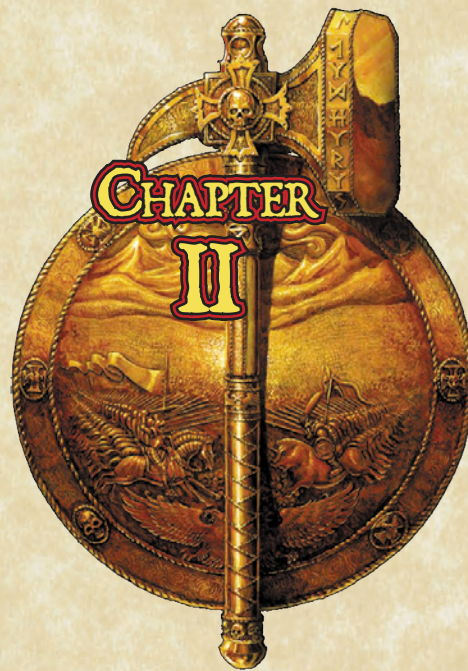


A MOCKERY OF LIFE

"You can always tell Vampires by their eyes; they hold disdain and dreadful need in equal measure. But carry a mirror as well."

—KIRSTEN STUMPFNASE,
VAMPIRE HUNTER



What you don't know *can* hurt you, especially if you hunt Vampires. Ignorance is a foe just as dangerous as Undead, and when anyone displaying a depth of knowledge about necromancy comes under instant suspicion, research is

not an easy task. Those who do not have access to forbidden works or the restricted sections of temple libraries may have to make do with incomplete or second-hand sources, such as the dubious *Vermin Alley Diary*.

19th Fore-Mystery

Coming to *Vermin Alley* was a mistake. Since I left the University, money has become a consideration; I had little choice but to take the cheapest of lodgings. The name alone told me all I needed to know about this street. It's infested with rats, cats, dogs, and vermin of the Human variety, from the wastrels of the Lock and Key Tavern down to Filthy Rothbart the gravedigger. Last night I dreamed I had become a monstrous vermin whilst I slept.

20th Fore-Mystery

When you cannot consider things growing worse, they find a way. I was escaping the cold at the Lock and Key when the Watch arrived to read out the Plague Orders. I was so terrified I cannot remember half of them, but for the important part: *Vermin Alley* has been deemed unclean and is to be sealed off for the city's protection, a "Cordon Sanitaire." We

trudged outside, jacks and steins in hand, gaping as they walled off both ends of the street, and the guards took up their positions. The walls are flimsy, but they are a line that cannot be crossed under pain of death. Back doors and windows were nailed shut; there is to be no egress that way either. I am locked in with the guttersnipes with no escape.

23rd Fore-Mystery

Our only contact with greater *Aldorf* comes with the *Mortality Bills*. A priestess of *Shallya* and one of *Morr* come in white and black raiment, like chess pieces. She ministers to the flock, and he pins up the bill, but you can see their true purpose as they eye us for buboes.

As a man of letters, I have been chosen to read the Bill aloud to a crowd of my neighbours. Five dead in *Ragansweg*, it reads. Two dead in *Breichstrasse*. Other streets had been closed off as we were for being breeding grounds of filth that spreads the miasma that, in turn, spreads plague.

A reward was offered by the city for each dead dog and cat in an attempt to clean the streets of the animal ordure that covers them. For a full day the sound of barking and yowling was constant, mingled with triumphant shouts of thugs and urchins as they earned another schilling.

25th Fore-Mystery

The lack of cats and dogs has made the street cleaner, but in their absence the rats have come forth in greater numbers. They are everywhere, bold as brass. One ran across the bar of the Lock and Key until Holz crushed its head with a stein of beer. Then he handed it to me as if it did not matter that half a mangled rat dangled from my drink.

My larder will not last, so I have taken to the tavern for sustenance. Where Holz gets his provender I do not wish to know. My companions there are a rough sort but not as bad as I first thought. Holz keeps a blunderbuss above the bar to keep them in line, but it is just for show. They share camaraderie in these dark days that I envy.

When the priests arrived today they noticed the Stahls were absent, though usually a pious family. The priests went into their house, then emerged ashen-faced and chalked the mark on the doorway. No one is to enter or leave that house until the sickness has done its work. There was little cheer in Vermin Alley today.

26th Fore-Mystery

Everyone is wearing talismans to ward off disease. Some recommend tobacco to ward the vapours. Frau Schadenfreude taught her son to smoke a pipe, though he coughed and cried; others swear by quicksilver clysters. Rothbart is selling moss grown on skulls, apparently a sure-fire ward. I bought a pomander from Frau Kopf. She guarantees the herbs keep sickness at bay, but I wish I could leave the alley to buy a more powerful talisman from the markets.

