



CHAPTER 1

A mist liked to hang over the river in the early morning, cloaking the willow trees and masking them in silhouette. Dewdrops clung to the ferns and the underbrush, gleaming in the dawn light and dripping quietly into the river. That brought the fish, big and silver, rising from the bottom in search of the insects that skimmed over the water.

This was Leonardo's favourite time. The sun turned the mist gold, the air was fresh and humid, and everything still hung in the sleepy, untouched state of the night. It was as if the forest were just waking, and the shadows didn't watch him as closely as they did during the day.

Leonardo rested a hand on the edge of the boat, the weathered wood damp and spongy where dew had soaked into the raw splinters. From afar the boat looked graceful; slim and fluted at the bow where he sat, with a tall bowsprit and tail stem like a Viking

longboat. Up close it was a tired old creature, ancient and battered with scars on the boards and algae stains where the river sloshed against the prow.

It slipped through the morning with quiet purpose, the only sound the rhythmic clunk-splash of its eight oars, churning in perfect timing under young but practiced hands.

Two boys behind him broke the stillness.

“Pinch!”

“Yes, Moth?” said Pinch flatly.

Leonardo closed his eyes.

“Are you trying to lose a hand?” demanded Moth, his breath short between oar strokes.

“Um...”

“There are crocs in there.”

“So?”

“Crocs eat hands.”

“Moth,” said Leonardo, glancing back. *Leave it alone. For once.*

Moth twisted to see him, a leaf trapped in his curly hair and his clothes skewed and rumped. The rowers faced backwards on their benches, so making eye contact was an awkward feat to begin with, doubled by the fact that it was Moth attempting it.

“But—” *it's dangerous*, Moth's eyes said.

Leonardo raised an eyebrow. *And pointing that out will make him stop?*

Moth sighed and, for a moment, Leonardo actually thought he would drop it. The other boys down the length of the boat glanced at them cautiously, afraid to jinx it.

Then Pinch made a noise, annoyed that the squabble was dying, and Moth twisted back around to glare at him. Pinch wasn't

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a rower, and his hand still dangled overboard, daring a challenge. He formed the perfect opposite of Moth; sharp-edged and wiry in a black tee-shirt and combat boots, a tricorn hat sitting cockeyed atop his head. His eyes flashed with dark delight, long fingers stirring the water as it streamed past.

“Name one person you know who’s had a croc eat their hand,” said Pinch.

“Loads of people!” said Moth.

Leonardo sighed, turning forward again. He actually had a job to do, and it didn't involve babysitting his two friends.

“Like who?” said Pinch.

“Well... there’s...”

“Liar.”

“Halfwit.”

“Liar.”

“Guys,” said Leonardo. Their bickering made it impossible to concentrate.

“Get your hand out of the water,” said Moth.

“No,” said Pinch.

“Why?”

“Because I’m busy.”

Leonardo sighed. “Please don’t ask.”

“Doing what?” demanded Moth.

“Trying to catch a fish, stupid.”

“And that’s why you never ask,” said Leonardo. Once, he’d found Pinch with a shirt-full of blackberries, placing them in a long line along the forest floor. When questioned, Pinch explained that he was attempting to catch a bear.

Life was simpler if you didn’t ask.