

# Dark Side of the Halibut



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# ***DARK SIDE OF THE HALIBUT***

*A Haliverse Novel*

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## CHAPTER ONE

# Hyperion Fortescue Tropedox Had Long Suspected

Far above the town of Homer, Alaska, although "above" is perhaps the wrong word, as it implies a conventional spatial relationship, and there was nothing conventional about the relationship between the town and what hovered beyond normal perception, swam the Great Halibut.

It is a fact universally acknowledged that a single fish in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a universe to swim through.

Or at least, that's how the Great Halibut seemed to feel about the matter, though it had never explicitly stated this preference, having the communication skills typical of most planetary-sized flatfish.

The universe, for its part, had never specifically requested to have a colossal halibut swimming through it. But universes, like in-laws and unexpected dinner guests, tend to accept what they're given with stoic resignation. This particular halibut, the Great One, the Cosmic Flounder, the Swimming Reality (as it was known by those who lived upon it and who had a fondness for capitalizing Significant Concepts), drifted through the starry void with the unhurried determination of someone who has nowhere particular to be, but has allocated a very specific amount of time in which not to get there.

The Great Halibut was, among other things, a world in itself, a living, swimming dimensional flounder that sustained the habitat

for creatures who couldn't be bothered with the rigid constraints of conventional physics. It was a cosmic compromise, a divine afterthought, a celestial clerical error that had somehow worked out for the best. Or so some Halibutians believed.

On its dark topside, which perpetually faced upward toward an aurora that couldn't decide between psychedelic and merely flamboyant, the Fishlosophers Guild held its seven-hundred-and-forty-second annual symposium on the topic "What Actually Exists On The Underside: A Speculative Framework for Non-Empirical Reality Assessment." The title had been workshopped for six months by a committee whose primary qualification was an impressive vocabulary and whose secondary qualification was the inability to summarize anything in fewer than twelve words.

The Fishlosophers were a distinguished order of scholarly beings who had developed the ability to breathe space, wear tiny spectacles, and debate hypothetical scenarios with the kind of passion usually reserved for arguments about sports teams or which pastry rightfully deserved the title of Supreme Breakfast Option.

Their debate chamber, a grand amphitheater constructed from overlapping oyster shells, hummed with the enthusiasm of academics who believe they are on the verge of a breakthrough, despite having made no progress since the previous 741 symposiums. (It should be noted that the definition of "progress" among Fishlosophers differs substantially from its definition elsewhere, being principally measured in the number of new terms invented rather than any measurable advancement in understanding.)

"The underside," declared Lord Bilgewater Blubbernock, Chief Theoretician and wearer of the most impressive tusks, a finely polished pair whose edges curved upward with the architectural ambition of Gothic cathedrals, "must logically be an exact mirror

of our own world, but illuminated rather than dark. This follows from the Principle of Cosmic Symmetry, which I just invented but will henceforth refer to as if it were established fact. Verily, blubber is wisdom!"

Lord Blubbernock was a walrus of immense intellectual self-regard and inverse practical capability. His philosophical stance changed with roughly the same frequency as his socks would have, had he worn any.

"Balderdash!" countered Professor Snifflebit Gnatworthy, whose academic robes were clearly designed to impress rather than serve any practical purpose, given that they were microscopic yet inexplicably visible. "The underside cannot exist at all! The Great Halibut is clearly an infinite plane, and therefore has only one side. What you call the 'underside' is merely a collective hallucination brought on by excessive consumption of fermented algae at faculty mixers." He buzzed irritatingly around Lord Blubbernock's head. "I have documented precisely 3,427 instances of such hallucinations between the years 4002 and 4003 alone!"

Professor Gnatworthy had devoted his entire academic career to the documentation of things nobody cared about, elevating pedantry to an art form that nobody wished to see exhibited.

A red blur of fur and parchment shot across the chamber as Scribblecheeks leapt onto the central podium, quill already a smudge of motion against her notepad. She inhaled dramatically, her whiskers quivering with the excitement of someone about to announce they've discovered gold in their breakfast porridge. "Wait! I've discovered in my historical research that the underside was once visited by the heroic expedition of Captain Whiskerflame the Magnificent, who descended with brave squirrels, probably my ancestors, carrying flaming acorns as torches!" She paused only to inhale again. "They discovered a civilization of upside-down beings who walked on their heads and played games of quantum checkers! Then, astonishingly,

everyone spontaneously juggled trout for seventeen consecutive days!"

History, according to Scribblecheeks, was less a series of events that actually happened and more a collection of exciting things that ought to have happened, if only reality had possessed better dramatic instincts.

A slow, disdainful trail of slime marked Friedrich Sluggenscoff's path to the speaking platform. "How adorably futile to construct such fanciful histories," he drawled, each word requiring tremendous effort to produce, as if language itself was an exercise in pointlessness. "The underside, the topside, this symposium itself, all equally meaningless in the vast cosmic slime trail of existence." The slug had perfected the art of making nihilism sound like it was doing you a personal favor by informing you of your own irrelevance.

"But how can you know that?" came the immediate buzzing interrogation from Bertrand Quibblesap, who circled Sluggenscoff's eye-stalks with aggressive skepticism. "Have you tested the nature of reality today? Yesterday? In the previous hour? Can you prove this slime trail isn't merely a hallucination produced by your own consciousness?" Quibblesap had never met a certainty he couldn't transform into a quivering mass of doubt through the strategic deployment of questions that sounded profound but were mostly just annoying.

The amphitheater fell silent as Baron Ignatius Nihilbite abandoned the high coral ledge he'd claimed above the speakers' platform and descended in a slow arc of grey wings. He landed at the center podium with the air of someone who has only arrived because existence made it technically necessary, took a moment to convey philosophical suffering through posture alone, and addressed the room in tones that carried melodramatic doom at distances where most despair couldn't manage. "All meaning is illusion, especially breakfast!" he proclaimed with the satisfaction of someone who believes they're the first to discover

existential despair. "The underside exists because it cannot exist, and does not exist because it must. As Kierkegaardfish never actually said but should have: "The abyss not only gazes back, it occasionally sends postcards from its vacation in nonbeing." The sea gull's nihilism was less a philosophical position and more a fashion statement, worn with the same commitment as his unnecessarily billowy cape.

"If I may," interrupted a younger scholar whose name nobody could quite remember but who was tolerated due to his ability to prepare excellent seaweed tea, "suggest another possibility. What if the underside exists, but in a form so completely different from our own that our limited understanding cannot comprehend it? Perhaps it is a realm of pure light, or conceptual mathematics, or discount furniture stores?"

This suggestion was met with a silence that indicated either deep contemplation or a collective brain freeze. It wasn't easy to tell with Fishlosophers, whose thinking faces were indistinguishable from their being-mildly-constipated faces. "Or," ventured an old octopus in the back row, speaking for the first time in seventy-three symposiums, "what if the underside is simply... Alaska?"

The amphitheater erupted in laughter so forceful it nearly dislodged several tusks and caused at least three monocles to pop out and roll away, pursued by their embarrassed owners. "Alaska!" hooted Lord Blubbernock, wiping a tear from his eye with a flipper that moved with all the delicacy of a construction crane attempting needlepoint. "Next, you'll be suggesting that the beings of the underside call themselves 'humans' and believe they are the only intelligent life in the universe!"

"I propose we immediately institute mandatory underwater umbrellas for all fish to protect them from the nonexistent underside!" The laughter redoubled, causing several junior Fishlosophers to choke on their seaweed tea, which is not a pleasant experience and usually requires several firm pats

between the gills.

The deep, rumbling voice of Tundrus Blusterhoof filled the chamber as the massive musk ox rose to his hooves, tears already forming in his eyes with the reliable promptness of a government tax notice. "Alaska! Land unwitnessed!" he boomed, his voice causing involuntary emotional responses throughout the audience. "Theoretical realm beyond our gills and fins! Are you myth? Are you truth? Are you but a dream within the slumber of the cosmic halibut?" Several Fishlosophers found themselves inexplicably weeping at this poetic outburst about a place they had just been mocking, their emotions hijacked with the efficiency of a professional feelings-burglar.

"Last week," continued Blusterhoof, his voice dropping to a quivering whisper, "I misplaced my favorite algae-gathering basket. Oh basket, lost basket! Your woven contours haunt my memories, all utility now vanished into the great unrecoverable past!" Blusterhoof's talent for generating emotional overreactions to trivial events would have made him a fortune in the greeting card industry, had such a thing existed in this particular corner of reality.

When order was eventually restored through the judicious application of a gavel made from a fossilized shark tooth (which secretly harbored resentment about its career change from apex predator to meeting management tool), the old octopus spoke again. "Mock if you must, but consider the question that has haunted our discipline for seven centuries: If we are real, and we exist on the Great Halibut, then what lies beneath? And if nothing lies beneath, what supports the Great Halibut itself?"

"The Great Halibut," pronounced Professor Gnatworthy with the confidence of someone who has never bothered to verify his own assertions, "requires no support. It is an axiom of reality, a fundamental truth upon which other truths are built. In year 3023.45, nothing significant happened, which proves my point entirely!"

"Wrong!" exclaimed Scribblecheeks, frantically scribbling at a speed that threatened to ignite her parchment through friction alone. "In that very year, the Great Halibut performed cosmic backflips and was briefly supported by a pyramid of dancing starfish who sang the entire history of time in perfect harmony!"

