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by Kim Fielding

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THREE WISHES

“What do you love?”

Xolani startled violently and fumbled the small glass bottle. He caught it with desperate grace. Only as an afterthought did he draw his sword from its sheath. “Wh-who are you?” he stuttered, hearing the fear in his own voice.

The man before him smiled. “Who do you think?” He was naked save for heavy iron bands around his neck, wrists, and ankles. Aside from a thick mop of dark curls on his head

and his heavy eyebrows, he was completely hairless, his skin so pale it glowed brighter than the moon. He should have been cold in the autumn air—Xolani had been shivering in his thin cloak—but the man stood quite still, his powerful arms spread slightly as if to demonstrate that he was unarmed.

Xolani had thought he'd used up all his terror over the past months, the fear flooding him at each battle and then leeching away like poisoned wine. But he was wrong, because now his bowels felt loose and watery

while his heart raced and his tongue caught in his dry mouth. “G-g-ghost?”

The man chuckled, although his glass-green eyes shone with sorrow. “You are so young to be haunted. No, I am no ghost. See?” He stepped closer and pressed his fingertips to the hand that grasped the sword so tightly.

The touch was real and very warm—so much so that Xolani’s grip faltered and the sword tumbled to the soft ground. The heat traveled from that hand up his arm and

through his body. It pooled low in his belly, transforming the churning there to something quite different but no less frightening.

“What are you?” Xolani whispered.

“A genie, of course. You should know. You summoned me.” He pointed at the bottle in Xolani’s hand.

Xolani had kicked it as he walked his rounds. It had been hard against his sandaled toe, and at first he’d assumed it was a stone. But for some reason he’d felt obliged to bend and pick it up

and then to hold it near a torchlight so he could see it better. The bottle was quite plain, its glass opaque from great age. He'd rubbed the dirt away with his thumbs—and the man had appeared from nowhere.

“A genie?”

“Yes.” The genie executed a deep, graceful bow. “And you hold my prison, which makes you my master. You know the tales. I am obliged to grant you three wishes.”

“Wishes,” Xolani echoed stupidly. He retrieved and sheathed his sword without

paying much attention to his actions. He didn't believe in magic. Genies were only tales told to children around an evening fire, perhaps an inducement for them to forget their empty stomachs and dream of better lives. And wishes... whatever wishes Xolani once possessed had withered like drought-stricken fruit, had dried up and turned to dust.

The genie waited patiently. He was beautiful. Strong features, muscular chest, narrow hips, plump soft sex. Xolani now knew how a moth must feel just before

it flew into the flame. He couldn't speak, not even to stutter.

“What do you love?” the genie repeated. “Tell me and I can give it to you. Wealth? I can get you sacks of gold. Power? You could turn from a lowly foot soldier to a general, even a prince. Adulation? I can make you a hero. The people will sing ballads about you long after your death. But I must warn you. Magic nearly always comes with a price, and I cannot say what yours will be.” He stroked his long fingers against his collar.

The wisest thing, Xolani

thought, would be to throw the bottle away, to turn his back on this apparition, to run to his captain and tell him that a strange being had appeared at the edge of the encampment. But Xolani did none of these things. He didn't understand his inability to act—comprehension would come to him much later, a bright bit of clarity among fevered dreams. He'd lived so many months without beauty or hope that he couldn't walk away from it now.

He lifted the bottle, held it in his palm, and stared at it. Then

he turned his gaze to the genie.

“What’s your name?”

The genie looked astonished—an expression Xolani guessed he didn’t wear often.

And then the creature smiled so widely that he resembled the sun more than the moon, and perhaps a little of the sadness in his eyes faded away. “Nobody has ever asked me that before.” He gave another bow, even deeper than the first. “I am Tendaji.”

“Hello, Tendaji. I’m Xolani.” His superiors and his comrades called him by his clan name, but he wanted Tendaji to know his

given name instead.

“It is a pleasure, Xolani. And how may I serve you? What do you love?”

Like a magic spell, the repetition of the question unlocked the answer in Xolani’s heart. “Home. I love my home.”

