

Chapter 25

The escape from prison had been terrifying. Sylas was sure they weren't going to make it out, as his leg had buckled underneath him and Morel had lifted his arm over her shoulder to help him limp along.

There had been so many guards. But Breska and Du'un had been commendable fighters, and Euphadora had been a terrifying force for her age; more than twice putting herself between Amelia and the guards and striking out with enough might to send fully-grown men stumbling back.

It was almost unbelievable when they made their way out the back door into the yard. And it was a miracle that they'd been able to get over the fence. If Du'un hadn't been with them to heft Sylas and Amelia over, they never would have gotten free.

And now they stood on the wooden deck of a ship, a rough-looking crew barking orders amongst themselves as they hurried their way out to sea while they still had time to avoid the city's naval crew from pursuing them.

Sylas felt Morel give an uncomfortable whisker-flick; almost all of the crew were neovi men. And they eyed her with as much mistrust as she eyed them.

But they didn't make any comment as Breska gave her a friendly pat on the back and laughed.

'Youse are a hell of a selkie, I'll tell youse what!' he cackled. 'Never met a fey like youse, before! I like it!'

He then turned to Amelia, flashing a toothy grin as she avoided meeting his eye. He lifted a hand to brush her hair from her eyes and she flinched.

'Now, now! I just risked my life for youse, missus!' he said, humour instead of offence in his tone. 'And what thanks are youse giving me! You act like I'm gonna bite youse!'

Sylas slipped between the pirate captain and his sister, feeling a protective spark in his belly.

'Leave her alone,' Sylas warned, flashing his fangs. 'Or I'll do to you what I did to her husband!'

Breska, as if on instinct, flashed his own fangs back; but then he seemed to realise Sylas' implication and, letting his snarl fall to an indifferent look, licked his teeth and glanced over Sylas' shoulder to Amelia. It was then, for the first time, that Breska seemed to notice Amelia's bruises.

'Oh, I see,' he said, softly. 'Youse are a bad way with love, hm?'

Amelia gave a short nod.

'Well, I'm sorry to offend. I ain't meaning no harm,' he said, taking one of his crew's hats to place on his own head, just so he could proceed to tip it politely. 'Just been a while since I seen a girl, is all. A proper girl, I'm meaning, not this brat,' he gave Euphadora a friendly kick as she passed him. 'I ain't remembering how to speak with 'em properly. I'll fix my manners up right, don't youse worry none.'

Sylas stepped back so he could put an arm around his sister, and held her tight. He ignored the burning pain in his leg as he stood tall; though it was clear Morel wasn't ignoring his pain, as she moved to his bad side and hovered her hand at his back as if

readying to catch him.

Breska seemed unbothered by this, as he dropped the hat back on his head and pressed back his fins. 'May I try that all again?' he asked, turning to address Amelia.

Sylas glanced to his sister, who slowly nodded.

'Y... Yes, you may,' she said, softly.

Breska gave a happy flick of his fins and then, with a polite bow, took her hand and kissed it, 'My dear lady. Now that we're out of that spat, where would youse like to be dropped off?'

A conflicted look fell over Amelia, and Sylas realised what was wrong only moments before she spoke it aloud:

'I can't... go back,' she managed, worry taking over her. 'I was a part of a prison break, I-I can't just go home—'

'It's alright,' Du'un's voice spoke softly from the crew, and Sylas eyed him warily as he stepped over and put a hand on Amelia's back. 'Breska is an honourable man, despite how he presents himself. You'll be safe here if you choose to stay.'

'Aye, aye,' Breska agreed. 'Youse are welcome to stay as long as youse need—'

Breska cut off with a hiss that was echoed amongst his crew, and he suddenly reeled back as a heavy, wet *THUMP* sounded on the deck behind Sylas and his family.

Sylas whirled around and saw Isseal, standing tall and strong as the neovi around her drew their swords and aimed their spears at her.

'Auntie!' Morel exclaimed, a rush of joy overtaking her as she ran to her aunt and threw herself into Isseal's embrace. 'Oh, Auntie! I was so scared! I thought I was going to be lost!'

'*Shh*,' Isseal lay a reassuring hand against Morel's hair, her whiskers shimmering as she sent out a comforting feeling to her niece. 'I'm here. I will never let you get lost, I promise.'

Sylas felt Isseal's comforting signal flow over to him as she looked up and met his eye, and he let out a long, relaxed breath and looked to Breska.

Breska's scowl faded as he watched Morel and her aunt embrace. Instead, he gave a curious flick of his fins. 'Auntie, huh?' he commented. 'This half-giant is yer aunt?'

Isseal released Morel, then, and calmly walked over to Sylas and his sister; seemingly unbothered by the weapons aimed her way. 'Yes. I am.'

'Heh!' Breska wiped his nose on his sleeve. 'Youse are these two's matriarch, ain't youse?'

'I'm these *four's* matriarch,' Isseal said, putting a protective arm around Amelia to make her point. She flicked her ears forward, watching Breska as he chuckled and licked his lips, before speaking again. 'You saved them, didn't you? You have my thanks, neovi. I know our kinds aren't always amicable, so I appreciate what you've done for my family.'

'Glad to be of service!' Breska said, bowing playfully at Isseal. 'And, I ain't even gonna say youse are owing me a favour! How's that for it, ay?'

'You have my deepest, most genuine gratitude,' Isseal told him; and Sylas felt that she meant it. Then, he saw Isseal's whiskers shimmer, and he felt a wave of thankful emotions from the waters around the boat as the matriarch continued, 'Mine, and the

rest of my family's.'

