

## Chapter 1

Fifthdae was always the worst night for fishing. The cargo boats came from Copper Swamp to deliver their ores to the city refinery, and the bustle disturbed the reef so much that the fish would scatter until next Thirdae.

Well, maybe next Thirdae was a bit of an exaggeration.... But it was still frustrating, and Sylas knew he wasn't going to catch enough to take to the markets for the weekend.

He'd barely managed to catch enough to feed himself.

Letting out a sigh, Sylas looked to the lights in the distance. He couldn't imagine a worse place to live than in the city. There were always so many boats in the docks, bustling with people all day and throughout the night.... But here, under the cliffs, it was quieter and the tide came in slower. And there were no people to bother him.

*One more fish*, he figured. Then he'd head home and get some sleep.

Not much else to do, really—

Sylas let out a shout as his boat rocked violently and his open tackle-box fell off the side of the boat.

'Damn the tide!' he hissed. *Should have gone home hours ago.*

His boat swayed again, though not as violently, and he heard something heavy smack against the hull.

Hm. That sounded like it was big.

Perhaps he should go.

Or, perhaps he should throw out some bait and hope his last hook would be strong enough to hold whatever had bumped him.

The boat rocked again, and there was the distinct sound of scrabbling on wood followed by a splash, and he whirled around to the noise just in time to see the shadow of something big slip under his boat.

He hurried over to try and catch a glimpse, but only found wet... hand-prints?

They couldn't be—

Again, his boat rocked. And again, he whirled around. Just in time to see a seal-whiskered woman attempt to climb onto his boat and slip again.

'By all the gods!' he gasped, stepping back as she jumped up again, this time managing to heft herself over the edge.

He tripped the side of his boat and almost fell into the water, except the woman leapt forward and grabbed him by his vest collar. The only thing between him and the ocean was the webbed hand of the stranger.

Sylas felt himself trembling as she pulled him forward. Her damp hair was thick and curled, and her skin was dappled like seal-pelt, and as she stared at him her whiskers twitched as much as her too-long ears as she cocked her head and grinned with teeth too sharp.

'Father...' he managed. 'On my boat.... A— A— A—'

'Ah!' she mimicked. Then giggled and let him fall to the floor. 'Ah! Ah! Ah!'

'Oh, gods!' he held up a hand to protect his face.

'Oh, cods!' she did the same, though much less fearfully. Then she brushed a lock of

wet curls from her freckled face and pointed to the bucket at Sylas' feet. 'Can I have a fish?'

'Take the bucket!' Sylas responded, thrusting the rusted tub into her hands and edging back as the boat rocked dangerously. 'Just— Don't eat me!'

'Eat you?' she asked, looking from him to the fish before burying her face into the bucket and messily biting into the pile. 'Why would I eat *you*?'

'Because you're a— You're a— A siren!' he stammered. 'Oh, Father above, don't eat me!'

The woman stared at him for a long, long moment as she chewed her mouthful of fish. Then she broke into a toothy grin and wiped the blood from her chubby cheeks with the back of her hand. 'Oh. I see. I'm a siren. A big, scary person-eater. That's it?'

Sylas nodded and swallowed the building bile in his throat.

'Well, then, of *course* I'm going to eat you!' she rolled her eyes and put the bucket down. 'I was just having an appetiser! COME HERE!'

Sylas let out a shriek as she lunged for him and threw out his hands. He felt them brushed aside easily as she leapt on top of him and buried her face into his neck.

He waited for death.

But all he felt was the tickle of her whiskers on his chin, followed by her tongue flicking out as she trailed spit from his shoulder to his nose.

'*Mlemp*,' she pulled her head back, her tongue still out and her eyes pressed tight in her silly grin. 'I'm such a big, scary siren.'

'You're.... You're not a siren, are you?' Sylas guessed.

'Nope,' she grinned, still pressing into his lap as she tapped a claw to his nose. 'I'm not a siren. I don't like sirens, much. They're mean. And I'm nice.'

'You're nice?' Sylas swallowed, his heart still pounding in his chest as her claw trailed down to his lip. 'Then.... what are you?'

'A selkie. My name's Morel,' she replied. 'What about you? I think I've heard about what you are before. Are you a boy?'

'I— Yes?' Sylas managed. Although, right now, with her on top of him wiggling and bouncing as she tried to get comfortable, he did *not* feel like a boy. He felt like a *lot more* than a boy.

'I've never talked to a boy before,' her claw was now poking at his ear. 'You're funny looking.'

'And you're... naked,' Sylas replied. He felt like he had to point it out. He felt almost guilty not stating it. Because— *Oh, Father!*

She shifted and he wasn't sure if he wanted her to do it again or stop. 'Naked? What's that?'

'You don't have any clothes on.'

'What're clothes?'

