

Hell or High Water

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A thousand years after global warming set the earth on a new natural cycle, in the Time of Neptune, a small community on the edge of the world faces the incoming Ice Age.



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They still talk about the stormsâ ;

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The bleak landscape stretching behind had nothing on the thunderclouds looming ahead, and in another few minutesâ darknesses would collide. Ari recalled a vague saying about unstoppable forces and unmovable objects. In his experience there was no such thing: everything moved eventually, and everything could be shaken, torn off and ripped to shreds. As for unstoppable forces, well, they stopped too, eventually, and when they did, they left nothing unmoved. He shook his head wondering what unobservant idiot, would come up with something so silly. Adí, as if to prove a silent point, had not moved.

In a few minutes it would not matter, in a few minutes the storm would start, and in a few months, winter.

The Moles were doing a good job, or so they said. The tunnels were nearing completion; and the caves would offer a luxury undreamed of on the surface, or so they said. Few dreamed anymore, neural synapses would fire at night same as usual, but you cannot dream if you do not have a past, you cannot dream if you cannot bring the future to life, when tomorrow is another whirlwind, and the future an endless field of iceâ such are not dreams, but fantasies in the void, and in the void there is terror.

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Only the Fish truly dreamedâ Neptune have mercy on their souls.

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â *We have been tried by Water and tried by Ice.*

â *We have been carved by its shards, and molded by its flows*

â *As Neptuneâ s tribulations pass, the power of Hades grows.â*

Knowing that the Time of Neptune, that The Age of Aquarius would come to pass, revealing Hades in all of his glory, ushering in The Return to the Cave, to the comfort before humanity wandered into the light and was blinded to reason by the sun, was little comfort for the disdainful looks of the Moles from across the aisle.Â Their time was close, and they knew it. One day, soon now, Hell will freeze over, and it will be their turn to rule, in Hadesâ Glory.Â Still, the scriptures could not mute the snickering, and even the vision of Hell, stretching endlessly outside the church window, could not quiet their heckling.

The Priest was formal; and the Blank Book of Scriptures, its pages untainted and its message clear and unequivocal. Millions of years past, a man shaped demon named Plato, son of the Scion of Hell, the wretched Socrates, had led to fore an Age of Reason, dragging Man from the comfort of the Cave, and into the blinding lights of Hell.

Upon the surface, man had first experienced the Time of Mars, when wars wrecked the world under the fear of the great cloud. Billions had perished as Hell shaped itself at Manâ s pleasure, over tens of thousands of

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years. Then came the Time of Hermes, and for a time Man flourished, striking a balance between its aspirations and Hell. In the Time of Narcissus, Man had forgotten his humble beginnings and the comfort of the Cave, and sought his own reflection in the light, his mirror image in Hell. The Time of Neptune had cleansed the world, and Hades would lead us back to the Cave.

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Ari shook himself awake, and for a few seconds, the world merged with the dream before washing it away. Those early moments, growing longer by the day, threatened to rip his sanity apart, and the dreams grew more vivid, with each passing night the fragile balance grew more delicate, one day he knew, like all the other Fish before him, reality would merge with the Dream, and the Dream would win.

â Ari, Ariâ lâ

Jonah had grown accustomed to the dull look in his sonâ s eyes, and the light that grew slowly, alerting him to his sonâ s return, just as he had grown accustomed to that same look in his fatherâ s eyes, when he was too young to understand himself, long before Ari grew accustomed to, recognized, and finally understood, that same look in his own. All the Fish Dream Fish Dreams.

â Ariâ lâ

Stepping into life from the Dream was as much a loss as a victory; there was comfort in the Dream, perhaps the comfort of the Cave. Perhaps. Fish were chosen after all, chosen to rule the Age of Aquarius, and had for five hundred years, who else would dream of the Cave and know it in their souls?

Ariâ s sharp intake of air, and sudden bolt upright brought light back to his eyes. He looked around, weighing up his surroundings, making sense of reality as he knew it before going to sleep, before he dreamed.
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â Father.â

His voice was firm, his grip solid. He shouldnâ t dream so young, not with such intensity, but he was one of a generation who sought out glory, sought ever deeper depths, ever darker crevasses, ever more dangerous valleys and canyons and towers. A generation for whom the darkness beneath, the endless echo of whale song, was the melody of the Cave, and the enticing murmur of Hades. Â

â Youâ re awake. Good. Your mother left you some food on the table. We must make the coast before the storm, and we will have to stay longer beneath.â

Ari sensed the tension in Jonahâ s voice.

â Itâ s fine fatherâ , he reassured him, â once weâ re under we can wait out the storm, weâ ll be needed once it has passed.â

Jonah did not respond. Instead he stared out the window to the cliffs and the thunderclouds creeping over the ocean. He turned and stepped through the doorway.

â The storm is a harbinger son, and winter is but weeks awayâ lâ

â I know father.â He looked up, but Jonah had left the room.

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The Moles had started work early. A storm could lie weeks of work to waste in a matter of minutes and last for days.Â There was a time when the Fish would have exerted unimaginable violence had the Moles failed in their task, and suffered setbacks in the Divine Undertaking.Â Those times were no more, and those times would change forever, unless the Dream took over the last remaining Fish before the Moles could find their vengeance.

Ari looked down to the other Fish waiting for his father by the cliff, only a few had shaken themselves awake but he saw Adi looking over the edge to the ocean, turning her back to it, spreading her arms wide and leaning back, bending backwards over the edge as if about to dive.Â

A stone hit him in the shoulder, a young Mole stood there, grinning. Times had changed. As the Divine Undertaking progressed, and the Dream took ever-larger numbers of Fish over the edge, the balance of power had shifted, and respect for the Fish was lost, now they served only a purpose, and that purpose would not last.

His father reached out and patted him on the shoulder. *Let it be*, his expression told him, *let it be!*

He reached the cliff quietly, and sidled over to Adi. Caught in the rising winds behind her, and the crash of the waves hundreds of feet below, she did not hear him place a hand behind her back before pushing her forward.

