

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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debborah and the djinn

by . . . Lucy Cores

**He was angry and ashamed.
He hadn't had a minute's
peace or satisfaction for
several hundred years. . . .**

DEBORAH ALLYN's Chilmark neighbors, had they known about her Lamp, would have said that it was just plain waste of good magic, since she was already so all-fired satisfied with what she had. Life was pretty good, Deborah claimed. And why not? For one, she was lucky enough to be born and bred on Martha's Vineyard, which, as all Vineyarders know, was enough to put her ahead of the large percentage of the human race, who are off-Islanders. Then, her gray-shingled house, where the Allyn's have lived since the beginning of time, stood on the likeliest spot in Chilmark, high up on Abel's Hill, so that on a clear day the upper part of the Island lay spread out before her like a beached whale. Her land went rolling down, over smooth green slopes of fine pasture land, through scrub, and over the sandy bluffs till it met the frothy surf of the South Beach. True, Noah Paddock's farm adjoined hers, but you can't have everything. . . . Deborah may have had a little trouble handling old Mr. Paddock, a spiteful, dried-up little parsnip of a man, who had always feuded with the Allyn's, but she had no trouble running her farm single-

Mystery readers will remember Lucy Cores as the author of several delightful novels, published some years back, including CORPSE DE BALLET and LET'S KILL GEORGE. Also published in the Ladies' Home Journal and the Saturday Evening Post, this story marks her first appearance, we gather, in this field.

handed and enjoying every moment of it. She was a tall strapping young woman, just on the right side of thirty, with just about the sunniest disposition in Chilmark. She had level blue eyes that looked through you and seemed to smile a little, in a good-natured way, at what they saw, and the Island sun had given her cheeks and hair a special glow.

As for the Lamp—it turned up, the way most everything on the Vineyard does, at an auction given every year early in June by the Ladies' Auxiliary Committee of the Dunke's County Historical Society at the West Tisbury Grange. Deborah got it for fifty cents. She had a special liking for old oil lamps, preferring their soft yellow glow to the hard electric light. A few days later she picked it up to clean it. One good rub was enough: before she could put the cloth down, a husky Djinn had materialized out of the lamp's chimney and was standing there, filling Deborah's kitchen. His dark blue whiskers curled like smoke over his big bare chest, and his face, under the regulation turban, was set in patient but gloomy lines.

"Hail, mistress! I am the Djinn of the Lamp, here to do your bidding. Command me as you will." He uttered this conventional greeting in a rather perfunctory manner, Deborah thought, without any real pep to it, as if he had had to repeat it a great many times. "Well," he went on, "what'll it be? What is your will? Shall I plumb the depths

of the ocean and bring you a chest or so of sunken treasures? Shall I burrow into the inner bowels of the earth and fetch you diamonds and rubies? Or build you a castle? Those are some of the more popular items that the ladies usually ask for."

He rattled all this off in such a weary let's-get-it-over-with sort of patter that Deborah had to smile. "Thank you very much," she said, "but I wouldn't dream of putting you to all that trouble. We don't go in for fancy jewelry on the Vineyard—as for a castle I guess it'd look pretty silly on Abel's Hill; and besides, there are some pretty strict building regulations in Chilmark. . . . But it was very nice of you to suggest all those things, and I appreciate it."

Like most people born on the Vineyard, Deborah had natural courtesy and always went out of her way to put an off-Islander at ease.

"As you will," said the Djinn. "Another item that's very much in demand is a marriageable prince. They're not as easy to locate as they used to be; however, I still could lay my hand on one if required. . . ."

This time Deborah laughed outright. "Now you sound like everybody here in Chilmark: they're all trying to marry me off. No, thanks—when I get around to marrying, it'll be someone I pick myself. Besides, I'm not figuring on leaving the Island."

The Djinn made a low salaam pulling at his beard in a harried sort

of way. "Let's see now—no treasures, marine or otherwise, no castles, no princes . . . Well, would my mistress desire . . . ?"

"You know what?" said Deborah interrupting him. "You're too darn conscientious. One minute out of the lamp and look at you, raring to get back to work, digging for diamonds and moving castles. Why don't you take it easy for a bit? Nobody's rushing you. . . . When did you eat last?"

"Eat?" said the Djinn, a bit dazed. He thought a little: "I seem to remember sampling human fare a couple of hundred years ago."

