

KYRA HALLAND



SARYA'S SONG

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## **SARYA'S SONG**

by Kyra Halland

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Sarya dyr-Rusac has risen from her destitute childhood to become a respected Arranger of musical magic rituals, until a wedding ritual she wrote results in tragedy. As unprecedented disasters follow, she returns to the musical service she left in disgrace, in search of answers. There, she confronts the mistakes she made in the past and resumes her complicated relationship with the gloriously talented singer Adan Muari.

Then a beautiful, nameless man in chains begins to appear in her dreams, begging her to sing him free. With time running out, Sarya must discover the truth: is he too dangerous and powerful to deal with, a threat to the man she loves and to their world, or does he have the power to end the catastrophes that threaten to tear the world apart?

## Chapter 1

SARYA SAT ON a small rise on the gently rolling prairie with her battered lute in her arms, picking out a new melody that she could hear in the wind. The breeze was sharp with coming winter, and the grass was dry and brown. She hadn't done as well in the northeastern provinces as she had hoped; the region's rich farming and herding had suffered from the last several years of increasingly long and harsh winters, and though the northern prairies weren't as poverty-stricken as the bleak and destitute Burnt Hills where she had grown up, there were still few coins to spare for a traveling minstrel. With the cold weather coming on, it was time to head south again.

A gust of icy wind rushed across the prairie, blowing strands of wheat-gold hair into Sarya's eyes, and she lifted her hand to brush the hair away from her face. As she did so, the wind rippled across the lute strings, bringing forth in its fullness the melody she had been hearing. Her breath caught at the beauty of the music even as its power chilled her heart with fear.

She had always been able to hear music no one else could hear. When she entered the Skola at Sucevita at age fourteen, she had learned that these melodies, called tropes, were part of the natural world and could be used to control the world. But several years ago, she had also begun to hear music that wasn't in any of the collections of tropes. At the same time, disasters unlike any ever before known began to strike: long, dry, scorching summers and harsh, bitterly cold winters; great shakings of the earth, unheard-of since the Days of Creation; outbreaks of bloodthirsty hostilities between previously peaceful nations; plagues that ravaged entire cities. Neither the known naturally-occurring tropes

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nor any newly-Composed chants had any effect on these disasters.

And then a protective chant in a wedding ritual Sarya had Arranged had resulted in the very tragedy it was supposed to prevent.

What had gone wrong with the wedding ritual? And what was going wrong with the world? Sarya had been wracking her mind over these questions in the months since she left the Skola in disgrace. The only answers she could think of were that either the chants were losing their power or there were new forces at work in the world that the chants couldn't influence.

But both of these were impossible. The music that controlled the world was a gift from Eshalarian the Creator, which He had given to mankind before moving on to new worlds and new creations. It was perfect, eternal, and unchanging. It couldn't fail. And unless Eshalarian had returned His attention to this world, no new forces could come into existence. Surely, if the generous and loving Creator were to return to His work here, He wouldn't do so by bringing death and destruction.

But the music she was hearing left no doubt about it. Something new was indeed at work – or something so old it had long been forgotten. If there were answers to be found, it was time to go find them, before the terrifying promise of the music in the wind became reality.

Sarya slipped her lute back into its worn-out case and then, instead of heading for the warmer weather and promise of easier living on the southern coast of Msaka Dolna, she turned west towards the great city of Sucevita and the Skola, where she had thought she would never return.

### **Eight months earlier**

SARYA PUT HER pen down, rubbed her eyes, and stretched. Rostan Kuhe, the Choirmaster's young assistant, stood on the other side of the cluttered work table, fidgeting anxiously with the sleeves of his gray Skola robe. "Master Jiu wants the rest of those parts now, dyr-Rusac," the boy said. "He'll eat me alive if I don't come back with them!"

What time was it? Sarya wondered. Here in this back corner of the Neumatorium, walled in by high shelves filled with books, she couldn't tell if it was night or day outside. Hours or even days could have passed while she was absorbed in arranging tropes into a wedding ritual that would be as beautiful as it was powerful. "He can have this Arrangement done quickly, or he can have it done right," Sarya said, irritated at the interruption. "The Naita and Arascas families had a lot of requests and I'm trying to fit it all in so the ritual doesn't last half a day and sound like cats fighting."

"Don't you have anything I can take back to him? Just so he won't shout at me?"

Sarya sighed. It wasn't the boy's fault that Master Jiu was impatient and short-tempered. She hated giving out parts to sections she was still working on, but, knowing the Choirmaster, Rostan was facing a good scolding at the least, and probably several days on kitchen duty, if he came back empty-handed. She searched through her papers and handed several sheets to him. "Here. This should keep the choir busy long enough for me to finish this. Tell Master Jiu that I said the rest of it will be ready in the morning, and that'll still give him a full day to rehearse before the wedding. If he has a problem with that, he can take it up with me."

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Rostan looked even more unhappy. "I'll tell him that." He left with the handful of parts.

Sarya dug the master copy of the unfinished Arrangement out from under the papers she had scattered, dipped her pen in ink, and set to work again.

She was adjusting the tropes in the next section of the ritual into a more pleasing arrangement when she heard someone approach her table; Rostan, most likely, back to torment her some more on behalf of Master Jiu. Reluctant to break her concentration, she ignored whoever it was.

Then a soft, accented female voice said, "You are Sarya dyr-Rusac, no?"

Sarya let out an impatient sigh and set her pen down hard on the table. "Yes, that's me." She looked up to see two women standing across from her. Their faces were draped in embroidered lace veils after the custom of the eastern coast of Msaka Ras, the great southern island-continent. One wore the colorful lace of a matron; the other was draped in the white lace of a young unmarried woman.

"I am sorry to disturb you," the woman in colored lace said. "I am Sinora Naita."

Sarya could have guessed that; the only people from Msaka Ras she had had dealings with recently were members of the Naita family, whose daughter's wedding ritual she was working on – or trying to work on – at this very moment.

"And this is my daughter, Sinorina Babiri," Sinora Naita said. "We are glad you are the one who is Arranging her wedding ritual. We have heard you are the best."

It was far from the first time Sarya had received such praise, but she still felt a little jolt of surprise and disbelief each time, especially since most of the people who had occasion to compliment her abilities were so far above her in birth, wealth, and station that they might as well live on different worlds. She doubted that the people who praised

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her Arrangements would still feel the same way if they knew how low her origins and background really were.

“Thank you.” With that, she hoped they would leave.

“May we sit?” Sinora Naita asked.

*Never be rude to the patrons* was the second rule of the Service. Most likely, the bride and her mother were just anxious to know how the Arrangement was progressing. It wouldn't have occurred to them that in their anxiousness to know, they were only impeding its progress, and it wasn't Sarya's place to tell them so. She gestured at some extra chairs off to the side of the worktable. After a moment's hesitation, as though they expected a servant – or Sarya herself – to move the chairs, the women pulled them over to the table.

When the two women were seated, they unveiled their faces. The bride, Babiri, was lovely, with smooth brown cheeks and full lips touched with a natural rosy color, large, dark, long-lashed eyes, and long glossy black curls. She looked younger than Sarya had expected, perhaps sixteen or seventeen. The mother was an older version of the daughter, her face not quite as soft and rounded but still unwrinkled, with only a few threads of silver in her black hair.

“I need to ask you a favor,” Sinora Naita said.

This was exactly what Sarya had been hoping she wouldn't say. “I'm sorry. It's far too late to re-open negotiations on the ritual. As it is, I'm barely going to finish it on time.” She picked up her pen and started writing, hoping the women would take the hint and leave.

“No, please. Listen to me,” the mother said more insistently. “This is not a matter for negotiations – we dare not have negotiations in this matter.”

Making unnegotiated changes to a wedding ritual was illegal as well as being against the rules of the musical Service, and, normally, Sarya would never even have entertained such an idea. But an edge of desperation in

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Sinora Naita's voice caught her attention. She put her pen down again and looked at the two women. The mother's face was filled with pleading that matched her words, and tears shimmered on Babiri's eyelashes and cheeks. Even though it was her wedding, Sarya realized, the girl had probably had the least say of anyone in the negotiations. "All right, I'll listen," she said, hoping she wouldn't regret it, "but I can't do anything on my own."

"Say nothing – no promises – until you've heard me out," Sinora Naita said. "When you know what is at stake for my daughter, then you can make a decision."

