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Genie Duty

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GENIE DUTY

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Savannah Franklin

May 2024

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GENIE DUTY

English

Missouri State University, May 2024

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

“The Magic in My Writing” follows the writing, inspiration, and brainstorming for an excerpt of the novel *Genie Duty*. *Genie Duty* follows the protagonist, who is later renamed Jane, with her newfound genie companion, Gene. She is put on trial after using her final wish to wish for more genies, against the rules. Her sentence to serve as a genie “temporarily.” Together they strive to fight their genie punishment and get to the root of the origins of genie-kind. Scholarly influences of the work include Lubomír Doležel, Franz Kafka, John Gardner and Wolf Schmid, who describe the unique first-person narration choices, define the links between the human and genie worlds, and support a retelling of the genie mythos by concept of modern myth. Mythological words are split by different entities. The transfer of humans and genies to each world is unbalanced. The literary inspirations from Toni Morrison and Sapphire shape this first-person novel: *A Mercy*, by Morrison, with its multiple narrators, and *Push*, by Sapphire, with its stream-of-consciousness writing style. The strife of geniehood and its status as a punishment is crafted to parallel the treatment of Black people from the sixteenth century to present day and their struggles caused by slavery, the school-to-prison pipeline, over policing, and the fight for civil rights.

KEYWORDS: magical realism, genie duty, genie, trial, enslavement, prison system

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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I dedicate this thesis to Kayla Buecker. Thank you for always believing in magic with me,
my fellow Disney princess.

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THE MAGIC IN MY WRITING

Prior to considering myself a genre writer, I unconsciously wrote what I liked to read the most. Series such as *Harry Potter*, *The Spiderwick Chronicles*, *The Magic Treehouse*, *Bone*, and others had different levels of fantasy that intrigued my imagination over horror, survival, or high school life stories. A common denominator was a protagonist who discovered a rare secret about themselves and began the role of being the chosen one to save a magical realm.

As a Black woman, I did not see much representation for individuals who looked like me compared to present day's representation. I had to relate to characters based on qualities I had, wanted, or based on how much I liked a character. Historical fiction and literature including Black characters only showed harsh or skewed version of reality for Black people such as *Song of the South* (1946) or *Birth of a Nation* (1915) versus more relaxing and mundane genres like slice of life, romance, or non-stereotypical stories. I would take this into account for my own creative writing and inspirations.

During my English career, I slowly gathered storylines for future projects. "Part-Time Wizard," a story about a wizard losing his powers, came to be after I saw a username of a social media site. "Untitled Heart" follows a boy whose robot has the capability for emotions while being hunted by non-emotional AI robots. "Soulcean" ponders over the existence of underwater ghosts inspired by the loss of life at sea, such as in the Middle Passage/Trans-Atlantic Slave trade or the *RMS Titanic*, and by the concept of mermaids.

Media exploring concepts of wishes, such as "Wishbones" from *The Grim Adventures of Billy and Mandy*, "The Magic Tree of Nowhere" from *Courage the Cowardly Dog*, and Prismo the wish master from *Adventure Time*, brought wish-granting magic to the forefront of my mind. *Genie Duty* was born from seeing *Aladdin* (1992) after Robin Williams passed away and from

reading a *Cyanide and Happiness* comic where the “master” wishes for more genies instead of more wishes. I had never conceptualized that loophole before, as not being able to wish for more wishes was always the hard rule. *Genie Duty* is a play on the phrase “jury duty.” These ideas combined into the plotline of our nameless female protagonist being put on trial for wishing for more genies. Her punishment is to serve as a genie herself, in a lamp granting wishes for others.

When taking ENG 786: Form and Theory of Prose, I was further introduced to scholarship about the writing process and elevated research about fictional works. Rather than just explaining what occurs in my writing while critically viewing my own work and reading Milan Kundera, John Gardner, Lubomir Doležel, and others, I became a better researcher who is better able to understand the ways my writing could be interpreted. These scholar’s concepts explain genre deeply, bringing method to my madness.

In my studies and through putting a scholarly eye on my own writing process, I came to understand my typical choices while I write. *Genie Duty*’s major components include multiple first-person narrators and magical realism, and provides a displacement for the myth of genies. I personally have a lot of internal dialogue; thus, most of my characters reflect that in first-person modes. Wolf Schmid, in *Narratology*, includes a chart that outlines written and unwritten information to producers and receivers of the novel. Schmid’s chart frames the consumers and creators of the written work in terms of what is written versus what is perceived.

Genie Duty mirrors the historic oppression of Black people in the United States, from imprisonment in a confined space (slave ship/lamp) to obeying a master without choice (Europeans/Jim, overlord of genie kind, and humans) and living by a different set of rules than other classes of people (second-class citizenship and imprisonment/ becoming a genie as punishment). Jim, the main antagonist of *Genie Duty*, is allegory to God and jinn as well as white

supremacy's effects on world. Beyond this comedy of a girl who must serve as a genie for an undisclosed number of masters for wishing for more wishes, this is a displacement for genies to give answers for their origins and creation. A displacement, defined per the words of Lubomir Doležel, "constructs an essentially different version of the protoworld, redesigning its structure and reinventing its story. These most radical postmodernist rewrites create polemical antiworlds, which undermine or negate the legitimacy of the canonical protoworld" (Doležel 207).

The weight of the history of Black Americans, the African diaspora, slavery, Jim Crow, and Civil Rights is not lost on me. While writing this novel, it occurred to me as I developed my antagonist Jim and the roles of genies instead a singular magical backfiring occurring between a girl and one genie, that the conflict, punishments, or obstacles could resemble historical treatment of Black people. I do not write this thesis to minimize or rid from the seriousness of the atrocious reality of Black people faced in the past or present time.

Two Is Better Than One: Narration

My primary choice of narration in my writing is first person. Jane and Gene are the main protagonists experiencing the world around them. They are not to be read as unreliable narrators. However, the psychic distance, how close or far away the character is from the narration, is meant to be shown as up close and personal, in their heads. The dialogue between them, combined with their internal thoughts/narration, is the main source of information, and through their focalization, the reader comes to understand the fictional worlds (Earth and the Genie domain) around them. This novel begins partially as a “bathtub story,” a story of stagnation taking place in one location or the character’s mind, as the genies are trapped within their lamps until it is time to serve a master again.

Figure 1 from *Narratology: An Introduction* (Schmid 65) depicts a diagram of communication levels, devised by Lubomir Dolezel in his book *Heterocosmica*. It demonstrates how individuals (readers) are *receiving* information and in which other individuals (author and narrator[s]) are *giving* information. I am the concrete author. As the concrete author, I am constantly concerned about the literary work, the concrete reader, the characters, the represented world, and the quoted world. While writing, I focused on the overall narrative question of what it means to have a mortal serving genie punishment. While I added in plot points and structures, I found my work moved further from the initial inspiration and undecided ending, and the tone became less comedic, darker. My quoted world had fewer details than desired. My characters were narrating and communicating, but the represented world wasn’t fleshed out. After edits and rereads, my characters still processed heavily with their minds but spoke more to what they could see.

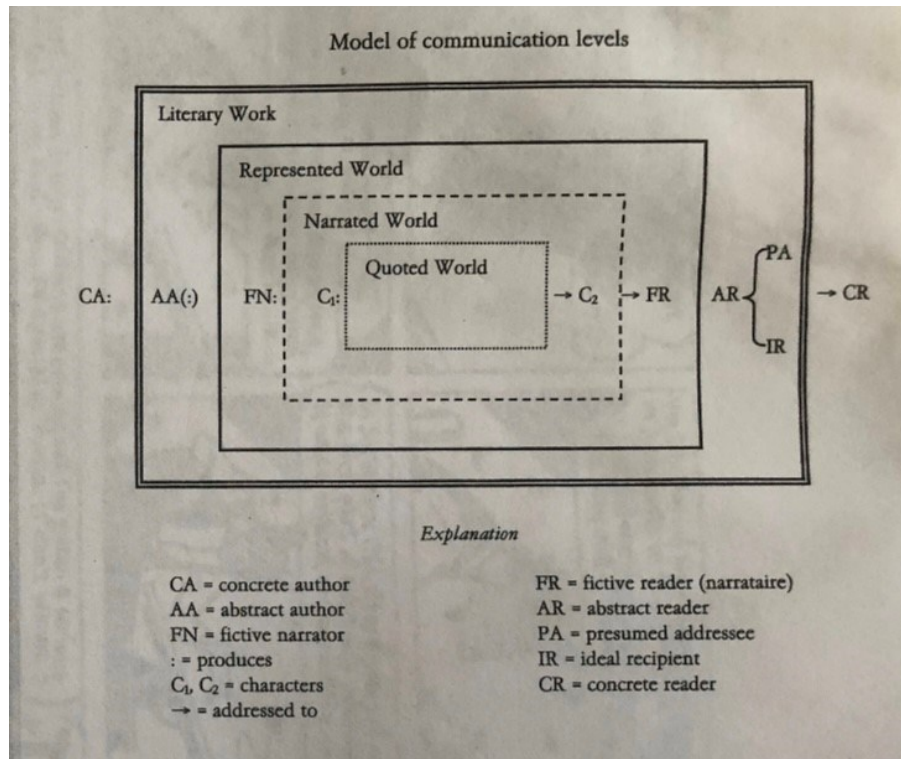


Fig. 1. Communication levels in fiction from *Heterocosmica* by Lubomir Dolezel, printed in *Narratology: An Introduction*. Berlin, New York City: De Gruyeter, 2010.

Gene and Jane are the fictional narrators. Their perspectives switch within the novel. Currently, the novel does not have flashbacks. The events happen in real time as followable by the concrete reader. I worry as the concrete author about giving up too much information and thus eliminating the opportunity for the concrete reader to debate or question; for information that will be eventually revealed, foreshadowing alone should suffice. If the information is not explicitly stated, I would like it to be up to speculation or possibly left for future installments. The past will not be shared with the reader until Jane regains her memories and/or Gene opens up about his own human life.

The minds of Gene and Jane are on the same wavelength with their banter and love of food. Jane meets her partner in crime when it comes to enjoying three-course meals or simple plates. Gene expands her palate include to international cuisine while he expands his mind watching food channels on television. They cope during their joint punishment by trying their

dream foods and comfort meals. Thanksgiving dinner with every side dish and heavy carb breakfasts fill them up from her magic lunchbox when silence is all they can produce. Jane grapples with the uncertainty of losing her life force by using her powers. She becomes mute, and Gene picks up the narration by detailing his eating coping mechanism. The longer the silence, the more anxious he becomes with her control of the food supply.

Writing more than one chapter or a twelve-page short story challenged me to be more forthcoming with information as word- or page-count limitations eliminate the option of lingering too long in a scene or expanding the world too much for a stand-alone piece. While it is easier to showcase multiple perspectives in visual media, in novels it can be more difficult if the main character is the narrator as opposed to having an extradiegetic narration. The novels I have enjoyed the most had a first-person narrator or multiple character perspectives, excluding concepts such as possession or dreams in other characters' points of view.

A Mercy by Toni Morrison, *Shiver* by Maggie Stiefvater, and *Push* by Sapphire are all books written in the first person. These novels are inspirations to me concerning how I want to write my foreseeable projects. In *A Mercy*, all of the characters get their own section to further the story. The biggest difference is they aren't labeled when it changes to the next person. Set at the end of the seventeenth century in the American colonies, the mixed group of different races navigate their lives after the white master passes away. I admire Toni Morrison's stylistic choice because each individual's story is told. *A Mercy* depicts the new effects of colonialism and those affected by it during the beginning of the nation and was a compelling read:

Their drift away from others produced a selfish privacy and they had lost the refuge and the consolation of a clan. Baptists, Presbyterians, tribe, army, family, some encircling outside thing was needed. Pride, she thought. Pride alone made them think that they needed only

themselves, could shape life that way, like Adam and Eve, like gods from nowhere beholden to nothing except their own creations. She should have warned them, but her devotion cautioned against impertinence. As long as Sir was alive it was easy to veil the truth: that they were not a family—not even a like-minded group. They were orphans, each and all. (Morrison 37) Lina, an enslaved indigenous woman, has an interesting perspective on the people of Vaark farm. From this passage she ponders the European religion and the population on the farm. Within the novel, she suffered between maintaining previous culture and assimilating to a new colonial set of expectations on top of the consequences of her trauma relating to being sold and juggled around by white Christians.

In *Push*, more famously known as *Precious* from its 2009 film version, the main character, Claireece “Precious” Jones, tells her tragic story of being abused by both of her parents. The book is written in a stream-of-consciousness narrative with Precious’s vulnerable side exposed. From the start she is about to be a mother for the second time and not at the grade she wants to be in for her age. Her journey to stability creates improvement both in her home life and her intelligence. She writes like she talks, in an eye dialect with poor grammar and spelling. As she states in the beginning of the novel, “I was let back when I was twelve because I had a baby for my fahver. That was in 1983. I was out of school for a year. This gonna be my second baby. My daughter got Down Sinder” (Sapphire 1).

Over time she becomes more active in school with poetry, and that fact is reflected in her more standardized speech and her use of punctuation: “I’m twenty-four years old it’s been eight years since I ‘left’ (I put it in like that cause you know how I left) my mother’s house” (Sapphire 169). My favorite aspect of this novel is the palpable change in the narrator/protagonist. The reader is reading Precious’ diary or sitting with her in her thoughts. By using artistic mediums,

she can be more forthcoming with telling her own story. While Precious' fate is unknown, the glimpse into her life is impactful.

