

Mason's Rats: Autotractor

Neal Asher

Mason tucked his hands deep into the pockets of his wax-cotton jacket and stared out the kitchen window at the miserable drizzling day. Gray, wet, and cold. He coughed and harrumphed, then removed a pack of tobacco from his pocket and peered at the health warning: smoking can cause non-smokers to damage your health. It figured. The health lobby of the Green Party would soon have tobacco banned all across the country. Greenies and Veggies had gone mad with power. A few months back an attempt had been made to defuse them a little with the claim that vegetarian farts were a prime cause of global warming, but it had not worked. The Greenies had thirty percent representation and were riding a wave to the next election. Mason rolled a cigarette. Bugger 'em. He had more important concerns.

The harvest was in, the stubble rotted in the soaked fields, and most of the recent floods had drained away, so now it was time to get the ploughing started. Mason was not looking forward to this. It was the same every year, this fear of the resident of Garage One. It had to be done though. He gritted his teeth, opened the kitchen door, and stepped out into the drizzle.

The black rat looked miserable, squatting atop his damp bale clad in a rain cape made from a foil-lined food-bag turned inside out, the snipped-off corner of the bag tied on his head as a sou'wester. Mason raised his hand but the black rat just stared at him with drizzle beaded on his whiskers. Mason shrugged and continued across the yard to the garages.

Combine Bertha was safely tucked away for the coming winter, probably prepared for another bout of agoraphobia in the summer. But the occupant of Garage One was different, and feared nothing at all. Mason hit the lock pad and hurriedly stepped back as the door slid open, wishing for a moment he had brought his shotgun. Ceiling lights flicked on in the wet twilight within to reveal the huge autotractor sitting there, silent and menacing.

Mason cleared his throat. "Autotractor, access code seven three two, Mason - respond."

There was a slow clicking and ticking as of cooling metal, then a low humming, and the tractor's lights glared into life.

"Code confirmed - instructions," the tractor growled.

"Ahem... all fields are now H-designated and ready for ploughing, cultivating, and seeding. Run a diagnostic-"

"I am ready," the tractor interrupted, its engine snarling into life and its gears meshing. It jerked forward and Mason hastily stepped to one side. He swallowed dryly. It was not supposed to do that, but then its mind was one of Ericson's chop jobs rumored to have been obtained through a contact in the MOD.

"The seed-grain is in-"

"I know where it is."

The tractor rumbled out on its immense cleated tyres, its optics and the black tube of its verminator focusing on Mason for a moment. It did that every time, perhaps trying to decide whether or not Mason should be considered vermin. In the middle of the yard it opened out its plough attachments as if stretching, and its cultivators whirred viciously. It would return later for the seeding attachments, in its own good time. With relief, Mason watched it turn to head out of the yard, but it halted abruptly, its verminator crackled, and a red flash lit the drizzle. There was a jet of smoke and a panicked shriek from the round sentry bale.

"Missed," stated the tractor, and jets of smoke tracked the black rat down the side of the bale. Then the autotractor muttered, "Bloody targeting's off."

"Stop! Desist! Cease!"

Mason ran between the tractor and the bale before he had time to think about it, but he certainly thought about it when the verminator zeroed in on him. The tractor was muttering to itself. He gulped.

"There is no fire risk," the tractor said eventually. "The moisture content of this bale is high." It sounded like a reprimand.

Mason said, "Things have changed here. The rats are no longer to be considered vermin." Silence met this statement and Mason took a deep breath to get himself under control. When he had finished coughing he

said, "Autotractor, access code seven three two, Mason. Program change. Verbal."

"Code confirmed. Open to program change," said the tractor sulkily.

"Rats are no longer to be considered vermin on this farm. All prior instructions to verminate them are cancelled."

"Not the enemy?"

Mason felt sweat break out on his brow as the verminator swivelled about in reflection of the tractor's confusion.

"Not the enemy," he confirmed. "Autotractor, access code seven three two, Mason. Close program."

