

Freely-Given Gifts

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Content Warning: Sixen

The pelt-adorned and dark-skinned dwarf looked cautiously to the cat that stood next to her, attempting to read his expression. The richly-dressed black-and-white cat looked skeptically to the elf standing before them, questioning the artisan's choice of students. The apron-wearing high elf looked patiently over all three young aspiring craftspeople, at least one-third unsure of her choices herself. All of them, standing in the large workshop, were wondering the same thing: what type was *this* one?

There were the sociable yet terribly ineffectual tribal ones from the forests, there were the skeptical and proud clans from the land of their kind's mythic birth, and there were the chaotic, explosion-prone, and tricky ones of the cities and ports. Sure, perhaps it wasn't fair to stereotype, but there was a reason many believed in them for these sorts: their species was frequently shorter lived than many intelligent peoples, and their communal nature and cultures here amongst the isles often—regardless of their teachings—did not produce wildly independent or diverse personalities. Maybe that too was a stereotype, but few had the time or profession to sit and compile anthropological collections of their kind's range of potential.

And so—although the aged elf woman had gotten to know this one at least well enough to know quick categorization was futile—the collected makers of things were left with a conundrum. She'd said she was from the mountains and spoke of her kind's mythologized creators with pride, she was excitable and sociable and seemingly utterly clueless, and she was here to make things with wild abandon. Without expectations and laden with an ever-increasing sense of fear, all the collected craftspeople could do was brace themselves for the worst.

Sixen, meanwhile, was totally oblivious to all of this. The pinkish-red kobold bounced happily on the fronts of her feet, grinning wildly with amber eyes sparkling with sheer awe. She was going to learn how to make a *magic item* today.

"Hm. Yes, we are all assembled," the elf observed, breaking the nervous silence that had otherwise been only occupied by a barely perceptible eeeeeee coming from a kobold with seemingly infinite breath. "You three have shown excitement for the craft, worked for me for a month to pay your dues and demonstrate your commitment, and each possess a talent in one foundational craft skill or another. Thus, with the graduation of my prior apprentice, I am prepared to teach anew. Today will do one of three things: prove you are unable to manage magic and encourage you into a more fitting trade, grant you the very basic proficiency of making magical trinkets so that you may investigate on your own or find another master, or...prove your worth to me as my next apprentice."

Seeing the dwarf and cat both grow emboldened by the announcement, she offered a warm but even smile. "Ortwyn," the master said, drawing the dwarf's gaze, "your leatherwork is impeccable, and your expansion into wood and stonework so far does your blood proud."

"skind of ya to say, miss." Ortwyn said, wringing her wrist in mild embarrassment.

"Nolan, your eye for tailoring and jewelry is impeccable, and a steady hand for the more delicate materials you seek to work with will come in time. I trust you will be highly sought in the future."

The cat smiled, chest puffed up beneath his fine tunic by the praise and faith. "Master Venra, you know I'll endeavor to do nothing else."

"And...Sixen."

Hearing her name, the kobold snapped out of her daydreaming haze to listen with full intent, looking up with a childlike admiration towards the crafting master.

Venra looked for words to say that would not disappoint those big eyes. "...your sculpture work, while frequently lacking diversity in its chosen subjects, is honestly surprising in its detail and artistry. Your angular style is...striking in its primal nature, and you continue to...solidify it." The long-lived elf was relieved to see the kobold's tail wagging happily at her words.

"Before I give you your task, I would like you to observe the process first." With a familiarity that only decades in the same tool-filled room could give, the tall woman strode to her first and favorite workstation: a potter's wheel. Elegantly, she pulled her custom seat to its edge and sat, straddling the well-used yet still masterwork device. She brushed back her long blonde hair and tucked it behind her tall, pronounced ears. "You have on occasion seen me spin for a custom order," she explained as she stretched her fingers and arms, "but I offer my art in that form as a passion. It is mere copper compared to the earnings of an enchanted order. You will find that bespoke magical orders are infrequent but the bulk of your earnings as a professional magic crafter...unless you are literally the most prestigious artisan in your specific field. You should never create magic items unless they are of good general use, commonly useful for your local community, specifically requested by a client, or representative of your deepest passions, artistry, and self. It is a tremendous waste of resources otherwise."

As she spoke and prepared, the three students gathered around. At first, they all stood nearby as the venerable woman lifted a large mass of solid clay and slammed it upon the wheel's surface. Venra shook her head. "I appreciate your respect, but you will want to find seats. Magic crafting is not limited by the physical speed of crafting but by the inherent flow of magical potency into the item. I can spin a pot in minutes. *This...will take hours.*"

The point was well-taken. Once they had respectively sturdily carried, gently pulled, and screechingly dragged their stools close and sat, she gestured to a side table next to her basin of clay. Three bowls sat upon it, each containing a unique and eye-catching ingredient. “Can you identify these?”

“Sapphire dust. Pure sapphire dust,” Nolan immediately said, stunned by the amount of superfine blue powder in the bowl, every particle sparkling in the slightest light.

“Ash of darkwood,” Ortwyn added, pointing at the pitch black powder that made the hair on her back stiffen. “...gotta be, from th’smell.”