Shiver's narrative choice is the one I closely emulate in *Genie Duty*. The main two protagonists, Grace and Sam, switch chapters to emphasize the conflict of their secret transformations, the wolves, and when or if they can change back and forth. During childhood Grace is attacked by wolves yet it is unknown how Sam became a "werewolf." Grace is temporarily not affected by being bitten, while Sam shifts depending on the temperature. After reuniting, their love story is placed on the back burner as they try to keep the other werewolves in their human forms and safe from the concerned mayor and his unlawful efforts towards wildlife outside of town. Jane and Gene, like Grace and Sam, become affected by the same curse. Each pair works towards protecting the other or helping to find a solution to their predicament.

The Isolated lamp, or temporary home of Jane and Gene, is to be an allegory for the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade and the uncharted territory of being sent away from home to perform for and suffer unspeakable treatment from an unknown master. Geniehood and its living conditions mirror conditions of slavery and the prison system—notably solitary confinement. Each group experienced miserable living conditions including bondage, cramped living arrangements, and being owned by other humans (Boston). This portion of the novel forces me to write Jane and Gene digesting their situation, assessing what they have at their disposal, and questioning the worlds around them.

Genies and Magical Realism

Genie Duty is a displacement of proto texts of Aladdin, but not the movie *Aladdin* (1992). The inspirations for this novel are both from stories of Aladdin and a *Cyanide and Happiness* comic in which a person successfully wishes for more genies, much to the chagrin of the original genie (Denbleyker). The original story, “Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp,” was not a part of the original text of *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights*. The film and story share major plot points, but the film omits several characters, including a second and weaker jinn. Jafar becoming a genie fuses the omitted roles of the lesser genie and the sorcerer’s brother. Genie from Aladdin has been stuck in his lamp for over 10,000 years, yet Agrabah’s technology, location, and culture do not seem to be futuristic to him.

The world of *Genie Duty* is set in twenty-first century Earth. It has not been decided if this story is to take place before or after *Aladdin*’s (1992) time period, as it is debated by fans if the film is set before or after present day. The unnamed world where genies reside appears in the thesis. Gene mentions it briefly on different occasions. He comments on how rarely trials are held, especially for humans. Genies’ leisure time is for watching trials and listening to the gossip surrounding the trials, as well as going to the food court in between serving masters. A genie’s lamp is a conduit to the human world while the genie realm bears resemblance to the human world with its culture and appearance. More than two genies are confirmed and will be further expanded on. Thus far identifiable genies who have appeared are Jim, who is the boss, Gene, and Jane. The trial happens within the genies’ domain and is witnessed by the genie population.

While being a genie does not have many perks, and genies mainly strive to avoid punishment, genies have access to a community outside of their lamps. Each genie name includes or sounds similar to the word “genie” or starts with G or J. Trials are rare and a form of

entertainment. Trials are usually viewed by a special few who gain the privilege of bragging to the others about what transpired. While genies socialize at the food court, trials are the highest topic of conversation outside of catching up with old friends. New genies arriving are almost more frequent than trials which are not often either.

The beginning of the novel follows Jane's transformation into a genie, with her punishment being the focal point as opposed to the experience of a poor boy who makes a selfless choice and arrives at a happy ending. *Aladdin* (1992) concludes with Genie becoming friends with Aladdin, who frees him. Genie is enslaved to his job and whomever his master is at the time. Gene and Jane's predicament nearly reverses *Aladdin's* plotline. As their friendship builds, the duo exacerbates their fate, and both continue on as enslaved genies when Jane uses her last wish to wish for more genies. The real-world tie-in for their punishment is an allegory to the prison system and unjust and lengthy sentences that Black, indigenous, and other people of color receive compared to their white American counterparts. Jim puts on a sham trial and sentences the pair to an undisclosed number of clients to serve in order to obtain freedom. Once the punishment is served, release is promised. However long or what is deemed the correct time to serve a sentence, that goalpost continues to be moved.

The Grim Adventures of Billy and Mandy, written by Maxwell Atoms, serves as a source of inspiration for *Genie Duty's* magical realism. The Grim Reaper is the key to Billy and Mandy having access to magic and other worldly beings through their shared ownership of him. During their initial meeting in "Meet the Reaper," in order to save their pet hamster, they accept Grim's challenge to a limbo contest. Grim cheats first, which then entices Mandy to change the terms of the bet: Grim becomes their BFF and they keep the hamster's soul. They cheat back and win

both of their “pets” (“Meet”). In the series, they have control, to a degree, over both Grim and his powers.

Gene is Jane’s access to the mythological realm, and magical wishes are contingent on his presence. Jane eventually receives powers nearly identical to Gene’s with limitations imposed by Jim. While *Aladdin* (1992) does not give much lore about genies, *Genie Duty* is an attempt to step away from the roots of being God’s subjects and having genies set up their own hierarchy. Jim is at the top of the genie pyramid.

Gene serves as Jane’s magical familiar during her sentence as a genie. While he is sentenced, too, his punishment includes teaching her how to be a genie and how to successfully serve masters. Unlike Billy and Mandy, Jane fails to get what she wants by breaking the rules. For Jane, using her magic comes at the cost of her longevity. Gene’s powers are limited, so he doesn’t do all the work for her. He can’t be her lackey, but his personality allows him to be the comic relief as they help each other to process their feelings about the situation.

Jane, the human protagonist’s “genie name,” is the only name written for her at this time. It is done purposefully to show the severity of the situation. She is given a new name, a new home (cell), fewer memories of her previous life, and limits on her powers. Just as the enslaved Africans who were brought over to the colonies and stripped of their culture, Jane retains her abilities from her wishes, as well as Gene and her spirit, to endure and eventually escape her enslavement.

The enforcement of their punishment mirrors the systemic oppression and punishments of Black people in America in that the upholding of white supremacy is not tangible. Genies and Black people have free will and have physical control of themselves and thoughts. The invisible enforcement of said punishment, however, limits what they can do, where they can go, and the

severity of their sentences. The law details the crime and a decided punishment. Attitude and opportunity when accused and after serving is upheld by culture and discriminatory preconceived notions of the punished. A jail cell is like a genie lamp, as the enforcer releases the captive to perform exploitative unpaid labor. Each group is subservient to its clientele. Genies are subservient to their masters. Prior to the Civil Rights movement, Black people were in forced into unpaid labor or underpaid service roles on behalf of white people. A genie's occupation does not have a clear end date, or perhaps they were born into their role. White flight, the war on drugs, segregation, and more kept Black people in undesirable living spaces without the opportunity to obtain the resources needed for a higher quality of life. Jim Crow and segregation kept Black people living at a standard beneath white people, with fewer opportunities and fewer people doing as well as or better than their white counterparts.

Currently, the goal of my writing is to write more Black female characters and magic. The type of fiction I want to write uses magic, mythological creatures, high-stake mystical items, or lower fantasy on Earth. *Part-Time Wizard*, another short story and eventually novel of mine, follows the elder protagonist experiencing a magical disease comparable to Alzheimer/Dementia effects as he loses his magical strength not memory over time. He goes on the run with the help of his prodigy, with the suspicion his scholarly opponent brought this upon him. This is meant to challenge the idea of magical strength over time, compared to all-powerful wizards being ancient yet powerful. What is the reality of aging for magic casters? What is the most important, the magic instrument or the person? And what is the source of magic: soul, life force/youth, or family lineage?

Modern Myth: Earth & Itty-Bitty Living Realm (Space)

Genie Duty has two worlds: The Genie Realm and Earth. A genie's lamp functions as a portal between both worlds. Currently, Jim is in control of the portals to either dimension. In figure 2, the illustrations of Kafka's worlds (Doležel 1986) dictate the relationships in which the natural, supernatural, visible, and invisible entities interact with each other. *Genie Duty*'s story best reflects the northmost oval W(E) Mythological World of figure 2. Each world is accessible to the other, but Earth does not have the means or knowledge to get to the other side. The northern hemisphere is the natural world (Earth). The southern hemisphere is the supernatural (Genie realm). The using of modern myth conceptualizes the unheard-of realm of genies.

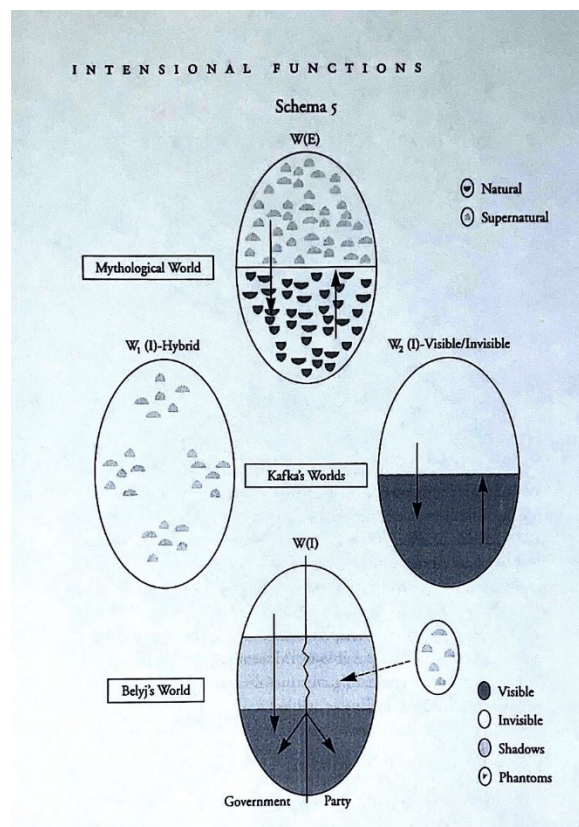


Fig. 2. Kafka's worlds from *Heterocosmica* by Lubomir Doležel, printed in *Narratology: An Introduction*. Berlin, New York City: De Gruyeter, 2010.

Genies pass through and return to their own realm in search of a master to serve. Humans moving between the realms was unheard of by majority of either world's populations. But rumors surround a human or two being put on trial in the genies' world. Jane is the most recent human to be put on trial. Jane is a human who became a genie as punishment, possibly the only one changed into a genie for the short term. Yet does her punishment fit her crime? She wishes for a loophole that is not under any of the listed rules, including the rule about "more wishes." In the American justice system, loopholes are argued in court. Depending on the judge and jury, the defendant can suffer punishment or be acquitted. If there is a lack of evidence or law to prove a crime, the defendant is let go, but the company, entity, or state/federal government makes a rule/law to not allow repeats of using the loophole. This is common when larger corporations get sued by a regular person who was wrongfully hurt or killed and then add a disclaimer after the fact, i.e., Panera with its charged lemonades or McDonald's hot coffee.

Genies, as mythical creatures, exist with limitations on their powers and their backfiring effects. There is no consensus on genie lore in mainstream Western media. Genies' clothing and lamps typically retain their Middle Eastern cultural form and influence. Genies exist to serve their masters and the plot of a story. They are few singular beings who seemingly do not reproduce. The questions beg to be asked: Where do they come from, and what provides their small population? Jane's escapade is shaping the questions about genie mythology or if, namely, genies have a past humanity. I plan to expand this idea based on Western interpretations and not the Islamic concept, in which jinn fall under God's domain, similar to angels or their fallen counterparts, demons. Jinn still fall under God's will, despite not protecting humanity as angels do. Genies are created, not born. In my novel, the rumors about two humans tried in genie court are true, but used as a front. The Genie world stopped trying humans but did not stop punishing

them. Genies are punished former humans. The eerie similarity is that geniedom is a form of cruel, unusual, and long punishment, comparable, in these fictional worlds, to slavery, sharecropping, inconsistent long prison sentences of Black people compared to white people, and the treatment of incarcerated people in America.

Based on the few comments from Gene, the genie realm has human elements, including the food court, trials, and other items brought back that they were first exposed to while “working” in the human world or so they are led to think. This almost brings a sense of familiarity to its inhabitants. Humans are a common topic of conversation among genies. Whenever Jim isn’t affecting his ability to speak, Gene alludes to his servitude having an end date and not being born a genie. Humans enter the genie realm just as genies move to Earth if the portals are open. In essence, the genie population, while small, is recouped by using humans.

On Jane’s Earth, humans have many fairy tales and myths that include genies. As if it is the duty of genies to grant wishes, they grant them, but with exceptions. The image of genies has been curated to include the truth of wishes backfiring but not the true nature of genies. Are genies truly *evil*? They are not trickster gods, but they are forced to produce unfavorable results unless the wisher is calculated and specific. Gene is down to earth, easy to talk to, and has a jovial attitude. When Jane treats him with respect, he gives advice to her about wishing.

The east oval (W_1) of visible and invisible worlds of Kafka applies to humans and genies with their differences of power. Humans become aware of genies only if they happen to come across one. Genies in *Genie Duty* have consistent access to humans. While genies may or may not receive joy in not giving humans what they want, they come away from the experience unscathed. Genies have strong magic that can conjure anything outside of the rules and alter memory. The humans are powerless against the genies. That power keeps the humans ignorant so

that the secret is not revealed, and this keeps them from being hunted by the larger human population who may want to exploit them for their wish-granting power. The all-consuming aspect of white supremacy applies to the characters of *Genie Duty* as well, as equality for women, BIPOC, and lower classes is perceived as ruining privileges and status of white people, men, and the wealthy. Equality for all would eliminate the haves and the have nots. Capitalism kills and punishes countless people while the wealthy at the top benefit from their exploitation and labor.