"Landsakes," said Deborah, shocked, "the way you men forget about your meals when you're working. You must be starved! Now, you sit right down and don't say another word till you've had something to eat. You better take that chair, it's the strongest. It's the only one my father was ever comfortable in: he was a big man, like all the Allynns, though nowhere near your size. . . ."

The Djinn sat gingerly in the chair, with his big bare feet pulled out of Deborah's way; his great black oriental eyes rolled from side to side, following her as she hustled around the kitchen.

"I certainly hope," said Deborah a little while later, "that you like New England cooking." The question was purely rhetorical since by that time the Djinn had finished five bowls of quauhaug chowder, six platefuls of pancakes, with beach

plum jam, and was starting on his second pie. "I do have a pretty light hand with the pie crust even if I say so myself. Now just don't stint yourself—I know you must need a lot of energy in your line of work. It's a pleasure to watch a big man eat . . ." She sat down across the table from him and watched him smilingly. Although a big eater, he was a neat and quiet one—in fact, his manners in general were excellent, for a heathen Djinn, Deborah thought. An idea struck her. "Excuse me," she said impulsively, "but do you suppose it would be against the rules to make a few changes in your appearance. Like that beard, for example . . ."

The Djinn raised his whiskery face out of his cup of coffee. He looked genuinely hurt. "I am sorry if my appearance offends," he said stiffly. "This has been my working costume for many thousands of years and nobody has objected to it before. Naturally, if it is repulsive, I can take on any shape my mistress suggests . . ." He pushed away his pie, unfinished.

"Land sakes, don't you be so sensitive," Deborah cried, dismayed. "You're a fine figure of a Djinn, as you are, and I wouldn't dream of changing you. All I had in mind was your trimming your beard and getting dressed up nice, so you could take me to the square dance they're giving tonight at the Chilmark Tavern."

"Square dance?" The Djinn raised his huge hands to his tur-

banned head and tried it in a gingerly way, as if to make sure that it was still screwed on.

"Oh, come on," Deborah cried, giving him a friendly little push, "it'll be good for you. Time you had a little fun, after all the fetching and carrying you had to do all those years. Now, you just run along and get yourself ready. I'll be expecting you at nine. I understand they have some fine new shirts on sale at Brickman's in Vineyard Haven."

The Djinn faded slowly with a look of extreme bewilderment on his face.

Deborah dressed for the dance that evening in a pleasantly unaccustomed sort of flutter. When you've lived on the Island all your life, you get to know everybody by heart, and there are few surprises left, which is a restful and comfortable arrangement; but sometimes a change is nice, Deborah thought; and there's nothing that can add flavor to a square dance like being taken to it by someone new. So Deborah put on an off-the-shoulder blouse and a blue quilted skirt with a special swirl to it, and a string of her grandmother's pink quartz beads at her throat; also she dug into Grandfather Allyn's sea chest for a Persian shawl he had brought back from his travels to the Orient. It was an outlandish but handsome piece of goods, glowing with strange saffron colors and figured all over with arabesques.

"Ought to make him feel right at home," Deborah said, chuckling,

as she wrapped herself in it and sat down in the parlor to wait for her escort.

The clock struck nine and as the last chime died away, a miraculously transformed Djinn stood before her. He was now wearing fawn-colored doeskin trousers, hobnailed boots and a bright plaid shirt. Nothing was left of his beard except a blue tinge on his large chin but he kept his mustache which curled up fiercely on both sides of his nose. He reminded Deborah of the Syrian rug salesman who had come to the Vineyard a couple of years ago and squired her around some, before moving on. Deborah even felt a reminiscent flutter in her breast as she looked at the Djinn, who stood before her shuffling his feet and looking sheepish.

"Do I find favor in my mistress' eyes?" he inquired diffidently.

"You certainly do," Deborah was enthusiastic. "Djinn, you look just wonderful, and I'll be proud to be escorted by you to the dance. It's getting late now so we'd better start . . . I guess we'd better take the station wagon."

"As you wish," said the Djinn with a salaam. He picked her up with one hand, the station wagon with the other, and in a twinkling of an eye deposited them at the door of Chilmark Tavern.