Venra looked expectantly at the kobold. Sixen, briefly distracted with sniffing the air at the dwarf’s words and sneezing at the stinging scent just barely far enough away to not send a cloud of expensive material flying. The student eventually looked to the third bowl and, to Venra’s mild shock, actually stopped smiling for a moment.

“...ground scale,” Sixen eventually responded. “...scale of green dragon.”

The elf had underestimated the kobold’s pride. “...if...it makes you feel any better, I was told it had gone into an irrepressible rage.” Venra’s face twisted in a reserved visage of guilt. “But...dragons are potent in their arcane potential, just as precious gems are to the divine and rare plant materials are to the primal. You must understand that we cannot turn up our noses at too much, lest we lose our connection to the precise demands magic makes of us for its use.”

Ortwyn clapped Sixen on the shoulder, firmly giving the girl a shake while Nolan rolled his eyes at what he clearly thought was a child’s overreaction. To his surprise, Sixen—thanks in part to the dwarf’s kind gesture—rebounded near immediately with that bright, charismatic smile, goofily bouncing on her seat as if to shake herself back to paying attention.

“The ingredients you see here, in these tiny portions, are conservatively appraised at close to four thousand gold pieces.” Venra didn’t pause for the dwarf’s near-choke at that knowledge or the envious swish of a feline tail at the master potter’s description of the amounts as ‘tiny’. “This is the rough amount of inherent value necessary with which to carry and channel this magic in perpetuity. These specific ingredients are chosen because they resonate well with magic relating to water, creation, and quality. In total, I will have to take four hours of focused crafting today in order to complete this item; you will find that time, magical power, and the value of gold relate strongly to each other. This is why the ingredients of a magic item and time spent crafting should roughly be kept at a ratio of one thousand gold pieces’ worth of materials to one hour spent crafting. You will understand the time and gold requirements for an item to be closely related to its recipe, so research very carefully.”

“Master Venra,” Nolan interjected with a small degree of hesitancy despite his usual boldness, “...how will you actually, you know...magic the item? Ortwyn here has been training

with that nearby grove. I've been studying under the blessed church. And Sixen is...presumably a wizard?" He didn't pay any attention to the kobold's confirming nod and proud pose. "But...you told us earlier you actually have no spellcasting experience yourself."

"That is correct." The wizened potter smirked. "But magic items are their own practice. If your skill is inherently superior and precise in your trade, you can replicate the will of a spell through the motions of your craft...so long as your ingredients and accounting are otherwise perfectly according to recipe. This was more commonly how magic items were made in the primitive past: accidental synergies with perfection in art."

"You mean, in the primitive past *after* the Old World's end," Nolan interrupted.

"But of course. Their methods were closer to ours now: exacting and calculated."

Her foot began to pump at the pedal, the wheel slowly clicking up to speed and spinning the clay mass around faster and faster. "Now, are you ready?" she asked over the mechanical whirring from the strange apparatus. "I know this craft well enough that I should be able to answer *some* questions while working, so long as you do not interrupt me during any mantra, but...I would rather you focus on my work for most of the time. If you get hungry, ignore it; lunch can wait until I am finished."

Her students nodded quietly, and Venra nodded back in turn. With a deep breath, she dipped her hands in water, tenderly brought her long fingers down to the mass, and began to shape.

Sixen had no way of knowing that her teacher and fellow students—noticing her during the brief lapses in their attention—were stunned by her strange behavior. One hundred percent of her focus was dedicated to watching Master Venra work. And while she'd been told she could ask questions—something her peers took advantage of—the kobold was entirely and uncharacteristically silent, as enchanted by the experience just as much as the forming object was to be. Sixen, the eager-mouthed extrovert, had in fact spoken the least of all present.

Her wide eyes followed the potter's hands travel in impeccably precise ways, delicate fingers curling around the spinning mass and gradually shaping it. Each motion was purposefully slowed, drawn out to a crawl as if the elf wasn't just crafting but *worshipping* the materials she worked with. Every so often, mumbling a memorized chant, the woman before her would sprinkle and caress into the clay one of the three potent powders. A stripe here, dots there, and plenty upon her fingers when she began to press a hollow into the forming vessel, the reagents under Master Venra's guidance bonded into the increasingly curvy shape.

There were no cracks in the pale clay as Venra tenderly formed it into the shape of a ceramic decanter. The basic shape of it took two hours on its own, something that had Nolan quickly fidgeting with impatience. The elf's leg and arms tirelessly moved, hands regularly dipped into water yet continuing to become caked with clay despite it all. Once those long hours passed and she had completed that decanter's overall shape, she curled her fingers; a single nail became the implement of her craft as she slowed the wheel and tenderly scraped off small bits of the outer surface, creating an almost faceted texture of teardrop shapes near the base and along the vessel's tall neck. Between the two areas, she ran her nail along the surface, drawing curving lines along the previously untouched band around the container's middle. Slowing the wheel even further, she began to subtly dent and etch, rhythmically moving as to only add a detail once at least twenty seconds had passed as to pace herself with her incantations. Each cluster of dents was placed along the curvy lines she'd drawn, and each soft etching outlined broad, jagged leaves. It was masterwork artistry in slow motion, a vessel truly made for wine of a superior quality.

