

DEATH SINGER

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"Here comes another one! Younger than we usually get, quite nice looking too." Shelley hung dangerously far over the edge of the roof garden, her bright hair brushing the white stone as she strained for a glimpse of the path below.

Kyra gazed over her friend's head into the haze through which one or two tall spires gleamed; all that could be seen of the city that, very far below, lapped the Singing Temple. A city that surrounded them on all sides, that gave tribute, that sent its people up the hill for therapy. Yes, here came another one. She had seen enough of them come in her years as a novice, and had seen them go. Once she had been curious, like Shelley. Now she was nervous. Another one - could this one be for her?

"He's not struggling much." Shelley sounded disappointed. "Not even a little bit."

"Careful! You'll fall off," Kyra warned.

But her friend was undaunted. "Let's sing to him," she said. "Make him afraid."

"No."

"Oh, come on. What's wrong?" Shelley eyed her suspiciously. "You were the one who suggested it the first time - don't you remember?" She grinned in sudden mischief. "I can still see his face! White as the Temple stone! Remember how he was cursing, all that foul language? We certainly shut him up."

Kyra smiled, then shook her head. "I just don't feel like it today."

The prisoner and his escort had disappeared beneath the walls. Kyra imagined them being received at the gate, shown to the proper place, the prisoner being locked in one of the tiny stone cells so that he could be prepared for his therapy, the escort making their excuses and leaving in haste.

"Ah, I get it!" Shelley jumped down from the wall and amused herself by plucking red berries off one of the many plants that drooped in tubs all around the roof. "You're ready, aren't you?" She threw a berry at Kyra, closely followed by a second. "And you're scared you'll mess up." The third berry hit Kyra on the nose.

"Stop that!" Kyra wiped the sticky red juice with her palm and licked it clean. She was not worried about making a mistake, for was she not the finest singer the Temple had ever known? Chosen as a young girl, her voice had been tutored most carefully to prepare her for the time when she would stand on one of the five points as an integral part of the Singing Temple's unique song therapy. But she was a little scared.

Shelley threw another berry.

"Shelley! I said stop that!" Kyra's hand shot out to slap the younger girl. She drew it back in confusion. It was all a game to Shelley still, but not for much longer. Soon she, too, would be expected to take her place on the pentangle, and then she would understand - or would she?

Ducking her head to avoid the low portal, Kyra allowed her thick hair to fall across her face. It made a curtain to hide behind, and she felt like hiding. Did everyone feel like this before their first Song? She ought to be glad that she would be helping to cure the prisoner, but there was something else; something that disturbed her in the way those who had been given song therapy left so quietly, walking as if in a dream back down the hill to the city... something. Ducking her head lower still, Kyra set her feet towards the cells.

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Two of the halfmen were on duty, watching over the prisoners. Kyra knew one of them well - Oviar, who had helped look after her when she was growing up, who had sung her lullabies whenever she was upset after a bad session with the Elders. She liked him, but lately she had felt awkward in his presence, and she knew the special friendship they had shared was over. She was a little girl no longer. Soon she would be a Singer, and that would widen the gap between them still further.

Kyra hesitated at the entrance to the cells, unsure why she had come. But now it was too late to hide, for Oviar had spotted her.

"Ah-ha! Here's our new Singer, come to spy on the test material." He elbowed his companion. "What do you think, Sonas? Shall we let her in? Or shall we inform the Elders that she's cheating?"

"Oh, shut up, Oviar." Kyra blushed. "You know I'm allowed to see the prisoners if I want to."

"Aye, and I know which one you'll be wanting to see," he said with a knowing wink at Sonas. "But don't get too hopeful, my little Singer, because from what I hear they'll be testing you on the woman first."

Kyra frowned. She had almost forgotten the woman, brought up the hill three days ago screaming and crying.

"What did she do?"

"Oh, poisoned someone in the Royal Court, I think."

"Then I hope we can help her."

"You don't fool me." Oviar was grinning. "You'd much rather sing to the young one who came in today, wouldn't you? We saw you hanging over the roof! That Shelley was virtually drooling at the mouth, and she still a novice, too." He shook his head with a theatrical sigh. "I'll never understand you Singers."

"You wouldn't. You're only Temple guards." As soon as the words were out, Kyra regretted them. She bit her lip when both Oviar and Sonas drew back stiffly. "I'm sorry..."

