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**Opening Extract from...**

# Ice Hunt

Written by James Rollins

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# ICE HUNT

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## PROLOGUE

**FEBRUARY 6, 11:58 A.M.**  
**538 KILOMETERS NORTH OF ARCTIC CIRCLE**  
**FORTY FATHOMS UNDER THE POLAR ICE CAP**

The USS *Polar Sentinel* was gliding through the dark ocean. The sub's twin bronze screws churned silently, propelling the Navy's newest research submarine under the roof of ice. The warning bells of the proximity alarms echoed down the length of the vessel.

'Sweet mother, what a monster,' the diving officer mumbled from his post, bent over a small video monitor.

Captain Gregory Perry didn't argue with Commander Bratt's assessment. He stood atop the control room's periscope stand. His eyes were fixed to the scope's optical piece as he studied the ocean beyond the sub's double hull of titanium and plate-carbon steel. Though it was midday, it was still winter in the Arctic. It had been months since anyone had seen the sun. Around them the waters remained dark. The plane of ice overhead stretched black as far as he could see, interrupted only by occasional blue-green patches of thinner ice, filtering the scant moonlight of the surface world. The average thickness of the polar ice cap was a mere ten feet, but that did not mean the roof of their world was uniform or smooth. All around, jagged pressure ridges jutted like stalactites, some delving down eighty feet.

But none of this compared to the inverted mountain of ice

that dropped into the depths of the Arctic Ocean ahead of them, a veritable Everest of ice. The sub slowly circled the peak.

‘This baby must extend down a mile,’ Commander Bratt continued.

‘Actually one-point-four miles,’ the chief of the watch reported from his wraparound station of instruments. A finger traced the video monitor of the top-sounding sonar. The high-frequency instrument was used to contour the ice.

Perry continued to observe through the periscope, trusting his own eyes versus the video monitors. He thumbed on the sub’s xenon spotlights, igniting the cliff face. Black walls glowed with hues of cobalt blue and aquamarine. The sub slowly circled its perimeter, close enough for the ice-mapping sonar to protest their proximity.

‘Can someone cut those damn bells?’ Perry muttered.

‘Aye, sir.’

Silence settled throughout the vessel. No one spoke. The only sound was the muffled hum of the engines and the soft hiss of the oxygen generator. Like all subs, the small nuclear-powered *Polar Sentinel* had been designed to run silent. The research vessel was half the size of its bigger brother’s. Jokingly referred to as Tadpole-class, the submarine had been miniaturized through some key advances in engineering, allowing for a smaller crew, which in turn allowed for less space needed for living quarters. Additionally, built as a pure research vessel, the submarine was emptied of all armaments to allow more room for scientific equipment and personnel. Still, despite the stripping of the sub, no one was really fooled. The *Polar Sentinel* was also the test platform for an upcoming generation of attack submarine: smaller, faster, deadlier.

Technically still on its shakedown cruise, the sub had been assigned to the Omega Drift Station, a semipermanent US research facility built atop the polar ice cap, a joint project between various government science agencies, including the National Science Foundation and the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration.

The crew had spent the last week surfacing the sub through open leads between ice floes or up through thinly iced-over lakes, called polynyas. Their task was to implant meteorological equipment atop the ice for the scientific base to monitor. But an hour ago, they had come upon this inverted Everest of ice.

‘That’s one hell of an iceberg,’ Bratt whistled.

A new voice intruded. ‘The correct term is an ice *island*.’

Perry glanced from the periscope.

A gray-haired man with a neatly trimmed beard stooped through the hatch to enter the control room from the forward research decks. It was Dr Oskar Willig, the Swedish oceanographer. He was accompanied by an ensign. The aging but wiry and hard-eyed Swede waved a dismissive hand toward the video monitor and nodded to Captain Perry. ‘It’s a much more spectacular view from Cyclops. In fact, Dr Reynolds asked to see if you’d join us there. We’ve discovered something intriguing.’

After a long moment, Perry nodded and folded up the periscope grips. He twisted the hydraulic control ring, and the stainless-steel pole with its optic module descended into the housing below. ‘Commander Bratt, you have the conn.’ He stepped down from the periscope stand to join Dr Willig.

