

Chapter 18

A month.

Sylas and Morel had agreed to wait a month, before they were heartbound.

It was supposed to be a time for them to think about the risks they were taking. And it was clear that Isseal wanted this thinking to turn into doubts about the ceremony. But the more they discussed it, the more they were sure it was what they wanted.

Sylas wanted to understand Morel on a deeper level. He wanted to be closer to her. As close as possible. He wanted to be inside her mind. To know everything she felt, regardless of the intensity or the risks.

But he knew a part of understanding her was respecting her culture; which meant he had to respect Isseal. And, so, though the days felt as if they crept forward at a snail's pace, he was determined to wait that full month.

On the bright side, it had given him time to meet with Morel's family several times more, and he thought they might have been beginning to trust him. The younger members of the colony had warmed up to him, at least. Though it seemed the older women needed more time to believe he meant no harm.

He held no grudge. He only hoped that they might be less fearful towards Amelia, when she came to watch him be heartbound.

It was the one thing that he was firm on. The one thing that mattered to him. The thing that he told Isseal he would do, regardless of if she gave him permission:

He would invite his sister to his wedding.

He thought himself lucky that Isseal understood.

Peter had been curious, of course. Though Morel had been bolder than Sylas and told him that —while Amelia was welcome to come— if *he* showed up, he would be met with her aunt's fist.

Peter had tried to play it off with a dismissive wave of his hand, though it was clear he had actually been sulking. Because what was he to do? Forbid Amelia from her own brother's wedding? It was something that would make him seem petty and childish, and so when Amelia had looked to him for permission to go alone he hadn't been able to deny it to her. No matter how much he clearly wanted to.

Though, as much as Sylas wished to take pleasure in his brother-in-law's frustration, it made him concerned for his sister. Amelia had looked at Peter with such anxiety in her eyes that it had left Sylas worrying for her all night; wondering if Morel's brash words might have been better left unsaid. If they might have made things worse for Amelia, rather than better....

He had thought on it, while he fished the next day, and decided to ask Morel to hold her tongue next time they met with Peter. As humorous as he found her words, he didn't want the risk of his sister facing Peter's anger behind closed doors.

He was sure she would understand; though he still made sure to practise how he intended to tell her. He had just figured out what he thought might have been the best wording when some playful selkie children had tipped his boat, almost accidentally drowning him, and the family had learnt he couldn't swim.

It was something they found unacceptable.

They said if he was to be heartbound to Morel he should, at the very least, know how to swim with her.

So now Sylas found himself neck-deep in the ocean, surrounded by Morel's family, struggling against the waves.

His head dipped under, and Isseal's hand lifted him back up so he could breathe.

'You're doing well,' she told him. 'Distribute your weight evenly—'

'What weight?' Cordelia muttered from Isseal's side. 'He's got no weight on him! How is he supposed to float with no fat?'

'He'll bulk up if he eats well,' it was almost a purr, as Isseal leant closer. She dropped her voice, whispering to Sylas as she hooked a hand under his arm and lifted him onto the beach to rest, '*May I use you as a lesson for the pups?*'

'Sure?' Sylas panted, flopping over in the sand to catch his breath. 'I don't mind.'

'Thank you,' Isseal gave a nod, before rising to her full height and addressing the young selkies that clambered over Sylas' boat and jetty: 'Do you see, little ones, why we tell you to drink your milk and eat your herring?' she said loudly. 'Without our fat to protect us from the ocean, we sink. And we shiver. Next time you think to be picky eaters, remember Sylas as he is now and reconsider if it is worth skipping meals.'

Sylas felt a humoured smile find his lips as Isseal motioned to him, and knew he must have looked a sorry sight. Especially when the children paused their playing to look at him with wide eyes and curious ear-flicks.

His smile only grew as Morel knelt down beside him and brushed his sopping wet hair from his eyes. She giggled at him, and he chuckled back, before pushing himself up on his elbows so Morel could lean down and kiss him.

A chorus of playful sounds came from her family and she pulled away from Sylas to flick her whiskers and make a face.

Sylas saw Ophelia flick her own whiskers back— And then Morel was chasing her across the beach, shouting playful insults as her sister called her names.

He sat up to watch them, his heart fluttering as Morel leapt on Ophelia and wrestled her to the ground.

Then, a mighty hand rested on his shoulder, and he let out a long breath as Isseal sat beside him.

He could feel the power in her touch; gentle, but firm. Strong, but soft.

Somehow in that moment, as Isseal and he watched Morel and Ophelia turn to seals and lumber around the shore barking, that strength made him feel safer than he could ever recall feeling before.

Isseal had said her strength was to protect her family. And... he was becoming a part of that family, wasn't he? So, though it was not said aloud, he understood that her strength would now protect him, too.

Isseal looked down at Sylas at the same time he glanced up at her, and their eyes met for a moment before Sylas looked away and coughed.

Another moment of quiet passed between them before Isseal gave one of her whale-blow snorts and turned her gaze back to her nieces.

