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Standing Firm on the Pipette Line
by Rajnar Vajra
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Science Fiction

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I'll tell you what lurks in the shallows of \_my\_ memory. Fearful
Friday. I'm talking about October 29, 2021, the eeriest day of my life. And my
God, the way it ended! Let's put it this way: a hungry shark in my Jacuzzi
would be easier for me to forget about than Fearful Friday. Two years and two
months have slipped by since that horribly premature Halloween, but I can
still remember every grotesque detail. Hell, if I close my eyes and let my
mind drift, I can practically \_taste\_ the terror....

\* \* \* \*

My breakfast nook, gilded by sunrise, was glowing cheerfully. Friday had
always been my favorite day of the week and this one promised to be clear and
crisp. But instead of savoring my beloved Jamaican Blue Mountain as usual, I
was feeling it etch away at my stomach lining like concentrated sulfuric acid.
I sipped and winced, dreading the upcoming afternoon press conference. The
only bright spot, I decided in my vast innocence, was that I'd surely reached
the penthouse level in my personal tower of stress.

But even the press conference exceeded my worst expectations. By 2:05
PM, despite fifteen minutes of my smoothest dodging and sidestepping, the
truculent sea of reporters had sucked me into a maelstrom of awkward
questions. Under my Armani jacket I was sweating like a cold pipe in a steam
bath.

Don't get me wrong. Like most politicians I adore media attention, but
not when I'm in a jam. Especially such thick jam and such extravagant
attention. Enough microphones were stuck in front of my chubby little face to
record the Boston Symphony twenty times over. And, worse, no less than fifty
live-feed video cameras were aimed my way, poised to capture every little
slip-up, stray drop of spit, and facial twitch. If I appeared even
fractionally confident, I deserved a damned Academy Award.

So many extra reporters had showed up, we'd had to set up outdoors. And
out in the open, standing on New City Hall's concrete steps, the smell of
rotting garbage kept adding insult to insult.

"Why are the Minuscules striking, Mr. Mayor?"

"As I already stated, we're looking into that."

"Why is this only happening in Boston, Mr. Mayor? Why not New York or
Seattle?"

"We haven't yet come to a definite conclusion on that subject."

"Is your \_ship\_ sinking, sir? Maybe this is more a desertion than a
strike." The witticism drew a good laugh, but not from me.

"Mr. Mayor! Mr. Mayor! What are you planning on doing about...?"

My press secretary, Dr. Lisa Stockton, knew I'd had enough and smoothly pulled me out of the line of fire to take my place. Lisa is wonderful. She knows exactly when and how to be a squid. I stared up at the attractive back of her head wondering what color ink she was going to squirt out this time...

"Thank you for your solicitude, ladies and gentlemen," she announced in her crispest professional voice. "But now Mayor Gould needs to return to work so that he can continue the fine job he's doing of managing this unique crisis."

If she noticed the sound of a thousand simultaneous grumbles, she didn't show it. "I believe our Mayor has already addressed most of your concerns. We will certainly have more to tell you later but I'm sure we all agree that the time has come for deeds, not words."

I couldn't detect any signs of such agreement, but I nodded and smiled as if every soul who caught my eye was the one exception to a universal rule.

Then it took my entire security staff, fifteen burly weight lifters, to get me through the crowd that rushed the steps, lenses and hand-held mikes held out like thrusting swords, and the whole time I kept thinking, deeds? What in hell am I supposed to do? For three weeks now I'd been waiting by the red telephone -- the so-called "Pipette Line" -- bracing myself for some tough negotiations. But how do you negotiate with striking workers who never bother presenting any demands?

I was nearly within smudging distance of the door to New City Hall when an unfamiliar reporter snatched me from a fog of worry by somehow reaching past my guardians and grabbing my sleeve. He was shouldered back by at least three security people.

Let's get one thing straight: you can't believe everything you may have read or heard about me; the media loves caricature far more than character. And yes, I know about those jokes that keep percolating throughout New England: What's the fastest way to commit suicide? Answer: stand between Tully Gould and political office. What's the tallest mountain in Massachusetts? Answer: Mayor Gould's ego.

Terribly amusing and perhaps there's even a few quarks of truth hiding in there somewhere. But while I'm no Saint Francis, my first reaction when the reporter went down hard was honest concern for the man's safety and worry that he'd been hurt.

"Pick him up, damn it!" I urged Little Jerry Connelly, the guard closest to our victim. "He'll get trampled in this crowd! And," I immediately added in a voice pitched for Connelly's ear alone, "think how colorful this is going to look on the newswebs." Jerry was my newest and smallest protector, a recently transplanted Virginian scarcely the size of King Kong, but he was bright enough to be a member of a certain rather exclusive club.

"Yes sir! I see your point, sir."

I was relieved to note that the reporter, set back on his feet, was merely dazed and was neither bleeding (externally) nor threatening lawsuits (immediately). I glared at my security team. You don't treat a voter like that -- particularly one with a camera.

Harrowing. And inside City Hall wasn't much better. Reporters weren't the only ones with unanswerable questions.

So when I finally opened the door to my private office, my nerves were thoroughly shot and I thought, for one relatively happy second, that someone had inconsiderately parked their dog atop my desk.

Then the smell hit my nostrils.

The sheer bulk of the German shepherd-sized beast had tricked me. I'd never seen a Majuscule in the flesh and hadn't realized, viscerally, how much bigger they were than ordinary Norway rats (and Norways can grow to nearly twenty inches long including the scaly tail).

But no dog (I hope) had ever emitted such unfortunate odors. As I understand it, Majuscules can adjust their "command" scents to reprogram the instincts of normal rats, the Minuscules. That's how they can give their

servants such specific instructions. But to me the stench made pure ammonia smell heavenly by comparison.

No, this was no dog. No dog ever sat back on its haunches like that, lifting a hand in silent greeting, a capable-looking hand with a fully opposable thumb. Majuscles run on all fours but they usually walk upright.

Horribly, the intercom was also on my desk. To use it I'd have to get within inches of the super-rodent. Avoid threatening movements, I advised myself, wondering what a Majuscule would find threatening....

The beast studied my timorous approach while I studied the beast. I don't know about him, but I was prepared to run like hell at any sign of trouble. Beady red eyes, reminding me of the ready lights on the cameras outside, smoldered when I finally reached the desk and pushed the button; fortunately the animal kept perfectly still.

"Dottie?" I asked my office secretary, my voice quivering like Junket in the 2010 Boston earthquake. "Can you please have someone bring in the Rattus translator? Right away?"

"Certainly, Mr. Mayor." A translator was, of course, built into the Pipette Line system; but we kept a portable one on hand in the unlikely case one of the Rat Lords suddenly dropped in.

