

Chapter 21

It was far too early in the morning for Sylas to find himself waking up. But yet, still, his eyes fluttered open.

Slowly, he felt his body pulling itself from its slumbered state, and he groggily lifted his head to look around his house.

It had been a week since the heartbonding ceremony, now. And despite the fact that he was recovering well and didn't need help caring for himself anymore, Morel's family had still decided to abandon the skerry they had been staying at to sleep in his house and keep watch over him.

They all laid across his cramped floor in a pile; from where his blanket brushed the ground, out the bedroom door to the main room, and halfway into the kitchen, selkies lay clumsily over one-another as they slept.

A small twinge of emotion caught Sylas' attention, and he glanced to his bedroom window to see Isseal gazing outside with a serious look on her face.

A spark of fear touched Sylas' whiskers from elsewhere in the room, and Isseal's whiskers flicked a comforting feeling in response.

When another wave of anxious emotion floated into the air Isseal turned, making a beckoning motion with her hand, and Sylas watched as Ophelia stumbled from the family pile and stood at her matriarch's side.

'Another bad dream?' Isseal asked.

Ophelia nodded. 'Th-The orca one.'

'Ah,' Isseal flicked her ear.

'You didn't reach me in time,' Ophelia said, softly. 'And it caught me mid-air and swallowed me whole.'

'I will always reach you in time,' Isseal promised, putting an arm around her niece.

'*It felt like it was happening all over again,*' she mumbled, and Sylas felt her suffocating memory; something slamming into her with so much force the wind was knocked out of her, and then the sensation of twisting through the air so fast she couldn't breathe in again.

'I will *always* reach you in time,' Isseal repeated, a firm, protective feeling radiating out of her. It blanketed the entire room like a tight and comforting embrace. 'Always.'

Ophelia shivered, letting out a long breath, and Sylas felt her relaxing as she pressed into Isseal's side.

He didn't mean to interrupt, but he couldn't hold back the instinctive sympathetic twitch that came out of his new whiskers, and the two women turned to look at him.

'Good morning, Sylas,' Isseal said. 'How are you feeling?'

'Better than yesterday,' he answered, carefully shifting out from under Morel's arm so he could stand and join the two selkies by his window.

'Which was better than the day before,' Isseal replied, a humoured note in her voice. 'If I didn't know any better, I'd think you were recovering.'

'You would think,' he chuckled back.

Ophelia gave him a tired smile as he stood beside her. 'Have you figured out how to

turn into a seal, yet?’

‘No, but I have been figuring out *this*,’ he lifted a hand, holding his breath and focusing very, *very* hard on his fingers. With a great amount of effort, a tingling sensation crept through his hand and his delicate finger-webbing slowly disappeared.

Then, sweat forming on his brow, he let his breath out and the webbing returned.

‘Fascinating,’ Isseal commented. ‘With practice, maybe you could appear human again.’

Sylas wiped the sweat from his face and shrugged. He didn’t say it out loud, but he didn’t see much of a point of trying to look human again; he had felt more at home in the colony than he ever had with other humans. And this new skin was more comfortable than his own had been.

Ophelia’s whiskers twitched playfully, and it was clear she and Isseal had felt what he had.

‘Morel likes you best like that, too,’ Ophelia commented. ‘She told me your dappling frames your eyes.... I don’t see it.’

It was Sylas’ turn to give his whiskers a humoured flick, this time.

As he did, he felt it returned with a strong squeeze of love that made him stumble into Isseal as his knees nearly buckled.

‘*Good morning!*’ he managed breathlessly, turning to his bed where Morel lay, her eyes half-open, watching him. ‘Sorry. Did I wake you?’

Yes, the feeling came through, alongside the strong feeling that she was glad he had; that she always wanted to be awake when he was, so she could spend every moment with him.

Isseal helped Sylas stand steady, and he pressed back his whiskers and took a deep breath, focusing on numbing the intensity of Morel’s loving emotions.

It was difficult, but he thought he was getting the hang of it. He was able to breathe easily, at least, and the weight of her feelings didn’t feel quite as crushing as they had when he’d first felt them.

Once he was sure he had his connection with Morel under control, he looked to her again and smiled; sending his own wave of love her way.

She giggled, her legs turning to a tail as she flung her lower half joyously into the air and kicked the blanket halfway across the room.

It fell onto one of the other selkies, who grumbled and brushed it aside before dozing off again.

Sylas chuckled at Morel’s silly outburst, before retrieving his blanket and starting back towards her.

But then he paused.

A strange, new pull tugged at him, and he looked across the colony to see Phoebe was watching him; her ears flicking up and her flipper tap-tap-tapping onto her mother’s stomach as she did.

It was clear, as she flicked her whiskers and wiggled out from under her mother’s arm, that she wanted him to go and lay with her.

Sylas cast a glance to Morel, who gave a grin and rose to her feet. She and Sylas both made their way over to the child, who clambered onto their laps as they sat down

together and laid across the both of them. She reached up for their attention and Morel blew a raspberry into her stomach, eliciting a giggle.

Cordelia raised her head, wearily looking at her daughters before laying back down and closing her eyes. As she settled, Morel lay against her; resting her head on her like a pillow, before grabbing Phoebe by her tail and yanking her up to lay on her chest.

