

Chapter 23

The salt from the air clung to the walls of the cliff-side prison, and the dim evening light crept in from the tiny, barred windows that sat high by the roof.

The holding cell that Sylas found himself locked within was cold and cramped; especially without Morel at his side. He could see her at the other end of the room, pacing anxiously as her ears flicked and her whiskers twitched her silent questions to him, over and over, asking if he was okay. If they were safe here. If his leg still hurt. Why were they not in the same cell?

Sylas was too tired to answer, though he still flicked his whiskers back out an attempt to comfort Morel. She didn't relax, so he took a deep breath and sat up.

'It's okay,' he said aloud. 'I'll explain it all later, I promise.'

The guards at the door to the room cast each other a side-eye glance. Then, a loud wet sniff came from the cell beside Morel's, and a voice followed as the lump on the bed shifted.

'Aye, don't look so confused, pigs,' it was a low, masculine voice that spoke with a sharp note of annoyance hidden within its foreign accent. 'They're selkies, right? They can read each other's minds. That's why they're always such pests. Can't tell what they're planning; can't prepare against it.'

Morel stopped her pacing, turning on her heels to stare at the lump. A moment passed as curiosity pricked at her.... Then she scowled, and Sylas was hit with a strong feeling of annoyance.

'Ugh, you're *neovi*, aren't you?' she grumbled. 'I should have known.'

'Ooh, ain't you *contemptible*?' the neovi responded, sitting up and throwing off his blanket. 'Did my existence strike a nerve?'

Sylas frowned at the neovi as he rose to his feet. His eel-like face was turned up in a grin, and his bright green-and-blue fins were flicked out in an expression that Sylas recognised from the neovi children who would frequent his stall— It was a cheeky look, full of mischief, and Sylas knew immediately that this man wanted to get on Morel's nerves on purpose.

Sylas flicked his whiskers, warning Morel to not engage; sending her the feeling that this man was just looking for a rise. And, for a moment, she turned away. Though she quickly turned back as the man hissed a laugh:

'You're just mad because you can't rob me through the bars, ay?'

'Well, *maybe* if you didn't over-hunt we wouldn't have to fight you for food!' Morel snapped back, ignoring Sylas as he called out for her not to listen.

'He just wants a reaction, Morel! Ignore him!'

'Hah!' The man's grin grew. 'If youse would just respect territory borders youse would have yer own hunting grounds!'

'The ocean belongs to *all*!' Morel argued, turning her nose up. 'It's not anyone's place to try and *control* it.'

'Ooh, youse are gonna start talking about the Wave Warden ain't ya—'

'Don't act like I can't! Do you know how much *damage* he did?! Do you know how

many selkies he killed—‘

‘He killed just as many of our kind as yer own,’ the neovi casually pointed out. ‘We hate him just as much as youse all do.’

Morel flicked her ears back childishly as the neovi grinned at her; frustration radiating off her in hot flowing waves that threatened to choke Sylas with their heat.

Then, the heat turned to sharp confusion as the neovi reached through the bars and offered Morel his hand.

‘Name’s Breska,’ he said. ‘They call me the Chain-Breaker, on account of all the chain-breaking I do.’

‘Chain-breaking?’ Sylas echoed. He eyed the guards by the door; one of who shrugged back at him and sighed loudly:

‘He was caught smuggling stolen slaves past—‘

‘Youse can’t *steal* people!’ Breska’s tone hardened from playful to angry, as he bared his teeth and gave a hiss-like breath. ‘They weren’t *stolen slaves*, they was *escaped victims* of the bastard rich in Violet’s Field! And I’d be caught a hundred times over, if it meant youse bootlickers ain’t able to get your hands back on ‘em!’

‘You’re really not scared of facing justice?’ the guard asked.

‘*Justice?*’ the neovi spit at the floor. ‘I ain’t facing no kind of justice! *Justice* would be thens victims not having to run for the rest of their lives! *Justice* would be children returned to their mothers, ‘stead of being put to work in sun-blazing fields! *Justice* would be that King Tobias paying retribution to the families he’s allowed to be ripped apart!’

A short spark of confusion flicked from Morel’s whiskers at Breska’s anger; though after a moment she crossed her arms and nodded in agreement.