Tendaji looked toward the center of the encampment, where a large cluster of tents hid hundreds of sleeping soldiers. Even this far away, the reek of human waste and unwashed bodies was strong, and the night’s silence was torn by the harsh cries of nightmares. There

had once been a village here, but Xolani didn't know its name; and in any case the huts had long ago been burnt to the ground, leaving nothing but hearthstones to mark where they had been.

“Your home is far away,” Tendaji said. This time he stroked the outside of Xolani's wrist. His touch was soft and tender, yet it scalded Xolani's soul.

“Yes,” Xolani answered.

“And you have not seen it for a very long time.”

Xolani looked steadily into the genie's eyes. “I won't see it again.” He'd known that truth

since the day he'd marched away, long before blood had stained his tunic and his dreams.

“But you can,” Tendaji said quietly. “If you wish for it. If you are willing to pay the price.”

Xolani closed his eyes. If his captain caught him like this, he would be punished. He was meant to be guarding the camp, keeping his eyes open for enemies. But he needed a moment to test the depth of his desires. When he looked at Tendaji again, Xolani was certain. “I'm willing. I wish to go home, Tendaji.”

The smile he received in return was warm and grateful and sad. Tendaji closed the small distance between them, grasped Xolani's shoulders, and brushed their lips together, feathery-light. He was a little taller than Xolani, but not much. He smelled exactly like the stew Xolani's mother made when the harvest was good: sweet potatoes, onions, ginger, cinnamon, and chilies. Xolani hadn't tasted that dish since he was a child.

Tendaji kissed him again—somewhat more firmly—and took a step back. “I am yours to

command,” he said.

And then he disappeared.

Xolani remained still for a long time, feeling the cold slowly seep back into his body. At long last, he slipped the bottle into the small pouch at his waist, and he continued with his rounds.

#

The morning dawned earlier than seemed possible. Xolani had obtained only a few hours of uneasy sleep after his night-watch duty ended, and even those hours were filled with

dream fragments about flames and glass and blades. He woke up groggy and slightly disoriented, and once he arose, he found himself stumbling into the other men and murmuring apologies.

But the war didn't care whether soldiers slept well, and the company quickly dismantled their camp and set to marching. Xolani didn't know where they were going, but that wasn't unusual. Nobody bothered to tell men like him what the plans were. Men like him marched when and where they were directed, stopped when they

were told to, drew their weapons and set to killing when the battle cry was raised.

The sky was gray that morning, and a sharp wind cut through Xolani's clothing. His scabbard was heavy at his waist. As usual, he tried to turn off his mind, or at least disconnect it from his body. When he was a boy, just as he'd heard tales of genies, he'd also heard about men and women who could shift from human shape to animal. If he were such a creature, he would want to be a bird. Nothing grand like an eagle, but

something small and bright. He'd fly himself home and live in the fruit trees outside his village, singing to delight the passersby.

He was imagining opening a tamarind pod with his beak when the horns blared their battle cry.

Every fight was like the others. Shouts and screams. The scent of blood, sweat, urine, and shit. Flurries of movement almost too fast to track, his own body moving without conscious will, his sword heavy in his hand. His mouth tasting of dust.

He tripped over the body

of a fallen comrade, and before he could scramble back to his feet, a man with wide brown eyes swung a heavy club at him. The club was aimed for Xolani's head, but he managed to roll slightly and it connected with his leg instead. He was struck by a pain so intense and pure that time stood still and the entire world dropped away.

This is what dying is, he thought, and was surprised by the clarity of his mind. He wasn't scared. Only startled, like when he used to wander through the forest and a flushed bird would

burst from the brush. He wondered whether anyone would grieve for him.

He landed back in the world with a lurching jolt. Hot blood sprayed his face. The brown-eyed man looked down with astonishment at his own chest, where the point of a sword had emerged as if by magic. He dropped his club, which landed on Xolani's arm but didn't hurt. And then the man collapsed directly onto Xolani's torso like a lover seeking an embrace. "It's all right," Xolani said to him. "I will mourn you."

And although the brown-eyed man shuddered, gurgled, and was still, Xolani kept on breathing.

