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PAOLO, FRIEND PAOLO

The stars were wrong.

The Navigator emerged into the grip of an unexpected gravity well. Everything behind the first narrowed pinch of her wasp-like body was numb and unresponsive.

She was their link to new worlds, bred and engineered to carry the Seed—but this was not her destination, not the dull brown ashen planet targeted for reformation. Instead, her guidance whips trailed limp into an exosphere overwhelming with vivid compounds and colors. Even from this distance, the continents spreading like stains beneath her black armor, it smelled of water and oxygen. A rich home, however unplanned.

The Navigator tried to orient herself, but her neural pathways had burned in transit. She tried to swing into orbit, the same instinctive and graceful swoop she had performed thousands of times, but her thin, ebon limbs hung paralyzed beneath her as she lurched closer to the stink of ozone.

The Sisterhood had prepared her for this. We often break, they sang, and instilled in her a love of the hard victory. But the reality of glorious exile exhumed thoughts of a familiar sun. She stretched toward empty space as if mere proximity could return to her the sounds and smells of land, the faces lost to her, the feel of wind on unarmored skin.

But home was far. Duty remained. Falling toward the planet, she sang the paean—We Bring Life, Even In Death—and exulted. Only the best of them were sent into the dark. And she was not yet broken.

She prepared the Seed to complete its task without her.

The ocean spit salt against the boat, fanning huge arcs over the heads of its two passengers. The first man—whom everyone thought of as “Friend” Paolo, if they thought of him at all—squinted and turned away from the primal churn of foam and spray. His suit was soaked through, warping until the pinstripes resembled ocean swells.

He wrung the water from his tie and held it in front of him like a clump of hair pulled from a drain. “I either need Kiton to make me a wetsuit,” he said, “or I need a heads up on these inspections, so I can stop playing Jacques Cousteau in hand-stitched

wool.”

The other man—simply called Paolo—only stared ahead, the dusking sun reflected white on his narrow spectacles. He leaned forward, rigid as an owl preparing to drop onto its prey.

“Look at it,” said Paolo.

A few kilometers ahead, a sliver of gray cut through the mist just above the horizon. The beginnings of a floating city, brick and steel perched like mountains atop an abandoned oil platform—the core of an alternative energy research facility—planted against the winds and whitecaps of the Pacific.

As usual, the scale of Paolo’s plan was unprecedented. The press called the project “audacious” and, in light of Paolo’s (and Friend Paolo’s) track record, declared the promised results an imminent disruption of the energy sector. Friend Paolo smiled and agreed—“Paolo is a visionary; I’m proud to work for him”—but silently he gnawed on logistics.

Details were his domain. Paolo envisaged the untapped potential of an off-shore location for solar, wind, and kinetic tidal energy, but it was Friend Paolo who found a viable site and navigated international bureaucracies. Paolo identified his “dream team” of researchers and engineers; Friend Paolo recruited them, got contracts signed, kept them invested in the project. Where Paolo saw concept, Friend Paolo saw construction. Complication.

It had taken two months to reinforce and stabilize the platform, another six weeks to install the panels that concealed its exposed steel skeleton. Two weeks ago, the north pylon cracked; three days later, the south. At every step: delay, disaster, death. Yesterday, two welders fell from their perch after a rogue wave reached up from the froth and swatted them like insects. They were fished out, swollen and gray, but had lost all their equipment. And today, the waves had grown sharp like teeth.

“It’s beautiful,” said Friend Paolo.

“It’s shit!” Paolo’s hands were clutched together in front of him and turning white. In this wide expanse, his voice sounded thinner than normal. “Look at the scarring! I’m trying to birth a child and you give me a crew of ax-fisted monsters to play midwife.”

Through the hammering saltspray, Friend Paolo saw a cluster of seams curving across the custom-tempered, maraging steel. It was Frankensteinian; not at all the smooth, easy aesthetic that Paolo required.

Material costs and repair times wheeled through Friend Paolo’s head, an impossible

arithmetic. And he remembered, not for the first time, what the general contractor had told them, just before Paolo fired him: “It can’t be done; the ocean will eat it.”

He wilted against the side of the boat, but said only, “We can fix this. It’ll destroy the budget, but we can fix it.”

Paolo snorted. “The money’s not the problem.”

And Friend Paolo knew that was true. Everyone knew that was true.

