

"Instead of Three Wishes"

a magical short story from the collection *Instead of Three Wishes*

copyright © 1996 Megan Whalen Turner

Selene and the elf prince met on a Monday afternoon in New Duddleston when she had gone into town to run an errand for her mother. Mechemel was there to open a bank account. He had dressed carefully and anonymously for his trip in a conservative grey suit—a cream colored shirt, a maroon tie. He was wearing a dark grey overcoat and carried a black leather briefcase. Selene hardly noticed him the first time she saw him.

He was standing on the traffic island in the middle of Route 237 when she went into Hopewell's Pharmacy and was still there when she came out again. She thought he must be cold, on a November day with no hat and no gloves. He looked a little panicked out on the median by himself. The traffic light had changed. The walk sign reappeared, but Mechemel remained on the island, rooted to the concrete, with his face white and his pale hair blown up by the wind. Selene walked out to ask if he needed a hand.

"Young woman," he snapped, "I am perfectly capable of crossing a street on my own." Selene shrugged and turned to go, but the light had changed again and she too was stranded. While she waited for another chance to cross, the cars sped by. The breeze of their passing pushed Selene and the elf prince, first forward, then back. It wasn't a comfortable sensation. When the walk sign reappeared, she was eager to get back to the sidewalk and catch her bus for home. A few steps into the crosswalk, she noticed that the elf prince still had not moved.

"Rude old man," she thought to herself. "I should leave him here," but she stretched out a hand. Without looking at her, the elf prince put his arm around hers and they walked to the curb together. Once they were up on the sidewalk, he snatched his arm away, as if it might catch fire.

"Well," he sneered, "I suppose you expect a reward now."

Selene looked at the crosswalk. She looked at the old man. "A nut," she thought to herself. "Nice suit though."

"No thank you," Selene said aloud. "Happy to oblige." She gave him the pleasant but impersonal smile she used on customers when she worked after school at the cafeteria.

"Of course you are," his voice dripped sarcasm and Selene took a step back. "But I can't let you get away without one, can I?" When he fumbled in the inside pocket of his suit coat, Selene took several more steps back. He pulled out a wallet. From the wallet he extracted three small white cards and pushed them at Selene.

"Instead of Three Wishes," from *Instead of Three Wishes*, © 1996 Megan Whalen Turner

They looked like business cards. Instead of a printed name, a filigreed gold line wrapped itself in a design in the middle of each white rectangle.

"What are they?" Selene asked.

"Wishes," said the elf prince. "You've got three. Just make a wish and burn a card. It doesn't," he looked her over with contempt, "require a college education."

"Thanks, but no thanks," said Selene, and handed the cards back. She'd read about people who were offered three wishes, by malevolent sprites. No matter what they wished, something terrible happened. She looked carefully at the man. Behind the nice suit and the tie, he was just as she thought a malevolent sprite might appear.

"What do you mean 'thanks but no thanks'?" the elf prince was irritated. "They are perfectly good wishes, I assure you. They're not cheap 'wish for a popsicle' wishes, young woman. They are very high quality. Here." he pushed them toward her. "Wish for anything. Go ahead."

"I wish for peace on earth," Selene said, and sneaked a look over her shoulder. Her bus was coming up the street, but still two blocks away.

"That's not a thing!" snarled the elf prince. "That's an idea, that's a concept. I didn't say wish for a concept. I said a thing. A material object. Go on."

Selene stood her ground. "I'd rather not."

"Look," said the elf prince, "You get a reward for doing me a favor. I can't go around owing you one. What do you want?"

Selene could hear the bus rumbling up behind her. "Why don't you pick something for me?" she asked. "Something you think is appropriate. How would that be?" The bus stopped beside her and the doors sighed open.

"Well," said the elf prince with some asperity, "I can hardly think —"

"— of something off the top of your head? I'm like that too," said Selene. "Tell you what, when you think of something, you can send it to my house. It's easy to find. We live in the New Elegance Estates."

She hopped onto the bus. The doors closed behind her and the elf prince was left standing on the sidewalk as the bus drove away.

"Oh," she thought as she sat down, "I wish I hadn't told him where we lived. I wish I hadn't."