‘Aye, I ain’t surprised a selkie agrees with me on freedom,’ Breska commented as he eyed her. ‘By-the-by, I do agree with youse that the ocean belongs to all. Water shouldn’t have no borders.’

‘But you said—‘

‘I was just trying to get a rise outta youse,’ he waved a dismissive hand. ‘As yer wife said.’

‘Husband,’ Sylas commented.

Breska raised his brow at that, looking Sylas over before giving a laugh. ‘Aye! Look at that, a male selkie! Now I’ve seen it *all!* Was youse born like that, or did youse change yer mind later on?’

‘I was born a human,’ Sylas said, simply. ‘The selkie part is what’s new.’

‘Aw, don’t know why youse would ever want to be a *selkie*,’ Breska teased, eyeing Morel for a reaction. ‘But to each their own, I ‘spose!’

Sylas opened his mouth to respond, but he cut off as a mournful shiver rippled through his whiskers.

Isseal had finally told the colony exactly what had happened, and they weren’t taking it well.

An aching loneliness —some kind of grief— gripped his soul and squeezed it tight. And he could see Morel felt it too, as her breathing quickened and she gripped herself tight in a hug.

Where are you?

He could feel the terrified questions from his family prickling in his skin.

Where are you?

Are you safe?

Are you lost?

An overwhelming feeling tore through his chest. It was as if the entire colony had cried out at once, begging for their lost family to return to them.

‘Sit down,’ said the guard. ‘You’re going to make your injury worse!’

Sylas couldn’t. He *couldn’t!*

He knocked over the chair beside his bed as he turned to the direction of the call and stumbled into the wall. He felt the desperate need to break through it. To get out, and to follow the silent crying that was overwhelming his senses.

‘Hey!’ shouted the guard. ‘Calm down!’

Morel let out a cry, echoed by Sylas’ own, and he collapsed to his knees as her misery shook his entire body.

‘Whoa, lady!’ Breska reached through his cell bars as Morel fell into them, sobbing, and wrapped an arm around her in a comforting way. ‘You’re right. You’re right. Take a breath, missus. Deep one, now.’

‘They’re calling us!’ she cried. ‘They don’t know that we’re safe! They don’t know!’

Trapped!

The horrible call stung Sylas’ mind, and he had to cover his mouth to keep from sobbing.

Trapped!

They’re trapped.

They’re lost.

They can’t find us.

They can’t get home!

Then he felt Isseal’s mournful call, and was stung deep into his heart by her grief as she silently mourned:

It’s happening again. I couldn’t save them.

Sylas knew she was thinking of her daughter, as the overwhelming feeling of helplessness and failure overtook her.

Then Morel gave a shout, shaking with sobs as her wails echoed off the prison walls, and Sylas felt the cries stab into him like knives.

He placed his head against the wall and felt tears escape his eyes as he tried to reach out to his family; he focused on the ache in his chest, pulling it out and pushing it through the air.

‘*I love you,*’ he whispered aloud. ‘*I love you. I love you. I love you.*’

Love.

The response came to him like a cool, salty wave running over his body.

We love you, too.

A warm air covered him, chasing away the chill of his cell, and he knew they returned his feelings.

‘A’ight,’ Breska heaved a sigh as Morel’s breathing calmed, though he didn’t stop rubbing her back. ‘You’re right. You’re right.’

‘Morel?’ Sylas asked, flicking his concern to her.

‘I’m okay,’ she said as she took a deep, shuddering breath and sat up straight. She wiped her eyes, then looked at Breska. ‘I never thought I’d be comforted by a *neovi*,’ she commented. ‘You always seem so much more interested in chasing us off.’

‘Hey, now, some of us are nice. We’re not a hive-mind, after all!’ he chuckled. ‘Unlike *some* people.’

Weak humour radiated from Morel as she scoffed at Breska and wiped her eyes again.

‘Aye, girl, don’t you look so worried ‘bout all this nothing that’s happening to ya,’ Breska said as he pet her shoulder. ‘I’ve been in plenty of scraps like this. Always turns out right in the end.’

Sylas silently agreed, sending a wave of comfort to Morel as he let out a long breath and let his shoulders go slack.

Everything will be alright, he thought; unsure if it was to comfort himself or the selkies who silently reached out to him. *We’ll get out of here, one way or another.*