Paolo’s great-grandfather had made a fortune building telegraph cables like spiderwebs between the coastal cities. Paolo’s grandfather, impatient and impulsive and consequently cut out of the family business, had made more fortunes tapping his father’s lines and blackmailing almost every moneyed family in Baja and Southern California. Paolo’s father did nothing of note, but he spent little and risked less, and as a result he did not lose those great fortunes before he died of a heart attack, alone in his walk-in closet. Now, with the help of the friend he had overshadowed since childhood, Paolo was determined to use that money to make the world remember him.

They arrived at the docking floats, which constantly adjusted to the surface swell. High above them, subcontractors clung to the sides of the oil platform like moss, welding, hammering, cutting.

“I’ll take care of it,” said Friend Paolo.

“Of course you will.” Paolo stared at him, his glasses mirrors. “Clean slate.”

Wind sucked the air from Friend Paolo’s lungs. A clean slate meant a new team, from the GC down. His mental timetables crumbled. Money might not be a problem, but time… Paolo was always very strict about time. “Let me talk to them. Maybe—”

“I get it. This is the good cop, bad cop routine? I keep you around because you’re ballast?” Paolo stepped onto the dock, his back to the boat, and shook his head. “That’s not it at all. You’re the mortar. I’m the pestle.”

Friend Paolo bit his upper lip, looked down, and waited.

The steady thump of the boat against the dock counted out the seconds as Paolo walked to the access ladder. “Gather everyone,” he said, not bothering to look back. “Fire everyone. Erase everyone. Build the fucking thing already.” He climbed, and as he climbed he grew smaller, blurrier, and finally disappeared over the top.

Friend Paolo sat and listened to the foreign sounds of the sea, lost in numbers and dates, internalizing his friend’s directions, and working as always to discern how to

bend the world to their needs.

Between the white noise pulse of waves, men’s voices drifted up like kites.

The strange planet grew larger.

The Navigator tried to cry out, to sing, but she could no longer feel others like herself. Instead of the constant neutrino-chatter of her sisters calling out their discoveries from distant stars, silence. Instead of the calm of a dead system waiting for the life she carried, the howl and shriek of radio waves.

Instead of the freeze of space, the burn of re-entry.

One moment, the platform swarmed with workers. Then, against the sunset, a coiling blackness fell and the world erupted. Paolo and Friend Paolo crouched like animals before it.

The detonation seemed to hang forever, a fortress of water and shadow so tall it consumed the sky, its movement betrayed only by the spit and froth playing along the top. But deep within, Friend Paolo saw—whether imagination or lightplay—a dark monstrosity, like an enormous insect, and ebon whips lashing against the sides of the wave, again and again and again—until it broke and fell like Jericho.

Friend Paolo returned to the world embryonic—curled and weightless. He tried to breathe but instead sucked saltwater, felt it burn down his throat and into his lungs. He flailed and kicked and clawed until, somehow, he broke out and rediscovered air. And blackness.

Night had fallen. Pale light decanted from the moon and stars—so many stars!—to illuminate the sea, his hands—everything—a strange, unvarying silver.

But the boat was gone. Paolo was gone. And before him, the harsh geometry of the platform, the only possible sanctuary, had been defeated. Two pylons had buckled. The outer walls had crumpled, revealing fractured support beams through jagged gaps, like mouths full of broken teeth. The platform itself, built to withstand even the most violent of anticipated natural disasters, had fallen. One side listed down and into the water, and the surface of it—where people had labored, where a city was to be built—was dull and gray and scraped clean.

He was halfway to that poor chance of refuge, wincing with each stroke, when he realized: even the oceanic swell was gone. Only his feeble paddling distorted the surface and its reflection of the ruin.

It was only after he reached the platform and pulled himself from the water that he

saw any sign of life, any hint that the world survived. There: a small dark smudge against the gray field of metal emerging from the ocean.

“Paolo!”

The shape didn’t move.

Muscles rubbery from the swim and his ribs still aching from the impact, Friend Paolo called out again, his voice rising in panic. But even as Friend Paolo staggered closer, Paolo sat motionless, halfway up the platform’s incline, transfixed before a smooth, black object. It was small, roughly the size of a bowling ball, but flatter. A rock, maybe, or a shell, unusual only because of its presence on the scoured platform.

Paolo held his hands over the thing, not quite touching it. Friend Paolo rested a shaking hand on his shoulder.

“Did you see it fall?” Paolo’s voice was quiet, strained.

Friend Paolo frowned. Did he see this shell-thing, hidden between the shadows in the water, the curving arcs of the whips? He stared at the sky, the horizon. “I saw something,” he said. “But not this.”

