

A Spell of Rats in Bad Places

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"Obviously," said Magician Reed, smiling from his vantage point on top of the kitchen table, "the royal kitchen has been with cursed with a Spell of Rats in Bad Places."

Second Assistant Magician Stalk studied his master and the King from his precarious position on top of the potato bin. He watched as Magician Reed glanced down at the hem of his long red velveteen cloak where a large brown and black rat was gnawing away at the gold trim. The Magician leaned over and tapped its furry head with his wand. The rat turned into purple smoke and wafted away.

Stalk looked back down at the stone kitchen floor where hundreds of squeaking black and brown rodents scurried back and forth over the stone floor.

More rats crept out from under the large cast iron stove. One leapt up towards First Assistant Magician Cane, who was balanced on the grain bin; another rat climbed up onto the table and stared at the King's leg. Stalk smiled to himself as King Marish hopped up and down on the tabletop, his chubby legs, covered in white silk hose, bounced and jiggled. It was all Stalk could do to keep from laughing when the King closed his eyes, scrunched his face, and kicked the rat off the table's edge. A royal black patent leather shoe with a silver buckle flew off after the rat and joined it under the icebox.

"I don't care what its name is, get rid of these... creatures! Use that purple smoke trick or something. And one of you fetch my shoe!"

Magician Reed raised the hem of his cloak and checked for hidden visitors beneath his legs. A kitchen wench tentatively poked her head through the doorway, squealed, and fled when fourteen rats raced toward her with tiny teeth bared.

"I am very sorry, Sire. I can easily eliminate this group of rats, but I fear that they will just continue to appear. You must understand, Your Majesty, that the name of the spell is actually *very* important." Stalk felt himself grow nervous. He knew what was coming.

"Stalk," directed the Magician. "Please explain to His Majesty."

Stalk cleared his throat. Magician Reed considered everything that occurred in the world as an excuse for a magic lesson. Failure resulted in extra study time. Therefore he gathered his thoughts carefully before answering.

"Well, Sire," he bowed his head towards the King and rapidly touched his chin, nose, and forehead with his right index finger. "The name of the spell is, in fact an indication of the nature of the spell. You might even say that the name of a spell is the spell." Stalk adjusted his balance on top of the potato box while keeping both eyes on ten red-eyed rats gathered below him. Stalk swore that they were licking their lips and waiting patiently for him to fall.

King Marish kicked another rat off the table with his remaining shod foot. He looked slightly confused and greatly impatient. "Yes, yes. Go on."

Stalk stroked his wispy blond beard. "For example, Sire. If Magician Reed had determined that this was a Curse of Continual Infestation, then the means to eliminate that spell would be vastly different than, say, an Incantation of Annoying Rodents, or in this case A Spell of Rats in Bad Places."

The Master Magician cleared his throat and ran his fingers down the long gray folds of his full beard.

"Excellent, Stalk. So, Sire. As I said. Since this is a Spell of Rats in Bad Places, my divinations and my obscure and arcane sources inform me that the only one who could have performed this deed is my old mentor, Wizard Stone--"

"--Wizard Stone, Sir?" First Assistant Magician Cane interrupted from his perch on top of the grain bin. "Didn't I see you having a beer with Wizard Stone last Tuesday at the Mangy Dog --"

"--Ixnay, Cane." Magician Reed frowned and pointed his wand at his assistant. Cane shut his mouth.

"Furthermore, Sire I have determined that if Wizard Stone cast this spell, then it must have been a deathbed wish. For only a deathbed wish could contain enough power to break the extremely well crafted spells of warding and protection that I have placed about this castle. Wizard Stone must have received permission from his King to place this spell upon your kitchen."

"But, Sire," Cane spoke again. "Didn't you teach us that the Spell of Rats in Bad Places is a spell which you alone developed and perfect--"?

"--Cane. Please do not interrupt while I am attempting to inform His Majesty, our benefactor, how we are going to rid his kitchen of rats."

