

Ifta

A commissioned story by Shadowrnr

Prologue:

It is written that in the twenty-fifth year of the reign of the great king, Solomon the Wise, power was granted unto him over all the spirits of the Earth; Jann and Ifrit, Peris and Shedim, and by His seal bound them each to serve mortal Man in ways suited to the talent of each, and secured each within impenetrable vessels, guarded by great spells and hexes, and that each spirit must serve the possessor of their vessel, be it lamp or bottle, granting their every desire in the fashion of their ability.

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“Why are you doing this, Khalil? This was your father’s most prized possession.”

Salāh ad-Dīn Khalil, heir to the Bahri Sultan of Egypt, looked sternly at his long-time friend and advisor. The two men were alone aboard the royal galley, inasmuch as a score of slaves manning the oars and a single helmsman constituted being alone.

“I have told you, do not question my resolve in this. My father, may Allah grant him peace, made this costly war on the Crusaders, and now I am burdened with the aftermath. This siege is bleeding us of blood and treasure, all because he could not resist the temptations of the creature within. Better that he had wished for pleasures of the flesh instead of glory in conquest.”

“But why, why not use the creature’s power yourself?”

“I will not be tempted!” Khalil stated firmly. “The Nile shall see to its safekeeping.”

With that, Salāh ad-Dīn Khalil, Bahri Sultan of Egypt, cast the crystal bottle into the river and watched it sink out of sight.

Part 1: 1898, A Fantastic Discovery

“Careful, gentlemen, careful. We must not damage anything.”

Egyptologist Victor Loret, head of the Egyptian Antiquities Service, waved his arms frantically in French, admonishing his workers not to damage the seal-stone that covered what had been designated KV35, the 35th tomb identified in the Valley of the Kings. His assistants stood around him, brushes and buckets and gardening shovels at the ready in case the entrance was

free of debris, as remote as that possibility might be. So far, all the tombs they'd discovered had been blocked by tons of rubble, and if the pattern remained true, so would this one.

As the heavy seal-stone was winched out of place with ropes and booms by twenty local laborers, the daunting task of clearing the rubble became apparent. Shaking his head, Arnaud Legrand handed his brother, Étienne, a 100-franc note and hefted a spade. It would be a very long day.

Working through the night, when the desert was coolest, the Legrand brothers and their local laborers dug their way through the rubble blocking the tomb, and by morning, they had cleared the entrance. Victor joined them at dawn and, torches in hand, squeezed through the narrow opening they'd made into the passage beyond and descended the slope into the first vault.



Experience had taught them to be wary of traps, deadfalls and pits in particular because torchlight only illuminated so much. The Legrand brothers used ropes tied around the waists of their lead workers to ensure they didn't fall to their deaths, and staves to find trap doors, but they found nothing dangerous.

More torches were brought, and the splendor of the unplundered tomb became apparent: marbled walls with artwork and writings, treasures and artifacts in niches cut into the walls, and a huge, stone sarcophagus emblazoned with images of the pharaoh sealed within. Passages cloaked in darkness led to the sides, but those chambers could wait. *This* was a pharaoh's burial vault. Victor and the Legrand Brothers began examining the sarcophagus, listing the nearby artifacts and setting them aside.

"Unless I am mistaken, this sarcophagus belongs to Amenhotep the Second." Victor was almost giddy with excitement as he deciphered the hieroglyphs on the side of the coffin. "Help me remove the cover," he said to the brothers, and the trio began manhandling the heavy capstone aside.

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"It is 400 miles to Cairo, and it may take a few days for the boat to arrive in Luxor if it hasn't already arrived," Étienne told the leader of the little troop. "Make sure nothing happens to the artifacts while you wait. You'll be met in Cairo by representatives from the Antiquities Service who will take charge of them."

Acknowledging his instructions, the caravan's Bedouin leader pulled his scarf around his face, shouted to the mahouts – the camel handlers – and the caravan set out. Étienne watched them

for a while, then returned to the dig site where his brother and Victor continued to categorize their discoveries.

