ONE

Vindor

Plague!

I lunged through the library door and stuffed *Plagues and Diseases of Medieval Times* into my leather medicine bag. The soldiers followed me outside, their faces grim.

“Velorian.” I shouted my husband’s name and raced toward him as he stepped out of the barracks.

He turned from his conversation with Sergeant Brady to stare at me.

Could he hear the terror in my voice? For the sake of the serfs, soldiers, and refugees who followed, I tried to keep calm, but the news was too much to bear.

Velorian’s eyes widened, and he ran toward me. “What’s wrong, love? Is the baby coming early?”

“No, no. Send for the king and his party. They must return. They’re only half a day out.”

Velorian studied my face and then nodded. He turned to Jasin Loren. “Lieutenant? Take our fastest horse and get to the king. Tell him we need him.”

Katie Day stepped up. “I’ll pack the lieutenant some food, then make sure we’re ready to receive the king and his party again. Don’t worry about meals, my lady. The other women and I can handle these.”

“Thanks, Katie. You’re a treasure beyond price.”

Jasin nodded his thanks and rushed to the stable, shouting orders as he ran.

“Velorian, get our family and meet me in the dining room. Hurry, filo. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

I cradled my bulging belly as I ran, thankful I wore Jindentor hiding leathers and soft-soled kinnats instead of a long day dress and boots.

The serfs stared, their mouths hanging open. They must have thought I’d turned into a madwoman. Several made signs to ward off evil spirits.

I rushed to the dovecote, wrote and attached messages to the legs of several pigeons, and released them before returning to the dining room.

Da grasped my shoulders. “Keena, what’s wrong? Your expression and the panic in your eyes terrify me.”

I swallowed the rising bile. My hands shook as I fought the desire to scream. “Plague has stricken the continents and will be here within the next four months.”

“Plague?” Mama-di shrieked and grasped Da’s hand until her knuckles whitened.

Piers and Jarrett started and gasped.

“Are you certain, Keena?” Lissy’s face turned a sickly yellow.

I panted and rubbed my swollen belly. “Yes.”

“What shall we do?” Wessin looked at me, desperation sharpening my brother’s voice. “Tell us what to do, Keena.”

Hopelessness overwhelmed me, and I struggled to be the healer they needed me to be. “I think we are too late. This disease is spread by infected fleas. Their primary hosts are rats, though they infect other rodents. These fleas can bite humans. Once humans are infected, they spread the disease to other humans by coughing, sneezing, talking, or touching.”

I described the symptoms.

My sister held her hand over her mouth to stifle her gagging.

Mama-di’s jaw firmed even though her skin had turned pale as candle wax. “We must warn our people.”

“I sent word to Mikel and King Laydor. Mikel will send messages to Alyks.”

Mama-di paced. “Snows will close the passes within the next several weeks. We need to prepare. If we don’t leave now—”

My knees almost buckled at the thought my mother might leave before the baby came. Fear spread through my body. I had assisted her with enough births to know babies and mothers didn’t always survive childbirth, but how could I ask her to stay when so many others would need her?

Terror choked me. “Go.” The word slid from my throat like a frog’s croak.

Velorian’s fingers encircled my wrist. Concern tinted his voice. “Keena?”

Mama-di embraced me and wept on my shoulder. My tears mingled with hers.

“I’ll stay with Keena, Mama-di.” Lissy stepped forward and embraced us both.

Wessin looked from us to Da. “I will stay if you don’t need me.”

Da nodded. “Stay. We leave after the king arrives.”

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King Galien and his party rode to the manor as if demons chased them. The king slid off his horse before the destrier stopped.

He grasped my hands. “Rafaah? What is wrong?”

“May I speak to you and the prince alone, Your Majesty?”

He must have heard the thin thread of panic joining each word because he straightened and gave orders to the generals.

I turned to Ashin and Linna, who had returned with the king. “Find my parents. They’ll give you the news. I’ll find you after I speak with the king and prince.”

They nodded and left.