The world around them had stopped. There were no birds. No sounds. No breeze in the air, no ripples in the water. The ocean went on further than he could see, as smooth and hard and flat as the steel of the platform. In the moonlight, Paolo leaned forward and brushed his fingertips against the object, so slowly, so gently…

And the world awoke.

Water churned a heartbeat rhythm against the welding scars of the platform. A bird wheeled its silhouette against the moon. Somewhere very distant, or very deep, Friend Paolo heard something keen, long and low. Above them, clouds labored again through the sky.

The small, smooth object had unfolded. He hadn’t seen it happen. It still lay on the platform, but geometric panels now emanated from it—not physical, solid things but half-seen tricks of the light.

“What the hell is it?” Friend Paolo hadn’t intended to speak aloud. It seemed almost blasphemous in the presence of this new thing, spreading its illusions like wings.

“These…” Paolo’s glasses shone and he shook his head. He reached out again and stroked his hand against one of the panels. It glowed a deep green, then filled with strange, tesseracting symbols.

The air around them became warm. Friend Paolo could no longer feel the wind, although he could hear it roaring past them.

“These are control panels,” said Paolo, kneeling reverently before the object. “This is an interface.”

Paolo traced a finger through the air, and lines of translucent triangles pursued it. The symbols hung momentarily, fading from green to dark blue as a thin rope of seawater coursed across the platform and into the shell. A small sphere of iron formed in the air—first as a tiny core, then layer upon layer coalesced, spreading over the core like ice on a window.

A few heartbeats after the stream of water stopped, the ball fell, startling them with the loud crack of metal on metal as it struck the platform and rolled to the water, where it vanished, reclaimed.

Friend Paolo backed away. “We need to call somebody,” he whispered.

But Paolo only emitted a crazed, high-pitched laugh and returned his hands to the controls.

Friend Paolo closed his eyes. This wasn’t his decision, he knew. It wasn’t his role. But he saw black whips pressed against the bottom of the platform, strong and vengeful, preparing to wrap around it, to crush it.

“We can’t touch that thing.” His voice sounded hesitant, even to him. “People are missing. And I saw—”

“Quiet, or I’ll throw you into the water to look for your friends.” Paolo didn’t even look up as he said this, didn’t make eye contact.

Heat flared in Friend Paolo, but he quenched it with a slow count to ten and walked briskly down to the seaward-edge, far from Paolo. Anger would solve nothing. He needed to think. The water lay flat as a mirror where the two surfaces met, creating a ghost of the platform extending out into the ocean.

There had been workers here. Dozens of them. But he heard no voices, no calls for help. No splashing. Nothing.

The Navigator awoke to endless, crushing blackness. Ocean. Space without stars. After years in vacuum, her scorched exoskeleton creaked beneath the pull of gravity.

She remembered the sensation, just barely, from her life before she was stoneskin,

before she joined the Sisterhood to sing her own news of sacrifice, and of dust swelling to life. Back then—back home—she had leaped, and floated, before her planet pulled her back and knocked the breath out of her.

Huddled in the shade of their filament screens, the adults had exchanged knowing glances. They had known what awaited her, but then she had not. She had been too preoccupied with the grit beneath her bare skin, the smell of the kai-blossoms drifting in with the storm winds, the envy of the other youths. All those things she lost to space and the relentless static presence of the Seed. Or paid, perhaps, in purchase of it.

The Seed.

Startled from her reverie, she realized she could still feel it, separated from her somewhere on the way down, but intact. It would carry out their mission.

Her armor, once seamless, shifted. Pieces of it ground against each other like tectonic plates.

Broken.

She tried to calm herself, but scores of tiny quicksilver creatures crowded against her, nibbled at her, tried to force open the hairline fractures in her carapace. And above, swarming in hives on the continents, there were other creatures, bipedal. She had seen them in their crude attempts to manipulate the spectrum to communicate, transmissions of violence and shouting and affection.

Soft and hopelessly vulnerable, like she had once been.

This was their home… until the Seed did its work. It would boil their oceans into atmosphere and petrify the strange greens of life here. Their children would burn and ash away into a sky that would turn slowly into the streaked oranges and reds so familiar from her youth. The vision grew in intensity—the smell of ozone, the screams—and she realized that these thoughts came from something outside of her.

Something had opened the Seed.

Strange movements, but following definite and purposeful patterns. Someone. She traced the patterns for almost an hour before she understood. This creature, whatever it was, hoped to interact. It thought the Seed was, what, an object? A tool?

