

Chapter 9 — Those Below the Surface

A final survey took them along the warm channel to an open fissure, where the glacier exposed layer upon layer of old stonework. The Titan used a small camera to inspect it. Far below, mechanical limbs rested in ranks around an immense circular joint. Most were motionless. One raised its head at the movement of the camera and looked upward, luminous markings following the lens.

It was not the first ancient guardian they had encountered, but this one did not guard a door. It watched a seam in the rock while slow pressure built on its other side. The machine placed a hand against the wall, absorbing a small vibration before it could travel into the valley.

"They're holding something in position," the Mage said.

"Maybe a boundary," the Titan answered. "Maybe only a wall."

The guardian's motions became strained. Pieces of ice fell from the exposed chamber. A second machine activated and took its place, allowing the first to fold itself back beneath a protective arch. The movement

looked almost like care, although no one could know whether the machines possessed anything like intention.

The Soldier watched the exchange and thought of rescue crews changing shifts during the catastrophe near the city. The pattern was familiar: hold the line, rest, return. It was a method, not proof of a shared origin.

As the camera withdrew, it captured a plate bearing four small lights. Three formed a triangle. The fourth stood alone beyond a line of warning marks. The Titan saved the image but deliberately omitted the coordinates of the buried chamber from the public report. It was evidence of a protected system, not an invitation for anyone with a drilling machine.

The guardian remained at its post. Above the ice, the herd moved across the warming slope, unaware that anything beneath it was keeping the valley intact.

THE BURIED WARNING Project Rift I Part IV

Chapter 10 — The Price of Heat

A fractured vent began releasing hot water beneath the central refuge. Within an hour the ice supporting the roof softened, and the Titan's sensors warned of a collapse. The trio could close the vent by sealing a nearby channel, but the warm water fed the valley's small plants and animals. A clean mechanical fix might kill the life it was meant to protect.

The Soldier organised a retreat route. The Mage used short, carefully measured pulses of energy to hold loose stone in place, stopping whenever the old system registered a sympathetic response. The Titan traced the water flow through the refuge's map until a bypass appeared under a collapsed floor.

They could not reopen it by brute force. The Titan cleared only the loose fragments blocking its mouth. Warm water changed direction, moving slowly toward a second, shallower basin where the animals had already gathered. The first refuge cooled. Its roof settled without falling.

A buried guardian approached the edge of the fissure. It stood where the channel had been altered, studying the flow. For a moment the Soldier expected it to enforce a forgotten rule and undo the work. Instead the machine turned and lowered a small wall, allowing the new route to remain open.

"Maybe that was always its purpose," the Mage said.

"Or we gave it a condition it recognises," the Titan replied.

They did not declare the valley saved. The new route might fail with the next season. Their records described precisely what had changed and what they had left untouched.

At the far end of the hollow, the fourth light faded on the Titan's screen for the first time since their arrival. The danger line in the winter records returned to a slow pulse. Somewhere under the ice, a line that had seemed close to breaking was holding again.

PROJECT RIFT

REAL WORLDS · OTHER REALITIES



ACT 3

THE EDGE OF WINTER

PART IV | RIFT UNIVERSE

PROJECT RIFT CONCEPT ARTWORK · NOT AN IN-GAME SCREENSHOT

Chapter 11 — The Unwritten Country

The team made one short journey beyond the refuge, following a safe route that wound between black cliffs and untouched fields of snow. The land opened suddenly onto an immense basin filled with pale mist. Across it stood towers made of intertwined stone and ice, too distant to examine and too carefully arranged to dismiss as natural formations.

The Titan's map ended at the basin. Every instrument returned slightly different distances. The Mage felt no pressure from the concealed region, no known signature of the greater ancient presence. It was a place they had never measured, and the distinction mattered.

A row of small markers ran along the near shore. Each showed the familiar boundary symbol turned away from the basin, accompanied by a pattern of dots. The Soldier counted them: four lights again, with the last separated. A warning repeated where a traveller might be tempted to take the shortest route.

At noon, shadows crossed the fog. They might have belonged to tall creatures on the far side, or to towers shifting as the light bent through layers of air. The camera could not resolve them. The Soldier refused to fire at what could not be identified.

