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## GIFTED

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He was the last of the Genies.

The others had served their purpose in a brilliant flash of three sharp bursts, and had been dust or less for many centuries. When he was born, if indeed a Genie can be said to know birth, he was taught. He could not remember the teacher at all, but the teacher's words were as sharp and clear now as they had been at the beginning of his awareness.

"You are part of the magic of the world," the teacher had said. "All things that live must have purpose, and that is yours. You will not be strong, as camels are, and you will not be cunning or wily in the manner of men; you will not be mortal, but you cannot live forever."

"What will we be?" One of the Genies had asked.

"What you are: Wishgivers. And when you have found the one, you will make your choice — and three times, you will know the power of the Maker. You might be as Gods, if you choose your dreamer wisely."

"What happens when the wishes are given?"

The teacher did not answer.

Time did. Time, and the first of the Genie's brothers. He was an impatient wisp of air and colour, with no thought to the future and only the desire of power to guide him. He found a poor man — who better than the poorest of the poor to make a great wish? — and gave his gift first to gold and jewels, second to beautiful flesh, and last to a kingdom that spanned the deserts. The wishgiver, the first of the wishbringers, knew the glory of power and the song of fulfilment, just as he had desired.

But the gold and jewels were scattered now, melted and changed over the passage of time. The beautiful women were dust and less than dust, and the kingdom was lost scant years after its founding. The first of the wishgivers had not lingered to see this: The last of his power, and the whole of his life, broke and burst in the instant the kingdom had been created. He was gone to wind and sand and the burning sun above.

The Genies had no time to bid their brother farewell. Sobered, they hid in the shadows and the little, secret places that magic makes. They made vows of abstinence, and swore to each other that they would no squander their lives or their

gift on insubstantial longing.

But the teacher had been right. What lives must have purpose. One by one, over the passing millenia, the Genies had succumbed to the silent call of their magical vocation. Yes, they grew crafty, and yes, they struggled to make their wishes immortal and fixed in the stream of time. Some created works of genius, and some bestowed genius upon the merely mortal; some created immortals, too soon lost to violent death when time would not take them. Some created war, and some won them; some let their seekers touch and know magic's glory.

But the price was always the same: The Genies grew beautiful in their work — incandescent to the eyes of their brothers, sublimely terrible — and when that work was done, they were gone.

The last of the Genies had once been privileged to watch one of his brother's giftings: The third and last. And he remembered, no matter how hard he had tried to forget, the pained look of surprise and loss, the sudden struggle and scramble for life, that had loomed for an instant upon a visage that was already disintegrating.

He had been afraid, then.

He made his vow and made it strong by seeing, always, the face of his long dead brother. When each of his kin succumbed at last to a call and temptation that had grown too ripe, he said a prayer to the maker, to no avail. He was the last of his kind, and he had lived without purpose for a very long time.

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As time passed, he learned how to avoid the call of human longing. He dressed himself in the guise of humanity, rather than the guise of the magical, and wandered human streets, watching time change them with distant fascination. He travelled the ocean, and listened to the whales mourn the coming of the great, noisy ships that cut them off, forever, from the voices of brothers they would never see.

He came to the new world — it was called a new world for reasons that he did not understand — because the people who came were few, and their dreams were linked to reality and their own actions. The young, he did not trust; it was always the young that had drawn his kin in and ground them up in the saying of three simple sentences in any of a number of languages. Not even all of the languages had survived their wishers.

He hid in the wild, listening to the hungry dreams of winter wolves and sleeping rabbits. But the towns and the cities always called him back; he could hear the dreams and the fervently uttered prayers that he had been born for. There was no sweeter sound, and none more horrible; he could not live with it, but the emptiness of separation hurt as well.

So he learned the the easiest way to avoid people was to stand beneath their gazes. He made the street his home, and conjured the clothing — with its peculiar smell — of the curb dwellers. He held out his hand, and murmured a sing-song little plea for coin, and men and women, with their dreams buried deep in darkened hearts, would scurry past in all their finery, never dreaming of what they might take from him, if they could see beyond his illusion. They would not even meet his eyes

or raise their heads while they sped past, and that was for the best.