"My, but you're strong," said Deborah admiringly, getting her breath back. She patted her hair into place and looked around her with some trepidation. To her relief, everybody

was already in the Tavern. A trio of violin, accordion and guitar could be heard tuning up and Charley Pease was saying, with a precise sort of twang, "Choose your partners and form your sets." She took the Djinn's arm. "Let's go in now. They're just beginning the Virginia Reel. You just listen to Charley—he's the best caller on the Island—and sort of follow me and you'll be all right. . . ."

And so he was. After a few bad starts, which sent the other couples in his set going down like ninepins, he caught on and in no time at all was going through the most complicated figures as if he'd been going to square dances all his life. He turned out to be a fine energetic dancer, the kind that makes himself felt. When he swung a girl, she would skim in the air with her feet parallel to the floor, and when he led the line around the head couple in the grapevine twist, they all flew out straight behind him like a tail on a kite. Deborah could see that he was enjoying himself thoroughly; even when he wasn't dancing, but just waiting his turn, he would keep time, making the hall shake as he tapped a huge foot.

Deborah was enjoying herself, too; it wasn't often that she had a chance to dance with a partner taller than she was; she loved being swung till she was dizzy without her partner having to brace himself; and when the Djinn would put his huge arm around her waist to promenade her home it made her feel down-

right dainty. She was pleasantly aware, too, of conjecturing whispers and glances floating their way from the big table where the members of the Chilmark Ladies Club were serving the refreshments.

"Having fun?" she asked the Djinn, as they came up with some difficulty from diving for the oyster, diving for the pearl.

"Fun?" The Djinn threw his head back and laughed. His great white teeth flashed blindly in a cavernous mouth and the sound of his laughter was both fearsome and merry like thunder in the hills; the music was drowned out and the other dancers stopped and stared and after a moment laughed, too. "Why, in all the thousands of years I've worked on this earth I've never had such fun before!"

Deborah found this confession a bit pathetic; in fact, when she thought of the poor blundering hulk of a Djinn spending all those years running errands and never having a smitchin of fun, she felt quite warm with indignation. "A crying shame, too," she commented. "But all you big good-natured men always get put upon, somehow."

"But I'm not a man," said the Djinn humbly. "I'm just a Djinn."

"So you are," said Deborah, taken aback. "I keep forgetting. You certainly look like a fine figure of a man, particularly now that I've gotten you to change your outlandish clothes. . . ."

"Praise to Allah, my mistress, that it was you picked up that

lamp," said the Djinn fervently, whirling her around and putting her down as light as a feather. "I shall be your faithful slave till the end of time." And he fixed his big black eyes on her with such doglike devotion that she found herself blushing.

All this was duly noticed and commented upon and between the dances Deborah had to submit to the genteel but thorough investigation by the Chilmark ladies, an accepted ritual that takes place whenever a marriageable young woman brings a new man to an Island social function. . . .

"What beats me is when did he get here?" said Mrs. Melantha Baker, who sent in social notes to the *Vineyard Gazette*, and prided herself on keeping track of everybody's arrival and departure. "Nobody saw him getting off the Ferry, and if he came on his own boat where is it docked? Not at Menemsha because I asked around. . . ."

Deborah merely smiled mysteriously.

"What did you say his name was?"

"And his occupation?" put in Mrs. Izaak Norton, whose husband always needed able-bodied help in his shipyard.

"Djinn," said Deborah truthfully replying to both questions.

"Jean? Is he a French fellow? Looks more like an Armenian or some such, what with those big black mustachios . . ."

"Anyways, a foreigner." That was Mrs. Ezra Gosnold sniffing her

thin nose disapprovingly. Deborah knew she was thinking about the Syrian rug salesman. "You always were pretty notional, Deborah, for an Allyn. I only hope . . ."

"Oh, it's not like that at all," said Deborah serenely. "He's just doing some work for me. Anyhow," she couldn't help adding, "I wouldn't be surprised if his family went back further than the Allyns—or maybe even the Gosnolds." This remark was disregarded as pure sauce, since, as everybody knows, nobody could go back further than the Gosnolds who were there when God made the Vineyard.