It was only about 20 miles by way of a wandering, unpaved dirt trail from the Valley of the Kings to Luxor. Camels weren't very fast, hardly more than a man's walking pace, and laden with treasure, they moved even slower, but the mahouts were in no big hurry to push their beasts to greater speed. Even so, they arrived at the ferry that evening. The barge was on the far bank, though, and didn't seem to be returning anytime soon.

With nothing else to do while they waited, Hassam Moossun, the caravan's leader, instructed his mahouts to tend their camels while the guards watched and then took a walk down to the river's edge to wait for the ferry. Spotting something glinting in the moonlight, he slipped down the bank and uncovered an ornately sculpted bottle with a stubby neck and a crystal stopper. It was crusted with centuries' worth of grit and slime.

'I wonder if this is worth a piastre or two?' he thought, wiping away some of the mud.

"Hassam, the ferry comes!" one of his men called, and Hassam shoved the bottle into his sack to examine later.

Part 2: Sleight of Hand

"Welcome to Luxor," Kiran Shah said by way of greeting, bowing slightly at the waist to the leader of the caravan as he entered the cafe. "I am Kiran, at your service."

Hassam Moossun looked the place over and removed his face scarf before acknowledging the Egyptian servant's presence. Hassam was a Bedouin, hired to lead and protect the archeologist's caravans as they brought artifacts from the excavations, and he had little regard for city dwellers.

"We need food and water for twenty men, and fodder for twelve camels and eight horses," he announced, taking a seat at a table and setting his dusty leather sack on the floor. "I will eat here. When does the steamship arrive from Cairo?"

"I don't know," Kiran replied as he filled a water glass for Hassam, "but I'll go to the terminal to find out." The Bedouine drank his first glass quickly and slammed it down to be refilled, then looked at Kiran. "What are you waiting for? Go, find out the steamship schedule."

Kiran bowed slightly at the waist and hurried off, leaving Hassam alone at the table.

Nearby, Ishaq Bux, Kiran's friend and fellow servant in the cafe, watched the proceedings from behind the counter where he was roasting fresh arabica beans for the evening coffee, and the aroma permeated the cafe. The sack attracted his attention, the tip of a bottle protruding from

the opening, and the hint of crystal suggesting something of value. With Kiran gone, he took the opportunity to approach the Bedouin's table with a pitcher and offered to refill his glass.

"What brings an important man such as yourself to our simple establishment, efendi?" Ishaq asked, trying to strike up a conversation so that he might learn if there was any reason for further investigation.

Hassam looked at the smallish man in dusty tan clothes and kepi. It reminded him of the French soldiers he'd seen in the Maghreb... Legionnaires, they were called, and tended to shoot without discretion or malice. Hassam hated them, and this little man reminded him of them.

"None of your concern," he snarled, setting his pistol on the table. "Just bring me food."

"At once, efendi." Ishaq hurried off to fetch some stew and bread, and perhaps some kumis to loosen the man's lips. Even if it didn't, he would probably sleep hard afterward, and that sack might be well worth the effort.

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Hassam did not sleep hard, as Ishaq had hoped, nor did the kumis loosen the man's tongue, and the lure of that crystal bottle remained. He decided a different approach was needed, and after the other patrons departed, he surreptitiously pulled out his faro deck and left it on the counter.

Kiran returned and broke the news that the steamship would not arrive until the next day. Hassam swore a blue streak, cursing the river tides, steamships, weather, and the Gods for his having to remain in this plague-infested hole of a city. He paid for his fare and rose to depart, but not before Ishaq managed to suggest that there were entertainments to be had in the city that were not found in the desert.

Hassam noticed the faro box. "Then perhaps I will be back," he said, and stalked off.

Kiran regarded his friend after Hassam had left, frowning. "Do you think it wise to gamble with a man accustomed to violence?"

"It will be fine." Ishaq replied, thinking to himself that *'it's only gambling if there's a chance you can lose.'*

Later that evening, Hassam and another man from the caravan came to the cafe to play Faro with Ishaq in a backroom off the stable, clouded with opium smoke. Ishaq had invited a couple of his friends to join in to make the game seem fair, but he had secretly backrolled the two ringers and expected to make a tidy profit. They played long into the night, the Bedouins steadily losing their money, but with occasional wins that kept them interested. Eventually,

Hassam's money ran out and, with just the right measure of kumis in his belly and opium smoke in his lungs, his sense of reason faltered.

