

SONG QUEST

© Katherine Roberts

extract from chapter 2

The First Singer's chamber was chilly and damp. When Rialle slipped inside and shut the door, the tall woman standing at the narrow window did not look round. Rialle smoothed her skirt and made a vain attempt to control her hair, which always went frizzy after a bath. "You wanted to see me, Singer?" she said, unable to keep the tremor from her voice.

As usual, the First Singer wore formal dress. The wind blew straight in from the west, stirring the grey silk around her stick-like figure and lifting the wispy hair damaged by years of dye. While Rialle waited, staring at that forbidding back with its severely erect shoulders, she could almost believe the pallet rumours that claimed Singer Eliya had been born before the Echorium was built.

"Tell me what you learned on the beach today."

She hung her head. "I'm sorry I let you down. I got sick. I know I was supposed to be looking for treasure, but I couldn't concentrate. Then the storm came, and I thought I heard songs coming from the sea. It was silly of me to scream like that. I feel much better now."

"So you learned nothing?"

"I... I didn't find anything from the wreck."

"And you think that's the only reason I sent you down there in this weather, do you? Any villager can find bits of wreckage."

"But Singer Graia said-" What exactly *had* Singer Graia said? Use all your senses. Use your ears. "-oh!"

At last, Eliya swung from the window. The skin around her cloudy eyes crinkled into hundreds of tiny lines. "Oh' indeed! Come over here and sit down, Rialle. We need to have a little talk."

She patted the cushions piled around the walls of the five-sided chamber. Their rainbow colours glimmered in the light of Eliya's lanterns, making a welcome break from the storm darkness that had invaded the rest of the Echorium. Rialle chose a lavender cushion and crossed her legs. She kept her back straight and folded her hands in her lap. The First Singer lowered herself beside her with great care, joints cracking.

"More comfortable now?" she said.

Rialle nodded, though she wasn't at all comfortable. Novices did not get invited to sit in the First Singer's company unless Eliya was about to tell them something they might not be able to take standing up.

"Good. Then repeat exactly what you think you heard."

Rialle fixed her gaze on the window and took several deep breaths. As well as she could, she echoed the songs that had come from the sea.

Children eaten... children dying...!

Hearing that wild, panicky melody on her own lips made her feel sick all over again. When she dared look at her teacher, Eliya was sitting very still and stiff-backed. She remained like that for several heartbeats, then pressed a gnarled finger to her forehead and closed her eyes.

Rialle took another breath. "Singer," she blurted out. "What does it mean? Whose children are dying and being eaten? Why can't I hear the songs now? Was it my imagination like Frenn said, or...?"

To her surprise, the First Singer smiled. "Oh, they're real enough. You've sharp ears, Rialle, sharper than the other novices - sharper than a lot of trained Singers, I might add. You heard the merlee. They're what we call half creatures. Half human, half fish in this case. I used to hear them when I was younger, too." She broke off to gaze at the window. "One loses the trick of it, unfortunately." She looked a bit sad. Then she shook herself. "Actually, quite a lot of people can hear merlee, though most of them think it's the wind or the waves. Very few have the gift of true communication. You're a lucky girl."

Rialle didn't feel very lucky. She had a nasty feeling something more was coming, and she was right.

Eliya patted her hand, an awkward gesture. Her skin felt like withered seaweed. "They're still out there, you know. It's just harder for you to hear them up here - the water helps transmit their songs. Don't worry. Before you go, I'll teach you a technique called farlistening. All Singers learn it. Sometimes it's useful for us to hear what other people are

saying when they think we can't. Then you'll be able to hear the merlee whenever you like, talk to them too."

"But I don't really want to-" Then she realised what Eliya had really said. "Before I go? Go where? I don't want to leave the Echorium! All my friends are here-"

The smile vanished. "You're in your Final Year, Rialle. Soon you'll have your moonblood, and then we expect you to repay us for all the years of training and care, one way or another. Few Singers remain behind these walls all their lives - or maybe you want me to send you to the Breeding House to keep Gilli company?"

The chamber spun. It was too much. What with the merlee and everything else, she missed the subtle *Kashe* in Eliya's final words. Then *Challa* filled the chamber, rippling around the blue walls. The stone at their backs seemed to grow warmer, the colours of the cushions brighter. Rialle relaxed slightly.

"That's better. I won't be sending you to the Breeding House, silly - you're far too promising a singer for that. You're going to have a chance novices seldom have. In a few days, when you've learned what you need to, you'll sail on the *Wavesong* with Second Singer Toharo as part of a Singer delegation to the Mainland. You'll persuade the merlee to give our ship safe passage. They'll listen to you, I think."

"Safe passage?" Rialle repeated, feeling stupid and frightened all at once.

Eliya sighed. "You're confused. It's understandable. I wish we had more time, but we can't afford to delay any longer. These storms must be stopped. No ship has reached the Isle in weeks. High seas mean no new patients, and no patients mean no trade. Our fishermen can't get out, and supplies are already running short. Soon we won't have anything to eat but seaweed salad." Again, *Kashe* danced through her words.

In spite of herself, Rialle's lips twitched. "But the storms'll stop soon, and then ships will come as before - won't they?"

Another sigh. "Not unless we send out the delegation."

"But I don't understand."

Eliya frowned at the window, as if considering how much to tell her. "These aren't natural storms, Rialle."

"Aren't natural? You mean... the merlee!" she whispered, in a sudden flash of understanding. "The merlee wrecked that ship!"

Rialle's adventures are only just beginning... when she leaves the safety of the Echorium, she needs all her skills as a Singer to save her friends and the merlee from the evil Khizpriest who wields the power of dark crystal.