

# PLAÉD



TSS 1

## Chapter 1- The Show

The masonite stage floor was cool under his feet. Blankets of deep scarlet velvet swayed across the stage—the curtains lush and lively. Flying open, they revealed the face of Dash Blake to the world.

Snaky. Arrogant. A rascal.

He walked, slowly—deliberately—towards the podium, head held high, nose in the air. A spotlight cut through the dim theatre, circling his frame until it caught a glimpse of gold. The medal dangled from a velvet cushion, carried by an usher whose footsteps echoed through the room like drums beating.

The crowd hushed.

Dash's arrogant smirk curved wider - a performance all on its own, as though he'd been waiting his whole life for this moment of fame. When the medal was lifted from its cushion and slipped around his neck, the stage lights seemed to flare into recognition, transforming his arrogance to legend. He tapped the medal twice with his knuckle, leaned towards the audience, and simply said, 'Well... of course I earned it!'

Not earnestly, but egotistically, like a stuck-up, selfish snob.

Of course, to him, he deserved it, winning title after title, breaking records left and right - he won the Olympics after all. The 100-meter, 200-meter, you name it - he was Australia's first descended Indigenous star, Dash Blake.

## Chapter 2- The Pet

He accepted his gold medal without grace; he turned and strutted off the stage.

Smugly smiling, he scooped up his pet rabbit, Gubby, caressing his fluffy head. But a faint buzzing whispered overhead. The lights flickered and then short-circuited, sparking viciously. His parents had always told him that non-natural lights were something that the gods didn't approve of, especially if they were filled with things that could bring harm.

The **gooey** fluids contained in the lights splashed down, burning the tender skin of Dash's prized pet, Gubby. The vulnerable rabbit yelped out in pain, its pure white fur singed and darkened into a smoky grey shade. Dash lashed out, shaking his arms—now covered in the liquid—and he dropped Gubby on the floor.

Noticing immediately, Ivy, the only vet in attendance, rushed out. Skilfully, the vet wrapped Gubby's body in the only thing available: a ball of **yarn**. Although the makeshift bandage only eased the pain, Gubby still visibly cringed at any movement. However, instead of thanking Ivy, Dash rudely snatched Gubby from her arms and scrambled back to the audience. 'How rude,' thought Ivy, who slowly retreated to the audience.

Suddenly, the microphone screeched to life. A voice echoed. It was simply outrageous. The accusation was falsely based, and he knew it. But did they?

## Chapter 3 – Lost

Accused of cheating. Dash had been accused of cheating. The audience murmured, noise filling the stage as Dash stormed off.

Ivy called after him, but Dash ignored her, furious at the humiliation and lies. Searching for Gubby, his eyes dashed and darted, left to right, up and down, furiously scanning the production crew for any suspicious looks. Worried, he rushed around backstage, before letting out a howl, and calling for Gubby.

Others, noticing his distress, bolted towards him, but he was having none of it. At first, silence descended on the crew, before the rustling noises came. The insects were taking away his precious Gubby. Dash's frantic calls echoed off the backstage walls, bouncing between riding poles and stacked props. His chest heaved as he darted past costume racks and forgotten scenery, eyes scanning every shadow. Each muffled squeak or rustle sent his heart racing; he couldn't tell if it was Gubby or something worse. The audience's murmurs of confusion and fear filtered through the curtains, growing louder, adding to the tension that gripped the theatre.

Then the fluttering began. Tiny shapes, dark against the stage lights, skittered along the floorboards. Insects.

Dash froze, dread coiling in his stomach.

## Chapter 4 - The Plague

They began to surge at Gubby in thick plumes, surrounding him as he fell to the floor. Head thudding to the ground, the world turned blurry, and then dark – sounds muffled in the background. It was dead silent. As he woke up, Gubby opened his eyes to absolute havoc. Being carried away in his own flying coffin, his eyes widened as he looked down. A swarm of tiny black dots were carrying him further away from the stage.

Children screamed in terrified panic, parents and adults scrambling desperately to find their children in the sea of screams. Chaotic. Fearful. There was no other way to describe it. And the bugs dropped him onto the ground. Hurtfully. And coursing through his body was pain, seizing his movements, easing him into immobility, and an aching feeling spread throughout his leg. Then his whole body. And, for the second time in a matter of minutes, nothingness.