#

As he lay recuperating in the healers' tent, what had bothered him worse than the agony of his ruined knee was worry over how he'd survive if he returned home. The healers had been kind and compassionate, and they'd done their very best for him. Because they cared for him so well, he hadn't lost the

leg. But many weeks had passed before he could walk again, and even then he could only hobble with the aid of a stick, as if he were a very old man.

One of the healers had taken special notice when she learned he had no family to support him. She was a round little woman named Bolanle, with gray hair that escaped from its bonds no matter how often she tied it back. Even though she was very busy, she found a little time each day to sit at his bedside and coax him into conversation. Most evenings she read to him from

her small collection of books.

“Were you a farmer?” she asked one night when the ache in his leg kept him from sleeping.

“Yes.” He had a little plot of land he’d no longer be able to sow and a small stand of fruit trees he could no longer climb for harvest.

She gave his hand a gentle squeeze. She didn’t pity him—he wouldn’t have been able to stand that—but she cared about him and felt his sorrow. “And the rest of your village? Everyone farms?” she asked.

“Everyone.”

“Have you a healer? A scribe?”

He shook his head against the pillow. “There are both in the nearest town, but that’s many hours’ walk from home. We’re too small.”

“Then I shall teach you to read. And when you can read, I shall give you a book full of remedies and cures. If your neighbors no longer have to walk to that town, if instead they can visit you to have a document written or their ailments nursed, I’m sure they’ll keep you well fed.”

It was an astonishing gift.

He had no way to repay her other than his deep gratitude and his diligent study. By the time he was well enough to travel home, he could read and write passably well.

The village didn't look much different from the dozens of little hamlets he'd seen as he traveled, but it possessed the singular attractions of being undamaged by war—and being home. It was smaller than Xolani remembered, even though now—with his limp—it took him much longer to cross.

He'd never had any close friends, but his neighbors greeted him nicely. While they might have clucked their tongues over his leg, they were pleased with his newly gained skills. As Bolanle had predicted, he was in no danger of starving. People came to him with their scrapes and fevers, or with letters from distant relatives, and when they left he had fresh bread and vegetables, meat and fruit. Sometimes they brought him other gifts as well, such as a new pot to heat his dinners or a colorful blanket to lay across his pallet. His cupboard was full, and

his little hut was much better furnished than before the war.

Surprisingly, some of the villagers came to him with something else as well: marriage offers.

Before the war, he'd been quiet and unremarkable. Women had barely noticed him, which had been just as well, considering he found his own gaze straying to men. But now there were so few young men left in the village that the women were willing to overlook flaws such as social awkwardness and a crippled leg.

At first, Xolani tried to put

them off by pretending not to notice their flirtations. But when their offers became considerably more direct, he grew desperate. He fabricated an uncomfortable insinuation that his knee wasn't the only body part ruined in the war. That ended the proposals but also engendered pitying looks from women and men alike. He decided he was willing to endure that much.

Even a heavy price may be worth it, he would think sometimes, glancing at the glass bottle he kept on a shelf.

Even though it was small,

his village was a good place to be. In the mornings, he hobbled past the field he used to farm and into the forest. He would find a comfortable place to sit—a fallen tree or a large stone—and watch birds and other small creatures go about their business.

Sometimes he'd sit for hours just to watch a spider spin her web or a line of ants carry food back to their nest, because after all the death he'd witnessed, any life—every life—seemed precious and good.

Before the war, he hadn't exactly been happy, but he'd

been content. Now he was grateful—for having survived when so many did not, for having been given so much by Bolanle, for having a comfortable home and a full belly and neighbors who valued him.

Sometimes he thought of the brown-eyed man, and he would offer a prayer to the gods, hoping the man had found peace.

And sometimes, when the night was long and cold, he thought of Tendaji and the warmth of his kiss.

A year passed, and another, and more. The war

finally ended. A few soldiers returned with haunted eyes and broken bodies. Xolani didn't spend his evenings with them, gathered around a fire, drinking, although they would have permitted it. Battles still haunted his dreams as thoroughly as they had crippled his leg; he didn't want more reminders of them. He spent his evenings alone in his hut, reading, writing letters he'd later burn, listening to the soothing night sounds.