Stalk noticed that King Marish had paid no attention to either Reed or Cane. The King cursed and paced back and forth on his section of the table.

"Stone! He has hated me ever since I sacked him ten years ago. The incompetent fool. It wouldn't surprise me to find him behind this. And King Firth would like nothing more than to see me suffer." He stopped abruptly and spun around to face Reed.

"Reed. Do what is necessary. I need my kitchen back in order." The King flung himself around in a half circle. "I have peasants to flay, merchants to tax, and Barons to behead." The King crossed his hands behind his back and sighed. "It is a busy and stressful day."

Stalk noticed Magician Reed grip his wand in both hands. Reed's knuckles whitened as King Marish continued his rant.

"And where is that cowardly cook. People of her station are used to rats. She should be here. I'll flay her like I did the last one if I don't get my mid-morning sandwich."

The King flung his arms wide and tilted back his head. His silk-lined velvet blue robe billowed open. He shouted at the top of his voice. "Cook!"

Stalk winced at the King's high-pitched scream and wished he had brought an Amulet of Selective Silence.

The door opened a crack and a timid voice squeaked through the opening.

"Sire?"

"Cook? Is that you? Get in here and prepare my lunch. I will be in my private rooms." A loud thunk came from behind the door, as if something large had hit the floor. *Sounds like a large middle-aged lady passing out*, Stalk thought.

King Marish turned to Magician Reed. "You have permission to perform magic upon my person. Please transport me to my rooms. Carefully now, you know I get motion sickness."

Reed let out a deep breath, smiled, and waved his wand over the King. All three magicians touched their chins, noses, and foreheads as the King faded from view. Stalk grinned as Magician Reed waved his wand toward the icebox. The silver buckled shoe disappeared as well.

"So, gentlemen." Reed announced. "We must begin. What shall we do first?"

Stalk thought he knew and blurted out an answer before Cane had a chance. "Could we use a Spell of Rodent Banishment? I just learned that one. I would be glad to perform the preparations, Sir."

Magician Reed shook his head. "Stalk, Stalk, Stalk. For one thing, the Spell of Rodent Banishment wouldn't work for the same reason that my Transformation into Purple Smoke would not work. The rats would continue to appear. Secondly, I believe I asked what we should do *first*. Cane?"

"First, Sir. We should arrange for King Marish to get his mid-morning sandwich." Cane smiled. "Shall I, Magician Reed?"

Reed nodded and absentmindedly zapped a rat that had traveled part way up his robe to sniff inside a large pocket. First Assistant Magician Cane called out for the cook.

"Cook. Please come to the door and open it part way. I will assist you in preparing the King's meal." They listened and heard the cook raising herself from the floor. The door creaked open. Fifty rats turned their heads in anticipation.

"Very good. Please hold still for a moment." Cane pulled a wand from his long woolen robe and began to wave it toward the kitchen door. He mumbled and chanted as he waved. A brown-green fog appeared at the tip of his wand and wafted across the room and out the door.

Cane placed his wand back into his robe. "You may safely enter the room, Cook." The door opened slowly, and the cook tentatively shuffled into the room. As she crept across the kitchen, the rats charged, but fled just as quickly. A puzzled Cook sniffed and held her nose; she shrugged and walked boldly across the room and toward the icebox.

"Gads, Cane. What did you do? She smells like sewage. I'm getting sick." Stalk held both hands over his mouth. He felt like he was a victim of a Curse of Green Around One's Gills.

Stalk grinned as Magician Reed removed a tiny clip from within his robes and placed it on his nose. "Cane has used a Curse of Particularly Foul Smelling Scum. Excellent, Cane. Don't worry how that foul scent will effect the food. I've tasted Cook's sandwiches. This odor may actually enhance their flavor."

Cook flung a scowl over her shoulder towards Magician Reed, then nervously continued her royal sandwich preparations, traversing the kitchen within her rat free zone. Stalk and Cane left their perches and jumped onto the kitchen table to join their master.

