

Introduction

I wrote the following novella in a former lifetime way back in 1988. I used ST Write to pen "Readers of the Lost Bark" and I only had a few short weeks to do it in. I guess it was my own fault for volunteering to write it after the novella that was originally lined up turned out to be (a) worse than my eventual attempt, and (b) very unfinished! Of course, it didn't turn out to be quite such an urgent job in the end, as the game was ultimately delayed by the sale of Telecomsoft to Microprose UK.

There was a long list of elements that had to be thrown into the plot. The novella had to end at the start of the game, and include all of the game elements within it. With the appropriate encouragement from the Project Manager, (Gary Sheinwald), I bashed away on my Atari STFM and wrote the novella in record time. Gary contributed the lyrics to the song, sung to the main tune in the game.

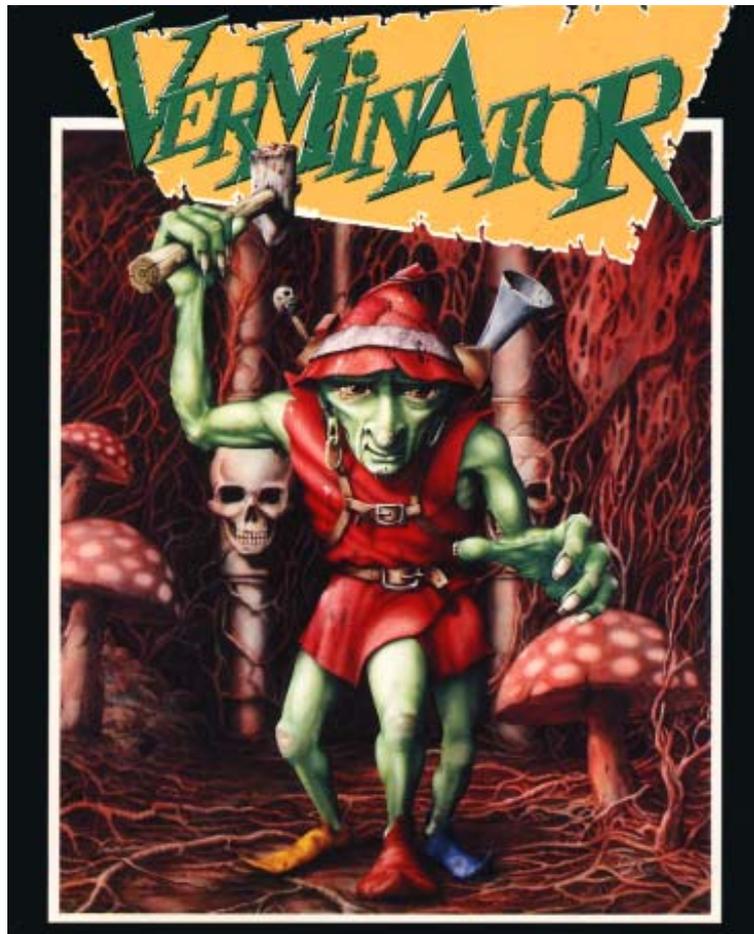
I think it was me who named the main character Jake, after the infamous Rolf Harris song "I'm Jake the Peg, With the extra Leg...". I fully expected to be asked to re-write most of the novella once I turned in my first finished draft, but for reasons I still don't understand, I never was.

Needless to say, I didn't write any more novellas after this one! Instead, I turned my attention to game manuals and have written over forty to date including Dino Dini's Goal!, Liberation: Captive 2, Legend, Reach for the Skies, and Lords of Midnight: The Citadel.

Anyway, please bare these facts in mind when reading the story that follows. It's always painful reading something that you wrote years ago, and this is no exception. As to whether it augmented or hindered the game, only the people who bought it can say one way or the other!

Richard Hewison, May 2002.

<p>NB: This document is only authorised for inclusion on "The Bird Sanctuary" (memories of Telecomsoft) at http://www.birdsanctuary.co.uk/ and Jeremy Smith's "Retro Reading - The Game Novellas Homepage" website at http://come.to/novellas. If you downloaded this file from any other website, please let me know by emailing me at: richard@www.birdsanctuary.co.uk.</p>



READERS OF THE LOST BARK

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Prologue

Jake could still remember the fateful day as if it was only yesterday. At first he presumed it was the lingering after-effects of the home brewed tree-root beer which he had drunk by the bottle the night before, but the reflection in his bedroom mirror only helped to confirm his worst fears. Somehow, during the night, Jake had acquired an extra leg...

Chapter One

He lay under the mushroom-skin sheets for what seemed like an eternity and stared in repeated disbelief at the three feet which poked defiantly out from the end of the bed. He rubbed his eyes, squinted at them through his fingers, then finally lifted up the sheets for a peek below as curiosity gained the better of him.

Sure enough, there was a third leg where before there had been only two. It was only when he tried to stand up and look at himself in the full length mirror on the far side of his squalid bedroom that the full significance of the new limb became apparent.

Up until that eventful morning, Jake had been just another ordinary citizen, unemployed and penniless. The Wallflower Street crash of '58 had badly affected the economic growth of the Kingdom of Dendra, and jobs rapidly became scarce. Shops and businesses closed down every day and even members of the police force were laid off and replaced with more efficient droid patrol units. The Tree Council was not entirely blameless for the depression, and the popularity of the Mayor plummeted as the community became more cynical of his hypocritical policies. The crime rate soared as more and more citizens became desperate, and the infamous crime syndicates prospered in the underground. Slowly but surely, the social fabric of Dendra was falling apart.

The present state of the Kingdom was the farthest thing from Jake's mind as he struggled to get out of bed. Having three legs made walking suddenly very difficult indeed, and after only a few short steps he twisted and fell flat on his face, banging his nose on the hard bark floor. He dragged himself back to the relative safety of his bed, and thought the problem through. After a few moments of deliberation, he confidently stood up again and moved each leg slowly in turn. This seemed to work, and after a couple of minutes of awkward (not to say, embarrassing) shuffling across to the other side of the room, he reached the mirror and immediately wished that he hadn't as he caught sight of his reflection. It would certainly take some getting used to, but Jake honestly believed that the idea of having a third leg would grow on him, given time.