"Anyway," Mrs. Enoch Flanders, a round and comfortable body, said smugly, "this Jean can certainly appreciate good cooking." She caught his eye and smiled benignly and the Djinn gave her one of his beautiful low salaams, wiping off the crumbs of her famous chocolate and coconut cake with lemon frosting from his mustache. "He certainly has lovely manners," Mrs. Flanders commented and Deborah felt a glow of proprietary pride. "And a good dancer, too. I haven't been swung around like this since I was a very young girl—boys nowadays haven't the muscles for it . . ." She gave Deborah a pat. "You could do worse, my dear, even if he is an off-Islander."

After the dance was over, Deborah and her Djinn departed in a more conventional manner than they had arrived. This time Deborah got in at the wheel of her car, while the

Djinn squeezed uncomfortably into the seat next to her, the top of his head making a bulge in the roof of the car. It was a pretty June night, fresh and windblown, with the moon sailing the sky like a pert boat. They rolled along sedately lurching gently on the country road and slowing up to let the rabbits scuttle out of their way. Presently Deborah noticed that the Djinn had lost his good spirits; he seemed to sag beside her like an oversized balloon losing air.

"What's the matter with you?" she asked him finally, when they got home. "I thought you had such a good time at the dance."

The Djinn heaved such a big gusty sigh that Deborah's shawl ballooned out like a spinnaker behind her. "Allah knows I was enjoying myself," he said. "And my heart is so full of gratitude that I fear it may burst." He slapped his chest producing a hollow sound like an empty barrel. "If I could but help you to your heart's desire, oh, kindest of mistresses, I should be happy to be drawn and quartered or roasted on a slow flame, or undergo any other such discomfort. . . ."

"No need for that," said Deborah, laughing a little, but at the same time touched at the big fellow's evident earnestness. "I'll think of something you could do for me, if that's what's bothering you. As a matter of fact, I have the very thing in mind. It's that piece of land right next to mine. Noah Paddock owns it and the only reason he won't sell,

is just pure contrariness. My father and he had a disagreement years ago and he'd rather see that farm go to rack and ruin than sell it to me. Well, I've tried to get it by all the natural means, so I guess I might as well try the supernatural. If you'd get me that land, Djinn, I'd be much obliged. And now I guess I'll say goodnight." She smiled at him. "I had a nice time, too."

The Djinn didn't say anything. Suddenly, he just wasn't there anymore, just the moonlight pouring in a silver stream where he had been standing. Deborah went into the house humming to herself. She was just getting ready to turn in when the Djinn startled her by materializing again unexpectedly in her parlor. He loomed before her, a picture of massive misery, his swarthy face pasty-pale, his eyes rolling desperately, "I can't go through with it," he groaned out.

"Now what's the matter?" Deborah asked. "You look downright sick . . . Can't you tell me what's troubling you?"

"It's the Lamp," said the Djinn, grating the words out through his big white clenched teeth.

"Your lamp? What about it?"

"Well . . ." The words seemed to stick in the Djinn's throat. Finally, he brought them out with a deep-chested groan that reminded Deborah of the time her prize bull had pneumonia. "Woe, is me, my mistress! That lamp is no good!"

"What do you mean?" Deborah cried.

He explained it to her, with many gusty sighs. It seemed that there was a whole consignment of magic lamps distributed around the world. Inevitably, a couple of them were defective—they didn't work the way they were supposed to. And this was one of them.

"You mean you can't really wish on it?"

No, it wasn't quite like that, the Djinn told her. You got your wishes all right, no matter how extravagant they were—("and you have no idea," said the Djinn reminiscently, "how greedy and unreasonable humans can be. When I remember some of the things I was told to do!")—but, somehow, everything you wished for and got turned out sour, so that in the end you would have been much better off not wishing for anything at all. "And that's what hurts me most," he said sadly, "to know that if I fulfill the very small and reasonable task that you have imposed upon me, it would be sure to lead to no good and perhaps even hurt you."

Deborah thought it over and her level brows drew together in a frown. "Well, now," she said, "I can't say I like this. When I get a magic lamp, I expect it to be a magic lamp in good working condition, and I can't help being a little riled when it turns out to be a fraud. Why, that's practically a breach of contract, isn't it?" She looked at the Djinn, drooping guiltily before her and her voice softened. "Now, I don't want you to think I'm blam-

ing you. As a matter of fact, it was darn nice of you to tell me. Saved me a lot of trouble, like as not."

