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## **The Ruskovian Ratastrophy**

–Gareth Ward

With the clank of cast-iron on cobbles Stanley heaved aside the manhole cover. His recent training at the Covert Operations Group, COG, had enhanced his wiry strength and the thick metal disc presented little problem. He whistled softly, attracting the attention of his mission partner, Lottie Brazil, who stood watch at the end of the alley.

Wisps of pre-dawn smog flowed into the hole, dribbling down the spiral of brick steps like an ethereal waterfall. Trapped below, hidden in the maze of sewer tunnels, waited the target of their rescue mission, Professor Petrovich Pavlov.

“Eew!” said Lottie, holding her hand to her nose, the stench of the sewers rising up to greet them.

Stanley grinned, an expression his cheeky boyish face seemed to have been designed for. “Smells like someone dropped a big rasper, don’t it?” He pressed a button on the side of his bowler hat and a circle of felt flapped open. A brass chemlamp with a purple lens telescoped from inside. The violet light played across Lottie’s puzzled face, picking out the mass of freckles that Stanley found so appealing.

“You know,” said Stanley. “Raspberry tart, far-“

Lottie raised her palm, cutting Stanley short. “I am unfortunately well aware of the crudities of your rhyming slang. I was surprised by the luminous pawprints.”

Fluorescing in the chemlamp’s light a tiny glowing trail of rat pawprints led down the steps and into the dark.

“Looks like the professor left us a clue, just like the note said.” Stanley adjusted the wickerwork basket strapped to his back then descended into the hole.

“Or is leading us into a trap,” replied Lottie, following behind.

The confines of the staircase opened up into a low brick-arched tunnel. A pinched footpath hugged one side of a sewer channel through which oozed a murky brown stream of effluent. Despite the tunnel’s width Stanley found it no less claustrophobic than the narrow stairs and his stomach cinched tighter with every beat of his quickened pulse. He was more used to prowling the magnificent rooftops of Coxford’s colleges with an eternity of sky above him and he felt the weight of the walls pressing in.

Lottie removed a leather and brass respirator from beneath her bowler hat and attached it over her nose and mouth. "You should put yours on too," she instructed.

Stanley shrugged. "Ain't the stink that bothers me. When I was living on the streets I probably hummed worse than this meself."

"It's not about the smell. There could be pockets of poisonous gas down here."

"Well how do the rats live then?"

"Not all of them do." Lottie pointed to a bedraggled lifeless grey lump floating down the sewer.

Donning his mask, Stanley said, "Sure, I can breathe proper now, but it ruins me good looks."

Lottie's eyebrows raised, her own respirator somehow making the gesture more expressive. "I kind of think it's an improvement."

"Good job I knows you don't mean it." Stanley winked and shuffled along the narrow path following the trail of pawprints.

From up ahead the sound of rushing water grew louder. The sewer flowed into a bubbling cistern of murky brown water crested with foam. Three similar sewers joined the brick cylinder, emptying their contents into the putrid pond ten feet below, before disappearing through a rusted outlet grate.

A twisted iron gantry that had once crossed the cistern hung in a mangled mess down one wall. Stanley had seen enough explosions on COG's weapons range to deduce that the collapse was due to a detonation of high explosive and not any form of rust-induced metal fatigue. In place of the gantry a wooden plank barely wide enough for the glowing trail of rat prints that ran across it bridged the torrid waters.

"Be careful," said Lottie, placing a hand onto Stanley's shoulder as he took a step onto the plank.

"Because I was thinking of being reckless and swimming in poo."

"You wouldn't be able to swim in all this gear. The decomposition fills the water with gas. You'd have no buoyancy and sink straight to the bottom like a stone."

"Thanks for sharing that," said Stanley. "I think I'll be careful."

Years of climbing and traversing the parapets and ledges of Coxford's tallest buildings had given Stanley an excellent sense of balance and he strode across the beam without so much as a wobble. Safely positioned on the slim path of the opposite sewer tunnel, he reached back for Lottie. His outstretched hand made it little more than a quarter of the way. "You can do this. It's just like the balance beam on the assault course," he said, staring into Lottie's pensive eyes.

His mission partner stepped onto the plank, the soles of her chunky boots overhanging the edges of the wood. She took three steps then the wood groaned threateningly. Lunging for the safety of the far bank, her fingers brushed Stanley's outstretched palm. Issuing a crack that echoed around the brick cylinder, the plank gave way, tumbling into the surging waters.

