



Heartbound

By C. Jade Wyton

Heartbound is a story of unlikely love. Lonely fisherman Syllas Hills has a chance encounter with the over-excitable selkie, Morel, and feels hopeful for the first time in years.

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Chapter 1

Fifthdae was always the worst night for fishing. The cargo boats came from Copper Swamp to deliver their ores to the city refinery, and the bustle disturbed the reef so much that the fish would scatter until next Thirdae.

Well, maybe next Thirdae was a bit of an exaggeration.... But it was still frustrating, and Sylas knew he wasn't going to catch enough to take to the markets for the weekend.

He'd barely managed to catch enough to feed himself.

Letting out a sigh, Sylas looked to the lights in the distance. He couldn't imagine a worse place to live than in the city. There were always so many boats in the docks, bustling with people all day and throughout the night.... But here, under the cliffs, it was quieter and the tide came in slower. And there were no people to bother him.

One more fish, he figured. Then he'd head home and get some sleep.

Not much else to do, really—

Sylas let out a shout as his boat rocked violently and his open tackle-box fell off the side of the boat.

'Damn the tide!' he hissed. *Should have gone home hours ago.*

His boat swayed again, though not as violently, and he heard something heavy smack against the hull.

Hm. That sounded like it was big.

Perhaps he should go.

Or, perhaps he should throw out some bait and hope his last hook would be strong enough to hold whatever had bumped him.

The boat rocked again, and there was the distinct sound of scrabbling on wood followed by a splash, and he whirled around to the noise just in time to see the shadow of something big slip under his boat.

He hurried over to try and catch a glimpse, but only found wet... hand-prints?

They couldn't be—

Again, his boat rocked. And again, he whirled around. Just in time to see a seal-whiskered woman attempt to climb onto his boat and slip again.

'By all the gods!' he gasped, stepping back as she jumped up again, this time managing to heft herself over the edge.

He tripped the side of his boat and almost fell into the water, except the woman leapt forward and grabbed him by his vest collar. The only thing between him and the ocean was the webbed hand of the stranger.

Sylas felt himself trembling as she pulled him forward. Her damp hair was thick and curled, and her skin was dappled like seal-pelt, and as she stared at him her whiskers twitched as much as her too-long ears as she cocked her head and grinned with teeth too sharp.

'Father...' he managed. 'On my boat.... A— A— A—'

'Ah!' she mimicked. Then giggled and let him fall to the floor. 'Ah! Ah! Ah!'

'Oh, gods!' he held up a hand to protect his face.

'Oh, cods!' she did the same, though much less fearfully. Then she brushed a lock of

wet curls from her freckled face and pointed to the bucket at Sylas' feet. 'Can I have a fish?'

'Take the bucket!' Sylas responded, thrusting the rusted tub into her hands and edging back as the boat rocked dangerously. 'Just— Don't eat me!'

'Eat you?' she asked, looking from him to the fish before burying her face into the bucket and messily biting into the pile. 'Why would I eat *you*?'

'Because you're a— You're a— A siren!' he stammered. 'Oh, Father above, don't eat me!'

The woman stared at him for a long, long moment as she chewed her mouthful of fish. Then she broke into a toothy grin and wiped the blood from her chubby cheeks with the back of her hand. 'Oh. I see. I'm a siren. A big, scary person-eater. That's it?'

Sylas nodded and swallowed the building bile in his throat.

'Well, then, of *course* I'm going to eat you!' she rolled her eyes and put the bucket down. 'I was just having an appetiser! COME HERE!'

Sylas let out a shriek as she lunged for him and threw out his hands. He felt them brushed aside easily as she leapt on top of him and buried her face into his neck.

He waited for death.

But all he felt was the tickle of her whiskers on his chin, followed by her tongue flicking out as she trailed spit from his shoulder to his nose.

'*Mlemp*,' she pulled her head back, her tongue still out and her eyes pressed tight in her silly grin. 'I'm such a big, scary siren.'

'You're.... You're not a siren, are you?' Sylas guessed.

'Nope,' she grinned, still pressing into his lap as she tapped a claw to his nose. 'I'm not a siren. I don't like sirens, much. They're mean. And I'm nice.'

'You're nice?' Sylas swallowed, his heart still pounding in his chest as her claw trailed down to his lip. 'Then.... what are you?'

'A selkie. My name's Morel,' she replied. 'What about you? I think I've heard about what you are before. Are you a boy?'

'I— Yes?' Sylas managed. Although, right now, with her on top of him wiggling and bouncing as she tried to get comfortable, he did *not* feel like a boy. He felt like a *lot more* than a boy.

'I've never talked to a boy before,' her claw was now poking at his ear. 'You're funny looking.'

'And you're... naked,' Sylas replied. He felt like he had to point it out. He felt almost guilty not stating it. Because— *Oh, Father!*

She shifted and he wasn't sure if he wanted her to do it again or stop. 'Naked? What's that?'

'You don't have any clothes on.'

'What're clothes?'

Slowly, Sylas motioned to his vest. 'These.'

'Oh!' the selkie gave the fabric a tug. And Sylas felt his entire body shift as she did. She didn't seem to realise her strength as she pulled him forward to examine him. 'Then, yes! I suppose I *am* naked! I've always wondered what these were called! What're they for?'

‘Keeping your modesty!’ Sylas blurted. ‘Nobody wants to see everyone else just— Walking around naked!’

‘Funny. My aunt told me that’s *all* boys want to see!’

‘N-No! It’s not!’ Sylas shuffled under Morel, and found he couldn’t wiggle free as she giggled and continued poking at his face. *Could he really argue that right now, with what he was feeling?*

‘Really? Because my aunt told me about boys,’ Morel gave him a cheeky grin. ‘She said all they’re good for is sex!’

‘Well, she’s wrong,’ Sylas groaned. *Though, maybe she wasn’t.*

‘Oh? She is? Really?’ Morel backed up, and Sylas noticed her slip as she tried to put her foot down. It was as if she wasn’t used to her legs— And he saw why as she settled down and they disappeared into a tail.

‘Oh, what in Deepland—’ he gasped as the chill night air replaced Morel’s warm touch.

‘What?’ Morel asked, following Sylas’ gaze to her flipper. ‘Oh, this? Can’t you do that?’

‘No!’ Sylas exclaimed.

‘Wow, that’s interesting!’ now Morel had his foot in her hand, and was tugging off his shoe. ‘Oh, wow! You have no webbing here, either! How do you swim?’

‘I... don’t?’ Sylas offered. ‘I can’t swim.’

‘You can’t?’ she blinked. ‘And you still come out onto the water like this? What if your boat tipped over?’

‘Then I’d drown,’ he said simply. ‘So maybe don’t rock us so much?’

She settled down in her cramped spot at the stern and held much more still. ‘Like this?’

‘Thank you,’ Sylas let out a breath of relief. Though he found himself half-wishing she’d sat closer to him.

‘So, is sex really all you humans care about, or is my aunt wrong again?’ Morel asked.

‘What?’

‘Is sex all you care about? I don’t think I’d know what else to talk about with one of you. I don’t know if I was being clear with my intentions before, but was actually *hoping* to talk about it!’

Oh, no, Sylas thought as he readjusted his clothes. *You were more than clear....*

‘I haven’t really prepared any other conversation starters,’ she continued, tapping a claw to her chin. Then she grinned and clapped her hands. ‘Oh! Uh, how about— Thoughts on inactive volcanoes and their affect on the crab population?’

‘The what?’

‘Or tactics for robbing neovi groups without making them swallow their children?’

‘Swallow their *what?!*’

‘See? You humans don’t know how to talk about *anything* else,’ Morel gave an exaggerated shrug, and started to edge closer to Sylas again. He saw her tail split and she pressed her knees around his hips and touched her nose to his— And he felt his cheeks blushing hot as her whiskers tickled his face. ‘Give us a topic.’

‘Uh...’ Sylas was having trouble thinking of anything besides the woman on top of

him, and how warm and soft she felt as she giggled and nuzzled into him. ‘The neighbouring lord, he— He had a son recently.’

‘What lord?’

‘The lord of Primrose Forest?’

‘What’s a “Primrose Forest”?’ she pulled back a little, though her hot breath still met Sylas’ cheek. ‘Is it important?’

No. Not right now, he almost said it aloud. *Not compared to this feeling, it’s not.*

‘Are you okay?’ she asked. ‘Am I too heavy? Do you want me to move?’

‘No,’ Sylas admitted. ‘You’re— You’re fine.’

‘Oh, good!’ she settled down on him, and he felt her weight press onto him in a way he hadn’t expected to feel so good. ‘Well.... How about fish? Let’s talk fish! What’s your favourite fish?’

His... favourite....

Her whiskers tickled his cheek again and he found he couldn’t focus.

Gods, she was so warm!

‘Come on!’ she urged, starting to rock in place with excitement. ‘Tell me what your favourite fish is!’

It was too much for Sylas to bear, and he let out a moan.

‘Oh!’ she gave an exclamation and shifted in his lap. ‘What is *that*?’

‘Sorry!’ Sylas panted. ‘I can’t— You’re just— Really—’

He lost his train of thought as Morel shifted again and a shiver ran up his body.

Morel seemed to think it was funny. ‘Oh, I see. You *like* me being here.’

Sylas could only nod.

She leant forward, pressing her entire body against his as her lips hovered dangerously close to his ear and her hips began to grind against his. ‘Do you want me to stay?’

Another nod.

‘Do you want to keep “talking fish”?’

Again, he nodded.

And again she giggled, and he felt her warm breath slide down his neck to his chest. ‘Okay.... Let’s “talk fish”....’

Chapter 2

He couldn't believe what had just happened.

Not in a hundred years would he have guessed that would have been how it happened.

Or how it felt.

He could never have guessed it would have felt like that.

Morel lay beside him, lifting a leg to the air and spreading out her toes playfully as she revelled in the last of the feeling of what they'd done.

'That was...' he hesitated.

'Fun?' Morel finished for him, rolling over so she could run a hand along his chest. She giggled again and buried her nose into his side, and he heard her tail slap onto the floor and realised her legs were gone again.

'Yeah,' he finally agreed, letting out an exhausted laugh that was more like a pant. 'That was.... Wow.'

'Yeah.'

'I've never done anything like that before,' Sylas admitted. 'Never.'

'Me either,' Morel's claws tickled Sylas' bare chest like the nip of the icy air, and she let out a deep sigh. 'I'd heard it was fun, but I didn't think it would feel *that* nice. And I've heard you boys aren't always so sweet.'

'Would you call that "sweet"?' Sylas breathed a laugh. 'I'd call it "sweaty."'

'*Sweaty*,' Morel echoed, moving her hand from Sylas' chest to her own, where it trailed over one of the dark, round marks he'd left on her.

He felt the urge to give her another, and found his lips meeting her neck as she gasped and squirmed. And when he pulled away he'd left another very visible kiss in her skin.

'Are all humans as fun as you are?' she panted.

'I wouldn't know,' Sylas admitted, wrapping an arm around the selkie and sighing. 'I don't spend much time with other people. I live by myself.'

'Really?' Morel pressed closer into him. 'That must be very lonely. I can't imagine being without my colony.'

'Your colony?'

'My family,' Morel gave a nod and pointed out to one of the rocky islands in the distance. 'We're staying over there. Though— Don't tell anyone! It's supposed to be a secret.'

'I won't tell,' Sylas promised. He stared out to Morel's home, and swore he could see movement along the island's edge. Was that her family? Or just waves against the shore? He couldn't tell. 'Is it a nice place to live?'

'It's wonderful. Better than the last place we stayed. I'm really not looking forward to moving on again.... There's kelp growing nearby, so we pad the banks with it to make the rocks softer. And at night we curl up together in a pile and sleep. It's nice.'

'It sounds it,' Sylas replied.

'So...' Morel's hand began to run along his chest. 'I uh.... This a little embarrassing,

but I think I forgot your name? Or forgot to ask for it in the first place. I don't remember which.'

'Oh—' Sylas realised she was right; he hadn't introduced himself. 'I'm Sylas. Sylas Hills.'

'Sylas Hills?' Morel echoed. 'Is that... ah, a last name! My aunt told me about "last names"! She said most boys have them.'

'You don't have a last name?' Sylas asked. When Morel shook her head he felt himself chuckle. 'Huh. Strange.'

'I think it's strange that you have two names!' Morel gave her own laugh, and rolled over. 'It's a little selfish, don't you think— Oh! Oh, cods! The sun! Oh, my aunt is going to kill me! I have to go!'

Before Sylas could argue Morel had leapt out of the boat with a splash and disappeared into the waves. He felt his heart drop as he stared after her.

She was really leaving?

Just like.... Just like that?

Well... uh.... Fair enough, he supposed as he leant over the water. If she hadn't left, he would have had to eventually, anyway. Wouldn't he? Though, he would have liked to have said goodbye.

And just as he thought it, she rose from the water again and pressed her lips against his.

'Will you be here again tonight?' she asked.

'Y-Yeah,' Sylas felt himself grin. 'I will.'

'Same time?'

'Yeah.'

She blushed, then disappeared under the waves again without another word, and Sylas was left in the warming rays of the early morning sun.

The sun.

Had they really.... All night?

'Wow,' he flopped back in his boat, not even caring that it lurched and rocked. 'Wow.'

Sylas looked out across the ocean to the lights of the city, and watched as the tiny specks in the distance sailed out from the docks.

He....

He'd....

Gods.

What had he done?

Why had he let that happen?

Why hadn't he pushed her away and said no? He wasn't supposed to let people in like that. He was supposed to be stern, and tough, and sensible. So why had Morel made him feel so breathless? Made his whole body tingle in a way that made it impossible to control himself?

He'd kept himself from those sorts of feelings for so long! He hadn't even *looked* at a woman in years—

A sigh, and he pulled on his pants.

He'd just answered his own question, of course.

Dammit.

He'd worked so hard to avoid situations like this. He'd built a reputation *specifically* so women avoided him.

But, he supposed, Morel didn't know his reputation. She was from out of town.

And a selkie.

He looked back to the city and bit his lip.

There was no point in heading to the markets, today. He hadn't caught enough to sell; and the few fish he had caught had already been chewed on by Morel.

Oh well, he shrugged. He could just eat the leftovers himself and try again tomorrow. Maybe come out early, catch some extra for Morel.... Would she appreciate that?

She seemed like she would.

No! he shook his head. *Don't make such an effort!*

Besides, he couldn't do anything like that, anyway, now his tackle box was at the bottom of the ocean.

Ugh. He couldn't afford to replace his gear. He was poor enough already without buying things he already owned!

Sylas' thoughts were broken as he let out a loud, sudden yawn. He rubbed his eyes and shook his head.

He could worry about that later. For now, he needed some sleep.

Muscles aching, Syllas rowed to the shore and found his usual jetty. It was old and falling apart —much like the boat that he moored— and creaked and groaned as he stumbled over it.

It wasn't far to his house; less than a ten minute walk. But in his exhaustion it felt like a lifetime. His legs were like jelly as he made his way up the dirt road, and the morning sun felt too bright and stung his tired eyes.

By the time he pushed through his front door his thoughts were a haze, and as soon as he collapsed in bed and his head hit his pillow he was asleep.

Chapter 3

Sylas woke in a haze.

He felt groggy, and ill, and when he looked out his window and saw the late afternoon sun it took all his effort not to stuff his head under his pillow and curse.

He'd slept all day! By the time he got to the city the markets would be closed!

Though.... Was he supposed to go to the markets, today?

He hesitated, and sniffed. And then when he sat up and looked out his window again he saw the ocean peeking out from over the hill and felt his heart catch in his throat.

Had last night been real? Or was it a dream?

He ran a hand over his chest, where the selkie had run her own fingers, and was sure it had been real.

Morel.

Sylas flopped onto his back and stared at the weathered roof. The wood was cheap and unpainted, and the grain was starting to split. He knew he'd have to have it fixed, soon. Not that he could afford it...

Slowly, his thoughts drifted back to Morel. It had only been a... *brief* introduction, before he had found his belt unbuckled and his vest playfully thrown to the wind, but she had seemed like a nice woman. Infectiously impulsive. And beautiful. With an intoxicating touch and a giggle worthy of a goddess.

He wondered why she'd chosen to climb in the boat with *him*, of all people. He was so plain, and boring, and ill-tempered.... Perhaps he was simply the first person she'd come across, or the only person on a boat small enough to climb into.

Maybe she'd just seen him and thought "sure!" and leapt into his boat without really caring who he was.

That seemed fairly likely, too.

Well, whatever it was, he wasn't going to spend any more time thinking it over.

He needed to get his mind off the woman. The selkie woman.

The beautiful, wonderful selkie woman.

He almost punched himself in the head just to knock some sense into himself.

Stop thinking about her! Get some... some breakfast! You're starving!

He pushed himself out of bed and stumbled into the kitchen, where he searched the pantry for something filling.

He found bread, and a few eggs that needed cooking before they went rotten; so he decided on that, plus the fish Morel had half-eaten, for his breakfast.

Lunch?

Whatever meal of the day.

He ate slowly, and by the time he was done he felt more awake. Though perhaps more frustrated. And a little giddy.

He had remembered halfway through his meal that he was meeting Morel again tonight— And after remembering, it had become the only thing he could think about. He didn't think he could wait for it to get dark; he wanted to see her again.

No! He didn't!

Oh, but... he did.

He flopped into his armchair and let out a deep breath as he remembered how the starlight had reflected off her damp, dappled skin. He didn't think he'd ever seen a woman so beautiful. And he'd seen a lot of women.

The marketplace was always full of them.

And he'd always put up his walls to all of them.... So what was it about Morel that had lowered his guard?

Was it her soft hair? Her bright eyes? Her smile? Her laugh?

Perhaps it was the surprise of a completely naked stranger leaping out of the ocean, sitting in his lap, and licking his neck before he even knew her name?

Yeah.

That last one seemed about right.

That, and how warm she was.

Father above, she had been warm!

