

A Difference of Opinion

Talina left the cottage's dining room in a hurry. Even without hearing his older sister's complaints, Maran knew what was wrong. The problem was, there was little enough that could be done about it. Denora was likely busy cooking or possibly sewing, and was intentionally ignoring the eldest Calasti sibling, again. Denora never fought, never addressed much of anything directly. She almost never explained why she did anything, and on the few occasions that she did, it exposed a very simple, intelligent reason that startled everyone by being completely sensible. But on this issue, Denora simply did not discuss anything at all.

"What did you need her to do, Talina? I can probably get a better result than you obviously did." He stood in the enclosed hall just past the main center of the household.

"It wasn't much of anything important. The problem is that she is persistent. I can't get her to explain why she seems to dislike me so much, and it's just going to get worse if I don't figure out how to fix it." Talina ran her hand through the pony-tail she wore when she was at home, something easy to keep her hair out of her way, but not the more formal braid that she wore when performing her duties as a Sacred Sword. HeartBeacon rested as always across her back, a sign that would gain her almost instant respect from anyone except Denora.

Maran sighed, "I don't know what to say. She's perfectly reasonable to the rest of us. There's something that's the source of this animosity, I'm sure, and I expect her reason would make sense if she ever explained it; the problem is that she won't. I've tried to get her to open up on this, and got exactly the response I didn't need."

Talina managed a weak laugh, "I remember. And it was worse than what I'm dealing with now. Absolute perfect obedience is not what most people expect it to be. She knew that we'd both regret trying to ask her to be courteous and respectful."

The situation in question had occurred only two tendays after Maran's hurried marriage to the steppelander. Talina had become exasperated at Denora's almost sullen silence, and asked Maran to try to warm up the frosty way Denora was acting. The results would have been comical if they had not also been completely reasonable. Denora spent the next four days being demonstratively obedient to anything Talina had said, save to explain her motives, and had nearly set the kitchen on fire when Talina neglected to preface what she was requesting with a 'when you have time'. Denora knew what she was doing; she could have avoided the accident completely, but was using her usual method of protest, retreating into her shell and treating almost anything said to her as a command.

Maran shook his head. Denora treated him with a deference he'd not yet been able to shed entirely. He'd made some inroads, mostly in trying to get her to explain things when her motives weren't clear. Whatever her problem with Talina was, though, Denora refused to talk about it. When pressed on the issue, she merely asked if her behavior was incorrect. That's what had brought about the previous incident. She never fought, with anyone. She merely made it clear that people didn't actually want what they thought they had wanted, by giving them exactly what they asked for.

It had been a lesson that hit home repeatedly, causing Maran to be very cautious about what he asked of his wife. She was pleasant enough on most things, but she also kept up an image that he might mistake for timidity if he didn't know exactly how capable she was. Whatever her grievance with Talina, it wouldn't be resolved until Denora felt that whatever had happened to necessitate this position was corrected. But that would likely take a long time, for there was no indication of what exactly had left Denora with such a frosty attitude toward his sister.

"I wish there were something I could do to fix this, but I just don't know what is at the source of the problem. Jalak's even tried to get her to talk; he's understood her better than I did at first. But she disarms every question asked of her."

Talina merely nodded and walked back to her own room. She apparently knew as well as he did that this would not simply go away, especially now, when Denora was beginning to slow down with the child she was carrying. Their father had taken all three of the elder Calasti siblings aside when it was clear that Denora was in fact pregnant already, and explained to them how impending motherhood tended to upset a woman's natural temperament. Maran couldn't tell that Denora's behavior had actually changed much, but she was more likely to retreat into herself when presented with something she disliked.

Maran carefully opened the door to the chamber that dominated the small house he still shared with his family. He'd already started working on building one of his own, but between the lessons he both gave and took at the bardic college he hadn't gotten it ready for use at this point. It wasn't weather-tight yet, and he wasn't going to move Denora in there until it was. He hoped that, perhaps, once he was ready to move into that cottage, some of these arguments would vanish. He would be pleased with them happening less often. He really disliked being put in the middle of an inexplicable disagreement.

As he sat down at the table near the fire, Denora seemed to have already noticed his presence. She was at the kettle hanging over the fire, pouring out a cup of tea that she considered it almost her duty to make sure he had when he came in. He still found her as mysterious as she'd been as a prisoner being brought from the mountains, six moons past. She'd made it clear that she wanted him, and was not only willing to partner him in any form that mattered, but that she was easily his equal in intelligence. It was this quiet intelligence that made what she was making things impossible. She knew exactly what she was doing, and chose this form of protest because it was something that Talina couldn't tackle head-on. Denora had simply decided to move the disagreement to a battlefield where she was not outmatched from the outset.

As Denora brought the cup of tea to Maran, he could see that she wasn't the least bit apologetic for ignoring Talina. He also made a note of what she'd set aside to make that cup of tea, and frowned. "You were attuning here, and put that aside without any concern. In this household, especially, leaving a partially attuned crystal can be hazardous."

"As you have taught, the crystal was stabilized and made safe before you entered. No harm would come from leaving it unattended for a few moments." This meant that she'd heard everything that had been said in the hallway. And made Talina's frustration even more poignant. Denora could have stabilized the crystal just as quickly when Talina needed something, but chose not to do so.

He decided to try a different tactic, as direct confrontations were not likely to work. "I've got an idea of something I'd like to do with our house, Denora. I'd like to have it properly suited to a pair of Singers. Doing so would require carefully attuning crystals for both illumination and use. You've skilled enough with the basic attunement that I think I should have you start working on some of this. You're not needed here, and getting you out of the house might be a good idea."

Denora's eyes lit up at the prospect of work she actually was decently good at. She'd taken to studying the skills needed to attune crystals almost as if born to it. This was not the case with other household chores, such as making bedding, clothing, or wall hangings, things that helped to keep the home cozy. But then again, she'd grown up in a yurt, and her people did not use looms. It was little surprise that her domestic skills were limited.

"I would work at creating the crystals, if that is what you wish. It should not be difficult."

He smiled and took a sip of his tea, "I have a new chest of crystals that the chakur of Chalkan have gathered for me. You'll need to go through them, determine which can be used, and start the attunement. We'll want the ones for lighting first, and only afterward those for various wards. I believe

there is a crystal of sufficient size and purity as well for you to start building your own attunement spike."