One bright autumn day there was a wedding in the village—the groom so young he'd not

been conscripted, the bride not much older. Their ages were such that Xolani could have been their father—if he'd ever had children. They were both radiant, and although the harvest was complete and the earth was settling in for its winter sleep, their joy spoke of new beginnings and burgeoning life. Xolani joined in the feasting and wished them both well. But even as the rest of the village celebrated, he returned to his hut and retrieved the glass bottle from the shelf.

It was dusty because he hadn't dared to clean it. But now

he took a soft cloth and polished the glass, and when it gleamed in the firelight he rubbed it with his thumbs. "Tendaji?" he whispered. "Are you there?"

And suddenly, Tendaji was.

He looked the same as before: naked, chained, beautiful. "What do you need?" he asked.

"Sometimes I'm sure I imagined you," Xolani replied.

"But here I am, real."

Tendaji touched Xolani's hand, his caress as hot as ever. His smile faded, however, when he looked at the walking stick in Xolani's other hand. "Your leg will always

pain you. I am sorry.”

“I’m not.”

“What do you need, Xolani?”

But Xolani didn’t answer him at once. Instead, he hobbled over to the corner of his hut where he kept his book on healing, as well as the other few books he’d managed to collect over the years. “Look at this, Tendaji. You didn’t just give me home—you gave me a treasure. And you know what else? My neighbors consider me a learned man. They come to me now for advice. I have power and

adulation. Probably nobody will compose any ballads about me, but that's all right. I have so much already."

Tendaji nodded slowly.

"You did not ask for wisdom, but it seems you have found that as well. I envy you. I was a fool for many centuries."

"So one bad leg was a pretty cheap price, considering."

He set the bottle back on the shelf and returned to the center of the hut. Usually the night air leaked in around the door, lending a distinct chill to this part of his home. But with

Tendaji standing close by, Xolani felt as if he were basking in midsummer sunshine. This time he reached over and settled his palm on Tendaji's upper arm. The genie's skin was smooth and soft.

“What do you need?”

Tendaji rasped.

“I've dreamt of family. Of a lover and children. Grandchildren someday. But I think that's... too big a thing to ask for, isn't it?”

The sorrow in Tendaji's eyes became so deep as to overflow. A tear trickled down his cheek until Xolani rubbed it away with his thumb. It was warm, like

the honeyed tea Xolani liked to drink on cold nights. “I am sorry,” Tendaji said. “My powers are not limitless. I could try to grant that wish, but I am afraid the price would be too dear.”

“I understand. I’m not a greedy man. I can wish for something smaller but still valuable, and I’ll happily pay the price.” Xolani drew Tendaji closer—so close their chests touched—and whispered in his ear. “I wish for one night in the arms of a man I care for. Just one night.”

Tendaji remained very still for a moment before drawing

back. In his gaze, Xolani saw his own loneliness reflected. “Who is this man?” he asked very carefully.

Xolani had to chuckle. “Well, maybe he’s not a man in the strictest sense. But he’s definitely male.”

Stunned comprehension dawned on Tendaji’s face. “You wish for *me*?”

“For tonight. And only if you wish it too.” He ran a finger along Tendaji’s iron collar. “You said I’m your master, but I’d never compel you to do this against your will.”

With a small sob that was strangely human, Tendaji pulled him close. “I assure you most heartily. This is not against my will.” He kissed Xolani—but not chastely as he had before. This time the lip pressure was more urgent, and Tendaji gently slid his tongue into Xolani’s mouth. Then he moved his head away slightly. “Are you sure that I am worth the price?”

“I’m certain.”

“Then I am yours to command.” They kissed again, deeply, deliciously. Tendaji’s mouth was like a furnace and he

tasted of spicy stew.

When the kissing became almost too much, Xolani stepped away, but only so he could disrobe. Eyes shining, Tendaji watched. Living as a soldier meant Xolani had seen many men nude, and he'd occasionally even seen one with a morning erection. But no man had ever looked at him the way Tendaji did now, and Xolani had never before felt the urgent desire to touch another man's hard cock, to feel it and taste it.

