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Opening extract from
Song of the Current

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CHAPTER ONE



There is a god at the bottom of the river.

Some folks will tell you that's just a story. But us wherry folk know different. When the reeds along the banks whisper that a squall is rushing across the marshland, we listen. When the tide flows up from the sea, flooding the river with muddy brown water, we know enough to watch.

The god in the river speaks to us in the language of small things.

That's how my father knew something was wrong even before we rounded the bend into Hespera's Watch.

"Caro, take the tiller." Pa leaned over the stern to dip his hand in the river.

Our wherry was loaded up with timber for the lumberyard in

Siscema. The boat rode low in the water, so he had no trouble reaching the surface. A tiny wake curled after his fingers, forming a wobbly line of bubbles. The sun had disappeared below the moss-draped trees, and the river grew stiller by the moment.

He pulled his hand back as if it had been stung.

I sat up straight. "What was that?"

"I don't rightly know." He looked as if he wanted to say more, but he only added, "He's unsettled tonight."

He meant the god in the river. Everyone knows it can be bad luck—even dangerous—to speak of a god by name. The wherry-men usually call him the Old Man.

"Fire," whispered Fee. The frogmen aren't a people of many words.

Pa turned to her. "You feel it too?"

Fee perched on *Cormorant's* cabin roof, her webbed toes spread out upon the planks. Her skin was the slick greenish-brown of a river bullfrog. With yellow eyes that protruded from a bulbous forehead, she stared unblinking at the water. The hem of her linen dress was shredded, threads trailing away behind her.

It's said that many thousands of years ago, time out of mind, the god in the river fell in love with a sailor's daughter. Their children became the frogmen. The land folks wrinkle their noses and call them dirty, but inlanders are ignorant about many such things.

I sniffed. "I don't smell any smoke."

As I spoke, the wind shifted and an acrid smell poisoned the air. Any moment now we would come into sight of Hespera's Watch, the first town south of the Akhaian border. I gripped the tiller so tightly my knuckles turned pale.

Cormorant's stiff black sail swung halfway out on the starboard side. The heat of the day still warmed her planks, though the sun was gone. I spread the fingers of my free hand upon the decking, as if peace could somehow seep from her into me.

The god in the river doesn't speak to me like he does to Pa. Not yet. "The day your fate comes for you, you'll know," Pa always tells me. "The way I knew when it came for me."

Well, it seems to me my fate might hurry up a little. Pa was fifteen when the god in the river first whispered his name. I'm two years older, and I've yet to hear anything. But I keep my ears open, because I'll inherit *Cormorant* someday. Eight generations of Oresteia captains have plied their trade on these rivers. All of them were favored by the god.

We slipped onward through the shadowy water. The trees fell away, and the port of Hespera's Watch was before us. Or would have been.

"Xanto's balls!" I swore, my eyes stinging. I grabbed the sleeve of my sweater, holding it over my face.

Smoke poured from the warehouse roofs. The masts of sunken ships stuck up like dead tree trunks in the ugliest, most desolate swamp. This part of the river wasn't deep, so a few of the wherries were sunk only to their cabin tops. One had been ready to sail—the gaff and boom floated, sail billowing between them, under the surface. It looked like the dress of a drowned woman. Coals smoldered orange on the blackened posts, and bits of ash drifted on the air. The docks were gone.

"Those wherries—" Dry coughs racked me. I returned the sweater to my mouth and drew in a blessedly clean breath that

tasted of yarn. No matter how I squinted at the wreckage, I was unable to make out any of the boats' names. "Pa, those wherries don't belong to anyone we know, do they?"

Cormorant's sail gave an angry clap, making me jump. In my shock, I'd loosened my grip on the tiller. I tore my gaze away from the debris, hastily straightening our course.

Pa hadn't even noticed my steering lapse, which wasn't like him at all. "Give the dock a wide berth." He squeezed my shoulder. "We don't want to run up on any wreckage. Find a spot on the bank, near to the road as you can get, and head up into the wind."