She sat back down in her usual spot and picked up the crystal she had been practicing with. It wasn't a good one; he hoped that the ones available in the chest he'd gotten would be less flawed. They could both work with flawed ones, but it limited their usefulness. At some point, he'd have to visit Chalkan itself, to explain how to determine if a crystal was likely to be useful. Without any seeming attention to anything else, she tapped out the unsealing rhythm on the crystal point and began humming. This was busy-work for her, something to keep her mind and hands active, for she had already shown that she disliked having time with no purpose, and many of the purposes that would work for the rest of the household would be a poor choice for her.

Beyond her work with crystals, and a fair share of cooking and cleaning, both of which she handled in ways that were traditional to her people, the only real time outside of the house were regular rides on the steppeland stallion she'd brought home. That stallion had brought Maran a fair amount of money, enough to help get his household prepared. The fees for letting the creature do what he would naturally do were more than adequate. Many of the local families wanted foals sired by the great beast, expecting good returns from that effort. She was always the one to ride the stallion to whichever household had asked for his services, especially as no one else seemed to be able to control him effectively. For her, it seemed almost effortless.

Maran really didn't regret the situation that had caused his marriage to Denora, well before his majority, which he'd only reached a little more than a moon ago. And he'd finally gotten as close to a straight answer to her about her own age. It had been hard to get, because she had no understanding of importance of birthdays, or of age at all. She simply didn't know her own age, though, they were both guessing that she was probably within a year of his age.

No, he didn't regret marrying Denora, though he still wasn't certain he loved her. He was comfortable with her, enjoyed her ready willingness to attempt almost anything he sat in front of her. She gave him a feeling of importance, and she never seemed to complain about anything.

He sat quietly sipping his tea, wishing he'd had some idea of how to make this change more comfortable for everyone. Denora kept to her patterns mostly because it was difficult for her to learn skills that were taught early to people here. Maran suspected that his Mother had had similar problems, for she still preferred cook food that no one else in Sharlan was familiar with. But by now, no one in Sharlan seemed to have any difficulty dealing with Quanild, understanding when she accidentally slipped into the language of her youth when excited. Quanild was reasonably popular, in fact, for she had a voice that would shame most bards, and she was often called upon to sing for small gatherings.

Truth be known, Maran kept Denora from many of the larger functions of the city, if only because he was uncertain of her control over her own reactions. While she was constantly exuding an aura of absolute docility and meekness, he'd seen her on three occasions that she'd felt physically threatened. The first nearly killed her as her mind-magical fire exploded out of her in desperation. The second hadn't bothered him, but the third had, when she'd shown that she had an inherent savagery that he didn't want to put in the practice courtyards where most students in the Academy studied the arts of physical defense. He still cringed inwardly when he remembered that she'd torn the throats out of her own tribe's warriors, efficiently but clearly not cleanly. He had determined afterward that mercy in battle was one concept that she didn't understand. If she should find herself threatened, he wasn't counting on her holding back from the pure destructive potential she had. She might not light the person she considered to be threatening her on fire, but that didn't make her any less dangerous.

Eventually, this was an issue he'd have to address. He had to find a way to moderate her moods. She had to find a middle ground, where she wasn't so almost perfectly obedient and wasn't lashing out at any threats. He realized with a touch of irony that there was some sort of good side to Denora's intentionally ignoring Talina. She wasn't going to strike out at his sister unless Talina made a

very serious mistake. And Maran knew that Jalak had taken Talina aside early on to give her an idea of what Denora was physically capable of.

He waited until she'd finished a keying cycle then stood up, walking almost silently in her direction. She tapped out the suppression rhythm and looked up, expectedly. "Perhaps we should go out to the house. It will do you some good. You can go through the crystals there, and perhaps get one attuned, and I'll work on sealing the place up a bit more. I'm hoping that perhaps in another moon, we'll be able to move in, though it won't have all of the comforts of this place just yet."

She said nothing, but wrapped the crystal in a piece of silk and stood up. He imagined she was pleased, or at least not displeased, with the opportunity to get out and about. But it wasn't something that could be told by an outsider. She kept herself so self-contained that almost no one could guess what was going on in her head. A moment later she took her cloak, really, his from before the journey east six moons ago, and was standing next to him, ready to go.

They walked quietly out further east from where they currently lived toward the small cottage that Maran had been building. For the first part of it, he'd had the ready help of his brother, but it was now time for the little parts, sealing the walls so that there would be no draft, arranging actual shutters, not oiled leather, to cover the windows in the three bedrooms he'd built. Though he knew that she was only expecting one child at this time, he had wanted to prepare for expansion. His own parents had spaced out his family in almost ten year spans, whether intentionally or not. Maran wanted to make sure he had the room if Denora carried again early. In the mean time, the spare bedroom could be used as a workroom for both himself and Denora.

She sat down almost immediately upon the floor of the main room of the cottage when they arrived, leaving the door open for the additional light she'd need to use to see into the crystals she would be preparing. He didn't expect any excited response, she never gave one. That was probably one of the hardest things he'd had to learn with her. While she might laugh on occasion, she didn't have any typical responses to joy or pleasure. It was almost as if she expected to be punished for enjoying anything. It was quite possible that, before she'd left her tribe, that would have been a reasonable expectation. But it did make it much harder to tell if she was pleased by anything.

While she was going through the small chest of crystals that had been sent, he started mixing up the mix of herbs, minerals, and plaster that would be used to seal the insides of the walls of this building. That mix was designed to protect against many types of damage, both that of the wood-eating beetle, and the rot that was not uncommon in this reasonably damp environment. He'd already sealed up the exterior with a similar mixture.

It was perhaps two candlemarks later when she stopped what she was doing and spoke with him. "You are displeased with how I handle things, again."

This was a potentially dangerous observation from her, as he knew that it could devolve into some fit of pique of her own. But he also knew that it was best he be honest. "I wish you'd tell us what Talina's done to earn your enmity. She's not a bad person, though I know that you probably still feel hurt by how she treated you when you first came here. You know, though, as much as I do, that the mage-bond was necessary, and that she's not even the one who ordered it. Yet you are perfectly pleasant and receptive to Father."

She shook her head, "The bond that I was placed in is not the problem."

He turned from where he was plastering the wall to look at her. "If it's not, why not tell us what the problem is? It won't be solved if there is no understanding of what's causing the problem. You can tell me, if you'd rather not explain it directly to Talina. I'm always willing to listen when you have something to say."