"We don't know whether anyone lives there," the Mage said.

"Then we behave as though someone might," the Soldier answered.

They erected no flag, collected no artefacts and left no beacon that could lure others into crossing without permission. The Titan took remote measurements from the marked shore, then withdrew.

On the return journey the basin vanished behind snow. The landscape did not close in their wake. It simply remained unknown. The fourth light kept its patient rhythm, and no one mistook the existence of a direction for a right to follow it.

Chapter 12 — The Buried Conductor

The oldest structure near the broken ring contained a chamber that was accessible from the surface after the avalanche. Inside lay a long series of metallic spines rooted deep in the rock. Each carried faint light, passing through the chamber in a pattern that matched the storm warnings in the refuge.

The Titan recognised the arrangement as a conductor, not of electricity alone but of the small dimensional distortions that moved through the glacier. It did not create the cold or summon the second horizon. It redistributed strain along lines designed to remain separate.

A warning panel showed that one spine had lost its connection. The surrounding ice pressed on the gap. The machine had been compensating, and the fourth light marked the place where the compensation was failing.

The Soldier studied the hardware. "Can we repair it?"

"We can see the fault," the Titan replied. "That's not the same as knowing how to repair it."

A manual bypass stood within reach. The Titan could have moved it, but its destination lay beneath the inaccessible towers in the distant basin. No one understood the consequences. The Mage suggested a smaller choice: remove loose ice blocking a passive relief channel, allowing pressure to subside without directing it into an unmeasured region.

They worked with hand tools while a guardian observed from the far doorway. Ice gave way slowly. The conductor dimmed, then resumed a gentler cycle. The damaged spine remained damaged, but it was no longer carrying more strain than the system could tolerate.

The Titan recorded the entire repair and marked it provisional. If the lights returned to an emergency rhythm, they would leave. The guardian lowered its head as they passed. The gesture might have been a reset command. The Soldier accepted it as a reason not to push their luck.

Chapter 13 — The Thin Blue Morning

The dawn after the repair was almost beautiful. Wind returned to the basin, and a wash of blue light crossed the lower clouds without opening another horizon. The herd moved freely through the valley. Meltwater ran beneath the refuge and emerged as steam where it met the cold air.

The Titan's data showed that the dangerous line had stopped accelerating. It remained vulnerable, and the broken ring could still be seen above the snow, but the fourth light now flashed only at long intervals. It had not disappeared because the mystery was solved. It had quieted because the immediate strain had eased.

The Mage stood beside the marker at the hollow. For a moment, the cold seemed to carry another sensation: a vast distance, carefully maintained. It was not the familiar pressure from the concealed region. The Mage wrote the experience down as a subjective impression and nothing more.

The Soldier used the remaining daylight to complete a survey of safe retreat paths. Their records included the animal routes, the warm channels and the places where moving through the landscape might cause unnecessary harm. Threshold would need those details if it ever returned, more than it needed photographs of distant towers.

Before departure, the Titan placed a second passive recorder beneath a sheltered rock. It would not transmit or attempt to communicate with the ancient network. It would simply store changes, if the environment allowed it to survive.

"One day we'll have to come back," the Mage said.

"Maybe," the Soldier answered. "But we can leave without making this place need us."

The fourth light pulsed once more. A soft reflection travelled across the ice. The trio took the long path back to the seam, leaving the broken ring where they had found it.

Chapter 14 — The Way Home

The crossing to Earth was narrow when they returned. They waited three days of local time for its natural cycle to widen, sheltering in a safe alcove and checking supplies with the discipline of people who had learned that patience could be a form of survival.

A final storm moved across the valley on the second night. The old warning lights woke, but their intervals stayed steady. The guardian beneath the glacier resumed its post, pressing one broad hand against the stone where the pressure was greatest. The hollow remained intact. No artificial opening was required.

On the third morning the crossing widened enough for passage. The Soldier went first to secure the Earth-side path. The Titan carried the survey records, including every uncertainty and every incomplete measurement. The Mage crossed last, looking once at the distant broken ring beneath its two pale moons.

