

The Star Forge

Irvak made the stars: each one bright and beautiful, each endearing or deadly.

The Star Forge was hot and sweaty, an ugly place that would make the most beautiful things. There was very little decoration on the bare metal walls, except for a few streaks of paint that were used to patch up the rust and scorch marks. No lanterns hung from the ceiling and no torches hung from the walls, but the light of the forge burned a bright blue that filled the room until it was almost unbearable to look at. Tanks of gases were strapped to the walls and Irvak approached the mighty anvil at the core of the forge.

The Maker of Stars was a giant by the standards of most visitors. His shoulders were broad and muscular, like moons held on his back. Irvak's big, bushy beard was dark as the void, flecked with star dust and revealing only a tiny gap for the giant's mouth when he did partake in the rare drink of water or the rarer meal. His beard blended into the thick hair of his head, going down passed his shoulders and tied back with a strip of leather. His chest was only covered by a heavy apron, ringing with the clatter of tools as he stalked around his workshop, heavy boot steps setting the tempo for his work. Irvak's hands lifted a pile of stardust to the anvil and Irvak got to work.

The hot gases would burn the hands of any but the Star Crafter. Eons of working with the material had made his hands thick as leather and calloused beyond the point of pain. The gases mixed and Irvak twisted the layers of dust in until the mass of star matter met the right balance of brilliance and heat. Then, he took a hammer and tongs off his belt and beat the star into shape.

The steady beat of the hammer against star matter was all that Irvak would listen to. He rarely had the time for conversation and no real taste for music. The pitch and sound of each impact would have sounded the same to anyone but Irvak, the sharp sounds as telling about the shape of the star as Irvak's own eyes as he crafted the brilliant, bright sphere. The footsteps entering his workshop didn't escape his notice, even if the stranger was polite enough to wait before speaking.

Irvak finished shaping the star, smoothing out the edges with increasingly finer tools until the sphere of bright light was a perfect orb of swirling, boiling gas. It was a fine piece of work with the gasses all moving delicately. Satisfied, Irvak took the star in his bare fingers and put it into the box where he kept his finest stars. When he had enough, he'd make a constellation out of them. For now, it would wait and smolder with the others. Now it was time to turn his attention to the stranger.

"What brings you here?" Irvak asked, slipping his small forging tools into the pocket on his apron. His voice thundered in the Star Forge, reverberating off the ancient metal walls and shaking the bolts holding the entire thing together. "What brings you to the Star Forger's workshop?"

"I've come for a star, sir." The stranger whispered.

The boy--or perhaps a man? Irvak could never tell when all humans were so small compared to him--was thinner than the handle of Irvak's hammer. His head was completely hairless and smooth with a pair of dark eyes that filled most of his face.

"My name is Syra," the newcomer continued. "On my world, our sun is dying."

"A new sun?" Irvak rumbled, running his hand over his massive beard. "No easy feat. However, for the right price, I could craft one. Did you want a certain color or—?"

"Forgive me, Star Forger, but our sun isn't dead yet. I was hoping you could help me save it."

"Save it?" Irvak said. "Why would I do such a thing like that? A sun on its last legs is unlikely to last more than a few thousand years, even under the best circumstances. Why would I waste my time and resources on saving a dying star? I'll make you a new sun, a thousand times brighter and more splendid than your current one. It will be less a million years before losing any of its luster."

"We could not afford a star so brilliant as that," Syra said. "But, if it's possible, we would like to save our star. Even if it only lasts another thousand years, we would be able to afford it easier than a new star."

"It always comes down to price, doesn't it?" Irvak said. "Very well. I shall craft this new star at half my normal rate."

"You are most generous, Star Forger," Syra bowed his head. "But are you sure we can't just...fix our current star?"

"Fine!" Irvak growled. This boy had the gall to interrupt his work and now he wouldn't stop being stubborn. "What do you ask of me?"

"I need a simple star," Syra said. "Nothing special. We'd be happy to use one of your cast-offs if you have no use for them."

Irvak did have a few broken stars: too much pressure or not enough gas, things that he couldn't quite unravel or break apart. Like the burns on the back of his hands, those stars were crude reminders of his pathway from apprentice to master.

"Do you hope to refine one well enough into a working sun?" Irvak shook his head. "No, you'd risk the sun going supernova and then collapsing in. If the gravity of a star is off by even the slightest bit, it'll cascade into a black hole."

"Then we'll at least try before resigning to our fate."

Syra's calmness struck Irvak like a slap to the face. He'd met humans before, but few with the grace that this young man possessed. It was a simple statement of fact, not a veiled plea for help or the whisper of hope. Syra knew that Irvak's failed stars weren't his best chance at jump-starting their sun. It was their only chance.

"I see," Irvak said, rubbing his chin. Without another word, he walked over to the metal box of cast-offs. Too small, too big, too much nitrogen, not enough dust...none of the stars met his approval, even if the point was to sacrifice it for a larger star's survival. Irvak picked through the box full of stars, the spheres clicking and clattering together as he considered them.

"No," Irvak muttered to himself. "No...not that one...damn it all! None of these will work..."

"Are you sure?"

"Nothing here will save your sun," Irvak said. "They're imperfect and even the slightest discrepancy in temperature or weight could destroy the sun faster."

"It was worth trying," Syra sighed. "I thank you for your time, Star Crafter. There's still time enough that--"

"Wait," Irvak said. If there was nothing imperfect for the job at hand, perhaps the perfect thing was closer.

Irvak approached the box he kept close to the forge. They were his exceptional stars, beads of light that would be strung into constellations or used for navigation. Irvak hadn't made them for customers, but they were always meant for those he thought were worthy enough. Perhaps Syra was.

"It won't prevent the inevitable," Irvak cautioned as he put the star into a box before handing it to Syra. "The sun will have to be replaced soon, but this could buy you a few thousand years."

"That would be enough time for us to get a new sun," Syra said, accepting the box. He put a smaller box in Irvak's hands. Irvak opened the box and looked inside: precious stones and jewels filling it up to the brim. It wasn't enough, not nearly enough, but Irvak knew the reward was letting Syra and his people survive."

"Thank you, Star Crafter."

"Of course," Irvak bowed his head. "I hope it works."

"If not, we tried," Syra said. "Thank you."

Syra left as quietly as he had arrived. The Star Forge was quiet again, save for the crackling of the burning forge over his shoulder. Irvak wiped his hands on his apron, walked back to the anvil, and picked up another handful of stardust. He'd have a sun ready next time.