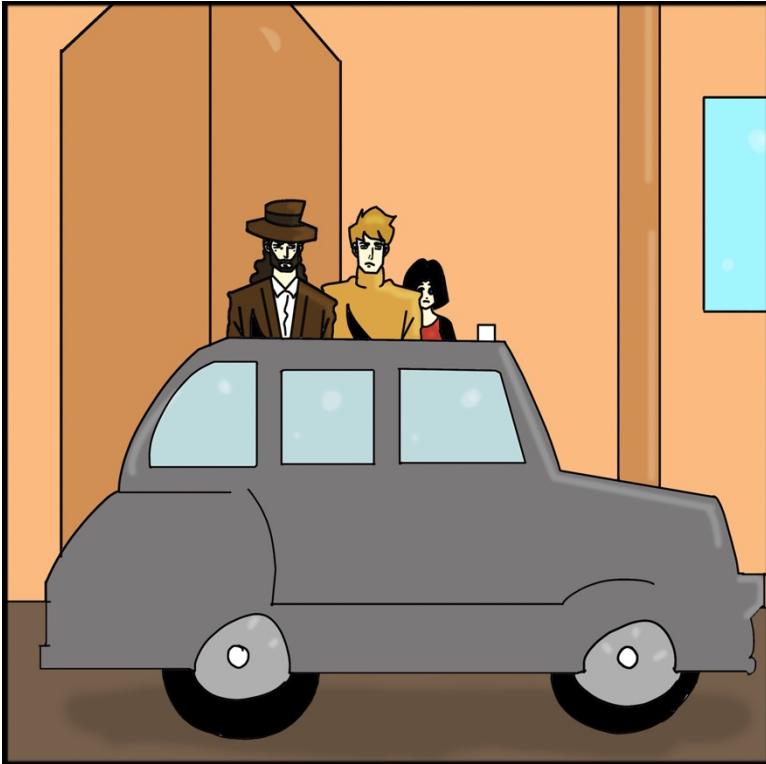


Chapter 8

“I wish”



It hadn't taken long for Charlie to get the meeting with Duke Cunningham scheduled and the tickets purchased. The Professor loved England and had visited many times over the years.

The cab ride to their hotel was filled with endless momentum as he reminisced about the last time he was in this quaint country. Memories of the enigmatic English woman he'd stayed with at a bed-and-breakfast in Worcester flooded

back. Her name was Lisa. She had studied finance and science, and she had it down. She was smart and full of good will. He did not know it would turn into more than renting a room for a week instead, shifting to a summer of romantic bliss.

That was ten years ago, but sometimes, he wondered out loud about her. What would his life have been like had he stayed and married her? It was what she'd wanted. He was not the marrying kind, though. Add that to his long list of flaws.

His overextended grin drew the attention of Gorilla.

“Hey, ya, Doc, what’s with the foolish-looking grin?”

“Kid, did you ever want more than you have and think about what you can’t have all the time?”

“Hell, yeah! But my problem is I want more than I can ever have, and I really want what I can’t have. It’s quite a conundrum.”

Charlie lifted her head, and her raised eyebrow went along for the ride. “Boys are so dumb. What the hell are you two talking about? None of that makes any sense. From Gorilla, I’d expect as much. But from you, Professor, for an esteemed educator of college minds, you urgently need a few English lessons to get you back on track.”

The kid didn't find her amusing, but her comment made him chuckle, because love made little sense. She was spot on, as she would say.

Gorilla teased, "Oh, what do you know? You never ever wanted more than you have, and you never think about more either? That's because you're already living the dream with me."



She sucked her lip in. "You know nothing about what I dream of or what I really want. That's why we are not together anymore."

That was the first time the Professor had heard they were no longer an item. He thought they were way too fond of each

other to be anything but married at some future point in time. A tornado of emotion washed over Gorilla as his face grew red with anger and his shoulders slumped forward, as if the weight of the world had finally taken its toll on them.

Sarantos said, “I’m sorry, I didn’t know you two were not an item anymore.”

Charlie raised her arm and moved it across her face as if to wave off the obvious.

The kid was more on the defensive. “Of course we aren’t. No one could tolerate that British entitlement better than me, nor that attitude for long. Oh, your highness, I apologize that you have to be in my presence. Just because you are a queen doesn’t make you royalty.”

