

A Gift of Faeries and Firekin

Crksslff waited until the door shut, and Devin and Jacaranda were safely outside bundled in their heavy coats and hats, before hopping its fiery self out of the fireplace. Time would not be on its side, not if it wanted to finish before the pair returned. The firekin zipped across the room until it stood directly underneath Tesmarie's bed-shelf. The faery had turned the plain slab of wood into a padded mixture of blanket, pillow, and other sources of comfortable fluff. Crksslff extended its arms solely so it could place them on its non-existent hips and glared up with its little black eyes at the underside of the shelf.

"Boooooooooored," Tesmarie grumbled up above. Crksslff let off a little puff of smoke from the top of its head. Of course the onyx faery was bored. She was meant to zip about the forests laughing with the squirrels and dancing atop deer antlers. Luckily Crksslff had a plan...assuming it could get her attention. It focused a bit of pressure in its core, creating a series of pops and sparks. Only other firekin could understand the words, but the noise was audible enough.

"Down here, excitable one!"

A half-second later, Tesmarie's head poked over the shelf's edge.

"Hi-hi," she said. "Something the matter, Puffy?"

'Puffy' was the name given to it by their mutual friend, Devin, since the name 'Crksslff' didn't flow particularly well off clumsy human, or faery, tongues. The firekin hopped up and down twice, then elongated its arms out from the core of its burning being. Communicating with others was difficult, and tedious, but it had discovered the best manner was to simply spell out the words of its message across its entire body, generally as letters atop its arms.

NEDHELP.

"Help?" she asked, and at her sudden concern, Puffy shook its head.

NO - MAKGIFT.

The onyx faery's diamond eyes lit up immediately.

"A gift?" she asked as she zipped off the shelf and flew to join him, her clear wings a-buzzing. "I love gifts! Is it for me? No, of course not, you wouldn't need my help for that. For Devin, right?"

Crksslff bobbed its head up and down.

ANDJAC.

"So what do you need me for? I can do a lot of neat tricks with my magic! You wouldn't believe all the weird stuff that happens when you manipulate time."

A little bit of steam hissed out from where Crksslff's mouth would be if it could talk. It was the equivalent of a firekin sigh.

UCARRY.

"Oh." Her disappointment lasted only for a single flutter of her wings. "Carry you, or carry the gift?"

BOTH.

Crksslff dashed into the next room, which Devin used as both kitchen and pantry. Tesmarie followed, and when it pointed to a candle, she quickly understood. Her right hand clenched into a fist, summoning a shimmering moonlight blade. One quick swipe, and off went

the very tip of the candle. She scooped it into her arms and zipped down to the floor. It wasn't much more than a blob of wax connected to the tiniest hint of a wick.

"Will this do, Puffy?" she asked.

In answer, the firekin shimmered and shook, releasing a great burst of steam as it shrank down its form by relinquishing much of its heat. It was dangerous to burn so low and so small, but Crksslff knew of no other way for Tesmarie to carry it about the city of Londheim. Once small enough, it hopped onto the candle and settled into a very slow, steady burn.

TOMARKT, it quickly spelled out in tiny letters that thankfully the equally tiny faery could still easily read. Tesmarie scooped the wax into her arms, and Crksslff made sure to shift its heat so that it would not burn her despite their proximity.

"To the market then," she said. "But I sure hope you don't plan on buying anything, because I don't have any money. Or are you secretly a rich firekin?"

In answer, Crksslff reshaped its body into the curved symbol used to mark currency throughout West Orismund. Tesmarie giggled at the sight of it.

"I don't think they'll accept you as payment, but maybe we can try that in a pinch."

Ever since Tesmarie had begun living with them, Devin kept one of the windows to his home cracked so she might come and go as she pleased. Tiny candle in her arms, she flew out through the crack, circled a loop above the roof to get her bearings, and then started westward. As Crksslff had hoped, she stayed far above the rooftops, ensuring no curious humans might notice and cause trouble.

"So what all are we getting?" she asked as she flew. Crksslff let loose another hissing sigh. Though she flew slowly and carefully (at least as slowly and carefully as an excitable onyx faery *could* fly) there was still a gentle wind blowing against them that would make spelling out letters impossible. So instead the firekin hunkered down and endured the chilly breeze. Slanted rooftops with dark shingles passed beneath them, the homes growing more and more packed together as they approached the outdoor market.

