

FIRE & METAL
BOOK ONE



Metal
Slings

RACHEL
SCHNEIDER

Metal Slinger

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ISBN-13: 9798324986469

Cover design: Murphy Rae with Indie Solutions

Editor: Editing by C. Marie

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CHAPTER 1

“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 atop his head in a 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 ship pitches to the side and we brace ourselves on the nearest post. My hand lands against one of the latrines, and I make a sound of disgust as I hurry to stand when the vessel rights itself. I shoulder Messer out of the way to 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. “It’s all or none,” he says. “We all go, or none of us go.”

The rare glimpse of self-control in Messer’s eyes works to loosen the worry between Kai’s brows as he hands me a towel 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 on 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 coming through the ceiling of the wooden hull along with a thunder of footsteps.

Kai spins me toward him by the shoulders. “Our first objective is to assess the situation,” he says, 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 happens once a year. There are two groups of Alaha who get the privilege of attending: guards who facilitate the trades and moving of goods, and the future graduating class of trainees. For some of us, it could be decades before ever seeing dry land again, if ever at all.

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 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 of the rocky shoreline in comparison to our home in Alaha. All the illustrations and paintings I’ve seen pale in comparison.

As if everyone is in a trance, the excited voices dim to a silence as we creep closer.

I’ve never felt so insignificant, never felt as small as I do as I crane my neck to take in its magnitude. Then I see it. The split in the stone cliff,

breaking it into two, like a giant used an ax to cleave the land right down the middle.

“Insane,” Messer murmurs.

The Market sits between the crevices. From rock face to rock 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 before we're able to moor. The sea laps between the ship and the dock, spraying water under the feet of the men offloading the dredge of fish we gathered 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.

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 our instructor, Gramble, hands clasped behind his back as he paces back and forth on the deck of the ship. “They're as ruthless as the giant squids.”

I keep my eye roll to myself. Nothing is feared more than the giant squids rumored to be found in the most remote parts of the oceans. They have no known home, no known origin. The only evidence of their existence are the abandoned boats they leave behind, left wandering aimless without a soul on board. The bodies of the crews are theorized to have been pulled underneath the water never to be seen again. That's if there's a boat left at all.

It's nothing more than a scary bedtime story to keep the Alaha children in line. The image of a snaking black tentacle coming through a bedroom window works wonders as a deterrent for unruly kids. But unlike a

giant squid capable of dragging an entire ship to the bottom of the ocean, the Kenta people seem...

Like regular people. I don't know what I was expecting, but they're not at all like the battle-worn Kenta from our history lessons, the people who won the war and banished the Alaha to live over the ocean with little more than the clothes on our backs and a few ships to our name. The host of Kenta soldiers lining the dock and stationed throughout the market do, however, look very much like people who won't allow our people to step foot on soil.

Squinting against the sun, I find Kai on the promenade. He disembarked early to debrief with the guards in his rank. His golden hair has darkened around his temples, damp with sweat. His eyes flit over the Kenta and the boats then up toward me for a brief moment.

Kai would have come last year with his own graduating class of Alaha guards, but he waited for me and Messer to join him on the off chance we could make our way to land.

Gramble continues prepping us. "When we reach the dock, stay with your group. Never more than four, never less than two. Be friendly, but not too friendly. We're here to continue the mutual benefits of Kenta, not to make enemies, understand?"

We all nod in answer.

Gramble deposits four coppers into each person's hand from his pouch of coins. "Don't spend it all in one place." There's a rare and wry smile on his face when he stands back to dismiss us. "To be Alaha," he announces with a fist against his chest.

In hellos and goodbyes, to condolences and congratulations. We are one.

We repeat the saying back in unison—to be Alaha—and break formation, following Gramble down the gangway and onto the dock. My heart is pounding inside my chest. I glance at Kai, at my classmates who reveal nothing, expressions trained to remain calm and unreadable, at odds with the mixture of panic and excitement in my veins.

The wooden boards of the promenade feel like solid rock beneath my feet after the weeks spent traveling over open ocean to get here. My hollow stomach cramps at the smell of foods and spices wafting in from the Market.

