

Graveyard rats

The d'Hanuri brothers had a reputation to maintain. Since the vyig went – and nobody was shedding any tears over those pricks – it was every dog for itself in Temeschwar. The two of them walked the wards and boroughs with the swagger of bravos who knew that they were the match for anyone who might try to draw steel against them. They took what they wanted, and when the watch got a little too close for comfort they knew all the best boltholes both in the city and outside it where they could wait for the heat to die down. Which made it all the more infuriating that this fat old mountebank, years past his prime, was talking bollocks about them. When he'd heard what was being said, Vance had furiously smashed a perfectly good bottle of wine. Half full, and brought all the way from Astolat. Crop was still a little bitter because it was his share of their more recent smash-and-grab that had paid for it and he'd had no more than a glass. Mind you, tonight he had more immediate concerns. For the third time in twenty minutes he nervously shone the little thief-lantern he had in his palm around the alley. The faint beam glittered in the eyes of a nasty looking sewer rat perched on a bin. It hissed at him, showing off crooked yellow incisors.

Vance chucked a knife at it, but it ducked away and disappeared into the rubbish that choked the far end of the alley. He thumped his younger brother on the arm, a little painfully.

“Stop jumping at shadows,” he said. “We're protected, remember?”

The older d'Hanuri pulled out a crudely made wooden amulet showing a scowling bearded face wearing a Varushkan hat on one side, and an angry goose on the other, inscribed with

Wintermark runes that apparently ensured the wearer was safe from the rats.

“How well do you think that's working, mate?” Asked a cheerful voice.

Emerging from the back door of The Old Priory was the man they were here to see. Brinton von Temeschwar had been a big deal thirty years ago but he'd drunk his talent away over the years and was good for little more than ring ante games and bilking credulous folk out of a few crowns with tall tales and shadow magic. Which was why Vance had been so angry, and decided to make an example of the muntebank.

“We hear you've been coming the big man,” snarled Vance, stepping toward him. Brinton looked drunk, swaying slightly, although Crop couldn't smell any liquor on him. Not that it was easy to smell anything in this stinking alley.

The other man reached slowly into one pocket of his shabby, darned coat and the two bravos tensed, drawing steel – a nasty short-bladed sword for Vance and the pair of curved hacking blades that gave Crop his nickname. But all the old soak pulled out was a handful of... cheese? Was that cheese? A fistful of soft, crumbly yellow cheese with little bits of apple in it. The smell was strong enough to penetrate the stink as he shovelled it into his mouth, slurping and snapping his teeth as he swallowed it down.

Crop began to get worried, feeling that pinch between his shoulderblades that their mum had called the “scoundrel's nip”, that presaged things going horribly wrong. He'd learned to listen to it, and he started to suggest to Vance that maybe this wasn't where they should be but it was too late. Vance was already running his mouth, trying to put the fear of the d'Hanuri into the mountebank. It wasn't working.

Brinton finished his cheese, sucking his fingers clean, and then came out a little further into the alley. He was a big man, but out of shape, his gut hanging pendulous over his checkered trousers. Crop didn't like how his eyes glittered in the dark.

"I suppose you're wondering why I called you here?" He said. The broad smile hadn't faltered, even though he was outnumbered two-to-one, and unarmed.

"What?" said Vance stupidly. "We're here to.."

"Vance..." said Crop warningly. "Vance let's get out of here."

"You should listen to your brother," said Brinton nodding agreeably. "But I'm afraid it's too late now."

He stepped forward again, and something about his manner tipped Vance over the edge. They'd only intended to rough him up, teach him to keep his mouth shut and send a message to some of the other low-lives that the d'Hanuri brothers were still mean street dogs. But Vance had always been terrible at sticking to a plan. Crop winced as his brother drove his sword into the Mountebank's belly halfway to the hilt.

Brinton didn't stop smiling, just looked down at the blade sticking out of his food-stained shirt, then back up at Vance. His eyes were like little chips of polished tempest jade.

"Oh well," he said amiably, as if they were discussing the weather. "The hard way it is."

Vance jerked the blade to the side in a move that should have disemboweled the unarmoured man. And in a way it did... but rather than spilling out entrails, the wide gash spilled out rats. Dozens of them. Fat, angry rats. A tide that scampered up Vance's blade, up his arm, onto his shoulders and face. He made the mistake of screaming, mouth opening wide, and when he did...