But, while Sixen's heart raced at such a hypnotic demonstration of skill, there was something else making it hard for her to breathe. Each time the master began a new lengthy mantra, the kobold subconsciously cast a spell upon herself without a single word. Magic collected in those entranced yellow eyes, allowing Sixen to see the energy that swirled and collected before her. Guided by the elf's tender hands, responding to every single syllable just so, the shimmering blue aether danced in the air like notes following a musical staff and slowly swirled to collect in each application of those magically resonant reagents like water funneling into a drain. The shiver that the kobold felt was one only achievable by looking at a deeply beautiful and awe-inspiring display. It was like looking over a cliff at a rainbow-shrouded waterfall, or sitting on a jagged mountain outcropping far from civilization and seeing through the deepest darkness the dream-like astral mists upon which the stars were placed.

Or like being close enough to touch the arcane gift of those who had given kobolds life.

Nolan kneaded at his thighs through his sleek black pants. Ortwyn tried to cover her stomach as if to quell its increasingly insistent hunger pains from the delays in obtaining her usual hearty lunch. Even Sixen was beginning to feel exhausted from such singular focus, much of her magic for the day already drained in her attempt to watch how magic responded. But Master Venra took no breaks. Even once the decanter looked like the essence of what all clay dreamed of becoming and the wheel stopped its turning, she was reaching to grab another small bit of clay from her supply, rolling it into a firm orb atop a tapering extension to serve as the decanter's future stopper.

Quietly, Venra carried her creations to a nearby door into a brick-walled extension of her store. A familiar wave of heat hit the assembled folk, one sufficient for finishing the vase's current baking needs. Only once she had tenderly placed it in a secluded, secure spot did she close the door, roll her shoulders, and look at her students. "...well, now," the elf sighed, wiping sweat from her brow and taking a nearby hand fan to wave at the back of her own neck, "that's

most of the work. I'll of course do the usual process of painting and glazing when it's time, but the magic will need that time to settle before it takes its permanent form and produces the intended effect. Was anyone able to figure out what this item is for?"

"Creation!" came the enthusiastic chirp, startling cat and dwarf both after how silent the kobold had been. "Is creation, but copy! Wine go in, kept for day, then jug make same wine each day after!"

"That is...correct," the potter commented, astonished at the accuracy. "Up to a certain quality, the decanter will produce enough wine for eight glasses each day. Truly superb wines will lose their most delicate notes, but it otherwise provides a high quality vintage. You...you have not learned magic item crafting before, have you?"

"No, Sixen never see magic craft before!" Sixen clapped her hands like one would at the end of a flawlessly performed symphony. "But you made magic dance, and you say water, creation, quality! And dance was of grapes, blessings, and envy. So item will want wine!"

Even understanding the kobold's broken language, a side-effect of learning the common tongue of these isles extremely late in life, all Venra could do was fold her fingers together in contemplation, pondering how a student could get the right answer with such blatantly nonsensical reasoning and a method entirely divorced from all arcane rules and knowledge. Unsatisfied with her own ponderings, she ultimately decided to ignore it. "...um, well, still. Very good, Sixen. Let's take lunch now."

Despite the significant patience often accredited to older elves and their lengthy lifespans, Master Venra didn't pause her teaching as the prospective apprentices spooned through their stew and dipped their bread in the broth. Even as she washed her hands clean of caked clay and ate a delicate elvish pastry, she spoke of the many exacting things necessary to craft: the runes and sigils to mentally picture, the specific verbal components for invoking magic into masterwork material, the difficulty in slowing down a crafting process when creating the base at the same time as the magic's addition, the lack of pride and personal resonance when using items not crafted at least significantly in part by the magic item crafter...a wealth of general information necessary for the young students' goals. It forced the starving Ortwyn to shovel her food hastily down her throat in order to not miss most of it, and Nolan allowed his stew to grow cold by foregoing the meal in favor of careful attention.

From how Sixen kept walking back and forth between wolfing down her bowl's contents and getting seconds, thirds, and even fourths—gobbling the bread and stew noisily down as if she had a portable hole for a stomach—her peers were pretty sure she'd not heard a thing. The only thing that stopped the kobold from enlarging the curve of a particularly full belly on her tiny and lithe body was the clap from their teacher to put up their dishes and return to the workshop's main table.

“Now...it’s time for you to try.”

Venra’s hand swept towards the table. The students recognized the three objects that rested there. Ortwyn chuckled, unsure what else to do with the embarrassment of seeing her first masterwork quality tortoise shell amulet. Nolan simply looked proud at the elegant cloak he’d created, the silver flecking amid the fabric an extra touch the master had guided him through. And, to Sixen’s complete joy, there sat the wooden statue she’d carved for Venra in thanks of her paying off her debts to the ferry she’d used to arrive at this busy port city. The sharp, abstract angles of a tall dragon seated on its hind legs framed a smaller, less brutalist depiction of a smiling kobold hugging a far taller elf woman’s leg; the polished oak had befuddled her current employer in how, despite the total lack of refinement and professional talent, it resonated with genuine passion.

“Your first masterwork crafts.” Venra observed, although she didn’t need to. “Rather than splitting your focus between crafting and learning the rules of magic, your first craft should be enchanting an already existing item of sufficient quality for magic to be maintained within. You will attempt to turn these items of yours into something eternally touched by the mystical.”