She recoiled at the thought, her limbs thrashing sluggish through the pressure. The sudden action disturbed something near her and she was rocked by the wake of something massive passing nearby—or perhaps the synchronized flight of thousands of tiny beings, invisible in the blackness. Water and atmosphere continued their

oppressive push onto her, into her, widening the faults in her armor.

Somewhere above, the creature continued its clumsy attempts at control.

The Seed still slept. But what would these creatures do when it woke?

Sometime during that first night, the welding seams healed themselves. Friend Paolo ran his fingers over the smooth steel in astonishment, but Paolo smirked and shrugged it off. “Trivial.”

The day came and brought with it thirst and hunger. Friend Paolo tried again to discuss leaving the platform and reporting the accident, but Paolo didn’t even respond.

Frustration turned to fitful sleep. Strange noises moaned in the night, stirring Friend Paolo in half-sleep and conjuring dreams of drowning, wrapped in iron-hard tentacles and sinking, sinking, the sensation so real that even as his eyes fluttered open he could swear he was really moving.

Friend Paolo sat up with a start. He was moving. The rig was shifting. Metal groaned, louder now, and as Friend Paolo tried to stand the entire platform leapt into the air like a breaching whale. He fell, scrabbling for a handhold on the slope but finding none, and slid backward toward the ocean void.

“Paolo!” he screamed, tearing his fingernails against the metal. Above him, black against the night sky, the platform’s far edge shook like a volcano, then settled, then straightened. It took several more gulps of air before Friend Paolo realized that the deadly slope had become level ground, like it was before the impact—that he was no longer falling.

In the stillness, Paolo laughed with delight.

Still pounding with adrenaline, Friend Paolo crept to the edge and peered over. The buckled legs of the rig were straight again, the platform returned to its proper place—but both were subtly different, their surfaces smoothly grained, not the bare gloss of steel, and seamless.

“Fixing is nothing,” Paolo said. He was standing, all a shadow, over Friend Paolo, who was still crouched at the platform’s edge, shaking. Friend Paolo could see a white smear of smile in the starlight. “Now it’s time to create.”

For days thereafter, Paolo experimented with the thing, talking to himself and building increasingly complex objects by manipulating the panels. Meanwhile, Friend Paolo paced circles as the shadows in his head grew darker, and the far-below water grew louder.

They were surrounded by things Paolo created, seemingly transmuted from saltwater, and then discarded. Smooth cubes; metal balls; intricate models; other objects, now debris. Even food, which Paolo had devoured but Friend Paolo had refused to touch. Over time—sometimes only a few hours—the initially perfect objects Paolo created had become pitted and sprouted fine, curling filaments. The untouched food gradually cocooned themselves, and Friend Paolo felt less and less tempted to try them.

Fresh water he could not resist, though, reluctantly drowning the urgent aching of his stomach from an elegant, rounded vessel which Paolo had manifested for him. Thirst sated but cramped by hunger, Friend Paolo continued pushing his friend, looking for any indication his advice would be heeded as it had been in all the years past.

“We don’t understand how it’s doing these things,” Friend Paolo said. “People are dead! And something… something may be looking for it.”

Paolo snorted. “Do you understand what I can accomplish with this? In one night, I fixed all of your team’s mistakes, in another I raised the very ground beneath our feet. What could I do a week from now?” He shook his head, in sorrow or perhaps disgust. “You’re probably still thinking about wind energy and research facilities. Still in love with your budgets and your spreadsheets. But those don’t apply any more. I hold the world in my hand now. Anything I can imagine, I can build. And I’m not setting that aside because my fucking assistant doesn’t understand how it works.”

“Assistant?”

They argued. First, a bickering kind of disagreement. Then louder and more fierce, unlike anything they had experienced before, as Friend Paolo pulled at his hair and refused to acquiesce—“the workers,” he yelled again and again—and Paolo grew colder and more unyielding in the face of this insubordination.

Finally, Friend Paolo demanded to leave. “This isn’t who we are, Paolo.”

They didn’t say another word to each other; Paolo drove him down from the platform towards the docking floats and used the device to conjure a crude sailboat and shoved Friend Paolo into it: a hollow, almond-shaped thing, the mast jutting out crooked like a branch, the rigging hanging in thin, fraying strands, the sails a strange wet material, rough like raw silk, the whole as light as fiberglass.

When it hit the water, Friend Paolo tried to paddle furiously back to the platform, shouting—“Paolo! You have to stop! Paolo!”—but the boat, curving itself around him, caught the wind and carried him, helpless, over the horizon to the distant shore.