#

It was winter in the city — which meant that snow and cold had driven the people from their places in the street by the turning of the night. Even the curb-dwellers were gone, huddled over steaming vents or sleeping in the vestibules of instant-money-machines when they could sneak past people who were not willing to gainsay their entrance.

The Genie was not troubled by weather, and in face welcomed the ice and the frost — it cleared the air of its summer haze, and made the streets more properly quiet. He leaned against the dirty bricks of an old store front on the Queen's street and tried to catch a glimpse of starlight through the spotty cloud cover.

He felt them before he saw them, and watched with remote curiosity as they walked past. They wore black leather with silvered bits around their wrists and collars; they had hair of various hues and shapes, and one carried a music-maker over his shoulder, although at the moment it was thankfully silent. They wore heavy boots, heavy coats, and grim expressions that were meant, he thought, to be smiles; it was hard to tell.

They were the angry youth, with stunted dreams of power that drove them to pettiness instead of greatness. Every life must have a purpose — so the teacher had said — but these man-boys were allowed none, and had grown wild in their frustration. In a bygone age, they would have been the best of soldiers, the best of followers. Here, in the now that the people of this world had chosen, they were wasted.

He did not fear them, and they did not fear him; but they, like their older counterparts, passed him by quickly, although he did not ask them for coin. He smelled their desires in the air; they hung like a cloud in a deadened sky. But they asked nothing of him, and as they drifted past, the shadows of their mutual companionship drawn tight about them, they were forgotten. Minutes drifted; snow, too cold to be pretty, fell wayward on the breeze.

A lone figure struggled along the icy cement, heavily coated and somewhat bent. He watched her as she walked, and knew her age by her awkward gait. He held out his hand in supplication; she met his eyes, and the lines of her face drew into a tight mask. She walked on, stopped and fumbled with her purse, and walked back. It was obvious, from the state of her worn grey coat and the rubber boots that she wore over swollen calves, that she was not among the city's wealthy, but she gave him the money that he'd asked for before turning west again without a word.

He looked at the coins in his palm; one was brass coloured, three copper and two silver. They jangled as he put them in his pockets, and vanished to the keeping place that only the Genies know. He settled back against the red-brick and waited, feeling the cold only because it was a curious thing.

When he heard the shout, he turned. The streets were empty, or almost empty, and the noise carried easily. Curious, he drifted westward, following the wind and the old woman's tracks.

She was there, and indeed it had been her voice that raised the shout; her words came again, less strong and less distinct. Surrounding her, like a pack of feral dogs, were the angry young men. Their voices were muted but darkly cheerful; violence was the taste of their dream.

He stopped when they became clear and distinct from their background, and watched. The young men chose not to see him, or chose not to care. But the old woman, struggling on all fours like a child learning to crawl, looked up. Blood, from a triangular cut in her forehead, dripped and fell into the folds of her skin; her glasses were shards and wire on the sidewalk, and it was obvious that she could not see clearly.

But her eyes found his nonetheless, widening and narrowing in turn. "Please," she whispered, as a foot caught her ribs. "Help me."

The young men turned and saw him. They looked back at the youth who was obviously the pack leader; he shrugged and spit to the side.

"Get lost."

The Genie tried to take a step backward, but found himself transfixed. Before he could even speak, his arms were in motion — a motion that was completely foreign and more natural than breath to a human. Smoke and light billowed up from the ground in shades of graduated red; a plume of fire touched the suddenly slack faces of the boys, responding in kind to their anger and their choice.

They screamed; he felt, distantly, their sudden pain and their desire to be free of it. But their wish had no power over him now, and they fled his fire and his magic.