The air of Earth felt warm even under snow. Their aircraft returned without loss, and the crew's instruments recorded no missing seconds. At headquarters, Project Threshold demanded a clear explanation of the fourth light. The Titan offered one limited answer: it had behaved like a warning associated with a system carrying dimensional strain.

"Does that tell us who built it?" a director asked.

"No," the Titan said.

"What was behind the basin?"

"We didn't cross."

The director looked disappointed. The Soldier placed the rescue footage beside the report: the freed animal, the restored warm channel, the stable refuge. Their mission had been to observe without repeating the arrogance of 2022. They had done that.

Below the headquarters, the Nexus Stone kept its steady rhythm. The mentor listened as they described the broken conductor, then nodded without claiming recognition. The fourth light was still present on the distant map. It was no longer the only thing they understood about the cold frontier, but it remained a question.

THE COST OF CHOICE Project Rift I Part IV

PROJECT RIFT

REAL WORLDS · OTHER REALITIES



ACT 4

WHAT THE ICE PRESERVED

PART IV | RIFT UNIVERSE

PROJECT RIFT CONCEPT ARTWORK · NOT AN IN-GAME SCREENSHOT

Chapter 15 — A Different Debrief

The public summary described a natural crossing, an inhabited ecosystem and a series of ancient structures whose function remained only partly understood. It did not identify an enemy, announce a new territory or promise that Project Threshold possessed the means to control the frozen world. That modest language angered some officials and relieved others.

The Soldier attended a hearing where one delegate argued the mission had been wasted because it returned without a resource or decisive discovery. The Soldier replied with the names of the six aircraft crew members who had come home alive, and with the survey evidence that a forced crossing might have destabilised the glacier.

The Mage met with the mentor to compare the sensations recorded at the basin with those sensed near the concealed region. The patterns did not match cleanly. They refused to merge them into a convenient theory. Two unknowns did not become one answer simply because both were frightening.

The Titan prepared an archive accessible to the researchers authorised to study the new world, withholding only dangerous access details. A year earlier, the Titan might have tried to reconstruct the conductor's entire network from incomplete fragments. Now the report included a line in bold: **No known safe method for activating the system.**

The team gathered in the observation gallery after the hearing. The mentor brought a set of old star charts that offered no help. The Soldier laughed for the first time in days. The Mage smiled. The Titan shut off a screen showing the fourth light.

They had begun this journey with a mystery. They ended it with a living valley still capable of surviving its own winters. That was not an answer to every question. It was enough to matter.

Chapter 16 — The Signal Beneath the Storm

Two weeks later the northern recorder returned its first data. The fourth light had not disappeared. Its pulses now occurred only during severe changes in temperature near the damaged ring. The Titan was preparing a cautious explanation when another station, far from the frozen world, recorded the same timing.

This station watched a naturally occurring seam beside a region of red, wind-scoured rock. No known path connected it to the frozen frontier. Its atmosphere showed traces of chemicals that did not belong in the Earth-side samples, and its boundary readings were unstable in a different way.

"Another echo?" the Soldier asked.

"Possibly," the Titan answered. "But we haven't measured enough to say."

The Mage looked at a photograph taken through the seam. Beyond the reddish ground stood black columns under clouds split by lines of crimson light. The landscape seemed wounded. Yet far in the distance a pale band of moving vegetation suggested something there remained alive.

Project Threshold requested no new expedition. The last mission's report was still under review, and the trio had been away too long. The Titan agreed to passive observation. The new station would record and wait. No relay would be activated, and no crossing would be enlarged.

During the next night, the frozen world's warning light appeared on the ancient city map at the same moment as a faint red flicker nearer its centre. They were not connected by a visible line. The observation left more questions than answers.

"We shouldn't call the next place corrupted just because it's red," the Mage said.

"Agreed," the Soldier replied.

The Titan looked at the quiet fourth light. "Then we learn what it is before we decide what to do."

Chapter 17 — A World Left Standing

The ancient city's guardians returned to their ordinary routes. On passive images, the open door from Part III remained shut. Water flowed through empty courtyards, and transit platforms crossed their quiet streets. Nothing showed where the vanished inhabitants had gone. Nothing proved they would return.

