

The Truth of Devotion

Maran entered his cottage with a bit of a skip to his step and a whistle on his breath. It was a whistle, and not a song, because music could be dangerous in his household. Even now, he didn't know all of the effects of the crystals he and Denora had brought back from the ruins on the other side of the mountains. Anything that could come close to an activation tone could be dangerous. He'd tested them enough to know that normal speech and the command notes used for household wards and lighting would not activate them, but he'd taken little time to examine them thus far.

He was in a good mood because of the progress that had been made with his greatest student. Although Maran didn't teach much at the Ollahmic College anymore, due to his duties to the Academy itself, he had been pressured to take on one of the female vocalists this spring, and her abilities were nearly astonishing. Not Singer quality, in the terms of singing crystals, but more than adequate for a bard. Lyril had an almost astonishing voice, with a very full range, and the insight on how to improve upon a piece of music. She'd do well once she left the College, likely going on to perform at one of the courts.

He almost didn't notice when Denora set his tea down in front of him, followed quickly with a plate of roasted tubers and cheese. She'd never gotten very good with breads, one thing he'd learned to accept. There was much more that Denora did than many housewives, and especially now, caring for the twins, he counted himself lucky that she'd made sure to have things prepared for him. It would take a load off of his shoulders to come home and not have to do much more than go through his notes and spend some time with his daughters. He considered for a moment asking Denora's opinion on the song he was penning for one of the seasonal songfests that the College hosted, but decided that the topic would likely make little sense to her. He'd never noticed her have much of a romantic streak, though she'd likely read enough love poetry in the books he'd consistently brought home for her.

Though it was early yet, she'd surprised him by having the children out from underfoot, likely in bed already. Though he liked the time he got to spend with his daughters, he couldn't help but view this as an opportunity not to be missed. He pulled out quill and ink, and added notes to the phraseology of the song, adding in notation in the Kee-Ali-Dahlri musical scoring for later expansion, maybe musical accompaniment, though he still would have liked to hear it sung by someone with a full shapeshifter's range. It was really too bad that Denora shunned any obvious signs of her intelligence and ability. Her voice would have been nearly perfect.

He only noticed that Denora hadn't gone back to her usual busywork when she refilled his tea, before it was completely empty. "What's the occasion, Denora?" He knew that she didn't usually like to sit idle, and this had to be out of character for her.

She shook her head, though there was a sense of her seeking something in him, even if she would not speak the question aloud. She sat down on the bench beside him at his gesture. He'd gotten used to her quietude; however, it did make things difficult for him at times. She'd never been chatty, and her words, when used, were well used. He knew that whatever the problem was, he'd have to approach it in some way other than the direct, if he were to know what she wanted.

For now, she only sat next to him, her eyes tracing his notation on the song. There was no doubt that she was testing out the music in her mind, for he'd trained her to do so naturally. All Singers could do so, because it was needful to be able to anticipate problems when keying a crystal. He went back to his notes, leaving her be for now. She'd mention something if she thought that there was something that could be improved here, though she'd no formal bardic training. Her training had simply been that which was necessary to work with crystals. She'd read enough music and poetry that she likely had a good head for it, but nothing more. That she had outright refused early on.

He'd finished his notation on that sheet, but she seemed to have other ideas instead of letting him work tonight. That, at least, was not surprising. She'd been disappointed when Hela and Iera had turned out to be daughters. He would prefer her to wait longer, perhaps another year or so, before trying for another child, but he wouldn't deny her attempts. There was no sign of her skin rippling, so the likelihood of success in such an endeavor was fairly low. Her body would wait until it was ready, and she should know that by now.

Her hand ran down his back, and he couldn't help but enjoy the sensation. That was one good thing that hadn't stopped with twins' birth. She'd proven to him that such activities were not something that she disliked or even simply put up with. He was still a bit abashed at having made that mistake for nearly thirty years before the situation forced him to look on her with new eyes. As youthful as ever, she knew exactly how to rouse his interests. He wondered again at how he'd missed the signs of her outlook for so long. It wasn't something that he should have missed, but, he corrected himself, she didn't respond like other women.