Commander Bratt raised one bushy eyebrow as he passed by. ‘You’re going to Cyclops? With all this ice around? You’re a braver man than I am, Captain. True balls of brass.’

‘Not brass.’ Perry tapped a knuckle on a wall plate. ‘Titanium.’

This earned a chuckle from his second-in-command.

The Swedish oceanographer’s eyes were bright with excitement as Perry joined him. ‘In all my years, I’ve never seen such a spectacular example of an ice island.’

Perry ran a hand over the stubble of his red hair, then motioned the older doctor ahead of him.

The doctor nodded, turning, but he continued to speak rapidly, lecturing as if still in his classroom at the University

of Stockholm. ‘These islands are rare. They originate when giant icebergs calve off the mainland glaciers. Then ocean currents drive these floating mountains into the polar ice cap, where they’re frozen in place. Eventually, during the years of thawing and refreezing, they become incorporated into the cap itself.’ Dr Willig glanced back at the captain as he climbed through the forward hatch. ‘Somewhat like almonds in a chocolate bar, you might say.’

Perry followed, bending his own six-foot frame through the opening. ‘But what’s so exciting about such a discovery? Why did Dr Reynolds insist upon us mapping around this embedded almond?’

Dr Willig bobbed his head, leading the way down the main passage and through the research section of the sub. ‘Besides the rarity of these ice islands, because they have been calved from glaciers, they contain very old ice and many even hold boulders and sections of terra firma. They’re frozen glimpses of the distant past. Can you just imagine?’

Perry followed, urging the doctor onward.

‘We dare not lose this chance. We may never find such an example again. The polar ice cap covers an area twice the size of your United States. And with the cap’s surface worn featureless by winter winds and summer melts, such islands are impossible to discern. Not even NASA satellites could pinpoint such discoveries. Stumbling upon this mountain is a scientific gift from God.’

‘I don’t know about God, but it is intriguing,’ Perry conceded. He had been granted command of the *Sentinel* because of his background and interest in the Arctic region. His own father had served aboard the USS *Nautilus*, the first submarine to cross the Arctic Ocean and pass under the North Pole back in 1958. It was an honor to be adding to his father’s legacy up here, to captain the Navy’s newest research vessel.

Dr Willig pointed to a sealed hatch at the end of the corridor. ‘Come. You need to see this with your own eyes.’

Perry waved him on, glancing over his shoulder. The

*Polar Sentinel* was divided into two sections. Aft of the control station were the crew's living quarters and the engineering levels. Forward of the bridge lay the research labs. But ahead, in the nose of the boat, where normally the torpedo room and sonar boom would be on a Virginia-class submarine, was the strangest modification of a naval sub.

'After you,' Dr Willig offered as they reached the sealed door.

Perry opened the hatch and pushed his way into the room. The muted lighting of the *Sentinel* ill prepared him for the blinding brilliance of the next chamber. He shielded his eyes as he entered.

The upper shell of the former torpedo room had been replaced with a canopy of foot-thick Lexan polycarbonate. The clear plastic shell arched overhead and in front, allowing an uninterrupted view of the seas around the *Sentinel*, a window upon the watery world. Viewed from outside, the Lexan canopy looked like a single glass eye, hence its nickname: *Cyclops*.

Perry ignored the handful of scientists off to the sides, bent over equipment and monitors. The Navy men stood straighter and nodded to their captain. He returned their acknowledgment, but it was impossible to truly break his gaze from the view out of *Cyclops*.

Ahead, a voice spoke from the heart of the glare: 'Impressive, isn't it?'

Perry blinked away his blindness and spotted a slender figure in the room's center, limned in aquamarine light. 'Dr Reynolds?'

'I couldn't resist watching from here.' He heard the warm smile in the woman's voice. Dr Amanda Reynolds was the nominal head of Omega Drift Station. Her father was Admiral Kent Reynolds, commander of the Pacific submarine fleet. Raised a Navy brat, the doctor was as comfortable aboard a submarine as any sailor wearing the double dolphins of the fleet.

Perry crossed to her. He had first met Amanda two years



ago when he was granted his captain's bars. It had been at a social function given by her father. In that one evening, he had inadvertently insulted her potato salad, almost broken her toe during a short dance, and made the mistake of insisting that the Cubs would beat the San Francisco Giants in an upcoming game, losing ten dollars in the bargain. Overall it had been a great evening.

