

Bottled Up

By Scribblesinink

Swirling the whiskey around in the glass in his hand, Bobby appraised the stoppered bottle with watery eyes. He'd put it in the middle of the dining room table, where it sat looking slim and elegant next to the half-empty bottle of Jack. A little of its bright colors still shone through the heavy layer of dust that coated it. Some hunter—Jed? Creedy? Bobby couldn't quite remember who—had recognized the glass vessel with the long neck for what it truly was at a yard sale, nicked it, and brought it to Bobby's for safekeeping.

Bobby snorted disdainfully. Safekeeping... yeah, right. How safe could he possibly keep the blasted thing, when he could no longer get up the steps of his own porch, and had to have a ramp installed to reach his own damn front door? He threw back the last of the whiskey and reached for the bottle to pour himself some more.

After he set the whiskey back on the table, his hand reached, almost of its own volition, for the other bottle. It seemed frail in comparison: curved and rounded, with a narrow neck, and stained yellow with age. Bobby considered it for another moment. Maybe he could...?

It was wrong to even think about it, he knew. Oh God, did he know! You didn't mess with the stuff they came in contact with, *ever*. Then again, it also sure as heck wasn't right that he was condemned to this damn chair, was it? After all he'd done, all he'd given, he deserved better than to be forced to live the rest of his life as a helpless cripple.

Without giving himself a chance to reconsider, Bobby rubbed his shirt sleeve over the dusty surface of the bottle until pink showed where he'd cleaned the glass. For a long minute, nothing happened, and Bobby barked a wry laugh. *Just my luck: a genie bottle with nobody home.*

But even as he thought it, the stopper popped up with a soft *thwop*. Thick, white smoke began to pour out of the bottle, curling and spiraling higher until it crystallized into a half-naked, potbellied, humanoid creature with a turban, about a foot and a half in size.

"Master called?" Its voice was remarkably deep for such a small being. "Three wishes I may grant." It blinked up at Bobby. "Consider well the thing you wish for." It folded his arms in front of its bare chest and waited.

"Um...." Now that the genie hovered in front of him, Bobby found himself at a loss for words. All he needed to do was say the words and—no, this could never end well. "I want you gone," Bobby growled. "I want you back in your bottle."

He thought he detected a hint of disappointment on the genie's round face but it nodded. "As you wish, it shall be done." It dissolved, and the white smoke was sucked back through the long neck, the stopper popping tightly closed by itself. Except for the smear where Bobby had wiped off the dust, the bottle looked exactly like it had before: shapely, fragile, and very, very old.

oOo

Bobby managed to put the genie in the bottle from his mind for a while, until another pair of hunters called to ask for help, and all he could do was listen powerlessly to their screams over the phone as they died, the horn clenched so tightly in his hand it left marks on his palm that took hours to fade. After the line went dead, he headed straight for the genie's vessel, sitting patiently where he'd stashed it on the bottom shelf of the cabinet in his study. Not bothering to wheel himself back to his desk, he balanced the bottle on his dead knees and rubbed vigorously. A minute later, the genie reappeared and intoned, "Two wishes I may still grant. Consider well the thing you wish for."

"I want my fucking legs back." The genie glanced down at Bobby's lap and a small crease of puzzlement appeared on its unwrinkled brow. "I want to get out of this goddamn chair—" Bobby smacked his closed fist against one of the wheels, not caring how much the impact stung, "—and I want to be able to get around without needing this godforsaken cripple-wagon."

The small frown smoothed out and the genie beamed with delight. "As you wish, it shall be done." Before Bobby could ask how, it fled back into its bottle.

Bobby waited, but he didn't feel any different. There was no tingling in his legs, or pain or—he pounded his thigh with a fist, and felt nothing. But maybe.... Heart thudding against his ribs, he set the bottle down on the ground next to his chair and pushed himself up off the seat with his arms, begging his legs to take his weight. They refused, as they had so many times before. Once his strength had gone, he ended up faceplanting himself on the floor next to the genie bottle. Cursing the genie, and the damned doctors, and the goddamn angels for not helping him, Bobby sobbed helpless tears until darkness fell. Then he hoisted himself back into the chair and wheeled slowly toward the back room, where they'd put up a bed after he could no longer get up the stairs.