The house of Blucher was sealed and marked this morning.

28th Fore-Mystery

I have found a new appointment, though one that I doubt would make father proud. I have joined the Durchsuchung, tasked by the priests to enter the sealed houses of Vermin Alley to check whether the



inhabitants live. I am paid with schillings from the sale of their belongings if they do not.

I wear a closed helmet with my pomander in the end of the beak-like face guard to keep away miasma. My hearing is muffled by the helm, but each house is quiet whether it holds living or dead. The diseased sit alone, waiting for the Old Man to claim them whilst their family huddles in other rooms, praying. If no one falls ill for three weeks, the house is declared clean.

In the Meers' house I noticed something peculiar. Fraulein Meer, though sick, bore no signs of plague. She was pale, feverish, unnaturally thin, her breathing was belaboured, and there were spots of blood about her face consistent with a violent cough. I recognise the symptoms from my reading of Gaelen. She has consumption, not the plague, so I removed the mark from their door. Still, it is a contagion, and it cannot hurt to keep her locked in the attic.

Five dead in Breichstrasse according to the Bill.

1st After-Mystery

Last night, by Imperial order, the rules were reversed, and the sick were allowed out whilst the well



stayed in. The gates were opened, and they walked through Vermin Alley. From my shutters I saw the strangest sights. The ground was wreathed in mist that curled up the legs of corpse-like children as they danced in circles, singing rhymes and falling to the ground, only to rise and run off, giggling. The older victims came behind them, muttering and stretching their legs, breathing deeply of the chill night air. The consumption seems limited to Vermin Alley; the afflicted of further afield all bore the traditional plague marks. I saw one poor soul who should have been dead, his countenance was so hideous. His head was hairless, skin grey as stone, mouth drawn back as if his lips had fallen off, ears twisted on his deformed skull, and he walked with the aid of a hunched assistant. His eyes shone with the unnatural vigour one sometimes sees in the deeply unwell as they stare back from the brink of the abyss. One moment I saw them, the next they vanished. It must have been a trick of the Altdorf fog.

2nd After-Mystery

The Schadenfreudes have fallen sick - tobacco does not work after all. Their symptoms are of consumption. Strange that two diseases should spread simultaneously.

I mentioned it to the new priest who arrived today. The old one never gave me the time of day, but this young fellow, Wechsler is his name, seemed fascinated. He made me show him the consumptives, and then he covered their houses with marks of Morr, even hanging his silver raven from the rafters of one. It never ceases to surprise me how the most rational of individuals fall prey to superstition in times of crisis.

Note: I shall have to buy a new pomander from Fran Kopf soon.

3rd After-Mystery

Strange noises last night. It sounded like a Daemon was loose.

4th After-Mystery

The Kopfs are all dead. Yesterday they were well, and today they are dead. It was not the plague or consumption or any disease that killed them, unless

we are witnessing an outbreak of Explosive Pox. Blood coats the walls, their bodies are torn. The source of the strange noises I heard is obvious. Some beast is on the loose, something capable of incredible violence. I shouted myself hoarse at the guards on the far side of the wall, but they would not listen. They have heard every excuse from the desperate souls who plead to be let out of Vermin Alley. My neighbours avoid me and give me strange looks, as if I am mad and that too is contagious.

5th After-Mystery

I am a fool. Wechsler noted the carnage in the Kopf house, and his fears were confirmed. It is not consumption spreading alongside the plague. It is the mark of the Vampire. One of the living dead is here, amongst us, feeding at its leisure. We are trapped like rats. Wechsler says there is no way to lift the Plague Orders until the sickness has passed. But he will help us.

There was a meeting in the Lock and Key. Everyone sat quietly whilst Wechsler spoke. I expected denial and fear, but the people of Vermin Alley surprised me with their resolve. Everyone knows something is wrong. Fraulein Meer's uncle says she raved about a monster that visited her at night before she fell sick. Holz and Rothbart saw the same strange figure as I prowling the Alley at night. Everyone heard the noise as it killed the Kopfs in its rage.

Wechsler explained the banes of Vampires: sunlight, garlic, holiness, hawthorn, and silver. Whilst I write, the others are sharpening stakes, looks of grim determination on their faces. Wechsler has handed out blessed water and holy implements. We pooled our funds, and Holz loaded his blunderbuss with every silver schilling we have. I was mistaken to call these people vermin because they live in filth. They are braver than any noble sitting in a glass plague-cage.

We will move from house to house until we find the real vermin. After days of waiting for death to come to us invisibly, death has been given a face; a face that we can strike at. When we find the monster we will impale it, decapitate it, stuff its brainpan with garlic, and expose that hideous face to the light of day.

I am not afraid to die. Today I noticed a lump in my armpit, the beginning of the buboes that spell my doom. When death comes, I only hope it comes quickly.