Kai gathers Messer, Aurora, and me on the deck. He must see my thundering emotions because he gives my wrist a quick squeeze in reassurance. I take a moment to block out the bustle of activity going on around us, focusing on his familiar gray eyes that mirror my own—the only common trait I share with our people. They're safe and comforting, the eyes of my friend.

"I don't know about you," he says, drumming up the smile he's best known for and easing the tension of our entire group with it. "But I'm finding the nearest food stall that doesn't sell fish and eating myself into a stupor."

His cheerful demeanor ripples through our class and garners a few murmurs of agreement. A natural-born leader as future captain of the Alaha people, everyone looks to Kai as an example.

It's the only reason I'm able to be here. Very few females are chosen to be guards, and considering my parentage—or lack thereof—I would have never been given a passing chance to compete, let alone accepted.

Messer slaps a hand down on Kai's shoulder, a broad smile stretching from ear to ear. "What are we waiting for?"

We turn toward the promenade and take in the vendors lining each side of the dock. Every stall has a banner attached, representing the families who've come a long way for this one day of trading. My curiosity jumps from booth to booth, noting the food and clothes and jewelry and different wares on display.

Kenta soldiers patrol, dressed in different variations of leathers and armor, knives and swords sheathed in armor lining their bodies. Some wear helmets made of metal, concealing their entire face except for a thin slit for their eyes to peer through. These soldiers in particular feel unworldly, like anything or anyone could be underneath.

One passes by, eyes sharp on Kai through the small gap, looking up and down his body. Kai maintains a relaxed posture, but I can see the itch of the Kenta soldier's stare crawling beneath the surface of his calm exterior, over his lack of finery and jewels for being the son of the captain.

Aurora's voice is tainted with disdain. "Seems a little overkill considering we're not allowed to have a single mildly sharp object with us." She glares at a nearby soldier with an upraised brow.

With an unflinching stare like hers, I don't blame the guard for breaking contact first.

"Aurora," Kai admonishes. "I'm the first descendant of Wren's to attend the Market. They're smart to be prepared."

She rolls her eyes. "We're the ones on enemy territory."

"We have half a day before we're herded back into that prison of a ship, and I sure as hell am not going to waste it gawking," Messer says, pinching Aurora in the side. "Besides, we know you don't need stabby things to scare people away."

She attempts to slap him in the shoulder, but he's able to dodge the hit, laughing. Kai nudges me with a ghostly touch of fingertips against my spine, guiding me past the line of soldiers, dipping his head in a nod of respect.

It goes unreturned. The Kenta may be people just like us, but they're sure as hell rude.

"Fix your face, Brynn."

Forcing myself to relax, I paste on a timid smile. "It'd be less offensive if they just spit in our faces."

"We're here in peace," Kai reminds me, but the weapons and cold stares say otherwise.

We're obligated to make ourselves yield to them—the very people who've outcasted us—and we're supposed to appear grateful for their generosity, supposed to thank them for allowing trade between our people like we're not constantly on the brink of starvation at their hand in the first place.

Messer leads us to a nearby stall with a variety of pastries displayed, fruit tarts and pies and breads twisted in plaits with sugary toppings. A lot of time and attention went into every cake, and my mouth waters at the sight.

Messer slaps all four of his coppers onto the wood top, drawing the attention of the clerk behind the counter. “Whatever this affords me, give it to me.”

Any fear I have over Messer’s overzealous behavior disappears as soon as the young woman softens at his infectious smile. She tucks her dark hair behind her ear and asks if he likes prunes, her accent thick around the vowels of her words.

Unconcerned with any of the cultural sensitivity training we’ve been given, Messer widens his smile in flirtation. “I eat anything if it’s covered in enough sugar, sweetheart.”

If I’m not mistaken, a blush tints her freckled cheeks. Silver and gold rings adorn her ears and brow and nearly every finger as she spreads out wax paper and packs up one of everything into a carrying pouch, a pouch Messer ruins by unwrapping it and shoving the first pastry into his mouth—whole. Moaning as sugar falls from his chin as he chews, he dips his head in thanks, hands steepled before him as he speaks with his mouth full.

