

Mason's Rats:

Black Rat

Neal Asher

Mason leant against the sun-heated wall of the barn and groped in his pocket for a couple of environmentally friendly shotgun cartridges. When he remembered that what he held in his other hand was a walking stick, he instead leant the stick against the wall, pulled out his tobacco tin, and rolled himself a cigarette.

He'd seen it disappearing round the corner of the barn. It was that big black bastard Smith had been having trouble with; the one that had led Smith's nice shiny new cybernetic ratter into the path of a combine. Yes, it was over here now, where the pickings were easier. No cybernetic ratters here, nor any automatic lasers. Mason drew on his cigarette and frowned.

His own rats hadn't done this, for he had an agreement with them, of sorts. It worked out at about one percent of his total harvest, which was certainly cheaper than the products of Traptech. There was also the advantage that he knew precisely where their food was coming from and was able to lace it with birth control chemicals. He peered down at the hole through the alloy wall. The black rat was certainly clever, he'd give it that, for the hole had been cut with a file or a hacksaw.

With a sigh Mason pushed himself away from the wall and headed back to his house. It looked like war again. As he stepped back out onto the track he noticed the chief brown rat watching him from a round bale of wheat straw. It wore its tool-belt and had a small sack slung over one shoulder. Mason pointed at the hole in the wall and in response the brown rat held up its paw, twitched its nose, and shrugged. Mason spat the remains of his rollie on the ground as the brown rat disappeared over the other side of the bale.

It might have been possible for him to push the agreement further, but communicating with rats was a difficult thing at the best of times. Last time he had done it with pictures: one of a rat eating grain nailed over the entrance to an old tin shed in which he put their one percent, and pictures of rats being blown apart with shotguns on the doors to the storage barns. After the violent demise of about ten rats, the rest only took grain from the tin shed, but Mason had to wonder if the pictures had helped them to come to a decision at all. And anyway, how could he convey with pictures his displeasure at the depredations of the black rat and his kin? No, there was only one solution: splatter the bastard.

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The shotgun closed with a satisfying click and Mason hoiked it up under his arm before setting out from his house. Two hundred acres of alpha-wheat had to be brought in today and he needed to get this problem sorted. He'd sealed the first hole only to find another behind a patch of stinging nettles, almost as if the first had been a decoy. This second hole led into the rapeseed storage barn, from which the rat had somehow managed to steal a quarter of a ton of seed overnight. As he had thought: it was here with its kin, and probably here to stay.

"Right, you little shit head," said Mason as he stepped out of his house. "Show one whisker today and you're rat burgers."

He surveyed the yard before him like a Tommy about to go over the top, then with firm purpose in his stride he set out for the combine garage. The black rat didn't show itself as he crossed the yard, nor when he hit the lock pad to Garage Two and the door slid open. He surveyed the yard again with deep suspicion before turning back to the garage and addressing the immense harvester before him.

“Combine Bertha, access code seven three two, Mason - respond.”

A low humming issued from the machine and its lights glimmered reluctantly.

“Code confirmed - instructions,” responded the silky voice of the combine.

“Fields G27 through to G31 are ready for alpha-wheat harvesting. Run a diagnostic and if you’re within parameters proceed to harvest.”

The humming from the combine increased and its lights glared bright then went out. Its diesel engine started, blasting out a cloud of acrid black smoke. Various mechanical sounds issued from its mysterious chambers. Its cutters swished together, its reel turned, and its augers chuntered to themselves. Mason nodded to himself in satisfaction: one of the best investments he had ever made.

“I am unable to proceed,” said Bertha.

“What?”

“I am unable to proceed.”

The combine groaned as it went into reverse gear and withdrew further into the garage.

“Why are you unable to proceed?” Mason asked through grinding teeth.

“It’s too big out there.”

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The brown rat came close, very close, for against the light background of the bales it had appeared black. Mason kept it in his sights just to make a point and watched it as it backed up to the wall of straw as if walking on broken glass. At length it dropped its sack and raised its paws above its head. Mason lowered his shotgun.

