

Above

Even more so than what lies below the Ground, which many lost interest in completely after the discovery that the World was round, what lies Above the Ceiling has been the primary subject of myth and speculation since before the dawn of civilization. Some thought that the ice just went on up forever. Others imagined a Realm Above, on the other side of the ice. Still others thought that eventually the ice stopped, but there was nothing on the other side. Of course, being the only one that could support detailed stories, the Realm Above theory was also the most widespread. It was arguably also closest to correct, although the truth bore little resemblance to any of the myths.

Unsurprisingly, all of the Realm Above myths had one mistake in common: they all held that there was water above the ice. The abundance of water made people tend to take the omnipresence of water for granted. Water was the closest they could imagine to emptiness. This ties in to a common criticism of hidden realm theory: ice rises, so if there was a realm above the Ceiling, why doesn't the Ceiling rise? The most common answer to this was that ice must merely be drawn towards the Ceiling, and it would fall in the Realm Above. No one considered the possibility of there being a realm without water Above the Ceiling until around the time that scientists first demonstrated that ice rises due to its lower density than water rather than any sort of long-distance attraction to the Ceiling.

Around two generations ago, we built a machine that could dig through the Ceiling, and we reached Above. The Ascender was operated by a single crewman in a sealed pod filled with water. Scientists had figured out by then that there would be no water Above (there turned out to be a small amount of oxygen gas), so they had not equipped the Ascender with exterior sonar. Instead, it had only a gas sampler and a camera with light source, with interior sonar output to the crewman. The light source turned out to be redundant however, because Above was illuminated. The surface of Above was relatively boring: There was ice all over, mostly smooth but occasionally bumpy or gashed. But in the Void above Above, there was a large, stationary, faintly-glowing disk, with a line passing through its center and extending quite far to either side, and myriad tiny meandering points of light. It soon became apparent that the disk was a sphere, and that our World circled around it with the same side constantly facing inward, while the points of light stayed relatively still. The line was found to be a system of concentric rings around the Sphere in roughly the same plane as our World's orbit.

At first, it was thought that most of the light illuminating Above was from the Sphere, but mathematicians soon discovered that the light from the Sphere was a reflection, coming from one of the Lights that stood out from the others as largest and brightest: the Source. Similarly, the Lights turned out to meander somewhat even after accounting for our World's rotation and revolution around the Sphere; this was accounted for by the Sphere revolving slowly around the Source. Naturally, we built better observatories and sent them Above so we could study the Void in more detail. We discovered several more bodies circling around the Source, and three more worlds circling around the Sphere. Eventually, we found several smaller bodies circling the Sphere, and some circling other bodies circling the Source.

Most of our attention was focused on the three nearby worlds. All were slightly larger than our own. One was closer to the Sphere, and two farther away. The innermost world looked rocky and inhospitable, but the outer two each had icy ceilings of their own, and many thought that there might be water underneath, and maybe even life in the water. Soon, technology and industry advanced to the point where we were able to send explorers to the outer worlds. The explorers found that there was water under the ceilings of both worlds, though in both cases, the ceilings were considerably thicker than that of our World. The explorers had to stay in their sealed suits throughout the entire mission, because the water of both worlds would have been inhospitable for us, but in the outermost world, we encountered a surprise: microscopic life that shared remarkable molecular similarities to life from our World. At first, many thought that this was just a strange coincidence, or that life had to evolve with

those particular molecular features. Eventually, however, a consensus emerged among biologists that there must be a connection, though no one could figure out how.

Around the same time, attention was turning to the four small bodies circling close to the source that could be considered large worlds. The third and largest of the four was of particular interest because much of its surface consisted of water open to the Void, whereas the other three appeared entirely rocky. We decided to send an explorer. As with all the previous missions, there was fierce competition for the job, but in the end, I was selected.

After the long journey, I arrived in the open ocean of the third world from the Source. It was even denser with life than our own World, and again, it had complex molecular similarities with life from our World and its neighbor. I had implicitly assumed that the life here would depend on geothermal energy, but after much inspection, I discovered that most of the autotrophs here actually produced chemical energy out of light from the Source! I encountered another surprise in the form of a species of large creatures that would periodically come to the surface, eject gas into the atmosphere, and draw more gas back into their bodies before returning. This was apparently the way they obtained oxygen, which seemed strange, as most of the other heterotrophs had developed a method for using oxygen dissolved in the water, similar to our own, and I could not conceive of any particular advantage to getting oxygen from the atmosphere.

In pondering this mystery, I thought of many implausible hypotheses. Among them was the possibility that air-breathing had been developed as a means of surviving on the rocky portion of this world's surface, and some creatures started spending so long on the rock that they lost their ability to breath water, only for their descendants to find reason to migrate back to the ocean. While this hypothesis did not seem any less absurd than the others on its own, thinking of it caused me to remember that, when I neared this world, I had noticed strange features on the rock that I could not explain. Maybe they were signs of life?

As ridiculous as the notion of life on rock seemed, it held my curiosity so much that I could not help but investigate. I journeyed to the edge of the rock, even knowing that I might face questions about why I wasted time and resources on such a pointless excursion when I returned. But, to my astonishment, it turned out that the surface of the rock was covered in life, maybe even more than the ocean. I was equipped with tools for tunneling through the ocean floor so that I could look for clues regarding this world's history. After my latest discovery, I decided to use these to tunnel under the rocky portion of the surface. Progress was slow, but I encountered several fascinating fossils, as well as arrangements of harder material in patterns that did not seem likely to arise naturally. It gradually dawned on me that I had stumbled into the ruins of an advanced civilization of rock-dwellers. I searched the rocky surface for signs of them, but found nothing. I could not tell how advanced they were, and unfortunately, I did not have time to find out, as I was running out of supplies, and had to return to our World. Maybe they were advanced enough to make the same journey that I made. Maybe they seeded our own World and its neighbor with life from this world. But then what happened to them?