Paolo did not watch him go.

In the upper bedroom of a seaside bed-and-breakfast, Friend Paolo stared at the closed blinds, his foot tapping a quick, syncopated beat against the black walnut floor. Almost two days since he left the platform. The longest he'd been away from Paolo for almost fifteen years.

The curves of the shadow-whips had begun to fade from his mind. His fear seemed silly now, but it hadn't been silly with 300 fathoms of saltwater beneath his feet. And he still felt it at night, when he forgot where he was and he could see again the impenetrable blackness of its descent and feel it reaching up toward him. It was the same feeling he used to get as a kid when he knew something was behind him on the basement stairs, close enough to grab him and trip him into the sharp, splintered corners of the wood and pull him down step, by step, by step, by step.

He shook his head and stood up. This was not the platform. Beneath him was nothing but wood floor and concrete foundation. Dirt and rock.

When he left, he left because Paolo had become indifferent. The missing workers were people; they had families. Friend Paolo had a responsibility to them.

But there was no hope now. He had waited, servile, while Paolo built and the survivors—if there had been any—drowned, alone and undiscovered.

Yet, more than 24 hours after checking into this room, he'd still called no one. Said nothing. And why?

He had hidden the new-made boat by a small dock at the edge of town, in a winter shed empty of anything but ancient oars, dry with rot. Fitting, for even before the coastline eased into view, the decay had commenced, slowly overcoming Paolo's new creation just as it had the others—creasing, flaking, shriveling it.

Perhaps it was already dust.

He had expected an uproar, but what he'd found on his return was the incongruity of a world that was just as he left it. The impact wave that had struck the rig never came to shore. No disaster had claimed the seaboard, no racing wall had smashed inland, erasing all before it, dragging the dead and the ruined in its wake. No news stories, no panic, no concern, only the murmur of a quiet vacation town, watching birds, shopping for souvenirs, oblivious.

No one saw the thing fall.

It was as though nothing had happened at all. Their investors were used to Paolo's silence and long ago learned to stay hands-off. The families of the lost workers didn't

expect them home for months, and so didn't have any reason to suspect that…

He started to pace, the same path he had paced almost every hour since checking in. He tried to tell himself: there's no point, they're gone. But he was too realistic, too honest to fool himself.

He was protecting Paolo.

One phone call would end everything—the project, Paolo's career, his own, their partnership… maybe more.

But Friend Paolo remembered the look in Paolo's eyes in those final hours, absorbed in the strange light of the thing that fell from the sky, and he knew.

Paolo was gone.

Everything was already destroyed. Even the little sailboat had warped and frayed, like everything else created with that monstrous device.

The only thing that remained was what to do next.

Friend Paolo picked up the phone.

The Navigator had been anointed because of her strength of will. And now? Now she was a cracking husk, deep, somewhere deep and lonely.

She tried to climb. She tried to rise, to surface, to warn. She came to build, not destroy. But each attempt ground her deeper into the sand and expanded the fissures fractaling across her exoskeleton. Her whips drifted now, useless, manipulated only by the flux and circulation of the ocean.

Far above, the Seed awoke.

The San Diego morning flared golden-white; the sun made Friend Paolo's skin itch.

Not permitted to accompany the investigators that had responded to his call, he lingered with a group of people gathered on the rocks by the shore, chatting over coffee and staring out toward the open sea.

The Coast Guard had mustered days before, but had been repelled.

No one could reach Paolo.

Near where the platform should have been, a vast dark cylinder—like a water spout,

but rigidly vertical and symmetrical—stretched like a thread between the black of the ocean and the churning clouds, casting that region of sea into shadow. It gave the impression of a tower, or perhaps a cluster of towers. Strange shapes curled out of the vortex, only the very edges of each visible through the gloom.

Friend Paolo sat, feeling the heat of the rocks press against his back, listening to the cries of the sea gulls, and stared with the others at the maelstrom darkening the furthest horizon. He felt a growing unease, the same tremendous weight he'd felt when he realized Paolo would not listen, would not stop. Not even for him.

The calm was broken by a scream echoing through the salt-sharp air from further down the beach. The entire crowd startled, then hurried to the source of the alarm.

At the bottom of a nearby cliff, bodies—some clad in the dark blue uniforms used by the platform workers, others in white military garb—were snagged on the shore in one great tangled mass, arms and legs necrotic and woven around each other—an obscene, final intimacy.