How he'd love to have her soft form in bed with him during the cold winter nights, instead of his scratchy old blanket.

Gods! What was he thinking?! He sounded like his sister!

He shook his head and tried to put Morel out of his mind. He didn't want to turn into a hopeless romantic like Amelia! He was perfectly happy on his own, just like he had been for the last six years.

Ah, blast it, he was meeting with Amelia and her husband tomorrow, actually.... They were coming all the way from the other side of the city to help him fix the wagon.

Ugh.

He hated Peter.

Sylas could never understand why Amelia dated the man, let alone married him.

Something about the way Peter spoke just gave Sylas the creeps. And Sylas had always trusted his gut on everything else; why should Peter be any different?

He gave another heavy sigh and looked to the empty fireplace.

He had to admit, though. He'd been a little jealous since he'd heard his sister was pregnant. He would have loved to have children. He could imagine them now, sitting on the rug by the fireside as he watched them play. He could read to them, if they wanted. And mend their broken toys. Tuck them in at night and take them fishing in the mornings.

That was the *one* thing he had always hated about not having a wife....

He would have liked two children. Maybe three?

At least two.

He could see them clearly in his mind, and wished so much he could imagine a mother for them, too.

But that was harder... he could never see a face. And her body was always just a fuzzy blob. Nobody in particular.

He closed his eyes.

It was a problem. Although....

His thoughts drifted back to Morel.

It had been surprisingly easy to let Morel in, when he'd forgotten to put on his ill-temper and push her away. Perhaps he could let someone else in like that, and fall in love.

No, no, he shook his head. That was the last thing he wanted to do. He wasn't about to end up a heartbroken fool like his father.

He wasn't going to let himself fall in love or have his heart broken. He would forgo women entirely, if he had to!

He would turn them all away, and live out his days alone, and he would be *happy*.

At least... after tonight, he would.

He *had* promised Morel he would meet with her, after all.... He couldn't go back on his word.

The thought of her made his body tingle and he quickly shook his head again to clear it.

But that would be it!

He would meet with Morel tonight and let her down gently.

Chapter 4

Sylas fell back against the side of his boat and felt a bead of sweat roll from his face to his neck as Morel pushed herself into his side and giggled.

That certainly hadn't been letting her down. And it certainly hadn't been gentle. It hadn't been anything he'd intended to do....

But when he'd come back to his boat to row out and meet Morel he'd found his lost vest and tackle box placed carefully under the seat and he'd let down his guard, just that little bit. And then when he'd asked Morel if it had been her who found his things and she'd giggled out her answer, he felt his defences crumble completely and had forgotten what he meant to say to her.

And *then*, when she'd pressed her lips against his neck he'd melted into a puddle of hopeless jelly and taken every suggestion she'd made without a second thought.

He half-wished he hadn't been so weak. But, at the same time, he found himself too entranced by Morel to care. She was so beautiful... he couldn't help but melt for her.

As he looked to her, her legs disappeared into a tail; which she rested over his feet as she shifted closer. And by the time she got settled her tail had turned to legs again and she had entangled them in his own.

Sylas didn't stop her. The feeling of her webbed fingers trailing his body made his heart beat fast. And he loved the way her whiskers brushed against his cheek when she buried her face into his neck. And the warmth that soaked into him as she pressed her soft form into his was like nothing he'd ever felt before.

What had he done to deserve feeling this wonderful? Why had Morel chosen him?

Without thinking, he asked it aloud.

'Why you?' Morel echoed. Then shrugged. 'Oh, well, I don't know. You looked lonely.'
'Lonely?'

'Yeah,' she confirmed, her hand laying gently on his chest. 'And I know what it's like to feel alone. I can't sleep properly most nights and there's never anyone to talk to. I thought... well, you were awake. And I'd never seen a boy before and thought we could have some fun.'

Sylas gave a nod.

'Did you have fun?'

'A lot,' Sylas admitted with a chuckle. 'A *lot* of fun.'

'Good!' Morel beamed, pushing herself onto her elbows and grinning widely. 'I had a lot of fun, too!'

'Good,' Sylas laughed. 'Good....'

He took a deep breath and let his head fall against the boat's wooden edge. The stars were starting to fade and the first rays of morning sunlight were peeking over the horizon, and he hoped Morel didn't notice. Not just yet. He didn't want her to leave in a hurry like she had the day before. But then Morel shifted, and gave a disappointed sigh, and he knew she'd seen the sunrise.

'Ugh, cods,' she muttered as she rolled to the edge of the boat. 'I have to go. My aunt will kill me if I'm not back before she's up.'

'Oh,' Sylas felt his heart wrench as Morel dropped into the ocean, and he leant over to watch her shadow as she rightened herself. When she came back to the surface they shared a quick kiss.

'Should I come again tomorrow?' Morel asked.

'I'll be here,' Sylas promised.

The grin she gave him was priceless.

Then she disappeared into the water and all Sylas saw was her shadow as she spun away into the distance. For a moment he felt like his heart was being tugged away with her....

Then he frowned and shook his head and told himself to be sensible, and reminded himself of his father's broken heart.

He didn't need that sort of pain.

Ugh, why had he promised to meet Morel again? He was perfectly happy on his own!

What was it about her that made him lose control?

He sighed.

Why had he let himself fall for her again tonight? He should have just said no, and been done with it....

Though... it hadn't been *too* bad a thing, had it? It had been fun. And Morel seemed like a lovely woman. Could it really be that terrible to spend time with her?

He shook his head.

Of course it is! Sylas let out a groan. *Don't be an idiot! Not like Father was!*

Sniffing, Sylas grabbed his boat's oars and made for his jetty.

His father was the last man he wanted to turn into; a heartbroken fool who's only comforts were found at the bottom of an ale mug... and who's last breath had floated up from bottom of a shallow pond. That would never be him. He wouldn't let himself become that.

Sylas climbed out of his boat and stumbled over the creaking jetty, only stopping at the end to watch the early sun reflecting off the waves below him.

He would be stronger than his father. And not give his heart away. He....

He caught sight of his reflection and hesitated.

Had he always looked so ill?

Sylas reached a hand to his gaunt face and sighed. The bags under his eyes were deep and dark, and his skin clung to him like there was nothing underneath.

Why did he look so....

Lonely, Morel's voice echoed in his thoughts, and he had to shake his head to chase her words away.

He supposed he didn't spend much time around others. And when he was with people he was working. Selling his fish in the markets, and making a point to keep his distance from his customers.

He never spent time with friends; he didn't have any. Morel had been the closest thing to a night out he'd had in years.

Perhaps that was what had made it so hard to refuse her.

Perhaps he was more like his father than he liked to think....

He pushed the thought down and stumbled off the jetty.

He wasn't *anything* like his father!

Sylas hurried home, feeling the weakness in his legs growing again like the morning before.

He would sleep off his thoughts, he figured, and meet his sister with a clear head.

Chapter 5

He hadn't been able to get the sight of his reflection out of his mind, and it had turned his dreams sour.

Waking up, he'd stumbled to his storage room and retrieved his mother's old mirror; he hadn't looked quite as terrible after sleeping, but he still looked like a half-starved mess.

So, with a sigh, he had gotten breakfast. Though all he had been able to find was half a loaf of stale bread and a single egg.

He promised himself he would get something healthier next time he was at the markets. He couldn't believe how empty his pantry was. How had it happened? He swore he'd bought enough food to last.

Sylas shook his head and rubbed his still-tired eyes as he returned to his storage to look for clothes that he hadn't worn every day for... months.

He closed his eyes and sighed. And when he opened them he caught his reflection in the mirror.

You looked lonely, Morel's words hit him again and he slumped against the wall.

He was filthy.

And all the clothes he could find were filled with holes. From moths or mice, he wasn't sure.

He supposed he'd just have to wash what he was wearing and hang them to dry while he bathed himself.

So he did just that.

He considered wrapping himself in a sheet before he went to the well to collect water for his bath but.... He decided against it.

He lived alone. And Morel was, for lack of a better word, *inspiring*.

So he went naked. Back and forth, six times.

It felt exhilarating to do something so reckless; anyone passing by the road could easily see him.

Though nobody did, and he climbed into his hot bath and scrubbed himself near-raw before he was satisfied enough to relax.

The water enveloped his body as he sank up to his neck, and he couldn't help but close his eyes and think of Morel's warmth.

He couldn't deny that she was like nothing he'd ever felt before. She'd made his whole body feel alive with an energy he'd never known. It was like static was shooting through him every time her skin met his.

If she hadn't been a selkie, he very well may have run into the streets claiming to have found a goddess come to ground.

He sighed.

What a stupid thought to have.

Morel was just a woman, not a god.... Though, the way she'd made him feel was damn-near divine.

Sylas pulled his head under the water and shook it.

Stop thinking that sort of thing! he told himself as he rose back above the water. *What good would inviting company in do for you, huh?! None! That's what!*

He wiped the water from his eyes and slicked back his hair with a curse. Then he looked to his hands, wrinkled from his time in the bath, and gave another sigh.

Perhaps a *little* bit of company wouldn't be so bad....

He pushed the thought away.

Then there was a knock on his front door and he leapt to his feet, slipping out of the tub in his hurry. He landed with a loud thump and sent the bucket he'd used to fill the bath sliding across the floor into a mop, which clattered to the ground.

'Sylas? Are you alright in there?' his sister's voice called out.

'Yes! Fine!' he replied, rushing to his bedroom window and pulling his clothes from the line. 'I'll be there in a moment, Amelia!'

'Take your time,' it was Peter who spoke, now, and Sylas felt himself scowling at the man's voice. 'We're not in any hurry.'

Sylas ignored Peter's comment and dried himself quickly, slipping into his clothes before he unbolted the door and opened it to his guests.

Amelia greeted him with a warm smile, and he felt his heart rise in his chest. But then, Peter rested his hand on her shoulder and Sylas felt all the warmth he'd soaked in from the bath disappear.

'Amelia, Peter,' his voice was flat as he nodded to the two. 'Come in.'

'Ah, as friendly as always,' Peter laughed, moving his hand from Amelia's shoulder to her back. Sylas thought he saw Peter give her a shove, but couldn't be sure as the pair made their way inside. 'And here Amelia was, worried you'd be rude to me again.'

Amelia glanced at her husband with an expression Sylas couldn't read, then turned and smiled at her brother as she held up a metal pot. 'I brought you some stew.'

'Thanks,' Sylas took the food gratefully and peeked under the lid. He caught a whiff of mutton and chuckled. 'Heh.... Like Aunt Grace used to make it, huh?'

'Mostly,' she answered. 'Though, no pumpkin. Not the right season for it.'

'Fair enough,' Sylas took the pot to the kitchen and put it down heavily on the stove. 'I'd offer you both something, but I'm afraid all I have is, uh....'

Amelia pulled a face as he motioned to a single mouldy orange that sat on his counter.

'Sylas, is that really all you have to eat?' she asked. 'A mouldy orange?'

'Ah!' he raised a finger, and tried to put on a playful tone. 'No. I also have a pot of stew!'

Amelia didn't laugh. She just looked at him pensively.

'I'm been meaning to go to the markets,' Sylas admitted. 'But I've been a little distracted.'

'With what?' Peter asked as he slipped into the kitchen.

'Things,' Sylas replied, coldly. Then he turned to Amelia and felt a smile edge its way to his lips. 'I met a girl.'

Peter snorted a laugh. 'Is that why you're clean, for once?'

Sylas ignored him and took his sister's hands. 'I can't stop thinking about her. I have no idea what to do, Amelia. I'm so conflicted....'

'What's there to be conflicted about?' Peter leant against the counter. 'Is she ugly?'

Sylas turned to his brother-in-law and felt his lip curl. But before he could say anything, Amelia gripped his arms and pulled him back.

‘I’m so happy for you, Sylas,’ she said. ‘What’s her name?’

‘Morel,’ Sylas answered.

‘Morel? That’s—’

‘A weird name,’ Peter interrupted. ‘Sounds ver or something. You have expensive taste, if you’re into venison.’

‘*Peter*,’ Sylas hissed. ‘I’m talking to my sister. And I would appreciate it if you didn’t interrupt our conversation.’

‘Careful, Sylas,’ Peter chuckled. ‘I think you’ve been drinking a little too much sea water. You’re salty.’

‘And you’re annoying,’ Sylas retorted, sighing when Amelia tugged on his vest. ‘What? He is!’

‘Sylas, *please*,’ Amelia’s voice was low and firm, and Sylas caught her nervous glance as she looked from her brother to her husband. ‘We came all this way to help you. Don’t pick fights.’

‘Right,’ Sylas sighed. ‘You’re right, Amelia. I’m sorry.’

‘Ah, it’s no worries,’ Peter grabbed Sylas by the shoulder and pulled him tight to his side. ‘We weren’t expecting anything less from you.’

Sylas went to pull away, but when he saw his sister bite her lip he decided against it. For a moment he scowled, but then he sighed. ‘Alright. I suppose I should show you the wagon, then.’

‘Yes,’ Peter gave Sylas an uncomfortable squeeze. ‘And while you do, Amelia will start on that pile of dishes.’

‘You don’t have to,’ Sylas muttered. ‘They’re my dishes. I’ll do them later—’

‘Nonsense!’ Peter let out a loud laugh that made Sylas’ gut turn as he was dragged towards the back door. ‘Leave the women’s work to the woman!’

Chapter 6

Sylas hated Peter.

Women's work.

It made him want to spit.

Women's work!

By all the gods, Sylas hated Peter!

He wound in his line and placed his rod on the floor of the boat. Then he put his face in a hand.

How did his sister ever end up with such a bastard?

Sylas shook his head.

It was just proof that love was more trouble than it was worth. He wasn't going to end up like that. Ever.

So what are you doing out here? he thought to himself with a sigh.

Perhaps he should just go home. Morel was late, anyway— Or she'd forgotten him.

Yeah. She'd probably forgotten him.

He grabbed his oars and started home.

If Morel wasn't going to show there was no point in waiting around for her. He'd get a somewhat early night, and take what he'd caught to the markets in the morning. Then he could buy new clothes and some fresh food.

He was about halfway to the jetty when the boat gave a familiar jolt.

'You're late,' he commented as Morel clambered over the edge. The words came out softer than he had meant them to and he almost cursed. *Be strong!*

'Sorry,' she mumbled as she flopped heavily into the boat, making it sway dangerously. She seemed clumsier than usual— Which was impressive, considering how clumsy she already was. 'My aunt wouldn't leave me alone. Every time I got up she'd ask me where I was going. I had to wait for her to fall asleep before I could get away...'

'You have to ask your aunt's permission to leave?' Sylas gave a humoured snort and, without thinking, nudged his fish-bucket towards Morel.

'Well, yeah,' Morel took a fish from the top and sniffed at it, her eyes half closed as she swayed in place. 'She's the matriarch.'

'Matriarch?' that was a long word...

'Yeah,' Morel gave a nod and bit into her fish. 'You know how it is.'

'Uh, no. Not really,' Sylas admitted. 'What's a matriarch?'

'You don't know?' Morel cocked her head and stared at Sylas before letting out a yawn. 'The head of the family? She makes all the rules, and decides where we settle down and when we leave.'

'Ah,' Sylas' voice was flat as he looked to his feet.

'Sylas?' Morel edged closer. 'Are you alright?'

'Fine,' Sylas lied. Then he opened an arm and beckoned Morel over. 'Rough day, is all.'

'Oh, me too,' Morel replied as she settled against Sylas. She gnawed on her fish for a moment before letting out another loud yawn. 'My aunt didn't let me sleep.... She said

too many long nights would turn me nocturnal.’

‘Did she?’ Sylas felt Morel shift again and couldn’t help but grin.

‘She said that if I stayed up I’d sleep well tonight and fix my sleeping habits,’ Morel groggily pushed herself up and pressed her nose into Sylas’ neck. ‘But jokes on her... because I don’t intend to sleep *at all* tonight...’

Sylas felt himself chuckle as Morel’s kiss moved from his neck to his lips. He could see her drooping ears and whiskers and could tell she was exhausted.

But, even though she was so tired, she’d still come back to meet him.... He couldn’t help but feel good about it.

‘You okay?’ he asked as her head dropped to his chest.

‘Yeah,’ she replied sleepily, and he felt her body tremble as she let out a yawn. ‘Let’s have sex again. It’s fun...’

In the state she was in?

Sylas almost laughed.

She obviously wasn’t in any state to have sex; though as her lips lazily trailed up his chest to his jaw, he thought that she didn’t seem to realise it.

‘Lie down next to me,’ Sylas whispered, rolling over and gently pushing Morel off his lap and to his side. He kissed her cheek, and then her neck, and ran a hand along her side as she sighed. ‘*There we go...*’

Morel let out a quiet moan, closing her eyes as a contented grin spread over her face. ‘Mm... That’s nice...’

‘*Shh...*’ Sylas breathed into her ear before pulling her into his chest. ‘*Relax....*’

‘*Mm....*’

It only took a few moments before Sylas felt Morel’s breathing even out. When it did, he pulled away and lowered her head carefully onto the boat’s gunwale.

He watched her for a moment as she dozed, hypnotised by the way her body moved with each breath she took.

She was beautiful.

Sylas let out a heavy sigh and settled into his seat at the oars, casting another glance at Morel before starting towards shore. It didn’t take long to get to the jetty, and even less time to walk to his house and back; fish bucket in hand one way, book and blanket in hand the other.

He laid the blanket over Morel’s sleeping form before settling down beside her and pulling the lantern from his ship’s bow. He let out another heavy sigh as he held the light over his book and tried to read.

Sylas had never been very good at reading. Which was a shame, because he enjoyed it.

But his family had been too poor for tutors and his parents were always fighting too much to teach him properly. He was lucky he knew as much as he did— Poor Amelia had barely been able to write her own name until Peter had taught her how.

Sylas ran his tongue over his teeth and felt himself scowling.

Peter.

Gods, he hated Peter.

That man made his skin crawl....

Sylas shook his head and tried to put it out of his mind; Peter wasn't here. Morel was.
Morel was here.