"We'll have a translating device in just a minute," I said to my visitor, talking at half speed. This was thoroughly idiotic of me; the animal undoubtedly understood English better than most of my constituents. Not even the most radical cryptozoologist suspected the existence of master-rats until recently, but Majuscles have been studying us for a long time.

One of the staff technicians, I think his name was Dave or maybe Bill, opened my door and with his back to me, tugged a wheeled cart into the room.

I'm good with names, but every one of my computer people is tall and skinny and has long brown hair tied in a ponytail. Since he was facing the wrong way, he didn't see the Majuscule and he apparently either lacked a sense of smell, or thought he was tactfully ignoring a potent mayoral digestive problem.

I cleared my throat to warn the man something was up but technicians seem to live in a world all their own, which, at the moment, struck me as a splendid idea. Dave (or possibly Bill) glanced over his shoulder and said, "Afternoon, Mr. Mayor," and managed not to notice the visitor until he'd tugged the cart past my desk and plugged a power cable into the wall. Then nothing. No reaction whatsoever. Not even, "Gee, how'd that devil get in here?"

That would've been an excellent question. I had no idea how the devil had gotten in.

"Just press 'Enter', sir, and you're ready to rock and roll." I watched the man stroll out the door, wondering if I could grab his ponytail and get tugged to safety.

"Testing one, two," I said after finally locating the right key among the electronic smorgasbord on the cart. I wanted to make sure the machine hadn't been mistakenly adjusted to translate my voice. If this Rat Lord (or Lady) spoke English, which was practically a given, a two-way translation would be sure to offend. Majuscles were known for being touchy. "Testing three, four -- "

"Wasting time five, six, seven," came an ironically sweet, feminine-sounding reply in vague counterpoint with the Majuscule's baritone squeaking.

Rattus translating machines frighten me. I don't mean there's anything alarming about the computer itself or its sampling and waveform-comparing functions. Such stuff seems like moldy old hat these days. The scary part is that the vocabulary-matching software was written by Majuscles, not humans. And the scariest part of the scary part is that while Majuscles reputedly have their own strange technology, they've apparently never built anything you or I would call a computer.

Word on the street has it that the super-rodents are very good with

languages and codes....

"I ... guess it's working. Uh, welcome to my office. I'm Mayor Tully Gould, and you are?"

"Eager to reach relevance. Call me Kut if you must apply a name. Lord Kut, since I am male and since your species cares about such trivia."

Get it together, Tully, I warned myself. The animal's skull looked no wider than a greyhound's from the front, but it stretched way back to make room for a brain as massive as Einstein's. I wondered, nervously, if sheer geometry made Majuscules particularly narrow-minded.

"I'm so glad you came by today, Lord Kut. This way we can ... resolve our differences face to face. But it is rather unexpected. Why didn't you use the Pipette Line?" I gestured to the dedicated phone he was practically sitting on.

"The 'Pipette Line' as you insultingly nickname the Rattus Pipeline, depends on a human-made fiber-optic telephone cable with inadequate shielding. There is someone -- or more accurately, some\_thing\_ -- that might overhear what I have to tell you this day."

"What? What?" I closed my mouth until it could stop sputtering. "I'm sorry, I haven't a clue what you're talking about. I assumed you were here about the strike...?"

"I am here to offer you a way to end our strike."

"Oh. Well, that's excellent! I have to admit the trash has been piling up a bit." In fact, I'd been getting complaints about the stink from as far away as Bedford. Since the Truce, rats were handling garbage in a dozen major U.S. cities including New York, Dallas, and Seattle. Yet, inexplicably, they were only striking here. "But nobody knows why you went on strike in the first place."

"Nobody?"

"I mean none of us humans."

"\_That\_ is why. You have an instinctual disregard for my species, for any species other than your own. We will no longer accept disregard."

"I see." I didn't see. Why were they picking on Boston specifically? Did we Beantowners have a higher level of "disregard" than folks down in the Big Apple? "I'm truly sorry and I do apologize, but what do you expect? We've only known there were intelligent rodents for -- for five years now. Throughout nearly all of human history, you kept yourselves perfectly hidden. Yet we've have been dealing with Minuscules for hundreds and hundreds of years, maybe thousands for all I know. Your servants have given my people \_plagues\_ for God's sake. If we hadn't gotten serious and started the Great Extermination in 2015, you might \_never\_ have revealed yourselves. It's going to take time to change people's attitudes."

"Bah. And since it bears repeating, I say bah. Your prejudicial attitudes are reinforced daily. We know what is happening. Brave Majuscules watch your tedious TV and Minuscules listen on the streets and report back to us."

Surprise and fear squeezed my heart. "I thought ... normal rats couldn't understand human languages?"

"Certainly they can't. But they can carry recording devices."

Rattus technology, according to researchers at M.I.T. after studying a few samples the Majuscules had reluctantly provided, was based entirely on tailored polymers. But what kind of polymer could record sounds? How would such recordings be played back?

Rumors of this "alien" science right here on Earth had given a lot of people, including me, a new interest in organic chemistry. I'd learned that the human secret of making polymers jump through hoops was in attaching useful extra molecules to the repeating strands, producing "macromolecular inclusion complexes." Only God (and the Majuscules) knew what the Rat Lords had achieved.

But I was avoiding the immediate question. "What have you heard humans saying that you take objection to?"

"Certain commonly used phrases."

"Such as?"

"'Dirty rat,' 'rat-hole,' 'rat-fink' -- "

"You're kidding! Somebody living in the 21 century actually says 'rat-fink'?"

"The phrase appears in recent movies about past times. I wasn't finished. Other usage include 'rats' as an expletive, 'rat's ass,' 'rat -- '"

"Enough! I get the point. I'll pass the word but it's going to be tricky trying to -- "

"Not good enough. We require a symbolic act to prove your sincerity."

"What ... kind of act?"

"The heroic kind."

That was a showstopper. "Heroic. Such as? And who is supposed to perform this 'heroic' act?"

"You."

"\_Me\_?" I had to swallow three times to get the next words out. "Why me?" I was too busy to be heroic. Also, too small, fat, and cowardly.

"We are believers in cities; the concept of 'nations' means nothing to our kind. Since mayors represent cities, we require a mayor for our challenge."

"But why -- "

"Since Majuscules now live exclusively on this continent, we have studied the mayors of every important American city and have concluded that only you may be proof against ... such fearful danger. You will, however, be required to select two staunch companions."

"Now hold it right there, friend!" I wasn't keen on those words "fearful danger." "Boston still has garbage trucks, you know, and we can get them out of storage anytime we want." This was a bluff. Not only had my constituents gotten unused to the idea of a garbage-removal service run by humans, the job had garnered a powerful stigma...

"Anytime you want?"