“Your lucky day, punk.”

He turned away and stomped back to his house. Watching him go the brown rat lowered its paws and shook its head. Had it sweat glands it would have wiped its brow. It hadn’t. It picked up its sack and with a degree of determination in its scamper headed for its home. Mason stepped inside his own home, abandoning his shotgun in the porch, and with much reluctance picked up his phone. About half an hour later he ended up speaking to a real person.

“What do you mean, ‘not till Saturday?’ There’s a belt of rain on its way!”

The voice on the other end of the phone said something reassuring.

“I paid good money for that harvester and I expect service!”

The voice deferred responsibility.

“Then put him on!”

The voice was apologetic.

“Majorca!”

The voice tried to cover all points.

Mason slammed the phone down.

As he picked up his shotgun and stamped outside he swore with staccato regularity.

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Three of the bastards, black rats certainly, but not the one, not the boss. He was bigger, had a bit of a limp and scars on his back from that encounter with Smith's ratter. Mason raised his shotgun and carefully rested it across the cowling of the old Fergusson. Now, all he had to do was wait until they were in line. They hadn't seen him yet. The little cart they were harnessed to was occupying all of their attention. Wait. Wait...

Mason let rip with both barrels. One rat disintegrated and another one leapt about, without the benefit of directions from its head, and tangled itself up in its harness. The third one hurriedly tried to unhook itself.

"Gotcha!"

Mason cackled as he cracked open his gun, but in his excitement he did it too high and the hot end of a spent cartridge hit him on the nose and sizzled.

"Fuck!"

The remaining rat was free and dragging itself away.

"Bugger!" Mason thunked in two new cartridges. His eyes were watering so much it took him a moment to locate the remaining rat over by the dung hill, which it was struggling to ascend. Mason took aim, then after a pause he lowered the gun. At the top of the hill stood the brown rat, its miniature crossbow held steadily on the black rat. Finally the black rat saw the brown, and froze.

"Go on, shoot," said Mason, wiping at his eyes.

Slowly, carefully, the black rat pulled itself upright and raised its paws into the air. The brown rat lowered its crossbow and watched as the black rat dragged itself away.

Mason could hardly believe what he was seeing. He raised his shotgun just as the tail of the black rat disappeared behind the dung hill. Then he swore and lowered it, came out from behind the tractor, and approached the cart the three black rats had been towing. The brown rat approached from the other side.

The cart had been made from a cut-down supermarket trolley and was loaded with various pieces of mechanical and electrical junk filched from one of Mason's workshops. There were also bags of rapeseed stacked on it. Mason glanced at the brown rat as it stared avidly at those bags. He gestured at the contrivance and turned away to head indoors. He needed to put some cream on his nose.

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Mason rested his hand on his wallet and repressed the urge to bolt the doors and fetch his gun as the suit stepped out of his car, still speaking into his mobile. Mason had asked for a maintenance man and they had sent him a salesman. He hated salesmen.

"Ah, Mr. Mason, so pleased to meet you," said the suit, pocketing his phone and taking out an electronic filofax.

Mason shuddered.

“Maintenance has informed me you are having some problems with that old TW157 harvester.” The filofax disappeared and the suit retrieved a briefcase from his car. The case opened with a horrid click. Glossy brochures glistened at Mason from the interior.

“If I might interest you in...”

Somehow Mason found himself in his own kitchen with brochures spread on the table before him and his throat clenched over a scream. The man must have trained as a time-share salesman before moving on, for his skin wasn't just thick, it was a veritable armor.

“But I don't want a new harvester or a new drive mind! I want my old one repaired, as it should be under the warranty!”

“Yes, of course you do, and there are advantages in retaining such archaic equipment. So for you I can offer twenty percent off the TW158 or twenty-five percent off the newest drive mind with free installation. I'll be in trouble with my boss, but for such a customer as you, Mr. Mason, it is essential that we...”