'Perhaps good old Fig will have an answer', said Jake as he studied himself.

Fig was his lifelong friend, and a self-employed inventor, whom he hadn't seen or heard from in weeks. In the past Fig had re-invented the wheel so many times that he got the distinct feeling that he was going round in circles. He once invented an automated door knocker that detected when someone was standing on the doorstep and knocked on the door. Unfortunately, the first caller to try out the new

invention was the morning Vine juice deliverer. He bent down to place the usual two bottles on the step and the automated knocker caught him on the head as he stood up and knocked him out cold. He was unconscious in hospital for a week.

Another of his less successful inventions was the 'Morning After Get Fresh Quick Kit', which comprised an automated arm equipped with soap, towel, toothbrush and paste. Unfortunately, it insisted on squirting toothpaste into your ear, rubbing soap in your eyes, and as for where it put the toothbrush, that was altogether something else. Let's just say that Mrs Blossom has not spoken to Fig since.

Jake turned away from the mirror and slowly moved off down the tunnel towards the kitchen. As he entered the less than hygienic room, he opened the wall cupboard to his right and pulled out a clean mug, then opened another small cupboard to his left and produced yesterday's empty bottle of vine juice. It was only after opening the bottle and trying to pour some non-existent liquid into the mug that Jake noticed it was empty. He threw it into the waste disposal hole next to the breakfast table, with the accuracy of a well rehearsed routine, then left the kitchen and headed for the front door.

As he approached the door he bent down and picked up the newspaper which lay on the mat, slightly torn at the edges where it had obviously been shoved through in a hurry. It reminded Jake of his brief stint as a newspaper deliverer when he was just 8 rings old, and how he was fired after one day for delivering every paper on his round to the wrong house.

The heavy oak door opened with an irritating creak. Jake looked outside. His house was one of a few in this part of the Down Town district, each of them more or less the same with their solid oak doors and small windows. The pathway outside Jake's house was covered by a mass of untidy knotted roots which he always managed to trip over.

It was one more thing he had always meant to complain about to the Tree Council. He bent down to pick up his daily bottle of vine Juice only to discover that it wasn't there. He looked around but it couldn't be seen anywhere. Jake cursed under his breath. He always had a bad day if he didn't start with a glass of juice. He slammed the door shut behind him and decided to crawl back to bed, tucking his copy of the Daily Leaf newspaper under his arm as he went. In fact, he was so pre-occupied with his missing juice and extra leg that he totally failed to notice that it was extraordinarily quiet outside. The street was completely empty...

The thing Jake liked most about the Daily Leaf was its sensationalism of the most trivial news stories, yet the front page headline that morning somehow seemed to be taking things a little too far. The words:

DENDRA DOOMED!

greeted him in big bold letters that filled up most of the page and leapt out and hit Jake right between the eyes.

"Great, first an extra leg and now the world is going to end!", he grumbled as he dumped himself back on the bed. However, as he began to read the paper he became more and more engrossed in it...

'The Daily Leaf can exclusively reveal today that the Kingdom of Dendra is threatened by a disaster of unparalleled proportion. The Tree Council has known for some time about the existence of a terrible new disease which is slowly affecting the inhabitants of all the districts within Dendra and causing widespread mutations within the community. It has already affected droves of vermin, who have in the past lived unnoticed in the shadows and deserted areas of Dendra. Giant specimens of mutated vermin have been in the custody of scientists at the Tree Council for the past few weeks, although yesterday Mayor Squishenbacker was making a formal "no comment" on this subject'.

(A small blurred black and white picture of something that was supposed to be a giant mutated vermin filled the middle right of the front page). The article continued...

'One of the eminent scientists involved in the investigation told this newspaper "off the record" that an invasion of giant mutated vermin was expected in the next couple of weeks, although it was no cause for alarm. Dr. Figgis Twig also believed that the disease would affect almost all the citizens of Dendra given time, although there is only speculation as to what the common symptoms might be. Watch out for the next mutation update, only in the Daily Leaf.'

He read the story a couple of times, and then stared at the ceiling while he considered what to do next. Where did this disease come from and how did he contract it? As he thought over these two questions, a third came to mind. What on Dendra was Fig doing working for the Tree Council? He wasn't a doctor of anything, and he certainly wasn't an officially recognised scientist. The Council must have been desperate for help.

Jake decided that he had to act quickly. If the newspaper was correct, (and it often wasn't) then he wouldn't be the only citizen affected by the disease, so he really didn't have to worry too much about going outside. He pulled on his red tunic, then picked up his shoes and put them on. Looking down at the new foot it looked very sorry for itself without a shoe. After searching through his wardrobe, Jake decided to wear three different shoes to make everything appear colour dis-coordinated and normal, or at least as normal as it could be under the circumstances.

As Jake pulled the front door to, and started out on his journey, he remembered his mother, who had always told him to wear fresh underwear in case he was ever involved in an accident. He just hoped that it was all temporary, since the red shoe on the new foot was a very tight fit indeed.

Every street along Jake's journey seemed totally deserted. As he shuffled past one house, he just caught sight of a worried face that immediately disappeared again. It was very strange to see Dendra so solemn and empty. Jake was so used to the bustling activity in the Down Town district that he'd never imagined it could be like this.

After an uneventful journey, Jake reached Fig's house. As usual, he was rather cautious as he approached the front door. He closely examined the doorstep for any tell-tale wires or devices, but he couldn't see anything out of the ordinary. Having convinced himself that everything was safe, Jake reached for the large tree-shaped brass door knocker. He knocked hard three times and stepped back, awaiting the familiar sound of the door bolt being drawn back from the inside. But it didn't come.

Jake bent down and looked through the letterbox.

"Fig, open up. It's me - Jake!", he shouted.

senior member of the Tree Council, with large bulging eyes and a prominent nose. It all seemed to be calm and peaceful outside, but he expected it to be quite different once the vermin arrived...

There was a loud knock on the door and in marched Mayor Squishenbacker, dressed as always in his flowing black gown and golden chains of office that hung loosely around his neck. His face seemed full of concern.

"How did the Leaf get hold of our official statement before it was released?" he fumed.

Alba stood up slowly and tried to think of a quick, plausible explanation for the obvious breach of security, but nothing sprang to mind.