The old woman lay against the thin ice, bleeding into the snow. She was no longer conscious. In horror, he drifted to her side and touched her; she was warm and solid. He lifted her gently, keeping the cold at bay, and stared in angry fascination at her broken face.

Years he had watched and kept his distance — and in one night, in a way that he did not understand, with no more control than the youngest of his kin had ever showed, he had made his choice; had found his one.

The pettiness of the wish that had cost a third of his life made him weep in the silence.

#

He knew where she lived, of course; she was his chosen and the knowledge could not be stopped from coming. Although age had made her heavy, the magic was now upon him — with a simple gesture and a bit of concentration, he, she and her forlorn purse were suddenly transported into the darkness of a small room. He could see, with perfect clarity, the outline of her bed; with a lift of two fingers, the sheets rose and dangled a moment in the air, waiting until he had removed her coat and boots. He laid her down, snapped his fingers, and caught the soft cloth rag that appeared, mid-air, before him.

Gently and slowly he began to wipe the drying blood from her face. She stirred, but did not wake, and when at last he'd finished his ministrations, he stood back, in a

darkened corner, to wait.

But the moon was out. Curious, he pulled back the shades and let light reveal — and shadow — the lines of the old woman's face. History marked her and aged her, and he viewed each wrinkle as if it were a chapter of a novel in a foreign, unknowable tongue.

He had known all his life that the chosen one would be special — but he had never dreamed, as he hid and avoided the making of the choice, that he would find an old, impoverished woman beautiful. What he felt he did not know, could not name — but the peculiar warmth that came he attributed to the beginning of his brief reign as an almost-god.

He was afraid, but thought that he finally understood why fear was not the only thing his brothers-in-thrall had shown.

#

She woke just after dawn — started beneath the sheets like a frightened animal and sat up with a cry. Then, as sunlight made the safety of her bed clear, she relaxed and fumbled at the small table beside her bed. Her fingers scrambled against the hard wood for a moment before he realized what she was searching for.

"They were destroyed," he said softly.

She froze. Very slowly she turned herself in the direction of his voice, her hands white now where they clutched at linen.

"You wanted help," he continued, in a steady voice. "I answered your call."

"W-what are you doing here?"

"Don't you remember?" He took a step towards her, and she shied back against the headboard, which creaked unsteadily in response. "You wished for help. I answered."

"How did you get in here?"

"By magic."

Her eyes were wide, troubled and undecided. He stayed in the corner, but thought to bring both of his hands, palm up, to show her. She squinted, and it became clear that she couldn't see them clearly. Minutes passed.

"You were attacked by young men," he began again, his own voice betraying confusion. "Last night. You gave me coins. Here." He called and they came, jangling in mid-air.

"You — you're the bum!" The lines on her face contorted and then relaxed into a frown of suspicion. "So — did you go through my purse to find out where I lived?"

"No." He shrugged. "I know where you live."

"How?" She was frightened again.

"I told you: Magic. You wished for help, and I answered that wish. You were unconscious; I returned you to your place of residence. You are my chosen

mistress, and I must grant two more of your wishes."

"Magic, is it?" She snorted, and tossed the bedclothing aside. "Did you take any money out of my wallet?" Without waiting for an answer, she stalked over to a large dresser and pulled open the slim, upper drawer.

At a loss for words, the Genie shook his head.

"Magic." She snorted again. "What will you young folk dream up next? I'm old, dammit, I'm not senile." So saying, she pulled a small, leather case out of the drawer, and from it, an old pair of glasses. These, she perched upon her nose with great authority.

"Well," she said, still squinting, "you don't look as bad as you did last night. And I'm grateful to you for saving my life." She came a little closer.

"But — but —"

"I can probably give you a little more money, for food or whatever. But you can't stay here."

"But — but Mistress, I *am* a magical creature! I'm — I'm the last of the Genies!"

"I don't care if you're the last of the Mohicans. You aren't staying here, and that's final!"

