

Chapter 20

Sylas awoke the next morning to a strange new sensation that he couldn't place. It was like there was a ringing in his ears, only it wasn't his ears— The ringing in his ears was the ringing in his ears, after all. So whatever this weird new feeling was must have been different.

It was like a whole new sense had reached out of him, grabbing and feeling at an unknown world he had never experienced before.

And this world was full of concern. And guilt. And a little bit of childish hunger.

Slowly, Sylas opened his eyes and looked in the direction of the hungry complaint; only to find himself watching, groggily, as Cordelia rolled onto her side and pulled Phoebe close to feed as the feeling of hunger and frustration faded to contentment.

He almost chuckled, though he was too tired to let out his laugh. But even though he didn't make a sound, both Cordelia and Phoebe turned to him (though, Phoebe refused to unlatch from her mother as she did).

Cordelia twitched her whiskers, and a curious sense fell over Sylas.

Then several more joined it and the man realised he was in his bed; his bedroom floor covered from one wall to the other in slowly-awakening selkie women. They all looked up to him as they rubbed their eyes and yawned; senses of relief taking over the guilt and worry that had filled the air before.

That was when Sylas felt a large, warm form beside him shift, and smiled as he sensed that Morel was curled against his side.

A deep, deep feeling of affection overtook him. And then several humoured sensations poked him in response, tingling his skin and mind in a way he couldn't quite comprehend in his tired state.

He didn't think he had the strength to stand. So, instead, he used what little energy he had left to roll over and place a hand on Morel's cheek.

Morel, feeling Sylas move, slowly blinked awake. Her senses tingled against Sylas' own as she took a deep breath and came back to the world.

And then Sylas was hit with a joy so strong it was like being gripped by a vice.

He gave a cry, his entire body cringing as the sensation shot through him, and he heard Morel gasp and felt her guilt and fear sting against him.

'Morel!' Isseal exclaimed as she hurriedly ducked under the bedroom door and rushed to the couple. Her presence was accompanied by a firm, stoic sense that pushed Morel's own feelings back. 'Control yourself. Give him room to breathe.'

Morel grabbed her whiskers with her hands, pressing them back and taking a deep breath, and Sylas felt the sensations that stung him begin to numb.

'I'm sorry,' she mumbled, her eyes flicking around the room as several waves of worry floated into the air. 'Are you alright?'

Sylas caught his breath, panting heavily as the worst of the pain subsided, and then looked to Morel with a smile.

He could almost feel the affection radiating out of himself— And, even if he hadn't felt it escaping him, he would have soon become aware of it as the selkies around him gave

relieved chuckles and mumbles and sighs.

‘Thank the tides you’re alright,’ Isseal’s voice was laced with anxiety and guilt; the same that flowed out of her whiskers and into Sylas’ new senses. ‘I thought I’d killed you, Sylas. I really thought I’d killed you.’

‘I’d forgive you if you did,’ he said, only half-joking.

Isseal gave a heavy sigh, the anxiety fading as she let her shoulders fall slack.

Her sigh was echoed by Morel, who pushed into Sylas’ side and shivered; her guilt and fear and anxiety poking at him as she whined and entangled her legs with his own.

‘*It’s alright,*’ he whispered to her comfortingly. ‘*I’m okay, now. I’m....*’

He caught sight of his own hand as he rubbed it up and down Morel’s back, and paused.

‘I’m....’

He felt Morel swallow, and she turned to watch as he lifted his hand; an awed feeling overtaking him as he spread his fingers and looked at the dark, fleshy webbing that had grown between them.

‘*It’s not just your hands,*’ Morel said, quietly. She lifted a finger to Sylas’ ear, and he felt it twitch at her touch.

Then she ran her hand down along his jaw, tracing her claw over his skin until she touched under his nose and caused something strange —something new— to flick and move.

Sylas pulled away, touching at the place the strange sensation had come from on his face, and felt long, wiry whiskers protruding from just above his upper lip.

He paused, blinking in confusion and surprise, before all but launching himself out of bed and directly onto the floor in his hurry to find his mirror.

The selkies around him gasped with worry and made to help him.

‘Easy, now! Easy,’ Isseal told him, hefting him back into bed and laying him down. ‘You want something? What do you want?’

‘My mirror— It’s in the main room,’ Sylas managed, feeling very out of breath underneath the heavy weight of Morel’s surprise. ‘I need to see myself. I need to know.’

Isseal nodded, rising up and weaving through the mass of women who watched Sylas with concern.

Sylas let out a long, effortful breath as Morel gently placed a hand to his chest. He looked around the room at all the girls who watched him. And then he wondered aloud; ‘Where’s Amelia?’

‘She had to go home,’ Morel mumbled. ‘She stayed as long as she could, after we brought you to bed, but she said Peter wouldn’t be happy if she didn’t come home on time.’

A feeling of unease came from the surrounding selkies at the mention of Peter, and Sylas responded to it with a hot anger and disgust as the selkies all remembered Amelia’s worried look. He could almost see how it had gone in his mind, as the colony all averted their gazes from him:

She had wanted to stay. But she had swallowed and backed towards the door, clearly conflicted by fear. What might happen to Sylas if she left, or what might happen to herself if she stayed.

