

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!’