She looked down, readjusting her seat, as she got uncomfortable fairly often now. "It is not an easy thing to explain, which is why I have not spoken of it. You have a role, one that is clear and makes

sense, makes it easy for me to see where I stand. Your father has another role, simple to understand. It allows me to know what I must do. Even your mother's role is clear, with no confusion."

Maran's breath caught in his throat, this wasn't entirely clear yet, but indicated that the problem was possibly far different than any he'd guessed at. "So there's a problem understanding where you stand with Talina?"

"Your sister wears part of many different roles, and they conflict. She is a warrior, which is strange to me to find in a woman. She is empowered, a mage. That is also in conflict. She tries sweet words some of the time, but issues commands as if she were of great position. In all of this, she has not seen what she deals with. Part of her still sees me as when she first saw me, and that was a flawed judgment even then."

Maran tried to understand what was being revealed to him. "So, you think she's still treating you as a threat?"

"As a prisoner. Even when we returned, after bringing safety to her and the other mages, she did not speak to me, but expected obedience. She did not see then, and still does not see. Everything to her is a battle to be fought, so I refuse to allow myself to be conquered."

"By not facing her directly. You're right on one thing. She has no way of dealing with that approach, and it's getting much more difficult for her, because she doesn't understand you any more than you understand her."

He flinched when he heard her hiss, a sign of dismay. "I see the roles, how they interact, and where they fail. And they fail greatly, often."

He deliberately restarted applying the plaster before replying, hoping that his next statements wouldn't be so stupid. Of course she could see the roles. She was always observant of how people interacted, and based her own interactions on their positions and temperaments. So, there was something that left Denora in a position where the only answer she could find would leave her silently ignoring Talina, or, when he'd requested her to listen to his sister, she'd used absolute and instant obedience because she had no other effective choice that would not put her in a more difficult position.

When he did reply it was with a series of questions, determined to try to find out as much as he could about where this conflict began. It was perhaps the only way he could repair the damage.

"Denora, I don't see things the way you do. You are right that Talina takes a position of command, but that has been earned, when she earned her soul sword. It takes a very special sort of person to carry a soul sword. I haven't found much difference in her general attitude from that of Father or Grandfather, and you do show Father as much respect as you can. Please, explain what's in conflict here, so that it can be resolved."

She didn't answer immediately, only took up a different crystal and started working on the harmonies that would generate adequate light in here. She'd completely activated the crystal, bringing the room into a much brighter state than it had been in previously before speaking again. "To her, I am not a respected ally; I do not hold position save only through you. I am still the tribeswoman, savage, and lesser. A warrior would either not lower themselves to interfere with one lesser, or would offer protection. But my protection clearly comes from you. A mage, a shaman, seeks to dominate, to make all beings lesser. She has much of that in her, though she tries to make it seem a warrior's rule. She sees no value in those who come from another background. Your brother has told her it is not wise to strike at me, but she still tries to exert force she has no right to. She holds no claim to that force."

He thought he could understand a bit of that, and realized that a large part of it might be his own fault. He'd never considered that Denora might chafe at being treated as Talina treated just about everyone. Talina was direct, where Denora was indirect. And Talina tended to trust her strength, her magery, and her sword. She didn't acknowledge her dependence on others. He hadn't heard a word of gratitude from her over the effort they'd gone through to save her life, and apparently that had also ruffled his wife's temper. Denora had set aside her entire way of life, had risked everything to try to

close a gate, something that could have threatened the western world. She'd allowed herself to be debased as necessary to get things done, but it was clear to Maran that she wanted some acknowledgement. His father had given Denora that, but it seemed that Talina had not.

"I'm getting the impression that an apology now for what Talina has done for several months isn't enough, and probably isn't what you're after. So, what do you want out of this?"

Denora shrugged, "She must learn to see what is before her. She has weaknesses, but has not met them fully. Until she does, she won't see the value of those around her."

He set down his trowel and walked over to his wife, setting his hands on her shoulders. "You haven't made this easy, either. She doesn't know how to see what's in front of her because it's hidden. You're hidden. You do not prove yourself openly, and that makes it very easy for you to be considered less than you are. She's never seen how to deal with someone who does not force their way. I know why you don't. You've given me enough of a picture of your people's ways that I understand how dangerous it was to attract attention. But you're not in that danger here, and most of your problems come from being too quiet, too contained. It's really easy to unintentionally push you aside, or order you around, because you don't fight."

"It would be unwise to fight her. I do not wish to anger the one she serves. It is better to merely avoid such conflict."

That had to be another sticking point. Though Denora had come through the passes initially looking for Railahns, demon hunters as far as she was concerned, she had no direct respect for the gods. She had been uncomfortable with the Jirellian ceremony that had made their marriage official, and did not visit any of the temples unless she was sent to look for someone. She doubtless still felt uncomfortable with the strong devotions that were fairly common here, with three good sized temples, and people worshipping each of the six gods. Denora's dealings with his father were actually more willingly based off of the fact that he was a capable warrior than his devotion to Railah.

Like Quaniid, Denora chose to follow no god. It wasn't all that surprising, as she came from a culture where the gods weren't revered, and were generally treated as enemies. Nor was she likely to have any personal contact with the divine beyond possibly meeting his uncle or cousin, both of whom lived in the heavens. He considered it a blessing that she was wholly against the demons that most of her people served. It resolved only possible thing that could have kept him from obeying the Kee-Ali-Dahlri life-debt that had ensnared the two of them. As the son of one Sacred Sword, and the brother of another, he would have been better off seeking death than joining with a demon-worshipper.

"So, you're worried about upsetting Railah if things come to a head? I suppose that's something I can accept. The gods tend to be more interested in my family than they are toward many. But I don't think that Railah would take up her Chosen's position if that position were unjust. And I don't think Talina would be stupid enough to push you to a position where you felt a true need to defend yourself. Yes, she's bossy, and tends to be shortsighted on a lot of other options, but she's got a good heart. She just needs to have some idea of when it is that she makes mistakes. If she doesn't know what the mistakes are, she can't correct them. I know that puts you in a difficult, untenable position, but it's the only way to show her what's wrong. She needs to know, as she's making the mistakes."

Denora seemed to shiver, though it wasn't really all that cool yet. This meant that she was working through something that left her uncomfortable. "I do not correct. Nor would it be my place to do so. Even when you made your greatest mistakes, I did not speak out. I left that for your brother to do. He alone present there had the right to do so."

