

A double life is hard to live. And that's the life Sasha was living. She was a selkie, half seal, half human. In the day, she led a human life; went to college, had a job, had a few friends. In the night, she swam as a seal in the cold seas surrounding England, where she lived as a human.

Sasha knew it must remain this way. A selkie who was touched by the moon's rays while a human would never be a seal again. And a selkie who was a seal when the sun rose would always be a seal.

Of course, Sasha had considered permanently becoming a seal or human, but knew it was a danger to do so. A selkie was not made to be a human, and neither a seal. No, a selkie was a perfect balance of seal and human that could live virtually forever. If a selkie stayed in one shape, it would fade away from existence, becoming no more than a shadow in the minds of those who had known her. A selkie must remain constantly changing to live.

A selkie as a seal was a pretty thing, but one as a human was even more beautiful. In human form, Sasha was slender and pale skinned and average in height. Her dark brown hair cascaded over her shoulders like a velvety chocolate waterfall. She had impossibly large, brown eyes framed with long brown lashes that no man could look into without falling in love with the selkie. But Sasha avoided men, knowing that she could never have a lover. She spent all her nights deep in the sea where no human man could follow her.

So for all her beauty, Sasha envied even the ugly women, who lived normal lives and could love men. She also pitied any man who saw her, knowing they could not help but love her. And she knew they would be heartbroken when she had to refuse them. Sasha was empathetic; all selkies were. She could feel the sadness, joy, hate, love and anger of humanity. She got her emotions from other creatures. But as much as she felt the feelings of others, she had no feelings of her own.

Once, before Sasha had known better, she had gone to the movies with a boy she had liked. The movie had been about wolves, and when a pack of them had cornered a rabbit, she could feel the rabbit's fear and panic. After the movie she had left the boy heartbroken and ran to the sea, for it was nearly dark. From then on, she had avoided men and movies. She had spent days moping after that, talking only with her mother Jen—Jen was an old selkie, old and wise. She loved Sasha dearly.

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Early spring was Sasha's favorite season. It was a time of joy and growth and new possibilities, and her birthday as well. Jen loved spring too.

To celebrate Sasha's 200th year of life, mother and daughter strolled through a park, fairly bursting with flowers. Sasha could not be happy, but if she could have, she would have. Jen, on the other hand, seemed preoccupied.

Suddenly, at the sight of a particularly bright patch of flowers, Jen fell to her knees, sobbing without being sad.

"Mother!" Sasha cried, rushing to her aid.

"These are beautiful," Jen sobbed, gently caressing the blossoms, "And I will live to see them die. And then bloom and die again. Life, death: it is the way of things. But we, though we live double lives, only live half a life. Death comes with life. To live without death is unnatural. Child, I must die. I will not go to the sea tonight."

"But Mum!" Sasha protested.

"Sasha," she said kindly, "You are the last of our kind. You are strong. I am proud to be your mother."

"Why?" Sasha protested.

"Dearest, my child, I am torn. My Noella, older than you. She has faded. And I am not sad. But I am torn between my children."

"A child, Mum?" Sasha asked, "Another child? I thought I was your dearest daughter, your *only* daughter!" Sasha could not be sad, of course, but she felt as though

Jen had just slapped her.

“Sasha, child, *please* forgive me. I never meant you grief.”

“Well of course I must forgive you, for I *cannot* be angry, but I wish I could. I wish I could be angry at you forever!” Tears slid meaninglessly down Sasha's face, but she could not be angry or sad no matter how hard she tried.

“She's older than you, Sasha. 688 years old. And lives near America. I see her rarely, but she came last night, and told me she would not feel the sea again. I—thought it better that you not know, but it is too much. I am 2,649 years old, and have lived much too long already. You must understand, Sasha. Whether or not Noella had faded, I would have had to fade at some point.”

Sasha softened. She stroked her mother's soft hair, crying—“Please don't fade away, Mum,” she pleaded, “But if you must, I swear I will never forget you.”

“Child,” Jen replied softly, “It is impossible not to forget. That is just the way of things. And it is good. Remembering would only wear you down.”

“But it's not *fair*,” Sasha cried.

“It is the way of life, Sasha. “No other way would be fair, either. It is almost dark. I will go with you to the beach, but you must go into the water alone tonight.”