"I'm a virgin," Xolani admitted. Not ashamed, exactly,

but wanting to explain his slight hesitancy and the fumbling that was sure to follow.

Tendaji merely smiled. “Then let me show you how beautiful two bodies can be together.”

He kept his promise.

With Tendaji’s gentle guidance, Xolani’s tentativeness soon disappeared. He explored every bit of the genie’s body with fingers and mouth and was explored as thoroughly in return, until they knew each other better than Xolani knew his village. It was as if he had discovered a new

home. And he felt wealthy with Tendaji to himself for so many hours, powerful with his ability to make Tendaji moan and arch and shudder, adulated with every touch Tendaji gave him.

By the early morning hours, Xolani was sweaty and spent. He curled up in Tendaji's embrace and wrapped his arms around the warm body. It was like being huddled with a soft, fragrant flame. Tendaji kissed him tenderly and called him sweet names in languages Xolani had never heard of, and as they drifted off to sleep, Xolani knew

what it was to be happy.

#

When Xolani woke up, his arms were empty. Tendaji was gone. But the bedding still smelled of him, still held a bit of his warmth. And the little glass bottle still stood on its shelf.

Xolani went about his usual business that day and the next. A father brought his little girl who was coughing, and Xolani told him how to prepare a poultice and a soothing tea. A woman dictated a letter to her

sister, who lived four days' journey away, on land that had once been torn by war. Xolani limped out to the forest, sat on his favorite fallen log, and watched the small creatures prepare for winter.

Although he knew better, he almost thought that he'd avoided paying a price this time. He suffered no injuries, and his leg was neither better nor worse than before. His cupboards remained as full as ever. He even received a new book—payment from a traveler who'd received a bad burn a few days earlier and

was treated with healing ointment and clean bandages.

But when Xolani lay down in his bed three nights after summoning Tendaji, wrapping himself in blankets that carried Tendaji's scent, he knew the price. Before, he had yearned for physical contact and the strong arms of a lover, and he'd wondered if lovemaking was as wonderful as everyone claimed. Now... now he knew what it felt like to lose himself in another's embrace and to fall asleep breathing in another man's exhalations. He knew what

feeling wanted and cherished was like. He knew the sound of his name cried out by his lover in ecstasy. And he knew he'd never have those things again.

It was a terrible loss—like watching his village burn to the ground or seeing his limb amputated. But he could bear that loss because he had no choice. And, he knew, it was worth it. For one night he'd had everything he needed, everything he desired, and how many people could say as much?

#

Three years later, the autumn was unusually cold. People huddled by their fires, going out only when necessary. A great many of the villagers came to Xolani for cough and fever remedies. The elderly and those with bodies battered by war asked for relief from their many aches. Xolani did what he could for them and was repaid with more food than he could eat. But at night he sat alone in his hut with his blankets around his shoulders, dreaming of warmer days.

One evening he decided to cook his mother's stew. Although he'd never done so before, he had all the ingredients, and he was certain nothing else would satisfy his hunger. He chopped the onions and sweet potatoes, plopped them into broth, and added cinnamon and chilies and ginger. Although a fragrant scent soon filled his hut, the meal wouldn't be ready for several hours. So he moved about restlessly, tidying things, sorting through the stacks of stuff that seemed to accumulate in corners as if by magic. Sometimes he

paused to massage his aching knee.

He was in the midst of dusting when he got to the glass bottle. Over the years he had gazed at it often. Sometimes in the spring he set flowers in front of it, as though it were an altar. He'd often thought of summoning Tendaji again and wishing for another night. But he wasn't sure he could ask for the same thing twice. And even if he could, he wasn't sure he could pay the price. His heart still felt raw and empty whenever he thought of the aftermath of that single night.

The only true joy in his life was the knowledge that he could summon Tendaji once more. He didn't know if he could survive once that final wish was spent.

But tonight he took the bottle gingerly into his hands. It was so small, and Tendaji was so large. What did he do during the long years of his captivity, all alone in his prison, naked except for his chains? Didn't his wishes matter too?

