

## Chapter 24

The night had been even harder than the day; Morel's lonely misery was echoed by the colony's own, as they reached out from the cliff-base below the prison.

Isseal had tried to move her family away from the dangerous waves and sharp stones. But even when most of the other calls had faded back to their home skerry, Cordelia's never faltered. Sylas could almost imagine her, nestled tightly into the rocks of the cliff, huddled back to avoid the waves that threw themselves up at her as she refused to leave her lost daughter alone in this terrifying new place that she was trapped in.

It was only the next morning when any kind of hope had been felt— When Amelia had stepped into the prison, baby Willis in her arms, flanked by two new guards who told her she had one hour before she was to leave.

The new guards had then taken over for the morning shift, and the guards who had spent half the night arguing with Breska gave relieved sighs and exited as quickly as possible.

'Good riddance, aye!' Breska hissed after them. 'Imagine thinking the *Harbridge* family needs defending— Bootlickers! They'd sell youse in their auctions, no second thoughts! If youse are gonna defend slavers, youse should at least be getting *paid* to do it!'

Breska's shouting continued as one of the guards—an undersized shae'vah who only stood as tall as Morel— walked Amelia over to Sylas' cell and gave her his own stool to sit on. He spoke softly as he flicked an affectionate finger at her baby, then offered Amelia some comforting words before retreating back to his place by the door and standing beside his human companion.

Sylas tried to tune out all of the overstimulating input that barraged him as he lay in his bed. He was overwhelmed by all he could feel; the call of his colony's mourning was intermixing with Morel's confusion and fear, and Breska's constant shouting certainly wasn't helping him clear his head any.

'Sylas?' Amelia asked as she watched her brother try to catch his breath. 'Are you alright? What happened to your leg?'

'They *harpooned* him,' Morel explained from her own bed. 'They shot him with a tiny little harpoon, and then tried to spear him!'

'An arrow,' Sylas clarified. 'I was shot with an arrow. There's not too much damage, but I need a few days to heal.'

'Nah, wounds like that take a few weeks,' Breska cut in with a wet gill-sniff. Then, after a moment of confused staring, he grinned at Amelia. 'Oh, hold up. Youse are a girl! What's a pretty thing like youse doing in a dank old place like this?'

Amelia seemed stunned by Breska's question, before she motioned to Sylas. 'I'm... here to talk to my brother.'

'Aw, yeah, the selkie-boy!' Breska chuckled. 'He's a nice bloke, ain't he? Real pretty! Looks like it runs in the family, does it—'

'Leave her alone, Breska,' the shae'vah guard sniffed. 'She's only got an hour, don't waste her time.'

‘Ugh, don’t *youse* start with me, Du’un,’ Breska huffed, turning away. ‘Youse could talk to me like that ways back when, but we ain’t an item no more. Don’t youse talk like youse has the *right* to tell me how to be!’

Sylas felt Morel’s whiskers twitch curiously at the drama, and he flicked his own in acknowledgement.

‘She just wants to talk to her brother,’ Du’un pointed out. ‘She doesn’t need your flirting. Leave her alone.’

‘I’m just being *gentlemanly!*’ Breska retorted; sulking his way to his bed and settling down. ‘But, right! Fine. I’ll leave her be.’

A moment passed, as Amelia waited for Breska to stop loudly complaining, before she turned back to her brother. ‘Isseal is worried,’ she told him, casting a glance between him and Morel. ‘She’s really scared you’re not going to get out of this. And Cordelia is completely beside herself. She couldn’t be convinced to return to the colony, last night. And I.... I’m scared, Sylas. What’s going to happen to you?’

‘Well...’ Sylas ran his tongue along his teeth. ‘Morel will be alright,’ he decided, firmly. ‘She was just defending me. They’ll take that into account. Besides, selkies aren’t one of the eight allied races; we can argue they don’t follow the same laws as us.’

‘*Mm,*’ Amelia didn’t sound convinced. ‘And what about *you?*’

Amelia’s anxious tone was echoed by Morel’s own nervous whisker-flick.

‘I... might have a harder time getting out,’ Sylas admitted. He then felt a wave of painful emotions hit him, and had to place his hands over his whiskers to help soften the impact of Morel’s fears. ‘Whatever happens, though, I don’t regret what I did.’

‘Sylas, you didn’t have to—’

‘I’m your brother,’ Sylas said, firmly. ‘It’s my job to protect you. I’m just sorry I didn’t do it, sooner.’

Morel sent out another short wave of anxiety, but Sylas responded to it with a flick of pride from his whiskers; a strong feeling that he was in the right. That he had done the correct thing— As Isseal protected her family, Sylas had protected his own.

Morel seemed to understand, though she clearly didn’t feel reassured as she curled up in her bed and gave a heavy sigh.

Then a wailing filled the room, floating in from up the stairs, and everyone turned to listen to the young voice that approached the cell-filled room.

A man in uniform poked his head in and grimaced, his arm half-around what appeared to be a tail-hopper child who wailed at the top of her lungs.