"So you'll let things stagnate in this pattern, because you won't show her, any of us, what specifically is causing the problem? It's a question of what's more uncomfortable. What you're doing makes it difficult for the rest of us, including me, because it puts me in the middle, trying to calm down two upset women. Can you even begin to try to make this right? She'd put forth the effort to fix her part, if she even knew what it was. But she doesn't. And I'm not sure that repeating what you've told

me will give her any clear indication of what she's doing wrong. You still haven't approached the situation directly, even though you've told me more than I knew before."

Her words were soft, almost breathed. If he hadn't known to listen for them, he wouldn't have caught it at all. "You ask me to shed my safety when that is all I possess."

He dropped his hands and turned away. He couldn't ask that of her, not when it was put so succinctly. She still relied on being essentially invisible, unnoticed. She never exerted any pressure openly, because, in her background drawing any attention to herself could well have been deadly. From her perspective, this could be just as dangerous, for she would have to confront a person who bore a sign from a god. Just as she would not challenge a shaman while there was any chance of his summoning a demon to use on her, she would not challenge any of the god-touched while there was a chance that their power could be used, or misused, against her.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize what I was asking." He knew that that statement was little more than a platitude. From his perspective, his background, her taking a stand on things would make life much easier. But he also understood that she hadn't had enough experience to see things from any background than her own. She would simply avoid any interactions that would put her under the power of one who could, if they chose, destroy her. The only way that was likely to change would be if a situation constituted a physical immediate threat. And then, well, he didn't like to think of what the results of that might be.

As he expected, there was no response to that. She simply picked up another crystal and started the work of attuning it for a light source. He hoped that she would understand that he had never wanted to take away her chosen safety. But he'd have no way of knowing that for certain. She kept her reactions almost too calm, too precise. But he would have to trust that she accepted his apology and realized he wouldn't force her action, or even apply any pressure in that direction now.

The next morning, Maran rose early, slipping into armor he only used during combat practice, and presented himself at the courtyard, not as much because he needed the practice, though more of his time lately had been involved in building his new home than keeping up the skills he needed, but because it was the best way to corner Talina without being within hearing range of Denora. Even with her senses sharpened to her highest level, she would not hear what was being said in the center of town.

He could even begin his conversation as they practiced. It would come in gasps and short statements, but it might make things easier. He was a bladesman himself, and thus had little problem recognizing this sister's moves and putting proper counters to them. She was still clearly his superior, but she wouldn't regret that practice.

He made sure to get her attention before stepping into a practice circle, nodding for her to join him. She slipped HeartBeacon out of her sheath with practiced ease, and they started the dance of blades, working slowly at first to loosen their muscles. As they did so, he spoke reasonably quietly, "She managed to talk to me a bit yesterday. I understand her a bit better, though I don't have real answers for you, not yet. And I'm not sure that I can get them."

As their blades crossed, Talina frowned, "I don't know how I can keep this up, trying to remember to avoid pressing her. She's just being wrong-headed about her aversion to me."

He countered and spun, dodging her next attack, "From her point of view, you're being the same way. She won't tell me exactly what it is that you're doing, only that she believes you don't see her as she is, keeping a lot of your previous judgment, and not recognizing her value. I think I can understand a bit of it...and there's little that can be done right now on that. She has very little experience with any of the gods, and she's afraid to push back when you do push, because she's afraid of Railah."

"Afraid of the Goddess? That makes no sense. As long as Denora's done no wrong, she has nothing to fear from Railah."

"Talina, remember, where she's from; she's only known of the gods as enemies. She doesn't have much at all to base her judgment of the gods on except the stories she was told as a child. That she was willing to come looking for Sacred Swords when she found the gate was a sign of desperation. She doesn't have any faith at all. She only knew that you destroy demons when you encounter them. She doesn't have any reason to trust the gods, and her only reason for looking for your order was because she feared the demons more."

Talina stepped into a complex move intended to disarm Maran, but he was ready for it, enhancing his strength so that he didn't lose that grip. They continued on in silence for a few minutes before Talina spoke again. "You say she's afraid of the gods, and imply that same fear of their servants. But she seems to have no problem at all with Father, and has allowed a Jirellian to determine that the child she's carrying is healthy. That doesn't agree with what you've tried to describe."

He attempted a few blows of his own, knowing before executing them that she'd ward them away easily enough. "Actually, you haven't seen her the nights after those examinations. She doesn't trust the priests, not really. I'm dreading trying to convince her to deliver in the Jirellian Temple. And as for Father, he doesn't rely on his position as a Sacred Sword with her. She can simply acknowledge him as a warrior, and, so long as he's not trying to pressure her religiously, she's perfectly accepting of him. You, on the other hand, take your position as one of Railah's Chosen as the most important thing about you. You're also a mage. She sees that almost as if you were a shaman."

Talina brought her blade down hard in an arc against her brother. Against a true human, that blow would have likely caused at least a fracture. But Maran was no human, and would survive it with little more than a momentary staggering. "Me, a shaman? If she believes that, she's no better than the tribes she left."

Maran cut low, his blade glancing off of her greaves. "That's where you're making the biggest mistake, Sis. She's working from the only knowledge she has. And, until she has good reason to see things from our views, real reasons, not only because 'it's what we know to be true', she's going to view the gods and our mages and priests with suspicion. She's going to treat them in the same way she'd treat an empowered member of her own people. And that's perfectly reasonable. She's only been among us for six moons, Talina. She hasn't had a chance to really understand. She doesn't have our experience."

He disengaged and pulled out of the practice circle; he hadn't realized before how right Denora was. His sister was so caught up in her views of things that she couldn't see things that were being pointed out to her without judgment. He'd tried to find an option that led to peace, but Talina was being as dense as he'd been, when he'd first met Denora.

He hadn't understood Denora's position then either. It had taken moons to get to the point where he could actually reasonably guess at the hidden meanings of the few things that his wife said. She didn't waste words. She treated every communication as valuable, something that meant much more than he would likely ever know. She may keep her sentences simple, brief, but they conveyed a much larger meaning.

But the responses he'd gotten from his sister told him that he'd have to act soon, to preserve what little peace there was. So long as Talina and Denora remained in close quarters, things would be difficult. Talina wasn't ready to try to see things from a different perspective, and Denora would continue to try to avoid her because of that. And the best solution was to take the time needed to finish building his house. He could pull Denora to help with some of that. She would be more than willing to work with the crystals to provide light and security. She'd finished three light-crystals last night alone, more than he'd expected. But to finish making the house suitable for them to move in might take extra effort.

