

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 stuffer books he had to study as an apprentice of Earth magic.

Finally, Jawan emerged from the alley and raced down one of Hadley Town’s narrow little streets. Front doors and a little less garbage distinguished the street from the alley. As shanty after shanty sped behind him, he wondered if his master sent him on these trips to the market only to show him how different the lives of other people were from his own.

No thick stone walls, turrets and battlements protected these people. Instead, they lived in rickety wooden hovels. The most prosperous among them might have had a house made of mud bricks. But Jawan knew that wouldn’t keep out the winter chill or the plague.

He stumbled over some children playing a game on the sidewalk.

“Where you going?” a boy with ruddy cheeks and ragged curls asked as Jawan muttered an apology and kept going.

Jawan knew they would stare after him, a boy not much older than they were—young enough to play with them, but old enough to give them something.

Oblivious to their poverty, they chased one another around, just like Jawan used to play in the mud outside a house just like these. The children didn’t know, as he hadn’t known, the wrongness of a yard not covered by lush grass, or that their beds were supposed to be more than sacks filled with straw, as his had been.

A nagging stitch in his side made him slow to a lope. He worried that he wouldn’t reach his master in time, but he had to slow down. He certainly wouldn’t be in time if he collapsed in the street. Though he wanted to stop all together and sit down somewhere, he kept up a steady jog when he heard someone call his name.

“Hey, Jawan.”

Jawan looked up from his musings and saw his friend Sipal. So while his mind fled the crowd, intent on reaching Myrlo, his feet had taken him down a street he knew well.

Sipal’s usually cheerful eyes darted around. He’d obviously come out to clear debris from his front yard, but was holding his rake like he might have to club somebody with it.

“Slow down,” Sipal squealed, not lowering his rake. “What’s going on? What was all that yelling? What’re you running from?”

He’d heard it? Jawan gulped. Of course, he’d heard it. And he’d go down there to the market, walking right into what the mob had been running away from, if Jawan didn’t think of a way to stop him.

Jawan paused, the word “plague” on the tip of his tongue. Should he tell him? No, he might as well run down the street like those terrified people shouting and carrying panic throughout the whole town. No, he’d better tell his master first.

Jawan glanced over his shoulder as if expecting someone to come up behind him.

“I l-lost them,” he said with a belated gasp.

Sipal frowned. “Lost who?”

That’s what Jawan liked about Sipal. He didn’t make fun of Jawan’s stutter, but kept on like it was perfectly normal and not worth noticing.

“Th-thugs from the Dripping Daggers gang.”

“They were chasing you?!” Sipal’s big green eyes grew even bigger.

“Well, n-no. Something’s going on down near the market, and I guess they just wanted me to go away.”

“They’re always up to something,” Sipal said, embarrassment reddening his cheeks as he lowered his rake to the ground. “But never so loud. They were screaming.”

“I th-think there might be a gang war brewing. From what I heard, one of them got played.”

“Played?”

“Y-you know, somebody played a trick on him, and now the whole gang is mad. I barely escaped with my life. You’d better stay away from the market until this trouble settles.”

Jawan knew he was overdoing it, but if it worked . . . Then he remembered his mission.

“W-well, listen, I need to go tell my master something. But stay away from the market for a while—unless you want to run into one of the Steps or the Daggers.”

“Oh, no! No way. You don’t have to tell me twice to stay away from those lads. Not like I can pull an avalanche down on them.” Sipal frowned at this thought. “I wish I had magic and could be an apprentice. Your life is so exciting.”

Jawan shrugged and took off. As he ran, he gave himself a mental thump on the head. Something happening down at the market? Well. It wasn’t a complete lie. There was something going on down there and he had seen some gang thugs somewhere, just not at the market today. And they were always planning something. At least this would keep Sipal away from danger.

His feet fell on smooth streets, repaired by his master’s Earth magic. He detoured around piles of refuse and slick puddles, wondering if the town folks expect his master to keep the streets clean as well? But some problems Myrlo couldn’t, wouldn’t, repair. He could do nothing about the hearts of the people. They

thought having magic performed for them as no more consequential than falling rain.

Despite this, Jawan couldn't imagine his master not helping the people. Without the Earth mage's ministrations, many of which the people weren't even aware, life in the town would be wiped out by the Earth's overpowering vicissitudes.

He reached a corner where he knew he had to turn. The red daggers painted on the doors farther down that street marked the territory of the Dripping Daggers gang.

