

THE RIVER SIREN

PART ONE

“COME ON YOU maggots. I don’t have all day. Get the ship loaded. We have work to do.”

Roark grunted at the first mate’s command.

First would come the warning, and then the whip.

He had bartered away his sentence in exchange for ten years of service upon *The Abundance*, knowing that Captain Todd treated all those under his leadership as little more than slaves. Soldier, steward, deck-boy, or sailor, each man was expected to pull his own weight, and that weight went towards whatever Todd wanted done in a particular moment.

There were fifteen sailors on the ship, a relatively small crew, but it was a smaller vessel. It had to be, for they travelled down rivers and not upon the open seas. Ten soldiers were outfitted to the ship. At most, twenty-eight men were ever onboard the vessel, and of those twenty-eight, only one was ever safe from the captain’s lash – and that was the captain himself.

Roark hefted the sack onto his shoulders – grain holdings, purchased from the local tribes to be hauled down stream – and made his steady march up the gang plank and to the bowels of the ship where stores were held. The ladder he descended was rickety, but he managed. The planks of the ship’s boards needed a good scrubbing, but the cabin-boy had been sick recently, and no sailor would do such menial work until there was no other choice but swab or suffer.

One of the men would be mopping come morning, he had no doubt of that.

With a loud groan, Roark heaved the sack from his shoulders to its place beside the other mealy grain pouches on the floor. There were at least seventeen more such bags waiting above ground to be loaded up before the day was done and he could finally take some rest.

Ten years he had signed away.

He’d served nearly the entire term, only a few months left before he was free to return to London and the family he’d left behind – his shame. No one would claim him, of that he was sure, when he stood upon the banks of the Thames and stared out at the city he’d outcast himself from.

Mayhap his crime would be forgotten, his name cleared of wrong doing as his magister had promised it would be by the time he’d served his sentence.

Wouldn’t that be a thing of luck?

For himself and his father who had turned his back and swore he had no son.

Roark stretched, arching backwards to work out the kinks in his spine.

Thirty-five years old, and he was as tired and achy as a grandfather hard off the line.

He moved to the side as Aeolus trudged past him, nodding in greeting, too winded for words, shoulders laden down as Roark's had been. Another trip to the deck, and another trip down the ladder. If nothing else, life here became routine, and he didn't have to think or remember what he had done or why he was here in the first place.

HE STARED AT himself in the mirror, the fine cut of his navy velvet doublet and crisp white shirt glowed against his polished skin. Aristocracy was always polished and poised. He'd never spent a day working beneath the sun. The most hazardous of his activities was riding around the park with others of his class, trying to entice the young ladies walking the paths to take a second look at their striking figures.

And she had.

Amelia Rothschild.

God, was she lovely. The most lovely lady of all London.

Her dance cards were full before she ever reached the balls. Suitors came from near and far wanting to court her hand. She was the desire of every man in England, and she had taken a second look at him.

It had been his honor to tip his hat and answer the unspoken summons to her side.

"My lady."

"My lord."

She danced with him at every ball, full card or not, and he offered her glasses of wine and delicate canapes for her to snack upon.

He fancied himself in love with her.

He would have done anything to have her to wife, foregoing the betrothal his father signed to sneak to her house in the dead of night, tossing rocks against her window to beg her to run away with him.

"To Gretna Green. We'll be man and wife before anyone can say aught against us."

She was the most delicate of flowers.

He said he would catch her when she climbed from her window to meet with him upon the grass below.

It was where her mother found them, Amelia's hair bloodied from where she'd fallen, his hands red from trying to staunch the wound.

The old woman called him murderer.

Murderer!

There was too much blood to deny the same.

THE BARRELS OF wine would have to wait until morning to be tied to the crane and moved into the hold. Darkness fell quickly upon the Amazon, and no one would dare risk the river's wrath by trying to beard its monsters during the night.

A silly superstition, the Captain said their first day upon the waters.

They had set into port and were unloading supplies when night came, and the town went quiet.

Only Todd's barking could be heard through the dense foliage, and the men had looked at one another, wondering at the sudden chill in the air.

Roark was not sure that it was truly something.

Bad luck took many forms, but a river god or a river monster, or whatever nonsense the townsfolk bemoaned, meant little to an educated man. But the crane had broken, the ropes holding the pallet of gun powder kegs tipped and fell.

One man was crushed beneath the heavy casks.

Roark was struck in the shoulder by another, but dove clear of death, watching as the heavy wooden barrel landed on the deck and crashed through the flooring.

That it had not broken the hull was a blessing.