Then he had an interesting idea. He could probably enlist Telin's aid for the plastering and possibly for the woodwork that still was needed. Telin may only be eight years old, but he had a reasonably long attention span, and could be encouraged to spend a few hours a day to finishing up the work necessary. Only the things that required a great deal more height would be beyond Telin. Nor did Telin disturb Denora even a bit. He was, perhaps, the one person besides Maran who Denora was willing to actually attempt to talk to.

Maran quickened his step, for he knew that Telin would likely be up already by the time he reached the Calasti home. He wanted to catch his little brother before Telin might leave to go play. He could get his brother and take him over to the cottage, perhaps bringing Denora over early as well, all before he himself went to his studies in the bardic college. Arandel had insisted that Maran continue his studies, if only because the younger Calasti had admitted to his near failure with some of the crystal work he'd done in the ruins. Anything that would help Maran become more proficient with his voice was something to be encouraged, especially as he was the only one at present beyond Quaniid herself who could work even a little with the crystals that had been brought home from the ruins. The possibility that some of the magic of the ancients might be recoverable was something too important to leave to chance.

He found Denora and Telin both in the dining room, Telin just finishing up his meal, while Denora was attempting some minor needlecraft. She was making progress, trying to learn crafts that were not taught to her people. She had already been able to reasonably repair most larger things with a little leather lacing. This only required her to learn to use needles, and keep her stitches finer. It would take time for her to become reasonably proficient with it, and he would probably still prefer to have most clothing and the like made by others in the village, but small household goods would probably be fine even with fairly crude stitching.

"Telin," he started, "I know that you usually have most of the morning free, up until highsun or so, when you attend the general school here, but perhaps, for most of the morning, you'd be available to help out at my new home? I could use someone with the patience to properly help me protect the inner walls of the house, at least the lower portions. That would leave me less work to do when I'm available."

Telin grinned, "That will be fun, especially if Denora's there. She can tell me more about hunting, things that will help me once Father lets me go out on my own."

Hunting? Maran hadn't thought about it before, but then realized that that was another area he simply hadn't taken into consideration. Of course Denora knew how to hunt. Her people were nomads. Everyone there had to know how to handle a bow as well as handling horses. It was a part of their way of life. And, since her life had relied on being able to hunt, and possibly trap small creatures, she might well know tricks that most of the locals didn't know, at least tricks that worked well in open plains.

"Yes, I'd like to have Denora over there as well, and she can walk you back when it's time for your classes. Or, perhaps, she might bring her stallion. There's enough place for him to graze there, and she seems to know how to keep him from running off, even when he's not tied down." Telin quickly finished his meal, heading back toward the room he now shared with Jalak, probably to get anything he might need in order to get some work done.

Maran sat down, allowing Denora to set aside her work in order to bring his breakfast. He could have gotten it himself, but he knew she considered it a part of her duty, even though it was never asked of her. That was just another part of her way of keeping true to her heritage. She likely hadn't even eaten yet herself, waiting until he'd been served.

"Denora, I hadn't considered that you were likely a more than fair shot with the bow. I could get you one, something to have at hand if you ever find a need to protect yourself without getting close to your opponent. I'm sorry for that oversight."

She sat down and bit into one of the fall fruits that usually made up a good part of breakfast at this time of year. He waited until she'd eaten a few more bites; she'd answer that when she was ready. He watched her wince and readjust as she ate, and wondered if that was more of a sign that the child was beginning to move within her. It brought back the memory he'd had of trying to figure out how to convince her to give birth in the Jirellian temple, where she and the baby would be well taken care of. There was so much about how she viewed things that he wasn't certain of now, and didn't want to risk misunderstanding on.

"A bow would be good. It will be another moon or two before the use of such will become difficult." As always, she spoke sparingly, but at least this gave him some indication of what might be pleasant for her. There might be times, once the child was born and old enough that she wouldn't have to watch it constantly, when she might well be able to hunt to supplement their food. While he wasn't bad at it, he got the feeling now that she would be far better.

He decided that he'd better broach the subject of the child's birth now, while there were still options available. "Denora, I don't know how your people approach the birth of a child, but here, we try to have the woman go to Jirel's temple, where there are priests who know how to handle such things. They care for the mother and baby, so that there are fewer losses due to childbirth. And here, at least, it's close to the Risen One's temple, should something go dramatically wrong, and someone need a healer's touch."

He watched her tense, though she did not speak out immediately against his half-spoken suggestion. When she did speak, it was with a tone that hinted at her fears. "In the tribes, we have wise women, women who have borne many, who see to caring for the mother, especially a first time mother. We lose many, due to the danger of the land, and sometimes a shaman might choose to shed a woman or her child, for purposes of a summoning they wish. They say that such makes a powerful sacrifice."

"They don't sacrifice women or children here, Denora. The priests want children to be born, and they wish to make sure they're healthy. If it makes it any easier, I'll be there, making sure that nothing goes wrong. You probably won't need healing, but I'd feel better if it was available, especially if there is any problem with the child."

She didn't answer at all to that statement, merely looked down and made certain to finish her meal. He was fairly certain that wasn't a good sign. It meant that she'd acquiesce, but that it was something that would still leave her uncomfortable. Which could mean that she'd fight the priests as they attempted to help her. It also meant that she'd probably take very poorly to any magic they attempted to use on her in that state. In such a case, his presence might be all that saved the priest in question from her claws, or possibly fires.

The problem was mostly that while he knew the gods were beneficent, even, largely, Vythen himself, she did not have that security. And in a position where she was already strained, he wasn't certain of how she'd react. It wasn't going to be something he could feel comfortable with without a priest present, but at the same time, he didn't want her to lash out in her own fear and pain. And he knew of no way to help her learn the true nature of the gods, especially now, when her own healing ability was far more than what even a priest of the Risen One could do in most cases. She never indicated whether the healing was painful, but she also very rarely gave complaint about much of anything.

He finished his breakfast and offered her her cloak. "We should get you out at our place, where you can get started on the attunement. But I don't want you to strain yourself, not now. It takes effort to attune crystals, and that effort might threaten our child if you aren't careful to give yourself adequate time to relax between crystals." He kissed her on the cheek, nodding to Telin to accompany them.