Someone spoke to him in horrified tones, but Friend Paolo could not understand, could only stand and tremble.

What has he done?

Sirens shrieked and news vans arrived, but Friend Paolo did not wait with the other bystanders. He pushed his way out of the crowd and ran back to the small, private dock and the corrugated aluminum shed where he left Paolo's sailboat.

Coast Guard orders or no, he had to get back.

The water lapped against the rocks of the shore differently here, arrhythmically, as if trying to communicate with him. A warning?—for when he released the latch, the door blew outward with a great exhalation and knocked him to the ground. Frost formed on his clothes and skin, then melted almost as quickly as it grew.

The rushing air was thin, too thin to breathe. It was only when the strange wind subsided that he could catch his breath and look inside the shack.

A thick, rubbery substance covered the walls. It had been a deep black, dense as lacquer, when he opened the door, but now it was turning purple and iridescent. From each corner of the room, from the edges of the floor and the ceiling, thousands of thin, rough-barked tendrils stretched inward like vines. Where their paths intersected, they twisted tightly around each other to form ropes, thicker and denser the closer they were to the center of the room.

There, suspended by the web of liana, was what had once been the sailboat.

Its splintering, wood-like frame had smoothed into a thing of elegance, long and thin and smooth and opalescent. Its sails, once clumsily tethered with fibrous strands, had been replaced by flat blades which nested together with absolute precision, almost invisible against the curving bone-like mast.

Friend Paolo stepped across the threshold and the tendrils tightened. The boat quivered. He took another step and the tendrils contracted further, pulling it into shadow.

The air was still thin—too little oxygen, somehow. Lightheaded, he rested his hand against the closest wall to steady himself, his fingers upon the purpling surface—and in a rush of cold, he felt fear, fear, fear pour into him.

He staggered back and the sensation cut away; still, he counted out the seconds to calm himself. But even as the adrenaline fog lifted the fear stayed, compartmentalized somewhere within him, separate from his own emotions as if it belonged to someone else.

In the corners, the rope-vines stiffened. The boat shifted; the fear in him surged.

“Is that…” he whispered, then, hesitantly, “Is that you, Boat?” He felt like an idiot.

Many years ago, before his work with Paolo had overtaken him, he helped care for his neighbor’s horse. A huge, stamping thing, wreathed in steam in the early mornings, it was always attentive, always nervous. He can feel you, his neighbor told him, even if you’re not touching him. Just gotta love him, that’s all, and he’ll trust you.

Why not? Friend Paolo licked his lips and shushed into the overgrown room. Just love him. He made a soft kissing noise and patted the wall. It rippled. The fear began to ebb.

“Okay,” he whispered, his heart beating faster as wonder overtook him. What had they done out there? “It’s okay. I think.”

The tendrils loosened and the boat swung a few inches toward him.

“Shh, it’ll all be okay. Let’s go find our friend.”

On the open water, the sail unfurled above him like the fin of an enormous steel fish.

A frenetic spiral of steam and water encased the platform. Around it, police and coast guard vessels clustered like a flock of fat metal birds. Hailstones rattled down on

them, pinging off hulls and churning water. Crew members flitted back and forth across the decks, but the ships themselves were held utterly still, gripped by the ocean swells like bugs in amber.

Through this still-life, the sailboat split the water like a missile.

Friend Paolo, hunched in the bow, rubbed at his arms and stomped his feet to combat the persistent, localized frost. People on the ships waved tiny matchstick arms and shouted unintelligible orders over bullhorns, but the boat raced on, trembling with exertion. Soon they were alone, and the towering madness of the vortex parted before them like curtains hanging from the sky.

Within the storm-pillar, everything was new and calm, as cold as a January dawn. The water spout, a smooth matte gray on the inside, rose rigid to frame a sky that glowed like embers. The platform was still there, but above it… above it…

The buildings constructed directly on the platform were unmistakably Paolo's designs. Smooth, sterile shapes, rounded at the edges. But higher up, the structures grew increasingly foreign, bulged and twisted, as though some other power had wrested control mid-creation. Higher still, high enough to catch the clouds, they split and stretched out like hundreds of bent fingers. At the top, no trace of Paolo's influence could be seen—no frame of reference existed for what Friend Paolo saw.

He lifted his hand over his eyes to block the smoldering orange sky, only to find his fingertips had turned blue. He half stood, panting for breath, but his knees locked and he fell against the boat's smooth walls, inches from going overboard. Like the shed, he realized, too late—the air was different, unbreathable.