"But what gives that truth its truth?" pressed the old octopus. "What makes axioms axiomatic? By what standard do we judge our standards?" The assembled Fishsophers twitched uncomfortably, recognizing the distinctive spiral of a presuppositional argument, the type of recursive questioning that leads inevitably to either a first cause or a splitting headache. Most were secretly hoping for the headache, as it would provide a socially acceptable excuse to leave early.

"Is not the absence of standards," intoned Baron Nihilbite, perched atop a decorative coral formation with the nonchalance of someone who considers everything beneath them, literally as well as philosophically, "the only true standard? The void awaits us all, my friends. Your debates are but the desperate scratchings of beings terrified of their own insignificance in an uncaring cosmos." Lord Blubbernock's voice boomed across the chamber with all the subtlety of a hippopotamus performing ballet. "I propose we solve this conundrum by instituting a new policy of mandatory philosophical filibustering! Each speaker shall continue their argument until either reaching a conclusion or running out of blubber reserves!"

"Trying again with another pointless policy?" drawled Sluggenscoff, leaving a trail of apathy-inducing slime across the central podium that would require special cleaning procedures and a motivational speaker to remove. "How depressingly predictable." Professor Gnatworthy buzzed irritatingly around Lord Blubbernock's head. "I've recorded 742 previous instances where you've proposed similarly nonsensical policies, and the success rate is zero percent!"

Sir Frostwick Veilguard, distinguished owl chronicler and dimensional explorer, observed this intellectual chaos from a comfortable distance. Perched on a tall library ladder, he adjusted his spectacles (which had never actually improved his vision but gave him the air of someone who understood gravity as a personal acquaintance) and made careful notes in a leather-bound journal. "Confluence approaching," he muttered to himself with the quiet concern of someone who's noticed the bathtub overflowing while houseguests are arguing downstairs. "Cosmic currents aligning. Probability matrix showing increasing instability in the Homer membrane, likely the work of those blasted Scale Collectors. Must alert the Tropedox family."

From below, the passionate debate continued with all the order and coherence of a food fight at a philosophy convention. Tundrus Blusterhoof had begun a seventeen-stanza epic poem about the hypothetical grains of sand on an Alaska beach, each with its own tragic backstory. Half the audience sobbed uncontrollably while the other half tried desperately to remember where they'd left their handkerchiefs. "Tiny particles of mineral composition!" his voice boomed across the amphitheater, causing structural vibrations that worried the oyster shells. "Each one a universe of heartbreak and desire! Formed by eons of erosion, only to be stepped on by hypothetical beings with feet instead of fins!"

Meanwhile, Baron Nihilbite had attracted a small circle of impressionable young Fishlosophers who nodded gravely as he explained that the underside was merely "the existential manifestation of our collective inability to accept the ultimate meaninglessness of spatial orientation."

The nodding was less a sign of understanding and more a way to stay awake, as the seagull's philosophical lectures had been known to cause spontaneous napping in even the most caffeinated listeners. Scribblecheeks was frantically documenting the entire symposium, her quill a blur as she wrote

an increasingly implausible account involving "a sudden invasion of philosophical space narwhals" and "the dramatic revelation that Alaska is actually made of compressed dreams!" Her version of events bore the same relationship to reality as a funhouse mirror does to accurate portraiture.

Sir Frostwick looked beyond them to the distant points of light, which were not, technically speaking, stars at all but rather the scattered scales of even larger cosmic fish, a fact that would have caused significant distress among astronomers had they possessed the proper instruments to perceive it. (It would also have played havoc with astronomical poetry, which relies heavily on stars not being discarded bits of cosmic dandruff.) "Homer's stability is deteriorating more rapidly than expected. If the boundary weakens further..." He drew a small diagram that resembled a town being swallowed by a fish, which was not the sort of illustration generally included in tourist brochures. "The Tropedox family's legacy must be preserved. The boundaries between worlds must remain intact, or both realities risk collapse."

Behind him, Bertrand Quibblesap had somehow managed to induce a state of complete paralytic indecision in Lord Blubbernock by asking rapid-fire questions about the ethical implications of umbrella distribution policies for fish who live in permanently dry environments.

"But have you considered the psychological impact on desert-dwelling fish? And what if umbrellas are sentient but hiding their consciousness from us? And where does one draw the line between an umbrella and an ambitious hat?" The walrus philosopher-king had been reduced to opening and closing his mouth silently, like a clock with indecisive gears.

Friedrich Sluggenscoff was slowly circumnavigating the entire debate platform with the speed and enthusiasm of continental drift, leaving a trail of slime that had caused three junior Fishlosophers to abandon their academic careers on the spot.

They were already drafting resignation letters consisting entirely of the word "why" followed by varying numbers of question marks. The true nature of reality, Sir Frostwick had discovered in his centuries of interdimensional exploration, was not unlike a poorly constructed layered cake. Each layer depends on the others for support, and if one layer is removed or destabilized, the entire dessert risks catastrophic collapse, resulting in disappointed party guests and existential frosting smeared across multiple planes of existence. The Great Halibut was one such layer, and the town of Homer was another. The boundary between them had been maintained for generations by a family that had no idea of their cosmic importance, which was probably for the best, as such knowledge tends to complicate breakfast conversation.

Sir Frostwick checked his pocket watch, which told the time in at least seven different dimensions simultaneously and was, therefore, completely useless for determining when dinner might be served. The small hand pointed to "Quantum Tuesday" while the large hand swung between "Half past Neptune" and "Conceptual Lunchtime." With a resigned sigh, he closed his journal and spread his wings. "The things one does for reality maintenance," he hooted softly, launching himself into the void with the purposeful flap of someone who has just remembered an urgent appointment on the other side of existence and is also fairly certain they left the astral kettle on.

Behind him, he could still hear Tundrus Blusterhoof's sonorous voice: "Void! Nothingness! Untraveled distance between meaning and chaos! I honor your emptiness with the fullness of my profound emotions! Your absence fills me with presence! Your nothing is my everything! Your silence speaks volumes, specifically leather-bound encyclopedias of melancholy!"

The Great Halibut continued its slow, celestial swim through the void, entirely unaware that its existential status was being

hotly debated on its back, which is probably just as well for everyone involved.

The Snowjet was sulking again.

This was not, technically speaking, possible. Snowmobiles do not have emotions or the capacity for passive-aggressive silence. They are machines constructed of metal, plastic, wires and the frozen tears of accountants who calculated their profit margins. They do not sulk.

The Snowjet sulked anyway.

"Look," said Hyperion Fortescue Tropedox, seventeen years old, up to his elbows in carburetor, and engaged in the kind of one-sided conversation that would have concerned his parents if they'd been paying attention, "I know you're upset about the timing chain. But I can't fix everything at once, and the race is tonight."

The engine block made a sound like a cat being asked to do something reasonable.

(It should be noted that Hyperion, known as Hype to everyone except substitute teachers and government documents, had been having conversations with machines since he was eight years old. It should also be noted that nobody believed him about this, which was fine, because nobody believing you about something true is excellent preparation for adulthood.)

"The fuel starvation issue is the priority," Hype continued, reaching for a screwdriver that had migrated to the far end of the workbench with the quiet determination of a salmon seeking its ancestral spawning grounds. "We fix that, and we beat Drago Malfield. We beat Drago Malfield, and maybe people stop looking at me like I'm the weird kid who talks to his snowmobile."

The screwdriver, now in his hand, protested.

You ARE the weird kid who talks to his snowmobile.

"Helpful. Thank you."

The screwdriver had made its point and was done with it.

"Four percent increase on the jet size," Hype muttered, making the adjustment with the care of a surgeon who happened to be operating on something he genuinely liked. "Not five percent, because then we run rich and foul the plugs. Not three percent, because then we're just rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic."

The Titanic didn't have deck chairs, the Snowjet pointed out. It had deckchairs: one word, technically a different thing entirely.

"Are you seriously correcting my metaphors right now?"

Someone has to maintain standards.

The garage existed in that particular state of organized chaos that suggested someone knew exactly where everything was, provided that someone was the person who had created the chaos in the first place. Tools hung on pegboards in patterns that defied alphabetical, chronological, and possibly spatial logic. The smell was a complex bouquet of motor oil, cold metal, and the ghosts of approximately seven hundred unfinished projects.

Outside, Homer, Alaska, did what Homer, Alaska, did best in January, sat in darkness like a town that had given up on the sun as a concept and decided to make its own entertainment. The entertainment, at the moment, was an illegal snowmobile race on Beluga Lake, which everyone knew about and nobody officially acknowledged, in the grand Alaskan tradition of pretending things aren't happening.

The garage door opened with a creak that had been carefully cultivated over seventeen years of neglect, letting in a blast of cold air and a twelve-year-old girl who had opinions about everything and the vocabulary to express them.

"You're talking to the Snowjet again," observed Calliope Enigma Tropedox. She entered the garage the way she entered every room: as if she'd been invited, expected, and was mildly disappointed by the accommodations.

"I'm calibrating fuel mixture ratios."

"Out loud. With pauses for response. And hand gestures." Callie pushed her fogged glasses up her nose with a mittened hand. The parka she wore made her look like a marshmallow that had developed ambulatory capabilities and strong opinions about literature. "The toaster told me you're racing Drago tonight."

Hype's hand slipped. The wrench he was holding made a sound of mechanical disapproval.

"The toaster," he said carefully, "did not tell you anything."

"It did. Right after it wished the bread good luck on its journey toward Becoming Toast." Callie hopped onto the workbench and began swinging her legs, a habit she'd developed specifically because she knew it annoyed him. "You're racing because Drago said the Snowjet looked like something a moose would leave behind after eating bad berries. Which is anatomically improbable, by the way. Moose are herbivores. Their digestive output doesn't typically include metal and modified engine components."

