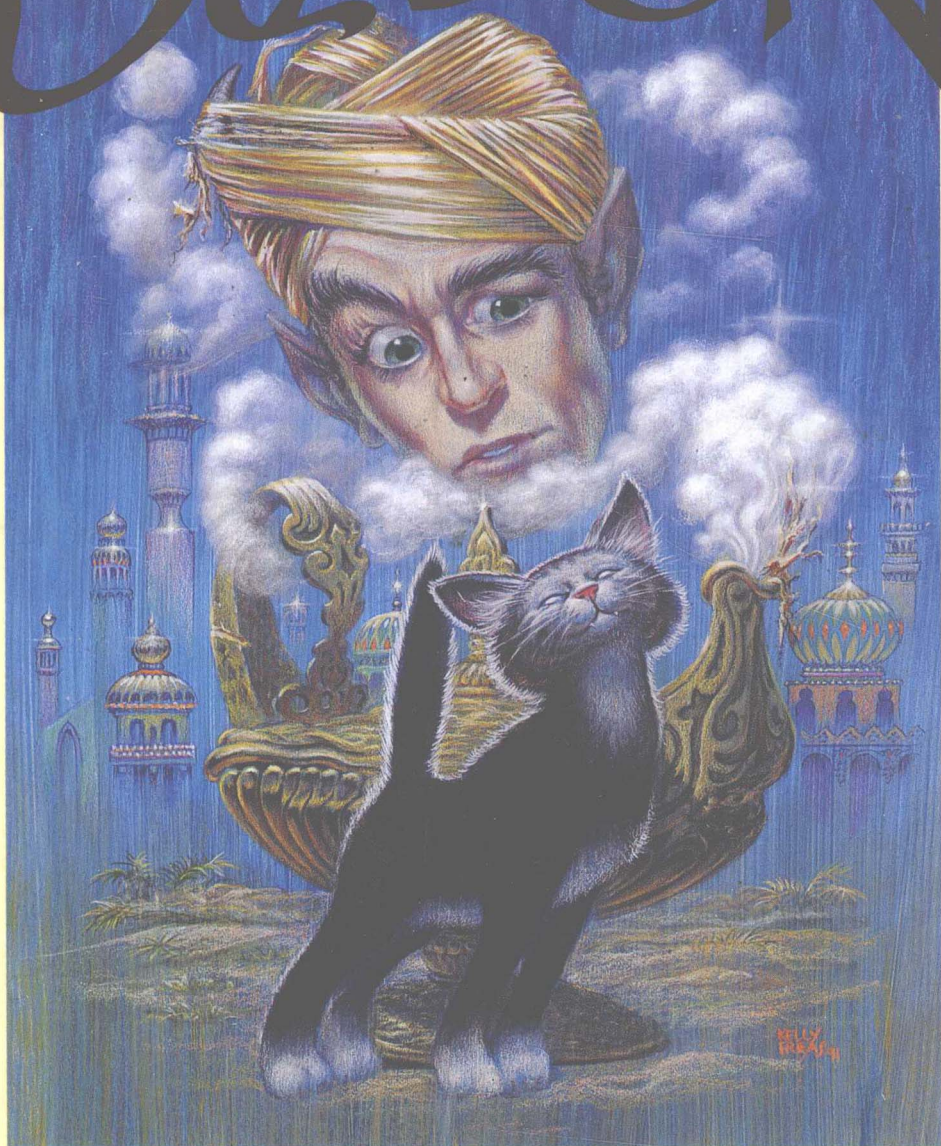


# WISHING SEASON



Esther M. Friesner

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# 1

**H**orrible in power, terrifying in face and form, mightier than all the armies of the earth, the genie Ishmael streamed from the gem of King Solomon's ring and hung the sky behind his awful person with curtains of fire and lightning. Twin scimitars gleamed in his mighty fists, blue smoke poured from his wide nostrils, and when he opened his mouth the tremendous roar of his battle cry struck the eagle from the sky and chased the lion back into his den as if he were a pussycat.

