

Mason's Rats

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Neal Asher (www.nealasher.com) lives in Chelmsford, England. Since 2000 he has published six novels: Gridlinked, a kind of James Bond space opera, was published in the UK in 2001; The Skinner, in 2002; then Line of Polity, Cowl, Brass Man (a sequel to Gridlinked), and Voyage of the Sable Keech (a sequel to The Skinner). All but Cowl are set in the same future, the "runcible universe," where matter transmitters called runcibles link the settled worlds. Other books out in 2006 include The Engineer ReConditioned and a novella, Prador Moon. His short fiction is appearing with some frequency in UK and U.S. magazines in recent years.

"Mason's Rats" appeared in Asimov's. It is short, biting, and to the point, and an interesting counterpoint to the Dozois story in this book. Farmer Mason discovers that his cats are missing and that the rats in his barn have become tool users and are carrying weapons.

The cartridges, with their environmentally friendly titanium shot, thunked into the shotgun with satisfying precision. Mason snapped it shut and with pursed lips viewed his sprawling farmyard. Where to start? Where would the killer stray be hiding? He hooked the shotgun under his arm and headed for the huge enclosed barns where grain handlers could still be heard at work. There would be the place, but he knew he would have to be careful where he fired. Micro-circuitry was robust, but not that robust, as he had discovered after blasting one of Smith's cybernetic rat traps, mistaking it for a rabbit. It had run home squealing and dropping chips like little black turds. He smiled to himself at the memory, then came suddenly to a stop, his smile fading. Perhaps that was it. Perhaps Smith had reprogrammed one of his traps to hunt cats, for revenge.

Mason's suspicions had only been aroused when the General had disappeared. The disappearance of the other two cats he had put down to other things. They could have found another home with a more ready food supply. He did not believe in giving them all they would want even though it was tax-deductible. He called it motivation. They were working cats after all. Another possibility that crossed his mind was that they had not been quick enough when the combine harvester had come round, and that he would find their remains when he came to do the baling. But not the General; that raggedy-eared moggy had been around for six years and knew the dangers. He also managed to grow fat on a steady diet of rats. Others might have thought the culprit a fox, but foxes don't attack cats. Cats, after all, have more natural armament than foxes. No, the greatest killer of cats is other cats. Mason shook his head and continued on to the barns.

The doors to G1 slid back only halfway, then jammed. Mason was not surprised. He had not used them in two years. The lights worked all right, though, and he could easily see into the dusty interior. Before him was a mountain of alpha-wheat. He reached down and grabbed up a handful, gazed with satisfaction at the pea-sized grains, then tossed them to the floor as a handler came whirring past him. He frowned as he watched the bulky device. The handlers were the one inefficiency in the circuit. The grain went from the harvesters to the barns, then, by handlers, from the barns up the ramps to the silos. Mason would have liked one of the new harvesters with its fans that could blow the grain directly up fifty feet of ducting into the silos, but he did not have fifty million Euros to spare. Still with a sour expression, he again gazed up at the pile of wheat grain. It was then that he saw the gray shape crouching on top of it, regarding him with glittery, avid eyes.

Mason raised his shotgun, deciding on the instant that this was the stray. The creature turned to flee, and Mason hesitated as he realized that it was not a cat at all, but a huge rat. He lowered his gun as it scampered down the other side of the pile, a sweat breaking out all over him. No wonder the General had gone missing. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his face, then cautiously moved in. No way did he want to come suddenly upon a rat that size.

On the other side of the pile there was no rat. Fifty yards in front of him were the doors to G2. He trotted over to them and hit the opening button. The doors slid aside and a wedge of light was thrown into the darkness. The rat was there. It froze, pinned by light. Mason raised his gun to fire and saw that the rat had something round its middle. It looked almost like a tool belt. The shotgun kicked and the rat shot into the air with a shriek and spattering of blood, then hit the ground convulsing. Mason stepped aside and turned on all the lights. He scanned around as other large shapes fled amongst the grain piles, but he did not shoot at them. Right then he had only one cartridge left in his gun and a couple in his pocket, and did not feel altogether safe. He approached the dead rat.

Somehow the creature had managed to wrap a piece of canvas webbing around itself. At least this is what Mason told himself at first. But as he came to stand over it he realized that this was not a good enough explanation. The rat was wearing a tool belt, and hanging from it were tools fashioned from bone, wood, and old nails.

Mason reached down and hauled up the huge rat by its tail, then glanced around as he heard more movement. Raising his gun he backed out of G2, dragging the rat carcass with him. As he reached the door he detected movement and looked up. Crouched on one of the grain piles was another rat. There came a snapping sound and something cracked against the door beam and clattered to the floor. Mason peered down at the small crossbow bolt, swore, then got out of the barn as fast as he could.

"Now Mr. Mason, there's no need to upset yourself. Traptech can sort out your little problem."

Patronizing jerk, thought Mason, staring down at the deep-frozen rat corpse he had dumped on the table. Smith had recommended this man but Mason did not like him. The suit was the first thing that annoyed him. Mason had an aversion to anyone wearing a suit. He reckoned it was a certainty that this bloke had a pair of green rubber boots in the trunk of his company car. He looked up.

"Upset myself? Little problem? I've got armed rats in my barns and you call it a little problem?"

"Yes sir. Perhaps I am wrong to call it a little problem, but it is a problem we at Traptech are used to handling."

