

THE RULES OF UNBINDING

Geoffrey A. Landis

Geoffrey A Landis <http://www.geoffreylandis.com> spends more time on writing science papers than science fiction these days, but he still pens an occasional story now and then. Since the last time he appeared in *Asimov's*, he has been involved in a lot of projects, most recently working on a mission to Saturn's moon Titan as part of the NASA Innovative Advanced Concepts project. His new tale uncorks . . .

THE RULES OF UNBINDING

Kharkov was not looking for a genie in a bottle, but of course he knew what to do.

What he had been looking for in the Negev desert was antiquities—most preferably, antiquities in the form of gold or silver—with his metal detector. In principle, he should have registered and gotten a permit from the Israel Antiquities Authority before doing anything of the sort, but they would have demanded paperwork, and likely would keep anything interesting he happened to find. He didn't much like rules. He had no intention of reporting anything he dug up, and definitely no intention of sharing.

He'd picked a spot not too far from the site of what had once been a small village, back in the time of Roman Palestine, too small to be of interest even to archaeologists. It had been abandoned for centuries. There were always wars and skirmishes and bandits, and in times of trouble it was not unusual for people to bury valuables in a secret spot outside the village. But often people would forget where they buried their treasure, or would die before telling their children where to look.

With the metal detector, what he'd mostly been finding was detritus from a much later conflict, the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. Even though he'd selected this particular part of the Negev as one that had hosted no notable skirmishes, there was enough metal scattered around that his metal detector was always going off. So far the largest find he'd made had been the rear axle and transmission from what looked like a 1946 Jeep. He had no idea why it had been abandoned, or how it had gotten buried; nor did he particularly care. He only cursed at the amount of time he'd wasted in uncovering it and moved on.

He'd been about ready to quit when he found the bottle. It had been only a very weak signal, and he'd debated whether it would even be worth uncovering, but he decided that this would be the last: he'd dig down until he verified this was another dead end, and then pack it up, head back to his hotel, and try one of the other spots he'd scouted tomorrow.

The bottle was ceramic, still intact, beautifully decorated with geometric patterns

in yellow and blue glaze, but bound with an intricate cage of bronze, which must have been what had set off the metal detector. A clay jar would be exactly what a fleeing family might use to put their stashed coins in, so for an instant he'd been hopeful, but this was more of a bottle than a jar, with the neck opening too small for anyone to slip coins into. It was closed with a carved stopper (ivory, maybe?) that was held in place with twists of bronze wire—green with corrosion now—and then sealed with wax. Ottoman era, he thought; perhaps fifteenth century. When he picked it up, he realized it was too light to hold anything metallic, but still, a piece of Ottoman ceramic could fetch something in the antiques market.

But he was curious what it had held—wine? Perfume? The rules of the antiquity market said that an untouched bottle would be worth more than one with the seal broken, but to hell with the rules. He could reseal the wax later and no one would know. He broke the wax seal, untwisted the wire, and opened the bottle to sniff the contents.

The genie came out of the bottle with a rush of air and smoke that smelled like a thunderstorm, like the musk of some powerful animal in rut, and at the same time like something ancient and rotten that had been buried long underground. The smoke solidified and gained form, in the shape of a man, and yet not a man, powerfully built and with eyes of fire, standing before him. Incongruously, he was attired in modern clothes. “You have freed me,” he said, in a voice that was not loud, and yet echoed from the hills around.

Kharkov knew about genies—who doesn't? No purpose in small talk. He cut to the point, so he would control the situation right from the start. “Three wishes, right?” he said. “Whatever I want.”

The genie paused for a moment, and then made the slightest of nods. “I am the servant of the master. As you say, three wishes I will grant you,” he said. “Whatever you desire. I will explain the rules—”

Kharkov cut him off. “First wish: no rules.”

The genie stared at him for a moment and then began to laugh, a hollow sound like rain falling into empty barrels. Kharkov permitted himself a small smile.

“I do not,” the genie said, “have to explain the consequences of a wish to you before granting it. But I may do so, if I choose. You may wish to consider more carefully.

“I admire your audacity. You are wishing, I am sure, to sidestep the rule that forbids you to make a wish to be granted infinite wishes. But you should know that rules are what make the Universe work. The rule of gravity that holds you to the Earth. The rule of oxidation that allows you to breathe.

“Yes, I could take away all rules. I don't know what would happen; whether every atom of your body would fly apart, as the rule of electrical attraction that binds atoms together vanished, or if you would suddenly collapse, as the rule of Pauli exclusion that prevents atoms from collapsing together fails to hold. Or possibly you would just vanish, as the rule of persistence of things stops ruling. I ask, wouldst thou be Abaddon? Then speak the word, and unbind the world.”

Kharkov cut him off again. “Fine. I understand. Good correction. A change, then.

“Now: first wish, no rules *about wishes*.”

The genie smiled, a broad smile with apparent genuine pleasure. “That is your wish?” he said. He snapped his fingers. “Your wish is granted.”

That was easy. So far, perfect. Kharkov thought for a moment. “Good. My second wish is—”

This time the genie interrupted him. “What second wish?”

“You are to grant three wishes. The second of my wishes is for—”

The genie shook his head. “Three wishes, that is the rule. But, as you said: there are no rules. And, with no rules, no second wish.”

Kharkov started to argue, but the genie shook his head. “I was the servant of the

master, sentenced to grant the desires of whosoever held the bottle.” The genie raised his arms above his head, and slowly began to float upward. “But the rule that bound me here, to this plane of mud and misery, is now unbound.” As he rose, he slowly faded, until there was nothing more than a slightly thicker part of the air, “—and I am free.” In a moment even that slight thickening of the air was picked up by a breeze and dispersed, and Kharkov was alone.

He stared at the sky for a while, but there was nothing more, just the dazzle of the sun in the cloudless sky.

He bent down and picked up the bottle. Looking more closely, he could see that he had been fooled: it was no fifteenth-century ceramic, but cheap kitsch, a novelty wine bottle from no earlier than the 1980s.

He tossed it over his shoulder and began to pack his equipment.