On the plains before the high city of Jerusalem, the great army of Unbelievers saw and trembled. Their swords were as many as the hairs of a young man's head, their spears keener than a fishwife's tongue, their chariots swifter than the changing of a young girl's desires or the passing of an old man's days. They had come in their uncounted ranks to pull down the shining walls of King Solomon's city. Now they were having second thoughts about the entire enterprise.

In the rear of the enemy host their king turned to one of his generals and said, "A fiend incarnate! You never told me Solomon had a fiend incarnate on his side, Nahash."

The general stroked his artistically curled beard and replied, "Mmmmmno. I don't think that is a fiend incarnate, Your Glorious Majesty. Our spies would have told us if Solomon had any of those lurking around the palace. I think it's an ogre unleashed."

The king was not used to being contradicted. "I wasn't

born yesterday, General. I know a fiend incarnate when I see one."

"Ever-Living Lord of All You Possess or Covet, much as I dislike arguing with Your Supreme Omnipotence, I really must point out that fiends incarnate never carry weapons. I have an uncle who is an evil sorcerer with whom I used to spend the weekend, so I know about such things."

"Do you." The king's eyes narrowed and a nasty light glinted in their depths. "Well, any fool with or without uncles knows that ogres are eaters of human flesh. *I* say it's *not* an ogre. And I further say that *you* shall go forth to the very front rank of my invincible army to confront the creature. If it eats you, it is an ogre, and I shall admit that you were right all along. If it only tears you limb from limb you will *have* to acknowledge that it is a fiend incarnate, just as I said, and you owe me an apology."

General Nahash paled and began to shake. "Majesty, I—I think it may indeed be a fiend incarnate, as you have so wisely observed. There's really no need to delay our attack over silly little experiments which are quite unnecessary to—"

"It's a genie," said the general's personal slave. He was a bright young man, an Israelite captured during a minor skirmish while the invincible army was making its way to Jerusalem from the seacoast. Now he leaned at his ease on the general's second-best shield, shaded his eyes against the sun, and studied the monster a little longer before adding, "Yes, I'm not mistaken; a genie. My lord King Solomon is master of many such fabulous creatures. Everyone who is anyone knows that."

"A genie, you say?" The slave spoke with such easy confidence that the king had to believe him. "And—ah—do you also perhaps know anything about the—er—habits of genies? As compared to ogres unleashed and fiends incarnate, I mean."

"Well, genies never eat human flesh—"

"Oh, good."

"—or rend you limb from limb—"

"Much better."

"—when it's so much simpler for them to reach down

and pluck your head right off your neck before you can say boo, just like a girl picking oranges."

The king swallowed hard and placed both hands lovingly around his own neck. The general did the same. The slave continued to observe the genie, who was now stalking back and forth before the first rank of the invincible army, bloody foam frothing from his lips and huge sparks of green fire coming out of his ears. He had grown a second set of arms, the better to display a pair of matched javelins which had appeared out of thin air. When he twirled them, the sky filled with an eerie wailing sound, as if ten thousand widows were weeping for the soon-to-die.

The general's voice was suddenly very dry and brittle. It broke easily when at last he asked, "If—if that's how genies like to do their killing—plucking your head off, like you said—then why—why is *that* one making such a spectacle of himself with those swords and javelins?"

"Showing off," the slave replied, cool as northern snow. "All genies, you see, are the slaves of my lord King Solomon. Some he keeps imprisoned in boxes, some in lamps, some in mystic talismans. That one there looks like the jewelry kind: magical rings, bracelets, ear-hoops, whatever you fancy. If you spent centuries inside a diamond or ruby big as a pigeon's egg, you'd be inclined to do things a little gaudily yourself. Besides, the greater a show he makes of your inevitable deaths, the more likely he is to impress my lord King Solomon and the more likely my lord King Solomon is to free him in gratitude. It's been known to happen."

The king had not absorbed everything that the slave had said. "Deaths?" he repeated. "Our *inevitable* deaths?"

"Sure as taxes," said the slave. He jerked his thumb at the genie, who had begun to growl. "Hear that? You're making him angry. When he plucks your head off your shoulders, he'll do it *slowly*."

"In all the gods' names, how am I making him angry?" the king cried out in anguish.

With yet another don't-you-know-*anything*? look, the slave explained: "It's the army that's doing it. And it's *your* army, Majesty. They're not retreating."