The road suddenly widened, shingles replaced with boards and thick blankets meant to offer shade from the sun. Though it was approaching evening, there were still plenty humans milling about, and more than Crksslff anticipated. The market had slowly recovered from the fear and insanity of the crawling mountain's initial arrival outside the city. Peddlers still had their wares to sell, and Crksslff peered down at their stalls and tables as Tesmarie's wings carried them along. With so many out and about, she decided the ground was not an option, so instead she carried them both to the top of a checkered red and yellow blanket above a stall selling what was left of bread baked that morning.

"So what is it we're looking for?" she asked again. Crksslff segmented its body down the middle twice so that it formed three straight lines connected only by its feet near the bottom. It had to do this carefully, for even a momentarily distraction might have it slip off its tiny blob of wax and start to consume the blanket they stood upon.

"So three things? Right-o, so what are they?"

Crksslff shook its head and extended an arm with a single finger from the center of its core. It did not trust the excitable faery to remember all three, nor that she wouldn't immediately zip about solo if given the full list. One at a time, that's how they'd do this.

FRSTBWIRE.

"Wire?" she said. Her nose crinkled. "Hrm. Maybe a...jeweler! They need to use wire, right?"

Crksslff hadn't the foggiest what all a human jeweler was or did, but it trusted Tesmarie to better understand these things. That's why she was here, after all! That, and she could carry the necessary items home. Firekin were magical entities of flame and heat. Physically hauling things about wasn't really an option.

Now with a goal in mind, Tesmarie flew them both in search, and it didn't take long, not with how the gold and silver glittered in the evening light. The two set down atop its canvas roof, then hung overhead to observe. The jeweler's display table was covered with necklaces set with various colored stones. The man was likely well off, based not only on that he sold jewelry, but also that unlike most others in the market, he had a tiny little oven with a carry handle resting behind him with slow-burning coals to keep him warm against the winter chill. Seeing that immediately gave Crksslff an idea, and it stood back up and gestured for Tesmarie's attention. Its arm zipped about, forming letters.

IDSTRACT.

"All right," Tesmarie said. "I won't need long, so don't go crazy."

Crksslff bobbed its head twice, then skittered down the side pole. Once sure the merchant had his back to it, Crksslff dashed into the heart of the oven. It wasn't much, just big enough to house a handful of coals to occasionally warm the merchant's hands. That needed to change. Crksslff settled down in the center, and once it saw Tesmarie watching upside from the top of the stall, it got to work. Reigniting the coals was easy enough. A bit of heat here, a touch there, and then when ready...

POP. Once, then another. POP. CRACK. As if a passerby had tossed in kernels of corn. The startled merchant spun about in mid-conversation.

"What in blazes?" he muttered. Crksslff kept perfectly still, its beady eyes hidden in the heart of the fire. Tesmarie zipped down the moment the merchant's back was turned, her movements unnaturally quick due to her innate ability to manipulate time. In the span of a grunt and head tilt of the merchant, she had shot past his displayed jewelry, flown into his assorted collections of tools and boxes underneath, and grabbed a spool of wire. Once done, Crksslff let the fire fade down, a weird quirk of the flame the merchant shrugged off before returning to his customer.

A minute later the firekin climbed up one of the stall's side poles and joined Tesmarie atop the canvas roof.

"So that's the first thing," the faery said, still cradling the spool of wire. "What's next?" Crksslff extended an arm to start spelling out letters.

FLWRS.

Tesmarie's face lit up.

"This sounds much more to my liking! There's lots of florists in the city. What flowers do we need?"

PRPL.

A smile blossomed on the faery's face as she realized Crksslff's intentions.

"I know *just* the flowers," she said. She scooped up the tiny wick-and-wax in one arm, the spool in the other. Crksslff hopped up, and though now significantly burdened, the faery carried them overhead the market, seemingly with a destination already in mind. Sure enough, they arrived moments later on the porch of a shop located just outside the main market thoroughfare. The street was much calmer, and based on the quiet interior, the shop would soon be closed. Crksslff could not see the name of the shop, but the painted wood plaque hanging above the door showcased a faded but pretty bouquet of flowers.