"Go on. But don't take too long – I'm already late with these parts. And, really, I can't make any changes to what's already been agreed on."

"Thank you," both women said at once, disregarding her cautionary words. Sarya wished she hadn't agreed to listen to them, after all. Whatever it was they wanted, she was going to have to disappoint them.

"In the last five or six years," Sinora Naita said, "three of Babiri's cousins have gone insane upon reaching their seventeenth birthdays. The usual curative chants have had little effect; their cases are very difficult. This has been kept quiet; the poor girls who were afflicted were secretly taken away to a private hospice before anyone outside the family could know what had happened.

"Now, here is the difficulty – my daughter's wedding will take place the day before her seventeenth birthday. We would have had the wedding a few months later, to continue treating Babiri with protective chants until the danger was past, but the wedding day was chosen as being convenient for the Arascas family, and three Oracles confirmed that it was an auspicious day."

Of course there would be Oracles involved, Sarya thought. Oracles, a superstitious remnant of the old Sirduccean Rite, remained popular in certain countries and cultures despite efforts to stamp them out over the last

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hundred and fifty years, mainly due to the support of their wealthy clientele, who could afford to pay them to say what they wanted to hear. “And you believed those Oracles?”

Sinora Naita shrugged. “It was convenient for the Arascas family to believe them, so we could not say otherwise.” A note of deep pride entered the woman's voice. “Though our family is well beneath the Arascases in name and influence, my Babiri caught Zigor Arascas's eye at a ball near our home last summer, and he fell in love with her, and would have her in spite of all his family's objections. He is the heir, and must marry as high as he can – they were hoping to attract a bride from the nobility for him – but he refuses to marry at all if he cannot have my Babiri.”

The bride blushed prettily, and her full lips curved into a smile. “I love him too,” she whispered, her blush deepening.

“So, you see, Mistress dyr-Rusac, how fortunate my daughter is, to be making a love match that is also so advantageous for our family, and how delicate our position is. The Arascases would snatch at any excuse to break the engagement, even now that everything has been agreed upon. We cannot let them find out about this infirmity that has come upon our family, and my daughter must be protected against the insanity. So I have come to ask you – to beg you – to put a chant to prevent the insanity in the wedding ritual, that will bind to her with the rest of the wedding chants and protect her for the rest of her life.”

Although Sarya could understand Sinora Naita's desperation, it was no small thing she was asking. “There's no way for you to continue to have protective chants sung for her after she is married?”

“She will be departing on her wedding journey immediately after the ceremony. The healers have told us that, from a distance, and without knowing exactly where she is, the chants would not be effective in this difficult case. And were she to bring healers with her, or request

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such chants after she is married, it would raise suspicion and could even give her husband grounds for divorce. The Arascases would cast her off and humiliate her. Our whole family would also lose face, and our good name would be tainted. But mostly I do not wish to see my Babiri's heart broken.”

Tears shone in the girl's eyes again. Sarya chewed her lip, considering the problem. It would be a tragedy for someone so young, with such good prospects ahead of her, to lose her mind. It would be almost as bad for the girl to be publicly rejected; the Arascases would certainly make the reason for the broken betrothal public, so as not to be held at fault in the matter.

Of course, with the Naita family money, the embarrassment could be hidden away – the girl could take refuge at a private resort until the whole thing blew over, and a perfectly suitable replacement husband could be bought with her dowry and her beauty.

But Sarya knew what it was like to desperately want something better in life than she had ever thought possible, and what it was like to suffer public rejection and humiliation. Rich and beautiful the girl might be, but she was as powerless to determine her own fate as Sarya had once been. A familiar mix of emotions began to burn within her: hurt, helplessness, shame, and resentment of a society ruled by customs, traditions, and laws that took away all power from some people and gave it to others regardless of fairness and justice or of dreams crushed and hearts broken.

She was probably going to regret this. It was against the rules, but there were more important things than rules, and if no one ever stood up for those things, nothing would ever change. “Any really effective chant to prevent insanity will be recognizable to anyone familiar with the Rite,” Sarya said. “There have been members of the Arascas family in the Service here in Sucevita and probably in other places

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too. I would have to use something less recognizable, even though it would also be less powerful. But I'll do the best I can."

"Thank you!" mother and daughter said together, their joy nearly raising their voices to a level that could be heard beyond Sarya's private corner of the Neumatorium. Babiri covered her mouth with her hand, looking chagrined, and Sinora Naita immediately dropped her voice to a lower level. "And you won't tell anyone about this?" she asked.

"I won't. I can't." Never mind the Naitas; she didn't even want to think about what would happen to her if this was ever discovered – a week of Penance, at the very least, possibly even imprisonment. She was a fool for even considering doing this, but she couldn't pass up this chance to strike back against the unfairness of the world. So she would just have to make sure it wasn't discovered.

Sinora Naita seized one of Sarya's hands and kissed it. "Angels bless you, Mistress dyr-Rusac!"

Angels, another superstition left over from the Sirducean Rite that was too deeply ingrained in certain cultures to be completely stamped out. Supposedly, angels were beings who had assisted Eshalarian in the Creation, but the Oradean Rite, which had replaced the old, error-riddled, corrupted Sirducean Rite a century and a half ago, taught that it was sacrilege to believe that the Creator had required any help at all.

Still, superstition aside, Sarya decided to accept the sentiment in the spirit in which it was intended. "I'll do the best I can," she repeated, wondering how good her best was going to be in these circumstances. Already she was trying to decide whether it would be better to search the Neumatories for an obscure trope that would work or to Compose a new one especially for this situation.

"We thank you so much," Sinora Naita said again as she and her daughter veiled their faces and rose to leave.

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“Because of you, my daughter will be the happiest bride in all the world!”

Sarya watched them as they left the Neumatorium. She had never really thought of her work as making people happy, but she supposed that was one way to look at it. Arranging wedding rituals that would ensure successful marriages certainly made people happy, and it was the closest she would ever come to enjoying a similar happiness herself. With that thought in mind, she began roughing out a new chant that would serve her purposes.

\* \* \*

IT WAS NEARLY dawn when Sarya put the finishing touches on the voice parts for Babiri Naita's wedding ritual. She had Composed a new chant that resembled the calming tropes customarily included in wedding rituals to soothe a young bride's fears and anxieties, but that also had anti-insanity properties. Hopefully, no one would notice that an additional calming chant had been included in the Arrangement. To further disguise the new chant, she had set the same text to it that would be sung with the real calming chants. Words had no effect on the power of a chant; the music's power lay entirely in the mode, pitches, and contours of the melody and in the power of the human voice that sang it.

The only problem was that for this anti-insanity chant to have the greatest possible effect, it would need to be sung by someone with a powerful True Voice. Sarya had assigned the part to Adan Muari, the strongest True Voice in the Great Choir, with two altos to accompany him, and had given his solo from the same section, the only place where the added trope would fit, to his friend Lefin Adaska. Losing his solo would sting Muari's pride, of course, and he would probably complain. Sarya did feel some regret about taking the solo from him; it was perfectly suited to

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his voice, and would have sounded magnificent – not that she would ever tell him that, of course. But the purposes of the ritual had to take precedence over artistic considerations, and Arrangers had the final say on how their Arrangements were to be performed.

She capped the inkwell, straightened up the sheets of music, then lay her head down on the table for a quick nap. The Great Choir would be gathering for rehearsal in just a few hours, and she didn't want to risk getting too comfortable in her room and oversleeping.

It seemed like her eyes had barely closed when someone shook her awake. “Dyr-Rusac!” shouted Rostan, her persecutor from the day before. “Master Jiu wants those parts, and he wants them an hour ago!”

*Damn.* Sarya straightened up and rubbed her eyes, which felt like they were filled with sand. Her head pounded and her stomach growled; she hadn't eaten dinner, or even had anything to drink all night, in her push to finish the Arrangement. “All right,” she muttered to the boy, who was bouncing up and down impatiently. She put on her gray Service robe, which she had draped over the back of her chair so the sleeves wouldn't get in her way as she worked, gathered up the stack of sheet music, and followed Rostan out of the Neumatorium, across the courtyard at the center of the complex of buildings that made up the Skola, and into the vast, cold, dimly-lit Shrine.

A series of stairstepped platforms built of the same gray stone as the Shrine filled much of the north apse. The Great Choir stood assembled on the risers, singing through the parts of the wedding ritual she had sent over with Rostan the day before. Sarya's arrival with the long-overdue parts distracted a number of the singers, and the performance fell apart.

