



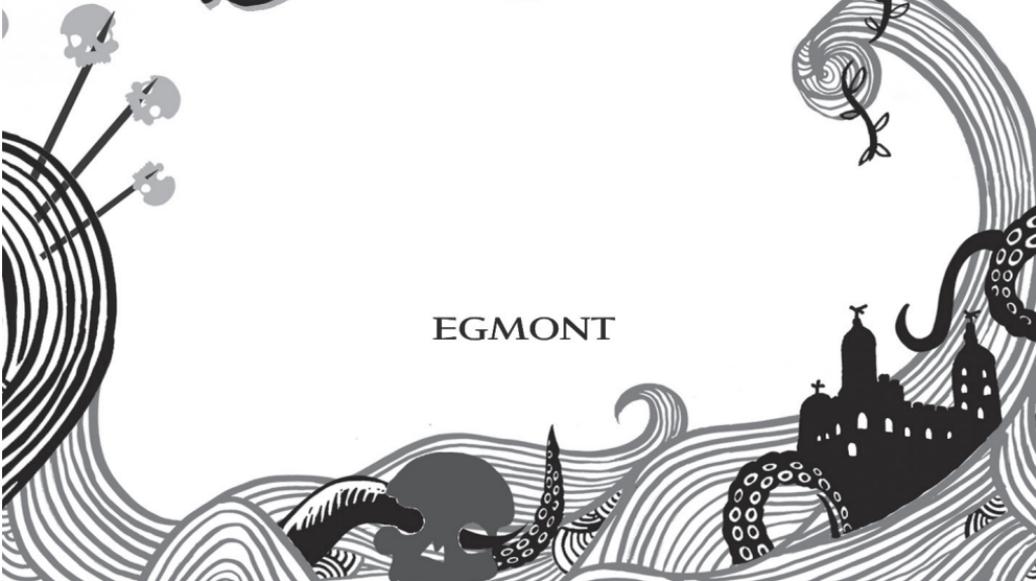
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# River Daughter



EGMONT



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*We bring stories to life*

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CHAPTER ONE  
*Strange Fish*

‘Sweet Harry’s scabs! Yer like a frog with hair,  
Leatherboots.’

‘Bet you’ve never seen a frog do this!’

Moss dived down, turning a full somersault as she went, leaving Salter grinning on the riverbank. As she stretched to touch the stony river bed, she felt the drag of the water against her body. The river here was in no hurry. No roar, no raging currents, just a wide bend and a grassy bank that ushered the moorhens politely on their way. Moss knew this

stretch of river as well as she knew the scratches on her knees. She knew the vole holes. She knew where the kingfishers flicked their jewel wings. She knew every dip in the river bed. Because it was here she'd learnt to swim.

She wore an old apple sack with holes cut for her neck and arms. At first Moss had gasped at the clumsiness of her kicks, fists gripped tight to the branch that kept her afloat, her friend never more than a few steps away. On the surface was a spluttering fight for air. Yet under the water, the quietness calmed her. So Salter had tied a rope around her middle and she'd let herself sink, eyes open, arms outstretched, and gradually her legs had learned a rhythm that propelled her body forward. When she ran out of breath, she would rise to the surface and gulp another. And if she strayed too far into the river, Salter would haul her back on the end of his rope like a strange fish.

Now the rope was off. More than a year had passed since she, Pa and Salter had left London,

and though Salter said she frightened the trout, Moss had spent much of those summer months swimming the river.

There were times when Moss could barely believe how different this new life was to their old. All those years in the Tower of London, the taunts of the Tower folk, the thump of the drum on Execution Day, Pa standing on the scaffold with his axe in his hands. And Moss herself, holding her wretched basket ready to catch a rolling head. Just thinking about it made the bile rise from her stomach. How many hours had she spent gazing from the battlements of the Tower, willing the mighty river Thames to carry her away from that miserable life? The river *had* saved her, thought Moss. But it had almost killed her too.

A breeze rustled the leaves on the willow. Autumn was coming and it would soon be too cold for dipping. She stared down at her feet, curled against the stones of the river bed. This was a very different river to the Thames. Here the water was

clear and waist deep. The only place for fish to hide was among the water crowfoot, giant green ribbons that swayed with the flow. But Moss avoided the tangled weeds and the clutch of anything that might drag her down.

Salter was lying in the grass, his dirt-smudged face propped on his elbows.

It hadn't been easy for the river boy to leave London or his beloved shack on the banks of the Thames. It had been his home, where he'd fished and thieved and managed to stay warm, winter after winter. But from the moment he'd first hauled a near-drowned Moss into his boat, their lives had changed. Though he would never admit it, they now had something that neither of them wanted to lose.