"You're wanting an early evening, it looks like," he kept his tone light, standing up and drawing her to him. She was exceptionally tall for a woman, easily as tall as a lesser man would be. Her kiss didn't require him to bend much at all. But there was something different tonight, something he couldn't quite place. All he could get from it was that she needed something, and wasn't going to ask for it outright. He'd have to play it by ear, especially if it wasn't something satisfied by a period of active closeness tonight.

Despite her height, she was delightfully lean, and light enough that he could easily sweep her into his arms and carry her back toward their room. A quick series of notes secured the main room with a ward to keep the fire contained, and darkened the room. That was one nice thing about his household, the keyed crystals were so much of a benefit he would have nowhere else.

Letting her into the room, he quickly tapped a sequence on a crystal next to the bed, watching three crystals spaced around the room glow softly. He needed no more light than that. Laying her on the edge of the bed, he smiled and undressed quickly, signing for her to wait until he could help with it. While she needed no help, there was something very pleasurable at being able to undress her, and maybe that show of gentleness might convince her to speak some.

As he removed her half-robe, and slipped her skirt to the floor, he let himself warm up to what appeared to be her desire. He felt slightly puzzled at her when it appeared that she seemed to be slightly at war with herself, both wanting to bring him to desire, and showing her own wants as little more than snuggling. It was almost as if she was torn between two possibilities. He wished she'd speak of whatever was bothering her.

Finally, as she lay beside him, his own energies reduced down to a low simmer, she spoke. She seemed to have wanted to wait until he had spent himself before broaching whatever it was that bothered her. "That song, you intend it for the songfest?"

That was unexpected. "Yes, it is. I've been trying to come up with something fitting for my student Lyril. It's actually a duet, and you haven't seen the other part yet. It's will show off her voice quite well, when paired with another trained musician."

He wasn't prepared to see her flinch, and couldn't for the life of him figure out why she would be suddenly interested in the songfest. She'd never attended a single one, and probably hadn't even met Lyril. Why would she be upset over the song he was writing?

"What's wrong, Denora? Obviously there's something bothering you, but I can't fix it if I don't know what it is."

She shook her head, retreating back into silence again, though her body seemed to tremble. Whatever this was, without her being ready to address the issue, he'd have no chance of solving it. "When you're ready to tell me, I'll listen. I always have. I did promise I would, if you remember."

She only nodded, placing her head up against his chest so that he couldn't watch her any more. That was a comfortable feeling, and he would have relaxed if it hadn't been for the sense that something more was happening that he wasn't aware of. Denora never fought, never showed any sign of unhappiness that a normal person would notice. He knew enough not to disregard anything that had to have shaken her up like this. If only she would speak to him about whatever it was.

The next several days followed much the same pattern, Denora showing uncommon attention to him, though she did not always send the girls to bed before he arrived. He wished he could tell what bothered her, but there seemed no sense to her constant wariness. About the most he could get out of it was the sense that she wasn't content with their twins, and really did want to bring forth another, doubtless hoping for a son this time. He knew enough of her culture to realize that she felt safest having a son to serve as a hold on him. No matter how much he assured her that he was quite happy with Hela and Iera, he knew that she simply wouldn't be satisfied with only daughters anymore.

He was still puzzling over Denora's unusual behavior when his younger brother showed up. He hadn't even realized that Telin was back in town; when he found out that Telin had been here for a tenday already, he felt very remiss. It was as if his preparations for the songfest had left him with no time to see to his family. "Telin, what brings you over here? Is it to see why I've been so buried in work that I've not sought you out already?"

Telin chuckled then glanced at Denora, "I'm going to have to take my brother out from under your watchful eye for a few minutes. There's something that he seems to have been unaware of."

