

Seaborn

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Chapter One

Melth had death on her mind.

Nes squinted through the downpour feeding the muddy torrent storming northward between low, grassy hills thrusting up from both banks. She scarcely recognized either the river or its mood. Foam seething on racing ripples, logs charging downstream like hunters' javelins, water hissing protest against *Riverborn's* hull—oh, yes, placid Melth was growing fractious. Nes laughed a secret laugh as the deck quivered under her bare feet, shivering in rhythm with the booming power of the rising river. Around her the rain pounded small dents into the flood and bounced off the chipped carving of the wooden railings, a glorious assault on everything in sight. It stung her cheeks with its cold fingers and ran in rivulets from the ends of her shoulder-length silver braid, a small flood to match the greater one around her. The one-piece blue iflen she wore, form-fitting and sleeveless, reached only to mid-thigh and was soaked through, shedding rain past her bare knees in myriad runnels. Through their chilly exploration of her toes she could feel the bold restlessness in the water pouring past *Riverborn*, challenging the little ship's right to sully its surface.

Something raked the hull with a shuddering crunch that drew all the hair up on her neck. "Neshuaas!" a deep, angry voice roared behind her. "Pay attention!"

"Aye, Da!" she called back reflexively, shaken. The exultation rooted in awareness of the river's effortless power faded when she glanced over the side and saw a monstrous bare-branched tree spinning away down the current. Nes gulped and wondered how it had failed to stave in *Riverborn's* hull.

We shouldn't be here, came the uneasy thought. Melth in this mood made sailing the maze of the Mother's Hair look easy, and many and many a Water Clan ship had never made its way out of those tangled currents at the bottom of the world.

Light footsteps pattered up the deck behind her. "Nes! That was scary!" Ephep wound his arms around her waist and clung tight.

"Phsh. Scary is when you can see the log from *inside* the hull." She set her arm around his slight shoulders and smiled down into her brother's solemn little face. "*Riverborn's* a brave ship, and Sister Melth's not really angry with us. It be spring, is all, and she be full of herself with all the snow melt."

Ephep peered past the carved wave curling forever over the water as it parted cleanly around the sharp line of *Riverborn's* bow. His grip loosened when no other deadly flotsam seemed to be aiming itself at the ship. Only ten, the youngest of Nes's

Comment [PIR1]: Is this the name of a river? It's a little confusing. First sentence led me to believe Melth was a character in whose POV we are in. Cool if you can pull that off, but if this is Nes' story we need a touch more information in sentence #1 or 2

four siblings, he had never seen a year like this one, so full of roaring rivers and endless rain and water boiling up from the very ground without anyone calling it forth.

But then, no one had, not in two hundred years at least, since the last time anyone had tried to call a season out of its running.

Nes suppressed a shiver of awe lest Ephep think it fear and gave him a brisk squeeze before letting him go. “We be coming to the last bend before Southbridge. You watch to port. I’ll watch to starboard. Four eyes make half the danger, eh?”

Ephep grinned his brilliant grin and squared thin shoulders inside a green iflen he had almost outgrown. “Naught will get past me!”

He hooked an elbow around the faded blue paint of the port rail and leaned over, peering down into the mad race of the current with the unblinking alertness of a raptor selecting its prey. Nes turned her own gaze to the right and the looming cliffs on the east bank, aware of her father’s hard stare on her where he stood on the high steering platform aft. Her back, already stiffly uncompromising, snapped a little straighter. It was hardly her fault that no one had consulted the Water Clans before a handful of Windriders took it upon themselves to overcome Wind’s stubborn refusal to bring winter to the inner plains. They had given Metrenna winter, all right—two solid months of endless snow, and now a wild spring of gales and floods. Nes would have given anything to witness the Storm Council calling Wind to heel—but Da called it irresponsible folly and a menace to trade. It had not, she noted sourly, stopped him pointing *Riverborn* into the flood, expecting Nes to persuade the river to ignore the ship’s intrusion into her tantrum.

