

The Wondrous Gift

Maran sat down at the table in the heart of the Calasti home and tried to work out in his head what he was going to do about the problems that had started with him bringing home his new steppelander bride. The problems, at least, seemed to be clearly limited. Denora was respectful, despite the difference in their ways, to both his parents and to both of his brothers. The problem seemed to only be confined to her dealings with his sister, Talina. And, whether it was merely that she wouldn't explain the nature of this problem, or that she couldn't do so at this time, Denora left him completely at a loss on how to smooth things over.

In his attempt to distract himself from the near omnipresent sense that Talina would have to go through him for anything she might want out of Denora, the Singer started writing up a description of the types of crystals he was wanting to purchase from Chalkan Citadel. They did so much mining under the Dalcyn Mountains that they were likely more than willing to sell off stones that they considered mostly worthless for their purposes. It wasn't like he was asking for diamonds or other rare, small, gems. He was looking for large, mostly uncut, faceted crystals. These would work as points and perhaps a new attunement spike for Denora, if he could get them. She was already showing that she hadn't lied about her desire to learn more about his work. Getting crystals she could practice on was almost of tantamount importance now.

He and Denora and Jalak had been back for just over a moon now. Though it was clear that Denora had made it central to her goals in life to make certain that he was at least content, if not happy, with the choice he'd made in the ruins, it was less clear how much strain the adjustment to his society would bring her. It had to be harder, in her case, because part of the reason for their hasty marriage had been the Kee-Ali-Dahlri life-debt that they'd incurred. Something very powerful that was a part of both of them now demanded a child of their blood. It appeared that they'd succeeded in conceiving that one, but Maran was afraid that the effort to adjust to a new culture while carrying her first child might be a little much for Denora. She never complained about it, but sometimes her very meek tones began to hint that this was not as easy as she made it look. It behooved him to find something that Denora could do that would justify her not having to adjust to chores and family obligations too quickly, and that could only be done by giving her something else to do, preferably something that held her attention. He'd already seen that she did not like not having something to occupy her mind during her waking hours.

She was standing at the hearth now, waiting for the water to heat enough that she could brew him a cup of tea. Though he would have been more than happy to get his own meals or tea, that was something she simply, without a hint of argument, insisted upon. Thereupon lay his own problem with the adjustment. He didn't want a servant, and he was still in awe at her way of making choices where no choices seemed to exist, but she seemed happiest at the times when she could be actively serving him in some small way. He knew that he could adjust to this small desire of hers in time, but he wanted something to distract her now so that he'd have the chance to make his own adjustments at a decorous pace.

He unrolled a piece of paper that he'd started working on at the Ollahmic College yesterday. It was the beginnings of a descriptive instruction on how to locate crystal points and spheres that could be attuned to resonant magics. It might take several days to work on this, and he hoped that he'd be able to finish it without having to send it to a scribe for recopying, most likely due to some indirect argument with Talina.

Denora seemed to know he was working on something, as she moved with his cup of tea to set it on a free spot on the table where it wouldn't easily fall upon his work. As she began to move off, he decided to try to engage her mind again, explaining what he was trying to do and asking for her advice, if only because she managed to greatly simplify any description so that it was very accurate without being overly wordy. For Denora, using a single unnecessary word was almost a crime. He had to chuckle as he realized how awkward that would be for most bards. But he wasn't precisely a bard, and her head for streamlining thoughts would be useful.

"Denora, I've been working on an idea, a set of descriptions that the Chakur can use to identify likely crystal points and spheres that we can use for attunement purposes. Since you'll need to learn how to identify which ones work and which are too heavily flawed, I thought I could give you a bit of a lesson while I also use your careful word choice to make the descriptions better for our Chakur friends. Like you, they tend to be a bit chary of over-describing things."

Denora obediently sat down next to him, on the side opposite his teacup. He suspected she chose that position intentionally. He waited until she was seated before placing weights on the upper corners of the page he'd unrolled, and pointed to the simple drawing he'd made of a faceted point, and then to the text beside it. "Let me see what you think of that? Is it something you can understand?"

Denora bent over the table, and he suddenly saw her eyes widen. It was a moment later that she almost fell backward over the bench as she rose too quickly and stumbled back. He wasn't certain what he'd done this time. He'd never gotten a response like this out of her, though the closest he'd come had to be when he'd unleashed his song against the steppelands in the ruins. He took a breath, held out a steadying hand, and very carefully tried to figure out what had just happened. "Denora, what is it? I don't think I'd written anything shocking in there, though your people might interpret things differently than mine do."