I didn't let the facts stop me -- you don't win elections by worrying about facts. "OK. Maybe it's taking us awhile to get organized, but any day now we'll be collecting our own trash again. Remember: we don't actually need you. But it's such a pity. I always felt our little arrangement was superbly convenient for all parties. You should know that we're in negotiations right now with the -- "

"We forbid it. Our 'little arrangement' still stands, but it is our right to strike for better working conditions. Your people have long established the precedent. And while we are striking, no human will be allowed to do our work."

Fear comes in all sizes. Suddenly, I felt as if there was an icicle lodged in my throat. "How would you, uh, stop us?"

I was instantly sorry I'd asked. If Majuscules declared war, they had enough troops to guarantee catastrophe. A hostile army of intelligently guided Minuscules could ... my imagination quailed at the thought of what they could do. We'd never had much luck at controlling the pests when they were wandering around on their own, simply trying to feed themselves.

And how many rats lived under the streets of Boston these days? Since the Truce, the population could have tripled....

My visitor's eyes seemed to glow brighter. "Perhaps we'd begin by making sure your garbage trucks lack tires. If you replaced tires with something less vulnerable, perhaps we'd consider puncturing vital fluid lines or biting through electric wires. If you managed to house all the wires and lines in -- do you really wish me to continue?"

I could see it. There was simply no practical way to protect trucks or most anything else from an almost infinite army of rodents guided by Majuscules. Not unless we kept all our equipment in hermetically sealed steel vaults. And my city's aroma wasn't going to improve with its garbage trucks stored in vaults. But it wasn't damage to our machines I was most terrified

of.

"No. Please stop." I'd already had my quota of threats for the day. "What ... what do you want me to do?"

The idea of Tully Gould acting "heroic" was ridiculous. And while I truly love Boston, I'd put up with a whole lot more stink if the alternative was risking my supremely valuable neck. But I was horrified to realize that I had to go along with whatever insanity Kut had in mind. I simply couldn't take a chance that a hot war between humans and rats would erupt. Majuscules could order their subjects to attack people and all the weapons in the world couldn't protect us.

"What do you want me to do?" I repeated.

Kut sat up on his haunches and stared me in the eyes. "That is the first sensible question you've asked this day and it was nearly worth hearing twice. I will tell you precisely what you are to do. I hope you are not a being ... overly sensitive to fear?"

I'd had no idea I could feel this scared.

\* \* \* \*

Seventy-two people were gazing at me with barely suppressed "why am I here?" expressions on their faces. The other three members of my staff were, I hoped, ignoring my words and watching my hands. I curled the ring finger of my left hand until it touched the palm, and I repeated the gesture five times while I was talking.

Even I wasn't listening to myself. I think I heard something about "keeping a firm resolve," and "in the face of adversity," coming out of my mouth but I've given so many speeches, I probably mumble such cliches in my sleep.

As soon as I could gracefully manage it I dismissed everyone and was pleased to see my three co-conspirators immediately break out their sat-phones. The next half-hour I spent staring at reports without seeing them and carefully avoided going into my office.

Finally, I figured enough time had elapsed and scurried down to Meeting Room G, which is in New City Hall's lowest basement level. I grabbed a folding-chair, stared at the blank old-fashioned blackboard, and waited.

They trickled in one by one: Little Jerry Connelly, three blue-collar workers, two lawyers, a police detective, a world-famous pianist, several physicists, Lisa Stockton my press secretary, and three college professors. When it looked like no one else was going to be able to make it, I stood up.

"I hereby declare this emergency session of the Fraternal Order Of Mu-Masons well and truly begun."

\* \* \* \*

I sometimes wonder if Roland Berill and Dr. Lance Ware, who founded the high-IQ club Mensa in 1946, ever envisioned how many branches would eventually grow from Mensa's main trunk. Most offshoots were caused by internal reactions to the gradual lowering of admission requirements. Some members were serious IQ snobs and hated it when the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile riffraff were allowed to join up in 2007. Like pearls formed through irritation, higher IQ clubs formed within Mensa. But I founded the Mu-Masons for a different and nobler reason than mere snobbery: I wanted a kind of secret steering committee for the City of Boston, smart advisors who weren't necessarily on my payroll.

I'll admit it: I don't know what, exactly, IQ tests measure. But I'll tell you something I've noticed consistently: people who score exceptionally high on, say, the Terman Concept Mastery Test, tend to be bright.

Lisa tells me I only believe in IQ tests because I score so well on them, but that's her opinion.

\* \* \* \*

For a Fraternal Order, there were a lot of women in the room. "By my count," I announced, "we have sixteen Brothers here," several lady Brothers favored me with ironic looks, "and I say this constitutes a quorum. How say you all?"

A general, slightly bored, chorus of "yeas" followed.

Our police detective spread his hands, palms upward. "What's this all

about, Tully? I'm still on duty for Christ's sake."

"Sorry, George. I need help and you are the people I can always count on. At this very moment, upstairs in my office, one of the Rat Lords is squatting on my desk." That news caused a stir. "He's offering a deal: I can end the garbage strike today ... if I do some dangerous task for the Majuscules."

"What task?" George demanded, leaning forward aggressively in his habitual interrogation pose.

"I don't know yet. I'm supposed to choose two companions first and then he'll tell me."

Jerry Connelly of my security staff stood up. Now he looked heroic with his superman build, high-school football-star face, and black, wavy hair. Connelly had recently moved here from Norfolk, Virginia. He hadn't been a Mu-Mason long and was meeting some of these Brothers for the first time.

"How are you supposed to choose companions, Mr. Mayor, when you don't know what you're supposed to be doin'?"

"Hell if I know. And Jerry, I'd better remind you. When Brothers are alone we use first names only."

"Sorry, Tully. I'm not in the habit."

"Here's what I was told: this job is going to take a heap of nerve and it has to be done at night. And when we find out what's what, we have to keep it secret. Any volunteers?"

Connelly stepped forward instantly. After a minute of Mu-Masons staring at each other, a tall electrician and inventor named Vince Bartolo joined him. Vince has a remarkably long pointy nose, a head that's quite flat on top, and a chin that barely shows up. He's built like a greyhound and always reminds me of Irving's Ichabod Crane.

"Little Jerry there," the new recruit said, in his throat-stuffed-with-whiskers voice, "will give you the muscle. But only I can give you the speed."

Connelly blinked. "That's interestin'. Are you implyin' I'm slow?"

"Compared to who, big guy?" Bartolo held out a long skinny arm. "I mean no insult. But a demonstration is in order. Try to grab my hand, Brother. Just try."

The security man hesitated then moved like a striking snake. Instantly, Bartolo's arm became less than a blur. Connelly and I looked down; the electrician had his bony fingers wrapped around the security officer's thick wrist. From the underside.

Connelly's reaction took me by surprise. He kept staring at Bartolo's hand and grinning in sheer delight.