"Eerr. .umm...erm..", he spluttered unconvincingly.

"All of our jobs are on the line here Alba...", said the Mayor as he began stomping up and down within the confines of the small office. The floorboards creaked their protest as Squishenbacker paced up and down, turning on exactly the same spot every time. "Matters have been taken out of your hands now Councillor I have been forced to place advertisements for Verminators immediately. Sooner or later the public will start to realise that we've not been telling them the whole truth."

Alba swallowed hard. The situation was now totally out of control. How could the Tree Council possibly explain that they had been preparing for a plague of vermin and a disease before it had officially happened? As he watched the Mayor pacing up and down and wagging the occasional finger in his direction, Alba scratched at the back of his hands and thought over the events of the past few weeks. The first few cases had been what they would have called isolated incidents. The disturbing common factor was that the people afflicted were from the Hanging Gardens district, where all the most important and wealthy citizens lived. A secret investigation had commenced immediately, with responsibility delegated to Councillor Alba by the Mayor himself. The investigation found nothing conclusive, although it had volunteered a suggestion that perhaps the source of the disease was from behind the Great Doors. This was ridiculed by the Mayor, who had never publicly believed the myths and legends of what lay behind the doors, although being the Mayor, he was the only person who really knew the truth about them. Each Mayor had read the sacred Scrolls of the Lost Bark and was sworn to secrecy over their contents.

Things began to hot up once the first few specimen of vermin were brought in by the police droids. The vermin that had once been tiny and unnoticable co-habitants of Dendra were also being affected by this disease. As with the infected citizens, the incident was given top priority and a major security-blanket operation was instigated.

The Mayor didn't like the idea of a cover up, but due to his special knowledge, he decided it was best for the Kingdom. All that Alba could guess was that it had something to do with the doors...

"..and the criminal elements in Dendra are going to have a field day with the streets empty and the police dealing with vermin. That's why we need the Verminators right now or anarchy will break out." Alba

looked up at the Mayor who had stopped walking up and down and was now leaning on his desk, looking straight into his eyes.

"Absolutely Mayor, I'll get onto it right away."

"This is your last chance, Alba. There are a number of Verminator candidates waiting for interview right now", snapped the Mayor, and with that he stormed out of the room and left Councillor Alba alone with his thoughts.

Chapter Three

Jake used the spare key that Fig had given him to get into the house. It wasn't unusual for Fig to lock himself away for a few weeks while he was working on a new invention, but he usually told Jake about it in advance. He knew (or rather hoped) that Fig wouldn't mind as he stepped through the front door and into the gloomy tunnel. The old man wouldn't tell him, that's for sure, as he had dozed off outside.

Fig's house was completely deserted. It was also tidy, which worried Jake as it had never been tidy before. He went to the cellar workshop first as he knew that if he was going to find something, it would be down there. He slowly walked down the winding wooden staircase which led to the old cellar. It was difficult with three legs, but Jake managed it eventually. The room was totally dark when he reached the ground level, but he knew where the light switch was and after a few moments of fumbling around he found it.

The workshop was a complete mess. Bottles, documents, and other assorted equipment littered the tables and floor. A thick layer of dust covered everything, so it was obvious that Fig hadn't been there for quite some time. Jake picked up one of the documents and held it under the glowing light bulb which hung from the grimy ceiling so that he could get a closer look. "Draft designs for Council weapons, sheet one of four...", he read. Following on was a collection of scribbled figures and drawings which Jake couldn't make any sense of. He searched through the junk covering the table and found another few pages, which included some blueprint designs of other weapons including a blunderbuss, a falcon, a rocket and an anti-mugger gun.

He put the papers back on the table in disbelief. By law, only police droids were allowed to carry weapons. Why would the Council want their own? It had to have something to do with that story in the newspaper about the vermin. Someone, somewhere wasn't telling the whole truth. It was obvious now that the reason why Jake hadn't heard from Fig was because he had been working in secret for the Council over the past few weeks and hadn't been allowed to talk to anyone about it. It sounded like a massive cover up.

Jake locked up Fig's house and left for home. The only positive thing to have come out of his wasted morning was that he had managed to perfect walking on three legs. As he neared home he even tried running and, after a short while and a few falls, he had it down to a fine art. Unfortunately, he wasn't as fit as he should have been for a Dendran his age (20 rings at last count) and by the time he reached home he was completely exhausted.

Staggering through the front door he found a leaflet lying on the mat. He picked it up and carried it through to his bedroom. It was the sort of junk mail that Jake usually threw straight into the wastebasket, but somehow he felt that this time he had to read it. On

one side was an advert for the local Casino. Jake had only ever been there once, when Fig was trying out his new gambling system device. He lost all his money that night and would have wagered his house on the next roll of the dice if Jake hadn't forcibly stopped him. The odds were very much against anyone winning a fortune but Jake remembered reading in the paper once about a citizen who won ten thousand largs in one night. He turned the leaflet over and noticed a small hastily printed ad at the bottom of the sheet which he found very difficult to read as the print was thick and blodgy.

"Verminators required immediately. Apply to the Tree Council Sanitation Division today and join the ranks of the proud... "

Jake was so tired that he let the leaflet slip from his fingers and float to the floor. He quickly fell into a deep slumber and began to dream. He was in a dark and gloomy street, with hordes of giant slimy horrible nasty vermin spilling out from every conceivable crevice, climbing out of the sewers and out of huge cracks in the walls. In less than a minute he was completely surrounded by these creatures, many of them with a single staring eye and green viscous slime oozing from their glistening jowls. As he was about to be engulfed by the horrors, he felt the ground shake as if a sudden massive tree-quake had hit Dendra. The creatures scurried away into the shadows. The shaking continued, then suddenly a giant hideous two headed beast that somehow looked familiar appeared from nowhere and began shouting his name over and over again.

"Jake, wake up Jake!"

Jake awoke from the nightmare and looked right into the eyes of the two headed monster from his dreams. It was Fig. He looked in disbelief at his life-long friend. This was no dream. It was for real. Fig had two heads and Jake just had to come to terms with it. Fig's left head looked down curiously at Jake's legs whilst the right head looked around the room. Both heads were identical, save for the small round rimmed glasses that perched on Fig's left nose, which Jake decided was on the original head.