â Aaaaaa! Riâ !.â

Her eyes bulged into reality, he realized then that the Dream was taking over Adi much faster than it did him, and that one day, he would not be there on time to tease her, no one would stop her fall.

â Weâ re up for a few days it sounds like.â She said matter-of-factly. Her left eye still bore a small scar below it, an acid burn from a poisoned tentacle. It had seemed trivial at the time; she had barely survived the poisoning.

Ari nodded. Adi laughed. She loved the depths, their darks and unexpected poisonous glows, and the whisper of giant beings, Neptuneâ s titanic children where once Jonah had slept and brought forth the truth of the Cave and the Divine Undertaking.

It took fifteen minutes for the rest of the Fish to gather over the cliff. Once they were equipped with their suits, propulsion engines, food and energy packs, and oxygen-recyclers shaped as a fin on their backs, they resembled the creature they were named after, although their name reflected their purpose rather than their style. Fish dove and swam, Moles dug and burrowed.

There was a time when there would have been a crowd gathered to see them off, there was a time when there was hope, but as the Time of Neptune grew longer, the storms stronger, the winters harsh and unpredictable, the ice encroaching over more land each year, and the Dream taking away sanity, authority, respect and lives, those numbers had dwindled, as had the number of Fish, just as the fish in the ocean had, hundreds of years before.

Jonah stood atop a stone, addressing his audience:

â Morning! Youâ ve all shaken yourselves out; get ready to stay that way! You ainâ t blind! You can see it coming just as I do! In all things the mission comes first! I have split you into two teams; David will sort you out, and tell you where to go! We have two objectives: fuel for the water filters, and power sources for the Divine Undertaking! The Moles have given me very specific directions as to the kind of power sources they

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require, so be careful! You know the works! Keep your Com units on, communicate findings to each other as necessary!

Adi raised a hand.

Jonah! This is not a storm, I mean it is, of course it is, but this feels like winter.

Don't be silly Adi, winter is not for a few months, until then, we have to gather as much fuel as we can. The storm will last more than a few days, bet your life on it, and we may have to travel quite far, save up on your food and energy packs. He paused to stare back at the clouds. Just to be safe, keep your eyes open for unusually cold currents and signs of early icing on the way back north. We won't be much use to anybody if we're trapped under David?

David stepped up to the stone, dividing the Fish into two groups. Ari sent to gather fuel, Adi, autonomous power sources. The Fish lined up along the cliff, and one after the other, in intervals of twenty seconds, leaped off the cliff, as if daring the incoming juggernaut, and kissed the waves, to the dark and glowing depths below.

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The waters retreated after less than a hundred years, and people thought they could reclaim the land for themselves. The waters were only the early sign of a cataclysm that would unfold over five centuries, relentlessly hacking away at humanity and civilization.

After the waters withdrew, the tides grew, stronger, longer, fiercer, salinizing land way beyond the initial rise, polluting fresh water sources and river ways far inland, destroying crops, rendering swaths of arable land the size of small countries unproductive for food or pasture.

The first riots erupted in urban areas all over the globe. Towns and cities were suddenly disconnected from the gossamer thin networks that sustained the modern way of life, power shortages affected electricity, electricity affected food storage and water, and famine drove people mad.

In the countryside, arable landowners organized themselves in militias, nations within nations, states within states, with power of life and death over starved populations. This lasted only so long as weapons were kept out of the hands of the hungry masses, and meanwhile, the tides kept growing. The endless cycle of melting ice, rising water and torrential rains, gave birth to super storms and super cyclones such as the early 21st century had witnessed only the burgeoning. Â

Few communities managed to survive in isolation, holding on to bits of technology, literature and art as they could save them, retreating ever further on themselves, ever further higher and inland, as the storms grew stronger, as the winters grew longer, and days and weeks went by without seeing the sun. And with the storms the waters rose again, the tides marking news boundaries to oceans and seas, where cities and sewers, nuclear power plants, factories and waste yards were built, where chemical weapons were developed and tried, where the slow poison of humanity's reason wrecked eternal damage, regurgitating bile into the waters where monsters grew, life changed, and the water, and all that it touched, decayed.

In this chaos, a new order was constructed. Earning from the mistakes of the past a new understanding of its mortality, and near frantically obsessed with survival, casts were established among the survivors. The Priests spoke of the Time of Hades to come, the Time of Neptune now upon us and the Divine Undertaking which every living member of society was to contribute to, and of this spiritual re-awakening two casts were given significant importance: the Fish, and the Moles.

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Fresh water, the ability to filter water, was the difference between life and death for the community. Ensuring the community's survival, in the near ascetic isolation, in the absence of evidence of other communities of Man, became ensuring the survival of Man, and its kind, and thus the Divine Undertaking came about, and Man's return to the warm embrace of the Cave from whilst it came.

The Fish dared the depths of the seas, for weeks and months at a time, through towns and cities long submerged, exposing themselves to unknown amounts of radiation and chemical pollutants over generations, salvaging materials for construction and most importantly securing power sources for the water filters and storage units, and increasingly for machinery towards the Divine Undertaking.

The Moles at first composed of the criminals and rejects from the community, dug, and burrowed, and dug and burrowed, first under the whip and tyranny of the Fish, but as the winters grew in malevolence, and the ice threatened salvation, and Fish's successful missions grew poorer and longer in between, the Moles found new prominence.

The Divine Undertaking was an attempt to return to existence as it was intended for Man before Plato and Reason ruined the world. A network of connecting caves and tunnels was to become the final resting place of a repenting humanity, the sum of the knowledge it had preserved, once the Ice sealed Neptune's fate, Hell froze over, and Hades rose.

And the Fish were going insane :

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Adi had been wrong, it was not winter yet, not quite, and the storm had lasted only fourteen days.Â Every time they dove the cities and towers changed, where the ice had retreated, entire areas were laid to waste, and each year, more of the seas stayed trapped under ice.