"Not the enemy," the tractor grumped as it drove out into the fields. Mason watched as the verminator flashed and a pigeon dropped out of the sky in a shower of feathers. Another flash and a crow flapped squawking into a hedge with its tail feathers smoking.

Now approaching the bale, Mason peered down at the melted and smouldering rain cape. He turned it over with his boot and looked around. The black rat crouched behind the bale, shivering and regarding him accusingly.

"Sorry about that," he said.

The black rat stepped out from behind the bale with a field-dressing clutched to his shoulder.

"Come on in. We'll soon fix that up," said Mason.

As was always the case, the black rat understood. He was an Einstein of the rat world. He hesitated a moment, then glanced up at the dismal gray sky before scampering after Mason.

The black rat had been lucky, for the reflective surface of his cape had saved him from serious injury and he had only lost a little hair and some skin. Mason put some ointment on the wound and covered it with a corn-plaster. Immediately after this, the black rat hopped down from the table and crouched in front of the radiator. Mason opened a bottle of whisky and poured himself a glass full. The rat's stare was intense until Mason poured him an egg cup full.

Gazing out of the window, Mason considered that this was the kind of day when the only sensible option seemed to be in a bottle. He did have plenty to do: Combine Bertha needed an overhaul and there was some welding to be done on one of the grain handlers. He shook his head then turned when there came a squeak from behind him. The black rat held up his empty cup imploringly, his right paw dramatically clutched to the corn-plaster. Mason frowned and poured him more whisky. It surprised him the rat had a taste for it. He walked back to the window.

“Oh shit!”

It seemed you only had to let your guard down for a moment. The car door slammed shut and the suit stood proud in his green wellies. Mason glanced to the round bale in desperation and saw that one of the black rat’s kin was manning, no ratting, the catapult. He saw the arm crack up, looked across and saw the suit jump back as the wing mirror of his car exploded. The man then stooped and picked up the wheel nut that had done the damage. Mason opened the front door just as the suit was entering the porch.

“I don’t want any!”

“I am not a salesman, Mr. Mason. You are Mr. Mason I take it?”

Mason nodded. The guy was obviously pissed off about his wing mirror. Mason watched him drop the wheel nut into a pocket and extract a card, which was flashed like an American police badge.

“I am from the reformed Health and Safety Executive of the sub-ministry to the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries.”

Dread came and sat on Mason’s chest, and it needed to go on a diet. A visit by a man from The Ministry was worse than one by any salesman, for it usually cost more.

“What... What can I do for you?”

The Ministry man smiled a brittle, nasty smile exposing teeth that looked decidedly pointed. He opened his briefcase and it was the sound of a tomb being breached. He took out a clipboard. Dread called the rest of its family over.

“It has come to our attention that you have a rat population on your

farm in excess of the new EU guidelines and, as I am sure you are aware, this constitutes a serious health risk.”

“Who told you?”

It had to be Smith. The old git had really not been pleased when Mason had shotgunned his nice new cybernetic ratter. The Ministry man’s smile was nearer to a sneer than to anything with humor in it.

“Where we acquire our information is not entirely relevant. Now, I have forms DXA137 through to 193. These must be completed with an ABD45 from a Ministry-approved exterminator. Here is a list of those who are approved.”

There were ten names on the sheet of paper, and it was only just possible to grip the stack of forms in one hand. Mason stared back at the Ministry man and did not blink an eye as a brown rat scurried past outside pushing a small barrow loaded with verminated pigeons.

“Why are the rats a health risk? They wash regularly and put on flea powder.”

He had made sure of that the previous spring when he found himself itching and scratching and seen the little bastard fleas leaping all over his bedclothes. He had built a bath in the old milking sheds and, over a period of a month, marched the rats in there at gun-point, liberally dousing them with flea-powder when they finished their ablutions. Towards the end of the month the rats were going by themselves, especially when he installed an immersion heater in the water tank. Nobody likes blood-suckers.

“Very amusing Mr. Mason. I’m sure. You have three weeks to comply. If after this period you have not complied, an exterminator team will be employed by the Ministry and brought here at your expense. You will also be subject to punitive fines.” Again that brittle smile. “Good day to you. You will be receiving the bill for repairs to Government property.” He took out the wheel nut and placed it on the porch table, returned to his car, and drove away hunched over the wheel, his nose almost against the windscreen.