Charlie slowly lifted her head and squinted her eyes into the shape of arrow slits. Anyone watching could feel the volley of arrows shooting around the vicinity. It was time to take cover, but the Professor couldn’t resist. “Duck!”

She turned to him just as the cabbie pulled up in front of their hotel. Saved by the timing.

The kid leaped out of the cabbie, laughing his foolish head off. Oh, but that angered her all the more. Sarantos felt sorry for them both, but he didn’t know how to avoid being trapped under the waterfall of their love.

Sarantos stepped out of the shower and immediately thought again of Lisa. Why didn't he want to marry her? His mind was her instrument, and she had learned to play it well.

He could've taken a job as a Professor at Cambridge, a very prestigious college, lived in a simple house with a gorgeous woman who would've done anything for him. She was lovely. He was an idiot.

He always felt slightly afraid that it wouldn't work out. Yes, fear always overtook him, especially in relationships. There was always a baseline level of anxiety that ate away at him, gnawing at his insecurities like a vulture. He liked to stay on the road. Most women didn't like that, and avoiding those falling rocks would be more difficult if he weren't alone.



Now, here he was wondering what it would have been like. His mind was like a drop in the ocean, and the waves of emotion trapped his soul, made it difficult to breathe, and blinded him. He could not see into the future, instead, was left drowning in his own anxiety wrapped in a blanket of uncertainty. So, he went to a solitary shore to avoid the drama and exhausting moments of trying to stay afloat. It just wasn't worth it. It was too difficult.

A knock at the door interrupted him, in the middle of tying his tie.

“You ready, Doc?”

“Just getting on my jacket.”

The dinner the Duke had planned for them was a casual affair, but he knew what that meant. By proper British standards, suit coat, and fashionable attire was the expectation.

He opened the door and chuckled, surprised by how well the kid looked in a turtleneck and jacket. Even his shoes were polished. Charlie stood next to him and looked radiant in a dark black dinner dress, cut quite low in the front and back.

“Did you order the cabbie?”

“No, the Duke has sent a driver.”

The kid looked at the two of them and said, “Oh, blimey, the Duke has sent a limo to retrieve us?”

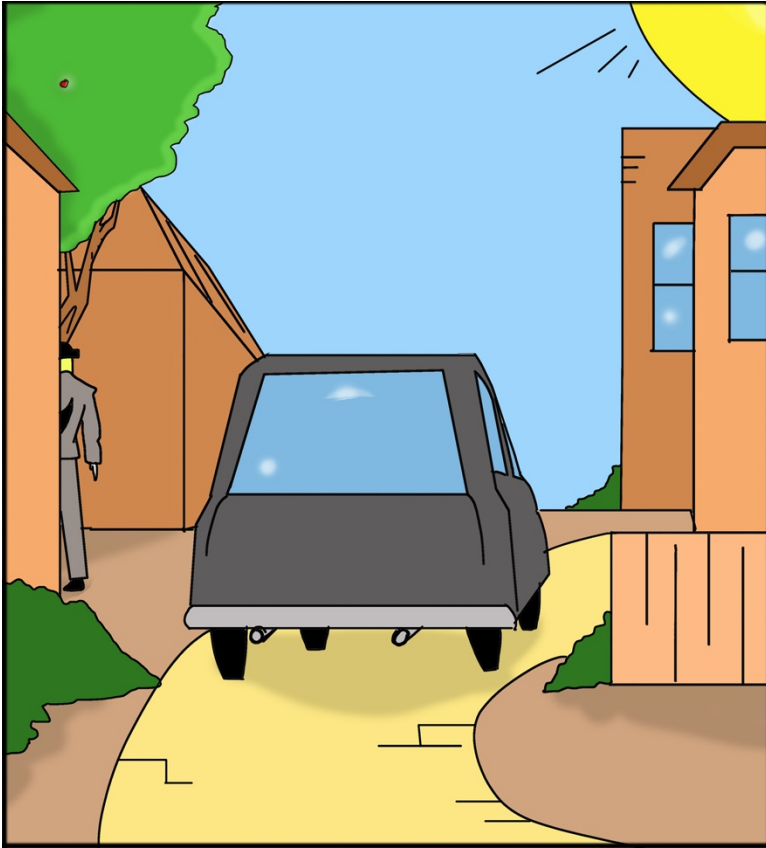
His British accent wasn't half bad.

Charlie kept walking, choosing to ignore the kid. He had to admit her presence mimicked that of royalty. The kid had been wrong to think she couldn't pass off the royalty scene.