"I think you've had the worse deal", said Jake as he pushed himself up into a sitting position. It was a stupid thing to say but he couldn't think of anything more appropriate.

"I used your spare key to get in. I hope you don't mind but we have some important matters to discuss and you didn't seem to be answering the door", said Fig as both heads spoke in unison.

"I don't think I've come out of it all that badly, my friend. After all, they say that two heads are better than none don't they?"

"Two heads are better than one..." corrected Jake as he stood up. Fig smiled with both of them as he acknowledged his mistake. "Whatever. But we really must talk. You didn't have anything planned for this afternoon did you?"

The two friends moved down the tunnel and into the kitchen. They each perched themselves on a stool next to the kitchen table and opened a bottle of the tree-root beer which Jake had pulled out from a cupboard. It was actually a brew that Fig concocted a few years back and he recognised the vintage as he wiped the dust off the label. Jake pulled out a bottle opener and levered off the sealed metal cap and threw the buckled remains into the wastebasket next to him.

"I went to your house this morning to see how you were. I saw the blueprints, Fig - and I've read the newspaper too. What are the Council up to?", he said as he took a swig from the bottle. Fig pulled out a crumpled leaflet from his breast pocket and passed it over.

"Seen this?". Jake nodded. It was just like the one he'd picked up earlier. Slowly it dawned on him.

"You're going to join the Verminator squad!"

Both of Fig's heads clashed as he shook them in disagreement. "Not strictly true", he said. "I don't suppose you have any straws do you?" he asked casually as he rubbed his left head where it had collided with the right. Jake left the table and rummaged through the kitchen cupboards, then returned with two reed straws. Fig put one into each mouth and lowered the opposite ends into the frothy beer and began drinking.

"That's better. Anyway, where was I?", he asked.

"The Tree Council...", replied Jake.

"Oh yes, the Tree Council. The truth is I went to them to offer my services, but not as a Verminator you understand. You see, having two heads has effectively doubled my IQ. I went to the Council to offer them my designs on some weapons which I thought they might want to use. This is finally my chance to invent something worthwhile! The disease isn't a curse, it's a blessing!"

Jake looked at his friend in amazement. Only he could turn a mutation into an advantage. Then again, the disease had given the old man his hearing back, so maybe it wasn't such a bad thing after all.

"They're desperate for recruits Jake. A plague of giant mutated vermin are expected at any time and hardly anyone has come forward so far. My designs give them the power to stop the plague, but all they need now are the people to fill the shoes, if you'll excuse the pun".

Jake immediately realised what Fig was suggesting.

"Oh no, I'm not going to work for the Council. Anyway, why aren't they asking the police to stop the vermin?"

Fig shrugged his shoulders and took another few sips of beer through the straws.

"I don't know. Perhaps they're too busy fighting off the mob".

Jake drank some more of the beer and thought hard about the situation as Fig ranted on.

"Destiny has brought this disease upon us, Jake. Someone up there saw our predicament and decided to give us a nudge in the right direction."

Jake looked down at his legs, 'What possible advantage can there be in having three legs?', he asked. "I suppose I could join a circus".

Fig shook his heads again. "No, you'd need more than three legs to pass off as a flea. Listen, think about being a Verminator, will you.

It's a job, and I've heard that the pay's good too. They promised me a small fortune for my designs...". His voice tailed off as he remembered the events of the past few days.

"What about the newspaper story? You leaked that information to the press, didn't you? The Council are hardly going to pay you now are they?" asked Jake.

"Okay. So they're not exactly pleased with me at the moment, but I'm sure they'll forgive me eventually..." said Fig with a hint of regret in his voice.

"Just do yourself a favour and apply for the job," he added.

"Okay, I'll think about it, but I'm not making any promises. If they're stupid enough to use your weapon designs then they might just be stupid enough to hire me. I might even talk them round to paying you for your work."

Fig's left head grinned as the right finished off the last drops of beer with a noisy sucking flourish.

"Great, I'll be off then. Let me know when you make up your mind. You know, if we play our cards right we could both turn out to be heroes."

Heroes. It was hard to imagine either of them fitting the description, but Jake liked the sound of it. Yes, he liked the sound of it a lot...

Chapter Four

Councillor Alba ushered the last of the Verminator recruits out of his office and closed the door behind him, sliding to the floor with exhaustion.

It had been a long hard day and the worst was yet to come. Somewhere out there, the vermin were probably gathering forces, preparing for an attack, and he didn't feel very confident about Dendra's chances of coming out of the melee intact.

He glanced down at his hands which had been itching persistently all day, and discovered to his horror that he had grown two extra fingers on his left hand and one on his right. Nobody was safe from the disease. They were all doomed to become mutants. Alba became so depressed that he just sank deep into his chair and stared blankly at the ceiling.

His trance was broken by the Mayor who marched into the office in a way that only he could do - as noisily as possible, like a fanfare announcing the entrance of someone very important, which of course he was.

"Well, Councillor. How many Verminators have we recruited so far?" roared the Mayor impatiently, whilst trying very hard to avoid what he thought was Alba's gaze. He needn't have worried, as Alba was too busy trying to seem like he was hard at work to look up at him. Alba grabbed a check list from his desk and passed it to the Mayor without even looking up at him.

"Fifteen at the last count, your worship. When will the weapons be ready?"

The Mayor scanned through the list to see if he recognised any of the names.

"The weapons are being manufactured even as we speak, but it is proving to be far more expensive than we first estimated. We're going to have to make the Verminators pay for the weapons out of their own pockets."

Alba frowned and looked up at the Mayor, who was now facing away from the desk.

"Anything wrong your worship?", he asked politely as he slid his hands under the desktop.

"Of course not. It's just the figures from Finance that have me concerned. He says that we're going to have to pay the Verminators for each individual vermin destroyed - a bounty if you like, but it'll prove very expensive. Fortunately, we can offset this by charging them for their weapons. If all goes well, we can come out of this without any disastrous financial setbacks.

Something didn't sound quite right about the Mayor's voice. Alba then realised that he'd never really heard the Mayor speak normally to him. He was always shouting about something or other.

Alba edged himself to the far side of the desk so that he could see directly into the mirror on the other side of the room. What he saw caused him to grin. The Mayor was sporting three noses! What was even worse was that the middle one was noticeably larger than others.

