

Metal Slinger

RACHEL
SCHNEIDER

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SATURDAY
BOOKS
NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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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 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

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."

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 floating aimlessly without a soul on board. The bodies of the crew members are said to have been pulled underneath the water, never to be seen again. That's if there's a boat left at all. I've heard whispers from my classmates throughout my adolescence that this is what took my parents from me, but I think 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, supposedly 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-hardened Kenta from our history lessons. People who, along with the other three territories, banished the Alaha after a brutal war 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 us to step foot on soil.

The stretch of dock floating on the water is the closest they'll let us venture to land.

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

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

Gramble continues prepping our class. "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 trade with them peacefully, 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.

From 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, trained to remain calm and unreadable. Their expressions reveal nothing, at odds with the mixture of panic and excitement in my veins.

The wooden boards of the pier feel solid 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 comes to stand with Messer, Aurora, and me on the dock. He must see my thundering emotions because he gives my wrist a quick squeeze of reassurance. I take a moment to block out the bustle of activity going on around us, focusing on his familiar gray eyes, the mirror of 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 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 group and garners a few murmurs of agreement. A natural-born leader and future captain of the Alaha people, everyone looks to Kai as an example.

He'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 be 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 for this one day of trading. My curiosity jumps from booth to booth, noting the food, the clothes, the jewelry, and other different wares on display.

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

One passes by, eyes sharp on Kai through the small slit, looking up and down his body. Kai maintains a relaxed posture,

but I can see the itch beneath his calm exterior, under the judgement of the Kenta soldier's stare, and I wonder if he's aware he's staring at the son of the captain without the added need of finery or jewels.

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 eye 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 in enemy territory."

"We have half a day before we're herded back onto 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 on 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 to them 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—a group of the very people who cast us out—and we're supposed to appear grateful for their generosity, supposed to thank them for allowing trade between our peoples like we're not

constantly on the brink of starvation at their hand in the first place. Though I suppose this is far more than any of the other territories have offered. Maile have turned their backs on us, Strou defers to Kenta on all, and while Roison claims allyship with us, they don't go out of their way to lend a helping hand.

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. 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 while sugar falls from his chin as he chews, he dips his head in thanks, hands steeped before him as he speaks with his mouth full.

"You're a goddess."

Color further deepening on her pale cheeks, she returns the small bow. It seems all women are enamored with 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 drops 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, he is indulgent with 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 our desserts and moan in unison. I take too big of a bite, half of the soft chocolate crashing to the ground.

"Dang rabbits," I mutter.

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

Aurora hurries to shove her own treat 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 regular 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 move 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 hair falling down the center of my back pales in comparison to the ornate plaiting and styled hair of the Kenta women.

Kai follows my gaze, then 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, searching for an escape route onto land. Backdropped by the stark cliffs, the soldiers stationed along the perimeter are a frivolous show of force. The stone 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: there might not be a way.

Ever.

We continue further into the Market until we see a crowd 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 feet.

Then the music comes to an abrupt stop along with the dancers. The crowd erupts into 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 until the Matching Ceremony.

The ceremony is named after the legendary Match Bond—a list of covenants each person of Alaha agrees to abide by once they finish primary school at age twelve. There's to be no intimate contact of any kind until the Matching Ceremony held within the same year they turn eighteen.

More often than not, the ceremony is a marriage of strategy, a negotiation between families rather than an actual love match. It was originally put in place to control breeding between bloodlines too closely related, but now it's practiced to slow the tide of underpopulation. People are more likely to have babies in an isolated environment when people are forced to marry at a young age.

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, and follow him onto the dance floor. The other couples smile politely at us as we settle between them on 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 gone to 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 cells. We had stolen the underwear from clothes lines and fastened them to a pole under the Alaha flag in the center of the Main. The prank wasn't worth the punishment whatsoever.

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 marrying, let alone finding a true love 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. 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 hard-working and so godsdamn beautiful," he says, emphasizing 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 a marriage with me. 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, to land, 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 a raised 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.