'*I hate that man,*' Sylas mumbled, his entire body trembling as he tried to hold the feeling back. *I'll kill him. If he dares to lay a hand on her, I'll kill him!*

Isseal returned with his mirror, then, and it was clear she felt the rancid thoughts pushing themselves free from Sylas' mind as she placed the mirror down and sat at his side; causing his bed to creak and bow under her weight.

She flicked her whiskers and they shimmered brightly, sending a calming sensation over Sylas that eased his rage and helped him to breathe.

He let out a long sigh, his entire body relaxing, and then pushed himself up to sit.

He cast a grateful glance to Morel as she helped him steady, before turning to the mirror.

What he saw was a very strange sight, indeed.

His once-plain skin had become mottled with dark spots, and his ears had grown long and pointed and flexible; flicking with his confusion alongside his long, silver-brown whiskers.

His fingers and toes were now webbed. And when he opened his mouth he found fangs instead of flat human teeth. The same paleness that had coloured his palms had now appeared on his stomach and chest, stopping just short of his neck and down to his—

Sylas pulled his belt forward, casting a glance into his pants, and saw that the marking ran down his thighs to his knees.

'*Is it still there?*' Morel mumbled in his ear.

'Is what— Oh,' Sylas almost laughed aloud at how silly a question it was. 'Yes.'

'It's just that the rest of you became... *selkie,*' she said, blushing, and Sylas felt her sheepish embarrassment tickle him. 'I wasn't sure what else might have changed.... It doesn't actually matter, I— I was just curious. I don't know why I thought of it.'

Sylas *did* laugh aloud, now, as he wrapped an arm around Morel and pulled her close to kiss her cheek. He felt a deep feeling of affection escape him, and Morel's embarrassment faded into love and relief as she turned her head, letting their lips meet.

'I never could have guessed this is what the ceremony would do to you,' Isseal spoke from the couple's side. 'There was no way to predict this. I've never heard of anything similar happening in all of selkie history. I'm sorry, Sylas.'

'Why?' it came out of him before he realised he'd asked it. But when his brain caught up with his mouth, he found he didn't mean it any less.

There was nothing to be sorry for; he had chosen to take the plunge into the unknown, knowing it was filled with risks. And... despite how strange he might feel in the moment, the changes were not a bad thing. The colony was beautiful, and to reflect it in his skin was an almost comforting thing.

He was one of them, now. And it could never be denied, nor taken away from him. His belonging to the family was deep within his flesh and soul.

The guilt that clung to Isseal faded as she watched Sylas with a quiet, curious look. It was clear she understood all he felt as she gave a long breath through her nose and relaxed.

The feeling of relief echoed throughout the room, and Sylas looked around the colony. They all watched him, tired smiles on their lips and a low hum of care radiating from their whiskers. And he couldn't help but smile back at them; his own happy feelings

rising out of him.

Then Morel's affection hit him again and he had to lie down to breathe.

'Is... is this how you feel all the time?' he asked her, quietly.

'Yes, it is,' it was Isseal who answered, her voice taking on a humoured note. 'I warned you her feelings were strong.'

'You did,' Sylas confirmed with a chuckle as Morel's love pressed down on him in a suffocating squeeze. 'You *did* warn me!'

'I...' Morel's voice cracked as a tear rolled down her cheek. 'I'm sorry. I'm sorry that I hurt you. I just... I love you. I love you *so much*. I wish I could control myself.'

'No,' Sylas took her hand, trying to hide the breathless note in his voice as he smiled up at her. 'No, don't be sorry. This is... this is *beautiful*. I've been numb for so long, I forgot what it was to feel so good. I love you. *Every single part of you*. Don't you ever, *ever* apologise for what you let me feel.'

The pressure of Morel's love pressed down harder, and Sylas took a gulp of air to survive it.

Then there was a knock on his front door and a wave of fear spread over the selkies as they all froze and held their breath.

A long, tense quiet held in the air before a familiar voice called through the door; 'Sylas?'

'Amelia!' Sylas exclaimed, joy rising up through him as Morel hurried to let his sister into his house. 'Amelia, I'm in here!'

Amelia rushed to his bed, throwing her arms around him and breaking down in tears.

'I was so scared!' she cried. 'I thought I'd lost you!'

'It's alright. It's alright,' he told her, hugging her tight. 'I'm fine.'

'I thought I'd lost you!' she repeated. 'I couldn't bare to lose you, Sylas! I couldn't!'

'*Shh, it's okay*,' Sylas breathed. 'It's okay.'

Amelia let out a long, loud sound that Sylas had only heard from her once before, and as she clambered into bed with him and curled up under his arm, he was reminded of the night their mother had left them. She had cried in much the same way; her inconsolable wailing echoing through the silent house as their father lay drunk and unconscious on the kitchen floor.

And so he spoke the same words that he'd spoken to her, all those years ago: 'It's okay. I'm here. Everything is going to be okay, I promise. I'm here.'