Humans have only one piece of the puzzle of knowledge, while genies know all about humans. Jim keeps the rules like this so that genies can fulfill their duties with humankind but can also avoid retaliation. It is an unbalanced power transfer. Humans may or may not be satisfied with their wishes. Genies satisfy their client quota. Jim, at the top, remains in control and matches genies to clients. Jim has all of the power able to conjure magic and his desires. Genies only have access to strong magic for servitude. Humans can have their desires fulfilled if they come across a genie. The bottom corners of this triangle feed power directly to the top.

The unknown source of “great cosmic power” is hypothesized by Jane. Humanity, or life force as a magic power source, could be the reason Jane is still human when her punishment starts. She only just has access to her powers when serving clients while Gene has minimal use of his powers to clean and help Jane in “training.” Two clients noticeably take a toll on her body, with her sleeping for over fifteen hours or her gold bracelets getting so hot that they burn her skin. Her concerns are valid as Gene tries to talk her down. The transformation process in becoming a genie is painful. Gene doesn’t remember it, while Jane doesn’t know her potential fate.

As the novel is still in progress, the depth of the genie realm and the realities Jim controls will be determined. Will he be a closer counterpart to Lucifer than God? What does his leadership mean in the grand scheme of things? The religious aspect I have attempted to remove but not completely erase due to the roots of the mythos being connected to it. Jim's powers are much grander than Gene's or Jane's when he uses them against other genies. His presence and influence are greater than the genies' justice system. Acting as a puppet master to his realm, Jim's influence mirrors how all systems and government uphold white supremacist attitudes and values, particularly fear of open conflict and belief in one right way.

While the fate of the novel could bloom into an origin story or eventual series, the tale of Jane and Gene is merely at the beginning of its journey. Using inspiration from critical writers like Doležel and Schmid and fiction writers like Morrison, I've decided my niche in storytelling and fiction: fantasy and sci-fi. The influence in my work and its plot points is driven to add to Black representation and preserve Black history in literature with my experiences as a Black American and collected knowledge of the collective experiences of the Diaspora. The struggles of Black people of the diaspora and genie kind is not a 1:1 ratio, but I want to do my best with this displacement of *Aladdin* and genie lore to shed light on that dark point in history. Rationalizing the contexts of the roles of God and jinn within the characters of the genies and Jim, the all-powerful leader, has been difficult and currently unresolved.

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GENIE DUTY

Chapter 1

“Excuse me, miss. Can I help you look for something?” asks the owner of the vast flea market.

“Can you show me where any unique lamps are? I need one that’s small enough for a nightstand,” I reply.

“Bedroom lamps, you desire? Right this way—follow me. I’ll show you the three tables that have the size of lamp you need. I know everyone and what they are selling because I pride myself in gathering the most unusual, beautiful, and useful antiques from just about anywhere they can be found!” he rambles as he sidesteps to get through the crowds of people and sets of tables. “My name is Oliver, by the way.”

Sheesh, he talks a lot. His passion is admirable, but why is he such a chatterbox? Show me where they are and tell me where to pay so I can go on with my life. *I just want a cool lamp so I can see while at my desk and bed*, I think to myself. The variety of sweet older ladies, couples, collectors, and vendors fill me with joy while creating a mild inconvenience.

The spaces between the rows are two people wide. No one wants to move. No one wants to lose their spot in line. The way the ladies are bartering, I need to stop and take notes. I feel like I will knock over the tables or its doodads while I follow Oliver. Women are ogling the jewelry stands. Two have magnifying glasses to check the authenticity imprints of the silver and gold. The dishes range from 1970s-looking bowls and coffee cups to colored crystal and goblets. I don’t want to ask Oliver about cast iron because I would whack him with the pan as soon as I got it in my clutches. I nearly fall after tripping into other old stuff when suddenly many lamps come into view.

“Welcome to the ‘Let There Be Light’ portion of the market. My lamp vendors are Tio, Ray, and Jim.” He leads me in front of three men, each with twenty-five lamps in front of him. “I’ll be in front where the registers are. I hope you find what you’re looking for. OK, gentlemen, you have a customer!”

Tio is fat, his dark skin covered with sweat, but he is smiling, nonetheless. Ray looks sleepy, as if he may fall backward in his seat at any moment. Jim, however, just stares in my eyes like he’s reading my history.

I am not about to lose a staring contest, but I really need to find a lamp. I step up to Tio to view his lamps.

“*Buenas tardes*. How may I help you? These are my lamps, which I have acquired over quite some time but need to get rid of,” says Tio, wiping sweat from his brow.

It looks like he needs to get rid of most of them in a dumpster. In terms of antiques, some of these look like they came from a 1980s storage closet. Two look OK, but I want something that I couldn’t find at a regular store. I want a piece to fit my challenging aesthetic.

“Thanks, but no thanks. I’m looking for a lamp that doesn’t necessarily look like a lamp but isn’t plain looking. If that makes sense,” I say, attempting to be gentle. Looking disappointed, Tio replies by sweating in silence.

Ray sways and then looks up at me. “Maybe one of my lamps would suffice?”

In front of him on his table are lamps ranging from ones with clicking buttons to ones with a dangling chain switch. These are kind of cute. If Jim’s are lame, I’ll buy two of Ray’s—one for my room and the other for the living room.

“Wow, Ray! These look adorable; I’ll give Jim’s a quick look-see and get back to you for pricing!” I squeal.

“Take your time, sweetheart,” whispers Ray as he closes his eyes and leans back.

Jim, who has never taken his eyes off me, finally speaks. “I know what you seek, and you will find it here.”

On his table are the most diverse lamps: those you actually have to light and possibly add oil to, lamps with objects inside their bases for design purposes. The gold from a lamp on the left sparkles in my eyes. Inside is also a smaller oil lamp. It is simply magnificent.

“I told you I have what you want.”

I look up from the precious lamp after being mesmerized to smirk at him. “But are you going to give me a good price for it since you know how badly I want it?”

“Since it seemed that you liked two of Ray’s, I’ll have you pay about what they were worth together for a price of \$99. No more, no less.”

He’s observant. But he never did take his eyes away from me. I’ll probably never find this lamp again. I’ll get it and one of Ray’s since I figured I’d be spending more money today than what he is asking for that lamp.

“That seems like a steal. I’ll take it, so thanks,” I say, and he smiles at me.

“All that glitters isn’t gold,” he says, sneering.

“I figured as much, since it’s only \$99.”

“Well, if you know what I mean, it’s fine. Thank you for your purchase.” He writes out his pricing and signature for me to take to the front register. “Don’t forget to wake up poor Ray now.”

“Oh. Right.” I remember. Glancing over at Ray, I see he is sound asleep.

“You know what. I’ll just sign for him,” says Jim, laughing and grabbing another receipt. “I’ll give you this 1930s lamp of his for \$40. No one has been coming for lamps, so he’ll be happy anyone bought one.”

“Wow, that’s nice of you. Now let me juggle these up there to Oliver.”

He stops me as I grip the second lamp and turn to leave. “Better let me help you. You don’t want to leave with less money and lampless.”

As we approach Oliver, he is checking out an older woman who has handfuls of records. “Are you sure you don’t want a newer record player to play those on?” he says, laughing.

“A quarter on the needle hasn’t failed me yet!” she says, giggling and leaving with her bounty.

“Did you find everything all right? I see you have two lovely lamps.” Oliver smiles at me.

“Actually, yes, I did,” I reply, waiting for Jim to hand over the receipts and lamps.

“I see you have a lamp within a lamp, a lamp-ception piece and an antique. Nice choices. Total will be \$139.”

I pay for my lamps and gleefully run to pull the car around to have them placed in the back. Oliver rambles on and on about his joy that I found something and to come again soon. Jim stands in the background and stares silently. I break my glance when Oliver gets my attention.

“Did you hear me about the return policy?”

“I figured there wasn’t one, since this is a flea market.”

“Correct. All sales are final. I’m just telling you for policy reasons. But you seem to be satisfied, so no need to worry!”

I still want to hit Oliver in the mouth, but I wave goodbye as he gets called over to help more people. Jim stands, arms crossed, and nods in my direction.

The guy had a nice lamp, but running into him again would just give me the heebie-jeebies.

I arrive home and set the lamps down for inspection. Where am I going to set these? Should I move my nightstand closer to the books and chair in my room? Should I have a table for the 1930s lamp only?

As I look more closely, it seems “antique” could also mean covered in dust or dirty. These lamps need a good shining. Ray’s lamp is green and smooth and has a silver metal structure. Covered in a film of dust, it is actually sea green. Jim’s lamp, while gold, does not shine in the light as it is supposed to. It reflects light as if it is squinting when light attempts to bounce off of it.

I have no idea what to clean these with. Hopefully, the glass cleaner isn’t too harsh and will get it done. I find a nice clean towel and some glass cleaner. Each lamp creaks and squeaks as I gently wipe the dust from their bases.

As they became presentable, I smile at my work and place the 1930s-style lamp by itself in the living room and the golden lamp on my nightstand and go to sleep.

It’s Sunday morning, I think to myself as I crawl from my bed. *8:36 a.m.*, reads the analog on the wall that has me staring at it long enough to make me consider looking at my digital clock on the nightstand behind me, but I’m too lazy to turn around. Wishing bacon would cook itself, I moped to the kitchen to get breakfast started.

Several strips of bacon are in the pan while the stovetop warms up. Why does bacon take the longest to cook? And then while it's cooking it doesn't look "done" until it's nearly burnt. I place bread in the toaster and watch the bacon with sleepy eyes. I laid the bacon down at 8:41 a.m. and it's been about two minutes since then. The toast will be done soon. I'll have eaten my toast or it will be cold when the bacon is done.

"Who cooks bacon with no pants on?" a male voice behind me chimes.

I wince and jump at the same time in an attempt to turn around, my voice vanishing in my lungs. As I face the direction of the voice, a golden aura shimmers in the sunlight. Floating from the waist up is the being to whom the voice belongs.

"What are you, and how did you get in my house?" I yelp, attempting to cover my legs with my nightshirt.

"Before you pee yourself, take care of your bacon. You don't want one side crispy and the other raw," he says, nodding in the direction of the stove.

Awkwardly, for the next five to ten minutes, which feel like an hour, I degrease the bacon into my plate and take my forgotten toast from the toaster. I gingerly sit at the table with my breakfast. "Would you like some?"

"Sure. Thank you. In returning the favor of your offer, I'll answer any questions you may have," he says, smiling and pulling up the chair next to mine before sitting and eating.

I excuse myself to get my pajamas from my room. I notice my phone. I can't call the police—they won't believe me, or he could disappear before they arrive, seeing as he's not human. He looks too shiny and bright to be a demon, and if he were going to hurt me, why would he ruin the element of surprise? I'll try talking to him and see where it goes. Otherwise, I need to text a friend and get a camera.

An oil lamp is on the floor in front of the golden lamp, which now appears to have an outline in black where the lamp used to be. Whoa! This can't be. I pick up the lamp and rush back to the kitchen with my pants nearly all the way up.

"You're a *genie*?" I sputter, not believing the words coming out of my own mouth. None of the food appears to have been touched, but it looks slightly different. "Did you help yourself? I said it was fine."

"Why, yes, I am. Glad that question is off the table. I did, and you cooked the bacon quite well. It would be rude of me as a guest to eat all of the food, so I replaced it. Nice of you to put on pants, but since the bacon's done, you're not in any more danger."

"What does this mean for me? I just bought a lamp yesterday because I needed a smaller light than what my room has. And, um, thanks, I'll eat in a second." I move my breakfast to the side and set the lamp on the table, awaiting more answers. Whew—I'm relieved. I don't have to bother anyone now. If the worst happens, I'll either throw the lamp out first chance I get or break it when he's not looking.

"Well, just listen for now so you can eat. I'll get the FAQs out of the way. I am the genie of this lamp that you found within a lamp. Someone thought it was a good idea to put my lamp within another lamp since 'These aren't used anymore,' and *Poof*, I'm trapped within two lamps. If that isn't insult to injury, I don't know what is.

"You can call me Gene. I'm not telling you my real name, because you'll use your wishes so quickly that I'll be onto the next person. Here are the rules:

"One: You can't wish for anyone to be killed or revived.

"Two: You can't make people fall in love either with you or whomever.

"Three: No wishing for more wishes. Hint: Be specific with yours.

“I can’t tell you how many people get mad at me like I made up these rules. Or, when the unexpected consequences happen, plead about how ‘That’s not what I meant.’ Also, I’m being nice since you offered hospitality to me before knowing who I was. I did scare you. I gave you some helpful information that I don’t share with others. Disclaimer, as I said about unexpected consequences, you are responsible for what happens and have to deal with it accordingly.”

His rant leaves me speechless. Glued to my chair, I simply stare at him.

“Hey, come back to me,” he says, snapping his fingers. “Don’t stare at me like I’m a ghost.”

“This is a lot to process. It may be a minute before I make any wishes. I want to think about it so I get what I want, how I want it. Is it OK when I get ready to wish that I write it down and give it to you like a combo of a detailed description and blueprints?” I ask.

“Wow, that’s clever. The closest I’ve gotten to that was someone holding up a drawing and then describing the poor visual.”

“Yeah, yeah. Just give me some time,” I say, pointing to his lamp.

