

## Chapter 14

It was a beautiful night. The wind was crisp with the cooling air, and carried with it the far-off scents of the city food stalls.

The sand was soft underfoot as Sylas ran, his shoes discarded up near the pier, after Morel as she giggled and stumbled.

He soon caught up to her, wrapping his arms around her waist sending them both tumbling to the ground. Though as they toppled to the beach in a giggling heap, Sylas knew Morel had let him catch her.

She rolled on top of him, her sparkling eyes staring into his as her twitching grin flicked her whiskers back and forth, and he hoped she would lean down for a kiss.

He barely noticed the wave that rolled under him and soaked his hair as Morel gave a giggle and fidgeted.

He felt her knees slip over his sides and realised she'd already shifted twice since he'd pulled her down. And when she rolled off him her tail flopped into the sand before her legs came back and she kicked a line of wave-water into the air.

Then she flinched, and shrunk into the ground, and Sylas felt a shadow looming over them as another wave brushed his side.

'*Morel*,' spoke a voice, old and firm.

Sylas flinched, rolling over to stare at the humongous selkie who stood above them. She was just a head shy of being twice Morel's height; with similar curly locks and an almost wolf-like face that made it clear, just from a glance, that Morel's aunt was half-giant.

Her whiskers, which shimmered as they twitched on the end of her snout, were as long as Sylas' arm from his shoulder to his fingertips. And her deep black eyes shone with a sharp gleam as she glared down at the couple with her arms crossed and lip curled.

'I thought I told you no.'

Morel flicked her tail, then pushed herself up until she was on her knees. Sylas saw her toes run along the sand before they became flippers again and she shrunk down— And when he looked back to her face it wasn't her own, but long and sad and guilty.

'I'm sorry,' it was strange to see a seal speak, and even stranger that it had Morel's voice. 'It's just that... I promised. And I couldn't break my promise. I'm sorry, Auntie Isseal.'

Isseal...

*This was Isseal.*

'I thought that you'd know better than to come here, after last night,' Isseal scolded. 'Kas told me about where she found you. In that boy's *house*, Morel! What could you possibly be thinking?!

'Sylas isn't so bad,' Morel promised, leaning up on her elbows as she looked much more like herself again; her legs pulling up behind her and flicking sand into the air. 'He's really nice to me!'

'All boys are nice, at *first*,' Isseal grunted, her glare growing deeper as it moved from

her niece to Sylas. ‘But the longer you stay, the worse they get. You can’t trust them.’

Sylas swallowed, but didn’t speak. Instead he simply looked up at Isseal as she watched him.

‘I just...’ Morel slouched down again, her ears pressing back as her legs turned into a tail and she looked utterly miserable. ‘I just thought the first night was so much fun. And then I went back again, and it was just.... And I started to feel like.... And by the time you’d told me to stop we were already friends! I just.... I....’

‘I told you no,’ Isseal repeated with a hiss. ‘That should have been the end of it. When the matriarch gives an order, it is to be respected! And still, you keep disobeying me. And you keep returning to him. It’s become clear to me that you can’t control yourself!’

‘I *can* control myself—’

‘Then *why* are you here?!’ Isseal snapped, and it was obvious as she turned back to growl at Morel that it wasn’t actually a question, but a scolding. ‘I told you no! But you didn’t listen! This is on *you!*’

Morel shrunk down, her face once again becoming more seal-like as she gave a low whine.

‘Pick a form and stick with it!’ her aunt ordered. ‘I’m tired of your childish shifting! Act your age and make a choice! You’re not a pup anymore!’

‘Yes, Isseal...’ Morel muttered, her head dropping in shame as she shifted one more time; her face and legs turning more humanoid. ‘I just.... I promised him I’d come back! I couldn’t break my promise to him!’

‘You should never make a promise to a boy!’ Isseal growled. ‘Do you think he’d keep his promises to you?! A promise from a boy means *nothing!*’

‘*His* promises do!’ Morel cried, desperately. ‘He’s kept every promise he’s made to me! Every one of them!’

‘I don’t believe that!’ Isseal snarled, turning to leer back down at Sylas as she spoke. ‘I don’t believe that a boy like him has ever meant a single word that they’ve spoken! You’re not to see him again!’

‘Auntie, please!’ Morel exclaimed, rolling to her knees and pleading with her aunt. ‘I *really* like Sylas! And he likes me, too! You can’t—’

Isseal let out a long, vicious roar and advanced on Morel, who gave a fearful cry and cowered under her aunt’s massive form.

And before Sylas had even realised what he was doing, he was on his feet; standing between them.

Isseal paused, her roar cutting short as Sylas put himself between the selkies, and her whiskers twitched in an almost curious way.

For a moment, there was no sound except the roll of the waves on the shore.

But the silence was short-lived as Sylas plucked up what little courage he had left in him and spoke:

‘Why can’t she stay?’ he asked. Then, he swallowed as Isseal’s curious look vanished back into her glare, and he tried not to shrink back as she stared him down. ‘She’s not a child— You said so yourself, didn’t you? Who are you to tell her what to do?!’