"Nor should they!" The general struck a proud pose.

"We have trained all who serve in Your Uncontested Magnificence's army to stand their ground, no matter what. Death is but for a moment, they are taught, but the wrath of their beloved and adored king can be made to last several months. They will not run, no matter how frightened they are."

"That's the problem," the slave said. "It would look *much* better for the genie if his appearance alone were enough to scare off the enemies of my lord King Solomon. Why, he'd be guaranteed his freedom if he did that! But if he has to put himself out to the point of actually *killing* all of you, one by one—well! It just isn't half as likely to impress his royal master."

One royal master was impressed. "Call them off!" the king shouted, his fingers digging into the eyes of the two carved gryphons that were the armrests of his portable throne. "Sound the trumpets! Give the word! Retreat, retreat, immediate retreat!"

The king's orders sent the general into a sputtering tizzy. "But—but—but, Your Peerless Splendor, what about the battle? What about the plundering of King Solomon's riches? What about the songs of praise that the court poets and musicians will write about us—I mean, you—when we return in triumph?"

A new growl from the genie's throat sounded like blackest thunder across the heavens. "Hear that?" asked the slave, studying his fingernails. "Now he's getting *madder*."

"*To the utmost pit with the battle, the plunder and the praise-songs, you fool!*" the king screamed, seizing the general by his beard and yanking out half the curls. "I said we get out of here!"

And so they did, although in the confusion of retreat the general misplaced his third-best sword, his second-best shield, and one newly acquired Israelite slave. That lucky slave was only the first to begin the plunder of the abandoned enemy camp.

A great cheer went up from the walls of Jerusalem when the people saw the invincible army fleeing for their lives. The great gates opened and the people raced out to join the slave in tearing apart the deserted tents, looking for valu-



ables. To reach the camp, they had to run between the legs of the genie, but not even the youngest among them showed any fear of passing so close to so great a monster. Like the newly freed slave, they knew that Ishmael was under the absolute control of their king and so was not to be feared while Solomon lived.

Finally, to the sound of trumpets, Solomon himself emerged from the city. He was carried on an ivory throne by eight princes. Four more carried upright silver poles that held a rich canopy of purple, crimson, and gold above the king's head. The throne, the poles, the canopy, and the princes were all liberally decorated with fabulous gems. As for the king, he wore no jewels except for a single ring whose giant ruby seemed dark and lifeless, as if the life had escaped from it.

Then Solomon raised his hands to his mouth and called: "Ishmael! Ishmael, my servant!"

The genie heard, and immediately began to shrink. Smaller and smaller he grew until he was only a little more than man-size. He no longer smoked or flamed, and his weapons had vanished along with that extra set of arms. He bowed before the king and said, "Behold, Your Majesty, how I have fulfilled your command." His voice was deep and rumbling, but nowhere near the bloodthirsty roar of earlier.

"You have, Ishmael." Solomon smiled. "And fulfilled it admirably. You have my thanks. Now, to celebrate this victory, I wish for you to bring here a royal banquet. Let there be tables of gold and silver covered with silk. Let there be meat and drink of every kind. Let there be enough so that every citizen of Jerusalem may come and be satisfied and come again when next he is hungry and—"

"No," said the genie.

King Solomon frowned. "'No'?" He repeated the word as if pretending he'd misheard it would change it.

Ishmael spread his powerfully muscled hands. "If Your Majesty will recall, when you first acquired me you wished for me to help with the construction of the Temple. Then you wished for me to fetch a suitable gift for the Queen of



Sheba as a souvenir of her visit to Jerusalem. Last of all, there was today's wish. That's three. And that's all."

King Solomon began to turn the color of his canopy, but Ishmael remained firm. "I told you the rules when you first called me out of the ring: Three wishes, and *no* using one of those three to wish for more wishes. You agreed, you wished, I complied, and now I am free."

King Solomon drummed his fingers on the arm of his ivory throne. "Even knowing that I possess powers to command the Armies of the Air to destroy you where you stand, you refuse me?"

The genie folded his arms. "You knew the terms. Fair is fair. And since you *do* have more than your share of magical beings to serve you, I think it would be selfish of you to fight over so small a thing as my freedom."

