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# The Plague Cart

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## Introduction

I set these words down by the guttering light of a tallow candle, the wick trimmed with a surgeon's care. My cart is unyoked for the night, its wheels crusted with clay from three shires and a ford that tried to take me. The air is bitter with smoke and rosemary; I have steeped the room so my lungs will not betray me before the ink dries. If I were a wiser soul, I would sleep. But a wiser soul would never have taken the oath that set me upon the road in a year when roads themselves seemed to sicken.

I was apprenticed to Master Lavel in the apothecaries' quarter, where glass and glaze were a second alphabet. We learned to weigh a hope to the grain and seal it in wax: theriac in thumb-sized pills, oxymel for throats gone raw, syrup of poppy when a body must be turned without screaming. The physicians argued of humors and of malignant airs sent on hot winds, of Saturn's frown upon Mars; I learned, instead, to count the days between a market fair and its funerals. I watched patterns as one watches the sky for weather. When the great mortality entered our ledger not as rumor but as tally, my master pressed into my hands a list of recipes and a blessing that sounded like a farewell.

The guild's seal opened town gates that fear had half-closed, but fear is a quick locksmith. To my charge were given not only vials and dried herbs—angelica root bound in linen, rue and yarrow bundled like small brooms—but also a flat packet of papers, forbidden because they dared speak plainly. Some were prayers; some were counsels: keep households apart though blood cry out, burn bedding that has cradled fever, set watchmen at the lanes and pay them out of the common chest, bring food to boundary stones and cleanse coin in vinegar. A few lines were sharper still, naming those who profited by confusion. I hid the pamphlets beneath a false board, above the axle where the jolt of every rut reminded me of my duplicity.

The country itself had taken on the manners of a sickroom. Villages drew hempen ropes across their roads and posted boys with pikes who looked older for the ash on their faces. At noon, bread and beans were left at a stile beyond the last cottage, and I would dip a purse into sour wine before I dared touch the baker's palm with silver. In towns, the beadles called the hour and the curfew, and smoke rolled from courtyards where families made sweet fires of juniper and inglewood to fight invisible taint. Some days I believed it helped, for the streets were cleaner and the flies fewer. Other days I saw the pattern leap the lane like fire jumps thatch, and I knew the enemy preferred crowds and closed rooms, and the time from cough to bell was measured not in fear but in days.

If the cart carried danger, it also carried a woman's hand. Mara was a scribe newly

widowed, the ink still under her nails when I first met her in a church porch where we took shelter from rain that smelled of gutters. She could copy a page at a pace that would shame a clerk and took more care with truth than I did. I meant to leave her with a pouch of dried mint for the cough that clung to her ward; instead she placed in my keeping a bundle of fair copies—those same forbidden counsels, but set in a hand a bailiff could not mistake. We told ourselves it was a commerce of necessity. The heart has a fondness for lies that resemble duty.

What follows is no physician's testament and no martyr's life, though there were days when either would have been simpler. I write of a cart that bore remedies and words, and how each burden weighed differently depending on who stood in the road. I write of watchmen who let me pass for a sprig of rosemary, and others who would not for a purse of nobles. I write of markets that learned to count to seven before opening again, of parish chests unlocked to feed strangers, of the hard arithmetic by which we chose which child might sip the last of the feverfew decoction and which must be turned to the window for air. I write, too, of my own faltering: when truth became a sting too bright to bear, I called it prudence; when I crossed a rope to bring tincture to a woman I loved, I called it mercy and prayed the word would be large enough.

If there is science in these pages, it is the science of attention: the way sickness follows along a river road faster than along a sheep path; the respite a village wins by closing its alehouse and sending its fairs to sleep; the strength it finds in simple ordinances—a pot of vinegar at the gate, a slate tally of rations, a morning bell for news spoken without rumor. If there is consolation, it lies with the hands that learned to pass care without passing breath: hands that left bread at dawn upon the stones and waited in the hedge to watch it taken.

I do not know what will remain when this fevered season has passed us by—what laws, what loves, what names on door lintels. I know only that wheels turn, and the road insists, and that a cart can be both a bringer of hope and a herald of dread. These leaves, like the herbs I parcel out, are meant for use. If they bring you courage, carry them on. If they make you cautious, all the better. The rest is the ordinary miracle of waking to another day, trimming the wick, and setting out.