#

The horrible bitterness of the brew that the old woman called tea was a new experience — and not a pleasant one at that. He took the opportunity to mix cream and sugar with it until the entire liquid was a syrupy, horrid concoction. The scones and the lumpy butter were at least a little more familiar, and he played at eating them while he sat in one of the two rickety chairs at the tea table.

"Look, son, why don't you just tell me what your real name is?" She poured herself another half-cup of the unpleasant liquid, and busied herself making it palatable.

"I don't have a name," he replied. Then, although he knew the answer, he asked for hers.

"Mine?" She laughed. "Didn't read the old driver's licence very carefully, did you?" But her smile was good-humoured, and she hadn't snorted in at least two minutes. "I'm Mrs. Susan Clarkson. Sue." She buttered half a scone, and reached for the jam, before suddenly looked up to meet his eyes. "Don't you ever blink?" As usual, she gave him no time to answer. "I want to let you know that I'm grateful for what you did out there."

He shook his head, bemused.

"But I'd feel more comfortable if you'd admit to the truth."

It was pointless to argue the case, but he felt compelled to it. "Mistress —"

"Sue."

"Sue, then. I'm the last of my kin. I'm a Genie. I grant wishes. That's my

purpose in life. What can I do to prove it to you?"

She snorted; he knew she would. He had never heard of anyone disbelieving a power they had called upon before. One third of his life had been given and granted — and it earned him mockery and the oddest twinkle of a human eye.

"You can grant wishes, eh?"

"Yes."

"Could you make me young?"

"Yes."

"Could you make me rich?"

"Yes."

"Could you take me back to the town I grew up in?"

"Yes."

She laughed. "Could you make it summer, you funny little liar? Could you bring back the dead?" And at that, her face grew still, and her laughter became a heavy silence.

"Yes."

"That's enough, boy. It's not funny anymore." She pushed her tea aside with such force it splashed out onto the lace cloth beneath it.

"But I'm trying to tell you, Sue — I'm not joking. This isn't a game — it's my life. Test it, if you will. Make a wish, and watch it come true. Shall I bring back the dead for you?" He raised an arm, and felt a tingling warmth that made him dizzy.

"Bring back the dead?" She muttered. "To this? He's in heaven, he is. He's happy. You think he'd appreciate being dragged back?" She made a laugh of it, and hollow though it was, it was still strong. "Tell me something, Gene. If you can grant all of this stuff, you must know a lot."

"I do."

"Is there a heaven? Is that where he is?"

But of course the Genie could not answer.

#

He tried to tell her that he had no need for sleep, but wasn't surprised when she called him a liar. She shoved blankets into his arms, and made him pull apart the chair that she called a couch. To his surprise, it became a bed, of sorts. He had seen them often, but had never used one before. She told him to lie down, and because she was his mistress, and he her servant, he did as she ordered.

There, in the darkness, he stared at the ceiling and counted the broken springs beneath his back. He did not understand this odd woman, with dreams buried so deep they were hardly reachable at all. He didn't understand why she wouldn't believe him, because he was thrumming with magic and power so strong he felt that they must be visible. He closed his eyes, and tried to sleep.

When the lights returned, he knew it was not dawn, and sat up at once. Sue stood in the doorway between the two bedrooms, and stared down at him. "Gene," she said quietly, "do you ever get lonely?"

"Yes. All of my brothers are dead."

She held out a hand that shook in the light, and he understood that she meant him to take it. He did, and it trembled.

"I want you just to be with me," she said, and her eyes were filmy with longing and shame. "That's all, nothing more."

And the last of the Genies, with power that could have turned time or death at her behest, felt the second wish strike him deeply in what could have been his heart.

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He stayed with her, of course. And every day she began by telling him that he would have to leave soon. He attended her in silence, and grew used to her complaints, her amusements, and the strict adherence she had to daily routine. He helped her dress in the mornings, when she needed the help at all, and accompanied her everywhere. She got used to his help, and once in a while would entrust him with her purse.