"I want a chance to win some of my money back," he demanded, setting his pistol on the table in an unsubtle way to intimidate Ishaq and his opponents. Ishaq's friends jumped away from the table in surprise, not having expected trouble, but Ishaq had been expecting that reaction.

The opium addicts didn't react at all.

"You have nothing of value, efendi," he objected. "No money. How do you expect to win anything?"

Hassam blinked, thought for a moment, and removed the bottle from his sack. The iridescent crystal shimmering beneath its crust of filth. "I have this. What will you say it is worth?"

Hiding his anticipation, Ishaq examined the bottle, clicking his tongue and humming to himself while the players looked on. "I can offer ten piasters for it."

"Thirty!"

"Twenty piasters. Nothing more, and I will lose money on the trade."

"Done!"

Ishaq slid the money across the table, set the bottle in his lap, and the game continued. It was no longer necessary to cheat; he had what he wanted, and Hassam left the game a winner in his own eyes.

Part 3: Outrage and Reward

"*You cheated a Bedouin!?*" Kiran shouted, astonished at his friend's stupidity. "He has a **gun**, and if he finds out you cheated him, he's going to return and kill you!"

Ishaq shrugged and laughed. He always did that when he was caught out in one of his scams, but this time the implications of what he'd done turned the laugh into more of a nervous giggle.

"Everything will be fine. I'll just get this cleaned up, and tomorrow I'll sell it to Husani the Merchant. After that, there'll be no..." A banging noise and shouting in front of the cafe interrupted Ishaq's explanation and caused both men to turn. Hassam had returned, and judging by the ruckus, he'd brought friends.

"Quick, take this and hide it," Ishaq said, shoving the bottle into Kiran's hands. "If it isn't here, maybe he'll go away."

“That’s the stupidest...” “Kiran began to protest, but fell silent once the heavy crystal bottle was in his hands. It *felt* valuable.

“Go!”

“Wait,” Kiran said, “you’ll have to pay him back. Take this...” Kiran shoved a fistful of piasters at his friend, who took them and stuffed the wad into his shirt.

Without another word of protest, Kiran fled the cafe, clutching the bottle and hurried past the stable and into the olive orchard beyond. Hassam’s shouting quickly faded in the distance, and Kiran’s initial panic at having to take charge of Ishaq’s ill-gotten treasure faded to nervousness, then calm as he left the orchard and slipped into a vacant goat herder’s hovel beyond.

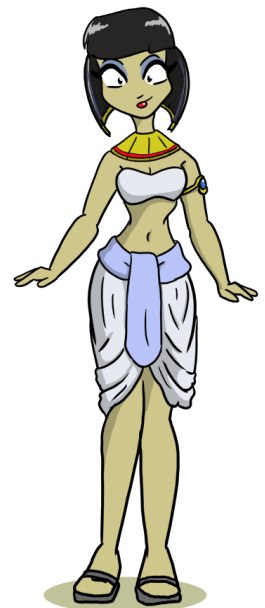
The eastern sky was just beginning to show the first signs of dawn, and Kiran could examine the bottle in the rising light. It was just under three hands high, with a stubby, narrow neck and a flat base, green, and a spherical body. It was difficult to tell what it was made of, but there was an iridescence to the small amount of exposed crystal, and he wanted to see more of it.

Kiran sat on a bench and used a rag to wipe off the bottle’s surface. When that didn’t accomplish much, he dunked it into a watering trough to loosen the mud and worked at it until he wiped it clean. Sitting on the windowsill in the sunlight, Kiran realized that this was no ordinary bottle.

“Amazing,” he said aloud, examining the delicate filigree etched into the bottle’s iridescent surface. There was a gold wire binding the crystal seal to the neck of the bottle, and Kiran was overcome with an urge to discover what it contained... exotic oils or wines from far off Greece, maybe. He did not understand the meaning of the engraving on the seal’s face, a small pentagram within a circle of nearly illegible script, and thought nothing of it. Still, he carefully unbound the seal. Even if the contents were spoiled, the bottle and the gold wire alone were still of great value.

