The Alchemist sat back in his chair, his eyes lidded, and a half smile curled at the corners of his mouth. Alyce had been a surprise guest today, but then, the scientist visited more often than most of his friends. Her inquiries and experiments often overlapped with his research. And regardless of their friendship, he did not allow his books out of the tower. As she finished her task of note taking and looked up for the first time in hours, he said, “I am happy I can help further your studies, but I will admit, it is somewhat selfish. I appreciate the company; it is lonely in my tower and my appearance often scares away my neighbors.”

Rubbing her eyes she laughed, “I’m grateful to have a colleague who understands my desire for knowledge… and solitude. You let me sit here all day and I would like to talk to you about some of my findings. Your insight is most welcome.”

He sighed, “Everyone has come to see me as a sage, a wise old man. It is advantageous to my studies… but I was not always a lone scholar, adrift in a foreign land far from home. Once I was young, and adventurous like you. And I thought to travel the world. I looked to the sea to take me far from home, not knowing how far that meant…”

My world was filled with sand. I had lived in a merchant hub, built around an oasis, a spring that welled from the underground like a miracle, like magic. At first, it sustained the lives of wild animals, but the first people to camp there were generations before record. By the time I was born, it was a thriving community. An oasis is always a gift in the desert, but this one had the added bounty of being along the spice trade route. Tinkers and traders came through daily, and our small community thrived.

My father was a merchant, and did well selling in both coin and goods. Our home was comfortable and full of food, luxury items and laughter. I was a spoiled lad, and my interest was in knowledge of the outside world. Worried that I would leave, he tried to appease me with a library that would rival the Shah himself. I was the most well read 10 year old that may have existed. And yet, the stories from other lands drove me to want to learn more. I began working, delivering for competitors of my father’s trade to earn money, sneaking off late at night and returning in the early morning. My parents were fooled for a time, thinking I had become a lazy teenager, dreamy eyed and sleepy. But one day when I was sixteen, Jamal, my father’s greatest nemesis, whose dates were sought after by all, boasted of how he had nabbed me as his best delivery boy from under my father’s nose. Retribution was swift and brutal.

He sighed, “No one is looking for me,” I replied solemnly.

Surprise followed by a moment of sadness passed over her face. Then she asked, “What do you know about ship?”

He called me sir!” the man roared to his mates, and they replied with laughter.

“It’s a polite dock rat, I will tell you. Captain Ry is going over the ship’s manifest with her first mate. They are at the prow of the ship, and if you interrupt, they’ll have your head. Good luck with that.” He cackled and continued loading the ship.

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In the front of the ship I found her, and waited politely before asking for work.

He cackled and continued loading the ship.

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By now I had gotten a feel of what to ask, asserted that I was strong, didn’t take up much room, ate even less food, and would work like a dog. Then I waited for her to ask if I had ever been away from the desert before, like all the others.

She stared for a moment, a smile in her eyes, like the rest of her crew. “I’m not going to have some great shah coming after me for a lost prince, am I?” she asked.

“No one is looking for me,” I replied solemnly.

Surprise followed by a moment of sadness passed over her face. Then she asked the doomed question, “Have you ever been on a ship before lad?”

“No,” I met her eyes and didn’t say more. It made no difference, I had already learned.

“My knee was twitching this morning lad. You know what it means when my knee twitches in the morning? It means I’m meeting a new ally. And since we’re about to take off, I don’t see anyone else my knee can be referencing. Get your things, you easy work and a full belly. Keep your eye to the workers. Pick the boat that has the most seasoned and happy crew that will have ya. It’ll be tough no matter what they say, but you will learn much, and see even more.” Then with a kiss on my forehead, and a blessing whispered in Romany, she sent me on my way. For all my homesickness, I had found a new family. What I know now is that family has a network that reaches across the world, and whose reach I have called upon many times.

It took me a bit of time to find a good ship that would have me. Heeding Adorana’s advice I approached crews that looked as healthy as their ships were sturdy. They laughed and waved me off, not willing to take on a child of sand. I was about to give up and wait for the next lot of ships to dock when I saw a mid-sized vessel. It was not as magnificent as the ones I had approached, but unlike many boats of its size they were unloading a lot of merchant goods, and reloading for their next trip. The crew sang out to each other, in a way that sounded like family. I walked up to a skinny man whose arms looked like ropes from the strain of the keg he lifted on board. “Sir, do you know where I might find your captain?” I whispered.