They walked this time, though Maran would have been more than willing to detour if she'd wanted her horse for the journey back. He sat in the front room, after setting a fire to ward off this morning's chill, and explained to Telin exactly what he wanted his younger brother to do. "Make sure to

keep the mixture damp enough. There should be more than enough water in the rain barrel for this, and when it gets a little too runny, add in more of these two substance. That will keep the plaster thick enough to be of use, and you should have enough material here to at least finish this main room. If you have time, start on the first bedroom. I know you can't reach the higher portions of the walls, but that will be easy for me to do later."

He left the house after a quick kiss to Denora, promising to look into getting her a bow that she could use later today. More than likely, she'd be adequate in fletching her own arrows after the first few were broken. He wouldn't need to purchase more than a single quiver, he was certain. He hoped that, with Telin helping him on finishing the house, he'd be ready to move her in within a tenday, and keep her where she didn't constantly have to try to ignore Talina.

With Telin's help, and, later, Jalak's, Maran managed to get the house prepared for habitation in five more days. Denora may not have much to work with right now, only the basic necessities for her household, but it would be her own. Jalak was more than happy to cart over the small chest of belongings that Denora had accumulated over the past six moons, laughing that the chest in question weighed less than the child would, when it came.

Denora didn't exactly express joy at having her own household, but then, she never seemed to do so anyhow. What Maran noticed almost instantly was that she seemed more relaxed, less likely to retreat into herself. If it gave her a measure of comfort not to have to worry about others' opinions on things, he was grateful. Especially with her becoming a bit ungainly, he didn't want her to feel that she had to get up and do something because someone else had a need. It was bad enough that she seemed to need to serve him; she didn't need to be at the beck and call of the entire Calasti family.

He was already planning on building a bit of an animal shed attached to one side of the building, but until spring came around, it would not be easy to get much work done on it. Nor did she seem to worry about her stallion spending his time wandering around the areas she'd dictated to him. For whatever reason, where no one else could control the steppeland horse, he was perfectly obedient to her, seeming to know exactly what she was explaining to him as if he were human himself. She convinced him to let her keep the horse at the house, in case something happened and she had to return to the town quickly. As long as she could ride, and she indicated that many steppelanders rode until hours before birthing, it was probably a good idea to keep the beast nearby. Especially as he was often away with schooling and his assisting the various trade delegations traveling through the area.

They sat together around the cozy fireplace and oven, the room warmly lit by crystals mounted in the walls. For all that the walls were threadbare, and there was only a dirt floor, strewn with rushes, it left Maran with a good feeling, because it was his. He'd traded some lighting crystals, activated with taps rather than song, for a few pieces of sparse furniture, a table and chairs, one proper bed and a cradle. The chests they used for clothing he could bring from his family home, as those were gifts from his family. A new kettle and pot rounded out the purchases for now, the dishes they'd had Denora had started making moons ago, showing that she knew how to carve a few bowls and cups. It wasn't fancy, but it was something Maran could be proud of, and he suspected that Denora agreed there, though she did not speak of it.

She seemed to be intent on making some decoration to the blankets she'd gotten for the child to come when he tried to find out how she felt about the most recent changes to her life. "Denora, no, you don't need to set aside your work, but I'd like to hear your opinion on this household, your moving away from my family. I know that it's been stressful for you to try to avoid Talina, especially as you didn't have anywhere else to go to keep out of her way. Perhaps this will help you feel safer?"

She looked up from the stitching she was doing and he was almost surprised to see her smile. "This will be quieter, giving more opportunity to learn what I need to learn. At least for a few moons. It is sometimes hard to learn when people act like this is something that should already be known. The peace will be welcome."

He chuckled, "That's about the most open thank you I've gotten out of you since we met. I'm glad you're happier. I want you to know that I'm willing to help you learn anything you need to. Nor do I think that you need to emulate anyone else. There's nothing about your skills and training that is wrong, only unfamiliar to me and my family. And if what is familiar to you makes things a little easier, I'm willing to accept that."

She set aside her stitching and got up, moving to sit next to him. "You offer much to me, though I am still an outlander, one who knows very little of your ways. I did not choose wrong when I accepted your protection with all that it meant. I try to learn things as quickly as I can, but it does not come easily, except working with the crystals."

"Will you be all right here, alone, most of the days? I will still need to spend a lot of time in town, because Father needs my skills for various things. There might also be a few times a year that I might need to travel, such as up to Chralis. Because Mother and I are the only properly practicing Singers within the Kingdom, I am needed for anything that might hint of another ruin, any place that might have active crystals. For now, I'm hoping to simply shut down and close up such ruins that might be found, but situations might change; I might be needed to do more, possibly, like I did with the ruins we went to earlier this year."

"Jalak has promised to check with me most days, to make certain all goes well here. I have my work with crystals to practice, and I will be leaving the house still to study under Han Lo. He says my control has become better, no longer dangerous as it was when we returned."

He reached out and ran a hand through her blonde hair. She no longer looked quite like how she had when he'd first met her, a prisoner being brought in by the pass guard. He knew that she was not physically the same being she'd been, though her features seemed mostly the same. The magic he'd activated to save her had changed her on a very deep level, and, consequently, she had the same shapechanging gifts that he had, and, more, an almost instantaneous ability to heal from most damage. She was quite possibly more durable than he was, something he always thought was in an interesting conflict with her constant fears of most other people she'd met.

"I'm glad Jalak's planned on checking in with you. His duties are somewhat different than mine, leaving him with a little more free time during the day. I'd send Telin, but Mother doesn't want him walking this way alone. And I don't think you want Talina bringing him. I understand now at least a part of why you needed to stay clear of her. When I was talking with her the other day, trying to reason about why you might be so uncomfortable, she thought that all of the reasons I produced were silly, because she can't see that your background has not prepared you for our ways. I don't like having to disagree so strongly with my sister, but in this, she's being an arrogant fool."

She pressed a finger to his lips, silencing him suddenly. "It is not my place to come between you and your sister. As she is not here, and will not be here often, I think, this is not an issue that has to be dealt with now. Perhaps things will change as I come to learn more of your ways." Denora kept things simple as always with her speech, but he seemed to see another reason why she had not defended herself against Talina's attitude. She knew how much family meant to most of the Calastis, and, consequently, did not wish to force him to take a side if things came to a head. Avoiding the one person who gave her trouble kept that from reaching the dangerous level it might have otherwise.