“Actually, can I lie down somewhere?” he pleads. “Having been in my lamp for so long, I am not entirely eager to go back inside.”

“Would you like to lie on the couch?”

“Can I have a blanket, too?”

“Sure.” I go into my room and grab my spare cotton blanket and return to see him sprawled out on the couch.

“This is really nice,” he says, sighing with pleasure. I cover him with the blanket, and soon his breathing is soft.

I have absolutely no clue what I want or how the rest of this day is going to go.

After several hours of thinking, with Gene's gradually rising snore encompassing the background, I come up with a few ideas and have to mull them over.

This is the chance of a lifetime! I cannot mess this up. Not wishing for love or death wasn't crucial to my current situation, so no skin off my back there. I could have anything. But I need something that will also last a long time. I need something that I can use often. I want something cool but can't arouse the suspicion of others, since I can't prove how I got it and they may think I stole it from someone halfway across the world, where I could never possibly have been. Maybe think I was in some sort of secret thief society. Whatever.

What do I need right now? Could I even ask for money? Because where would it even come from? Will he just twist fate in a way that strings are pulled for me to be in my favor? Does his power deal with probability manipulation? So many questions. Let me just think of stuff that I want. Sucks I can't wish for more wishes—a genie can only grant three. But I can't wish for more wishes. Why don't I wish for *more genies*? It's perfect and doesn't go against any of the rules he mentioned. If he didn't want me to wish for anything seemingly outrageous, he should have specified! All right, let me make a list of a couple awesome necessities in case he tries to make up some balderdash, like, "You can't do that."

I quickly jot down my third wish while leaving room for my first two.

I guess I'll always need food.

My Wish List

- 1) A medium box-shaped lunchbox from which I can pull out any food or drink I want and that only works for me and will become a regular lunchbox when I die.

What about luck? With luck I may not need millions and millions of dollars. If the outcome of a situation could favor me, I can live a decent life with no one the wiser.

- 2) Power of Luck manipulation: When used, it will have a situation favor me but not necessarily give the best outcome. There will be no bad outcomes hurting me whenever used.

Last but not least, the grand finale of all wishes to be granted.

- 3) Three more genies to grant me wishes, each with his own space to linger while I decide what wishes to make.

Done! Now to wake up Gene and have some dreams come true.

Chapter 2

“HERM?!” sprouted Gene from his couch-potato nap.

I throw my hand up and away from him. “Sorry ... I’ve made a list of wishes. I am not sure about all of them, but I do know I want to make the first one.” I unclench my hand and straighten out the sheet of paper.

“Cool ... beans? All right, lemme see.” He reaches out towards my hand.

I clutch the paper to my heart. “I said I was ready for one! This is not a final copy by any means!”

“All right, all right. No need to pound your chest to assert dominance. Your wish is my command: so long as you follow the rules.” Gene waves his hands up, surrendering.

“I might think you’re funny.” I scoot the blanket over and sit on the couch next to him. He smiles with his hands in his lap.

“You know, you are the only master I’ve had who’s actually nice.”

“The bar must be in hell, because I haven’t even wished for anything yet.”

“Well, a typical day in my life when I have a master is them arguing with me, demanding things, becoming enraged about how their wishes turned out or wished so quickly they could have at least bought me dinner and a movie first.”

He sighs and puts his hand to his chin.

“You let me eat a nice Sunday breakfast and let me rest. Typically, we can only do what we are ordered to. You talked to me. I was able to ask for things without using sarcasm.”

I don’t notice the single tear until he flicks his wrist for an embroidered handkerchief.

“Oh, my God. I don’t know what to say. But thanks.”

“You don’t need to say much. Just keep that wonderful attitude of yours. We have wishes to grant. What is número uno?”

“Okaaaay. I wish for a medium box-sized lunchbox from which I can pull out any food or drink that I want, that only works for me and will become a regular lunchbox when I die.” I spit words out so fast I slap my hands over my mouth.

Gene maintains eye contact with me. I breathe in and out several times after holding my breath. His lips tilt upwards. “THAT’S all you want?” He bursts out laughing. As he holds his sides, gold dust stirs up in the air.

ACHOO!

“Sorry about that, sweetheart. This is like the most innocent thing I’ve heard in a while. People are freaks out there. Even if it was just one item, it was wild as hell. You don’t want to know.”

“But—”

“Don’t ask me! I don’t want to remember!”

“One whatever-you-just-said lunchbox. Here we GO!” Gene swims upwards by the light bulbs and slithers to face me upside down. Gold dust and sparkle effects fill the room, as if he were a bladeless fan. I wave it away from my eyes and try not to breathe it in when he stops in front of me with a not-so-special-looking lunchbox with a baggage tag attached to it.

“Hot and fresh from the oven. How’d I do, champ?”

I shake the lunchbox to check its weight. I feel nothing. I pull the baggage tag down. “**PROPERTY OF/If found return to**” It has all my current contact information, though blurry. The text appears to shift in the light, but I can’t put my finger on the effect.

“Go ahead try it out.”

He looks so excited. We just ate breakfast. It's Sunday. *Lazy* Sunday. I am always down to eat, but I just don't have an appetite. I can't believe I have a genie. I made a wish! What's the catch? Is there a catch? I tried to be specific.

"Sweetums?" he asks, looking at me like I'm going to pass out.

"Oh, umm. Sure." I close my eyes and think. We just had bacon. What else would make for a complete breakfast? Biscuits? Hash browns? Mmmmmmm. McDonald's hash browns.

I unzip the lunchbox, unsure of how to work the darned thing. Before my eyes register what is inside, I smell potatoes. The grease hypnotizes me. I need ketchup. I put down the lunchbox to snatch the ketchup from the fridge.

"Seems to me you have more goodies in there," Gene says as he peeks over the side of the lunchbox.

"I thought it only worked for me?" I ask, setting the ketchup bottle down.

"Well, sweetheart, you already opened it for the items you wanted. The food appeared. And people can still see you eat. Now, are you going to hurry up? Those biscuits are screaming my name," says Gene, maintaining eye contact with me as he slides the lunchbox closer to his side of the table.

"Excuse you!" I grab the box from him. From inside I pull four McDonald's hashbrowns and a plate of homemade buttery biscuits. They are still hot, but the temperature is perfect, as if I just removed them from a pan.

"Hurry up, sister." He glares at my hand with the plate of biscuits. "You got any jelly? Honey or butter is also appreciated."

"Help yourself. All I have is butter. So how does the box know what I want? Is it psychic? What does it do to pick food items? Do I have to be specific?" I ask.

Gene takes his time sliding his butter knife into the butter from the butter dish. He waves his wrist like he's in one of those margarine commercials. Unfortunately, the butter isn't soft enough, and he flakes biscuit crumbs all over the table.

He looks up from the tablespoon of butter. "Oh, you were talking." He places the whole bottom half of the biscuit in his mouth. After a period of chewing and wiping the melting butter from his mouth, he answers: "Yes, you need to be specific if you want a specific item. Like these taste like biscuits from a grandmama and obviously McDonald's hash browns. Ordering like you would do at a restaurant or drive-thru would probably be the best method. Be careful about thinking about food randomly. Because, until you empty it out, it will be holding the next thought after it was used last. But if you eat some and put it back inside, it is a normal lunchbox. But the temperature isn't going to be what it was, all fresh and plated." He takes a bite from a biscuit with butter sandwiched between the halves.

"I will write that down. Leave the hash browns to me since you are enamored with the biscuits."

I squirt the ketchup on top of the hash browns, stopping just before the paper. Taking a big bite, Gene makes eye contact with me.

"Aww... why did you stop? There's enough grease on that paper."

"Shut up and eat." I hurry and eat the rest of my hash browns and leave to shower.

* * *

"Shower Jams" Playlist

1. "I Miss You" by Aaron Hall
2. "You Don't Understand" by Faith Evans
3. "I Can Love You" by Mary J. Blige

I turn off the nozzle. I mix up the order of these lyrics all the time, as my imaginary part-time job as background singer. I finish patting myself dry and wrap the towel around me. I open the door to head to my dresser as Gene, sitting on my makeup-covered vanity, points his finger behind himself at me. After a small woosh of glitter, I'm in my clothes I set out.

“Sorry, sweetums. I didn't see anything. But there you go. I was planning on finishing my nap, but I was soooooo entertained by your shower concert, your bed didn't do it for me—”

“*Ohmigod?* Why were you listening? Didn't you have an entire plate of dry biscuits to eat?” I scream. I feel more violated than the fact he almost saw me close to naked twice.

“You may not be a singer, but, whew, I felt those *feels*.” He snaps his fingers as if he witnessed a spoken-word performance. “Hey. It's noon on a Sunday. Let's get the rest of these wishes out of the way. You seem smart and knowledgeable about genies. You are satisfied with your first wish. You'll be busy with your regular life soon and forget about me. Let's get your wishes out of the way while you still have them.”

“I don't mean to be a smart ass, but I am going to choose as carefully as possible. My next wish is way more complicated than the last one. I don't want to jack it up. I will be thinking about my wording. Plus, I have homework and my job, and I'm trying to meet with my friend, Vesta, as much as I can,” I say and lie on my bed's fluffy comforter.

“Oh, so you're one of those 'students' nowadays. Tell me what's that like.” Gleefully Gene turns around to face me.

“How long have you been in the lamp?” I ask.

“I don't keep time well. Everyone keeps their spaces different. I've seen people from all different ages and places. I try to ask questions and keep up with the times if I can. What I do

notice is that I've seen more women as clients. Tell me what you can about the world. I may not be familiar with the terms for them, but I can keep up."

"I can tell you about the world from what I've read and learned, but what I have lived and seen personally may not be that interesting." I look down.

"Hey. Don't sell yourself short. You can tell me." He puts his hand on top of mine.

I give a short overview of the evolution of women's rights and newer opportunities in the world. More women in positions of leadership. Women making their own money and having careers with or without children. I make it a point to explain intersectionality and what that does to Black, Indigenous, and People Of Color/women in comparison to white women. Technology changes so quickly now compared to the years in between the Bronze versus Iron Ages. A man landed on the moon, and now there are so many satellites from so many countries in the atmosphere. War has never ended. The death toll and violence is growing. The population is in the billions. I feel like I'm rambling, so I take a break by playing him the *Family Guy* song, "You've Got a Lot to See." There is just so much.

"I'm tired. I'll answer more of your questions tomorrow. Good night."

"I'll be on the couch. Gimme a pillow, would ya? Thanks."

* * *

"Breakfast in bed. Breakfast in bed. Breakfast in bed," Gene chants at my bedside. I can't see. The brightness of my room is overwhelming since the lights are on and the curtains with the blinds are open.

"Dude, my alarm hasn't gone off yet. Plus, I have to work today," I say. All of the sleep evaporates from my eyes. In his hands, Gene has my lunchbox. He shakes it with gusto to emphasize there is nothing.

“As you can see, I can’t use it. Only you can. So, can I tell you what I want, please?” He puts on his puppy-dog eyes, adding artificial sparkles to boot.

“Go sit at the table. Lemme get dressed for my soul crusher of a job.” I shut him out and head to the bathroom. I’m glad he’s warming up some, but sheesh. I get completely ready so I can figure out what I’ll do with him when I’m out living my life. *Oh no*. I have two wishes left and don’t want to use them too quickly or wrongly. How am I supposed to *hide* him? How am I supposed to *live with him*? I don’t want for people to get in my business or harass us. How long is this going to going to be?

I power walk into the kitchen. Gene smiles as I reach the table. I don’t sit down but stand over him. “I’m going to get you food, but we need to make some ground rules for your stay *au chez*. Thankfully, I have this lunchbox, so you won’t eat up my food budget. I’ll need you to keep yourself hidden. I don’t really have guests unless Vesta comes over or I answer the door for mail. Obviously, you *cannot* leave the building. I’ll be gracious and let you sleep on top of my bed if you don’t want the couch when I am at work. I don’t have extra bedding for the pull out. I don’t have any more rules right now, but is that clear?” I gush in a slight panic.

“Don’t you worry your pretty little head. I know how to stay hidden. Your place is so much nicer than mine. I feel right at home. Can we have Japanese food for breakfast?” he claps his hands together in excitement.

“What kind of Japanese food? It’s almost 8 a.m. Where did you even learn about that?”

“I watched the TV with captions all night. The food channels have things from around the world and then the fusions from the States. I want karaage and an egg sandwich. Of course we need ramen, too.”

I sit down and take the lunchbox. I have to google these items he spoke about. I've never had any of them. I feel the weight change and open the box. The ceramic is hot. They don't spill as there is no way that all of these bowls and plates have fit easily. Gene slides the food in front of him and immediately starts slurping.

"It's the polite thing to do. This is delicious." He pauses between all the bites of his dishes.

I pull out the crispest waffle with perfect bacon and syrup. I follow Gene to tastebud heaven. I never get waffles this firm and with some crunch. They are always soft like pancakes or burnt. Who knew magic could be *good*? I check the time and have just enough time to drive to work if I leave right now.

"I've got to get to work. Remember the rules. I'll be back. I won't be back for lunch but dinner."

"Don't worry I'll just think about what I want to eat. And dessert!" says and waves Gene as I jog out the door. Time for fast-food hell.

Chapter 3

I am so nervous. Gene is a decent house guest, but carrying this as a secret has added so much stress to my life. When I went to work after first meeting Gene, the crust-tomers of The Good Sub made me earn my small wage. Everyone wanted a custom sandwich without paying for the extras. I'm so tired I don't feel excited anymore. For dinner that first night we had my favorite type of smash burger and fries. We said cheers with our favorite sauces.