“Where is the ship’s manifest with her first mate. They are at the prow of the ship, and if you interrupt, she’ll have your head. Good luck with that.” He cackled and continued loading the ship.

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“My knee was twitching this morning lad. You know what it means when my knee twitches in the morning? It means I’m meeting a new ally. And since we’re about to take off, I don’t see anyone else my knee can be referencing. Get your things,

For months I traveled the desert with my new friends. They were a happy lot. I had never witnessed anything like their abilities in fortune telling, and ethereal lore. It was a formative few months that moulded me as much as the previous 16 years and I will be forever grateful. But despite that, our time ended the moment...
you're part of the crew."

I was sick for weeks. The sailors took it in good humor, and thank the gods they did not toss me overboard during that time. When I finally gathered my sea legs, all kindness and patience was put aside for the hardest labor I have ever done to this very day. None of the work came easily to me, having never seen more than a fountain of water before in my life. But from tacking a sail, to the dozens of types of knots, I was eager to learn and master everything. I practiced hard, and as amused as they had been at my green gills, the sailors were equally amused by how they could find me in a corner of the boat, with a rope in my hands, asleep where I sat. It was this very dedication to learning that gave my most valuable lesson on the ship. And the one that set me on the path that was to determine my fate.

Our ship was a cargo carrier and Captain Ry, while proud and accomplished, was not a wealthy merchant. She was paid to move freight along the coasts, which she did with great speed and expertise. However she did not have the business acumen or interest to negotiate the product and sales for herself. We were given a fair wage, and knew we lived free and wild, beholden to no one, but the crew was small and no one sailor had just one job. Cooking duties and cleaning were rotated among every one. Each sailor may grumble at some chores over another, but they also enjoyed talking turns at navigation and telling me how to chart our path by the stars. Knowing how to count up sums in my head, thanks to my father's trade, it was the only task where I surpassed my peers quickly. One of the sailors, Raef, an old sea dog gnarled and weathered, relied on me heavily, as his eyesight was fading. I didn't mind since I was asked to haul out the privy the most frequently. As we shared our knowledge, I learned that the constellation we called "Hunter's Bow" was known as "The Palace Arch" in his homeland, but both pointed to true north. Of all the men on the ship, Raef was the one that looked after me the most. Making sure I took water when the days were hot, and covered me with a blanket when he found me asleep with my rope.

It happened on one of those evenings when I had fallen asleep on deck. The midnight bell had sounded some time ago. My eyes were heavy, while my aching hands twisted the hemp into the same shape over and over. As I willed my muscles to remember the hitch, he appeared, looming over me. Startled awake, I opened my mouth to speak, and he motioned me silent. Beckoning me to follow him, he moved to the prow of the ship. It was then that I realized at some point the stillness of the night was supernatural in quality. Not a breeze stirred the sail. We were dead in the water, a doldrums that could last an hour or a week from the stories I had heard. My attention shifted back to Raef, and I saw that he was leaning against the rail peering over the edge. I came beside him and looked over as well. Below I should have seen the familiar darkness, with flashes of light where moonlight glinted off the water. Instead the sea was as flat as the mirror on my mother's dressing table. I could see it clearly, and not from the moonlight that hung in the night sky, but from the sea itself. It glowed from the depths, that cast our faces in a pale green hue. I looked to Raef, his face twisted like a horse's in a moment of panic. He saw my panic and smiled gently. "It's unnatural alright. But the silence means they do not know we're here. If this quiet was in the middle of a storm, well..." "His face darkened in a memory, "...I would not think I would survive a second time. It was more than I had ever noticed before. I saw he glanced over his shoulder at the sky then angled for one of the smaller patches near the edge. We landed on the sand alongside it. The plants in this bed were dark brown in the center, with a purple tint where it caught the light. The leaves were more bulbous than flat, and grew out of long tendrils. Raef grabbed one of them and pulled it taught, then with his other hand he drew the knife that most sailors carry, from its sheath strapped to the side of his leg. He cut it quick then stuffed it in one of two bags he had loosely hanging across his shoulder. He pulled the other bag over his head and handed it out towards me. I stared one more time at him, then snatched it and began harvesting the same plant. It was then I realized this was wrong. Something terrible had been casting its net, and caught our vessel. We were moments from being swallowed down to the deep we—my mind blanked in blind fear.