Thus alerted to Sarya's presence, Master Jiu turned to glare at her from under his thinning bush of frizzy gray hair.

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“What took you so long?” he demanded. “I needed the complete ritual two days ago!”

“I could have used another month to work on this,” Sarya said. “It’s the most complicated ritual I’ve ever had to Arrange. Last night I came across something I’d forgotten to put in, and I couldn’t make it fit. I had to re-write some parts.”

“I’m not interested in your excuses, Sarya dyr-Rusac. This is the most important wedding of the year!”

Ignoring Master Jiu and his temper, Sarya stepped up onto the risers and began passing out the parts. The choir members leafed through the pages she handed them, exclaiming or complaining at what they had been given.

“What’s this?” a fine masculine voice demanded. Adan Muari held out his new part, staring at it. “I can’t sing this. It’s too high. What happened to my solo?”

“I know your range,” Sarya said. Adan Muari, tall, handsome, well-built, auburn-haired, heir of a family that owned nearly a quarter of Msaka Ras and a substantial portion of Msaka Dolna, possessed a True baritone voice of divine quality and extraordinary magical strength, and an equally extraordinary opinion of himself. She hated adding to that opinion. “I need a strong True Voice on that bit, so I gave it to you. Lefin Adaska can handle the solo.”

“I can’t sing this,” Adan said again, shoving the sheet of music back towards her. “I’ll sound like I’ve been gelded.”

She pushed the page back at him. “Don’t tempt me.”

“Yeah, Muari,” his friend Rabac Luca said from the tenor section. “Better not give her any ideas. She might bite them off.”

The other tenors laughed, and Master Jiu scolded, “Please! This is neither the time nor the place for such vulgarity!”

Sarya stared flatly at Rabac. “You are disgusting.” She turned back to Adan. “Just sing it.”

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“Sarya *dyr-Rusac!*” Master Jiu protested. “You cannot change soloists so close to –”

“I’ve been up all night working on the damned thing. I’m the Arranger; you have to perform the Arrangement however I damn well tell you to.”

Master Jiu drew in an outraged breath, but Vidette Fabara cut him off. “Well, you certainly told us.” Vidette, the soprano soloist, was as rich and stunningly gorgeous as Adan, with gleaming, curly chestnut hair and a generously-curved – and generously-shared – body. “Your word is law, right, *dyr-Rusac?*” Her voice dripped with scorn.

Sarya chose to ignore Vidette and the snickering that accompanied her emphasis on the patronymic that was all Sarya had instead of a proper family name. It was nothing she wasn’t used to. The Service was the only socially acceptable outlet for musically-talented young people from the wealthy and noble classes; while art music and musical theatre enjoyed widespread popularity among the upper classes, those who performed it were considered little better than confidence tricksters and prostitutes. Being educated at a Skola and singing in a Service choir was a much more respectable endeavor, and the Skolas and Shrines were happy to accommodate the talented offspring of the rich and highborn in exchange for their families’ generous support. To get to where she was now, Sarya had had to work ten times harder than those daughters and sons of the privileged classes, and she had no intention of allowing the taunting of a spoiled bitch to make her back down.

She handed out the last of the parts in silence, then, as Master Jiu called the choir back to order, she left the Shrine in search of breakfast and her bed.

\* \* \*

THE NEXT DAY, Sarya slipped into a back row seat in the Shrine just before the wedding began. The bench in front of

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her, like all the benches in the Shrine, was made of highly polished red-gold wood from the rainforests of Msaka Ras and had a brass plaque affixed to the back engraved with the words, "Gift of Lasan Muari." Just a small token of the Muari family's appreciation when Adan was named a soloist in the Great Choir.

The Shrine had been transformed overnight from the cold, gray, cavernous monument to Eshalarian into an elegant wonderland. Pure white candles burned in every candelabra and candle niche. Endless lengths of costly white silk and lace swooped between the columns surrounding the interior of the Shrine, held in place with bouquets of white flowers that, judging by the sweet scents that filled the vast space, had to be fresh. Sarya had no idea what kind they were, or where such a bounty of fresh flowers had come from in the gray, icy, slushy depths of late winter. She would probably never know; the rich had resources she couldn't even imagine.

Whenever she could, Sarya attended the ceremonies she had written the Arrangements for, listening to the results of her work and picking out every place where she could have done better. It wasn't by accident that she was the best-regarded Arranger in the Service at Sucevita, the greatest city on Msaka Dolna. She had worked hard to get to where she was now, and, even though she had achieved a measure of respect for her work, far more than she ever would have expected, given her low birth and background, she couldn't afford to ever let up on her efforts to improve her skills and her reputation.

The choir, dressed in elaborate white ceremonial robes, filed into the north apse, behind the altar. Master Jiu took his place in front of them, then Hierarch Sobot, the Hierarch of Sucevita, entered the Shrine and walked over to stand before the altar. As the intricate opening of Sarya's Arrangement floated out through the Shrine, the groom, accompanied by his mother and father, entered from the

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west apse and came to stand before the Hierarch. All three Arascases were resplendent in purple and black velvet, silk, and lace. Then the bride came in from the east apse with her parents. Babiri Naita was draped from head to foot in white lace that glittered with tiny crystals, while her parents were richly clad in blue and green, their family colors.

The long ceremony continued. The choir sang two more sections of the ritual, then Hierarch Sobot pronounced the couple's vows and heard their responses. After the exchange of vows, the Hierarch bound the couple's right hands together with a length of white silk ribbon while First Chanter Predu sang the marriage chant, accompanied by the choir.

Sarya watched and listened, a tiny, bitter feeling pricking at her heart. A wedding like this was not for someone like her; she would never have white lace, jewels, a silk ribbon to bind her to a man who wanted nothing at all if he couldn't have her. Weddings like this were for beautiful rich girls who could bring money, status, and social connections to the marriage, who could run a wealthy household and bear heirs of suitably elevated bloodlines; girls who hadn't had to fight their way out of the mining towns of the Burnt Hills.

Not that it mattered. She had had enough of men and sex at an age before most girls knew what was what. The Skola was her home, her place in the world; she had worked hard to earn the right to be there, and she had no reason to ever leave.

The longest part of the ritual began, the chants that would ensure good health, good fortune, happiness, health, and fertility for the couple. Turning her mind back to her real reason for attending the ceremony, Sarya listened carefully for any flaws in the intricate flow of the music.

Try as she might, she couldn't find any fault in her Arrangement. It was as close to a perfect ritual as she had ever written. Then the choir came to the part where she had

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added the new chant above the baritone solo; if there were going to be any flaws in the Arrangement, they would be here.

Adan Muari's glorious voice, like burnt sugar and cream, filled the shrine with the solo while Lefin Adaska and the two altos sang the anti-insanity chant. Normally during one of Adan Muari's solos, Sarya would close her eyes and let his voice flow over her, and wish it didn't sound like everything she could ever desire. But now she sat fuming, barely hearing the perfect blending of the melodies.

Whose decision had it been to change her assignment of parts? Had Adan refused to give up his solo and take a part less suited to his voice? Or had Master Jiu placed more value on his own aesthetic judgment than on Sarya's knowledge of the properties of the tropes in the Arrangement? Either way, the result was the same: the disguised anti-insanity trope she had Composed was not sung with the strength it would need to have the greatest effectiveness.

A silken soprano joined Adan's voice and the two solo lines twined sensually around each other. For some reason, Vidette and Adan's duets always ended up sounding like an intimate conversation between lovers, no matter how Sarya tried to arrange their lines to not have that effect. The fact that they were lovers – though their relationship was far from exclusive – probably had something to do with it.

Enough, she decided. This was the best Arrangement she had ever written, but she couldn't stand to listen to another note. Already stewing over what she was going to say to Muari when she got the chance, she stood up and slipped out of the Shrine.

## Chapter 2

SARYA LAY IN wait for Adan in the hallway outside the choir robing room, off the north apse of the Shrine. When he finally walked past in the midst of the mass of singers exiting the robing room, she hissed at him, “What in all the hells of Torment did you do that for?”

He paused. “Do what?”

Sarya joined him, and together they left the north wing of the Skola and headed along the covered walkway that surrounded the central courtyard. “You know what. Sing the solo instead of the part I gave you.”