You could not blame Adi for her care, sudden onsets of winter had caught and trapped Fish time and time again, but you could usually read the signs:Â the permafrost spread its fingers further south, leaving the oceans frozen out of season, and the currents did not lie, blasts of cold water killed as often as they warned, but allowed the Fish to know where to swim and complete their missions safely.

Winter was a near cosmic experience for the Fish, the freezing waters took on a glassy, reflective look moving forward along the city grids, swallowing block, after block, turning the waters to solid ice from the ocean floor to the surface, each encroachment sending silent explosions along the currents, ice walls several thousands of feet in height and thousands of miles thick, until the summer came and freed them again, but always shorter summers, and always less water.

Adi was dead. Â Ari saw her in the Dream and knew that she had succumbed to her mission. She was in the Dream with him, floating through the depths with the whales and the sharks, spinning through swarms of jellyfish unbitten, he knew she had succumbed to the Dream and merged with it, leaving reality behind for the endless echo of singing whales :

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â *Excerpt from the Council of the Divine Undertaking*

Point of Order: Of the Fish.

Mole Councilman Eli Khadivi:

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Members of the Council, as we know, the Divine Undertaking is nearing completion, although they suffered significant casualties, the Fish, in their own time, managed to provide enough energy for the power units to support our needs for several hundreds of years.

Before congratulating ourselves we must consider the implications of the undertaking. Neptune saw fit to grant us the strength to survive his trial, and Hades has embraced our endeavors and blessed them with success.

But what are we to do of the Fish? We must consider the fate of these poor degenerates, if we are to prosper in the warm embrace of the Cave. Would these poor creatures hopelessly addicted to the freedom of the waters find peace in the bowels of the earth? Those dreams of which they speak, which we naively believed to be Neptune manifested, those dreams, which inevitably, inexorably lead every Fish over the cliff, are nothing more than madness, insanity brought about by their arrogance and vanity. Did we ever really believe that they heard the whales? The Fish thought themselves Neptune's chosen and are paying the price of blasphemy. Should we have to suffer for them? We who believed them, pinned our hopes on them? Sweated blood for the Divine Undertaking?

We know not what they may unleash; we cannot afford to offer salvation to all of our own as we are. We must chose councilmen, not out of centuries of hate and resentment, nor out of pity for their poisoned and diseased minds, but by the light shining through the darkness, by the shadow on the wall ;

When Hell freezes over, when Neptune closes his scaly fist upon land and sea, the fate of the Fish shall be sealed.

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The Fish's quarters lay at the bottom of each settlement along the coast, looking up towards the higher echelons, where the Moles and the priesthood resided, through which the staircases, spiraling underground, were the only way in, or out of the Divine Undertaking.

Bells rung from the Divine Hall, striking the hour. Ari thanked his mother for the bread, and looked up towards the well-lit windows of the Mole district. His mind was elsewhere. The Dream was stronger since the last mission; laughter mingled with submarine harmonics, and somewhere, Adi giggled at imaginary mermaids. He shook his head but for a moment, reality disappeared, and dolphins glowed a sickly green around him ;

He came to, shaken violently by his father. As his mother burst suddenly into focus, he saw her tears.

À Even awake, now!wide awake, now!À Her hands clung to her apron and rolled them into fists, she was biting her lip, shaking. How long had he been gone?

Jonah rested a hand on her shoulder, and wiped a droplet of blood pearling on her lower lip.

À Iâ ve turned out alright.À He said.

À No, no you havenâ t, none of you. You donâ t hear yourselves at night, or maybe you do, maybe youâ re all together somewhere, but I hear you, loud and clear. The sounds you makeâ theyâ re not human Jonah! Theyâ re notâ lâ

À Weâ ve been over this before, theyâ re just dreams Zohar, just dreams.À

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She looked at Ari, spat some blood into her apron, and walked to the window, facing out to the cliff.

“One night, the two of you, the two of you were—synchronized, you all were, every single one of you in every house! The Moles came down with the Priests. No one could wake you, none of you. I left the house, I wandered to the edge of the waters, there were things down there Jonah, not the whales, you’ve shown me those, they spit water, other things, strange things, glowing things circling each other endlessly. I stayed and watched them spin for hours; made myself sick! I only turned back when they left. When I got home the noises had stopped, you were breathing normally again, both of you: ALL OF YOU—”

“The scriptures are full of stranger things my soul, they’re just dreams—”

He threw his son a look, Ari smiled at his mother, as he did, the dolphins flickered back into focus. They floated in suspended animation, staring at him silently, and exploded into particles of ice, ripping his mother apart.

“

When Ari entered the conference room, the tables were laced with maps of Hell in the Time of Narcissus, marking cities in lands that no longer existed.

The room was full of high-ranking Moles, representatives of the Priesthood and leaders of Fish communities along the coast. The air was heavy with whispers and mistrust, smoke made eyes squint, and people look askance. His father was leaning over a map, arguing with a Mole councilman and an on-looker, a silent Priest.

“With all due respect Councilman, we could not have accomplished this mission six months ago. The chances of success were slim then, they are null now.”

“Is there something the Fish can’t do Jonah?” the councilman laughed, slamming a companionable hand on Jonah’s back.

“I appreciate the jest Councilman, and the trust, I do, but most of these cities are caught in the glaciers, this entire region, in fact, is solid ice from sea to sky, and has been so for years. Even if we could make it that far, hoping some river ways are still navigable and some landmasses are still uncovered, we would need six months to complete this mission, with relays, a network of them, located here, here and possibly here. We don’t have the human capacity to support an operation of this size, even if we had, time is against us, winter will be upon us before we can return, and we’d be too busy to keep track of encroachments in the permafrost.”

“How about a hit and run? I believe was the old-fashioned term. How about a hit and swim to the glaciers, we have several seismic charges which the Divine Undertaking will not require, free as much land and town as you can, salvage what you can, and swim back?”