Chapter 2



I'm deep inside the market.

The stone walls loom closer on either side of the dock, blocking out a large portion of the sunlight and casting the booths in shadow. The air is different here, rich and earthy. It reminds me of the scent that comes before it rains. It's my favorite.

The vendors this far in are nestled closer together. It's less crowded, filled with more locals than Alaha. There are candles and honey and stoneware fit for royalty, gold and embossed. It'd be downright blasphemy to put the fish stew we've been eating anywhere near these dishes.

The merchant behind the booth selling the hand-painted stoneware doesn't beckon to me. It's obvious I'm not his normal clientele, but he smiles at me as I admire the saucers. Deer and rabbits and foxes, animals you'd find on land.

They put my charcoal sketches to shame.

A woman in a knee-length dress approaches the booth, and I move out of the way. That's when I notice him. *Again.*

The first time was a quarter of a mile back. Our eyes connected for a moment when I passed, but I registered a lot in that brief flash of time: the way he stood with his arms folded over his chest, how his smile dimmed when he saw

me, and how the conversation he was having with his fellow Kenta soldier stopped.

Dark hair, dark eyes, a gold ring in one nostril. Lips I somehow know often say crude things—or maybe it's his entire demeanor that tells me that, but there's something inherently vulgar in his beauty.

I'm positive he's been following me ever since. I maintain my gait, not wanting to let on that I know I'm being followed, but I cross the dock to put distance between us. It's far enough to create a buffer but not too far to be suspicious between us, and change course back toward the ships.

What's your next move?

Sure enough, he crosses too, staying a few paces behind me. A strap of daggers adorns his chest, the leather embroidered with the emblem of Kenta, signifying his wealth and high rank. I do a quick inventory of my surroundings and can't find one Alaha in sight. There are only Kenta in every direction.

I glance over my shoulder.

He doesn't bother hiding his interest this time, dark eyes focused on me as he weaves through the crowd, towering over the heads of people.

Maybe he's keeping an eye on me because I'm alone. Gramble's reminder to stay in a group rings in my head, but my gut tells me otherwise. My gut tells me I'm being hunted.

I pick up my pace, skipping the next row of vendors before daring another glance over my shoulder. This time I don't look away, letting him know I'm aware of him and I'm not afraid.

He has the nerve to smile. It's unsettling, his grin as wicked as it is beautiful. Maybe he just gets a kick out of intimidating Alaha girls.

I stop at a random vendor, hoping if I ignore his existence he'll just lose interest.

“Any color you’re looking for in particular?” asks the lady behind the counter.

I don’t even look to see what she’s selling as I shake my head in answer before moving on. I pretend to peruse the stalls, skipping every few in an effort to get closer to the front of the promenade.

The tension in my muscles dissipates when I spot two Alaha guard within yelling distance. I see Messer’s glossy hair through the crowd, then Kai, as they weave between people, heads swiveling as they search for me. Aurora follows, swigging from a cup without a care in the world.

Once again, I look over my shoulder and am further relieved when I don’t find the soldier. I wave at Messer, who slaps Kai in the shoulder and points to me. As I wait for them to come to me so we don’t lose each other in the crowd, I notice the booth nearest to me has gems on display. Light refracts from the cut facets of hanging gems and throws rainbows onto the dock and stone wall behind it. I walk closer and run my fingertips across a small stone that looks like sea glass.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” the vendor says, a genuine smile behind his full beard. Remembering the four coppers still in my pocket, I inquire, “How much?”

“These are very valuable stones,” he says, picking up one of the smaller cuttings. “They’re hard to find, deep within the mines of the earth. One gold coin for this one.”

Dreams of hanging one from the window in my room float away. “They’re very beautiful,” I say with disappointment.

He nods, a dip of his chin in understanding. Before I can move away, a hand slaps down over mine. I suck in a breath as the soldier looms over me, dark eyes rimmed with anger and locking me into place.