“Lefin hadn't been practicing that solo for the last week,” Adan said. “He wasn't going to be ready to sing it. Besides, the new part fit his range better than mine, and he's got a decent enough True Voice, and so do Amarina and Jayana. Master Jiu agreed that it would be better to do it that way. With what the Arascas and Naita families paid for this wedding, they were expecting the best performance possible.”

“Didn't it occur to you that I might have actually had a reason for assigning the parts the way I did? I didn't do it just to make you sound bad, you know.”

“I didn't know what to think. You've never switched parts on me like that before.”

“When have I ever tried to make you sound less than your best?”

“Never,” he admitted. “But you didn't give any explanation for the changes, so what was I supposed to think? And anyway, what was so important about that new chant? It was just another calming trope.”

They reached the door of the refectory. Adan started to go in, but Sarya grabbed the sleeve of his gray common-wear robe and pulled him aside, against the wall. They

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stood there, huddled together, as choir members, tired from the long performance, streamed past them into the warmth of the dining hall. “It wasn’t just a calming chant,” Sarya whispered. “It was something else, and I can’t tell you what it was, but it was important, and it had to be sung by a strong True Voice to be effective.”

“It – what?” Adan asked, just barely keeping his own voice low enough to not be overheard. “What do you mean, you can’t tell me?”

“I promised I wouldn’t tell anyone. It was requested by... one of the family members. I can’t tell you any more, but it was important.”

“Did anyone else know about this? Like the other parties to the wedding agreement?”

“No. And it has to stay that way.”

Adan shifted, looking around, then leaned in closer to her. His presence was almost overwhelming; he looked perfect, he sounded perfect – unlike a lot of singers, his speaking voice was as fine as his singing voice; he even smelled perfect, a masculine blend of musk and cinnamon. Sarya reminded herself that, however perfect he was, he was also vain, overbearing, and arrogant, and his vanity and arrogance had ruined her carefully-crafted plan.

“You know it’s against Service rules,” Adan whispered insistently, “not to mention illegal, to alter a wedding Arrangement without full knowledge and approval –”

“Hey, you two!” Lefin Adaska shouted. He and Rabac Luca were approaching the door of the refectory. “Get a room!”

Sarya’s face flamed, and she tried to put a little breathing room between her and Adan. Lefin and Rabac laughed and went into the dining hall. When they were gone, Adan went on in a low voice, “I can’t believe you would do something like that.”

“I know. Believe me, I never would have done it if it wasn’t important. You won’t tell anyone, right? I

## Sarya's Song – Kyra Halland

promised.” She hated having to ask him for a favor, but this was important.

“Of course I won't tell. I just hope this doesn't lead to any kind of trouble.”

“Thanks.” He would keep his word; at least she could say that for him.

Adan headed into the warmth and light of the refectory, but Sarya didn't follow, even though it was even colder now and a sleety rain had begun falling just beyond the covered walkway. In spite of Adan's promise, her stomach was knotted up with worry and her appetite was gone. She found herself hoping very hard that Sinora Naita's concerns about her daughter's sanity had been groundless.

\* \* \*

THREE DAYS LATER, Rostan Kuhe cornered Sarya in the Neumatorium, where she was preparing to start work on a coming-of-age ritual for the eldest son of a duke. “Masters want to see you. Now.”

Sarya finished making a note on the list of trope requests, then set her pen down. “Which Masters? Why? I'm in the middle of something.”

“All of them. I don't know.” Rostan sounded even more put-upon than usual. “They're in the Council room.”

This wasn't good, being called before the whole Council of Masters of the Sucevita Skola. She hoped it didn't have anything to do with the wedding ritual. Adan wouldn't have told, not after he promised not to. Had someone else detected the presence of a new and superfluous calming chant in the Arrangement?

With her heart pounding and a knot in her stomach, she followed Rostan to the Council room. Adan Muari, accompanied by another Master's assistant, met them at the door. He raised his eyebrows in inquiry to Sarya, and she shrugged. Then they went in.

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The four Masters, First Chanter Predu, and Hierarch Sobot all sat along one side of a long, narrow table. The other side was vacant except for one empty chair. Master Telciu, Master of the Skola, who was sitting just to the Hierarch's right, gestured to the empty chair. "Please be seated, Sinorene Muari."

Adan sat, but Sarya was forced to remain standing. That was only to be expected, but, under the circumstances, being singled out only made her stomach hurt even more.

The white-bearded Hierarch spoke. "What I am going to tell you is not yet known outside the families and a few officials, and must remain in strictest confidence. Babiri Naita went mad on her wedding night and stabbed her husband and herself to death."

"What?" Adan demanded harshly. The news left Sarya's mind blank with shock. She could hardly even breathe. Then her thoughts went back to the night of the wedding. Anxious and upset, she hadn't been able to sleep, and an unfamiliar trope, its melody jagged and tortuous, had played persistently in her mind. She was used to hearing strange tropes; they had been increasing in number the last few years, and she hadn't thought anything of this one in particular. Had it signaled Babiri Naita's madness the way the other tropes she had been hearing had heralded other disasters? The Masters were looking at her, waiting for her to say something, but she had no words for what had happened or for what she felt.

"What was that chant you added to the ritual, Mistress dyr-Rusac?" the Hierarch asked. "It appears to be a calming chant, an extra one which was not requested for the ritual, but upon closer examination it has been determined to have anti-insanity properties. It also does not seem to be in any of the commonly-used Neumatories."

"It –" Sarya's mouth was dry. Her legs felt weak; she leaned forward and rested her hands on the table to steady

## Sarya's Song – Kyra Halland

herself. “Yes. It was an anti-insanity chant. I Composed it especially for this ritual.”

“No such chant was ordered for that wedding,” Master Tanash, Master of the Shrine, said. “Unsanctioned Composing and unauthorized changes to a wedding ritual – This is most shocking.”

“Explain yourself, Sarya dyr-Rusac,” the Hierarch said.

Sarya was trying to understand for herself what had happened. It shouldn't have turned out like this. Even a weak chant sung by a weak True Voice, let alone three reasonably strong Voices, should have at least moderated the insanity. Instead, it seemed to have worsened it to the point of murder and suicide. In her mind, Sarya saw Babiri's pretty, radiant face twisted with madness and spattered with her husband's blood. How could one simple chant have gone so wrong?

“Sinora Naita and her daughter, Babiri, came to see me two nights before the wedding, while I was trying to finish up the Arrangement. Sinora Naita told me that in the last several years, a few of Babiri's female cousins had gone insane around their seventeenth birthdays. She was afraid that Babiri, whose seventeenth birthday was the day after the wedding –” A day she had not lived to see. Sarya's voice faltered.

A moment later, she recovered and went on. “Sinora Naita was afraid that Babiri would fall victim to the same madness. The affliction in the family had been kept quiet, and the Arascas family knew nothing about it. The Naitas wanted to keep it secret because the Arascases were opposed to the marriage and they were still looking for a reason to call it off, even though all the agreements had been signed. Sinora Naita asked me to insert a chant into the ritual to protect her daughter against the insanity, and to not tell anyone.”

The Masters stared at her in silence for a long moment, judging her truthfulness or just too shocked to say anything.

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Then Hierarch Sobot said, “We are to understand that you changed an agreed-upon wedding ritual without the consent or knowledge of all of the involved parties, and kept secret something that had a significant bearing upon the desirability of the marriage?”

Sarya swallowed, knowing there was no defense she could make. The accusation was true, and her reasons for doing what she had done would mean nothing to these men. “Yes, Hierarch.”

“So you Composed – without permission – a weak anti-insanity chant and, in order to conceal what you had done, you buried it among the weaker voices of the choir,” Master Jiu said.

“Mistress dyr-Rusac assigned the part to me, but I refused to sing it,” Adan said. Surprised by his admission, Sarya looked at him. He was pale except for some unflattering red blotches high on his cheekbones and around his eyes; he appeared to be taking this much harder than she would have expected. “It was too high,” Adan went on. “Mistress dyr-Rusac said she needed a strong True Voice on that part, but I disregarded her instructions. I didn't think it mattered.”

“And the reason you didn't think it mattered was because Mistress dyr-Rusac didn't explain to you why she needed your voice on that part, because she was trying to keep what she had done from being discovered,” Master Uldo, the Master of the Neumatorium, said.

“You should have come to us immediately upon receiving Sinora Naita's request, Mistress dyr-Rusac,” Master Telciu said.

“Sinora Naita swore me to secrecy,” Sarya said. “The Arascas family never would have gone ahead with the marriage if they had known about the madness in the family.”