The Duke paid for the hotel, so of course, it was quite prestigious. They elegantly designed the interior as if the King himself was staying here. Everywhere, the décor smelled like white rose, a perfume supposedly worn by royalty. A good old-fashioned English flair was obvious with custom, handmade pieces adorning the hallways. Like a blizzard of butterflies on a journey towards a new home, they marched in unison.

The limo was waiting outside the large revolving doors, that were a newer clever twist to a popular design. They were around since the late 1800s but not well travelled worldwide yet. They were being installed in many skyscrapers at a fairly rapid rate in the last year, however. The world was bouncing. He had to admit his admiration for the revolving doors was surprising.

The driver had one of those British royalty limo hats on and it was the obvious that he fancied it himself. It was his crowning glory.



As they drove, the Professor noticed significant improvements to the land since his visit ten years ago which had been right after the World War. Newly constructed homes littered the countryside, manufactured after the ravaging of the bombings. The road to rebuilding Britain after World War II tore homes and families apart seemed successful.

The economy seemed healthier, and there were fewer workers protesting. The press claimed it had been the first time in any war when anyone had directly attacked civilians,

but he thought of the American Indians. Sarantos knew several of them and thoroughly enjoyed their company. He always felt they were overlooked. Foreigners always came into America demanding freedom and rights, but Native Americans should have more freedom and rights. It was their country in the first place.

A few minutes later, he noticed a runny-nosed, red headed English boy standing on the corner in rags, with his hat out, begging for coins. A woman dressed in simple clothing put something in his hat and the young lad bowed politely. The scene broke his heart. Sadder than any book he had ever read, he could not understand how anything like this could exist in the modern world. Life is a long lesson in humility.

Sometimes he thought he was mad and ungrateful in a self-centered world that he created for himself. Is it wrong to put yourself in the center of your own universe? Why shouldn't you put yourself first? Some mornings, he woke up and wished he was happy and free. What the hell was he thinking? He was free, and it was up to him to create his own happiness or to find it around him and bring more of it into this world. Like a simple shower, some never enjoy what they have. They don't understand that most others don't have simple things like the clean water they take for granted every day.

The nights were worse. He often covered his mind in a sheet of darkness, bombarded by thoughts he wished weren't his. Why was he such a failure? Why couldn't he do more, be more? Who would he like to be? He didn't have a bad hand in his life, not really, and yet, he wanted more. More for himself. He could have more if he worked harder for it or

changed his perspective. Most nights, he just wanted to be happy, more happy than he was. He was never happy enough.



One night, he actually wished he had a genie to wish he was not himself. What a fool! What then? Would he be better off to be that child begging in the streets? Or a prisoner of war, a war he hadn't asked for. Or an old man at the end of life? Maybe he wanted to be a powerful king who had many servants and an endless supply of gold with no genuine commitments running a government that he had little say in. Or a President that was ridiculed over every decision, even if all of them were not his alone? Or a man who lost his family to war, or hunger, or both?

He should be thankful he is who he was, a man with a clear conscience and a voice. A voice to have influence if he chose to. A different man might use those thoughts to quit feeling sorry for the world and move past the present, let go of the future and move forward, racing in joy to a new tomorrow.

Maybe he would make a go of it and promise himself to do better, to be better. After all, that's the only thing one can do.

He laughed.

That drew the attention of the kids.

“Doc, what’s the joke?”

Charlie just stared at him, appalled by his childish behavior.

“I was just reflecting on how I take thinking too far.”

The kid busted his guts. “That is too hilarious, Doc. Yes, you gotta stop thinking so much. You’ll set your hair on fire.”



Charlie said, “Well, that’s the most logical thing you’ve said all day.” She paused and put her hand on her chin. “Well, maybe all year. Sorry Professor, but the truth hurts, I’m sure.”

He laughed harder. “Yes, you are right.”

After his thoughts ran away, the ride seemed to take forever. An abundance of fall flowers were sown across the countryside. The driver pulled off the main road and down a one lane path.

The car swerved and swayed over steep hills and around nasty bends, and after about fifteen minutes, they could see a mansion with turrets in the distance. How the Duke could afford to keep his land intact after the war was beyond comprehension.

The vehicle pulled into a circle drive and stopped in front of a large wooden door with stairs leading up to a porch and large pillars at the front door. A car port was off to the left with a garage that looked like it could house ten cars.

