

Molly Finn and the Seven Seas Fountain

by Kate Keeley

Prologue

When she first saw them swimming alongside the boat, Molly thought they were dolphins. Their sleek backs arched, and their powerful tails slapped the water as they dove under the waves. Sunlight danced like rainbows on the silver scales of their thick, sleek fins. These wild creatures looked bigger than the dolphins she had seen at Sea World. Captain Cross called out orders to his crew, and Molly felt a tug as the boat shifted gears and slowed. The waves alternately lifted and then dropped the bow, and Molly swung her head around, searching for something to help her steady her balance. She grabbed hold of the rail. Shielding her eyes from the glare of the sun, she searched for the school of dolphins.

“*Oi,*” Captain Cross hollered from his perch on the upper deck. “*A’l cói a bé!*” He waved.

Molly followed the direction of his gaze, her eyes coming to rest on five men and four women bobbing to the rhythm of the waves. Rays of sunlight pierced the water, and she could see their tails swaying back and forth, keeping them upright as they waited. *Merpeople.*

She rubbed her eyes.

The captain vaulted down the steps and stood in the middle of the main deck. “Look sharp, lads and lassies,” he said. “Yer about to embark on the adventure of a lifetime.” He grinned, exposing rows of yellow teeth. “Ere ya ready?” The way he pronounced “ready,” the word sounded like “reedy.”

Without waiting for an answer, Captain Cross rocked on his heels and turned to his crew. “*Ach ú ä ta.*”

The men stamped their feet and hustled below decks.

Tilting his head, the captain glared at the Nit-Wixley students under his charge. “The sea is yer mother,” he said, “but ye’ll not find ‘er soft like the mum’s you left behind this morning.” He looked each of the students in the eye. “Mind ye pay ‘er the respect she’s due.”

The clatter of footsteps caused the captain to swivel on his heel. He waited for his men to fall in line. “Pass the tadpoles their gear and see them over the side,” he ordered.

His first mate saluted and barked at the others. “*Ach ú tu noch.*”

The men nodded and dispersed, each taking a place in front of a Nit-Wixley student preparing to go over the side of the boat.

Molly turned in a slow circle. All she could see, in any direction, was water. The sea went on and on until it met the sky at the horizon. She shivered in spite of the sun beating down on her. She had been waiting for this moment since the night of Winter Dance. And now she wasn’t sure she wanted to go. She opened her mouth, ready to tell Captain Cross to take her home. Ivy grabbed her hand.

“Can you believe it?” Tugging her friend forward, Ivy stepped up to the sailor holding out her pack. “Can you believe we’ll be eating dinner tonight in the City under the Sea?”

Molly shook her head. “It’s like a dream,” she said. She looked past Ivy to where Will waited his turn to drop into the sea. Mandy, already leaning on the rail, let herself fall backward, stretching so that she hit the water headfirst, entering with hardly a splash.

One of the crew held out Molly’s pack so that she could slip the straps over her arms. He let the full weight drop onto her shoulders. “Have ye got yer balance?” he asked, stepping back but keeping his arms poised in front of him.

“Chë, chë,” Molly replied, not feeling very balanced at all. She sat down on the warm steel, raised her feet, and let herself tumble into the ocean.

She smacked the water hard, knocking the breath out of her. Her legs tingled and went numb. The weight of the pack pulled her down. She gasped as her head slipped underwater. One of the merwomen flicked her tail and swam over to Molly. Reaching out, she lifted Molly so that her head rose above the waves.

Coughing and spitting up saltwater, Molly thought, *this was my wish; this was what I wanted*. She shook her head, spraying droplets of water around her like a crown. She laughed. *You could go all your life, she supposed, just plodding along, and then some small thing changed—like a district line—taking your whole life down a different path.*

“I’m ready now,” she said. “Let’s go.”

The merwoman nodded. She gripped Molly’s hand and pulled her down, down, down under the sea.