

The Cats and the Mouse

Original Story by Andrew Johnson

Stretching and cracking his back, Jesse relaxed for the first time in an hour. He wiped the sheen of sweat off his brow with the back of his hand, allowing the rough texture of his gloves to pick up as much of the dirt and grime as possible. The meager light of his lantern made it difficult to properly appraise his haul, but by the weight of the canvas sack, he estimated he had managed to procure about 20 kilograms of ore. Nodding to himself, he allowed himself a self-satisfied smile. *Not bad for only 5 hours of work. This should be plenty to replace my tools.* Speaking aloud, he made sure to keep his voice a hoarse whisper. “Now, I had better head back upstairs before dad gets worried.”

Whistling quietly to himself, Jesse trekked back up through the tunnels. They had been well-kept by his family over the generations, so he didn’t have any issues following the path back to the exit. Reaching the ladder back up to his forge, he placed the sack of ore in the lift basket. Reaching the top of the ladder, he stopped his whistling. He stepped off to the side onto the constructed platform and lifted the heavy trapdoor. Finally, he pulled the lift basket up using the pulley system, setting it onto the platform before lifting the bag of ore out of the mineshaft.

Frowning to himself, Jesse kneeled down and examined the rope used in the pulley system. He had felt some roughness as he lifted the basket, and after a minute or so he found the cause: the rope had begun to fray in an area. While not threatening, he knew from experience that any issues with the system needed to be resolved quickly. *After all, I don’t want to end up like dad. Trevor should have some rope at his shop, so I’ll stop by there after lunch. Refining the iron can wait until after I fix this issue.* Closing the trapdoor behind him, he finally raised his voice to its normal booming crescendo. “Hey pops! I’m back from the mine! What’s up for lunch today?”

“...”

The silence that followed worried Jesse. His father’s injuries hadn’t bothered him in months, and he was always waiting with bated breath for Jesse to return from the mine. Worried, Jesse headed into the house, once again calling out. “HEY, POPS!”

“...”

Now almost running, Jesse passed through the kitchen, where a loaf of bread sat, half-cut through with the knife still resting in the loaf. Jesse skidded to a halt, turned back and ran back into the kitchen, passing the island and barely missing hitting the hanging pots with his head. Breathing hard, his eyes went wide with panic when he saw his father collapsed on the flagstone floor. “Pops!” He knelt down, ripping off his gloves and gently lifting his father’s head off the ground. He laid his calloused fingers on his father’s throat, checking for a pulse. After a few seconds, he let go of his bated breath, breathing in a heavy sigh of relief. *Thank the gods. But why* – His thoughts were interrupted as his father’s eyes shot open, staring emptily back into Jesse’s.

Surprised, Jesse almost dropped his father by the sudden action. "Pops! Are you okay? What happened?" His father didn't respond. In fact, he didn't seem to even register Jesse's presence. He slowly got to his feet, trudging out of the kitchen and towards the front door. Now even more worried, Jesse also got to his feet. He furrowed his brow, wondering what could have happened. *By the way he's moving, dad's injury isn't bothering him. So, what happened? And why is he ignoring me?*

As he pondered these developments, the bell rang as the front door opened, before ringing again as the door shut. *Don't tell me he left? He hasn't left the house since the accident! Where could he be going?* Jesse ran to the front door, flinging it open and rushing outside. Suddenly, he stopped, a look of surprise crossing onto his face. Everyone in town was opening their doors and leaving their houses and places of work, trudging outside with their expressions glazed over in a ghastly absence of any and all thought.

Acting quickly, Jesse ducked back into the house, and closed the curtains over the windows. Whatever was happening to everyone else in town was serious bad news. Peeking out through the curtains, Jesse watched the movements of everyone in town; they seemed to all be moving towards the town square. *The only way I can find out what's going on is to follow everyone. For that I need to blend in with everyone else.*

Stepping out of the house once more, Jesse began trudging towards the town square, keeping his head angled towards the ground, but constantly glancing around. *I can't match the lack of expression of everyone else, so I'll just have to keep my head down. But I need to make sure I'm matching my pace with everyone else's.*

The group of townsfolk all trudged in unison towards the town center. It would look to anyone viewing the town from an overhead position as if lines of ants were crawling to the center of their nest, traveling well-worn paths. Looking closer, the townsfolk all began to arrive at their destination, aligning themselves into ranks and standing to attention.