“Impossible sir, the glaciers are too high and too thick, we could wreck significant damage, here.” He scanned the map for a few seconds. “And here maybe, but the repercussions are unpredictable, the pressure of thousands of cubic tons of ice could cause giant waves, could bring down water temperature just enough to allow the glacier to spread faster rather than crumble, it would collapse and solidify farther in a matter of minutes; we’d be trapped under and in, there would be no coming back. A hundred years ago, even fifty, maybe. Today—”

“It is settled then, avoid the deep north, and focus your efforts on these two regions, you—”

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“I would need six times the men we have sir.”

Councilman Khadivi’s grin told Ari that his father had fallen right into it.

“And you will have them! The Council would never ask the Fish to risk their lives on a suicide mission, nor would we make this unusual request if the Divine Undertaking didn’t demand it, and not without a significant involvement by the council.”

“Sir? It’s *all* deep north, it’s not a question of where so much as when.” Jonah didn’t like losing, his face frozen, as he grappled for arguments to throw off the wrench he had wedged for himself.

“We are grateful for your help, but your men aren’t trained. There is a reason why Fish pass the tradition down, one generation after another. We would need weeks to train your men, and that’s barely enough for them to use their equipment, and handle the storage units sir. With all due respect sir, we are talking about months under water!” His fist slammed down on the map, and momentarily quieted the buzz of distrust and suspicion bouncing from wall to wall and committee to committee. “Your men, well intended though they may be, don’t have a mind for the depths, they would slow us down, they’re a hindrance sir, you should know that.”

“Didn’t you say that you would need relay points along a network Jonah? That you would be too busy to monitor changes in currents, sudden encroachments of permafrost, marine life, and threats of such nature?”

Jonah stood nonplussed.

“Well yes sir, except the last bit sir, we can handle those, but—”

“It is agreed then, that with enough manpower the mission can be accomplished before the winter yes? Our men will serve at your command as relays, to monitor submarine activity, and maintain open communication with the Council. If for any reason, we were to believe your mission could end in failure or death, we would pull back, and wait out the winter. If you have any reason to believe they cannot complete such simple tasks after three weeks of your expert training, we’d be the first to call the operation off. After all what are few more years to Hades?”

Jonah was staring out the window, his eyes black and unfocused. Councilman Khadisi, looking firmly away from him, smiled and said:

“Agreed Jonah?”

Jonah didn’t respond. Everyone in the room had stopped talking, and stared desperately at him, the Fish leaders, intimately aware of what was happening, not daring to intervene. All the Fish Dream Fish Dreams, everyone knew by now, Fish, Mole, Priest and Beast[1], Ant[2] and Bee[3]. Everyone understood, but none would speak of it. For Jonah, this meant that he could not ask the councilman to repeat himself, that whatever had been said, whatever the councilman’s intentions, whichever conditions had been laid out, Jonah had no other choice but to acquiesce.

“Agreed? Jonah?”

His eyes shifted back to reality, he looked around, catching the other Fish’s eyes and knew he had lost.

“Yes sir, agreed sir, of course sir.” Embarrassment and loss tinted his voice. “In the name of the Divine Undertaking all Men must labor and all Men must sacrifice.”

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Power had shifted from the Fish to the Moles as swiftly as gradually. Cast realities meant that groups were tied to the land they labored, the machinery they operated, the seas they swam and the caves they dug.

When the Moles first revolted, a hundred years in the past, they did so by barring access to the Divine Undertaking, and short of blasphemy, threatened the destruction of the caves, and took the Priesthood hostage in an attempt to sway the other casts against their Fish masters.

The Blank Book of Scriptures did not define a hierarchy between casts based on Divine purpose; rather the Priestsâ moral authority determined which casts held most sway in the Council, and which held none not at all.

In the Age of Aquarius, where each day was lost to sea, the Fish had risen to prominence out of necessity. Manâ s survival depending on their skill and devotion to the sea. But as the Divine Undertaking advanced, and the Return to the Cave grew closer, people found evidence of divinity in the Moles over the Fish.

The Time of Hades was coming about, certainly through the Fishâ endeavors and bravery, but in reality, the Caves were dug, equipped, planned and prepared by Moles.

Fish Dreams, prophetic a first, the Voice of Neptuneâ s Chosen, soon revealed the truth behind them, madness. Insanity that threatened Manâ s survival, insanity that brought the numbers of Fish ranks down, but more importantly, destroyed motivation in worthy members of other casts, to join the Fish. Without fresh blood, the Dream grew stronger with each generation, taking Fish over the edge ever earlier, babies born in the Dream, thrown over the edge, Fish children losing touch with reality found beaten or dead after missing for days. For the first time, people, not only Moles, feared the Fish.

The Moleâ s revolts swept along the wave of mistrust and fear, coercing the Priests into positioning themselves against the Fish, and over time excluding them from the Council. Neptuneâ s time was over and Hadesâ was at hand. The Fish had served their time and their madness condemned them to fade, first from power and eventually, from existence.

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Fish Dream on land, and Fish Dream in water. Ariâ s Dreams grew deeper as the weeks passed, installing markers, trackers and cables along the way west before heading north.

The waters far beneath swallowed even the darkness, light didnâ t fade so much as squeeze to death, leading to the real bottom, the old ocean floors, rather than submerged lands, those depths were the true dark. Somewhere down there was where all Fish went, the currents rising from it lashing upwards to the surface, suddenly drawn back down like giant tentacles, carrying echoes that spoke of minds, deep below.

In the depths, day or night, reality or Dream, who knew? And in his sleep, tied to rocks and cliff walls, beaten by the currents, he could feel other Dreamers, circling him, but unlike the surface, where the other Dreamers were shadows, underwater he knew their evil, their care, their disdain, their disinterest, their love, their amusement, but above all, even in the deepest Dream, when things he had never seen and would not bear to, loomed over and around him in his sleep, he knew that he was safe in the Dream.

The recruits were suffering heavy losses. Nights could go by without an incident and one day three never woke up, two were never found and one couldnâ t be identified for missing a head, suit and skin.