There wasn’t an eye in the room without a twinkle in it at those words. “I have given each of you a specific recipe and the magical reagents to use,” she continued. “Ortwyn? You will use the provided sample of darkwood ash to make your amulet into an amulet of natural armor. Nolan? The sample of sapphire dust is yours to use to create a cloak of resistance. Sixen? You will use-”

“No.”

Heads spun. Sixen was looking the teacher in the eyes with a more reserved smile than the bombastic grin she almost never left behind.

“E...excuse me?” the master asked with genuine confusion.

“You to say ‘use dragon scale powder’ to make item, yes? Sixen say no.”

“Gh...little Sixen. Are y’sure ‘bout this?” her dwarvish peer said slack-jawed. “Yer always talkin’ of making magic items, whole month I’ve known ya. If y’say no to this...”

Sixen widened her smile for Ortwyn. “You good friend, Ortwyn! But Sixen say no.”

“...guess she’s the proud type after all,” the cat chuckled to himself. “Well, all the more-”

“Sixen make item without!”

The declaration was followed by a heavy silence. Sixen used the opportunity to hop upwards and snatch the recipe from the table, scanning over it and tapping her chin. "Hm! Was to make statue with light. Hmm...no very enjoy light spell yet. Chant is all light, mental rune is light...no, no. Not true to Sixen. Statue is of friendship! Symbol of Sixen heart for elf-friend. Hmhm...hmhm..."

"Y-...did you not hear anything I said at lunch?" Venra sternly spoke, planting her hands on the table and leaning forwards as if to impose her height and authority upon the unbothered reptilian girl. "You cannot just...ignore the rules! Magic is very particular, and it takes years to research the correct combinations, costs, spells, and reagents for the creation of new magic items!"

Sixen laughed, her master once more shocked and sent stepping backwards by a reaction she had not possibly expected. "Of course Sixen hear! Sixen good listener, yes yes," the kobold chirped. "And you teacher! No can learn if no listen." She shifted her hips to one side, confidently looking up at Venra. "But...you also say waste to make item if no general, useful, ordered, or from heart, yes? So Sixen not waste statue-gift to you! And Sixen no craft from heart if using dragon part not free-gived."

"...freely given?"

"Yes yes, Nolan-friend! That words."

Venra covered her mouth with her hand not to hide a smile but to ponder. "...this is...fair," she relented, speaking through her palm. "But it will not change the fact that magic demands precision and exactness. You cannot just...'heart' your way through the calculations it would take others years to make."

The kobold shrugged, grin broadening. "...why not? No know if no try!"

"...well, what do you intend to craft then, Sixen?" the woman asked her student testingly. "I will have to know your intent if I am to evaluate anything that results from this...reagentless, improvised experiment of yours."

Sixen looked back at the recipe sheet, then studied the dragon. Inwardly, she hoped for a flash of dreamlike inspiration, but—as they always had been for her—the dragons were silent. The ocean wind blew against the workshop's outer wall, testing its sturdiness as often it did. Eventually, she looked to the small Sixen and Venra the dragon's cubist form framed. The statue was of friendship. The dragon was silent. But...

"...will make dragon smile!" she declared. "Will make dragon smile when look at friend of owner. If no smile, no true friend of owner!"

“...a mood detector? Really?” Nolan snorted.

“No. Mood timp...tempow...tempraree.”

“Temporary.” The cat hated this.

“Exactly! Tempory!” Sixen nodded enthusiastically, and Nolan rolled his eyes. “But friendship deeper. Detector of...the you in other heart!”

The old elf sighed and shook her head. “Well, today is meant to be a test. So long as you accept the results of this test as your own, you may take it as you will.” Clapping her hands, she gestured to the three smaller tables she’d given them as their personal workstations those few weeks back. “You have two hours. These crafts should take only one. Do with that what you will. Now, begin!”

The aspiring craftspeople rushed their scrolls, ingredients, and meaningful objects back to their stations. All except one. Sixen left the small thumb-sized bowl and recipe scroll aside, focusing her entire attention on carrying the hefty mantelpiece-display-sized art piece towards its embrace with magic.

Sixen recalled the steps she’d read on the simplified recipe she’d scorned.

Step 1: Prepare the Vessel — Craft the base item. This may be combined with Step 2 or Steps 2 and 3 in craft-focused magic item creation. For enchanting, simply obtain a masterwork item of the appropriate base for its use.

She gazed at her statue. It honestly was befuddling to her that her wood carving might be considered masterwork in its artistry. She’d left her village and home because her sculpting and carving skills were insufficient on their own to inspire her to excitement. It almost made the kobold wonder if she’d have had her work eventually reach the discerning eye of one of the dragon rulers of her homeland. But Sixen had no regrets; she was sure her work in the future as a merchant and magical crafter would surely impress her idols someday.

Step 2: Direct the Vessel — Picture the specific runic glyph that corresponds to your craft and will that vision into the object. The more specific to your craft, the better. For example, while the druidic glyph for fire might work in creating an item for enhancing a fire’s strength, more specific glyphs that correspond to “heightened fire at a distance” would make the crafting both easier and more likely to succeed. This is where careful research is required blah blah blah...

