

Chapter 11

The meal had gone well. The stew had been nice— Though, not to Sylas' pride. After about twenty minutes of the final hour of simmering, Amelia had taste-tested the food and quickly corrected the spices.

Now, stomachs full and the sun in the centre of the sky, Sylas and his sister sat together on his cramped boat; their old tattered deck of cards between them as they conversed more than they played.

It was nice to spend time with her again. Time with *just* her again.

Without Peter.

Sylas couldn't help but notice that, without her husband, Amelia was much more relaxed.

Her shoulders weren't tense and her smile never faltered. Not even for a second.

It made Sylas angry.

One of these days, he knew, he was going to snap. He was going to snap, and he was going to kill that sorry excuse of a man....

Pleasant thoughts, Sylas told himself; echoing something his sister used to say to him. *Enjoy the moment. Enjoy the—*

Something large and familiar bumped the boat, knocking the deck of cards off the centre thwart and almost toppling Amelia sideways.

'Oh, Mother Moon!' Amelia exclaimed as she regained her balance. 'What was *that*?'

'Uh...' Sylas rubbed the back of his neck, abandoning his hand of cards to instead grip the side of the boat. 'This is going to be strange, Amelia, but just try to stay calm—'

He didn't have time to finish his sentence before Morel's mottled, naked form was suddenly on the gunwale besides Amelia.

Both women were taken by surprise.

Amelia screamed, falling from her seat into the bottom of the boat.

And Morel screamed, falling from the side of the boat back into the ocean.

And then Sylas, despite himself, let out a laugh.

'Wha— Who— The—' Amelia stuttered as Sylas hefted her back into her seat. 'Who was— *Who?*'

'*That's* Morel,' Sylas chuckled as the boat was jostled again. He ignored the movement, instead gently touching his sister's stomach as he settled her back down. 'Are you alright? You're not hurt?'

Amelia shook her head, giving a very nervous-sounding chuckle. 'I'm fine. We both are.'

The boat jolted again and Morel reappeared; this time leaping up to cling to the stern. She hung on tight, a confused frown on her face as she looked between Sylas and Amelia.

'Who's this?' Morel asked, pointing a finger at Amelia. 'She's pregnant? Who got her pregnant?'

'Morel, this is Amelia,' Sylas introduced. 'She's my sister.'

'Oh, I didn't know you had a sister!' the confused look disappeared from Morel's face and she happily hefted herself over the edge.

She landed heavily, causing the boat to tip dangerously on one side... and then she nearly tipped it again as she tried to slide over to join the pair by the bow. It was only Sylas flinging himself full-force into the stern that stopped the entire boat from flipping upside down.

'I have sisters,' Morel continued, seemingly oblivious to the chaos she had just caused. 'Three of them. I'm the oldest, you know.'

'Are you, now?' Amelia asked, her voice shaking with a nervous chuckle as she grasped the edges of the boat; clinging to them like her life depended on it. 'Sylas is... also the oldest.... Though, it's uh.... It's just the two of us.'

'Ah,' Morel gave a knowing nod before flopping down heavily against Sylas. She rested her head on his shoulder and played with his hair as her bottom half shifted, back and forth, between legs and tail. 'I remember when it was just me and Ophelia.... Then Kas had to come along and ruin everything!'

The grin Morel gave Sylas as she mentioned her sisters was infectious. And not just to him, but to Amelia as well. Sylas could see the woman was starting to relax again as a genuine-looking smile found its way to her lips.

'And don't even get me *started* on Phoebe!' Morel chuckled. 'She's *such* a little brat! You'd think Auntie Isseal would be keeping an eye on *her*, instead of *me*! But no. Apparently *I'm* the one she's worried about!'

'Huh...' Amelia gave a half-laugh. 'Why's she worried about you?'

'Oh, she, uh...' Morel blushed, then, and averted her gaze; moving her fingers from Sylas' hair to a loose thread on his vest. 'She doesn't like that I spend so much time away from my colony. She says that, one day, I'm going to get myself lost and not be able to find my way home.'

'Ah I... see...' Amelia's eyes fell, slowly, to stare at Morel's shape-shifting lower half. 'Um... Morel? I hope it's not rude to ask but... *what*... are you?'

'Oh? Oh!' Morel flicked the flipper on the end of her tail playfully as her mood lifted again. 'I'm a selkie!'

'Oh...' Amelia's tone of voice made it clear to Sylas that she had no idea what a selkie was, though she still smiled politely and nodded at Morel. 'I see. That's... that's interesting.'

'You think so?!' Morel exclaimed, leaping up onto her feet and clapping her hands in excitement as both humans clung anxiously to the rocking boat. 'If you think transforming my tail is interesting, just wait until you see *this*! Nobody else in my whole family can do *this*!'

Morel closed her eyes, then, and took a very deep breath.

The first thing Sylas noticed was her ears shrinking. They grew short and round. And when he leant forward to crane his gaze from her back he realised her whiskers had vanished. As had the webbing between her fingers.

And then the mottling pattern across her body blended and her skin became one smooth, rich, deep brown like his. And when she opened her eyes and smiled at him, her teeth were flat and even.

She looked completely human.

'Wow...' Sylas breathed. He hadn't realised that Morel could change like *that*....