"How could I do otherwise? I couldn't bear to think of harm coming to you. But I am angry and ashamed that it should be so," said the Djinn, his eyes flashing under the black brows and his voice rumbling low and angry. "I have had the custody of this accursed lamp for several hundred years, ever since it was first put out on the market, and it hasn't given me a minute's peace or satisfaction. Do you think I've liked doing all this hard work, running from one end of the world to the other fetching the glittery junk that you humans call treasures? Or carrying castles to a more convenient location? And all for what? For nothing! Because everything turns out badly, anyhow, and you and the lamp end up on a rubbish heap waiting for the next victim."

"Well, I think it's a shame, said Deborah indignantly, "to assign a good honest worker to a shoddy piece of merchandise like that. Something should be done about it!"

The Djinn merely shrugged his shoulders and remarked with typical eastern fatalism: "Kismet."

"We'll see about that," said Deborah, who rather prided herself on her business sense. She sat down on her rocker and rocked, thinking hard, while the Djinn settled himself cross-legged in the corner and watched her anxiously. Originally

she had thought up the task merely to please the Djinn; but now her New England sense of justice was outraged and she'd be darned, she thought, if she would allow herself to be done out of her rights.

Presently she smiled in a pleased way and stopped rocking.

"I think I've got it," she told the Djinn. "You just go right ahead and get Noah Paddock's land. *But*—and that's the trick—you're not getting it for me. I don't have to be the owner. I don't want it anyhow—all I've ever really wanted was to get rid of a pesky neighbor. So I don't care who has it—as a matter of fact, you can be the owner. "Yes," she said with satisfaction, "that'll be the best, and legally we're quite safe on that deal, don't you think?"

"My mistress," the Djinn pronounced, wagging his head in wonder, "is as subtle as a serpent."

"Well, the Allynns have always been considered smart traders," Deborah told him modestly. "I think I'll say good night now. I suggest you get plenty of rest before you tackle Noah Paddock—he's got the prickliest tongue on the Island. It's no pleasure to do business with him."

The Djinn disappeared, with a long backward look of admiration, and Deborah went to bed, feeling quite pleased with herself. Her dreams that night were agreeable ones: she dreamed that she was again being transported through the air by the Djinn. He was holding her very carefully and tenderly in

his powerful arms and his mustache was tickling her ear.

The first thing she saw when she woke up early the next morning was the Lamp standing on the dressing table by her bedside where she had put it; looking like any old oil lamp. Smiling she reached for it and was about to rub it, when she recalled just in time that she was in her nightgown, not a fit garment in which to receive callers. I'll get dressed and call him for breakfast, she thought, as she got out of bed and she smiled as she thought of him putting away her pancakes with his big black eyes fixed worshipfully on her. "I'm getting some old fond of that Djinn," she reflected, running a comb through her bright long hair.

Just then she heard the telephone whirring hoarsely in the kitchen and ran down to answer it.

"Well, Deborah, you can stop pestering me about buying my farm now." When Noah Paddock had bad news to tell you, he didn't fool around with the preliminaries but got right down to it. "I just sold it. Thought you'd like to know. I guess you Allynns can't have it your way all the time."

"Sold your land? To whom?"

"I don't know—some foreigner. A big hefty fellow with a whale of a black mustache. Woke me up in the middle of the night and said he wanted to buy the farm. I was so riled I almost let him have a barrelful of gunshot only he pulled out a roll of bills big enough to choke a horse. Offered me ten times what

the place is worth, the poor sucker, so I sold it to him. So you got a new neighbor, Deborah. Shouldn't be surprised if he was a gangster by the looks of him." He hung up with a spiteful cackle.

Deborah finished dressing, humming to herself as she did. It was a lovely morning. The birds were all trilling together in a chorus and the morning mists were rising up rapidly from the slopes of Abel's Hill, like thin white curtains drawn up to let in the view of a sun-flooded world. She took time to tuck in a blue scarf at the neck of her shirt, and give an extra smooth-over to her hair before she picked up the lamp and rubbed it.

Nothing happened.

Deborah rubbed and rubbed till the brasswork shone, but to no avail. The Djinn didn't appear. Finally she gave it up. "Looks like I must have dreamed him," she said to herself, and at the thought her heart grew unaccountably heavy and all the brightness seemed to go out of the morning. But when she stepped outside on her way to the barn to milk the cows, there was her Djinn, sitting on the porch steps, his great hulking shoulders bowed disconsolately, his head sunk low on his broad chest.