“And who could blame them?” Master Tanash said.

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“As it is, they are furious,” the Hierarch said. “They are demanding that we return the fees and donations they paid for the wedding, and are also insisting that the Arranger whose ritual led to the tragedy be severely punished. The Naitas are also angry that your ritual apparently brought this disaster down upon their family and are also insisting on severe punishment.”

“But the Naitas were the ones who asked for the change and wanted it kept a secret!” Sarya protested. It was useless to try to defend herself against the anger of rich, powerful families like the Arascases and the Naitas, but the blatant unfairness of this was too much. “I was only doing what Sinora Naita asked me to do!”

“There may be a lawsuit between the families, but that is none of your concern,” Hierarch Sobot said. “You know the rules. Your disregard of them has cost this young couple their life, and could turn out to be very expensive for the Skola and the Shrine here in Sucevita, in terms of reparations, forfeited donations, and lost future donations. Therefore, in consequence of these serious offenses, you are sentenced to a full month of Penance.”

“A full month?” Adan demanded before Sarya was even sure she had heard right. “No one can survive a full month of Penance, especially not this time of year. It’s still freezing at nights, even in the Shrine!”

Adan’s protest shocked Sarya almost as much as the sentence had. Why should it matter to him? He wasn’t being blamed or punished, and there was no reason why he should take her side in this.

“I do have to say,” the Hierarch said, “that the Arascas family first demanded that she be executed for causing death through malicious mischief.”

The word sent a sick spasm of terror through Sarya. “*Executed?*”

“We were able to convince them not to go so far,” the Hierarch went on, addressing Adan, “by promising that

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Mistress dyr-Rusac would be given an appropriately severe punishment and that she would never be allowed to Arrange another wedding ritual.” He turned to Sarya. “You will begin your Penance tonight, and when the month is over we will discuss your continued future with the Service.”

Sarya didn't know if she was going to cry or be sick. Everything she had worked for – her position, her reputation, her livelihood, the security of having a home here at the Skola – was in ruins because she had agreed to do a favor for a woman too sheltered, too thoughtless, to realize exactly what she was asking or what the consequences to Sarya would be if the deception was discovered. She might have even lost her life.

And she hadn't even managed to save Babiri.

She should have said no. This was where her compassion had gotten her, she thought bitterly – thrown into the fire as the sacrifice in a dispute between two families too wealthy and high-ranking to be held responsible for their own roles in the disaster. For a long time she was unable to say anything. There was nothing she could say that would make any difference. Finally, she forced the words, “Yes, Hierarch,” from her dry mouth, then turned and left the room.

She lingered on the covered walkway outside the wing where the Masters' offices were located, feeling utterly lost. She wanted to cry. This couldn't be happening. She couldn't believe that Babiri Naita and her husband were dead, and that she had destroyed her reputation, her career, her life, for the sake of a rich family who had then turned on her. Not that she should have ever expected otherwise. No rich family would ever stand up for someone like her, especially not when it was easier to blame her for their misfortune.

And she had never heard of anyone being given more than two weeks of Penance, never mind a full month. A

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person doing Penance was allowed only one meal of bread, milk, and water each day, and spent the days in hard, menial work in the kitchen and stables or on the Skola's farm. Nights were spent kneeling in the Shrine, singing chants of repentance and humility, after receiving five lashes. Between chores and the overnight chanting, there was almost no time to sleep. Most sentences were only for three or four days, or at most, for serious offenses, a week or so. In those cases, the sentence was usually shortened for good behavior or, more often, after the penitent's family paid a substantial 'reparation' to the Skola. Everyone Sarya had ever known who had served more than three days of Penance had spent the following week sick in bed.

Adan was right; she probably wouldn't make it through the month. But she had no rich relatives to buy out her sentence, and her only other choice – not a sanctioned option, but still a possibility – was to leave the Skola, the place she had made her home for the last ten years, the only real home she had known since she was a small child.

"Sarya!" Adan came running out of the building, his face flushed with emotion, his breathing hard and ragged. "I tried to talk them out of it," he said when he reached her, "but they're set on the full month. Both families are threatening to completely remove their support from the Service here."

She wasn't interested in the Masters' reasons for the sentence they had passed or in Adan Muari's pity. "If you had sung the part I gave you, the chant would have been strong enough and none of this would have happened. No one would have ever known."

"You know the rules. You should have told someone. Even if it was at the last minute, something could have been agreed on."

"No, it couldn't. The Arascas family never would have let the marriage go forward. They were opposed to it in the first place, and were just looking for a good excuse to call it

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off. If they had found out about the insanity in the Naita family, they would have broken off the betrothal, and made sure everyone knew why so they wouldn't lose face. That girl loved Zigor Arascas –”

“I know. And I know he loved her.” Adan's voice grew harsh with emotion. “He was my friend.”

Great Creator God. No wonder he was so upset. She hadn't known. If she had known... But she hadn't. She hadn't meant for any of this to happen. She had thought she was doing the right thing. “Don't try to tell me the Arascas family wouldn't have publicly humiliated her,” she said. “It would have killed her. You don't know what it's like, to be told in front of the whole world that you aren't good enough –”

“And you do know what it's like. Believe me, I know. You're never going to let me forget.”

“If you had the slightest idea what it was like, you would understand why I couldn't stand by and let it happen to Babiri Naita.”

“But since I've never been rejected, I'm incapable of understanding or caring about how other people feel, right? Is that what you're saying? Because you're wrong. I do know what it's like to be rejected, and I do care about other people's feelings. But this is the Service, Sarya. All the people of all the lands of the world depend on our integrity. There are rules that must be followed, and laws, and good reasons for them. Your first duty is to the Service, not to yourself and your feelings. And if you can't remember that, or if you don't agree with that, then maybe you don't belong here.”

His words slammed her breath from her. As contentious as their relationship was, as much as she hated everything he came from, everything he represented, Adan Muari was the closest thing she had to a friend. She had thought that he, out of everyone at the Sucevita Skola, accepted her as

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an equal, as someone who had earned a place there. To hear him say she didn't belong, after all...

Tears filled her eyes. She didn't dare open her mouth to make a retort. Now she noticed the crowd of fascinated onlookers, including Vidette Fabara and a number of Adan's friends, that had gathered around them. Abruptly, she turned her back on him and fled to her room, to wait with only her misery for company until it was time for her first Penance lashing.

\* \* \*

A FEW HOURS later, Sarya reported to the robing room just off the north apse of the Shrine. In the cluttered room, lined with wooden wardrobes and littered with robes in need of cleaning and mending and other detritus, she took off her gray Service robe and her shoes and socks, then stripped off her brown wool overdress and coarse-woven cotton blouse. Wearing only her thin, sleeveless shift, she knelt, waiting for the lashing that would mark the beginning of her first night of Penance. The sound of singing drifted in from the Shrine, somehow making her feel even more alone and forlorn.

Master Jiu had been assigned to oversee her Penance. The Masters usually preferred to leave the distasteful task of administering Penance lashings to their underlings, and now one of the assistant choirmasters entered the robing room and took the lash, which consisted of three long, knotted leather thongs attached to a wooden handle, from where it hung on the wall. The whipping passed in silence except for the sound of the lash cutting through the air and landing on Sarya's back. The five strokes were just hard enough to sting, but not hard enough to break her skin; drawing blood during a Penance lashing was expressly prohibited, one of the few concessions to mercy found in ordinary Penance.

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After the whipping, Sarya went into the dimly-lit Shrine, where a small choir of students was finishing the evening ritual under First Chanter Predu's direction. Sarya's skin bristled with goosebumps in the frigid air of the late-winter evening. She walked around to the center of the Shrine and knelt down on the hard stone floor, facing the altar and the choir. The stones of the floor appeared smooth, but kneeling on them quickly revealed the existence of a multitude of bumps and sharp corners. Sarya shifted to try to find a comfortable position, bowed her head, and waited.

The choir reached the end of the ritual, then filed out of the Shrine. Once she was alone, Sarya began singing the cycle of chants of repentance, which she would repeat all night every night for the next month.

She would make it through the month, she told herself as she sang. It wasn't like she had never been cold and hungry before. She would not be the sacrifice in a quarrel between rich families. She would not let them drive her away from the Skola, her home, where she had worked hard to earn a place instead of having it bought for her or gifted to her.