Perry cleared his throat and made sure Amanda was looking at him. 'So what do you think of Cyclops?' he asked, speaking crisply so she could read his lips. She had lost her hearing at the age of thirteen as a result of a car accident.

Amanda Reynolds glanced overhead, turning slightly forward. 'It's everything my father dreamed it would be.'

She stood under the arch, surrounded on all sides by the Arctic Ocean. She appeared to be floating in the sea itself. Presently she leaned on one hip, half turned. Her sweep of ebony hair was snugged into an efficient ponytail. She wore one of the Navy's blue underway uniforms, crisply pressed.

Perry joined her, stepping out under the open ocean. Being a career submariner, he understood his crew's discomfort with this room. Although fire was the main fear on any submarine, no one completely trusted the foot-thick plastic shell as an alternative for a double hull of titanium and carbon plate – especially with so much ice around.

He had to resist the urge to hunch away from the plastic canopy. The weight of the entire Arctic Ocean seemed to hang overhead.

'Why did you call me up here?' he asked, touching her arm to draw her eyes.

'For this . . . something amazing.' Amanda's voice tremored with excitement. She waved an arm forward. Beyond Cyclops, the sub's lamps illuminated the wall of ice slowly passing by the front of the vessel. Standing here, it felt as if they were motionless, and it was the ice island instead that was turning, revolving like a giant's toy top in front of them. This close, the entire cliff face glowed under the illumination

of the sub's xenon spotlights. The ice seemed to stretch infinitely up and down.

Without a doubt, it was both a humbling and starkly chilling sight, but Perry still did not understand why his presence had been requested.

'We've been testing the new DeepEye sonar system,' Amanda began to explain.

Perry nodded. He was familiar with her research project. The *Polar Sentinel* was the first submarine to be equipped with her experimental ice-surveying system, a penetrating sonar, a type of X ray for ice. The device had been based on Dr Reynolds's own design. Her background was in geosciences engineering, specializing in the polar regions.

She continued, 'We were hoping to test it on the island here and see if we could discern any boulders or terrestrial matter inside.'

'And did you find something?' He still could not take his eyes off the slowly turning cliff of ice.

Amanda stepped to the side, toward a pair of men hunched over equipment. 'Our first couple passes failed to reveal anything, but it's like peeling an onion. We had to be careful. The sonar waves of the Deep-Eye cause minute vibrations in the ice. They actually heat it up slightly. So we had to proceed one layer at a time as we scanned the island. Slow, meticulous work. Then we discovered—'

Perry still stood under the eye of Cyclops. He was the first to see the danger as the sub edged around a thick ridge of ice. Ahead, boulder-sized chunks of ice floated and bounced up the cliff face, an avalanche in reverse. But ahead, a large dark crack skittered across the face of the ice. A monstrous section of cliff face suddenly leaned toward the slow-moving ship, toppling out toward them. They were going to collide with it.

With a gasp, he dove for the intercom. 'Captain to the bridge!' he yelled.

'On it, Captain,' Commander Bratt answered, tense. 'Flooding negative.'

Instantly Perry felt the familiar tug on the sub as thousands of pounds of water drowned the emergency tanks.

The sub dropped, diving at a steep angle.

Perry stared out of Cyclops, unblinking, unsure if they would avoid a collision as the wall of ice dropped from the cliff like a blue ax. It was now a race between the buoyancy of the falling ice and the weight of their own emergency ballast. The submarine canted nose first. Handholds were grabbed. A notebook slid down the slanted floor.

Small cries echoed, but Perry ignored them. He watched, powerless. A collision here would be disastrous. There was nowhere to surface for miles around. Though the *Polar Sentinel* had been built to handle the rigors of the Arctic, there were limits.

The toppling wall of ice filled the world ahead of them. The sub continued to dive. Seams popped and groaned from the sudden increase in pressure as the sub plunged into the frigid depths.

Then open water appeared ahead, just under the slowly falling slab of ice. The submarine dove toward it.

The section of cliff face slid past overhead – no more than inches. Perry craned his neck, following it past the arch of Lexan above his head. He could read the pictographic lines of algae across the ice's surface. He held his breath, ready for the screech of metal, ready to hear the emergency klaxons blare. But the continual low hiss of the oxygen generators persisted.