The king's soldiers, sworn to keep law and order on the streets, made themselves scarce for anything short of an out-and-out insurrection. And they did nothing about the gangs. If Jawan entered gang territory, he'd be on his own. So he turned left on Cobblers Alley and took the long way around to his master's castle.

Just ahead of him, a blind man in rags begged for alms on the corner.

Before Jawan crossed the street to drop something in the man's cup, members of the Dreaded Steps gang approached the man.

They were out of their territory. Probably on their way to start something with the Dripping Daggers. Jawan tried to keep running. He had to get to his master, and he didn't want to tangle with those lads. But something about the way the thugs snickered and elbowed each other as they eyed the beggar made him stop.

"Alms for the poor," the beggar cried out.

"Shut up," one of the thugs sneered, throwing a rock at the man. "I'm tired of hearing a mouse squeaking."

"What's he got in the cup?" another Step asked.

Jawan started toward the bullies, then stopped. What was he thinking? The Dreaded Steps weren't people you could talk out of mischief. But by the time he considered his options, their deeds against the blind man would be done.

His master warned him not to use magic, especially not in public. He was just an apprentice, after all, and something could go wrong. His master wanted him to use spells to direct and fine tune his raw magic. Spells! He had to talk right to use spells, but that, his master assured him, would give him the control that wasn't always there in his innate magic.

Jawan had no spells, but he knew he couldn't win a fistfight against three big beefy thugs. He'd get hurt, maybe killed, and the thugs would still have their way with the beggar.

Taking his master's "especially" to mean there were exceptions, Jawan located his target and backed into the shadow of a nearby tree. The Steps hadn't seen him and wouldn't know what hit them. Using Earth magic, he picked up a rock near the blind man and threw it back at the thug.

Wincing from the blow, the thug whirled on the beggar. "Why, you dirty rag doll. Hit me, will you?"

He raised his foot to kick the man. But Jawan rolled the pebbles under his other foot, tumbling him to the ground. The other two Steps started to close in on the blind man, but Jawan concentrated his magic on all the stones in sight. The stones rose unsteadily, shaking this way and that, as if they weren't sure what they were doing in the air. He gritted his teeth and focused as each stone hurled itself at the thugs until they were all laid out on the ground.

They weren't dead, but they'd need a physician for sure. These superstitious creeps would accept that they couldn't explain some mysteries, and shouldn't mess with some people —like supposedly blind beggars who could aim rocks at their heads with painful accuracy.

Jawan turned to run. How much time had he lost now? But before he could take a step, he heard the old man beckon him.

"Young lad."

Jawan walked to the man as if compelled. He had to go home, but his feet were not his. They kept walking toward that voice, carefully avoiding the bodies reposed on the ground.

"Y-yes, sir?"

The man looked right at him, though Jawan couldn't imagine that his milky white eyes saw him.

"Thank you for helping a tired old man."

Jawan blinked his own eyes. "What? Thank me for what? I didn't do anything."

The old man's face crinkled into a mischievous smile.

“Did something you aren’t supposed to, huh. Don’t worry. I won’t tell.”

Jawan was dumbfounded. How did this blind man know? Even if he had eyes, how could he know Jawan’s secrets?

“H-how did you know? How could you even know what happened?”

“You’d be surprised what I know. Others see only with their eyes. I see with the whole Earth.”

“Th-the Earth?”

“That’s how I knew you, mage of my mother.”

“I’m n-not a mage. I’m just an apprentice.”

Jawan could have sworn the man’s colorless orbs regarded him even more keenly.

“Ah, lad. You don’t know yourself. You don’t see what I see. If you did, you would not stutter, for you would have confidence in yourself.”

“C-confidence? I don’t understand.”

“No. I guess you don’t. But you will. You are a poor boy who does not know the world, but boy, you will marry a queen.”

Jawan felt his legs released from the beggar’s spell, and took that as a dismissal. He raced back to his master’s castle, wondering what had just happened to him. If the man had magic, he could have disposed of the thugs himself. He’d known what was going on, but had let Jawan take care of it. Who was he?

Marry a queen? Jawan tried to dismiss this as the ramblings of an old man who hadn’t had enough to eat. But what had he meant by confidence? Jawan mused. *Was that the answer?*

He passed the last dingy hovels on the outskirts of the town and made his way down a path flanked by wild flowers and weeds. That reminded him that he still didn’t have the plants his master needed for his magic potions. He’d have none now. If only Myrlo could use these wild flowers and weeds. But he needed the exotic plants the merchants brought from afar.