The cold seeped into her bones. Her feet and then her knees and then her entire legs grew numb. After a while, she stopped shivering, but she still forced herself to fidget to keep herself from freezing. Her voice, already a husky, throaty alto, had turned into a rough croak by the time she started her fifth repetition of the repentance cycle. She couldn't stop singing, or trying to sing; there was no way to know when one of Master Jiu's assistants, or even Master Jiu himself, would be listening in to make sure she carried out her Penance properly.

A small bottle of water had been left for her. She took a swallow and resumed singing, but her voice cracked like an old raven's.

Laughter like golden bells floated from behind her. "Lovely, just lovely, Sarya dyr-Rusac," Vidette Fabara said.

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“I volunteered to check in on you during the night. I thought it might be entertaining.”

An unpleasant mix of emotions boiled up inside of Sarya and her fists clenched, but she forced herself to keep singing and not respond.

Vidette was silent a moment as though waiting for Sarya's response, then she went on. “You know he's right.” At the reminder of Adan's angry words, a knot in Sarya's throat threatened to choke off her voice. “You don't belong here. A debt-orphan from the Burnt Hills – we all know what girls like you have to do. You have no education, no refinement, no culture, no family or friends of any importance. You might be a passingly good Arranger, but you are more of a stain on the Service than an asset to it.”

*Ignore it. It's nothing you haven't heard before,* Sarya told herself. Still, her eyes ached with a sudden flood of tears that she refused to let fall.

“I know you can hear me, *dyr-Rusac*. There's no use in pretending you can't. I just want you to know that I agree with Adan. We don't need or want you here.” Footsteps followed the words as Vidette left the Shrine.

Alone again, Sarya let her voice die and her tears fall. Adan and Vidette were right. She didn't belong here. She wasn't part of this world; she would always be an outsider. She could never accept the way this world worked, and because of that she had made a terrible error in judgment. Something had gone wrong with her chant, and she didn't know what, and as long as she didn't know and as long as she was unable to make herself accept the way things were, there was no guarantee that she wouldn't make another terrible mistake. It was better that she not be here at all, than to take that chance.

She would be told to leave when her Penance was done; there was no question about that. There were two wealthy and angry families to be appeased. If she was going to have to leave anyway, she might as well do it now instead of

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waiting until the end of a month that she might not even survive. She wasn't a prisoner; no one would force her to stay if she chose to leave. And the sooner she left, the sooner everything could be settled and the better off everyone would be.

Except for young Babiri Naita and her husband, but no amount of Penance would bring them back from the dead.

Having made her decision, Sarya rose on stiff, aching legs, returned to the robing room, and got dressed, leaving behind her Service robe. Then she collected her lute and her few other possessions from her room. Not knowing what the future held for her but knowing that she could never come back, she set her back to the Skola and walked away.

### **Nine months later**

SARYA ARRIVED IN Sucevita on a gray day in early winter, a month after the wind had played the beautiful, disturbing music on her lute. Already this had been the coldest, stormiest winter yet after several years of gradually worsening weather. The first snowfall had disrupted the harvest, and, during her journey west, she had seen farmers working hard to salvage what they could of their crops before winter settled in for good. In the towns she had passed through and especially now in the city, signs of the worsening shortages showed in the long lines at bakeries and vegetable sellers, where prices were higher than ever before.

Sarya hadn't seen such scrabbling for food since she was a child in the Burnt Hills. There, the mining concerns owned the towns and everything in them, and the miners and other laborers had to rent their housing and buy their food and clothing from the company. Prices were high, so people dressed in rags and went hungry and still ended up owing more to the company than the company owed them

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in wages. Those who were able-bodied enough continued working in the mines at no wages until they had earned off their debts; those who weren't were sold to wealthy landowners, who wrung every last bit of usefulness out of these debt-slaves until their debts were paid off or until they died, whichever came first.

That was how Sarya had lost her family. Her oldest brother had disappeared into the mines as an unpaid laborer until his death in an accident. Her father, worn out from twenty years in the mines, and her mother and other siblings had been sold off to work the lands of the wealthy. Sarya, the youngest, had been left a debt-orphan at the age of eight, dependent on the scant mercies of the mining town and her own meager resources.

Sarya pushed away the memories dredged up by the sight of hungry people waiting in long lines for dearly-priced food. That was another life, and she had left it far behind. Instead, she returned to the question of why the weather-control chants that should have ensured fine weather throughout the harvest had failed. She thought about the savage fighting that had broken out between nations and realms that had never before warred against each other, the strange upheavals of the earth, the unstoppable illnesses that spread through towns and cities like fire through dry grass, unaffected by even the most powerful healing chants. What was making the world go out of control?

The last month, as she walked from the knoll on the prairie where she had heard the haunting music in the wind, Sarya had struggled with her decision to return to the Skola. She wanted answers. She wanted to know how the simple chant she had added to Babiri Naita's wedding ritual could have gone so terribly wrong, and what lay behind the other uncontrollable disasters that were causing so much death and hardship. As far as she knew, she was the only one who could hear the strange new tropes that accompanied the

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disasters; therefore, it seemed reasonable that she should be the one to investigate them and find an explanation, and maybe even a solution, for the troubles that had come upon the world.

But finding answers meant facing the Masters again after running away from her Penance. Asking them for permission to stay at the Skola and use the Neumatorium would be hard enough – at best she risked embarrassment, at worst she might be punished for deserting her Penance – but she could do it for the sake of solving the mystery. What she didn't think she could do was face Adan Muari. If he and Vidette Fabara found out that she was back, that would be even more humiliating than going before the Masters with her tail between her legs. As she approached the Skola, Sarya hoped desperately that if angels did exist, they would keep her return a secret from everyone but the Masters.

### Chapter 3

THE SHRINE AND the Skola occupied a great square in the center of Sucevita. As Sarya approached the Shrine on the broad avenue that bordered the complex on the west, she saw a myriad of elegant coaches waiting along the street. The carriage closest to the Shrine's west entrance was decorated for a wedding, with flowers and lengths of white silk ribbon. The doors of the Shrine had been left open, despite the cold, to keep the inside of the Shrine from becoming stuffy and smoky. The sound of the choir singing drifted out through the doorway.

Sarya hesitated, trying to decide what to do. Unless Adan Muari had finally done his family duty and left the Service to marry, he was no doubt singing in this wedding. The Shrine offered the most direct route to the north wing of the Skola, where the Masters' offices were located, but her chances of avoiding notice – and Adan – would be better if she entered the Skola complex through the stables and the back door of the kitchen at the southwest corner. But, almost against her will, the music drew her into the Shrine like a thirsty woman to water. She found a place in the shadows in the back where she could be unobserved, then leaned against a pillar bedecked with ribbons and flowers and closed her eyes as she listened to the choir.

The vows had already been pronounced before she arrived, and now, at the climax of the ritual, a baritone voice like burnt sugar and cream soared through the Shrine and wrapped around her. The pain of that last argument, of Adan's words, *Maybe you don't belong here*, stabbed fresh into Sarya's heart. She told herself she should just go on about her business, but, no matter how much it hurt to hear him, she couldn't tear herself away from the glorious sound

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of his singing. So she stood and listened, keeping her eyes tightly shut so she wouldn't have to see him, and hoped to the Creator that she could find what she was looking for and leave again without him ever knowing she had been there.

Vidette Fabara's brilliant soprano joined Adan's voice. Her line arched above his and overpowered it, then the two lines came together in a jarring meeting that made Sarya's teeth clench. She would not have put the two tropes together that way; a slight offset in the rhythm between them would have made their blending much more graceful. She wondered who had written this Arrangement. Grudgingly, she had to admit that it wasn't even as good as Vidette's work. Vidette would have wanted to show off her high range during that section, but her own vanity wouldn't have permitted her to arrange her part so that it clashed so badly with Adan's. Sarya's fingers itched for neuming paper and a pen so that she could rewrite the section the way it should be.

But, by running away, she had turned her back on the profession she had come to love, the art of arranging tropes into stirringly beautiful rituals. She would only be at the Skola long enough to try to solve the problem of the unknown tropes, and then she would leave again, this time for good.

The solos ended in an upswelling of the entire choir, and the ceremony neared its conclusion. If she left now, she could beat the choir to the hallway in the north wing that led from the robing room to the Masters' offices. Keeping to the shadows along the walls of the Shrine, Sarya headed for the east door, which opened into the complex's central courtyard, then walked along the covered walkway to the north wing.