But she thought him simple, that much was obvious. She taught him about money, taught him about food, taught him about clothing, and even tried to buy him some. She called him Gene; it was her joke, and her private name, and as she was Mistress, he answered to it.

She talked, slowly of her life, and he was amazed at the endless detail, the endless memories, that so short a time could produce; in the evenings, tea in hand, she would regale him with stories of a youth so long gone he could hear it only in the wistful tone of her voice.

"I could make you young again," he would say, but she would only shake her head and smile.

"And what would happen if I were young again, eh? What would happen if you made me young?"

"I would die," he replied.

She laughed wickedly. Always the laugh. She would slap him on the back, shoulder or thigh — whichever happened to be closest, and say, "Gene, you have made me young again!"

#

She took him to the ballet. She took him to the movies. She took him to the Salvation Army, and made him work with "real" bums, as she called them. She took him to church, where he met with a priest who talked about an after-life and heaven. Heaven was important to Sue, and she spoke of it with both longing and fear. He didn't understand it.

But he grew to understand her, and he was happy, in his way; as happy as he had ever been in the millenia that preceded these few years. He forgot what



loneliness was like.

But Genies are immortal until they make the last of their gifts; humans are not. One morning, just before the glint of dawn, he felt her shake in her sleep. She was hot; he had not realized how dry and tight her skin had become. When she woke, she coughed and shuddered horribly. He took her to the hospital.

There, he waited in a room that smelled of vile chemicals. People came and went and he ignored them; they had become unreal. Only Sue was real, and Sue was someplace beyond him. She had ordered him to wait, or he would have been at her side at once.

The doctor came out to greet him. "She's got pneumonia, Gene," she said quietly.

"Will she be all right?"

"I don't know. She's old."

"And if I made her young again?"

The doctor winced. "I think she'll be fine, though," she said lamely. "Why don't you go to her? She's asking for you."

The Genie didn't have to be told twice. With a gesture of crossed arms and a wrinkle of forehead, he was at her side. She was crossed and tied with tubes, or so it first appeared, and her skin was very pale.

"Sue," he said quietly, as he caught her hand in his. "What is this needle doing here? Shall I take it out?"

She laughed — and the laugh became a terrible cough. "No," she said at last, when she could speak clearly. "It's intravenous. Good for me."

"What can I do to help?"

"Nothing." She shrugged. "Nothing but stay. Do you mind? I told 'em you were my son. They won't make you leave." She coughed again; the rattle of phlegm at the back of her throat was constant. She was in pain, and that hurt him, although he didn't understand why.

"Sue — let me help you. Let me make you young."

The cough was laughter, he tried to tell himself that.

"Always on with wishes, aren't you?" But she caught his hand and held it tightly. "I wouldn't be young if it'd kill you, Gene. And you're what I wished for, you know. You've been a good friend. What'd the doctor say? Tell me the truth."

"She said she didn't know whether or not you would be all right."

"That's what I thought. She looked pretty grim." She was quiet for a moment; the rattle of her chest rose and fell. "But I don't mind being dead, you know."

The Genie nodded; he'd heard it all before, and he knew she found comfort in the belief. But he heard an edge of fear to the words, and rested his head against her chest — whether to comfort her or himself, he wasn't certain.

"I'm afraid of the dying," she whispered, as she stroked his hair with her free

hand. "I wish — I wish you could come with me, and stay with me, no matter where I went."

And the magic swelled up, recognizing in her words a true wish; it pushed at the inside of his skin, radiating heat, warmth, life; it rushed out through the pores, the eyes and mouth, and the tips of his fingers. He closed his eyes in fear and terror, pleasure and fulfilment, waiting the end.

The end did not come; there was no end waiting, and no loneliness either. He saw the shape of her death in her face, and felt peace. He caught both of her hands in both of his, and kissed her forehead gently. "Sue," he whispered, as tears trailed down her cheeks. "I *will* come with you and stay with you, forever."

She laughed, she always laughed.

She was laughing when they left that room together.