I’m not Mama! Why does he expect me to know what she knew? Even Earth Mother herself probably winced from Nes’s fumbling attempts to meld with her father’s talent in the way that Mama had always made look so easy.

“Sentinel ahead!” Rasha sang out from his perch atop *Riverborn*’s single mast. Nes glanced up at her second-youngest brother sitting on the lookout above the furled sail with his bare legs dangling nonchalantly over nothing. He nodded down at her and pointed at the tall finger of black rock thrusting from the middle of the river ahead, marking a sweeping, dangerous eastward curve. The turn into Southbridge was bad any time, flanked by unforgiving cliffs to the east and shallows to the west. Today, with Water in such a mood and the Melth so full of things no self-respecting river should allow, Nes found her secret satisfaction in this magnificent display fading to an uneasy trickle of a thing she refused to ever admit troubled her. She hated fear.

Fear had killed her mother. Fear kept Nes where she didn’t want to be. Fear was a beast lurking like the Ancient, the living fire in the deeps of the earth, waiting its chance to flash out and burn her to ash.

Below her feet, a deep vibration thrummed through the whole ship. Nes tensed under the wordless booming of her father’s voice, which sounded eerily like the flood itself roaring around her. Her feet tingled in rhythm as the boards underfoot quivered and shook. *Riverborn*’s prow angled slightly eastward, closer to the cliffs frowning out of the clouds. Water raced and slapped at the base of the streaming black wall of rock where many an over-confident master had brought his ship to grief trying to claim a

share of the rich trade on the upper Melth. None were about today; only a River Clan ship would dare Melth in her current mood. *And only my da would want to*, Nes thought sourly.

Fear began to creep through her guts in earnest as the cliffs seemed to lunge straight at the impudent ship driving into the current foaming through the only safe channel. Safe, that is, on normal days when the river ran placidly between her banks. Safe only in comparison to the rock-studded shallows on the left or the unforgiving black cliff on the right. A hand's breadth miscalculation to either side and even a clan-built ship would end up as floating splinters. Truly, even *Riverborn* should be tied up somewhere upstream, waiting until the worst of the flood subsided. She carried nothing of value enough this trip to warrant risking the ship and all that remained of the family who crewed her. They had no pressing schedule to keep and nothing awaiting them in Southbridge. This was pure Da, the same arrogant race for reputation that inspired every waking moment of Rhuash ak'Kal's life. Any moment now...

It came, the expected, hated demand curling around her like a drover's lash. "Neshuaas! Coax a little padding up over those rocks!"

A few years ago she would have shouted back, *Coax her yourself!* but a woman of twenty-two no longer had the luxury to act like a child. Not with Ephep clinging to the opposite rail, Seppep and Rasha aloft, and her sister Huath standing in rigid silence by the closed hatchway into the forward hold. She could feel *their* eyes, too, along with a solid weight of expectation pinned on her. Not on Da. Her.

The rocks ahead looked like the giant black teeth of some slaving beast hoping dinner would wander into its jaws. Nes eyed the exposed knobs of black stone only vaguely rounded by untold years of Water's ceaseless caress. A small shiver crept down her back. Containment stone was so dense it could cage even the living fire in the deeps of the earth; it would rip *Riverborn* to shreds in an instant and never even chip if Nes misjudged.

She drew herself up straighter, unconsciously planting her bare feet a little wider apart on the chill, wet deck. Ahead on the right, a solid, creaming torrent of muddy water had begun to narrow into a smoother race into the channel; on the left, the thumb of rock the river folk called the Sentinel loomed in silent warning in the middle of the river.

"Eph, hang on tight." She threw a quick, warning look up at Seppep in the rigging, who was waiting to loose the sail after they shot the bend and passed the turbulent, confused stretch beyond. For now all he could do was cling fast and trust to Da's skill on the rudder and Nes's bond with the water under *Riverborn's* flat bottom.

A last rebellious thought shot through Nes's head as *Riverborn* committed herself irrevocably to the channel. *This be master's work, so where be the ak'Kal after my name, Da?* And then Melth seized the ship with iron fingers and titles no longer mattered, only the raw elemental power her people had been born to wield.