"That's very good nose...er..news sir." he remarked The Mayor fortunately either didn't hear or decided to ignore the remark and walked towards the door instead.

"Yes, well...we'll have to see, Good night Councilor". he muttered as he rushed out.

When he had gone, Alba looked again at his hands His problem wasn't as noticeable as the Mayor's and for that small mercy he was grateful. What was worrying him intensely was the vermin outside, and the population of Dendra who would soon have to face the plague...

Chapter Five

It was night time when the vermin finally began to emerge from the cracks and Shadows. The seemingly organised invasion wasn't deliberately planned. They had simply waited until they felt that their numbers were large enough to create absolute havoc. Somehow, all of the diseased creatures had gathered together over the past few weeks into one large army as if instinct had told them that there was safety in numbers.

They all knew where to gather, as if the invasion had been organised on a grand scale. The variety of creatures within the writhing masses would have been quite astonishing to anyone that witnessed their arrival and lived long enough to tell the tale. They were all different colours and came in a variety of shapes and sizes. Some had

just one eye and others two. Some crawled along the floor and others flew through the air thanks to the wings they had grown. Some grew arms, and some lost arms, yet they all had their own particular way of moving and attacking anything that seemed a threat to them. They pushed their way up through the ground and out of the shadows. Some exploded through the small cracks in the walls of old buildings, sending a shower of splinters onto the slime-covered ground.

Swiftly they multiplied, spreading themselves throughout the Kingdom. But that was not all. As if in reaction to the arrival of the hungry vermin, the indigenous plant life of Dendra began to mutate into enormous twisted monstrosities. Perhaps it was a form of self defence to scare the creatures away, or perhaps it was a move towards an invasion of their own. Strange new plants shot up from the sell, the product of mutated seeds. Some began to resemble giant arms and hands which thrust up into the air as if they were mocking the desperation that the citizens of Dendra would soon experience.

Chapter Six

Jake awoke early the next morning. He had found it difficult to sleep during the night, as he mused over his discussions with Fig. He had a very important decision to make. His life would never be the same again if he became a Verminator, although his life would never be the same again if he didn't. That simple thought made up his mind for him.

'There's no harm giving it a go I suppose," he muttered to himself as he headed for the kitchen and a quick breakfast. It was then that he noticed the strange shadows that obstructed the usually good view from his kitchen window. Jake approached the window, gazed out onto his back garden and gasped at what he saw. It was completely overgrown with the weirdest plants he'd ever set eyes upon. He saw huge monstrous growths that looked more like revolting tentacles than plants. Even more worrying were the huge slimy one-eyed bugs that were crawling all over them.

There were dozens of the creatures, moving very fast in all directions. A strange blue winged insect flew past the front door, emitting a very loud buzzing noise. Suddenly, Jake saw for an instant what resembled a giant eyeball on a stalk erupt from the ground, look around for a second, and then disappear again beneath the soil like an organic periscope.

"It's started..." he said to himself. Suddenly, a large bug stuck itself to the window directly in front of Jake's face. Taken by surprise, Jake jumped back in terror and shrieked. The 'thing' stuck firmly to the glass pane and made some revolting squelches as it slowly crawled off to the right and out of view, leaving behind it a calling card of thick yellow slime.

Jake dashed into his bedroom and quickly pulled on the red leather jerkin, which had served him so well over the years. The only weapon he could lay his hands on in the house was a large mallet which he had used last year to put up his new front fence.

He was taking no chances by going outside unarmed. Jake had to get to Figs house somehow, so pulling on his favourite red hat, he apprehensively headed for the front door, crouching behind it, mallet raised, and slowly opened it inch by inch. When the door was open wide enough for him to see that there was nothing nasty lurking in

the porch ready to pounce on him he stepped into the front garden. Quickly but silently he closed the front door behind him and locked it.

Looking back at the house, he traced the sticky yellow slime trail as it moved over the front window and up onto the roof, disappearing down the other side. Even the overgrown tree vines that always tripped him up in the mornings had grown so large that he now had to jump to avoid them. There was no use in complaining to the Council about anything now - they'd be far too busy with the vermin plagues to worry about overgrown plants.

Wielding the wooden mallet in his right hand Jake set off down the street. Miraculously, he seemed to be avoiding the vermin, and was beginning to relax his guard a little when he suddenly heard screams coming from nearby. His first thoughts were to run in the opposite direction, but if he was going to be a hero it would have to start now or never. Ignoring every instinct his mind could throw into the general muddle collectively known as his decision-making process, Jake headed towards the source of the screams. What he saw wasn't some poor helpless citizen besieged by vermin, but a poor helpless citizen being attacked by large brutal muggers from the infamous mob.

The muggers were uniformly dressed in blue overalls and each wore a tacky black mask to hide their true identities. They hovered around the woman and were so busy trying to take what little money she had on her that they totally failed to notice Jake appear from behind them. Jake didn't fancy taking on the muggers single-handed. Of course, he'd often heard about their antics, but they'd always stuck to the lower districts. This was the first time he'd ever heard of them coming Up Town. He looked down at the mallet in his hand and wondered whether or not to use it. Heroes saved damsels in distress. He'd read it in books from the library. Now was the time to see if he had what it took to be a real hero.

"Oy, erm...stop that!", he shouted unconvincingly. Somehow the words seemed to linger in the air and echo down the empty street a bit louder than Jake planned. In some ways he had hoped that the muggers wouldn't hear his remark, but unfortunately they did. They stopped for a moment and looked at Jake as he nervously edged a bit closer.

"Who's the pipsqueek with the 'ammer?", asked one of the muggers in a typically gruff criminal voice, From where he stood, Jake couldn't tell which one of them was doing the talking.

"Dunno. Shall we find out?" said another, chuckling loudly.

"Why not?", added a third. The muggers let the woman go free, but as she made off down the street, she ran straight into a dozen viscous plant-like things that wrapped their sticky tentacles around her struggling body and devoured her before she could rummage through her handbag for her personal attack alarm. Of course, Jake wasn't aware of this as he had other, more immediate problems to worry about...

As far as he was concerned, he'd done his good deed for the day and now it was his turn to run away. Jake turned and scooted off down the street before the muggers knew what had happened. They tried to give chase, but soon lost him amongst the overgrown plants.