"Thank you, Brothers," I said. "Seems we've, uh, assembled our team. Now I'm going back upstairs to find out what the hell the team is for. Vince and Jerry -- you might as well return to work for now and the three of us will meet back here in, say, two hours."

\* \* \* \*

Lord Kut was still on my desk and he hadn't shrunk in my absence. His contra-perfume hadn't mellowed either.

"You have chosen your companions wisely?"

"How should I know? Hard to know what makes a good accompaniment without hearing the melody first. Why couldn't you tell me what this was all about before I -- "

"Only beings willing to face the terrible unknown can succeed in this quest."

Was he deliberately trying to scare me to death? "What quest?"

"We want you to hunt something down for us and kill it."

"Kill? What ... kind of something?" I whispered.

"Deep beneath the Great Nests of Boston and New York and other cities, there are tunnels unknown to you humans. Majuscules constructed them over a century ago. Since the Truce, when we agreed that Minuscules would only enter the upper realm to remove your garbage and to feed on it, both branches of our

people have largely kept to these tunnels."

"Go on."

"An ancient predator has been stalking us in our own domain, a monster beyond your imagination. This is the horror we want you to kill."

Christ! "Does this horror have a name?"

"None you would recognize, but I think I can provide one." The Majuscule bunched itself up and sprang six feet through the air to land gently on the translator-cart. "As you must know, we Lords have our own superior ways of doing things, but this device seems simple enough for any novice to manipulate."

Lord Kut fiddled with the mob of high-tech controls and uttered one of his cello-like squeaks. The translation came out, "Voracious." Then Kut did it again, slamming a paw down on a key in the middle of the translation.

"Vora" was the result -- accent on the hard "a".

"That will do nicely," the Majuscule stated, jumping back to my desk.

"What does this ... Vora look like?"

"You shall see for yourself -- if you do not retreat screaming in abject fear."

"How big is it? At least tell me that!"

"Not so big. No more than forty or fifty human feet long."

Holy shit! "How, in God's name, am I supposed to kill something so -- "

"We will provide the means. You will be using pure Majuscule technology, utterly unknown to your kind, and will be the first human in history to do so."

"I'm ... honored." Actually, I felt more like I was fainting. "Where do we start this hunt of yours? And when?"

"Tonight. Soon. And you will begin from the basement level of this very building. Have the translator brought downstairs and I will meet you in the lowest basement corridor in three human hours. And a piece of profound advice: wear shoes with softer soles."

The Majuscule leaped to the nearest wall, stuck out a brown tongue, and touched it to a nondescript spot on the plaster. A line appeared on the wall that quickly expanded into a gap. Sections of the wall to either side suddenly curled up tighter than Florentine scrollwork and the gap became wide enough to allow the Majuscule to stride through. Kut vanished into darkness and the rolled-up faux plaster slowly curled back into place.

I leaned against my desk and waited for my hands and knees to stop shaking. Then I walked to the wall, squatted, and ran my fingers along the place where Kut had exited. It looked and felt solid, but when I tapped, the sound was unnaturally hollow.

I was impressed in a horrified kind of way. No one who hadn't been alerted would've noticed that this one rectangular area had a slightly different texture. A mere hint of a line bisected the rectangle. There were two extremely faint, slightly glossy spider-web patterns to either side of the line and each web terminated in a tiny dot near the rectangle's center. I could have touched both dots simultaneously with my thumb.

I'd heard about such doorways. Some comic referred to them recently as "rat-zippers": a kind of memory-plastic kept in one form as long as a mild electric charge was applied to the surface. As soon as the charge was interrupted, the plastic would spring into its secondary form.

My admiration was somewhat constrained because there was a secret passageway in my personal office!

No amount of pushing, tugging, or twisting reopened the panel and I suspected that if I hoped to open the doorway myself, I'd have to put my tongue on the dots in the center. Or perhaps that trigger spot was coded somehow only for Majuscules. It didn't matter; I wasn't up for such an experiment. The whole thing was extremely distressing. Even the thought that City Hall apparently had a subterranean egress to a giant-rat tunnel system failed to cheer me up.

\* \* \* \*



I was twenty minutes late for my rendezvous with my two companions; everybody and their relatives wanted a piece of me today and I wasn't functioning with my usual suavility. By the time I returned to Meeting Room G, Little Jerry Connelly was treating Vince Bartolo like an exciting new toy.

"Watch this, Mr. May -- I mean Tully."

"Watch what?"

"This." The security officer was casually bouncing four pieces of colored chalk of varying lengths in his right palm. Suddenly he hurled them at Bartolo. I instinctively expected sounds of impact and cries of outrage but there was nothing but an ephemeral swishing noise accompanied by a burst of soft clicks.

The electrician had barely seemed to move; but when he opened his right hand immediately, not only was it holding the four pieces of chalk, they'd been neatly arranged in order of size.

"This gentleman here is a true freak," Connelly remarked in awe. "He's like somethin' out of the comics!"

I shook my head in annoyance. "Brothers, I've got a slight idea of what we're up against now and I'm going to tell you all I know ... and give you both a chance to back out. You're not going to believe this, but the Rat Lord claims that..."

I described the situation but, amazingly, my companions appeared more thoughtful than dismayed.

"Can we bring along our own weapons?" Connelly asked.

"Got anything likely to take out a fifty-foot long monster, Jerry?"

"Maybe."

"I sincerely hope you're kidding. We'll have to ask about weapons. So, this is it. Can anyone think of something better to do this evening?" I sure could.

Bartolo shrugged. "You may need me, Tully. Besides, just yesterday I was thinking that life was getting monotonous."

Connelly straightened to his full impressive height. "Looks like you got company tonight after all, sir," the security officer said firmly. "When do we leave? I should call my brother and let him know I might be a few minutes late for supper. You know what? This just might be fun."

I never claimed that a high IQ was any indicator of common sense.

\* \* \* \*

When Lord Kut appeared, he wasn't alone. Four smaller Majuscules were with him and all five were walking upright. Two of Kut's entourage were supporting each end of a long, segmented pole tipped with a milky translucent globe. These bearers moved slowly, with synchronized pomp. The other unfamiliar Rat Lords were holding basket-shaped objects that glowed faintly in the dim lighting of the basement's main corridor.

The smell was astronomically powerful. I wondered if it was possible for a stink to get so strong that it would collapse into itself like a black hole.

Kut's companions deposited their burdens and departed through another secret gateway -- this one at the west end of the corridor. They somehow left the "zipper" wide open. My security officer glared at the rectangular hole, shaking his head and swearing under his breath.

Bartolo was more interested in the lamps. "We humans have these modern inventions called 'flashlights,' you know," he pointed out to Lord Kut.

"Certainly. But our lamps are more reliable in the great tunnels," replied the feminine voice from the translator. "They are constructed of light emitting plastic, far superior to the crude material you use for your TV and computer-monitor screens."