She drew a deep breath laden with the dank smell of wet rock and the wild freshness of the rain on the wind. Water smashing against the Sentinel shattered into spray that wet her face and ran in rivers from the supple green iflen she wore as a fish wears its

scales. Ephep gave a shrill, exultant giggle, caught into the raging power of the river and the driving speed of the ship. But the rocks loomed close, and suddenly his laugh changed to a thin shriek of alarm that Nes barely heard over the roar of the river. She felt *Riverborn* straining to ride the deeper curve of water under the cliffs but for once Da had misjudged, or Melth was simply ignoring the demanding power he was sending through the hull in an attempt to force the prow to the right. Nes gasped as the bow smashed into a trough and staggered up again, too close to the nearest dark tooth.

Sister, remember my name! she cried in silent appeal to the river, throwing mind and soul into the torrent. The rain and spray soaking the decks whirled up off the planks into a waist-high column around her, a caress as chill as winter and yet as welcoming as the summer sun. Nes gasped, bracing against a sudden sense of being battered from behind, of water running through her in a torrent and pouring out her chest. Her arms wanted to drift up; she felt light enough to float away and yet solid enough to stagger under the push. She anchored her toes hard, gulping under the power of *connection* that both gave her kin power over the river and protected all talented folk against Earth Mother's tempestuous children.

Melth answered her with a surge spuming up from the depths. A curtain of brown water shot up between *Riverborn* and the rock, shoving the ship slightly farther into the safer grip of the current. The swell ran ahead of them, a strange bubble riding the crest, shielding *Riverborn's* vulnerable hull. Cliffs and rocks and shattering spray whirled past and vanished as Nes stood wrapped in a surging, mindless connection to the untamed power of the flood. She could smell mud ripped from the drenched banks upstream and snow melt cascading down from the Karth Mountains where the Melth was born, and the quicksilver scent of fish hiding in the depths. Just for an instant she caught a dizzy impression of a vast and mazy web full of infinite stories waiting to be told. A thousand thousand voices dripped and trickled and gurgled and roared, with somewhere at the heart of it all a restless rumble so deep her ears throbbed. That was the voice of the sea; it sparked a quickening of her heart and a sudden, intense longing for waters she could not remember.

Then the river, displeased with Nes's lack of attention, flung the bubble of water straight at *Riverborn* in a cold wave that broke in a solid wall over the bow, and Nes, and Ephep where he still clung to the port rail. Shocked back to the deck, Nes snatched instinctively at her brother, wrapping both arms around him as the wave staggered her backward two steps. *Riverborn* heeled sharply to starboard, robbing her of her remaining balance. She crashed to the streaming boards, twisting frantically to shield Ephep as the ship smashed hard into another trough. Her father's voice poured over Nes, a spate of sound without words or tune that set every bone and nerve shivering under its insistent power. Say what you would about Rhuash ak'Kal, the man was worthy of the Fourth Rank master's badge on his shoulder.

The deck tilted steeply. Nes scrambled for a handhold as she began to slide helplessly across the deck to her left. Ephep wriggled in her arms, screaming something about rocks; hurriedly she gasped, "Hush, hush! Hang on to me!", staring over his head at a sharp stony finger thrusting out of the thundering waters just off the port bow.

At the last moment *Riverborn* answered her father's deep-throated command. Nes, both feet braced against the rail, her arms clamped tight around Ephep, cried out in relief when the prow righted itself and pointed firmly into the safe center of the channel. The black fingers of death whirled past and were lost behind them. Muddy, raging water opened out beyond the bow, seething against the toes of low hills misted with the shy green of early spring.

Nes fought off an urge to collapse into a quivering heap and hauled herself up instead with one hand on the rail, steadying Ephep with the other. He clung to the weathered wood with both hands, staring wide-eyed back upriver. Nes spared a glance aft down the long length of *Riverborn* and drew a slow breath in awe and chagrin. From this angle the rocks looked even worse. Accustomed to the sight of placid water sliding quietly around them, she could scarcely take in the solid white torrents parting in angry cataracts that smashed together on the downstream side in a froth of spray.