Sylas looked to her and couldn't help but smile as she mumbled something and buried her face into his side.

Morel was here. And Morel was beautiful.

He closed his book and put it aside, instead shifting so that he could rest his head against Morel's.

He wished he didn't enjoy the feeling of her company so much. He wished he could shut her out like he'd done everyone else... but she'd put something deep inside him, and he knew the breathlessness that came when he thought of her couldn't be pushed away so easily.

He wasn't sure what it was, exactly, that she'd said to make him feel so warm. She'd made opening up seem so easy and natural and he couldn't figure out how. This was only the third time he'd seen her and already he felt closer to her than anyone he'd ever met before; closer than people he'd known for years.

Maybe it was her beautiful smile and the tickle of her whiskers that drew his attention.

Or maybe it was the way she talked; her infectious excitement so loud that he couldn't possibly put his walls up and ignore it.

Or maybe....

Maybe he wasn't as happy as he'd thought he was, all these years, and he was just too used to it to realise.

He shook his head at the thought.

No, no.

That was stupid.

He was fine.

It was probably just because Morel had caught him by surprise. That's all. It was just because Morel had appeared so suddenly and been so beautiful and friendly—

Sylas felt a shiver run up his spine and froze. A very sudden, terrifying feeling had gripped him. Like something was watching him. And that something wasn't happy with him.

Slowly, he turned and looked out across the ocean. He scanned the rocky outcrops that rose from the water and dotted the distance to the horizon.

And he saw it.

The huge shadow of a beast resting no more than a few hundred meters away on a large, flat outcrop.

It raised its head as his gaze fell on it, and there was a silver shimmer across its long whiskers as it stood; its form becoming much more human as it folded its arms across its chest and began to tap a foot.

Even slower than he had turned to it, Sylas turned back around and let out a long breath.

If he were to wager a guess?

That... was Morel's aunt.

Chapter 7

The boat rocked gently, stirring Sylas from his sleep. He couldn't remember when he'd dozed off.... It had still been dark, last he remembered; but now the sun was peeking from behind the cliffs on the distant horizon, and he wished it wouldn't.

He buried his face back into Morel's soft form and squeezed his eyes shut tight.... Though sleep didn't return and he gave a sigh and rolled onto his back.

The boat rocked again, and something tapped against its side. It sounded small, and wet, and suspiciously like hands. And as it moved from the bow to the stern Sylas closed his eyes and held still.

'Morel!' spoke a very young voice. 'Morel!'

The boat rocked, and Sylas dared to peek. He let his eyes half-flutter open to look at whoever was whispering and spied a young girl, no more than fourteen, with tight-curved hair and dark dappled skin almost identical to Morel's. She stared at Sylas, and it was clear she hadn't noticed he was awake as her whiskers twitched curiously and she leant in close and sniffed at him.

'*Who's this?*' she muttered. Then she gasped in surprise and slipped, clumsily splashing back into the water. 'A boy!'

Sylas almost sat up to watch her, but stopped himself as he felt the boat rock again and heard the girl clamber onto its other side. He glanced to Morel and saw the child tapping her on the shoulder.

'*Morel!*' she whispered. '*Morel, wake up!*'

'Mmm?' Morel turned, though her eyes barely opened as she gave a grunt and a sniff. 'Kas?'

'*Shh!*' the child, Kas, hissed. '*Don't be so loud! There's a boy next to you! You can get away if you're quick!*'

'That's Sylas,' Morel yawned. 'He's a nice boy.'

'*Auntie Isseal said there's no such thing!*' replied Kas.

'Well, Auntie Isseal was wrong,' Morel retorted.

'*Auntie Isseal was—*' Kas gave another gasp. '*Morel! Auntie Isseal is never wrong!*'

'She's wrong all the time,' Morel snorted, turning away and burying her face under Sylas' arm. 'You just don't hear about it because you're a kid.'

'*I'm not a kid!*'

'Yes you are. Leave me alone.'

'*But Mum said you have to come home.*'

'I'm sleeping, Kas. I'll be home later.'

'*But Mum said—*'

'Go away!' Morel growled, burying herself deeper into Sylas' side. 'I'm of age, unlike you! I don't have to do anything Mum says.'

Sylas had to bite his tongue to hold back his laugh as Kas frowned and sank down, until all that was visible of her behind the gunwale was her eyes and long ears.

'*Hm. Fine...*' Kas grumbled. '*I guess I'll go home and tell Auntie Isseal that I found you sleeping next to a boy!*'

‘DON’T YOU DARE!’ Morel launched herself into the ocean, and Sylas was flung onto the floor of the boat.

He heard the girls splash away as he rolled back up to sit, and by the time he’d recovered he could see them in the distance— Or, two seal-like shapes that he could only assume was them.

He stretched out his stiff muscles and let out a chuckle. He could remember when Amelia had been that annoying, chasing him down in the woods to bring him home.

Actually, it was quite funny that Morel’s mother was still calling her home at her age, when he hadn’t spoken to his own mother in years. Not after what she’d done to his father. He barely knew where she was living nowadays. With that new man of hers, most likely. Or perhaps she’d cheated on him, too....

He shook away the thought and stumbled off the boat and jetty, his blanket slung over his shoulder and his book grasp tightly in his other hand.

So. Morel had a sister, huh?

That was news.

Sylas chuckled again.

She was pretty young. There was a good... what? Nine, maybe ten years between them?

Hm. It couldn’t be considered *that* big an age difference, could it? Perhaps it just *seemed* big, to Sylas, because Amelia was barely a year younger than he was.

Probably.

Sylas furrowed his brow and bit his lip.

Amelia.

He barely saw her, anymore. Yesterday had been the first time in months. And it had been... different. Like they’d grown apart. He supposed they must have. Their lives were so different now it was like she was a whole other person from who she had been growing up.

Sylas felt a pang in his chest as he reached his front door, and had to lean on it a moment to catch his breath. He missed his sister. He regretted not reaching out to her. And if yesterday was anything to go by, it seemed like she regretted it, too.

He took a deep breath and pushed his way inside.

Perhaps it wasn’t too late, though, and they could still mend their relationship. If he wrote her a letter, and asked her down.... He was sure she’d come. And perhaps he could meet with her when he went to the city to sell his fish. Sure, she was on the other side of the city to the markets, but she’d made the effort to come here. So he could make the effort to go there.

Sylas gave a nod and made for his room. He would write to Amelia, and ask her over. He picked up his pen and paused.

Peter.

Peter read Amelia’s letters to her. So an invite to her was an invite to him.

Sylas grimaced.

That was a downside....

But he wanted to meet with Amelia again. So he supposed he would *have* to put up with Peter. Perhaps if he got to know him more he might see what Amelia saw in the

man.

He almost laughed.

Oh. No. That didn't seem likely. He didn't think he could *ever* understand what Amelia saw in that bastard.

Sylas shook his head again and quickly penned a letter for his sister. He would give it to the post when he went to the markets today. He had enough fish to sell, even after Morel had eaten some, and he figured now that his wagon was fixed he had no excuse not to go.

Oh.

Or perhaps, instead of the letter, he could go see Amelia in person if he found the time after the markets closed.

He bit his lip and sighed.

He would see her, *if* he found the time?

No. No.

He would *make* the time to see her.

Chapter 8

The markets were crowded. But for once Sylas didn't mind. He couldn't seem to shake his good mood, no matter how hard he tried. And with his smile firmly planted on his face he'd managed to almost completely sell out of his fish, which was unusual... but understandable. Pushing people away and creating a reputation for himself was bad for business. He'd always known it. Even so, he'd made the decision to sacrifice business for peace.

Though he had never intended for that peace to turn into loneliness.

You looked lonely.

He still couldn't shake Morel's words.

Or the silly argument she'd had with her sister.

He felt himself chuckle as he recalled the look Kas had given him before falling off the side of his boat.

'Someone's chipper, today!' called a voice from the stall next to him, and Sylas turned to see the fruit vender's wife had come to help her husband close shop. 'You feeling in a pretty mood, Sylas?'

'Aw, Pippa, 'e's been grinning like a fantasist all day!' replied the vendor, reaching up to tug down his stall's cover. 'Staring off into space an' sighin' an' all! Reckon the lad's had something *real* good happen to 'im to put 'im in such a good mood!'

'Evening, Mrs Earnshaw,' Sylas gave a wave. 'Nice day, isn't it?'

'*Nice day?*' Mrs Earnshaw echoed, her voice rising in disbelief. 'Sylas what *has* happened to you? You don't seem yourself at all— Not that I'm complaining none. Smiling suits you, you know.'

'So I've heard a lot, today,' Sylas replied, making his way to the front of his own stall. He figured he should close up, too. He was running out of fish to sell, and he still needed to go see his sister before sundown, so he quickly pulled down his stall's cover and swept the last of his fish into a tray before heading over to the Earnshaws. 'You two want some fish? It's too much for me to eat in a day, and they won't keep too long.'

'Generosity as well?' Mrs Earnshaw gave a laugh, and accepted the tray. 'Now I *must* know what you've done!'

'I've met a girl,' Sylas admitted, blushing when Mr Earnshaw snickered at him. 'She's a wonder of a woman. Comes from out of town, and acts like it too. She's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen and, for some reason, she likes the look of me.'

'Well, she'd *have* to be from elsewhere, wouldn't she? To even *think* of approachin' you!' Mr Earnshaw teased. 'I'm guessin' she don't know of your reputation?'

'Nup,' Sylas replied. 'You know, the first thing she did when she met me was ask for a free fish.'

'She *didn't!*' Mrs Earnshaw gave a playful gasp. 'Oh, my lord. I remember the last fool who asked your family for a handout like that! Your daddy nearly snapped his hackles.'

'Heh, I remember that,' Sylas gave a click of his tongue and shook his head. 'Father never was one for charity.... I hate to say it, but I think he rubbed off on me a little

there.'

'Oh, come now, lad!' Mr Earnshaw put an arm around Sylas and gave him a squeeze. 'Just cos you ain't able to *afford* charity don't mean we ain't seen you turnin' out your pockets for poor ol' Jensen.'

'Excuse me, I've done no such thing,' Sylas lied, giving a sniff as he straightened up. 'You must have been mistaken. You know as well as I do the Hills family don't talk to the Jensens, let alone give them money.'

'Yeah, yeah!' Mr Earnshaw slapped Sylas on the back and picked up a nearby bag of apples. 'You liar! You know as well as I do if you had the money you wouldn't be spendin' it on yourself. No matter what you say.'

'Hey! No,' Sylas raised his hands defensively— And then fumbled to catch the bag of fruit as it was thrown at him. 'I'm not a good person. I'm a nasty piece of work!'

'Oh, Sylas,' Mrs Earnshaw shook her head and lifted up the tray of fish as if to make her point. 'You've been lying to people for so long, you've managed to trick yourself into thinking you're not as sweet as a pie. Don't forget we've known you as long you've been born! And we know it's all just a *front* you put on.'

Sylas shrugged at that. A week ago he would have argued—maybe even cussed them out and called them old fools— but with the mood he was in today, all he could bring himself to do was roll his eyes at the couple and smirk.

And when he did, Mr Earnshaw let out another laugh. 'Love feels good, don't it lad?'

'Love?' Sylas hesitated, his smile falling from his face. 'I don't fall in love. Besides, I barely know her.'

'*Aw, Bobbie, you've scared the boy,*' Mrs Earnshaw muttered to her husband. Then she turned to Sylas and put a hand on his shoulder. 'Listen to me, hon. Love doesn't always make sense, you hear? I only knew my Bob for a day before I knew it was meant to be. Now I look at you, happier than you've ever been, and I know you must be feeling something good. You're feeling something *real* good.'

'I... guess,' Sylas looked to the ground and scuffed his foot along the cobbled road. 'I don't know if I'd call it *love*, though.'

'Well, whatever it is, you hold onto it, you hear me?' said Mrs Earnshaw. 'Now, we have to get home, and I'm sure you've got your own business to attend to.... Stay safe, Sylas.'

Reluctantly, Sylas let the old woman plant a kiss on his temple, and gave a short nod. 'You too, Mrs Earnshaw. Mr Earnshaw.'

'Right, lad. You get on, now,' Mr Earnshaw gave a wave and a smile, and then linked arms with his wife and turned in the direction of the inner-city.

As soon as the couple disappeared from view, Sylas lifted his vest and wiped his face where he'd been kissed.

The Earnshaws were strange. And a bit annoying. But they were long-standing friends of the Hills family and he didn't have the heart to hate them. Especially when they'd stuck by his father for so long after his mother left.

And they'd stuck by him, too. Even when he thought they'd have been better off not....

A sigh followed by a smile, and Sylas readjusted the bag of fruit in his arms and

Heartbound

started towards his sister's house.

Chapter 9

It had been four weeks since Sylas had his first chance meeting with Morel, and his days now were spent in anticipation as he waited for the late-evening so that he could spend it pressed deeply against her, his arm wrapped around her as he left his line propped on the gunwale for fish to bite.

He always gave Morel the first fish he caught.... The one time he hadn't, she'd decided his method was too slow and leapt into the water, bringing back a live rockshard crab which she had bitten into with a terrifying show of strength.

Sylas couldn't even get through those things with a nutcracker, let alone his teeth!

He rubbed his bruised eye and snorted.

Speaking of his lack of strength....

It had been three days since he'd picked his fight with Peter and lost. He didn't regret calling him out. Not one bit— He intended to do it again, in fact, if the bastard dared to make another comment about Amelia's "place" as a woman.

But he did wish the ache in his skull would fade enough to let him sleep properly. He was meeting Amelia again, tomorrow, and wanted to be rested for it.

Morel's hand met his, and she caressed his cheek tenderly before giving his bruise a kiss. Her whiskers ticked against his skin as she did and Sylas couldn't stop himself from chuckling and turning so their lips met instead.

'You look good in my hat,' Sylas commented.

'Thanks,' grinned Morel. 'I'd take it with me, but I don't think my aunt would be too happy about me having it.'

'No?'

'No. And she's not happy I've been spending so much time away from the colony. Especially since I'm spending it with a boy,' Morel said, grinning and pressing firmer into Sylas until he could feel her excited trembles. 'But... that's her problem, isn't it?'

Sylas chuckled and nodded. Though he wasn't sure he completely agreed.

Morel's aunt Isseal was terrifying, and no matter how much Morel told him that she was a very good matriarch, Sylas definitely didn't want to cross her.

He still hadn't gotten used to the feeling of her looming at them from the distance. And though he'd never seen her up close, let alone met her, he felt like if he ever told the woman something was "her problem," she would give him a hundred more problems of his own.

Sylas' worries of Isseal were interrupted by Morel's breath on his lips and, for a moment, he let her kiss him— But then he pulled away.

He still wasn't sure about this. He kept telling himself he was going to end their meetings and stop himself from falling into this nonsense trap, but... the longer he waited the harder it was not to cave when Morel looked to him with... with those eyes. That smile. That twitch of her whiskers....

He leant forward, and Morel's ears flicked up as he pressed his lips back into hers.

Sylas thought he never wanted to leave this moment. And then he caught himself thinking so, and broke away again; turning to look out across the waves.

All of his father's mistakes were starting to make a lot more sense to him now.

Had the old man felt like this, too?

Sylas wasn't given much time to think on it before Morel pressed against him and the boat tipped dangerously to one side. He had to push her back to the centre of the boat, and the two tumbled into the deck in a pile.

Sylas could feel his heart pounding as he waited for the boat to stop rocking.... And when he saw his rod come unhooked from the gunwale and slowly start to tip towards the ocean, he almost flipped the boat again in his hurry to catch it.

Morel gave a loud, excited laugh as Sylas fell back onto her and tried to weight the boat down. He heard her tail slap onto the seat as she wiggled and shifted her form, and he couldn't help but grin as her arms wrapped tightly around him.

He rolled over to kiss her, and she nuzzled into his cheek— But then she gasped and pulled away, and her ears flicked down guiltily as she sat up to peer over the edge of the boat.

She glanced around in a hurried way, as if looking for something, before she pressed herself to the floor of the boat again with a whine.

'Morel?'

'I have to go!' she was in the ocean before Sylas could stop her, and all he could do was watch as she kicked out her tail and spun through the dark water.

She moved quickly, with her seal-like shape, towards one of the nearby islands— And Sylas felt himself shrink into his boat when he saw the woman on the shore.

No matter how many times he saw Isseal, Sylas was never prepared for how huge she was. At least three heads taller than Morel was, and no less than twice as tall as himself. No *less*... and he thought she might be taller. But it was hard to tell from the distance.

Though, even with how far she stood from him, he could see the familiar spark of her glare and the shimmering along her whiskers as she stared him down.

Morel pulled herself to the shore besides the matriarch and bowed her head, looking like a child caught out past curfew as her aunt turned and scolded her.

Morel cast Sylas one more glance before leaping into the water and disappearing. Isseal watched her from the shore, her eyes trailing the dark ocean as her gaze followed Morel into the distance, and Sylas let out his breath.

He wasn't sure he would ever get used to Isseal....

He looked to the floor of his boat, retrieving his oars, and then felt the hair on his arms stand on end.

Isseal was staring at him. He knew she was, even before he dared look up to meet her eye.

He might row home quickly, tonight.

Swallowing, Sylas turned in his seat to adjust his oars— And when he heard a loud splash he dared to glance up to see Isseal had vanished.

Right.

Right....

A deep breath and he started home. Though he couldn't shake the feeling that Isseal was still watching him.

He tried not to let it bother him. From what Sylas had heard, Isseal didn't trust strangers much and always kept a close eye on anyone her family came into contact with. Morel had said that was the job of a selkie matriarch: to keep the family together, safe from prying eyes and non-selkies with bad intentions.

He could understand that, he supposed. But he wished—

Something shook his boat and he almost screamed as large, vicious ripples followed a humongous dark shadow that swam out from under him.

'Okay,' Sylas breathed to himself. '*Stay calm, Sylas. It's just Iss—*'

His boat shook again and the scream escaped him.