## Chapter 5 - The Olympian

Dash had always been fast. From the moment his legs first carried him across a dirt field as a child hunting in the bush alongside his father, running was his escape. Not from games or races, but from fists, voices, and a home that felt more like a cage. Every bruise on his arm, every cruel word from his father became fuel for his ambition. On the track, he wasn't a victim; he was unstoppable. Winning was survival.

Just a few minutes ago, he stood on the Olympic podium, building himself a wall of pride and arrogance, shutting out pity before anyone could offer it. He wore his selfishness like armour, hiding the scars of the boy who once ran barefoot from broken bottles in the yard. Gubby, his rabbit, was the only creature he allowed close, a companion untouched by betrayal. But that closeness was a weakness, and as the insect plague grew, so did the shadow of his past, ready to catch him last. On the stage, Dash's arrogance became almost tangible. He strutted under the spotlight as though the gold medal around his neck had transformed him into a god, untouchable and admired. Every cheer from the audience fed his ego, while Ivy watched silently from backstage, her concern for Gubby met with nothing but his dismissive sneer.

The insects did not help. They flew. They buzzed. They invaded space. The noise was deafening, a mix of buzzing, screaming, scrambling, and microphone static, which had fallen in the commotion.

But she didn't care. Not too much. Insects never bothered her. And they never would again.

## Chapter 6 - The Victim

It was easy for them to control others remorselessly - they didn't feel guilt, as they say. A psychopath. And controlling others never got harder. The people they targeted were never good people - culprits of bullying walking into their own traps, crafted from intelligence and hatred.

And for them, it wasn't fair. Nothing was fair. They grew up in an abusive household - victims of violence. Who *hadn't* seen them, isolated in school - sad - bruises plastering their skin, faces sombre.

Their family grew a garden, full of the deadly nightshade - *Atropa bella-donna*. And threats of its consumption always came with every fight that occurred.

So when power was within their reach, it was almost stupid - idiotic to refuse. The rabbit was the key, though, to executing the plan. Feed Gubby some blakeoak and lungwort, and he breaks out in hives, indistinguishable and forced, and most importantly, passable as a general disease. But no one understood the control they'd get - the power over others they'd receive. Especially when the method was only known to Indigenous Australians and their close friends. It was the perfect poison.

The **novel** of cures was the last key. But they couldn't find it. Not yet anyway. But this was their only straw to grasp. And probably, their only chance.

## Chapter 7 - The Hope

Dash stood alone beneath the dim stage lights, the theatre reeking of rot and buzzing with the endless drone of wings. Ivy was with him the only one left. Clutched in his trembling hands was her worn leather **novel**, pages crammed with half-legible notes and diagrams that looked more like abandoned **homework** than salvation.

Somewhere in this mess was the cure; he could feel it, but the swarm pressed closer with every heartbeat, forcing him to act before both Gubby and the crowd were lost forever. He flipped frantically through the pages, skimming past doodles of herbs, half-finished recipes, and blotches of ink until a single word caught his eye: **plunge**.

The instructions were scattered, fragmented, as though Ivy had written them to confuse anyone who found them. “**Plunge** the host into darkness. Gather bitter root. Bind the breath.” Dash frowned. It was nonsense, or at least it looked that way, but with Gubby’s small body twitching on the floorboards, he had no choice but to trust the scribbles. The buzzing grew louder, the air thick with wings as the insects pressed against the curtains, spilling onto the stage in a block tide.

Dash tightened his grip on the **novel** and glanced at Gubby, whose breathing was shallow, each rise of his chest weaker than the last. His pulse hammered. He had never followed instructions that looked like riddles, never mixed strange roots or herbs; it all felt like **homework** for a class he’d never taken. But he knew one thing: if he didn’t **plunge** into that swarm and find bitter root, Gubby would be gone, and with him, any chance of ending the plague.

## Chapter 8 - The Shield

He tore a strip of cloth from his shirt and wrapped it around his mouth and nose, a feeble shield against the crawling mass that waited beyond the footlights. Clutching the scribbled page against his chest, Dash took a breath and leapt from the stage, plunging straight into the swarm. The insects crawled at his skin and tangled in his hair, their legs scraping like needles, but he forced himself forward, eyes straining for any sign of the rot Ivy had scrawled about. Every step felt like wading through a storm of claws and wings, yet the thought of Gubby's fading heartbeat pushed him onward.