"Which way did 'e go?" asked one.

"Dunno" said another.

"I think 'e must have gone that way..." guessed the third and they all charged off down the street in the wrong direction. As soon as the muggers had gone, Jake emerged from behind the cluster of dustbins where he had been hiding, and caught his breath.

"Three legs do have their uses than after all...", he puffed. After checking that the muggers had gone and that there were no vermin in sight, Jake continued his journey to Fig's house.

Chapter Seven

Councillor Alba woke up that morning with a terrible pain in his neck. Falling asleep in his office chair had never been good for his posture. Although he didn't yet know it, his decision to stay in the council chambers overnight had saved his life. He lifted his feet from the desk and yawned. It was only then that he noticed the pile of documents and a memo which lay on the floor by the door. Somebody had obviously pushed them through the gap under the door during the night.

Alba bent down, picked up the memo, carefully unfolded the paper and began to read:

CONFIDENTIAL TREE COUNCIL MEMORANDUM

To: Councillor Alba.
From: Mayor Squishenbac

The first batch of Verminator weapons designed by Dr, Figgis Twig have been completed and are being sent to the refurbished General Stores immediately. I have arranged a 1000 larg loan with the bank for each recruited Verminator. I have also prepared documents for each recruit to read. These include instructions regarding vermin and the function of each weapon. Please oversee the entire operation until I return. I shall personally contact each Verminator at the end of every week to check on their progress and to hand out fresh orders when required. No news yet on finding a cure for the disease?

Alba read the note over a few times then folded it up neatly and placed it in his tunic pocket for safe keeping, intending to file it away later under "B". He hadn't even begun to initiate a search for a cure - there was this nagging feeling that ftwas all beyond their control. Of course, he was as anxious to find a cure as badly as the Mayor, but it somehow felt like a futile exercise, as if the odds were stacked heavily against them.

The familiar and distinctive sound of the police droids whizzing past outside reminded Alba that the first Verminator recruits would be arriving very soon. He gathered up the copies of instructions left by the Mayor and headed for the main council chamber where the morning roll call would begin in a few minutes.

As he headed for the door, Alba glanced out of the small window which usually shone bright morning sunlight onto his desk. He viewed a sight that took his breath away, for only an instant, but that instant would haunt him for the rest of his days. The view outside was darker, more sinister than he had imagined it would be in his nightmares.

Not only was the street crawling with giant vermin, but huge mutated plants and trees blocked out most of the natural daylight and plunged the streets into a terrible twilight, which helped to conceal the

vermin as they moved on, Alba quickly pulled closed the shutters and continued with his duties. It was a sight he was going to have to get used to.

As he walked down the corridors of power, he looked again at the list of recruits. They were a mixed group, from all walks of life. There were bankers, ex-police officers, librarians, street cleaners, and even a worm charmer from the local circus. Would they have what it took to protect the Kingdom from the plagues of vermin? Alba seriously doubted it.

Chapter Eight

Councillor Alba wasn't the only person to find a note stuck under a door that morning. After his narrow escape with the muggers, Jake had run all the way to Figs house to tell his friend that he had decided to sign up for the Verminator detail. The note he found was just sticking out from under Fig's front door. It was sealed in a small plain brown envelope which had the initials J.M written across the back. Jake carefully slid his fingers under the sealed flap, opened it., and read...

"Dear Jake,

I seem to have got myself into more trouble than I can handle. I didn't tell you the whole truth before because I didn't want to get you involved in this mess, but circumstances have forced me to explain everything now in case I never see you again.

The Tree Council were very willing to use my designs but they weren't prepared to commit them selves unless they saw working prototypes. I couldn't afford to construct them, using my own limited finances so I'm afraid to say I did something rather stupid. I went into the underground realms and managed to make contact with the mob. They were willing to lend me enough money to make the prototypes, as long as I payed them back by the end of the week. I was so desperate that I agreed to the terms. As the Council haven't paid me yet I can't even repay the interest, never mind the loan, and the mob have sent their heavies out to kill me.

The money received from the Daily Leaf for the expose didn't last very long either, but I felt I had a moral responsibility to tell the public what was going on. I hope you can now understand my strange behaviour over the past few weeks and that you can understand my reluctance to involve you in my problems.

Now do yourself a favour and become a Verminator (I wonder if the Council could use me in their PR department? That's quite a catchy catch phrase don't you think?)

Your friend,

Fig."

At the very bottom of the letter was a hastily written postscript which Jake had trouble reading. The rest of the letter had been written very neatly yet this was obviously written in a great hurry and as an afterthought...

"P.S. Be careful when using the Blunderbuss. It has been known to shoot backwards. Don't tell the Mayor though!"

Jake was so preoccupied with the letter that he failed to see the muggers creep up on him until it was too late. With the expertise of a well rehearsed manoeuvre, the three shadowy figures quickly overpowered him. One knelt on his chest pinning him down whilst the other two searched through his pockets.

"Thought you could get away from us did you?", taunted one.

"We never forget a face", said the second as he pulled out an assortment of coins from Jake's tunic pocket.

"Right" said the third.

Jake struggled in vain against the trio. One of them (who Jake had decided must be the leader) grabbed the letter from him and showed it to the others.

"This must be your lucky day. Look what we have 'ere lads. I think the boss will want to 'ave words wiv you".

The others read, or tried to read the letter and agreed. They tied Jake up with a strong length of vine and then knocked him unconscious. Between the three of them, they carted him off down the street.

Chapter Nine

Councillor Alba glanced at his watch for what seemed like the hundredth time. It was all too much of a coincidence that every single Verminator was late for their first day.

Either they had all backed out at the last moment, or they had become victims of the vermin already. He prayed that he was wrong on both guesses, although another explanation eluded him. Without any Verminators, Dendra had but a few hours instead of days remaining before chaos ensued and civilisation totally collapsed. He paced up and down the main council chamber and began singing an old Dendran song to keep up his spirits.

*"Dendra, Oh Beautiful Dendra
Where everyone's hap-py
And the Vine Juice is free. Yes it's free, free oh free free oh free.*

*Dendra, You fill me with splendour
I'll be your defender
While the Vine Juice is free...."*

The Dendrans were rather fond of their Vine Juice. The overwhelming majority of folk songs concerned the beverage, and all of them seemed to be written whilst under the influence of it.

