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Setup Note: This excerpt is from CHAPTER 3. Luthan, who has been the representative of the Singer, the oracle/prophet of Lladrana, to the other segments of Lladranan society, is confronting her. The setting is a chamber of the Caves of Prophecy which are beneath The Singer's Abbey. The Singer has been less than forthcoming to him lately.

The Singer has just Summoned the final Exotique, Jikata, from Earth to Lladrana. Jikata is on the floor, confused, her bird companion is with her.

### Portion of Chapter 3, Echoes In The Dark

"Sweet Song Salutations, Singer." It was difficult for Luthan not to hiss the greeting, to keep the proper rhythm and lilt, but that's how she judged people. Irritation would have made his tones hard and he was glad he'd lost it. He'd be courteous until the new Exotique was settled.

When his gaze met the Singer's, he knew she saw that he doubted her deeply. There was a flash of arrogance there, her own annoyance.

A long glint caught his eye and he peered into the shadows of the cavern wall opposite them and saw a huge mirror, the glass covered with a faint sheen of blue that he thought could be sapphire dust.

He'd taken part in tuning the last Exotique, Raine, to the vibrations of the planet Ameer. Grimly, he said, "I see that you have chimes, and the crystal bowls for additional Song, cymbals to approximate the gong. But not the gong itself. You brought the Exotique by mirror magic."

The Singer's eyes flashed Power. She lifted her chin. "Do you presume to think that my Summoning could be inferior than the Marshalls puny chanting Song? Especially now that Partis has died and cannot lead them?"

Luthan held his ground, narrowed his own eyes. "Your Song is incredibly more Powerful than the Marshalls—"

Her expression relaxed.

"Your voice magnificently trained, your Friends almost as good a team as the Marshalls."

"Almost!"

"I have fought with the Marshalls, been mentally linked with them as a team in battle, in healing circles after battles. They are the premier team on Lladrana." He gestured to the people in colored robes around them. "Neither you nor these Friends have experienced life and death circumstances that form such a bond. Further, the Marshalls participate within their bond as equals. Your Friends will never be allowed to be equal to you. Could never be equal to the Singer."

Her expression showed pride mixed with irritation. Not many told her the truth. "But my team must have done well enough. We drew her here."

Luthan nodded. "She is here, but how tuned are her personal Exotique Terre vibrations to our planet of Ameer? You have the chimes, the crystals, cymbals. But you do not have the

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gong."

"And the gong is so necessary?"

"I have been at four Summonings and a tuning, have seen and felt and heard what occurred. You have not attended. Yes, I believe the gong is necessary. Unless you want to limit and cripple this Exotique to stay near to the Abbey, as the Seamasters crippled their Summoned one."

Again the Singer's eyes flashed with Power. Her lips thinned. "If the gong is needed, the gong will sound and be heard!" She raised her hand and fisted her fingers in a snatching, twisting gesture.

The low note of a gong – could it really be the silver gong in the Marshalls' Castle so many leagues away? – resonated throughout the chamber.

The woman, who'd sat up, flung back her head. A cry came from her throat, but the sound held music.

The Singer's gaze snagged his again. "How many times?"

She knew, he'd reported the damn ritual five times, hadn't he? "Three."

Another clench of her hand, pull of her elbow. This time the gong note held longer, echoed loud against the cavern walls.

Another long wail from the woman, a thrashing of her limbs. By the time her body finished shuddering, she'd changed her position, sat cross legged and hunched. She raised uncomprehending eyes and stared at him. He was watching her, but the Singer's gaze had not left him.

"You know, she felt the tuning with my cymbals thrice already," the Singer said in her musical voice. "Now you insist that she experience the gong. Do you think she will be pleased with you?"

He forced his stare from the beautiful woman to the Singer. "Doing what is pleasant isn't as important as doing what is right."

The Singer lifted both of her hands, fingers straight. She nodded. "As you will, then. And three!" She closed her hands.

The sound was massive, clanging against his ears. He staggered one step, saw Friends fall from the corner of his eyes. A long, ululating cry came from the woman, matched by the warble of the bird.

There was a tinkle of chimes, and the mirror in the cavern faded – was it real or illusion? How much was truly needed for a portal between the worlds?