They were friends.

He was watching her now.

'Do you have to go right to the middle?' he called. 'Those great hooves'll scare the fish all the way to Silbury!'

'Don't worry about me, Smudgeface!'

‘I ain’t worried about you! I’m fishin later. Just don’t want me catch driven away that’s all.’

Moss grinned. ‘Well, catch this, fisher boy!’ She ducked under and swam to the bank, bobbing up in front of Salter’s face with a splash.

‘See.’

‘I don’t see nothin.’

‘I can swim, or hadn’t you noticed?’

She could see his smile coming. A little crows-foot crinkle in the corner of his eyes. She flipped a handful of water at his face and ducked back down, kicking strong strokes back out into the river. But when her head broke the surface, Salter wasn’t looking at her any more. He was staring downriver.

‘Hey!’ she called, ‘Come on in!’

He stood up, still peering into the distance.

‘What is it?’ she said.

‘Dunno.’

Moss waded a few paces to the middle of the river where she had a clear view past the bend. She screwed up her eyes and stared.

There *was* something.

A dark ripple, moving slowly towards her. In front of it, specks of silver darted from the river to the bank, lightning quick, threading the grass with a shining mesh.

‘What is that?’ said Moss.

Salter squinted into the sunlight. ‘Pope’s earholes! It’s the fish!’

‘Fish?’

‘The fish are jumpin. Out of the river.’

Moss stared at the bizarre sight before her. Salter was right. Driven forward by the dark ripple in the water, the fish seemed to be panicking. Leaping high out of the river and throwing themselves on to the banks. Landing in a silver heap where they gasped and jerked, helpless in the grass. She watched, mesmerised by the jumping fish and by the strange shape behind them, getting closer and closer.

‘Fish leapin to their deaths . . .’ Salter was shaking his head. ‘Ain’t never seen nothin like it.’

‘It’s like they can’t stand to be in the water,’ said

Moss. 'Like they can't get out fast enough.'

Salter jumped, as though someone had whacked the back of his head.

'Get out of the water. *Now!*'

'What?'

'Don't argue, Leatherboots! Do as I say. Quick!'

Moss dived down again, her arms pulling against the current. But something was wrong. She'd hardly moved.

'Swim!' Salter's muffled voice yelled above her.

There was a splash. Salter was still shouting. 'I'm comin! Keep swimmin, Leatherboots! Don't stop!'

All at once Moss's eyes filled with silt. She spluttered to the surface and saw Salter in the river, staggering towards her. The water was thickening with mud. It pressed in on her body, slowing her arms and legs. She tried to reach down with her feet to touch the solid river bed, but it was gone. In its place was shifting mud that oozed between her toes. All around her, the river was brown and choking, a muddy rag stuffed down its throat.

‘Don’t stop!’ Salter was still yelling, ‘Keep goin!’

But her feet wouldn’t move. The mud gripped her, warm and sticky, holding her fast.

‘Salter! I’m stuck!’

‘Wait!’ He lunged forward, arm outstretched. As if in some slow dream, Moss watched the water drag him under.

‘SALTER!’

He was gone.

Now the mud beneath her began to tug at her feet. Sucking her down. Inch by inch. And the more she thrashed, the deeper she sank. Her flailing arms beat the surface to brown froth as her head was pulled slowly under.

Something brushed against her body. Through the stew of water she saw lashing fronds of water crowfoot, felt it against her legs, coiling and tightening. But instead of dragging her further down, the crowfoot seemed to be pulling upwards, as though trying to free her from the mud. Then a mighty rush of current snatched her up and she

felt herself bowl over and over until all at once it stopped. Her feet found the stony river bed and she pushed with all the force she could muster, exploding to the surface in choking breaths.

On the opposite side of the river, Salter was heaving himself towards the bank.

The mud had gone. The water was clear, the crowfoot swaying gently, great, trailing tendrils, stretching towards her. She kicked out for the bank and the crowfoot seemed to pull back. But as it did, a shadow curled underneath. Too big for a fish.

For a flit of a second, the shadow showed itself. In the tangle of weeds.

What she saw almost stopped her heart.

A hand. Then a face. Then it was gone.

Moss dived back into the river, floundering through the weed, dragging it out in great clumps, pulling it apart.

Nothing. The shadow had vanished, and with it, the face.

It was a face she'd never seen before. Yet it was

familiar. Green eyes, a tangle of hair. So like her  
own. But older, sadder.

She couldn't be sure. She'd never seen her.

Her mother's face.