"I've been here plenty," she said. "In secret, yes, but still plenty of times, and the owner is a very nice lady with a mostly nice husband. They dry and press all kinds of flowers."

The firekin pointed toward the door. The upper hinges were loose, which meant the closed door hung slightly low and left a gap the faery could easily fit through.

GETTHEM.

Yet instead of flying in with her standard unrestrained excitement, she crossed her arms and hesitated.

"I really don't want to steal them," Tesmarie said, and she frumpled her face in a way that would have worked wonders on Devin. Crksslff, however, had a true heart of coal.

NOCARE.

"Well, *I* care, and since I'm the one carrying it, what I say goes. Mostly." She looked to the florist. "You know what? I'm just going to ask."

Crksslff's eyes bulged.

UMAD?

"It'll be fine, I promise!"

Her wings buzzed, and she took flight, dashing through a crack in the door before Crksslff might write a single additional word of protest. Fearing the worst, Crksslff flattened itself so it might watch from underneath the crack. Try as it might to be hopeful, the firekin anticipated disaster at every possible moment, a feeling not shared by Tesmarie as she fearlessly flew straight up to the florist watering what few potted plants still grew with the coming winter.

"Hi there!" she said with exaggerated slowness to ensure the human could easily understand her. "Might, um, might I ask for a favor?"

The florist dropped the clay pitcher she carried. It hit the ground and cracked, yet the woman did not once look down to see the damage.

"A favor?" she asked, dumbfounded. Her entire body looked frozen in place. If Tesmarie noticed, she certainly didn't convey it.

"Yeah, a favor! It's for my friend Puffy over there." She pointed toward the door. "Right there, see, Puffy is shy, but really nice, I promise."

Reluctantly Crksslff slid entirely through the door crack. The florist's brown eyes, already bulging, suddenly threatened to leave her skull entirely. Trying not to incite any further panic, the firekin extended a long, fingerless arm from its right half, raised it upwards, and then vigorously waved as if its life depended on it.

"The fire is alive," the woman breathed. She looked between them. "The fire is nice. All right. That's fine. This is fine." She took a cautious step back. "You won't...you won't do something weird to me if I don't, right? Just what kind of favor is this?"

Tesmarie tilted her head to one side.

"We need some flower petals, that's all. What kind of favor did you *think* I'd want?"

"Well, faeries in stories tend to want firstborn...look, never mind. Flower petals, right? I can do flower petals. Just...just make sure that thing over there doesn't burn my shop down."

Crksslff's eyes narrowed as it slumped. Burn down the shop? How insulting. As if the firekin were ever not completely in control of its flame.

"Thanks so much!" Tesmarie shouted, ignoring the concern. She pointed to one of the shelves, which contained a thick leather-bound book full of pressed petals. "In there, I'll show you which ones!"

The florist seemed to calm down a bit once no longer concerned Tesmarie and Crksslff were there to destroy her belongings, enslave her children, or do whatever other silly nonsense

humans believed about the dragon-sired. After a bit of searching, Tesmarie returned triumphantly carrying four vibrant purple petals.

"I got them!" she practically squealed with excitement. "Thanks so much, miss florist lady!"

"You're welcome," the florist responded, her demeanor like a woman trapped in a dream. Still, that was better than trying to snuff out Crksslff's fire with a broom or swatting at Tesmarie like she were a bothersome fly. Supplies in Tesmarie's hands, Crksslff exited the door and hopped atop the candle wick. Tesmarie scooped them all into her arms, but carrying the flowers, wire, and wax was clearly cumbersome for her. After a mere dozen feet or so she turned about and more careened than flew to the space underneath the florist's porch. Safely hidden, Crksslff spared his slowly dwindling candle to instead hop atop a torn piece of cloth that had dropped through the wood planks.

"There's no way I can carry you *and* all this stuff," Tesmarie said, and she hoisted up the wire and flowers to showcase exactly that. "I'm gonna bring it home, then come back. Wait here!"

Crksslff did as told, happy to consume the errant scrap of cloth. Londheim was particularly chilly today, and while the firekin did not experience weather and temperature like non-elemental beings, it still felt the cold nipping away at its presence. Less than thirty seconds later Tesmarie returned, hands free and her excitement growing.