## CHAPTER ONE: The Bell at Matins

The first sign of the change was not a weeping sore or a sudden fever, but a sound that failed to arrive. In the city of Bristol, the bells are the heartbeat of the day. They tell you when the gates are unbarred, when the fishwives may begin their shouting, and when the soul must turn toward God. But on that Tuesday in late August, the bell at Matins from the Church of St. Werburgh did not ring with its usual iron authority. It stuttered. It gave three uneven clangs, like a man gasping for air, and then fell into a silence more terrifying than any thunder.

I was in the cellar of Master Lavel's shop, my hands stained a deep, bruised purple from grinding dried violets and alkanet root. The air down there was thick with the scent of old dust and the sharp, vinegar bite of the tinctures we kept in green glass bottles. When the bell faltered, I paused with the pestle mid-strike. In the silence that followed, I heard the frantic scratching of a rat behind the wainscoting—a sound so common we usually ignored it, yet that morning it felt like a serrated knife drawing across silk.

Master Lavel appeared at the top of the stairs, his silhouette framed by the morning light filtering through the shop's upper windows. He was a man made of sharp angles and graying beard, usually possessed of a calm that could soothe a panicked horse. That morning, however, his fingers were worrying the silver chain of his spectacles. He did not call me by name. He simply stood there, watching the dust motes dance in the light, until the second bell—the one from the harbor district—began to toll. It was the slow, rhythmic cadence of the passing bell. Someone of importance had died, or perhaps simply someone who had died in a way that frightened the sexton.

"Nicholas," he said finally, his voice sounding as dry as the herbs hanging from our rafters. "Go to the quayside. Do not enter any house. Do not speak to any man closer than the length of a spear. See if the rumors from the Melcombe ships have found their way onto our cobbles. And take the pomander—the one with the extra cloves."

I did as I was told, though my stomach felt as though I had swallowed a handful of lead shot. I stepped out into the street, and the heat hit me like a physical blow. The summer of 1348 had been a season of rotting humidity. The mud in the gutters refused to dry, instead fermenting into a thick, bubbling soup that smelled of offal and stagnant river water. Usually, the lanes were a riot of motion: porters carrying wool-sacks, apprentices dodging carts, and the constant, rhythmic clatter of life. But today, the motion was erratic. People moved in sudden bursts or stood entirely still, staring at the closed shutters of their neighbors.

As I walked toward the river, I noticed the first of the marks. It was a simple thing—a splash of white lime on a door in Corn Street. A man was standing before it, a beadle by his red tunic, holding a long pole. He looked at me with eyes that were sunken and rimmed with red, the look of a man who had not slept since the moon was full. He didn't speak. He simply pointed the pole toward the center of the street, gesturing for me to keep my distance. I pressed the silver pomander to my nose, breathing in the sharp, artificial sting of cloves and ambergris, trying to drown out the smell of the mud and the underlying scent of something sweet and sickly that seemed to hang in the damp air.

At the quay, the bustle had curdled into a tense, hushed waiting. Three ships from the south were moored there, their sails furled tight like the wings of dead moths. No one was unloading. A group of sailors stood on the deck of the nearest cog, their faces pale against the dark wood of the railing. On the stone pier, a group of town guards stood with their pikes leveled not at any enemy, but at the gangplank. They were preventing anyone from coming ashore, and more importantly, preventing anyone from the town from reaching the ships.

The harbor master was there, arguing with a man in the fine fur-trimmed robes of a merchant. Even from a distance, I could hear the merchant's voice cracking with indignation. He was shouting about spoiled grain and the rights of the guild, about the cost of delays and the madness of listening to sailors' superstitions. But the harbor master, usually a man who bowed to the weight of a purse, merely shook his head. He looked toward the ship, where a man had slumped against the mast. Even from fifty paces, I could see the way the sailor's head hung at an impossible angle, his skin the color of wet parchment.

I turned away, my heart hammering against my ribs. It wasn't the death that frightened me—I had seen death in the apothecary shop many times—it was the stillness of the ships. A ship is a living thing of creaking rope and shouting men; these were tombs floating on a tide of greasy water. I began to walk back, taking a longer route through the weavers' quarter. It was there that I saw the first of the "forbidden" sights Master Lavel had whispered about.