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Some recruits spoke of darker shadows, moving faster than the currents, of muffled noises around them on nights when their companions disappeared, of deafening sounds and stinks of decomposing flesh. The Fish feigned incomprehension; they were too far at large to cause further panic by voicing speculations, and it helped that Fish died and went missing as well.

The recruits were trained and knew the perils, but it was clear that they were not drifting at large out of negligence, that they were firmly and properly tied at night, that they weren't clawing their own faces off in their sleep. What the Fish did not dare voice, was the presence in the Dream, the sense of looming beings in the night; the sense of safety they all shared, inevitably translated into one, or several, dead recruits.

This had never happened in Fish memory, when teammates went missing, it was either one of five things, poisoning, bleeding, drowning, freezing, or Dreaming. Never was a Fish found eviscerated and fed on in the morning. Sea creatures could be as vicious as they were kind, attack with blinding speed in the blind waters, jellyfish brainless and indiscriminate in their thousands, and things with mouths—but in the Dream there was always safety, safety until morning.

Once they installed the relay stations, the recruits would be safer, it would be possible for them to keep guard and alternate working shifts. They would be safer.

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â West...Westâ lâ

Rebecca's communications were erratic, confusing and almost rhythmic. For days, between flashes of lucidity, she kept muttering the same word over the Com lines. *West, west, westâ* !You could not shut her out without cutting yourself off from the network, so he endured on. They would lose her any day, and the sooner the better for them as well as her.

â Becky, weâ re heading north-northwest.â Someone would chime in every now and then. That was the difficult part; keeping Rebecca focused enough so she would not try to head back southeast, in the opposite direction she urged us towards.

They were swimming over a town called Budapest, what remained of it. It wasn't their destination, there was nothing left to offer in the city or in the nuclear power plants further north. Bridge foundations remained intact, but everywhere metal frames spiked out of shattered buildings, massive structures open to the waters, rows upon rows of seats surrounding stages, empty plazas covered in rock and weed. From above, you could clearly tell where the river used to flow under bridges and around the central island. All of the city's wealth in wiring, batteries, glass, plastic, anything that could be salvaged, used, fixed or recycled had been plundered by generation after generation of Fish.

They would head northwest from here towards France and with luck, the ice would have retreated far enough that land would be free up to London and most of the old industrial zones were open to scavenging. Or so Jonah hoped. Without luck England would still be under, northern France would be iced over already, and if the ice had reached the western Alps then they would have to double back and pray; it would be the last winter before returning to the Cave.

A few more days and it would be the longest Ari had ever spent underwater, and never this long over Europe. He had been as far as Istanbul, and much further southeast for oil, where most Fish missions went, and could have reached here sooner, but this was a different route, further southwest towards Greece to install a relay station before B-Team headed further west towards Spain and A-Team caught currents heading north. *We should have sent Rebecca along with them.*

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That was a terrible thought; Fish took each other's passing very seriously. Before the Dream took you, some of the things you said had meaning, unfortunately, most of what you said did not. Recycling was not an option for Fish, unless one of them died of disease or some accident or another. Even then the body would be thrown unceremoniously over the cliff. All that needed saying was said in the Dream, and the brief moments before one's passing were treated with near reverence, pity they were so much nonsense. Sometimes they were prophetic, but prophecy is as much a matter of minutes as of centuries, it will happen sooner or later, you would lose your mind before the Dream took you, trying to decipher every random thought.

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â B-Team do you copy? B-Team, do you copy? We have reached Munich and found evidence of deep icing at the bottom. What is the situation in Spain? I repeat, what is the situation in Spain?â

With the winter, it was not uncommon for communications to go out for days between teams. Contact between teams and relay stations, and between relay stations and the Council, were given on the networks. Any change in the ice cap could muddle communications over long distances between teams.

â Relay Station 2 do you copy?â

â We copy A-Team.â

â Relay Station 2, inform the council, ice has encroached to Munich, I repeat, ice has encroached to Munich. By our estimates the glaciers must be no further than 3-400 miles north-northwest, north-northeast might be safer, but not very long. Water has solidified overhead. Relay Station 2 Do you copy?â

â We copy A Team. We will inform the Council and communicate their instructions. A Team, do you copy?â

â We copy Relay Station 2. On stand-by for instructions.â

Ari spun. Behind him Rebecca's voice exploded through the Com lines, and out of her body, propelling him backwards into a tower. For a second an orca appeared where she floated, swallowed by a lantern-eyed beast the size of the buildings beneath him.

â Ari? What fool games are you playing? If there was anything here we wouldn't be picking ice out of our noses. Look above you. Are you stupid?â

Jonah's voice was thick with nerves. Ari shook himself out of the rubble and floated up to his father.

â Look up? Look behind you! I told you about Becky days ago, and you're gonna take this out on me?!â

Panic registered beneath his father's helmet. He activated a sensor meant for locking arms to half-ton cubes for transport, and clamped Ari's shoulders.

The sudden pressure nearly broke them and sent a flash of searing pain through his brain; his father froze in front of his eyes and started freezing him with him, through his palms and into Ari's shoulders.

â Rebecca's been gone four days now!â

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The ice retreated from his shoulders back into his father's palms, unfreezing him along. The waters turned a deeper blue with sunlight shining through the ice cap. He started heaving into his breathing unit, his father's hands unclenched, his hand twisted and caught Ari across the face with a blow, while his other hand kept him from spinning.

"She's been gone four days Ari, when was the last time you saw her?"

"Just a moment ago...she was right behind me before she left"

He turned around, looking upwards and downwards; all five hundred fish in A Team were focused on them. Some swam in concentric and overlapping circles around the group, but all Com units were silent and intent on the conversation. None appeared to have seen Rebecca, or an orca, or a giant stomach with teeth, or heard a fish burst into whale song, or heard of a fish bursting into whale song in their entire lives.

"When is the last time you remember her with the team?" Jonah's words were slow, the deafening silence on the Com waves made the ocean feel like a Priest, his head tilted, looking for confirmation of what he already knew.