"How do you know what Drago said?"

"I know everything." Callie examined a spark plug with the air of a jeweler assessing a suspiciously cheap diamond. "Also, you left your race map on the kitchen table. Also, I heard you telling the refrigerator you were going to 'smoke that trust-fund jerk into next Tuesday.' The refrigerator had no comment. It's always been the strong, silent type."

"I wasn't talking to the refrigerator."

"You were facing it directly and gesturing with a sandwich."

Hype wiped his hands on a rag that had long ago achieved a state of grease saturation that physicists would have found theoretically interesting. "What do you want, Callie?"

"Information exchange." She set down the spark plug and fixed him with a look that contained far too much intelligence for someone who still technically qualified for the children's menu. "Atalanta Chase is going to be there tonight."

The wrench slipped again. Something in the Snowjet's engine made a sound that was definitely, absolutely not a snicker.

"So?" Hype said, with the studied casualness of someone who had practiced saying "so" in front of a mirror and still hadn't gotten it right.

"So, she beat Drago at the Kachemak Classic last month. He's been telling everyone it was a fluke, which is why he challenged her to a rematch." Callie tilted her head. "I assume you already knew this, given that you've been adjusting the Snowjet's performance specs all week with the intensity of someone preparing for war."

Atalanta Chase. Lanta. Hype's brain did the thing it always did when her name came up, which was to briefly forget how to operate the rest of his body.

She worked at her family's outfitter shop on Pioneer Avenue. She knew more about small engines than people three times her age. She had once told Drago Malfield that his racing technique displayed "all the finesse of a concussed walrus attempting ice ballet," and Hype had witnessed this, and he thought about it more often than was probably healthy.

The thing about Lanta was that she treated machines the way most people treated beloved pets, and treated most people the way most people treated machines: with pragmatic assessment of function and a willingness to disconnect faulty components.

Hype found this deeply attractive in ways that probably said unflattering things about his own psychological development.

"She thinks you're funny," Callie added.

"She does not."

"She told me. Last week, at the shop. She said, and I quote: 'Your brother's funny. Strange, but funny. He talks to carburetors like they have feelings.'" Callie smiled the smile of someone delivering ammunition. "I think 'strange but funny' is high praise from a girl who once described human beings as 'the only species that invented small talk and then complained about

it."

She's not wrong about small talk, the Snowjet agreed.

Hype ignored this. "Is there a point to this conversation, or are you just here to make my life more complicated?"

"Both." Callie hopped off the workbench. "I'm coming with you tonight."

"Absolutely not."

"I'll tell Mom and Dad about the race."

"They won't care. They never notice anything."

"I'll tell them you've been talking to the appliances."

"They already think I'm weird."

"I'll tell them you've been talking to the appliances and they've been talking back."

Hype paused. This was, technically, blackmail. It was also, technically, true. These two facts sat uncomfortably in his mind like cats forced to share a windowsill.

"Fine," he said. "But you stay on the shore. You don't get on any machines. And if anything goes wrong, you run."

"Define 'wrong.'"

"I'll know it when I see it."

Callie smiled. It was not a reassuring smile. "The toaster says thank you for being reasonable."

"I'm going to unplug that toaster."

"It knows. It's already forgiven you." She headed for the door, then paused. "Oh, and Hype? The Snowjet says the timing chain is more important than you think."

She left.

The engine block sat in a silence that was simultaneously innocent and deeply suspicious.

"Some things," it finally said, "you're not ready to hear."

Somewhere across town, Drago Malfield was probably polishing his overpriced snowmobile and practicing his victory sneer. Somewhere closer, Lanta Chase was doing whatever Lanta Chase did on Friday nights, which Hype imagined involved

being competent and intimidating and completely unaware that he existed.

Hype tightened the final bolt on the carburetor and ignored the feeling that tonight was going to be considerably more complicated than a simple race on a frozen lake.

"I want to come with you," Calliope said, as if she'd just announced her intention to breathe air for the remainder of the day.

Hyperion snorted. "To an illegal snowmobile race? No."

"I have reasons why you should take me," she said, unzipping her backpack and pulling out a carefully wrapped package. The brown paper crinkled as she unwrapped it, revealing sandwiches that released a tantalizing aroma of peanut butter and banana into the garage's oil-scented air.

"One, I'm bored. Two, Mom and Dad think I'm at Jessie's house for a sleepover, so they won't miss me." She paused, letting the scent of the sandwiches waft toward her brother. "And three, I made these specially. Peanut butter and banana. With honey. And I put potato chips inside them."

Hype's stomach growled audibly. He hadn't eaten since lunch, too focused on the Snowjet's modifications to remember dinner.

"Also," Callie added with calculated casualness, "if you don't take me, I'll tell Dad you're using his premium gas for the race."

"That's blackmail."

"I prefer to think of it as aggressive negotiation." Calliope smiled sweetly and held out half a sandwich. "So, do we have a deal?"

The Snowjet's engine made a small clicking sound that Hype knew was laughter.

"Fine," he conceded, accepting the sandwich and biting into it with the resignation of someone who had just lost a battle they hadn't realized they were fighting. The combination of sweet, salty, and crunchy distracted him from the fact that he'd just agreed to bring his twelve-year-old sister to an illegal

snowmobile race.

As he ate, Hyperion studied his sister with newfound curiosity. There had always been something off-kilter about Callie, as if she were tuned to a frequency just adjacent to normal reality. She'd known about their grandfather's heart attack before the phone rang and had dug up their mother's lost wedding ring in the exact spot in the garden where she'd "dreamed" it would be. Her perpetually present notebook was filled with drawings and observations that walked the fine line between precocious and unsettling.

"How much longer until we go?" Callie asked, looking around the garage as she bit into her sandwich.

"About an hour. I need to finish this tune-up and load the Snowjet onto the truck."

Callie nodded and wandered back to the shelf of spare parts. She picked up a small metal spring and examined it with the same fascination she'd shown the gear. After a moment's consideration, she slipped it into her pocket as well.

"Did you know," she said, looking over the work shelf for interesting objects, "that the ancient Greeks believed gears were the teeth of time? And that if you collected enough of them, you could build a clock that would let you see the future?"

"That's completely made up," Hype said, returning to his carburetor adjustments.

"Maybe," Callie agreed cheerfully. "But it's interesting. More interesting than saying 'gears transfer rotational force' or whatever boring true thing you were about to tell me."

And that was the heart of their difference, Hyperion realized. He saw the world as it was, predictable, governed by laws of physics that could be understood and relied on. Callie saw the world as it might be, fluid, magical, full of possibilities that existed just beyond the edge of perception.

The radio on the workbench switched songs, now playing the Bee Gees at a volume that suggested the band was trying to

communicate with aliens several galaxies away. Hyperion tolerated disco the way most people tolerated dental work, as something unpleasant but necessary in modern 1970s society.

He reached over and turned it down, receiving a sulky scolding from the radio in response.

"Sorry," he muttered to it. "But if I have to listen to one more falsetto about staying alive, I might not."

"The radio doesn't mind," Callie said absently, now examining a spark plug with equal fascination. "It just wants to be heard."

Hype's hand froze on the wrench. "What did you say?"

"I said the radio just wants to be heard. Isn't that obvious? That's literally its whole purpose." She put down the spark plug and picked up a length of fuel line, bending it into a circle. "Do you think snakes ever get tired of not having arms? I would."

Hyperion stared at his sister, a cold feeling spreading through his chest that had nothing to do with the winter air seeping through the garage's inadequate insulation. Either Callie was engaging in her usual non-sequitur conversation style, or she shared his ability to understand machines. Neither possibility was comforting.

"Callie," he said, easing the words out as if they were live wires in a puddle, "can you hear them too?"

She looked up, her eyes magnified behind her glasses until she appeared to be at least forty percent pupil. "Hear what?"

"The machines," Hype said. "When they talk."

There was a pause. Not a long pause, just the sort of silence in which the universe decides whether to pretend it didn't hear that.

"Don't be ridiculous, Hype," Callie said at last. "Machines don't talk. They clank, they grind, they explode at emotionally significant moments, but they absolutely do not talk."

Relief washed through him, warm and immediate, and then receded just as fast, leaving a small sandbar of doubt behind. Her tone had that studied casualness he himself used when insisting

he had not just argued with a carburetor.

"Now finish fixing your snowmobile," she added, turning back to the fuel line with the air of a general adjusting troop formations. "We have a race to win."

Hype frowned. "I never said anything about winning."

"Didn't you?" With an enigmatic smile, Calliope Enigma Tropedox, seeming to know the story's end, leaned over the Snowjet's engine. "My mistake."

On the halibut's white underside, the King Crabs Parliament was engaged in its seven-hundred-and-forty-second emergency session on the topic of "Directional Adjustment: A Critical Assessment of Our Current Trajectory."

(It should be noted that the Parliament had held precisely seven-hundred-and-forty-one previous "emergency" sessions, suggesting either an impressive streak of crises or a fundamental misunderstanding of the word "emergency.")

"Right!" shouted Chancellor Winstonia Churchclaw. She was a plump crustacean with decorative barnacles arranged in a legislative powdered wig that had taken sixteen molts to perfect. "We need to go right! The cosmic currents are favorable, and the star-plankton density increases by 7.3% if we adjust our heading seventeen degrees starboard!"

"Preposterous!" countered Senator Vladimir Leftclaw. His left pincer was noticeably larger than his right, giving him the look of someone perpetually about to make an extremely important point that would subsequently disappoint everyone. "Left is clearly indicated by the Committee's fourteen-part report on Optimal Trajectory Maintenance!"