"Well that's two," she said. "What is the third?"

The firekin was most uncertain about this aspect, but it still held hope somewhere in Londheim they could manage to find it. Up and down weaved its arms.

SAND.

"Sand?" Tesmarie asked. "That's...huh. That's not going to be easy, not with how far we are from the beach. Don't lose hope, though! I bet there still might be some for sale. I think humans like to color it and stuff it in jars and necklaces." She stomped a foot. "You wait right here. I'm going to zip around the market super-fast, since this sounds like a tough one."

Crksslff disliked waiting around while someone else did the work, but it accepted that if they were to finish before everyone closed up shop, then this was the only real option. The firekin shrank itself down into a teardrop shape in protest, nonetheless, but accepted.

"All right, be back in two blinks and a clap!"

Off she went, a faint streak of black and green as her wings carried her at blistering speeds. Crksslff resumed burning atop the cast off cloth, perking up only when it heard the sound of crying. It was a small child, that much the firekin could tell, and surprisingly close. It glanced up, noted the noise coming from the window of the nearby home. Curiosity got the best of it, and so it left the porch and skirted up the other building's side, leaving a tiny ashen line along the building's corner edge that would blow away with the next gust of wind. From there, it hopped through the window to find a cramped bedroom. There was barely enough space for the bed, and certainly none for the dilapidated dresser shoved into the room's corner. A small child sat on the bed, face buried into his arms, sobbing.

Crksslff glanced about, but there seemed no one else to help. It didn't know if the child were frightened, or lost, or in pain. The firekin didn't consider itself particularly wise about humans, nor know how old this child might be. Not a baby, but still young, so very young. What Crksslff did know is that it wanted to help...even if it had no actual clue as to how. So the firekin did what it did best, and what these humans seemed to appreciate most: being a little puffy goofball.

First, to get the little boy's attention. Crksslff let out a series of crackles and pops as it hopped onto the opposite edge of the bed. It shaped itself to look as harmless as possible, just a little orb of fire with two long feet poking out the bottom. At the same time, it widened its coal-like eyes, making them as big as possible. The child looked up, and upon seeing the firekin, scooted an inch, his back pressing against the wall. The reaction hurt Crksslff deep inside, that knowledge of how the mere sight of it was cause for alarm instead of welcoming joy. There would be no fixing that, not now, so it continued on. It hopped back and forth, left foot, right foot, left foot, right foot, and waited for the child to realize the firekin meant no harm.

"He-hello?" the child asked after a moment to compose himself.

Excellent, an acknowledgment! Crksslff straightened up. This would take a bit of concentration, but it started to reshape its entire body, an elongation here, a crook there. It felt like doing an extremely difficult stretch, and it had to angle part of the second letter weirdly to keep its form together in one whole piece, but at last it blazed out that single word: HI.

The boy sniffled even as he chuckled.

"Hi," he said again.

Crksslff collapsed back into itself, then stood up, form changing again to fully mimic the legs, arms, and head of a stereotypical human. It put those hands on its hips in a manner akin to how it had seen Tesmarie do and then stood tall and proud. The boy watched, a mixture of confusion and curiosity, until Crksslff started to dance. It was a ridiculous dance, one it had watched performed by drunken men in an age long past, before the human goddesses had cast all the dragon-sired creatures into a centuries-long slumber. Up and down went the firekin's legs, non-existent knees forming just so they could bend. Its arms it held out to the side, elbows bent so the upper forearms hung downward...and then they swung back and forth in a most ridiculous manner. Bounce the legs, sway the arms like a clock's pendulum.

Crksslff danced in place, with the vigor of a drunken human, and right when the child looked ready to burst into laughter, the firekin released a steady shower of sparks from the top of its head. The display worked, the laughter began, and it was enough to warm Crksslff already burning heart.

"Puffy, I found some sand!" Tesmarie called from outside. "Uh? Puffy? Where are you?"

Crksslff glanced to the window, then back to the little boy. His eyes were still red from tears, but he was mostly calmed now, and there was a smile on his face as he sniffled and wiped at his nose.

"You need to go?" he asked.