King Solomon considered this. "Fair is fair," he agreed. "And truth is truth. Behold! You value your freedom more than your existence, yet you value what is *fair* more than your freedom. Is it so?"

"Precisely, O Wisest of Earthly Monarchs." Ishmael bowed more elaborately this time.

"Oh," said King Solomon. He pulled the ruby ring from his finger. "You'll be wanting this back, I suppose."

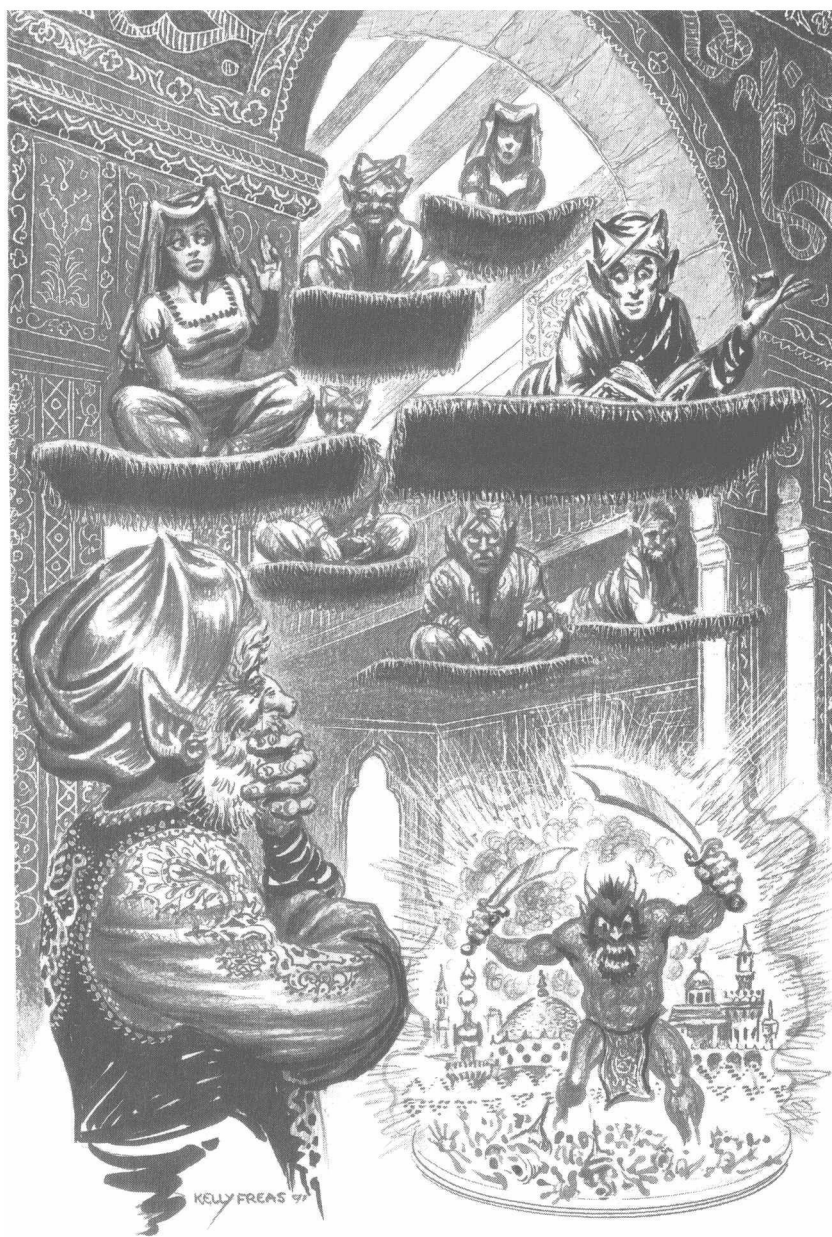
"If it is not too great an inconvenience, Majesty."

"No, no, not at all." He flipped the ring high into the air and remarked, "Catch."