Sixen had no time for research. She had two hours to make one and a half feet of whittled oak into something that could give friends a smile! However, she also knew she wasn't particularly smart or good at memorizing things, a deep failing for a wizard like her. "Sixen know arcane glyph for dragon...and for friend," she mumbled, filtering through the very basic draconic arcane glyphs she actually knew in her mind, the thoughts of those circles, angled lines, shapes, and runes making her head ache even as she considered them. "Maybe just think of both? ...Sixen throw in rune for yes and rune for no. Should be fine."

*Step 3: Imbue the Vessel — Apply magically resonant and appropriate materials to the vessel while casting into the material over the appropriate length of time. If you do not know the actual spell or cannot cast magic, you may either use scrolls or research a chant that appropriately invokes the same requisite forces for manifesting the spell. While actual spell components can be improvised by experienced crafters, reagents and magical materials of appropriate cost **cannot** be skimped on without risking total magical scarring and ruination of the vessel permanently. Magically resonant materials blah blah blah...*

There was no guilty look to the main table. She refused. She did not blame those who used dragon materials, but Sixen curled her hands into fists thinking about those who would slay or rob dragons for such materials. Her respect was too great to use those spoils herself. "...Sixen sure it not necessary. Just need...anything magic."

Her eyes browsed the nearby shelf, her haste eventually allowing her gaze to land on a flask filled with green fluid. "Alchemist acid!" the kobold cheered under her breath. "Like...acid of green dragon. Alchemy good with arcane magic...and acid fit for replacing green dragon scale!" Climbing atop her table and lifting up onto her tippy-toes, she barely was able to reach the tightly sealed container. With a couple of flicks of her fingers scooting it closer to the edge, she eventually tipped it off and caught it against her chest. "Oof! Good thing bottle sturdy; Sixen no have green scales," she giggled, climbing back down into her seat and popping the rubber stopper from out of the flask's mouth. "Hmm...large flask. This be...twenty gold worth? ...so it...only four hundred eighty gold off? Close enough!"

With that, Sixen took a deep breath and began to emulate her master to the best of her ability and imagination.

By the time Venra came around and caught a glimpse of what the kobold was doing, it was far too late. To her, it was as if she were proctoring a university exam and, while walking the aisles, spotted someone writing an answer so egregiously wrong that it would single-handedly result in a failing grade. "The sky is blue because it is an upside-down ocean" degrees of wrong. In horror, all she could do was try her best to walk away, but that same horror demanded her attention for at least a while.

Sixen stood precariously atop her chair, leaning over the table, slowly dripping alchemist's acid atop one of her most beautiful works, and chanting in draconic language. The

hissing of caustic fluid hitting insufficiently protected wood was physically painful to hear, each drop seeming to drill further and further through the top of the dragon's angular head or haphazardly missing enough to dribble down its folded wings or back. Given the flask's emptiness, assuming Sixen had been appropriately pacing herself for a full hour's work, she must have been pouring potentially-damaging liquid atop that loving gift for almost twenty minutes now. There was no way Venra could know what glyphs the kobold was focusing on, but given the sing-songy chanting Sixen had chosen roughly translated to "Dragon friend, dragon friend, I want to see you smile! My friends are good friends so you can show them too!", she didn't have much faith that the glyphs were particularly accurate or helpful.

After a minute of full agony, the master craftswoman finally tore herself away. The other two, at least, were promising. Ortwyn—while having difficulty managing the slightly higher level spell her craft required—had managed to understand and translate the written guidelines into that secretive druidic language and knowledge necessary for such a craft. Notes filled the page, and she'd even drawn a basic glyph using the runes of the druids. Venra couldn't read the secret script herself, but she could tell from the feeling in the air that the ash was responding to the magic and will of the druid-in-training. Nolan, meanwhile, was performing as if a prodigy. The casting was done confidently, carefully, and slowly, the sapphire dust sank into the threads of the cloak, and already the basic abjuration magic was creating a slight pressure to the air that made the elf feel keen and aware as she passed by.

Curiously, Venra fished out of her own desk a small glass circle. Slotting it into a gold frame, she placed the rare item to her eye and quietly whispered a word. Instantly, the air gained a clarity she never could see without magical aid. Various items around the room shimmered with a discernible aura, and gentle wisps of colored energy floated about like smoke. Moreover, each trace carried with it a mental message, an enhancement to her own ability to understand and identify the magical. The ability to see magic was taken for granted by those with inherent magical abilities, but it was a rare and beautiful occasion for anybody else; only the most focused of crafters and frequently only non-magical ones saw the true beauty of a tinkerer's monocle.

Sure enough, Nolan's craft was flawlessly structured. The divine abjuration magic that issued forth both from him and from the metal holy symbol he clutched was finely controlled, each stream spiraling into the other before following the particular path that only a clearly imagined glyph of resistance could provide. The sapphire, invisible once magically infused into the fabric, was visible here, sparkling with a firm blue glow that promised a perfectly successful result.