When she entered the building, it occurred to her that all the Masters were probably at the wedding and not in their offices. She ducked into the nearest hiding place, the

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recessed doorway of a storage closet between the robing room and the door she had come in through. With any luck, one of the Masters would come down the hall while the members of the choir were still changing from their ceremonial robes into the everyday gray robes of the Service. Or maybe she should go wait somewhere else – like in the kitchen, where they would probably welcome her as long as she was willing to chop some vegetables or wash a few dishes – until after the choir had cleared out.

Before she could make up her mind, the door of the robing room burst open, releasing a flood of choir members into the hallway. She watched from her niche as they passed, then someone needed to get into the storage room. She was forced to step aside, and found herself caught up in the crowd of singers headed for the exit.

And then the last voice she wanted to hear called out, “Sarya! Sarya dyr-Rusac!”

Panicked, she tried to push her way through the crowd towards the Masters' offices, but Adan caught her by the arm and spun her around to face him. “Where have you been? You left without a word to me or anyone –”

“I didn't realize I needed your permission to leave.” She tried pull away from him, but his grip on her arm tightened.

“I didn't know where you were or what had become of you,” he said. “I didn't even know if you were alive or dead!”

Around them, people were stopping to stare. Sarya tried to turn away from Adan, but he moved with her, giving her no choice but to keep looking at him. “I just need to speak to the Council of Masters about something,” she said, “and then I'll be off again.”

“Don't leave.”

“Why not? You said yourself I don't belong –”

“Damn it, Sarya!” He pulled her against him and pressed his mouth to hers.

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Sarya's legs nearly went out from under her in shock, but he caught her behind her back with his other hand and held her securely. His mouth was warm and hungry against hers; his upper lip and chin were scratchy with late-afternoon whiskers. She told herself she should push him away instead of melting against him while he kissed her as though he were starving and she was his banquet, but she was too busy melting and couldn't do it. Laughter and whistles came from the crowd around them. "You show her who's in charge, Muari!" someone called out.

Adan finally let her come up for air. She stood gasping, her knees wobbly and her heart racing, torn between slapping him and dying from embarrassment and – Great Creator God, what a fool she was – wishing the kiss hadn't ended.

"Sarya dyr-Rusac!" Master Telciu said from behind her.

Her face flamed at being caught like this, and she spun around. "Master Telciu."

"What a surprise to see you here!" he said. Of all the Masters, he seemed to like her the most, or at least to dislike her the least. He was the one who had argued that a penniless debt-orphan of no family name but great musical talent should be admitted as one of the rare charity students the Skola took on.

"I need..." Sarya had known what she was going to say, but then Adan, damn him, had gotten her all flustered. And he was still standing behind her, close enough that his body brushed against hers in a maddeningly distracting way.

She took a deep breath and tried again. "I need to speak to the Masters. I've been thinking about what went wrong with the chant I added to the Arascas-Naita wedding ritual, and I believe it might be related to the other strange things that have been happening. I want to ask permission to use the Neumatorium to..." She felt Adan shift behind her, warm and solid against her back, and she lost her line of thought again. She stepped aside, trying to shake him off,

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but he stuck to her as though he was glued to her. “Do some research,” she finished gamely.

“Ah,” Master Telciu said. “Any answers you might find would be most welcome. The Arascas-Naita situation has turned into quite a headache for the Skola, and, of course, the Service as a whole is under considerable pressure regarding these other troubles. Come with me to the Hierarch's office and we'll ask to meet with him right away. Adan Muari, would you please find the rest of the Masters and ask them meet us in the Council room as soon as possible?”

“Of course.” Adan left to track down the other Masters, and the onlookers drifted away, buzzing with gossip.

Sarya followed Master Telciu down the hall to the Hierarch's office. Hierarch Sobot arrived a few minutes later, walking briskly in spite of having to lean on a walking stick. “Sarya dyr-Rusac,” he greeted her. “This is unexpected. What brings you here?”

“Mistress dyr-Rusac wishes to speak to the Council,” Master Telciu said. Sarya kept silent, figuring it would be better to allow Master Telciu to speak for her. She probably had little or no credibility left with the Hierarch. “She believes there may be a connection between the Arascas-Naita tragedy and the other adverse events which have been occurring lately,”

“Indeed,” the Hierarch replied. “Have the other members of the Council been summoned?”

“Adan Muari is looking for them right now,” Master Telciu said.

“Good. Come with me.” The Hierarch led them to the Council room, where he took a key from the pocket of his elaborately-pleated gray velvet robe and unlocked the door. “It had not occurred to me that such a connection might exist. An explanation of what happened could go a long way towards appeasing both families. As it is, the legal

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proceedings are proving to be very expensive for the Skola and could go on for years.”

Inside the room, he and Master Telciu took seats at the long, polished wood table in the center of the room and the Hierarch offered Sarya a seat as well. She took it; being offered a chair, in contrast to the last time she had been in this room, was a promising sign.

“And, of course,” Hierarch Sobot went on, “it is imperative that we find a way to reverse the current difficult conditions and find a way to prevent future calamities. I will admit that I’m curious about what you think the connection between these events might be, Mistress dyr-Rusac, but I’ll wait until the other members of the Council have joined us so that you don’t have to repeat yourself.”

Hierarch Sobot’s attendant brought in hot tea, and the three of them sipped in silence while they waited for the rest of the Council. A short time later, a knock on the door signaled the arrival of the other Masters, and the Hierarch invited them to enter.

Master Jiu, Master Uldo, and Master Tanash came in, followed by Adan Muari. “Please be seated,” Hierarch Sobot said, and the Masters took their places at the table. Adan also sat down, as if he’d been invited.

“I only wanted to speak to the Council,” Sarya said. It was bad enough that Adan knew she was back, and that he had managed to knock her thoroughly off balance in front of the whole Great Choir; she had no desire to have him watch as she groveled before the Council.

“As First Chanter, Adan Muari is part of the Council,” the Hierarch said.

“First Chanter?” Sarya burst out. Adan raised one eyebrow a little and gave her the very slightest yet smuggest of grins. “What happened to Chanter Predu?”

“He and Master Varna, ah...” Master Jiu trailed off, looking uncomfortable.

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“They ran away together,” Adan finished for him.

“They what?” Sarya tried to picture the dour First Chanter and the impish singing-master together, and failed utterly. “But what about their Pledges of Service? And family duties?” Membership in the Service was supposed to be a lifetime commitment, unless you stated in your signed Pledge of Service that you reserved the right to leave in order to marry or otherwise fulfill a duty to your family.

Master Telciu shrugged. “They both have brothers who have already taken up positions as heads of the families and produced heirs, so that responsibility has been lifted from them. And, well, these things just happen sometimes.”

Sarya wondered if her own unauthorized departure had been met with such lack of concern. Rich people breaking their Pledges was one thing; they made their own rules and could buy their way out of any trouble they got into. But someone like her... On the other hand, maybe everyone had been just as glad she was gone.

“The incident,” Master Telciu went on, “is good reason for us to reconsider the rule that members of the Service must remain unmarried or otherwise unattached.”

“I think it's high time the rule was changed to require those in the Service to remain celibate and not just single,” Master Tanash said. “The way the rule is written now, it only encourages licentious behavior, which gets worse every year. When I was a student –”

“There has always been a certain amount of misbehavior, ever since the world was made and the Service was founded,” Master Jiu said. “If we suddenly begin requiring celibacy, I fear that our supply of talented young people eager to serve would dry up.” He, Master Tanash, and the Hierarch directed pointed looks at Adan, who had the grace to blush. Celibacy, as he often said himself, was not something he excelled at.

Master Uldo spoke up. “It would greatly benefit the Service and the Skola if their members were subject to

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much stricter rules and to severe consequences for breaking those rules.”

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” Hierarch Sobot replied.

“However, as important as the matter of Service rules is, it will have to wait until another time. And, in any case, we here in Sucevita cannot change the rules on our own. Such matters must be decided by the Council of Councils. Right now, we are here to discuss certain theories that Mistress dyr-Rusac claims to have formed regarding recent untoward events.”

“Of course, Hierarch,” Master Uldo said. “I for one am eager to learn what she thinks she knows. Let us get on with the matter at hand.”

“Thank you, Master Uldo,” the Hierarch said. “Now, Mistress dyr-Rusac, please tell us your thoughts on the subject.”

