

READER REVIEWS

‘Phenomenal . . . a perfect 5-star review. It delves into a fictional war, intricate politics and profound love. The characters are both heartbreakingly lovable and remarkably resilient. I was personally held hostage by this book until the final pages.

I will be waiting for the next release.’

‘An extraordinary debut that questions the cost of power, the dangerous game of politics and the ability to trust even in a time of chaos.’

‘Epic . . . the wordbuilding is nothing short of amazing. Moira keeps giving you hope and then crushes it again.’

‘Captivating . . . you become so invested in each of the characters.’

‘5 stars from me . . . Loved every single second reading it.’

‘This book was amazing, I couldn’t put it down. It’s a **heart-wrenching** story and we’re only really into the beginning of what’s to come! I loved this so much.’

‘The almost folkloric juxtaposition between the pretty perfection of the town and its folk and their hidden actions are chilling and believable. This took me by surprise and I can see it being **a big hit.**’

‘Easiest 5 stars ever . . . anyone who loved *The Handmaid’s Tale*, will adore this book.’

‘Brilliant! I loved it so much and was SO sad to finish it.
When is the next one coming?’

‘I read this all weekend and couldn’t stop! **A classic.**’

‘Loved it. How long do I have to wait for the next one?’

‘The Chrysalids is one of my favourite novels and by merging its themes of empathy, communication and imagination with that of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Songlight* stands as a dystopia that addresses many of the most urgent topics of today. Written with passion, compassion and propulsive energy, **it will enthrall and inspire a new generation**, much as *The Hunger Games* did.’

‘It is a **brilliant, page-turning** read.’

‘A joy to read. I loved Elsa, she had moments of strength and extreme vulnerability. The world, and songlight, had so much depth.’

‘Electrifying.’

‘The writing is so engaging, really draws you in and on with the characters, who are all brilliantly conceived. I laughed, cried and I actually **cannot wait to read more.**’

‘I couldn’t put the book down and still can’t stop thinking about it.’

‘A brilliant book. Original, moving, dramatic and exquisitely written.’

SONGLIGHT

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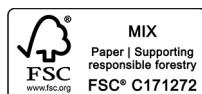
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SONGLIGHT



MOIRA BUFFINI

faber

For Midie



River Montsan

REEM

MONTSAN BEACH

CARAQUET

AYLAND

FORT PEREGRINE

FORT ABUNDANCE

Alma Straits

Lake Lunen

TENMOTH
ZONE

BRIGHTLINGHELM

River Isis

WHITECLIFFE

MEADEVILLE

SEA of SIDON



NORTHAVEN

River
Borgas

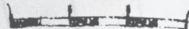
BORGAS
MARKET

BRIGHTLAND

GREENSWARD

GREAT PALANTIC OCEAN

50 Miles



*Ever seeking balance,
grant us wisdom
to be shepherds of creation.*

Ancient prayer to Gala.
Fragment from the *Book of Woe*.

PROLOGUE

KAIRA

I'm leaving my bedroom for the last time. I can't take anything with me, as this is supposed to be an ordinary shopping trip. I put my coat on. I haven't had a new one in years and my arms poke out of the sleeves, embarrassing me with their length, like the soft talons of a baby bird. I glance at myself in my little mirror. After today, I'll never stare in it again. I'm seventeen but no one would know. I'm small for my age, thin from illness and plain as a bean. My thick spectacles don't help. I daren't think about what I'm going to do. My heart is knocking at my ribs.

Stop thinking, I tell myself. Just go. I close the door behind me.

The smell of ham and cabbage hits me. In the kitchen, my latest Mama is cooking. I console myself with the thought that I'll never have to eat her soggy food again.

'I'm going to the market now,' I call.

Ishbella looks out of the kitchen. When she first came to our house she was sharp. She wore pointy dresses with pleats like knives and her lips were always painted red. She looks tired and creased around the edges now – and everything I say and do scrapes upon her like a lathe.

'What about your papa's jackboots?' she demands.