"We're anchoring?" My mind leaped to our second cargo, the crate of muskets roped to the deck and surreptitiously covered by a tarp. We never stopped in towns when we were smuggling. "I thought we were making for Heron Water."

Pa rubbed the stubble on his chin, surveying the ruins. "A wherryman always helps a wherryman in need."

The sight of those lonely wrecks made my skin crawl. Where had all the people gone? I didn't need the god in the river to know something was very wrong.

Pa and Fee went forward to drop the sail. Pushing the tiller over, I steered *Cormorant* in a slow arc until her blunt white-painted nose pointed into the wind. She inched through the water, easing to a stop. Pa paid out the anchor rope, and we went about our ordinary tasks of stowing and settling the wherry.

Smoke permeated the air belowdecks, making the cabin seem even more cramped and close than usual. Pa shrugged on his good wool overcoat, arranging the collar so it fell just right. His somber

manner heightened my worry. He only wore that coat to temple, or to pretend he hadn't drunk too much the previous night.

Candlelight flashed on something metal at his waist—his best flintlock pistol.

I paused with my hand on the locker door. "Weapons, then?"

"Better safe than sorry," he said gruffly.

I grabbed my leather-sheathed knife from the locker. Stuffing it in my pocket, I bounded up the cabin steps.

We rowed the dinghy ashore and walked into town, our footsteps scraping the gravel road. It was the only sound but for the mournful murmur of reeds along the riverbank. Pa kept glancing apprehensively at the river. Fee's head was cocked toward the water, listening with that elusive sixth sense I would've given anything to possess.

I swallowed down my envy, goose bumps prickling my arms. It was spring in the riverlands, and the temperature still dropped after sundown, but the chill I felt was mostly inside me. Why hadn't the god in the river protected the wherryman whose ship had been sunk? And what did Pa and Fee know that they weren't telling me?

We found the dock inspector standing beside a pile of crates, surveying the docks with reddened eyes. From the haphazard way the boxes were stacked, it seemed they'd managed to salvage at least some of the cargo from the fire.

"You're a lucky man, Nick," he greeted Pa, as they clasped hands. "If you'd a been here two hours ago, I reckon that'd be your boat at the bottom of the river. Ayah, along with the rest."

Pa kept his voice low, out of respect. "What happened?"

“Eleven wherries sunk.” Smoke trailed in a thin curl from the dock inspector’s pipe. His voice was calm enough, but I noticed his hand trembled. “The ship come down from Akhaia. *Victorianos*.”

“The name don’t strike a bell,” Pa said.

“She were a cutter. Speedy looking, with six four-pounders. They had ’em loaded with fire rockets.”

I glanced up the river, almost expecting to see the ghost of the cutter rounding the bend. There was nothing but the trees’ dark shadows, lengthening across the water. Looking at the charred masts, a pang of loss pierced me. Wherries weren’t just cargo ships. They had personalities. They were homes.

I turned back to the dock inspector. “A cutter like that is wasted on this part of the riverlands,” I said. “She can’t use her speed proper with all these twists and turns, and her keel’s too deep to get into the best hidey-holes. She belongs on the sea. What were they doing up here?”

“Trying to destroy the docks?” Pa asked. “Or one of the warehouses?”

The man shook his head in bewilderment. “Far’s I can tell, neither. They aimed at the wherries first. Three of ’em were loading. The cargo all went up. Then the docks caught, and the fire spread to the first warehouse. We managed to get a bucket line going, but two boys were badly burned fighting the fire.” He gestured at the stack of crates. “This is all that’s left of the cargo.”

The dock inspector looked so solemn, I knew there was more.

“How many killed?” Pa asked softly.

“Only two. The Singers were asleep aboard *Jenny*.”

“Current carry them.” Pa pulled off his woolen cap, smoothing back red hair streaked with silver.

“Current carry them,” I echoed in a whisper, clenching my hands into fists. The ragged edge of one bitten nail dug into my palm. I couldn’t imagine who would do something like this. The burned skeletons of the wherries poked out of the still water, where several wooden casks and crates bobbed.