Denora nodded, the first trace of a smile Maran had seen on her face in several days appearing. Whatever else, Telin knew how to earn warmth from his wife. Maran wondered why he had to be taken aside, but figured it might have something to do with business that Telin didn't want discussed openly. That shouldn't bother Telin, for he certainly knew that Denora was no gossip, barely consenting to speak at all to anyone outside of the family. Maran shrugged and followed the younger Calasti out of the house, and actually a little way away from the cottage itself.

"What is it that brings you, brother? I don't usually have you dragging me away from my home." Maran tried to keep the easy tone that was his normal way of dealing with things, but realized that his efforts sounded hollow even to himself.

"What brings me is trying to save you from your own mistakes, like our other brother attempted years ago. You never have figured out how to keep an ear open to what's going on around you, I've noticed. And seem to forget that Denora does listen. She might not say anything, but she does hear just about everything that occurs in town."

Maran looked confused, "What do you mean? What could possibly be happening that would affect Denora without me knowing?"

Telin shook his head and cuffed Maran across the shoulder. "It's very well known how much time you're spending with your new student, and how proud you seem to be over her voice. You might be too innocent for your own good. A bardic student that you train is going to have some leverage, outside of their own voice. Especially if it is seen that they have some influence over you. I know where your attentions are, but you seem blind to what you're creating here."

Maran coughed, "What exactly are you suggesting? I certainly have spent no time inappropriately."

"I know that; but it might not be as obvious to Denora. She was raised differently. Calasti honor means nothing to her, only the fact that she's still within your household does. And with Largo gone permanently, there's little in her eyes that she can hold onto as her protection. She's not the only one who notices how pleased you are with Lyril's progress. If you'd listen to common discussions, you'd hear

talk about how young and pretty Lyril is, and how much you focus on her. Just be glad that Denora's so passive. You wouldn't want the results if she wasn't."

Maran was so caught up in the implications of what his brother was saying that he missed the last bit, unsure by what Telin meant. "What do you mean about Denora being passive?"

"Denora doesn't fight back, not unless she, you, or the children are physically threatened. That's very much to your benefit now, because if she weren't so passive, I'd be expecting to hear of some accident befalling your special pupil. An attuned crystal left carelessly where it could be activated by someone without the training to control it, perhaps? Or a fire breaking out unexpectedly near Lyril? Your wife has multiple ways of dealing with threats, but, because of who she is, she's not likely to take them. But you should consider what these rumors have to be doing to her."

Maran sputtered, realizing that for all that Denora never argued, never attempted to correct anyone's view of her, she was more than capable of very destructive actions. It had been years since he considered the fact that she could call fire very easily. As long as it wasn't obvious that Denora was concentrating on her mind-magic, most people wouldn't connect her to such a sudden fire as Telin had suggested. And some of the crystals they had access to were very easy to attune to where a normal voice could activate them. He'd never considered what jealousy could do.

"Where did you get these ideas? Surely, she hasn't explained them to you. If she'd come up with them, they would have been completed without a sign of her complicity. So, why are you pointing these things out?"

"I know a lot about women, in part due to some help that Denora gave me, years ago. I owe her a favor in return for what she did for me. That favor is due now, though she wouldn't think to ask it. I know what many women would do if they possessed her abilities and such an obvious rival. I suspect, if she does act, it will be in a direction you weren't expecting, one that you haven't prepared for. Do you have any idea how much she focuses on your happiness? If she gets some sign, and there are many that could be interpreted this way, that you are unhappy with her, she'll attempt to find some way that will make you happy. That could turn self-destructive. I know that's not what you want, but it's a very real possibility unless you do something, and quickly, to correct the situation."

Maran sighed, "What do you think I need to do? You are the one who travels everywhere solving other people's problems. Tell me what you'd suggest, because you wouldn't come without a suggestion in hand."