Mason returned to the kitchen and looked down at the black rat who was now flat on his back with his back feet up in the air and his forepaws across his chest. His whiskers twitched as he no-doubt dreamed about hurling tractor wheel nuts at reps.

* * * *

In the afternoon the autotractor rumbled back from the fields to refill its tanks with diesel. Mason watched it through the kitchen window. When it pulled out of the yard again he noted how both black and brown rats were following it out into the fields with their little barrows. It seemed there was no such thing as racism in the rat world. When the tractor was gone he went into his office and glared at the pile of forms he was supposed to fill in. He really did not want to start killing off his rats, for he quite enjoyed their company - more so than the company of most humans. How could he get round this? The ABD45 was the crux, since he needed it filled in and signed by a Ministry-approved exterminator. He studied the list and picked up the phone.

At seven thirty it was getting dark outside. The black rat was disinclined to follow him out and kept looking up at the whisky bottle on the shelf. Mason held the door open.

“Now!”

The black rat reluctantly slouched out into the drizzle.

Little fires were burning behind the barns and as he approached Mason saw that just about the entire rat population was there... enjoying a barbecue. They were roasting spitted pigeons and drinking something from empty shotgun cartridges. As the black rat ran to join his fellows Mason picked up a coke can full of the substance they were drinking and took a sip. After he had finished coughing and his eyes had stopped watering he carefully placed the can full of petrol-flavoured grain spirit on the ground, not too close to any of the fires, and turned to head back inside. That cut it. As far as he was concerned there was no truer test of civilization. He wondered where their distillery was located.

* * * *

“Ah, Mr. Mason, Quentin Beasley, Rathammer.”

He was not quite so bad as the usual sort, for he wore jeans and a checkered shirt and there was no sign of a filofax. Mason nodded and kept a firm hold on his shotgun. There might be glossy brochures.

“I understand you have a bit of a rat problem?”

“The man from the Ministry tells me I have, but they’re no problem to

me.”

“They do constitute a health risk.”

Mason started walking across the yard. “Come with me.”

With his mouth hanging open, the man from Rathammer stood frozen in the doorway of the milking shed. Steam rose from a shallow bath crowded with rats and soap suds. Leading to this, numerous rats stood in a queue, with sacking towels draped over their arms. Other rats were drying themselves and applying flea-powder with abandon.

“Now, why do they constitute a health risk?”

“Their droppings...”

“So I’ll install toilets.”

Beasley just kept on staring.

“What do you do when you come here?” asked Mason.

“Er... ah, yes, we bring in a number of TT15s... Have you seen the Trapttech ratters?”

“Yes, I’ve seen them.”

“Well, right, basically they are programmed to do a patterned sweep of your farm with all their search areas interlinked. No rat on your property can escape.”

Mason reached out and put his hand on Beasley’s shoulder.

“Come into the house. We must discuss this.”

* * * *

Beasley sat at the table, his expression stunned as the black rat toasted him with an egg cup full of whisky then downed it in one. He took a gulp of his own drink, blinked blood-shot eyes, and then leant forwards with his elbows on the table.

“Your rats... so advanced. I’ve seen rats using tools, but not to this extent.”

He spoke slowly, carefully. Mason topped up his glass.

“They only have to be given a chance... So tell me, after the TT15s have made their sweep, what happens then?”

“Oh, thassit... we compare kill figures to the Ministry figures and if they are within five percent you get your ABD45.”

“Have some more whisky. Tell me, what happens if no kills are made?”

“Thas highly unlikely.”

“Yes, but should it happen?”

“Nother sweep.”

“And if it happens again?”

The black rat fell to the floor with a resounding thud. A high-pitched snoring filtered up from under the table.

“Guess we’d declare... clear,” said Beasley, his head under the table.

“And I would get the ABD45?”

Beasley came up for air and nodded. This, after his ducking down, became too much. His head thudded to the Formica.

