



Junquito

Surveillance on Metals had a touch of independence and adventure about it and Athelstar was pleased that Skandvar had managed to swing it for them. It gave a Rat a chance to explore and to make a name for himself. He was pleased that he had his best mate along even so.

For days now there had been something strange over in Metals, a confusing smell that gave Athelstar pause. Today they couldn't ignore the smell. Soon someone else would notice and wonder why they hadn't reported it first.

'We got to investigate, Skandi.'

'No, 'Star, we report back. We're surveillance, not exploration or defence.'

'We'll be a laughing stock! What are we going to report? It smells bad? We're in the middle of a flaming rubbish dump, of course it smells bad.'

'We trust our noses and whiskers, 'Star.

Badger, fox and cat

Hawk or dog or hostile Rat

The nest will fight together

'gainst all fur and feather

If some other creature call

Stick together one and all.

This is *some other creature*, 'Star. We have to tell the colony.'

‘It don’t smell ... dangerous though.’

They looked up at the towering heap, the biggest heap in the centre. It was the limit of their fief. Over to the left was Chemicals. One Rat could bring something back that would wipe out all three colonies. It had almost happened in the Great Death in the Third Year of the Colony. Metals wasn’t Forbidden though, just something to be kept an eye on in case anything turned up. Barren for the most part. Skandvar realised his impetuous friend would never forgive him if they didn’t at least poke their noses in to sniff the air. After all that was why they had been chosen for Surveillance, they were young and inquisitive. Without another word he squeezed under the corrugated iron fence and scurried to the edge of a car fender. He knew without looking that Athelstar would be right there with him.

‘OK, how far do we need to go. It’s stronger here.’

Athelstar’s whiskers twitched.

‘This way.’

He twisted and turned round the bumper, through the handles of an old lawnmower and suddenly they were in the darkness of the heap.

‘Never been this far in Skandi. Have you?’

‘Odin’s teeth, it’s like being in the tunnels. A Rat could live here, if only there were more food.’

‘Well something does, don’t it?’

They went slower now after the first charge, stealing through the maze of twisted metal, looking about in wonder, until they came to a larger chamber made by an old cast iron tub tilted on one edge. The smell was very strong.

‘Don’t see no tracks, ‘Star’

‘Smells though.’

‘I’m getting vibes, ‘Star. I don’t like it.’

‘We’re warriors, Skandi!’

And then the whole chamber seemed to rise and it was like the nightmare Athelstar used to have when he was a kitten; the nest thrust aside, pushing up, the open air engulfing him. The tub surged upwards, the smell was everywhere, Metal thrust towards them from every side. In a twisting, snarling surge of fur both Rats turned as one and fled for their lives.

Back in Cardboards, Tord was having a difficult day. Representatives from Materials and Organics had both turned up unannounced. By Thor, they knew the protocols. Materials and Organics didn't get on, that's why they sent ahead. Thankfully Raise had headed off young Litki from Organics before the two met.

They'd have to meet now though. This was a nest-wide problem. Rats disappearin' from thin air. No smell, not even traces of fight or panic. This was sudden death if death it was.

'Okay, Raisa, bring in Litki and Bronson – and make sure we have a full complement of warriors in here in case they decide to start something!'

Raisa, Tord's number one mate, scurried away and then Cardboards' top guards started to stream in, twenty of them. Enough to make sure both of the envoys kept their peace. Finally Litki, young, lean, bright eyed, and Bronson, old experienced, thick shoulders and haunches, were led in, eyeing each other warily.

'I've heard representations from Materials and Organics this morning,' he nodded to each in turn as he spoke, 'and I can assure you that I don't bring you together lightly. It seems clear that there is a nest wide catastrophe upon us and I do not want it made worse by misplaced blame between your two factions. Understood?'

They shuffled shamefaced, tails down and whiskers still.

'We must work together on this and I wish you both to take this message back to your ...!'

And then two young Rats bowled into the chamber wild eyed and stinking of terror.

Tord had held his paw up for calm before even the guards had moved. He recognised young Athelstar and Skandvar immediately. Young idiots bursting in on an audience at this level! Still no one would have stopped them in the state they were in. They both stood panting and exhausted at the centre of a horde of curious Rats.

'Skandvar? Explain yourself. You were assigned to Metals surely?'

'A m-monster, Lord Tord. In the middle of Metals. S-strange smell ... investigated ... enormous, metallic m-monster!'