Telin swept into a bow, a broad grin on his face. "The suggestion is probably going to surprise you, and might demand a little forcefulness on your part. I've heard that you've been writing a love song, a duet, at that. Take that piece from Lyril. Instead, convince Denora that she needs to sing it, publically. Use whatever influence you have on her to make her do this. I think you'll be pleased by the results. Especially with it showing off the full power and control of Kee-Ali-Dahlri Singers. No one has ever heard her perform. They won't know what to do. But the show, you and Denora singing that song, will silence any rumors, and make it clear that if Lyril herself is a source for those rumors, that your heart is already clearly taken."

"Denora has always refused to sing before. What makes you think she will do it this time?"

"I think that you can exert the pressure to convince her. Right now, she feels that she's in a fragile position. Use that to your advantage, and, indirectly, hers. It's high time that she showed off what she can do, and since this will prove exactly where your intentions are, it's not really abusing her trust. And, if I were you, when I take that song away from Lyril, I'd not mention who it's going to, not yet. Instead, mention that it's a singer who's been studying music longer than she's been alive, and whose last performance had magnificent results. That's true enough, considering that Denora's only public performance was while closing that master portal to the Frozen Hells. If she'd had less than a perfect performance then, you wouldn't be standing here today. Let Lyril make her own guesses. You

want Denora's appearance to completely shock the town. And I can almost guarantee that if you do it right, you'll do that."

Maran laughed. "If I do this, I'm not sure that Denora will ever forgive me for proving her ability openly. But, you're right. That song will make a difference. Lyril had been pressuring me to attempt the man's part myself. So I'll tell her that I will take it, but that there is another singer that has precedence for her part. It may disappoint her, but if you're right, and she's behind such rumors as you've been hearing, well, it's the best way to handle things."

Telin grinned and slapped Maran on the back. "Then I have been successful. It will help me to feel a little better about the favor I'd asked Denora for so long ago."

Maran raised an eyebrow. "What favor was that? I can't imagine her being much use to you."

Telin looked down, "This is something that I don't want to get to Father. It would merely cause arguments that won't be solved easily. I knew early that I didn't want a relationship like you have, or like Jalak was after. I knew that I wanted to travel, and arranged my education to make that easier. Just before I reached my majority, I asked Denora to handle a little deception. There was something I wanted purchased from the mage's tower that I couldn't get openly. Any hint that it was going to me, or even Jalak, would have brought a great deal of trouble from Father...and it would have immediately come to his attention. But, it was something that she could legitimately get, and the personal ingredient for the magic was something that was easily passed off as yours. There's an advantage to all of us having the same red hair."

Maran waited, unsure of what his wife had done, or what Telin had asked for. "I gave her the coin needed. But I wanted a token, tied by essence, to keep me from having results to any indiscretions that I might have. Denora cares little for our way of looking at adulthood, and saw no fault in me having such a token. As far as she was concerned, it was merely my way of making sure that I wasn't hurting anyone else for what I wanted. She agreed and got it for me, using your wishes about her not bearing unless it was in Jirel's Temple as an excuse. It was perfect; Father would not have raised any questions if he did see it. And I was free and clear."

"Risking our family's honor, brother?" Maran breathed, surprised not at his wife's amiability to this request, but more at his brother for making it.

"I'm careful enough of Calasti honor. I keep myself clean and respectable here, and while on the road, I will only touch a willing, and unmarried, woman. There's never any result to such actions other than a bit of fondness for those who've spent time with me. If you think about it, there's little Father can do now. He can't insist upon a marriage for me. I could leave whenever I wanted, and he'd have no influence over me. So, please, let this stay our secret. It will keep there from being any general unpleasantness among us."

Maran frowned. He didn't like what his brother was doing, but knew that there were both no laws being broken there, and that it wouldn't do any good trying to force him to grow up and act like a man. Nor could Father do anything now to stop him. And it would only make things unpleasant for everyone if it was known. "I'll keep quiet, but remember to keep our honor in mind. It wouldn't do for people to get an idea that the Calasti name is anything less than what Father made it."