Slowly, Sylas motioned to his vest. 'These.'

'Oh!' the selkie gave the fabric a tug. And Sylas felt his entire body shift as she did. She didn't seem to realise her strength as she pulled him forward to examine him. 'Then, yes! I suppose I *am* naked! I've always wondered what these were called! What're they for?'

‘Keeping your modesty!’ Sylas blurted. ‘Nobody wants to see everyone else just— Walking around naked!’

‘Funny. My aunt told me that’s *all* boys want to see!’

‘N-No! It’s not!’ Sylas shuffled under Morel, and found he couldn’t wiggle free as she giggled and continued poking at his face. *Could he really argue that right now, with what he was feeling?*

‘Really? Because my aunt told me about boys,’ Morel gave him a cheeky grin. ‘She said all they’re good for is sex!’

‘Well, she’s wrong,’ Sylas groaned. *Though, maybe she wasn’t.*

‘Oh? She is? Really?’ Morel backed up, and Sylas noticed her slip as she tried to put her foot down. It was as if she wasn’t used to her legs— And he saw why as she settled down and they disappeared into a tail.

‘Oh, what in Deepland—’ he gasped as the chill night air replaced Morel’s warm touch.

‘What?’ Morel asked, following Sylas’ gaze to her flipper. ‘Oh, this? Can’t you do that?’

‘No!’ Sylas exclaimed.

‘Wow, that’s interesting!’ now Morel had his foot in her hand, and was tugging off his shoe. ‘Oh, wow! You have no webbing here, either! How do you swim?’

‘I... don’t?’ Sylas offered. ‘I can’t swim.’

‘You can’t?’ she blinked. ‘And you still come out onto the water like this? What if your boat tipped over?’

‘Then I’d drown,’ he said simply. ‘So maybe don’t rock us so much?’

She settled down in her cramped spot at the stern and held much more still. ‘Like this?’

‘Thank you,’ Sylas let out a breath of relief. Though he found himself half-wishing she’d sat closer to him.

‘So, is sex really all you humans care about, or is my aunt wrong again?’ Morel asked.

‘What?’

‘Is sex all you care about? I don’t think I’d know what else to talk about with one of you. I don’t know if I was being clear with my intentions before, but was actually *hoping* to talk about it!’

*Oh, no,* Sylas thought as he readjusted his clothes. *You were more than clear....*

‘I haven’t really prepared any other conversation starters,’ she continued, tapping a claw to her chin. Then she grinned and clapped her hands. ‘Oh! Uh, how about— Thoughts on inactive volcanoes and their affect on the crab population?’

‘The what?’

‘Or tactics for robbing neovi groups without making them swallow their children?’

‘Swallow their *what?!*’

‘See? You humans don’t know how to talk about *anything* else,’ Morel gave an exaggerated shrug, and started to edge closer to Sylas again. He saw her tail split and she pressed her knees around his hips and touched her nose to his— And he felt his cheeks blushing hot as her whiskers tickled his face. ‘Give us a topic.’

‘Uh...’ Sylas was having trouble thinking of anything besides the woman on top of

him, and how warm and soft she felt as she giggled and nuzzled into him. ‘The neighbouring lord, he— He had a son recently.’

‘What lord?’

‘The lord of Primrose Forest?’

‘What’s a “Primrose Forest”?’ she pulled back a little, though her hot breath still met Sylas’ cheek. ‘Is it important?’

*No. Not right now*, he almost said it aloud. *Not compared to this feeling, it’s not.*

‘Are you okay?’ she asked. ‘Am I too heavy? Do you want me to move?’

‘No,’ Sylas admitted. ‘You’re— You’re fine.’

‘Oh, good!’ she settled down on him, and he felt her weight press onto him in a way he hadn’t expected to feel so good. ‘Well.... How about fish? Let’s talk fish! What’s your favourite fish?’

His... favourite....

Her whiskers tickled his cheek again and he found he couldn’t focus.

Gods, she was so warm!

‘Come on!’ she urged, starting to rock in place with excitement. ‘Tell me what your favourite fish is!’

It was too much for Sylas to bear, and he let out a moan.

‘Oh!’ she gave an exclamation and shifted in his lap. ‘What is *that*?’

‘Sorry!’ Sylas panted. ‘I can’t— You’re just— Really—’

He lost his train of thought as Morel shifted again and a shiver ran up his body.

Morel seemed to think it was funny. ‘Oh, I see. You *like* me being here.’

Sylas could only nod.

She leant forward, pressing her entire body against his as her lips hovered dangerously close to his ear and her hips began to grind against his. ‘Do you want me to stay?’

Another nod.

‘Do you want to keep “talking fish”?’

Again, he nodded.

And again she giggled, and he felt her warm breath slide down his neck to his chest. ‘Okay.... Let’s “talk fish”....’