"What makes them so superior?"

"Efficiency. Once the plastic is charged, it will shine for a full day. Plus, our film transistors are completely flexible and our zinc and aluminum oxide cores are organically interwoven with shock absorbing polymers. If you drop a human-made flashlight repeatedly, you will soon be lost in the dark."

Bartolo looked dazed, which I understood completely.

"Can we bring weapons along?" Connelly remembered to ask.

"Bring whatever you wish, but only the Staff can kill the monster." I took it that the "Staff" was the long pole on the floor.

"How does it work?" Bartolo wondered.

"If you survive, I may answer that question."

Now it was my turn. "Hold on! Why the hell do you need us? Why don't you use this Staff thingy yourselves? Or just send a few million rats and simply overwhelm the creature?"

"We cannot. The Vora has a natural defense against us. It emits a gas no rodent can withstand; we are instantly paralyzed and the monster can dine on us at its leisure."

"Ah. You're saying the gas won't work on humans?"

"We hope not."

This wasn't what I'd call high-caliber reassurance.

Connelly burst back in. "How come humans have never seen this so-called monster of yours?"

"You never saw us until we willed it. You tend to be blind to anything that conducts life in the depths."

Suddenly my throat was very, very dry. What he said was true enough; the oceans, for example, were still full of mysteries. But there was another, more alarming possibility. "Is this thing ... intelligent? Didn't you say something about it being able to tap into the Pipette -- the Rattus Pipeline?"

"We believe it to be highly intelligent but its full powers remain unknown. You may soon learn more about the Vora than we ever have." The Majuscule turned to face Connelly. "Go forth and fetch whatever weaponry pleases you and I shall explain to these other two how to use the one weapon that will work. You depart in twenty-two human minutes.

"Major Gould alone will wield the Staff."

\* \* \* \*

Twenty-two minutes took forever to pass, but that's probably because I hanging on to each minute, clinging for dear life.

Lord Kut finished up our instructions but didn't offer to accompany us on our mission. I was too nervous to make an exit speech, which was a first.

Bartolo and I went through the hole in the wall easily enough but for the security officer it was a squeeze. Particularly since the huge man was carrying an arsenal of grenades, pistols, extra ammunition, one of the LEP lamps, and a shotgun designed for a recently developed form of ammunition: puzzle-shot.

Connelly wanted us to "understand our resources" so he quickly described puzzle-shot. Each "screwball" was made of hundreds of small, flanged pieces. Upon firing, the weapon's rifling would get the shell spinning rapidly and centrifugal force would expand the screwball enough to keep the flanges interlocked. But when, after a hundred yards or so, the shell's spin fell below a certain RPM, it would start tumbling and would fly apart into a cloud of intricately shaped shrapnel.

The advantages over standard shells were accuracy and distance.

Connelly then offered various weapons to Bartolo and me but since neither of us knew how to use any of them we declined.

Lamp two was in the electrician's skinny hand and appeared brighter since it was no longer competing with the basement lights. The "Staff," which luckily telescoped down to a three-foot long rod, was strapped across my back. It wasn't quite as heavy as it looked but its rigidity made me feel awkward and vulnerable. It rattled a bit.

Once through the hole, we found ourselves in a narrow passageway terminating in a very long wet ramp. Echoes resounded disturbingly and every little noise we made seemed to swell, actually getting louder for a few seconds and never quite dying out. There was a continual but uneven low rumble, probably from traffic in the human tunnels under Boston that had been constructed in the controversial "Big Dig" due for completion in, with luck,

the year 3000. We three heroes studied the route ahead and exchanged grim looks.

We three fools of disorient are ... I'd never seen such a rampant ramp ... fear was making my forehead sweaty and my thoughts twitchy.

In fact, the slope seemed to descend at least to the Earth's core, and it was steep enough so that we were forced to slither down it seated like kids on a slide. The back of my trousers was soon soggy and cold and the surface was just rough enough to be painful after a few minutes. I prayed my trousers were tougher than I was. Nobody said a word but I was wondering how hard it was going to be to climb back up -- assuming we ever got the chance.

The ramp ended in another narrow but level corridor, this one with a claustrophobia-inducing low ceiling. The air was warmer here but it smelled worse. An acrid, animal undertone punctuated by sharper Majuscule stench tainted the earthy aromas of mushroom, damp stone, and mildew. Every few yards, the roof lowered until we were finally reduced to crawling. If I'd had any idea that human knees were designed to bang repeated into hard rock, I got reeducated.

Suddenly, the roof soared and we could walk normally. Life's simple pleasures! Then Connelly scared me half to death with a sudden grunt and the echoes made it sound as if a million pigs were attacking. "Jesus," he whispered, "I'm sorry. But get a load of this."

He squeezed to one side so we could see ahead and I almost grunted myself. We'd come to another, even more impressive ramp. This one appeared long enough to reach goddamn Jupiter and it was steeper.

Luckily, the slope had decent traction and there was sufficient headroom so that we could stand upright and shuffle downward, our free hands braced on the ceiling. I, of course, was the only one with both hands free.

Progress was so slow and the ramp so outrageously long, I wondered if we were going to be stuck here forever. Infinity, I decided, equals eternity. My shoulders began to ache and soon felt as if they were contemplating falling off. But before I found out if such a deplorable event was physically possible, the slope began to level. Disappointingly, the ceiling was slow to take a hint and kept sinking gradually for a dozen more yards until even I couldn't stand upright.

I tried and failed to estimate how far underground we were. Then, looking around, it dawned on me that we had to be in one of the "great tunnels" Lord Kut had mentioned. This section was plenty wide but we all had to move hunched over. I thanked God that I'd inherited petite genes from my petite mother.

As we walked, small passageways began to appear randomly to either side and every time we passed one, the acrid smell grew fierce. This tunnel wasn't quite round; aside from a flat floor it had irregular bumps and indentations marring the smoothness of the walls (or was it the ceiling?). I couldn't imagine how even a trillion rats could create such a thing or where on Earth they could have put the tailings.

But I'd recently read an article in Scientific American elaborating a theory that ordinary rats had, ages ago, been genetically manipulated by Majuscules to be "resource gatherers." The biologist who wrote the article suggested that there might even be specialized Miniscules we'd never seen, modified for various specific purposes. Rat miners?

By unspoken agreement we still moved single-file. Vince Bartolo led the way, his basket-lamp illuminating the path ahead. I was in the middle and Jerry Connelly guarded our backs. The electrician was swift and graceful but I was huffing and puffing in no time. I glanced down at my ample waistline in useless regret.

"Hold up," I gasped. "I need to rest for a minute."

"We might as well," Bartolo hissed. "Obstacle coming up."

Kut hadn't mentioned any obstacles. Ten yards ahead was an amber-colored, translucent, flat-bottomed disk filling the tunnel. I didn't like the look of it. We approached this object slowly and side-by-side.