"No!" shouted Stanley and leapt for Lottie. Grabbing her wrist, his trailing hand seized the wrecked gantry's twisted rail. His body jerked taut, the rusted iron cutting into his fingers. Below him dangled Lottie, her feet inches above the churning sewage. The gantry groaned then jolted, one of the securing bolts giving way. Lottie's bowler hat tumbled from her head, plopping into the dirty waters.

“You’ve got to climb out,” yelled Stanley. The metal vibrated below his pained fingers, more of the securing bolts inching away from the brickwork.

Lottie grasped Stanley’s belt and heaved herself up, taking hold of the mangled rail. Hand over hand she scaled the ironwork, Stanley pushing her with his free arm from below. With one final effort she collapsed onto the footpath.

Free of Lottie’s weight, Stanley spidered up the web of iron. Casting a final look down he pulled himself over the cistern’s lip. In the roiling waters bobbed Lottie’s bowler hat and the remains of the wooden plank, its gnawed underside revealed in the chemlight’s glow.

Slumped against the tunnel’s curved brickwork Lottie’s chest rose and fell. She pushed her respirator free of her mouth, the need to suck in air now greater than any concerns about the toxic smell. “Thanks,” she said between pants.

Stanley loosened his own respirator, letting it hang around his neck. “Don’t let it ever be said that the Nobbster leaves his friends in the sh-“

“Shssh!” said Lottie, holding up a finger. “Do you hear that?”

In the distance, further along the tunnel, a cacophony of squeaks sounded like laughter.

“The rats deliberately weakened that plank,” said Stanley. “They chewed through the underneath where we wouldn’t see it.”

“Rats aren’t that smart,” said Lottie.

“Smart enough to nearly kill us both.”

“I’m not denying they may have eaten through the plank, but someone must have rubbed cheese into it, setting a trap.”

“Pavlov?”

“Maybe, or it could be his Ruskovian masters.” Lottie gripped Stanley’s arm and pulled herself up. “Let’s go find out.”

The trail of luminous violet pawprints continued along the brick footpath following the gentle curve of the sewer tunnel. Unease twisted Stanley’s stomach. Now cut off from the stairs they were trapped in the maze of sewers unless they found another exit before his chemlamp ran out.

Squeaks and the sound of scurrying rats drifted along the tunnel, then a purple light shimmered from around the bend, the faint rays glistening against the ceiling’s damp brickwork. The giant shadow of a rat played across the arched wall. Stanley unclipped the retention strap on his steampistol’s holster and gave a thumbs down signal to Lottie, the code for enemy.

Lottie nodded and pointed to Stanley’s hat. He killed the chemlamp and waited a few moments for his eyes to adjust. Feeling the firm touch of Lottie’s hand on his left shoulder, signalling that she was ready to move, he continued along the footpath, his steps as stealthy as a cat on the prowl.

Creeping around the bend, the source of the light came into view. Lottie’s bedraggled hat lay on the footpath, its chemlamp dimly shining.

“Look at that. It’s your bowler,” said Stanley, reaching down to grab it.

Lottie’s grip on his shoulder tightened, pulling him back. “Wait!”

“Ah yeah,” said Stanley. “Good thinking. It’s been in the cark.”

“No. It’s not that.” Lottie’s brow furrowed. “How did it get there?”

“With all that squeaking and scurrying reckon the rats probably brought it.”

“The same rats that tried to drown us in the sewage?”

Stanley twiddled one of his overlarge ears. “Thought you said it wasn’t them.”

“There’s something weird going on.”

“You mean weirder than a message in a bottle from Professor Pavlov begging to be rescued from the sewers?”

“Yes, weirder than that.” Lottie pulled a Nimrod Barm extendable arm from her leather utility pouch. “Stand back.” She took several steps away from the bowler and depressed the trigger on the extendable arm’s handle. The titanium scissor cross-sections elongated and the clawed segmented hand took hold of the hat’s rim.

The sewage erupted with a splurging splash and a heavy spring-loaded metal bar arced from the effluent. Smashing down, it crushed the bowler hat into the bricks, reverberating with a metallic twang.

Stanley shuddered. The thick metal bar would have cracked his spine like a rat in a trap. “Thanks. Lucky you stopped me.”

From further along the tunnel issued a tirade of excited squeaks.

“I don’t think everyone sees it that way.”

“The rats couldn’t have made that trap, it’s way too complicated,” said Stanley.

“Maybe, but you said it yourself, they could have brought my hat and baited it just for us.”

Flicking his chemlamp back on, Stanley faced Lottie. “I’m not the smartest…”

His mission partner nodded, waiting for him to continue.