‘Du’un, you’re better with kids than me,’ said the man. ‘Can you figure out what’s going on with this one?’

Du’un’s eyes went wide as they lay on the girl, some sort of unreadable surprise on his face, before he hesitantly agreed; silently nodding his head.

‘I want my brother!’ the girl sobbed as she stumbled into Du’un. ‘I lost my big brother! I can’t find him! Where’s my big brother?!’

Amelia gave a motherly tut, rising to her feet to go and comfort the child as Sylas watched on with a sympathetic sigh.... But then he felt a flick of suspicion from Morel, and his brow furrowed.

*She’s not a child.*

Sylas was taken aback by Morel's suspicion; but then he looked closer and realised she was correct.

Though the girl was short for a tail-hopper, she didn't actually *look* like a tail-hopper child. There was something off about it all; she couldn't have been much younger than Kas was, at fourteen, and yet she was acting like a small child under ten, wailing and shouting but not actually shedding any tears.

Then Sylas spied a trimmed-back mane and realised that this girl was a half-vijak, using her short stature to appear younger to the inexperienced humans who couldn't tell the difference.

'I want my brother!' she wailed as the door was shut and the two guards left in the room watched her cry. 'Where's my big brother?'

'Cut the act, Euphadora,' Du'un commented firmly; causing the other guard to frown and look up at him. 'You're thirteen, not three.'

'Oh, look!' the girl, Euphadora, exclaimed; her wailing cutting off and her tone becoming casual as she flicked a wrist and a metallic-looking stick fell from her sleeve to her hand. 'There he is! Hi Breska!'

Before the other guard could react, Euphadora had turned around; the small metallic stick extending into a baton that she swung twice. Once to his left knee to knock him to the ground, and once to the side of his head to knock him unconscious.

Then she turned to Amelia, and Sylas felt his heart leap to his throat as she raised the baton again.

'AY! Ay!' Breska's voice cut in over Sylas' own shout. 'Not her! Right? She's not part of this! Euph, *don't* hit the damn baby! I raised youse better than that!'

Sylas felt a wave of relief, both his own and Morel's, wash over him as Euphadora backed away from his sister. He wrapped an arm around Amelia as she pressed back into his cell bars, trembling, and tried to comfort her.

'Can I hit Du'un?' she asked, eyeing the shae'vah who towered over her.

'Yet to be seen,' Breska sniffed, before looking up at the she'vah guard. 'Youse gonna snitch, or youse gonna hand over yer keys?'

'I don't have the keys,' Du'un said, casting an unimpressed look to Euphadora as she passed her weapon from hand-to-hand. 'That'd be Sykes upstairs. Or, if that smile is anything to go by....'

'I got 'em!' Euphadora tugged a small set of keys from her oversized pockets, and jingled them up at Du'un. 'And don't youse try to take 'em back from me! Or I'll knock *your* knees out, too!'

'I'd like to see you try,' Du'un gave a humoured scoff, before he gave a heavy sigh and looked down to his unconscious coworker.

Sylas could see a tired look pass over the man's face as clear thoughts ran through his mind, and he thought Du'un's exhaustion seemed familiar; a lonely, miserable longing for things that seemed too far away to even try to reach for.

'C'mon, Du'un,' Breska urged. 'I know youse know what the right thing is....'

A spark of hope sparked in Sylas' chest; though he wasn't sure if it was his own hope, or Morel's, as she rose to her feet and watched the conversation with curiosity.

The shae'vah looked conflicted, his eyes flicking from Euphadora to Breska and back.

Then his shoulders slacked, and he cast his glance to Amelia, who flinched and pressed back tighter into Sylas.

‘What do you think?’ he asked her, softly.

Amelia hesitated. But then she looked to Sylas, her grip on her son tightening, and he could tell exactly what she was thinking.

‘Can... can you get my brother out?’ she asked. ‘And his wife. *Please*. I’m so scared for them, and it’s my fault they’re in here...’

‘Amelia, it’s not...’ Sylas trailed off as Amelia’s chest heaved with a laboured breath, and he instead focused on comforting her. ‘It’s okay. It’s not your fault.’

Du’un watched Amelia for another moment before he gave a slow nod, a sombre look in his eyes as he stepped out of Euphadora’s way and let her scurry over to Breska’s cell.

She unlocked it, and then stepped sideways to Morel’s cell, and Sylas felt his heart almost leaping out his mouth as she was freed.

He could barely feel the pain in his injured leg as his own cell door was opened and he stumbled freely into Morel’s tight embrace.

A heavy wave of love and relief hit him, almost crushing him as Morel sobbed into his neck.

‘It’s okay,’ he told her, squeezing her tightly back. ‘Everything’s going to be okay.’

It was then that the prison door opened, and the guard who had brought Euphadora down stepped in and paused; a horrified look in his eyes as he realised what was going on.

The moment of shock held the room, before Breska motioned to the guard.

‘Alright, then, Euph,’ he said, his smug tone nearly insufferable as he gave a toothy grin. ‘You can hit *him*.’