Crop tried to run, but there were more rats, bursting out from the rubbish at the end of the alley in a dreadful swift-pawed flood, silent as the grave. By the time they'd finished - after Crop had answered the questions repeated over and over in a cheerful, patient voice by the thing that called itself Brinton von Temeshwar - all that was left of the d'Hanuri brothers was a pile of bloody, gnawed bones and a pair of blood-stained sickle knives.

Overview

For nearly a year now, the northern League city of Temeschwar has been beset by rats. They emerged shortly after the Winter Solstice last year, and "high points" included attacks on Virtue's Respite and Lorenzo's Great Game, and the reasonably high profile murder of the apothecary Ernesto di Temeschwar.

During the Summer Solstice, the Temeschwar Chamber of Commerce met for a second time to determine what to do about the rat problem. By this point, many of those able to do so had temporarily quit the city for the countryside – or howling wilderness – of greater Temeschwar. After some debate, weighing the option of very large dogs and the or anti-vermin poison, the business owners of the city decided to go a different way and paid a significant retainer to the Rat Kings guild to protect places of commerce and private homes across Temeschwar.

Guild of Ratcatchers

- The Rat Kings guild now protects businesses and the homes of the wealthy from the threat of the rat plague
- They are on retainer to the city for nine months after which

their contract may need to be renegotiated

Temeschwar's self-described pre-eminent collective of rat-catchers, sewer walkers, and nightsoil collectors. Their claim to be one of the oldest (if not the oldest) guilds in the city is largely unsubstantiated, although they can trace the origins back to the first loose association of people with wheelbarrows and shovels, finding wealth in the leavings of others. Despite their grand claims, and while their members seem to be everywhere, they don't seem to be especially wealthy.

That last might be about to change. It turns out that when given a chance, they prove to be very good at hunting rats. The Senator for Temeschwar, Giuseppe Sanguineo von Temeschwar, met with representatives of the guild during the Summer Solstice and apparently secured their services on behalf of the city. The Chamber of Commerce agreed to pay their comparatively reasonable price - believed to be no more than a dozen thrones - but their retainer lasts only for nine months. If the crisis is ongoing, there may need to be a renegotiation of contracts at the Spring Equinox 387YE.

For now though, they have gone to work with a vengeance. With their traps, and their small but vicious mongrel dogs, they have brought the rat plague under control. There have been no more incidents with massive swarms descending on Temeschwari landmarks, and the number of attacks against residents of the city have declined dramatically. The number of businesses hanging attaching discreet little terrier-head signs to their lintels, indicating that they are protected by the Rat Kings, has skyrocketed.

Obviously there's some suspicion that the Rat Kings' ability to deal with the rats goes beyond anything mundane. A few broadsheets have made accusations that the guild somehow caused the crisis in the first place. The city being what it is,

sensible people waited with interest to see if the printers of those broadsheets would turn up eaten by rats, but so far it hasn't happened. The Rat Kings are just getting on with it.

Giselle's Tomb

- Virtue's Respite is still suffering rat attacks
- The sinecure will produce half the normal amount of liao and money until the rat attacks stop

There's one exception, one place that it seems the Rat Kings are unable to adequately protect. Twice since the Summer Solstice rat swarms have descended on the Virtue's Respite, the tomb of Empress Giselle. There've been no deaths but in each case those visiting the tomb were bitten, scratched, and terrified by the sea of black, brown, and white furry bodies. A number of people needed treatment for the odd sickness that sometimes follows in the rat's wake.

After the second attack – the third or fourth since this current crisis began – visitors begin to avoid the place. Those who do visit seem to be motivated by dark excitement at the risk they are taking, and the chance to perhaps see a swarm of rats, more than any appreciation for the late Empress' tomb. As a consequence, until this particular problem is resolved, the Guardian of Giselle's Tomb Casimir Marcelino di Sarvos will find their income of liao and money halved to 4 doses of liao and 32 rings respectively.

The Rat Kings shrug, and mutter that the place's location is inauspicious, and make any number of other excuses that leave people more suspicious than when they started.

A Handful of Deaths

- There have been a handful of peculiar deaths placed at the doors of the rats
- Some citizens wonder whether the Silent Bell might investigate to see if there is a connection between the victims

Even with the Rat Kings on the job there have been a small number of deaths directly attributable to the rats. The remains of four people have been found gnawed to death in their own homes, reduced to little more than bloody bones. A small-time fence named Kara Dimonte di Temeschwar who was apparently eaten alive while sat at her own rickety table having her dinner; a freelance historian by the name of Bulgar von Temeschwar who was killed late at night in his little bookshop and not found for three days; and a two deeply unpopular bravos named Vance "Sheepdip" d'Hanuri and his brother Crop "the sickle" d'Hanuri both of whom were overwhelmed while lurking in the alley behind the Old Priory - an inn in the wilder parts of the city.

