

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.