"If you're going to see the prisoners, Singer," said Oviar, cool now, "then you can take their water with you. It's time for their drink, and no doubt you'll make a better job of it than we will."

Kyra took the two bowls without protest, held them for Sonas to fill from the jug, then walked slowly down to the occupied cells, trying to ignore the hurt of that rebuff. She had deserved it, but still it stung. Would she be happy if she was just a Temple guard?

There was plenty of light in the corridor. Sunshine streamed through the barred windows, making patterns on the cell floors, but the woman hunched in a corner as if she sought shadows that were not there. She wore the simple white shift prisoners were clothed in to symbolise the purity of soul they would gain through their song therapy, and her hair was loose. She seemed very scared. For a long moment Kyra watched her. Then she laid one hand on the bars and sang a single pure note.

The woman in the cell snapped alert as if she had been struck. She stared up at Kyra with terror-filled eyes.

"Don't be afraid. I've brought your water." Kyra placed the bowl just inside the door and quickly shut it again. She frowned at the prisoner. "We're going to help you. There's no need to fear us."

In reply, the woman snatched up her bowl and threw it at the door. "Filthy soul stealer! Get away from me! Leave me alone!" The bowl hit the bars with a clang and bounced back, but some of the water splashed out into the corridor, soaking the hem of Kyra's midnight blue robe as she jumped, startled, out of range. Heart pounding, she stared at the woman, who was slumped on the floor of her cell sobbing violently.

"That was stupid! You won't get another drink until tomorrow," Kyra said, catching her breath. But the woman made no answer.

Kyra was more cautious when she approached the second cell, though the new prisoner sitting there seemed docile enough. Shelley was right. He was young, maybe about her age – and handsome, too. As she drew near, his bright blue eyes fastened themselves upon her face, making her cheeks glow.

"Are you a Singer?" he asked, his voice light and curious. "Are you going to sing to me now?"

"Not yet." Kyra paused with her hand on the bars of his cell, struggling to control the blush. "I've brought you a drink. Make it last. You'll get another at the same time tomorrow."

His face lit up with pleasure. Kyra could hardly summon the right note to open the door, and hesitated outside while he examined her quietly.

"So, Singer. Do I have to lap it through the bars? Or have you a straw?"

"Be quiet and stay there," she said, singing the door open to place the bowl inside.

She eyed him warily, but he made no move. Nor did he flinch when she sang. He simply watched her with an amused smile until she had the door safely shut again. Then he picked up the bowl, took a long draught, and carefully set the rest aside.

"I thank you, Singer. Do you have a name, or is it blasphemy to ask? I am Tian, although no one here seems to care very much. Do I have a number? Or a note, perhaps?" He smiled again.

Kyra was torn between running back to her room and staying to talk to the boy. She knew what she should do, but there was no one here to tell her off, and Tian intrigued her. He did not act like the others.

"I'm Kyra," she said, watching him closely in case he was going to throw anything at her. "And I'm not a Singer - at least not yet. Although I might be by the time you get your therapy." She broke off, saddened by the thought. Would they expect her to sing to him as well?

"I hope you are." His eyes were laughing at her. "If I'm to have my soul stolen, then I could do worse than give it into your keeping."

Kyra started. That again! Twice in the same day, yet she had never heard the term before. But then, she had never really spoken to the prisoners before. As a rule they did not speak sense once they had been brought into the cells, and afterwards they made hardly any sound at all.

"What's this about soul stealing?" she demanded.

Tian laughed out loud. "Aren't you aware of your reputation in the city, Kyra? Do you think your patients struggle and scream for the fun of it?"

"We give you song therapy so that you can resume normal lives in society," she said, echoing the Elders.

"And do you know what happens to those who have undergone your song therapy?"

"No." Kyra stepped forward curiously. "What?"

Tian gave her a long measuring look. "Ah - I see now. You really believe you help us, don't you?"

"We do!"

"Then you understand very little, Kyra." His blue gaze left her face and turned to his water bowl. He licked his lips, as if thirsty but considering saving the rest for later. She followed his glance.

"I could get you some more - say I spilt some," she said.

Tian did not react.

"Tian?" She wanted him to look at her again, but he ignored her. She called him a second time, but he didn't look up. With a shake of her dark hair, Kyra turned angrily on her heel and left the disturbing prisoner alone.

