

All was silence as the Doc descended the stairs.

Each step fell with weight greater than his body could bear, forcing the old planks and nails to announce his pain in the heavy silence.

Then the quiet broke, shattered by another burst of boisterous laughter from the Djinn in the golden cage.

"What is that?" Doc asked.

"A Djinn." Rho answered.

The undead youth spoke reverently. Lista watched with interest. He'd been so familiar with her, being kind but treating her more like a visiting friend than anything else. Here, his back was straight and his eyes looked over 'Doc' as if he was somehow both a god and a feeble old man.

"Djinn." Doc said everything with the word. "Cursed things."

"Ahahahahah, cursed!" The Djinn rolled around on it's back.

Doc walked over, grabbed a thick cloth from the table where the lab equipment sat, and threw it over the gilded cage. The laughing became a muffled burbling instead. Lista looked at the Doc's face as he passed her. She'd hadn't had a chance to really look at him at their first meeting. She'd been pretending to be unconscious, he'd been pretending to sell a miracle cure for the Gray. A pair of liars brought together, both too concerned with their own deceptions to look into each other too far.

He was older than she'd first surmised. There were signs that his hair had been dyed, and terribly so. White roots and stray strands near his ears told a story of decade's passing. His face held the cracks, wrinkles, and folds of time spent fighting the world and receiving only pain as his reward.

"Doc." Rho came over and took the old man's arm. "What happened?"

"Plague keepers." Doc mumbled. "They happened."

Rho shared a glance with Lista. She didn't know what he was looking for. She had nothing to offer either of them. She was just a dead farm girl who was somehow still walking and talking. She knew nothing of this city, or the Doc, or his experiments.

However, she did know the Keepers. The memory of the one who burned her friends, her family, everyone she'd ever known. It curled and smoked in her mind.

Rho must of seen some of those embers on her face, for he looked away.

"They took the wagon." Doc planted his hands on the laboratory table and let his weight fall on them. "Burned it."

Silence reigned once more.

"All...?"

"All of it." Doc finished. "All the samples, the experiments, the notes... gone."

Rho collapsed. It was slower than Lista would have expected. His knees just bent and he fell into a pile of bony arms and legs. His head was the only part that remained upright, his face paler than the death that already touched it.

"But....the cure...." Lips barely moved as the words slipped by them.

"We'll have to start over." Doc breathed, his fingernails digging into the ancient wood of the table, making the laboratory glassware shudder and chime. "Begin new tests, new trials."

The Djinn laughed even harder from beneath his shroud, shouting words that might have been profanity.

The Doc's head slowly turned toward the sound. His left hand seemed to move of its own accord, reaching over, curling into the fabric and pulling it off the tiny, golden cage. The Djinn was revealed. His face-less glowing body pressed against the bars. Still, you could feel the manic grin beneath the blue-green flames.

"Djinn... Do you grant *all* wishes?"

"Doc!" Rho fought to get to his feet.

"OH, yes!" the Djinn nodded with vigor. *"All the stupid, human wishes! All the power, all the moneys, all the... cures. Hehehehehe."*

Doc dropped the cloth, his hand inching closer to the cage, turning a sickly green under the light.

"Tell me what you want, little thing!" The Djinn wriggled against the gold. *"Tell me what you neeed. You have a need, I feel it. You want to tell me. I'll help you. I'm always so.... happy to help."*

"I wish-"

"No!"

Rho reached the old man and grabbed his arm in a grip that only an undead could maintain; cold, strong, implacable. Doc's arm was pulled back from the Djinn's unsavory light.

"Rho, don't! I... I just want, for you... I want-"

"I know." Rho's grip fell away and arms opened instead. The old man fell into them as if they were an open port in a raging storm. "But not like this, never like this."