Terric and Galien followed Velorian and me into the planning room.

“Speak, Skazendra.” Galien signaled me closer. “Your expression sends fear down my spine. You look as if you have seen the Reaper.”

“I have, Your Majesty, and he wears the name of the Black Death. He will dock in Binrom in four months. He has already killed hundreds of thousands on the northern and eastern continents.”

“Plague?” Galien’s voice rose.

Velorian stepped forward and grasped my arm. “Keena, you’re sure?”

“Yes.” The answer sounded as if I’d dragged the word over gravel.

“Sit.” Galien signaled us into chairs. “How do you know? How did you get this information?”

I swallowed and reached for the book in my bag.

Velorian’s eyes widened. “Keena?”

I looked into Galien’s face. “You once asked if you and King Laydor had plumbed the Jindentors’ secrets.”

“Yes, and you said no. What does this have to do with—”

“I’m trying to tell you. Only four of us know the biggest secret of all.”

I opened the book and began to read.

The bubonic and pneumonic plagues struck Middle Continent seven centuries ago during the reign of King Tiev of Binrom, King Galien of Vindor, and King Laydor of Trezlandia. This plague, commonly known as the Black Death, arrived at one of Binrom’s ports and spread quickly.

Scientific evidence and an evaluation of available records indicate infected fleas passed the disease to rats, which carried the plague from the far northern continent along the trade routes to the eastern continent.

Within three years, the Black Death circled the globe. Within ten, the plague had killed more than half the world’s population.

“Seven centuries?” Terric leaned forward, a heavy frown furrowing his dark brows. “What are you trying to tell us, Keena?”

“I’m telling you our Jindentor ancestors, the ones we call The Firsts, were time-travelers from more than seven hundred years in the future. They survived a great world war and returned to the past to set up a new society. They brought books like these with them.”

Galien’s lips opened and closed as if he would speak, but no sound escaped.

I waited until he could find the words he needed.

“Who else knows about this, Keena? You said only four know. Who are they?”

“Mikel, Lissy, Velorian, and myself.”

The king jerked. “Winebald? He used information from such books to build his wing and to weaponize water?”

I nodded.

“The armor-piercing weapons? The ideas came from books brought from the future?”

“Yes.”

“This explains a lot.” Galien stood and paced. He stopped in front of one of the maps and traced the border Vindor shared with Binrom. “Velorian, go and get Generals Brax and Sando.”

In the ensuing silence, I said, “My king?”

He looked up. “Speak, Rafaah.”

“May I ask you to leave the Jindentors’ time-traveling ancestors out of your narrative? Please? Even Mama-di, Da, and Wessin don’t know.”

Galien glanced at Terric, who nodded. “Yes, Healer, though not revealing my sources may be difficult.”

Generals Brax and Sando strode into the room minutes later.

“Velorian, bar the door.”

My husband obeyed the king, stopped beside me, and grasped my hand.

Galien’s eyes met those of Sando and Brax. “Generals, I will get to the point because we have no time to spare. Within the next four months, the plague will reach our continent. Already, this disease has decimated the populations of the northern and eastern continents.”

“Plague!” General Sando yelped.

General Brax glanced at me before returning his attention to the king. “What would you have us do, Your Majesty?”

“We must plan as best we can.” He turned to me. “Rafaah?”

“Your Majesty?”

“What actions can we take to mitigate the death toll?”

“Close and guard the border with Binrom in three months. None should be allowed to enter or leave. Watch the passes. Once the plague hits, many will try to escape through the Nordranics into our lands. They must be stopped.

“Since the disease is spread to humans by infected fleas and rodents, I would advise an all-out effort to rid homes, stables, and caravans of rats. Remove these rodents’ food source and shelter. Also, citizens should bathe and wash their clothes regularly.”

“How regularly is regularly?” General Sando barked his question.

“They should wash their bodies daily, though clothes may have to be cleaned twice a week.”

The general spluttered. “Surely this is excessive, Lady Ernaut. Most people bathe once every few months. I know many who take baths once every year or two.”

