

Reign of the Black Death

Not deterred by the fields of golden wheat nor the promise of a hearty harvest, the Black Death donned his ghastly cape and crept onto a ship destined for Missina. He hid quietly at first, seeking slumber in emptied barrels and crates, but his presence seeped into every layer of the ship, carried by lively rats and their fleas. The robust crew soon found themselves overshadowed by a masked, caped crusader in desire of a world blackened by pestilence. The Black Death sent his henchmen—the rats and fleas—after the crew, and violent coughs rattled the ship as the once invisible invader became a menace. One by one, the men succumbed to the prowess of their formidable foe that lurked in the shadows. And one by one, the men fought and lost battles with Death himself.

When the ship docked at the Sicilian port of Messina, the people awaiting the arrival of the crew encountered a grisly horror: an overwhelming mass of corpses onboard. Authorities demanded that any ship of death be sent away into oblivion, terrified of contracting the mysterious malady. But the Black Death crawled out of the confines of the ship's bowel and leapt onto the shore, his henchmen accompanying him. The people of Messina left the port, but a fog of a foreboding nature settled upon them; the Black Death had proven himself to be quite the resilient terror. The rats and fleas dispersed, weaving through the bounty of merchants and carrying their master's touch of massacre through the streets of Messina. And the Black Death himself dragged his cape across the land, leaving no soul untouched as fright emerged from the vanishing sun.

As the season of fall swept Messina of green leaves, the season of the Black Death swept the city of its life. Fever and cough gave way to pain as lymph nodes swelled and skin turned

black, bodies falling like faded leaves. And then ravenous fear consumed Messina like a fire set on becoming the eighth wonder of the world. Doors slammed and families dumped their fallen members into streets, crying for a savior to rid them of their bleeding agony. In response, the Black Death burst from the shadows and climbed to the highest point of the city, standing large beneath the grey sea of the sky.

“Bring out your doctors!” he voiced to the cowering clumps of clueless citizens.

The people of Messina heeded the villain’s words and called upon their doctors, paying large sums for a vague diagnosis and the obvious statement that Death lay on the horizon. Cautious hands drew protective charms and blunt tools toiled to no avail. No amount of bloodletting nor boil-lancing could stall the prowl of Death, and the last breath of many departed citizens clouded the air. Aromatic herbs combated the stench of Death’s arrival, but only a flood of tears washed away the blood, the suffering. And despite this upwelling of agony, Death remained oblivious to his own atrocities as well as the tears of Messina; he pursued his ever-growing need to devour.

The wealthy turned their weary eyes to the Black Death’s lofty perch and cried out, begging to be spared from a fate sealed with black boils. But the Black Death merely laughed and said, “I see no distinction between you and your poor; you must suffer as well.” The wealthy gathered their young and fled to the countryside, but the Black Death had unleashed his rats to the far corners of the land. No amount of jewels nor favors could deter the Black Death from carrying out his deal with Death, and so the villain watched as those that fled dropped to their knees in a hopeless panic, crying for salvation as their animals perished and their children contracted the inescapable disease. The Black Death felt his cavernous chest swell with pride as

his minions traveled beyond Messina into the world, the rats and fleas leaping out of Italy into the rest of Europe. No amount of rosewater baths could prevent the monster that once stowed away on merchant ships as quiet as a rat. No amount of riches nor tears could sway the villain that never slept. The flames of fear left no soul untouched.

Parents buried their children. A shortage of wool occurred as sheep fell in numbers. Crows picked at the dense, perpetual ocean of bodies awaiting burial, and strangers handled the carcasses of other strangers, pocketing a handsome fee for their undesirable task. Rumors traveled, feeding upon the fear of humanity as outcasts and minorities suffered torrential blame and anger, forced to stomach more of Death as the humans persecuted each other in an attempt to regain control.

All the while, the Black Death enjoyed the fruits of his labor. He dined on the despair of the globe as the number of lost lives climbed into the heavens. When terror proved great and indomitable, so did he. The Black Death walked beside Death himself as an endless heap of bodies piled carts, the corpses pulled arduously to mass graves. With each rapidly filled trench, another was dug. And so Death's reign of terror began, the Black Death catering to his endless appetite in hopes for recognition and appraisal. The world—Europe in particular—experienced tremendous anguish underneath a perpetual night sky, the Black Death's vast, inescapable cape thrown over the land. The only light that touched the weary faces of humanity squeezed through sparse holes in the darkness.

Nearly one-third of Europe perished, millions of lives vanquished by Death and the one carrying out his bidding. No end was in sight. Hope lay in tatters. And despite the disease slowing in hunger after a period of five years, it returned.

“How foolish of you to believe I would disappear,” the Black Death voiced to the world he had created. “I did not begin with that ship in Messina, and I will exist beyond these five years.”

The Black Death spoke truth, for he revisited the scarred remains of Europe incessantly, standing as an unforgettable monster that would roam the streets with Death for the rest of time. Half of Italy fell to the sagacious villain and his cape, staring into his gaunt eyes as he crushed the life out of his victims, letting the streets of the world run red with his grisly triumphs. A new batch of doctors confronted the Black Death, dressed in dripping, heavy coats and wearing leather gloves for gauntlets. Their faces remained obscured by a mask resembling that of a crow, their beaks filled with aromatic herbs to stymie the stench of Death’s toll. The doctors carried staffs and kept their distance from patients, prodding the ill while standing a meter away. Yet they too were mystified by the origins and nature of the Black Death’s malady, and they too failed to alter Death’s rapid, rising tide. The Black Death swatted the doctors away like birds and continued his march.

All of the light in the world had fizzled, and existence proved a challenge. And when the Black Death—in need of a transient slumber—withdrawed his cape from the sky and crept to find a resting place, Death remained ever-present. Humanity remained afraid.

But the Black Death, peaceful in his haughty doze, underestimated the humans he spat upon. For despite their lack of power and their trepidation in the face of microbes, humans possessed a resilient spirit as well as a desire to overcome. The bird masks of the plague doctors gave way to vaccines and accelerated technology. And the flaming beast of fear reduced to a maintainable fire as knowledge found purchase in the impossible climb to eradicate disease.

When the Black Death awoke, he found his cape shredded and a thousand white coats plotting a coup to send his reign reeling, their hands dipped in latex and their faces guarded with filtering masks. And although the Black Death slipped through the army of gloves, his terrifying influence collapsed into a few thousand annual cases. Fear sought other muses while the Black Death sputtered and smoldered, dreaming of a time when he held the entirety of the world in his gnarled hands. He dreamed of a time of useless crows and carts overflowing with corpses, for now an ocean of white had brought back the light, the new age of doctors fighting the spread of pestilence with unquenchable resiliency. At last the reign of the Black Death had come to an end.

Death watched his once faithful puppet with a face of disappointment, withdrawing his trust to fuel the influence of other evils and future maladies. But the sky—although periodically blackened by the sun's disappearance—will never forget to be alive. And the relentless crusaders in white coats will never forget the reign of the Black Death nor the power of microbes.

Life exists in such a fragile state, and humanity encounters this reminder through brutal events that forever mar history. The arrival of the Black Death in Messina was not the beginning nor was it the end. Another reign of terror will arrest the world's perception. The earth has proven itself of an untamable nature, and humans are not its sole, unmatched rulers.