'I've done them.' I smile, pointing to a pair of gleaming jackboots.

‘Get me a tin of chicken paste,’ she says.

‘I won’t,’ I say to myself. And I leave.

The fresh air hits me. It’s dizzying. A wind whips around me as I walk towards the market. But the market’s not my destination. I’m going to escape.

I send a thought-frond high into the air, just as Cassandra taught me. A single, solitary note of songlight, aimed keenly. I feel it touch her spirit.

‘I’m on my way,’ I tell her.

I feel Cassandra’s presence brighten as she lets me into her consciousness. Momentarily, I see the world through her eyes. She’s leaving work, walking down the corridor towards the hospital entrance. She passes a senior doctor and nods to him.

‘Goodnight, Nurse,’ I hear him say.

Cassandra leaves the building. She walks gracefully, with such an easy spring, so unlike my halting limp. When I’m with her in songlight, I feel a happiness so sudden and acute I find it almost painful. To be held in her light . . . It’s like the most perfect summer’s day.

When I was in hospital, Cassandra was the nurse who saved my life. She sensed my songlight, before I dared to name it.

‘You know what you are, don’t you?’ she asked. She spoke without using her voice, yet I could hear her very well. I replied the same way.

‘An unhuman.’

‘No,’ she replied. ‘Never use that word. You’re a Torch.’

I see the lights on the esplanade falling in pools ahead of her now. The city’s great turbines turn in the breeze, rising above

her like a metal forest.

‘You know where to meet me?’ she asks.

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘I’m ready.’

She senses my raised heartbeat, my trepidation. ‘Freedom isn’t easy. It’s dangerous. But it’s the right thing.’

‘Where will we go?’ I ask.

‘It’s safer not to tell you. Don’t be scared, Little Bird.’

‘I’m not.’

In my heart, I wish she wouldn’t call me Little Bird. I know she does it for safety – we should never say each other’s names, not even in songlight, in case a Siren is eavesdropping. But ‘Little Bird’ makes me feel like I’m a kid, just someone she has to look after.

The tram station looms ahead, built in the Brethren’s mighty style. I climb to the platform, taking each step slowly. I’m tiring now and I stop to get my breath. I’m getting stronger every day but the Wasting Fever has left its mark. I tire quickly and my right leg is slightly thinner than the left – some days it aches so bad I need a cane. But I’m luckier than some. I survived.

The platform is crowded. Citizens wait on either side of the tracks. I try not to look at the lone Inquisitor, who stands at the top of the stairs in his dark uniform. I pass him as meekly as I can and I walk down the platform. At last, I see Cassandra arrive. She passes the Inquisitor and winks at me. I feel a beam of joy. In truth, I’d follow Cassandra to the moon and back.

I think of the days ahead that I’ll spend in her company and the beam becomes a glow that warms my whole body and fills me with strength. My trepidation fades away.

I’m going to be free.

I feel a pang of regret for my papa – but the strain of hiding who I am has grown too much to bear. I know my secret would have broken out sooner or later – and it would cause Papa anguish to destroy me. I can never be the daughter that he wants.

Cassandra stands apart, as if we're strangers waiting for our tram. I won't be afraid. I won't have doubts. I will be worthy of her friendship and her care. I allow myself to glance at her, my whole soul shining with gratitude and love.

And then it happens.

I see something flicker in the atmosphere beside her. A male figure, staring at her. A glimmer of a man in cheap suit, a hat pulled over his shaven head. He's one of our kind, a Torch who has been captured and now, in exchange for his life, he must use his songlight to ensnare others.

He's a Siren. And he has my beautiful Cassandra in his sights.

PART ONE

|

ELSA

I know there's something in the lobster pot before I start to lift it. Down there on the sea floor, I can sense the creature I have caught. It's eaten the bait and tried every way to escape, finding its huge claws to be only a hindrance. I do what any good seaworker would do and concentrate on how badly Northaven needs to eat. Food shipments from Brightlinghelm are becoming unreliable and we don't have good farming land round here. Up on the cliffs there is moorland and marshland, not the green and golden wheat fields that you hear of in the south. Our last harvest was shredded by the gales. This runs through my head as I pull the rope up from the sandy floor, bringing the unlucky creature into my boat.

