

Chapter 19

It was a beautiful night.

The stars hung overhead and the full moon shone bright to illuminate the skerry and the selkie colony that stood on its stony surface.

A circle had been formed around the couple that stood together on the highest point of the rocks, an array of decoratively woven seaweed and colourful shells unpolished-but-cleaned surrounding their feet.

Amelia stood at Sylas' side, her baby tight in his sling as he slept against her chest. She watched her brother with a tired-but-loving smile as he let out a long, deep breath and tried to calm his nerves.

Cordelia took up the same place beside Morel as Amelia stood beside Sylas, and looked to her daughter with a mix of deep love and poorly-restrained anxiety.

Sylas had been told she hadn't slept in almost two days, making herself sick with worry that the ceremony would go wrong and her daughter would be hurt. Or the outcome that Sylas had overheard her fretting to Isseal about: that his "true" intentions were to trap Morel with the heartbonding so he could steal her from her colony and keep her for himself.

He wished there was a way to reassure the poor woman; a way to prove to her that all he was doing was done out of love and that he could never take Morel away from the family she cared for so deeply.

But there was nothing he could say that she would believe. Instead, he would have to prove it to her with his actions, and earn her trust over time.

Morel beamed at Sylas, her smile pressing up her chubby cheeks to crease her beautiful eyes. Her damp skin sparkled in the moonlight, the pale speckles in her dark dappled markings looking almost as silver as the stars as they gleamed.

She looked even more beautiful than usual, and Sylas had to bite his tongue to stop himself from saying it out loud as Isseal approached from the shore.

The crowd of selkies parted to let her through, bowing their heads respectfully as she passed them to take her place between the couple on the rocks.

She raised a hand, her whiskers shimmering, and the shuffling feet and quiet whispers died down until the only sound left in the air was the washing of waves against the island's edge.

Her hand lowered and she stood a moment longer, looking down to Morel with warm, loving affection....

Then her gaze settled on Sylas and a concerned look came to her.

You're sure? she mouthed in silence.

Yes, Sylas mouthed back with a slow, subtle nod.

Isseal returned his nod, her ears pinning back in a serious way, before she took a deep breath.

'Under the stars of the Ilyrisian night, we gather to stand as one,' she said, her voice echoing through the quiet night. 'Two families to be joined, our ancestors watch from their place above us, beside the gods of many names, and our past matriarchs shine their

approval down with the light of the their silver whiskers; reflecting off the waves around us, strengthening our magic and our bonds.'

Sylas took a breath as Isseal motioned to the shimmering galaxies above and wondered, with an anxious swallow, if the Moon Mother's bright full light meant she approved of this union, too.

'And no two bonds tonight shall grow as strong as that of the pair that stands before us,' she continued. 'Souls to be united as one, hearts to be bound in union. Morel, born in late spring on the shores of a warm grassland, accepts to bind herself to Sylas, born in early winter in a city of humans.'

Sylas let out the breath, slow and even, as Isseal bent over and gently took his hand, lifting it to join it with Morel's.

'Their love is pure and strong,' Isseal said, rising again to her full height to address her colony. 'A joy unlike any other; receive their hearts now, and understand why they must be joined.'

The surrounding selkies all closed their eyes, taking deep breaths and flicking their whiskers and ears forward receptively. And Morel closed her own eyes; lifting her head and flicking her whiskers once.

Twice.

Four times.

And the family let out a collective sigh as her feelings of love fell over them and they felt all that she felt.

Isseal cut her eyes to Sylas, looking unsure of how to continue, before she flicked an ear in Amelia's direction. '*Share with her, Sylas,*' she whispered softly. '*In whatever way you humans do.*'

Not sure what else to do, Sylas glanced to his sister and grinned, trying to sniff back his happy tears as he did. He knew he must have looked like an idiot, as she laughed aloud at him; a smile so large and genuine he thought they might almost be children again, playing ball by the roadside and collecting worms for their father to use as bait.

Isseal seemed to approve, as Sylas turned back and wiped his eyes with the back of his free hand.

Before he could lower it, Morel took it and squeezed it tight; gazing into his eyes as she leant forward to press her forehead against his own.

'To you, I open my heart,' she said.

'To you, I open my heart,' Sylas repeated.

'Touch your whiskers,' Isseal told them, before giving an awkward pause. '*Hm.*'

Morel flicked her whiskers forward, batting them against Sylas' cheeks and eliciting a chuckle from the man, before glancing to her aunt for approval.

Isseal nodded, seemingly content with this action, and so the couple spoke together; repeating the words they had been taught in time with each other:

'Interweave our whiskers. Connect our veins. As one we shall live. As one we shall be. Our hearts bind, our minds entwine, and our souls shall never part.'

Isseal flicked her whiskers, flashing them brightly and sprinkling glow of magic that fell from them like stardust. It scattered over the couple, touching their skin with a spark that faded with its glow into a dull tingling sensation.

'*Be as one,*' Isseal breathed.

As the last word left her mouth, a sudden wave of energy hit Sylas from all sides and he felt like he was choking.

It was like a hundred voices had burst through his head and pushed themselves directly into his thoughts; talking so loud they drowned out everything else around him.

So many voices. All at once.

It was overwhelming.

He collapsed to his knees, struggling for breath as Morel caught him and held him close.

'Sylas?!' Morel cried, her worry hitting him like a speeding cart over a cobbled street that knocked the wind out of him. 'Sylas, what's wrong?!'

He couldn't catch his breath to tell her, and the hundred voices started screaming with fear and his skin crawled as if bitten into by a thousand tiny insects.

'*It hurts!*' was all he could choke out as he grabbed at her arms and tried to pull her close. '*It's so loud! It— It hurts!*'

'Sylas!' Amelia had him, now, laying him on his back and pressing her hands to his chest as if readying to resuscitate him. 'No, no— No, please! Please, no! Breathe, Sylas! Breathe! I just got you back! Please! I *just* got you *back!* I can't lose you again!'

Give him space!

It was Isseal's order, but not her voice, joined by a feeling of worry that overtook his body as the matriarch cleared the selkies crowding around him. She shooed them all to the opposite side of the skerry until all that was left at his side was his wife, his sister, and herself.

'Sylas,' Isseal said as she knelt at his side. 'Sylas, can you hear me?'

'I— I— Can't— Breathe—'

'*Oh, what have I done?*' Isseal whispered, guilt radiating from her like an ice-cold draft of winter air creeping through a cracked window. '*What have I done to you?*'

She bowed her head, placing her forehead against Sylas' own as a long, lone tear rolled down her snout and he felt in his heart exactly what she was thinking:

Don't let me have killed you.

A petrified wave of horror shot from Morel's mind to his own, stinging his entire body with a feeling so strong he convulsed with the pain.

A chorus of terrified voices followed, both in his ears and in his mind, along with the sound of his nephew's wailing.

Then, as suddenly as it had had hit him, the world went dark and silent.