And so it went on, and on, and Mason found himself walking to the door, clutching a piece of paper he'd been a hair's breadth from signing, the suit pacing at his side. The sell was getting more brutal now, for the suit was moving him to different territory - the garage - to try a different approach, perhaps to draw comparisons between his old 157 and the new 158. Mason felt powerless to resist. Perhaps if he signed something this suit would go away, disappear. How long had it been now? One hour, two hours?

“Of course the TW158 is not so prone to agoraphobia as the 157. It has the optional on off switch, which makes for a substantial power saving. You'll notice your bills-”

“Agoraphobia?” Mason managed. He halted at the door, shaking his head. “My harvester has got agoraphobia?”

“Yes, the fear of open spaces, fairly common with the 157 when garaged for the winter. As I said, with the optional on off switch there are such-”

The salesman opened the door and there came a resounding thud.

“Such what?”

“Urgh!”

“Pardon?”

“Aargh!”

The suit stumbled back and sat down on the floor. Mason peered down at him and noticed a large cut on his head at the center of a quickly inflating lump on his forehead. In front of the salesman, lying on the doormat, was a large hexagonal wheel nut. Mason ducked down by the jamb and looked outside. The black rat, the boss, was legging it for the fields, his beautifully constructed siege catapult abandoned in the yard. Mason grinned then frowned.

“Have to find a way,” he said, and thumped the door jamb, then, “Of course, idiot!”

The suit gurgled.

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As the car weaved from side to side up the drive shedding glossy brochures as it went, Mason headed for his workshop and got himself a couple of tins of paint. Soon he had altered the signs. On the storage barns he had splattered black rats as well as brown, and on the old chicken shed he had an even more complex sign. Now, after blocking up the holes in his barns, it was a waiting game.

It was past midnight when he heard a low squeaking from the wall of the barn. He eased himself off a pile of rapeseed, a shovel in one hand and a shotgun in the other, and crept over towards where the sound was coming from. After a moment there came a flicker of moonlight through a small hole as a drill bit was retracted. Next, a cut-down hacksaw blade poked through and the laborious cutting of the soft metal began. An hour later the cutter had completed its circle and a disk of metal fell in. Moments later the black rat stepped through, removing a set of thick gloves as it did so. Mason slammed the shovel in front of the hole.

“Right, you little git.”

With very beady eyes the black rat looked up the throat of the shotgun.

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“Agoraphobia, y’ say? Right. Mr. Mason, we’ll soon sort that.”

The maintenance man wiped his hands on his overalls then reached into the back of his van and removed a club hammer.

“It’s a matter of psychology,” he said, knowingly.

Mason eyed the hammer dubiously.

“You’ll see.” The maintenance man glanced round. “Is that...?”

“A rat,” said Mason.

“What’s...?”

“A catapult, throws tractor wheel-nuts.”

“Oh.”

The black rat stood on a round bale by the drive. Next to it rested its catapult and a stack of wheel nuts. It was watching the drive through a set of opera glasses mounted on a tripod.

“The harvester is this way.”

The repairman scratched his head then followed Mason. To be expected really - some of these farmers were a bit loopy. The repairman put it down to ergot dust.

Mason stood at the doors to the garage as the repairman worked his magic on Bertha. Two blows of the hammer and some artistically couched threats and the harvester was edging out of the garage. Encouragement to follow had it trundling off to the fields in a few minutes.

“Funny sign there, on that old chicken shed...” said the repairman as he returned to his van. “What’s it mean?”

“If you’d been wearing a suit you’d have found out,” replied Mason cryptically.

The repairman replaced his hammer in the rack beside five others and closed the back of his van. Definitely the ergot dust. He got the required signature, hopped into his van, and drove away as quickly as he could.

Mason returned to the chicken shed to view his work. The picture of the black rat eating grain had been easy. The picture of the man in a suit lying on the ground clutching at his bleeding head had presented more of a challenge. Mason grinned to himself then turned away. Before setting out for the fields to see how the harvester was getting on, he raised his hand to the black rat guard; the first living employee on his farm in decades.