She traced her path backwards to gaze at the kindly dwarf's work. As she'd suspected, what Ortwyn lacked in magical potential she made up for in wisdom. The primal magic issuing forth from the nature-gifted girl was weak and unsteady as it flowed from her mouth like warm clouds of breath, but, as soon as it was caught in the air about the amulet, it obtained perfect order and direction. The ash did not issue forth a potent blue feeling of protection, but Venra

could feel her delicate skin beginning to grow tougher when she approached. If the craft failed to produce a meaningful effect, it would still surely demonstrate the potential to succeed.

Then, feeling duty bound to at least humor the positive, imaginative kobold she'd rescued from immediately landing in pauper's prison—it was surely their last day together as master and student, after all—she took a deep breath and prepared for agony. She closed her eyes, tensed her body as if to brace for a blow, and turned towards Sixen's station.

“...wh..what.”

The immediate sight caused the monocled eye to swell with tears, forcing the elf to wipe it clear so she could be sure of what her eyes had shown her when looking again. “...what is...”

The entire area around Sixen was filled with shifting pink, red, purple, and gold energies as if she were the center of her own nebula. It didn't spread outwards but instead seemed to embrace her, almost as if it was demonstrating that she wasn't the magic's origin but its goal. Like a beautiful cloak, it concentrated and rolled over her form. Like a rich noble's luxury oil, it ran down her arms but clung to her dutifully. It encircled the flask of acid and followed each drop down, and, like the purest drops of dew falling into a fairy's pond, impacted and dispersed with a spectacular display of prismatic color. The statue had seemingly suffered no acid damage whatsoever as if it had been magical and resistant to damage from the very beginning, and she could only assume it was an effect of this swirling, beautiful arcane power.

Master Venra stepped closer, desperately looking for anything with familiarity. There, amidst the strange cloud of magic, she finally spotted it: a stream of pink and white magics coming from Sixen's chest. “Enchantment...and divination,” she whispered to herself, immediately identifying that they were not only tremendously weak streams but also terribly disorganized. The threads never seemed to join together or find any coherent path, flitting along aimlessly in the vaguest direction towards the object.

Then they veered and veered hard. First, it was around Sixen's free hand. The hand was swaying as she hummed her makeshift song of friendship, smiles, and dragons like she were conducting a choir. The streams of arcane magic strengthened as they passed through, wrapping around her fingers and allowing the hand's motions to tug them into place. She was literally tugging on her own magic. *...sorcery?! the artisan thought in astonishment. No, no... she said she was a wizard. Then...arcanism? That's a rarity...does she not know she can do this? Or does she genuinely think all wizards do this?*

Even weirder, though, was how the newly bolstered magics reacted to where that mental visualization would be. Immediately, the two streams abruptly yanked into a new direction and began navigating the firmest path Venra had ever seen, as if the rune in Sixen's mind was made literally tangible by sheer charisma. It was an utterly nonsensical path compared to any magic the elf knew about and surely would've resulted in some non-functional mess, but it was full of

certainty. But then that cloud of strange, undefinable magic seemed to reach down and—ever so gently—tug the streams in small, subtle ways. A little pinch here, a little ebb there, bit by bit until the streams began following a coherent path. It was still no spell the woman had ever seen, but at least the power was funneling into the statue in a way that obeyed the most basic calculations and rules of magic.

The monocle's magic wore off, and she immediately used her second and final word to resume watching the magic in its chaotic but gorgeous display. Another three minutes later, having stared in dumbstruck confusion at Sixen's station for the entire time, she was left with only her normal elven sight. She had never once thought her workshop, filled with so many tools, materials, appliances, structures, and items, looked plain. Now, she couldn't help but feel there would always be something beautiful missing.

The three students placed their items down on the main table where they'd initially found them, each one appearing to the naked eye entirely unchanged. Everyone knew better than that, though. Whether failures or successes, these items had been irrevocably changed with primal, divine, and arcane magics.

"...miss, ye alright?"

The dwarf's words snapped the woman back to attention. "Oh, yes. Sorry. I was...thinking. Please, your amulet."

Ortwyn passed over the tortoise shell amulet with its leather strap over to her teacher. Venra strapped it around her neck and, without any hesitancy, picked up a nearby clay-cutting wire, pulled it taut by the handles, and pressed it to her own arm.

Sixen winced instinctively. Nolan turned away. But when the elf lifted the tool, only a single drop of blood and an aggravated red line of unbroken skin appeared.

"Partially successful, Ortwyn," the elf announced with a tone of approval, confusing the dwarf for a bit. "This is not a bad result for using a base spell component that is beyond your current normal capabilities. I do not discourage you from this field in the slightest; you have a strong mind and good potential."

"Erm, thank ya," Ortwyn sighed, "but...was hopin' for a better result anyway."

Venra offered an understanding nod, handing the amulet back. "Well, I advise you to keep this anyway. It is your first craft and, if you look back on this in the future, I think you will see it with proud eyes then. Nolan?"

Nolan handed over the cloak. Venra swept it over her narrow shoulders and clasped it together. At this point, the three knew what was likely to come in a non-magical artisan's evaluation, so they weren't too surprised when she opened a jar of sickly brackish black fluid and retrieved a sponge from inside. She wiped it across the tender skin a good distance further down her arm than the wire nick before putting the disgusting sponge and its container away. After a few seconds of turning her arm over and back, she nodded.