“Thief,” he says, voice echoing off the canyon’s walls.

I shake my head, half in an attempt to defend myself, half in disbelief. I yank my hand from where he has me pinned to the table, but his hold is unmoving. “I didn’t take anything.”

“Yeah?” He pushes the sleeve of my tunic up my forearm and turns my hand over in his, exposing the stone of light green glass in my palm. “Then what’s this?”

I gasp. “You put that there.”

His dark eyes drill holes into mine. “Are you calling me a liar?”

“Yes,” I answer, refusing to back down from his domineering stare.

His hand tightens around my wrist between us. “I heard the Alaha remove the limbs of people who break any of their precious covenants. What is it? A finger or a hand for a thief?”

I speak through clenched teeth. “I didn’t take anything.”

He regards me for a moment, eyes bouncing between mine. Looking for what, I’m unsure, considering we both know he concocted this entire scheme.

The neighboring vendors and shoppers stop to watch the spectacle.

He breaks first, clearing his throat and signaling to someone behind me. “A hand it is.”

I’m wrestled away from the table by another soldier.

“This is absurd!” I flail to dislodge the strong arm around my waist, but the soldier lifts me so I’m unable to leverage myself against the ground. “I’m not a thief!”

My accuser leads us around the booth and behind the row of vendors. The soldier holding me places me before the stone wall, which is like a sleeping giant before us. Warmth radiates from its surface, not more than a foot away. It’s the closest I’ve ever come to touching land.

The dark eyes of the accusing soldier drill into the side of my face. “Place your hand on the wall,” he commands.

I don't move or so much as blink as I assess my options. The decade of training should kick in at any moment now, but it's hard to think with the attention of half the promenade on my back. The bustle of the market has dulled to a low buzz behind me.

Everything stills as I take a calming breath, then I stomp as hard as I can onto the foot of the soldier that's holding me, ripping my arm away at the same time. It weakens his stronghold enough to free myself, but the momentum throws me off balance and I fall into the grasp of the dark-eyed soldier.

He's quick to spin me in place, wrapping a forearm around my neck with a blade at the base of my throat. If I wasn't on the sharp end of the knife, I'd be more impressed by his speed and ability, but panic countermands any rational thought besides calculating a way out of this mess.

I look for Kai, my focus jumping between faces in the crowd, but I come up empty. Only strangers stare back at me.

He murmurs the command into my ear for only me to hear, sending a shiver down my spine. "Place your hand against the stone." He's not simply playing games with me like I had suspected.

I shake my head despite the sting of the blade. "Why are you doing this?"

He's done waiting for me to comply. Instead, he uses his free hand to grab mine and places my trembling palm against the warm stone, his hand covering mine.

Pain unlike anything I've ever felt before lances through my body. Heat sears my arm and my chest, down my body and into my legs. It's like a live current, similar to the sort produced by the electric eels found in the coral outside Alaha, but multiplied by a thousand.

I scream.

Then, in the span of a blink, it's over.

My eyes fly open and my breath rushes out abruptly, the scream dying in my throat. I'm on my knees, the wood of the dock cutting into my shins. My senses flood back into focus. The sounds of murmuring and shocked voices filter in through my haze. I lift my hands to my face and am relieved to see I still have both of them attached to my body.

But the pain . . .

I look up, up, up and into the soldier's face. He looks as stunned as I feel, eyes wide as he stares down at me, breath frozen in his chest.

Kai's voice shouts over the gathered voices. "Let her go!"

But the soldier doesn't break eye contact, something between awe and fear staring back at me.

"I said," Kai demands, the voice he rarely uses silencing the crowd. "Let her go."

The soldier is slow to turn, head swiveling in Kai's direction before his gaze slides away from me, face transforming from awestruck to cold as he looks at Kai. "That won't work on me," he says, voice low and undeterred. "You have no power here."

