
Fair Trade

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"Come right this way, sir, madam," Craftmaster Harper Gian called to the couple walking down the eerily lit hall behind him. He made a note to tell the drudges to use more glows next time - he did not particularly like the greenish cast the fixtures were giving off at the moment. Details on the walls were blurring in to one another, and threatened to give him a headache. "I've kept it in the back room of my office so that you would be the first to see it. I think you're going to be pleased."

Headwoman Maeve was panting slightly; it was an obvious effort for her to try and keep up with the Harper or her husband, who was now a step ahead of her. Still, she made no complaint. "We were surprised to hear that it had been finished already, to tell you the truth."

Gian flashed Maeve a smile. "Well, you could say that I had a hand in speeding things along a bit." He stopped when he reached the door to his office, opened it, and stepped aside so both his guests could enter before he did. When he stepped into the room, he gestured toward the two comfortable chairs near his desk. "I'll bring it here for you to see. The back room is a little less presentable than my main office, I'm afraid."

"Take your time," Tersan called after Gian, and offered his wife a hand to help her sit.

Gian was gone only for a moment, and beamed radiantly as he carried a small-sized harp from the back room. "Here it is! I could hardly wait to show you - I think our crafters did an outstanding job refurbishing this, don't you think?"

Maeve gasped when the harper sat the instrument in front of her. "Oh, it's lovely - don't you think so, Tersan? The dark brown stain looks so rich and elegant." She hesitantly reached out a hand to touch the smooth top, but looked to Gian for approval before she actually touched the harp.

"Feel free to inspect it, although please be careful of the strings" Gian grinned, and Maeve glided a finger over the wood's smooth finish, nodding appreciatively.

Tersan had risen from his chair and was kneeling next to the harp to take a closer look. He traced a finger over some ornate birds and flowers that had been carved into the harp's side. "This is excellent work. Were these designs there before?"

"Well, yes and no. That's partly Mahar's work. The old design was a bit worn, so he sharpened them and added a few highlights with some dark brown stain."

"He did a wonderful job," Tersan nodded. "It looks lovely, and it will be an honor for this little harp we found to stay here at the Hall."

"Could you play something for us? It would be good to hear it tested properly," Maeve suggested.

"Of course. Excuse me for just a moment." He set the harp aside so he could stand, and his finger brushed up against one of the harp's strings. Gian made a face. "Hmm. Needs a little tuning, but that's to be expected with a harp. The strings are new; once they settle in, they won't need to be adjusted quite so constantly." That said, Gian left quickly and retrieved both a chair and a small wooden box. He settled into the chair, then placed the harp on the box and leaned the instrument comfortably back toward him. Flashing another quick smile toward his guests, he started adjusting the tuning levers at the top of the instrument. One of them seemed to be a bit more stubborn than the others; it took a bit more work to push the lever downward. He grinned sheepishly at his guests, feeling frustrated that he had not caught this before. He was sure he had inspected the harp thoroughly earlier in the day, and everything was fine! "I'm sorry - I'll have Mahar take a look at this gear once we're done here... I assure you this is entirely fixable."

Tersan nodded silently. His expression had hardened a bit, and Gian could only hope this minor problem had not changed the Holder's mind about the quality of the instrument. Gian put great pride in the ability of the hall's crafters. Not only would this harp be put to good use by a student Gian was sure would excel at the instrument, but the hall would receive a few more acres of planted hardwood for the making of future instruments in payment, as well.

"We're sure you'll do your best to fix it," Maeve said quietly. Her eyes were fixed on Gian's every move, as though she were afraid the harper was going to break the lever.

Suddenly, Gian snapped the lever into place. He smiled warmly at his guests. "There we are. Nothing a little bit of oil won't fix. Now then, let me show you how lovely she plays." He deftly positioned his hands over the strings and began a lively tune.

Maeve's eyes glistened as Gian finished singing and let a plucked harmony linger. She clapped her hands together. "That was lovely. Do you think Moya will be able to learn to play the harp as well as you do?"

"Moya loves music; I have no doubts about that. She has quite a bit of talent, and I have to admit how surprised I was at how much she taught herself to play the guitar before she came here. I think she'll do nicely with this. And by the time she masters the harp, she'll probably be more than ready to walk the tables at Cove and get her Journeyman knots."

"I'd much rather see her pursue that vocation than go back to the Weyr," Tersan said quietly. "I was nervous about her going there in the first place, but after that gold

dragon tore that other girl apart?" He shook his head. "Moya was standing so close...I thought we'd lost our daughter for good."