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Kyra could not sleep that night for thinking of Tian waiting so calmly in the cells for his therapy. But Oviar proved correct about her first Song. She was tested on the woman who had thrown the water at her.

She stood nervously on the third point of the pentangle, her voice directed through a song tube across the central pentagon, where the prisoner sat clamped to a revolving stool. The woman had been fitted with a tongue restraint so that she could not interfere with the Song. They sang One Star for her first session, followed by Two Stars for her second, and finished with a Cluster, by which time Kyra's nerves were tense enough to snap. But the four older Singers who had sung on the other points smiled when it was over, and even the Elder Jayarie made no criticism of Kyra's voice, which was praise indeed coming from her. Shelley pressed for details of what it was actually like on one of the five points. Did she hear anyone else's voice at all? Did the Song affect her? Could she see the prisoner's eyes? Could she hear herself? And more such trivial and stupid questions until Kyra, utterly sick of them, told her friend to shut up.

Then, still disturbed and needing to talk to someone, she wandered back to the cells.

"But what did he *do*, Oviar?" asked Kyra as she filled Tian's water bowl.

"No one knows for sure, but it must have been something bad. I hear he's to have a Nova, is that right? Yes, well I expect he deserves it."

"He seems so... nice."

Oviar rolled his eyes. "Do not be deceived, my little Kyra. Young men from the city are well known for their wiles, and you're an attractive girl. You should take care. Perhaps you shouldn't visit him again?"

"Mind your own business, Oviar!" she snapped. "I'm a Singer now, remember."

"Oh yes, a Singer. How could I forget? Well then, I suppose that makes you immune to his charms. But are you here as a Singer or as yourself, Kyra?"

His perceptive query caught her off guard. She blushed and strode through the patchy sunlight towards Tian's cell, ignoring Oviar's light laugh that floated after her.

Tian was sitting in much the same position as last time, though he seemed less alert, probably the result of five days without food. But his bright blue gaze lit up with a spark of joy when he saw her.

"I thought you had forgotten me, Kyra - or should I say Singer Kyra now?"

"You should," she agreed.

He studied her carefully. "And are you going to sing to me?"

"Yes."

He caught her gaze with his, held it for a moment, then frowned. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong." Kyra sang the door open, passed Tian his water, and sealed him in once more, evading his steady look. How could she do it? How could she sing a Nova to him? She remembered the woman leaving her third session, walking slowly from the Temple with a blank expression as if they had truly stolen her soul. Kyra shuddered. Yet the woman's therapy had been mild in comparison to what lay in store for Tian. She blinked, feeling her eyes prick.

"You are to have seven sessions ending with a Nova." Why had she told him? He would not understand, anyway. The Song codes were not known in the city.

Tian looked solemn. "Is that your... highest... Song?"

"Not quite. Supernova's the highest." And the worst, she added silently. No, that was not right. Not the worst, but the most effective. Reserved for really hard cases where intensive

therapy was required, Kyra had witnessed only a handful of Supernova Songs during her entire training.

"Well, that's a relief." The prisoner tried a smile but it was not very bright. Kyra thought he looked worried, as well he might do.

"We start tomorrow." She hesitated in the corridor, chewing her lip. "So you'll be free next week."

"And you'll have my soul, Singer Kyra." His voice was quiet, accepting.

She shook her head. "No..." She backed away from him, blinking hard, and fled to the roof garden where she could be alone, shouldering aside a surprised Oviar on the way. She sank down beside the low wall, sobbing, clutching the parapet with tight fingers. Tomorrow the Elders would expect her to help them steal Tian's soul. For the first time in her life, she was afraid to sing.

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The next six days were agony for Kyra. Each time she stood on her point of the pentangle and watched Tian led, unresisting, to the stool, it was harder to open her mouth and begin the Song. With every session, more of the life leaked from Tian's blue gaze. Each morning he walked slower, shuffling his feet like an old man. Elder Jayarie watched Kyra closely as the Songs grew in complexity, and she realized that this was her final test. If she completed Tian's therapy, she would be a Singer for the rest of her life.

It was what she had always wanted – or was it?

At night, when she grew tired of tossing and turning on her hard bed, she crept down to the cells and persuaded Oviar to let her see the prisoner. He would not let her wake Tian from his therapy-induced slumber, but she did not need to. Just seeing the boy curled up on the floor, moaning in his dreams, was enough to make up her mind.