“General, the infected fleas and their rat hosts prefer dirty environments over clean.”

Prince Terric drew my attention. “What else, Rafaah?”

“Once the flea-to-rat barrier has been broken, human-to-human contact will further spread the disease, especially if the contaminated person coughs, sneezes, or speaks with an uncovered mouth. They leave tiny particles in the air other people breathe. Soon, these people will sicken. Many will die. You will need a large area to bury the dead, unless you intend to cremate the bodies.” I tried to remove the hopelessness from my voice at the thought of how unsuccessful these actions would probably be, considering human nature.

How could we retrain a whole continent of people in a few months to act in a manner directly opposed to traditions and beliefs developed over centuries?

King Galien rubbed his jaw. “This also means we will have to close the border with Trezlandia at some point.”

“Close the border?” General Brax’s jaw tightened. “Our lands do not yet support our population, Majesty, though we are engaged in extensive rebuilding since the flood. We still depend on food transports from Trezlandia.”

“I know. I will send word to King Laydor. We must plan.” The grimness of the king’s voice matched the grimness of Brax’s and Sando’s jaws.

“I sent several messages as soon as I found out. King Laydor knows. He will be expecting to hear from you soon.”

“Thank you, Skazendra. What else? I hear shadows in your words. Speak.”

“King Tiev needs to be warned, Your Majesty. Perhaps the people of Binrom can prepare.”

Galien remained silent for several heartbeats before nodding. “You’re right. I will warn Tiev. He may not heed the warning, but at least we will have tried.”

“But this would mean sending an envoy immediately.” General Brax looked at me. “Is this safe?”

“The pestilence won’t spread to the Binromese for another four months.”

General Sando frowned and his voice grated. He looked directly at me. “Four months? Your words make no sense. How did you come by such information?”

I pursed my lips and looked at the king.

“I have every confidence in Lady Ernaut’s sources, General, though she cannot reveal them at this time.”

“You would risk such economic harm to our people and incite panic based on information from sources who seem to be able to predict the future, Your Majesty?” Sando’s tone held disbelief.

Galien nodded. “I would rather err on the side of caution and save countless lives, General, than wait to see if the sources are reliable and lose millions.”

Leaving King Galien, I met with Linna, Ashin, and my parents. Mama-di and Da had given my in-laws the news, and Linna’s bloodless lips and constant hand flutters signaled her distress.

“We must return home immediately, Ashin. Gina and Luko must be warned. Gina is pregnant too.”

Ashin nodded. “But we must keep this news quiet until we have permission to share.” His eyes met mine. “The king may not be ready to leave tomorrow, but Linna and I will leave at first light.” He looked at the threatening sky and sighed.

Velorian clasped Ashin’s shoulder. His father returned the shoulder clasp.

Linna hugged me and cried. “I wanted to be with you when the baby came, but this changes everything. I’m sorry, Keena.”

“Do what you must do, Linna. Wessin and Lissy volunteered to stay with me, so I’ll have support. Piers and Jarrett will also remain.”

She daubed at her eyes with a kerchief and sniffed. “I doubt the boys will be much help at a baby’s birth.”

We said our goodbyes, then I clasped Velorian’s hand. “We must speak with our people now.”

“Yes. Come.”

The soldiers, serfs, and refugees stopped milling around when we entered the library. Fear filled their eyes and blanched their skins.

I took a deep breath. “I do not know how to share this news in a gentle way, so I’m just going to say what needs to be said. The Black Death has decimated the populations of the northern and eastern continents, as I speak. In four months, the plague will reach Binrom and will spread to all parts of our continent. Multitudes will die.”

Kallen screamed and put her hand over her heart. Serfs and soldiers cried out.

I described the symptoms and how the disease spread. Fighting the panic threatening to overwhelm me drained my energy. The more I thought of the hugeness of what we faced, the more I trembled inside. How many of our people would die? Would I survive? Would the baby?

Velorian spoke into the silence. “We will engage in a war against rodents on this estate. We’ll make more snares and traps.”