After a long half minute, Perry let out a deep breath and turned to the intercom. 'Captain to the bridge,' he said. 'Good job up there, men.'

Commander Bratt answered, relief and pride in his voice, 'Shutting the flood. Venting negative.' The sub began to level. After a moment, Bratt added, 'Let's not do that again.'

'Aye to that,' Perry agreed. 'But let's do a slow circle back around and inspect the area – from a safe distance. I wager that breakaway may have been triggered by the DeepEye sonar.' He glanced to Amanda, remembering her concern about the new sonar's vibration signature and heating effect. 'We should get some pictures since we're testing the darned thing.'

Commander Bratt acknowledged and ordered his bridge crew, ‘Helmsman, left full rudder. Ahead slow. Take us around.’

The submarine eased away from the ice mountain in a slow circle. Perry crossed to the bank of video monitors. ‘Can we get a close-up of the fracture zone?’

One of the technicians nodded. ‘Yes, sir.’

Amanda spoke, her words slightly slurred, her enunciation slipping with her anxiety. ‘We should’ve anticipated such a fracturing.’

He patted her hand. ‘That’s why we call this a shakedown cruise. If you’re not shook up a time or two, then you’re not doing your job.’

Despite his poor attempt at humor, her face remained tight.

Then again, his own heart still pounded from the close call. He bent closer to the screen as the technician manipulated a toggle to bring the exterior cameras into focus on the fractured area. The shattered chunk of cliff shimmered into clarity.

‘What’s that?’ Amanda asked. She pointed to a dark blemish on the screen. It was in the center of the fracture zone. ‘Can you zoom in?’

The technician nodded and twisted a dial. The section of cliff swelled. The blemish grew in detail and depth. It was not ice or rock, but something unusual. As the sub turned, the *Polar Sentinel*’s spotlights illuminated it. It was black, angular. *Man-made*.

As they swung closer, Perry knew what he was seeing: the stern end of another sub, frozen like a stick in a Popsicle. He crossed over to the canopy of Lexan glass and stared out. He could just make out the sub poking from the ice. It was old, ancient.

The *Polar Sentinel* glided past at a safe distance.

‘Is that what I think it is?’ Dr Willig asked, his voice weak.

‘A sub,’ Perry answered with a nod. He could recognize any submarine from just a casual glance. ‘I’d say a World War Two-era sub. Russian I series.’

Amanda, her face less pale now, spoke from where she now stood with two researchers. ‘This supports our earlier discovery. The reason I called you down here.’

Perry turned to her. ‘What are you talking about?’

She pointed to a different monitor. ‘We mapped and taped this earlier from the DeepEye.’ The screen displayed a three-dimensional image of the ice island. The resolution was amazing, but Perry didn’t see anything significant.

‘Show him,’ Amanda continued, placing a hand on one of the technician’s shoulders.

He tapped a few keys, and the image of the ice island dissolved from solid to ghostly. Within the interior of the island, passages and distinct tiers sectioned the iceberg, rising up layer by layer toward the top.

‘What is it?’ Perry asked.

The technician answered, ‘We think it’s an abandoned ice base built inside the berg.’ He tapped a few keys and the image swelled to concentrate on one tier. There appeared to be rooms and corridors. It was definitely not a natural formation.

‘A *Russian* ice base if you’re right about that sub,’ Amanda added, lifting an eyebrow toward Perry. ‘The vessel is docked at the lowest level.’

He pointed to several darker objects scattered here and there on the display. ‘Are those what I think they are?’

The technician overlaid a cursor atop one of them and tapped a key zooming in on it. The shape of the form was unquestionable.

‘Bodies, Captain,’ he answered. ‘Dead bodies.’

A flicker of movement drew Perry’s attention to the edge of the screen – then it vanished. He frowned and glanced to the others. ‘Did anyone else see that?’

Amanda’s eyes widened. ‘Rewind the tape.’

The technician shuttled the recording backward and zoomed slightly outward. He forwarded to the blurred movement on the screen. He slowed it down. On the lowest tier of the station something stirred, then disappeared into the deeper depths of the ice mountain, retreating beyond the

reach of the sonar. Though visible only for a moment, there was no doubt.

Amanda whispered, 'Something's alive in there . . .'