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his tale speaks of two legends. One born of the wilds . . . and one born within city walls.

I, Tejal, have served as witness to both in visions that haunt me to this very day. Gather yourself now and listen as I regalé you with a story about a young druid boy ... and the thing that he will become.

A plague has stretched its shadow hand across the map, finally reaching a small city not far from Westmarch. The people look to their lord to ease their suffering, but their cries fall on willfully closed ears. Even now, I can hear the whispered rumors of the plague's origin—whispers that will fuel the flames and forever scorch the city.

We begin with a conversation-and we end in blood ...

"My lord," Holps said, wringing his hands, "food is already scarce. The peasants may revolt at such an order. If you damn the peasants, our crops will lie untended in the fields—"

The lord scoffed. "Now I need care what the filthy underclass has to say? I am their *lord. Your* lord. See that my will is done."

Another man, Ardan, cleared his throat—its sound echoing off the chamber walls. "Forgive me, sire, b-but your people are starving. Please, might you reconsider—"

Kirek could see their pleas would lead nowhere. There were more urgent matters to which to attend, and little time to waste. "Sire. Urgent tidings from Westmarch." As he addressed his lord, he noticed movement to his right. Through the wall, between a gap in the barnstones, Kirek spied the young druid boy, Vylum, whom his lordship had taken in as a babe. Vylum had always made Kirek uneasy. He saw too much and said too little, creeping about the castle like an uninvited guest. For company, he shunned the children his age in favor of the castle rats. Even now, the boy stared at him with eyes that made no promise of a soul within, nuzzling the rat on his shoulder as it nibbled the fabric of his finespun tunic.

The lord grumbled dismissively. "What now? More news about this peasant rebellion?"

"Sire. It is a problem far more grave. A great disease, spreading quickly. We have reports of thousands dying in the streets: boils on their skin, splitting open with pus. It seems to have reached the holdfast as well." Kirek swallowed hard, looked back over his shoulder, and signaled to the guard who stood out in the hall. "It appears a plague has come to our lands, my liege."

The guard, hands gloved and mouth covered by a cloth, dragged someone into the room and tossed him down before the men. Kirek's heart beat faster with fear. He didn't know how the lord would react. He only knew that his lordship would do nothing unless he saw proof with his own eyes, and now that proof was kneeling before him, coughing and quivering.

The lord sat back on his throne, his brow furrowed. The peasant coughed and,

#### "DENY THEM THE CRUMBS FROM YOUR MEAL AND THEY MIGHT MAKE A MEAL OF YOU INSTEAD."

with spittle still dangling from his lips, moaned in pain. His face and arms were covered in boils—several of which had burst open, leaving a greasy sheen on his already filth-covered skin.

Kirek spoke again, his voice softer. "The apothecaries say hordes of rats are spreading the sickness like wildfire. But the lowborn say it is perhaps the curse of...a druid."

The lord shook his head. "A curse indeed, but no druid caused this. The druids are friends to this holdfast, and to your lord. Be mindful where you place blame, Kirek. Or have you forgotten my son was once counted among their kind? If not for the druids, I'd have no heir at all."

Kirek's mind turned to the boy watching within the walls. He wondered if Vylum had any idea of his true parentage. If the lad did not know before, he certainly did now. A fitting reward for his lurking and eavesdropping.

Kirek addressed the lord once more. "Your son beckons rats inside the castle walls, sire, makes them fat on food that could better fill the bellies of your starving subjects."

"Rats seldom starve," Vylum said now, his voice loud enough to carry. "Deny them the crumbs from your meal and they might make a meal of you instead." He looked at Kirek with dark eyes, a smile full of crooked teeth.

Kirek continued, ignoring the outburst. "Druidic curse or not, your son is contributing to this plague. The apothecaries advise we smoke out these creatures and burn them—"

"Mind your tongue, Kirek. Lest I order it removed." There was the briefest of pauses as the lord's gaze shifted from Kirek back to the messages lying on the table before him, awaiting his attention. "Perhaps we can settle two problems with the same solution: take no action. Let the lowborn starve and fester, believing themselves cursed. Their deaths will save food and slow the plague. You have your orders." Kirek looked to his comrades Holps and Ardan for help, only to discover their expressions had hardened. All hope of saving the people had dissipated at his lordship's words. The only ones who looked pleased were the lord and his son, who seemed content that his rat friends would face no harm in the coming days.