"Point of order!" bellowed Treasurer Adam Pinchersmith. "The previous speaker used the word 'trajectory' without filing Form 12-C: Declaration of Intended Semantic Content for Navigational Terminology!"

"Form 12-C was abolished in the reforms of '73," said Minister Margaret Catchher, not looking up from her seventeen

clipboards.

"The reforms of '73 were declared invalid by the Committee for the Preservation of Conditions Previous to Conditions Subsequent!"

"That committee was never officially ratified!"

"Order! Order in the chamber!" Speaker Gandclaw Methuselah banged his ceremonial coral gavel. His shell had been worn smooth by time and countless meaningless motions. "I've served in this Parliament for over three centuries. In my day, we debated with dignity while accomplishing nothing! And we were proud of it!"

Far above them, separated by miles of flesh and the unfathomable mysteries of piscine neurology, the Great Halibut adjusted its fin by approximately two degrees. The movement was, to the Halibut, roughly equivalent to a human shifting in an armchair. To the Parliament, it registered as a gentle earthquake that sent three junior clerks tumbling into the stenography pool.

"The Halibut has spoken!" shouted Delegate Alexander the Hastey, scuttling in frantic sideways motions. "It's a sign! A SIGN!"

"It's indigestion," muttered Representative Marie Antoinet-shell, adjusting her pearl decorations. "It had that same twitch after the plankton bloom of '97. Let them eat kelp, I say."

The truth was that the Great Halibut went where it pleased, when it pleased. The king crabs had approximately the same influence on its direction as a group of extremely opinionated backseat drivers would have on a bus with no driver, no steering wheel, and no awareness that it was a bus at all. But this didn't prevent them from forming committees dedicated to the serious business of pretending they were in charge of something more significant than their own delusions.

"I should note," announced Minister Catchher, consulting her clipboards, "that under Standing Order 4,291, any seismic event during session requires a mandatory fifteen-minute recess for

theological consultation."

"Seconded!" shouted someone who had clearly been waiting for an excuse to leave.

"The motion fails," said Speaker Methuselah. "Standing Order 4,292 specifies that Standing Order 4,291 can only be invoked on days ending in 'Q'."

"What day is it?"

"Irrelevant! The calendar sub-committee hasn't convened since the Temporal Ambiguity Crisis of '84!"

None of them noticed what was happening beneath them.

A small patch of the Great Halibut's white underbelly had begun to waver, like heat rising from asphalt on a summer day. The distortion rippled outward in concentric circles of non-being, or perhaps pre-being, or possibly post-being.

(Ontological classifications are notoriously difficult to pin down when reality itself is having a moment of uncertainty.)

Had any of the crabs bothered to look down, they might have noticed that this distortion corresponded to the location of a certain small Alaskan town on the other side of the dimensional membrane. They might have noticed the sinuous forms slithering along its edges, serpentine bodies adorned with scales harvested from the Great Halibut.

Though, as everyone except chefs in cooking competition shows knows, halibut do not have scales. Which raises questions about what was being harvested, and whether taxonomic accuracy matters when reality itself is being compromised.

Near the membrane's edge, the imposing figure of Count Eelgrim the Vile observed the proceedings with malicious joy.

Eelgrim had not always been a nihilist. There had been a time, centuries ago, when he had believed in things. He had believed in the fundamental goodness of sea creatures. He had believed, most fatally, that if he submitted his fourteen-volume philosophical treatise "On the Inherent Meaninglessness of Directional Swimming" to the King Crabs Parliament, they would

engage with it seriously.

They had used it to insulate the junior clerks' dormitory.

The rejection letter had been three words long: "Not sufficiently crabby."

It was, Eelgrim had decided, the final proof he needed that existence was a cruel joke. And if existence insisted on being a joke, then he would be the one to deliver the punchline.

His massive wolf eel body wiggled along as he made notations in a journal bound in eel skin. His jaw opened occasionally to reveal too many teeth, as if his mouth had over-ordered and refused returns.

"Phase Two proceeding ahead of schedule," he said. His voice was grinding gravel in a tuba. "The dimensional membrane has thinned by 62.7% at the primary locus."

"But Count Eelgrim," ventured his assistant, a nervous no-see-um named Fibble, "I've been reviewing the calculations, and I'm concerned that the increased extraction rate might be causing structural instability in the..."

"SILENCE!" Eelgrim coiled tighter with elegantly malevolent displeasure. "Your concerns are bubbles in the vast ocean of despair, momentarily visible before being crushed by the pressure of inevitability."

A cold sensation washed over Fibble, as if someone had replaced his hemolymph with ice water and then charged him for the privilege. This was a common effect of standing near the Count, whose presence alone could induce a feeling of existential hopelessness that would make a motivational speaker agree to therapy.

Fibble sighed and made another notation in his secret journal. The document was now bursting with entries prefaced by phrases including: "Ethical Concerns:", "If Anyone Finds This After The Inevitable Catastrophe:", and "Ideas for More Reasonable Evil Plots That Don't Involve Destroying All Lifeforms:".

"Tonight," Eelgrim continued, his voice dropping to a whisper that bypassed the ears and nested directly in the nightmares of everyone within hearing range, "we create the first stable breach between the halibut and the human world."

"Hurrah," said Fibble with all the enthusiasm of someone contemplating a tax audit conducted by piranha with accounting degrees.

What Count Eelgrim failed to recognize was that boundaries exist for reasons beyond the mere inconvenience they pose to megalomaniacal sea creatures. The separation between the Great Halibut and the human world wasn't an arbitrary division but a necessary buffer between fundamentally incompatible worlds. Just as the membrane between cells, or the social convention that prevents people from saying what they think about their relatives' cooking.

Meanwhile, back in the King Crabs Parliament, the debate had devolved into a shouting match about whether shouting matches required Form 7B-942 submitted in triplicate.

None of them noticed the membrane beneath them growing thinner by the second. None of them suspected that their seven-hundred-and-forty-second emergency session might, for once, involve an actual emergency.

And none of them were prepared for what would happen when Count Eelgrim's plan reached its culmination and the membrane between worlds finally tore.

The Tropedox household was a monument to 1970s interior design, suggesting that someone had once looked at the full spectrum of available colors and deliberately chosen only the ones that induced mild nausea when combined. Shag carpeting and wood paneling covered every available surface, creating the impression that an unusually geometric fungus was slowly consuming the house.

Their parents were out for the evening at what Hyperion's father had described as "a very important business dinner" and

what his mother had more accurately called "drinks with your father's boss so he can pretend to like him for a promotion." This conveniently aligned with Callie's fictional sleepover, leaving Hyperion with the perfect opportunity for his nighttime racing plans.

An hour later, with the Snowjet secured in the bed of his father's pickup truck and Callie bouncing excitedly in the passenger seat, Hyperion drove through the quiet streets of Homer. The town had the sleepy quality of an Alaskan winter night, with most sensible people tucked away in their homes, leaving the streets to teenagers with questionable judgment and the occasional moose with no judgment at all.

"Are you nervous?" Callie asked, her breath fogging the window she was drawing on.

"About the race? No."

"About breaking the law and potentially disappointing our parents if we get caught, resulting in a cascade of consequences that could affect your college applications and future employment prospects?"

Hyperion glanced at his sister. "Has anyone ever told you that you think too much?"

"Only people who don't think enough," she replied, adding tentacles to whatever creature she was drawing on the foggy window.

The darkness was thicker than usual that night, less a mere absence of light and more an active presence pressing against the truck's windows. The stars above arranged themselves in unfamiliar patterns as if the constellations had decided to try new configurations without informing the local astronomers.

"The sky is wrong," Callie said suddenly, as if reading his thoughts.

Hyperion gripped the steering wheel tighter. "What do you mean?"

"The stars are swimming." She pointed upward through the windshield. "See? They're moving in circles, like fish in a pond when you throw in bread."

Hyperion looked up briefly but saw only the normal winter sky, bright pinpricks of light in the vast darkness. "They look the same to me."

"That's because you're only looking with your eyes." Callie returned to her window drawing, adding a set of complicated mathematical equations to the tentacled creature.

The truck's heater worked overtime against the cold, creating a cocoon of warmth contrasting with the frigid darkness outside. As they approached Beluga Lake, Hyperion could see headlights and portable generators, the makeshift pit area for the night's entertainment.

"Remember the rules," he said as he parked at the edge of the gathering. "Stay with the spectators. If anything happens, "

"Find an adult, go home, don't tell Mom and Dad. I'm twelve, not stupid."

"The two aren't mutually exclusive," Hyperion muttered, but he was already focused on the task ahead.

Unloading the Snowjet, Hyperion felt the familiar pre-race tension building in his stomach. It wasn't fear, more a body's natural response to knowing you're about to do something that insurance companies would specifically exclude from coverage.

The race area was a haphazard affair. A roughly circular track had been marked out on the frozen lake with colored flags, and about a dozen snowmobiles of various vintages and states of modification were lined up near the starting point. Their owners, mostly teenage boys with more mechanical skill than common sense, made last-minute adjustments and engaged in the time-honored tradition of pre-race trash talk.

"Well, look who decided to show up," came a voice that managed to be both nasal and smug simultaneously. "If it isn't Trope-a-dope and his trash sled."

Drago Malfield stood next to a gleaming new Ski-Doo that probably cost more than Hyperion's college fund. With his expensive snowsuit and perfectly styled hair (how did he manage that under a helmet?), Drago looked like he'd stepped out of a catalog titled "Rich Kids Who've Never Faced Consequences."