The deaths are a cause for alarm. While Kara Dimonte and the two d'Hanuri brothers are unlikely to be missed, Bulgar von Temeschwar was a solid citizen of the city and if a doddering old sage is not safe in their place of business, who is? There's no obvious thread that connects these three incidents, and nothing to tie them to Ernesto di Temeschwar who was the first high-profile victim of the rat plague.

Uncertainty and concern have lead to some of the burghers of Temeschwar questioning whether the bishops of the city might call in the Silent Bell. Not to look into the root of the rat plague so much as to determine why these seemingly unconnected people are being targeted for such vicious deaths. Others wonder if it might be a case for the Lantern Wolf to investigate

once their offices are complete - although how exactly they would do that is not clear. Mostly this concern seems to originate with those more prosperous citizens with skeletons in their own closets, who want to be reassured they are not going to be the next pile of bloody bones.

Contained Not Ended

- The situation is under control but it is by no means over
- There is some hope that a group of citizens may be able to speak to the cause of the problem during the Autumn Equinox

The Rat Kings are good, but there are still more rats than there should be in Temeschwar, and they are brazen. While most flee the approach of people, some don't. They may retreat a short distance but they still watch. Just going out on the street, the average citizen will see two or three rats on a walk to the shop. The problem is contained it is not over.

During the Summer Solstice however it's known that the grandmaster of the Unfettered Mind lead a small group through the Sentinel Gate to Temeschwar to meet a dubious old mountebank named Brinton von Temeschwar who claimed to have a token allowng safe passage to emissaries who could speak to the King of Rats. What happened during that meeting is not public knowledge, but Brinton himself has since disappeared.

There is hope in some quarters that the grandmaster, or members of their party, may be able to use this token to parley with whatever is behind the rat plague, and secure some assurance that the threat will not escalate again. Hopefully they will be able to use whatever information they received from Brinton before his disappearance to detect a conjunction of the Sentinel Gate during the coming summit.

Bishops of the League

Citizens of Temeschwar, do not let fear and carelessness spread with this plague. Stay vigilant. The bishops of Temeschwar open their doors to provide sanctuary to the sick and afflicted. Seek anointings to drive off delusion, seek bladeroot and prismatic ink to cure sickness. We shall stock our supplies high. Let no single citizen go unchecked. Knock their doors and drive out plagues where they fester, rescue the sick and drag them to halls of healing, seek out poisons in your neighbour's fields lest it grow in every corner of our city. We shall not tire. Prepare. Thwart. Overcome.

*Emil Radana von Temeschwar, Summer Solstice 386YE,
Vote: Greater Majority 304-10*

- After the Autumn Equinox any Temeschwar congregation that preaches Vigilance or Loyalty will receive additional votes in the Synod but reduced liao

Emil Radana von Temeschwar raised a statement of principle in the League assembly calling on the bishops of Temeschwar to provide sanctuary to the poor people of the city in the face of the rat threat, and urging vigilance. They also shared details of the known treatments for the rat sickness

– bladeroot and prismatic ink. Their words were endorsed by the assembly, and had a surprisingly positive impact. As the Rat Kings began their defence of the city by protecting places of business, the people of Temeschwar, supported by their bishops, set about looking after the people who couldn't or wouldn't flee the city while the ratcatchers did their work.

This loyalty is repaid, although this being the League its effects won't linger long. Following the Autumn Equinox, any priest in Temeschwar who preaches Vigilance or Loyalty will find their congregation swollen by dozens of additional congregants eager to both hear words of vigilance and mutual support, and

take advantage of the open doors. They will gain two additional votes, but lose one dose of liao – the lost liao is used to create consecrations and provide anointings and hallows to people seeking spiritual succour in the face of the rat problem.