Whenever I am not at home, I'll hear whispers from Gene about what he wants to eat for dinner or asking when I am coming back. I refuse to carry the lamp with me, since he popped out and Vesta almost saw him. I barely get to hang out with her as is. To distract her, I waved my arms in the air and yelped like there was a bug in my mouth. I think she bought it because she laughed.

He stays at home now. As I said, I don't carry his lamp anymore, either. It was cumbersome and did not fit in my purse. I chewed him out perfectly for coming out when he wasn't supposed to. He now focuses on watching TV, saving his questions for later. My printer paper and notebooks have been overtaken by summaries of food shows and printed recipes that I could recreate with my lunchbox. I am so glad I do not have to go grocery shopping anymore. But my food waste has also gotten worse. Gene cleans his plate. My palette is not that sophisticated. I need to watch my favorites, the American food shows, and log out from Netflix.

The types of cuisine we both are obsessed with have meat, potatoes, desserts, and feature dairy. We have feasted on barbecue ribs and baked beans, tres leches cake, pot roast with veggies, sandwiches with Cheesecake Factory brown bread, chicken fried chicken with mashed potatoes and gravy, and discontinued fast food menu items like the Cherry Berry Chiller from McDonald's. OK, more food!

* * *

“I think I’m ready to make another wish now,” I say. Gene’s table manners may or may not be improving, depending on which culture he’s eating from.

“You sure took your time to mull it over. I’ve gotten to eat so many good meals, I was not going to rush you.” He smiles.

I unfold my wish sheet. My fingers glide across my words.

2) Power of Luck manipulation: When used, it will have a situation favor me but not necessarily give the best outcome. No bad outcomes will hurt me whenever used.

I’ll choose my percentage of what I want to happen. Should I impose a limit so that it won’t do it for me automatically? Between 1% through 99% only? Since there are no absolutes nor impossibility like 100% or /0%? Will this margin come and bite me later? How else should I make this limitless? I guess when I use it, I need to implement a time frame of its likeliness to happen. For example in thirty seconds blank will have insert percent of succeeding. Or X vehicle has a 99% chance of not crashing when running this red light. Lemme write it down:

Power of Luck manipulation with percentages: Prediction-based observations (pick a percentage between 1% through 99%) that becomes the chance of that circumstance to occur. No using 100% and 0% to remove absolutes and impossibilities. The same object or circumstance can receive more than one prediction. A time limit will be determined to ensure that the outcome occurs when desired by the user. Will be spoken into existence. Could use words for events such as “succeed,” “fail,” “happen” or “will not happen,” etc.

“Gene, I believe I have this written down correctly. Grant this as is, please.” I hand him the sheet of paper.

He pulls out a pair of moon-shaped glasses I haven’t seen. Dramatically he straightens out the paper on the table. His hands are not clean. It is less legible.

“My handwriting is not that bad! And you ruined the page!” I shout at him. “I am not trying to be rude, but could you be a little less messy?”

SNAP! As his middle finger pops from his palm, the dishes are washed and put away. The table is wiped clean. Gene’s hand holds a pristine wish list. My handwriting appears typed or rewritten.

“Your lunchbox has given this little Ikea table, small cabinets, and white refrigerator more class than they will ever receive in their shelf lives, sister. It’s not the end of the world. Come here. Stand next to me.” He points down to two golden shoeprints next to his matching Ikea chair.

As soon as I step on the prints, I feel suspended in my own body. More golden wind looms in the kitchen. It centers around my throat. The pressure increases, but I can breathe. Gene is silent with his glowing golden eyes. I feel like I am being sealed air tight when wind encompasses me. The light in the room returns to normal and I am released.

“Aside from that spectacle, I don’t feel anything different. Did it work?”

“It should. I used my powers. I’m going to take a nap after my hard work.” Skipping to the couch, he snuggles in his pillow.

“I bet you’ll only nap for forty minutes. I am 90 percent sure you will.”

“Oh, please, I am the nap champion. Plus, that was a complicated request I had to pull. ‘Hasta la vista, baby,’” The covers are pulled over his head and the snoring starts.

Forty minutes later on the dot, Gene jolts upright. Awakened by a sound, the prediction succeeded. Groans and complaints erupt in the silence of the house. I am about to confront him for interrupting my quiet thinking time, but I get a text from Vesta: “Hey! I’m coming over real quick since it’s your day off”

Crap! She could be here in three, five, or fifteen minutes. I have to hide him!

“*Gene?* Hey, buddy. Listen, you can go back to sleep. That prediction was just a test to see how accurate its uses were. My friend is coming, and you gotta go back to your lamp, just until she leaves. I know you don’t like that.”

“Why don’t you just adjust the probability of her freaking out or accepting this ‘secret’? he suggests.

“But should we even chance telling her? Aren’t genies supposed to be a secret?” I ask.

“You only have one wish left. Does it matter?”

“I don’t want to risk my friendship with her. Plus, it won’t matter after you’re gone, anyways. *Please* get in the lamp!” I shout.

“Ouch. And here I was thinking you cared for me.” With those words he solemnly poofs, leaving a glitter residue. The lamp is on my nightstand. Before I can apologize, my front doorknob is jiggling with quick raps at the door. I punt the lamp under my bed before rushing to the door.

“Coming, Vesta!” I’m about to reach the door, and I realize I don’t have any food or snacks since I’ve relied on the lunchbox. I pick up my feet to not make any noise. At the kitchen table I pull out a box with five slices of pizza to equal a “semi-eaten pizza.”

I whisper to myself as a Hail Mary: “Vesta has a 99 percent chance of accepting my secret and not being mad at me *when* she finds out.”

“Sorry about that. I was in the bathroom. I just ate some pizza. Do you want some?” I finally let her inside. She is still gorgeous, with her messy brown bun and screen tee and damp from the rain.

“I’ll take some off your hands from almost becoming the Wicked Witch of the West at your doorstep” She air-hugs me and drops her stuff on the foot of the couch.

“You would need some henchmen and magic before that happens to you. So how’s life?” I ask happy for tea updates.

“Dating still sucks, obviously. The pool has piss in it instead of hot lifeguards. Being at the hospital is no joke and lacking respect.” The pepperoni brings a smile to her complaining face.

“I’m sorry to hear that. But remember, you’re a tough cookie; you put your foot down and show them who’s boss. Also, are you on dating apps or getting yelled at in person?”

“I keep coming back to the app and deleting it. Then for the guys I don’t swipe or ignore, when I’m off, I’ll run into one or two in person while out. It’s awkward,” she says, balling up her fist.

We chat. I haven’t seen her since summer ended. She’s stressed out. I hate my job. She ate the rest of my pizza. I don’t mind. Vesta’s roasting of the guys has me crying. She leaves at midnight. I head to my room after locking the door. Gene’s standing in my doorway.

Chapter 4

“Dude, she just left. What are you doing? How long have you been standing there? She could have seen you!”

Gene isn't listening. He's holding up my “almost done” list from my nightstand. His eyes are bulging from his face. Tears sparkle at the ends of his eyes. “You don't know what you're asking for,” gasps Gene, pointing at my third wish.

“What are you talking about? I was very specific about what I want on my list. I know exactly what I am asking for.” Confused, I enter the room to look at my chicken scratch handwriting.

My Wish List

- ~~1. A medium box-shaped lunchbox from which I can pull out any food or drink I want that only works for me and will become a regular lunchbox when I die.~~
- ~~2. Power of Luck manipulation: when used it will have a situation favor me but not necessarily give the best outcome. No bad outcomes hurting me whenever used.~~
Last but not least the grand finale of all wishes to be granted.
3. Three more genies to grant me wishes, each with his own space to linger while I decide what wishes to make.

“Well, this isn't specifically in the rules, but I just know I cannot make this happen. Please think of something else so neither of us will be punished and I can pretend it never happened.” Panic is bubbling to the surface of his eyes.

This isn't ... good. But he just said it wasn't in the rules. Shouldn't I get the wish, then? Maybe I should listen to him. I need a better explanation, though. I just want to go to bed.

“You aren’t making sense. You need to explain. If it isn’t in the rules, grant the wish and have them add it to the books later. You said there were only three rules and the last one was pretty much just kind advice.”

Gene just gawks at me. He’s shaking at this point and staring at the front door. “Hurry and take it back!”

“*Gene!* Calm down. You aren’t telling me what’s wrong?”

“You *must* take it back! You don’t know what you are asking for!” he flaps his arms up and down while crumbling the page. Every movement of his whirls his aura, bringing enough force to shake the room. I back away in fear as he repeats:

“TAKE IT BACK! TAKE IT BACK! TAKE IT BACK!”

I don’t know how to stop him. He holds his head in his hands and breaths erratically. I don’t want to listen to him. I’m not breaking any rule he gave me.

“*I wish for three more genies!*”

My bedroom door bursts open and red smoke fills the floor and begins to envelope Gene and me, his golden shimmer weakening and merging with the red. I can’t breathe. I’m falling to the floor, fading out. A familiar pair of eyes stared me down. *Jim?* The man from the flea market?

* * *

“What are we to do with this girl?” Jim snarls.

“Hey, dude, I just work for you. I don’t make any rules,” Gene says.

“Yet you are supposed to follow and emphasize them! Greedy girl found a loophole like that. How can we not have put that in the rulebook!?” Jim roars.

“I told her the rules, but I guess we could file it under ‘3a. No wishing for more genies,’” says Gene, teeth chattering.

“No. We need to make an example out of her. Genies are not to be created on *whims*. We don’t need future clients asking for the same and having an increase in the genie population. But the rules do need to be changed.” Jim rubs his hands, deep in thought. “She will be put on trial. The fastest way to turn around a law is with implementation. Her punishment will be the example for humans not to meddle in powers that do not pertain to them.”

“Lovely, Jim. You always do know best. So, what about my next assignment? I am not close, but I really have been knocking it out of the park with clients so far. I have been getting them to be done with me, have me placed and found by a newbie within one to two weeks—”

“*You* are also at fault! This is your fault because of your rushing through clients and overall ‘personality’; you will also face punishment. Both of your punishments will be determined at the trial! Until then, why don’t you rest and catch our esteemed guest up on the event to be held in her honor?”

Red gas pours from Jim’s downward-faced palms. Gene wails and pleads to Jim’s unwilling ears while Gene loses consciousness. Jim picks up the double lamp that hosted Gene’s lamp. As he waves his free hand, the rust-colored vapor fetches Gene’s small lamp. After Jim clicks its lid four times, the lamp inhales Gene, Jane, and the contents of her bedroom. Jim sneers at the scene of the crime. He traces his fingers to mark the nightstand with yellow tape. Returning to the door he arrived at, he closes it. Tapping four times in the shape of a kite, Jim opens the door revealing a ruby-colored swirling portal and steps through to leave the human dimension behind.

* * *

I try to peel open my eyes.

I feel like I wore mascara or eyeshadow recently. Why are my eyes sticky? I've had crust in my eyes before, but yuck.

“Did you enjoy your nap, *sunshine*?”

I'm on a couch. Gene's eyes are dull, his black eyebrows etching into his golden face. The ceiling here is *low*. He steps away from me.

* * *

I grab his arm. “Why did I see Jim? He's the one I bought the lamp from!” I need to calm down. I press my fingertips over my eyelids and slowly breathe. Gene's shoulders slowly slump. “Where's your *joie de vivre*?” Getting up to face him as he leans on the back of the couch, I immediately see him losing his luster.

“You broke the law of genies.” His voice feels listless without the sarcasm and snark. Reaching with his other hand towards my wrist, he removes my grasp. I flinch. I didn't realize we were both trembling. “We're all in this punishment bag together.” With his hands on the top of the couch, he turns away from me to stare at the legs of the coffee table.

“Punishment?”

Every time I try to search his face for anything, he shifts his position and eyes away from me. This low-ceiling room has a kitchenette plus the couch I'm leaning on. The glittery wooden cabinets and walls hurt my eyes as I flash a light with my phone at pile of jewels, reflecting their lights everywhere. But there is no real treasure to find here.

“What does Jim have to do with this? This ‘big no-no’ wasn’t in the explanation of the rules you gave me. Aren’t loopholes corrected after the fact? Shouldn’t they cut their losses and do something to make sure it isn’t repeated?” I’m pleading, scratching my short curls into a frizz.

“He’s my boss. He’s *the* boss. Could you imagine if the mafia had a justice system? I don’t know how old he is or what he is, but he is powerful. What he says goes. He spends his time making sure genies’ duties are assigned and carried out. He acts like a goofy old man who devises ways for people to find a genie. He assigns other people to do the harder work.”

“So does that mean my case will be heard and I can argue for the loophole?” I ask.

Gene lifts his head up to roll his eyes. “I believe you heard ‘justice system,’ took it, and ran with it. These trials have existed longer than United States politics.”

“I am not naïve enough to not know how badly trials can go. See: Salem witch trials. Or not being able to afford an attorney.”

He finally smirks a little bit. “Prior to this excursion, I enjoyed trials. Trials are entertainment. If you were lucky enough to get in to witness one, you’d have bragging rights as you recounted the details to those who weren’t around or were late for the event. Each trial differed so you’d have a story to tell at parties for decades.”

“How was it entertaining? People were being charged with crimes!”