"Drag," Hyperion acknowledged with minimal enthusiasm. "I see your dad bought you another toy."

"At least my dad can afford it," Drago replied, the insult lacking creativity but making up for it with malice. "What's that pile of parts you're riding? Did you find it in a junkyard?"

The Snowjet shuddered under Hyperion's hand, communicating what he interpreted as indignation.

"We'll see who's laughing when we're actually racing," he said, patting the snowmobile reassuringly. "Machines aren't about how they look. They're about how they perform."

"Whatever helps you sleep at night," Drago snorted, turning back to his friends who dutifully laughed as if he'd said something clever.

Callie, silently watching this exchange, tugged on her brother's sleeve. "His snowmobile is very unhappy," she said matter-of-factly.

Hyperion stared at his sister, a cold feeling that had nothing to do with the temperature creeping up his spine. "What?"

"His snowmobile. It doesn't like him. It thinks he's mean." She adjusted her glasses. "Also, he overtightened the left side panel. It will vibrate loose if he goes over forty miles per hour."

Before Hyperion could respond to this disturbing statement, the race organizer, a senior named Mike who had appointed himself in charge by virtue of owning a stopwatch, called for the racers to line up.

"Go find a good spot to watch," Hyperion told his sister, still unsettled by her comment. "And stay there."

Callie nodded in agreement and drifted toward a cluster of onlookers huddled near a crackling fire. Her bulky orange coat

transformed her into a tiny tangerine-colored puff moving among a sea of regular-proportioned individuals.

As she walked away, Callie opened her ever-present notebook and began writing frantically, her mittened hand moving with surprising dexterity. Above her, unnoticed by anyone, a lone owl circled in the night sky, where the thin spots between worlds grew thinner still.

Sir Frostwick Veilguard had been monitoring the Tropedox family for generations, since their ancestors had inadvertently created the dimensional anchor point that kept the Great Halibut detached from the human world. The anchor had not been crafted with any cosmic significance in mind, it had simply been a fishing charm carved by a devout Tropedox in 1837, who had unwittingly imbued it with the power of Absolute Ontological Certainty.

The charm-maker had been blissfully unaware that they were forging a cosmic stopgap between fundamentally incompatible realities, one that prevented the human universe from experiencing a catastrophic merger with its fishy neighbor.

Sir Frostwick had often reflected on the problem with reality. It had a distressing tendency to depend upon people who had no idea they were important.

(It should be noted that the Bureaucratic Pedants Guild of the Great Halibut had spent seventeen decades arguing about whether to classify this particular anchor point as a "Cross-Dimensional Tether" or a "Trans-Reality Mooring Hook" on their official letterhead. The debate had resulted in three splinter factions, two coups, and one aggressive memo-writing campaign that exhausted the Halibut's entire supply of red ink for a fiscal quarter.)

Over the centuries, the ability to perceive and interact with the boundary has manifested in various Tropedox family members, most notably in communicating with machines, devices that straddled the gap between the purely physical and

something more. The machines existed simultaneously in both realities, drawing energy and intelligence from the Great Halibut while maintaining physical form in the human world. They were dimensional amphibians, equally at home in the waters of cosmic absurdity and the dry land of physical law.

As he circled above the frozen lake, Sir Frostwick could see the dimensional Membrane thinning to a dangerous degree. The Halibut was swimming too close to the sinkermoon, drawn by the Scale Collectors' deliberate weakening of the barrier. And at the center of the distortion stood two young Tropedoxes, utterly unaware that they were characters in a celestial drama for which no one had bothered to provide them with a script.

"Oh dear," he muttered, making a quick calculation in his journal. "The Membrane integrity has decreased by 42% since yesterday. At this rate, full collapse could occur within hours, resulting in a catastrophic reality merger that the local tourism board will be completely unprepared to promote."

CHAPTER TWO

## Hyperion Was Having a Dream About Fish

*"Fish schools and schools of thought share a remarkable similarity, both involve groups moving in synchronous patterns while remaining utterly convinced they understand the currents of reality, despite evidence suggesting they're just swimming in circles."*

– Sir Frostwick Veilguard, *An Expedition Somewhere North of Normal*.

Hyperion Tropedox was having a dream about fish. This wasn't especially surprising for someone from Homer, Alaska, where the fishing industry was as much a part of daily life as complaining about the weather or pretending to understand tide tables. What was unexpected was that the fish were discussing him in this dream.

"Cranial integrity seems stable, though that's a relative term for mammals," said a chirpy voice. "Remarkable how they keep all those thoughts inside such a fragile container."

"You're overthinking it, Ripplehop. Their brains are simple. Essentially the same as a badly organized toolbox."

"Should we poke him again?"

"No more poking! He's not a jellyfish."

Hyperion kept his eyes firmly shut. The cold that had grabbed him when he fell through the ice had been replaced by a warm blanket executing the restless movements of a hyperactive ferret, scooting, bunching, and occasionally performing

interpretive dance across his torso.

The smell hanging about reminded him of the ocean during its yearly performance review, mixed with notes from his grandmother's spice cabinet (which remained under lock and key following The Great Paprika Disaster that had temporarily dyed three cats orange and caused the neighbor's prize petunias to sneeze for a week).

What caught his attention most, however, was the gentle humming of equipment around him. Unlike hospital machines he'd heard before, these sounds held conversations. A rhythmic beeping to his left reassured him his heart rate was fine. Another device nearby clicked in a pattern reminiscent of Morse code, but somehow he understood it monitored his temperature.

"I think he's pretending to be unconscious," said the second voice. "His breathing pattern changed."

"Ooh! I know what to do!" The first voice grew excited. "EMERGENCY! EMERGENCY! PATIENT EXPERIENCING CATASTROPHIC EXISTENCE FAILURE!"

Hyperion sat up. He immediately wished he hadn't.

He was lying on a makeshift bed, a haphazard collection of kelp, driftwood, and unmistakably recycled life jackets supporting his body. The abalone shell ceiling above him curved iridescently, throwing rainbow patterns across the room with the casual artistry of unconscious showmanship.

Medical equipment surrounded him, though none of it resembled anything from a doctor's office. A contraption combining a bicycle pump rigged to several glass jars gurgled with liquids in colors that would force chemists to reconsider their career choices. Nearby, a weather vane crowned with tiny bells spun lazily, signaling, "Patient is confused."

Strangely, Hyperion felt he could understand the devices' communications, the bubbling jars expressed contentment, while the spinning bells sounded mildly annoyed, reminiscent of a receptionist explaining the same form for the third time.

But most disturbing of all were his caretakers.

Two sea otters stood beside his bed. The smaller one wore a nurse's cap folded from a paper boat, while the larger one had goggles pushed up on her forehead and a tool belt around her middle that contained instruments spanning every stage of technological evolution from "pointy stick" to "quantum-powered screwdriver."

"Oh good, you're awake," said the larger otter. "I was worried Rip's shouting might stop your heart. That would have been inconvenient. I just finished calibrating the Death Predictor." She gestured to a toaster connected to a mood ring by chewing gum and optimism.

"You, " Hyperion began, then stopped. His voice sounded absurd to his own ears, as if it had traveled a lengthy distance to reach his mouth, taking a scenic route filled with unnecessary detours.

"Yes, I talk. We all do. Get past it quickly, please. We have a schedule." The otter adjusted her tool belt with the brisk efficiency of someone who organizes the universe into labeled boxes. "I'm Marilyn Finchtool, Chief Engineer of the Dorsal Medical Bay. Everyone calls me Meril. This is my assistant, Titus Ripplehop."

The smaller otter cheered, spectacles sliding down his snout. "Hello! I've never seen a human up close before! Your fur distribution puzzles me. Is that intentional? Begging your pardon, of course!"

"I've officially lost it," Hyperion muttered, pressing his palms against his face. "Complete mental breakdown. Dad always said too much time alone in the garage wasn't healthy."

"Oh, you haven't lost it!" Titus chirped, patting Hyperion's arm with a surprisingly soft paw. "Though we did find bits of your sanity floating in the Membrane when we pulled you through. We scooped most back in, I think. Some pieces proved rather slippery, if you take my meaning!"

"Ripple!" Meril scolded. "Don't tease the patient. His species takes reality seriously. Their dimension has strict physical laws, a clock that refuses to run backward even when asked nicely."

"You did say there were two humans who came through the tear," Ripple reminded Meril, adjusting his spectacles, which promptly slid down his snout again. "Is the female one coming back soon? She accepted talking otters immediately. She understood right from the start, she did!"

"Two humans?" Hyperion lowered his hands and stared at Ripple. "There was someone else? Where? Was it a girl? About this tall?" He held his hand at what would be Callie's height.

Meril nodded, tapping her white paw three times before adjusting one of her machines that responded with an appreciative gurgle. "Your sister, we believe. She came through a different tear in the Membrane about a quarter-fin east of where we found you. Silver's patrol spotted her while we were still fishing you out of the dimensional undertow."

"Calliope? Is she okay? Where is she now?"

"Remarkably well, actually," came a familiar voice from across the room. "And taking copious notes."

Hyperion jerked his head, and his neck popped like a champagne cork fired by an overeager but inexperienced waiter. Sitting cross-legged on a barrel in the corner, his sister looked unharmed and unreasonably cheerful. She read from her ever-present book, occasionally making notes with the pencil tucked behind her ear.

"Callie!" Relief flooded through Hyperion so intensely that it momentarily overwhelmed his disorientation. His last image of her was standing alone on the ice, growing smaller as he plunged into the freezing water. "Are you okay? What happened? Where are we?"