And Xolani knew what his last wish must be.

A tenderly as he might stroke a lover's skin, Xolani

rubbed his thumbs against the ancient glass. “Tendaji. Tendaji, please. Come see me once more.”

Without causing so much as a ripple in the hearth-fire, Tendaji appeared.

Oh, he was magnificent. Paler than the whitest paper, hair curly and soft like a young lamb's. His body was powerful, and his face could inspire a sculptor or painter. But his glass-green eyes were somber, and the iron cuffs were an abomination. “What do you want, Xolani?” he asked. Hesitantly, as if he feared the worst.

“I’ve missed you,” Xolani said. “I never thought I could yearn for something more than home, but I do. I long for you every minute.”

“I am very old, you know. Once I possessed kingdoms, but I lost them. I lost even myself.” Tendaji raised an arm and looked at his metal cuff. The iron was so dark it seemed to absorb all the light in the room—even Tendaji’s own glow. He let his arm fall to his side. “I lost hope. I lost everything. But when I sit in my bottle and think about what I don’t have, only you come to

mind.”

“I’m sorry then. That I made you spend that night with me.”

Tendaji smiled. “I am not sorry. And you made me do nothing—you let me act of my own free will. And for that I will always be grateful.” He bowed deeply, as if Xolani were a king. Then he straightened. “What do you want?”

Xolani... wanted many things. More books. A hut that wasn’t so drafty. Friends to laugh with. And when it came to Tendaji, he wanted everything.

More than the genie could give.
He wanted forever.

But he wasn't a greedy
man.

He stepped close and
hugged Tendaji, holding him so
tightly they were almost one
body. He kissed Tendaji's cheek,
his ear, the tender skin of his
neck right above the collar.

Xolani was crying, although
he didn't want to, and he could
feel Tendaji's hot tears on his
skin as well. His throat wanted to
close up so tightly that he
couldn't say a word.

But Tendaji said, "What do

you want?”

“More than anything, Tendaji. For any price I have to pay. I want you to be free.”

Tendaji stopped breathing. Very slowly, he drew his head back so he could look into Xolani's face. “You could wish for anything, beloved. You could have the world, if you want it. This is your final wish.”

“I don't want the world,” Xolani replied with conviction. “I want to know you're free. **That** is my final wish.” He kissed Tendaji firmly. “For the last time, you are mine to command.”

There was no name for the sound Tendaji made. It seemed born in despair, enriched by pain, and yet it blossomed into something else—a cry of exultation. He kissed Xolani back, very swiftly, and then took a few stumbling steps away. It was the first time Xolani had seen him move with anything but grace.

And then the glow within Tendaji's body increased. It wasn't moonlight any longer; it wasn't even a flame. It was hot as molten metal, hot enough to scorch everything. Xolani thought he might be blinded, yet he

couldn't look away. So he saw Tendaji smile broadly and his eyes sparkle; and he saw the iron bands become soft and pliable, then drip off Tendaji's body and onto the packed-dirt floor. The soil swallowed the drippings like a hungry bird swallowing its dinner, and then the bonds were gone.

The fire inside Tendaji went out as well—suddenly, as if puffed out by a god.

Tendaji collapsed.

Xolani rushed to his side, certain he'd killed him. But Tendaji still breathed, and his

heartbeat was strong and steady. But his skin.... It had turned light brown, its luminescence quite gone. Unconscious on the floor of Xolani's hut, Tendaji looked like nothing more than a sleeping human.

When several minutes passed and Tendaji didn't awake, Xolani dragged him to the bed. He was still muscular and very heavy, but Xolani managed to get him atop the pallet with the quilts pulled up to his chin. And then Xolani banked the fire and lay down beside him, holding him close.

#

When Xolani awoke, his arm was asleep and a pair of green eyes stared at him. “You’re still here,” Xolani said.

“I am.” Tendaji burrowed more tightly against him. “And I am cold. Could you set a fire, please?”