“So, no attempt to deny it,” said Stanley, disappointment in his voice. “No telling me I may not be book clever, but I make up for it with streetwise cunning.”

Lottie frowned. “Why would I say that?”

The basket on Stanley’s back creaked as his shoulders dropped. “So, tell me clever-cogs, why are we following a trail laid by rats, when it appears the rats are trying to kill us?”

“That is a very good question,” said Lottie, perhaps trying to make amends. “I wish I had an answer other than we have no choice.”

“I wish you did too.” Stanley angled his lamp down and warily continued along the path. “It feels like we’re on a sewer-side mission.”

The tunnel came to a junction where a smaller tributary led off to the right. Little more than three feet wide, the low arched tunnel had no footpath, only a single width of bricks running each side along its length. The glowing trail disappeared along the narrow brick ledge.

“Well, this stinks of a trap,” said Stanley.

“It certainly stinks of something.” Lottie sniffed the air. “I can smell acetone, and maybe formaldehyde.”

“Is that bad?”

“Not bad, if you’re in a science laboratory. A bit unusual for a sewer.”

Bracing a foot either side of the channel Stanley stooped under the low arch. Adopting an awkward shuffling gait while bracing his hands against the damp-slick brickwork, he manoeuvred along the tunnel. He’d gone little more than twenty feet when a

greenish light illuminated the passage and a heavily accented Ruskovian voice rang out.

“Hello. Who is there?”

Stanley didn't answer, wary that it could be another trap. He wished that he could draw his steampistol but to do so might unbalance him and he didn't fancy falling face first into the stream of wastewater running between his feet.

“I am Professor Pavlov of the St. Petersburg Medical Military Academy,” said the voice. A white bushy bearded face appeared in the pool of light that marked the end of the passage. “Are you here to rescue me?”

“Yes, we are,” answered Stanley, there no longer seeming to be any point in trying to remain silent.

“Please proceed with haste. We may not have much time.”

The tunnel opened into a subterranean pumping station crisscrossed with sturdy iron pipes. Steam hissed from slow-moving pistons that spun a heavy fly wheel connected to a tall cylinder. Along one side of the room, away from the machinery, a makeshift lab had been constructed. Chemicals, glassware and an array of scientific apparatus stood on benches, below which nestled a mass of empty cages.

“Welcome to my prison,” said Pavlov.

Lottie looked around. “You don't appear to be a prisoner?”

“The rats. They won't let me leave. The serum I created made them too intelligent.”

“Why do you want clever rats?” asked Stanley.

“The Ruskovian military planned to use rats to carry explosives into enemy defences, then detonate them. We soon discovered if you use Ruskovian rats they only attack Ruskovians. My position at Coxford University allowed me to train Brittanian rats but I thought a better solution was to make the rats intelligent. I was wrong.” Pavlov stroked a white rat with pink eyes that crawled from his jacket pocket. “One night I came down here to work and the rats had escaped. They force me to stay and keep making the serum, then they bring more rats.”

Lottie grabbed Stanley's arm and pointed. All around on the pipes and cylinders slunk an army of rats, their beady black eyes glowing in the lamp light, their razor-sharp teeth luminous slithers.

“I'm sorry I got you into this.” Pavlov held the white rat up and kissed it on the nose. “Pyotr here remained loyal. He took my message and set the trail for you, but I am afraid it is too late. The others, they want the serum and won't let us leave.”

“Oh, I think they will.” Stanley slung the wicker basket from his back and rested it on the floor. “I brought a secret weapon of our own.” He unbuckled the leather straps holding the basket's lid closed and took a step back.

The lid shuddered, then a leopard-spotted paw pushed out from beneath the wickerwork. A second paw joined the first and a sinewy gladiator of a cat slunk from within. Its golden rosette-spotted fur shimmered in the lamp light and it would have been quite beautiful were it not for its fight-tattered ears and devil yellow eyes that radiated malice.

“Meet Hobbes,” said Stanley. “Ratter extraordinaire.”

Hobbes yowled at the mention of his name. The vicious, threatening caterwaul bounced from the sewer walls to be met by a cacophony of squeaks. This time, however, they were not excited, or laughing, or threatening, but filled with terror.

## **ABOUT THE WRITER**



**Gareth Ward** attended Banbury Comprehensive School in the UK, with over 2200 children split between three halls and an upper school. Having absolutely no idea what he wanted to do on leaving school, and to stop everyone asking, Gareth told them he was going to be a vet. It was the humorous fantasy stories written by Terry Pratchett that steered him towards being an author. His advice to aspiring writers is to write what you enjoy reading – you’ve got to love your own work before anyone else does.

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