Phoebe gave a squeal of surprise and joy, though she was silently shushed by several selkies' whisker-flicks and covered her mouth in a childish motion.

Then Kas sat up from Cordelia's other side and looked at her sisters. She clearly turned a few thoughts over in her mind, her whiskers giving out a tingle of annoyance at being woken, before a sharp realisation of whose fault it was spiked from her and she lifted a hand, bringing it down hard directly in the middle of Morel's face.

Morel squawked loudly and more selkies shushed her— Both with whiskers and with words. A moment passed as Morel's whiskers gave an immature flick, and she held Phoebe tight to her chest with one hand so she could roll over and smack Kas with the other.

Kas immediately hit her back, and Morel raised her hand to strike her sister yet again... but before she could, their mother sat up and cast a glare from one girl to the other.

They both bowed their heads in shame and lay down quietly on either side of their mother.

A humoured feeling came from the window, and Sylas glanced over to see Isseal and Ophelia shaking their heads at each other and rolling their eyes. He chuckled as Isseal's gaze fell back to quietly watching out his window at the early morning light... but it then turned to a confused anxiety, as Isseal's whiskers twitched in concern.

'Isseal?' Cordelia asked as several selkies roused at Isseal's sudden worry.

'It's...' Isseal flicked her ears, quickly glancing to Sylas, before looking back out the window. 'It's your sister.'

'Amelia?' Sylas was on his feet in moments, weaving through the waking selkies as he made for his front door.

It was far, *far* too early in the day for Amelia to show up at his house unannounced, so Sylas made his way into his yard, followed by half the colony, and hurried to his sister as she stumbled down the road.

The first thing he noticed was the blood on her face.

It was a smear across her cheek broken only by the lines where her tears had fallen, with its source still slowly oozing from her nose and down to a split in her lip.

The second thing he noticed was the rip in her nightgown's shoulder, as if it had been grabbed and yanked so violently the seam had split.

And the third thing he noticed was the baby in her arms, clutched tight and protectively against her chest; too tight, perhaps. As if she thought she would lose him if she let him go.

'Amelia?!' Sylas cried, grabbing his sister as she stumbled over to him and all but fell into his embrace. 'Are you alright?!'

'Again— It's starting again!' she cried, her sobs shaking her entire body as she gasped each breath. 'He'd stopped for so long I thought— I thought maybe I'd imagined it— But

I— I can't— I can't do it again! I can't! I can't!

'What's starting again?' came a young voice, and Sylas turned to the young girl who'd spoken just in time to see her mother grab her wrist and drag her back inside. 'Why's she upset?'

Hot white rage filled Sylas from head-to-toe, and it was echoed through the colony; each selkie who laid eyes on Amelia immediately sharing his anger and disgust.

'What happened?' the voice was firm and strong, and it caused an immediate path to part in the crowd of the colony, so that Isseal could stand at Amelia's side.

Amelia was sobbing too much to reply, as Isseal watched her with a scowl. Protective anger flicked from the matriarch's whiskers— It was a violent want to rip, and tear, and destroy whatever it was that had hurt the vulnerable young woman in front of her.

And it was one that Sylas echoed right back, as his sister pressed her bloodied face tight into his chest and cried so hard it ended with a wretch as if she were about to be sick.

'What. Happened,' it wasn't a question anymore, but an order to elaborate. 'Tell us, Amelia. So that we can help you.'

'He wouldn't stop crying!' Amelia's voice broke as she lifted herself away from Sylas and clutched her son tight. Every part of her trembled as she squeezed her eyes shut and heaved again. 'Peter kept yelling and yelling at me to make him stop! And I tried! I tried! But he wouldn't calm down! And then— Then— Peter— He kept— *Shaking him*— He wouldn't stop *shaking* him! I thought— I thought he was going to *kill* him! I had— Had to— To do *something*! I had to do *something* to stop him! But he— He— He—'

The rage from the selkies rose like flames roaring heat into the sky. Furious, joint energy breathed out of the colony in a single strong wave of disgust as Amelia choked out the beating she'd received.

The wave blanketed the selkie family, floating around them like unseen mist that drew out growls and snarls and shouts.

But, angrier than the entire colony together, Sylas stood by his sister's side, trembling with emotion he couldn't contain.

Unable to stop himself, Sylas turned and started up the road.

'Sylas!' Isseal called after him, and he felt her question lap at his heels: *Where are you going?*

He responded by turning to look Isseal in the eye; though he knew every selkie felt the angry intention that escaped his heart.

He was going to kill Peter.

He was going to kill Peter, and nothing in this world *or the next* was going to stop him!

Anything that even *tried* to get between his hands and his brother-in-law's throat would be torn to shreds.

Isseal met Sylas' eye, her gaze unflinching as he shared with her his rage. And then she nodded, sending back her understanding; every protective feeling she had ever felt, every fight she'd had to endure to protect her family, every wound she'd suffered, every bite that filled her mouth with the tang of blood— It all rushed through Sylas' mind. And it gave him strength he'd never felt before.

Then his eyes flicked to Morel, who pressed her ears back in fear.

‘Sylas—’

‘Stay with Amelia,’ was the last thing he said before he turned away from his family and made for the city.

Please.

Morel’s unspoken words chased him along the path, touching to his quivering whiskers, and he knew she was struggling not to follow him.

Please don’t get hurt.