Was Isseal trying to sink him?!

Quickly, Sylas retrieved his oars from the water and set them in place again—

Bracing himself as his boat jolted for a third time.

He waited for the fourth jolt; muscles tensed and hands gripped tight on the oars....

Nothing.

Sylas let out his breath.

Perhaps Isseal wasn't trying to *hurt* him. Perhaps she was just trying to give him a fright. Show him who was boss, in a way.... Well, if that was her goal she had certainly succeeded.

Any doubts Sylas might have had about her size and strength had been completely quenched. He was sure, now, that no matter how hard Morel tried to convince him that Isseal was a wonderful aunt... he would remain terrified of her.

Chapter 10

Sylas had spent all morning preparing for his sister's visit. He'd mopped the floors, pulled out the dusty old couch from storage, and put on a pot of stew so they could have lunch together.... And now she was late, and he was anxiously pacing by his front door as he waited for her to arrive.

Was she even coming?

They hadn't spoken since his fight with Peter, and he had no way to know if she even still wanted to see him after what had been said.

She was always urging him to get along with the man. Maybe this had been the last straw for her....

Sylas kicked a stone by his foot and retreated back into his home, stalking to the kitchen to turn off the stew and collapse in a chair at the dining table.

He shouldn't have assumed she was coming.

He was a fool to think otherwise. A fool *and* an idiot.

He'd gotten in a fight with her husband. The man she'd *chosen* to be bound to and live with. While he was just her brother; someone she'd never had the choice of not-knowing. She probably wouldn't have ever spoken to him at all if she hadn't been born into his family.

For the last six years she'd had her own life with her own family, and Sylas was just... dead weight. Clawing at her ankle and pulling her down with him.

Sylas sighed and leant over to rest his head on his arms.

He supposed there *was* a reason Amelia had married Peter and moved out as soon as she'd turned eighteen. He was lucky she hadn't cut him off completely.

Though, maybe that was happening, now....

It wouldn't be undeserved. He had been treating her poorly for years, and she alone had carried the burden of holding what was left of their relationship together....

'Sylas?' Amelia's voice cut in, and the man leapt to his feet.

'Amelia?!' he exclaimed, turning to his sister. 'Amelia! I thought you weren't coming! I thought— That you.... After the fight...'

She smiled at him, her tired eyes creasing at the edges. 'The carriage was running late. That's all. No reason to fret.'

A moment of hesitation, and then Sylas grinned and opened his arms for a hug. 'I'm so glad you could come.'

'So am I,' Amelia agreed, returning her brother's embrace. 'It's meant a lot that you've been wanting to see me lately. I've really missed you.'

Sylas felt his heart turn— If it was a twist or a flutter he wasn't sure. The knowledge that she'd missed him was both a breath of relief and a stab of guilt.

'Oh! Oh!' Amelia pulled back from the hug, and grabbed Sylas by the hand. 'They're kicking! Quickly! Right here! Right here! Can you feel it?'

He could.

He *could* feel the kick.

'*Oh my gods,*' he breathed. 'Oh— Oh my gods! That's them? That's— *Oh....*'

‘Isn’t it amazing?’ Amelia asked, her eyes sparkling as she looked down at her own belly. ‘They’re so strong already, and they’ve not even been born.’

‘Oh my gods,’ Sylas repeated; it was all he could manage.

He couldn’t believe he’d missed so much of this until now....

‘Did your stove go out?’ Amelia asked, suddenly, and Sylas looked up from her belly to see her craning her gaze towards the half-cooked pot of stew. ‘That can’t be safe.’

‘Oh, no, I put it out,’ Sylas admitted, feeling his cheeks burn in a blush. ‘I thought you weren’t coming, so...’

‘You’re such a silly thing,’ Amelia giggled, pecking a kiss on her brother’s cheek before making for the stove and relighting it. ‘I love you, Sylas. Please try not to forget that.’

‘I promise I’m trying,’ Sylas sighed. ‘But it is easier said than done— Amelia, no! Leave the dishes. They’re my responsibility.’

Amelia didn’t argue as Sylas took the plate she had begun to clean and set it back down on the bench. No; instead she seemed relieved and let herself be sat down at the table so Sylas could take over the work.

‘Sorry. Thanks,’ she said with a nervous chuckle. ‘It’s just habit.’

Habit? Sylas almost snorted as he scraped down a plate. *It shouldn’t have been habit — Not right now. Not in the state she was in.*

If Peter was making her labour when she was *this* heavily pregnant, Sylas was going to kill the man!

‘So, when do I get to meet this girl of yours?’ Amelia’s question pulled Sylas out of his simmering, and he placed down the scourer to turn to her. ‘I *have* to meet the girl who managed to break down *your* walls! What did you say her name was, again?’

‘Morel,’ said Sylas. ‘She’s... she’s wonderful. I think you’d like her.’

‘I think I would, too,’ Amelia leant her chin on a hand. ‘I can see how happy she makes you.’

‘You can?’ Sylas asked. ‘Really?’

‘Mhm,’ Amelia gave a nod. ‘You’re opening your curtains, again.’

Sylas took pause, at that.

He hadn’t even thought about the fact he’d drawn back the curtains to let light in. Today had just seemed like such a nice day to welcome the sun.... But he realised that his sister was right. Every time she had visited in the past six years, it had always been *her* to draw back his curtains and talk about how miserable the dark house seemed....

‘It’s... a nice day,’ Sylas finally managed, much to Amelia’s humour.

The woman covered her mouth and shook her head as she looked to her brother, eyes sparkling. ‘*What’s so nice about it?*’ she teased, her voice deepening in a mocking tone.

Sylas realised she was mimicking *him* and gave a half-humoured sigh as she giggled.

‘So, when can I meet Morel?’ Amelia asked again. ‘Does she live nearby? Maybe we could pop in and you could introduce me?’

‘She’s... close, yes,’ Sylas answered, biting his lip. ‘Though... I wouldn’t try and “pop” in. Her uh... her aunt’s a little bit.... Well....’

‘Mean?’

'*Protective*,' Sylas settled on. After all Morel had told him he wasn't ready to condemn Isseal or call her a bad person... even if he was terrified of her. Morel just spoke about her with too much love for him to think poorly of her. 'She doesn't approve of me. And honestly I don't blame her. I wouldn't approve of me, either.'

'Naw, Sylas...' Amelia opened her mouth as if she was about to argue, but then slowly closed it again; a pitying look passing over her as she let out a long breath through her nose.

She clearly knew she couldn't argue that he was in any way a desirable man. Not after he'd spent almost a decade making sure he wasn't.

'So...' Amelia gave a cough to clear her throat, and leant forward in her chair. 'What's she like? Morel, I mean.'

'*Beautiful*,' Sylas said with a sigh. 'Just... in every way. She's beautiful.'

'Hah...' Amelia's lips turned in a cheeky grin. 'It's been a long time since you've called something beautiful, let alone a person.'

'Mm...' Sylas gave a hum. Then, he felt himself returning his sister's grin. 'Hey. Do you want to go fishing?'

'*Fishing?*' Amelia echoed with a disbelieving laugh.

'After we've eaten,' Sylas clarified. 'We could take some cards with us and play a game, like we used to as kids. What do you think?'

'Sylas, I would *love* to!'

Chapter 11

The meal had gone well. The stew had been nice— Though, not to Sylas' pride. After about twenty minutes of the final hour of simmering, Amelia had taste-tested the food and quickly corrected the spices.

Now, stomachs full and the sun in the centre of the sky, Sylas and his sister sat together on his cramped boat; their old tattered deck of cards between them as they conversed more than they played.

It was nice to spend time with her again. Time with *just* her again.

Without Peter.

Sylas couldn't help but notice that, without her husband, Amelia was much more relaxed.

Her shoulders weren't tense and her smile never faltered. Not even for a second.

It made Sylas angry.

One of these days, he knew, he was going to snap. He was going to snap, and he was going to kill that sorry excuse of a man....

Pleasant thoughts, Sylas told himself; echoing something his sister used to say to him. *Enjoy the moment. Enjoy the—*

Something large and familiar bumped the boat, knocking the deck of cards off the centre thwart and almost toppling Amelia sideways.

'Oh, Mother Moon!' Amelia exclaimed as she regained her balance. 'What was *that*?'

'Uh...' Sylas rubbed the back of his neck, abandoning his hand of cards to instead grip the side of the boat. 'This is going to be strange, Amelia, but just try to stay calm—'

He didn't have time to finish his sentence before Morel's mottled, naked form was suddenly on the gunwale besides Amelia.

Both women were taken by surprise.

Amelia screamed, falling from her seat into the bottom of the boat.

And Morel screamed, falling from the side of the boat back into the ocean.

And then Sylas, despite himself, let out a laugh.

'Wha— Who— The—' Amelia stuttered as Sylas hefted her back into her seat. 'Who was— *Who?*'

'*That's* Morel,' Sylas chuckled as the boat was jostled again. He ignored the movement, instead gently touching his sister's stomach as he settled her back down. 'Are you alright? You're not hurt?'

Amelia shook her head, giving a very nervous-sounding chuckle. 'I'm fine. We both are.'

The boat jolted again and Morel reappeared; this time leaping up to cling to the stern. She hung on tight, a confused frown on her face as she looked between Sylas and Amelia.

'Who's this?' Morel asked, pointing a finger at Amelia. 'She's pregnant? Who got her pregnant?'

'Morel, this is Amelia,' Sylas introduced. 'She's my sister.'

'Oh, I didn't know you had a sister!' the confused look disappeared from Morel's face and she happily hefted herself over the edge.

She landed heavily, causing the boat to tip dangerously on one side... and then she nearly tipped it again as she tried to slide over to join the pair by the bow. It was only Sylas flinging himself full-force into the stern that stopped the entire boat from flipping upside down.

'I have sisters,' Morel continued, seemingly oblivious to the chaos she had just caused. 'Three of them. I'm the oldest, you know.'

'Are you, now?' Amelia asked, her voice shaking with a nervous chuckle as she grasped the edges of the boat; clinging to them like her life depended on it. 'Sylas is... also the oldest.... Though, it's uh.... It's just the two of us.'

'Ah,' Morel gave a knowing nod before flopping down heavily against Sylas. She rested her head on his shoulder and played with his hair as her bottom half shifted, back and forth, between legs and tail. 'I remember when it was just me and Ophelia.... Then Kas had to come along and ruin everything!'

The grin Morel gave Sylas as she mentioned her sisters was infectious. And not just to him, but to Amelia as well. Sylas could see the woman was starting to relax again as a genuine-looking smile found its way to her lips.

'And don't even get me *started* on Phoebe!' Morel chuckled. 'She's *such* a little brat! You'd think Auntie Isseal would be keeping an eye on *her*, instead of *me*! But no. Apparently *I'm* the one she's worried about!'

'Huh...' Amelia gave a half-laugh. 'Why's she worried about you?'

'Oh, she, uh...' Morel blushed, then, and averted her gaze; moving her fingers from Sylas' hair to a loose thread on his vest. 'She doesn't like that I spend so much time away from my colony. She says that, one day, I'm going to get myself lost and not be able to find my way home.'

'Ah I... see...' Amelia's eyes fell, slowly, to stare at Morel's shape-shifting lower half. 'Um... Morel? I hope it's not rude to ask but... *what*... are you?'

'Oh? Oh!' Morel flicked the flipper on the end of her tail playfully as her mood lifted again. 'I'm a selkie!'

'Oh...' Amelia's tone of voice made it clear to Sylas that she had no idea what a selkie was, though she still smiled politely and nodded at Morel. 'I see. That's... that's interesting.'

'You think so?!' Morel exclaimed, leaping up onto her feet and clapping her hands in excitement as both humans clung anxiously to the rocking boat. 'If you think transforming my tail is interesting, just wait until you see *this*! Nobody else in my whole family can do *this*!'

Morel closed her eyes, then, and took a very deep breath.

The first thing Sylas noticed was her ears shrinking. They grew short and round. And when he leant forward to crane his gaze from her back he realised her whiskers had vanished. As had the webbing between her fingers.

And then the mottling pattern across her body blended and her skin became one smooth, rich, deep brown like his. And when she opened her eyes and smiled at him, her teeth were flat and even.

She looked completely human.

'Wow...' Sylas breathed. He hadn't realised that Morel could change like *that*....

‘Wow,’ Amelia echoed. ‘That’s amazing! I’ve never seen anything like that before.’

‘Neither has any other selkie! At least, not any other selkie I’ve met,’ Morel beamed, proudly. ‘They say that nobody has ever been able to turn into their father-race, before!’

‘Father race?’ Amelia’s brow furrowed in confusion. ‘What do you mean by that? Is your father not a selkie?’

‘My father was human,’ Morel explained, sitting back down heavily into Sylas’s lap as her form returned to her seal-tailed self. ‘Just like all of my sisters— I think my mother has a type, you know.’

It earned a laugh; though it was clear that Amelia still didn’t understand.

‘There are no boy selkies,’ Sylas explained. ‘They’re always born girls. Morel told me about it, once.... They have to find men from other races, if they want children.’

‘Men like you?’ Amelia asked in a joking tone.

Sylas opened his mouth to defend himself, but before he could speak Morel let out a loud gasp and he felt her hand close tightly around his wrist.

‘Oh. *Oh!*’ she exclaimed; her ears sticking up as if the potential consequences of the last five weeks had never occurred to her before. ‘Oh, that could *happen!*’

The look Sylas’ sister gave him made him blush, and all he could do was nod at Morel and say; ‘Y-Yes. There’s always been that chance.’

‘Oh... no wonder Auntie’s been so mad about it!’ Morel giggled, relaxing again. She reached out her foot to Amelia, poking at her with a toe, before pulling back; her legs becoming a tail again so she could heft it up into Sylas’ lap.

Sylas felt himself winded as Morel shifted on top of him and her elbow dug into his stomach, much to Amelia’s humour.

‘Are you alright, Sylas?’ Amelia asked.

‘*I’m fine,*’ Sylas managed, not sounding fine at all.

Amelia looked doubtful. Though she didn’t say anything about it as she smiled at Morel, warm and genuine, and motioned to the woman’s legs. ‘You’re very good at that. Is it hard to do?’

‘Uh... no. No, it’s very easy,’ Morel gave a chuckle; which Sylas noticed now seemed a little bit nervous. ‘I don’t even mean to change my legs, most of the time. Actually, it’s.... It makes Auntie Isseal....’

‘What?’ Amelia asked, gently.

‘She says it’s childish,’ Morel clarified. ‘To uh... keep changing my form all the time. It’s something pups do. Not... not adults. But I just can’t *help* it, you know? I just feel so much, all the time, and I just have to... to change! Auntie hates it though. She says I have the attention span of an otter and she has to tune me out a lot.’

‘Tune you out?’ Amelia looked sympathetic. ‘She ignores you?’

‘Oh, no, she doesn’t ignore me!’ Morel said, shifting on top of Sylas again. ‘It’s just that when I get excited I tend to make it hard for her to track everyone else, so she has to block me out so I don’t overwhelm her whiskers! It means I can get away with a lot more but.... But she still checks on me, so I can’t usually be gone for *too* long before she notices and comes looking for me.’

‘Overwhelm her... Whiskers?’

‘Yeah, she feels what we feel through them,’ Morel explained. ‘With her telepathy.’

‘T-Telepathy?’ Sylas blinked. *Isseal was a mind-reader?* ‘I didn’t know selkies could...’

Trailing off, Sylas remembered all of the horrible things he had thought over the past month. Had Morel heard all of those horrible thoughts that always sloshed around in his head?

‘Can... can *you* read minds?’ he asked.

Morel shook her head. ‘It’s not a mind-reading thing. It’s a *feeling* thing. And we can only do it to our own family,’ she explained. ‘The matriarchs are the best at it, though. They can sense where everyone is and what kind of emotions they are feeling. It’s so she can look after us.’

Sylas gave a slow nod. He still didn’t fully understand, though he thought it made a little bit of sense.

‘And it’s just that my thoughts are so erratic, and my feelings are so strong,’ Morel continued. ‘If she listens to me all the time it makes it hard to hear everyone else— Oh! *OH!*’

Suddenly, before Sylas or Amelia could react, Morel had launched herself off the side of the boat.

Sylas gave a loud grunt as he was winded again, much more powerfully this time, and watched as Morel’s shadow vanished into the deep water.

Then he turned his gaze back to Amelia, and the pair shared a quiet moment of confusion before Morel erupted loudly from the water again; leaping onto the boat from the other side and sending it rocking back and forth.

‘Morel!’ Sylas cried as he lunged forward to stop his sister from falling over the gunwale. ‘Why did you—’

‘Squid!’ Morel answered, happily, and held out the still-wiggling mollusc. ‘Want some?’

‘Uh... no,’ Sylas answered carefully. ‘No, I’m alright. Thanks.’

‘Amelia?’ Morel asked, offering the squid to Sylas’ sister— Who shook her head quickly and looked faint. ‘You sure?’

‘I’m sure, thank you,’ Amelia gave a nervous laugh and waved her hand dismissively. ‘Pregnancy and... food aversions. You know how it is.’

‘Not really, no,’ Morel replied before taking a large bite out of the creature’s head. ‘I’ve never known anyone to not like squid just because they’re pregnant.... Anyway, what were we talking about?’

A small, stifled snicker escaped Amelia as she cast a sideways glance to Sylas and answered; ‘We were talking about how *distractible* you are.’

‘Ah.’

Chapter 12

It had been a week since Amelia and Morel had met. They'd gotten along well, even after their initial confusion about each other, and in the end the two girls had all but *begged* Sylas to arrange another time for them to meet and talk.

So he had. He'd put aside time for dinner and invited them both.

This time, however, Amelia couldn't get away with leaving Peter behind. Which meant Sylas had needed to go into the city and buy Morel a dress.

She'd been very excited to try on the dress. And though in the end she complained that it was strange and uncomfortable, she had kept it on and promised that she would, once Peter and Amelia arrived, shape-shift into her full-human form and hold it.