Months passed.

The wave of death and ill fortune had become known as the Great Pestilence. It swept through Westmarch, taking the life of even the lord. Soon, barely half their number remained. At the behest of the surviving citizens, Kirek, Holps, and Ardan took on the harrowing task of leadership. They followed the apothecaries' advice and took to caring for the lowest among them, even clearing the plague-ridden corpses within the city walls.

As Kirek hoisted another body over his shoulder like a sack of grain, he tried hard not to inhale. The stench of rotting flesh and open boils had turned his stomach enough in recent days, and while he was determined to help the city, the smell of death and decay was almost too much to bear. There were no funerals—only burn piles. That is, all but for his lordship. In the end, the lord had died gasping and coughing, and it had been Kirek who'd placed his lifeless body within the grave that Holps and Ardan had dug. They'd have buried his druid son as well, but the boy must have fled the holdfast for safer lands or died in some crevice of the castle, unbeknownst to them. *Good riddance*, Kirek thought as he dropped the body he'd been carrying onto the burn pile and collected another.

Holps tilted his head to the side as he examined the limp form hanging over Kirek's shoulder. "Are we sure this one's dead?"

Kirek tilted the body forward to examine the face, a mask of pockmarks crusted with infection and green pus.

As Kirek's eyes fell on the corpse's face, his lips curled in disgust. "It's *him*. The druid boy. Like father, like son—as worthless in death as in life, I say. Better we get to the burning."

The corner of Vylum's mouth twitched—those same sharp teeth forming a smile, even so near to death.

Ardan gasped. "He's alive!"

Kirek could summon no pity. "The boy's beloved rats—a remnant of his filthy druidic parentage—hastened this plague, I am certain. Let him die and help put an end to it." Then Kirek spoke to Vylum, who seemed oddly at ease in the plague's grip. "Are you done with the misery of your existence, boy? Because the rest of us are."

And with that, Kirek dropped Vylum's limp, gnarled form onto the burn pile, which hissed in a gasp of smoke and fresh flames.

Cruel laughter boiled out of the three men as they walked away, joined by the crackling of the flames. Kirek gave one last glance back, watching a fresh layer of sweat glistening on Vylum's brow as the heat of the fires spread closer. Ever closer.

He waited until the flames lapped at the lad's skin, sizzling his sweat, before turning away.



Years passed.

The Great Pestilence lasted all that time. When it finally came to an end, Kirek, Ardan, and Holps found themselves with a wealth and power they had only ever imagined. Their sprawling pastoral estates were well kept and idyllic, with the lowborn eager to repay the service each man had given in plague time, and they knew neither toil nor hardship. After hailing them as heroes, their new lord assigned them one final duty: overseeing the removal of all vermin within the city. For while the plague had passed, the rats remained, consuming stores of grain and threatening to spread sickness anew. Worse, they had been acting strange, excitable, as if something they had been long awaiting would soon come to pass. Peasants even claimed to have seen the rats moving as one large mass through the alleyways at night...

"I thought we'd given enough of our time to cleaning up this damned plague, yet here we are again, trudging through the sewers like the very rats we're hunting." Kirek shone his torch down the darkened tunnel, searching for signs of infestation. In his free hand, a sack full of captured vermin floated on the water, fighting his attempts to drown them. Ardan carried his own bag filled with rodents—dead from ingesting a poison the apothecaries had concocted. When they arrived back at the sewer entrance, they would add the vermin to the burn pile. "And where in the name of all the Hells has Holps run off to? Not like him to shirk his duties."

"Probably home, drinking his cellar dry. I envy him." Ardan cast a glance around them, taking in the grimy stone walls of the sewer. "This place makes me uneasy. It feels like, like we're the ones being hunted ..."

Kirek nodded in agreement. He hadn't felt right ever since they'd entered. There were eyes on him, thousands of eyes he couldn't see, though he felt their weight nonetheless. "Let's take our leave and join Holps. The sooner we're away from this stench, the better."

But when they reached Holps's manor, they found the front door standing ajar. Furniture had been tossed about, splintered, and perhaps gnawed on. The fireplace was filled with softly dying embers. A trail of black sludge soiled the fine carpets of his sitting room; they followed it to his chambers and into his featherbed. The bed was empty, save for a large rat's skull carved with runes they did not recognize or understand.