The ring spun in the sunlight, a blur of blood-red and gold. As it tumbled against the bright blue sky, it slowed in its flight, climbing and climbing, never reaching the top of its arc, never beginning the fall back to earth. Its outline became fuzzy. Small glints of ruby-colored light broke away from the great jewel, filling the sky with free-falling flakes of brilliance. The lights multiplied until all that could be seen was a blizzard of scarlet brightness. King Solomon disappeared behind the sparkling veil, the towers of Jerusalem vanished, and the whole world was swallowed in a scarlet haze.

"Teacher! Teacher! I can't see what King Solomon is doing!"

Ishmael turned from the fading vision of past glory that



he had conjured up for his students and sighed. Really, this new generation of genies was quite without any appreciation for a really *artistic* ending.

With infinite patience he answered, "There is nothing more to see, Gamal. The vision has made my point. And what do you think that point is?" He raised his bushy gray eyebrows and regarded his unpromising pupil hopefully.

Gamal shifted uncomfortably on his flying carpet, making it buck and dip in mid-air. Although genies could change their looks, they could not change them *entirely*. An ugly genie could transform himself into a horse, but it would be an ugly horse. Gamal would make a *very* ugly horse. He was big and beefy, with a flat, sallow face that always seemed to be frozen in a sulky frown. He mumbled something which was not the correct answer.

There was a ripple of laughter from the other young genies in the classroom. It stopped abruptly when Gamal glared at them. He had a reputation as a cheater of mortals, a liar, and a brat, but mostly as a bully.

Only one of the assembled genies did not stop laughing at Gamal. This was because he had never started. He lay comfortably on a lush blue-and-green carpet that hovered in the corner of the classroom nearest to the garden window. Clearly he held himself to be above these petty schoolday squabbles. A little leather-bound book of poetry was in his hand. Without bothering to look up from it he said:

"Your point, O Teacher, is that no matter how high and mighty the mortal master we serve, our first duty is loyalty to the rules that limit our magic. Even if it means putting ourselves in danger." He raised his handsome face from the book and his honey-colored eyes twinkled with a smile. "After all, fair is fair."

"Well said, Khalid!" Ishmael could not hide the pride he felt for this, his best student. The lad was—what?—no more than a century and a half old, yet he had easily mastered every lesson of Advanced Harkening and Obedience, lessons it took other genies half a millennium to complete.

*If only he did not know how smart he is, Ishmael thought. Ah, well! I suppose he has good reason to be so vain.* A teasing voice whispered in the elder genie's ear, *Pride*

*goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.* "Oh, shut up, Majesty," he muttered to King Solomon's ghost.

A hand shot up in the back of the classroom and a sweet, musical voice said, "O Revered Teacher, the vision likewise shows us that no matter how high and mighty the mortal master we find, we must always be certain to state that he or she is entitled to three wishes, three wishes only, and none of these may be used to wish for more wishes."

Khalid sniffed. "I didn't think I needed to mention something so obvious, so . . . *elementary*." He went back to his poems.

Ishmael clapped his hands together and, to punish his uncalled-for sneering, Khalid's book vanished in a blaze of blue fire. After the necessary reprimanding frown at a startled Khalid, the teacher's smiles were all for the pretty genie maiden, Tamar. The lass was often Khalid's equal in the classroom, yet modest where he was smug. "You are right, Tamar," Ishmael said. "What is vital is often elementary. It was careless to have forgotten mentioning the *However* clause." He looked at Khalid meaningfully.

"I did not forget it," Khalid maintained. "I simply didn't think—"

"That's for sure." Gamal snickered nastily.

"At least Khalid didn't say that the point of our teacher's lesson was how to pluck the heads off mortals," Tamar snapped. Her flying carpet rose with her temper until her dark curls nearly brushed the domed ceiling.

*So much fire*, Ishmael mused as he observed Tamar's heated defense of Khalid. *Beauty and brains to match*. He clicked his tongue. *I wonder how many centuries will pass before she realizes that Khalid notices none of it!*

It was all very depressing, and Ishmael had one time-proven cure for sorrow. "For tomorrow, practice making blue smoke come out of your nostrils, bloody foam from your mouths, and green fire from your ears. Class dismissed!"

The young genies leaped from their carpets and bowed the moment that their feet touched the tiled floor. "HEARKENING AND OBEDIENCE," they all cried as one, and van-

ished. This time only five of them neglected to make their hats disappear too.