He grinned and kissed the finger on his lips then stood up, sweeping her into his arms. Not only was he every bit as well muscled as his father, but he had the advantage of Kee-Ali-Dahlri physical enhancements; consequently, even now, heavy with child, she was an easy burden for him to carry back to their bedroom. This would be a new experience, staying with her in a home that was completely his

now, able to settle in early if he cared to. And he thought he could come up with something to occupy that time tonight.

The moons passed fairly quickly, with Denora attuning crystals and trying to make the house a little more cozy, while Maran split his time between the Ollahmic College and the town's council, where he helped deal with trade agreements, using the diplomacy he'd learned to try to arrange deals that profited both the town itself and the traders who came through. While it was clearly possible to fleece the traders, he wanted them to come through his town regularly, and thus fair agreements were absolutely necessary.

During early winter, he met with a chakur delegation from further north, not Chalkan, but Noraldon, asking after his techniques to activate crystals without needing a mage or priest to control the lighting. Such crystals could be of great use under the Dalcyn Mountains, offering emergency lighting that was unlikely to fail should the caster be harmed or die. He did not want to leave the discussions yet, so asked Talina, who was within the council hall finishing up calls for justice, to quickly make a trek out to his house. Denora would know which crystals he'd need.

"You expect her to give them to me?" Talina sounded incredulous at the idea.

"If you tell her that I need her to do this, she'll be more receptive. It shouldn't take her much time to find them, and you can get there and back while I'm still discussing the other aspects of this trade."

Talina shook her head, "I'll try, but previous attempts at getting a response from your wife have been pretty futile." She excused herself and headed out toward the east side of town. It wouldn't be a long walk; she knew that, but she expected some trouble once she got there. She rehearsed what Maran had told her to tell Denora, hoping that this once the steppeland woman would see sense and simply offer her the crystals Maran needed.

Reaching the door of the secluded little house, Talina knocked at the door, then pulled it open herself at the sound of a crash somewhere beyond. Denora lay sprawled halfway between the fireplace and the front door, clearly having just fallen. Talina surged forward, reaching to help up her sister-in-law. "Are you all right? You didn't have to rush so quickly."

Denora's usually yellowed skin seemed extraordinarily pale in the light of the crystals she'd attuned moons earlier. Talina didn't like that paleness, but didn't realize there was something wrong until Denora grimaced. In all the time Denora had been in Sharlan, Talina hadn't seen her show physical pain or even clear displeasure in her expression. "What's wrong?"

Denora braced herself against the nearest wall, almost panting. "The fall, it has done what was unanticipated. The child will not wait."

"The child? We have to get you into town, to the temple." Even Talina understood that if Denora was willing to speak at all to her, the situation must be serious. She hadn't known before that Denora was that close to the time of her lying in. "I'll help you onto that stallion of yours. He'll carry you to the temple, even if I have to fight with him to get him to the stable afterward."

Denora shook her head, "No, there is no time. This child will be born here."

Talina panicked, "I can't ride your horse, certainly not fast enough to get a priest here. We have to get you to the temple."

Denora pulled herself completely upright, her face a mask of pain. "There is no time, nor any other who can aid me. You will have to learn the ways of a woman." Her voice held an edge of command that startled Talina. The ever meek steppelander woman had just taken control of the situation without any qualms, now.

She tottered over toward the fire and pulled the kettle off of the fire. Then she pointed in the direction of the bedrooms. "Bring the blankets from the cradle." Her breathing was heavy and she seemed to only barely be standing.

Talina was so shocked and frightened, she simply obeyed, where, at any other time, she would have balked at woman's chores. She was a Sacred Sword, not a midwife, nor did she expect to keep a household like this of her own one day. Coming back with the blankets, she saw Denora tying up the edges of her skirt.

"Shouldn't you be lying down? Won't that make it easier?"

Denora managed a laugh, though it ended up with a bit of a croak at the end. "In the tribes, it is known that a child will come more easily if it is in a position to fall. I must stay upright, to make this easier on both of us."

"You still expect me to deliver this child? I am no priest. There's no priest within shouting distance, and I don't dare leave you alone even once the child is born."

Denora looked up at Talina's shoulder, "Then use your sword, demon-hunter. Call the other who can hear it. Let him know to bring aid." She gritted her teeth and shook, a pool of blood and fluid beginning to pool around her feet.

My sword? Then Talina understood, Denora was speaking of the swordsong. Yes, her father was within signaling distance; she could send a more complete message than most, because of her magery. She could use HeartBeacon as a focus for a magical sending. "Let me try. Just try to hold still. I'm calling for help."

A moment later, she could feel the returning signal echo in HeartBeacon. Hopefully Father could get Maran and a priest up here before the child was actually born. But the choked gasp from next to her told her that the child was already well on its way.

"What do I need to do?" Talina tried to offer Denora an arm to hold, but the steppelander shook her head, "Kneel, and watch. Be ready to catch the child." This was all said between gasps.

Denora crouched, her feet pulled as far apart as she could and remain at least partly upright. Talina knelt and held her hands under Denora, unable to disobey the other woman in this one issue, where Denora seemed to have more knowledge than she did. There was something there, something moving, she realized, as her hands brushed against what appeared to be the top of a head descending from Denora's body. "I see the child. It's coming."

Denora grunted softly, swaying slightly as she seemed to struggle to stay upright. She held still for a long moment, then suddenly, almost as if being washed out by a flood, the child slid down into Talina's hands, covering them in blood and some clear fluid. Denora braced herself against the bench to one side. "There will come something else, the child is attached to. I have seen it before, a bag of blood. That must come, and then the tie must be cut, closer to the bag than the child."

Talina tried to draw the child back into her arms, not even worrying about the stains that would be difficult to clean from her uniform if she didn't use magic. "I think I see it. Just a moment. There, it's out. You want me to cut it?"

Denora stumbled backward, allowing herself finally to sit. "Cut the cord. Then wash the child gently, with the water that is warm then wrap it in a blanket." She worked tiredly at the knots she'd tied in her skirt to pull it out of her way while she gave birth.

Talina hardly knew what she'd done, but obeyed the instructions as if they were her lifeline. The child had come unexpectedly, and she'd helped to deliver it. Even as Talina carefully washed the blood off of the child's face, she could hear its first plaintive wail, a dual tone, the clear sign that this child would inherit the shapeshifting gifts of its, her, parents. It was only at this point that Talina even thought to see whether she had a new niece or nephew.