Stupid, stupid, stupid! Her glance flicked to her father standing with his feet planted wide apart on the steering platform, his blocky body braced against the rudder pole, holding *Riverborn* on course with brute strength now. Water took ill to continuous demands for her attention, even from Fourth Rank masters. What *idiocy* it was to assume she would rouse herself from such a mood simply because Rhuash ak'Kal wanted to prove himself the best master on the river.

Nes glared at him down the length of the deck, ignoring a moil of activity over her head as Seppep loosed the single triangular sail. She felt the deck quiver and tilt as the wind raging northward down the river with the current found the green canvas. Rasha sang out something nearly lost in the rush of air, his piping voice as cheerful as a bubbling spring. Nes saw her father look up at him and nod sharply as he used the wind's impetus to aid the rudder in breaking the river's grip, guiding *Riverborn* into the smoother, safer waters on the right as the hills began to flatten. It infuriated her that her father could stand there so calmly after putting them all in mortal danger for no good reason.

She started toward him, bracing without conscious thought against the shiver and dip of the wet deck shifting to the nervous pull of the river. Huath darted out from her sheltered spot above the middle hatchway and caught Nes's arm. Though half a head shorter and six years younger, she had the strength of a lifetime of shifting cargo and hauling sails embedded in a sturdy body the mirror of Nes's own, and she kept her grip when Nes tried to jerk free.

"Don't!" she whispered, her blue-green eyes staring out of a plain, honest face made ruddier by the long silvery curls tumbling around it. Nes wondered what expression her own wore to put such panic onto her sister's. "He'll have you standing lookout for a week!"

"No, he won't," Nes said grimly, though the thought of sitting up there where Rasha was now turned her stomach inside out. Any height greater than the distance from the deck to the water made her head spin. And well Da knew it.

She managed a tight smile for Huath. "He needs me on deck with Melth in such a mood. Even Da would not be such a fool as to run these waters otherwise."

Huath's hand tightened. "Now's not ta time to pick a fight!"

"He could have killed us all! Do you want another trip like this one?"

"We're here now, and we can't be going back upriver till she settles. Leave it alone, Nes. Please."

"Why do you always take up for him?" Nes demanded, wrenching her wrist free.

"Why do you always have to provoke him?" Huath drew herself up, squaring her shoulders in the stiff, obstinate way Nes deplored. "You won't change him, so why keep stirring everything up?"

"If he doesn't change we'll all be dead!" Nes stared at her incredulously.

"He's been running this river twenty years now as master and we're still here. Stop—

”

"Mama's not, is she?"

Huath flinched as though Nes's whip-sharp tone had flayed her indeed. "That be not fair."

"It be true." Nes started past her.

"Nes!"

She ignored Huath's despair, stalking toward the raised steering platform that would be a whole deck on a seagoing ship but was scarcely an afterthought on *Riverborn*. To Nes's resentful eye it seemed less a necessary part of the ship's construction than a narrow sanctum belonging to her father where he could look down on his family and passing river craft. Rhuash ak'Kal watched her come, standing as square and immovable as the Sentinel with both his big hands wrapped around the heavy tiller pole, shoving it sideways against the relentless grasp of the current with easy strength. In *Riverborn*'s wake, the turbulent boil of the cataracts slamming together was smoothing out, easing the sense of restless ferocity under the hull as the river carried them swiftly northward toward Southbridge. The easy skimming passage of the little ship belied the danger upriver, eroding Nes's fine fury as well.

"You've a thing to say to me, daughter of mine?" The booming, hateful voice slid thick arms of sound around her, trapping her three strides from the steps up to the platform.

Nes stopped, glaring up into eyes so green they seemed to leap out of his face. "That I do, but what would be the point? You'll do as you please whatever comes."

"And what should come?" His calm infuriated her. "Melth will have her say but she'll not claim *Riverborn*. Have a bit of trust, girl."