"Why Djinn!" Deborah dropped the milking cans with a great clatter. Surprisingly the morning was bright again. "What happened? I rubbed and rubbed . . . How come you're waiting outside?"

Receiving no answer she sat down next to him on the steps. He looked so big and helpless and disconsolate that she couldn't help throwing a protective arm about his great bowed shoulders. "Is anything wrong?"

The Djinn nodded sadly. "They threw me out of the Guild. The Djinn Guild. For revealing professional secrets."

"They never did!"

"The law is that when a Djinn transgresses, all his magic powers are stripped from him and he's got to retain whatever shape he had taken on at that moment." He shuddered. "When I think of some of the shapes I've had to take on while doing my work . . ."

"Then you mean you're no longer a Djinn."

"That's right."

"Then—then what are you?"

"I don't know—a human, I suppose."

"Do you feel very badly about it?" asked Deborah softly. "About not being a Djinn any more, I mean. Because, you know, it's not so bad being a human."

The Djinn thought it over. "Well of course after one's been a Djinn for a couple of thousand of years, it is a little hard to make a change. And being a human hasn't seemed an enviable thing—that is, not until last night." He looked at her timidly. "Was it wrong of me to come back here? I couldn't think of any other place to go."

"Why you big oaf," said Deborah indignantly, over a lump in her

throat, "where else would you go, for goodness sake? Why, when I saw you sitting there I was just so pleased and relieved I didn't know what to say." She patted him consolingly. "Now don't you worry about a thing anymore. I'll take care of you. I feel responsible for you, you know."

The Djinn blinked his eyes very rapidly and muttered in broken tones about her kindness in taking in a discredited and homeless Djinn.

"Some old homeless," Deborah chuckled suddenly as recollection struck her. "You're a landowner, don't you remember? Say, you aren't in such bad shape after all! You've got the Paddock farm and nobody who's got land to farm on the Vineyard got any call to be worried about making a living."

"But I've never farmed before," the Djinn faltered.

"You'll learn," Deborah told him. "You'll certainly be better off farming than going around peddling faulty merchandise." She smiled into his doubtful face. "And I know you'll like living here. There's no place like the Vineyard in the whole world." And she began telling him what it's like to live on the Vineyard. How in early April you can hear the tinklepinks tuning up for spring, and the beach plum puts out its creamy blossoms along the pastures and behind the dunes. And how in the summer time there are roses brightening the old fences with their crimson shower, and the pastures are soft and green for the

cattle to graze on; and the cut hay smells sweet with clover, and a stray blackberry vine or wild rose mixed in here and there; and the ponds stand mirror-still in noonday heat. She told him about fall, clear and cool, the horse-chestnut days and the flowering of wild grapes, and later, the quiet mornings lying low in the reeds and watching the flocks of wild geese threading across the chill red sky; and of the peaceful winters, with the snowdrifts sweeping soft and white down the deserted roads. She mentioned the fishing; how the school of bluefish looks flashing across the Sound, and told him about the lobsters lurking sluggishly in the lobsterpots; and the black marshy grounds harboring scallops and clams; and how you hear the sea pounding softly against the beaches all year round; and in the winter, when all the summer folks are gone, the seal come to sit on the offshore rocks.

She told him all that and much more, and the Djinn began to perk up visibly as he listened; the curl came back into his drooping mustache, and his black eyebrows reversed their dolorous tilt, until finally he was smiling a big anticipatory grin. "Just as long as you'll be here to show me," he said humbly.

"I'll be here," said Deborah and smiled at him. "I'll be pleased to help you any time, neighbor. . . ."

"Did you hear the news?" Mrs. Flanders asked a couple of months later. "Deborah Allyn is getting

married. To that foreign fellow who bought the Paddock farm next to hers."

"Doesn't surprise me any," Mrs. Gosnold returned, "always knew she'd marry an off-Islander . . . Wonder what the children will be like: never can tell when you bring foreign stock in . . ."

As it turned out the children favor both their parents. They are fine husky specimens, with their mother's level blue eyes, and their father's black hair. Deborah claims that they have also inherited his trick of disappearing into thin air, so that the only way to get them in for dinner is to rub that old lamp.