"Gentlemen. This is a particularly difficult spell to remove. By the way, First Assistant Magician Cane. I would appreciate it if you kept your knowledge of

my comings and goings to yourself in the future. Particularly if you wish your head to continue to look like your head. Magician Stone and I were discussing some particularly intricate points of magic. That is all you need to know." Reed glared at his first assistant while Stalk smirked.

"Stalk. I suggest an extra four hours of study tonight before bed. You seem to need brushing up on the applicability of Banishment Spells." Stalk wiped the smirk from his face.

"Gads! I love this spell. Countless, unending rats pouring forth from a location calculated by the spell to be of great discomfort for the victim." Reed surveyed the rat filled room. "This is an beautifully cast spell, is it not, gentlemen?"

Stalk nodded his head in agreement. He glanced at Cane who was nodding as well.

Reed continued. "Cane. How may we proceed?"

Cane cleared his throat and glanced around the room. Stalk noticed that the rats now filled the entire space of the kitchen. They even seemed to be piling up on top of each other. Except of course, wherever Cook walked with her Scum Smelling Feet.

"Sir. I feel we should banish this lot, then layer a Cantrip of Periodic Intermittence on top of the existing Spell of Rats in Bad Places. Finally, we would need to move the existing spell to another location where it would continue to operate, but would no longer cause harm to His Majesty's kitchen."

"Excellent, Cane. You will soon be ready for full Magician status. Stalk? Please tell me what Cane's suggestion would do?"

Stalk thought a moment. He reached into his ragged rough linen robe and retrieved a well-fingered notebook. After consulting several pages, he responded. "Sirs," he nodded at Reed and Cane. "Cane's suggestion would clear the kitchen of this batch of rats and alter the original spell. Instead of Rats appearing in random amounts at random times, we would cause them to appear one at a time."

"Excellent, Stalk. Almost exactly right. Cane?"

"Yes, Sir." He looked down his nose at Stalk. "The Cantrip of Periodic Intermittence can be adjusted to force the rats to appear one a time in a predictable amount of time. I think I could slow it down to a once every ten heartbeats. Would that be sufficient, Magician Reed?"

"Quite. That will make the task of moving the spell much easier. I wish I could just reverse the silly spell entirely, but that is our curse. The Spell of Rats in Bad Places is just too refined." He glanced at Stalk and threw him a wink.

"Stalk. Since you will be studying banishment spells this evening, I would like you to perform the first step. Cane. You may perform the Cantrip. Meanwhile, I will prepare myself for applying the Charm Locomotive."

Stalk, obviously not wanting to mess up this opportunity to impress his master, stood up on the table and removed his wand. He kicked two rats off the edge of the table and concentrated on the black and gray mass of undulating rodentia below him. After a quick consultation in his notebook for the proper words, he waved his wand and chanted.

"Rodentia Deflagro!"

Every rat inside the kitchen instantly burst into flame. Smoke filled the room, and for a brief moment thousands of tiny squeals could be heard. All three magicians erupted into a fit of coughing. Magician Reed waved his wand while hiding his stinging eyes in the sleeve of his robe. The smoke cleared.

Stalk looked down from the table. The floor showed no sign of rats, but a coating of what appeared to be fine black soot lay over everything. He glanced around to find the cook. She was standing in the center of the room, covered with rat soot, a black sandwich in her shaking hands. She threw the sandwich on the floor and stormed out of the room screaming about damn fool wizards with their bungling spells.

Magician Reed stroked his beard. "Hmm. Well, Stalk. I might have chosen to say Rodentia Aboleo and merely caused them to disappear into ether, but your method did work." The Magician brushed soot from his red cloak and grimaced in disgust when he noticed that it left a stain.

"Cane? It appears to be your turn. And please, something less dramatic than our well meaning Second Assistant."

Cane did not hesitate but raised his wand and began to chant. "Brevis Decimus, Tempus Fugit!"

Nothing obvious happened. They peered over the edge of the table at the kitchen floor. Nothing. Time ticked away as they counted heartbeats. Stalk saw it first.