Left behind, the elf prince was non-plussed. When he had recovered, he propped his elegant briefcase on the top of a postal box and opened it wide enough to pull out a small Persian carpet, which he threw down on the sidewalk. He stepped onto it.

"Home," he snapped, and disappeared.

Selene and her mother lived in a housing development several miles beyond the suburbs of New Duddleston. The builder who had bought up the farm on the outskirts of the city had intended to build an entire community of different-sized homes and apartment buildings. He had laid out the roads, and then paved all the driveways. By the time he began building the houses, he had run out of money. Only a few of the

"Instead of Three Wishes," from *Instead of Three Wishes*, © 1996 Megan Whalen Turner

smaller ones had been finished when he went bankrupt, leaving the owners of those houses surrounded by vacant lots covered in weeds with driveways that led to no houses and roads that went nowhere.

Selene's mother was one of the owners. She had used her savings to buy the house and had hoped to take in a lodger to help with the mortgage payments, but so far no one had been interested in such a peculiar neighborhood. She and her daughter lived frugally on a monthly insurance check and waited for someone else to buy the land and build houses to go with all the driveways.

"Hello! I'm home!" Selene shouted as soon as she was in the door.

"I'm in the kitchen. Did you have a good day at school?" Her mother had her wheelchair pushed up to the kitchen table. In front of her was a plate of crumbs and one remaining half of a scone.

"Hey," said Selene, "I thought I told you to eat those up yesterday when they were still fresh."

Selene's mother smiled. "I ate as many as I could. And you know that I always think your scones are better the longer I wait."

"That's only because you're hungrier when you finally eat them. I bought the stuff to make more. And I got your prescription filled. Do you want a pill now?" The wrinkles around her mother's eyes showed that she was having a painful day.

"Yes, please dear," she said. "I'm a little sore. Did you have any trouble getting the prescription filled?"

Selene was reminded of the peculiar man outside the pharmacy, "Not with the prescription," said Selene, "They know me at the pharmacy."

"But you did have a problem?"

"Not a problem, really. But I ran into a nutty old guy." Selene described her encounter with the elf prince. She provided a skillful caricature. "Still, I wish I hadn't told him where we lived."

"I wouldn't worry. He has probably forgotten all about you by now."

The next morning, as Selene was pulling on her coat before going to school, the doorbell rang. She opened the front door and found a shockingly green small man on the front step.

"Your Gift," he said, "From Prince Mechemel of the Elf Realm of South Minney." And he swept a bow all the way down to his toes and waved it out across the stubby crab grass to the street. A golden coach and six black horses stood at the curb.

"Zowee," said Selene. "Is that for me?"

"Our master sends it to you and hopes that you will accept it as repayment of his debt to you."

"Oh," Selene paused, then said, "Look, that's really nice of him, but could you . . . take it back? I really appreciate it and everything. It's very beautiful, but the coach

"Instead of Three Wishes," from *Instead of Three Wishes*, © 1996 Megan Whalen Turner

would never fit in the garage and I don't have anywhere to keep the horses. Tell him I said thank you, though." She carefully closed the door.

By the time she had walked to the living room window that overlooked the front yard, the leprechaun, the coach, and the horses were gone.

"Zow-ee," Selene said again and went to tell her mother all about it.

"It's a good thing we don't have many neighbors," her mother said, "They'd wonder."

The next day the doorbell rang again. This time when Selene opened the door, there was an elegant woman with deep blue skin and dark green eyes. She was wrapped in a sea-green cape that covered her all the way down to her toes and puddled there at her feet. In one thin beautiful hand she held a set of keys on a silver key ring.

"Our master entreats you to accept these as repayment of his debt to you." She held out the keys. Selene started to ask what they were for, when she caught sight of the mansion newly arrived on the lot across the street.

"Oh my," she said. "Is that . . .?"

"For you," said the blue woman with a happy smile. "Do you like it?"

"It is a beautiful house," said Selene.

"Palace, really," said the hamadryad, "It's got those gates in the front. I don't really remember if that makes it a palace or a chateau, exactly. I know that if it had a portcullis, it would be a castle, and it doesn't. But it does have those little turrets at the corners, so I think that means it's not a chateau."

Selene was silent.

"I'd definitely call it palace," the hamadryad assured her. "Do you like it?"

Selene said that she thought it was a lovely palace, she really liked the gold turrets at the corners, but she lived alone with her mother and they could never use so much room.

