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# Before the Melt

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## Introduction

It happened almost overnight. The polar ice caps—guardians of a precarious balance—succumbed to cataclysm, their ancient bodies dissolving into endless tides. The oceans rose, swallowing coastlines, cities, and nations in a relentless, all-consuming flood. Islands vanished. Continents fractured. Civilization, once sprawling and seismic in its reach, retreated to tenuous sanctuaries perched above or hidden beneath the new world sea.

In the years since the Melt, humanity survives as fragments of its former self. Those lucky or ruthless enough to claim high ground have staked out mountaintop isles: isolated citadels ringed by cliffs and suspicion. Elsewhere, engineers and innovators erected buoyant megastructures—vast floating cities whose populations press steadily against the fragile walls separating them from oblivion. And below, in the cold darkness, scientists haunt the remnants of drowned empires, pursuing discoveries in experimental habitats beneath crushing waters.

This shattered earth is ruled not by old flags or faded ideals, but by factions locked in a desperate struggle. Pirates—merciless and desperate—roam the waves, preying on floaters and refugees. Corporate syndicates, now the arbiters of order and cruelty alike, enforce their grip with fleets of drone patrols and hired guns, bartering scraps of technology and safe passage for fealty. Refugees drift among the ruins, haunted by memories and hunger, searching for hope in salvage and myth. Scattered researchers, outcasts or visionaries, piece together a broken past, searching for an answer that might never come.

Into this tempest moves Mara Bishop—a scavenger diver, resourceful and resolutely alone. She makes her living pulling secrets and treasures from the drowned world, trading risk for the chance to forget her scars. The sea is her refuge and her enemy both: every dive a test of memory, every breath a reminder of what the waters took—her family, her faith, and something of herself she cannot name. Mara's past is as murky as the depths she plumbs, and she trusts strangers as little as she trusts the luck that's kept her alive.

But even for those resigned to this new normal, legends persist. Whispers drift across the waves of a land untouched by salt and tide, a stronghold beyond the reach of power and storm. For most, it's superstition—a fantasy to dull the ache. But for some, it is a beacon, a siren call for the desperate and the dangerous alike. The truth, as Mara will soon discover, is far stranger and more perilous than myth.

In the story that follows, the last survivors of a drowned civilization hunt not only for a

place to belong, but for answers. Against a backdrop of sunken towers, floating fortresses, and unknown depths, alliances will fracture and secrets rise from the water. When trust is a luxury and hope is treacherous, Mara Bishop must chart her own course—one that might redeem the world, or doom it to vanish beneath the waves forever.

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## CHAPTER ONE: The Drowning World

The hull of the *Sea Serpent* groaned, a familiar symphony of protesting metal and shifting ballast as the current nudged her against the skeletal remains of what was once a towering office building. Salt-crusted wind whipped Mara Bishop's dark hair across her face as she cinched the straps of her rebreather rig, the air tasting of ozone and distant rain. Below, the water, a bruised indigo, swallowed the last of the afternoon light, promising only the cold, silent depths.

Her work rig was a patchwork of scavenged tech and meticulously maintained ancient pieces - the rebreather itself was a pre-Melt military unit, modified to run on a crude but effective algae-based oxygen generator. The deep-sea lamp on her wrist cast a pale circle, illuminating the swirling particulate in the water below. Mara stood on a precarious dive platform, barely wider than her shoulders, bolted to the *Sea Serpent's* starboard side. Her small, salvaged vessel was more rust than paint, a testament to her solitary existence and the scarcity of resources in the flooded world.

This sector was known as the 'Lower Manhattan Graveyard,' a vast, submerged necropolis of glass and steel. Most of the easy picks had long since been stripped by pirates or corporate salvage crews. What remained were the deep, dangerous sites, the ones that promised either immense reward or a watery grave. Mara preferred the latter; the challenge kept the ghosts at bay.