Through the haze of wings, his foot struck something firm beneath the warped floorboards. He dropped to his knees, clawing past the crawling bodies until his finger closed around a cluster of twisted roots, their surface slick and bitter-smelling. The same crude sketch stared back at him from the **novel**'s page, he had found it. Shoving insects away with desperate sweeps of his arms, Dash yanked the riot free, ignoring the sharp bites that tore at his skin.

It wasn't triumph he felt, not yet, only a fragile spark of home that this strange cure might keep Gubby alive. But before relief could settle, the swarm shifted. Instead of scattering, the mass of insects recoiled as one, spiraling upward in a dark column that blotted out the lights. Then, like a living tide, they poured through the broken stage doors, streaming toward the wetlands beyond the theater.

Dash clutched Gubby close; his heartbeat steadied, but then he got worse, the cure didn't work, it was either incorrect, or they had to find another way.

## Chapter 9 - The Swamp

Their journey had started a few hours ago. From glory and triumph to mess and insects, and now somehow the swamp, he could barely imagine the past moments. And losing Gubby. Gubby - the only person (he could not bear to call him an animal) he had ever cared about - was now missing and gone. And of course, Ivy had insisted on coming along in case Gubby was injured. 'In need of care,' she had emphasised. Reluctantly, Dash swallowed his fear and plunged into the darkness. The muck swallowed him, devouring him in slimy tendrils of oozing mess. As he fell down the bottomless pit, he hit something. He looked up to find Ivy falling down straight onto him, knocking the light out of him. Meanwhile, unbeknownst to Dash and Ivy, Gubby was panting quickly, in a dark, unfamiliar place, his case of hives getting worse and worse. The itching was unbearable. When he bit his own skin to relieve his own itchiness, only big red swells puffed up. The insects poked him over and over with their little beaks. They were merciless, clearly they had been tasked to torture him and they were doing a very good job. Dash had finally regained his consciousness and around him, he saw a vast swamp ahead of them. The smell was horrid. The stench was like thousands of corpses piled together. On top of the pile lay an old deteriorating book. Dash hurried over. Was this the book they needed?



## Chapter 10 - The Novel

Dash opened the **novel** to find one page. It contained a recipe and a map. Ivy crawled behind, limping; obviously, she had rolled one of her ankles. Dash quickly hurried to help her. However, she flicked away his hand and looked to the top of the pile of corpses. Suddenly, a look of distraughtness washed over her face. Dash, worried, wondered if it was the **novel** he had found that she was looking for. Surprisingly, Ivy didn't give a straight answer. Dash didn't care. All he needed was to find Gubby and cure him. He flicked through the **novel** again, and the same scribbles he had seen earlier appeared. The book read:

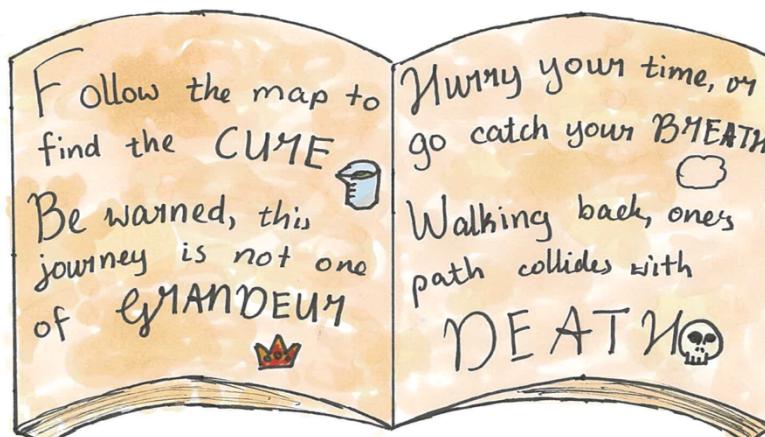
Follow the map to find the cure

Be warned - this journey is not one of grandeur

Hurry your time, or go catch your breath

Walking back, one's path collides with death.