Daniel stepped forward. “Rafaah, will any of your medicines repel fleas?”

Several straightened at the big blacksmith’s question and looked at me with hope.

“Yes, the minta oil is strong, and fleas and other insects don’t like the smell. The oils of rhodina and margoset are highly effective repellents, but these oils come from the southern continent and the large island to the southwest. We can only get them if caravans bring them. They are costly to produce, and my stock of these oils is small.”

Kit Woodman tapped his lip. “If a group were to sail to the island, could they bring back these plants to be transplanted in this environment as well as supplies of the extracted oil?”

I didn’t speak for several moments. “The plants grow in a warmer, moister climate than we have here. Even though Vindor is warmer in the winter than my home in northeastern Trezlandia, I don’t think the plants would survive without intervention. They would need a covered and moisture-controlled place to grow.”

Velorian nodded. “Let’s talk to my father about building such a structure. I’m sure he can come up with solutions.”

Katie stepped to Daniel’s side. “We have a lot of minta growing in the beds. Can we plant more? Will you show us how to extract the oils, Rafaah?”

The tightness in my chest loosened. I would not have to face this alone. I scanned their intent, determined faces. Without conscious thought, this new threat seemed to have drawn them together and solidified their willingness to overlook differences and work together.

“Yes, we’ll plant as much minta around the dwellings as we can. We can start new plants in pots since winter is on us, and we’ll keep them inside until we can transplant them in the spring. This plant spreads and takes over if we aren’t deliberate about where we plant.”

Katie shrugged. “In light of our problem, is that such a bad thing?”

My muscles relaxed, and I smiled. “You’re right, Katie.”

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I entered the planning room, but Kallen did not hear me. She stared at the large wall map with the same intensity she stared at Lissy and me during Vindoran language lessons. With such focus, she learned faster than most others and could apply what she learned as soon as she understood.

I moved a chair into place.

She startled. “I came in to tidy the room after the king and his people left, my lady. Thank you for letting me serve them. This is the least I can do for all you’ve done for me.”

She pointed to the map. “How can anyone understand locations or distances by looking at lines, numbers, and symbols? This makes no sense to me.”

I laughed. “I thought the same way until a friend showed me how to interpret the map.”

Her eyes widened. “You understand this?”

“Yes. This is a map of Middle Continent from a birds-eye view. Look. The information at the bottom of the map is called a legend. The length of the line at the bottom shows the distance in leagues. These cone-shaped symbols represent the Nordranic Mountain Range. The blue lines are rivers or streams, and the green areas show forests.”

“Where are we?”

I pointed to the dot in the top right of Vindor near the Binromese border.

“Where is Miestrav?”

“Here.” I tapped the larger dot to the northwest near the center of Binrom.

She measured the line in the legend with her thumb and index finger then measured the distance from the estate to the Binromese capitol.

“That is a long way.” Her voice dropped, and she stared at the map. “How long will the king’s envoy journey before they get to Miestrav from here?”

“Do you see these brown lines?” I traced a set of dark lines halfway between our place and Miestrav.

Kallen nodded.

“The markings indicate a steep canyon. The envoy must skirt the canyon to the west, which will add three more days, so I’m guessing they’ll reach the capital in three weeks, barring any bad weather or accidents.”

“Where is the road that traders use?”

I traced the red line, and Kallen compared the distances between the two.

“The king thought their journey would be faster leaving from this estate than traveling on the trade route?”

“Yes.”

She studied the map for several moments. “Where are Jindentor lands?”

I showed her where they and the Jinmarins lived, and she again measured the distances.

“You are a long way from home, Rafaah.”

“This is my home now.”

She remained silent for two deep breaths before nodding. “When will the envoy arrive, my lady?”

“The king and prince leave tomorrow. King Galien sent carrier birds this afternoon with instructions, so I expect the soldiers will cross paths with the king and prince several days from now. We’ll see them in a week and a half.”