That only the two barrels were lost, and only one man, was the Captain's displeasure, and he did not try to hide it from the crew.

Make up the time and make up the labor.

It was only an accident after all.

But *only an accident* happens once.

Three more nights in three more ports and five more men lost to tragedy...even Todd began to look scared at the coming of the dark.

ROARK STOOD AT the rail of the ship and looked out over the bustling settlement they'd stopped in. His fellow sailors had hunted down quarters for the night; the single women of the village plied an age-old trade that the men were only too willing to take advantage of. A few of the soldiers were relegated to night watch, but most had already traveled inland, away from the rocking of the ship at dock for the evening.

Roark remained where he was.

There was nothing here he could content himself with, not when the woman he wanted was gone.

A small penance to pay for the ending of her life too quickly.

HER NIGHTDRESS BLEW in pale shadows with the wind against the railing of her bedroom. The iron bars caught at the gown as she held on, staring down at him below, a smile on her face, barely a storey between them.

She stretched her arms wide.

Her foot slipped on the stone balcony.

The jump she'd been about to make became a fall, her body tilting sideways, hands scrambling at the railing, her head striking the platform with a heavy thud as he lunged to catch her from below.

His fingers shook with her blood on them. Her face was so pale.

Roark cupped her cheek, but there were no roses in her flesh, no rise and fall of her breast where he held her to him...

HE WATCHED A young woman emerge from the tree line that surrounded the town. She was dressed simply, her garments dark, their color indiscernible in the moonlight, though she walked with a purpose all too clear to guess at.

He shook his head.

The woman looked young from his distant vantage. But a few English or Greek or German coins went far in this area.

She'd make a good profit for the night, if she was smart.

A hand landed against his shoulder and Roark jerked from his staring to look at the man who had come upon him unawares.

He smiled at the sailor, the dark brown eyes glinting with mischief that never dimmed despite their constant toil.

“I thought you were out in the city taking your leisure.”

Aeolus grinned. “And leave you here alone unchaperoned? Would I do that to you, Brother?”

Roark shook his head.

For whatever reason, the other man had taken to him from the start.

It might well have to do with their shared circumstances. Aeolus running from Greece as he ran from England, the lawman’s gavel waiting to ring them home should they return, debts unpaid. Brothers, and it was good to have found someone to call kin here when all of his had turned their back on him at his trial.

“I need no governess, mate.”

“Everyone needs a governess, Roark.” The man waggled his eyebrows, and it was not what Roark had meant with his statement, but it was what the man would interpret it as just the same.

“You’re a right git sometimes.”

“Eh, you’re just jealous because I’ve found someone to warm my cot at the last three ports while yours remains empty.” The hand was back at Roark’s shoulder, the drunken grip strong despite the alcohol on the sailor’s breath.

Company or not, companion or not, Aeolus always had some sort of wine or spirit in his hand, ready to liberate a head too prone to thought when not sloshed.

“It would go better for you if you strayed to the streets, Roark. Women do not like the boats. They say the water is cursed and will not touch it if they can help it.”

Roark snorted, an undignified sound that clashed with the croaking of frogs and the roar of other beasts stalking the woods. “Another curse to be wary of? What is this one now? Must not work after dark or the river gods will get you. Must not touch the Thames lest its goddess pull you under?”

“Amazon, mate. We are not in your London anymore.”

No, they sadly were not.

Something he could not forget.

“That one was pretty enough, and you watched her for a time. You should go down and see if you can find her out. I bet she’d be willing to spread her legs for an honest sailor such as you.”

He turned to stare out over the communal yard before the village, see if he could spy where the woman had disappeared to, catch the hint of her dress disappearing through a door.

He wouldn’t chase her or hunt her down.

The desire wasn’t in him like it was in Aeolus and the other men. He liked to think that he’d been a good one, before everything happened back at home. Roark liked to think that he was honorable, and honest, and true.

“You said there was a new curse upon the water. What is it now?”

Aeolus laughed, slapped Roark on the back before leaning against the rail, side by side. They stared over the encampment together, at the bonfire glowing brightly at the center of the houses, at the candles that went dark one by one as the night wore on. “They say that there has been bad blood between the villages and the sailors. That we’ve neglected our hosts and not given the proper respect to those who comfort us. There is a legend that the goddess of these rivers does not take kindly to men in general, but especially men who do wrong to those under her blessing.”

“Like men who work when the time for work should be done for the day?”

“Aye, like them.”

“It’s just bad luck, Aeolus. There are no such things as gods and curses and legends and myths.”

“Maybe not in England, Brother, but in the Amazon, there is room for all sorts of things.”