

Finding *Oannes*

By Michael Haley

“we mistake ourselves when we suppose that wilderness can be the solution to our culture's problematic relationships with the nonhuman world, for wilderness is no small part of the problem.”

- **William Cronon**, *The Trouble With Wilderness or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature*, 1996

It feels like lifetimes have come and passed since the great *Oannes* was lost at sea.

Life on the mainland has become stale. No longer does Wonder have a home on land—everything there is to know about the ground below our feet has been figured out. Resources crucial to the survival of humanity have been meticulously mapped out, and international leaders have set up mining operations that allow consistent production and extraction of carbon-based fuels. Nature Reservations are established across the planet's continents to compensate for the rampant fracking and exploitation of the Earth to harvest these precious resources. Only on these reservations does wildlife exist. Generous amounts of land have been cast aside to maintain controlled habitats of all remaining land-based species that share Earth with Humanity. Visitors are not permitted access to most of these sanctuaries; the ones that allow tourists have a hefty fee and tax attached to each ticket - narrowing the privilege to only the wealthiest of dreamers. This restriction was a necessary punishment to atone for the brutal and ravenous nature of which Humanity gutted the Earth. The mainland had to be strictly governed to avoid utter ecological devastation.

On the mainland, life had become predictable, devoid of wonder. With its predestination and lack of imagination, the ground had lost its appeal. But Wonder hadn't died yet. Many looked toward the stars for inspiration. Space and its emptiness offered a canvas to paint our adventurous fantasies. While speculation of what escapades await in the stratosphere, there was nothing the modern man could do but speculate about space. For some, this was enough, but others, like myself, craved something tangible. And so, we turned to the abyss, the deep blue that defines the land's boundaries, the sea.

For those of us seeking adventure, we turned to the abyss. The deep blue that defines the land's boundaries. The sea, our ultimate frontier, a realm of mystery and wonder for centuries.

Once an obstacle, the ocean has become Earth's last 'no-mans-land,' where the spirit of exploration still thrives. Humanity sought sport and relaxation in the sea as it grew out of its earthy habitat. Soon, people looked to the ocean like they once did at our forests and deserts. A sense of feral curiosity swept the world, and soon, harbors and bays were cluttered with sails and lone center console boats. But one stood out amongst all the ships that skimmed the ocean surface: the beautiful *Oannes*.

And then there was the *Oannes*, a marvel, a vessel crafted from ivory and gold, adorned with tall, glistening chimneys that exhaled robust, dark black smoke. Her deck was a spectacle, illuminated by spotlights rumored to be so powerful they could pierce the deepest waters, turning them clear as glass. Strapped alongside *Oannes* were a fleet of smaller boats and sub-nautical vehicles, each equipped with an impressive array of camera equipment and scuba gear. The mainland's newspapers were abuzz with tales of the wonders within her hull: rumors of an aquarium vast enough to house displays for every recorded marine species, a library stocked with multiple copies of every known source of oceanic research, and a glass keel that served as an observatory for her Captain, Glanton, to peer into the depths and gaze upon the ocean floor.

Before we delve into the story of the *Oannes*, let us first meet the man who captained her, a man of unparalleled courage and intellect, Captain Jonathan Glanton. Glanton, a hero dedicated to advancing human knowledge, was like Einstein or Galileo, his name spoken with reverence. The Captain and his ship were traveling monuments, illustrating the tremendous feats of knowledge acquired regarding the oceanic realm. They were universally renowned for their successful collection and preservation of detailed records of the ocean's contents and are held responsible for over three-quarters of the knowledge Man has of the sea.

Some of Glanton's most notable surviving notes are meticulously documented mile-by-mile surveys of the ocean's floor, keeping track of every fish and crustacean Glanton's camera systems catch. Glanton was known to travel with a rather large film crew, who worked in shifts, constantly keeping digital eyes glued to the deep. Every camera had its live feed broadcasted in the Captain's living quarters. In many of Glanton's addresses to the land, he would compare aspects of the sea to established concepts on land. Schools of fish would be described as "perfect traffic," colorful coral reefs were called "miniature skylines, rich with subaquatic culture." Glanton painted a renaissance picture of the deep sea that took the land by storm.

Glanton's research also revealed relics from long-forgotten pasts: remains of prehistoric animals, ruins of sunken ships, and even things from the skies, such as fallen planes or asteroids. All of these were meticulously documented, and coordinates were relayed to the mainland for swift extraction. Numerous hydro excavation orders were issued, and owing to Glanton and the magnificent Oannes, human history has never been more definitive and accurate. High-ranking professors and historians have used Glanton's discovery to create a single compilation of human history that is entirely representative of all the world's population.