"Flawless, as I expected," the master said. "My skin barely even itches; a fast-acting but simple disease like that should've resulted in boils by now. Basic resistance at full potency."

Nolan's tail swayed, smug smirk stretching across his face. "Thank you, Master Venra."

Then, Venra smiled, her eyes and then everyone else's falling on the small, charming, and seemingly clueless kobold girl. "Sixen...may I have the statue back?"

Sixen giggled, sliding the polished oak sculpture across the table. "Of course! Is still gift for you! But Sixen thankful you give for first craft!"

Tenderly, as if she were handed a king's crown for safekeeping, Venra lifted the statue. There had been a little acid damage, now that she was looking up close. The dragon's head was slightly rough to the touch, and discolorations ran like strangely smooth imperfections in what was previously pure, unspoiled oak. She caressed the statue's head as if petting a cat, and then the artisan turned the statue towards Sixen.

...

Nothing in the statue changed. The touched expression the elf had been wearing slowly slipped back into an expression of disappointment. Ortwyn looked genuinely sad as if she'd been keeping her fingers crossed. The cat, though, found it quite humorous.

"Pff, what did you expect?" Nolan laughed. "Kobold ignored all the rules and didn't learn anything. You didn't do even a single one of the four steps right, did you?"

Sixen, who had been previously smiling away at seeing her teacher simply holding the object she'd poured her heart into twice over with respect, slowly turned towards the cat. Ortwyn could swear she heard gears turning in the bubbly girl's head. Then, all at once, Sixen gasped and jumped up onto the table.

"Step 4: Complete the Item!" she exclaimed, remembering the step she'd read of but forgot, scrambling towards her teacher and the statue on a startlingly more even height than Venra was used to. "Sorry, dragon! Sorry, friend! Fixing now!"

Before the elf could open her mouth, Sixen drew out her traveler's spellbook, leaned around the statue, licked a finger, and quickly rubbed the digit in a quick flourish on the dragon's back. Visibly, a cartoonishly smiling kobold head with the plain draconic runes for "Ixen" above it began to glow.

"Aaaand to seal the magic in!" Before a very befuddled three people, she knelt down next to the statue and wrapped it in a tight hug. "Aaaaand one more for my friend!" Bowing her head down, she placed a small kiss atop her arcane mark.

A flash of light sent the dwarf stumbling back onto her rear, forced the elf to turn her head up and away, and made the cat shield his face with a hand. Then, as if it were simply a flare spell, it was gone; everyone's eyes adjusted. Sixen, believing this to be the most normal thing in the world, shuffled her butt back to the edge of the table, hopped off, and skipped back to her previous position as Nolan glared and Ortwyn stood back up.

Venra looked back down at the dragon. "...friend?" she hushedly inquired to the inanimate object. The statue, other than the slowly turning invisible arcane mark, looked entirely untouched still. Had it been anyone else who had kindly kissed it, the elf would have given up. But...after seeing what she had seen? She wanted to believe in Sixen. She did believe in Sixen.

She turned the statue to face Sixen.

crr-creeeeeeak~

The wood of that blocky head stretched and warped, a subtle crack in the surface becoming more pronounced and distorting. After the sound stopped, though, it was undeniable: a line had carved itself into the wood and turned upwards. The dragon smiled.

Sixen grinned wider than she had at any other point during her long day in the workshop. "See? Sixen good friend! Now you know for certain!"

Still somehow in disbelief despite the faith that had coaxed her to try it once more, Venra turned the statue to Nolan.

Crrrr-creeeeeeak...

Just as it had smiled before, the dragon's expression turned the other direction. Rather than adopting a simple neutral line, though, the sole facial feature of the dragon kept distorting until in an unpleasant frown.

"Ooooooooooh..."

Nolan glared at Sixen, unappreciative of her interjection. "That doesn't mean anything," he scoffed. "It's just a malfunctioning item."

"Nolan." Venra's gaze was even and steady towards the feline. "If you are to be my apprentice, I will need you to be honest with me."

Nolan's eyes widened at the elf's serious reaction. He glanced to his left, catching a disapproving look from the druid in training too. "...I don't really see how it's appropriate to be *friends* with a *teacher*, okay? Totally different relationship."

"Nolan, the dragon would have likely not *frowned* if that were the case."

"Wh-...why do you even believe that would be the case?!" he incredulously yelled. "There's no coherent logic here! She did literally everything wrong! She barely ever got close! She didn't have anywhere near the inherent worth of materials to respect magic of that degree. She didn't even have a spell that was even close to being related! I doubt she even knows Charm Person!"

"Is true! No have that spell," Sixen confirmed cheerily, not caring that it wasn't actually helping her case by saying so.

"Nolan. I have had experience with countless more magic items than you," the venerable artisan countered, her expression darkening. "Yelling will not convince me either. I will have the truth or I can guarantee you that you will not be my apprentice."

Nolan's tail thrashed, and his ears flattened. Glancing to either side and realizing nobody would take his side over a statue's was enough to make him growl. "Fine," he spat, "I resent that, of all the magic item craftspeople in this massive city, the only one who would even give me a chance was an old elf potter. Not even a glassblower; a *potter*! Pottery is a rural trade for those without the money or smarts to have superior crafts. The only rich people who get it are the type who want it just to be 'quaint' or 'quirky'. I am meant for richer crafts!"