He hadn’t thought Isseal’s glare could be any more terrifying, but as he stood between her and Morel, she quickly proved him wrong. It was like her eyes were

burning into him, and it took all his effort not to look away as her whiskers flashed brightly. Her wolf-like face turned in a snarl as her nostrils flared and a snort like an orca's surfacing breath escaped her.

'Who are *you*,' she echoed. 'To stand between a matriarch and a member of her family?'

'S-Sylas Hills,' he answered, his courage finally leaving him; though he still stood in place. It was only after Isseal gave another twitch of her whiskers he realised it had been a rhetorical question that hadn't needed an answer. 'I— And I—'

'Auntie?' Morel's hand met Syllas' shoulder, and she pulled him down from standing on his toes, and brought him back a pace. 'Please.'

The glare softened into tired eyes, and Isseal's shoulders dropped. 'Go home, Morel.' 'Can I at least say goodbye?'

Isseal let out a snort, and Syllas thought she might say no... but then her ears flicked back, and her whiskers twitched and shimmered, and she gave Morel a gentle nod.

Morel hugged Syllas tight from behind and he could tell she didn't want to let go. But as he met Isseal's eyes they sharpened into a glare and she stepped forward to lead Morel away.

'It's for your own good,' Isseal said, putting an arm around Morel and guiding her to the waves. 'Boys.... You can't trust them.'

Syllas swallowed as Isseal turned to meet his eye again.

'I like him, Aunt Isseal,' Morel replied, her shoulders falling slack. 'And I trust him.'

Isseal just sighed. 'One day you'll understand what I mean, Morel. When your sisters are grown and not as lucky as you, you will understand why we don't make friend with boys.'

'But—'

'No,' Isseal said firmly. 'Go home.'

'Yes, Aunt Isseal,' Morel's sad gaze slipped from Syllas' own as a wave washed against their ankles, and Morel disappeared along with it back into the ocean.

There was quiet as another wave hit.

Isseal let out a sigh, long and deep, and her whiskers' shimmering faded to a dull white glow.

Another wave rolled up their ankles.

Their eyes met, and Syllas swore he could feel the pain in Isseal's gaze as if it was his own.

*A fourth wave.*

He realised he was an outsider, in all of this.

*A fifth.*

Just a man who'd barely scratched the surface of who Morel was. Though he desperately wanted to know everything.

Another wave washed their feet, and Isseal finally spoke:

'She's idealistic. I dare say that means I've done a good job. The world hasn't hurt her, yet.'

'Yet?' Syllas echoed. 'I'm not.... I wouldn't....'

'I don't believe you,' she replied simply.

‘Why not?’

‘Selkies...’ she hesitated. ‘We’re drawn to you boys. We need you. Crave your companionship. It’s like an addiction that we can’t resist. But you don’t need us. You never need us. So we keep our distance. And we turn it into play. And we don’t get attached. That’s how we survive.’

‘I need Morel,’ he said. And he meant it.

‘You say that, but it’s always the same story,’ Isseal said. ‘And not once, not even *once*, when told by a thousand girls from a hundred colonies, have I ever heard it end differently. You’ll move on. You’ll leave her behind. And she’ll be the one to bear the scars from it.’

‘I...’

‘When you met her, the first thing you two did was...’ Isseal paused, her ears folding down and her whiskers flicking back in a pained way; as if the knowledge of what had been done was hurting her. ‘I know that’s all you meet with her for.’

‘No!’ Sylas defended. ‘No! It’s not just the sex! It’s *so* much more than sex! I love her! I *love* her!’

‘I don’t believe you,’ Isseal said again. ‘I *can’t* believe you.’

‘I’ll prove it,’ Sylas said, a desperate note emerging from his sorrowful tone. ‘I’ll prove that I love her. Please. Just let me try.’

‘I’m sorry, but I’ve heard that before,’ Isseal’s lips curled, in an almost disgusted way, and she shook her head. ‘Too many times. And every time, it’s a lie.’

‘It’s not,’ Sylas told her. ‘I swear, it’s not a lie. I mean it. Look into my eyes, do that—that feeling thing that you do— and tell me I’m lying!’

The snort Isseal let out almost sounded like some sort of chuckle, as she shook her head again and dropped her gaze to the sand. ‘If I could, I would. But that’s not how my powers work,’ she said, simply. ‘I can only sense those within my family. I am not your matriarch; we have no connection.’

Sylas’ shoulders dropped as Isseal crossed her arms, and he felt tears welling in his eyes. ‘I mean what I say,’ he told her. ‘I *do*.’

Isseal’s eyes flicked back up to his and for a long moment, with the rising tide sweeping up against their legs, they simply stared in silence.

Then Isseal’s whiskers twitched, as did her nose, and her brow furrowed in a curious way as she leant forward. She took Sylas’ chin with her fingers and he was surprised by how gentle she was as she eased him forward.

She looked deep into his eyes, her own filled with confusion as she let out a long breath.

Then she pulled back, releasing Sylas and rising to her full height.

‘*By the tides,*’ she whispered. ‘I think I might believe you.’