The Vora, Kut had warned us, had a way of temporarily sealing off tunnel sections, but Kut had failed to reveal the lurid details. Had the \_monster\_ put this disk in place? If so, the word "temporarily" suggested that the Vora had been right here. Recently!

Now I was panting from panic as well as exhaustion and I put a hand on the barrier mostly to keep from falling over. It was warmer than I'd expected and even felt somewhat like amber but there weren't any prehistoric bugs inside. I pushed on it gently, then harder and harder.

"Whatever this thing is," I gasped, "it's stuck pretty damn good."

Connelly and Bartolo added their strength to mine but the result was the same.

"Stand back, Brothers," Connelly ordered before using the steel-sheathed butt of his shotgun as a battering ram. When the echoes finally died down to a steady rumble, the barrier was standing unmarred and unmoved.

"Screw this," the security man stated dispassionately. "I'll need you two to move at least twenty yards back down the tunnel."

"What are you planning on -- "

"Since the tunnel curves, I can't get far enough away for the screwball shot to separate, but we'll see how well this thing handles a blast from close-range."

"All right," I said reluctantly. "But we don't know how tough the disk is so you'd better think about possible ricochets."

Connelly chuckled. "If you weren't my boss, I might say somethin' about not teachin' Gramps to slurp soup."

As Bartolo and I backed away, I felt increasingly uneasy about the three of us being separated, even for a small distance and a short time.

"That's far enough," Connelly called after us. "When I say, 'cover your ears,' do it. I'm gonna \_blow\_ this thing away." Sticking my head past the curve in the tunnel, I watched as he stuffed something into his ears before raising the shotgun and aiming at a careful angle. Then he yelled, "cover 'em."

Even with my hands protecting my hearing, the explosion and its echoes sounded as if the world had come to a bad end, and I'm not talking whimper. Connelly's voice came out strangely muted when he called, "Hey, take a gander at this!"

As we ran forward, my security officer pulled out his earplugs.

The barrier was intact but it now had one smooth hole in it that looked more like something produced by a laser than any kind of bullet.

"Interestin'. If I keep shootin', I \_may\_ be able to make a big enough space to fit through. But we might need the ammo later on. Any ideas, Mr. -- Tully?"

"I don't know. This ... artifact feels like plastic to me, Brothers. Smooth." A feather of suspicion tickled the back of my mind. "Maybe the only thing keeping it in place is pressure. Maybe if we all shove, but on one side only? Or you might try bashing the \_edge\_ with your rifle, Jerry, instead of the middle..."

Connelly turned around, half-squatted, put his back to the disk's edge, and began applying all the power of his massive legs. In this position, he took up so much of the available space that Bartolo and I could only assist by bracing his legs.

Nothing happened except the veins in the security officer's neck stood out farther and farther until he gave up, panting from exertion.

\* \* \* \*

Years of experience have taught me to trust my subconscious. So when a repeating image of Connelly throwing chalk at Bartolo began to run through my mind, I assumed, unlikely as it seemed, that there was some relevance. I let my thoughts drift...

"I've got a nutty idea," I announced.

"My favorite kind," Bartolo stated seriously.

"I just remembered an article I once read about Thomas Edison. Maybe

this obstacle is like Edison's chalk, or its opposite?"

"What do you mean?" Connelly asked.

"He's talking about the electromotograph," Bartolo said smugly. "Edison replaced the vibrating armature and electromagnet in a telegraph with a chemically-dampened cylinder of chalk. He used an electric current to vary friction on the chalk's surface through electrochemical decomposition. All to get around a certain patent."

The security officer shrugged. "So you're thinking this thing is held in place by sheer friction? And we might be able to change that somehow with electricity? What good does that do us? How are supposed to give it a charge ... or remove one?"

"Hold the lamps closer," I commanded, sitting down and putting my face near the disk. "Oh, crap. I was right."

"About what?" Connelly wondered.

"This is like those Majuscule 'zippers.' There's some kind of circuit you can see if you get at just the right angle."

"Really? So why are you looking so sour?"

"Wait 'till you see what I have to do to activate it! Or maybe not; I'm going to try a ... more esthetic way first."

I put a thumb in my mouth and placed it firmly against two tiny dots I'd seen near the disk's center. "Now push," I ordered.

Of course nothing happened.

I sighed. "It figures. I just knew it wasn't going to be that easy. Here's the real way to do it."

With even more distaste than I feel when someone offers me snails to eat (escargot my eye!), I placed my tongue on the dots. My mouth tingled uncomfortably and filled with a nasty metallic taste.

"Now puth," I said as clearly as I could with my tongue in the way.

I should have added "gently." With no warning, our obstacle suddenly rotated. Connelly was off-balance and he lurched involuntarily several yards down the tunnel. Meanwhile, the disk came around smartly and caught me a good one on the side of my head. Bartolo, naturally, had jumped cleanly out of the way.

"What I'd like to know is -- " the electrician began.

"Shhh!" Connelly interrupted, holding up a cautionary hand.

We listened, but for a minute all I could hear was the "Shhh" reverberating, sounding like God was taking a shower.

Then I heard it: distant chittering, but with a power to it out of all proportion to its volume. That sound was being produced by a lot of small throats. I shivered in the warm tunnel.

"What were you tryin' to say?" the security man asked Bartolo quietly.

"I was just wondering where all the rats are ... keeping themselves."

\* \* \* \*

I scrutinized the floor; there wasn't so much as an old dropping. For the first time, and far too late, I began to seriously question Lord Kut's honesty....

"We'd better get going," I whispered with unintentional harshness. What had we gotten ourselves into?

After fifteen minutes of overly-brisk walking, we came to a place where the tunnel divided into two and, reluctantly following instructions, we took the left branch. Less than a mile later the tunnel divided again. Kut hadn't bothered to mention a second fork.

"Left or right, Brothers?" I asked worriedly.

"Right side's bigger," Connelly pointed out. It seemed as good a criterion as any.

We hadn't gone more than a hundred yards down this new passageway when the background chittering abruptly rose to a deafening shriek. An endless stream of scrambling, leaping rodents erupted from a side-passage, swept across the tunnel practically at Bartolo's feet, and hurled itself into another side-passage across the way. The stench was strong enough to be

painful and every rat was evidently screaming its little head off. Five minutes passed. Then ten. The three of us kept looking at each other in mounting wonder and horror.

At least twenty incredible minutes after the first one had appeared, the last animal vanished and we could continue -- if we had the nerve. Now, there were droppings. Each of us stepped carefully over the splattered gooey area where the ... stampede had passed.

The next barrier we came to was too wide to step over.

We'd reached a section where the ceiling had risen to a good ten feet. It was quieter here and a resonant, periodic, almost crystalline "plink," warned us of something strange ahead.