Supplies for Sickness

Temeschwar Apothecary Supplies

Commission Type:Ministry

Location: Hanari, Temeschwar

Cost: 16 wains of weirwood, 48 Crowns, three months

Effect: Creates the title *Temeschwari Doctor of Medicine* allowing purchase of medical supplies

Temeschwari Doctor of Medicine

Type: National

Appointment: Tally of Votes

Powers: Oversee the Temeschwar Apothecary Supplies ministry

Responsibilities: Oversee the Temeschwar Apothecary Supplies, ensure Temeschwar apothecaries and doctors are prepared for curses and sickness in the city

Bladeroot

7 crowns

16 bladeroot

17 crowns

33 bladeroot

30 crowns

50 bladeroot

Prismatic Ink

88 rings

2 prismatic ink

212 rings

4 prismatic ink

360 rings

6 prismatic ink

- The Doctors of Temeschwar propose laying up stores of supplies needed to treat the rat sickness
- The Temeschwar Apothecary Supplies could also increase readiness for any other weird curses or sickness coming out of the dark woods and hills

By the Autumn Equinox it's clear the Rat Kings have brought the plague of vermin under control, at least for now. The wealthy and privileged begin to return to the city. There is still some concern about sickness, however. Even a nip or a scratch risks persistent nausea and mild hallucinations involving being watched by rats, worsening to the point where patients are unable to keep down wholesome food and are driven to feast on refuse that exposes anyone not fortunate enough to have the draughir lineage to further sickness. The hallucinations of rats get worse, and there are now several patients who have to be treated for blood loss after becoming convinced that rats are somehow inside them. As pointed out by Emil Radana von Temeschwar, the sickness can be treated with medicine brewed from bladeroot, if it is caught early, but the worst cases have also required a suffusion of prismatic ink to help chase away the delusions of rats. The doctors of Temeschwar are holding their own, and with the number of rat attacks subsiding, the situation seems to be under control.

Inspired by the national assembly, several of those doctors have proposed that it might be an idea to lay in additional supplies of the materials needed to treat the sickness. More to the point, there have been several incidents in recent years where dark creatures of the forests and hills have caused a nuisance for good Temeschwari citizens. They point to the unpleasantness with the agents of Scathe in Metri (several of whose attacks caused awful wounds that would not stop bleeding), the curse

on the sinkhole, the weird cases of irrational brutality in some mercenary groups... living so close to Varushka creates its own problems.

As such they propose steps be taken to address any future magical maladies that might beset the people of Temeschwar – and to make sure that the doctors of the city have access to the materials they need. At the moment that means bladeroot and prismatic ink. Bladeroot is comparatively easy to get hold of in bulk, especially given the proximity of Varushka, but prismatic ink is a much harder proposition. Still, thanks to the Gift of Knowledge ritual, and the benefits of letting people know there is a market in Temeschwar, it might still be possible to bring enough into the city to deal with the worst rat sickness cases.

The doctors propose the establishment of Temeschwar Apothecary Supplies, a ministry that would be responsible for securing resources for the healers of the city. At the moment that means bladeroot and prismatic ink, but if a new crisis emerges there would likely be opportunities to change what it produced. The Temeschwari Doctor of Medicine would oversee the ministry, liase with healers, and take the lead on dealing with any new threats magical or mundane to the health of the city.

This opportunity remains available until the situation in Temeschwar changes significantly; likely until the end of the Spring Equinox 387YE at the very least.

Participation

If your character is from Temeschwar, or is visiting Temeschwar this season, and for as long as the rats continue to be in evidence, you can choose to retire your character by having them horrifically eaten by rats. If you decide to take

advantage of this opportunity, email [plot@profounddecisions.co.uk plot] and, presuming we are writing an appropriate wind of fortune, we'll ensure that people know about your grisly fate.

More than vermin

- There are claims of something much, much larger than a rat skulking in Temeschwar's backstreets

As if all that were not enough cause for alarm, rats are not the only creatures stalking the streets of Temeschwar this past season - or at least, that's what the city's finely polished rumour mill has been claiming. The first stories revolve around a vengeful ghost haunting a particular alley behind the Bloody Great Theatre, and are largely ignored by Wiser city dwellers as just another thespian superstition.

But more stories develop over the coming weeks: the spectre of a hound which can be found in one of the city's meat markets after dark and will chase you through the empty racks and stalls until you leave an appropriate offering of steak; a dire bear on the loose, allegedly escaped from the Great Game where it was the most expensive card dealer for hire; a bravo who took an experimental potion brewed by a Varushkan merchant, intended to give her unparalleled strength but which has now transformed her into a monstrous form.

The vast majority of Temeschwar's residents claim the stories are hogwash, or, more likely something to do with the ongoing rat problem, but the atmosphere of the city changes when the sun goes down. It's much rarer to see someone walking alone than it was only a few weeks ago, even allowing for the threat of rats, and hurried looks back over shoulders have become commonplace. Regardless of any individual rumour, it's clear

that a significant portion of Temeschwar claims to hear the noises of a great beast late at night, usually in the more shadowy or secluded areas of the city.