"About four days ago, she kept babbling on, same as she had for days, she started drifting east. I caught up with her, and turned her back our way. Been keeping an eye on her ever since."

"Son, Rebecca was gone in the morning, she was never with us on the fourth day and she's been behind you since?"

He didn't answer. The A Team kept floating around them effortlessly. His father shook his head.

"It's fine. Night will be on us in a few hours." He raised the volume on his speaker. "We'll bunk in the buildings and wait for word of the Council. The center of the city has the most remaining structures; we'll bunk in groups of ten within a one-mile radius. We'll reconvene in nine hours if we haven't received word. Understood? Good. Ari, you bunk with me."

^

The ice was thicker nine hours later, nine hours later, the glaciers had moved southeast enough that the water gleamed with thin with particles of ice pushing south.

"Relay Station 2 do you copy? This is A Team do you copy?"

"We copy A-Team. We have just received word from Relay Station 1. You are to stand-by A-Team, I repeat stand-by. An emergency session of the Council was called to discuss matters. We have received word from B-Team that significant progress was made in Spain. Stand-by for further instructions. I repeat, stand-by for further instructions. A-Team do you copy?"

"We copy Relay Station 2. It's getting rough out here. Ten to twelve hours tops. We will expect word from you. In exactly twelve hours I will give orders to consolidate at your location until further communications. Relay Station 2 do you copy?"

"We copy A-Team. We'll be passing on instructions soon. Hang in tight."

^

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Exactly eleven hours later, just as Jonah was giving orders to double back, Relay Station 2 broke silence.

â A-Team do you copy? A-Team this is Relay Station 2. A-Team do you copy?â

â We copy Relay Station 2. About to lift camp. I repeat, about to lift camp. Relay Station 2 do you copy?â

Temperatures had plummeted since the last contact with the relay station. Where thin particles of ice lit up the dark only a few hours ago, the water was now thick with them, almost slush.â Another twelve hours, less, and the slush would thicken, coagulate, and harden, and harden and harden until the moving glacier created explosions on the surface, like a giantâ s thump blowing dust in every direction, blasting ice further south into the waters ahead, and grow.

â We copy A-Team. B-Team is heading back west from Spain.â You are to reconvene over Sicily and help with transport. I repeat reconvene with B-Team over Sicily and help with transport. A-Team, do you copy?

â We copy Really Station 2. Requesting explanation for the delay in communications. Do you copy? Requesting explanation for the delay.â

â We copy A-Team, a flash storm, heading north-northwest hit the colony over night, communications were disrupted for ten hours. A-Team, do you copy?

â We copy Relay Station 2. Relay Station 2 the glaciers are moving faster than anticipated. Conditions over Munich deteriorating exponentially, I repeat. Conditions over Munich deteriorating exponentially. â At going rates, we will never be more than 24 hours ahead of the ice. I repeat, we will never be more than 24 hours ahead of the ice. We may have to evacuate Relay Stations after contact with B-Team. Relay Station 2 do you copy?â

â We copy A Team, and thank you for fair warning. On stand by until you make contact over Sicily. Repeat, on stand-by until contact in Sicily. Over and out.â

Priority communications shut down and no one spoke until Amir cleared his throat on the Com line and spun a few back flips for show. Amir made everything he said sound like he was coughing up spiteful spit.

â Havenâ t heard of a north-northeast storm, flash or otherwise heading for the colony this season since never. My old man might have said something about that but the Dream took him, even in his right mind he never made much sense to me!â

Laughter rang on the Com line. Amir spun a few more back flips and cleared his throat again. He would die before the Dream took him, and that shouldnâ t be long. No living Fish had known his father; at nearly sixty Amir was the oldest Fish alive.

â

It took a little under a week to reach Sicily. Even out of the slush, the waters were streaking particles of ice all the way south. The Alpsâ summits shot high over the ice cap, but the bodies shifted currents underwater, creating powerful maelstroms, yanking Fish down between boulders and into caves. The Dream was free of Dreamers, after weeks of feeling their presence it was discomfoting to sleep. They werenâ t always there, but now they were gone, entirely, and they were getting less sleep each night. Caves in the Alps were still inhabited, a cave in this weather a death trap either way, youâ d wake up breathing ice, backed up against a stone wall, alone if you were lucky. Some thought a quick death better.

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Never more than a few hours rest, and they'd wake up in pre-glacier slush, beating the ice by only a few hours each time.

By the time they reached Sicily, they had lost over fifty teammates to the Dream and the ice. They had rested in cities only twice, and only because the weather conditions made sleeping along cliff walls too dangerous. In both Milan and Naples, buildings had come down on the Fish during the night, and the slush had infiltrated respirators, oxygen converters and filters over time. ^

There was no sign of B-Team.^ At least the ice had slowed its rapid progress south, the bulk of the glacier still working its way around the Alps.

^ Relay Station 2, this is A-Team, do you copy?^

^ We copy A-Team. Over^

^ There is no sign of B-Team, I repeat, no sign of B-Team. The ice is gaining ground, but the mountains are in the way. Evacuate Relay Station 2, consolidate at Relay Station 1; I repeat, evacuate and consolidate at Relay Station 1. Relay Station 2 do you copy?^

^ Copy A Team. Good luck. Over.^

They would need luck, the Dream was taking them in droves; several Fish would go missing at a time, falling behind and into the deeper slush. Some would emerge and fall back again, ever slower in their movements, ever weaker in resisting the currents.

Their last communications were barely intelligible, as if trying to articulate the void, or let them know what they were missing. What a Fish saw last, what a Fish felt last, they would all know soon.^ Ari held on to sanity for Jonah, and Zohar at home, but fear rode the Dream, not his own fear, but it was there, and it blurred his vision almost constantly now, behind him, he caught a reflection of a whale in the ice wall where there was no ice, and no whale, around him and ahead of him thickening slush, where the waters were clear, slightly icy, but clear. His limbs fell numb as he swam, he didn't need them. Perhaps the other Fish were all seeing the same thing. If it weren't for Jonah's constant surveillance, he would have fallen behind too.