Telin laughed, "Thank you. Now, go inside and make things right with Denora. She needs to know how much she means to you."

Back in the cottage, Maran tried to figure out how to approach Telin's solution. Telin was right. If people saw him with Denora like that, both singing, especially a love song, it would help them realize that he really was devoted to his wife. The problem was convincing Denora of that in such a way that she would agree. He knew that Denora would be able to master the song quickly. Her understanding of

music was on such an intrinsic level now that she hardly needed to practice any more. Instead, she merely attuned new crystals for household use or sale.

Finally, he simply knew that he had to approach it. "Denora, there's something I would like to have you do for me. It's something I think will be very important, even if you are reluctant to do so. I knew, even when I started my new song, that I'd prefer the music to be sung, at least first, by someone with the range and capability of a Kee-Ali-Dahlri Singer. I still would prefer that. I'd like to have you sing opposite me on this, at the songfest. I'll have something else for Lyril."

Denora looked up at him sharply, and he could tell that she was torn between the desire to please him and the fear of revealing her gifts. He knew he could keep her from outright refusing, but it would take some work. "Listen, I know you don't like showing off, but I really want you at my side for this. I know that I can expect a flawless performance from you. You sang without a single falter when we were closing that master portal; I know you can do this. I think that it's time to show the town what you can do, and I want you to do this, for me, if not for yourself."

"Why would you want this of me?"

"Denora, this song is complex enough that I would like someone with a great deal of technical skill. True humans lack the ability to bring out its fullness, at least by themselves. The only other person who can sing this appropriately is my mother, and because of the topic, I'd prefer not to have her across from me. You have the voice, and the training, to do this. I know I can count on you to sing it perfectly. And that's why I want you." It might have been a bit of a lie; at least it avoided the major reason for him wanting this. But it was something she would likely believe.

She frowned, then gestured toward one of the bedrooms, "The children..."

"We can have my mother watch them during the performance. They'll be sleepy then, and won't be any trouble for her. But please, do this for me."

She bit her lip. This was clearly hard on her, but he could trust that she'd obey him regardless. "I will do as you say. Let me learn the song and I will sing for you."

He stood up and made his way over to where she stood, drawing her into his arms. "I'm glad I can always count on you, Denora. This will be a show to remember, I think."

As Maran sat in his office in Rescent Tower, he prepared for the hard part of his plan, explaining this to Lyril. He had already made another choice for her song for the songfest, and was only waiting on her arriving so that he could explain the change, without identifying the singer. He had a copy of the song he intended for her to sing, and had left word that he wished to speak with her here. The reason this might be difficult was the hint that Telin had left him with. The rumors that were going around could well have been caused by Lyril, and if that was the case, he needed to disarm her carefully.

A few minutes later, she made her way into his office, and for almost the first time he realized exactly how well poised and pretty she made herself. Denora chose not to show off, and he understood why, but he wondered now at how he'd never noticed Lyril's choice in appearance. He knew he'd never ever caught her without perfect appearance. Carefully he moved his thoughts away from these issues.

"Lyril, I've asked you here because there has been a change in plans. As you have said, because of the complexity of the song, I am almost the only vocalist capable of handling the man's part properly; however, there is a female vocalist who has agreed, with a little persuasion, to take up the woman's. This woman has more experience with songs of this complexity level, and the voice to make it work appropriately. Consequently, I'm changing the song that you will be performing to Lyrinal's Dance. It's a work that will show you off appropriately, but will not go beyond your capabilities, as I'm afraid my own song might."

She gaped at him, "What do you mean, changing my song?"

He repeated himself slowly. "There is another vocalist who has the experience with the level of complexity in my music. I have worked with her before, and know that between the two of us, we can pull off a perfect technical rendition of my music. I would be less certain of your own skill there. The woman I'm discussing has been training musically longer than you've been alive, and her last performance was so masterful that I would not be able to properly describe it. It took a great deal of work convincing her to do so, but I believe that's the right choice. Now, here is a copy of the song I intend for you to sing. You will be introduced to the other vocalist when the rest of the town is, at the songfest."