I love the blue melt of the sea and sky, the salt spray, the way I have to balance on the swell, the sun dazzling, the wind lifting my spirits high into the air. I reckon I'm a natural on the water – like my pa. My brother Piper is a senior cadet, training for the war. So when Pa died, the boat was left to Ma and me. As a widow, Ma is not supposed to work outside the house, so in those dark years after Pa's death, I taught myself his trade. I think I had it in my bones. Pa knew I liked the water. He'd take me out with him when I was barely old enough to walk. He'd move about the boat, grinning at me, showing me the wonders of the sea. I love

the moving waves so much that when I step on solid land, I feel all heavy and bereft.

I look at the lobster: a huge female. I see her egg sacs, held precious under her belly. I admire her blue-black armour, her otherworldly eyes. I'm opening her pot when I realise I'm no longer alone.

I smile with delight and I thrill at the danger. Rye Tern has come. 'How's the catch?' he asks.

I see him then – or sense him, I should say. Songlight can't be described in words. Rye's with me, but he's not. I see him, but I don't. He's here in every sense – but only my sixth one perceives him. He's leaning on a mop, his shirt sleeves rolled up. He'll be somewhere in the barracks, but to me it seems like he's standing in the stern. The sun still shines through him but as our minds cleave to one another, he grows more solid. 'We were parading and I saw your boat. Got myself put on punishment duty so I could come.' He brandishes his mop. The way he smiles through his troubles makes my heart flip upside down.

'Reckless idiot.' I turn to my work, considering the lobster.

Rye comes closer. 'She looks a bit like you.'

'I'm better defended.' I melt at his grin.

His light is closer still. I've no defences against Rye at all.

'She's carrying her egg sacs,' I tell him. 'So she has to go back in the sea.'

I lean over the side and let the lobster queen slip back into the water. We watch her disappear down into the blue. Her freedom makes me glad.

Rye comes out to my boat whenever he can. It's the only place

that we feel safe, where our love isn't hidden. We can let ourselves go here, high into the air, circling each other like gulls – or we listen to the deep. We can tell when there are herring coming – we sense their sleek glide, all singing the same note. Sometimes there are yellowfins, speeding under us like shooting stars. Always there are jellyfish, drifting in shoals like the souls of the dead.

His songlight is all I'm aware of now, his presence joining with mine. Desire twists in my guts as I remember the last time I touched him for real . . . As night was falling, a tap came on my bedroom window. Rye was there in our garden, vulnerable, his jacket ripped from a fight with his pa. I cherish that image of him. It comes into my mind, over and over – the way the moonlight fell upon his skin, the hurt that I could sense in him. I climbed out of the window and he caught me in his arms. I held him close, not wanting to speak. The intensity of his body took my breath away. The smell of him, the iron of his arms, his lips on my neck . . . Nothing in songlight could ever come close.

Together we went down to Bailey's Strand and swam. We lay on the sand, under the stars. We heedlessly broke every rule and restraint. Thinking of it now – of being joined with his body as well as his mind – makes me crave for it again. I want Rye Tern here, in my boat. I want to smell him, kiss him, explore him with my hands. Rye can tell what I'm thinking of. I feel his longing in every breath.

What we've done is interdicted. According to the *Anthems of Purity*, which we must learn by heart, I am now tarnished. But how can such a thing be criminal? We are not sex traitors, we are Elsa and Rye.

'I have to see you,' I whisper.

'I know,' he says. 'Something has to change. We have to be together.'

'Meet me,' I tell him. 'Down on Bailey's Strand. Tonight. In the flesh.'

'It's dangerous.'

'I know.'