No doubt lingered in their minds. Holps was missing. And something in the sewers had taken him.

Ardan held up a mug to toast, his words slurring. "To our absent friend."

The tavern they sat in had no name, but it had good ale and decent food and, most importantly, an air of anonymity. Ale slopped from fresh mugs as the barmaid set them on the counter, but neither Kirek nor Ardan noticed. Truth was, they were six drinks each into debating what had happened to Holps, and no amount of ale would ever be enough to wipe from their memories what they'd seen. Kirek turned the rat's skull over and over in his hand, studying it in the glow of the crackling fireplace. Then Kirek lifted his mug, clanking it against Ardan's.

The barmaid ran a cloth over the countertop. "So, how did he die?"

"Never said he died." Kirek tossed his head back, swallowing mouthfuls of ale before wiping his mouth clean with the back of his hand. "He's *missing*."

Clucking her tongue, the barmaid shook her head. "A shame. But not the first to go missing 'round these parts of late."

Ardan's voice shook just as much as the mug in his hand. "That's no ordinary rat's skull, Kirek. The size of the damn thing ... must be from a plagued vermin. Hear those things are the size of cats. And those runes ... they look druidic. You don't think—"

"Keep it together, mate." Kirek glanced around nervously.

The barmaid straightened some. "Druidic runes, you say?"

Kirek grumbled, wishing she would mind her business. "Yes. What of it?"

"It's probably nothing, but I've been hearing stories, about a creature said to have the soul of a thousand vermin." Wiping off her hands on her apron, the barmaid leaned in, holding the men's attention as she spoke. "He wears a worn disc carved with runes on a string around his neck. Some say that it acts as a beacon, aiding him in his murderous endeavors. He snatches folk into the sewers, where he and his pack of rats feast on their brains and eyes."

The men fell silent for some time, until at last Kirek scoffed. "Ludicrous. Holps likely won a hand of cards and pissed off the wrong man."

Ardan gulped. "Think there's something ... unearthly lurking in the sewers?" The barmaid's eyes gleamed. "I'm sure it's just rumors. Your friend'll turn up soon."



Hours passed.

The moon hung full and low in the sky, casting a cool blue tint over the thatched rooftops and cobblestoned streets. On any other evening, it would have been a welcome sight, but this night was filled with too many shadows for Kirek. All he could think about as he staggered home was the look in the barmaid's eyes as she spoke of the creature who dwelled in the sewers. It had sent a strange chill up his spine—one that lingered.

Kirek ambled from street to street, his missing friend consuming his every thought. As he emerged from an alley, he noticed several rats gathered in the street before him.

"Ah, here you are." He kicked the first one into a wall; a moist, satisfying *thump* accompanied its final squeal. He stomped on the next, grinding the rodent's skull into the cobblestones. With each tiny death, he felt a bit of twisted pleasure.

Across the street, a dark entrance to the sewers caught his attention. He couldn't shake the feeling he was being watched from its gaping maw. But by whom? And was he seeing things, or were there two glowing green pinpricks of eyes in the dark? He blinked, and they were gone.

"Good riddance, filth," he slurred.

Moments later, he was stepping foot inside his home, content to pass out in his bed next to his wife. The last thought he had before his head hit the pillow was of Holps and the rat skull.

And the glowing green pinpricks of eyes.



The door to Ardan's home stood open as Kirek approached, reminding him too much of the way he and Ardan had found Holps's place the day before. As he moved slowly through the dark house, he winced at the tacky sound his boots made upon the stone floor, not knowing what it was and somewhat afraid to light a candle and remove all doubt. But as he proceeded to the back of the house, he noticed his boots were now splashing black sludge about with each step.

Still, he pressed on. Where were Ardan and his wife? Despite his fears, he located a candlestick in the dark and lit it with the tinderbox from his pocket. Turning slowly, he surveyed the room, then stopped, bile rising in his throat.

Two figures were tied to the bed, each stripped of every bit of skin and muscle and tissue. Ardan. Cassandra. The blankets were drenched in blood and bodily fluids—so much so that the fabric couldn't hold it all, the gristle and blood dripping onto the floor. On the bed between the corpses was an oversize rat skull, carved with runes. Just like the one they'd found at Holps's home.