The dryad looked so crestfallen that Selene rushed to say, "It's not that I don't like it. It's just that we're really very comfortable here."

"It's got central heating," the dryad said wistfully.

"We couldn't afford to pay the bill," Selene said sadly.

"And really lovely plumbing. Much nicer than we have back at the castle."

"I'm afraid not," said Selene, "But thank you, really. Please tell Mr . . His Highness that all this isn't necessary. He doesn't owe me anything."

She smiled at the dryad and the dryad smiled sadly back and went away. The lovely white palace with the gold roof dissolved into mist and disappeared.

The next day Selene waited for the doorbell to ring. By the time she had decided it wasn't going to, she had made herself late for school. On Thursday afternoons, she worked in the school cafeteria baking rolls for school lunches. She didn't get off the bus until almost five-thirty and walked home through the pitch dark. She could see the lights in her house from a long way off.

"Instead of Three Wishes," from *Instead of Three Wishes*, © 1996 Megan Whalen Turner

As she went inside her mother called from the living room. "Selene, do come meet the delightful young man who's come to marry you."

"Marry me?" She went into the living room. Her mother had her wheelchair pulled up to one side of the coffee table. On the other sat a young man, about Selene's age, in a fitted maroon velvet tunic that was held in place by a wide belt across his thighs. He wore dark green tights and leather slippers punched full of tiny cross-shaped holes. His cape was thrown over one shoulder and artistically draped on the sofa beside him. It was also maroon velvet, but was imprinted with a leaf pattern. Green lace leaves in the same pattern trimmed its edges. In his lap was a soft conical hat with a twelve-inch blue feather curling above it.

The prince was very handsome, Selene had to admit. He had dark curly hair and very round blue eyes. He had the very cleft in his chin that is the prerequisite of fairytale princes.

He stood up and bowed from the waist. "A great pleasure to make your acquaintance," said the prince.

"It's nice to meet you, too," said Selene. "Did I hear that you're supposed to marry me?"

"Yes," said her mother. "It's what-sis-name's newest idea. He thought any girl would jump at the chance to marry a prince."

"That's the theory," said Selene. She turned back to the prince. "Could you," she said, "tell me a little about yourself?" They spent a pleasant evening together, Selene, her mother and Harold. Until her accident, Selene's mother had taught history at the high school. Since then, she had pursued her profession at home, sending Selene to the University library for endless piles of books on the weekends. Now that she had a genuine fourteenth-century prince on hand, she had endless questions to ask.

Unfortunately, Harold couldn't answer them. He knew quite a bit about the clothes people had been wearing when he'd last been in the human world, but he didn't know anything about treaties, or border disputes or religious schisms. All he could say was that he thought that a few heretics had been burned in his day, but he couldn't remember which kind.

"We had ministers to keep track of all those things," Harold explained, lamely. "I'm sure that if they were here they could answer you're questions." He looked around, as if he expected a prime minister or a chargé d'affaires to pop out from behind the sofa.

"What did princes do?" Selene asked. "We gave treaties the authority of our names," Harold said grandly.

"How?"

"Well" – the prince looked uncomfortable – "we signed them, you know, with our names."

"Instead of Three Wishes," from *Instead of Three Wishes*, © 1996 Megan Whalen Turner

They ended up discussing the elf prince's court. Selene asked about the plumbing. Her mother asked about the central heating. Then they asked about the elf prince. Harold was surprised to hear that Selene's impression of him had not been favorable.

"He's mostly really very nice," he insisted. "I once dropped a flagon of red wine in his reflecting pool and her wasn't angry at all." Harold did his best to convince them of Mechemel's kindness, his generosity, and his good humor. Selene was skeptical, but her mother pointed out that anyone who has recently had a fright can be forgiven a lapse in manners.

"I think the passing cars must have disturbed him," she said. "Are elves really bothered by iron?" asked Selene.

"I don't know that it actually hurts them," said Harold, "but it does you, know, give them the willies."

"Yes, I see," said Selene's mother.

"Of course, they gave me the willies, too," admitted the prince. "Things didn't move so fast in my day."

Harold spent the night in the spare bedroom. They sent him back the next morning. As she closed the door behind him, Selene's mother said, "He was a very nice young man." "He was sweet," said Selene. "But what in the world would he have done if I'd married him? Gone out to look for a job?"