Sylas wasn't sure why, but he had a bad feeling about what Peter might do if he discovered Morel was a selkie. And when Amelia had agreed it might be best for Morel to remain human in Peter's presence, Sylas had felt a sensation like a hot stone burning his gut.

Something about that man made his chest tight with rage.

But, as Peter's familiar and heavy knock sounded on Sylas' front door, the man pushed down his anger and forced a smile to his lips.

'Amelia, welcome,' he greeted his sister with a warm hug and ushered her inside. 'It's good to see you again! Morel's in the kitchen. She brought a salmon, so we've got that in the oven.'

'Ah, the fisherman's girl likes to eat fish!' Peter teased. 'Why am I not surprised—'

Sylas shut the door in Peter's face, cutting him off mid-sentence.

He ignored his sister's gasp, simply rolling his eyes and scooping a hand around her to lead her to the kitchen as Peter let himself in and followed them.

'Sylas, I wish you wouldn't...' said Amelia, quietly, as Sylas took the dish she carried and placed it on the table next to the food he and Morel had prepared. She looked like she wanted to say more, but as her eyes lay on the selkie-in-disguise she smiled and instead reached out a hand in friendly greeting. 'Morel, it's so nice to see you again. That dress looks beautiful on you.'

'Thanks! Sylas bought it for me!' Morel chirped, turning in place so the dress spun around her. Then, she stopped spinning and very, very gently lay a hand on Amelia's stomach. 'You must be so excited—'

'Wow, Sylas!' Peter's voice cut Morel off, and everyone cast him a glance. 'That's a big woman you've gotten yourself. With a twig like you, I'm surprised she hasn't broken something!'

Sylas felt his chest burn, then, and he almost said something— Though Morel beat him to it.

'This is your husband, Amelia?' Morel asked loudly, glancing back and forth between the pair before giving a scoff through her nose and casually turning to adjust the table settings. 'Alright, then.'

It was clear that the simplicity of Morel's statement cut Peter deep. The fact she had seemed to care *so little* about him that she hadn't bothered to put effort into an insult

appeared to offend him more than anything Sylas had ever said to him, and he sat down at the table with a quiet huff of annoyance.

Morel simply ignored him, though Amelia hurried to fuss over him in a way that made Sylas' chest squeeze in a rage he couldn't place the cause of.

'So, Amelia!' Morel turned to the woman and, seemingly unaware of her worry over her husband, took her hands and bounced in place. 'I told Auntie that you were pregnant, and she told me to give you this—'

Amelia chuckled, perhaps a little nervously, as her hands were released and Morel hurried from the kitchen to the main room and back.

When she came back she was holding up a necklace. Its thread was made from woven seaweed, with clean-but-unpolished seashells hanging from it in a decorative order that seemed to have a lot of thought behind it.

Amelia's smile turned from nervous to excited as Morel hurried over to her and carefully placed it around her neck.

'Wow, this is so beautiful!' Amelia beamed.

'Auntie caught each of these herself, just to make the necklace for you,' Morel explained, pointing to each shell. 'This one here brings you good health. And this one is lucky!'

'Doesn't sound too lucky, if your aunt was able to catch it,' Peter mumbled.

Sylas almost snapped at him, until Morel continued and he realised Peter looked more furious about being ignored than he ever did when someone argued back— So instead Sylas felt himself grin as Morel took Amelia by the arm and led her to the seat opposite the man so they could sit down together.

'And this one represents the inner spirit and true self,' Morel continued. 'Auntie said that might be the most important one. Because if you're not true to yourself, then who *can* you be true to?'

Amelia gave a laugh, gently petting Morel's hand as it lay on her shoulder. 'Tell your aunt I said thank you,' she said. 'I really appreciate it.'

'Maybe you can meet her and tell her yourself!' Morel suggested, beaming. 'She'd really love you, I think!' then, she turned to Peter. 'Not you, though. I think she'd hate you.'

Peter gave an offended squawk and Amelia's eyes went wide— But Morel didn't seem to notice as the kettle gave a squeal and she leapt to her feet and hurried over to it; pointing at it with enthusiasm.

'It's done! Sylas! It's done! Tea! Your tea!'

Sylas felt his heart flutter at Morel's excitement, and he couldn't help but give a dreamy sigh as he slipped past her and took the kettle from the stove.

'That means the salmon is ready, doesn't it?' Morel asked, practically dancing in place as she bounced from foot to foot in joy. 'You said that they would be ready at the same time! I can't wait! Ah! I'm so excited!'

'Hey, hey, careful!' Sylas laughed, quickly stepping away so she didn't knock the hot water from his hands as he poured it. 'You can't run around in the kitchen, Morel! You're going to hurt yourself.'

'Oh, sorry! Sorry!' Morel stilled herself as best she could, and Sylas saw her form

shift —just for a second— before she took a deep breath and composed herself. ‘Is this better?’

‘Yeah, at least while we’re in the kitchen,’ Sylas chuckled. Then, he retrieved the salmon from the oven and placed it on the stove.

‘Ooh!’ Morel’s eyes went wide. ‘That smells so good!’

‘Give me a hand?’ Sylas asked as he cut the salmon and served its pieces onto four plates. ‘One cup and one plate each; if you would give Peter his?’

‘Sure!’ Morel chirped, grabbing a cup and a plate and turning back to the table.

She was such a wonderful girl. He couldn’t help but smile every time she spoke to him, now....

And as he turned back to take Amelia’s food to her, he saw the smile on *her* face and felt himself blushing.

Was he really that obvious?

Then Peter snickered, as Morel placed his food down, Sylas he felt his face fall in annoyance as the man waved a hand at him and said in a mocking tone:

‘Wow you really *are* smitten, aren’t you, twig-boy?’

Before Sylas could open his mouth to respond, Morel spat loudly onto Peter’s dinner, before calmly turning away and retrieving her own plate.

Too stunned to respond, the trio of humans simply stared at the spit-covered salmon serving with their mouths hanging open and their eyes wide.

‘So, Amelia,’ Morel said as she casually took her place at the table. She put down her food, and then laid a hand over Amelia’s pregnant belly. ‘What are you thinking of calling them?’

Sylas almost laughed, but managed to hold it back as he placed his sister’s food in front of her and retrieved his own. He shifted his chair over to sit closer to the girls; leaving Peter to deal with his plate on his own.

He had doubted himself before, not wanting to admit it to anyone, including himself— But he knew now, undeniably, in that moment as he watched Morel lean forward to blow a playful raspberry on Amelia’s stomach:

He was in love with Morel.

Chapter 13

Sylas lay in his cramped bed, Morel pressed tight against him as she slept. He had an arm around her, both to keep her close and to keep her from rolling off the side to the floor, as he stared up at the roof and let out a long breath.

As soon as Amelia and Peter had left, Morel had all but collapsed from exhaustion; her human form slipping away as her whiskers returned and her ears grew and her legs fused into a tail. She'd lay on the floor where she was for a long while, before Sylas had convinced her to move to the bed so she could rest more properly.

She had fallen asleep almost as soon as the blanket was thrown over her, and Sylas had been feeling a churning mix of guilt and appreciation since.

It had been mentioned before that holding her full-human form was tiring, but Sylas hadn't realised just *how* exhausting it was for her.

He thought he'd have to find a way to make it up to her, as he rested his head gently against her own and sighed.

He could remember the conversation they'd had as they'd lay on the floor of his main room.

One thing Morel had said, in particular, had stuck out to him:

"Peter seems a lot more like the sort of boy my aunt warned me about."

It had made Sylas' skin crawl, to hear it.

It meant it wasn't just him who saw it. That something really *was* wrong with Peter. That the man really *was* vile and rancid and disingenuous.

He prayed that his sister would be okay.

Knowing that the worried looks she had cast him at Peter's annoyances weren't just in his head—that Morel had seen them, too—made his heart beat into his throat and his skin grow cold and clammy.

How could he help her, when she would never admit to anything being wrong?

It made his entire soul hurt. Because in the end it was his fault, wasn't it? His own vicious attitude had driven his sister into the arms of a horrible man who had trapped her in his grip and would never let her go.

He was a terrible brother.

He closed his eyes tight, his brow furrowing in frustration as a surge of guilt bit at his mind like an angry dog.

And then he heard the *clunk* of his front door and hurriedly sat up.

He fumbled at the side of his bed for something—anything—to take up as a weapon as he heard his front door close again rolled to his feet.

His hand gripped an old wine bottle, which he brandished at the ready as he slowly slipped out his bedroom door— But then he saw who had entered his house and hesitated, lowering the bottle.

It was Morel's young sister, Kas; gazing around curiously with her seal-like eyes and twitching snout.

She sniffed the air and slowly let her gaze trail around the room, before it fell on Sylas and she tensed, her seal-like features vanishing into a more human face as she took in a

sharp breath and stumbled back a pace.

'Hey, it's okay,' Sylas said, softly, as he discarded the bottle. 'You're Morel's sister, aren't you? Kas?'

Kas gave an anxious nod, and Sylas thought he saw her swallow as she stared at him with a terrified look. 'M... M-Mum s-says Morel... needs to come home. A-Auntie Is-Isseal is— She's really mad.'

It was clear, now, that Kas was trembling from head to toe. Sylas wasn't sure how to reassure her that she was safe with him; so he simply nodded and tried to keep his voice soft as he spoke. 'She's asleep,' he said. 'I'll go wake her for you.'

Kas didn't respond; instead, she rubbed at her arms and glanced around as if expecting something to come at her from another direction, before retreating a few more steps back.

Not wanting to make her any more nervous, Sylas headed back to his room and made his way to Morel; sitting beside her and gently shaking her by her shoulder.

'Morel?' he said, gently. 'Morel, your sister's looking for you.'

Morel simply groaned, rolling over and ignoring Sylas.

'*Morel!*' it came out as a laugh, as he leant back over her and pecked a kiss on her cheek. 'Come on. She's come all the way out here looking for you, I think you should at least acknowledge her.'

'*Acknowledging,*' Morel mumbled, waving a hand. 'And then ignoring.'

'Morel, she's scared,' Sylas explained. 'I think she needs you to reassure her.'

'Why?' Morel groaned. 'You're not going to hurt her.'

'I don't think she knows that,' said Sylas.

'She'll figure it out.'

'Morel...' it came out as a sigh, this time. And Sylas shook his head as he looked away.

And as he turned he saw as Kas, now standing in his bedroom doorway, flinched and instinctively moved to half-hide behind the wall.

They watched each other for a moment, as Morel groaned and rolled onto her back and rubbed at her eyes, before Kas' ears flicked up attentively and she slowly eased into view.

'Morel says you're a *nice* boy,' she said, a quiver in her voice as she took a deep breath. 'You... you don't seem so bad.'

'He's not bad at all,' Morel huffed, sounding exhausted. She pushed herself up, then, and put an arm around Sylas, leaning close so she could press her nose into his cheek and chuckle.

This act seemed to calm Kas, who twitched her whiskers and took several steps into the room. She paused when Sylas smiled at her; fidgeting for a moment, before taking the last few steps to the bed and smacking her sister.

'Ow! What was that for?!' Morel complained.

'Mum's really mad!' Kas blurted. 'And Auntie Isseal is even madder! You were meant to be home before sunset! You *promised* you'd be home before it got dark!'

'Yeah, well... I fell asleep,' Morel dismissed, rising to her feet and waving a hand. Then she smiled, and cast a glance to Sylas. 'Did you know Sylas' sister might be having a *boy* for her pup?'

‘What?’ Kas’ brow furrowed in confusion. ‘Is that even possible?’

‘Yeah, boys up here are born just like girls are!’ Morel’s smile turned impish. ‘And they don’t know which it’s gonna be until they have them!’

‘That’s weird!’ Kas winced. ‘Boys aren’t meant to be *pups!* They’re just *boys!*’

‘Yeah, well, they have to make new boys *somehow*, right?’ Morel teased. Then, her ears flicked up and she cast a glance at Sylas. ‘Do you think when *we* have a pup, it might be a boy?’

‘No!’ Kas exclaimed, smacking at her sister again. ‘There’s *never* been a boy selkie, before! Auntie Isseal said so! She said it’s impossible!’

Sylas wasn’t sure what to say, as they argued on— He was too stunned by Morel’s question.

When they had a....

When?

It made his breath catch in his throat, and he covered his mouth with a hand as tears welled in his eyes.

‘Sylas?’ Morel’s tone changed, as Sylas let out his trembling breath, and she crouched down to meet his eye. ‘Sylas, what’s wrong?’

‘I always had this... this image in my head,’ he admitted. ‘Two children, sitting on the rug by the light of the fireplace. I’d watch them play. And read to them. And I’d mend their toys. But I could never imagine a mother for them. No matter how hard I tried.’

Morel’s eyes tightened in confusion as she cocked her head and leant closer. And behind her, Kas’ ears twitched curiously. But neither girl said anything as Sylas wiped his eyes and took Morel by the hands.

‘I can imagine you as their mother,’ he said, softly. ‘Even clearer than I can imagine them. I didn’t think you’d want that, as well. But... you do? You really want that, too?’

Morel blushed, deep dark red creeping over her cheeks as she looked Sylas in the eye. ‘Oh. I.... Oh, I said *when*,’ she realised aloud. ‘I meant if. *If we* had a pup.’

The look Kas gave her sister was one of shock, realisation, and perhaps a little bit of horror. ‘Oh, cods, you *did* say “when”!’ she blurted. ‘*Morel!*’

‘Stay out of this, Kas!’ Morel hissed viciously, before turning back to Sylas and letting the gentle note to her voice return. ‘You want pups?’

Sylas nodded.

‘Auntie Isseal said boys *never* want pups,’ Kas commented. ‘She said they *always* leave, when they find out a girl is going to have pups!’

Sylas felt a tired chuckle escape him. ‘I think your aunt might not know as much about boys as she thinks.’

Kas gave an incredulous gasp, covering her mouth with both her hands as she did. ‘You did *not* just say that! Morel! Did you hear what he *said?!?*’

Morel ignored her sister, instead pecking a kiss on Sylas’ lips and rising to her feet. ‘Meet me tomorrow at the beach?’ she asked.

‘Of course,’ Sylas breathed.

‘Morel, no!’ Kas exclaimed. ‘Auntie will be *so mad* at you!’

‘Only if you tell her!’ Morel shot back. ‘And you’re not going to tell her, *are you?*’

Kas covered her mouth, again, and made for the door.

‘That’s what I thought,’ Morel said, her whiskers giving a smug twitch before she looked down at Syllas with affection. ‘Tomorrow. When the sun starts to set?’
‘I’ll be there.’

Chapter 14

It was a beautiful night. The wind was crisp with the cooling air, and carried with it the far-off scents of the city food stalls.

The sand was soft underfoot as Sylas ran, his shoes discarded up near the pier, after Morel as she giggled and stumbled.

He soon caught up to her, wrapping his arms around her waist sending them both tumbling to the ground. Though as they toppled to the beach in a giggling heap, Sylas knew Morel had let him catch her.

She rolled on top of him, her sparkling eyes staring into his as her twitching grin flicked her whiskers back and forth, and he hoped she would lean down for a kiss.

He barely noticed the wave that rolled under him and soaked his hair as Morel gave a giggle and fidgeted.

He felt her knees slip over his sides and realised she'd already shifted twice since he'd pulled her down. And when she rolled off him her tail flopped into the sand before her legs came back and she kicked a line of wave-water into the air.

Then she flinched, and shrunk into the ground, and Sylas felt a shadow looming over them as another wave brushed his side.

'*Morel*,' spoke a voice, old and firm.

Sylas flinched, rolling over to stare at the humongous selkie who stood above them. She was just a head shy of being twice Morel's height; with similar curly locks and an almost wolf-like face that made it clear, just from a glance, that Morel's aunt was half-giant.

Her whiskers, which shimmered as they twitched on the end of her snout, were as long as Sylas' arm from his shoulder to his fingertips. And her deep black eyes shone with a sharp gleam as she glared down at the couple with her arms crossed and lip curled.

'I thought I told you no.'

Morel flicked her tail, then pushed herself up until she was on her knees. Sylas saw her toes run along the sand before they became flippers again and she shrunk down— And when he looked back to her face it wasn't her own, but long and sad and guilty.

'I'm sorry,' it was strange to see a seal speak, and even stranger that it had Morel's voice. 'It's just that... I promised. And I couldn't break my promise. I'm sorry, Auntie Isseal.'

Isseal...

This was Isseal.

'I thought that you'd know better than to come here, after last night,' Isseal scolded. 'Kas told me about where she found you. In that boy's *house*, Morel! What could you possibly be thinking?!

'Sylas isn't so bad,' Morel promised, leaning up on her elbows as she looked much more like herself again; her legs pulling up behind her and flicking sand into the air. 'He's really nice to me!'

'All boys are nice, at *first*,' Isseal grunted, her glare growing deeper as it moved from

her niece to Sylas. 'But the longer you stay, the worse they get. You can't trust them.'

Sylas swallowed, but didn't speak. Instead he simply looked up at Isseal as she watched him.

'I just...' Morel slouched down again, her ears pressing back as her legs turned into a tail and she looked utterly miserable. 'I just thought the first night was so much fun. And then I went back again, and it was just.... And I started to feel like.... And by the time you'd told me to stop we were already friends! I just.... I....'

'I told you no,' Isseal repeated with a hiss. 'That should have been the end of it. When the matriarch gives an order, it is to be respected! And still, you keep disobeying me. And you keep returning to him. It's become clear to me that you can't control yourself!'

'I *can* control myself—'

'Then *why* are you here?!' Isseal snapped, and it was obvious as she turned back to growl at Morel that it wasn't actually a question, but a scolding. 'I told you no! But you didn't listen! This is on *you!*'

Morel shrunk down, her face once again becoming more seal-like as she gave a low whine.

'Pick a form and stick with it!' her aunt ordered. 'I'm tired of your childish shifting! Act your age and make a choice! You're not a pup anymore!'