We had anchored in a graveyard.

“Hair like weeds,” Fee whispered, swiveling her eyes toward the dark water.

Before I had a chance to ask what she meant, a voice sounded behind us. “Nicandros Oresteia, captain of the wherry *Cormorant*?”

I wheeled around. An army officer stood on the dock, his knee-length blue coat covered in road dust. He was lit from the back by the last rays of the setting sun, so I couldn’t see his face.

Pa and I exchanged glances. My pulse fluttered nervously.

The man spoke again, his voice carrying across the water. “I’m looking for the captain of the river wherry *Cormorant*.”

Pa slowly turned. “I’m him.”

“By command of the Margravina of Kynthessa, I’ll need you to come with me now.”

I sucked in a sharp breath. He wore a longsword and two pistols. He had drawn none of the weapons, but he didn’t have to. They were easily visible on his belt, a silent threat.

“Really,” Pa said, equal notes of teasing and disbelief in his voice. “Didn’t think the Margravina knew my name to command me. We ain’t acquainted.”

Slowly I moved my hand, the one the commander couldn't see, toward my pocket, where my knife was stashed. I'd grown up on tales of Oresteias making mad, reckless escapes from men in uniform. I was ready.

Pa shook his head at me, and I paused, my hand hovering.

"I am Commander Keros," the stranger said, "of the Margravina's Third Company. I'm authorized to speak as her voice, as I'm sure you well know. Will you be so obliging as to come along with me to the harbor master's office?"

Then soldiers marched onto the dock behind him, and I knew he wasn't asking.

I spoke up. "You don't really think *we* had anything to do with this."

"Of course not, girl." The commander glanced at me the same way I might look at a minnow or an ant. He directed his words to my father. "I have an offer I wish to discuss with you, Captain. In private."

"But I'm—" I started.

Pa jerked his head toward town. "Go up to the Spar and Splice, Caro. I'll meet you there."

Before I had a chance to protest, they whisked him up the blackened cobbles, pressed between the commander and the soldiers. I wasn't fooled by his casual saunter. His shoulders were stiff as he burrowed his hands into the pockets of his overcoat.

I watched until my father was out of sight. It had happened so fast. My fingers twitched, brushing the outline of my hidden knife. They'd let him keep his pistol, I reminded myself. He couldn't be in *that* much danger.

“Well,” I said to Fee, then grimaced. I’d intended to sound confident, but it had come out as almost a shout. “Let’s go.”

Hespera’s Watch had but one tavern, the Spar and Splice. Its roof tiles were singed, but it was otherwise undamaged by the fire. I took the steps two at a time, barging through the door. Fee padded along behind me, her knobby elbows gleaming green in the lamplight.

A floorboard creaked under my battered canvas deck shoe. I glanced down, and realized I stood in a puddle of water. It trailed down the hall, staining the planks and soaking the woven rug.

Light flickered from an open door. I heard hushed voices, both male and female. Curiosity pulling me closer, I peeked into the room. Something long and lumpy was laid out on a bed, shrouded in a wet linen sheet. At first I didn’t realize what I was seeing, until my gaze fixed on the boots sticking out from under the sheet.

I swallowed. I’d only known the Singers to shout hello to. Mrs. Singer had had lovely hair, long and straight. It spilled out from under the sheet now, like a black jumble of eels, drip, drip, dripping.

Hair like weeds. Remembering Fee’s cryptic words, I pictured Mrs. Singer’s hair tangled with the slimy green reeds at the bottom of the river, drifting in the murky current.

A shiver went through me.

Averting my eyes from the bodies, I stumbled down the hall to the barroom. I’d never seen a dead person before. My heart hammered in panic. *Stupid.* It was stupid to be afraid. Corpses couldn’t hurt anyone.

Fee touched my shoulder. “Strong.”

I nodded, inhaling deeply to steady my nerves.

