

Robin D. Owens

Cut Scene from Echoes in the Dark

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We are at the Singer's Abbey, after Jikata has seen the vision of the planet, Amee.

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The evening actually went well for Jikata. She watched as the Singer gave the young Chevalier who was testing to become a Marshall – apparently the creme de la creme of warriors in Lladrana – a potion. She was told that sometimes smoke was used, or hand lotion.

The young man stared at Jikata, and she understood that she'd be a good source of gossip for him. Then she took his right hand and the Singer took his left.

Thankfully the dream wasn't intense and was full of images that Jikata couldn't quite decipher. There was the curve of the world, edged in blackness that gave way to a brilliant sunrise shooting yellow streaks into a blue sky, the sound of huge applause. There were strange monster shapes and flying horses and castles and a winding sapphire river, a hill covered with golden blossoms.

Though she felt the low, cycling throb of the planet beneath all the visions, all the melodies engendered by the Chevalier, there was no vision of a woman with her hand pressing her side over a horrible leech. Jikata thought that the Chevalier was aware of the planet and her Song, but had never visualized her. Naturally, she had no idea what the Singer might have seen over her long years.

But Jikata was grateful she didn't have to face the world's manifestation again. She had taken a nap but had not slept well, dreaming of the crying woman, lifting a sword that was too heavy.

Her own heart hurt, simply ached, with a depth of compassion she hadn't been aware she'd held. She did want to help the world, Amee, she could fight. The idea of becoming the Singer – a different sort of Singer than the old woman before her – tantalized.

Magic was in every sound all around her and she loved the music of her new life.

She knew there would be a price to pay.

Killing that evil leech, whatever it was.

She didn't think that destroying it would be easy.

"It is done." The Singer rolled a low note and the shared Song and with the Chevalier's subsided, the vivid images faded into the dimness of sleep. The Singer withdrew her hands from the young man and as the strength of his Song inundated Jikata, she hurriedly did the same.

The older woman was smiling with satisfaction. "You will awake when I snap my fingers," she said, and put thumb and middle finger together.

Jikata stared, then said, "Wait!"

"What?" The Singer glared back at her.

"Aren't you supposed to count down to ease him from the trance and say that he'll be refreshed, and..." She strove to recall the occasional hypnosis session she'd experienced when she'd wanted to lose more weight.

"What?" Now the Singer sounded incredulous.

Even as the older woman narrowed her eyes at Jikata, Jikata said in a soothing voice, "You will awake at the snap of the Singer's fingers, after I count from ten to one." Could she do

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it? Did she know the Lladranan words for each number? She hoped so. She thought she'd heard them all. "As I count down you the trance and the sleep will gradually become lighter. You will awake relaxed and refreshed and able to recall your entire experience without any disturbing emotions." That would have to do.

The Singer snorted and folded her hands.

"Ten, you are rising from your trance and feeling energy – Power, in every muscle..." Jikata spaced the count out over multiple beats, and exactly on beat the Singer snapped her fingers and the Chevalier opened his eyes.

He fixed his brown gaze on the Singer. "Did I pass my Song quest? Can I become a Marshall?"

"Ayes," the Singer said shortly.

A small frown knit between his brows. "But I won't be in the invasion force, I don't think?"

"Ttho," the Singer confirmed. "I will leave you with my apprentice." She glided from the room.

Apprentice. Not colleague, not Friend, apprentice. Anger fizzed in Jikata.

The Chevalier gasped and drew Jikata's glance back to him. "You're the Exotique Singer!"

She smiled. She rather liked that title. Much better than "apprentice." She believed she'd left her "apprentice" singing days long behind her.

"And I've seen you! Nobody except Luthan has seen you and he isn't talking. I heard Koz is trying. All the others are avid to know when you'll be coming to the Castle. Can you tell me—"

"—You will come with me now." A large Friend that Jikata vaguely recognized and who looked more like a bodyguard entered the room. He held out a massive hand.

Sighing, the young man put his fingers in the other's clasp and was drawn to his feet. Another Friend came in, this one a young, pretty woman, carrying a glass of orange juice. She gave it to the Chevalier, and winked at him.

Attraction spun between them.

Weariness settled in on Jikata and another large man, a Friend in purple, moved from behind the two and took her arm. She stiffened, but all she felt was concern from him, no threat. "Come with me, Lady. There's a light meal and a soft bed waiting for you." He walked slowly and she leaned a little on him. Before they left the room, she turned back to the Chevalier who had an arm around the woman's shoulders. He worked fast.

"Congratulations," Jikata said, since he seemed to have achieved something he'd wanted.

He gave her a smile much shier than the one he'd given the young woman. "Merci." He inclined his head. "Merci, Exotique Singer."

Jikata's escort opened the door and they departed, and once again she was taken away from any outside source of information.

Left only with questions: what exactly were Chevaliers, and Marshalls, who was Koz and what Castle?

What invasion force? To where?