"Poor boy, can you picture him trying to get one?" Her mother laughed. "What are your qualifications? Well, I look good in velvet and . . ."

"Can't read or write . . ."

"Can't type, can't drive, don't know what electricity is, never heard of a vacuum cleaner."

"He couldn't buy groceries, cook dinner, or pay bills."

"If you wrote out the checks, he could sign his name."

"Of course," said Selene after a pause, "He would have ministers to take care of all that. He'd do okay if he just came with a pot of gold."

"Oh no," said her mother, "That's *leprechauns*."

Selene was late for school again. As she went out the door, she said, "This is the third gift we've rejected. Do you think his highness the elf prince of wherever will give up?"

Mechemel wasn't giving up. He was getting out the big guns, going to the experts, checking with an authority on humans. He went to talk to his mother. She had a room at the top of the castle with windows on all four walls so that she could lie in bed and look out at the forest. She was old and a little frail, and she didn't get around much, so she passed her time keeping an eye on daily activities in the forest and watching television.

Mechemel climbed up the stairs to her tower. He sat beside her bed and twiddled his thumbs while he explained his difficulty. After a while he grew suspicious of her silence and looked up in outrage.

"You're laughing at me!"

"Mechemel," his mother's laugh was a lovely sound, "this is the most foolish thing that I have ever heard in my life. I warned you about how fast those iron contraptions can go."

"It's your fault," said Mechemel, "You're the one who wanted to keep your gold in a bank. Who ever heard of fairy gold in a safe deposit box? Much less a checking account?"

"I know, dear," she smiled apologetically. "But so many of these mail order companies want to be paid by check or money order and the sprites were complaining about the lines at the post office. I thought you'd send a leprechaun."

"Leprechauns are unreliable," grumped her son. "They only have to meet one sharp character and they hand over everything."

"Yes," admitted the fairy queen, "but surely you could have sent a hamadryad, or even one of those human princes that are always hanging around."

"Hamadryads are even worse than leprechauns, and the princes, well . . ." he smiled ruefully at last. "There's no point pretending that any of them were gifted with brains."

"And here you are fussed because the mortal girl thought the same thing. Stop sulking and admit that this is funny."

Mechemel stiffened and then stifled a snort. "You should have seen her face when I pulled out the wishes. She looked afraid for her life."

"She probably was, poor thing."

"What did she think I would do, turn her into a frog?" "She probably thought that you were a homicidal maniac."

"A what?"

"You don't watch enough television, Mechemel. It's one of those humans that goes around murdering other humans for no good reason." She waved one hand at the television set on a stand beside the bed. It stood on a stand of crystal and carefully wrought gold. Its cord ran across the floor and out one window where it dropped to the ground and was wired directly into one of Ontario Hydroelectric's cross-country power cables.

"I don't understand how you can stand to watch that."

"Oh, it's amusing sometimes. It's so terribly dull, since the humans have stopped coming to court. There's never anyone new to talk to. Watching them talk to each other is the next best thing."

"You should go out more."

"Instead of Three Wishes," from *Instead of Three Wishes*, © 1996 Megan Whalen Turner

The elf queen slipped deeper into her feather pillows, "It's too much trouble. Things have changed too much in the last hundred years. Besides," she added slyly, "look what happened to you."

"It's all very well to snicker about it. The longer I owe her a favor the more in debt I am. So . . ."

"So what?"

"So tell me what will make her happy."

"I haven't a clue."

"But you're supposed to know!" He threw up his hands. "And stop laughing!"

His mother reached out a hand to pat him on the knee. "Don't worry," she said, "You find out a little more about her and then we'll think of something."

On Saturday, Selene was out in the front yard, sawing at a dead tree, when the elf prince arrived. The tree had been the builder's one attempt to fulfill a clause in the contract that said, "fully landscaped." Stuck into ground packed hard by bulldozers and surrounded by weeds, the little tree had given up immediately and died. Selene didn't mind the weeds—many of them were pretty—but the brittle branches of the dead tree depressed her, so she was cutting it down.

She looked up from her work and realized a man was watching her from the sidewalk. "Are you the next silly idea of that ridiculous elf?"