Tension lay over the crowd in the barroom like a held breath. People huddled and whispered in small groups, occasionally slamming mugs on the bar. I could almost smell the shock and anger above the stale scent of spilled beer. There were many women, and one small boy, who stared with saucer-shaped eyes as his mother held on to his collar. It was not uncommon for wherrymen to sail with their families aboard. Two frogmen sat at a corner table, mottled heads leaning together as they croaked in their own language. On any other night, Fee would have hopped over to join them. Tonight, she only stepped protectively closer to me, her wary gaze darting around the barroom.

Someone whistled. “Ain’t you Nick’s girl?”

Thisbe Brixton was in her thirties, with a thick blond braid down her back and a tattoo of a serpent winding around her forearm. The sun had bleached the hairs on her arms white and creased the skin at the edges of her eyes. I was momentarily overwhelmed with relief to see someone I knew—until it hit me that Captain Brixton’s wherry must be among the sunken boats.

I elbowed my way to the bar. “Why are there soldiers here?”

“Don’t know.” She beckoned the bartender over and ordered two mugs of the strong dark beer they favored in the northern riverlands. “They arrived right before you did.”

“They wanted to talk to Pa.” My voice sounded hollow. I was shaken, still remembering the disconcerting stillness of the dead bodies and the brusque way the soldiers had hauled my father away. “Said it was about a job.”

From the red rims of Captain Brixton's eyes, I could tell she had been crying. "I don't like any of this," she muttered.

I curled my hand around the cool mug. Despite the horrible circumstances, I couldn't help feeling pleased she thought me old enough to order a drink. I'd always admired Captain Brixton. Her wherry was one of the few crewed only by women, and she carried the prettiest pistol I'd ever seen, engraved with a pattern of swirls and flowers.

"Thank the gods your pa's here," she said. "We're putting together a crew to hunt down those bastards what did for the Singers."

The old man beside her shook his head. "We are *not*."

"Oh, stuff it, Perry. The time to act is now." She banged a fist on the bar, setting the mugs clattering.

If someone sunk *Cormorant*, I reckon I'd be raging to charge off and fight too, four-pound cannons be damned. Something like excitement stirred recklessly inside me. I shoved it down. People were dead. Pa was in trouble.

I turned to the old man. "Your wherry too?"

"Ayah," he said, "though we fought like hell to save her."

I couldn't believe he'd lost *Jolly Girl*. Captain Perry Krantor had been sailing her since before Pa was born. She was a lovely old boat, with a cheery red-painted deck and a weather vane at the top of the mast carved like a windmill. As for the captain himself, he'd been a friend of my grandpa. It was too awful to take in.

"Was the damage bad?" I asked. "Can she be raised?"

"Bless you, Caro," he said, and my heart ached at the way his

sun-spotted hands trembled around his mug. “I don’t know as she’s a total loss, but that’ll be for the assessor to decide. And the salvagers. We sent off a runner to Siscema. On a gods-bedamned *horse*.” He twisted his lip to show what he thought of a wherryman stooping to send word by road. “Not a boat left bigger than a dory.”

I suddenly saw *Jolly Girl*’s weather vane, warped and blackened, paint curling from the heat of the fire. My fingernails bit into my palm.

“Reckon you and your pa don’t get down south much these days, eh?” Captain Brixton said. “Well, I do. Heard of this *Victorianos*. Her master is Diric Melanos, and we all know who that black-guard runs with.” She spat on the floor.

I didn’t know. She was right—we didn’t get down south much.

Seeing the question in my eyes, she leaned in close. “The Black Dogs.”

“Black Dogs?” My head shot up. “This far up the river?”

Everyone knew to steer clear of the Black Dogs, an Akhaian mercenary crew—pirates, really—whose fast ships terrorized the Neck, the long saltwater bay in the southern riverlands. Now I knew why Captain Krantor wasn’t keen on putting together a crew. Standing against the Black Dogs was a good way to get yourself dead.

“Pirates,” hissed Fee. She dipped a long green finger into her beer and pulled it out again, examining the bubbles on her fingertip. Captain Brixton paid this no mind. Wherry captains were used to the frogmen’s odd mannerisms.

