

## Chapter 17

Sylas had found himself, for the last hour or two, in the centre of a crowd of very curious, and extremely naked girls.

He tried his best not to stare at the unclothed selkies as they stood around him, peering over each other to gawk at him.

The younger girls, children and teenagers (plus three little toddlers who could barely form toes and simply bounced about on their tails) were at the front; grabbing at his clothes and hair and hands to examine all the things about him that were different from themselves. He allowed this, of course, sitting down on the ground so the youngest children could climb into his lap and poke at him safely.

Meanwhile the elder selkies, those older than himself, hung closer to the back of the group, watching on with more caution and occasionally pulling a child back as if to protect them.

Sylas tried not to be offended. After the things he'd heard from Morel, and his talk with Isseal on the beach, he understood that they were jaded. It was a feeling he knew all too well from his own life, and he didn't think it fair to judge others for it.

'What is this?' asked one of the little ones, yanking on Sylas' pants leg and gaining his attention. 'It looks funny!'

'They're pants,' Sylas answered, simply.

'What're pants for?'

'My legs?' he wasn't sure what else to say.

The children all looked confused, their whiskers twitching in silent communication as they glanced towards the adults for help.

It was Morel who spoke up, as she scooped the girl from Sylas' lap into her arms and held her close— It was then that Sylas realised this child looked more like Morel than the other selkies. And, when she addressed the girl by name, he knew it was her youngest sister.

'See, Phoebe, humans don't like seeing other human's bodies,' she said. 'They think bodies are icky! So they keep them secret.'

'Why would you think a body is icky?' Phoebe asked, looking to Sylas. She twitched her whiskers at him, and it was clear she was trying to communicate; though it didn't come through, and all the adults gave humoured chuckles as she flicked them again. Then, when she realised Sylas couldn't understand her, she spoke with words; 'It's just a body.'

'Human bodies are... well,' Sylas tried to think of a way to word it. 'You selkies, you all look very similar to one another. Humans have more differences. And we prefer if those differences are kept private.'

'What kind of differences?' another child piped up. 'You only have as many differences to us, as we do when we have different father-races!'

'Mhm! You don't look *that* different.'

'He does without his pants,' Morel commented. She was immediately shushed by her mother, who took Phoebe from her daughter's arms and cradled her close.

‘Can you show us the difference?’ one girl, who looked around five or six, shuffled closer. ‘Do you have dappling on your back? Or— Or— Or webbing inbetween your toes?’

‘I don’t have dappling,’ Sylas answered, before lifting a leg up to remove his shoe. ‘And no webbing.’

‘*Whoa...*’ the children all breathed, shuffling closer to examine his foot.

A snort-like chuckle sounded from near the shore, and Sylas glanced over to see Isseal watching him with a warm smile.

‘You’re good with the pups,’ she commented. ‘I didn’t expect that.’

‘Neither did I,’ Sylas admitted. ‘It’s making me feel a little more confident for when I have my own.’

All of the selkies, the children included, gave a sudden cringe and turned to Morel; who was blushing a deep, deep red all the way from her cheeks to her chest. She cleared her throat when Sylas looked to her, before settling down beside him and resting her head on his shoulder.

‘For when you have your own... with *me*?’ she asked, hopefully.

‘If you’d let me,’ he answered.

Her blush grew deeper, spreading further down her shoulders as she nuzzled into Sylas’ side and flicked up her tail in joy.

Meanwhile, her family all made faces. Some looked embarrassed. Others looked curious. Some of the younger children giggled. But most of the older selkies just looked concerned.

Then, one of the younger adults spoke up:

‘Morel, how do you know he’s telling the truth?’ it was a quiet question, asked with nerves, by a selkie who shared Morel’s eyes. ‘Boys *never* look after the pups.’

‘Sylas does,’ Morel answered, her gaze not moving from Sylas as she spoke. ‘He has a sister, and she’s just had a pup. And Sylas helps look after them both.’

The younger selkie shifted, uncomfortably, before looking to Isseal and flicking her whiskers. ‘*Auntie?*’ she whispered.

‘It’s true, Ophelia,’ Isseal confirmed. ‘I’ve seen him with his sister on the shore. He treats her pup with a softness that even some selkies don’t show their own.’

Gasps echoed the colony, followed by more whispering.

Sylas let them talk as his focus fell back to Morel.

‘You’re beautiful,’ the words were out of his mouth before he realised he was saying them. ‘I love you so much.’

‘I love you too,’ Morel replied.

A low, growl-like sound came from beside Sylas, and when he turned he expected to see Isseal— But instead, he was met with Morel’s mother as she stood, only several paces away, with a distrusting glare in her eyes.

Morel leant forward, a miserable look overtaking her. ‘Please, Mum, don’t—’

‘Cordelia,’ Isseal interrupted, softly, as she took her sister by the arm. Her whiskers shimmered in communication as she stood with the woman in an understanding-but-authoritative way. ‘If I thought he was going to hurt her, I would have put a stop to it already.’

‘She can’t fall in love with a boy,’ Cordelia said. Her tone, much to Sylas’ surprise, was not one of anger like he had expected; but one filled with concern so strong it almost had a tearful note to it. ‘If she does, she’ll never be heartbound.’

A chorus of whispers was the response, as Morel buried her face in the curve of Sylas’ neck and whined.

‘Heartbound?’ Sylas echoed. ‘What’s that?’

‘You humans call it *marriage*,’ Isseal said, licking her dog-like fangs. ‘Though you never take it seriously enough to connect your minds like we do.’

‘Connect our... minds?’

‘Yes,’ Isseal echoed. ‘Though, Morel has told me that humans do not have the same power as a colony. That you *can’t* share your feelings?’