“You’re a goddess.”

Color further deepening on her pale cheeks, she returns the gesture. It seems all women are enamored by Messer, Kenta and Alaha alike.

The girl looks to me, her next customer, and I inspect my choices. I’m tempted to do like Messer and spend every last bit of my coin on the cakes. The lavender one looks delicious, but there’s also a chocolate square that looks downright divine.

Kai’s breath sends chills across my neck when he dips his head over my shoulder and speaks into my ear. “I may or may not have a few extra coins in my possession.”

I pretend to be unfazed by his proximity, keeping my gaze steady on the goods in front of me. “Wouldn’t expect anything less from the spoiled son of the captain.”

If Kai's father is anything, it's indulgent of his only heir.

He chuckles. "Spoiled I may be, but I'm also very giving," he says, voice deepening. *Conspiratorial*. "Get whatever you like."

In that case, I pick out four of the chocolate squares, one for each of us. We hold them in the air in a toast.

"To be Alaha," Messer says.

"To be off that godsdamned ship," I amend.

Aurora makes a face. "You got that right."

We all take a chunk out of the dessert and moan in unison. I miss my mouth on the next bite, half of the soft chocolate crashing to the ground.

"Dang rabbits," I mutter.

Messer scrunches his nose at me. "You're so weird every time you say that."

Aurora hurries to shove her own portion into her mouth when it begins to fall apart. "It doesn't make any sense."

I dust off my hands and shrug. "That's why I like it."

We find a vendor serving blackberry teas and munch on our sweets as we peruse the Market. The Kenta people don't seem as wary of us as their soldier counterparts. If anything, they treat us like we're invisible unless confronted with our company, then they seem to tolerate us well enough.

I'm captivated by the skirts and dresses of some of the women. At various lengths and colors, they swish around their legs as they work and venture between booths, some adorned in beads and jewels.

I've never put much thought into what I wear, but I can't help but find my simple trousers and blouse lacking. Even my single braid of sun-kissed auburn hair falling down the center of my back pales in comparison to the ornate plaiting and styled hair of the Kenta women.

Kai shoves me with his shoulder. "You're a member of the Alaha guard—dressing in finery isn't conducive to fighting."

"Not unless you want to look ridiculous," Messer says, adding in his two cents. Always the nosy bastard.

I feel like fighting in a dress would look less ridiculous than the soldiers with giant metal buckets on their heads in this sweltering heat.

We continue strolling down the promenade, heads swiveling left and right. Backdropped by the stark cliffs, the soldiers stationed along their perimeter are a frivolous show of defense. The stone of the land is smooth and free of any blemishes. There's not a single foothold or crack for anyone to use as leverage to scale the walls.

“They have to haul everything here somehow.”

Kai doesn't reply to Messer's observation. Doesn't need to. We're all coming to the same dismal conclusion that there might not be a way.

Ever.

We continue further into the Market until a crowd begins to form around a makeshift dance floor in the center of the dock, and we squeeze our way to the front of the circle. A band is set up on a small stage, fiddles and harmonicas and stretched drums. The skirts of the women's dresses flare around them as they dance.

It's stunning to watch. The dancers flit in and out of formation, finding the next partner with their hands before ever laying eyes on them. Laughter and smiles light up their faces, happiness radiating from them as the song continues to increase in tempo. Faster and faster and faster until it's a challenge for them to keep up, and only then do I see mistakes. A missed step, unclaimed hands, stumbling of feet.

Then the music comes to an abrupt stop along with the dancers. The crowd erupts in cheers, and we join in, clapping as the dancers laugh and share smiles, bowing to one another before departing. One of the women passes near me, and I stretch a hand out to run my fingers over the material of her skirt. It's the briefest of touches, but it feels like water flowing between my fingertips.

The lone fiddler begins a softer melody, and a few of the remaining couples stay on the dance floor, swaying with their partners.