“There’s something gods-cursedly fishy about this whole

business. They didn't even take nothing." Captain Brixton took a big pull from her half-empty mug. "First Black Dogs, and now soldiers."

"You ought to slow down, is what," Captain Krantor told her.

"And you ought to mind your own business, old man."

I pushed my beer away, untouched. If pirates had set fire to those wherries, they might attack others. My thoughts leaped to *Cormorant*, anchored alone and unprotected out there on the river. Those pirates hadn't been looking to capture prizes or coin. Their purpose was to destroy, and with six cannons they were well equipped to do it.

"Black Dogs." My throat was hoarse. "I have to tell Pa."



CHAPTER TWO



Only one guard was posted outside the harbor master's office. Not much older than me, he slouched on a bench on the porch, picking at a hangnail. I strode past him.

"Hey!" he cried belatedly, leaping to his feet with an armored clatter. "You're not supposed to—"

I banged through the screen door. "Pa!" I gasped, out of breath. "It's the Black Dogs."

Pa sat in a spindly-legged chair, arguing with the harbor master across a cluttered desk. "Now look here, Jack—" He broke off, turning at the sound of my voice. "What?"

Commander Keros stood behind the harbor master, arms folded. The last of the sunset slanted in through the blinds, lighting up dust motes on the air and sparkling on his sword hilt. The

office was lined with glass-fronted cabinets stuffed with curios from around the riverlands.

“I—I heard the news in the tavern,” I stammered, suddenly embarrassed by the weight of the strangers’ eyes on me. “Captain Brixton says the ship belonged to Diric Melanos.”

Pa’s head snapped up. He recognized the name even if I didn’t.

The commander’s mouth tightened. “A fish story from a bunch of wherrymen. They don’t know what they’re talking about.”

I heard the scuff of heavy boots behind me. Two soldiers stood on either side of the door. Startled, I stepped back, bumping the glass cabinet and causing the articles inside to shift with a rattle.

“Those wherrymen are my friends.” Pa cut a grand figure with his long red hair and his shirt laid casually open at the collar, exposing the faded tattoos on his chest. “I trust them more than I trust the likes of you.”

Commander Keros turned to me. “What do you mean barging in here, girl? This is a private meeting.”

Pa sat up straight. “Whatever it is you have to say to me, my daughter can hear it.”

“This girl is your daughter?” The commander studied me in a way I was, unfortunately, plenty familiar with. I tried to ignore the prickly feeling as his eyes crawled over me.

My mother resembled a classical bronze statue, tall and stern. She gave me her brown skin and long, slender neck, but the freckles and the auburn shade of my tightly coiled curls came from my father. In the coastal cities, it’s common to see folk with mixed heritage. But in the inner riverlands, especially here, near the

Akhaian border, my appearance stuck out. The commander looked back and forth between the two of us, like we were a puzzle to be figured out.

Pa ignored him. “Melanos and the Black Dogs, this far north?” He shook his head. “It don’t make sense.”

Drawing a rolled-up parchment from inside his coat, the commander tapped it in his palm. “As I was saying, Captain Oresteia, there is a certain . . . shipment . . . resting in the warehouse. We want you to deliver it to Valonikos.”

The Free City of Valonikos, an independent city-state to the northeast, was a week’s journey by wherry. I was familiar with the run, which traversed two different rivers, but it wasn’t one we made very often. Pa preferred to work the route between Trikaia and Iantiporos. The money was better.

“That’s the pitch?” Pa’s eyes flashed with anger. “That’s all you got to say? Looks to me like eleven friends of mine got burned out because the Black Dogs were looking for this shipment of yours. Didn’t expect me to put two and two together and make four, did you now?”

It was the harbor master who spoke. “Run the shipment to Valonikos, and the smuggling charges go away. It’s the best deal I’m prepared to—”

“What charges?” I interrupted. “What’s going on?”

The harbor master narrowed his eyes. “Don’t bother playing innocent. That crate you’re hauling is filled with muskets and enough shot to make trouble.”

