



THE SCOURGE

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CHAPTER ONE

Few things were worth the risk to my life, but the juicy vinefruit was one of them. Even more so today because I was long past hungry. If I didn't eat something soon, my life was in danger anyway.

Not immediate danger. Mama had poor man's bread at home and, indeed, was expecting me back soon for supper. But I couldn't stand the thought of gnawing on those thick crusts for yet another meal. Especially not now, not after spotting a vinefruit this close, in perfect ripeness.

Getting it would be simple.

Well, not *simple* in the traditional definition of the word. But simple, meaning that I intended to get that fruit if it was the last thing I ever did.

It required a climb up a tall tree with thorns that tore at the only good dress I still owned. I also had to avoid the sticky vines that loved to tangle my arms and legs, leaving behind a terrible rash wherever they touched skin. So far, so good. All I had left was to shinny across a thin branch,

avoiding the hecklebird that nested there. Hecklebirds were mean, with long narrow beaks that pecked mercilessly at whoever disturbed their eggs. Well, I didn't want the eggs; they were disgusting anyway. I only wanted the vinefruit next to the nest.

So out onto the limb I went, patiently inching my way forward, listening for the hecklebird's ugly caw. I got about halfway out and then heard a crack.

The limb snapped in half, and I clawed for anything that could keep me from falling. My hand found the vinefruit, which actually might've helped save me if it had not been so perfectly ripe. Instead, it came with me as I fell.

I went down headfirst, crashing into another hecklebird nest, which sent a particularly foul-smelling bird fluttering into the air in anger. It'd be back. Then a vine caught my leg in a tangle, leaving me suspended in midair about twelve feet above the ground.

I caught a yelp in my throat, reminding myself I was not the type of girl who panicked over ordinary near-death experiences. I was, however, a girl whose heart was racing far too quickly. I needed to breathe, to think. But mostly, I needed to not fall any farther.

Granted, this had not turned out as well as I'd hoped. But my best friend, Weevil, had said he'd meet me here today. If necessary, he could help. It wouldn't be his first time saving me from my own stupidity. This wasn't even the worst mess he'd have caught me in.

Blood rushed into my head, and everything around me turned upside down. My skirts threatened to tumble over my head as well until I bunched them between my knees. At least I still had the vinefruit. I had originally intended to bring it home whole to my parents, but it had crushed in my hand and would never last. Thick red juice ran in lines up my arm. Better that I eat the vinefruit alone than let it go to waste.

That's what I told myself to pretend I wasn't being selfish. I knew my parents were every bit as hungry as I was. But I'd have to drop the vinefruit before unwrapping my leg from the vine, and that'd ruin it.

The longer the vine stayed on my skin, the worse the rash would be, but I didn't care. My hunger now was worse than a little itching later. Despite the awkward angle, I ate the fruit, trying not to let the red juice stain my mouth the way it had stained my arm.

I finished the fruit, letting the pit fall somewhere into the underbrush, when I heard the crunch of leaves beneath me. I swung my body around, expecting my friend. Then I immediately went still.

"It figures we have to come get the grubs," one man said. "There're men younger than us who should be doing this work."

These were wardens. Their cocked woolen hats gave them away. I prayed they wouldn't look up and see me. The wardens and my people weren't exactly friends.

“Grubs” was a reference to those of us who lived up in the river country of Keldan. The term wasn’t much worse than our description of the townsfolk below as “pinch-worms,” but they started the name-calling first, so we felt justified. Besides, pinchworms were known to eat grubs, so the nickname was accurate.

“Governor Felling is punishing us for what happened last week,” his companion said. “Punishing *you* and made me come along for protection.”

Protection? My people were peaceful. Well, we had been peaceful so far. If the wardens were here, then that might change. It all depended on what they wanted.

Governor Nerysa Felling wasn’t a popular leader. Compared to our neighboring country, Dulan, most of Keldan was poor, and everything the governor tried only increased the burdens already weighing heavily upon the people. Whispers of overthrowing her power grew louder, and increasing numbers of challengers stepped forward each year. Everyone knew Dulan looked at our borders with hungry eyes. It was only a matter of time before they attacked.

Governor Felling was even more disliked by the River People, whom she loved to blame for the troubles in Keldan. Each year, she pushed us back, farther from the towns and higher into the hills, where food was more scarce. About a year and a half ago, she forcibly recruited several men, many of them River People, for an exploration north to find new resources. Weevil’s father was taken amongst them. But

the Scuttle Sea is famed for its terrible storms, something Governor Felling certainly should have known. The ship was lost. There were no survivors.

There was only one reason Governor Felling still remained in power and perhaps only one reason why Dulan had not yet brought us a war.

The Scourge.

The disease first appeared three hundred years ago. It swept through our country and cut our population by a third. Fear of its spread shattered our economy, isolated us from neighboring countries, and created outcasts of my people, who were accused of originating the disease. The scars it caused within Keldan were still apparent today.

After four long years, the terrible sickness went away, and the people of Keldan were free to breathe again in peace. The worst tragedy in our history was over.

Or so we thought.

Last year, the Scourge returned.

This time, it started in the prisons on Attic Island, cleaning them out entirely before it moved into the general population. It was a disease without mercy. Highly contagious, but with no clear sign of how it was transmitted. Symptoms were nearly impossible to detect until it was too late, and there was no treatment. The Scourge always ended in death. Always.

The one good thing Governor Felling had done was hire physicians who determined that if the disease was caught in

its earliest stages, even before symptoms appeared, then it was less contagious. They used the old records to develop an early test to identify and isolate Scourge victims, which seemed to keep the disease from spreading as quickly. But for those who did test positive, Attic Island was transformed into a Scourge Colony, where victims were sent to live out the rest of their short lives. It was the governor's way of hoping to contain the disease. Fear of the disease spreading over its own borders had also kept Dulan at bay. For as long as the sickness reigned, Dulan would not cross Attic Island's waters.

The disease wasn't Governor Felling's fault, obviously. Inheriting that problem was just her bad luck. But she was the River People's bad luck. Proof of that was in the wardens' presence below me.

I craned my head enough to see the two men. The first warden, the stockier one, had requested a break to remove a rock from his boot and was taking his time about it. "Governor Felling ordered us to take five grubs for testing." The shaking of his voice betrayed his worry about being here. "If she only sent two of us to get them, how does she think that'll go?"

Five of us, to test for the Scourge? Since we were isolated from the towns, so far the Scourge had not touched my people. We never mixed with the pinchworms except on the rare occasions when we needed supplies, and in those cases, we never went to towns where the Scourge had appeared.

So why was the governor sending wardens to test us for the Scourge?

“It may sound like a hefty punishment, but it’s deserved,” the second warden said. “Grubs always cause the worst uprisings.”

What was he talking about? There was no uprising. The last trouble we’d caused happened when those men were taken for the exploration, and even that was minor. There’d been nothing close to an uprising since then.

A caw sounded off to my right. An angry, nasty caw that only could have come from the hecklebird. The hateful thing was back, but why now?

No doubt it smelled the vinefruit juice that had dried on my arm. It knew I’d disturbed its nest. It wanted revenge and would get it now, better than the bird could’ve ever expected.

That bird would expose me to the wardens below.