There was no help for it. No telling what he might find at the market—or what might find him. Better to go back to his master empty-handed than with a nasty little gift. He shrugged and sighed. One way or the other, he’d have to bear the bad news that the plague had come this far north. With that task ahead of him, Jawan slowed down, allowing gravity and inertia to prolong each step.

He tiptoed into his master’s laboratory, though he needn’t have bothered. Myrlo was already there.

Jawan paused at the door, sweat coating his hands where the package his master sent him to get should have been. With anyone else, he could have taken this time to calm himself, but Myrlo, the great Earth magician, knew everything that moved around his castle. He could fine tune his focus or stretch it out with diminishing results.

“What has frightened you, boy?” Myrlo asked without moving his eye from his nanoscope.

There was no help for it. Jawan stepped forward, empty hands clasped behind his back.

“Th-the plague is here. I heard the town folks screaming . . . and I ran.”

Jawan tried to get his tongue to move as fast as his thoughts, but it tripped all over itself, stuttering the words out as his mind raced on to the next five thoughts. It made him sound and feel stupid.

“Yes, I know. It’s what I’ve been studying,” Myrlo said impatiently, as if he didn’t want to talk about it.

Jawan stared at his master. *He knew?* In his long, dark earth-colored robe, in the depths of his forest green eyes, Myrlo knew!

“Y-you knew it was here?”

“I knew . . . well, there’ve been reports.”

Of course he would know. Myrlo knew everything, even if he didn’t tell Jawan everything. That was the way of magicians to conceal more than they revealed. But still, Jawan sensed his master’s unease.

“W-why are you studying it? Why not just make it go away?”

“And how am I to do that?” Myrlo raised his head from his nanoscope only to show his irritation. “I don’t have a magic wand. I work with the elements, not against them, and I can’t do anything until I know what I’m dealing with, and that takes study.”

Jawan’s heart slumped inside him. He’d been so sure the powerful Earth master would rise to obliterate the problem.

“P-people will die, Master.”

“Yes, I’ve heard the rumors from other towns. People with the plague are given up for dead. There’s nothing I can do.”

Jawan squealed in frustration. “But there must be something we can do.”

Myrlo clucked his tongue and Jawan gulped. He’d never spoken so boldly to his master before. Not in eight years. Though the stern-faced mage in dark robe no longer terrified him, Jawan always kept his objections to himself. Some masters would whip their apprentices for merely raising an eyebrow at them. His master had never raised a hand at him. Still, Jawan shuddered, thinking maybe he needed to check himself before he went too far.

But suppose someone he knew came down with the plague? One of his friends? He didn’t want to believe his master didn’t care about the people, but he found it just as incredible that Myrlo, the great Earth mage, didn’t know what to do. Jawan had seen him perform awesome feats of magic, and couldn’t understand why a plague should be beyond his ability.

Didn’t disease come from the Earth? It was something that was supposed to exist, just not inside people’s bodies. He started to open his mouth, sure that logic and reason were on his side. But Myrlo had turned back to his nanoscope, clearly out of patience with a discussion he’d rather avoid.

Jawan tried anyway. “Th-there’s got to be something we can do.”

“We aren’t going to do anything right now. I will continue my studies, and you, young man, will focus on yours. Are you ready for the coming exam?”

“N-not quite,” Jawan admitted. “But I will be.”

“*Will be* is not the same as *are*. Saving lives is an honorable pursuit, but you will save a lot more if you focus on moving past apprenticeship.”

Jawan wondered at these dismissive words. An honorable pursuit? As if saving lives were an extracurricular activity, or a hobby—something to do in his spare time. *Honorable pursuit*. This didn’t sound like Myrlo at all, and that troubled Jawan.

“You should be in the library right now instead of worrying over matters you are ill-prepared to deal with. I’m not even sure what I can do. Be off with you.”

“Y-yes, sir.”

Jawan heaved open the massive doors of his master’s vast library, and walked past rows and rows of books that held the secrets of the Earth. Books like *Master of Spells*. He wanted to touch the spines. Just touch them. But once, as a small and curious child, he’d merely brushed the surface, and a spark ran through his fingers and up his arm.

Fascinated, he pulled the book from its shelf. The spark increased until it became painful. These books weren’t just about magic, they embodied magic.

The memory still made him shudder. He walked on past until he came to a recess where Myrlo kept a special section of shelves containing the books for Jawan to learn what he needed to know as an apprentice. And these were the only ones that didn’t try to electrocute him when he touched them.

“Jawan.”

He stopped, wondering who could be calling him. There should be no one else in the library. He shrugged and dismissed it as the rustling of his slippers on the stone floor.

