

Chapter 6

The Hook

Melamira didn't waste any time yelling out Tilly's name, nor did she spend a moment looking dumbstruck. She simply dove out after her friend without thinking. She'd been accused of being a bit *too* quick to act in the past, and she really *had* been trying. But sometimes you find your quarry of pigs or your four-foot tall kobold friend is thrown out the window in a strange accident and what are you going to do? *Not* jump out the window?

The air rushed past her as she made sense of her environment. Easily a hundred feet up in the air, she had the time to really take it in, not least of all the surface of the river rapidly getting closer. The river which, she noticed, was not its usual calm self. Water had been thrown onto the banks and was rushing back into the main riverbed. There was what appeared to be a crater on the forest-side, and water was rapidly flowing into that, too. There were shapes coming out of the forest. Big ones. She'd probably have to think about that in a second. For now, she had to focus on Tilly, who was screaming obscenities all the way down. Mellie held her arms close to her body and closed the distance. She had only seconds, and though the kobold was sturdy, the way she was flailing, impact with the water would be... unpleasant.

But Melamira had grown up in the Mangroves. She knew how to dive, how to break the surface from half a mile up without shattering every bone in her body. She just needed to grab Tilly like *this*, despite her protestations, and hold her in front of her chest like *that*, folding Tilly's little arms in front of her own chest, and then land in the water feet first like--

Instantly, the icy waters of the Wide River enveloped them. Between the impact and the freezing temperatures, the air was knocked out of her, and she took a moment to let the shock take over, steadying herself. Ah, the things one learns growing up in a waterside society. Tilly was panicking, but Melamira couldn't allow herself to try and help the creature until she herself had full control of her limbs, but she also couldn't wait too long, or the cold would seep into her bones, and they'd both drown. She kicked her legs experimentally. The river was deeper here than one might suspect, and she resisted the urge to wait for the bottom to have something to push off against. The odds were too high of losing sight of the light above.

She began to swim upwards. It was hard to use only one arm, dragging Tilly behind her. Her lungs were already crying out in protest, and she said a quick prayer that Tilly wouldn't try to breathe any water on the way up. The surface was within reach, and she could feel herself getting desperate, clawing at the water with every inch they approached air. Fresh, necessary air. But the surface was... wild. Before she had a chance to really think about it (not that she really wanted to waste any time) the surface was broken by something. Something big, crashing into water close enough to them that they were pushed and pulled in its wake. Something with long, spindly legs, easily the size of a house, kicking and screaming loudly enough to be heard even under water. Its skin was a sickly white-green, and at the end of each chitinous leg was what appeared to be a hand larger than Tilly.

Melamira realized with a jolt that her body was starting to convulse, and decided not to think too much about it, and made the rest of the climb in just a few seconds. As soon as the air hit her face, she took the deep breath she needed, then pulled up Tilly next to her.

Thankfully, her friend was still fully conscious, sputtering for air. They weren't too far from the shore, and they would have to close that distance quickly. Sure, air wasn't a problem, but the cold still was, and they'd be running out of energy before long. The problem was that the shore was absolute chaos.

Melamira had grown up with the stories, of course. And she *had* once traveled through the Redwood, brushing up against ancient spirits that hadn't been seen by spirits for a thousand years. Well, none who had survived the encounter at least. But that had been in their domain. That had been in the dark. Seeing the monsters and gods of her childhood lullabies and tales in the light of day was harrowing. It was like watching nightmares come to life. The many-legged creature in the water next to them was still sinking, and it had clearly been thrown there by what appeared to be a deer, over a hundred feet tall, four near-blind eyes blinking in the sunlight, shaking its six massive antlers. There were still bits of spider hanging off them as it turned back onto the shore.

Melamira shook herself out of the very real shock of seeing more and more spirits emerge from the forest. She needed to get solid ground under her feet, dangerous as the shore clearly was. There was something with tentacles pulling itself along the trees. There was a mass of buzzing creatures that moved from shadow to shadow. A raven, larger than any of them, spreading its wings and taking off. There was more than she could wrap her mind around, and between all of it ran panicked little people, although the creatures seemed too focused on each other and getting out of the forest to pay too much attention to them. It was what she imagined hell looked like.

She pulled Tilly behind her to the shore, trying to find a spot that was a little removed from the chaos. The crater wasn't too far from them, and the creatures seemed to avoid it. They were so *loud*, all of them screaming in primal tongues older than any language any Melmamira knew. When her feet touched the mud of the shore, she trudged on until she could throw Tilly into the shallows as well, who gratefully stumbled to her feet, clearly unsteady, her teeth chattering.

Melamira herself collapsed onto her legs as soon as she could reasonably do so. The shore was a warzone. All around, creatures that hadn't seen sunlight in millennia burst forward from the forest, and she had no idea why. Most of them milky white, covered in moss. Several of them looked like reanimated corpses, or were vaguely translucent. There were figures wandering out from between the trees that seemed to be filled with starlight, impossible to focus on, avoiding the din.