Hurriedly, Dash grabbed Ivy's hand and sprinted, following the map without thought. They passed marshes and towering trees, yet nothing could stop the pair, or more precisely, Dash, who was practically dragging a tired Ivy behind him. Eventually, they reached the final point on the map. A looming door stood above them. On one dilapidated handle on the door, it read 't\_ee la\_y\_\_\_th'.



## Chapter 11 - The Labyrinth

Dash warily entered, when he took out the **novel**, it showed nothing to him apart from two words. Dash cringed at the cruelty of the writer. All that it read now was 'Good Luck'. The **novel** was a trap. How had he not thought of that. He was silly to blindly follow the words. He looked at Ivy, who was just as confused about where they were as Dash.

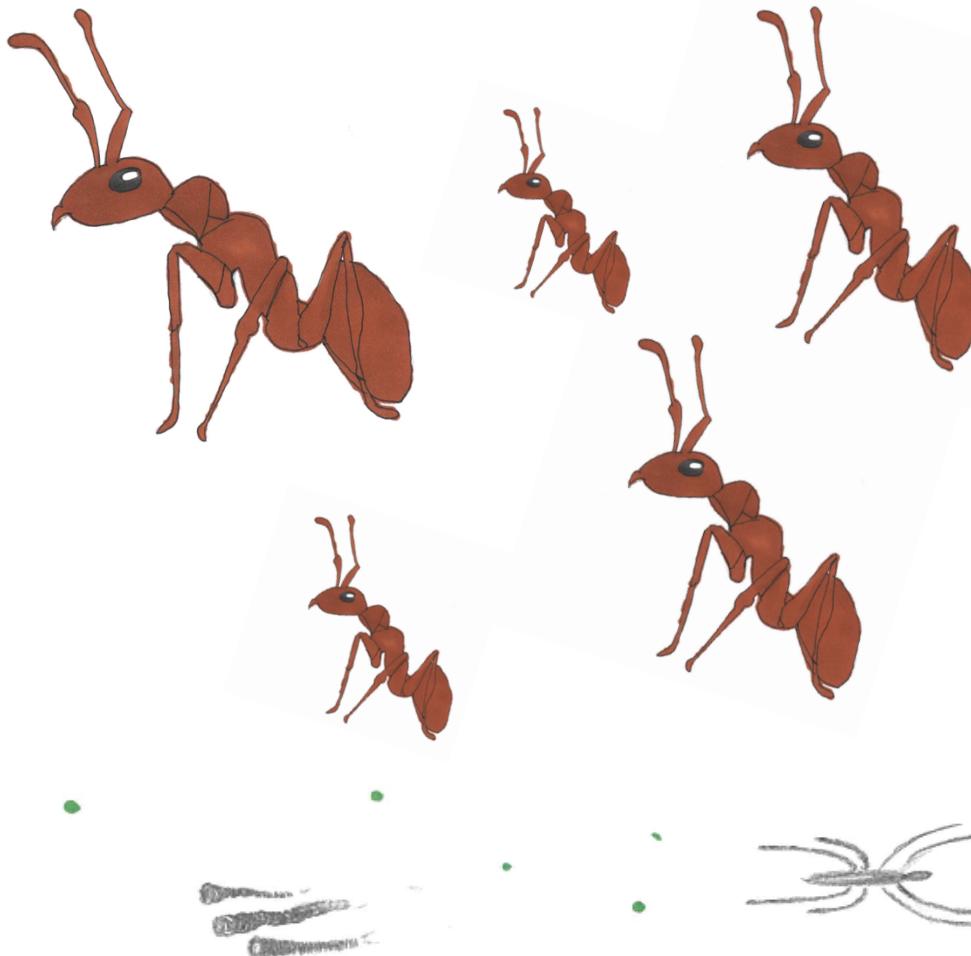
Dash knew the idea of labyrinths, endless mazes with one exit and hundreds of monsters guarding. Worriedly, he explained the whole situation to Ivy. Distraughtly, she questioned him whether he knew how to get out, he responded with a negative answer. So they did the most sensible thing, they started walking in a random direction. After what seemed forever, they had finally found something that looked different from the cold stone walls of the endless corridors.

Many times they almost fell into traps like pitfalls, but now they knew how to identify them. A faint buzzing sound as well as a soft light shone down a corridor. The duo made their way towards the light. Relieved to see another light apart from the cold blue light that filled the dungeon, they rushed through the corridor, just to be faced with many giant fire ants.