"No," said Mechemel, and didn't say anything else.

Selene was terribly embarrassed. She looked from her saw to the tree and back to Mechemel.

"Yes," he said, "do stop dismembering that poor bush and invite me in." "It's a tree, actually."

"Bush," said Mechemel, "Salix bebbiana. Or it was. All it is now is dead."

He moved past Selene toward the ramp that led to the front door. "Fortunately uninhabited," he said as he went.

Still carrying the saw, Selene followed him up the ramp and into the house. He waited in the hall while she went to fetch her mother. He looked startled when Selene rolled her in, but collected himself quickly.

"I understand," he said, "that you are willing to take a lodger?"

Selene's mother asked him for references and he provided them. He told them that he was a visiting professor at the local university. "Waterloo or Wilfred Laurier?" Selene's mother asked.

"Uh, Waterloo."

"Lovely, perhaps we know the same people. You said you were in the history department?"

Mechemel saw that he was on dangerous ground and retreated rapidly. He was new there, he didn't know anyone, he wouldn't actually be teaching in the department, just doing research.

"Instead of Three Wishes," from *Instead of Three Wishes*, © 1996 Megan Whalen Turner

"Oh," said Selene's mother, disappointed. "Well, still. I'm sure it will be very nice to have you as a lodger. Did you say that you wanted to take your meals here?" she asked hesitantly.

Mechemel shuddered, "No, thank you," he said.

So Mechemel moved in. Selene and her mother wondered about their new lodger. He came with very little luggage, just the one suitcase. He was always home at dinner time, but he never seemed to eat. Selene cooked her mother dinner and the two of them ate at the kitchen table, wondering what Mechemel was doing in his room.

"Maybe he lives on store-bought cookies and soda," said Selene.

"It would be warm soda," her mother pointed out. "He doesn't have a fridge."

They didn't see the leprechauns skipping up to the spare bedroom window, carrying trays of covered dishes. Mechemel was willing to sacrifice in order to get this debt paid off, but he was not going to eat whatever humans called food. Before he'd left the castle, his mother had told him dire stories about microwaves and things called burritos.

Mechemel had been staying with Selene and her mother for a week before Selene did any baking. On Friday, Mechemel's rent payment made it possible to buy an extra dozen eggs, baking chocolate, and five pounds of extra-fine cake flour. In the evening, she read through her collection of second-hand cookbooks and decided that she wanted to try a brittle chocolate crème de menthe gateau.

"It sounds wonderful," said her mother. "Do we have crème de menthe?"

"Somebody brought some to the Christmas party last year. I think it's still in the closet over the oven."

"Now that we are rolling in dough, so to speak, will you not be making anymore scones?" In the past Selene's baking had been limited to scones, because their ingredients were affordable.

"Oh, I'll make those first thing in the morning, then try the cake," said Selene, and she got up early on Saturday in order to have the scones ready for her mother's breakfast. Mechemel woke to the aroma of buttermilk currant scones baking in the oven. He got out of his uncomfortable narrow bed and into his clothes before being pulled irresistibly into the kitchen. Selene was measuring out ingredients for her cake with the precision of a chemist, her mother was having a cup of coffee. Mechemel sniffed, appreciatively.

"Are those scones?" he asked. He suffered from an elven addiction to sweet things.

"Yes," said Selene, without turning around. There was only half an inch of crème de menthe left in the bottle and she was looking through the recipe to see if it was enough.

"May I have one?"

"Of course. Have as many as you like." Selene looked around and smiled at him, before turning back to the recipe. It was not the impersonal smile that she used on

"Instead of Three Wishes," from *Instead of Three Wishes*, © 1996 Megan Whalen Turner

customers; it was a real one that she reserved for people she thought she might like. Mechemel's eyebrows went up in astonishment. He remembered Harold saying she had a smile that would make flowers bloom early, but he had assumed that Harold was exaggerating, as Harold always did. Mechemel sat down at the table. While Selene's mother watched in amusement, he ate the entire plate of scones. The only one left was the one in Selene's mother's hand.

When Selene was done measuring out the crème de menthe, she looked at the plate, empty of all but crumbs. "You ate them all?"

Embarrassment colored Mechemel's face deep pink. "I am terribly sorry. I don't know what came over me. . . . I, um, . . . It's been sometime," he explained, "since I had scones. And these really are, were," he corrected himself, "delicious."