Mason could not believe he was having this discussion. The last he had heard about tool-using ability in the animal kingdom had been from a program about apes, who managed to break open nuts with rocks.

"Tell me again where they come from."

"As I said, man has become the greatest force of evolution. We are forcing intelligence on the animal kingdom. It is—"

Mason raised his hand before the Traptech rep could move into full bullshit mode. "Okay, what have you got for me?"

The suit smiled like a shark and pulled a thick catalog from his briefcase. Mason felt a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach—one he normally associated with the sight of little brown envelopes with windows in them. The suit opened the catalog on the table next to the thawing rat and snowed Mason a picture of something that looked like a security camera.

"This is the TT6, which we introduced only last year. It is a guided pulse laser with dual heat and movement sensors. Four of these in each of your two barns should solve your problem. Smith was most satisfied with them."

"How much?" asked Mason tiredly, then frowned at the answer. The new harvester retreated even further into the future.

The men from Traptech installed the TT6s in a day. Mason noted that they wore helmets, visors, and overalls with mi-cromesh ring mail stitched in, and that one of them stood guard with a pump-action shotgun. The rats remained hidden, though. From the TT6s, the men ran an armored cable into his house to the farm computer. When all the work was completed the suit arrived to demonstrate the system.

"This is the control package," said the suit after loading two discs and plugging the cable into the computer's unused security circuit. "Now you can call up diagnostics on each TT6, find out if there have been any hits, and even get a view through each unit."

The computer screen flickered on and showed: HIT ON TT6 G1/3.

"Ah, marvelous," said the suit, and demonstrated how the view could be called up on that unit. The screen flickered again and showed the greenish infrared view of the inside of G1. Lying before one of the grain piles, smoke wisping from the laser punctures in its body, lay Mason's remaining cat.

"Ah... it would be advisable to keep other animals out of the barns. The sensors are set to pick up on animals within certain size parameters. Obviously they will miss humans but—"

"I will expect some sort of reduction for this," interrupted Mason, his teeth clenched.

On the first day the diagnostic program reported a malfunction and Mason could get no picture through that particular unit. It never occurred to him to be surprised. With his shotgun hooked under his arm he went to G1. On the floor before the TT6 one of the rats lay in a smoking heap. The TT6 was smoking as well though, two crossbow bolts impaling it. In the night two more were scrapped. In the morning Mason called up the suit.

"Ah," said the suit, inspecting the crossbow bolt shortly after he arrived, "this sometimes happens. Your best move now would be to get a mobile defense." He opened up the dread catalog and pointed out something that looked like a foot-long chrome scorpion. "This is the TT15."

"Those TT6s are still under guarantee."

"I can give you a very reasonable exchange price with service contract and deferred payment, and though they are expensive, you will only need one TT15."

The TT15 arrived the next day. Just taking it out of its box gave Mason the creeps. After turning off the TT6s he took it into the barns, and turned it on. Immediately it scuttled into the shadows. Mason found himself fearing it more than he feared the rats, and he quickly went outside. Its homing beacon he placed by the compost heap. After half an hour the TT15 came out with a dead rat in its mandibles and dumped it by the beacon. Next to the tractor on which he was working Mason shuddered and turned back to his task. Later, as he sat on one of the tractor's tires and rolled himself a cigarette, he saw three rats run out of G1 with the chrome scorpion in pursuit.

He found himself hoping the rats would escape but, before they reached the polythene-wrapped straw bales, it had the slowest of them, caught it, crunched it, then like some horrible gun dog took it to the compost heap. However unpleasant the thing might look, Mason decided, it was damned efficient.

The men from Traptech came the following day to take down the TT6s. When they had finished, their foreman came to see Mason.

"Says here you had eight TT6s, mate."

"That's right. The rats scrapped four of them though."

"We know about that. We've got those four. Just that one of the good one's gone missin'. I'll have to report it, mate."

For the rest of the day, while he baled straw in the fields, Mason wondered confusedly where the missing TT6 could have gone. By evening he had figured it out and in a strange way was quite glad. As soon as he got back to the farmyard he fetched his shotgun and went with it into the barns.

It had been one hell of a fight in G1. The rats had swivel-mounted the TT6, using a couple of old bearings and a universal joint, on one of the grain handlers, and powered it from the handler's battery. Mason was impressed, but realized the rats had not taken into account the reflective surface of the TT15. They had obviously fired the laser many times, enough to have drained the handler's battery, but the TT15, though damaged, had not been immobilized. A battle with crossbow bolts and hand weapons had then ensued. The floor was littered with dead and dismembered rats, weapons, and silvery pieces of the TT15. Finally the rats had managed to shut the doors into G2 on it, trapping it, and there it remained, its motor whining periodically.

Mason walked over to the doors, opened them, then hit the lights for G2. The TT15 scuttled on into the barn, immediately zeroing in on movement at the farther edge of the floor. Mason gazed across and saw a group of rats. Many of them were injured. Many of them were applying dressings and tying on splints. They all looked up at him, glittery eyed. He raised his shotgun and saw what could only be described as a look of fatalism come onto their ratty faces. He fired both barrels of the shotgun and blew the TT15 to scrap.

As he turned and left the barn shortly after, on his way to cancel the check he had sent to Traptech, Mason felt extremely pleased with himself—in fact, the happiest he had felt in days. The kind of rats he really hated wore suits and cost a damned sight more than a few handfuls of alpha-wheat.