"There, Master! Under the ice box." A rat poked its nose out and surveyed the rat immolation. It scurried across the floor and began to drag the sandwich back toward wall. Ten beats later, another rat appeared from under the icebox, rushed out and began to fight its predecessor for the meal.

"Excellent, Cane. Excellent. You have controlled the timing perfectly and allowed us to identify locus of the spell. Now it is my --"

"--Reed! You worthless excuse for a magician!" The King tramped back into the kitchen, slipped on black soot and fell upon his velvety blue behind.

"Damnation on you Reed. The cook has quit, which of course means that I will have to execute her. And why am I still on this filthy floor?"

Reed, Cane, and Stalk scrambled off of the table and scurried to help raise the King to his feet. Another rat appeared from the icebox and joined the great sandwich battle. In the bustle, Stalk found himself on his knees brushing rat remains off of the royal backside. He stopped and looked up to see the King glaring down at him. Stalk turned bright red and sheepishly stood back up. He silently slid behind Magician Reed.

King Marish recovered a portion of his dignity and demeanor while all three magicians performed a continuous cycle of chin, nose, forehead salutes.

"So, Reed. I see you have almost succeeded." Stalk grimaced as the King looked down at the foot of the icebox where five rats were tearing apart the remains of his meal.

"But you have had plenty of time. All ten of my barons will be arriving soon, I will need the assistant cook to prepare an evening meal for myself and my nine remaining barons. I also saw a rat in my bedroom. I swear, Reed. If one crawls on top of me tonight in bed, I will have your head and the heads of these cowering idiots next to you."

Stalk, hiding behind his master, could feel the magician shaking with anger. Unbidden, the thought entered Stalk's head that Her Majesty has had to deal with that very problem ever since her marriage to the King. He wisely held in his snicker.

"Yes, Sire. Of course, you are correct to be displeased. But the last part of my procedure is to move the spell to a less harmful location. Mage Law constrains me against performing any magic that my liege does not approve; therefore, I must ask you where you would like the rats moved. Might I suggest the wine cellar, or the gardener's shack, or the --"

"Damnation, Reed!" King Marish hopped back up on the table as the fifth rat was joined by a sixth. The sixth one had ignored the sandwich and skittered toward the King.

"I don't care where you put the spell. Just get the rats out of my kitchen!" He pulled a silk handkerchief from his sleeve and dabbed a bead of sweat from his forehead.

"Well, Sire. It is not a simple task. It must be shifted to *another* bad place. I mean I can't just send it out into the forest. That wouldn't qualify."

Stalk was surprised by his master's unusual hesitation.

"For instance I could send it to Her Majesty's dressing room; that would definitely qualify as a bad place, but then--" Reed pulled out his wand and tapped it on his palm as he thought. "--that wouldn't help us much, would it?"

Stalk could see that the King had had enough of Magician Reed's indecision. From his perch on the table, he yelled and stomped his fat little feet.

"Reed. I--don't--care. Send it anywhere. I order you to move this spell now!"

Stalk swore that Magician Reed smiled. He stepped back as his master raised his wand.

"Rodentia Locomotus Inguinis."

Green smoke wafted from the Magician's wand and surrounded the rats on the floor. They disappeared in a puff. The smoke continued along the floor and disappeared under the icebox. King Marish, Stalk, and Cane gaped in fascination. Reed crossed his arms and closed his eyes.

A moment later, the green smoke drifted back out from under the icebox and lazily made its way up and to the kitchen table. King Marish jumped as the smoke curled between his legs and then blew out of the window and disappeared.

"Wh-- Wh--" The King stammered. "Where did it go, Reed? Where did you send it?"

Stalk looked around but was as confused as everyone. Magician Reed seemed to be counting under his breath but paused to speak.

"We should know right about..." He continued his count.

"...eight abracadabras, nine abracadabras, ten abracadabras. Now!"

They all waited. Then the King began to twitch. He started dancing around the table, yelling and screaming.

"Damn you, Reed! You will die for this!"