"Trust! How can I trust when you take stupid chances like that one?" Nes's voice lifted out of her control, a lifetime's bottled outrage pouring out at once. She quite forgot the patient lessons her mother had tried to instill in her for all those years before the crash at Jhainmot silenced her forever. *Your Da be stubborn*, she'd said, over and over, *and he'll not be pushed. Don't beat at him like a wave at a headland and you'll get much further*. But Nes had never been any better at patience or stealth than Da was. She stood at the foot of the steps, fists planted on hips, and gave him back his stare with an added curl of her lip for good measure.

“Do you know how close Eph just came to going o’erside?” she shouted up at him. “And what if Melth had not answered me, eh? I’d scarce time to think what to ask her—”

“But she did answer, didn’t she?” he shot back, still maddeningly cool. “And it was you taking your eyes off her that almost got you both washed overboard.”

“*Me?* It wasn’t me put us there to start with! And then you want someone else to fix it, just like at Jhainmot—”

Her father jerked upright. *Riverborn* gave a shuddering little skip, her bow pointing a degree or two out of true, dancing toward the west bank. Da’s mouth pulled down into a horrid frown; he hauled at the tiller and yelled at Seppep to do something about the sail, but Sep was already hauling on it to correct that moment of inattention. Nes snapped up straighter, her hands clenched tight together in front of her to resist the eager pull of the river under her. Oh, to call Water’s daughter Melth up to slap the arrogance from her father!

Riverborn steadied again. Da looked down at her, his mouth a tight, grim line. “What happened at Jhainmot was no fault of mine.” His voice took on the river’s chill and a warning rumble Nes ignored.

“Do you still blame Mama, then? She be *dead* because you couldn’t wait to run the confluence at flood and prove it could be done, and now you’ll toss all the rest of us after her—”

“*Enough!*” he shouted, his wind-weathered face flooding with dusky color. “You’ll not speak of things you know naught of—”

“Naught? And who was there if not all of us—”

“You’re not a master! You’ll not be judging what you do not understand!”

“And why am I not a master, eh?” Frustration all but brought Melth bubbling up over the decks in fatal solidarity. Nes ground her clenched fists together to stop the wave she could feel building under the hull and met her father’s angry green eyes. “Tell me that, Da! I’ve naught more to learn from you—”

“That you’ll listen to!” he roared back. “I’ve plenty still to teach, but will you hear?”

“Stop it!” Huath’s anguished shriek jerked both their heads around. “Just stop it, please! You’ve no call to scream at each other!”

The furious eye-to-eye contact broke as Huath arrived beside Nes, her fists locked in the mane of silver hair flowing loose around her shoulders as she preferred it. She looked as though she would tug it all out in despair, her face such a mask of misery that it penetrated Nes’s rage.

“Please, *please* stop this.” Huath’s gaze slid from one to the other and back in nervous, fitful jerks. “We coom past t’Sentinel with no harm done, so leave it! Just leave it!” All at once she sounded just like her mother. *And no wonder*, Nes thought acidly, for Mama had spent much of her time pleading with Da in that deepwater accent of hers.

“What of next time, eh?” Nes asked Huath.

“If you’d listen to me you’d learn what you need to know to ease your fears!” Da growled.

“What *things?* You never *show* me anything!”

“Cause you’ll not listen!”

Huath grabbed Nes's arm and tried to turn her away. "This be pointless. You'll never listen to each other. Coom on below. I think that log might have started a leak—"

Nes shook her off. "You know how to stop it. I've things to discuss with Da."

"The first thing to learn is timing, daughter of mine," Da said curtly. "Now's neither the time nor the place. Get forward and watch for logs. I've no trust in Melth to turn them aside with her in such a mood."

Nes hesitated. Hot words brimmed on her tongue, demanding to be said. Something in Huath's frozen face stayed them. Stiffly she turned and stalked back up the chill deck, her back very straight. It *was* her job to make sure no underwater hazards ripped the bottom out of *Riverborn*. Rasha's eyes were sharp but from the lookout perch he could not see what lay directly under the bow. The last thing they needed was to hit a log or foul the boom when they came into the anchorage at Southbridge. Even if *Riverborn* survived it, the damage charges would beggar them.