'Yes, Isseal....' Morel muttered, her head dropping in shame as she shifted one more time; her face and legs turning more humanoid. 'I just.... I promised him I'd come back! I couldn't break my promise to him!'

'You should never make a promise to a boy!' Isseal growled. 'Do you think he'd keep his promises to you?! A promise from a boy means *nothing!*'

'*His* promises do!' Morel cried, desperately. 'He's kept every promise he's made to me! Every one of them!'

'I don't believe that!' Isseal snarled, turning to leer back down at Sylas as she spoke. 'I don't believe that a boy like him has ever meant a single word that they've spoken! You're not to see him again!'

'Auntie, please!' Morel exclaimed, rolling to her knees and pleading with her aunt. 'I *really* like Sylas! And he likes me, too! You can't—'

Isseal let out a long, vicious roar and advanced on Morel, who gave a fearful cry and cowered under her aunt's massive form.

And before Sylas had even realised what he was doing, he was on his feet; standing between them.

Isseal paused, her roar cutting short as Sylas put himself between the selkies, and her whiskers twitched in an almost curious way.

For a moment, there was no sound except the roll of the waves on the shore.

But the silence was short-lived as Sylas plucked up what little courage he had left in him and spoke:

'Why can't she stay?' he asked. Then, he swallowed as Isseal's curious look vanished back into her glare, and he tried not to shrink back as she stared him down. 'She's not a child— You said so yourself, didn't you? Who are you to tell her what to do?!'

He hadn't thought Isseal's glare could be any more terrifying, but as he stood between her and Morel, she quickly proved him wrong. It was like her eyes were

burning into him, and it took all his effort not to look away as her whiskers flashed brightly. Her wolf-like face turned in a snarl as her nostrils flared and a snort like an orca's surfacing breath escaped her.

'Who are *you*,' she echoed. 'To stand between a matriarch and a member of her family?'

'S-Sylas Hills,' he answered, his courage finally leaving him; though he still stood in place. It was only after Isseal gave another twitch of her whiskers he realised it had been a rhetorical question that hadn't needed an answer. 'I— And I—'

'Auntie?' Morel's hand met Syllas' shoulder, and she pulled him down from standing on his toes, and brought him back a pace. 'Please.'

The glare softened into tired eyes, and Isseal's shoulders dropped. 'Go home, Morel.' 'Can I at least say goodbye?'

Isseal let out a snort, and Syllas thought she might say no... but then her ears flicked back, and her whiskers twitched and shimmered, and she gave Morel a gentle nod.

Morel hugged Syllas tight from behind and he could tell she didn't want to let go. But as he met Isseal's eyes they sharpened into a glare and she stepped forward to lead Morel away.

'It's for your own good,' Isseal said, putting an arm around Morel and guiding her to the waves. 'Boys.... You can't trust them.'

Syllas swallowed as Isseal turned to meet his eye again.

'I like him, Aunt Isseal,' Morel replied, her shoulders falling slack. 'And I trust him.'

Isseal just sighed. 'One day you'll understand what I mean, Morel. When your sisters are grown and not as lucky as you, you will understand why we don't make friend with boys.'

'But—'

'No,' Isseal said firmly. 'Go home.'

'Yes, Aunt Isseal,' Morel's sad gaze slipped from Syllas' own as a wave washed against their ankles, and Morel disappeared along with it back into the ocean.

There was quiet as another wave hit.

Isseal let out a sigh, long and deep, and her whiskers' shimmering faded to a dull white glow.

Another wave rolled up their ankles.

Their eyes met, and Syllas swore he could feel the pain in Isseal's gaze as if it was his own.

A fourth wave.

He realised he was an outsider, in all of this.

A fifth.

Just a man who'd barely scratched the surface of who Morel was. Though he desperately wanted to know everything.

Another wave washed their feet, and Isseal finally spoke:

'She's idealistic. I dare say that means I've done a good job. The world hasn't hurt her, yet.'

'Yet?' Syllas echoed. 'I'm not.... I wouldn't....'

'I don't believe you,' she replied simply.

‘Why not?’

‘Selkies...’ she hesitated. ‘We’re drawn to you boys. We need you. Crave your companionship. It’s like an addiction that we can’t resist. But you don’t need us. You never need us. So we keep our distance. And we turn it into play. And we don’t get attached. That’s how we survive.’

‘I need Morel,’ he said. And he meant it.

‘You say that, but it’s always the same story,’ Isseal said. ‘And not once, not even *once*, when told by a thousand girls from a hundred colonies, have I ever heard it end differently. You’ll move on. You’ll leave her behind. And she’ll be the one to bear the scars from it.’

‘I...’

‘When you met her, the first thing you two did was...’ Isseal paused, her ears folding down and her whiskers flicking back in a pained way; as if the knowledge of what had been done was hurting her. ‘I know that’s all you meet with her for.’

‘No!’ Sylas defended. ‘No! It’s not just the sex! It’s *so* much more than sex! I love her! I *love* her!’

‘I don’t believe you,’ Isseal said again. ‘I *can’t* believe you.’

‘I’ll prove it,’ Sylas said, a desperate note emerging from his sorrowful tone. ‘I’ll prove that I love her. Please. Just let me try.’

‘I’m sorry, but I’ve heard that before,’ Isseal’s lips curled, in an almost disgusted way, and she shook her head. ‘Too many times. And every time, it’s a lie.’

‘It’s not,’ Sylas told her. ‘I swear, it’s not a lie. I mean it. Look into my eyes, do that—that feeling thing that you do— and tell me I’m lying!’

The snort Isseal let out almost sounded like some sort of chuckle, as she shook her head again and dropped her gaze to the sand. ‘If I could, I would. But that’s not how my powers work,’ she said, simply. ‘I can only sense those within my family. I am not your matriarch; we have no connection.’

Sylas’ shoulders dropped as Isseal crossed her arms, and he felt tears welling in his eyes. ‘I mean what I say,’ he told her. ‘I *do*.’

Isseal’s eyes flicked back up to his and for a long moment, with the rising tide sweeping up against their legs, they simply stared in silence.

Then Isseal’s whiskers twitched, as did her nose, and her brow furrowed in a curious way as she leant forward. She took Sylas’ chin with her fingers and he was surprised by how gentle she was as she eased him forward.

She looked deep into his eyes, her own filled with confusion as she let out a long breath.

Then she pulled back, releasing Sylas and rising to her full height.

‘*By the tides,*’ she whispered. ‘I think I might believe you.’

Chapter 15

It was a beautiful evening. One of the best that there had been all year. The air was crisp, but didn't bite bare skin or sting through clothes, and the rays of light shining in the orange sky still kissed away what little cold may have otherwise nipped exposed faces.

It may have been that the miserable weather of the past few months was finally starting to warm up with the first days of Spring, or it might have been that Sylas' own heart had melted its icy shell and he was finally seeing his future from a different perspective, but life suddenly seemed worth living.

He may have said it to be either of those two things, or those two things combined. But, mostly, Sylas knew that it was because Morel had spent the day by his side, joking and laughing with the Earnshaws as they manned their stall and served their customers.

Morel had been practising holding her full-human form, and she had been feeling confident enough today to join Sylas in the city.

Her aunt had, of course, warned her away from it the previous night. But Morel was not one for being held back from opportunity. And so she had come with Sylas anyway. Her whiskers only slipped out once, and it was as much to Sylas' surprise as it was to Mrs Earnshaw's; though no words had been spoken on it besides a curious "oh?" from the older woman before she had motioned to her own face and Morel had quickly hidden her selkie features away again.

It had only been a month since Isseal had spoken to Sylas on the beach and given him and Morel tentative permission (he would not dare call it her *blessing*) to continue seeing each other, but that month had been one of the best of his entire life.

And, with Isseal's permission for the couple to meet, Morel had not seen the need to rush away come sunrise. They had time to sit together, now. To talk properly about things. About anything, and about everything.

Morel sat on the stool that Mr Earnshaw had offered her as Sylas packed up his stall. Deep, dark bags were starting to form under her eyes and she had begun looking very tired. Twice, she had almost nodded off, and both times Mrs Earnshaw had tapped her on the shoulder and said something to lift her spirits.

Not that her spirits seemed to need lifting, as she was already as happy as any person could ever be.

'I can take you home, if you need,' Sylas offered as he pulled the cover over his stall. He placed a hand on Morel's back as she looked up to him and shook her head. 'I can visit Amelia tomorrow.'

'I want to meet her pup,' Morel said, simply. 'I've never seen a boy pup, before.'

A muffled chuckle came from Mrs Earnshaw, who pet her confused husband on the chest and whispered something softly to him.

Sylas pursed his lips as he thought, seriously, about whether or not Morel would make the trip.

Peter was working on the night shift, he knew that much— Amelia had specifically timed their visit so that they could avoid seeing the man. She was too tired, looking after

the new baby, to watch the couple pick a fight with her husband.

But Sylas still wasn't sure if going to his sister's house was the wisest idea....

Then, as if reading his mind (which, he knew she couldn't), Morel gave a childish huff and flopped limply against the back of her chair, reforming her long selkie ears just so she could press them back in a display of frustration.

Mrs Earnshaw quickly yanked off the scarf around her own head and used it to cover the girl from view; affixing it safely over her hair and ears before pulling its last length over her face and tucking it in just right to obscure her whiskers.

Morel gave a relieved sigh, and Sylas saw her entire body relax as she reached up to put a webbed hand against Mrs Earnshaw's own in a grateful motion.

'Amelia's house is closer than mine,' Sylas found himself saying aloud; if they hurried to his sister's, Morel could lay down and rest until she felt up for the long trek home.

Morel simply nodded as the Earnshaws helped her to her feet, and she rested against Sylas to balance herself as he led her through the crowded streets.

There were only a few looks in their direction, as they made their way through the city; but it seemed more like concern at Morel's clear exhaustion and clumsy gait, than any sort of notice to her strange clawed hands or unusually dappled skin.

They arrived at Amelia's house quickly and, as she had instructed Sylas to do in her letter, simply opened the door and entered the building.

Morel made her way for the nearest chair and sat down on its padded cushioning, her legs disappearing as she fell onto her side and let out a long, animal-like groan and turned completely into a seal.

'Sylas, is that you?' Amelia's voice called from the direction of the bedroom, and she soon emerged and paused; her eyes falling onto the seal that lay, panting heavily, on her couch.

And the seal's own eyes widened as she saw the frail little bundle that was latched to Amelia's breast.

'Is that him?' Morel asked, rolling over and off the couch with a heavy *fplap* onto the hard wooden floor. 'That's the smallest pup I've ever seen in my entire life! Are all boys born that small?'

'All *humans* are,' Amelia told her, her concerned look turning into a warm smile as she stepped over to sit on the couch that Morel had just rolled off.

She readjusted the sling that helped her hold her baby and Sylas caught sight of the newborn, eyes closed and little hands gripping his sister's hair tight, and thought he might cry as he felt tears coming to his eyes and a lump forming in his throat.

His nephew.

This tiny little thing was his *nephew*.

Little baby Willis.

He was the smallest, most precious thing that Sylas had ever laid eyes on.

'*Can I hold him?*' Sylas asked; his whispered voice breaking as he took a step forward and, shakily, lifted his hands.

'Of course you can! I'd appreciate the break,' Amelia chuckled. 'Just let him finish eating, first.'

Chapter 16

Sylas' heart was beating harder than it had ever beat before, as he rowed his boat to the shore of the skerry that jutted out from the ocean. He could see, as Morel had described, the seaweed-padded banks and the scattering of licked-clean shells and fish bones.

Morel was out of the boat before he was, grabbing it by its breasthook and hefting it up so it wouldn't be pulled away by waves that lapped at the side of the rocky island.

Isseal was the only selkie who hadn't fled to hide behind the jutting stones on the far side of the skerry. Or, well.... Sylas had seen Kas stand her ground, until a very motherly-looking older selkie had taken her by the arm and pulled her away.

'You said they knew I was coming,' Sylas said to Morel as he caught Isseal's disapproving look. 'So why is she looking at me like that?'

'Uhhh,' Morel gave a grimace, her ears flicking down guiltily. 'I may have lied. I asked Auntie for permission, but....'

She trailed off as Isseal crossed her arms.

'Morel,' Isseal growled, her whiskers twitching in an angry gesture. 'I told you *no*.'

'I know, but—'

'You went against my orders,' Isseal interrupted.

'But if I didn't, then Sylas would *never* meet the family!' Morel argued. 'And they'll love him!'

Sylas wasn't so sure about that, as he watched the women peek out at him with wide eyes and anxious looks. They looked far too scared of him, to like him.

Still, he raised a hand and gave a polite wave.

Kas was the only one who returned it, though the selkie who had grabbed her by the arm quickly pushed her hand back down.

'You disobeyed me!' Isseal snapped, pointing an angry finger at Morel. 'I cannot believe you would put the family at risk for this boy!'

'But I'm *not* putting the family at risk!' Morel argued. 'Sylas is a *good* boy! He wouldn't hurt anyone—'

'I told you *no*!' Isseal took a deep breath and stood straight; looking almost like she had suddenly doubled in size.

And, instinctively, Sylas stepped between her and Morel.

Isseal paused, her breath slowly escaping her as her anger deflated and she looked weary and tired. 'I'm not going to hurt her,' she said, her tone firm but even. 'Acting in anger and harming any member of my family, regardless of how much disrespect they show me, would make me a terrible matriarch. Though.... I respect your bravery, Sylas. I've never known a boy who would put himself in harm's way for a girl, before.'

'It sounds like you haven't met enough boys,' was all Sylas could manage.

He saw, as he swallowed the lump in his throat, Kas whispering to another young selkie beside her. Then she leapt up, pulling away from the older selkie's grasp and rushing out from the safety of the rocks to stand beside her sister.

'I-I like Sylas!' she said, a trembling note in her voice. 'He gave me a fish when he

saw me swimming out by the docks. A-And he showed me how to tie a clove hitch, after I accidentally untied his boat, instead of getting angry at me for touching his things! I-I think he's a really nice boy. I-I do! I don't think he'd ever hurt us.'

Isseal let out a breath from her nose, sounding like a whale's blow, before she cast a glance to the rest of her family. Her whiskers shimmered brightly, as if signalling something, and all the girls slowly stepped out of hiding.

At a glance Sylas thought there must have been at least a hundred of them, all of various ages. They approached Sylas slowly. Warily. Clearly still unsure of his intentions in their home.

The first to reach him was the selkie who had pulled Kas away. She took the young girl by the hand again, moving between the child and Sylas as if to protect her, and then lifted her unusually-floppy ears with curiosity. It took Sylas a moment to realise she resembled a shae'vah, and that her father-race must have come from the swamps.

'Is this really him?' she asked.

'Mhm!' Morel hummed, proudly. 'What do you think, Mum?'

'The way you spoke of him, I thought he'd be a little better looking,' she said. Then she blushed and averted her gaze to the ground, as if only just remembering that Sylas could hear her.

But Sylas just laughed. He knew he wasn't much of a sight to behold. He was scrawny and plain, with deep bags under his eyes and stressed wrinkles that came too early for his young age.

As Sylas laughed, he saw the surrounding selkies all twitch their ears and whiskers, some cocking their heads with curiosity.

He smiled warmly at them, gazing around until his eyes settled back on Isseal.

She was watching him with a tempered look.

'Isseal?' he swallowed as he stepped towards her; his smile falling to a more respectful look. 'Um.... For what it's worth, Isseal, I'm sorry.'

Her ears twitched, and her furrowed brow faltered.

'I meant *no* disrespect to you by coming here,' he offered. 'I just wanted to make Morel happy. If you want me to go, I will.'

A long moment of quiet hung in the air as the family all glanced to their matriarch.

And then, to Sylas' surprise, Isseal smiled.

'Thank you, Sylas,' she said, softly. 'For respecting my authority. You may stay until sundown.'

Sylas gave a polite nod, trying not to cast his gaze around the selkies as they gave surprised gasps and started muttering amongst themselves.

He heard them whispering their confusion: Isseal was allowing a *boy* to be so close to them? To walk amongst the colony? To be near the *children*?

Then he heard a small voice, sounding like it was spoken from a child no more than eight or ten years old, that made him laugh aloud.

'Are we *sure* he's a boy?'

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.’

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.’

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.

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.'

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.

Chapter 22

Sylas was too angry to notice the surprised looks he got as he stormed his way through the city.

People who knew him from the markets did double-takes as they saw his strange new form. And even those who didn't know him stared; for he looked none like any of the eight known races who commonly walked the streets. He was something new and unfamiliar to the humans around him— Something to take a step away from, as his ears pinned back and he pressed through the crowd towards his sister's house.

A crowd drew around him as he slammed into the gate, gripping his hands on the old metal and shrieking as loud as his lungs would allow:

'PETER YOU WIFE-BEATING BASTARD! GET OUT HERE OR I'LL BREAK DOWN YOUR DOOR!'

There was movement at the window, the curtain pulling aside so the man inside could look out with a confused scowl as Sylas leapt the gate and stumbled furiously towards the house.

He was at the door before Peter was; his foot slamming into its hard wooden surface with enough force to cause splinters at the hinge.

Sylas kicked it again, as he heard Peter making for his hallway.

The third kick broke the lock, and the door narrowly missed the man inside as it flew open.

'PETER!' he shrieked, his voice echoing through the house with the violence of canon-fire. 'YOU BASTARD!'

'Sylas?!' it was obvious Peter was surprised to see his in-law. In this form. In this rage. It was clear that everything about Sylas was a shock, as Peter's eyes went wide and he took a step back.

'YOU BASTARD!' Sylas repeated, advancing on the man. 'How dare you! How *dare* you hurt her!'

Peter dodged around Sylas, stumbling into his front yard. For a moment his face turned in a scowl, but then his eyes cut to the crowd who watched them and it quickly changed into a cool, false expression of confusion. 'I don't know what you mean—'

'You know *very well* what I mean!' Sylas hissed. 'You lay your hands on my sister— You lay your hands on her *son!* A baby, Peter! You beat a fucking baby!'