She was wrapping the child in a blanket when the door burst open again, Arandel, Maran, and Brother Pendo rushing in, almost tripping over themselves as they came to a stop where they could see

Talina caring for the girl. Brother Pendo scurried around, reaching out to take the child in his arms. "Let me see if the Risen One has blessed us with a healthy child."

Maran made his way around the table to reach his wife, still sitting in the gory mess that she'd caused only minutes before. "Denora, are you all right?"

Denora managed a wry smile. "The child came unexpectedly. I think your sister learned more than she cared to of woman's work."

Talina looked up helplessly, suddenly well aware of how she must appear, smeared in blood and some sticky substance. "I didn't have time to get her to the temple. She was right, even if she'd gotten on her horse, she wouldn't have made it to the temple in time."

Arandel laughed from where he stood in the doorway. "I've always thought Mother was right, making sure that all of her children knew more than the most basic healing that the Order teaches. Perhaps this might give you reason to learn a little more, Talina."

Talina shook her head and forced herself upright again. "This place is a mess, and so am I." She rattled off a few syllables in the tongue of the ilkari, leaving the floor and both women suddenly spotless. Then she remembered something, and grinned to her brother. "Well, it looks like you've got a daughter now. And she's got our abilities, clearly."

Denora struggled to stand, her recovery clearly a result of her own shapechanging gifts, for such had come with the ability to heal far more rapidly than any other. "Talina, you must name her. It is your right."

"My right?"

"You were the first to see her, and as such must name her."

Talina's jaw dropped, and she looked at her brother for confirmation. He merely shrugged, "It seems that that would be the tradition among the tribes. It is an honor, and I don't think you understand yet how much that means."

Talina gaped at her brother then looked at Denora, "You really want this? Me to name the child?"

Denora nodded, stumbling over to the nearby bench. Brother Pendo tugged at Talina's tunic, offering the child back to her. "Let me see how well the mother is doing." He stood back, seeing Denora's flinch at the thought of magic being used on her. "I won't use any magic other than to see, unless you are badly harmed. Your husband says you heal quickly," he coaxed from his position near the fire.

Talina held the child close to her then thought for a long moment. She'd never expected to name one of her nieces or nephews. She wanted to choose a name that would be appropriate, something that would reflect both cultures, and, after a moment, she thought she had one. "She will be named Uhbara, which is Peace in the Kee-Ali-Dahlri tongue. Because, I think she's going to bring peace here."

Maran accepted the child from Talina's arms, holding Uhbara close, a look of pride on his face, "That name is perhaps more appropriate than you know, Sis. Denora spoke to me, the first night we came together, of a prophecy from a wise woman of her tribe that there would be someone from our line that would bring peace to the steppelands, woo them away from the demon worship. It is possible that this is that child, though I have no way of knowing yet."

Arandel looked up, a strange expression on his face. "It is always important to let things develop on their own, trying not to influence it. I sometimes wonder if I accidentally influenced Talina, with what I knew."

"You knew that she'd be a Sacred Sword," Maran commented dryly, "Most of us had guessed that. But you're a foreseer, that shouldn't bother you much."

Arandel shook his head, "I suspected she'd bear a sword long before she was born, almost as soon as I knew she'd been conceived."

"How was that, Father?" Talina looked at him curiously.

"It is time that this can be revealed, I think. You've heard about my former partner, Isala, who was a ghost when I knew her. I never explained to any of you why she's no longer there. She wasn't pleased with my taking a wife, so I arranged, with Railah's help, for Isala to have another choice, a way out of our partnership. The path she took surprised me. She chose to be reborn, as a Calasti."

Maran didn't look up from his new daughter, "I've guessed that for a while, ever since I heard you whispering to Talina while she lay dying. Jalak and I discussed it. We'd known that there was something different about how you treated Talina, and this made the most sense."

Talina seemed to take that in, "That's why you said I'd know your swordsong, that first time. Because it was hers, mine, before. That's something I never did understand."

He nodded. "That's one thing I've always worried about, the thought of losing you again, after what happened with her. It's one reason I've encouraged you to continue your lessons at magery. I want you to be better prepared for your duties than Isala was. And, amusingly, I think that this might have given you preparation you wouldn't have had otherwise." He gestured expansively at the room.

Talina nodded, "It wasn't something I was prepared for. I didn't know what I was doing. My training, my knowledge, was useless here. Denora had to tell me what to do, while she was giving birth. I never expected to learn anything from her."

Maran laughed, "There's probably a lot that you could learn from Denora, if you ever gave her a chance. The Steppelanders don't live like we do, but there are a lot of things they do better than we do. You've seen how she handles that stallion, or any horse. She also survived through a winter with little more than the clothes on her back. I still don't know all of how she did that, but I do know that she's got more knowledge of the natural world than I do. And I'm willing to learn from her, whenever she's ready."

Talina moved over toward her sister-in-law. "I never realized that you knew things that were useful. You always seemed backward, a savage. I only saw the things you couldn't do well. I'm sorry."

Denora took Uhbara from Maran's hands, moving to try to get the child to feed for the first time. "It is a wise person who knows how much they need to learn."

Brother Pendo moved away from where he'd been studying Denora, "I am astounded by the speed at which she heals. She is recovering far more quickly than any have even under my ministrations. She has taken no great harm, or it has repaired itself already. I would suggest treating her gently for a day or two, but she's already stronger than many women a tenday after their lying in."

Maran stood behind his wife, amazed not only at the arrival of his daughter, but at the change that had come over the relationship between Denora and Talina. Denora may not have said that she accepted the apology, but it was clear that she had, the same way that she'd accepted Maran's, when he realized how little he really knew about making a child. "I think that perhaps it's time to give her some rest. I'll stay here. I've convinced the Chakur that I'll speak with them tomorrow, though, Father, I'd like it if you sent Jalak up here to stay with her for the time I will have to be away. I don't want her to spend much time alone for the next several days, in case something goes wrong."

Arandel nodded his agreement, and moved to usher his daughter and the phoenix priest out of the house. "Just see to it that she gets the rest she needs. Even if she is a fast healer, she'll need time to regain her energy. Then, when you have both the time and willingness, I'd like to see you all over at the Calasti household in a few days, to present Uhbara to the rest of her family."

Denora looked up from the child in her arms. "That will be my pleasure."