'Anyone hurt? Did it follow you?'

They looked at one another and Athelstar shook his head.

'N-no, my Lord.'

Tord motioned for two guards to check entrances to Cardboard.

'OK, we have a little time. A monster? Could this be related?' He turned and addressed the last question to the two envoys.

Litki shrugged.

'A smell? We haven't been aware of it.'

Tord sighed. 'Tell me the story, boys.'

Alternating, Athelstar and Skandvar tumbled out their tale.

'Big then... really big?' asked Bronson,

'I felt it was all around us,' said 'Star still shaking. 'The whole structure moved.'

Tord raised up on his haunches, the biggest and most ferocious Rat in the colony.

'We must investigate. Bad times, bad times for all. Rats disappearing, monsters in Metals. Each of you bring five of your best warriors to Metals! They will be under our command!'

In less than an hour 'Star and Skandi were at the corrugated fence again, feeling braver with twenty fully mature warriors at their backs, the pick of the three tribes. The Rats

streamed into Metals following the scent of fear left by the two youngsters as they had fled earlier. It was an easy trail to follow. Before they reached the site of the ambush a warning screech was heard and everyone stopped dead still. There came a low thumping as the warrior who had stopped them signalled with flicks of his tail that they were to converge carefully towards him.

‘Star stared at the small ball in front of him. The Rats circled it watchfully but it was clear to all of them that this was no threat. And yet ... and yet it was undoubtedly the source of the smell that had drawn them here at first. Even to his fine sense of smell 'Star could not work out whether it was alive, dead, or simply some of the strange rubbish that the Humans brought here. Heavier than all but the biggest Rats it would take 2 or 3 of them to roll it back to the nest.

‘Star, curious as always, sniffed around it. Pitted skin with crevices across it, it was like nothing he had ever seen. He tried to get his teeth into it but it was hard. Nevertheless he thought that something stared deep within.

‘Are you sure we should take it to the nest?’

The leader of the guards looked amused.

‘Cautious? You? That’s a new one, Athelstar. It doesn't seem a threat. What worries you?’

‘Star twitched his whiskers.

‘Nothing. Everything. If this had something to do with what attacked us ...’

‘If this had something to do with what attacked you then we have nothing to worry about! Two *Surveillance* Rats escaped without a scratch. We have twenty warriors here.’

As darkness fell on the colony something stirred in Cardboards. Something that had been pushed and kicked, sniffed and scratched and finally abandoned in the tunnels. With a smooth twisting and a cautious stretch Junquito Tolypeutes Matacus risked a look. From Recife in Brazil to

a landfill in Reading is a long way and anyone making such a journey can be relied on to be a brave and even dangerous creature. Junquito would have been surprised at such a description and yet that is what he had become. It is doubtful whether any armadillo had undertaken such adventures or seen such wonders before Junquito. Here in England he had found at last some peace although he had also become to feel a little loneliness. He sensed the Silent Death were close and he had not wanted to bring other animals within their hunting ground. They would not come near the jagged heap of Metals but they watched, oh he knew they watched.

He had little fear of the Rats. He had known their sort the whole World over. Fine, courageous creatures. A little suspicious but fiercely loyal. Then the killing had begun. He sensed what the Rats couldn't because he knew what to look for. Whether They were just hungry or whether, more likely, they were challenging him, he did not know, but he couldn't let it go on.

He was in the nest to make contact with the Lord of the Rats. He had been sorry to scare the youngsters. He had admired their courage and hoped that they would not resent him. Taking his bearings in a strange complex of tunnels, as only one of his tribe could, he turned towards Tord's sleeping quarters and ambled, apparently carelessly along the corridor.

At the entrance to Tord's quarters a lone guard stood wide-eyed as the armadillo approached. Junquito held up a paw and slowly lowered it turning his face away in what he hoped would be understood as a gesture of peaceful intentions. He was pleased to see that the guard did not relax. These Rats would need all their cunning and care if they were to survive the Silent Death.

'I wish to see your Master. The survival of your colony depends upon it.'

'Stay still! I can call more guards in seconds.'

'Friend Rat, I may be bigger than you but I am no fighter.'

He lifted his sharp claws.

'These claws are for digging not fighting. This armour is to hide behind until my enemies tire.'

‘You say. How did you get into Cardboards? Did you kill the guard?’

Junquito could see that the Rat was terrified. It was only the paralysis of fear that had stopped him calling others already.

