

Into the Vortex

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I've been crawling up this *a'a* rock cliff for far too long, my fingers already bloody and torn to shreds, moving so slowly as to barely outrace the rising tide, when I hear a splash below me.

I look down to see a head bob up in the churning surf. Some guy has fallen or jumped into the three-sided cauldron of churning surf below me. He's looking around, trying to get his bearings. He's already starting to move with the slow and relentless whirlpool of current that rides up and down the unpredictable chug and ploof and spray.

This is the first time I've looked back to where I came from, and I'm trying to get my bearings. Everything is moving in so many directions, I have to close my eyes in order to focus and remember what I did to break free of the surf.

My foot slips and I catch myself, gashing my bare shin. I'm not safe yet.

I look back down, searching for the swimmer. He's there. There. I can see a long black mark down the side of his face. It's blood. Must be running pretty freely to appear again so quickly after having been underwater. He's hurt. He starts swimming. He's smart to move with the current, angling out of its orbit without fighting it. But I can tell that he's going to end up against a smooth section of rock that offers no purchase. Indeed, below the surface there, the water has hollowed out caves that it sweeps through, creating undertow.

I yell, but my voice doesn't carry through the rumble of the waves and wind. I tentatively loosen my grip with one hand, I manage to get my back to the cliff wall, feet planted on awkward, tiny ledges. I wave my arm and yell louder.

He looks up, but in the wrong direction. I yell again, and he sees me. I point to a boulder that is almost completely submerged: "Head for that!"

He looks in the direction I point, but he can't see the boulder and he looks back up at me, confused. He yells a question. I can't hear him either, but I know what he's

asking.

I point again and try to give him more information about what he'll find if he'll only head in the direction I'm pointing. Using more words is not helping. Yelling louder is not helping. He looks at me and tugs his ear with as much of a shrug as he can muster. The water's cold. He's getting tired.

Out of the corner of my eye, specifically non-Brownian motion catches my eye. There it is again. A black triangle.

Shark.

I hadn't realized there were sharks. I'm both relieved that I hadn't known when it was me down there and also panicked on behalf of the swimmer. Just as he starts to swim again, I frantically point, jabbing the air repeatedly in the direction of the only safety I know of, practically screaming. "Swim! Swim! GET OUT OF THE WATER! THERE ARE SHARKS!"

I slip again, almost falling. I'm so tired, and it is so tempting to believe that I am safe by comparison. But I am not safe.

He checks himself and looks up at me, disgusted. With great exaggeration, he shapes his mouth to form four words:

"YOU. ARE. SO. JUDGMENTAL."