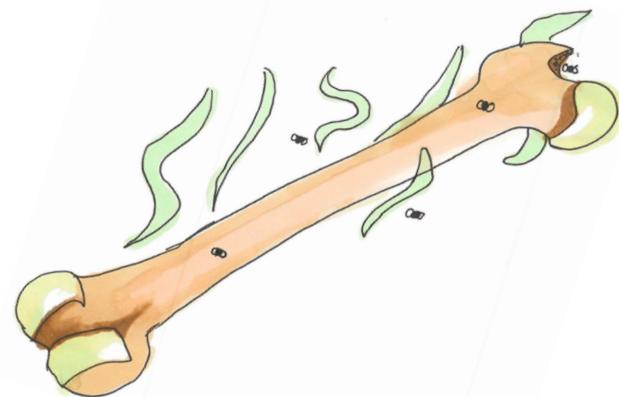
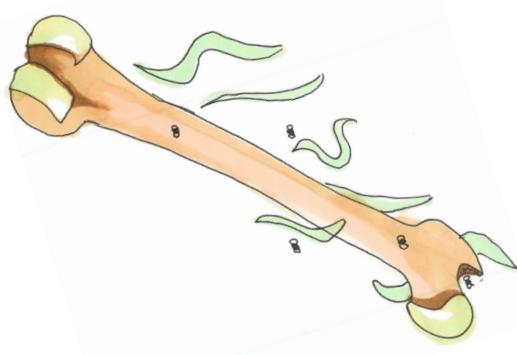
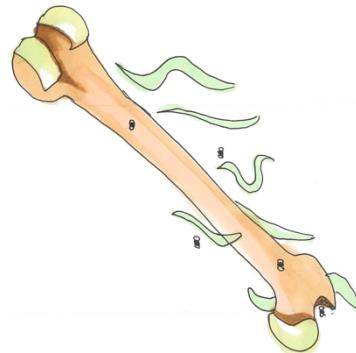
## Chapter 12 - The Last Stand

They swarmed out for as long as the eye could see. Their pincers, clashing together. Sweat dripped from Ivy's forehead. "I've never seen these types of ants before," she had exclaimed. Dash scanned their surroundings and noticed the corpses of many scattered around the room. It seemed like many others died like them. He signalled to Ivy to follow him out, however, she only walked forward towards a corpse and then laughed maniacally. Dash visibly looked concerned. "Had she gone mad?" he thought to himself. The ants all looked towards Ivy. Their legs moved uncontrollably. He ran down to Ivy, brandishing the bone of an unfortunate victim of the labyrinth. He would fight them all. He did not care if the odds weren't in his favor, he pushed himself still and fought back the ants. The ants now seemed wary when approaching Dash to try to crush him, as they had been poked a numerous amount of times. Ivy whimpered, muttering under her breath that it was all her fault.



## Chapter 13 - The Escape

Ivy sighted the exit. She grabbed Dash and sprinted to the exit. The ants closed in slowly, but the exit was there, like a lure, drawing them closer and closer still. Eventually, the point reached where all the ants were almost a meter away from them. Dash poked them with the bone, however, suddenly, a sharp crack sounded. Dash had finally killed one of the ants, but now his weapon was now reduced to a small heap of fragments. Suddenly, a light shone down on them and lifted them out. Finally, Dash remembered the words of the **novel**, one of them wouldn't return. Then he realised that they were all in the labyrinth and by killing an ant, they had been able to escape from their gruesome fate as ant food.



## Chapter 14 - The Identity

They had made it out of the swamp a few hours ago, and were now trudging towards the stage where their whole ordeal had started. Time had seemed to have reversed. Gubby rested on Dash's lap and Ivy was right next to him. Relieved, Dash relaxed back into his chair. Guiltily, Ivy revealed the truth. She was the one who had got the bugs to attack Gubby. She was the one who had made the labyrinth to kill the pests of society. Ivy broke down in tears, knowing that she had failed to kill the egoist, Dash. However, that was no longer Dash. He was a changed man. A changed man, standing above the rubble of the stage where he received his gold Olympic medal.