He saw my panic and smiled gently. "It's unnatural alright. But the silence means they do not know we're here. If this quiet was in the middle of a storm, well..." "His face darkened in a memory, "...I would not think I would survive a second time. It was a miracle I lived at all. But this is a boon. I know it will be dangerous boy, but I need..." He paused there, unable to take enough in. That paired with the heavy weight of the water in my lungs kept me teetering on the edge of panic, until I felt his hand on my shoulder. Raef, steadied me with an apologetic look in his eye, and checked me to ensure I was alive. I was angry, more than I had ever felt with my father for abandoning me, and I lashed out. My limbs were not used to the water, so all I did was uselessly flail and turn myself upside down. When I finally oriented to him again he was floating, arms adrift and legs kicking slightly back and forth. He kept his distance this time, and pointed downward. As much rage as I felt, curiosity and wonder got the better of me, and I looked downward and saw... a farm. I cannot explain it any other way, but that is what it looked like. The sea floor was awash with fields of algae and seaweeds in rows too straight to be a product of nature. At the far edge of the fields lay two buildings. One was smaller and squat, made of coral. Arched openings looked like they could be entryways for fish, but gave the impression of windows. It was decorated with layers and layers of shells and colored rock of pale orange and pink hues. The other was far larger and more plain with just one entrance. For all my life it looked like a pretty little cottage and a barn, paired with plowed fields.

As much as I wished to marvel at what lay below me, I saw Raef motion to me to follow him as he started swimming down. Again, my personal safety was nothing compared to my wonderment, and so I followed him, awkwardly trying to emulate his movements as we swam down closer to the farm. I noticed he angled for one of the smaller patches near the edge. We landed on the sand alongside it. The plants in this bed were dark brown in the center, with a purple tint where it caught the light. The leaves were more bulbous than flat, and grew out of long tendrils. Raef grabbed one of them and pulled it taught, then with his other hand he drew the knife that most sailors carry, from its sheath strapped to the side of his leg. He cut it quick then stuffed it in one of two bags he had loosely hanging across his shoulder. He pulled the other bag over his head and handed it out towards me. I stared one more time at him, then snatched it and began harvesting the same plant. It was then I realized this was wrong. Something terrible had been casting its net, and caught our vessel. We were moments from being swallowed down to the deep we—my mind blanked in blind fear.

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Except that it wasn't. The liquid I drew in was upsettingly thick, but somehow, I did not black out. The air that kept me alive seemed to be imbued in this water, and while every part of me screamed in primal certainty that I would die, this water would kill me, I was still awake, still alive, still... breathing. I realized that if I did not calm down soon, I may still yet hurt myself, as the quick breaths I was trying to gasp were impossible in submersion. I forced myself to slow my breath to long deep intakes of the water. Even as I calmed down, I still felt a shortness of air, as if winded and unable to take enough in. That paired with the heavy weight of the water in my lungs kept me teetering on the edge of panic, until I felt his hand on my shoulder. Raef, steadied me with an apologetic look in his eye, and checked me to ensure I was alive. I was angry, more than I had ever felt with my father for abandoning me, and I lashed out. My limbs were not used to the water, so all I did was uselessly flail and turn myself upside down. When I finally oriented to him again he was floating, arms adrift and legs kicking slightly back and forth. He kept his distance this time, and pointed downward. As much rage as I felt, curiosity and wonder got the better of me, and I looked downward and saw... a farm. I cannot explain it any other way, but that is what it looked like. The sea floor was awash with fields of algae and seaweeds in rows too straight to be a product of nature. At the far edge of the fields lay two buildings. One was smaller and squat, made of coral. Arched openings looked like they could be entryways for fish, but gave the impression of windows. It was decorated with layers and layers of shells and colored rock of pale orange and pink hues. The other was far larger and more plain with just one entrance. For all my life it looked like a pretty little cottage and a barn, paired with plowed fields.
culprit. Their eyes moved higher and higher in their hemisphere, and I knew it was moments before they would see us. I stopped staring and started swimming as earnestly as I could. Tripling my efforts from before and ignoring the pain I felt from the lack of air. We had risen much closer to the surface, at least two thirds of the way, but I knew they would be faster. Then I heard a shriek that could only mean they saw us. I kept swimming, and saw that Raef, was almost to the surface. He had stopped swimming, drawn his knife, and hovered above me looking down, eyes wide in fear. I struggled, arm over arm, desperate to reach him, and as I drew closer, I sensed rather than felt something coming up from below me. I twisted, moving my hand to my side to draw my blade when a barracuda slammed into me, teeth snapping, and just missing the leg it had gone for.