‘Wow,’ Amelia echoed. ‘That’s amazing! I’ve never seen anything like that before.’

‘Neither has any other selkie! At least, not any other selkie I’ve met,’ Morel beamed, proudly. ‘They say that nobody has ever been able to turn into their father-race, before!’

‘Father race?’ Amelia’s brow furrowed in confusion. ‘What do you mean by that? Is your father not a selkie?’

‘My father was human,’ Morel explained, sitting back down heavily into Sylas’s lap as her form returned to her seal-tailed self. ‘Just like all of my sisters— I think my mother has a type, you know.’

It earned a laugh; though it was clear that Amelia still didn’t understand.

‘There are no boy selkies,’ Sylas explained. ‘They’re always born girls. Morel told me about it, once.... They have to find men from other races, if they want children.’

‘Men like you?’ Amelia asked in a joking tone.

Sylas opened his mouth to defend himself, but before he could speak Morel let out a loud gasp and he felt her hand close tightly around his wrist.

‘Oh. *Oh!*’ she exclaimed; her ears sticking up as if the potential consequences of the last five weeks had never occurred to her before. ‘Oh, that could *happen!*’

The look Sylas’ sister gave him made him blush, and all he could do was nod at Morel and say; ‘Y-Yes. There’s always been that chance.’

‘Oh... no wonder Auntie’s been so mad about it!’ Morel giggled, relaxing again. She reached out her foot to Amelia, poking at her with a toe, before pulling back; her legs becoming a tail again so she could heft it up into Sylas’ lap.

Sylas felt himself winded as Morel shifted on top of him and her elbow dug into his stomach, much to Amelia’s humour.

‘Are you alright, Sylas?’ Amelia asked.

‘*I’m fine,*’ Sylas managed, not sounding fine at all.

Amelia looked doubtful. Though she didn’t say anything about it as she smiled at Morel, warm and genuine, and motioned to the woman’s legs. ‘You’re very good at that. Is it hard to do?’

‘Uh... no. No, it’s very easy,’ Morel gave a chuckle; which Sylas noticed now seemed a little bit nervous. ‘I don’t even mean to change my legs, most of the time. Actually, it’s.... It makes Auntie Isseal....’

‘What?’ Amelia asked, gently.

‘She says it’s childish,’ Morel clarified. ‘To uh... keep changing my form all the time. It’s something pups do. Not... not adults. But I just can’t *help* it, you know? I just feel so much, all the time, and I just have to... to change! Auntie hates it though. She says I have the attention span of an otter and she has to tune me out a lot.’

‘Tune you out?’ Amelia looked sympathetic. ‘She ignores you?’

‘Oh, no, she doesn’t ignore me!’ Morel said, shifting on top of Sylas again. ‘It’s just that when I get excited I tend to make it hard for her to track everyone else, so she has to block me out so I don’t overwhelm her whiskers! It means I can get away with a lot more but.... But she still checks on me, so I can’t usually be gone for *too* long before she notices and comes looking for me.’

‘Overwhelm her... Whiskers?’

‘Yeah, she feels what we feel through them,’ Morel explained. ‘With her telepathy.’

‘T-Telepathy?’ Sylas blinked. *Isseal was a mind-reader?* ‘I didn’t know selkies could...’

Trailing off, Sylas remembered all of the horrible things he had thought over the past month. Had Morel heard all of those horrible thoughts that always sloshed around in his head?

‘Can... can *you* read minds?’ he asked.

Morel shook her head. ‘It’s not a mind-reading thing. It’s a *feeling* thing. And we can only do it to our own family,’ she explained. ‘The matriarchs are the best at it, though. They can sense where everyone is and what kind of emotions they are feeling. It’s so she can look after us.’

Sylas gave a slow nod. He still didn’t fully understand, though he thought it made a little bit of sense.

‘And it’s just that my thoughts are so erratic, and my feelings are so strong,’ Morel continued. ‘If she listens to me all the time it makes it hard to hear everyone else— Oh! *OH!*’

Suddenly, before Sylas or Amelia could react, Morel had launched herself off the side of the boat.

Sylas gave a loud grunt as he was winded again, much more powerfully this time, and watched as Morel’s shadow vanished into the deep water.

Then he turned his gaze back to Amelia, and the pair shared a quiet moment of confusion before Morel erupted loudly from the water again; leaping onto the boat from the other side and sending it rocking back and forth.

‘Morel!’ Sylas cried as he lunged forward to stop his sister from falling over the gunwale. ‘Why did you—’

‘Squid!’ Morel answered, happily, and held out the still-wiggling mollusc. ‘Want some?’

‘Uh... no,’ Sylas answered carefully. ‘No, I’m alright. Thanks.’

‘Amelia?’ Morel asked, offering the squid to Sylas’ sister— Who shook her head quickly and looked faint. ‘You sure?’

‘I’m sure, thank you,’ Amelia gave a nervous laugh and waved her hand dismissively. ‘Pregnancy and... food aversions. You know how it is.’

‘Not really, no,’ Morel replied before taking a large bite out of the creature’s head. ‘I’ve never known anyone to not like squid just because they’re pregnant.... Anyway, what were we talking about?’

A small, stifled snicker escaped Amelia as she cast a sideways glance to Sylas and answered; ‘We were talking about how *distractible* you are.’

‘Ah.’