He tried to stand, but the room spun around him with the wild enthusiasm of a carousel discovering its first customer of the day. He stayed focused on his sister as if she might disappear

if he looked away.

Callie closed her book and came to his side. For just a moment, her cheerful facade dropped, and she squeezed his hand with surprising strength. "I thought you were gone, Hype," she whispered, her voice cracking before she composed herself.

Then, with characteristic resilience, she straightened up and assumed her usual practical tone.

"I'm fine. Better than you. You were the one who decided to take an unscheduled polar plunge." She gestured around the bizarre medical bay. "As for where we are, well, that's the interesting part."

He noticed how she wiggled her notebook, her tell when she was excited but trying to act casual. Despite everything, he felt a small smile emerge. Even in whatever bizarre hallucination this was, Callie was still Callie.

"Whoa there, big fella," said Meril, pushing him back down with surprising strength for a creature weighing only twenty pounds. "Your inner workings are misaligned. Imagine a clock whose gears have taken separate vacations."

"What does that mean?" Hyperion asked.

"It means your equilibrium hasn't adjusted to Haliverse gravity. It's approximately 0.87 of what you're used to, plus it has a slight sideways pull depending on which way the Great Halibut is turning," Meril explained, as if this clarified anything. "Messes with your inner ear fluid something terrible. Rip's got the calibration boots ready."

"We fell through the ice," Callie said, closing her book. "But it wasn't ice. It was the Membrane. That's what they call it here. A thin spot between our world and this one."

"A dimensional boundary," a fresh voice elaborated, noting the boy's confused expression. "Usually stable, but lately growing increasingly permeable due to the activities of those blasted Scale Collectors. Your falling through wasn't entirely accidental, though the timing was unexpected."

Hyperion turned to see another sea otter enter the room. This one carried himself with such authority that Hyperion immediately straightened up despite his dizziness. Camouflage patterns covered the newcomer's fur, and he wore a military uniform crafted from salmon leather and bottle caps arranged with the precision of a five-star general's chest. One eye shone paler than the other, giving him a piercing, all-seeing gaze. Around his neck hung a stone pendant with a large green jewel set in its center.

"Admiral Ahab!" Ripple snapped to attention, knocking over a tray of instruments despite standing nowhere near it. He darted to retrieve them, tripped over his feet, and landed in a position that rearranged the fallen items into perfect order.

The Admiral spoke, his voice suggesting authority, "At ease, Ripplehop. Mark my words, we've got a situation brewing in the eastern membrane quadrant." He tapped his right paw once for emphasis.

"And where is 'this one'?" Hyperion asked, dreading the answer.

Meril and Ripple exchanged glances with the complicated facial choreography of people deciding who must deliver bad news.

"You're on the Great Halibut," Meril said, adjusting her multi-lens goggles. "A cosmic entity hosting various civilizations, ecosystems, and at least one very annoying traveling salesman who keeps trying to sell me 'authentic' clam polish from the Underside. Herbert, my Bone Shuffler over there, hasn't been the same since I traded his gyroscopic stabilizer for what turned out to be snake oil. Literally. Oil from a snake."

"We're on a fish?" Hyperion said flatly.

"A very big fish," Callie corrected, opening her notebook to a sketch she'd already made. She turned it to show Hyperion a surprisingly detailed drawing of a planet-sized halibut floating in space. "It swims through the cosmocean. Different communities

live in different regions, we're in the Dorsal Fin Settlement now. There's the Eye Ridge to the north, the Gill Forests to the east, and, "

"And the Underside, which is a whole other matter," Admiral Ahab interjected, gazing dramatically into the middle distance while touching his stone pendant thoughtfully. "That information requires Clearance Level Magenta, which you have not been granted yet. We must trim our sails accordingly."

"It's quite efficient when you think about it," Callie continued, seemingly oblivious to the admiral's caution. "No need for complicated orbital mechanics. The Great Halibut just swims where it wants to go."

"Or where it's meant to go," Admiral Ahab added cryptically.

Hyperion stared at his sister. "You seem remarkably okay with all this."

Callie shrugged. "I've always suspected reality was more interesting than it let on. I'm just glad it finally stopped being so boring."

It is important to note that most realities resent being called "boring" and occasionally go to extraordinary lengths to prove otherwise, usually at the most inconvenient times possible. This explains why tax accountants experience such eventful lives, though they rarely discuss it at parties.

"Your sister has adapted remarkably well," Meril said, checking something on a compass whose needle spun indecisively. "She's been helping us understand your physiology. Did you know humans can't regrow limbs? Terribly inefficient design. I could fix that with the right parts, but that insufferable little otter Titus Ripplehop misplaced my Appendage Encourager."

"I didn't misplace it!" Ripple protested, his whiskers quivering with indignation. "It grew legs and walked away! Which means it works perfectly, if you take my meaning!"

"Where's my snowmobile?" Hyperion asked, memories of the Snowjet sinking beneath the ice flooding back.

"Ah, your motorized conveyance," Meril's whiskers twitched with professional interest. "It's in my workshop. Fascinating construction. Primitive, but elegant in its simplicity. The temporal oscillators need adjusting, of course, but that's expected from your dimension."

"Can I see it?"

"If you feel up to walking, I don't see why not," Meril said. "Ripple, fetch the gravity adjustment boots. The green ones, not the purple ones. The purple ones remain calibrated for octopus locomotion, and I don't fancy explaining to the Admiral why our human guest is suddenly slithering about the corridors."

While Rip rummaged in a cabinet hollowed from a sea turtle shell, the door to the medical bay swung open. The large scallop shell hinged to the wall had clearly been designed by an architect who considered right angles strictly optional.

A small sea otter messenger burst through, skidding to a halt before Admiral Ahab. "Admiral! Critical situation at the Membrane near the Caudal Region! Another tear has formed, and the Scale Collectors are gathering!"

Admiral Silvercrest's countenance darkened. "We're sailing treacherous waters, my friends. Best keep a weather eye on the horizon and your compass true." He turned to Hyperion with newfound urgency. "I'm afraid your workshop tour must wait. We have more pressing matters to discuss. We believe your arrival connects to these tears and something far more dangerous lurking beneath the surface."

He held up the stone medallion, staring into the large green jewel.

"Are you feeling well enough to answer a few questions?" the Admiral asked.

"I guess so?" Hyperion replied, unable to look away from the stone.

The moment Hyperion spoke, the stone lit up brilliantly blue. Admiral Ahab nodded, seemingly satisfied.

"This is an Empathy Stone," he explained, noticing Hyperion's fascination. "It helps us determine the emotional state and truthfulness of those we speak with. Blue means you're confused but honest. Mark my words, that's a good start." He tapped his paw once.

"What other colors does it turn?" Callie asked, leaning in so close that her nose almost touched the glowing object.

"Red for anger, green for fear, yellow for deception," Admiral Ahab listed. "And plaid for when someone tells a truth so bizarre that the stone can't quite process it." His whiskers twitched with amusement. "It's proven most useful when dealing with the bureaucrats from the Caudal Administrative Region. You'd be surprised how often plaid appears during budget discussions."

Turning back to Hyperion, Admiral Ahab adopted a formal posture. "The Scale Collectors work for Count Eelgrim the Vile. They harvest dimensional fragments to weaken the Membrane between worlds. We believe they're targeting your town of Homer specifically because of its unique position in the dimensional alignment."

"I found my lucky pebble in the water junction yesterday," Ripple interrupted, returning with sandals made from compressed seaweed and small weights. "It told me the boy here might fix the machinery problem! Sometimes luck is the right accident happening in the right place!"

"I'm not discussing anything until I see my snowmobile," Hyperion insisted, swinging his legs off the bed.

Rip helped Hyperion put on the sandals, which felt ridiculous but provided welcome stability when he stood. The room tilted before his vision steadied, like a carousel winding down for its lunch break.

"Fine," Admiral Ahab conceded. "A brief visit to the workshop, then we talk. Time is of the essence, or as we say in the navy, the

tide waits for no otter."

They led Hyperion through corridors constructed from a baffling mix of organic materials and salvaged human objects. A chandelier combining jellyfish and Christmas lights illuminated one passageway, casting light patterns that danced along the walls like drunken fireflies. Another featured walls lined with vinyl records in overlapping patterns that Meril explained functioned as "dimensional dampeners to prevent reality leakage, or possibly just good acoustics. I haven't decided yet."

When they reached the workshop, he almost didn't recognize the Snowjet. His beloved snowmobile sat in the center of the room, partially disassembled, with various otter-sized tools scattered around it. But the changes to the machine itself transfixed him.

The Snowjet's metal frame now shimmered with an iridescent sheen, essence of fish scales gleaming from its surface. The headlight had elongated into an anglerfish's lure, and small fins sprouted from the chassis sides like metallic gills seeking air.

"What did you do to it?" Hyperion asked, approaching his transformed vehicle with horror and fascination.

"Nothing!" Meril held up her paws defensively. "It started changing on its own shortly after arrival. Exposure to the Great Halibut affects its composition. Quite remarkable. I've been studying the transformation. Your dimension's laws of physics function here merely as strong suggestions, comparable to traffic laws in an Italian roundabout."

Hyperion laid a hand on the snowmobile's seat and immediately felt a familiar vibration, the Snowjet recognizing its owner. But the machine's "voice" had changed, grown fuller and more complex.

"It's happy to see me?" he said, surprised. He ran his hands along the handlebars, which warmed at his touch. "And it's happy here. It feels more awake."