## Chapter 15 – The Vet

She didn't mean to be a bad person. She simply grew up in a household knowing nothing but fear, terror, and pain. So deranged of power. So when the chance came for her to use her power, she finally had to take the chance. Her best friend in school, Gaia Malcolm, a half-indigenous and half-european friend was talking to her, she let it slip. 'The power to rule all insects known to indigenous kind comes from a book,' she had described. And so, it was a miracle that the chance had come to her – that that seemingly impossible thirst for power was tangible.

But her power was never meant to be used for bad intention – it just so happened that bad intention had to be caused for good to come her way. For good to come for all who had ever been mistreated, misused, and exploited. To all those children, innocent in their childhoods, but victims of domestic abuse.

Before any of this happened, she had to erase those hurtful memories. The nightshade was burnt, the house was burnt, in an unfortunate 'accident' and she was the only survivor. Then she learnt to fend for herself, in a pitiless world.

But watching Dash and his rabbit, so lovingly, she had to give up her power. As long as she got power of her own.



## Chapter 16 - The Spotlight

The masonite stage floor was cool under his feet. Blankets of deep scarlet velvet swayed across the stage - the curtains lush and lively. Flying open, they revealed the face of Dash Blake to the world.

Smart. Kind. A changed man.

He walked, slowly - deliberately - towards the podium, but there was a humbleness to his pace. A spotlight cut through the dim theatre, circling his frame until it caught a glimpse of gold. The medal dangled from a velvet cushion, carried by an usher whose footsteps echoed through the room like drums beating.

Dash's kind smile curved. When the medal was lifted from its cushion and slipped around his neck, the stage lights seemed to flare into recognition, transforming him into a living legend. He tapped the medal twice with his knuckle, leaned towards the audience, and simply said, 'Thank you to all those who helped me receive this medal!'

Earnestly, but certainly not egotistically, like a gentleman.

Of course, to him he didn't deserve it, for he knew in his heart that the only reason why he had won the olympics, winning title after title and breaking records left and right was all because of those who helped him along the way. Winning didn't matter anymore. All that mattered he had another chance with the one who helped him, especially Gubby.

He was a changed man-Dash Blake.



## The Epilogue

The theatre sat quietly now.

Empty velvet chairs, discarded programs, and golden confetti clung to the corners like ghosts of the chaos that once ruled. The insect plague was gone. The swarm, wiped out. And Gubby, healed, rested peacefully in a warm basket under the soft sun that poured through Dash's newly built animal sanctuary. He never ran another race. Instead, Dash devoted himself to the ones who couldn't speak for themselves: the wounded, the voiceless, the forgotten. At the sanctuary's heart stood a small vet clinic, its doors open to all. Above the entrance, a wooden sign read:

**"The Blake-Atropa Foundation."**

Run by two people: an Olympic gold medalist and a vet who once almost destroyed him.

Ivy Atropa.

She had changed. Genuinely. Slowly. She had stayed behind, helped rebuild the town, and even published a book titled "*From Plague to Peace*". Children adored her. People forgave her. Dash did too. But for a separate reason.

But not everyone was convinced.

Because no one could find her records. No school ID. No birth certificate. No trace of her family. The garden of nightshade she once spoke of? It never existed. Not even through ashes. There's more to her past than meets the eye.

And late at night, when the wind howled through the trees, some swore they could still hear the whisper of wings... and laughter in the dark.

Olympic medallist **Dash Blake** basks in glory on stage, showing off his arrogance and his beloved pet rabbit, **Gubby**. But disaster strikes when the lights malfunction, injuring Gubby. **Ivy Atropa**, a kindly vet, rushes to help—but tension brews as Dash dismisses her aid.

When Gubby mysteriously vanishes, a plague of insects swarms the theatre, causing panic and chaos. Dash desperately searches, while Ivy seems to know more than she reveals. Flashbacks expose Dash's troubled past and selfish pride, but the real twist comes later: Ivy, not Dash, is the mastermind. Using Gubby as a vessel, she engineered the plague to gain power and control.

The theatre descends into terror as insects spread and people fall victim. Dash discovers Ivy's cryptic notes, hinting at a cure, and risks his life in the swarm to save Gubby. The fight leads into swamps, labyrinths, and secrets of identity—until the final spotlight reveals truth, betrayal, and the fragile hope of survival.

Follow this link to download the online version of the novel, and help support kids with cancer!

<https://avracing.github.io/PLAGUED/>

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