The upcoming exam would test him on quantum physics and the elements controlled by the five mages. He pulled down the books he needed to read: *A Comprehensive Study of Bosons and Fermions, Pair Production as a Means to Create Matter, Mastering the Elements, Synergy of the Elements*.

“Jawan.”

He swerved around to see who had called him in this empty chamber, but saw no one.

He opened *A Comprehensive Study of Bosons and Fermions* and turned to where he’d left off:

Magical Science: Matter and Antimatter

Positrons are antimatter. They are identical to electrons except they are positively charged while electrons are negatively charged. See Figure C to transform a positron into an electron using W bosons.”

“Jawan, we know you hear us calling.”

He stiffened and focused all his energy on Figure C. It showed a W boson colliding with a positron, changing it into a neutrino. Then another W boson collided with the neutrino, changing it into an electron. He read on:

“A neutrino is a form of dark matter, not to be confused with antimatter. They can become hot dark matter when their velocity approaches the speed of light.”

Jawan closed his eyes and pictured a sphere of dark matter dancing to his own choreography. Irrational, he knew, since dark matter wasn't visible. But he could imagine it. Just like he could imagine himself moving mountains by his will alone. He'd never seen even Myrlo move a mountain, but he liked to think big.

“We'll dance too, Jawan. If you dare open our pages.”

Jawan looked around. That wasn't rustling slippers or paper. The voices were coming from Myrlo's forbidden books.

If he dared open their pages. He remembered the pain.

“When you were a little kid, yes. But what about now?”

Jawan stiffened again. Did they know his thoughts? He lived in a world of magic. His master performed wondrous feats that no ordinary human could, but to have his mind invaded by books he wasn't even allowed to read . . .

The voice taunted him. “And do you still believe you can't read us, just like you couldn't when you were a little runt?”

This was too much. Jawan sat up, staring toward the magic books. No, this was magic. This was real. The books knew him and had something to tell him.

What? When he was a little kid. After eight years, did he have no more power? He still couldn't utter a decent spell.

“And you never will, reading those baby books.”

Picking up one page with languid fingers, he glared at it, remembering once again what it meant. There were no spells in the books Myrlo let him read.

He sighed. Despite his academic successes, Jawan longed to practice real magic. Though Myrlo made sure his apprentice understood the responsibilities that went with the power, Jawan couldn't wait for the day he'd acquire the highest honor of magicians. He'd be able to go to those secret meetings.

“They won't be secret anymore. All the secrets lie within our pages. Just waiting for you. If you dare.”

Rising from his seat, Jawan walked toward the forbidden stacks. He could at least find the book that was talking to him. Hold it in his hands and learn its secrets. There had to be something to those books, else why would they be protected with magic? And why could there be only one master of each element?

“Only one Earth mage. Learn our secrets and you can be that one.”

Earth mage? That meant Myrlo would have to die. Jawan gulped and hurried back to his seat. He put the sphere of dark matter down in his mind like a toy he no longer wanted to play with. How could he play when he coveted a position that could only be his after his master died? He didn't want that.

Myrlo had been the Earth mage as long as Jawan could remember, and he couldn't imagine the Earth without him. Truth be told, Jawan knew the planet would be in big trouble if its stability depended on his limited knowledge.

Magic books? Humph! They'd told him what he'd desperately wanted to hear. Maybe one day he would overcome stuttering and move up to a journeyman. But to be the kind of master the Earth needed, he'd first have to master himself.

There was no help for it. From the bottom of a well-established hierarchy, Jawan turned his focus on

moving from apprentice to journeyman. Journeyman. He liked the sound of that. Journeyman—especially the man part.

Jawan sighed. Who was he kidding? Eight years of stuttering every time he opened his mouth. Eight years and still studying for tests that he should have taken long ago if his master meant to make him a journeyman.

All this jumbled in his mind with the realization that nothing would stop the mob spreading panic all over town. He'd raced back, believing that Myrlo the Great would take care of everything, but instead . . .

The library closed in around him, not with dingy brick walls, but with endless rows of books from which he'd never escape.

Maybe his master knew that he'd never be a journeyman and just didn't want to break the bad news. Jawan had invested so much and excelled in all his lessons. If only he could write his way out of apprenticeship. But one day he would have to utter a spell. If he stuttered, he might accidentally call up a gigantic mudslide or make a mountain collapse. This must be what his master feared.

His friend, Loby, liked to boast about being the fire master's journeyman. Jawan could hope, he could wish, but he feared he'd always be a lifelong apprentice, fit to be sent to the market or to fetch for his master, but little else.