Gian nodded and set the harp back into an upright position. He had suddenly lost all desire to play. "I had left it up to Laedir and Moya whether they wanted to go or not, but I regret that decision in hindsight."

Maeve looked troubled at the very topic of their current conversation, and her eyes misted over as she spoke. "She hasn't seemed like herself since she's come back from the Weyr. She seems so withdrawn and so tired. Her classmate Alyssa says Moya hasn't been sleeping well. I'm worried about her."

"Which was one reason why I asked the crafters to make refurbishing the harp a top priority," Gian responded quietly. "Music can be a release. Perhaps learning how to play a different instrument will be the distraction she needs to get her mind off that day on the sands."

"I'm glad you liked the idea when I brought it to you, Craftmaster," came Tersan's solemn reply.

Gian's smile returned. "I plan on teaching her myself, you know."

It was Maeve's turn to beam. She reached across her chair and grabbed Tersan's hand. "Oh, that's wonderful!"

Tersan managed a quick nod at his wife and turned his attention to Gian. "Now, Gian, about the trade for the harp..."

"Ah, yes! I was curious when you said you'd--" Gian was interrupted by a knock at the door. "Yes?"

A small, thin boy slowly opened the door and nodded at the craftmaster. "Sir, Headwoman Hisra wanted me to tell you that your dinner is ready."

"Oh, good!" Gian said, getting to his feet. "Tell her we'll be along shortly." When the boy had left, he turned to Tersan and Maeve and gave a slight bow. "I asked the cooks to stir up something special. Would you like to accompany me to the private dining room? We can finish our discussion following dinner, if you'd like."



"Send my regards to the cooks," Tersan said, taking a sip from his wineglass to wash down a bite of sweet bread, "and to Thorren, as well. This is one of the best wines I've had for a while."

Gian blinked at Tersan a moment, but managed not to let his confusion be shown. Since when had Tersan become a wine connoisseur? The Holder himself had admitted during a past visit that he never really cared for the stuff. "Ah - Thorren makes a good red," Gian said, refilling his own glass. He normally wasn't one to indulge, but he took exception when it came to a particularly fine bottle of wine. "This is one I'd saved back for a special occasion."

Maeve flushed, but whether from the wine or from Gian's compliment was uncertain. "You flatter us."

"It's a rare occasion when *both* the Holder and his Lady get the chance to grace our humble hall," Gian

grinned, tipping his glass in his guests' direction and taking another sip.

"About the harp, Gian," Tersan suddenly blurted, casting a glance at Maeve. "We're happy with it, but wanted to know if you might consider a change in our trade."

"A change?" the craftmaster replied. They had agreed on the terms of the trade long before the repairs to the harp had been started. Something did not seem right. Nevertheless, he helped himself to another sausage from a nearby platter and prepared to take a bite.

"Do you mind our discussing this now? Maeve tells me she would like to visit with Moya once more after dinner."

Gian shook his head to indicate he did not mind, although he inwardly wondered about Tersan's sudden forwardness. "No. I'm interested in what you have to say."

"Well, Maeve and I both have discussed this since you and I came to our agreement. We knew the crafters here would do an outstanding job with the harp, and we wanted to be prepared to offer something that would be of equal... or greater value than the harp and the lessons combined."

Tersan paused to take another sip of his wine, and Gian couldn't help but notice that Maeve looked particularly excited about what her husband was about to say. It struck the harper as odd that Maeve was involved in this business matter. He had figured that Maeve had come along to see and admire the finished product - and to visit with her daughter. But she had helped Tersan decide upon something else to trade for the harp? This seemed most strange indeed. He cast a quick glance at the Headwoman. She was still smiling. Gian took a bite of the sausage on his plate and nodded to Tersan to indicate that he was paying attention.

"In exchange for the harp, we want to offer you our daughter's hand in marriage."

Gian nearly choked on his mouthful of food. He managed to save a semblance of outward composure by quickly washing down the wayward morsel with a swallow of wine, but he stammered his reply. "Y-your daughter? You mean Moya?"

Tersan nodded.

Gian's mouth was slack, and a reply seemed amazingly hard to find. Holders were always trying to offer their daughters' hands in marriage, but never like this! Besides, Tersan could hardly offer the hand of one of Gian's own apprentices in marriage! His mind raced to recover from this unexpected shock, and to try to find words that would still seem polite, as well. "I-I'm very honored that you would make such an offer," he stammered. "But --"

Maeve, not Tersan, quickly interrupted, uncharacteristically ignoring the fact that interrupting the Craftmaster was rude. "It's a shame for a man of your status to be single. You should have a woman to take care of you and make you happy. And what better wife would there be than someone who loves your profession just as much as you do?"