Smuggling was a time-honored tradition in the riverlands. We dabbled in it, as did plenty of other wherries. Certain men would

pay good coin to have an undocumented cargo transported across the border, no questions asked. It wasn't as if those muskets were going into the hands of criminals—their destination was a group of Akhaian rebels, exiled from their country for printing a pamphlet the Emparch hadn't liked. Pa had a soft spot for them, and often smuggled them supplies and packets of letters from their homeland.

"How do you know about—" Cheeks flaming, I balled my hands into fists.

Of course. While Fee and I were in the Spar and Splice, the commander's men had been stomping their muddy boots all over *Cormorant*. They had no right to board our wherry without permission.

Pa's face was tight around the jaw. "Maybe I broke some rules with those crates, Jack," he said. "But you be breaking some yourself with that search and seizure."

I stepped forward. "This is blackmail."

Commander Keros ignored me. "Captain Oresteia, I'm prepared to give you a letter of marque," he said. "Authorizing you to use any and all force necessary to get that shipment up to Valonikos."

"A letter of marque?" Pa's voice curled up.

"Ahem." The harbor master turned red around the edges. "The fact is, you are the only ship in Hespera's Watch that wasn't destroyed by the fire."

"Begging your pardon, Jack, but *Cormorant* is a wherry. We're equipped to haul cargo. How d'you want me to stay clear of the Black Dogs? Outrun 'em? Such an endeavor would require

more speed than we have. Not wishing to be impolite, of course. But you catch my meaning.”

“I think I know what a wherry is, thanks, Nick.”

My curiosity getting the better of me, I turned to the harbor master. “What’s the cargo?”

It had to be something important. Something dangerous. Why else would the Black Dogs leave their territory in the southern waters to come all the way up here? And why would the commander go to all this trouble, searching our wherry and trying to intimidate us with soldiers?

The harbor master shuffled his sheaf of papers. “I can’t say.”

“Then I can’t run it to Valonikos. Caro’s right.” Pa flicked the papers. “You ain’t meaning for us to have a choice, are you? It’s bad of you, Jack.” He looked at the harbor master. “How long you been knowing my father?”

“Your father would never have touched them smuggled guns, an’ you know it.”

Pa laughed. “I know my father was very good at what he did. I’ll say no more than that.”

I bit back a smile. My grandpa had been a notorious smuggler, but of course the harbor master had never caught him.

The harbor master’s lips pulled to one side. I could see Pa hadn’t exactly endeared himself with that comment. “You’ll take this crate to Valonikos.”

Pa could handle old Jack. It was the commander I was worried about. He had the air of a man not used to being denied.

“I’ve already got a cargo,” Pa said evenly. “Got a full load of

timber for Siscema. Or have you confiscated that as well? You won't, for you haven't got the crane and levers to unload it, not with the docks in ashes. Nor have you the right. The paperwork on that timber is in perfect order." He tapped the table. "As for this crate of yours, maybe a few years ago. Not now. I got my daughter with me, Jack."

I bristled at that. Pa always talked about the Oresteias' proud history as smugglers and cannon dodgers and scalawags. We were the perfect wherry for the commander's cargo run. A tiny thread of indignation twisted in my chest. I couldn't hear the god at the bottom of the river yet, but I reckoned I could throw a knife as well as anyone. I wasn't a child.

"Pa, I think—"

He quelled me with a stern look. "Fraid it's a no go. I don't deliver cargo unless I know what it is, especially something that brings danger to me and my crew. You want someone who'll take your coin in the blink of an eye with no questions, you ought to talk to Bollard Company."

The Bollards were a powerful merchant family with a reputation for being somewhat ruthless. I reckoned they could afford to take on a contract like this—they had buckets of money and owned dozens of ships. More importantly, they had cannons.

Pa's grip tightened on the arms of the chair. "I'm a free wherryman," he said, and I knew he was preparing to stand up and leave. "I don't have to run your errands for you."

The commander smiled. "I'm sorry to hear that."