She seemed intent on complaining. "I thought I had the best range and control in town?"

"Actually, there are two female vocalists here that surpass you. Of the two, I suspect my Mother would disdain proving her ability now. The other simply had to be convinced to do so. As I said, you will meet her when the rest of the town does. Now, I have other things I must be doing to prepare for the fest."

He could tell that she wished to protest more, but he'd made his intent clear, and she knew better than to challenge him when he was in this mood. Which worked very well for him. He didn't wish to coddle any vocalist; it tended to spoil their presentations. He waited for her to leave the office, then went and locked the door. He needed the time to calm himself down. She had enough time, just over a tenday, before the performance. She'd learn the new song, and would have to wait with everyone else to see who was singing his song.

Maran and Denora stood with Maran's parents just outside the performance square. Maran had Iera in his arms while Hela lounged in his father's. "Denora, when it's time for us to sing, I want you to approach from the left, while I'll come in from the right. You can keep your cloak and hood about you while you sing, if you prefer, though I'll have you remove your hood afterward. I have a bit of Kee-Ali-Dahlri magic that I'll be putting into this as well, something for the lighting. We're going to be the last song of the night, and I am counting on your performance to be perfect."

Denora stood there shivering. He was familiar enough with that shivering. It was almost never a sign of cold for her, but always a wariness, a sign that what she was going through mentally was difficult. He moved close to her and wrapped his free arm around her. "Denora, I know you're afraid. This is something you've never done before. But I know you'll be more than adequate. And I think that it's more than time to do this."

She lowered her head, almost whispering to him. "Maran, I do not know what I will face, when others know that I am not what they thought me."

Arandel chuckled as he shifted Hela in his arms. "Denora, you've held to your illusions long enough. Maran's right. It's more than time that you were known for who you are. I know you'll perform perfectly, because you've been so capable for so long. There is no need to fear what you can do. It might actually help people to learn to respect you some. And I think that's something you really need."

Maran felt Denora freeze under him. That was something he hadn't expected. Even less was the very meek response he heard from Denora. "I will do as you say." That was almost the exact response he'd expect from her to something he said, rather than toward his father. But it also was precisely the added strength he needed her to have. No matter how frightened she was, she had the voice that would truly astound people here. She only had to be convinced to use it.

They waited through performances, listening to the various bards singing in the snow. The winter songfest had always been Maran's favorite, and now it held an almost bittersweet tone, knowing

that three years ago his son had been transformed in a ritual that restored life to the world. Midwinter now held new meaning to him.

Finally, after Lyril's excellent rendition of Lyrinal's Dance, he nodded to Denora and moved through the crowd toward the platform set up in the middle of the square. He watched Denora move opposite him, approaching, as he directed, from the left. When they reached the platform, he took out a crystal sphere and sang a few notes to bring a bright light out of seemingly nowhere to shine over the square. Deliberately, without looking at Denora, he spoke up.

"Tonight's final song is one that I've written, and will now be sung as it was originally intended, by a pair of trained Singers." He turned to Denora and warbled a few words of encouragement in the Kee-Ali-Dahlri tongue, "It's time; you can do this."

She began the opening notes, instantly hushing the crowd with the fullness of her voice. The tones were intricate, but she was more than ready to sing them. When it was time for him to start in on the counter notes, his voice was strong and vibrant, matching hers as perfectly as when they'd closed the portal in the steppes. Note for note, each one caught every intricate change in tone, every nuance of inflection. Maran could hardly hold in the almost overwhelming feeling of pride in his wife as she proved her absolute mastery of sound. He'd always been considered the greatest vocalist in Sharlan, but he knew, especially now, that there was one better. She used her magic more fully than he did, more powerfully. And it could be no more visible than it was tonight.