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She wrote her mother's name on everything, forcing herself to remember even though her brain wanted to forget. And inevitably, she did. The next day when she looked at the name she had scribbled across a piece of paper, at first she did not know what it meant. When she finally remembered, she was furious at herself. But even as she pounded her fist against her head, she was starting to forget again.

But Sasha remembered what Jen had said, even though she didn't remember who had said it. *You are the last of your kind*. The words echoed through her head, terrifying her. Sasha was the *last selkie*. Over the few weeks, her few human friends tried to comfort her, asking why she was upset. Sasha always replied that she wasn't

upset. Her friends were skeptical, but it was true. Selkies had no emotions of her own. Sasha could mope, cry and yell all she wanted to, but she would never be truly upset.

Sasha knew that, and that made her want to be upset. But she could not be, so she contented herself with thinking. *What are selkies for?* She asked herself time and again. She could live for ever, have any man begging for her hand in marriage, could know what others were feeling. But being a selkie, Sasha realized, was more of a curse than a blessing. What was the good of being immortal when you could not enjoy life? A double life and yet half a life.

You are the last of our kind. . . You are the last of our kind. What had happened to the other selkies? 200 years ago, when Sasha was born, the seas were full of selkies. She had never felt lonely. And now she was lonely, but of course she could not feel lonely.

Before Jen had faded, Sasha had spent time with people who were sad, angry, happy or grumpy; whatever she wanted to feel. But now others' emotions made her sick. She could not stand to feel people's emotions; it felt too much like stealing. Violating their privacy. But she could not be around people without sensing their feeling, so she spent her days alone.

She cried without feeling sad. Screamed without feeling angry. But mostly, she stayed silent, lost in thought. She could not stand to be alive, but she kept on going. Her only motivation was the need to think.

In her mind, there were two possible options. Either have lots of kids and populate the seas with selkies, or fade away. Which was nobler? Which was better? If she faded, she would let down the race of selkies. But if she had even a single child, it cause humanity grief. She argued with herself, but could not bring herself to choose. In her mind, having a child seemed better, but in her heart she wished to fade. And her heart eventually won.

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Flowers bloomed in a flurry of color, defying Sasha's gloomy thoughts.

The world is so beautiful, so full of joy, she thought. And it is joy that I will never be a part of.

With that thought and Jen's word in her head, she walked to the beach. The sun was low in the sky, and the beach was empty, except for a family with two children chasing each other around in the sand. Their smiling faces seemed to snap something inside Sasha.

I can't go back! She thought violently. I can't live like this anymore. I can't, I can't. She repeated the words to herself, but but her feet started walking towards the water of their own accord.

At the edge of the sea, Sasha forced her feet to stop. "I can't," she said. "I won't. I won't!" She was almost yelling now, and the family gave her strange looks. She tried to smile at them, but already the sun was setting and they had left. But the memory their smiling was lodged in her heart like a thorn. After this, living like a selkie would be impossible.

The tide was coming in and the cool water caressed her bare toes, inviting her into the sea. But the ocean's touch, once familiar and welcoming, now left a bitter taste in her mouth. The pleasant lapping made her shiver.

Sasha stepped back, burying her feet in the warm, dry sand and watching as the sun's final ray set the clouds ablaze with color, exquisite pinks, warm oranges, brilliant reds that mixed with the deep, ocean-like blue of the east to form purples dripping with color. The sunset was reflected on the sea, and in Sasha's tortured heart, calling to her, offering her once last chance to be a selkie. But she refused.

Retreating farther onto land, she watched the color fade from the sky, the clouds now dull and gray. The sky turned deep ocean blue, but was illuminated as a cool, gentle breeze from the sea gently nudged the clouds apart, unveiling a perfectly full, silver-white moon wreathed by a hazy halo of silver light that battled the dark clouds trying to once more cover the moon.

Sasha lifted her arms as silver rays gently fell upon her, illuminating her perfect features. Her rosy lips, turned molten silver by the light, parted slightly, in awe of the radiance that had never once touched her skin. Pure, bright moonlight reflected in her dark eyes, sparkling in them like diamonds. The cool air gently caressed her face, and in the breeze her hair swirled around her bright figure, like a dark cloud around the moon.