And then her eyes fell on the figure in the middle of the crater. It seemed to be a young man, maybe in his twenties. His most striking features were curved golden horns, and golden scales that covered his arms, shoulders and upper chest. Dragonborn, unlike any she'd ever seen before, missing the trademark elongated face, although his cheekbones were sharper than any human she'd ever seen, and he seemed to be sporting some serious fangs. He was also very naked. It was hard not to notice something like that. He seemed to be stirring as the cold water started to envelop him.

With a resigned groan, Melamira pushed herself up onto her feet and stumbled over to him, grabbed a wrist and began to drag him onto dry ground. Tilly rushed over to help, and after a second, she realized it got easier. The boy was kicking. He was awake. She looked him in the eyes. Gold. Of course.

"Are you awake? Can you hear me? Do you understand me?" She fired off the questions rapid-fire and realized just how *cold* she was, stuttering and stammering through her words. If she didn't warm up any time soon, she was *still* at risk of freezing to death.

"I--" he said, his voice almost velvety, and then his eyes landed on the menagerie of monsters around them. "What the *fuck*?" he yelled. "Where the... what the... *what the actual fuck is going on*?" Well, he was awake, and clearly aware of being naked. She'd offer him her cloak, but she'd taken it off so as not to get dragged down into the water by it.

"We need to get out of here," she said. "Are you able to stand?"

"Am I able to... lady, I have no clue what's happening right now, but I'm going to need you to back all the way up and turn this shit off, because I'm not into it. This is worse than that dream I had after I had that sushi I *knew* was off, b--" Tilly had slapped him, and the boy looked at her like she had... well, like she'd slapped him.

"Let's save your life first," she said. "You can yell at us later." Tilly made eye contact with Melamira. "Do you know who he sounds like?" Mellie nodded.

"I do."

There was a loud screeching nearby, and Mellie saw several insect-like creatures the size of small horses thunder towards her. Her bow was in the water somewhere, and going by the frantic grabbing at her own back, Tilly's sword had been swallowed by the cold waves as well. It was only when the first of the giant creatures crashed into the ground, a large feathered arrow sticking out of its head, that she noticed they were getting fire support.

Several dozen feet away, Serana was running towards them, arrows whistling through the air faster than even Melamira could loose them. The River Princess closed the distance in just a few seconds and kept the creatures at bay, who seemed to realize they weren't going to be getting any closer any time soon.

"You're both alright?" she whispered, not even passing the naked figure a glance as she fired ghostly bolt after bolt.

"Freezing, scared, confused, angry as shit. I want to go home. I'm having none of this tabletop shit," the man rambled. Tilly shot him another glance and he clamped his mouth shut.

"Alive," Melamira said. "Cold." Serana looked at her for a moment. Once upon a time, Melamira had been scared of that gaze, until she'd gotten to know the person underneath. Right now though, she wasn't sure if the chill in her bones was the water, or Serana's eyes.

"On my signal," Serana said, "take the boy and run." Melamira nodded with a sigh.

"Where do we go?" She looked at the mangrove, already detaching itself from the shore. "To your city?"

"No," Serana said. "He's got whatever she did."

"You hear it too?" Tilly asked.

"And I see it. The body language is all wrong."

"What are y'all *talking* about?" the man said, looking back and forth between them, then reaching up to touch his horns as if this was his first time seeing them. He muttered curses under his breath. "Who are you people anyway? My name i--"

"On my signal," Serana repeated. "The village upriver has horses. Take the southwestern road, then head north. If you don't find me at the Whitehallow bridge, head on to see her. She'll know what to do."

"Well," Tilly said, "she'll figure *something* out."

"By accident," Melamira added. "Serana, we're in no shape to run through... that."

"You will be. It will be unpleasant. Get ready." She stood up. "And cover your ears." With that and no further explanation, Serana ran to the nearest of the largest still-circling of the giant bug-like creatures and leapt at its head. Dark energy swirled around her as she did things to the monster's life force Melamira didn't really feel like thinking about, and a second later, she and Tilly were both hit with... something. Something that warmed her bones, but

not like hot chocolate in front of a warm fire might warm her bones. This was sickly, wrong somehow. She realized what Serana was doing and she hated that they needed it. She felt gross, like she needed a bath. But at least her muscles weren't cramping up anymore.

"I guess that was the sig--" Tilly began, when Serana let loose a wail that pierced their ears, their very souls. Not a person or creature, living or... otherwise, on the beach, was unaffected by it. Giant creatures that moved like snakes on a cracked mirror curled up on themselves. Wolves that moved as if through mist howled and yelped. Even the creatures between the trees flickered in and out of existence.

Melamira grabbed Tilly and the man's hands, and ran.