Smoke erupted from the open bottle.

A woman appeared, a beautiful woman. She had short black hair in a manner not popular for a Pharaoh’s age, and wore a chest binding and shendyt of white and blue linen. A collar of gold plates adorned with blue sapphires circled her neck, and her bronzed skin was silky smooth. When she spoke, it was with the voice of a cherubim.



"Greetings, Master," the woman said with a deep bow. "I am Ifta, the genie of this bottle. Thank you for freeing me from my confinement. As such, I shall reward you with three wishes."

Kiran cried out and stumbled back in shock, collapsing onto a rickety bench and staring at the apparition that had appeared before him. The bench, riddled with termites, creaked and cracked, but a gesture from the woman prevented him from falling to the floor and turned the rotted wood whole again.

"I don't believe it," he said, running a hand over the restored bench, its surface clean and smooth as if recently sanded. "A genie... a real, living genie!"

"I have heard such disbelief before, Master," she said, the tone of her lovely voice both irritated and condescending. "And yet the proof is before your eyes. I *am* the genie, and I am here to serve you."

"How... *how* is this possible!?"

Ifta sighed, thinking that the mortals of the world must have grown stupider during her long confinement.

"Have you heard of the great king, Solomon?"

"Who hasn't? His wisdom is extolled in scripture."

"His magic is equally great," she said. "He made a pact with The Almighty to confine jinns and genies to their totems to serve Man."

"Is?" Kiran questioned. "You speak as if you know him. Solomon has been dead for centuries."

Ifta bit her lip and stamped her foot in frustration. "What year is this?"

"1898... why?"

"I have been trapped in my bottle since Sayf-ad-Din-Qalawun was the Bahri Sultan of Egypt."

"I've never heard of him," Kiran replied.

"That was *centuries* ago."

"Then you are... "

"Older," she said without emotion. "Show me your world, Master, so that I may serve you better."

"Yes... of course, Ifta." He looked around and found an empty meal bag used for feeding horses, placed her bottle inside, and slung the bag over one shoulder. "Come, please."

The sun was well above the horizon by now, and Kiran led Ifta from the goat herder's hut through the olive orchard to a rocky bluff overlooking the flood plains. It was late spring, and the crops were already thriving: barley, wheat, lentils, and beans, and the plain was green with

growth. In the distance, the Nile was a muddy ribbon over a mile wide, and the far bank was shrouded in the morning mists.

"What is that?" Ifta asked, pointing at a dark object belching black smoke out on the river.

"A steamship," Kiran replied, "from Cairo."

"I do not see oars or sails. How does it move against the current?"

"The steam turns a wheel and pushes the boat. I don't know how that works."

Ifta gazed on the distant steamship as it approached the landing. A smaller, mechanical device clattered down a trail to the dock and stopped. Two men emerged and walked out onto the Landing.

"What is that?" There was excitement in her voice, and amazement at all these new contrivances.

"They call it a steam buggy."

There was disbelief in her eyes, the marvel of a ship that moved without slaves or sails, and a wagon that moved on its own were foreign to her.

"Master, may we go closer? I would like to see these wondrous things close up."

"Of course, we'll just walk... "

Ifta gestured, and they were suddenly standing on the shore at the end of the landing beside the buggy, waiting for the ship to arrive. Caught in mid-stride, Kiran nearly lost his balance and fell, but Ifta caught him before he could injure himself. She examined the mechanical beast intently, running her hands over its dusty surface and pulling them away quickly when she felt the heat of the boiler that provided steam.

"This is amazing, Master. I have never seen its like."

"Your power is amazing," he observed, smiling at how quickly she'd brought them down from the bluff to the river's edge. Kiran was unaccustomed to genies and their ways and wasn't used to guarding his speech; he was too open and honest. Naive. His next comment sealed his fate.

"I wish I knew what it was like to be a genie. Abilities like yours are amazing."

Ifta looked at him, a gleam in her eyes as she briefly considered what to do next. She wanted to explore this world. Her time in the bottle had been trivial in the greater scheme of things, a mere blip in time, but so much had changed in the world that she had missed. She did not want to miss it any longer.