* * * *

Mason tried every Pied Piper technique he could think of. He left grain in the trailer but he had taught them too well; they only took the grain he left in their shed. He tried showing them a picture of many rats packed into the trailer, but if they understood they showed no sign. Many of them paid no attention at all and he was sure they were drunk. He returned to his house and threw the picture on his desk then picked up his shotgun and went back out to try threats. He managed to get four rats into the trailer, but the rest had scattered. He’d used threats to get them to bathe, but it had taken him a month to do that. He only had a day. As he released the four and returned to his house he realized he needed to be really devious.

* * * *

It took the rest of the afternoon to find it. He searched all the outbuildings, but it was in none of them. On his way back from poking around in the disused pig sties he stopped by an old Jaguar that had been dumped on him years before and was quietly rusting away in a corner with grass growing on its roof, and there he caught a whiff of something fermenting. Whisps of smoke filtered up from round the bonnet. Mason lifted it and looked into what used to be an empty engine compartment, which now contained a milk churn filled with what smelt like fermenting grain. A small fire had been lit underneath it and from its lid petrol pipes curved back through holes into the passenger area. Mason looked inside and saw the cooling vessel: a large glass bottle filched from his disused milking shed. He walked to the back of the car and opened each of the fifteen-gallon petrol tanks. What was inside would have run the vehicle had it an engine. This accounted for the petrol aftertaste. Mason returned to his house.

It took him an hour to dissolve all the pills in the whisky. When it was done he casually returned to the Jag, keeping a look out for beady eyes. Half a bottle went in each tank.

As it grew dark the autotractor returned in a cloud of feathers, with most of the rat population sitting on its cowlings plucking pigeons. Mason watched it halt in the yard so all the rats could disembark then head in to get another refill at the diesel tanks. Obviously it had decided that if they were not enemies then they must be friends. As it headed back out into the fields he heard something like squeaky rattish speech issuing from its PA system. Ericson said it only used a fraction of its mind to perform its farm duties, but now seemed to be using more than that. Mason was not overly attracted to the idea.

After an hour the rats lit their fires behind the barns. Smiling to himself, Mason picked up another bottle of whisky and went out to join the party. By midnight the area was strewn with snoring rats and the chewed carcasses of pigeons, whereupon Mason, a little unsteady on his feet, set to work with his own wheel barrow. He counted two hundred and seventy rats into the back of the trailer and locked them in with a couple of buckets of water and some grain.

* * * *

The men from Rathammer arrived in the morning in two parcel vans and began to unload and program the TT15s. Keeping well back, Mason watched with disgust as the horrible chrome scorpions scuttled off into the

fields. Beasley refused an invite into the house and stayed in the back of one of the vans, at a monitoring station with his two companions. Mason joined them.

Three kills were reported in the first half an hour. By dinner time there had been eight and the TT15s had nearly completed their sweep. Mason guessed that took care of the teetotallers.

“How strange,” said Beasley noncommittally.

“Bloody Ministry,” said one of his companions.

Mason nodded and smiled in his best thick inbred farmer manner and went to start work on Combine Bertha. Later he felt a momentary panic upon seeing one of the men head out into the fields with some kind of detector. Eventually the man returned with a crushed and burnt TT15.

“Do you have heavy machinery operating out there, Mr. Mason?” Beasley asked him shortly after.

“Yes, an autotractor.”

“One that does not recognise standard agri-codes... I would be grateful if you would stand it down while we make our second sweep.”

Mason went into his house, called up the autotractor through its satellite link, and ordered it to shut itself down for the next three hours before returning.

The second sweep yielded only another three rats and Beasley reluctantly filled out an ABD45 for Mason. With greater reluctance Mason filled out a cheque and handed it over. As the two parcel vans departed, the autotractor returned from the fields towing its sealed trailer. Mason wiped his oily hands on his overalls and went to release some very hung-over and pissed-off rats. After that he kept his head down when he saw the catapult trained on his kitchen door.