I struggle to get to my feet, legs giving way when I try to put my weight on them. I can't look behind me to see Kai's expression, but the unflinching gaze of the soldier tells me this isn't going to end without collateral damage. He flips the blade in his hand, a visual reminder that Kai and I are defenseless against him and his men.

"Let her go," Kai repeats, more placating than before. The soldier tips a brow. "She's not yours."

There's a beat of calm before a loud crash comes from our left. Messer leaps over the now overturned booth, glass jars of jellies and jams shattering across the dock. Chaos ensues as he tackles my second captor from behind.

Using the distraction to my advantage, I reach for the blade strapped to the soldier's thigh and make a clean swipe through his heel. He barks in pain, knee hitting the dock beside me. He reaches to grab me, but I swing the blade in a wide arc, forcing him to dodge the blow that comes within centimeters of his face. It gives me just enough time to get my legs underneath me, careful to avoid the surface of the stone wall as I wobble into a fighting stance.

He levels his gaze up at me. "Don't," he says, an air of desperation coating the single word.

Something in the distressed way he's holding my eyes as he struggles to pull himself up on one leg gives me pause, but not enough to actually stop me.

Sensing my intentions to run, he yells to his fellow soldiers. "Don't let her off this dock!"

I stumble toward Messer, who is grappling with the other soldier. Seeing me coming, he gets on top of the man and slams a fist into his face, knocking him out cold. He rushes toward me, wrapping an arm around my waist to help me stay upright.

Kai sees us and begins clearing a path through the people. Alaha have joined the fray, and it's an all-out battle to get our people back to the boats.

"Are you okay?" Kai asks, taking up my other side.

I don't waste energy replying, concentrating on my steps as my faculties slowly come back into full working order. We sprint for the end of the dock, to the Alaha flags overhead. It's a mass exodus as the Kenta people move out of our way.

"What the hell happened?" Gramble shouts as he runs toward us, eyes flicking over our heads at the angry mob of Kenta soldiers hot on our heels.

He doesn't wait for an explanation, moving quickly to usher the students onto the nearest gangway. Alaha guards take

position along the dock, a last line of defense as our people rush to safety on the boats.

Kai halts at the makeshift line. “Where’s Aurora?”

Messer nearly trips over at the abrupt stop, his chest heaving as he searches for her. “I thought she was right behind us.”

An explosion rocks the dock, sending everyone to the ground. Silence rings for a long moment before I’m able to get my bearings. Debris and wood rain down, and I cover my head until it slows to a stop. Messer helps me up, and I shove my hair out of my face as Kai grips me by my upper arms.

“I’m okay,” I tell them, voice muffled in my ears. “Are you?”

There’s no time to take inventory as Gramble continues to shout for us to embark. The Kenta soldiers behind us begin to rise. Half of them shake off their disorientation as they take in the plume of smoke billowing into the sky from deep within the Market. The other half are once again moving towards us, filled with vengeance.

Messer pushes me toward the ship. “I’m going to find Aurora.”

He stops mid-step as she appears from the chaos, unhurried and unconcerned as she stalks toward us, holding the same cup I saw her carrying earlier.

“Figured we could use a head start,” she says, winking at Messer’s stunned expression as she passes by.

All heads turn to watch as she stalks up the gangway.

Kai shakes his head and urges me forward. “We need to go.”

The crew works in a fury to pull up the gangway and push off from the dock, setting off in just enough time to watch the Market collapse in on itself.

Seawater swallows an entire portion of the promenade in one gulp, people included.

Hurrying to the mast, I use the last of my strength to climb. Kai yells my name, but I don’t stop, wanting a better view of

the damage. Nothing could have prepared me for the scale of the destruction. Aurora managed to take out a section the size of two ships right in the middle of the Market. Hundreds and hundreds of people tread water, clinging to whatever they can find and to each other.

A century of trade and peace . . . *demolished*. There's no coming back from this. Retribution *will* be coming.

I realize my fist is still clenched and look down to find the soldier's blade clasped tightly in my shaking hands.