Kirek vomited before bolting out of the house, his heart rattling inside his chest, pounding like fists against his rib cage. He needed to run. He needed to keep moving. He needed to get home. This, paired with the disappearance of Holps the day before—Kirek now knew that he and his family were no longer safe in the city.

He raced through the shadows, but the scuffling sound behind him was distracting. Casting glances over his shoulder, he saw no one following, but the sensation of eyes boring into his back refused to leave him. Panic filled his every breath. How could he go home? If this thing followed him there ...

Forcing from his mind the gruesome image of Ardan and Cassandra, Kirek quickened his steps through the streets. Who had slain Ardan and his wife, and in such a horrific way? Had it been the city guard, at the behest of their new lord? Perhaps their new liege—a wise but mercurial man—was displeased with their failed attempts to quell the rodent infestation and had run out of patience with them. But to resort to execution? And if not him, then who?

Or what?

A creature said to have the soul of a thousand vermin ...

Ducking into a sewer opening, Kirek debated staying there until he was certain his pursuer was gone—that is, if he was being pursued. Then he recalled there was a route home through the sewers. Without thinking, he vanished into the dark waterways, groping the slimy walls.

#### AT FIRST, THE FIGURE LOOKED MORE LIKE AN AMALGAMATION OF RODENTS THAN A MAN.

After a while of stumbling through the tunnels, he came to rest in an open chamber. Roots had twisted through the stone above, forming cracks that let in a few pale streaks of moonlight. He figured he must be under the tree-filled town square.

He wondered if those above would be able to hear him, should he scream. Before him, bits of bone dangled from strings on the ceiling, clinking together like ghastly wind chimes. Clay pots in various sizes cluttered the space—some home to plants, others to a wide variety of fungi. An old wagon wheel sat propped against one wall, serving as a trellis to a climbing vine. A bed in the corner lay heaped with rotten animal skins, blanketing the space in a thick odor.

At the center of the room sat a bubbling pot, tiny animal skulls floating on the surface.

His heart pounded as he spun around, looking for the way back out, eyes falling on a human skull protruding from a garden and a rash of mushrooms winding up the rough-hewn wall. A low, rumbling laugh drew his attention to the far side of the room.

At first, the figure looked more like an amalgamation of rodents than a man. But then Kirek could see that this cloaked figure was indeed human, wearing layers of pelts, his face obscured by a hood and mask. There were bones—skulls—tied with strips of cloth and string around his neck, and at his hip, and on his boot. And were those rat corpses strung over one of his broad shoulders?

"Please. I didn't mean to-I'd just like to leave," Kirek managed.

The figure laughed again, pulling down his hood and mask to reveal a bald head painted with tattoos. Still, something about him seemed familiar. The sharp teeth of his mouth as it split into a smile.

Recognition washed over Kirek, and he could see the boy this man had once been. Kirek cleared his throat. "You're the . . . the old lord's adopted ward. You're you're a-alive. V-Vylum, isn't it?"

"It was." His words shifted into a peculiar chuckle as a large black rat took its

#### "THE RATS SHOWED ME MORE KINDNESS THAN ANY MAN EVER HAS."

perch on his shoulder. As the rat sniffed at Vylum's mouth, it looked almost like the creature was giving him a kiss. "But I am so much more than that now."

Something heavy settled at the bottom of Kirek's gut. He couldn't say for certain that Vylum was the person who'd been following him. He only knew that every bone in his body screamed to leave.

A creature said to have the soul of a thousand vermin ...

Kirek remained frozen in place. "Why do you dwell here and not in the light of day? The holdfast—"

"The *holdfast* is a blight on the land." Vylum's voice was like ice. "This city cleared the forests for farms and marred the land with waste. It poisoned the air with smoke and choked the rivers with filth. And now, my friends are going to take back the land that mankind stole from them."

Kirek shook his head. He didn't understand. He needed to *think*, to distract the man. Gesturing to the smudged tattoos on Vylum's skin, he said, "Those marks. You didn't have them when your father was alive. W-what are they?"

"They tell my story, growing up in the sewers. I painted them myself." He grinned. He stroked a series of long rat tails hanging from his shoulder and tapped the rodent skulls and corpses above them. "These are my family members, found dead, now reunited with their great protector. And these ..."

He passed a hand over the long, pointed bones dangling from his hip. "These are trophies, of a sort. They mark each kill. I possess only a few now, though I've many more to find. These four are new. Care to admire them?" He lifted a bone. "This one called you *husband*."