The King jumped off the table and fell to the floor. He rapidly began unbuckling his clothing and pulling down his hose and raising his bodkin. A large black rat jumped out from between the Kings legs and disappeared under the

stove. Moments later, another rat appeared perched between the King's very white and very chubby legs.

"Definitely a very bad place. Wouldn't you say, Stalk?"

Stalk pushed his fingers in his ears to try and mask the King's screaming as rats appeared in the area of his groin every ten counts. Magician Reed turned to Cane.

"Cane. It seems that the position of Master Magician is now open in King Marish's castle. I think you are ready for the task."

Cane stood with mouth open and nodded. "But, Sir. The rats? They are coming out of his --" Cane looked at King Marish rolling on the ground in agony, shuddered and turned away.

"Oh, don't worry about that." Reed waved his wand at the kitchen door and a giant bolt appeared, locking the door from outside intruders. Royal guards, in response to the screams banged on the other side of the door, demanding to be let in.

"Actually, the spell is on his undergarments. Sooner or later, he will figure that out and take them off. You heard my Charm Locomotus. Just modify it and send the Spell somewhere else."

Magician Reed moved to the back door and opened it. He looked down at King Marish writhing on the floor and grinned. "I think you may safely assume the King's permission to perform magic upon his person."

Reed stepped outside and then turned back. "Er. Magician Cane. Would you mind bumbling around a bit? Give us a head start?" Cane continued staring at the King's legs but nodded his head.

Reed motioned towards Stalk. "Coming? I will need a new First Assistant."

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Stalk groaned and shifted their bulky pack hoping to find a better spot for it on his shoulders. They had left the castle behind, but every ten counts, a bloodcurdling scream pierced the air. Stalk glanced over at his Master.

"Sir, may I ask a question?"

"Certainly, Stalk. Ask two if you like."

"Well, Sir. The spell. It is your spell, is it not?"

Reed placed his hand on his assistant's shoulder and kept walking. "Yes it is, Stalk. One of my finest. No Spellcaster could have cast that spell without my assistance."

"Well then, Sir. Did you ask Wizard Stone to cast the spell?"

"Very good Stalk. I am impressed."

"So, Wizard Stone didn't really die?"

"No, Stalk. Wizard Stone did not die -- He and I came to a Wizard's agreement. We are a fiercely competitive lot but we both had items to trade. He wished to retire, I wished to get out from under King Marish's, shall we say, less than enlightened approach to leadership. We struck a deal."

"Sir! But then that means you planned this all--"

"Stalk, Let's just say that Wizard Stone was too old to properly perform the intricate Translocation to Climates Containing Scantly Clad Women." Reed removed a worn pipe from within his robe and tinkered with the tobacco inside the bowl. "And I needed someone to cast the spell of Rats in Bad Places. Mage Law prevented me from applying it myself." He peered down at Stalk.

"It also means that Wizard Stone is now basking on the beaches of the South Islands and that King Firth has an opening for a new Master Magician -- and a first assistant. Stone assured me that Firth's dungeons are seldom used and his people are often happy."

Stalk stumbled on a stick, recovered and hurried to catch up. Reed picked up the pace as they crossed the Fords of the Swampy River. They were now in King Firth's lands. Reed pulled his wand out of his robes and began to polish it on his velveteen robe as they walked. Stalk surveyed the bright green meadow that they now strolled through. He took in a deep breath and smelled the flowering redfruit bushes scattered about their path.

"Stalk, remind me to tell you the story of The Curse of Incomparable Beauty."

"Incomparable Beauty, Sir? That would not be a curse. That would be a good thing."

Magician Reed smiled at Stalk. "Oh no, my young friend. It is a horrible curse, which causes great trouble for the maiden and for all those around her. I remember a young lady; name of Helen, I think. She had the curse. Oh! The trouble that caused..."

They kept traveling, farther and farther away from King Marish. At first, periodic and horrible screams interrupted their technical discussion. But as they walked, the screams faded, as did any residual guilt.

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