“Crimes against genies. Or genies committing crimes or breaking rules. Look, you work a job; you don’t like *all* of your coworkers. Humans being put on trial, though, is a rarity.”

“How rare?”

“I’ve never gotten to hear from someone who witnessed a trial for a human.”

“How long have you been a genie?”

“I don’t count the years. I count the clients.”

“Well, then, how many clients?”

“I didn’t socialize with them like I have with you. Humans look alike and their faces blur together. It’s hard to be friends and catch up with my fellow genies. Everyone’s doing assignments and being stuck in their lamps. Meeting at the food court just isn’t the simple reality we genies have.”

I can’t imagine Gene with a red tray waiting in line for Panda Express or Sbarro. If genies are magical, would they need to gather in a fast-food place when they could just conjure items for themselves? If all genies’ homes are in lamps—

“Umm ... where are we?” My breathing quickens again.

“This is my lamp. However, it seems like another room was added due to you being here.” He points behind me to two wooden doors with genie-shoe-shaped door levers. “Still only one bathroom.”

“Just like in Aladdin. *‘Itty bitty living space,’*” I say laughing anxiously.

“I wish your attitude would level up to the situation.” Stomping, he shot past me to the right door. “I’m going to get some rest.”

I’m going to trial. Over a loophole. Do I even get representation? Is this just a sham? I look up to search for a clock. There isn’t one. What about school? Vesta? Maybe I should have told her. My only consolation is I don’t have to go to work. My lunchbox is on the table. How long was I unconscious? I don’t have an appetite. I grab my lunchbox and sit back down on the couch. I pull out a thermos of tea to calm down. After a long sip, I cradle my lunchbox between my legs. Tears slide down the waterproof material of the bag.

Making my way to the bathroom, I see my toothbrush next to a different toothbrush in the holder. I brush my teeth until a small spot of blood appears from not flossing as well as I should

have. I take the towel to pat down my face and mouth. The shower curtain is pulled back, and I see various products, known and unknown, fighting for space.

I stand before my door. I listen towards Gene's door. I can't hear anything. I open my door only to find a bed and a nightstand with lamp with an oil-lamp-shaped hole in it.

Chapter 5

I open my eyes to be reacquainted with the glittery golden walls of Gene's lamp. Oh. Yeah. I'm not at home right now.

My bed and nightstand are the same, but, otherwise, this room's walls tighten against my furniture. I've never seen this dresser before. I'm still in my pajamas from yesterday's shower.

I can't communicate with anyone. I wonder how long it will take to report me missing? I didn't want to rely on or worry my family. Vesta. I was going to text her to see if we could hang out for once. She's so busy with her big-boss job. She majored in something more immediately available and profitable. All I have is a minimum-wage job and debt.

The plum covers match the pillows, trim, sheets, and canopy curtains. All I need is a weighted blanket. The blanket's too light or the A/C is hitting me more because of the shallow space.

My pillowcase is covered in dried snot and damp tears. I reach into my nightstand. Empty. The lamp with the soot-colored lamp imprint is the only useful object in my room. I didn't check my toiletries in the bathroom. I don't know which toilet paper is in there, but I hope no more damage is done to my face in lieu of tissues.

Scooting to the edge of my bed, I take the one step to the door and open the regular glass doorknob. My lunchbox is on the couch. The thermos, missing one sip, sits on the table where I left it.

The bathroom door is closed, while Gene's is cracked. I peek, but he's not in there. There's too much gold and not enough light, I can't tell if the room is upside down or not.

I hear the sound of the shower and products falling against the tub floor. A yowl of pain precedes a musical number.

“Aieee!”

His humming continues in place of “Iko Iko.” This continues over a chorus of songs. I taste my tea, but the warm, calming effect I wanted is gone. I pour it out in the sink and turn to my lunchbox. I open it up to see if any dream I don’t remember affected it in any way. A new tea cup is steaming in a saucer next to a small pot of honey and a stirring stick.

I play with the steam and stir in two dips of honey. Tea in one hand and stirring stick in the other, I twirl the dangling string over and over again. Gene exits the bathroom.

“Is there enough water left for me to pee and brush my teeth?” I slurp a very long sip while finally getting eye contact from him.

“Yeah.” He opens his mouth to speak again but walks into the kitchenette. He begins shuffling in the cabinets.

Clearly this conversation is over. I turn around to walk into the bathroom.

“Hey,” says Gene.

I stop. I keep my back turned.

“Yes, Gene?”

“Can you make me something with your lunchbox?” he asks quietly.

“Isn’t this your place? What’s in the fridge?” I snap.

“Ummm, about that,” he pauses and walks to the nearest chair at the table to sit. “They took away my powers,” he whispers.

“Why? How? What exactly do you mean?” I turn to look at him, his elbows on the table.

“Well, *we* got into trouble. And *we* are awaiting punishment. After getting yelled at by Jim, we got sent to my lamp to await the trail. And thus, I can’t use my powers right now. I don’t know what’s going to happen or if I’ll get them back.” His mumbles come from his cross-folded arms.

“I don’t know what to say.” I look down at my toes. “What can I get for you?”

“More biscuits, please. This time with chicken. Extra butter and jelly.” Gene’s stomach growls.

I pick up the lunchbox from the coffee table. I set it in front of Gene who starts a small happy dance.

“Thank you, dear.”

“You’re welcome.” I can hear him smacking while I head to shower and check my toiletries. Tears stream down my face before I turn on the water.

* * *

I pat a cool damp towel over my face to make it look like I wasn’t crying. It’s not working. The contents of my bathroom are on the tub’s ledges and under the sink. I am prepared. I am grateful. I don’t know how long I’ll be here. I don’t want this. I don’t want to stay forever. I don’t want to become claustrophobic.

To calm myself, I exit to see Gene washing the plates from his breakfast.

“Save anything for me?” I feign innocence in my voice.

“No, sweetheart. But you cook, I clean!” he coos while squeaking the sponge on the dishes.

The mahogany table looks darker against the glittery walls and floors. I look inside the lunchbox. Empty. With crumbs. I rezip it and my mind is blank. What would I like to eat?

“When you get done, can you come sit with me and we can start thinking about a strategy?” I ask while holding my hands tightly together.

He nods. The silence amplifies each sound in the room. I’m not sure if Gene is squeaking these plates on purpose. I remember my small collection of cups. I quickly gather them together

and slide them next to the dirty side of the sink for him to wash. He doesn't acknowledge me, but he dumps the cups in to the water.

* * *

The chicken noodle soup I eventually decided on is long cold as Gene pulls up a chair across from me.

"Gene, what are we going to do?" I say.

"We? *WE!*? You didn't listen to *me!* I warned you! I told you it was bad! But no. Stubborn girl just had to pull from a 'loophole.' A *loophole*. This isn't America or trials as you know them. I'm not sure what you're going to do, but I'm going to try to get mercy from my boss. I didn't give you what you wanted, and we both are stuck in here!" Gene erupts with anger.

I freeze with shock. He never raised his voice at me.

"Well, don't genies have laws, rules, or exceptions to things that aren't in the rules? What are the rules?" I snap back.

Does he not think I am afraid for my life? We are in this together, aren't we? Will he get a lighter sentence since he is a genie? I'm a human. Magical creatures usually hate humans. Is that why wishes backfire?

"I'm not sure why I'm going to trial for this, anyways. Don't most, if not all, wishes backfire? My lunchbox here. It works perfectly, but its appearance is childish."

"I don't know what you're talking about. It works perfectly, as *you* described. And you are concerned with its appearance." Gene's eyes dart as he speaks.

“But, as you see, you and I are receiving the same treatment. I can’t use my magic. We are sustained by that lunchbox, which was produced by my magic. Who knows if your second wish came through. There’s your mercy.” His golden eyes are sharp with annoyance.

Don’t cry. Don’t cry. Don’t cry. Don’t cry. Don’t cry.

“Do you have any idea what is going to happen to us?” My voice cracks. “Do you care what happens to me?”

“Do you think cruelty ends with only humans?”

My mind blanks. What does he mean by that? What is the culture surrounding genies? If they go to the trials for entertainment, gossip is also a commodity.

I am pulled from my thoughts when a door slams. What is he not telling me? I feel horrible I don’t want to fight with him. I just want to be his friend. I just want to have a clue what’s going to happen for whatever reason. Despite Jim’s anger, we weren’t separated. Sure, Gene doesn’t have his magic. But he could be observed elsewhere as I could also be. I can’t win against magic.

I still haven’t eaten. My lunchbox is on its side at the middle of the table. My single teacup and the honey are still on the coffee table. I treat myself to a vanilla cupcake and turkey sandwich. I close the lunchbox and head to my room to eat.

* * *

A quick pattern of knocks rap on my door, waking me up.

“Who’s it?” I wheeze.

“Hey. Can I talk to you?” Gene whispers.

“I’ll come out. Hold on.” I pull my head under the covers. I want to talk to him about this. But I see how it is. It *is* my fault. And he is angry. Why can’t we just get this over with

already? I slide to the edge of my bed, hitting my knees on the dresser. I pull out pants and a T-shirt. I get dressed and head into the living space.

Gene is on the couch. He looks like he woke up on the wrong side of the floor.

“You all right?” I ask.

“I’ve been better.” He smiles.

“Would you like to eat?”

“I think I owe you an apology. Even though I do think this is all your fault, it was wrong of me to yell at you and vent my frustrations. I’m sorry.” He holds his hand out.

I shake it. “Thank you for that. I think we should get some food in us before we waste any more brain power.”

He pulls a chair out for me before swooping to his side of the table. “Sweet pea, while you do know just what I like and how I like it, this time can we get something that will stick to you? I want a Monte Cristo with raspberry jelly, fried crisp to perfection.”

I watch him unironically lick his lips while holding a sliver knife and fork in his ore-colored hands.

“I haven’t eaten that before, so I do hope it comes out right.” I unzip the lunchbox. First I pull out the smallest pot of jelly I’ve ever seen. Then on a plate appears what looks like a big cube of unsliced bread emerges. The steam and smell of grease hit my eyes as I lift it up and away from me to Gene.

“*Grazie!*” He opens the jar and turns it upside down. The knife slices through and bit of jam fall on top of the bread exterior. He presses the globs to make them melt faster on the crust. I’m not sure if I am appalled or jealous. I reseal the lunchbox and think of a chicken lo mein and can of soda. I am gentle with it, so as not to agitate the soda.

There is sweet-and-sour sauce in the bag. Thank God. My soda, which did not explode on me, is not as cold as I would like it, but I do not care. This meal is delicious. I am glad for now.

After Gene licks his fingers for the five hundredth time, I offer to wash the dishes this time. The cleaning materials do not include bleach, so hot soapy water only it is. Will my lunchbox work for any item including nonedible? I still don't even know how to plan for this trial.

"This meal was heavy, just like this upcoming topic. We should start soon; otherwise you're going to lose me to the sleepiness from the grease." Gene exhales while patting his stomach.

Placing the last dish in the drainer, I wipe my hands dry. I return to my seat at the table. I forgot to wipe off the table. Darn it.

"I just can't think of a strategy since this is nothing like 'American Trials,'" I whisper.

"Perhaps they may make an exception for you. As a show of mercy, things may be done in a way familiar to the defendant. You are a human, after all."

"You were so scared of Jim. It seems like he's going to be the one sentencing us! I am 99 percent sure that he won't give us the death penalty." I scratch my head.

"Let's put the fear down for a second, because, let's be honest, it's going to be there when we get done with this conversation. Fact number one: Jim's scary. We need to get our facts straight if you catch my drift?" He winks at me.

"What do you suggest, then?" I smirk. I don't think he means pleading insanity, but I hope it will be just as fun.

"Depends how much pride you have, and are you willing to perform?" he cackles.

“I smell what you’re putting down, I think,” I say. Ah, we aren’t going to plead insanity. We are going to put on *a show*. I don’t know if I can cry on demand.

“I DIDN’T PLACE YOU IN HERE TO *PLOT*. I PUT YOU HERE AS A MEANS OF TRANSPORT!” Jim’s voice bellows through the small lamp apartment. The lamp slants diagonally. Gene and I fall from our chairs. I feel hands around my waist lifting me towards the center of the lamp as we avoid the furniture moving downwards. I’m nauseous and don’t want a replay of my meal.

“Girl, I just barely stopped being dizzy. Don’t yak and make me a sympathizer!” Gene’s voice shakes in rhythm with the lamp.

The tilting switches directions. Now the couch is tumbling toward us. The ceiling is too low for us to get around it. Our yelps synchronize. Gene tries to zoom us to the end of the room, but with the increasing altitude of the tilt and gravity, the couch is going to crush us.

The brilliant light shines behind us as we watch the couch and other furniture form a pile to crush us. I hit what I think is a wall first. I’m losing my air, and that whack bruised the back half of my body.

Gene’s arms are gone. I can barely hear his voice. This bench is made of wood. The floors are an ugly brown tile with white grout. Why am I on the ground? I didn’t know I could have this many spots in my vision.

* * *

“Why are you fraternizing?” Jim scowls, standing over Gene.

Gene lays the girl on the floor, then hovers to eye level. His sparkles dull a bit. His coloring shifts back and forth from brown to gold, encouraged by his nausea. “I didn’t choose

her as a master. I didn't even grant her the wish. *You* took my powers. How could I not talk to her when there was no food to eat?" barks Gene.

"You are mouthy, *boy*. You were having fun with her even before this 'sleepover' of yours. You have your job, for now."