She pointed at the paper and seemed to spend a long moment trying to control her breath. He didn't pressure her. With potent fire-starting abilities that she was only barely learning to control, he didn't want to do anything that might make her lose that fragile control. When the words came, they were not what he'd expected. "What magic is this? You said your only magic came from your voice. And yet, here, you make marks that mean things."

Marks that mean things? Then he realized. Writing. She was acting like she'd never seen writing before. "You've never seen this? Is that true? It's something my people have done for ages, all of them. I can write in three languages, and you can probably read all three now, if I'm guessing correctly. I can teach you to write in them, though it may take a little time and effort."

She seemed to be torn between looking at him and looking at the paper. "I do not understand. How do those marks say words in my head?"

He instantly turned his mind to try to understand it in her native tongue. But, as he discovered very quickly, there was no word for writing in her speech. Her people simply did not use any form of written account, and, beyond the designs that her people wore on their clothing, did not seem to have any kind of symbology at all. This would be a truly magical experience for her, if he handled it right. And he hoped that Talina would not pick this moment to show up. The thought that his sister might ruin this unique situation for her was something he didn't want to think on.

"Wait a moment, I'll pull out a blank sheet, and I'll show you about something all of the people at these schools here learn. Telin even knows it already." He signed for her to sit down and he pulled a blank sheet from his scroll case. Then, unrolling it like the other one, he dipped his pen into the inkwell and started tracing out a few characters. These he repeated in each of the three script styles that he knew. And then he pointed to them. "Look at these, and tell me what they say to you."

"They call to me, saying my name. They say Denora." Her voice was filled with utter awe.

He smiled and dipped his pen again and wrote down a few more symbols, again repeating in each of the three languages he could write in. "Try those ones now."

She studied them then looked at him in amazement. "Those are your name. How did this magic come to be? And how did I understand it so easily?"

"They aren't magic, not really. They're knowledge, a different form of our languages, so that when I am done, I can roll this up and give it to someone else and they can look at it and understand what I want to tell them. As to how you learned them, that's not as much a surprise to me as the fact that you were completely unlettered. When I transferred languages with you, I gave you all of the languages I knew, and that included their writing. I wouldn't be surprised if you can read music too, though that may take a little more effort to master. My people have a specific set of symbols that just relate to music, that tells you where to put your voice. It will take you time to learn how to make these symbols, but since you can read them, it will only take you time to learn the forms in order to be truly proficient."

She seemed to stop and take this in. But the light never left her eyes. "This, you will teach me this as well as how to sing the stones?" There was a tone to her absolute amazement that he really didn't care for, the hint that she would have to work hard to find some way to repay what he was doing simply because he enjoyed sharing knowledge, especially with someone as bright as she was.

"Denora, most of this you already know. What I can do is to give you a clay board and the charcoal that we use with people just learning how to write. Once you've gotten good at that, I might have things I need you to write up, because you are better at not overwhelming the reader with words. But this is not something you will have to repay. It is a useful skill here, something that I would not see you without. Perhaps, in time, you might set a script of your own to your peoples' tongue. I've read something at some point about your people once writing, or using word-symbols, like the Toyurasi do. It might be worth it for both of us to learn that, if we can find anything that survives of that."

He thought for a moment, "Actually, it might be best if you ask Telin to start showing you the basics, in Trade. He's only now learning the elvari script, and won't touch the Kee-Ali-Dahlri for some time. I'm often at the school, or running errands for Father. Telin has more time that he can help, and you won't have to feel so alone here when he can teach you new things."

Denora signed for him to set down his pen. When he had done so, she leaned over and pulled him to her emphatically. This was not entirely unlike the first kiss she'd bestowed upon him, when she was frightened, and had just discovered that she was now a shapeshifter like he was. But, despite her fear and shock then, he had been almost overwhelmed by her passion. That passion came back fully now, in the middle of his family's dining room. And she didn't let him go for a good long moment.

When she finally did release him, he was a little lightheaded. That had to be a good response from her, a sign of absolute wonder and astonishment. As he tried to reorient himself again, he couldn't help but smile at her. "I'll take that as a thank you. I wish I'd known earlier that your people were unlettered. It would have allowed me to share this new idea with you sooner. I think I might just have found you something to enjoy while I'm working."

She looked down at her hands, but he could see the faint hints of a smile around her eyes. That might be one problem down. And it might just give him the breathing space he needed to start working on solving the others. With a grin, he put away the page he'd used to scribe their names on, and pointed back at the other, "Looking at that, what changes would you make to the wording? I'll let you master your surprise as I teach you." And he knew that things had just gotten a little bit easier in the Calasti household.