Around the sloping land, a barn, a corral, and outbuildings were casually dispersed. Several modest cottages stood in the background. They were probably servant's quarters, though some preferred the term laborers, or housekeepers, farmers, etc.

An elderly lady answered the door and guided them to the waiting lounge. She opened the door to expose a large faithful fireplace, several chairs and a couch scattered around it. An aged table sat across the room with four chairs, two of which were occupied by a beautiful young man with skin like cream and a young woman who had hair the color of the fire with freckles sprinkled across the bridge of her nose. It was attractive on her. She was quite delicate and when she looked up and smiled; the room lit up and her elegance swallowed it whole.



Two aristocrats sat in the comfy armchairs by the blaze, smoking cigars of superior constitution. The smell was like a spark of interest filling the room, inviting everyone to stay.

An ivory skinned woman got up from the couch with a drink in her hand. She was also breathtakingly beautiful. Sarantos needed to relax.

She moved toward them with quick, fluid movements and a grace that was unmistakable. As she lifted her hand to shake theirs, the glow of the fire scattered across the green of her eyes.

“You must be Professor Sarantos. I am so pleased to meet you. My father has told me all about you and why you’ve come. Times have been hard after the war here and all of our priceless items are needed. It takes a lot to keep up this estate. My dad will leave the estate to me, and I intend to do everything I can to make sure we overcome the dire effects of the harsh and unfortunate economic situation that England has been experiencing for the past 11 years.”

All that went through him as he smiled politely. All he cared about was who was she married to.

“Will I be dealing with you directly, your father, or your husband?”



She blushed a slight pink hue.

“Only with me and my father.”

While she’d been speaking, a man with a clean-shaven face and a thick Oxford accent slid next to her and introduced himself. “Welcome to Whittington Manor. The name was from my great-great grandmother, who took over the manor after her father passed away. We never changed the name to Cunningham; it didn’t seem appropriate.”

The beautiful woman shifted her hand to her dad's arm and grinned. "It should stay in their family name. We all approve. I should say my name is Lady Helen Cunningham."

She held out her other hand, palm down.

Sarantos said, "Lady Cunningham, I am pleased to make your acquaintance." He lifted her small hand and kissed her soft skin.

The kid did the same and Charlie curtsied with the same pleasant manner you would bestow upon a British lady.

Lady Helen grabbed Charlie and hugged and kissed her, smiling all the while. "Oh, dearest Charlie, I've missed you since you ran off to play with the Americans."

"And I you, my dear friend."

"Well, that explains a lot," Gorilla said.

Charlie looked at the men with a smug face that reeked of got you.

A young woman entered the room.

"Dinner is served."



They all followed the woman down an exquisite hallway with grand paintings of important looking people. One weathered painting looked like the Manor when it was first built.

The Duke grinned. “I’ve had to add electric and bathing features over the years.” He turned to the woman. “Eloise, please bring us a bottle of my favorite vintage French wine for our special guests.”

She nodded and scattered down an opposite hallway, while the Duke continued the lengthy walk to the massive dining hall. He could hear the two young people chatting behind him.

They seemed happy. Is this what would make him happy, too? How did that thought creep up on him again? Maybe he was a man in search of meaning?

A tall Indian man sat them all in intricately woven wooden chairs with cushions covered in blue velvet.

Candles were lit along the table and the fireplace that took up one entire side wall was as cold as the hearth. It was a warm day, so there was no need for its services.

That woman was an absolute treasure. He could not take his eyes off her. Would that make him happy? To marry her and be a distinguished Duke? Would he be a real duke, though, or just a man married to a goddess? He couldn't figure out how to describe how he wanted the world to see him.

“A penny for your thoughts, Sarantos.”

Her words were softly spoken, and her sky blue but mostly green eyes penetrated his with a subtle movement like the wind. That moved him more than he cared to admit.

The Duke spoke up. “We will have dinner and speak afterwards of your purpose here.”

With that, there was displacement all about the room, as men and women delivered a feast made for a king, and alcoholic refreshments that would definitely make him happy, at least for a little while.

Yes, he could see himself here until the end of time, in bliss, with her, and teaching at Oxford or Cambridge.

This was happy. He was happy. He needed to make it come true because for him, there was no genie to grant him this wish. There was no one else that could do it for him either.

A thought crossed his mind... he had to be his own genie.