The soldiers seized Pa's arms, dragging him up out of the chair,

which toppled with a bang. He kicked the shortest man, attempting to sweep his legs out from under him. But he might as well have been trying to knock over a tree.

“Pa!” I lunged forward, my hand hovering over the hilt of my knife.

My father jerked in the hold of the soldiers, his muscles straining. He blew strands of hair out of his reddened face. “Caro! Stay out of it!”

The commander waved to his men.

“It’s too bad we couldn’t come to an arrangement,” he said calmly as they shoved Pa out the door. “But fortunately there are eleven wherryman in the Spar and Splice who currently find themselves without wherries. One of them will agree.”

“No!” My voice cracked. The idea of someone besides us sailing *Cormorant* made me sick. She was our home. “You can’t! She’s *ours*.” My mind raced with all the things that could go wrong. The Black Dogs might sink her. I might never see her again.

The commander turned to me. “What’s your name, girl?”

“Caroline.” I glared fire at him. If he called me “girl” one more time . . .

“Put that knife away, Caroline.”

I stared down at my hands in surprise. I hadn’t realized I’d unsheathed the blade. Everything had happened so fast. My shock was so great, I stepped backward. My legs hit the chair, and I dropped into it.

A commander of the Margravina’s army. And I’d pulled a knife on him.

But he didn't seem as if he was about to hang me. Or arrest me. Indeed he did not seem to regard me as a threat at all. The commander glanced in the glass above the harbor master's desk, straightening his uniform coat. He looked almost bored by the proceedings.

Returning the blade to its sheath, I sprang up. "What about my father?"

"Your father will be conveyed to one of the prison ships in Iantiporos." He opened the door. "He will be assigned an advocate, as is his right under the law."

"This isn't fair." I followed him onto the porch. I'd heard gruesome stories of those ships, where hundreds of men lay in chains and filth awaiting trial for crimes against the Margravina. "You had no gods-damned business boarding our wherry without our leave."

"Vulgarity doesn't impress me," the commander said. "I don't tolerate it from my young soldiers, and I don't care for it from you either."

Well, I wasn't one of his soldiers, so he didn't have a say.

The men marched Pa around the corner of the building. Fee jumped off the railing and scrambled after them. As soon as they were out of my sight, a pang of uncertainty pierced me.

The commander was already at the bottom of the porch steps. "What about *Cormorant*?" I called, anger thickening my voice.

"Your wherry is under impoundment. It will be confiscated and put under the control of the harbor master."

A wherry was a "she," not an "it." I burned with resentment. "What about me and Fee? Where are we supposed to go?"

“I’m afraid you’ll have to take that up with your father. It was he who made the choice, not I.”

“You didn’t *give* him any choice.” I jogged to keep up with his long strides.

“I might remind you, Miss Oresteia, that smuggling is a crime in these waters.” He raised his eyebrows. “And since it is perfectly obvious that you and the frogman were complicit, one could say you’re getting off easy.”

“What if I pay the fine?”

He stopped. “Very well.” I could tell from his voice that his temper was growing short. “If you can produce sixty silver talents and pay them to the harbor master, you can have your gods-bedamned father and your gods-bedamned boat.”

He knew I didn’t have that much money. He was toying with me. I swallowed around the bitter lump in my throat.

The commander smirked down at me, as if I were a clump of dirt under his boot. “Good day.”

The beginning of an idea is like the wake behind your boat when you first shove off from the dock, nothing but little bubbles twirling in a lazy circle. But then it deepens and picks up speed, until there’s a frothy white wave trailing away from your stern. My idea started like that—a tiny flicker of bravery that grew.

“Commander Keros!” I ran to catch up. “Wait!”

“What is it now?” he barked, voice crisp and commanding. I realized he’d been holding back before, but now his patience seemed to have worn through.

“I’ll deliver your cargo.” There was no way he couldn’t hear my

heart pounding. “I know the way to Valonikos like the back of my hand,” I said. “And I know *Cormorant*. I’ve been sailing her my whole life. I reckon that makes me a better bet than any of those other captains.” In truth, I wasn’t sure of that at all.