It was the final Nova that would complete the damage. She was the best Singer in her class. What if she were to sing a counterpoint, so that instead of adding to the intensity of the Nova, her voice might in some measure cancel out the other four?

Kyra shivered. She had no idea what the Elders would do to her if they suspected her of deliberate sabotage. But she knew she had to try, for Tian's sake.

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It was harder than she had expected. By the end of the Nova, Kyra was sweating with effort and trembling on her point. She could barely keep her eyes open. The other Singers were blurred blobs of midnight blue in the shadows of the pentangle, where occasional glimmers of gold betrayed movement. Observers in the gallery were a faceless mass. Shelley was up there somewhere, and Elder Jayarie, but Kyra could not see them and failed to notice the deep frown that sat between the Elder's eyes. She saw only Tian, slumped on the stool, his eyes closed as if he were sleeping. Had she helped him at all? Or had the Nova still been too strong for him?

She winced to see the way he leant on Sonas's shoulder, the way his bare feet shuffled across the floor and tripped in the grooved lines of the pentangle. He was being taken to the gate of the Temple, where he would be turned loose to find his own way down to the city. This was the last time she would see him - ever.

"Tian," she breathed as Sonas carried his burden closer. "Tian, I'm sorry."

The halfman gave her a hard look, which Kyra ignored. Tian was destroyed. They had given him therapy, and now he was a boy without a soul. Her throat tightened, tears brimmed in her eyes, and she ducked her head to hide them behind her hair. Then she caught her breath, her stomach fluttering. For as he was led slowly past, Tian glanced sideways and winked at her with one twinkling blue eye.

Kyra could not help a small smile of triumph. She saw that the other Singers had already gone, and turned to leave her point, too. But someone was holding her. She swung round with a frown to see two of the halfmen she did not know very well. Their hands were on her arms. She pulled angrily away, stumbling when they did not let go.

"Steady." They kept her on her feet. "Careful - you'll fall." Were they helping her?

"Let go," she said. "I'm just tired, that's all. Leave me alone."

Their fingers tightened, frightening her.

"Let me go! I'm a Singer!"

"Oh? So you are a Singer when it suits you, Kyra?" The words were harsh.

She looked up with a start, straight into Elder Jayarie's hard stare.

"And just what did you think you were doing?"

"I..." Kyra controlled a sudden stab of fear. "I don't know. I'm sorry... I know it wasn't quite right. I must be tired. The Nova is difficult..."

"Difficult!" Jayarie glared at her. "Yes, it's difficult. And I might have expected mistakes from any other novice. But not from you, Kyra, oh no. We would not have asked you to sing today if we hadn't been sure you could manage the Song, so don't lie to me! One or two slips may have been understandable, given that this was the last of seven difficult sessions, but not your sort of 'mistakes'. Did you think we wouldn't notice? The prisoner will die anyway, you know. Even a half-sung Nova is enough to kill."

"*What?*" Kyra, who had been madly thinking up further excuses while the Elder was speaking, could not control her horror. "What did you say?"

Jayarie smiled coldly. "All of our Songs can kill, some slower than others. The Nova is quick. He can expect to live no more than a few days now."

"No!" Kyra flung herself at the Elder, only to be pulled back by the halfmen, whom she had forgotten in her shock and revulsion. "No, it can't be true! Tian..." She began to tremble, remembering what he had told her about the Singing Temple's reputation in the city. Remembering her own observations of 'cured' prisoners. Remembering that she had stolen his soul. "No, oh *no*."

"Yes," said the Elder Jayarie, watching her. "It is the truth."

"I'm never going to sing again!" Kyra felt drained and weak. She sagged against the halfmen.

"No, you're not," Jayarie agreed. "We can't have Singers in the Temple who disobey orders." She nodded to the halfmen. "Take her to the cells for preparatory fasting, and make sure you fit a tongue restraint. She can sing doors open, remember."

Kyra gaped at the Elder, suddenly realising the awful thing they were going to do to her. "You can't!" she cried, trying to free her arms. "Please, it was a mistake. I won't do it again, I promise. Please...!"