Hyperion bent closer to examine the small fins that had emerged from the chassis. They fluttered as he looked at them, mimicking a dog's tail-wagging after a three day separation. "But this differs from before. It could only hum a few notes previously, and now it's trying to sing a whole song."

"You can communicate with machines?" Admiral Ahab asked, one eyebrow raised. "That's a rare gift, even here. We call it Vibration Speaking."

"In a way, I guess." Hyperion moved his hand to the engine casing. "I get impressions, feelings. It's hard to explain. Back home, machines talk to me. Not with words. With feelings. Impressions. I can tell when they're running right or something's wrong."

"I knew it!" Ripple exclaimed, nearly toppling over in excitement. "The lucky pebble was right! This surpasses finding a perfectly shaped skipping stone, if you take my meaning!"

"Mechanical empathy shows up in certain species here," said Meril, "though I've never encountered it in a human before. The machines themselves possess a kind of consciousness, you might say. Most people can't perceive it." She scribbled furiously in her notebook. "I should run some tests. Maybe a partial cerebral examination. Nothing invasive. Probably. Just a small incantation or two."

"Later," Admiral Ahab said firmly. "We're facing headwinds and rough seas ahead. The Count's activities at the Membrane demand our immediate attention."

"Ooh! Maybe the boy can help us!" Ripple bounced excitedly, somehow organizing a shelf of tools despite paying no attention to his paws. "If Count Eelgrim uses harvesters to collect reality scales, someone who speaks vibration might convince them to stop!"

As they left the workshop, Hyperion glanced back at the Snowjet. The machine gave off a vibration that said: *I'll be ready when you need me*. And for the first time since waking up in this

bizarre world, he felt a small sense of comfort. At least one thing from home still recognized him, even if it now sported fins.

## Scene 2

Admiral Silvercrest confronts Calliope and Hyperion in the medical bay about Callie's notebook, identifying it as a rare "Metaphysical Muddlemap" that can see patterns and connections in reality. When Callie shows the admiral her book, which has predicted events before they happened, he explains that in the wrong hands, such an object could lead to catastrophe.

A bell announces "Scale Rain," forcing the group to evacuate with Reality Umbrellas. Outside, they enter the Dorsal Fin Settlement, a community built on a massive fin rising from the landscape, inhabited by sea otters, seals, puffins, and other creatures. The Scale Rain causes reality distortions as scales fall from the sky.

Callie catches a rare "cryo-crystal" during the rain. As the group moves through the settlement, they observe the Fishlosophers Guild debating the nature of the "Underside" and pass through markets and schools.

Suddenly, they're confronted by Crabmechanicals, sophisticated robot spy crabs that identify Callie's book as a "priority acquisition target." When Callie writes that the Crabmechanicals are caught in a logical paradox, one malfunctions, but the others adapt and attack. Admiral Silvercrest uses a flute to disrupt one while Hyperion rescues Callie from another.

The group escapes through maintenance tunnels as more Crabmechanicals arrive. Admiral Silvercrest explains that someone is upgrading these crabs for aggressive purposes and that Callie's Metaphysical Muddlemap would make reality malleable in the wrong hands. He believes Hyperion and Callie's arrival through the Membrane is significant, wondering if they're meant to prevent or witness a disaster.

Back in the medical bay, Calliope spread her notebook open and showed something to Ripple, who nodded enthusiastically

with the focus of someone discovering a new religion.

"Ah, there you are," Admiral Ahab said. "Now, there's something important we need to discuss about your sister's book."

"My book?" Callie looked up, clutching the notebook closer. "What about it?"

Admiral Ahab settled onto a stool, his expression serious. "Based on our observations and analysis, your book functions as a Metaphysical Muddlemap."

"A what now?" Hyperion asked.

"A Metaphysical Muddlemap," Admiral Ahab repeated, as if increased volume might enhance comprehension. "A rare object existing at the intersection of multiple storylines. It both records and influences the reality around it."

"It's just a notebook," Callie said, though she sounded unconvinced. "I write things in it. Observations, mostly."

"May I see it?" Admiral Ahab held out a paw.

Callie hesitated, then carefully handed over her book. The admiral handled it with reverence, turning the pages slowly. The Empathy Stone slipped from his uniform and began to glow with a soft blue light.

"Just as I suspected," he murmured. "The patterns are unmistakable. Look here." He pointed to a page where Callie had written about Drago Malfield's snowmobile breaking down during the race. "You wrote this before it happened, didn't you?"

She nodded slowly. "I just had a feeling."

"And here," he flipped to another page, where Callie had sketched a crude map. "This depicts the Dorsal Fin Settlement, but you drew it before seeing it."

"I thought I was just doodling."

Admiral Ahab returned the book to her. "A Metaphysical Muddlemap doesn't create reality, it clarifies it. It helps the user see patterns and connections hidden to most observers. In the right hands, it becomes an invaluable tool. In the wrong hands..."

"Let me guess," Hyperion said dryly. "Catastrophe, doom, the end of the world as we know it?"

"Pretty much," Marilyn Finchtool confirmed cheerfully. "Though add more tentacles and exploding stars than you're imagining. And the aftermath paperwork qualifies as absolutely murderous."

A loud bell began to ring somewhere outside the medical bay, its tone suggesting not dinner or visiting hours but something significantly more ominous. The admiral's ears twitched in alarm.

"Scale Rain," he said tersely. "We need to move. Now."

"Scale Rain?" Hyperion repeated. "What's, "

"No time to explain," Meril said, already gathering equipment with the efficiency of someone who practices emergency evacuations competitively. "Ripple, get the Reality Umbrellas!"

"I can only find two!" Ripple called back, rummaging through a closet hollowed from a tree stump.

"Then we'll have to share," Admiral Ahab said grimly. "Quickly now!"

Hyperion found himself hustled toward another door by surprisingly strong otter paws. Callie was already there, peering out with undisguised curiosity.

"Come on, Hype," she called. "You have to see this place!"

Stepping through the scallop-shell door plunged him into a dream, the kind that makes perfect sense until you wake up and try to explain it to someone else, when you realize it involved your third-grade teacher riding a bicycle made of cheese.

The Dorsal Fin Settlement spread before them, a community approaching architecture the way jazz musicians approached sheet music, as loose suggestion rather than strict requirement. Buildings of all shapes and sizes clung to what Hyperion now recognized as a massive fin rising from the landscape. Some structures consisted of driftwood and kelp, others of salvaged materials from shipwrecks. A few seemed built entirely from

bubbles that somehow remained solid despite occasional fish swimming through them.

The sky above wasn't sky at all, but a vast expanse of deep blue-green that occasionally rippled, suggesting the view from the bottom of an ocean. Distant lights twinkled through this not-sky, but whether stars or something else entirely, Hyperion couldn't tell.

Most striking of all were the inhabitants. Sea otters bustled everywhere with characteristic industriousness. But they weren't alone. Hyperion spotted seals lounging on floating platforms, a group of puffins operating a postal service, and even a walrus in a judge's wig presiding over a dispute between two crabs whose dramatic pincer-waving suggested accusations of crimes against crustacean-ity.

"Reality Umbrellas up!" Admiral Ahab commanded, snapping Hyperion out of his daze.

Ripple distributed umbrella contraptions fashioned from interlocking fish scales. Admiral Ahab unfurled one over himself and Callie with a flick of his paw, while Meril sheltered Hyperion and Ripple beneath the second.

Looking up, Hype saw scales falling from the not-sky. But these weren't ordinary scales. One landed on a nearby barrel, turning it into a small grandfather clock before reverting to its original form.

Another fell into a puddle near Hyperion's feet. The puddle instantly froze, then inverted, showing no reflection of the sky above, but a glimpse of somewhere else entirely. For just a second, Hype caught sight of a white, luminous city and an upside-down crab wearing a sophisticated outfit, looking as startled to see him as he was to see it. Then the puddle returned to normal, leaving him blinking in confusion.

"Did you see that?" he asked Meril.

"The scales sometimes open tiny windows between realities," said Meril. "Or delusions. Usually harmless, but best not to step

in any puddles during scale rain. I once saw an otter do that and he returned with someone else's memories and a sudden inexplicable preference for tapioca pudding."

Callie, meanwhile, watched the falling scales with rapt attention. As one exceptionally bright scale drifted down, she reached out her hand despite Admiral Silvercrest's warning and caught it before it hit the ground.

"Callie!" Hyperion called out. "What are you doing?"

But nothing catastrophic happened. The scale sat in Callie's palm, radiating a crisp chill that made her fingertips tingle. It wasn't a scale at all but a perfect crystalline snowflake, its edges splitting the light into tiny rainbows.

"It's beautiful," she murmured, carefully tucking it into her pocket. "And it's cold."

"A cryo-scale," Admiral Ahab observed with interest. "Rare, even during scale rain. Best keep that safe, young lady. It might prove useful."

"Scale rain," Meril explained to Hyperion, seeing his bewildered expression. "Happens when the Great Halibut swims through certain cosmic currents. The scales cause reality distortions more confusing than the average tax form."

"Is it dangerous?" Hyperion asked, watching as a scale landed on a flowerpot, turning the flowers inside into tiny singing fish for a few seconds.

"Not usually," Admiral Ahab said. "More of an inconvenience. However, I once saw an otter get hit directly and spend three days convinced he was a teapot. Kept trying to pour tea from his nose."

As they huddled under their reality umbrellas, making their way through the settlement, Hyperion noticed a group of scholars engaged in heated debate. They wore academic robes designed specifically to snag on passing objects, and each carried scrolls or books that they occasionally waved at each other for emphasis.