As the song died away, he wrapped his free hand around Denora, pulling the hood from her head. "Now, I'm sure you're wondering who it is who could prove so superior to my own mastery here. May I present to you all, my wonderful wife Denora, who has truly mastered the gifts given accidentally in a ruin where her courage was clearly proven." He held Denora tight, sensing that she almost wanted to flee the scene. "Denora, for all of her aversion to attention, is truly the greatest vocalist I have trained, and has surpassed me in skill."

He took her hand and walked through the crowd, most of it so shocked by the sudden revelation of her gifts that they were silent. Even as he reached where his parents had the twins, he could hear the sudden ripple of cheering, the awakening of the town to the realization that Denora was far more than what she had been thought. And it was a sound that gladdened his heart.

Pulling her in against him, he whispered to her, "Thank you. This was as much for you as for me. They'll never doubt our love again. And you can know that I won't leave you, not now or ever." She merely stood there and shook, as if her sudden revelation was tearing her in two. He knew she'd survive it, perhaps thrive from it, but it would take time.

Maran was expecting some sort of a response from Lyril after that kind of revelation of Denora's full abilities, but he wasn't quite prepared for Lyril's full fury as she burst into his office the next day. "How dare you do that!" she seemed quite livid. "How dare you take that creature, and put her up in front of everyone, with the song that was to be mine!"

Maran did his best to keep his face and voice neutral. "Firstly, I would suggest that you retract your words about Denora. She may no longer be human, but she is far from a mere creature. As I was certain, your voice was not adequate to pull off the full effect that hers would give the song. You did quite well with the song you were given, so there should be no problems there. Even I had to admit that Denora's better than I am. When you're dealing with someone who spends a part of every day practicing resonant magics, it is nearly impossible to find anyone with a superior mastery of their voice. It was certainly not something to shame you, unless you account it a shame to be followed by someone with natural gifts that are simply not human."

She glared at him. "How can you defend her? From all that I've heard, you either took pity on her for her defects, or were forced into an unwanted marriage because of a child. She's never appeared to be anything at all."

Maran stood up, using his natural height to his advantage, drawing upon it to face the accusations from a point of strength. "Following mere rumor? You should be ashamed of yourself. I have never indicated that Denora was less than my equal, either in music or in intelligence. She's read more than half of the books in the Ollahmic library over the past thirty years. She's the one who handles most of the attuning of crystals we sell. And that's in addition to having raised two children, and now handling two more. She's been very helpful to me over the years, and I have no reason to be anything less than absolutely devoted to her. Are you hinting that her presence was perhaps more a threat to rumors that you might have had a hand in? I only discovered those rumors thanks to my younger brother. I find it hard to believe that anyone who truly wished me well would indicate that there was anything inappropriate in my behavior over the past year."

Her eyes flashed, "I had no reason to believe that you cared for her. You certainly haven't defended her publically before now."

He laughed, "That was mostly for her own comfort. She dislikes drawing attention to herself, and I had to learn that unless she was willing to show her own abilities, nothing I could say would have any affect other than appear foolish. These rumors that have come up were the only reason I pressured her to sing. Even then, she would have avoided doing so without a great deal of convincing. But it seems that you account my family honor less than it is. Know well that the Calasti name means something to me. I will never go back on my word to her, and, even before our hasty marriage, I had promised her that I would never leave her. I will keep that word, no matter what anyone else does."

Lyril seemed to shake with rage. "How can you say that now, of all times? After publically shaming me? "

"There is only shame if you were attempting something you should not. And, as that seems to be the case, I have to conclude that, for reason of your lack of detachment and reserve, that you are no longer capable of learning what I have to teach. I will inform your other instructors of that I have finished the lessons I would give you. You will have to find another instructor. As an aside, for your personal safety, I would caution you not to attempt to vent your frustrations on Denora. If you do so verbally, it will do you no good because she's very good at ignoring people when she wishes to. If you attempt anything physically, I can almost guarantee that my father will be calling for the corpse wagon. Denora is far more capable in defending herself or our daughters than you seem to understand. In addition to her voice, which can activate any of a dozens of crystals we keep around our home, she has the physical durability of a shapeshifter, and the physical attacks to fight back. Lastly, though it is no longer common knowledge, she has the ability to start a fire at any place within her field of vision. So, I do warn you that attempting to take vengeance for your own mistakes would be very dangerous to you. Now, I have things I need to do, so kindly excuse yourself."