Crksslff bobbed up and down the affirmative. It offered one last trick, another colorful shower of sparks, this time from a big clap of its hands, and then zipped back out the window. Tesmarie waited in the little alley, arms crossed and foot tapping. The blob of wax waited beside her.

"There you are," she said as Crksslff slid down the side of the home and then hopped to a perfect landing atop the wick. "Had me worried, silly goose. I already brought the sand home. So is that everything?"

Crksslff reformed its body to show the numbers one, two, and then three, followed by reshaping itself into a human hand with its thumb held upwards. Seeing this, the faery shot him a grin.

"Then home it is!"

Once back at Devin's house, and with all the essential gathered materials, the two got to work. Folding the wire into a few long lengths of it was easy enough, both for Tesmarie to perform and for Crksslff to explain in the first place. A few cuts from her moonlight blade also rendered them the proper length. The starting object was a simple one, and once Crksslff detailed what it wanted, Tesmarie quickly went to work. She cut two small bits of wire and folded them, the first into a triangle, the second into a moon.

"Like this?" she asked.

Crksslff nodded, then formed a hand to reach out. With but a touch, it melted the triangle and moon together so they would hold as a singular shape.

Next came the flowers. Tesmarie used a bit of string she stole from one of Devin's shelves to tie them so the petals would hold together. That was as far as the firekin had planned, but it seemed the faery had other ideas. She pursed her lips and tapped them with her fingertips as she thought.

"Give me a moment," she said. Once decided, she put her hands atop the purple petals and lowered her head. Her eyes closed. Words of magic slipped from her lips, quiet at first, then louder. Crksslff more sensed than saw the change coming over the petals. They shimmered with a faint pink aura that rapidly faded, then stiffened as if they were suddenly carved out of wood. When the faery withdrew her hands, the petals moved not a bit. Crksslff hopped closer and tilted its entire body to one side to showcase its confusion.

WATDO? it asked.

"I locked the petals in a form of time stasis," Tesmarie explained. "Now they'll never age, or fade, or wilt. Not a bad idea, yeah?"

Crksslff bobbed its head up and down.

USMRT.

"Us mert?" Tesmarie said. "Oh, *you smart*. Why yes, yes I am! Thank you for noticing."

The process Crksslff planned for the sand was by far and away the most difficult of the bunch, but the challenge was honestly exciting to the firekin. After a lot of prompting, Crksslff had Tesmarie lay the sand out in a V shape atop the bricks next to the fireplace. It would need the extra heat to draw into itself for what it planned. After a moment to compose itself, Crksslff settled atop the sand and flattened itself out, completely covering every little inch. Streams of flame soared into its body from the fireplace as Crksslff concentrated. It had to burn hotter, and hotter. Never before had it pushed itself to such temperatures, but if the sand were to melt, Crksslff had no choice.

Several minutes later, an exhausted Crksslff leapt off and into the fireplace to recover. It dwelt within the heart of its coals, though it still kept one beady eye watching Tesmarie's reaction. The sand had been melted and crystallized into glass, and upon seeing the final shape her entire face lit up.

"Awww," she said, and clasped her hands together. "They're beautiful, Puffy."

Compared to forming glass, the final task was a simple one. Once cooled down from the glass-making, it bounced across the floor to the front door, then sprinted up the wall to the plaque just beside it. The plain board had two thick metal hooks in the middle meant to hold Devin's sword and pistol. Crksslff did the easy part first, which involved elongating itself to a sharp point and burning four tiny holes. Then came the more laborious portion. The firekin flattened its upper half into a hand, and with one finger it began slowly burning letters into the wood. Tesmarie hovered nearby, and thankfully caught when Crksslff was about to err in spelling. Once finished, it didn't even need to explain to Tesmarie what all its plan was. The

faery saw the holes, the collection of objects, and the word Crksslff had carved, and quickly put it all together.