Approximately a thousand questions hovered on Xolani’s tongue, but he didn’t ask them. Instead he stood, shivering even though he was still clothed, and he added logs to the glowing

coals. He'd forgotten the stew in the previous night's excitement, and now his empty stomach remembered. He placed the pot over the flames so the food could reheat.

Tendaji watched him silently. His expression was solemn, yet there was a brightness to his eyes that Xolani had never seen before. And he gave a small smile. "Could I have some water? My throat is very dry."

An earthen jug sat on a small table in a corner of the hut. Xolani poured some water from

the jug into a cup, which he brought to Tendaji. "I can make you some tea. It will help to warm you."

"Thank you. I think I might like that." He watched as Xolani filled the kettle and set it near the stewpot and then sprinkled some leaves into a large clay cup.

Tendaji sat up very slowly, keeping himself covered by the blankets. "Do you have some clothing I might borrow? I am afraid I have... nothing." He smiled. "Except myself."

"Of course. But... what happened? I don't understand."

“Look, Xolani.” Tendaji gestured at the side of the hut. The glass jar had tumbled off the shelf and now lay in scattered shards that glittered in the firelight. “You freed me.”

“I.... Oh.” Even Xolani’s good knee felt weak and he had to sit down quickly. “You’re free.”

“I am.”

“But also you’re... you’re different. What happened?”

Again moving slowly, Tendaji rose to his feet. He let the blankets fall so he stood naked and shivering. There was no sign of the iron bands. “What do you

see when you look at me now, Xolani?”

“I see... a man.”

“Not a genie?”

No. There was nothing magical about him now. Well, that wasn't quite true, because he still made Xolani's pulse beat fast and his head feel light and giddy. “Just a man. A beautiful man.”

Tendaji's wide smile blossomed. “You still find me desirable? Even now that I cannot grant wishes?”

“I've desired you from the moment I set eyes on you, before

I knew what you were and what you could do. That hasn't changed. Wait. Yes it has. Now I desire you even more."

"And if I told you that now I will age? I will not always be so strong. I will wrinkle. Maybe I will get fat and my hair will fall out."

Xolani smiled. "I'll age too."

And then he lurched to his feet—not easy with his bad leg—and moved into an embrace with Tendaji that felt like heaven.

Tendaji squeezed him tight.

A terrible thought struck Xolani, making him gasp and pull away. "This is... so much. So good.

But gods, what price will I have to pay for it?" Any price would be worth it, he knew that much. But he hoped fervently that he had a little time for happiness first.

To his surprise, Tendaji laughed. "Do you not see? The price has been paid already."

"No. I don't... I don't...."

"My powers, my immortality. They are gone. Once I was a mighty genie. Now I am a very ordinary man."

There was nothing ordinary about him, Xolani thought. And he shook his head. "But it was *my* wish. The price should be mine."

“Magic is a strange thing. It obeys its own laws, and it can be quite literal. It can also be... inventive.” Tendaji kissed his cheek. “I love you. You may have freed me from my chains, but you still own my heart. And if I belong to you, then my price is your price as well. You see?”

Xolani wasn't sure he understood. But after a moment's consideration, he decided it didn't matter. Tendaji was here, in his arms, and neither of them need fear any calamity beyond the commonplace human ones. That was far more than he

ever could have wished for.

“I’m yours too,” Xolani said. “Heart and soul, bad leg and all.”

“Say it three times, Xolani. Say it three times so I know it’s true.”

Xolani grinned, kissed him quickly, and broke their embrace. He bowed, shallow and awkward, but nonetheless heartfelt. “I am yours to command. I love you. I love you. I love you.”

Once again they fell into each other’s arms. Tendaji’s strength kept Xolani from falling despite the knee, and Xolani

pressed close so as to share his body heat.

The stew was beginning to scent the hut, and no doubt the water in the kettle was boiling. And the villagers... well, they would need some sort of explanation about how this stranger appeared in their midst and why he was staying with Xolani. But those were minor matters. They could be sorted later.

Xolani loved Tendaji, he needed to make his lover warm, and he wanted to spend the morning rediscovering Tendaji's

body. He was fairly certain it wouldn't take a genie to grant those wishes.