"So, what is going to happen then? She's a human, and I am a genie. Are we having two separate trials? Is there going to be even going to be a trial?"

"Enough. Follow me."

Jim's smoke forms tendrils that drag the girl's body and handcuff Gene. She groans in pain from her injuries, while Jim's grasp keeps her high off of the ground. Deeper in the hallways of an office space, they travel beyond the public gathering spaces. Upon arriving at the flight of stairs, Gene cradles his arms to lift the girl's head higher. Jim has no sympathy as her feet continue to drag.

The basement is a holding center. The walls are lined with cells. Black-colored magic enforces the barriers to keep people in. There are no guards.

"This is where you'll be held until the main event. In separate cells. I do not think you'll be able to communicate well down here. No matter, it won't be long. Get ready to deal with the consequences." Jim turns to leave.

The gelatin-like tendrils pull them towards different cells.

"Wait!" Gene pleas. "Let me check on her real quick. You'll need someone to try."

Without a response, they are slid next to each other. Gene's hands are unbound. He runs his hands in her short black curls. Her breathing is steady, but she winces in pain.

Reacting to her movement, the red vines stretch into the cells, sealing them in the basement.

Chapter 6

I'm bound on ... a chair at the stand. My head is ... set ... up and towards the audience, ... Jim and my empty defendant table. I'm not sure if ... the cloth wrapping me up like a snake is tulle or only covering the top of my eyes, but I can only see ... wood and the bottoms of the furniture. Is there representation... for each... side?

I feel something on ... my leg. I don't know if it is Gene ... his pants leg. Who knows if we are being tried ...? Separately or ... together. Voices sound... like... Charlie Brown adults...

"Please rise for the Judge,"

"Is that even possible?" whispers the crowd.

"Don't the rules prevent things like this?"

"WHAT PRECEDENT DOES THIS MAKE FOR US?"

"WHO IS THIS TO MAKE A FOOL OF GENIEKIND?" screams Jim

"GUILTY!" says the judge as he slammed his gavel.

The floor ... opens. I see the red eye of the storm ...

* * *

Gene

She has a small bump on her forehead but is breathing. I caught her when she fell back into our shared cell. I don't have the heart to put her down yet. All the smoke did was blow all of the dust out of the cell and repurpose us to the lamp. *Creaaaaaaaaaak*. A door forms between the kitchen and our bedrooms. Jim slides through sans his red aura.

"Your punishment will be served together. Isn't that nice? I am being merciful, yes?" says Jim as the corners of his mouth twisted into a smirk.

“I doubt it will be any different than my previous experience. What are you up to?” I set her down and use myself as a barrier in front of Jim.

“You’ll see,”

Jim rolls his hands and arms to form a ball of light. It shoots intense beams, which reflect off every glass surface in the room. In the blink of an eye, it expands over me and the girl. The girl’s eyes open as the light covers her irises. An emblem appears on her body but is covered by an off-shoulder top and harem pants matching the color of her plum bedroom. Lastly jewel-embedded gold bracelets enclose her wrists and ankles. She is shackled to geniedom.

“Wake up, *Jane*,” Jim commands. “Welcome to your new job. Gene here will be teaching you”

“Your name is Jane? Sweetie, you could’ve told me.” I’m laughing and turning to meet her slightly glazed eyes. Her irises, now also plum, focus onto me.

“Yes, I am Jane,” she says, smiling at this fact. “And you are?”

“I’m Gene. You know me” My smile of relief falls while I study Jim’s and the girl’s faces. Her face is innocent, sure, but that scaredy cat is gone. It’s also like she isn’t aware

“She now has the cosmic powers of a genie. Both of your punishments start now. She will be taught by you to serve clients. Shadow for her and then, when she can work by herself, you will stay *inside*.”

“What about my own debt? I was keeping track of my years of service,” I interrupt Jim.

“*Boy*, your punishment is her clients count for herself only. You will resume your remainder whenever I see fit.”

Jane’s smile doesn’t waver as Jim damns us to indefinite sentences. She’s *obedient*.

“Jane, you don’t hear this?” I step up to her and shake her shoulders. The plum in her eyes dim. The corners of her mouth dip a little.

“I will take my leave now. I’ve granted you back your powers to be a good teacher. Don’t worry; I’ll be sure to leave the lamp in a high-traffic area so you rule-breakers cab get to work.” Jim slams the door he made behind him.

With that we are alone, maintaining eye contact as tears well in both our eyes. Red, fuchsia, and gold auras swirl in the air. Until we are summoned, we are stuck in this lamp.

* * *

Jane

“That Jim is weird, but he’s the boss, right?” I say, giggling.

Gene removes his arms from my shoulders and sits on the couch. “Jane’s not your name,” he says quietly.

“Of course it is! Your name is Gene.” My head hurts.

“I’m sorry. I never asked you for your name before this whole debacle. I didn’t think I would be with you that long.” Gene frowns.

Wooziness comes over me. I am ... Jane. Gene’s my best friend. This is my home. ... Our home. Best friend forever abode. I stumble on my way to the couch next to Gene.

“Hey, sugar, it’s been an awfully long day. Let’s just go to bed,” he says as he catches me.

I don’t fight him. I feel more paralyzed by the second. Why do his arms feel familiar? After ten steps, we are in my pretty purple room.

“Goodnight, sweetheart,” He tucks me in. My body is more relaxed than my mind. That’s weird. I thought I was home. This isn’t my bed? I don’t even hear Gene close the door.

Chapter 7

Jane

As I enter the kitchen, Gene is hugging the lunchbox.

“It’s not going to go anywhere, dude,” I say.

“Good morning to you, too, snickerdoodle. I’m ready to eat, since there is nothing else to do,” he says, his usual snark absent.

“Don’t you have a lesson plan scheduled, *teacher?*”

Gene flinches at his new title. “You could just ask me questions. But can we eat first? Pleeeeeeaaase??” he begs, sliding the lunchbox to my side of the table.

Before I exhale an answer, the lamp jolts. The furniture to lift from the ground and slams back to the floor. Gene’s and my auras whirlpool around, dragging us to a small window that wasn’t there previously. It is like a glitter bomb went off, and it’s pushing us out of the lamp and glitter into my nose.

Cough *cough* *cough* *cough* *cough* *COUGH*

As I realize there is no glass of water to reach for, a confused man sits on the ground in shock. I regain my composure, slowly. Upright, I hold my breath and smack my clothing to get rid of the glittery air.

“Are you an angel? Because your body is heavenly,” he says with his eyes traveling up and down like a droplet in a level.

“Gene, what do I do?” I scream whisper as I turn to face his direction.

He is there, but his golden aura has him hogtied. “Only you can see and hear me. Just talk to him and introduce yourself.” Gene gently rests his head on the ground after rolling on his back.

“I’ll cut to the chase, whatever-your-name-is. I am Jane the genie. Three wishes, sweetheart. No murder, no love, and no more wishes. What do you want?” I keep my distance from this man. Between his ogling and cheesy line, I don’t believe what I said sunk in.

“I would think this was a Halloween prank if you didn’t blow all of this glitter in my place by coming out of that lamp. But I dreamt of meeting someone like you, Janie.” He moves towards me.

“It’s Jane, not *Janie*. Stay over there.” I point to the couch.

“Ah, come on, do I need to wish for you?” He sits down.

“I said no love. That includes coercion.”

“Well, if I can’t have you, I don’t want anything,” he says pouting. A gem on my bracelet on my right arm flashes red. “Psssssst. Oh. Wait, he can’t hear me. But that red light means because he said that, if he doesn’t make a wish before he goes to sleep, we can bounce,” Gene says softly.

“Do I have to tell him that, or can I just stall?”

“Do what you need to do. It’s dinnertime out here, so you only need to hope he goes to bed or the clock strikes twelve. This floor is so uncomfortable.” Gene rolls closer to me.

“This place is a mess. But I am glad you are so easily satisfied. Too bad you can’t have me,” I say smirking.

“Can’t you do something about this? I’m sorry. I’m not necessarily the cleanest person,” he says, picking up some trash. The gem now turns green, and my aura covers my hand. I wave my hand over the length of the room. The trash makes it way to the stainless steel can. The black and white throw on the furniture folds itself, returning to its proper place. The coffee table,

leather couch, and chairs straighten up and move to create an open walkway from the front door to the kitchen.

“Good job. Using your powers is easy, yes. It’s voice-activated like those Alexa things I’ve seen. Humans are becoming so creative,” Gene says faintly smiling.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, I didn’t wish for that,” the man stutters.

“You commanded me. Your command is your wish.” I bow to cover my laughter. “Down to two, good sir,”

“You better listen to me. I am *your* master.” The man hops on his toes, then lunges at me. I have my footing, so I float out of reach.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk ... that is going to get you nowhere.” I wiggle my finger at him.

“Actually, if they are intent on harming you, they can lose all or remaining wishes,” exhales Gene as he attempts to pull his body into a sitting position.

Until midnight, the man and I play a game of jumping tag. I lower myself closer to the ground of his apartment while he catches his breath. With a second wind, his anger refuels him to scratching the air where I was as I move up out of the way. His choice of words are full of cursing. Yellow flashes on my bracelet’s gem, and my violet aura fogs up the apartment. Gene yelps as he gets sucked into the lamp. The man is picked up by an invisible hand and is laid out on the couch. Before his eyes close, the aura takes the shape of a hand to poke his forehead. He has been put to sleep. The lamp flies towards me. My aura is becoming thicker. The drop into the lamp feels like a huge roller coaster’s drop.

“How ’bout them apples?” Unbound from the magic, Gene hugs the trash can while he flushes green.

“If you are going to yak, please go to the bathroom. I’ve been on bigger rides and liked it,” I say laughing.

“Can I have some soup, please?”

“What kind?” I am hungry after using my powers. This is an odd side effect. I felt so powerful, like I could do anything. But I just want to lie still, and my eyelids are heavy. Magic was like second nature. “... *phenomenal cosmic powers*....” Hmmm.

“Chicken noodle soup is the best thing when you are sick, remember?” Gene says matter-of-factly.

“Here you go.” I slide him a bottle of Pepto-Bismol and Panera’s version of the soup with a piece of baguette.

“Just what the doctor ordered,” says Gene. He sits down and puts the trash can in the chair next to him. I don’t want to chance seeing him vomit. I grab my lunchbox and turn to my room. I am knocked out as soon as I hit the bed, and my lunchbox falls on the ground.* * * *

Knock. knock.

Knock. Knock. knock.

Knock knock. Knock. KNOCK.

“Jane? JANE?!”

“Imawake ... whatdoyou ... need?” My tongue is still asleep. I reach for my lunchbox for a bottle of water.

“You’ve been asleep for eighteen hours!” screams Gene from behind the door. “I thought I would let you rest, since this is the beginning of punishment, but you didn’t stir when I checked on you multiple times,”

The water misses my mouth and pools on my bed, soaking the mattress. “Look, I’m ... sorry. You *are* probably hungry ... lemme get dressed.” I reseal the lunchbox to summon some honey for my throat. I feel like Pooh Bear; it’s so good. I am still getting used to this genie attire. I don’t feel I need to change. Upright, my feet act as if they are used to my weight. I slowly get to the door. Gene nearly falls into me as the door opens.

“Goodness gracious, sweetie pie. You need some eye cream. I won’t roast you anymore today, but let’s eat,” He leads me to the table and goes back for the lunchbox. “I tidied up your room for you, plus here’s your water. You don’t want mold or ants to pop up.”

“Why do I feel like this, Gene?” I ask.

His forced smile drops a little. “I don’t know. You are a genie now, right? At least you’re dressed like one.”

I look down at the table. I notice my hands. I still look the same. My body is the same. My skin is the same. I am just dressed differently.

“I noticed that you, Jim, and the other genies in the courtroom, your skin colors match your clothing. Why is that not the case for me? My eyes are red-violet, though,” I say, leaning back in my chair.

Gene freezes. He just looks at me. I can see his eyes attempting to do the mental math while he switches from checking himself out and staring at me. He begins to tremble while he pulls his chair out and puts his head in his hands. “Oh, my God”

“*Oh. My. God.* You’re still *human!* It never occurred to me. I knew that you looked like before, and since you were able to use your powers” He’s talking so fast and pausing to think.

“So what? I’m human. What does that have to do with anything?” I snap.

“When I use my powers around you, do I become as weak and tired as you do?” he questions.

“You asked me for a blanket and napped on my couch,” I correct him. “You remember that we had a delicious breakfast, too?”

The tension eases as he busts up with laughter. “I’ll have you know that I hadn’t eaten that well in a while. Anyways, this isn’t about me; it’s about you! I didn’t sleep that long; nor do I lose that much energy,”

“Let’s eat while we discuss this. You look stressed out, and I want to put something on my stomach,” I say while I reach for the lunchbox.

Chapter 8

Jane

Bacon, biscuits, hash browns, ketchup, honey, and jelly fill the table. I serve Gene his plate and he happily accepts it. He begins to hog all of the sauces as he dumps them on the appropriate food.

“You seem to be enjoying yourself, even though you didn’t tell me what you wanted,” I say.

“How nostalgic of you. Picking our first meal.” He recovers from bouts of laughter to giggle at my comment.

He doesn’t speak for the remainder of the meal. I eat my regular serving while he inhales the remaining family-style plates. Any attempt to resume our unsettling conversation is met with shooshes from a mouthful of food with a trembling finger.