I didn't think, but lashed out in reaction and while the jab was at a strange angle, my hours spent sharpening it paid off, as the blade tore a ragged line across the barracuda's right eye and gill. It writhed in pain and blood darkened the water. I moved away quickly knowing that, other predators would come with the smell of blood. They were never far from the boat since we threw chum over the side daily to draw them near enough to fish. I kept swimming upward. As I came alongside Raef, I felt a hand grab my ankle. The sea creature pulled me back downward, but Raef was just as fast and grabbed my left hand with his, using it to slingshot himself towards the creature, his right hand moving to jab it with his knife. It loosened its grip to block the attack, and I used that moment to kick it in the face and move upward again. As I did, Raef touched my head and said ‘A respira.’ and pushed me upwards. My head broke the surface as I spewed water from my lungs and took a real breath of air to scream. I saw faces above, already looking down and pointing. A rope dropped over me and I grabbed at it desperately. Then I was being hauled up to the boat as sailors poised with barbed fishing spears looked for an opportunity to attack below. Already the barracuda that had gone after me was caught. I saw my mark on its face as it lay on the deck of the ship. I turned away and looked back down. Other ropes had been lowered, and on one of them, Raef was climbing his way up. As he reached the rail, the water below him surged and the sea creature, blood flowing from its shoulder, leaped out of the water and landed on the deck. Scrambling to the edge it tried to meet Raef as he came up, but it had underestimated the readiness of the crew on board. Seeing it was already surrounded it looked at all of us. “Thievessssssss,” it hissed. “The ocean will remember!” and it dove below.

“You're bleeding!” gasped one of the sailors and I looked down at my leg, realizing that the barracuda had gotten that bite after all. Pain hit me as my consciousness faded.

I came to, and it was night once again. I looked at the stars above as I swayed in a hammock tied between the two poles. I peered around and saw Raef, keeping watch.

“Tried to put you below. You kept yelling in your sleep. Terrified the others, so we did this,” he said.

“How long?” I asked.

“Three days. Should've realized a sand dweller didn't swim. Figured you'd learned. Sorry lad, didn't mean to put you in that much danger.”

“But… why?” I asked

“Take a look at your leg,” he said.

I leaned forward and looked down. Wrapped around my leg was one of the tendrils we had harvested. The bite underneath it looked weeks old. The wound was red like a healing scar. A bite like that could be bleeding still, or heavily scabbed, and almost always oozing pus because of the rot in the mouth of sea monsters. Instead it looked well enough to walk on. As I stared, Raef leaned over and popped one of the bulbous leaves. The purple ooze that came out of it covered the cut and the slight pain I had been feeling disappeared.

“Used half a tendril. Rest will be stored below. What we took will keep us in medicine for this ship for at least a few years, maybe more if we’re lucky. Or cap't can sell it and buy a new ship with what we got… after she pays us our finders’ fee,” he said quietly. “The rest wouldn’t come. Not that they fear death, but they fear what I did to you. With the water inside you. And they fear the monsters more than that. And while they’ll take the medicine… they fear it too.” He looked at me, eyes bright and knowing. “You. You don’t fear those things. Well, not as much as you want to know about ‘em. Your curiosity is greater than your fear. It’s a gift.”

“Teach me what you know?” I whispered.

“Of course lad. Least I can do,” he replied with a smile.

The Alchemist fed another log onto the fire. “Raef gave me my first lessons about the wonders the world held, but he would not be the last. That seaweed was only the beginning. I learned all he had to teach me by the time we landed in a port far from my home and also a long way from here. But that is a story for another time.”