

Chapter 1

“Plague! The purple plague!”

Jawan froze as a surge of panicked town folks rushed toward him.

He tried to reason out what was going on, but his own heart raced as he picked up the hysteria of fifty wild-eyed faces, coming closer at a speed that only fear could drive them.

The summer sun shone down with indifferent brightness as farmers pushed slowpokes out of their way with pitchforks and shopkeepers puffed along, trying to avoid the pitchforks. Children of all shapes and sizes ran ahead of women in long dresses ill-suited for running, much less escaping.

“Fools!” an old man screamed. “You can’t outrun the plague!”

But he might as well have asked a whirlwind to stop and think its actions through. A grocer abandoned his vegetable cart and darted down a side street. Tomatoes leaped into the air and stained the cobblestones blood red as the horde raced on, heedless of anything in its way.

The only intelligible sounds Jawan heard over the staccato of pounding feet were piercing cries:

“The plague!”

No! Not here. The plague was something that happened to other people, in other unfortunate places.

“It’s here!” came the scream, slaying his only sustaining, but false, security. The purple plague had found its slow, malignant way to Hadley Town.

“Plague!”

The single-minded mantra echoed through his head and up the street, and Jawan envisioned his own body

squashed underfoot like a tomato if he didn't run. They were coming fast, young boys like himself and men. So close. *Run!* His frozen legs ignored him.

Like spooked horses, they'd gallop right over him. On this narrow street, Jawan saw only one way they could go—past shuttered shops, over startled pigeons, toward him.

Move, legs! He screamed at his comatose body to move. He started running—just another spooked horse. Fear was guiding him. He had to stop and think where he was going. Stop?! *No!* Run and think. He could think while he ran. And get out of their path before they trampled him.

An alley that smelled of rotting garbage even from ten feet away offered his only escape. Holding his breath, he dashed into the mouth of the alley, crashing through garbage and cast-aways. He heard the shrill terror of the crowd as they swarmed past the alley, but he didn't look back. The mob and the plague some of them might even be carrying were behind him—gone another way.

But like the man warned, they couldn't escape that dread disease no one could see. He had to tell his master. Myrlo, the great Earth mage, would know how to stop this.

If only he could reach Myrlo before the mob spread their panic all over the town. They went another way, and would not chase him down this alley. Still, he couldn't stop. He had to reach his master.

The other end of the alley seemed a long way off, and Jawan thought he'd never breathe fresh air again. As the mob's clamor faded into the distance, he heard glass crunch under his feet and the sharp edges of discarded furniture scratched his limbs. But he paid it no mind. The stench and decay only made him long for the stuffy rooms of his master's castle, and the stuffier books he had to study as an apprentice of Earth magic.