'I'm sorry that I misjudged you, Sylas,' she said simply. 'And I appreciate that you

treat Morel well. I admit, I have always been scared for her.... I'm sure you've seen she's different from the others of our colony. More energy. Less caution. She rarely thinks things through and her emotions run wild no matter how hard she tries to control them.... I was sure that she would meet a boy who would take advantage of her. Who would tell her lies and break her spirit. I'm glad to be proven wrong.'

Sylas gave a gentle nod at Isseal's admission. He had thought that her attitude towards him had come from a protective place, but having it confirmed was reassuring. She didn't hate him; she simply loved Morel and wanted to keep her safe.

A squawking shout came from the playful fighting on the beach, and Sylas looked up to see Kas had joined her sisters, circling them as they wrestled so she could bite at their tails.

Isseal shook her head as Morel and Ophelia both turned to pursue Kas over the sand. And she gave a snort as the two older girls caught their sister and sat on top of her; batting at her with their flippers as she shrieked and giggled.

It was impossible not to laugh at their antics, and Sylas found his heart fluttering as he watched them.

Then, without thinking, he spoke. 'How many children do selkies usually have? I was wanting at least two, but I've seen that a few of the older girls have three or four daughters.'

'It depends on the selkie,' Isseal told him. 'And how well their experiences with boys go.'

Sylas nodded. 'So it's likely that Morel and I...'

'I'd wager at least three before you're thirty,' Isseal said with a chuckle. 'If Morel was to have her way, that is.'

'She can have her way,' Sylas returned. 'I would love three before I'm thirty. More, even!'

'Well, I look forward to seeing how the family grows.'

Sylas nodded. And then, after a long pause, he asked, 'What about you?'

'*What* about me?'

'Do you have any children? Morel's never mentioned having cousins.'

Another pause, as Isseal seemed taken by surprise. Then her face fell into one of sorrow.

'Yes. I had a daughter, once,' she told him. 'Arnavi, I called her. She would have been just a few years older than you are, now.'

'*Would* have?' Sylas' heart wrenched as he realised what her answer meant.

'She was caught by a fishing vessel when she was a pup,' Isseal heaved a sigh, her whiskers pressing back in a mournful way as her lip curled and her brow furrowed tight. 'She was curious, much like Morel is. I told her many times to keep her distance from the boats. But she always snuck away from me to watch them. And then, one night, I awoke to her fearful call on my whiskers. I followed her cries for as long as I could but... the boat was faster than I was. And our powers have limits. Our connection faded to silence and I was never able to save her.'

'*I'm so sorry*,' Sylas breathed. 'I can't even imagine how that must have felt.'

'Mm. I haven't had pups since,' she said. 'Men find me too intimidating.'

‘As they would,’ it came out before he even realised he was speaking, and he quickly covered his mouth.

‘As they *should*,’ Isseal responded with a growl. Then, her face softened as her sister approached, and her whiskers gave a shimmer. ‘I’m fine, Cordelia. Just telling Sylas some of the family history.’

‘Arnavi?’ Cordelia asked, her ears pressing back when Isseal nodded. ‘It wasn’t your fault. You did everything you could.’

‘No, “everything I could” would have been to watch her better,’ Isseal said, simply. ‘I made a mistake. And I refuse to make it twice. That’s all there is to it.’

Another sigh, ‘Sometimes I worry that it affects your judgement,’ Cordelia commented, before turning and making for her daughters.

She got between them, breaking up their game just as it started getting perhaps a little too vigorous, and shooed the three girls in different directions.

Morel immediately hurried towards Sylas, flopping onto the ground beside him and nuzzling into his side as her lower half turned back and forth between a tail and toes, over and over.

Isseal simply chuckled, stretching out her own legs before shifting them into a single thick tail that she used to flick a trail of sand at Morel. ‘You’re never going to grow up, are you?’ she said affectionately. ‘No matter how old you get.’

Morel giggled as she was showered with another flipper’s worth of sand, and pressed closer into Sylas; almost pushing him over.

Then a sad look came to Isseal’s eyes, though her smile didn’t falter. ‘I can’t believe you’re already old enough to be heartbound,’ she said. ‘I still remember helping your mother deliver you. Was that really so long ago?’

Morel just kept giggling, her form changing again until she had completely shifted into a seal; her head resting in Sylas’ lap as he ran a hand over her back.

‘I can see that you two aren’t going to change your minds,’ Isseal said, softly. ‘As I said. It’s not my place to deny you. If you’re *really* this determined, perhaps making you wait doesn’t serve much purpose....’

Morel perked up, her ears standing on end as she became herself again and rolled over to look at Sylas with twinkling eyes.

But Sylas shook his head. ‘I love you, Morel. But we promised we would wait a month. I think we should keep our promise.’

Morel huffed playfully and rolled her eyes as Isseal’s smile warmed at Sylas’ gesture of respect.

‘Thank you, Sylas,’ Isseal said with a chuckle. ‘I think that you’re going to have no trouble finding your place within the family.’