She adjusted the mask, the synthetic rubber cool against her skin, and double-checked the integrity of her comms unit. Static crackled in her ear, a constant companion. "Coming up on two hundred meters, Mara. Readings are stable, but there's a strong thermocline around one-fifty. Watch your buoyancy." The voice belonged to Jax, her comms tech and only regular crewmate. He was a skinny kid, barely out of his teens, with eyes that held too much fear and a surprising knack for ancient tech. He operated the *Sea Serpent's* sonar and atmospheric sensors from the cramped bridge.

"Copy that, Jax. Anything on the long-range scan?" Mara asked, her voice muffled through the comms. She knew the answer. The ocean was a vast, open hunting ground. Corporate enforcers were always looking for independent operators to either absorb or eliminate. Pirates simply wanted everything you had.

"Clear for now. But that doesn't mean much this far out. Just remember, our last run-in with the Leviathan crew was around these coordinates." Jax's voice was tinged with a nervous tremor. The Leviathan crew were a particularly brutal band of pirates, known for leaving no survivors and stripping vessels to their last bolt. Mara had a score to

settle with them, though she rarely let herself dwell on it. Sentiment was a luxury in this world.

“Noted,” Mara replied, her gaze fixed on the submerged skyline. The tips of the tallest buildings, once cloud-piercing monuments to human ambition, now barely broke the surface, resembling jagged, oxidized teeth. Lower down, entire skyscrapers lay on their sides, forming artificial reefs where bioluminescent creatures pulsed like distant, alien stars. The silence of the deep was a balm, a temporary escape from the incessant hum of the *Sea Serpent’s* aging engines and the gnawing anxiety that was life above the water.

With a final breath, Mara tipped backward, a practiced roll that sent her seamlessly into the cool embrace of the ocean. The current pulled at her, but her movements were fluid, honed by years of navigating treacherous waters. The lamp on her wrist pierced the gloom, revealing a confetti of debris – twisted rebar, shards of glass, the skeletal remains of what might have been office furniture. Each piece held a story, a silent testament to the speed and ferocity of the Melt.

The pressure built steadily as she descended, a dull ache in her ears that she equalized with practiced ease. The thermocline hit at exactly one hundred and fifty meters, a sudden drop in temperature that made the water around her ripple. It was here that visibility began to truly diminish, the pale blue fading to a deeper, more ominous black. Her lamp became her world, a small, defiant beacon against the encroaching darkness.

She swam towards a particularly large, dark mass on the sonar, a building that Jax’s readouts suggested had remained remarkably intact. It was a long shot, but sometimes the most promising targets were the ones that seemed too dangerous to bother with. Most divers wouldn’t risk such a deep penetration into a potentially unstable structure. But Mara wasn’t most divers.

As she drew closer, the contours of the building began to resolve themselves from the inky blackness. It was a research facility, or at least, that’s what the faded, barnacle-encrusted plaque near the entrance suggested: ‘Project Seraphim – Oceanographic Research & Development.’ A shiver, unrelated to the cold, traced its way down Mara’s spine. Research vessels often carried unique tech, sometimes even untouched data. But they also attracted the most dangerous kind of attention.

The main entrance, a gaping maw of twisted metal and shattered glass, beckoned like a forgotten crypt. Mara paused, hovering just outside, her lamp sweeping the perimeter. The water was unnervingly still here, the usual currents muted by the sheer mass of the submerged structure. A strange sense of foreboding settled over her, a prickle on her skin that she had learned to trust over years of near misses.

“Mara, you there?” Jax’s voice, a thin thread of sound in her ear, sounded more strained than usual. “Lost some of your telemetry. Are you inside?”

“Not yet. Just observing the entrance. It’s... a research facility. Project Seraphim.” She kept her voice even, not wanting to alarm the kid. But the name itself stirred something, a half-forgotten whisper from a past she usually kept locked away. Seraphim. Why did that sound familiar?

“Seraphim?” Jax repeated, a hint of awe in his voice. “I’ve heard stories. Ancient, pre-Melt. They were supposedly on the cutting edge of... something. Ocean seeding, deep-sea exploration. Top secret stuff. You might be onto something big, Mara.”