The roof became damp, then wet; the floor developed deep craters we were forced to skirt. The air grew hot and steamy. Then, right over a large pool of water that doubtless filled the biggest crater of all, a small stalactite depended from the ceiling. One at a time, a clear drop would hang from the stalactite and fall into the pool.

But the pool was boiling!

"I ... could maybe ... throw you two across," Connelly said dubiously. The water was about ten feet wide and the floor was so slippery here that running and jumping was out of the question. Not that I could jump so far -- not even with a tailwind. Little legs, big stomach: poor recipe for track-and-field success. But my arms were fairly strong...

"Should we just give up and go back?" the electrician wondered gloomily.

"I might know a way past this," I said slowly. "It all depends on the depth of the pool and how sturdy this Staff is." I withdrew the weapon from its straps and pulled it out to its full nine-foot length. A twist of the final segment locked it in place. Then I placed the butt end on the floor and put more and more of my weight on the Staff until my feet were momentarily off the ground. "So far, good enough. Ever try pole-vaulting, Brothers?"

I was a bit annoyed to notice my companions gazing dubiously at my belly.

"Don't you worry about me," I muttered. "In fact, I'll go first."

I fed the pole into the roiling water, aiming well left of the pool's center; I didn't want to bang my head on the stalactite. I hoped the weapon would still be functional after this abuse. Luckily, the liquid wasn't as deep as it looked, only a few feet. So I clamped both hands high on the Staff, took a deep breath, took one quick step forward and jumped. At the same time, I felt a strong shove on my back. I landed on the far side of the water with several inches to spare and turned to see Bartolo grinning at me.

"Thanks for the push, Vince," I said, glowering. "But I would've made it on my own."

"Just buying flight insurance, Brother."

Connelly put his shotgun into a holster on his back and held an arm out. I swung the staff over to him and he joined me with casual ease, grasping the pole with only one hand and holding the lamp-basket with the other.

"Don't bother," Bartolo said when Connelly looked back over at him. The electrician stood at the pool's edge. He bent his knees no more than a few inches -- suddenly he was standing next to me, pointing at the staff still in Connelly's grip.

The odd, milky globe at the end was now glowing a dull red. If Kut had told us the truth, we were on the right track. Or the wrong one.

\* \* \* \*

I didn't dare re-collapse the Staff; there was no saying when we might need it. So we had to walk much farther apart. Nevertheless, I came close to banging Bartolo with the oddly radiant tip a dozen times. The roof was lower again and I couldn't tilt the pole up very far. I wasn't sure what would happen if I actually hit Vince with the thing, but I didn't care to find out. This device had been built to slay monsters....

The tunnel had gone curvy on us, twisting back and forth like a snake

in agony. Half the time, I couldn't see either of my companions.

So I had no idea at first that Connelly had disappeared. But I'd gotten used to seeing a double shadow at my feet and I suddenly noticed that the shadow pointing ahead of me was missing.

"Hold up," I whispered none too quietly to Bartolo and turned around to wait for the security man.

"Jerry?" I called out softly. Nothing. "JERRY!" I shouted in abrupt uncontrollable terror. Still nothing but the echoes of my terror. I turned around.

"Dammit, Vince. Where could he have -- VINCE! WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU?"

The electrician's lamp-basket was sitting on the floor of the tunnel, but Vince Bartolo had vanished.

\* \* \* \*

I wanted out.

I was paralyzed with fear -- that's a phrase I'd heard all my life, but now I knew what it meant. The Staff slowly eased to the floor from my numb hand and I couldn't move to pick it up. My body felt as if it had been stuffed with rebar and concrete.

Tiny but violent sounds I'd managed to block out until now by craftily assuming my companions were making them were suddenly as obtrusive as gunshots. Startling, hideous crunches and cracking-glass clicks randomly syncopated the uneven rumble and chittering in the air. Every new noise opened up a new chink in my mental armor allowing some new terrible thought to intrude. How many millions of tons of crushing weight were pressing down on this apparently unsupported tunnel from above?

And I was sick with worry about Vince and Jerry. Were they in agony somewhere? Had something simply ... eaten them both? How? Jerry was strong as an ox and he'd been covered with weapons. All our conventional weapons, come to think of it --

And Vince? The man was so damn fast ... how could anything have gotten to him without giving him a chance to at least cry a warning? My imagination had nothing but shadows to chew on and I didn't appreciate the flavor.

I don't know how long I stood there, but eventually I noticed a new sound had entered the passageway. A slithering noise, as if some vast carpet was being dragged along the ground a few feet at a time. I knew I wasn't paralyzed any more because I started shaking and my muscles felt like they were made of hot, dripping wax.

Maybe, I thought, I should just turn and run like hell.

God knows I wanted to, but I couldn't. The rumble stopped me.

Somewhere, maybe miles away or maybe close by, people were driving their cars through underground tunnels under Boston. My people. They'd put me into office twice now and I'd sworn to be responsible for their welfare. Hell, I was responsible! If I gave up and ran away it might trigger a ghastly interspecies war. And, far less important (but bad for my future career), the garbage would keep piling up and up....

The globe on the Staff had changed from a deep, almost magenta red to orange flame. I reached inside myself for strength, found none but picked up the weapon and Vince's abandoned basket-lamp anyway and forced myself to walk down the tunnel to face God knows what. I didn't feel noble or self-sacrificing -- just small, fat, and terrified.

\* \* \* \*

From orange to yellow to green to teal, the evolving colors on the Staff's business end warned me I was getting closer to the Vora. Lucky me. I chewed my lips and somehow kept moving.

When the globe finally emitted a deep cobalt blue, hard on the eyes as a black light, I heard a tiny clunk and my basket-lamp went out. Maybe the globe was a black light by then. For the passageway suddenly glowed like a long hole punched into an endless nightmare. The walls were randomly

fluorescent and fungi too flat to be seen under normal lighting displayed themselves in a thousand unearthly tints. Then I saw it.

That hideous head nearly filled the tunnel, hiding its body completely. Just as well -- the head was enough. And the reek was the smell equivalent of a hurricane, too powerful to resist.

Lord Kut had claimed the monster was beyond human imagination. I don't know about that; we humans have robust imaginations. But I'll go this far: I'd never had a dream half as terrible as that face.

It was furry. Furry gray eyes gazed at me hungrily, a furry gray mouth opened, and a furry tongue licked furry teeth. It was pulling itself along on furry limbs more like tentacles than arms, and every time it hunched forward I felt a vibration in my feet. The Vora sniffed the air eagerly and began to speed up.

I will never, until the end of my days, know how I managed to stand my ground. When the Vora was within striking distance, its mouth opened ridiculously wide. So I shoved the staff down its throat as far as I could and waited to die.

