

Chapter 9

It had been four weeks since Sylas had his first chance meeting with Morel, and his days now were spent in anticipation as he waited for the late-evening so that he could spend it pressed deeply against her, his arm wrapped around her as he left his line propped on the gunwale for fish to bite.

He always gave Morel the first fish he caught.... The one time he hadn't, she'd decided his method was too slow and leapt into the water, bringing back a live rockshard crab which she had bitten into with a terrifying show of strength.

Sylas couldn't even get through those things with a nutcracker, let alone his teeth!

He rubbed his bruised eye and snorted.

Speaking of his lack of strength....

It had been three days since he'd picked his fight with Peter and lost. He didn't regret calling him out. Not one bit— He intended to do it again, in fact, if the bastard dared to make another comment about Amelia's "place" as a woman.

But he did wish the ache in his skull would fade enough to let him sleep properly. He was meeting Amelia again, tomorrow, and wanted to be rested for it.

Morel's hand met his, and she caressed his cheek tenderly before giving his bruise a kiss. Her whiskers ticked against his skin as she did and Sylas couldn't stop himself from chuckling and turning so their lips met instead.

'You look good in my hat,' Sylas commented.

'Thanks,' grinned Morel. 'I'd take it with me, but I don't think my aunt would be too happy about me having it.'

'No?'

'No. And she's not happy I've been spending so much time away from the colony. Especially since I'm spending it with a boy,' Morel said, grinning and pressing firmer into Sylas until he could feel her excited trembles. 'But... that's her problem, isn't it?'

Sylas chuckled and nodded. Though he wasn't sure he completely agreed.

Morel's aunt Isseal was terrifying, and no matter how much Morel told him that she was a very good matriarch, Sylas definitely didn't want to cross her.

He still hadn't gotten used to the feeling of her looming at them from the distance. And though he'd never seen her up close, let alone met her, he felt like if he ever told the woman something was "her problem," she would give him a hundred more problems of his own.

Sylas' worries of Isseal were interrupted by Morel's breath on his lips and, for a moment, he let her kiss him— But then he pulled away.

He still wasn't sure about this. He kept telling himself he was going to end their meetings and stop himself from falling into this nonsense trap, but... the longer he waited the harder it was not to cave when Morel looked to him with... with those eyes. That smile. That twitch of her whiskers....

He leant forward, and Morel's ears flicked up as he pressed his lips back into hers.

Sylas thought he never wanted to leave this moment. And then he caught himself thinking so, and broke away again; turning to look out across the waves.

All of his father's mistakes were starting to make a lot more sense to him now.

Had the old man felt like this, too?

Sylas wasn't given much time to think on it before Morel pressed against him and the boat tipped dangerously to one side. He had to push her back to the centre of the boat, and the two tumbled into the deck in a pile.

Sylas could feel his heart pounding as he waited for the boat to stop rocking.... And when he saw his rod come unhooked from the gunwale and slowly start to tip towards the ocean, he almost flipped the boat again in his hurry to catch it.

Morel gave a loud, excited laugh as Sylas fell back onto her and tried to weight the boat down. He heard her tail slap onto the seat as she wiggled and shifted her form, and he couldn't help but grin as her arms wrapped tightly around him.

He rolled over to kiss her, and she nuzzled into his cheek— But then she gasped and pulled away, and her ears flicked down guiltily as she sat up to peer over the edge of the boat.

She glanced around in a hurried way, as if looking for something, before she pressed herself to the floor of the boat again with a whine.

'Morel?'

'I have to go!' she was in the ocean before Sylas could stop her, and all he could do was watch as she kicked out her tail and spun through the dark water.

She moved quickly, with her seal-like shape, towards one of the nearby islands— And Sylas felt himself shrink into his boat when he saw the woman on the shore.

No matter how many times he saw Isseal, Sylas was never prepared for how huge she was. At least three heads taller than Morel was, and no less than twice as tall as himself. No *less*... and he thought she might be taller. But it was hard to tell from the distance.

Though, even with how far she stood from him, he could see the familiar spark of her glare and the shimmering along her whiskers as she stared him down.

Morel pulled herself to the shore besides the matriarch and bowed her head, looking like a child caught out past curfew as her aunt turned and scolded her.

Morel cast Sylas one more glance before leaping into the water and disappearing. Isseal watched her from the shore, her eyes trailing the dark ocean as her gaze followed Morel into the distance, and Sylas let out his breath.

He wasn't sure he would ever get used to Isseal....

He looked to the floor of his boat, retrieving his oars, and then felt the hair on his arms stand on end.

Isseal was staring at him. He knew she was, even before he dared look up to meet her eye.

He might row home quickly, tonight.

Swallowing, Sylas turned in his seat to adjust his oars— And when he heard a loud splash he dared to glance up to see Isseal had vanished.

Right.

Right....

A deep breath and he started home. Though he couldn't shake the feeling that Isseal was still watching him.

He tried not to let it bother him. From what Sylas had heard, Isseal didn't trust strangers much and always kept a close eye on anyone her family came into contact with. Morel had said that was the job of a selkie matriarch: to keep the family together, safe from prying eyes and non-selkies with bad intentions.

He could understand that, he supposed. But he wished—

Something shook his boat and he almost screamed as large, vicious ripples followed a humongous dark shadow that swam out from under him.

'Okay,' Sylas breathed to himself. '*Stay calm, Sylas. It's just Iss—*'

His boat shook again and the scream escaped him.

Was Isseal trying to sink him?!

Quickly, Sylas retrieved his oars from the water and set them in place again—

Bracing himself as his boat jolted for a third time.

He waited for the fourth jolt; muscles tensed and hands gripped tight on the oars....

Nothing.

Sylas let out his breath.

Perhaps Isseal wasn't trying to *hurt* him. Perhaps she was just trying to give him a fright. Show him who was boss, in a way.... Well, if that was her goal she had certainly succeeded.

Any doubts Sylas might have had about her size and strength had been completely quenched. He was sure, now, that no matter how hard Morel tried to convince him that Isseal was a wonderful aunt... he would remain terrified of her.