The Titan added the frozen frontier to the evidence map, marking only confirmed crossings and observations. The hidden region remained dark. The new reddish seam appeared as an unverified disturbance, not a destination. Every place was separated by boundaries that had survived far longer than Project Threshold's brief history.

The Mage studied an image of the horned animals drinking beside warm water. The cold frontier had not been a blank wilderness waiting to be named. It had possessed its own routes, shelters and rhythms before anyone from Earth found it. Whatever had made the ancient conductor had also left at least one system that could still protect life.

The Soldier remembered standing beside the aircraft wreckage that had nearly been lost in the eleven-second overlap. A life could depend on understanding when not to advance. Across worlds, that lesson had remained unchanged.

At the end of the final review the director asked whether the fourth light represented a new threat. The Titan considered the winter records, the guardian in the ice and the damaged conductor. "It's evidence of strain," the Titan answered. "We don't know what will happen if it grows."

The team left without a new order. Their work would continue as observation rather than conquest. Under the silver sky of the empty city, a map turned slowly, guarding its darkness and measuring the spaces between worlds.

Chapter 18 — The Red Edge

The first red pulse arrived on an ordinary morning. It was too weak to be considered an alarm, and for several minutes the station classified it as noise. Then the temperature near the reddish seam rose without a corresponding change in weather.

A camera recorded black stone, crimson clouds and a stream flowing around a patch of pale plants. The plants bent away from the air above them. No figure appeared. No creature crossed. The atmosphere itself seemed to carry an unfamiliar stain, moving in careful waves along the edge of the boundary.

The Titan compared the red signal with the fourth light. The timings were related but not identical. The frozen system had reduced strain by distributing pressure away from its valley. Here the pressure appeared to be moving into the landscape, where it might affect whatever lived there.

The Soldier asked for a new safety perimeter around the Earth-side station. The Mage recommended watching for the first signs of reversible harm before making assumptions about the entire world. They had seen corrupted beings recover, and others who had suffered far too long. A warning was not a sentence.

They did not cross. They did not activate the Nexus Stone. The research team installed only passive sensors, checked the surrounding wildlife and told local authorities what could be safely disclosed.

Far away, beneath the frozen frontier, the old guardian held its post. In the empty city the fourth light remained dim, and another small mark began to flicker at the edge of the map.

The frontier had taught the trio to recognise a warning. Now they would have to learn whether a wounded place could be helped without making its wound larger.

Epilogue — BEFORE THE RED

In the quiet northern valley, the horned herd returned to the warm water. Their tracks crossed old snow, new snow and the shallow scars left by the avalanche. Beneath the glacier a guardian lowered its arm, then raised it again when the deep stone shifted. The broken ring stood where it had always stood, half-buried and unfinished.

On Earth, the fourth light appeared in the Titan's final report as a measured signal with an uncertain cause. It was not named, claimed or turned into a promise of conquest. The report ended with a simple conclusion: the observed boundary remained intact during departure.

In another place, under clouds the colour of ash, a crimson line moved across a black stone and reached a blade of living grass. The blade curled at its edge. Then, slowly, it lifted again.

No one saw that small recovery. The camera was pointed towards the sky, where a second red light had just appeared.

THE END OF PART IV

THE STORY CONTINUES

THE NEXT JOURNEY AWAITS

TO BE CONTINUED

Source & Canon Notes

• Primary story authority: FL Ecosystem Source of Truth — Game

Blueprint; supporting story: Project-Rifts-Story / STORY-BIBLE.md.

• These volumes extend the proposed illustrated literary story from Parts I, II and III, preserving the

Soldier, Mage and Titan and their shared past.

• The Nexus Stone is a dimensional stabiliser, never an all-purpose weapon or key. Project

Threshold was established in 1962; the 2022 Scottish Highlands disaster was deliberate; the main

campaign is set in 2040.

• Unresolved in these creative proposals: the vanished civilisation, barrier and guardian makers, the

concealed region, and the identity and nature of the greater ancient presence.

• All additions in Parts IV-VI are unapproved narrative proposals only. The current offline Alpha

plan and future online multiplayer blueprint are not changed.