She seemed to seethe in anger still, but a simple shift of his skin to remind her that he was no more human than his wife was seemed to get the point across. She exited the room very quickly, only to have someone else catch the door as she retreated. Maran looked up to find his father in the doorway, JusticeBeacon as always at his back. "Now that was a discussion I hadn't expected, though I should have known that it would take something serious for you to pressure Denora to reveal her abilities so publically."

Maran looked down. "I was unwise, and did not consider that any student would try for anything beyond training from me. I will be far more cautious in the future."

Arandel laughed. "I'd say that the show that was put on was a perfect solution to the difficulties that seem to have emerged. You not only showed where your heart lay, but did so where the only shame that Lyril could have was of her own making. The song you'd chosen for her was perfect to my

ears, and could well have shown her off if she'd simply accepted that. You showed fairness that was beyond what most could expect there. I'm quite pleased with the outcome. I should think that, once Denora recognizes the benefits that come from acknowledging her own abilities, that she'll finally become a real member of our community."

Maran managed a weak smile. "That is something I've been hoping for for ages. But I won't know if she succeeds for a while now. It's going to take her time to adjust."

Arandel moved forward and set his hand on his son's shoulder. "This is something that should have been done long ago, but I don't think she was ready before. I don't think I'll need your help on the trade agreements right away. Go home and help her work through these new feelings. I don't think she's ever known how it would feel for many people to appreciate her. And, from the things I was hearing on my way in, they certainly do appreciate what she did. The marketplace is already buzzing with tales of her singing. Now, get yourself back to Denora. She deserves what comfort you can give her."

Maran did as his father suggested, and in fact hurried back to his cottage. Where it would usually be a half candlemark's leisurely walk, it took far less with him hurrying through the snowy streets. He nearly interrupted an attunement with his sudden appearance. He waited almost impatiently as she tapped out the command to pause an attunement. "Denora, it seems that last night was quite the success. And in more ways than I would expect you know. I'm sorry that I had to deceive you before. There was a very good reason I wanted to have you perform the song, beyond the fact that your music was far better than Lyril's would have been. Telin let me know what rumors you were hearing, and I knew I needed to prove where my heart lay in a big way. I had to make it clear that no one would ever be able to take me from you. And to do that, I had to show at least part of why I love you."

Denora looked slightly amused by that statement. "Bards talk of love, but I still do not understand it. I know only that it is a word that they speak often and lightly."

Maran moved over to pull her into his arms, barely avoiding Hela's arms as she recognized that her father was home. "Denora, I think that though many bards speak of love, very few truly understand it. For myself, love is simple. It is putting someone else's wellbeing and happiness before my own. That's how I know that you do love me, and have from the first. It only took me time to grow into that love. I haven't always been as gentle as I've wanted, and for that, I'm sorry. But what I did last night was completely for you. I wanted to assure you that you will always have a place at my side, and discourage anyone else from making an attempt to pull me from you."

Denora squirmed a bit in his arms. "It is nothing to care for one who is so good to me as you are. You prove yourself always the warrior whose claim I accepted."

He lifted her chin and kissed her. "I needed a lot of coaxing to become that person. I hadn't reached that for a long while after you'd chosen me. But I think that a lot of things will change for the better, because I won't have to be silent anymore. I've been wanting, for decades, to be able to sing your praises openly, and now I can. Thank you."

She didn't say anything, but she didn't need to. It was enough to feel her in his arms. He may not have wanted to marry when he did, but his heart had eased to that long ago, and he now couldn't see any future that did not have Denora in it.