Our songlight is one keen note of desire. I want his lips on mine, his belly pressing against me, my legs wrapped around him. We hold the note, breathing our need, until the whole ocean feels like it's singing to our tune.

Then I sense him looking over his shoulder. For a second I see the world through his eyes. He's in the refectory, mopping the floor. I hear heavy footsteps approaching him.

'Someone's coming,' he says. Instantly, his warmth and vigour fades.

He's gone, leaving me in turmoil.

The quality of the sound all around me changes. I become aware of the breeze, the water lapping against the sides of the boat. I hate it when he vanishes suddenly like this.

I pull in my nets and I turn back towards Northaven. My songlight isn't wanted there. I keep it buried underneath my lungs. I push my songlight down my legs and arms and hide it under my fingernails. If anyone else in our town has songlight, they must keep it well concealed. To my knowledge, it's just Rye and me. In Northaven, songlight is a burden; it's treacherous. Occasionally, I'll sense a note on the air like the colours of the loom, or a sigh like water falling down a drain, or thought-wreathes hanging like the crackling of

a fire. And then the singer notices and suddenly it's tight and hard to breathe. I know the feeling. When Great Brother Peregrine took power, back when Ma was a girl, there were culls of all unhumans. Our temple to Gala was closed and locked. Anyone known to have songlight was cuffed around the skull with lead and taken to Brightlinghelm to be enslaved. Every few years, an Inquisitor comes with his Siren to inspect the population. Last time, the Inquisitor took old Ellie Brambling, Mr Roberts and Seren Young. I was a junior choirmaiden then, and my songlight had not fully shown itself.

Before the Inquisitor left, he stood with our eldersmen and drilled us on how to spot the signs. If we had this mutation, this corruption, it would soon become apparent. If we sensed any signs in ourselves or in others, we were beholden to confess. Did we, when alone, ever feel the presence of another? Did we ever sense what others might be thinking? Did we experience a sensation of floating, of being out of our bodies? Did we ever feel controlled by the will of another? If we suspected an unhuman at work or felt an unhuman stain upon our souls, we had to come forward and speak. If we were honest, no harm would befall us. Our songlight would only be contained. We'd be able to use it in service of the Brethren.

'No thanks to that,' I thought, as my songlight developed in full flow. Night after night I'd wake and find myself high above our house. I would be out in the boat and find myself looking down from the sky, feeling birdsong like a language, or seeing the world through the eyes of the seals that watch me as I work. I felt intensely connected to every living thing. And very, very afraid.

Then one day, Rye Tern showed up in my boat. I'd known Rye all my life – he was one of Piper's friends. He appeared in songlight

when I was pulling in my nets. I tried to ignore him, my heart thumping with fear. *Unhuman. Unhuman.*

‘I know you can see me, Elsa.’

‘Leave me alone, unhuman,’ I told him.

‘You’re unhuman too, fool. What’re you going to do about it?’ he asked. ‘Turn me in?’

I had nothing to say; just a slow tear that fell down my face.

‘It’s like your worst fucking nightmare, isn’t it?’ said Rye quietly.

I nodded.

For a while we prowled around each other like cats, claws out, not daring to trust. But it was such a relief to have a friend. I’d been so lonely with my oddness, so scared when it began. It was far worse than my monthlies. The pain and the blood-cloths were nothing compared to the fear I felt when my mind began to leave my body. When I began to glimpse the underthoughts of others, sensing what they felt when their words said something else, I was full of lonely dread. But Rye and I shared our otherness. It was a solace, every time we met. Maybe I’d have loved Rye even if he’d been ugly as a stick because his hurting, his anger, his raw sweetness, the way he finds humour in the darkest things – all these things are beautiful. But I’ve watched him grow from boy to man and Rye Tern isn’t ugly, not by any stretch. Rye Tern is a looker. From his long lashes to his gorgeous shoulder blades – every inch of him thrills me.

On land, in person, we make sure to keep apart. Not even Piper, my own brother, knows how we’re connected. But we’re two songs joined. And there’s a word for that.

A harmony.