"The Fishlosophers Guild," Admiral Ahab explained, following Hyperion's gaze. "They're debating the nature of the Underside. No one from the topside has ever seen it directly. The debate about what exists there has lasted seventy-three years and advanced nowhere."

As they drew closer, snippets of the debate became audible.

"The Underside must logically mirror our own reality in reverse," insisted a portly seal with spectacles balanced precariously on his snout. "The principle of cosmic symmetry demands it!"

"Nonsense!" countered an elderly otter with a beard that reached his feet and housed at least three smaller creatures that had either gotten lost or taken up residence. "The Underside doesn't exist at all! It's merely a theoretical construct we've invented to explain the Great Halibut's movement!"

"You're both wrong," said a third voice, belonging to a young otter with mismatched flippers. "The Underside exists, but in a state of quantum superposition that collapses into definite form only when observed!"

"And who, pray tell, performs this observing?" demanded the bearded otter, several small berries falling from his facial hair as he spoke.

"The King Crabs, obviously," replied the young otter, as if this explained everything.

Admiral Ahab sighed. "They've been having the same argument since before I was born. Come along, we need to reach the Council Chamber before the Scale Rain intensifies."

They continued through the settlement, Hyperion trying to absorb everything while avoiding the occasional reality-warping scale that slipped past their umbrellas. They passed a market where merchants advertised their wares with jingles that rhymed in three different languages simultaneously, a school where young otters learned the fine art of cracking sea urchins against specialized stones, and a jazz club where seals played

instruments fashioned from coral and driftwood, producing music suggesting Miles Davis reincarnated as a walrus.

Callie scribbled furiously in her book, pausing only to ask questions that impressed and alarmed Admiral Ahab.

"So the Great Halibut doesn't control where it goes?" she asked.

"Not consciously, no," Admiral Ahab replied. "It swims according to its nature, following cosmic currents that have existed since the beginning of flatime. Or Tuesday of last week, depending on which fishlosophy you subscribe to."

"And you all just live on it? Without knowing where it's going?"

"Is that so different from your planet?" Meril asked. "Does Earth consult its inhabitants about its orbital patterns?"

Before Hyperion could explain the fundamental differences between a planet and a giant fish, a scuttling sound caught his attention. He turned to see a crab approaching, though calling it merely a "crab" would equate a battle tank to a children's tricycle.

Its shell featured welded metal plates and circuitry, while motorized appendages jutted from its body instead of natural limbs. Camera lenses rotated on telescoping stalks, and a miniature satellite dish perched on its back, constantly swiveling to track invisible signals.

"Pinchwraith!" Admiral Ahab hissed, pulling Callie behind a nearby barrel faster than a bargain hunter grabbing the last discounted television on Black Friday. Meril and Ripple followed suit, dragging Hyperion with them.

"What is that thing?" Hyperion whispered.

"Robot spy crabs," Meril explained in a low voice. "They've been appearing more frequently lately. No one knows who built them or what they want, but they're always watching, always collecting information. They function like your dimension's tax auditors, but with more legs."

The pinchwraith paused in the middle of the street, its camera eyes surveying all directions. For a moment, one lens seemed to focus directly on their hiding spot, and Hyperion felt a chill unrelated to his recent dip in freezing water.

Then, without warning, the pinchwraith skittered toward them with alarming speed.

"It's seen us!" Ripple squeaked.

Admiral Ahab reached into his uniform and pulled out a small flute carved from a hollow reed. "Stay behind me!"

But before the admiral could unleash whatever defensive capabilities the flute possessed, the pinchwraith suddenly stopped. Its parts whirred and clicked, and then, to Hyperion's astonishment, it began to transform. Additional legs unfolded from hidden compartments, its body reconfigured, and within seconds, what had been one crab became three smaller ones, each equally menacing.

The three Pinchwraiths formed a semicircle, blocking their path. The cameras focused on Callie, or, more specifically, on her book.

"Metaphysical Muddlemap detected," came a tinny voice from the center pinchwraith. "Priority acquisition target identified."

"They're after the book!" Admiral Ahab raised his flute to his lips.

"Wait!" Callie jumped up before anyone could stop her. She held up her book and opened it to a page she had just written on. "I don't think they want to hurt us."

"Callie, get back here!" Hyperion lunged for his sister, but Meril held him back with surprising strength.

"Wait," the otter engineer said. "Look."

The pinchwraiths had frozen in place, their parts whirring but making no forward progress. They had run into an invisible wall, the kind that mimes pretend exists and passersby pretend to believe in.

"What did you write?" Admiral Ahab asked, flute still at the ready.

Callie turned the book so they could see. The page contained the words in her neat handwriting: "The pinchwraiths found themselves unable to move forward, caught in a logical paradox of their own programming."

As they watched, the center crab began to twitch and spark. Its camera spun wildly, and smoke rose from its joints.

"Logical paradox detected," it announced in its tinny voice. "Rebooting systems."

With a series of clicks and whirs, the center pinchwraith collapsed into a heap of inert metal and shell.

But to everyone's surprise, the other two remained functional. They circled their fallen comrade, their appendages reconfiguring into weapons that looked alarmingly purposeful.

"That's new," Admiral Ahab muttered, raising his flute again.

"Alternative acquisition protocols activated," announced one of the remaining pinchwraiths. "Resistance identified. Escalation authorized."

The two crabs suddenly scuttled forward with alarming speed, one heading directly for Callie while the other moved to intercept the admiral.

The admiral blew into his flute, producing a high-pitched note that made Hyperion's teeth ache. The pinchwraith charging him suddenly veered off course, its movements erratic as if its navigation systems had been disrupted.

Meanwhile, Hyperion broke free of Meril's grip and lunged to pull Callie out of the way of the second pinchwraith. They tumbled behind a cart just as the robot crab snapped its claws where Callie had stood moments before.

"We should be moving along," Admiral Ahab shouted, still playing disruptive notes on his flute. "They're calling for reinforcements!"

Sure enough, more scuttling sounds echoed in the distance, growing louder by the second, reminiscent of someone spilling a box of wind-up toys down a metal staircase.

"This way!" Meril called, pointing to a narrow alley between two buildings. "The maintenance tunnels will lead us to safety!"

They ran, dodging confused settlement dwellers and occasional falling scales. Behind them, the pinchwraiths regrouped, joined by more of their kind emerging from side streets and shadows.

"In here!" Meril yanked open a manhole cover disguised as a large decorative plate. "Quickly!"

They dropped into the opening one by one, Hyperion going last after ensuring Callie's safe descent. He pulled the cover closed just as the first pinchwraith reached their position, its claws scraping against the metal with the sound of fingernails on a chalkboard amplified through stadium speakers.

They found themselves in a dimly lit tunnel that smelled of seaweed and machine oil. Soft bioluminescent moss provided just enough light to make the otters look like attendees at an underwater rave.

"Why are those things after us?" Hyperion demanded once they had caught their breath. "And why are they so interested in Callie's book?"

"Pinchwraiths originated as maintenance crabs augmented with technology, but someone has been upgrading them for more aggressive purposes," Admiral Ahab explained, still holding his flute at the ready. "The Count's influence, no doubt."

"We don't know who controls them," Meril added, "but they've become increasingly interested in artifacts of power."

"I don't understand," Callie said. "Why would anyone want my notebook? It's just full of random thoughts and observations."

"That's what makes it valuable," Admiral Ahab said gravely. "A Metaphysical Muddlemap in the hands of someone who understands its power could make reality extremely malleable."

"Which is never a good thing," Ripple added helpfully. "Reality gets cranky when bent too much. Professor Bubbles once tried to rearrange the constellations and ended up with a three-day migraine and star-shaped freckles. In places you wouldn't expect freckles, if you take my meaning!"

"So what do we do now?" Hyperion asked.

"We continue to the Council Chamber," Admiral Ahab said firmly. "But we'll take the maintenance tunnels. It's safer, if somewhat more circuitous and occasionally occupied by creatures with too many legs." He turned to Meril. "Can you guide us?"

"Of course," Meril said, producing a small light from her tool belt. "The tunnels are my domain. Well, mine and the maintenance squirrels, but they owe me a favor after I fixed their communal bubble bath last month."

As they set off through the winding tunnels, Hyperion found himself walking beside Admiral Ahab while Callie chatted animatedly with Meril and Ripple just ahead of them.

"Those pinchwraiths," Hyperion said in a low voice. "One stopped working when Callie wrote about a paradox, but the others didn't. Why?"

Admiral Silvercrest's expression grew grim. "It means they're evolving, becoming more sophisticated. The Metaphysical Muddlemap can influence reality but not control it. Someone is preparing these spy crabs to resist such influences."

"Who?" Hyperion pressed.

"That," said the admiral, "is what the Council wants to know. And why is your arrival, both of you, so significant? The Great Halibut doesn't bring people through the Membrane by accident."

Hyperion glanced at his sister, who was now showing Ripple a drawing in her book while the small otter gasped in delight.

"You think we're here for a reason," he said. It wasn't a question.

"I know you are," Admiral Ahab replied softly. "The random patterns reveal themselves as unmistakably unreasonable. The question remains whether that reason is to prevent a disaster or to witness one."

Above them, the Great Halibut continued its cosmic swim, blissfully unaware that on its dorsal fin, two human children from Homer, Alaska were about to become entangled in the most significant crisis in its long and fishy existence. The universe, meanwhile, made a note to itself to pay more attention to where it put its cosmic fish, as things were getting entirely too complicated on this particular one.



END OF SAMPLE

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