The crowd whispered amongst themselves; but it was not of Sylas' concern. While Peter seemed to worry of his reputation and the looks that followed Sylas' accusation, Sylas knew that his reputation was the last thing Peter should have been thinking of.

He should have been running for his life.

A vicious feeling contorted through Sylas' body, and he lunged at his brother-in-law; chasing him backwards into the gate.

Peter was too slow fumbling with its lock, and Sylas' new, sharp teeth found his shoulder.

Blood oozed from the marks Sylas left in his skin. Though as he clamped down and yanked he realised his teeth had caught more fabric than flesh, and the sleeve of the

thick cotton garb Peter wore ripped away with a cracking of seams that echoed over the noise of screaming from the crowd.

Peter gave up on his gate's lock, then, and all but fell over it into the street.

Sylas was quick to follow, leaping on the man as he tried to find his footing and biting again; this time snapping at his ear and scoring deep, sharp marks across Peter's cheek.

He was thrown off Peter's back to the ground, though he missed no beat between rising to his feet and taking to pursuing his in-law as he fled.

He chased the man through the city, ignoring the people who screamed and scattered around them. Every time Peter glanced back, Sylas would scream his name in rage; vile threats and putrid words following from both their mouths.

From Peter's house to the beach, Sylas pursued; driving the man towards the waves before finally catching up as Peter stumbled on a loose rock, and leaping onto his back.

His teeth met his ear again, this time tearing it off.

That was when Peter's hand closed around Sylas' throat, and Sylas was slammed into the sand. A boot met his face before he could roll to his knees, and Peter grabbed Sylas by his long blond hair and repeatedly lay his fist to the side of his head.

The taste of his own blood mixed with Peter's in his mouth as he struggled to free himself; though Peter's grip was too firm, and his strikes too precise for Sylas to properly fight back.

The expertise in Peter's punches only made Sylas that much angrier as he realised how the man had become so skilled in laying down blows. And the thought of exactly who he had been practicing this violence on filled Sylas with a mind-numbing fury like none he had ever felt before.

Peter's fist met his jaw again, and Sylas let out a cry of rage as he kicked out at Peter, writhing in the man's grasp before finally breaking free.

He fell to the ground, barely having time to right himself before Peter lifted his boot to stomp on him— But then a heavy form slammed into Peter from the side and the man's horrified screams echoed against the crowd's as Morel, slick and wet with seawater, clamped down on his arm and tugged back violently; blood spurting into her face as flesh tore from bone.

She stumbled back as Peter pushed her, releasing her hold so the meat of Peter's arm could fall and hang loosely from the few strands of tendon that connected it to the rest of him.

Peter stared at Morel as she gave a snarl and flicked her whiskers furiously, and Sylas felt all of her anger and rage hit him in a violent wave that sent him chasing after Peter again.

They flanked him together as he ran over the sand, spatters of blood trailing behind him.

Sylas leapt upon him, his teeth scoring deep gouges into the skin of Peter's cheek. And then he felt Morel at his side; her teeth clamping onto Peter's shoulder and tearing meat from bone with inhuman strength.

Peter broke free and stumbled back, torn skin and flesh hanging from his arms and face as he stared, wide-eyed, at the couple.

He looked terrified as they stood together, shaking in rage and watching him with

sharp eyes.

Good, Sylas thought. *I hope you're feeling every bit of fear you ever put into my little sister!*

Peter took another step back as Morel licked her teeth, and Sylas readied himself to take chase again—

But then Cordelia rushed in from the ocean, coming with the wave that washed Peter's feet. She sunk her teeth in Peter's arm, ripping a chunk out of him as he pulled away with a shriek.

He turned to stare at the woman with wide eyes; clearly surprised by her shae'vah-like size and crocodile-strength jaw.

'Wh-What?!' he breathed, stumbling back as Cordelia took a deep breath and growled so low the sand at her feet rumbled. 'What *are* you?!

'A *mother*,' she retorted. 'A mother who sees a man not worthy of his wife and pup!'

Peter trembled under Cordelia's form, before rushing around her and making to flee — But he was cut off by Isseal, herself, as she emerged from the waves and loomed over him.

Horrified screams echoed through the crowd at the monstrous creature that stood before them; though Isseal's focus, as she let out a whale-blow breath of fury from her nose, was completely on Peter.

'How dare you,' Isseal said, her voice trembling with a deep, violent rage. 'What kind of monster attacks his own child?'

Peter was too shocked to reply as he stumbled back; his breath choking in his throat as Isseal inhaled deeply and stood to her full, terrifying height.

'You are a vile creature,' she growled. 'And if you want to act like an animal, I'll end your life as one!'

It was so fast Sylas wasn't sure he'd even seen Isseal lunge. All he knew was what he saw now; a huge, looming beast of a seal that was as large as two horses standing side-by-side had clamped her humongous jaws over Peter's head and throat. She lifted herself up, biting down as Peter shrieked and struggled in her grasp....

And then she threw all of her weight downwards with a sickening *CRUNCH* and horrific snapping sound.

Peter fell limp at Isseal's feet as she stood back up to her full height and pushed back her blood-covered curls.

Sylas felt his heartbeat begin to slow as Isseal flicked out her whiskers.

It was done.

It was over.

She had performed her duty as the colony's matriarch and protected her family from the danger that had threatened them.

She met Sylas' eye, giving him an exhausted nod— And then she stumbled as a pole arm narrowly missed her, its spiked axe-head top sticking into the sand beside her.

Sylas recognised it immediately as belonging to the city guard and gave a cry of fear, his whiskers flicking with urgency for his family to flee.

'Into the water!' Isseal ordered, ushering Cordelia into the ocean. 'Morel! Sylas! You too!'

Morel made for the sea, but Sylas hesitated.

The water was still so looming and vast, and he still struggled to swim— What if it hindered him? What if he drowned?!

‘*SYLAS!*’ Morel’s shriek caught his attention, but not in time.

An arrow sunk in his leg and he collapsed with a cry in the sand.

A spear-tip then aimed itself at Sylas and he rolled to raise his hands in submission.

‘Don’t move!’ the lead guard ordered, his voice cracking in fear as he side-eyed the dead man on the ground. ‘Stay down until we bind you!’

Sylas nodded, ready to submit. But then he felt a shooting feeling of fear sting his whiskers as Morel threw herself over him, shielding him from the guards as they pointed their weapons at him. She made to lunge, but Sylas grabbed her; willing her with everything he had to follow their orders.

If she tried to fight, they would kill her.

But if she stayed still as they said, they would take them both alive.

He felt Isseal’s call for him and Morel break through the waves, and he sent out another signal for her to retreat; to go home. To check on Amelia.

He felt her hesitation at his plea. But he pressed the urgency for her to not come for them. To listen to his warning and keep her distance.

He begged with all his heart for Isseal to trust that he knew this world of men and spears, just as she knew her world of currents and coral, and that he would keep Morel from harm.

But she had to leave them behind to save them.

The thought sent a horrible pang of guilt through Isseal, and he felt it radiate through the air painfully as she, against all her instincts, listened to Sylas and turned away.

Chapter 23

The salt from the air clung to the walls of the cliff-side prison, and the dim evening light crept in from the tiny, barred windows that sat high by the roof.

The holding cell that Sylas found himself locked within was cold and cramped; especially without Morel at his side. He could see her at the other end of the room, pacing anxiously as her ears flicked and her whiskers twitched her silent questions to him, over and over, asking if he was okay. If they were safe here. If his leg still hurt. Why were they not in the same cell?

Sylas was too tired to answer, though he still flicked his whiskers back out an attempt to comfort Morel. She didn't relax, so he took a deep breath and sat up.

'It's okay,' he said aloud. 'I'll explain it all later, I promise.'

The guards at the door to the room cast each other a side-eye glance. Then, a loud wet sniff came from the cell beside Morel's, and a voice followed as the lump on the bed shifted.

'Aye, don't look so confused, pigs,' it was a low, masculine voice that spoke with a sharp note of annoyance hidden within its foreign accent. 'They're selkies, right? They can read each other's minds. That's why they're always such pests. Can't tell what they're planning; can't prepare against it.'

Morel stopped her pacing, turning on her heels to stare at the lump. A moment passed as curiosity pricked at her.... Then she scowled, and Sylas was hit with a strong feeling of annoyance.

'Ugh, you're *neovi*, aren't you?' she grumbled. 'I should have known.'

'Ooh, ain't you *contemptible*?' the neovi responded, sitting up and throwing off his blanket. 'Did my existence strike a nerve?'

Sylas frowned at the neovi as he rose to his feet. His eel-like face was turned up in a grin, and his bright green-and-blue fins were flicked out in an expression that Sylas recognised from the neovi children who would frequent his stall— It was a cheeky look, full of mischief, and Sylas knew immediately that this man wanted to get on Morel's nerves on purpose.

Sylas flicked his whiskers, warning Morel to not engage; sending her the feeling that this man was just looking for a rise. And, for a moment, she turned away. Though she quickly turned back as the man hissed a laugh:

'You're just mad because you can't rob me through the bars, ay?'

'Well, *maybe* if you didn't over-hunt we wouldn't have to fight you for food!' Morel snapped back, ignoring Sylas as he called out for her not to listen.

'He just wants a reaction, Morel! Ignore him!'

'Hah!' The man's grin grew. 'If youse would just respect territory borders youse would have yer own hunting grounds!'

'The ocean belongs to *all*!' Morel argued, turning her nose up. 'It's not anyone's place to try and *control* it.'

'Ooh, youse are gonna start talking about the Wave Warden ain't ya—'

'Don't act like I can't! Do you know how much *damage* he did?! Do you know how

many selkies he killed—‘

‘He killed just as many of our kind as yer own,’ the neovi casually pointed out. ‘We hate him just as much as youse all do.’

Morel flicked her ears back childishly as the neovi grinned at her; frustration radiating off her in hot flowing waves that threatened to choke Sylas with their heat.

Then, the heat turned to sharp confusion as the neovi reached through the bars and offered Morel his hand.

‘Name’s Breska,’ he said. ‘They call me the Chain-Breaker, on account of all the chain-breaking I do.’

‘Chain-breaking?’ Sylas echoed. He eyed the guards by the door; one of who shrugged back at him and sighed loudly:

‘He was caught smuggling stolen slaves past—‘

‘Youse can’t *steal* people!’ Breska’s tone hardened from playful to angry, as he bared his teeth and gave a hiss-like breath. ‘They weren’t *stolen slaves*, they was *escaped victims* of the bastard rich in Violet’s Field! And I’d be caught a hundred times over, if it meant youse bootlickers ain’t able to get your hands back on ‘em!’

‘You’re really not scared of facing justice?’ the guard asked.

‘*Justice?*’ the neovi spit at the floor. ‘I ain’t facing no kind of justice! *Justice* would be thens victims not having to run for the rest of their lives! *Justice* would be children returned to their mothers, ‘stead of being put to work in sun-blazing fields! *Justice* would be that King Tobias paying retribution to the families he’s allowed to be ripped apart!’

A short spark of confusion flicked from Morel’s whiskers at Breska’s anger; though after a moment she crossed her arms and nodded in agreement.

‘Aye, I ain’t surprised a selkie agrees with me on freedom,’ Breska commented as he eyed her. ‘By-the-by, I do agree with youse that the ocean belongs to all. Water shouldn’t have no borders.’

‘But you said—‘

‘I was just trying to get a rise outta youse,’ he waved a dismissive hand. ‘As yer wife said.’

‘Husband,’ Sylas commented.

Breska raised his brow at that, looking Sylas over before giving a laugh. ‘Aye! Look at that, a male selkie! Now I’ve seen it *all!* Was youse born like that, or did youse change yer mind later on?’

‘I was born a human,’ Sylas said, simply. ‘The selkie part is what’s new.’

‘Aw, don’t know why youse would ever want to be a *selkie*,’ Breska teased, eyeing Morel for a reaction. ‘But to each their own, I ‘spose!’

Sylas opened his mouth to respond, but he cut off as a mournful shiver rippled through his whiskers.

Isseal had finally told the colony exactly what had happened, and they weren’t taking it well.

An aching loneliness —some kind of grief— gripped his soul and squeezed it tight. And he could see Morel felt it too, as her breathing quickened and she gripped herself tight in a hug.

Where are you?

He could feel the terrified questions from his family prickling in his skin.

Where are you?

Are you safe?

Are you lost?

An overwhelming feeling tore through his chest. It was as if the entire colony had cried out at once, begging for their lost family to return to them.

‘Sit down,’ said the guard. ‘You’re going to make your injury worse!’

Sylas couldn’t. He *couldn’t!*

He knocked over the chair beside his bed as he turned to the direction of the call and stumbled into the wall. He felt the desperate need to break through it. To get out, and to follow the silent crying that was overwhelming his senses.

‘Hey!’ shouted the guard. ‘Calm down!’

Morel let out a cry, echoed by Sylas’ own, and he collapsed to his knees as her misery shook his entire body.

‘Whoa, lady!’ Breska reached through his cell bars as Morel fell into them, sobbing, and wrapped an arm around her in a comforting way. ‘You’re right. You’re right. Take a breath, missus. Deep one, now.’

‘They’re calling us!’ she cried. ‘They don’t know that we’re safe! They don’t know!’

Trapped!

The horrible call stung Sylas’ mind, and he had to cover his mouth to keep from sobbing.

Trapped!

They’re trapped.

They’re lost.

They can’t find us.

They can’t get home!

Then he felt Isseal’s mournful call, and was stung deep into his heart by her grief as she silently mourned:

It’s happening again. I couldn’t save them.

Sylas knew she was thinking of her daughter, as the overwhelming feeling of helplessness and failure overtook her.

Then Morel gave a shout, shaking with sobs as her wails echoed off the prison walls, and Sylas felt the cries stab into him like knives.

He placed his head against the wall and felt tears escape his eyes as he tried to reach out to his family; he focused on the ache in his chest, pulling it out and pushing it through the air.

‘*I love you,*’ he whispered aloud. ‘*I love you. I love you. I love you.*’

Love.

The response came to him like a cool, salty wave running over his body.

We love you, too.

A warm air covered him, chasing away the chill of his cell, and he knew they returned his feelings.

‘A’ight,’ Breska heaved a sigh as Morel’s breathing calmed, though he didn’t stop rubbing her back. ‘You’re right. You’re right.’

‘Morel?’ Sylas asked, flicking his concern to her.

‘I’m okay,’ she said as she took a deep, shuddering breath and sat up straight. She wiped her eyes, then looked at Breska. ‘I never thought I’d be comforted by a *neovi*,’ she commented. ‘You always seem so much more interested in chasing us off.’

‘Hey, now, some of us are nice. We’re not a hive-mind, after all!’ he chuckled. ‘Unlike *some* people.’

Weak humour radiated from Morel as she scoffed at Breska and wiped her eyes again.

‘Aye, girl, don’t you look so worried ‘bout all this nothing that’s happening to ya,’ Breska said as he pet her shoulder. ‘I’ve been in plenty of scraps like this. Always turns out right in the end.’

Sylas silently agreed, sending a wave of comfort to Morel as he let out a long breath and let his shoulders go slack.

Everything will be alright, he thought; unsure if it was to comfort himself or the selkies who silently reached out to him. *We’ll get out of here, one way or another.*

Chapter 24

The night had been even harder than the day; Morel's lonely misery was echoed by the colony's own, as they reached out from the cliff-base below the prison.

Isseal had tried to move her family away from the dangerous waves and sharp stones. But even when most of the other calls had faded back to their home skerry, Cordelia's never faltered. Sylas could almost imagine her, nestled tightly into the rocks of the cliff, huddled back to avoid the waves that threw themselves up at her as she refused to leave her lost daughter alone in this terrifying new place that she was trapped in.

It was only the next morning when any kind of hope had been felt— When Amelia had stepped into the prison, baby Willis in her arms, flanked by two new guards who told her she had one hour before she was to leave.

The new guards had then taken over for the morning shift, and the guards who had spent half the night arguing with Breska gave relieved sighs and exited as quickly as possible.

'Good riddance, aye!' Breska hissed after them. 'Imagine thinking the *Harbridge* family needs defending— Bootlickers! They'd sell youse in their auctions, no second thoughts! If youse are gonna defend slavers, youse should at least be getting *paid* to do it!'

Breska's shouting continued as one of the guards—an undersized shae'vah who only stood as tall as Morel— walked Amelia over to Sylas' cell and gave her his own stool to sit on. He spoke softly as he flicked an affectionate finger at her baby, then offered Amelia some comforting words before retreating back to his place by the door and standing beside his human companion.

Sylas tried to tune out all of the overstimulating input that barraged him as he lay in his bed. He was overwhelmed by all he could feel; the call of his colony's mourning was intermixing with Morel's confusion and fear, and Breska's constant shouting certainly wasn't helping him clear his head any.

'Sylas?' Amelia asked as she watched her brother try to catch his breath. 'Are you alright? What happened to your leg?'

'They *harpooned* him,' Morel explained from her own bed. 'They shot him with a tiny little harpoon, and then tried to spear him!'

'An arrow,' Sylas clarified. 'I was shot with an arrow. There's not too much damage, but I need a few days to heal.'

'Nah, wounds like that take a few weeks,' Breska cut in with a wet gill-sniff. Then, after a moment of confused staring, he grinned at Amelia. 'Oh, hold up. Youse are a girl! What's a pretty thing like youse doing in a dank old place like this?'

Amelia seemed stunned by Breska's question, before she motioned to Sylas. 'I'm... here to talk to my brother.'

'Aw, yeah, the selkie-boy!' Breska chuckled. 'He's a nice bloke, ain't he? Real pretty! Looks like it runs in the family, does it—'

'Leave her alone, Breska,' the shae'vah guard sniffed. 'She's only got an hour, don't waste her time.'