Ephed still clung to the rail up forward, peering over at the water creaming back from the bow. He looked around at Nes as she came up beside him, his eyes wide and dark and troubled. Guilt twitched at Nes. He still looked cold and unsettled from the dousing by petulant Melth. She ruffled his streaming silver hair and said gaily, "You've more sense than the rest of us combined. See anything to worry about?"

"No, but... you'll not be leaving us, will you?"

Nes stopped dead in the act of leaning over the rail to eye the swirling water. "What?"

He squirmed. "I heard you tell Sep you'd apprentice with a river scow if it got you off *Riverborn*." His gaze slid toward the rain-misted hills downriver that hid the dark buildings of Southbridge and all their bustling possibilities.

Nes's face heated. "I would, at that," she said after a moment, because she'd never lied to her sibs and never would. "But it's not you I want to be leaving, little brother." She put her arm around his shoulders and drew him close, trying not to feel how stiff and scared he felt. "Besides, I can't leave with Melth in such a mood, can I?"

His eyes lightened even as that disagreeable truth jolted home in Nes. Melth was always dangerous in the upper stretches where, naturally, Da most wanted to go. Water answered best to a man's voice and a woman's hand. Huath might one day make a helpmeet but she was too shy to demand that Melth listen to her. Seppel had power but it complemented Da's in ways too closely akin, leaving great gaps for tricky, indifferent Water to slide away and mind her own affairs with scant regard for the mortals who rode her back. Earth Mother's second child had none of her sister Wind's eager inquisitiveness or Old Man Fire's angry hunger that threatened so often to scorch all it touched to ash. Water tended her own mysterious business in the deeps and let the rivers and springs and shy, trickling brooks bound to the land attend to their own. Nes still remembered, though, a time when Mama had called Water to account on the lower reaches of the Kep. Though Nes had been but a tiny girl, she remembered the howling storm pouncing from a sky the color of ink and a surging wall of seething water racing up the river, smelling of the sea. She remembered the helpless river scows and barges and tiny skimmers caught in its path, and a Wave Clan ship heeling hard over in front of

it, as impotent as the rest. But Mama had done... something; just what, Nes had no idea. All she could recall was the deep roar of Da's voice from astern and her mother standing in the prow with her hands raised, wrapped in a column of water Nes had thought would snatch Mama right away.

It hadn't. She had poured water from her hands in a continuous flood and told Water to behave herself, a sound and a word Nes could not remember but that still shivered through her dreams. The only other thing she remembered was walking with Mama and Da ashore while they called remnants of that wave to refloat craft scattered far inland from the breakup Mama had forced upon it.

Da expected the same power from her, but Nes had no notion how to do what Mama had done, nor any idea how to summon Water herself when it was difficult enough to get lazy Melth to listen. And she never would while even her half-trained skills were all that stood between Da's recklessness and the lives of her siblings.

She lifted her chin and straightened her shoulders against the unfairness of it. Maybe if—

Rasha's clear voice overhead jerked her eyes up, a shriek of amazement and what sounded like fright. "*Da!* People in t'river!"

Nes jerked around in horror. Huath arrived beside her in a thunder of bare feet on boards and leaned over the starboard rail, shading her eyes to peer through the rain still gusting over the river. Nes stared in consternation at a thrashing knot of activity on the east bank ahead where the road running toward Southbridge perched just above the water. She saw in an instant what had happened: a raw gouge in the bank showed where Melth had gulped down a section of the bank long undercut by the river's passage. Those poor passersby had gone in with it. She counted three heads in the water.

Her breath suddenly stuck in her throat. Two of those heads were so pale she could not imagine how such elderly folk could fight free of the river's clutch. Someone ashore had flung a rope and managed to snag one of them; another man was running downstream trying to toss another to a dark-haired person in the water. That one was tumbling helplessly in the fierce grip of the current. Apparently whoever it was could not swim a stroke.