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I read the letter Kallen addressed to me, then picked up the gold ring and diamond-encrusted hair comb she’d left in payment for the extra food and clothing she’d taken.

“What did she write, my lady?” Edvaard’s eyes met mine.

“She planned to smuggle herself inside one of the envoy’s supply wagons. She intends to find out what happened to her sister, Helleen, and to warn Queen Sanna about the plague.”

Velorian frowned and looked at Jeniss. “Will the queen see her? Does she have much chance at success?”

Jeniss nodded. “She is one of the queen’s favorites. I think they knew each other before Sanna became queen. They came from the same province. If she can’t get to the queen right away, she might seek out the queen’s cousin, though I haven’t seen Lord Dayvidsen in a while.”

I shook my head. “If her plans are to return to Vindor and the border closes, she may have bigger problems than she anticipated. The only way she can get back onto the estate is to travel with the envoy. They have silver water and instructions on what they should do before entering.”

Aylain’s soft voice quivered. “What will the captain of the envoy do when he finds her, Rafaah?”

Kit laughed. “That woman is a smart little songbird. I’m sure she will hide until they are too far to send her back. Then, she’ll convince the captain he needs her to translate and to get into the castle.”

“Let’s hope our attempts to contact Tiev are successful.” Velorian smiled at the refugees. “Goodnight, servants of the Most High. Remember, all things are in El’s hands. Nothing is out of his control.”

The tension lines around their eyes relaxed, and they nodded.

Edvaard bowed. “Truly, my lord. Thank you for the reminder.”

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Images of plague victims disturbed my dreams and awakened me. I sat up and brushed sweat off my forehead. My stomach roiled as the images faded.

I glanced at the medicine bag on the chair and shivered. I’d not willingly step on the cold floor, even to walk three paces.

I turned on my side and snuggled next to Velorian’s warmth, but the upset didn’t subside. I sighed and slid from under the covers. At the first step, warm liquid flowed down my legs. I stared at the puddle, trying to comprehend what had just happened. Dread filled me. The baby.

Fighting down panic, I mentally talked myself through each step in the birthing process. With quiet movements, I stripped off my nightgown and dressed in the Jindentor birthing clothes. The birthing mat and chair waited nearby, but I wouldn’t need these for several hours.

I stoked the fire, put the tea kettle on to boil, and cleaned up the mess on the floor. Then I paced the room with quiet steps, often glancing at Velorian to make sure my movements didn’t disturb him.

Near daydawn, I sat on the birthing chair and watched as Velorian turned on his side and reached for me. He snapped awake when he touched the cold sheets.

“Keena?”

“I’m here.”

He took in my sweat-drenched face and clothing and lunged out of bed. “How long have you labored?”

“Seven or eight hours.”

“Why didn’t you wake me?”

“You couldn’t do anything but watch me sweat, filo. At least now I can let the moans out.” A contraction hit, and I did more than moan. “Get Lissy.” I gasped through the words.

He pulled on his pants and rushed out the door. Within minutes, he returned with my sister.

Lissy washed her hands with soap and water then smoothed on silver water. “Do the same, Velorian. You’ll have to help.”

My husband’s eyes widened, but he nodded and did as he was told.

The pain intensified and tried to rip me in half. I screamed.

Velorian watched, jaw clenched and a look of helplessness in his eyes.

I panted. “Lissy, see if you feel the baby’s head.”

She checked. “Yes, you’re crowning. Push with the contractions now, Keena.”

Lissy handed Velorian the baby’s birthing blanket. “Get ready to catch your child.”

Velorian’s hands shook as he waited.

A slap and the squall of a newborn signaled Olin Ernaut’s entry into the world.

I smiled and cried at the same time when my sister laid my son in my arms. I stroked his cheek. “You’re a handsome fellow, little one. Welcome to the family.”

Lissy laughed. “Right now, he looks like a shriveled mess. Give him to me, and I’ll clean him while you pass the afterbirth.”

She tilted her head toward the wash basin. “Come, brother. You will have your first lesson in how to bathe your son.”