

## CRICKET

*The pitiful are the most terrifying creatures.*

That was the lesson I learned after becoming a physician's assistant.

The door groaned under the assault of banging fists; it was a racket that could wake the dead.

I paused my grinding of crickets; I got to my feet on swollen knees, a rag fisted in hand. Wove around the spare bird's mask and plague suit. I opened the door—sunlight split the darkness of the house—with sour rebuke on my face. Rebuke that faded, as my gaze settled on the boy and the jagged doorstep. Small and scrawny like a cricket. Fragile too. His frosted eyes were mixed panic and fear.

My tongue was doorframe sharp. 'Whatever are you doing?' Full of rejection as to whatever ailment that might follow him, I tried to wave this cricket off with my dusting cloth. It was as though it could keep me safe from his troubles, his chimney smoke. 'I'm busy. Be off!'

I tried to shut the blackened door, but the boy was too fast—already, he held the door open with bony foot and hand.

I regretted.

‘Madam, please!’ His fingertips had turned bone white. ‘Please, the physician! My mother—she is unwell. Can he come?’

His words shot, a gunfire. His desperation, an accelerant.

I held the door firmly—I had naught to give up idea of brazenly shutting him out—and surveyed him with hawk-like eyes. Evaluated the disease that latched on his skin like as the nettles did to the steps. ‘He’s not here,’ I eventually said. I pushed back on the wounded door. Rusted hinges groaned. ‘He’s with a patient, out of town.’

The boy swallowed, hard. The lump on his throat rolled. ‘When will he come back?’

‘I do not know. At least thrice of a day away.’

‘Please!’ The boy’s pleads began to seep, mucous wet. ‘Surely, madam, you could aid us—’

I inadvertently let my grip loosen; the brat quickly forced a worn shoe in. This foot encroached upon my stained hallway; tension rippled like dripping water. ‘I can’t. I am but mere assistant.’ I paused, adding, ‘What ails your mother?’

‘I don’t know.’ I could see him thinking. His eyes were strained, skin pale, hair dark with sweat. Old clothes torn. He was at once both fearful and desperate of the memory. ‘She is hot. She has taken to bed.’

I frowned, deeper. These symptoms—with his panic, and my meagre medical talents, I thought of the worst possibility: ‘Has she buboes?’

‘Buboes?’ His thin body trembled. ‘...What?’

‘Black lumps.’ I squeezed a finger out the crack of the door and gestured at him with a flick of the rag. ‘Under the arms, on the neck. The *plague*.’

He stared at me, at my face, both seeing and not seeing; the word rolled in the tumultuous waves of his panicking mind. I watched the fear run down his chest—Death’s sickle on spine.

My aged frown flinched. I took the risk to propel him out of the house, shoving him only through the contaminated cloth. The aversion pinched my face. ‘I cannot help,’ I said. ‘Leave.’ I moved to shut the door, but a sliver of pity ran through my selfish lips. Through the narrowest of cracks, I added—to my ears, it was not unkindly— ‘Later, I will send the physician.’

The dread filled the boy’s blue eyes. Perhaps he had realized the severity of this matter from my wrinkled eye. ‘Madam, can’t you help? Aren’t you a good person?’

I paused. My breaths were short and quick. ‘Fear not. I know of your mother. The St. Giles woman.’ I feared taking too deep a breath. I feared the miasma of disease following him and his mother. ‘He will come. Now, leave. Don’t stop on the way back.’

‘Can’t you come with me?’ The boy began to beg, ‘Mother said you were a good person. She saw you saving crickets from birds. Please, save her!’

‘I’m an assistant—’ *A cowardly assistant.*

The boy begged me for life. He kneeled at the steps of the door. ‘But you’re a good person! Madam, please, *please*—’

I slammed the door shut. It groaned with dying ache, a wail. I cut off the boy’s fervent gaze and my shame.

When the door slammed, I heard him quieten. A handful of breaths. Then, the desperate pattering of thin legs stomping on cobbled earth.

Then, I walked back to grind the crickets.