'Is yer family following the boat?' Breska asked, eyeing Sylas as he glanced to the water. 'Cos they're more than welcome to come aboard.'

'I would rather not see my family have spears aimed at their throats,' Isseal said, seriously.

Breska motioned for his crew to lower their weapons; grinning wide when he was obeyed. 'Hows about now?'

Sylas felt her hesitance. And it was clear that Breska saw it, too, as he gave a shrug and began to circle Isseal with a wide grin.

'So. Youse are just here to pick up yer family and head off, then?' he asked.

'Yes,' Isseal answered, simply.

'Mm... well, then, if youse don't mind me asking: *how* exactly are youse intending to keep the humans afloat?'

A frustrated snort escaped Isseal, alongside a prickle of fearful realisation that poked Sylas like a thorn-bush.

'I dunno what yer plan is,' Breska sniffed casually, giving Isseal a smug look as he paced around her. 'But getting these two on this boat weren't easy! His wounded leg ain't strong enough to kick against the waves, and *she* says she can't swim at all! Let alone the baby. Youse know baby humans ain't able to swim, right? Was youse planning on carrying them on yer back 'til youse found safe shore?'

Isseal's lip turned up in frustration; which only made Breska's grin grow wider.

'Now. I ain't gonna pretend to be no genius,' Breska chuckled. 'But that don't seem like it would be healthy *or* feasible. So, if youse are willing to have an open mind, I would like to propose a solution to youse all.'

Isseal's ear twitched as her eyes narrowed. 'Go on.'

'There ain't never been a selkie-neovi alliance,' he said with a grin. 'How'd youse like to be in the first?'

'An alliance?' a wave of conflicting emotions found their way from Isseal; confusion, intrigue, a little bit of disgust.... And then a strange, almost hopeful twinge; like she was reflecting on something deep within herself.

And then she looked to Sylas, and he understood what she was thinking:

She'd been wrong about him and her belief that all boys were dangerous to her family. So could her biases towards neovi be wrong, too?

Curiosity twitched from her whiskers, sparking Morel's own interest. And when Isseal looked to her niece, she received a small flick of the ear and the quiet comfort of knowledge that Breska had, despite being unbearably annoying, acted with nothing but kindness and strong moral integrity.

'Aw, with those looks!' Breska interrupted the silent conversation with a very loud laugh. 'Listen, I ain't even proposing youse stick around for good! I'm just suggesting that, until yer injured are healed and youse find a safe place for the girl and her kiddo, both our families give each other helping hands, a'ight? What youse think about that?'

'What *kind* of "helping hands"?' Isseal asked, her suspicion prickling in Sylas' skin as an itch.

'Ah! Well. Youse can all turn into seals, yeah?' Breska grinned, widely, as Isseal

nodded. 'Youse are good at scouting. And humans —no offence to youse both— but humans ain't too smart about ocean fey! Sailors from these kingdoms ain't gonna be none the wiser when they see a couple of seals looking up at 'em out the waves, *right?*'

Isseal gave a slow, deliberate nod of acknowledgement.

'Youse could be very valuable in helping us take down slave-ships,' Breska said, simply. 'It'd be much appreciated if youse would help us free the wrongly-indentured from their bonds.'

The suspicion from Isseal turned to intrigue at the mention of slave-boats, and Sylas saw her frown falter into an almost-curious look.

'In return, youse would have the protection of an armed crew,' Breska continued. 'My brother over there? He ain't called Komi the Orca-Killer for *not* harpooning whales. And, yer family would be welcome on my ship! A place to sleep. Share meals. Heal yer injured. Etcetera. Etcetera. *Thoughts?*'

Doubt prickled from Isseal, stinging the air as she looked down at her family. Then the feeling of defeat sunk over her, and Sylas echoed her sigh.

'I don't think I have much of a choice,' Isseal snorted.

'Aw, naw,' Breska waved a hand. 'I ain't gonna *force* youse to help us. And I ain't gonna throw these three overboard if youse refuse. We're *against* slavery here, aye! Ain't gonna enslave people into freeing slaves. Defeats the point, don't it?'

The comment humoured Morel; whose muffled chuckle helped to ease Isseal's nervous doubts.

And then, making her choice, Isseal stood taller and flicked her whiskers in a beckoning call that drew her family from the waves and onto the neovi-filled ship.

Anxiety and mistrust were clear on the faces of both the colony and the crew. But, with a signal from their leaders; they all hesitantly began introductions.

Sylas watched on, too tired to join them.

And then he felt Morel press into his side, her arm wrapping around him to help him stand stable, and he was filled with a deep feeling of affection for her.

The affection sparked Morel's own feeling of love, which was so strong it rippled through the colony with enough force to make all the girls cringe and turn to watch as Sylas collapsed to his knees and wheezed under the weight of it.

Morel sat down beside him, pulling him close in concern, and he laughed as he felt her warmth seep into him.

'*Oh, Morel,*' he breathed. 'I love you so much.'

'I love you too,' Morel answered.

And, then, the colony echoed the feeling; laying a blanket of affection over the couple as they sat together.

Even without words, the colony said so much in that moment that Sylas could feel tears welling in his eyes.

They loved him. And they were relieved that he was alright.

Even if the situation the family now found themselves in was new, and strange, and scary; they were ready to take it on to keep him safe.

Sylas breathed in a deep, shaky sob of joy as he felt the family's love embrace him as tightly as Morel's arms.

He knew, now, that no matter what happened: he would never have to face the world alone again.