Suddenly the main chamber doors flew open and in staggered the Mayor, plastered from head to toe with seething sluggy-like vermin. He was trying to scream, but the slugs covered his entire face and crawled inside every time he opened his mouth. Alba froze for a moment in panic, then turned tail and ran from the chamber. Moments later he returned with one of the prototype Verminator weapons cradled in his arms. He placed the butt of the weapon under his chin, then took aim and fired. The blast from the blunderbuss hit the middle of the writhing mass of vermin. Many were killed instantly and dropped from the Mayor onto the floor in a smouldering pile at his feet.

The few remaining creatures continued the attack regardless.

Alba couldn't risk another shot, as this time it would almost certainly endanger the Mayor too. Instead, he physically wrenched the slugs off his body and threw them into a corner of the chamber. Then, while they were still stunned, he raised the blunderbuss, took aim a

second time, and blew them all away to the great sluggy understone in the sky.

When it was all over he threw the gun to the ground and tried to help the Mayor to his feet, but it was too late. Alba lifted the Mayor's head off the floor and propped it up so that he could hear what he was trying to whisper to him.

"You're our only hope now Councillor... don't let us down... I know the Verminators will do a good job..." he winced through the pain. "You must now take control... take this key... read the scrolls... save Dendra....."

Squishenbacker's head went limp as the last breath whistled through his teeth. Alba gently lowered the body to the floor and looked down at the key which lay in the palm of the Mayor's open left hand. He recognised it as the key to the heavy oaken cabinet which held within it the sacred Scrolls of the Lost Bark. Contained within the scrolls was the final truth about Dendra and the Great Doors. Only Mayors were allowed to read them. It was a tradition that had been handed down over many generations.

Alba left the council chambers and headed for the Mayor's office. He found the door wide open, and he cautiously walked inside. Standing in the far corner of the room was a tall, important-looking cabinet, engraved with strange runes that had puzzled Dendra's greatest scholars over many centuries. Acting Mayor Alba gingerly pushed the key into the small brass keyhole and slowly turned it clockwise. He heard a hollow click from inside and slowly the cabinet creaked open. Lying on a solitary shelf was a collection of musky scrolls. Each one was held by what looked like a golden clasp shaped like a fist. The scrolls looked quite old, but not fragile. He reached into the cabinet and took them out, sat down at the Mayor's grand desk and carefully removed the clasp from the first scroll and even more carefully unfurled it. What he read took him completely by surprise.

Chapter Ten

Jake was having a wonderful dream. The business with the disease and the infected vermin had been nothing more than a bad nightmare. He was sunbathing in his front garden in an attempt to promote a healthier shade of green. The only problem with this otherwise ideal situation was that when he lay still it felt like he was being dragged along. The truth was that he was being dragged down some connecting stairways by the three muggers who had attacked him earlier. Slowly he opened his eyes and caught sight of one of the teleport booths that the rich citizens of Dendra used to use before the vermin invasion began. You had to be very important to use them, which was why Jake never had. Fig always wished that he had invented them as he used to imagine how much money he would have received from the patent.

Jake's head hit one of the steps and he yelled in pain. The muggers looked down at him and laughed.

"So, 'ad enough beauty sleep 'ave we?" roared one.

"Not finkin' of leggin' it are we?" joked another. For once, the third one said nothing at all. Jake struggled to free himself from the vines but they were far too tightly wrapped around his body. The surrounding streets were becoming dirtier and darker, and Jake

guessed that they were now in the very lowest district of Dendra, in the underground itself.

The muggers suddenly jolted to a halt, and Jake banged his head again, this time on the ground. The leader seemed to be sniffing the air in suspicion and the others began looking around. They mumbled to each other and then after a few more moments of hesitation, grabbed Jake and continued on their journey. Only a couple of seconds later though, they stopped again. Just as they were about to start of there was a loud bang and one of the muggers disappeared. The remaining two turned round to face their unexpected foe and Jake caught a faint glimmer of surprise on their faces moments before they too vanished into thin air.

Jake lay helplessly on the floor waiting for some vulgar monstrosity to appear from the darkness and consume him. Instead, he saw Fig appear from his ambush post with what looked like a gun tucked under his arm.

"Fig! Am I glad to see you!" exclaimed Jake in relief as Fig began to untie the vines.

"I'm sorry to have got you into this mess", said Fig. "We have to go now!"

Fig hurried Jake along the underground tunnels and up a staircase to the district above. He kept glancing at a device strapped to his belt, and looking furtively up and down the street.

"What's that?" asked Jake.

"A scanner. It warns me when there are any vermin nearby. We should be able to get there safely if we hurry", answered Fig as he motioned to Jake to follow. Jake ran after his friend.

"Get where? Where are we going?". Fig looked at Jake with both heads.

"There's only one sanctuary left to us now. Outside. Beyond the doors."

Jake couldn't believe this new development. "You're crazy. No one has ever opened the doors. Even if you do, you don't know what's out there!"

Fig shook his head. "Ever heard of the sacred scrolls?".

Jake was stunned. "You've read them? What do they say?"

"No time my friend. Just stay with me and we'll be alright. As for the doors, I've got another device which should be able to open any lock. How do you think I opened the sacred cabinet?"

The journey was relatively free of incident, thanks to Fig's scanner. It enabled them to avoid any of the larger vermin - Jake dispatched the smaller worms with his mallet. They soon reached the Great Doors of Dendra, which stood large and proud. Up until recently they were constantly guarded by police droids. The doors had a number of scratch marks around the lock where countless citizens had tried to open them over the years. Jake craned his neck to look up at them. He hadn't been to this part of Dendra for a long time.

There were so many myths and legends about the doors and what lay beyond them. Children's fairy tales told of giants and enormous beanstalks and other such nonsense. They were the one mystery that Dendra held close to its collective heart, and now he was about to discover their truth. Fig set down the scanner and produced a small black box from his tunic.

"This should get them open," he explained as he strapped the device onto the surface of the great doors. Minutes passed like hours as Fig fiddled with his invention. Jake decided to look at the scanner and saw dozens of small blips approaching rapidly from all directions.