“Or nothing at all,” she countered, pushing aside the unsettling feeling. “Stay sharp, Jax. If anything moves on that sonar, you tell me. And I mean anything.” She didn’t wait for a reply, pushing through the shattered entrance. The water inside was even murkier, thick with sediment and the detritus of a world violently extinguished.

She moved through the submerged corridors with methodical efficiency, her lamp cutting through the gloom. Offices floated eerily, their chairs and desks suspended as if frozen in time. Discarded files, still legible despite the water damage, drifted past like ghostly jellyfish. Mara ignored them. She was looking for something more substantial, something worth the risk. Data drives, high-tech equipment, anything that could be traded for fresh water, rations, or the precious few components needed to keep the *Sea Serpent* operational.

The building’s internal structure was surprisingly intact, a testament to its robust pre-Melt construction. She passed what looked like a control room, its consoles encrusted with rust, the screens dark and dead. The air inside her rebreather felt heavy, each breath a conscious effort. The pressure was immense at this depth, the very water pressing in on her, trying to reclaim her.

Then she saw it. Tucked away in a partially collapsed laboratory, a small, reinforced safe was bolted to the floor. It was old-world tech, built to withstand a siege, let alone a flood. It was also, infuriatingly, locked. Mara knew better than to expect easy access. Nothing ever was.

She pulled a small, specialized cutting torch from her utility belt, its blue flame flickering eerily in the watery darkness. This would take time, and time was a luxury she rarely had. As the torch bit into the metal, a cloud of fine particulate erupted, swirling around her. She worked slowly, methodically, the grinding sound a dull thrum through the water.

Minutes stretched into an eternity. The safe’s door finally buckled, revealing a small,

watertight compartment. Inside, nestled among a few other sealed containers, was a sleek, black journal. It looked surprisingly intact, its digital display dark but uncracked. This was it. This was the score. It wasn't the usual salvage. It felt... important.

Just as her fingers closed around the journal, a faint, rhythmic pulsing reached her through the water. Not the hum of the *Sea Serpent's* engines. Something else. Something larger. The tell-tale thump of propellers, far off but growing closer.

"Mara! Contact!" Jax's voice, sharp with panic, sliced through her comms. "Three signatures, fast-moving. Bearing two-seven-zero, closing rapidly. They're heavy, Mara. Could be corporate, could be Leviathan. Get out of there, *now!*"

Mara cursed under her breath. She didn't need Jax to tell her. Her body already felt the vibrations, the subtle shift in water pressure. They were close. Too close. She snatched the journal, tucking it securely into a watertight pouch on her belt, and shoved the other containers into a spare bag. The torch clattered to the floor as she pushed off, kicking furiously for the surface.

The familiar, reassuring darkness of the building's interior now felt like a trap. Every shadow seemed to hold a lurking threat. She burst from the building's entrance, her lamp sweeping wildly, catching glints of something large and dark in the distance. The pulsating sound was louder now, a predatory thrumming.

She swam upwards with desperate speed, her lungs burning, the rebreather struggling to keep pace with her exertion. The surface, a distant patch of bruised light, seemed impossibly far away. Below her, a massive, shark-like shadow detached itself from the gloom. Not a fish. A submersible. And it was fast. Too fast.

The water around her erupted as a powerful propulsion wash hit her, almost tearing the rebreather from her face. She spun, disoriented, the submersible a dark blur hurtling past her. It wasn't a pirate vessel, not with that sleek design and silent power. Corporate enforcers. And they knew she was here.

A sharp, almost imperceptible *ping* echoed through the water. Sonar. They were actively hunting her. Mara veered sharply, using a cluster of submerged vehicles as cover, her heart hammering against her ribs. She was a single, vulnerable target in an ocean full of predators. The journal, heavy and silent against her hip, suddenly felt less like a prize and more like a curse.

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