“Well.” The commander’s gaze swept over me. I held my breath. “Then I suppose, Miss Oresteia, we shall need a contract.”

The harbor master looked up from his account books in surprise as we reentered the office. The carpet was still rumpled near the door where my father had fought back against the soldiers. I dragged my eyes away, settling myself stiffly in the chair. Then I remembered how Pa had sprawled, as if he didn’t care. I forced myself to lean back until my shoulder blades touched wood.

The commander drew a fancy piece of parchment from his coat pocket, unrolling it flat on the table. “This is a letter of marque, Miss Oresteia. Do you know exactly what that entails?”

Numbly I shook my head.

“The Margravina is the ruler of Kynthessa—”

“I know that,” I snapped. “I’m not an idiot.”

He went on. “A captain with a letter from the Margravina in her possession cannot be detained or questioned. Anything she does, any action, even murder or an act of piracy, it is understood that she does in the service of the Margravina.” He tapped the parchment. “You’re a privateer now. If anyone gives you trouble, you’re to show them this letter.”

I thought of the Black Dogs, in that cutter with the four-pound cannons. If I showed them a piece of paper, they’d likely

laugh in my face. And then shoot me. But I kept that thought to myself.

“You’ll deliver the crate to the Akhaian Consulate in Valonikos. Upon completion of your contract, you shall be paid ten silver talents.”

Ten silver talents was an incredible sum of money, far more than a cargo of one crate was worth.

“And if I do this,” I said carefully, “if I take this shipment to Valonikos, no questions asked, et cetera, whatever. If I do this, you’ll let Pa go free? Drop all charges?”

“You’re not exactly in a position to bargain here.”

I heard Pa’s voice in the back of my head. *You’re always in a position to bargain. If they think you’re not, all the better. You’ve already got them.* I shrugged. “Fine. I guess we don’t have a deal.”

The commander’s jaw twitched. “This shipment must be on the wherry and out of Hespera’s Watch within the hour, either with you or another captain.”

I gripped the chair arms. “You wouldn’t dare.” But I knew he would. Deep inside me, a small voice wondered if *Cormorant* wouldn’t be safer in the hands of Captain Brixton or Captain Krantor.

“Calm down, Miss Oresteia.” He sighed. “Finding another crew would take time. Attempting to reason with your unreasonable father would, again, take *time*. Time is what I don’t have.”

“Why don’t you take the box yourself, if it’s that important?”

“My men and I are bound across the border for Akhaia,” he

said. "There's . . . unrest in the capital. We go to look out for the Margravina's interests there."

"The box isn't one of her interests?"

"Young lady, we're soldiers, not carters or wherrymen," he said dismissively, as if a carter or a wherryman was a person far beneath the commander of a military company. A person of little consequence. He shrugged. "We all do as we must."

I understood his meaning. He was telling me our conversation was at a close. Now I must do what I must.

"The Margravina wants me in Akhaia, not squandering precious hours in this dirty little town," he said. "Your terms are acceptable. If you deliver the crate to the dock inspector in Valonikos, your father will be a free man. For the time being, he shall remain here in the harbor master's custody."

The harbor master finished scribbling out the contract and blew on the ink to dry it. He offered the sheet of parchment to me. I dragged it across the table.

"Can you write your name?" The commander pressed a pen into my hand.

I glared at him. "Of course I can. I might not be a *commander* in a very fine coat, but I'm not stupid."

From the sharp look he gave me, I knew I had annoyed him. He must have been eager indeed to be rid of me though, because he said nothing.

Pa says you should read every word of a contract at least twice, but the language was flowery and included many clauses that went off on endless tangents. I exhaled. *Calm. Like the river.* I tried to

visualize water flowing peacefully among rocks and reeds, but my emotions were as riotous as ocean breakers. The words swam before me like black spiders on the parchment. I gave up and signed “Caroline Oresteia” next to the *X* at the bottom.

And then it was done.