In a small alley, away from the prying eyes of the guards, a woman was washing the threshold of her house with a mixture that smelled strongly of vinegar and lye. Beside her, a man was nailing a piece of parchment to a post. I paused, keeping my distance as instructed. The parchment wasn't a church notice or a royal decree. It was a list of instructions, written in a clear, hurried hand. It spoke of washing hands in wine, of burning the bedding of the sick, and of staying away from the markets. These were the things the guild masters and the bishops called "incitements to panic," yet here they were, being posted in the shadows by people who looked not like heretics, but like parents who were simply terrified.

Returning to the shop, I found Master Lavel not at the counter, but in the back room where we kept the most expensive resins and the heavy ledgers. He was packing a small leather satchel with iron-bound corners. On the table sat a pile of those same forbidden pamphlets I had seen in the alley, their ink still fresh enough to smudge. Beside them was a heavy brass seal—the official mark of our guild, which granted the bearer the right to travel through locked gates and quarantined districts.

"They are dying at the docks, aren't they?" he asked, not looking up.

"They are dying, Master," I replied. "And the beadles are marking doors in Corn Street. The harbor is a graveyard with masts."

He nodded slowly, finally turning to face me. He looked older than he had an hour ago. "The physicians are meeting at the Guildhall. They will talk of the stars and the balance of blood and bile. They will prescribe gold-leaf pills for the rich and tell the poor to pray. But the air is moving, Nicholas. The sickness follows the roads, and the roads are the arteries of this kingdom. If the heart is sick here in Bristol, the limbs will soon wither in the shires."

He pushed the satchel toward me. It was heavier than it looked. "I am too old to sleep in a cart and argue with village headmen who have forgotten their mercy. But you are young, and you have a steady hand with a scale. The guild has been tasked by the council to send remedies to the outlying towns—to Bath, to Gloucester, and the villages between. But you will carry more than just theriac and dried rue."

He tapped the pile of pamphlets. "These are the works of men who have watched this fire burn in the south, in the lands of the French and the Italians. They know that huddling together in a church only speeds the end. They know that cleanliness is a better shield than a relic. The bishops call it a challenge to God's will. The merchants call it a disruption of trade. I call it the only way to keep the living among the living."

I looked at the satchel, then at the seal, and finally at the window where the sun was beginning to bake the filth in the street. I was an apothecary's apprentice, trained to measure grains of powder and soot. I was not a messenger, and I certainly was not a smuggler of dangerous ideas. Yet, as the bell at Matins finally began to toll again—this time the slow, steady rhythm of the funeral knell—I realized that the world I knew was dissolving.

"Where is the cart?" I asked.

Master Lavel managed a ghost of a smile, though his eyes remained shadowed. "In the yard. I've had the wheels greased and the axle reinforced. It's an old thing, meant for hauling wood, but it's sturdy. I've stocked it with the basics—the feverfew, the poppy,

the sponges soaked in vinegar. The rest is up to your wits and the road."

I spent the remainder of the afternoon loading the cart. It was a modest vehicle, covered with a heavy, waxed canvas that smelled of linseed oil. Underneath the main floor, Master Lavel showed me a concealed compartment, a shallow space just deep enough to hold the packets of pamphlets and the more precious vials of tincture. We worked in a silence that was broken only by the distant, echoing sound of bells from across the city. Each toll seemed to mark a new door being shut, a new family being consigned to the darkness of their own homes.

As the sun began to set, casting long, bloody shadows across the cobbles, I felt a strange sense of detachment. The fear was still there, a cold knot in my gut, but it was overlaid by a sudden, sharp clarity. The city of Bristol was a cage, and the bars were closing. Outside, the road waited—uncertain, perilous, and likely winding through a landscape of nightmare—but it was a road nonetheless.

I took the reins in my hands for the first time, the leather cool and familiar. I wasn't just hauling herbs; I was hauling the last vestiges of a plan. I looked back at the shop, at the jars of colored glass and the bundles of drying sage, and wondered if I would ever see the cellar floor again. Then, with a click of my tongue to the horse, I steered the cart out of the yard and into the thickening gloom of a world that had forgotten how to breathe.

The journey began not with a flourish, but with the heavy, rhythmic clatter of wooden wheels on stone, a sound that seemed to mock the silence of the dying city. As I approached the East Gate, I could see the torches of the guards flickering like angry orange eyes against the coming night. The bell for Vespers began to ring, but I didn't stop to pray. I had a satchel of forbidden truth and a cart full of bitter remedies, and for now, that would have to be enough to see me through the gate.

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