The discussion of Service rules had given Sarya time to collect herself, in spite of Adan's unexpected and unwelcome presence on the Council. “As you all know,” she began, “I've always been able to hear naturally-occurring tropes. You'll remember that that was one of the reasons why I was admitted to the Skola. The last few years, and more frequently over this past year, I've been hearing tropes that, to the best of my knowledge, are not included in the Oradean Rite. They seem to be associated with bad weather and other disasters – the earth shaking, vicious and blatantly unjustified military actions, the uncontrollable spread of disease, and so on. Then, a month ago, I heard this.”

She took her lute from its battered case, quickly tuned the strings, and began playing the music the wind had played on her lute. She hadn't played it since that day; though tropes only had power when sung by the human voice, it was wisest not to unnecessarily perform music of great power and unknown effect through any means. But the long, intricate melody still sounded in her mind as

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clearly as she had heard it that day, and, as she played it now, its beauty still tore at her heart and chilled her with fear.

She played the last notes, then laid her hand flat against the strings to silence them. “The wind itself played this on my lute.” *Almost as though I was meant to hear it.* That thought had come to her a number of times in the past month, but it didn't make any sense. Nature was impersonal, and had no reason to care who heard any particular trope. She left it unspoken now.

“That is indeed music of great power,” Master Jiu said in a hushed voice. The Hierarch, Master Telciu, and Master Tanash nodded agreement.

Master Uldo seemed unimpressed. “And your request is...?” he asked with a sour look on his round face.

“I would like permission to search the Neumatorium collections for any older chants in the Oradean Rite that have been forgotten or fallen into disuse, that match this trope and the others I've been hearing. I would also like to look in the Sirduccean books, in case these chants existed in that Rite and were not included in the Oradean Rite.”

“Absolutely not,” Master Uldo said. “The few surviving Sirduccean Neumatories are far too old and fragile, and they must be preserved for the historians. They are not to be used by Arrangers.”

“Mistress dyr-Rusac would be acting as a researcher, not as an Arranger,” Master Telciu said.

“I agree with Master Uldo,” Master Tanash said. “The Sirduccean books are best left alone. The Sirduccean Rite had become corrupt, useless, and weak –”

“On the contrary,” Master Jiu said, “far from being weak, it contained corrupted natural tropes and ill-written Composed tropes of great power. That is why they should not be looked at, especially by someone with a True Voice.”

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“I’m not going to sing them,” Sarya said. “But there are things happening that the commonly-used tropes of the Oradean Rite can’t control, and –”

“Are you suggesting that Eshalarian did not leave us with everything we need to take care of ourselves and our world?” Master Tanash demanded. “The Oradean Rite contains the tropes He gave the Eldest Children, restored to their original purity and perfection, stripped of the corruption and errors that had crept into the Sirduccean Rite. To suggest that our Creator would leave us helpless in any way is blasphemy of the greatest order.”

“That’s not what I’m saying.” She should have known that Master Tanash, at least, would not take kindly to her questioning the integrity and perfection of the Oradean Rite. “I’m saying that maybe the tropes we need were accidentally left out of the Oradean Rite, or forgotten, or something.”

“I think she makes a valid point,” Master Telciu said. “What do you think, Hierarch?”

Sarya anxiously waited to hear Hierarch Sobot’s opinion. Council matters were decided by a majority vote, but in the case of a three-three tie, the Hierarch’s vote decided the matter. Master Tanash, Master Jiu, and Master Uldo were against approving her request, while Master Telciu was in favor of it. Hierarch Sobot’s vote was crucial – as was, she hated to admit, Adan Muari’s. First Chanter Muari’s. She shuddered to think what being elevated to such a high position at the relatively young age of twenty-seven had done to his opinion of himself.

“It’s true, Master Uldo has authority over the use of the books in the Neumatorium collections,” the Hierarch said in response to Master Telciu. “It’s also true that there were many tropes in the Sirduccean Rite that were corrupted or ill-Composed and very dangerous. That is why the Oradean Rite was developed by the greatest and most devout musical scholars of a century and a half ago, and why the

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surviving Sirduccean books are forbidden to everyone but trusted and pious historians.

“As well, we must not forget the Covenant with Eshalarian that was accepted by the Eldest Children on behalf of us, their descendants. Among other things, the Covenant requires care and exactness in the use of Eshalarian’s sacred gifts to us, including the tropes that give us the ability to manage and control the world.”

All the other Masters nodded in agreement, while Adan sat leaning back in his chair, arms folded across his chest, one ankle propped on the other knee, a bored look on his face. So far he had given no indication that he was paying any attention at all to the discussion, Sarya slumped in her chair. The Hierarch was going to deny her request because it risked violating the Covenant, and Adan wasn’t even listening to her. She had come crawling back all this way for nothing.

“However,” the Hierarch went on, “we are in the midst of an unprecedented crisis.” At this change in direction, Sarya perked up. “Our legal and financial difficulties with the Naita and Arascas families pose a severe threat to the continued existence of this Skola and Shrine, at least at the comfortable level that we have enjoyed up until now. And, of course, the grieving families would like to know what led to this tragedy. It has become clear to me in the months since then that even a weak anti-insanity chant such as the one Mistress dyr-Rusac Composed, weakly-performed, should have at least lessened the crisis that suddenly came upon Babiri Naita instead of making it worse.”

The Hierarch’s words lifted a weight from Sarya’s mind that had been there for nearly a year. Her chant couldn’t have caused Babiri Naita’s murderous insanity.

“Therefore,” the Hierarch continued, “the blame for that tragedy does not lie with Mistress dyr-Rusac’s Arrangement, though she still broke the rules by keeping the Naitas’ request a secret. Nor does it lie with Adan

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Muari for not singing his assigned part, nor with Lefin Adaska, who did sing it, nor with Master Jiu for allowing the parts to be performed by different singers than were specified by the Arranger.”

“I should certainly hope you don't –” Master Jiu said, but the Hierarch silenced him with an uncharacteristically sharp look.

“So then,” the Hierarch went on, “the question is, if Babiri Naita's malady was not a type of insanity that can be controlled by currently-existing tropes or by tropes Composed according to the rules given in the Oradean Rite, then what was it?”

“And then there is the matter of this extreme weather, which our weather-regulation rituals have been unable to affect in the least. And these quakings of the earth – there are no mentions of such quakings in all our books of tropes; neither have the Composers been able to devise new tropes which will control them. If these earth-quakings were part of the natural order of this world, Eshalarian would not have left us helpless against them. Therefore, either these upheavals of the earth are something beyond the scope of what Eshalarian created, which of course is impossible, or the tropes for controlling them have been lost.”

“But the Oradean Rite –” Master Tanash started to say.

The Hierarch silenced him with a look, as well.

“Therefore,” he continued, “I vote that Mistress dyr-Rusac be permitted to use any and all of the books in the Neumatorium collections, including the Sirduccean books, to research the problem.”

At these words, Master Jiu, Master Tanash, and Master Uldo looked unhappy, but Sarya wasn't ready to celebrate yet. With the vote three against and two in support, including the Hierarch's crucial vote, all eyes turned to Adan Muari, who was deeply engrossed in contemplating his fingernails. If he voted to deny her request, that would give the 'nay' vote the majority, outweighing even the

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Hierarch's vote. "First Chanter Muari?" Hierarch Sobot asked.

"It's obvious to me, as it should be to all of you," Adan said without looking up from his study of his fingernails, "that if someone doesn't figure out what's going on, we're all going to be in serious trouble. Sarya dyr-Rusac is the first one who's suggested that we broaden our search for answers instead of continuing to try things that we already know don't work. If anyone can find answers, it's her."

Sarya stared at him in amazement. Not only had he been paying attention, he actually supported her. The Masters seemed equally astonished.

"I am to understand, then, that you vote to approve Sarya dyr-Rusac's request?" Hierarch Sobot asked.

Adan gave him a look that Sarya couldn't imagine anyone else being arrogant enough to direct at the Hierarch of Sucevita, that said as clearly as words that the Hierarch's question went beyond obvious all the way to obtuse. "Yes, Hierarch. That is my vote."

"Very well, then," Hierarch Sobot said, apparently unruffled by Adan's attitude. "By a vote of three to three, with my vote in favor, Sarya dyr-Rusac is granted permission to use the entire collection of books in the Neumatorium, including the Sirduccean Neumatories, until she finds an answer to the questions we have discussed here or comes to the conclusion that no answers are to be found."