Kai takes my hand in his. “Dance with me.”

I lift my brows in surprise. “Here?”

It would be a blatant breach of the Rule of Boundaries, a list of covenants each person of Alaha agrees to abide by once they come of age. There's to be no intimate contact of any kind between the opposite sex until the Matching Ceremony.

More often than not, it's a marriage of convenience, often negotiations between families rather than actual love matches. It was originally put in place to monitor breeding between too close of bloodlines, but now it's to slow the tide of overpopulation.

Kai gives me a look. "Who's going to report us? My own soldiers?"

I look around and spot many of our own people observing the band from the crowd. Looking at Messer, I pass my drink to him. As per usual, I let Kai lead me onto the dance floor. The couples smile politely at us as we settle between them on the decking smoothed by years of feet moving across its surface.

"Hey," Kai says, drawing my chin up with a finger. "Just you and me."

His eyes are unwavering as he coaxes me into a steady rhythm. Our movements are less whimsical without the flowing fabrics, but I close my eyes and force my body to move with Kai's, willing my mind to slow. I focus on his hand on my hip and the smell of home that still lingers on his skin and—gods, the walls are just so tall.

"Brynn, look at me," Kai demands.

So I do, eyes snapping open.

"I'll always protect you."

He thinks I'm scared of being reprimanded—as I should be, considering the harsh consequences of breaking one of the covenants of the Alaha—but I don't fear grunt work or the brig.

"It wouldn't be the first time we've spent time in the brig," I say, giving off an air of indifference. "Or the second."

I must do a terrible job of pretending because Kai doesn't crack a smile at the subtle mention of the last time we were sentenced to a night in the stone cells. We had stolen the underwear from clotheslines and fastened them to the Alaha flag in the center of the Main. Wasn't worth the

punishment whatsoever, but we pretended it was to make ourselves feel better for being stupid kids.

What I'm not expecting are the words that leave his mouth next. "I asked my parents for permission to choose you at the Matching Ceremony."

My heart goes still. "Why would you do that?" I say, voice wavering.

"Come on, Bry," he says, eyes drilling hard into mine. "You had to expect this was coming."

I shake my head.

I've never allowed myself to entertain the idea of ever getting a match. I've disciplined myself to push those thoughts away, to lock them somewhere inside myself so deep even I'm not sure where they're kept.

Kai has his pick of girls and their families vying for his hand in marriage, and true love matches are few and far between. I have no family. No dowry. No incentives for a marriage. I'm at the bottom of the list.

Why would he ever choose me?

"The future leader of Alaha doesn't choose an *urchin* as a wife."

He grits his teeth but doesn't break stride. "You know how much I hate when you call yourself that."

"That's what I am, Kai."

"No, it's not."

His hold on me tightens, but he doesn't push. I inspect him, looking for a hint of what Kai has up his sleeve, but I can't find anything other than anticipation staring back at me.

"You are smart and hardworking and so godsdamn beautiful," he says, punctuating each word to ensure I'm convinced of their authenticity. "Your name has been whispered by my own men behind my back, because they would never dare to speak their interest in courting you to my face."

His statements create a vise around my chest as I stare into his eyes. Kai's been my best friend for as long as I can remember. He's had to defend me to everyone in his life, probably more than he's ever let on, but he's never so much as hinted at any possible interest in me. Not romantically. Not like this.

I shake my head in a daze. “Is this real?”

His gaze is deadly serious as he looks down at me. “Do you want it to be?”

Our movements come to a halt. I’ve spent what has felt like my entire life waiting for this day, waiting for the chance to come to the annual Market, and he’s dropping this on me now?

Gritting my teeth, I shove him in the chest with my palms. When he doesn’t budge, I do it again, but harder. He stumbles into the couple behind him, but he doesn’t break eye contact as I take a step back.

His eyes narrow. “Brynn—”

I stop him with an upturned hand. He opens his mouth again, but I don’t hear whatever it is he says because I turn away, hurrying through the crowd in my bid to escape, to outrun the weight of all the eyes on me.