The outburst silenced the room. The outer walls creaked with the late afternoon breeze. The dwarf, daringly coughed. All until...

"Sixen believe in you, Nolan! Make the rich things!"

The sheer incredulousness on the cat's face from Sixen's cheer was just too much; the old elf broke into an airy, tender laugh. "...you are certainly a magnificently strange three candidates I have encountered," she said, wiping tears of mirth from the pits of her eyes. "But I am fully convinced now. I will admit, having watched you all work, I suspected this would be my decision. Now, I am certain."

Placing down the statue, Venra walked to the students' side of the table. Tenderly, she knelt down on the ground, getting as close as possible as she could to a certain kobold's height. That six-ridged forehead tilted up, bright amber eyes shining with pureness. "Sixen...Ixen Kosjcharir," she said, voice formal yet kind, "I would like you to stay and become my apprentice. Will you accept?"

Sixen grinned. It was, as always, a brilliant, unrestrained grin of sheer joy from all the surprises of life.

"Sixen decline!"

"WHAT?!"

Master Venra chose to ignore Nolan's outburst and subsequent trouncing around in a blind fury. "May...I ask why?"

Sixen wrung her hands. "Sixen admit," she began, sharing her tone with any kid who was explaining all the very good reasons they snuck a few cookies before dinner, "very good offer, very good teacher. But...Sixen no want to make things only. And...if Sixen here, Sixen make things only! That no path for Sixen. Sixen want to learn-be good wizard! Sixen want to make friends! Sixen want to make magic things! Sixen want to make carvings and see rocks! Sixen want to buy and sell! Sixen want to travel world! Sixen want to be *merchant!*" Had it not been Sixen, nobody would have understood the proudly pointing and posing kobold's declaration of that job to be one of genuine admiration. "So...Sixen no can apprentice. But Sixen got to learn magic items! Sixen know how to start now! Sixen forever grateful for Venra-friend."

Venra, as she did when Sixen first gave her one, gasped at the kobold's sudden hug. Somehow, she never expected an adult of any kind who was decades younger than her to ever give her such a free and innocent embrace. Her great-grandchildren certainly weren't innocent anymore. "You are...where do you go next, then?"

"Sixen hear of smaller port, but with new business! It is the Port of Cairn. Boat go tomorrow, but thanks to work with you Sixen can pay for this time!"

The master nodded. "Then go," she said. "But...if you ever find a place to at least set up shop, please send word to me. I would very much like to keep in touch."

"Of course! Sixen no forget friend." Releasing her teacher, she bounded off towards the workshop's lobby and street-side door, waving at all the friends she'd made. "Thank you! Good meet you, Nolan! Good meet you, Ortwyn! And Venra? No hurt dragon, please! Is gift!"

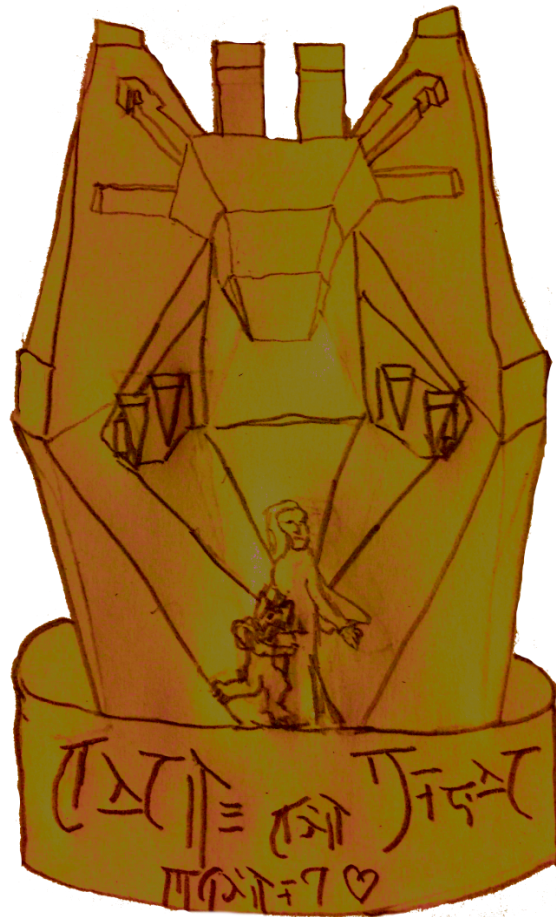
The assembled aspirants watched the wild kobold go, no closer to categorizing her than they were at the very beginning. "Ther' go Sixen," the dwarf summarized for the three of them.

Crrrrr-creeeeeak~

The dwarf and cat turned. Quietly, the elf woman had stood up, returned to the carved figure of Sixen's friendship with her, turned it towards Ortwyn, and let the guardian dragon judge: it was a soft, kindly smile.

"...well, it seems my first choice's friend considers you a friend to me as well," Venra said with a smile. "If you are willing to split your time between me and the druid's grove...?"

Ortwyn wrung her wrist and shuffled a foot against the ground. "er, who'm I t'argue with a dragon, miss?" she chuckled as the cat stormed off in a frothing rage. "Ah accept."



*Venra vur Sixen
Thurirl ♥*