For one eerie moment, the titanic head was illuminated from the inside, then everything went absolutely dark.

Sounds erupted from everywhere: thousands of squeaks that somehow combined to sound like laughter, scrabbling noises as if made by thousands of small, clawed feet, and a general rustling reminiscent of strong winds rushing through a leafy forest.

The staff fell and when it hit, I heard it shatter and heard pieces roll along the floor. One came to rest against my foot.

My basket-lamp ignited again just in time for me to catch sight of a few hundred rats dashing into various side-passages. Only one animal had stayed behind. The unmistakable figure of Lord Kut was standing in the tunnel directly in front of me. There was no sign of any monster.

I looked down at a cylindrical object touching my shoe. It was one of Duracell's latest-model lithium-ion batteries. "D" size. Another eight or nine such batteries were scattered on the floor; one was still rolling.

"What the hell!" I gasped.

To my utter amazement, the Majuscule gave me a distinctly human bow of respect. Then he turned around and waved his paw, gesturing that I should follow. I walked behind him in silence for a few minutes until I couldn't hold it in any longer.

"There isn't any real monster, is there? There never was! What I saw was ... an army of Minuscules clinging to each other, imitating a monster. And that Staff was just a battery-powered, radio-controlled toy with some kind of color-wheel at the tip. Human technology. I'm on to you, don't think I'm not! This was all just a damn trick. Am I right?" Kut nodded but kept moving.

"What have you done with my friends!"

The Majuscule couldn't reply, of course, but he stopped and raised his hand, holding up two fingers. I groaned in frustration. "What the hell is that supposed to mean? Two of something?" He nodded again. "Two of what?"

The answer turned out to be hours. That's how long it took us to get out of the tunnels. If Kut had ever heard the phrase "as the crow flies," he hadn't taken it to heart. Instead, he led me along a route seemingly too convoluted for a mere three dimensions. After the first few minutes, I couldn't have pointed north if my life depended on it.

For some time we were alone, a little man following a giant rodent. Then during one long, straight stretch, an endless row of rats with an occasional Majuscule supervisor stood at the sides of the passageway facing inwards, standing stock-still like soldiers undergoing inspection.

And I got glimpses of ... things. We passed occasional openings blocked with translucent disks; some of the disks were half-open. I always peered into the vast rooms beyond and sometimes I wished I hadn't. Sure enough, Rattus technology seemed based more on strange biomechanics than mechanics.

One room had dozens of twisted trees growing under a glowing ceiling



the color of my basket-lamp. Sap was dripping down the trees, collecting in buckets, and some of the sap was shining brighter than the ceiling.

Another example: imagine a large laboratory filled with inclined slabs, and lying on each slab an unholy cross between an obscenely huge rat and a tarantula. Imagine a hundred bloated abdomens exuding a thin, clear paste being woven into an assortment of shapes and textures by oversized, furry spinnerets...

Some rooms held even less pleasant things.

Yes, the rumors were true. Majuscules were very, very good with languages and codes -- obviously including the genetic kind.

Our path led constantly upwards but so gradually it hardly felt as if we were climbing. Kut kept a steady but bearable pace and only stopped when a blank wall finally blocked our way. He used his tongue to open a "zipper."

I gladly followed him through the hole; I never wanted to see those tunnels again.

For one weird second, however, I thought we'd entered some vast rodent cathedral. Then I recognized my surroundings. We were back in Government Center, at the eastern end of City Hall's lowest level. Lisa Stockton, my press secretary and fellow Mu-Mason was waiting for us, the faithful Rattus translator at her elbow. Her face was deathly pale but the instant she saw me, her expression lit up; her normal color returned even before she gave me a bear hug.

"Thank God! Thank God, Tully!"

"Nice to see you too, Lise. Any idea what's going on?"

"Lord Kut came to see me shortly after you left and explained what they were planning for you and why. I didn't like it, but -- I'd better let him do the talking."

I turned to face the Majuscule. "Now. Before anything else: where are my friends?"

The super-rat gave me another deep bow. "Safe, Mr. Mayor. We have carried them to a place where they may rest comfortably and when they awaken we will lead them here."

"But what did you do to them?"

"Humans have taught us a million tricks." Was I crazy, or was this creature treating me with respect? "Your blowgun, for example, makes it easy to capture the fiercest animal. And our own technology supplies effective tranquilizers."

"But ... but why? Why send me off to kill an imaginary monster and then ask me to bring along -- "

"For trust. We had to know if you merited ours. So we did our best to build as much fear as possible in your mind and still you persevered."

"Once again: why?"

"We are an ancient race, Mr. Mayor. Consider: when mammals first walked the Earth, they looked far more like my kind than like yours. It took us eons to evolve, eons to build our civilization and learn to manipulate the world. When humans finally emerged, you were pitifully primitive and we failed to take you seriously.

"Yes, we are far older than you are; but I fear little wiser. For countless centuries we ignored humanity, allowing our servants to run amok in your cities, gathering what nourishment they could. We never once considered the consequences to you."

"Isn't this all ... water under the bridge?"

"No. This is our deep and lasting shame. Then suddenly your purely mechanical technology took a biological turn we could equal but not overmatch. You began working with the stuff of life, as we have long done, twisting it to your own ends. You made a rat-specific mutagen capable of murdering all our servants. We were helpless -- not because we lack the science to develop an antidote, but simply because there are too few Majuscules to have developed it quickly enough.

"So we revealed our existence to you and you withheld your killing hand

and our Truce was formed. Majuscules had never been concerned with matters of cooperation; in our world such a thing is unnecessary. Yet when we began to take humanity seriously, we could not miss seeing the benefits of cooperation and compromise in a heterogeneous society."

Lord Kut studied my eyes, which must have been pretty wide at that point.

"If I'm hearing you right," I said carefully, "you're suggesting that humans and Majuscules might be better off working -- "

"Together."

"Actually ... that sounds like a good idea."

"Therefore we need an ombudsman. Someone humans can identify with to carry our hopes and ideas into the circles of human power and then carry human response back to us. We need a human we can trust."

"All right. But I think I asked you this before: why me?"

"Only the mayors represent cities and when we evaluated the mayors of the larger American cities, you were the only one who seemed intelligent and sincere enough to suffice. But we had to be sure of your mettle."

"'Mettle!'" I gave Kut my strongest scowl but there was a paradoxical feeling of pride warming my heart. "OK. I understand you now. Perhaps I will be your agent. Perhaps. And I do appreciate your confidence, but I resent like hell the way you've treated my companions and me. I bet this evening has taken ten years off my life. This is one Friday I'll never forget! What gave you the right to test me like you did?"

"Necessity ... and something else. Just as your people set the precedent for strikes, so too you set another precedent. Those white 'mice' you experiment on in your laboratories are nothing but albino servants of ours. How many times has a rat run through a maze for human research?"

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