"Not to mention," Tersan continued where his wife left off, "if Moya were to marry you, she wouldn't be tempted to

go back to the Weyr. You mentioned yourself that you'd hate to lose an apprentice of her talents."

"Why yes, but--" Gian could not find his tongue, which frustrated and panicked him to no end. He could not remember a time when the wit to retort quickly had left him completely. All he could do was stammer again and try to get a word in....

....Which Tersan would not let him do. "You don't have to make a decision right at this moment. It shouldn't be a decision to take lightly. We only ask that you take our offer seriously. And please- we'd rather Moya not have her harp until this issue has been settled. Now, if you'll excuse us," the holder said, rising from his chair. "We're going to visit with our daughter before we take our leave." He extended a hand toward his wife and helped her to her feet before moving toward the door.

Gian rose[,] nearly knocking his chair over in his haste. He was angry beyond words that the Holder and his wife would not even let him speak! However, when he opened his mouth to call after the pair, nothing came out but a hoarse whisper. Had he lost his voice?

He called out again with the same results. And suddenly, with a laugh, Maeve turned around and spoke... in Headwoman Hisra's voice.

"Gian, you'd best wake up now. Holder Tersan has come to look at the harp."

Gian bolted awake, nearly falling out of his chair, to find an amused Hisra peeking around the door at him. "I trust you've had a good nap, sir?"

"Ah, yes... a good nap. Uh, very good." His face felt flushed all of a sudden. "It's hot in here, don't you think?"

Hisra tried to hide another chuckle. "I'll tell the Holder you'll be along in a minute."



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"Sit up straight now, Moya. That's right. Now - rest the harp on the pedestal and lean it back so it rests against your shoulder."

Moya carefully did as Gian instructed, then looked up questioningly at her teacher.

"It is a delicate instrument, Moya, but you don't have to treat it as though it were made of eggshells."

"Yes, sir."

"Now, watch me carefully. Place your fingers on the strings just as I've placed them on my harp."

It took some work, but Moya finally arranged her fingers properly. Gian nodded his approval and continued. "That was the easy part. What I show you next is going to be a lot more difficult. Ready?"

Moya nodded, her eyes glued to Gian's every move.

"Now pluck the strings. Just like this. You will need to snap your fingers toward you slightly

to achieve an acceptable timbre, but not so much so that you snag your fingers on the strings. This is important, as in the future you will need to move between strings quickly."

Moya's first plucked notes were tinny and strained sounding, to say the least.

"Again. You need to sweep your fingers out slightly more."

Her second attempt wasn't much better than the first. Gian nodded again.

"One more try."

The craftmaster listened as the sounds of plucked strings echoed in the practice room, then fell silent as he thought for a moment.

"Practicing what I have shown you this morning is going to be your assignment for the day." He held his hand up as Moya's mouth crept open in what Gian knew was going to be a 'but I want to learn more' protest. "The basics of how to properly place your fingers and pluck the strings is one of the most important things you can learn about playing a harp. If you don't teach yourself to do that properly now, you'll run into trouble later - just like you had to un-learn the way you were wrapping your thumb around the neck of your gitar, as you recall."

Moya nodded, but the disappointment on her face was obvious. Gian felt it was his duty to offer encouragement.

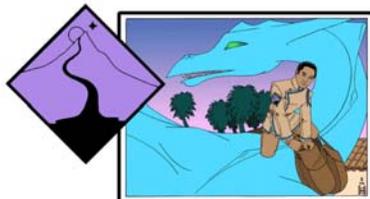
"Not everyone can learn to play the harp, Moya. It is a difficult instrument to master. But you have promise. If you are as persistent with the harp as you have been with your gitar, you will learn to play it just as well."

Moya smiled and nodded, looking quite convinced. And Gian could not help but smile himself as he watched her pack up the harp to leave, treating the instrument with the utmost of care. Moya had been overjoyed when he had shown the harp to her yesterday morning. Gian could only hope that having a new focus would cure the poor girl of her worries of late.

As Moya took her leave, Gian's mind wandered back to his dream and shook his head. He knew well that many Holders had daughters they would be thrilled to offer him in marriage, but a daughter for a harp? He wondered how his mind had ever dreamed up such a trade, and why such a subject had even entered his dreams at all.

For a moment, his mind wandered to the future. Moya was not unagreeable at all. She was pretty, smart, and had the same love for music that he could feel in his very bones. He knew she would make an excellent wife...

...for some man, someday.



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