"My... wife. You—" The weight of grief unmoored him. The world seemed to spin, weighing him down until Kirek fell to his knees. His wife was dead. Probably murdered much in the same way as Ardan's had been.

"I-I see how I have wronged you, druid." He felt the words tumbling from his

#### DEATH WAS COMING FOR HIM WITH A THOUSAND HUNGRY MOUTHS AND THE COMMAND OF A WHISPER.

mouth faster than he could think them. "I apologize, but you need not kill me-"

"I will be the judge of that. And the rats my jury and executioners." His jaw tightened and his eyes became fiery slits as he took a step toward the weeping man. "You left me for dead."

"I said I was sorry! Please!"

Vylum clucked his tongue. "The rats showed me more kindness than any man ever has. After you cast me into the fire, the rats saved me, dragged me from the mound of corpses. Over the years, they've become my eyes and ears in exchange for my protection and aid. They are my only friends. They were *always* my only friends." He shook his head. "The plague was never the problem. It was the people."

Kirek tried but couldn't bear to bring himself to stand. All he could think about were his wife and comrades and how much they must have suffered in the end. Needlessly. Hot tears drew lines down his face. "Please! I am begging you, druid. Let me go! Or at least finish me quickly."

"Answer me this." Vylum locked eyes with Kirek. "Are you done with the misery of your existence?"

Kirek let out a gut-wrenching wail.

Vylum touched something that hung around his neck. A talisman, perhaps? His lips moved, but the whispers that reached Kirek's ears were coming from others. A thousand voices speaking words that Kirek could not translate. But he understood with great clarity the deadly intent of those words.

Not a talisman. No. A beacon.

Rats poured in through every crevice imaginable, covering the floor, surrounding Kirek in a deadly embrace, filling his ears with deafening squeaks and the endless scratching of claws scrabbling against stone, splashing through puddles and damp.

Vylum gripped Kirek by the hair, dragged him through the mound of rats, and slammed him hard against the wall. He spoke strange words to the vermin. Commands, perhaps? Then the rats carried him on their backs as they began to flood out of the room toward the tunnel's exit.

Above, at the entrance to the sewers, was the last burn pile in the city: the one Kirek and his comrades had used to dispose of the city's rats. It was there the creatures let go of a screaming, writhing Kirek. Vylum gripped the nobleman and tossed him with surprising strength onto the burn pile.

"No!" Kirek shrieked. He reached out but could only manage to grip one of the carved bones hanging from Vylum's neck. Pain seared across Kirek's skin as he caught fire. His body was so battered that he couldn't fight back, even as the flames charred his flesh.

Death was coming for him with a thousand hungry mouths and the command of a whisper.

I, Tejal, bore witness to this vision and shall carry it with me for all my days. It is my burden. It is my gift. And it is my duty to share word of such legends to all who may listen.

No longer do rats plague the land. No longer are whispers shared there of druidic curses and a creature lurking in the dark. The people are safe.

But to this day, if you were to visit, you might catch yourself glancing over your shoulder as you walk the streets at night and keeping a close eye on shadowy corners. For the stains of blood never truly wash away.

Vylum was not the hero of this tale, nor was he its villain. At his core, he was just a boy whose soul had been crushed by this world and who sought to unleash the torment he'd experienced on those who'd caused his pain. So too could be said of Kirek, whose own suffering he'd caused himself. The world is not made of heroes and villains. Rather, it's made of people and pain and loss. What matters is what those people do with that pain and how they recover from that loss that shows us they are the stuff of legends—be it hero or villain.

May the flames of this tale singe away intruders, to allow the land to reclaim what was stolen from her ...



## About the Author

**Z B R E W E R** is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the Chronicles of Vladimir Tod series, as well as eight additional books (so far). They've written more short stories than they can recall and have worked as a game dev for Poorly Timed Games as narrative lead. Their pronouns are they/them. When not making readers cry because they killed off a character they loved, Z is an antibullying and mental health advocate. Plus, they have awesome hair. Z lives in Saint Louis, Missouri, with a husband person, one child person, and three furry overlords that some people refer to as "cats." They are the proud owner of a cob of human teeth.



### TEJAL HAS MANY TALES TO TELL. MORE SHORT STORIES FROM THE HEDAJI

ARE COMING SOON