"Oh, Da, we have to help!" she cried, forgetting her pique with him.

"I see them." His voice washed over her, deep and unperturbed. "Sep! On deck!"

Seppep's bare feet thumped onto the planking behind her. Ephep raised troubled green eyes to hers, his face so tight and frightened that Nes instinctively drew him close. "Going to be like Mama?" he asked, his voice so low she almost did not hear it over the river's rush.

"No! Oh, no!" Nes swept him into a tight, hard hug before turning him loose and setting him back, her hands on his thin shoulders. The clearest memory he had of their mother was of her being carried aboard limp and dead and streaming water. What else could he think?

"We're going to get them out. Watch!"

Riverborn shivered under her as Da's voice lifted in a booming, imperative call. Nes's bones ached from that demanding power even as pure envy shot through her. She

could nudge the prow a degree or two left or right, but *Riverborn* was heeling right over now, defying the wind and the current. The sail slapped around as Huath and Rasha hauled hard together, but Nes felt the power of mastery running through the boards underfoot, melding like water itself into a seamless current speeding the ship faster and faster inshore. She glanced up at Seppep as he ran up beside her, his handsome face alight with excitement.

“What are you going to do?” Ephep cried as his eldest brother set his hand on the rail.

“Nothing to worry about, raindrop.” Seppep grinned at him and returned his attention to the river. One of the two elders was being hauled ashore at the end of the rope; the other and the dark-haired one were firmly in the grip of the river, struggling against the deceptively slow boiling of the deep water in the center. But *Riverborn* caught the wind again and trued up to the current, driven on faster and faster by the power Da sent through her hull. It built a bubble of the Mother’s elemental potency under her and made her so light she skimmed down the crest of the roaring current on the strength of that push, a fish flying free of its native element.

They passed the group of travelers dragging their dripping companion ashore and drove down on the two in the water. Nes set her hand on *Riverborn*’s carved prow, throwing her awareness of the river into the driving, humming thing that was Da’s connection to Water. For just a moment they melded and became one, a harmonious bond that erased the uncomfortable quiver in her bones and made her feel as though the rain and the spray and the rivulets of water on deck were part of her, that any moment she would simply dissolve into oneness with the river. Beneath her, Melth surged, an enormous swell rising from nothing that flung *Riverborn* forward like a stone cast from a giant hand. Nes gasped in awe—and the connection broke, but not before *Riverborn* gained nearly the entire distance to the helpless folk in the water.

Seppep grabbed her arm. “Come on!”

Ephep cried out and threw his arms around Nes, quivering so hard she thought he would fly apart. “Eph! It’s all right!” she cried, trying to reassure him with an arm around his shoulders, her eyes on the helpless two dying in the river. “I have to go!”

She shook off his hands as Seppep caught her shoulder and pointed at the dark-haired one up forward. Nes nodded and flung open the gate in the railing, standing rigid beside him in the opening. As they came abreast of the pale-haired person swimming feebly with the current Seppep launched himself into a long, clean dive, his stocky body a dart of blue iflen and silver hair suspended like an arrow in flight. His shout of laughter trailed back. Seppep, of all of them, loved challenging Water to do her worst. Da’s son, he was.

Nes locked her gaze on the man—she thought it was a man—in the water just off the port bow. She could not tell if he was alive or dead, but the idea of leaving him to the river repelled her. She had seen innumerable dead creatures float out of Melth’s grip, bloated and horrid. This man, and his friends on the bank, deserved better, whoever he was.

She fought to connect herself to Water, fighting nagging unease. It was not the river she feared but the things in it, the hidden, bobbing logs and waterlogged debris that could smash her to pieces before she saw them. She took a deep breath and wrapped herself into the rain, striving to meld with Water again, to build herself a protective shell. But before the strange and welcome thickening of the air stroked her skin the dark-haired man went under—and did not reappear. Nes gasped. Without conscious thought she shoved off from the rail.

Too late, she saw the rolling dark bulk of a log bobbing up from the deeps beneath her.