"Wh—" he said, but his tongue froze inside his mouth, the saliva made ice, his teeth aching. Blue had leaked from his fingertips, up his hands and arms in thin, veiny streaks.

I'm going to die out here.

His lungs pumped a strange mixture of gases, in and out, never sated. But through his coarse gasping, a new noise rose over that of the water, of his frantic pulse.

Shhhhh, it said, shush, shush.

Above him, the boat's bladed sail tremored like a rattlesnake tail. Something touched his shoulder.

Shhhhhhhhhh. Again the sail trembled.

His chest seized. Everything was turning gray.

The touch upon his shoulder slithered up to his chin, wet and groping. Friend Paolo tried to look, but his neck wouldn't respond; he could only stare in terror toward the approaching platform. Soundless, the thing pushed against his neck. Tiny hairs emerged from it, crept up his face like ivy on stonework. Past his chin and his paralyzed lips, scraping filaments across his tongue, they probed at his throat. He tried to breathe, tried to scream, and they plunged forward, threading through his lungs and into his bronchial tubes.

High on the platform, something moved.

Friend Paolo was not dead.

The sky burned, strange cancerous growths had overtaken the platform, and within the buildings leggy shadows scurried past windows—and Friend Paolo was not dead.

He stood in a narrow canyon between the platform's distorted shapes, learning to breathe again. Thousands of rubbery strings webbed through his body, emerging from his mouth and nose and even his pores to snake back through the alleys and streets to the edge of the fantastic cityscape where they rooted him to the sailboat. Pain dotted hot white stars across his vision. But in this strange place, even though he might have died—who could know—before the loving symbiosis of the boat brought him back, he felt more vibrant than he'd felt in years.

At the center of the once-smooth platform, where he had once gulped impossibly fresh water, where he'd argued with his oldest friend, there was now an enormous, fleshy cone, stuttering open and closed at the top as it gasped in air and belched out a frosted mist that curled slow, lazy spirals around his ankles.

Beside it, the shell, the device, whatever it was, rested on one of only two unaltered areas of steel. Its interface panels had unfolded and unfolded again, into a prism of shapes that could not exist. And yet they persisted. Twice as tall as him and wider still, they cast a pulsing green glow over everything. Endless symbols flashed and scrolled within the panel-wings, but the hieroglyphics were meaningless to Friend Paolo except to show that the object was hard at work.

And beside the shell, on a small circle of the unblemished rig was Paolo: still kneeling, but naked, blackened, and withered. Only the flutter of his eyelids and the rise and fall of his emaciated chest suggested he was still alive.

Friend Paolo sighed, and his ribs creaked, the cords in his lungs swelling with the effort of extracting and delivering oxygen.

Symbols on the interface quickened, thousands upon thousands of them flaring to life and fading in long meteoric streaks. High above, ropy growths separated from the buildings and coalesced into spider-like creatures. They exhaled ribbons of vapor as they descended, their long legs tapping sharp against the walls.

The threads in him writhed and flexed; everything blurred with tears—but he had to stop it, whatever Paolo had done, whatever the device was still doing.

He reached for the thing, smooth black beneath its green wings, closed both hands around it, and everything flared white—green?—white, blinding—as within him, the ties to the boat yanked and inflated, cracking bone, tearing muscle, and he floated, perhaps, or…

Amputated…

And—Paolo? Paolo?—Paolo was gone.

Friend Paolo felt himself unmoored, vertiginous, in the interstices of the cosmos. Stars, planets, the precise mathematics of orbits and heavenly trajectories, the fluttering pathways of comets, all were laid out like a map. And scattered among them, fragile clusters of life, strangers in the dark. Or… friends.

Friends?

He was not alone.

Something shared his mind. Something purposeful. Fanatical.

The object—the Seed, that was its name, he suddenly knew—rested heavy in his hands. He saw the platform again and his own body, still intact, and the overgrown ruins of Paolo’s buildings, and he knew now their pinpoint place in the expanse.

Instructions, or instinct, coursed through him—the unstoppable drive to take root, to create—and he sank in the undertow of the Seed’s will. Molecular bonds separated before them; atoms waited for guidance. Within them, together, they held the power to remake the world.

But buried beneath that, deep beneath that, Friend Paolo felt something else. Something pitiful, and with pity.

Hello? said a voice that was not a voice. Hello? Hello? Hello?

Something responded to the Navigator’s greeting. A new presence, softer than the other, the one that had flared and fallen. It thought at her in strange sounds, a string

of guttural code; the language was alien, but beneath it there was common ground in the emotion and the intent.