“Spit it out, Gene. Not the food, please,” I snap. I have some energy back and don’t want to waste it being nervous out of my mind.

“You still being a human in this situation is not a good thing,” he starts. “You look lovely in your favorite color. You matching both of your bedrooms is adorable,”

“Don’t butter me up just to put me down. What is the problem?”

“I am theorizing because I don’t believe what’s happening to you happened to me. I don’t remember any sensations like that or much from the beginning ... ERRRMMM.” He holds his throat, then clears it. “Basically, I’ve always been like this. I’m a genie.” Gene exhales deeply, avoiding my eyes.

“But what does that mean for me?” I ask. I can surmise that this is both horrible and potentially an unintentional side effect or consequence. Am I going to *die*? And when? I cover my mouth to control whatever noise escapes, and tears pool in my eyes.

“Please don’t cry, Jane.” It feels so unnatural when he says *my* name. “I am not trying to scare you. I am just trying to tell you this information as gently as possible. This is my theory. I don’t know what all is true or what exactly the outcome could be. I’m thinking about what Jim said. He made it seem like your punishment was temporary because you are a ‘feeble human that found a loophole.’ You are serving as a genie with genie powers, but your body is *still* human. Changes did happen to you, but as a human. The power is either too much or coming at a cost. You can work as a genie, including the powers, but you are tapped out after using the slightest bit of magic. Somehow your magic is fueled by your own body.” He places his arm around my shoulder as he makes his way to my side of the table.

“Do you mean my life force?” My jaw is on the ground. I didn’t even think about being physically in danger as part of the punishment. I am being made an example for other genies, *not* paraded in front of humans on what not to do. Why am I my own power source? How *do* genies get their powers?

“Is my soul going to *disappear*? Can I reincarnate? Is reincarnation real?” I blubber out questions between sobs and shallow breaths.

“Hey, hey, hey, my sweet girl. I don’t know the answers to those questions. But that’s OK. I don’t think Jim, wherever he is, is going to come back to give us answers, either. What we both know is that magic and genies are real, we have each other, and we can hypothesize about the afterlife. Do I know if you will die from your punishment? No. Do we know how long Jim intends for either of us to be punished? No. But we can try to make some progress without it

being too much at your expense. How does that sound?” He speaks to me while holding his face on my shoulder.

“I know you’re trying to be helpful, but I want to be alone.” I push Gene away from me and head to the bathroom to wash my distressed face.

* * *

Gene

She braced herself on the wall from the bathroom to her room and shut the door without looking in my direction. Jane. Oh Jane. I know she’s not mad at me, per se, but I’m doing my best. I’ve kept my cool this entire time since we reentered the lamp together in punishment. That first guy was ridiculous, but no one was going to get hurt.

I was no help to her. I am no help to her. I don’t technically need to eat, but it’s nice to have something, especially warm meals. She’s making me realize how bad this all is. My life has improved with her being in it. I now have company—a roommate. I can eat again. I am technically a boss with an intern, and I’m not doing all of the work.

I am still stuck in this lamp. We barely have room between the two of us. *And* we have to share a bathroom. Jim wasn’t being considerate when accommodating different genders. I don’t think this has happened before to where he would have to think to be considerate. He’s a short, regular, older-looking guy, but he seeps intimidation into all who are in the presence of his aura.

Did he lead those other two human trials? What were those about? Was there any footage or records? I wish I could have been able to see it with my own eyes instead of hearing it second hand from Billie Jean.

My strength saps from me as my body bends into a plank and becomes tied down. It's happening again. Jane's door slams open as she is yanked from her bed through the spout of the lamp. I shortly follow feet first.

... Am I in a trash can? The lamp is in my lap. Jane is frantically trying to talk to an older lady. The gems on each arm are beeping red in alarm: Get out of public view.

"Jane. We need to," I gag, since I'm sitting in garbage. "Get out of human sight. Cross your arms over the flashing lights,"

She complies. She looks confused at me when she faces me but quickly focuses on the woman. "Tilt your head downward real quick." Before she opens her eyes, we arrive in this nice lady's kitchen, with vintage colorful ceramic bowls, containers, and hanging cookware.

"Honey, you're not answering the question. Where are your clothes?" says the old lady.

"Ma'am, I am fine, thank you for the concern." Jane shakes her head and hands attempting to reassure the lady.

"We're in my home?" the old lady asks surveys her own kitchen.

"Yes, ma'am. So, I'm not sure how you found my lamp, but I'm here to grant you three wishes. The rules are simple: No love, no death/revival, and no extra wishes. How does that sound—"

"A genie!? Jesus Christ! Where is my Bible? Where is my holy water?" The woman scrambles to her living room with a Jesus cross over the front door and his portrait on the opposite wall.

"Back away, demon!" she yells. Jane doesn't notice her bracelet signaling. My front-row seat at the kitchen table aligns with the perfect shot of the old woman not flicking her wrist fast enough for the holy water to come out. Many scoffs escape my mouth as I try not to scream-

laugh. Jane's face only holds concern for the woman, not herself. I believe she is purposely not using her powers, but wanting to help this old lady who seems like a sweet grandma. I want to go through her kitchen or candy dishes for goodies.

“Hey, Jane. Clearly, we aren't going to get anywhere with her. Did she drive to where we found her in town, or was she dropped off?” I ask. My legs are too tight to scoot my chair to the window or hop away.

“There is no garage, and a car is sitting outside,” Jane mouths while holding the old lady to support her. “Ma'am, do you need to sit down?” The lady is crying as she is losing steam. “What are you doing in my home? Jesus help me! Save me.” Jane ignores her hollering and has her sit on the plastic-covered couch. I'm not sure if Jane sees me laughing or cares. Her bracelets are covered in light. She balls up her fists.

“Jane, it's OK. You can use your powers. Looking at you, I know your forearms are burning. She is not cooperating and is clearly emotionally distraught. I don't think you'll get anywhere with this client, anyways. We can go back now,”

Her lips are straight. She isn't expressing that she is in pain. Raising her palms up, she releases her plum aura. The old lady falls asleep on the couch. And back to the lamp we go.

* * *

There isn't a calendar in here, so I can't tell how much time has passed. I guess I can go by weight. Jane would have me hold the lunchbox to give me exactly what I wanted. She provided way too big portions. In hindsight, maybe that was my doing? And she came out of her room two times—sometimes three times a day—to feed me. At first I obliged her. She just didn't want to talk. With the mix of guilt and being a grubby, greedy little genie thinking with my stomach, I ate like she would choose to stop feeding me at any point. All the food that came out

smelled like my preferred and the best version of the dishes. It felt like the opposite of the Irish famine since I was eating so many potatoes.

Jane wouldn't sit at the table, either. Her small plates were brought to the sink when she came in with her lunchbox. Aside from eating, sleeping, and waiting for Jane, I continued doing the dishes. I didn't know her plates from mine. I didn't notice until I was begging on my knees for her to eat something. She went from having a small pouch on her stomach, baby-face cheeks, and curves to losing the youthful glow in her face and becoming lean.

I felt my upper body turn into a greasy butterball. It didn't fall to my lower half, but I couldn't tell my sweat from the amount of oil I was consuming. Avocado, truffles, and butter. Dairy, carbs, and fatty cuts of meat. I mean, it was heaven. My diet was balanced only when it was weighed out on a scale. I didn't eat enough of the good stuff, and, if I did it, was mixed deliciously with animal fat as seasoning. Green beans cooked with bacon grease. Chopped brussels sprouts with chopped bacon. Bacon-wrapped asparagus. All that and more, oh me oh my.

I knew in my mind that I should choose healthier options, and the box would provide the best-tasting version of it all. Yet whenever it got in my hands, it became super-duper heavy. It was always too late. Jane would unload the box with me. She would let out the smallest chuckle as my buffet spread decorated the table beautifully. Thanksgiving dinner was remixed several times over: collard greens, cornbread, candied yams, potato salad, fried chicken, peach cobbler, baked ham. The meals were fancied up by swapping out different proteins and sides, or made into food fusions. She tried to not let me see any of her emotions. Jane wasted no time returning to her room after the lengthy food prep and fiasco of getting my meals.

She never commented on my weight gain. I only looked in the mirror to maintain my hair and hair removal care. I oozed the smell of whatever I ate. I cleaned the bathroom extremely well after I used it. I left no mess made by me.

* * *

I believe she is now watching me carefully. I've been ordering lemon water, grilled chicken and different leafy greens instead of my wildest imaginations. My portions are similar size except in the order of water, plants, then protein. I love all of these salad dressings so much. I love having her at the table questioning my food choices while she dresses up her plate.

Chapter 9

Jane

I don't want to admit Gene is right. He *could be* correct, but he's not right. I did not help the only two clients for whom I was summoned. Seems like genies have their own rules for themselves. Or I can't understand my gem bracelets. Gene is a lifesaver, but it seems like he can't be forthcoming with me. I'm sad. He's lost his sass. I've become mute. He's eating me out of house and home.

He's anxious and watches me like a hawk. If this dude doesn't chill

I'm handling it. His sudden change in eating habits has me concerned. He ate like this is his last meal, but now all of a sudden is health conscious. I didn't know immortal beings were concerned about that kind of thing. Granted, he did gain weight, though only in his torso. Does power usage have to do with metabolism?

I can't even decide that I don't want to not use my powers. We haven't gotten a new client since that day. My gems don't glow. The lamp amenities have not changed. We still have running water and light to see with. I wonder if Jim is still listening to us. We haven't plotted so much as cried out our fears and unconfirmed revelations.

Hmmmm. Gene can use his powers in the lamp, only to clean. I can use my powers for others outside of the lamp. Would it be possible to escape? Or can I get us to more clients? Is there a way to move the lamp?

I jump from my bed and burst into the living room. I don't see Gene, so I pound on his door. "Hey Gene! Hey! I think I have a piece of a plan going. Let's talk about this!" I shout between raps on the door.

“Ummm. Finally, it’s good to hear from you, sweetie.” His muffled voice comes from the bathroom. “I’m wrapping up business here. I’ll be happy to help soon.”

Awkwardly exiting the bathroom, Gene wipes the sweat off his brow. “What are you so excited to tell me?” He comes in for a hug. “Don’t worry I always wash my hands,”

“I didn’t doubt you, Gene.” I laugh. He laughs with me. His arms still have strength, and his belly has slimmed up some. He is comforting, like a weighted blanket. I didn’t realize I was sobbing until I stepped back and Gene’s eyes grow large.

“What’s wrong? What did I do? Did I squeeze you too hard? I didn’t realize—” he spouts.

“No. No no no no no. I’m not hurt. I hope you don’t think I’ve been ignoring you,” I blubber. “I feel like the wind was taken from my wings. I feel better, but I haven’t used my powers since. My arms didn’t scar; maybe they tanned? I got an aloe leaf from the box and used it for my arms. I was only able to remove the bracelets for a limited time to apply some.”

Blurry-eyed Gene jerks his hands from my forearms. He places his hands on my shoulders. “I am not trying to guilt trip you or make you feel bad. You had an idea. Let’s hear it,”

We sit at the kitchen table across from each other with only a box of tissues as the centerpiece. I tell him what I’ve been thinking. Jim’s punishment is not just indefinite and isolating but stagnant. How did we get two clients, albeit useless, so close together? Now we haven’t had anyone for a long time. We also haven’t been “buddy buddy” or in the same room much. I am unsure if he is always listening or peeks in every so often. We may need to start communicating silently with each other.

“Gene, you need to find out how much magic you can use altogether. You need to get your mobility up outside, as well.”

“Did you just call me lazy?” He fakes looking offended. “No, but you are right. I am also not in the best of shape, either. With your mental health and no new clients, it caused me to panic eat. Going to the food court is a privilege that had to be earned and was very spaced out. Obviously, I can’t do anything to work towards that again.”

“Now that I am seeing an irregular glimpse into your life, how often did you ... eat?” I ask.

“I would eat at my master’s. I would sneak it or sometimes get an offer. If I could follow them along in public, I would steal. Like taking candy from a baby.” He looks away from me. I’m unsure if he means figuratively or literally.

“I am so sorry. I just thought you couldn’t really pick what you wanted all of the time especially since you mentioned the food court. Why would they allow you to starve if you weren’t being punished?”

The lines on Gene’s neck become visibly strained. He takes his hands from the table to massage his neck, his mouth pressed shut. Is Jim watching *us*?

“Are you choking? Can you breathe? Tell me what’s wrong?” I jump and make my way across the table, digging the corner into my stomach.

As soon as I touch him, his mouth opens sucking in breaths. He stares into my eyes, pleading to communicate his thoughts.

“He doesn’t have to be here to control the situation ... us,” I say. He slightly nods and shakes his hand so-so.

“So, it’s a curse,” I say. I search his skin to see any remnants of red sparkles or lines.

“I can’t say much or negative about...it. I am not sure if this was placed on me when we were caught or it didn’t affect me until now.” Gene’s eyes well up tears. He is trying to stay strong in front of me since I finally mustered out of my funk. It’s not working.

“Will written communication or a code suffice?” I ask.

Gene frantically gestures away from himself without breaking my gaze. *Outside.* We need to get outside of the lamp to make any plan let alone an escape.

“Gee, I sure do miss Vesta,” I whine. For the first time in a while, Gene has hope in his eyes.

“Watch this.”

Gene floats and twists his body towards the lamps spout. Clumsily he manages to poke his head outside of the lamp.