^

Relay Station 2 was deserted as expected; the slush hadn't reached the station from the north, confirming that the northeast was still relatively quiet, yet the recruits had packed all the equipment, including chargers for the propulsion engines, food and energy packs, and oxygen filters. ^ ^

^ Relay Station 1 do you copy? Relay Station 1?^

The Com Line was silent.

^ B-Team do you copy? This is A-Team do you copy?^

^ Copy A-Team, this is B-Team do you copy?^

^ We copy B-Team. Over.^

^ A-Team do you copy?! A-Team?! A-Team head east now! I repeat! Head!^ an explosion sounded on the Com line and communication stopped.

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“ B-Team? B-Team, do you copy? B-Team!”

Something was not right, his father’s yelling on the Com line shook Ari out of the Dream long enough for him to assess the situation coldly: B-Team had lost contact, Relay Stations 1 and 2 were deserted, and it took twenty hours altogether, *twenty hours*, for the Council to communicate instructions.

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Relay Station 1 was not only abandoned, it was sabotaged, and they’d lost dozens more in a few days. “Laughter heals, but its comfort dulls the mind. Maybe if Amir had not joked, maybe they would have paid closer attention to what it was he said about flash storms this season, and started adding up. *Not since never? Maybe his old man?*” No one had ever met Amir’s old man, he had been dead forty years or more, and if Amir couldn’t be sure. It took a few minutes for each member of the team to put the last few days together, but someone had to ask.

“Jonah. When you met with the councilman. What were his reasons for this mission?” The voice sounded like Sarah’s.

Jonah gave a start, hesitated, and paused, but Adam cut in.

“It’s alright Jonah, we know, we saw you argue this mission best you could.”

“Yeah, don’t worry about it Jonah.” “Yeah boss, couldn’t have done better myself.”

“Yeah, we all saw you Jonah.” “Yeah.”

The Com line was a chorus of agreements.

“It was gonna happen sooner or later Jonah,” Amir proclaimed, “we all saw it coming, we just never said nothing, none of us. We never cared; none of us did, even now. Moles set us up, Council says nothing, Dream kicks in, decisions are made and we’re out at sea again, swimming head first into Hell, not remembering what the hell for or how it is we got suckered in again. None of us care anymore; the Dream’ll take us all. Sounds to me like something else got B-Team, and I don’t see them caring either. So what they say, huh? What can you remember?”

Jonah threw his head back and floated closer to the group.

“The only thing that matters every time Amir: the spouses and kids will be cared for.”

Amir laughed out loud. “That’s a nice thought! Not that it matters much either.”

“Easy for you to say, we aren’t all married to Fish.” “Yeah, you imbecile, my wife is a Bee.”

“So is my husband.” “My wife was a Mole until they cast her out.”

“And so is my wife.” Jonah interjected before a fight broke out. His voice had grown firmer. “We made that choice when we married them and we knew what it meant. For Yuri it meant extra ratios of grain we all know that.”

“Laughter again relieved the tension, but there was little to be wary about anymore. “Those we meet in the Dream we can worry about then, for those we don’t. Hades’ embrace is warm and comforting.”

Jonah’s words afterwards were few and short. The Council had urged the mission forward, in full knowledge of the risks to the Fish, and there was little doubt left that the Moles and Priests were expecting the

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outcome. Exploiting the last of the resources in Europe before the ice settled over it, and the last winter before the Cave? Rightâ

Fish missions seldom headed north. Monitoring missions would travel regularly to measure changes in the glaciers and alert the colony to ice moving south. But Europe was always intermittently under ice now, most missions headed south themselves, over the Gulf, for oil reserves that were immediately available and easier to transport. Those waters teamed with submarine life, some benign, some not, attack, not ice, was a Fishâs first concern, but in these waters, where the Dreamers had gone, sifting through the equipment left behind at Relay Station 2, running out of oxygen, food, sleep, and power, finding only enough propulsion engines to get a handful safely back to a colony that had already decided on their fateâ

âA voice boomed through the waters, part human, part whale song: *WESTâ*

A-Team turned west, Ari spun on himself and saw Rebecca again, floating ahead of him, translucent, and glittering with ice flecks, then disappear in a silent blast again, a few feet from the Fish, rippling through the waters in waves knocking Fish back, up through the ice crust, and down towards the bottom. They all felt it this time. Ari tumbled back, regained control, and stabilized himself facing the direction of the blast.

In the distance, the waters were getting darker, and gaining ground forward, he focused his visor on a noticeably darker shape, caught deep in the incoming slush, and reality caught up with the Dream. Another shock wave threw him back, and another, and another. His visor focused again on the shape, tumble after tumble. He zoomed in on it, revealing a two-headed white whale; its tail caught in the western glacier, struggling to free itself, each new blast ripping chunks of flesh, as ice, cut through skin, nerve and bone.

Another blast dislodged ice from the surface, raining chunks dozens of feet thick weighing several tons down on the scrambling Fish. Ari felt drawn forward, moving at great speed towards the living ice wall, and the dying whale and yet remained motionless. He braced himself for impact when dizzyingly, before his eyes, the glacier was spreading ahead of him now, he could not move, air was freezing in his lungs and the cold numbed the pain from his massive wounds, his entire body trapped, his tail useless, he caught sight of his second head, its eyes black and deadâ

âThrough the ice, far in the distance, he could see Fish-like shapes, tossed left and right, struggling to stay out of the blast radius. His strength was leaving him, and his eyes zoomed forward again, through the ice, and into the desperate shapes. He saw himself floating lifeless a few yards ahead, just as he collided with himself, reality took over and his father was floating above him, one of the metal fixings from the relay station jammed in his ribs, blood twirling into a shield around him as he spun helplessly, bounced around by the blasts, dead underwater.