It communicated fear. Not for itself, not at first, but for its home, and for its friend.

Safe? said the creature, without words.

The Navigator, pinned to the sand, felt the creature’s helplessness. No, she said. Not safe.

Why? Why not safe? Seed?

Correct. Seed, not safe.

Paolo is strong. Save him? I can save him?

The creature’s love and longing flooded the Navigator and, reflexively, she mirrored it with her own. Her whips lifted in the current, a mockery of her former lightness.

No, she said. You cannot save him.

They were quiet, alone together.

Finally, the creature spoke again. Why?

He stood before it like a wall. Battered to dust.

And now?

Everything changes.

I can stop it?

No, said the Navigator. Batter you to dust.

We can stop it?

No. It does not stop. Batter us to dust.

Something penetrated the expanding cracks of her armor and scraped its mouth against her. She was so soft now.

The creature insisted: Slow it?

It has a mission.

You brought it to kill us?

No, she said. I was not to be here. You would not have been there. Mission is to build new home.

The waterlife bit into her. Pain radiated through the segments of her body, like before, when she was fragile.

Reminded of her former fragility, she thought of her people withering without a home and, without meaning to, she shared visions of this new world flaring orange and red, disintegrating before the transformative power of the Seed. The creature panicked, then paused. The Navigator could feel its emotions smoothing.

Redirect it? the creature said after a pause. Let the Seed build somewhere else? The creature thought of other planets nearby—dead, harmless places, so close.

I am broken, said the Navigator. It will build here.

The creature considered. Its mind was visible to her. It thought incessantly of the other as if pleading or praying for response, then it was lost in the magnitude of the planet and, beyond that, the breadth of space.

It thought in great whorls and loops like the other creature had, but stiffer, more effortful, and less fruitful. But the other was gone; the other was dust, and this new creature froze in long contemplation.

And gradually the shape of its thoughts hardened into grids and schematics, an imposition of order.

Contain it, it said finally. The creature showed her a platform, perched atop the ocean, surrounded by the maelstrom which contained the Seed's changes.

It is too small, she said, but immediately the creature shared a new vision, of mountains and plains, an entire continent raised from the ocean floor for the Seed to do its work upon, all cabined within those same walls of wind and water, made as impermeable as minerals leached from saltwater, leaving the contents pure. Walls reaching out beyond the alien-blue sky. A whole world within their world.

The Navigator saw this and had her own, secret, vision—of the Seed raising her up from the crushing depths to see starlight again, even if only for a brief moment.

Maybe enough, she said. Maybe yes. But very difficult. Flooding, containment; very

difficult.

Only details. The creature’s thoughts were steady now. Leave to me. Talk to Seed? Explain?

Maybe yes. But do not trust it.

Air rushed back into Friend Paolo’s lungs. Deep inside, the threads from the boat retracted. He was free.

The Seed still buzzed with energy, but its influence around him faded; the plan was under way. Structures froze, mid-transformation. Everything was as quiet as when the Seed first unfolded, glassening the sea.

The stillness was broken only by Paolo, toppling backward, his familiar face collapsed, unrecognizable, his eyes white and unmoving. Friend Paolo knelt and cradled him, but found no tears.

Far above them, the clouds moved again.

A tremor rocked the platform, then a second and a third. Enormous swells distorted the water around them. The Seed was at work. Somewhere distant, the ocean floor began to reach toward the sky.

Friend Paolo was no longer afraid of the darkness or the whips; the Navigator had shared with him the burn and the helpless rush of freefall, and how they had finished her. Cold and alone, she was nothing compared to the menace of the Seed that lay before him.

What would they do if the Seed decided it didn’t want to be contained? What if it wanted more? Perhaps, together… he reached out again.

But the Navigator, too, was lost to him.

The Seed called out, and from a thousand directions, a thousand answers.

The Navigator heard and joined their chorus. Please, she sang into the vacuum. And finally, riding the signal of the Seed, she felt again the electric thrill of the Sisterhood’s contact.

They endured the strobing flashes of her message—water, life, creatures, these creatures that swarmed—and this one that knew her. The Seed, blooming, insistent, inhaling the old world and exhaling the new. Contain it, she sang, contain it.

The Seed chirped, and the Navigator cracked open like an egg. But as she faded, rocked to sleep by foreign tides, the presence of the other navigators enveloped and warmed her.

Sister, they whispered, sister, they said, be patient.

We are coming.