‘Ugh, don’t *youse* start with me, Du’un,’ Breska huffed, turning away. ‘Youse could talk to me like that ways back when, but we ain’t an item no more. Don’t youse talk like youse has the *right* to tell me how to be!’

Sylas felt Morel’s whiskers twitch curiously at the drama, and he flicked his own in acknowledgement.

‘She just wants to talk to her brother,’ Du’un pointed out. ‘She doesn’t need your flirting. Leave her alone.’

‘I’m just being *gentlemanly!*’ Breska retorted; sulking his way to his bed and settling down. ‘But, right! Fine. I’ll leave her be.’

A moment passed, as Amelia waited for Breska to stop loudly complaining, before she turned back to her brother. ‘Isseal is worried,’ she told him, casting a glance between him and Morel. ‘She’s really scared you’re not going to get out of this. And Cordelia is completely beside herself. She couldn’t be convinced to return to the colony, last night. And I.... I’m scared, Sylas. What’s going to happen to you?’

‘Well...’ Sylas ran his tongue along his teeth. ‘Morel will be alright,’ he decided, firmly. ‘She was just defending me. They’ll take that into account. Besides, selkies aren’t one of the eight allied races; we can argue they don’t follow the same laws as us.’

‘*Mm,*’ Amelia didn’t sound convinced. ‘And what about *you?*’

Amelia’s anxious tone was echoed by Morel’s own nervous whisker-flick.

‘I... might have a harder time getting out,’ Sylas admitted. He then felt a wave of painful emotions hit him, and had to place his hands over his whiskers to help soften the impact of Morel’s fears. ‘Whatever happens, though, I don’t regret what I did.’

‘Sylas, you didn’t have to—’

‘I’m your brother,’ Sylas said, firmly. ‘It’s my job to protect you. I’m just sorry I didn’t do it, sooner.’

Morel sent out another short wave of anxiety, but Sylas responded to it with a flick of pride from his whiskers; a strong feeling that he was in the right. That he had done the correct thing— As Isseal protected her family, Sylas had protected his own.

Morel seemed to understand, though she clearly didn’t feel reassured as she curled up in her bed and gave a heavy sigh.

Then a wailing filled the room, floating in from up the stairs, and everyone turned to listen to the young voice that approached the cell-filled room.

A man in uniform poked his head in and grimaced, his arm half-around what appeared to be a tail-hopper child who wailed at the top of her lungs.

‘Du’un, you’re better with kids than me,’ said the man. ‘Can you figure out what’s going on with this one?’

Du’un’s eyes went wide as they lay on the girl, some sort of unreadable surprise on his face, before he hesitantly agreed; silently nodding his head.

‘I want my brother!’ the girl sobbed as she stumbled into Du’un. ‘I lost my big brother! I can’t find him! Where’s my big brother?!’

Amelia gave a motherly tut, rising to her feet to go and comfort the child as Sylas watched on with a sympathetic sigh.... But then he felt a flick of suspicion from Morel, and his brow furrowed.

She’s not a child.

Sylas was taken aback by Morel's suspicion; but then he looked closer and realised she was correct.

Though the girl was short for a tail-hopper, she didn't actually *look* like a tail-hopper child. There was something off about it all; she couldn't have been much younger than Kas was, at fourteen, and yet she was acting like a small child under ten, wailing and shouting but not actually shedding any tears.

Then Sylas spied a trimmed-back mane and realised that this girl was a half-vijak, using her short stature to appear younger to the inexperienced humans who couldn't tell the difference.

'I want my brother!' she wailed as the door was shut and the two guards left in the room watched her cry. 'Where's my big brother?'

'Cut the act, Euphadora,' Du'un commented firmly; causing the other guard to frown and look up at him. 'You're thirteen, not three.'

'Oh, look!' the girl, Euphadora, exclaimed; her wailing cutting off and her tone becoming casual as she flicked a wrist and a metallic-looking stick fell from her sleeve to her hand. 'There he is! Hi Breska!'

Before the other guard could react, Euphadora had turned around; the small metallic stick extending into a baton that she swung twice. Once to his left knee to knock him to the ground, and once to the side of his head to knock him unconscious.

Then she turned to Amelia, and Sylas felt his heart leap to his throat as she raised the baton again.

'AY! Ay!' Breska's voice cut in over Sylas' own shout. 'Not her! Right? She's not part of this! Euph, *don't* hit the damn baby! I raised youse better than that!'

Sylas felt a wave of relief, both his own and Morel's, wash over him as Euphadora backed away from his sister. He wrapped an arm around Amelia as she pressed back into his cell bars, trembling, and tried to comfort her.

'Can I hit Du'un?' she asked, eyeing the shae'vah who towered over her.

'Yet to be seen,' Breska sniffed, before looking up at the she'vah guard. 'Youse gonna snitch, or youse gonna hand over yer keys?'

'I don't have the keys,' Du'un said, casting an unimpressed look to Euphadora as she passed her weapon from hand-to-hand. 'That'd be Sykes upstairs. Or, if that smile is anything to go by....'

'I got 'em!' Euphadora tugged a small set of keys from her oversized pockets, and jingled them up at Du'un. 'And don't youse try to take 'em back from me! Or I'll knock *your* knees out, too!'

'I'd like to see you try,' Du'un gave a humoured scoff, before he gave a heavy sigh and looked down to his unconscious coworker.

Sylas could see a tired look pass over the man's face as clear thoughts ran through his mind, and he thought Du'un's exhaustion seemed familiar; a lonely, miserable longing for things that seemed too far away to even try to reach for.

'C'mon, Du'un,' Breska urged. 'I know youse know what the right thing is....'

A spark of hope sparked in Sylas' chest; though he wasn't sure if it was his own hope, or Morel's, as she rose to her feet and watched the conversation with curiosity.

The shae'vah looked conflicted, his eyes flicking from Euphadora to Breska and back.

Then his shoulders slacked, and he cast his glance to Amelia, who flinched and pressed back tighter into Sylas.

‘What do you think?’ he asked her, softly.

Amelia hesitated. But then she looked to Sylas, her grip on her son tightening, and he could tell exactly what she was thinking.

‘Can... can you get my brother out?’ she asked. ‘And his wife. *Please*. I’m so scared for them, and it’s my fault they’re in here...’

‘Amelia, it’s not...’ Sylas trailed off as Amelia’s chest heaved with a laboured breath, and he instead focused on comforting her. ‘It’s okay. It’s not your fault.’

Du’un watched Amelia for another moment before he gave a slow nod, a sombre look in his eyes as he stepped out of Euphadora’s way and let her scurry over to Breska’s cell.

She unlocked it, and then stepped sideways to Morel’s cell, and Sylas felt his heart almost leaping out his mouth as she was freed.

He could barely feel the pain in his injured leg as his own cell door was opened and he stumbled freely into Morel’s tight embrace.

A heavy wave of love and relief hit him, almost crushing him as Morel sobbed into his neck.

‘It’s okay,’ he told her, squeezing her tightly back. ‘Everything’s going to be okay.’

It was then that the prison door opened, and the guard who had brought Euphadora down stepped in and paused; a horrified look in his eyes as he realised what was going on.

The moment of shock held the room, before Breska motioned to the guard.

‘Alright, then, Euph,’ he said, his smug tone nearly insufferable as he gave a toothy grin. ‘You can hit *him*.’

Chapter 25

The escape from prison had been terrifying. Sylas was sure they weren't going to make it out, as his leg had buckled underneath him and Morel had lifted his arm over her shoulder to help him limp along.

There had been so many guards. But Breska and Du'un had been commendable fighters, and Euphadora had been a terrifying force for her age; more than twice putting herself between Amelia and the guards and striking out with enough might to send fully-grown men stumbling back.

It was almost unbelievable when they made their way out the back door into the yard. And it was a miracle that they'd been able to get over the fence. If Du'un hadn't been with them to heft Sylas and Amelia over, they never would have gotten free.

And now they stood on the wooden deck of a ship, a rough-looking crew barking orders amongst themselves as they hurried their way out to sea while they still had time to avoid the city's naval crew from pursuing them.

Sylas felt Morel give an uncomfortable whisker-flick; almost all of the crew were neovi men. And they eyed her with as much mistrust as she eyed them.

But they didn't make any comment as Breska gave her a friendly pat on the back and laughed.

'Youse are a hell of a selkie, I'll tell youse what!' he cackled. 'Never met a fey like youse, before! I like it!'

He then turned to Amelia, flashing a toothy grin as she avoided meeting his eye. He lifted a hand to brush her hair from her eyes and she flinched.

'Now, now! I just risked my life for youse, missus!' he said, humour instead of offence in his tone. 'And what thanks are youse giving me! You act like I'm gonna bite youse!'

Sylas slipped between the pirate captain and his sister, feeling a protective spark in his belly.

'Leave her alone,' Sylas warned, flashing his fangs. 'Or I'll do to you what I did to her husband!'

Breska, as if on instinct, flashed his own fangs back; but then he seemed to realise Sylas' implication and, letting his snarl fall to an indifferent look, licked his teeth and glanced over Sylas' shoulder to Amelia. It was then, for the first time, that Breska seemed to notice Amelia's bruises.

'Oh, I see,' he said, softly. 'Youse are a bad way with love, hm?'

Amelia gave a short nod.

'Well, I'm sorry to offend. I ain't meaning no harm,' he said, taking one of his crew's hats to place on his own head, just so he could proceed to tip it politely. 'Just been a while since I seen a girl, is all. A proper girl, I'm meaning, not this brat,' he gave Euphadora a friendly kick as she passed him. 'I ain't remembering how to speak with 'em properly. I'll fix my manners up right, don't youse worry none.'

Sylas stepped back so he could put an arm around his sister, and held her tight. He ignored the burning pain in his leg as he stood tall; though it was clear Morel wasn't ignoring his pain, as she moved to his bad side and hovered her hand at his back as if

readying to catch him.

Breska seemed unbothered by this, as he dropped the hat back on his head and pressed back his fins. 'May I try that all again?' he asked, turning to address Amelia.

Sylas glanced to his sister, who slowly nodded.

'Y... Yes, you may,' she said, softly.

Breska gave a happy flick of his fins and then, with a polite bow, took her hand and kissed it, 'My dear lady. Now that we're out of that spat, where would youse like to be dropped off?'

A conflicted look fell over Amelia, and Sylas realised what was wrong only moments before she spoke it aloud:

'I can't... go back,' she managed, worry taking over her. 'I was a part of a prison break, I-I can't just go home—'

'It's alright,' Du'un's voice spoke softly from the crew, and Sylas eyed him warily as he stepped over and put a hand on Amelia's back. 'Breska is an honourable man, despite how he presents himself. You'll be safe here if you choose to stay.'

'Aye, aye,' Breska agreed. 'Youse are welcome to stay as long as youse need—'

Breska cut off with a hiss that was echoed amongst his crew, and he suddenly reeled back as a heavy, wet *THUMP* sounded on the deck behind Sylas and his family.

Sylas whirled around and saw Isseal, standing tall and strong as the neovi around her drew their swords and aimed their spears at her.

'Auntie!' Morel exclaimed, a rush of joy overtaking her as she ran to her aunt and threw herself into Isseal's embrace. 'Oh, Auntie! I was so scared! I thought I was going to be lost!'

'*Shh*,' Isseal lay a reassuring hand against Morel's hair, her whiskers shimmering as she sent out a comforting feeling to her niece. 'I'm here. I will never let you get lost, I promise.'

Sylas felt Isseal's comforting signal flow over to him as she looked up and met his eye, and he let out a long, relaxed breath and looked to Breska.

Breska's scowl faded as he watched Morel and her aunt embrace. Instead, he gave a curious flick of his fins. 'Auntie, huh?' he commented. 'This half-giant is yer aunt?'

Isseal released Morel, then, and calmly walked over to Sylas and his sister; seemingly unbothered by the weapons aimed her way. 'Yes. I am.'

'Heh!' Breska wiped his nose on his sleeve. 'Youse are these two's matriarch, ain't youse?'

'I'm these *four's* matriarch,' Isseal said, putting a protective arm around Amelia to make her point. She flicked her ears forward, watching Breska as he chuckled and licked his lips, before speaking again. 'You saved them, didn't you? You have my thanks, neovi. I know our kinds aren't always amicable, so I appreciate what you've done for my family.'

'Glad to be of service!' Breska said, bowing playfully at Isseal. 'And, I ain't even gonna say youse are owing me a favour! How's that for it, ay?'

'You have my deepest, most genuine gratitude,' Isseal told him; and Sylas felt that she meant it. Then, he saw Isseal's whiskers shimmer, and he felt a wave of thankful emotions from the waters around the boat as the matriarch continued, 'Mine, and the

rest of my family's.'

'Is yer family following the boat?' Breska asked, eyeing Sylas as he glanced to the water. 'Cos they're more than welcome to come aboard.'

'I would rather not see my family have spears aimed at their throats,' Isseal said, seriously.

Breska motioned for his crew to lower their weapons; grinning wide when he was obeyed. 'Hows about now?'

Sylas felt her hesitance. And it was clear that Breska saw it, too, as he gave a shrug and began to circle Isseal with a wide grin.

'So. Youse are just here to pick up yer family and head off, then?' he asked.

'Yes,' Isseal answered, simply.

'Mm... well, then, if youse don't mind me asking: *how* exactly are youse intending to keep the humans afloat?'

A frustrated snort escaped Isseal, alongside a prickle of fearful realisation that poked Sylas like a thorn-bush.

'I dunno what yer plan is,' Breska sniffed casually, giving Isseal a smug look as he paced around her. 'But getting these two on this boat weren't easy! His wounded leg ain't strong enough to kick against the waves, and *she* says she can't swim at all! Let alone the baby. Youse know baby humans ain't able to swim, right? Was youse planning on carrying them on yer back 'til youse found safe shore?'

Isseal's lip turned up in frustration; which only made Breska's grin grow wider.

'Now. I ain't gonna pretend to be no genius,' Breska chuckled. 'But that don't seem like it would be healthy *or* feasible. So, if youse are willing to have an open mind, I would like to propose a solution to youse all.'

Isseal's ear twitched as her eyes narrowed. 'Go on.'

'There ain't never been a selkie-neovi alliance,' he said with a grin. 'How'd youse like to be in the first?'

'An alliance?' a wave of conflicting emotions found their way from Isseal; confusion, intrigue, a little bit of disgust.... And then a strange, almost hopeful twinge; like she was reflecting on something deep within herself.

And then she looked to Sylas, and he understood what she was thinking:

She'd been wrong about him and her belief that all boys were dangerous to her family. So could her biases towards neovi be wrong, too?

Curiosity twitched from her whiskers, sparking Morel's own interest. And when Isseal looked to her niece, she received a small flick of the ear and the quiet comfort of knowledge that Breska had, despite being unbearably annoying, acted with nothing but kindness and strong moral integrity.

'Aw, with those looks!' Breska interrupted the silent conversation with a very loud laugh. 'Listen, I ain't even proposing youse stick around for good! I'm just suggesting that, until yer injured are healed and youse find a safe place for the girl and her kiddo, both our families give each other helping hands, a'ight? What youse think about that?'

'What *kind* of "helping hands"?' Isseal asked, her suspicion prickling in Sylas' skin as an itch.

'Ah! Well. Youse can all turn into seals, yeah?' Breska grinned, widely, as Isseal

nodded. 'Youse are good at scouting. And humans —no offence to youse both— but humans ain't too smart about ocean fey! Sailors from these kingdoms ain't gonna be none the wiser when they see a couple of seals looking up at 'em out the waves, *right?*'

Isseal gave a slow, deliberate nod of acknowledgement.

'Youse could be very valuable in helping us take down slave-ships,' Breska said, simply. 'It'd be much appreciated if youse would help us free the wrongly-indentured from their bonds.'

The suspicion from Isseal turned to intrigue at the mention of slave-boats, and Sylas saw her frown falter into an almost-curious look.

'In return, youse would have the protection of an armed crew,' Breska continued. 'My brother over there? He ain't called Komi the Orca-Killer for *not* harpooning whales. And, yer family would be welcome on my ship! A place to sleep. Share meals. Heal yer injured. Etcetera. Etcetera. *Thoughts?*'

Doubt prickled from Isseal, stinging the air as she looked down at her family. Then the feeling of defeat sunk over her, and Sylas echoed her sigh.

'I don't think I have much of a choice,' Isseal snorted.

'Aw, naw,' Breska waved a hand. 'I ain't gonna *force* youse to help us. And I ain't gonna throw these three overboard if youse refuse. We're *against* slavery here, aye! Ain't gonna enslave people into freeing slaves. Defeats the point, don't it?'

The comment humoured Morel; whose muffled chuckle helped to ease Isseal's nervous doubts.

And then, making her choice, Isseal stood taller and flicked her whiskers in a beckoning call that drew her family from the waves and onto the neovi-filled ship.

Anxiety and mistrust were clear on the faces of both the colony and the crew. But, with a signal from their leaders; they all hesitantly began introductions.

Sylas watched on, too tired to join them.

And then he felt Morel press into his side, her arm wrapping around him to help him stand stable, and he was filled with a deep feeling of affection for her.

The affection sparked Morel's own feeling of love, which was so strong it rippled through the colony with enough force to make all the girls cringe and turn to watch as Sylas collapsed to his knees and wheezed under the weight of it.

Morel sat down beside him, pulling him close in concern, and he laughed as he felt her warmth seep into him.

'*Oh, Morel,*' he breathed. 'I love you so much.'

'I love you too,' Morel answered.

And, then, the colony echoed the feeling; laying a blanket of affection over the couple as they sat together.

Even without words, the colony said so much in that moment that Sylas could feel tears welling in his eyes.

They loved him. And they were relieved that he was alright.

Even if the situation the family now found themselves in was new, and strange, and scary; they were ready to take it on to keep him safe.

Sylas breathed in a deep, shaky sob of joy as he felt the family's love embrace him as tightly as Morel's arms.

He knew, now, that no matter what happened: he would never have to face the world alone again.

—END—

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