Ishmael chuckled over the forgetfulness of youth as he gathered up the castoff turbans and veils. A snap of his fingers sent them flying back to their owners. Then he went out into the garden to sit beside the fountain pool, feed tidbits to the goldfish, and forget the quirks and failings of his students.

"They will learn better once they have cut their teeth on the real world," he told the fat fish. They rolled their goggly black eyes at him, opening and shutting their mouths, saying nothing. "I only hope it comes in time for Khalid. If his head gets any bigger, soon he won't be able to get it through the classroom door. He's certainly bright enough to enter the wishing business—an even chance whether he or Tamar will be the first to graduate, in fact. Once out there, he'll find out that book-learning doesn't give you all the answers for dealing with humans. Yes, after the first encounter with a mortal, everything falls right into perspective."

Ishmael grew suddenly thoughtful. A notion had lodged itself in his mind, and the longer it stayed, the more attractive it became. "Yes," he said to himself. "Yes, of course, that might be just what he needs. Khalid!"

"You summoned me, O Teacher?" Khalid was seated beside the older genie almost before Ishmael had finished shouting his name into the air. He looked as cool as if he had been there all along.

Ishmael beamed and patted his best student on the shoulder. "Khalid, my lad, I have good news for you. . . ."

## 2

“—**I**nto a *lamp*? Oh, Khalid, that’s wonderful!” Tamar clapped her hands together and gazed at him with undisguised admiration. As Ishmael had already observed, Khalid remained entirely unaware of the genie maiden’s affection.

“Yes, isn’t it?” he replied, basking in the congratulations of his fellow students. Ishmael’s pupils had gathered at their usual after-school spot to sip sweet sherbet drinks and watch the unicorn races. Ever since Khalid’s announcement, however, no one paid any attention to the race. “He said it’s the custom to assign new genies to rings, but because I show such promise, he’s lending me his very own lamp for a trial run. If I succeed in correctly granting wishes to one human being, I go straight into a lamp of my own.”

“Straight into a stewpot’s where you belong,” Gamal grumbled. The big genie’s face darkened with hate as he saw how Tamar still hung onto that obnoxious Khalid’s every word. *Brains aren’t everything*, he thought bitterly. *In a fair battle of magics I could take that pretty little rosebud Khalid and snap his stem in two. And in a battle of magics the way I like them, there’d be nothing left of him but a few worm-eaten petals and a gooey black smudge.*

Tamar sighed. “I wonder how long it’ll be before I earn my own lamp? I’ve heard those rings can be so crowded, hardly any storage space, and no room at all to raise a family . . .” She let her voice drift off suggestively, her eyes on Khalid.

“Oh, I’m sure Master Ishmael thinks you’re bright enough to be assigned to a brass bottle, not a ring,” Khalid

said, missing any and all hints Tamar might send his way. "Well, I must be off. The lamp awaits." He made the briefest of bows to his classmates and began to dematerialize.

"I hope your first master's kind!" Tamar called after him.

"Why shouldn't he be?" Khalid responded. "All mortals are pretty much alike."

"What? All mortals *alike*?" Tamar's eyes were wide. "Not by a long shot! Weren't you in class when we studied—? That's right, you weren't. Khalid, wait, you really ought to know! Why, there's males and females, tall and short, clean-faced and whiskered, bald and hairy, hair curled or straight, hair, eyes, *and* skin in so very many colors you can't begin to count them, some whose eyes cannot see, some whose ears are incapable of hearing, some who run, some who cannot even crawl—"

"Yes, yes, I *know* all that." Khalid's body was mist from the waist down. The vanishing effect climbed swiftly up until his last words before it reached his mouth were, "You'd think I wouldn't know a mortal when I saw one!"

Khalid lay scrunched up within Ishmael's lamp and wondered how his teacher had managed to squeeze into a ring. It was not only cramped in the lamp, it was boring. The worst part was not knowing how long his captivity might last. Senior genies did not have to inhabit their lamps at all times. Only junior-grade genies had to stay within the objects containing them, until they had proved themselves to their elders. They could not afford to take the chance of being so far away that they missed a summons. Experienced genies like Ishmael had senses so trained that they might fly to their proper places the moment some lucky mortal found the lamp and rubbed it. Until then, they were free to enjoy the gardens, orchards, palaces, and ten thousand other pleasures of the genie homeland.