Ice particles were flashing by, cutting through skin-suits, and riding only a few minutes ahead of the slush, coagulating almost instantly on disoriented Fish.

Ari floated up to his father and ripped the propulsion pack attached to his back, cursing himself, hoping against luck that there was enough energy left to make it to the Colony. No matter what happened, he would see his mother, and he would die taking out as many Moles as he could before they did him in. The Dream could claim him then, but not now.

He repeated the operation with three more corpses, attached a Food & Energy pack to his skin suit, feeding through osmosis, and blast his way out of the thickening muck, and ahead, faster and faster ahead.

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The Glacier had changed directions. The Fish had wrongly assumed that its progression was a constant south-southeast. They had never considered that it could have been moving in full on from the west as well. The explosion that silenced B-Team made sense to him now. Spreading cracks in the icing overhead alerted him to the much larger northern glacier resuming its progress south.

If he was not careful, he would be caught in a vise and forced south. If he did not gain speed he would be too far south to reach the colony, if he did not run out of propulsion first. He shot himself towards the surface at an angle, trying to break the ice cap to get a sense of the glacier from the surface.

At full speed, he projected himself forward and up at a spin, to ease the impact with the surface and have a rotating view, catching all the angles before plunging back and repeating the operation again. Cutting through the air rather than the water would keep him out of the slush, and the explosions, and with luck, he would stay ahead just long enough when he dove back to allow himself another leap.

His helmet broke the ice into the blaring sunlight. The spin should have blocked the sun out intermittently, but the reflection on the ice made it worse. He activated his shading unit: the bulk of the glacier was closing in on him, full west and northwest.

The sun shone bright on the ice, and the sky was a perfect blue, but you couldn't guess from what happened beneath. The ice cap stretched for several hundred yards behind him, until the glacier filled it in from the bottom, and there, the world ended. *A mile, maybe less, and moving at three yards a second.*

The surface blew up and settled in sequence, row after row of frozen eruption, just like the Ants would cause to artificially induce soil replacement and accretion in the frozen fields behind the colony before the spring. A cloud of diamonds and glass, stretching north and south further than he could see, settling down, rising up again a few yards ahead, settling and rising again in waves. Where the detonations below were silent killers, the deflagrations outside were shock waves of vertigo. He saw a group of Fish leap through the surface and into the air in the distance, he could not tell whom, but they were too close to the glacier, much too close. The Fish spun down headfirst into the ice. Ari zoomed out too late, the first Fish's head exploded in blood against it, missing the thinner ice cap by only a few yards. The glacier exploded southward almost as soon as he hit, tearing the rest of the body limb from limb, slicing the rest of the group in an explosion of spears of ice.

Ari's own spin brought him downwards, through the ice cap, into the streaking ice, and up again in five hundred yard leaps. It was all he could do to stay ahead, trying to beat Neptune's closing, vengeful fist, leaping and swimming north-northeast towards the colony.

The waters were shallower when he approached the cliff, leap after leap. He couldn't dive as deep nor leap as high, his propulsion pack was running out, and the smaller, more frequent, leaps gobbled up all the energy. In the shallower waters, the glacier moved faster, blast after blast, threatening almost every leap and every dive, but the familiar cliffs of the colony were ahead of him.

The smell of smoke caught his nose mid-jump; burning pyres lined the edge of the cliff. He couldn't tell what they were, but he had little doubt the Moles had kept their word and taken care of the children and spouses.

Thousands of voices flooded the Dream. Not the screams of the bodies on the pyres, he was too far to hear them, but a choir of emotions and feelings, none of them painful, all of them acceptant. He sought for his mother in the jungle of sentience, and couldn't find her. He probed for his father, and felt him somewhere,

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and Adi, and Amirâ

The smell of smoke broke the spell, but it was too late. Caught in the dead Fishâ Dreams, he tried a leap towards the cliff wall. He would break the surface, soar over the flames, and find arms somehow, food too, somehow, and then heâ d wreck havoc, and then and only then, the Dream would take him. But it was too late; he concentrated all the power in his propulsion engines for a final leap forward. His head broke the ice, but the slush congealed against his feet, stopping his forward motion and pulling him back, snapping him in half at the waist. The ice closed in on his body before both halves could separate and numbed him to the pain.

He tried to scream but his lungs were freezing with each passing second. A slow rumble came up from the bottom, alerting him to the eruption to come. The sun faded from his vision along with the smell of smoke and the burning of the pyres.

The world disappeared, and he saw shapes floating through the depths, worse than the lantern-eyed hallucination of a few weeks back, larger, faceless, each tentacle holding an eye and mouths all over their bodies. Between those monsters, he saw dolphins and sharks, glowing in shades of yellow and green, slowly dying of radiation poisoning, slowly changing into new things. And even smaller, between the dolphins and the sharks, between and around the monsters and the whales, tiny, tiny creatures, shaped just as Fish were when they wore their suits. Small creatures as he had never seen before, attaching themselves to dolphin, shark, whale and monster alike, guiding them, drifting gently at their sideâ he felt himself shrink as the rumble of the glacier grew tenor, then baritone, and saw a giant two-headed whale in the depths, catching the light glowing off the dolphins, and he swam closer to it, ever shrinking, ever deeper, ever smallerâ

â The explosion obliterated his body in a deluge of ice, flesh and blood, but Ari was already in the depths, in the comfort of the Dream.

[1] **Beasts** are the lowest cast by tradition, but have risen over the Fish since the takeover by the Moles. Their cast builds and maintains living and storage structures and repairing damage to infrastructure, caused by storms or seismic activity.

[2] **Ants** build maintain and operate the machinery that supports the coastal communities, without Ants, there would be no fresh water, no power sources, and no food, the production of which depends on the availability of filtered water, no communication units and, initially, no equipment for the other casts, until production passed along to artisans within each cast.

[3] **Bees** work the fields and produce food for the community. Some Bees are involved in pasturing in high altitude plateaus deeper inland, but their numbers are very small, given the limited species available for sustenance.Â

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