It would've been too good to be true, anyway.

oOo

He woke late the next morning, with a memory of dancing with his wife on their

wedding day fresh on his mind, hard on the heels of a long night filled with dreams in which he could walk. He was lying on his stomach, his face scrunched against his pillow at an awkward angle, and his neck and shoulders ached. Great. Now he'd have a crook in his neck to add to his misery.

As soon as he made to roll over, though, some instinct warned him not to. He lay still, trying to puzzle out what was different. Something was definitely not as it should be.... Was there someone (or something) in the room with him? Had something broken through the wards and the salt lines and the curses carved into the door posts? He pricked his ears, before slowly moving his head a little so he could take in the room. The sun slanted yellow rays of light across the floor, but otherwise the room was exactly as it had been when he'd fallen asleep.

Reassured he was alone after all, he twisted further around and began to sit up so he could drag himself into his chair and find breakfast. That was when the truth dawned on him.

Filled with sudden dread, he froze again.

Already knowing what he'd find, he forced himself to raise his right arm over his left shoulder. He scrunched his eyes shut and groaned in dismay as his fingers touched soft feathers. *Dear God, no...* It was a struggle to open his eyes again. When he did, he craned his head around as far as it could go, until he could finally catch a glimpse of white wings from the corner of his eye.

That goddamn genie...!

Deep down, Bobby knew he only had himself to blame. He was the one who'd made the wish, in the way he'd made it; the genie had merely been trying to fulfill it. But, dammit, this sort of crap was the last thing he needed!

Climbing back into the wheelchair with those wings folded across his back was even more awkward than usual; he found himself balancing precariously on the edge of the seat, forced to bend over to make room. Wheeling himself back to his study, he prayed he wasn't gonna fall out and land flat on his face again. Yet he didn't dare try put the wings to use.

At last, he reached his study and found the bottle discarded on the floor where he'd left it the night before. He brushed the last of the dust off with his palm.

As soon as he could make out the shape of the genie, he jerked a thumb across his shoulder. "What the hell is this?"

The genie grinned toothily at Bobby and bobbed its head happily. "Wings. As you wished."

"I did not wish for goddamn wings!"

The genie's brow creased a little in confusion. "You wished to be able to move around without your wheels. Now you can fly!"

"Like hell I can!" Bobby glared at the small creature. "As soon as I set down somewhere, I'm back to being stuck in place. I wished for my legs back. That means I want to *walk* again, you idjit!"

"Oh...." The genie's face fell as it considered Bobby's words. Then its expression lit up with a new smile. "I could make that happen? You just need to wish it. One wish I can still grant you."

Bobby scrubbed a hand across his face, suppressing a dismayed groan. His shoulder blades prickled where the wings were attached to his body, and he shifted uneasily in the chair in an attempt to relieve the itch.

He realized the genie was looking at him expectantly, and that he was supposed to say something. He took a deep breath. "I wish...." He paused a moment, and then suddenly knew exactly what he should say. "I wish for you to take away these wings, and put everything back the way it was."

The genie nodded. "As you wish, it shall be done."

A moment later, even before the genie had fully been sucked back into its bottle, the itch faded from Bobby's shoulders. He let out a relieved breath and cautiously tried to sit up straight, pleased when he found he could. Shaking his head at himself—what in hell had he been thinking?—he leaned over and picked up the bottle from the ground, trundled off to the storeroom with it, and put it away in a curse box, a sturdy, studded wooden casket. Shutting the lid, he turned the tiny key until the lock clicked, and then went to the kitchen to throw the key into the trash.

There. That should do it.

The phone rang again, distracting him from thinking more about the genie in its bottle just then. And over the next couple weeks, as he was kept busy translating ancient texts, fielding calls and pretending to be the FBI, he tried very hard not to think about how much he wanted to walk again. It mostly worked, too. Until he caught wind of a nine-hundred-year-old witch playing for time....

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