Jayarie's eyes were cold. "No, you won't do it again. As from now, you are no longer a Singer, Kyra. There's no place for you in the Temple." She drew her Elder's robe around her and turned away, ignoring Kyra's desperate pleas as the halfmen dragged her unceremoniously from the chamber.

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Kyra sat in her cell crying quietly, tongue tied so that she could not sing the door, wrists linked behind her so that she could not undo the strap. There were lines of sun on the floor between the dark shadows of bars, but she was cold in her white shift. Cold, yet sweating at the same time. What Song would they give her? Would it be a Nova? Or maybe even a Supernova? Had her crime been that great? The bars chimed softly, startling her, and she looked up to see Oviar with the daily offering of water that she could not drink unaided.

"Poor child." The halfman gently unstrapped her tongue. "Have you been crying?" He touched the tears on her cheeks, then held the bowl to her lips. "Here - drink. It'll make you feel better."

Kyra gulped gratefully, every last drop, and choked on a sob. The door stood open, but she did not try to run because she knew there were more of the halfmen in the corridor under special orders from the Elders to make sure that she did not escape. And if she hurt Oviar, then none of the others were likely to bother helping her when they brought her water. The fasting was bad enough without being thirsty too. So Kyra simply sat and shivered.

"I'm scared, Oviar," she whispered.

"Don't be." His hands squeezed hers. "It's only Therapy, you know that."

"It's death." She shivered again.

"Don't be silly, Kyra. You know those stupid city rumours aren't true. Sure, people die sometimes, but only because they believe they will." He looked concerned. "You don't believe a song can kill, do you, Kyra?"

"I... Tian told me... Elder Jayarie said..." She bowed her head in misery. "I don't know."

"Stop thinking like that! You, of all people, should know better. You're a Singer."

She stared at him, a new sadness welling up inside her. "Not any more. I shall never sing again."

"Now you are being silly. All right, so the Temple doesn't want you. Big deal! There are plenty of places in the city that would pay you well to entertain their customers, perhaps even the Royal Court? You've a beautiful voice."

"Stop it!" she screamed, hiding her face from him.

Oviar glanced nervously over his shoulder. "Shh, Kyra, or they won't let me bring your water next time."

"I don't care." More tears welled up, which the halfman brushed away for her. "I'm going to die anyway."

"Kyra..." Oviar's touch was very gentle.

"Oh, leave me alone!" She kicked the water bowl out into the corridor, so utterly miserable that she hardly noticed another of the halfmen standing there staring in at them.

Oviar, however, did see, and picked up the tongue restraint, wiping it clean on his sleeve. "I'm sorry, child. It's time. Open your mouth, there's a good girl."

Heart pounding, Kyra flattened herself against the wall of the cell. "Already? No..."

"Come on, little one." Oviar stepped close and brushed a lock of hair from her eyes. "Open, Kyra, please. You know it'll hurt if we have to do this by force."

Kyra tearfully opened her mouth and allowed him to fasten the strap, wincing as it cut her already sore and swollen tongue. She went with the halfmen to the pentangle, where she sat on the prisoner's stool as if in a dream, too weak with fear to resist when they drew the restraints closed around her wrists and gently started her spinning.

Five faces whirled before her eyes, crowned with gold. Solemn Singers, silent as yet, waiting for the signal that would start her Song. Kyra experienced a stab of doubt as she recognised Shelley's white face and bright hair. What was she doing on one of the points? The girl was hopeless. She would never manage any of the complex Songs. Then Kyra's heart leapt in hope. They must be giving her a mild therapy, perhaps one that would not kill her?

Encouraged, she looked at the other four Singers and saw what she had failed to notice when Oviar had strapped her to the stool. All were novices, singing their first Song. It might have been meant as an insult, but Kyra was relieved. Even note perfect, these five could not do her much harm.

The Song began.

Never having listened at the centre before, Kyra was amazed by the effect. A wall of sound hit her from all sides, swiftly building to unbearable pitch and then falling as suddenly away before piercing her head once again. The Song was so distorted that she could not recognise it. She wanted to clasp her ears and hide her head, but her wrists were clamped firmly to the slowly revolving stool, so she was reduced to squirming and shutting her eyes. At first she felt sick and dizzy, then, surprisingly, very sleepy. The Song whispered deep into her subconscious and finally fell silent.