He grew still pinker when Selene laughed. "It's okay, I can make more," she said, "but see if I offer you any cake."

"You're making a cake?" Mechemel said with delight, then backtracked hastily. "Well, no, no, I certainly wouldn't trouble you for any." He stood up from the table and tried not to look disappointed.

Selene's mother reached up to pat him on the arm, "No, sit down," she said, "Selene was only teasing." The elf prince looked at her in surprise. He wasn't used to being teased, and no one but his mother had ever patted him on the arm.

So Mechemel sat at the kitchen table and talked to Selene's mother while Selene made her brittle chocolate crème de menthe gateau. Selene's mother told him their version of the week's events and ended up saying, "In fact, if you had been a present from the elf prince, you would have been perfect."

Mechemel winced. If he had known, he could have sent them a real lodger. It was too late now.

Selene's mother asked Mechemel about his research project and he made up answers as well as he could. He gathered that Selene's mother was writing a dissertation on something called the Battle of Hastings. He drew a strange look when he raised one eyebrow and said, "Which one was that?"

"Surely you know the Battle of Hastings. When the English lost to the Norman invaders?"

"Oh, yes of course. How silly of me, yes. A friend of mine was there." He saw another startled look forming and realized his error, "Last year, at the site, not at the battle itself, of course." After that he thought he had better excuse himself. He went back to his room and didn't come out until the cake was ready. He ate half of it.

On Sunday, Selene made another batch of scones for herself and her mother and one batch for Mechemel to eat all by himself. On Monday, he came home in the evening with a bag of groceries and a jar of cloudberry jam. He said that he didn't think it was fair that they spend all his rent money feeding him.

"The jam is from my mother's pantry."

"Instead of Three Wishes," from *Instead of Three Wishes*, © 1996 Megan Whalen Turner

"Oh, does your mother live near here?"

"Not far," he responded, "As the crow flies."

Every week Mechemel would bring home a bag of ingredients for scones and other delicacies, and on Saturdays Selene would bake, experimenting with every recipe in her worn-out cookbooks. On weekdays, when Selene and her mother thought he was going to sit in the library at the University of Waterloo, Mechemel went home to talk with his mother. He described Selene's sugary concoctions in detail and related his conversations with Selene's mother. Then he and his mother tried to pick a gift that would please Selene. His mother suggested a cubic zirconia tennis bracelet that she had seen advertised on the shopping channel.

"She doesn't wear any jewelry. She'd probably sell it to buy cake flour. As nearly as I can tell, baking is the one thing she enjoys."

"Buy her five hundred pounds of cake flour."

"I can't. Every time I give her that sort of thing she makes more cakes and scones and I eat them."

"Well, I don't know which I envy more, your never-ending supply of sweets or the company of that girl's mother. She seems quite clever."

"She is."

"We haven't had a clever person here in years," Mechemel's mother sighed, and Mechemel promised that when he had taken care of his obligation to Selene, he'd try to find something that would amuse her, maybe a video cassette recorder.

He was always back at the house in New Elegance Estates in the late afternoon to share a cup of tea and a long talk with Selene's mother. While they talked, they ate Selene's present scones. They discussed history, more often than not; it was Selene's mother's passion. She was particularly interested in Canadian history, and Mechemel, who had lived through a good part of it, was able to provide eyewitness reports of several events. He, of course, lied about the source of his information.

So a little of Selene's mother's loneliness was relieved, and a little of Mechemel's mother's boredom, but Mechemel got no closer to finding a gift to repay Selene. With each passing day, Mechemel was more determined to choose a gift without parallel. Money was too easy. He wanted something better.

In the spring time, New Elegance Estates looked as good as they ever did. All the weeds were blooming. The empty streets were washed clean by nightly rains. Mechemel walked home one evening, avoiding puddles, carrying his bag of groceries. He heard footsteps pounding behind him and turned to wait for Selene. Behind her, the number seventeen bus pulled away.

Selene didn't bother to evade the puddles. As she ran, she stamped heavily into each one in her path, spraying water in circles across the pavement. She slowed down before she reached Mechemel, but several especially motivated droplets landed on his

shoes. He leaned to look at them over the top of the grocery bag, then looked at Selene with his eyebrows raised.