* * * *

The rats relented late in the afternoon two days after their ordeal. There came a scratching at the kitchen door and Mason opened it cautiously to see the black rat standing there regarding him. The peace offering was an old milk bottle filled with grain spirit and a cold roast pigeon. He passed on the pigeon since he preferred his birds gutted before they were cooked,

and peered out into the yard.

The autotractor was back with what appeared to be the entire rat population sitting around it and on it. Two hundred and seventy heads turned to regard Mason and then as one turned back to regard the verminator on the tractor. Even from where he stood Mason could see the device was damaged. So that was it. He walked out to take a look.

“Autotractor, access code seven three two, Mason. Run diagnostic on-”

“The verminator is damaged. Replacement with M87 Rapifire with a two thousand round box of caseless plutonium needles or with a Zunigun armor-piercing laser is optimal.”

That confirmed Ericson’s sources. Mason shook his head and climbed up onto the tractor to inspect the verminator. Rats sat on the cowling watching him, the tractor’s optics above them. It took him only a moment to realize the verminator had been wasted, probably by a low branch.

“Mason!”

The shout had an edge of hysteria, and Mason turned to watch a bedraggled figure dismounting from a bicycle. The Ministry man did not look at all happy. He glared at all the rats on and about the tractor, and began rubbing his hands on the front of his rumpled jacket as if he could not get them clean. Complete disgust twisted his features. When he returned his attention to Mason, his hands fisted round the material of his jacket.

“I have been demoted,” he said, a quaver in his voice and his eyes as big as an owl’s. “I have been demoted because of my inaccurate assessment of the rat problem in this area.”

Mason thought there must be something more involved in this demotion. As he understood it, incompetence in the civil service usually led to promotion. However, the true facts aside it seemed this official considered Mason to blame. When the man turned to his bicycle to unstrap his briefcase, Mason could see his hands were shaking.

“Now I see the truth,” the Ministry man continued, spittle appearing on his chin.

Mason noted that the rats were now abandoning the autotractor and fleeing. Even they recognized that a crazy man had arrived. From his briefcase The Man from the Ministry extracted a thick wad of forms.

“No one makes a fool out of me! You will fill in forms DXA99 through to 403!” He started to step from foot to foot as if his shoes were too tight, waving the wad of forms to emphasize his words. “You will be fined, your latest crops will be condemned, and you will bear the cost of a full Trapttech sweep!” Some of the forms slid from the wad and were being picked up by a breeze, whereupon Mason noted the autotractor’s ruined verminator tracking their progress. “When I return to the Ministry your ABD45 will be cancelled! This time there will be a body count!” His movements became even more frenetic and his bicycle fell over. Spittle now flew from his pointy teeth.

“Enemy?” wondered the autotractor, and its engine started. Mason hurriedly leapt to the ground. Showing an immediate grasp of the situation the few remaining rats leapt down as well and all of them still in sight ran for cover. Such was his frenzy the Ministry man hardly noticed.

“I want to see dead rats! I want to see hundreds of dead rats! This is war, Mason! You do not fool with The Ministry!”

“Enemy,” snarled the autotractor, and with its wheels kicking up gravel it spun a hundred and eighty degrees to face the Ministry man, whose mouth abruptly dropped open. Remaining forms thumped down into the mud. Mason heard the verminator clicking ineffectually as the engine snarled out a cloud of black smoke.

“Stop,” he said without much conviction.

Its huge cleated tyres kicking up great clumps of mud, the autotractor hurtled forward. The Ministry man screamed and ran, his cycle-clipped trousers hiked up and his sock-suspenders showing. Mason watched him sprinting across the fields in storklike bounds with the tractor in hot pursuit, and soon lost sight of the both of them in the twilight.

* * * *

The autotractor returned when it was fully dark, but Mason was sitting at his kitchen table a third of a bottle under by then, and in no pain. He did not bother to find out what had happened. Later, when he peered out of the kitchen window, he saw that the barbecue fires had been lit, yet the tractor had bagged no pigeons that day. Some other meat was on the menu.

Mason stayed indoors and finished the bottle. He never heard from that particular Ministry man again, and he hid the bicycle under a dung heap.