Ten minutes later, the entire gift was assembled. Crksslff inspected it as best it could given the height, then retreated into the fireplace. Devin and Jacaranda would be returning home soon, but the wait was interminable. The firekin paced for a bit, and then started popping coals impatiently. It so badly wanted Devin to like the gift it had made. In ages past, it had fled from civilization, both human and magical dragon-sired. It had wanted no part of their war, for seeing the death and destruction had only made it hurt in a deep way it could not understand nor convey. After the world changed, and the magical creatures awakened from their centuries-long slumber, Crksslff had been alone, lost, and confused. It'd been so very scared, too, but then it had seen a distant campfire. The hint of life, and other people, had brought it close, though truth be told the warmth and fuel had also been deeply needed given the wind and snow.

Devin had slept at that campfire. The human had seen Crksslff dance about the gathered twigs, quietly watching its celebration at awakening from the imprisoning slumber. Instead of being afraid, or angry, or scare him off, the confused and lonely human had sat up in his bedroll and smiled.

Hello there, little guy.

And when Crksslff had retreated, startled by him being awake, Devin had shown not a hint of offense.

Are you frightened? he had asked. *Please, do not fear me. There's too many frightening things in this world, and I would hate to be one of them.*

When Devin had gifted him dry kindling to burn, Crksslff could not resist the temptation, even if it were a little embarrassing the way the human had offered it like he might offer a bone to a friendly hound. Without any other friends or family, Crksslff had been given someone to watch out for, and it had protected Devin from poor, mutated creatures that wanted to cause him harm. Though the firekin had spent much of the recent weeks calmly burning away in the human's fireplace, it had enjoyed every minute of those quiet moments. This was home, and Crksslff wanted to ensure that Devin truly understood how important all this had meant to it.

The door opened, pulling the firekin from its memories. Devin and Jacaranda were back from whatever they did at night to protect the people of Londheim. Crksslff crackled and popped nervously. This was it. Would...would the humans like their gift?

"Hi-hi-hi," Tesmarie said, verbally assaulting the two the moment they stepped inside the home. "It took you soooooo long to come home!"

"Would that we could stay here all night with you instead," Devin said, and he raised an eyebrow, clearly mistrusting the faery. "Is something the matter?"

"Something is," Tesmarie exclaimed, and she clapped her hands together excitedly. "But something good, I promise. A gift! It was Puffy's idea, but I helped!"

She pointed, and both turned to see the culmination of their hard work. Crksslff hunkered lower into the fireplace, both proud of its gift yet feeling embarrassed and almost preferring to vanish while awaiting their reaction.

The plain board with two hooks beside the front door now carried new editions added by the duo. At the bottom right corner, threaded through tiny holes Crksslff had sizzled into it, hung four thin strands of wire. From the first, a tiny triangle and moon pendant, matching the one Devin always wore about his neck, that showed his devotion to his goddess. The second hook held the dried and pressed jacaranda flowers, forever locked in stasis by Tesmarie so they would not wilt or fade. A set of glass wings hung from the third wire, similar in size to Tesmarie's,

though the glass by no means could match the vibrant color of the faery's actual wings. The fourth and final bit of wire ended in a circle wrapped about the blob of wax Tesmarie had carried around Londheim during their little adventure.

The plaque originally lacked decoration, but now it bore a single word Crksslff had painstakingly burned into it like a woodcarver: FAMILY.

"You two..." Jacaranda said, and her fingers brushed the time-locked flower petals. "You two are the best."

Tesmarie twirled like a dancer, the movement carrying her up a few inches before she dropped in a flourish of her wings and dress.

"We know," she said, and laughed.

Devin turned to the fireplace. Crksslff poked its head up, and seeing the grin on Devin's face was enough to send it running. It zipped across the floor, hopped twice up the wall, and settled onto the tiny blob of wax hanging from the plaque. There it its beady eyes squinting in its best approximation of a smile as it burned infinitely pleased with itself.

"Thanks, little one," Devin said. He flicked the candle with his fingertip to set it to rocking. "Consider this the closest to a hug I can give a firekin."

Puffy remembered their very first meeting in what felt like a lifetime ago, and it recreated those same letters to send the same message.

YUWELCOMFRIEND.

"Friend?" Devin asked, and he tapped the plaque twice before settling down in his favorite chair beside the fireplace. "I think you said it best yourself, Puffy."

There atop that wax, Crksslff vibrated with emotions it couldn't quite control. Letters reformed, perhaps too fast for Devin and Jacaranda to read, but it trusted them to know the message all the same.

YUWELCOMFAMILY.