‘You brought me in yourselves!’

So quickly that the Rat hardly saw it happen Junquito transformed himself into a ball and rolled a few inches closer before smoothly uncurling again.

‘Your Master? Only I can help you overcome the Silent Death.’

A second Rat, a giant Rat, appeared from behind the guard.

‘I am his Master, and you are flirting with Hel, herself.’

Junquito dropped down low and twisted, showing his throat. He could, he knew, be all armoured up long before even the quickest Rat could reach him, but the gesture was clear. He offered no threat and had placed himself at their mercy.

‘You have manners at least for a stranger. Come no closer! The Silent Death? I see that you know of things that may be useful to us. Egill! Stay at your post. You, stranger, come with me.’

Junquito was impressed with the old Rat’s decisive manner of command. Of necessity he had to tell him a little of his own history. How the Tolypeutes had offended the Silent Death and how only he, Junquito the metalician, had survived. He knew that his story was dangerous. Some animals would give him up to rid themselves of the two Harpy Eagles that had followed him all the way from Recife, Brazil, to Reading, England. But he knew Rats. They had pride and loyalty matched by few others. He had come to them and now, he hoped, they would help him.

‘How, among all your kind, did you escape these creatures?’

Again and again it came to that question and Junquito found himself explaining, to animals not equipped to understand, how he worked with metal, how it was the Tolypeutes way to defend themselves with armour and how he, Junquito the metalician, had learned to add to himself, to make himself bigger, stronger and safer using the metals thrown away by

the *homens* in Recife and now here in England.

‘And this was how you frightened our Surveillance team? They returned with tales of a huge monster and yet we found a ... a ball. Harmless we thought.’

‘I am harmless, Senhor. I can frighten even the mighty if they are unprepared and I can hide behind my armour even under attack from the Silent Death. But I do not have the instincts to harm another creature. With your help though ...’

Watched over by Egill, Tord and Junquito spent the night talking. The Harpy Eagles, called the Silent Death by men and beasts in their native Brazil, had killed six Rats in the last few days. According to Junquito - a strange name, perhaps Junk would make more sense - they had only been here a couple of days, finally catching up with him when he thought he had escaped. In a week they would have the whole colony in terror. They needed a plan, and they needed to work together, all three colonies, and Junk too.

’Star was out beyond Materials, out where he shouldn’t be, where two Rats had disappeared before. No safe ground here. Even if he saw something coming he had too far to run. The Silent Death, the stranger had called them. The Stranger from far-off Brazil, called Junk the Armadillo by Lord Tord, didn’t seem or smell dangerous but ’Star couldn’t forget how he had seemed that first time in Metals. How had he done it? No one knew and the armadillo himself either couldn’t or wouldn’t explain. He took on the Metal somehow. He had returned to Metals in the morning, after spending more hours with Tord, saying that he had much work to do.

Concentrate. The site was dusty at this time of year and the sun shone bright. Tord had said this should help them. They would see the shadow of the enemy a moment before the strike. But Junquito, Junk, had said ‘No’. The Silent Death cast no shadow. They come from nowhere and go nowhere. It was obvious that Junk himself hated risking the Rats lives but he could not do this himself.

There was a low whistle and ’Star turned. Skandi was far away, closer to Metals,

safer. They could not seem to be together. Junk had told them that the Harpies would strike as one, that they would not see or hear anything but that the first strike was rarely fatal. He stopped and sniffed the air, looked up into the sky and saw nothing. Turned back and busied himself as before as if following a trail.

He was perhaps dreaming. Had the sun taken away his senses? It was as if the wind had suddenly blown and the sky had come down to greet him. He felt nothing. No, not true. On one side he felt the wind blow, on the other he had no feeling as the sharp talons caressed his side. He had not really imagined that the armadillo could be telling the truth. A creature that could strike a Rat without a smell, a sound or sight, he would have said that it was impossible. And then, improbably, he was falling, it seemed like forever. He twisted in the air, bringing his feet down first in a landing that knocked his breath away and then scanned around to figure out where he had landed. Just within the perimeter fence thank goodness, but dangerously close to Chemicals and quite a way from Metals. He couldn't see Skandi and hoped that his friend had fared better, or at least no worse, than he had. He searched the air anxiously for signs of the Harpies, or any other airborne predator, for kestrels and buzzards might take the opportunity of a Rat in the open. No sign. Had the plan worked? Had the Harpies shown themselves in their attack frenzy and allowed Junk to divert their attack to him.