"Heavens," she said, "Will you melt?"

He watched the drops evaporate before he answered dryly. "I think I'm safe. Did you have a good day at school?" He made a hook with his elbow and she caught her arm through it. They walked shoulder to shoulder toward home.

"Good enough. Only sixteen more days to go." When they got to the front yard Mechemel pointed with his chin.

"Your bush has rejuvenated." Selene was stunned. She had never finished the job that she'd started the day Mechemel arrived. All winter, the tree had stood with its trunk sawn halfway through. Now that the warm weather had come, tiny shoots of green had sprung from the bark below the cut.

"I think you'll find that you can cut away the dead part and those green shoots will grow up into a very pretty bush."

"You said it was a bush before, what did you call it?"

"*Salix bebbiana*. It's one of the diamond barked willows."

"Goodness, you know a lot." "Not everything," said Mechemel.

That was the day that the letter came. Selene found it in the mailbox at the top of the ramp to the front door. She dumped her school books down in the front hall and sat beside them while she read it. Mechemel watched her face grow pink with pleasure and then fade with disappointment.

"What is it?" He asked. "Oh, it's a letter from the Boston School of Culinary Arts."

"Yes?"

"I sent them my scones by overnight mail. As a sample of my work. They liked my scones and they say I can enroll in their school." She looked up at Mechemel. "They are very exclusive. It's an honor just to be invited to enroll, especially for the pastry program. Listen," and she read aloud from letter, ". . . thank you for your application. The judges enjoyed your scones and feel that, although their charm is rough, you may have talent worthy of cultivation."

"Sounds very pompous," said Mechemel.

"They are, but famous, too."

"Did you want to go study there."

"Lots."

"Then why aren't you more pleased?"

"No money," said Selene.

"Ahh," said Mechemel, suddenly understanding.

"Besides," said Selene as she folded up the letter and put it away, "there's mother. She'd hate to move to Boston. And I couldn't leave her here on her own, so it's no go either way."

"What will you do instead?"

"Instead of Three Wishes," from *Instead of Three Wishes*, © 1996 Megan Whalen Turner

"Probably take the job they've offered me at the school cafeteria. It's full time." She collected her books and left Mechemel standing in the front hall.

After a while he put his bag of groceries down and went back out the door to visit his mother.

The next day was Thursday. Selene came home late, but the sunset was not yet over when Selene closed the front door behind her.

"Selene," her mother called, "Come into the living room." Selene went to the doorway, "Only fifteen days left," she said to her mother, who had her wheelchair pulled up to the coffee table. Mechemel was sitting on the couch next to her. "What's up?" Selene wanted to know.

"Remember that elf prince?" said her mother.

"Oh no," said Selene, "he hasn't resurfaced has he?"

"He has," said Mechemel. "What now?" Selene began to ask, but thought better of it. She looked at Mechemel and suddenly blushed.

"He's been slow," said her mother, "but he has finally selected a present for you." Mechemel handed Selene an envelope. Inside a piece of parchment, much adorned with ribbons and seals, informed her that she was the recipient of a centennial scholarship awarded for excellence in the Very Fine Art of Scone Making and that the Mechemel Foundation would pay the tuition and board at the School of Culinary Excellence of her Choice, so long as it subscribed to the high standards of the Foundation.

"But, I told you—" Selene directed a fierce look at Mechemel.

"—And" her mother interrupted her, "while you are away at school, Mechemel's mother has most graciously invited me to stay with her. For as long as is necessary to complete your education," she emphasized.

"With her?"

"And myself" said Mechemel.

"Yes," said Selene's mother with a smile, "I'll be able to give Harold your regards."

"Zowee."

So Mechemel arranged for a dryad to move into the willow in the front yard and keep an eye on the house. Selene went to Boston and her mother became great friends with the Elf Queen. In the evening, they sometimes watched television together, but mostly they talked. Mechemel sometimes stopped in and the three of them discussed the Meech Lake Accords and the French and Indian War. In the summer, Selene came to visit as well and demonstrated what she'd learned in school: cherry coulis, blanc manger, clafouti, mille-feuille, and puff pastry with fresh strawberries picked in the forest by the sprites. And every afternoon she made a fresh batch of scones for tea.