The last known photograph of Oannes was taken in Port Burt on the south end of the mainland. The image, taken on 35mm film, is grainy and smudged due to being out of focus. Gleaming streams of white light fill much of the frame, indicating that the film was not coiled adequately before being withdrawn from the camera. The warm, green water of the harbor, a heavy black smoke trail, and the stern of the lovely yacht remain visible in the photograph. The shot is dated 'May 68'; the last confirmed signals from Oannes' communications deck occurred over a year later, in March. The Oannes' last known objective was to collect folklore about the

seas from the mainland surrounding islands and their peoples. These stories would then be translated and edited to fit the mainland's history. Glanton's goal was to bring the stories of these people who were geographically outcasted from global society and integrate their cultures and values to create a new, wholly unified humanity. It is this mission, this unwavering determination to uncover the secrets of Oannes, that drives our protagonist forward.

Soon after she vanished, scientific organizations from throughout the mainland collaborated to collect and consolidate Oannes' surviving notes and data; abundant information on mineral deposits and other methods of locating and collecting natural resources was assembled and transmitted globally. It didn't take long for regulating bodies to need licenses for every possible aquatic activity. Permits were issued for activities such as fishing, swimming, and operating vehicles (with multiple licenses for different vehicle classes), and each permit included a monthly-to-annual subscription cost. Large maritime regions were marked and cordoned off with view buoys and security detail, and gigantic oil rigs were scattered across the seas face within a decade after Oannes' disappearance.

*Oannes* never had the opportunity to show the world his folklore collection. The mainland's ruling powers neglected the proposal, and any attempt to recapture *Oannes* was immediately abandoned. The mainland recovered from the disaster, but the Wonder remained alive—not for me. I would not rest until I discovered the secrets and intellectual riches that were lost with *Oannes*.

I found Oannes fifteen years after she disappeared. It was easy to locate the ship; the most challenging part was obtaining the necessary documents to perform such an examination. I packed my center console boat with a subaquatic camera to control remotely and set out into the deep blue. As previously indicated, there were recordings of messages from Captain Glanton in

which he provided his coordinates and plans. I followed his last known coordinates, which led me to a stretch of icy sea between two lonely, unnamed islands. Both islands were populated, as evidenced by shelters built on each beach. I couldn't see any of the island's residents, but could feel their eyes on me. I stared at the bleak length of the sea before me. What happened next changed the world for me.

I submerged my subaquatic camera and almost immediately spotted the remnants of *Oannes'* great chimneys. They were duller, softer, and faded white compared to their once glistening form. I maneuvered the camera to try and find an entrance into the ship; I looked for breaks in the deck or shattered windows, to no avail. The vessel had stayed in one piece throughout its descent to the ocean floor. Through windows, I saw the library, surveillance equipment, and types of machinery fit for a laboratory. Glanton's prestigious work had all been paused precisely where he had left it - successfully avoiding getting swallowed by the natural world. The ship, albeit worn down, still resembled its proud former self, but something was under her hull.

I approached the front end of *Oannes*, delving closer and closer to the seabed. That's when I saw the arm of the beast. Crushed between *Oannes* and the rocky ocean ground was a woman. Her torso alone was the span of the small single-console boat I arrived in. Her arm stretched diagonally towards the surface, her finger extended—as if reaching for the sun. The woman's face was obscured by dark black hair, but her head was angled backward in anguish. Just before the woman's waist, her pale skin hardened, splitting into individual grey scales - each reflecting the flashlight on the front of my camera. The being's legs couldn't be seen, for they were flattened underneath *Oannes*.

The sight of the woman beneath Oannes evoked a heartbreaking mix of amazement and melancholy. Here, beneath the weight of human ambition, lay a being from myth and legend, her ethereal beauty eternally trapped in time. She spoke of a forgotten world, a land of mysteries and marvels hidden beneath the seas, which we had abandoned and unknowingly devastated in our never-ending quest for understanding. I saw the intricate fabric of life and loss in that peaceful underwater tableau, where light and darkness moved in a timeless ballet. The woman's form, a delicate fusion of myth and reality, echoed the bittersweet melody of human endeavor and its unforeseen effects. It was a moment of significant reflection in which the ocean's depths mirrored the depths of our collective consciousness, exposing both the beauty and tragedy sewn into the fabric of creation.