‘Oh, no,’ Sylas confirmed, much to the surprise of the surrounding selkies. ‘We can’t. Our thoughts are completely our own.’

‘Strange, though it perhaps explains some things that I’ve never understood before,’ Isseal said in an almost-humoured way. ‘Since meeting you, I’ve begun to wonder how much about boys I’ve gotten wrong.’

The whispering grew louder at Isseal’s confession.

The matriarch admitting that she had been wrong, especially to somebody outside of the colony.... From what Sylas could overhear it was not *completely* unheard of; but it was unusual enough to take the colony by surprise.

‘To be heartbound,’ Isseal continued loudly, causing the rest of the selkies to fall quiet. ‘Is to connect your minds with an irreversible link that binds your spirits together. Our powers have limits; a colony can only feel those they are connected to over a short distance. But when you are heartbound, that distance does not matter. You will feel each other’s life-force regardless of where you are. How far you travel. How long you are apart. Your pleasures, and your pains, will be felt as one.’

Sylas swallowed, the lump that had come to his throat refusing to go back down. ‘How is it done?’

‘It is a simply ceremony,’ Isseal explained. ‘I’ve cast the spell many times before. But know, Sylas, that once it is cast, it cannot be undone.’

‘Isseal, why are you saying it like that?’ Cordelia asked. ‘Like you’d actually...’

‘It is not my place to deny a heartbonding,’ Isseal said, simply. ‘Regardless of my personal feelings, I would be a poor matriarch if I refused the ceremony. And I can see it on his face; he is considering it.’

An eruption of confusion sounded from the selkies around Sylas, but he couldn’t deny Isseal was correct. All he could do, as Morel’s breath caught in her throat and hopeful tears welled in her eyes, was smile warmly and take her hand.

‘*I would do it*,’ he whispered. ‘*I would do anything for you.*’

Isseal cleared her throat, loudly, before flashing her whiskers brightly at the surrounding selkies.

They seemed to take heed of a silent order; retreating away a far distance. Some took to the opposite end of the skerry, while others disappeared into the ocean.

But Morel’s mother didn’t move.

‘Isseal,’ Cordelia said, seriously.

Without a word, Isseal flashed her whiskers again, and Cordelia flinched.

‘She’s my *daughter*, Isseal, I’m not leaving her to discuss this with you alone—’

Another whisker flash, which Cordelia returned.

A brighter flash from Isseal, with a sharper twitch that Sylas thought resembled a shout; and Cordelia returned it again with a furious look.

The selkies who all remained on the island turned, looking very uncomfortable at the wordless argument between sisters, before Isseal gave a hiss and Cordelia growled back.

Then, Isseal stepped forward; letting out a furious roar, just like the one she’d aimed at Morel on the beach, and Cordelia bowed her head submissively.

Sylas swallowed as the woman hesitantly backed away; leaving the couple alone with Isseal.

Isseal paused for a long moment, before she finally turned to address the pair.

‘It is not my place to deny a heartbonding,’ she repeated, firmly. ‘But I *will* still speak my mind on the matter: I do not think it is a good idea.’

‘But Auntie, Sylas—’

‘Is a human boy,’ Isseal interrupted. ‘No boy nor human has ever been heartbound, before. And, if it really is as you say and humans do not have a psychic connection to their own families, then who knows what it will do to him. What it will do to *you*.’

Morel bit her lip, shifting uncomfortably under Isseal’s gaze and transforming her lower half back and forth between legs and a tail.

‘And even if it goes as it is meant to, and Sylas connects with you as a true heartbonded should,’ Isseal continued. ‘Your emotions are intense and erratic. Your joy can be so strong that it is painful to share instead of pleasant. Even as your matriarch I struggle to not be overwhelmed by the extremity of your emotions. If Sylas has never shared his mind before —has never learnt how to refuse a thought or block a feeling— then I fear that you will hurt him.’

‘But—’

‘Heartbonding is irreversible,’ Isseal said, seriously. ‘And if your thoughts cause him harm, there will be no way to save him from it. He would have to learn how to survive it. And it is not be an easy thing to learn— Perhaps impossible, without whiskers to regulate what he receives from you.’

Morel’s ears pressed back miserably, as Isseal gave a heavy sigh.

‘There are just too many uncertainties for me to approve of it,’ Isseal told her. ‘As I have said, it is not my place to stop you. But I cannot, in good conscience, give you my blessing.’

Sylas felt his heart sink to his gut as Morel let out a shaky breath. And as a tear rolled down her cheek he found himself pulling her close; kissing it away before he hugged her tight.

‘I know that you care for him deeply, Morel,’ Isseal said, her voice softening with sympathy. ‘But it is simply not fair to ask this of him.’

Morel was sobbing, now.

Her entire body shook with each laboured breath she took, and tears streamed down her cheeks as she buried her face into Sylas’ side and transformed, shifting into her full-seal form.

Sylas pet her back as she cried, running his hand over her dappled skin in a comforting motion.

He swallowed. And then, pushing down all his fears, took a deep breath and made a choice.

‘Isseal?’ Sylas turned his gaze to the elder selkie.

Isseal acknowledged him with a flick of her ear.

‘She’s not asking me. I’m *offering*.’

Morel was suddenly herself again, a hopeful look in her eyes as her ears stood up and her entire body tensed. Her shaky breaths caught in her throat, coming out with a whimper as her lower lip trembled and her whiskers twitched.

Isseal’s brow furrowed with worry. ‘Sylas, the risks you will be facing—’

‘I’m willing to face them,’ he said, firmly. ‘For her.’