Someone helped her from the stool. Clumsy hands - not Oviar's - unstrapped her tongue. Other hands carried her, not back to the cells as she expected, but to the main gate of the Temple, where she saw Elder Jayarie standing between her and freedom. The Elder's finger tilted her chin until she was forced to look up into that hard, cold stare.

"Be thankful, Kyra. We were merciful. But be warned, also. Now go - we never want to see you inside these walls again. Understand?"

Kyra, floating on a dream cloud, nodded. The Elder gave her a small, regretful push and she began to stagger down the hill. The stone was very hot under her bare feet, the sun too warm on her arms. Wild flowers blurred at the edges of her vision. Everything was too bright. After a while she sank to her knees, blinking at the Temple lost in a haze of heat far above. Had she come so far? Below, the city was a distant confusion of noise. She lay down in the grass at the side of the path and closed her eyes.

She was so sleepy, so very sleepy... a sleepy Singer... no, not a Singer... not any more.

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"Kyra?"

Someone was shaking her. Oviar, waking her for early Song training. She batted the hands away with a groan.

"Singer Kyra!" A delighted voice, touched with familiar amusement. "Wake up, sleepyhead."

She opened one reluctant eye and saw two concerned blue ones. Was she dreaming? "Tian...?" She struggled to sit up, but the sudden movement started such a pounding in her skull that she flopped straight down again. "Ooh, my *head!*"

"Careful, Singer. Take it slowly."

"I'm not a Singer." Kyra blinked up at the violet evening sky. How long had she slept? How had Tian found her? And why wasn't he dead? She clasped his arm. "Tian! Are you all right?"

He smiled grimly. "Better than you, by the looks of things. Now just lie still a moment." His hand pushed her back to the damp grass. "I can see you're no longer a Singer. Here you are, asleep in my front garden, barefoot and robed in white. Why, Kyra? Why did they do this thing to you?"

"It's my punishment for singing your Nova wrong."

"You sang it wrong? To help me?"

She nodded, but wished she had not as the pain in her head increased.

"Oh, Kyra!" Tian's arms encircled her shoulders, drawing her gently against him. His hand stroked her hair. "You silly, silly girl. What a waste." He sighed. "But you've come to the right place. I live up here now. I've decided to help those who come out of the Temple, do what I can for them. I'll look after you, Kyra, don't worry."

"But you can't, Tian," she said, her voice muffled in his shoulder. "We sung a Nova to you, and now-" She choked. "Now you're going to *die!*"

His hand continued stroking her hair, so very calmly. He gave no sign of having understood. Perhaps he thought himself immune since he was still alive? But he was wrong.

"Tian!" she cried, pushing herself away so that she could see his face. "Don't you understand? Our Songs are death! And the Nova is quick. The Elder said a few days at most... Oh!" She clung to him again. "It's not fair."

Tian's whole body shook. At first Kyra thought he must be crying, too. Then she heard him laugh - a full, bright laugh. She drew back, confused.

"Kyra, Kyra! You have no idea, do you?" His expression sobered. "There was really no need for you to sing the wrong song. I'm deaf. I can't hear a thing, never have been able to, only I read lips so well that very few people realise it. My enemies at Court had no idea, either, or they would have made sure of me by more direct means - a knife in the back, perhaps. But they thought to make me suffer for daring to cross them, and so they sent me to the Singing Temple." He took her trembling hands. "I'm very sorry, Singer. I'm the reason you're here, but in a way I'm glad too, for now we can be together." He gave her a doubtful look. "At least for a while."

Kyra stared at him, finally realizing why he had ignored her in the cells when she'd called to him that first day. "You mean... you're not going to die?"

"One day, for sure." Tian's lips twitched, and something of the old mischief lit up his face. "But not for a long time yet, I hope. I think the vibrations in the air did have some effect on me, even though I couldn't hear your voices, but it soon wore off. I just pretended to be sleepy and confused, so your Elders wouldn't suspect."

Kyra raised her gaze to the Singing Temple, her heart suddenly light. "And the novices could only have sung One Star for me..."

She turned back to Tian, remembering he needed to see her lips. "The One Star Song is nothing," she said. "I'll be able to help as well, maybe even reduce the effects of Therapy. I know all the Songs." She smiled, full of daring plans. "The Elders may have banished me from the Temple, but I'm still a Singer, Tian!"

And, as the boy from the city hugged her, Kyra knew that she had never felt more alive.

THE END