"Hurry! There are some vermin approaching!"

Fig grabbed the scanner from Jake's hands, looked at it, and passed it back, continuing with his work.

"Not vermin, they're police droids. They're after me. Probably under the Mayor's orders."

Jake looked around. They were breaking the law by trying to open the doors. If they were caught...

"I've done it!" shouted Fig. Jake turned round and looked in disbelief as the doors slowly creaked open. Blinding white light poured out from behind the doors, engulfing Fig completely. Somehow he'd always imagined a great chorus of archangels or something to herald this important event, but it was only in movies like *The Road to Dendra* where the hero's every move was accompanied by the dramatic music that let you know that danger was lurking just around the corner. This wasn't a movie, this was for real.

"Come on Jake, let's go!" he yelled, but Jake wasn't sure. He'd lived all of his life in Dendra. To leave now was almost like the proverbial rats deserting the sinking ship.

"I'm not coming, Fig. You go if you wish, but I can't leave now. Dendra needs me. You told me to join the Verminator squad. Well I think you're right. You might have no future here Fig, but I do."

He could barely see his friend as the strange light engulfed him. There was also a strong hot wind blowing through from the other side. Jake glanced at the scanner. The police droids would arrive any moment.

"Get going. I'll hold them off, somehow" yelled Jake. He thought he saw Fig wave goodbye, then he was gone. The mighty doors slammed shut just as the police droids appeared. They surrounded Jake and he immediately put his hands up to indicate surrender.

Chapter Eleven

Alba was a changed person in more ways than one. Now he knew the truth. As the new Mayor, he had read the sacred Scrolls of the Lost Bark. As Mayor his first command was issued to the police droids, to locate Dr Figgis Twig and enlist his help once again to oversee the Verminator operation. Alba needed as much help as he could get. He was sitting at his new desk pouring over the latest concensus in his office when the police droids arrived with their prisoner. He looked puzzled at the strange three legged citizen who was marched into the office and dropped in front of him.

"This isn't Dr Twig. You've apprehended the wrong person!" One of the droids floated around the desk to Alba's side and whispered in his left ear.

"I see," said Alba as he looked at Jake. "Leave us".

The droids left the room and closed the door behind them. Jake looked at Alba in a distrustful manner.

"Where's the Mayor?" he asked.

"I'm the new Mayor", announced Alba. "I need Dr Twig's help if we are all to overcome this vermin invasion."

Jake was puzzled. "You didn't want to arrest him?"

"Of course not. We must all work together. I need him as much as I need new Verminators."

Jake quickly thought things through. "Fig has escaped through the Great Doors. He had no future here anymore. Thanks to you and the rest of the council."

Alba considered what Jake had said. He could never tell him what lay beyond the doors, or what his friend might face there.

"Dr. Twig is the only person who seems to know how these vermin operate, how to stop them spreading. He also hinted that he knew what causes the mutations. I need him" explained Mayor Alba.

Jake shook his head.

"I honestly don't know how to open those doors. Fig had a device of some sort that picked the lock. He took it with him when he went through. All I saw was the bright light."

"A bright light?" queried the Mayor. He didn't know what to think of Jake.

"So how did you become involved in all this?"

For a moment Jake was reluctant to answer. Talking about Fig was okay, but he didn't want the subject changing to himself. It might be the start of a form of interrogation, a clever manipulation of the truth to point the accusing finger at him as an accomplice.

"I was - still am - Fig's friend. I know I've broken the law by helping him through the doors, but if he stayed here the mob would have killed him."

Mayor Alba looked at Jake as a plan began to form in his mind. Here was the perfect chance to recruit a Verminator. He pulled back his chair of office and stood up. At full height he was a good two tendrils taller than Jake.

"You have two choices. Either you can rot away in a prison cell for the rest of your life, or you can earn an honest wage by joining the Verminator Squad. The choice is yours, but I need your answer now."

Jake found the offer suitably ironic. He had been out of work for so long, and then along comes a job that he had decided to go for, only to be threatened into accepting it anyway.

"Okay. It seems as if I don't have much choice. I don't particularly fancy being stuck inside a prison cell with vermin on the loose..."

Alba smiled. Being The Mayor did have it's advantages.

"I have to warn you that it is a job that cannot be taken lightly. You will assume the responsibility for the lives of every remaining citizen of Dendra. There are also a number of details that have to be settled regarding bounty payments..."

"It doesn't matter", Jake interrupted. "I've been unemployed long enough to know that you don't pass up a job opportunity", admitted Jake.

"I suppose the extra leg will come in handy on the job" remarked the Mayor.

He paused for a moment longer and weighed up the possibilities in his mind.

"You can start immediately..." he announced, handing over some documents to Jake.

"I just hope it isn't too late..."



VERMINATOR

**Wanna earn some cash . . . ?
You do? Well, here's
your chance . . .**

You're a regular kind of guy – a dead ordinary three legged green mutant living inside a large oak tree. All you need now is a regular kind of job . . .

And what a job! Recruits are required pronto to stop the plague of vermin – nasty slimy creepy crawlies which have appeared in droves to infest the kingdom of Dendra.

Every last one of them has a price on its head(s), so use your skill and cunning to clean up the place.

Collect the bounty at the end of each week, and pay a visit to the General Store to buy some sophisticated new equipment to make life (and death) just that little bit easier.

Put the rest of the money in the bank, or carry it around with you if you think you can dodge the muggers lurking in the shadows.

Borrow money from your friendly bank manager if you can, or alternatively you could try your hand at gambling in the local Casino.

And if you're really hard up for cash, you could always make your way down to the bottom of the tree, and seek out The Mob for a no-questions-asked loan at only semi-extortionate rates.

But remember, if you don't pay back the money, they'll send the boys after you to break a leg . . . or three . . .

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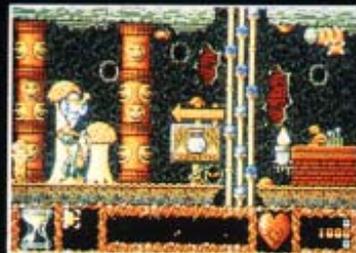
VERMINATOR

An arboreal fantasy world, captured and brought to you by Rainbird Software.

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