

"If there's a way," I say, confirming the plan.

Kai dips his head in a nod. "Yes, but no one goes alone." He ties his blonde hair in a high knot and looks at Messer. "Agreed?"

Looking at the reflection in the tiny mirror hanging over the wash bowl, Messer smiles at Kai as he rubs a hand across his freshly shaven chin. "Afraid we'll have fun without you?"

"I need you to be serious for ten minutes," Kai admonishes.

The merchant ship pitches to the side and we brace ourselves on the nearest post.

As the boat begins to right itself, I lose my footing and my hand lands against one of the latrines. I make a sound of disgust as I hurry to stand once we're even-keeled. I shoulder Messer out of the way so I can stick my hands into his leftover suds. The closer we get to land, the bigger the swell has become. It's why the majority of our classmates are congregated on deck, eager to see the coastline for the first time in their lives.

Messer places a reassuring hand on his best friend's shoulder. 'We all go, or none of us go," he says.

The rare glimpse of self-control in Messer's eyes works to loosen the worry between Kai's brows as he passes me a towel

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to dry my hands. They still don't feel clean, but I push the thought from my mind. There's nothing to be done about it. "Remember, our first priority is to scope things out," Kai says. "Assess the situation. We only attempt to get onto land if we're absolutely sure there's a way without getting caught."

"That's not a problem for me," Messer says, hand to his chest.

"You two, on the other hand, have a terrible track record."

I roll my eyes at him in the mirror. "You're going to run out of luck one day."

I attempt to tame the strands of hair that have escaped my braid, but it's futile. My hair hasn't obeyed a day in its life, not even when I was born, coming out a copper hue unlike the blonde common for our people.

Voices grow in volume from above, an overlapping sound of excitement along with a thunder of footsteps coming through the deck head above.

Kai spins me toward him by the shoulders. "Our first objective is to assess the situation," he says, before releasing me. "So don't do anything hasty. There'll be other chances."

I can't tell if he's trying to convince me or himself. The Market only takes place once a year, ever since our people were ostracized from land over a century ago. There are two groups of Alaha who get the privilege of attending: guards who facilitate the trades and moving of goods, and the graduating class of guards-in-training. There's fifty-six trainees in all, and for the most of us, it could be decades before we see dry land again, if ever at all. Only a handful of all of Alaha's guards get chosen by the captain to return to the Market every year.

Today could very well be our only hope.

'We should go up before anyone notices we're missing." Messer pastes his signature smile back in place. "Oh, and I may have told Aurora she could tag along with us."

Kai and I both look at each other, annoyed. We voice our displeasure, but he's already well ahead of us, crossing the interior barracks and moving up the stairs to the upper deck before we can catch up. Any and all arguments fall from our lips at the sight before us.

Land.

Nothing could have prepared me for the stark differences between this rocky shoreline and our home within the trees of Alaha. All the illustrations and paintings I've seen pale in comparison.

As if everyone is in a collective trance, the excited voices dim to a silence as the ship creeps closer.

I've never felt so insignificant, never felt as small, as I crane my neck to take in the magnitude of the vertical rockface. Then I see it. The split in the stone cliff, like a giant used an ax to cleave the land right down the middle.

"Insane," Messer murmurs.

The Market sits in the crevice on a massive dock. From cliff face to cliff face and as far inland as the eye can see, the dock stretches across the expanse as a neutral meeting ground between us-the Alaha-and the people of Kenta.

It takes a few more hours for our small fleet of ships to navigate through the barrier of breakwaters before we're able to moor. Guards set the gangways for the men to offload the cargo of fish we trawled on the voyage here. One of the commanders barks orders as the nets are lifted from the water and heaved into the awaiting wagons for the people of Kenta to exchange the fish for whatever necessities the captain is able to negotiate with the king. Usually wheat and produce.

I've spent my entire life waiting for this day, half-convinced the land dwellers were a myth. As evidenced by the bustling pier, they most definitely are not. Dressed in rich colors and strange cuts of fabrics, the Kenta are possibly the most beautiful living beings I've ever seen. Judging by the murmuring of my fellow classmates, gathered on the ship's deck as we wait for our turn to disembark, they're as awed as I am.

"Don't let their pretty clothes and jewelry fool you," says Gramble, our instructor, hands clasped behind his back as he paces back and forth on the deck. "They're as ruthless as the giant squids."