Feeling bruised and broken he dived for cover and started to make his way carefully towards Metals. His sharp ears picked up the faraway clang of metal and he followed the noise. Skirting round the edge he smelled Junk's strange odour. Skandi was hobbling towards him, one leg hanging uselessly and he wondered how he himself looked after his battering by the birds.

Skandi pulled him along, around the edge of a car, and there was the monster Junquito, their new friend Junk, not a strange scaly creature a little bigger than a Rat, but a huge metal monster as big as the Men who worked on the site, with shining metal claws, thick rusting armour, and a cage, the strong bars pulled together by the armadillos legs. The cage was

part of him and he could not move without releasing the Harpy Eagles within. The Silent Death were the biggest birds 'Star had ever seen and they were not taking their captivity peacefully. It was not the Rats' way to fight quietly like this and 'Star found it terrible to watch. They tore and scratched ferociously but silently with their terrible beaks and razor sharp claws. He was astonished to realize that only a few minutes ago he had been held in those savage talons.

Even the slightest gap or weakness in the armour would have meant certain death for Junquito. As he watched 'Star began to make out the armadillo's features in the mass of metal. His face was halfway up the structure and if the talons could reach far enough they would tear him to pieces. A stain of blood lay on the ground beneath them and 'Star realised that the Harpies must have struck at least once before the trap shut around them.

He heard a low murmur begin and moved closer. It was not the Harpies but Junk himself who was making the sound. A long low ululation, a rhythmic singing, and as he sang the ferocious attack subsided. Eventually the two creatures stood transfixed, sharp eyes dulled. This, Junk had told them was the most dangerous moment.

Tord stepped forwards and slowly Junk parted the cage. The strange wailing continued and Tord motioned silently for the Rats to enter the cage and start leading the two predators out. Brave as he was 'Star didn't think he would dare do that, but the well-trained warriors filed in and began to push the two Harpies forwards.

Once they were out of the cage Tord turned to the Rats.

'We must act quickly. If the stranger stops his song we are all dead, you understand? Now to your jobs!'

Rats scattered in all directions and the warriors began to lead the Harpy Eagles towards the most dangerous part of the site, the Human dwellings. They couldn't go beyond the sound of Junk's singing but it was crucial that they were close enough to the Humans for the plan to work. 'Star and Skandi headed closer to the colony. What was coming was, to

them, worse than the Harpies themselves because it had been terrified them all of their lives. The dogs that the Humans kept were mostly to keep other Humans off the site, but they took Rats if Rats were silly enough to come too close. They could have decimated the colony but their instinct told them that taking on a whole colony of Rats was a dangerous thing to attempt.

He heard the barking first and then picked out Egill, Tord's personal guard, tearing across the dusty ground. Two huge Rottweilers hurtled around the corner after Egill as he dived under a fence and Wulfram, a powerful Rat from Organics, sped out into their path a few metres further on. If he could only round the next corner towards Metals then the Harpies would be in sight and surely the dogs would head for them. Fast as they were the Rats were no match for the Rottweilers and 'Star held his breath as he saw them round the corner. If only Wulfram could get to cover and leave them with only the two eagles in sight. But there was no cover. 'Star could see the panicked Rat's head darting this way and that and then ... the young warrior plunged between the eagles and stopped stone still.

As the dogs ploughed into the birds, the Harpies' strange trance was broken. There was a twisting and snarling melee of fur and feathers as the four animals collided. Caught unawares the Eagles were at a disadvantage but 'Star realised that if they gained flight they would be more than a match for the dogs. He heard a yelp and one dog threw himself backwards and then stood at bay. An eagle lay on the ground, its wings flapping feebly. Another fought for its life tearing at the second dog. There was blood everywhere and then both dogs stood at bay and there was a moment of calm. The Eagle turned swiftly, gathered up its mate in its claws and took to the air.

'They will not come back, at least I think not.'

They turned to see Junk, small again now but back to his usual form, standing watching as the bird gained height.

‘I have travelled a long way to get rid of them. Who would have thought that here, in this quiet little place, where creatures do not know the ways of the jungle, that I should find the friends who could rid me of them?’

Tord stepped forwards and bowed a little in recognition of bravery of the armadillo. Junquito Tolypeutes Matacus bowed deep and low back and then turned to make his way into the depths of Metals.

