

## Chapter 16

Sylas' heart was beating harder than it had ever beat before, as he rowed his boat to the shore of the skerry that jutted out from the ocean. He could see, as Morel had described, the seaweed-padded banks and the scattering of licked-clean shells and fish bones.

Morel was out of the boat before he was, grabbing it by its breasthook and hefting it up so it wouldn't be pulled away by waves that lapped at the side of the rocky island.

Isseal was the only selkie who hadn't fled to hide behind the jutting stones on the far side of the skerry. Or, well.... Sylas had seen Kas stand her ground, until a very motherly-looking older selkie had taken her by the arm and pulled her away.

'You said they knew I was coming,' Sylas said to Morel as he caught Isseal's disapproving look. 'So why is she looking at me like that?'

'Uhhh,' Morel gave a grimace, her ears flicking down guiltily. 'I may have lied. I asked Auntie for permission, but....'

She trailed off as Isseal crossed her arms.

'Morel,' Isseal growled, her whiskers twitching in an angry gesture. 'I told you *no*.'

'I know, but—'

'You went against my orders,' Isseal interrupted.

'But if I didn't, then Sylas would *never* meet the family!' Morel argued. 'And they'll love him!'

Sylas wasn't so sure about that, as he watched the women peek out at him with wide eyes and anxious looks. They looked far too scared of him, to like him.

Still, he raised a hand and gave a polite wave.

Kas was the only one who returned it, though the selkie who had grabbed her by the arm quickly pushed her hand back down.

'You disobeyed me!' Isseal snapped, pointing an angry finger at Morel. 'I cannot believe you would put the family at risk for this boy!'

'But I'm *not* putting the family at risk!' Morel argued. 'Sylas is a *good* boy! He wouldn't hurt anyone—'

'I told you *no*!' Isseal took a deep breath and stood straight; looking almost like she had suddenly doubled in size.

And, instinctively, Sylas stepped between her and Morel.

Isseal paused, her breath slowly escaping her as her anger deflated and she looked weary and tired. 'I'm not going to hurt her,' she said, her tone firm but even. 'Acting in anger and harming any member of my family, regardless of how much disrespect they show me, would make me a terrible matriarch. Though.... I respect your bravery, Sylas. I've never known a boy who would put himself in harm's way for a girl, before.'

'It sounds like you haven't met enough boys,' was all Sylas could manage.

He saw, as he swallowed the lump in his throat, Kas whispering to another young selkie beside her. Then she leapt up, pulling away from the older selkie's grasp and rushing out from the safety of the rocks to stand beside her sister.

'I-I like Sylas!' she said, a trembling note in her voice. 'He gave me a fish when he

saw me swimming out by the docks. A-And he showed me how to tie a clove hitch, after I accidentally untied his boat, instead of getting angry at me for touching his things! I-I think he's a really nice boy. I-I do! I don't think he'd ever hurt us.'

Isseal let out a breath from her nose, sounding like a whale's blow, before she cast a glance to the rest of her family. Her whiskers shimmered brightly, as if signalling something, and all the girls slowly stepped out of hiding.

At a glance Sylas thought there must have been at least a hundred of them, all of various ages. They approached Sylas slowly. Warily. Clearly still unsure of his intentions in their home.

The first to reach him was the selkie who had pulled Kas away. She took the young girl by the hand again, moving between the child and Sylas as if to protect her, and then lifted her unusually-floppy ears with curiosity. It took Sylas a moment to realise she resembled a shae'vah, and that her father-race must have come from the swamps.

'Is this really him?' she asked.

'Mhm!' Morel hummed, proudly. 'What do you think, Mum?'

'The way you spoke of him, I thought he'd be a little better looking,' she said. Then she blushed and averted her gaze to the ground, as if only just remembering that Sylas could hear her.

But Sylas just laughed. He knew he wasn't much of a sight to behold. He was scrawny and plain, with deep bags under his eyes and stressed wrinkles that came too early for his young age.

As Sylas laughed, he saw the surrounding selkies all twitch their ears and whiskers, some cocking their heads with curiosity.

He smiled warmly at them, gazing around until his eyes settled back on Isseal.

She was watching him with a tempered look.

'Isseal?' he swallowed as he stepped towards her; his smile falling to a more respectful look. 'Um.... For what it's worth, Isseal, I'm sorry.'

Her ears twitched, and her furrowed brow faltered.

'I meant *no* disrespect to you by coming here,' he offered. 'I just wanted to make Morel happy. If you want me to go, I will.'

A long moment of quiet hung in the air as the family all glanced to their matriarch.

And then, to Sylas' surprise, Isseal smiled.

'Thank you, Sylas,' she said, softly. 'For respecting my authority. You may stay until sundown.'

Sylas gave a polite nod, trying not to cast his gaze around the selkies as they gave surprised gasps and started muttering amongst themselves.

He heard them whispering their confusion: Isseal was allowing a *boy* to be so close to them? To walk amongst the colony? To be near the *children*?

Then he heard a small voice, sounding like it was spoken from a child no more than eight or ten years old, that made him laugh aloud.

'Are we *sure* he's a boy?'