Finally, after that long pause, she replied. "Your wish is granted, Master."

There was a flash, and both of them were surrounded by smoke, smoke that was quickly drawn into the bottle and vanished. Ifta, now wearing Kiran's mortal body, removed the crystal bottle from the meal bag and fastened the golden wire around the seal.

“You shall be safe in there, Master, until I return and release you.” She looked for a prominent landmark above the river’s waterline that she could easily remember and buried the bottle at its base. “Enjoy your rest.”

With that, Ifta, now Kiran, strolled down the landing to where the steamship had just arrived and began her exploration of this strange new world.

Epilogue:

The Nile floods came and went; the Inundation, the Egyptians called it, stimulating river traffic and fertilizing the fields. Ifta’s bottle, buried beneath a prominent landmark, was soon exposed by a higher-than-normal flood and washed down the river towards Cairo, coming to rest on the muddy banks of Da’ud Island, where it remained for many years. For Kiran, trapped within Ifta’s ageless genie body, time seemed fleeting and ‘she’ had no real sense of it passing.

Many months later, Ifta, in Kiran’s body, returned after the floods receded only to find that the prominent landmark she’d selected was gone, swept away by the flood. She searched high and low for her bottle, digging with her hands in the mud as much to free her master as to reclaim her identity and powers.

Exhausted and depressed, Ifta collapsed on the shore to rest and think. Where could her bottle be?

“You! Thief! Where’s my treasure?”

Ifta looked up and saw a smallish man in dusty tan clothes and a kepi approaching with anger in his eyes.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Ifta replied.

The man ignored her protest and pulled a revolver from beneath his sash. Ifta had seen devices like it and was instantly concerned, rising slowly to her feet with hands extended in supplication.

“I don’t have...”

Ishaq Bux flinched as Ifta rose to her feet and the gun discharged. Pain and disbelief clouded Ifta’s features, and she sank back to the muddy bank, her hand over the wound in her chest. Blood poured between her fingers. As the light faded from her eyes, her final thought was for her mate.

‘Oh, Aazim. I am so sorry...’

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Lord Shona entered the vast chamber where Lord Haji held court and nodded greetings to the chamberlain, Lord Than Den. The latter glanced at the bottle Lord Shona was carrying and

smiled. He raised his staff to announce the lord's arrival, but the latter stopped him with an upraised hand.

"My business is not with Our Lord, but with his First."

"Another gift for Lady Lahab?" Than Den asked. "Where did you find this one?"

"On an island in the middle of the Nile, buried within a hundred years of silt and cow dung. It was a miracle that I stumbled upon it."

"You smell as if you spent a hundred years beside it," the chamberlain chided. "I would do something about that before meeting with Haji's First."

Lord Shona huffed something disparaging, which the Chamberlain found amusing and strode through a nearby arch into a hidden passage, changing his clothes with a gesture. He circled around the council chamber, turned through the wide double doors behind Haji's throne, and ascended the carpeted stairs up three levels past niches alternately filled with statuettes, exotic bottles and lamps, or other artwork.

A pair of *haris al-harim*, harem guards, stood watch at the top, flanking the wide, white double doors through which he could see The Amber Room. Beyond was the Harem, where Lady Lahab guided and protected the young genies under her care.

"What have you found, my Lord?" It was Lady Zakiya. She'd been waiting in the chamber as if expecting someone's arrival.

"A totem from the mortal lands of Egypt, for Lady Lahab," he replied. "It remains sealed."

Zakiya took the bottle and examined the seal. "I thought that this looked familiar; this is a very old seal."

"Then I shall leave it with you, for I have important duties elsewhere," he said, bowing and withdrawing from the chamber.

Zakiya bowed her head in acknowledgment and returned her attention to the bottle as she walked slowly back into the harem and past the pool.

"Ifa... Ifa... Ifa..." she said to herself before placing the bottle on a shelf with a dozen other totems; some sealed, some not. "Where have you been all this time?"

Credits:

This story has been a work of fiction inspired by *I Dream of a Jeanie Bottle*. In fact, this particular story is actually canon, even though some descriptive elements have been drawn from several of my fanfiction stories.