The result of this arrangement was that no senior genie knew where in the mortal world his lamp was. For all Ishmael could tell, this lamp he'd sent Khalid to inhabit was at the bottom of the sea, or buried in the ruins of an earthquake. On the other hand, it might be sitting in some mer-



chant's shop, or already in the possession of the mortal destined to rub it and get the surprise of his life.

"May it be so," Khalid muttered to himself. He squirmed against the cold metal walls. "Master Ishmael is a great teacher, but I don't care for his taste in furnishing a lamp. When I get one of my own, I shall ask for something a little more cushiony and comfortable." He worked a bad cramp out of his right arm. "If I ever get this stupid assignment done and get my own lamp, that is."

All at once, a prickly, electric buzzing ran up Khalid's spine. His eyes flashed. A joyful grin spread itself wide across his face. There was no mistaking what was happening. Even though the elder genies claimed they could not put the feeling into words, no genie since the dawn of time ever mistook *that* sensation for anything but what it was: Someone was rubbing the lamp.

Khalid straightened his turban, tugged a wrinkle out of his silk trousers, decided he would come out in a puff of blue smoke, then changed his mind and made it orange. The tug of a magical summons drew him from the lamp before he could switch smoke colors a third time. Surrounded by orange clouds, he soared upward. Sunlight from the lamp's spout dazzled his eyes. He burst out into the fresh air with a happy shout, accompanying his big entrance with a modest thunderclap.

The scrawny, brown-striped alley cat stared up at him and sneezed.

"Hail, O master!" Khalid made his fanciest bow, eyes lowered all the way. It was only good manners. "Name your wish, for I will grant it. Yes, three wishes and no more I will grant you. *However!* not one of these may ask for more wishes. If these terms please you, then by them I am your slave." The last words were uttered in Khalid's deepest voice, for they were the most potent of spells and bound the genie utterly to his newfound master.

The alley cat sneezed again from all the smoke, then rubbed its mangy chin against the lamp again.

Hearing no word from his new master, Khalid looked up. He saw that he was in a dark, smelly, very cluttered place. There were no alleys in the genies' world, nor rubbish

heaps, nor cats. The smallest animal Khalid had ever seen was an infant dragon, and that was almost as big as he.

*Ah, he thought. It seems that Tamar was quite right. These mortals do come in a bewildering lot of shapes and sizes. This one is a lot smaller than those Master Ishmael showed us in his visions. His whiskers are not as tidy as that General Nahash's, and—What is that long thing curled around his feet?*

Khalid squatted down and repeated his offer of three wishes to the cat. He still got no answer and became worried. *Perhaps I should have listened more carefully to what Tamar told me of mortals, he thought. The week that Master Ishmael taught about them, I missed class. I vanished so fast during disappearing practice that I made a draft and caught cold from it. I meant to ask Tamar for the lessons, but—*

The alley cat had no idea of the thoughts passing through the young genie's mind. His own mind was full enough, although his stomach was not. He was not a fighter, and he did not find life in the alleys pleasant. Although he could not speak, his heart and mind yearned strongly and constantly for some food, some time to give his fur a proper washing, and a home with someone to love him. He couldn't tell a genie from a human any more than Khalid could tell a human from a cat. Heart full of hope, he went up to Khalid and rubbed against his hands, skinny body shaking with purrs.

"Master?" The genie was bewildered.

"Meow," said the cat.

" 'Meow'," Khalid repeated thoughtfully. "I know I was in class when we learned all the tongues of mortals. That word sounds *almost* Chinese, but the accent is wrong. Hmm. Perhaps this human is like one of those Tamar mentioned—having eyes but unable to see. He cannot speak! And see how he is so weak, he must support himself on all fours, like a unicorn. Oh, Master, Master, if you cannot speak, how can you ever make your wishes? And since I have already bound myself to serving you, how can *I* ever grant them and get out of here?" Feeling very sorry for himself, Khalid sat