Standing with everyone else, Jesse breathed a sigh of relief that everyone else's heads were slightly bent down. Glancing surreptitiously around, Jesse took stock of the situation. *What is everyone doing? This definitely isn't by their own free will, so I have to figure out how to free them all.* The approaching conversation of two unfamiliar voices jolted Jesse from his thoughts, and he focused his hearing to listen to what they were saying.

"... e should have waited longer! Going through this rigamarole every time we take over the minds town is boring!"

"Quiet fool. We have no guarantee that the minds of everyone here belong to us yet. Until we are certain of that, we keep quiet about our work."

“Fine, fine. Whatever you say Sour. In the meantime, how about we have a bit of fun? We certainly don’t need this many people alive to keep up appearances of the town operating. If we dangle the carrot of regaining their minds, it could be quite a show to watch the mental acrobatics.”

“Really Sweet? Why do you enjoy breaking people even further? We already control their minds, giving them thought back in that sort of hell would be torture. You were tortured by the imperial army yourself, so you know what it’s like. Why inflict that kind of suffering on others?”

“That’s exactly why! I’ve suffered enough because of the government of these fools, so they should feel like I did! And what about you Sour? You also went through the imperial torture, so why don’t you feel the same?”

“Maybe I’m just more sympathetic than you. Anyways, lets head back. It seems like everyone here is under our control, so we should set them to work and get ready to head for the next village. What’s our next target anyways?”

At this point, Jesse realized that the pair had been pacing along the ranks of the townsfolk during the entire conversation. They had been stopping and checking the faces of townsfolk every now and then. Jesse was lucky enough that his face was never checked, and he breathed a sigh of relief that these people would be moving away.

“Dunno. Bitter is the one who sets the targets. It’s probably down on the other side of the mountains though. Alcott here was the last village in the Vartooth Peaks and –”

“You dumbass! You know better than to mention Bitter!”

“What’s the problem? You said yourself that everyone here is under our control, so Bitter’s job should be complete.”

“Either way, we need to get moving. Because of your messing around back in Joth, those desert nomads are on our trail.”

“Yeah, yeah. They’ll never catch us. At least not until we have enough troops under our control that they won’t be a problem. So stop worrying for once.”

The two men turned a corner and their voices faded from earshot. As they did, everyone in the town center stood to attention, their faces shooting up to face forward once more. Just as quickly, they all turned and went in different directions, moving much more naturally and of sure foot than when they moved to the town center. Some expression had returned to their features also, enough so that Jesse almost thought that everyone was back to normal.

But I can’t forget what I heard. Everyone here is under the control of those people I’ve never seen before. But what the hell? Sweet and Sour? What kind of names are those? Jesse turned

and started walking back to the shop, keeping an eye on the other townsfolk to see how they acted. *It seems like everyone here is going about their lives normally now, so for now I'll do the same. But if what I heard is true, then this isn't the first town they have taken over, and I need to get out of here and warn someone.*

With that thought, Jesse grimaced. The image of his father, smiling and laughing while a young Jesse struggled to operate the family forge, was burned into his mind. The thought of abandoning his father to save himself was almost vomit-inducing, and for a split second he struggled to force the bile the rose in his throat back down. As he calmed himself down, he felt a hand land heavily on his shoulder, like the judgement of Baion, God of Sins, falling upon him. He felt his heartbeat quicken and pulse, sweat seeping to the surface of his skin as goosebumps formed. As if his entire existence was being looked at and judged, searching for weakness.

Behind Jesse, the man who had grabbed his shoulder frowned. *It looked like everyone here was under Sweet's control. But I have a bad feeling about this person. I can't quite explain it, but my gut is telling me he isn't yet broken. His reaction here should tell me all I need though.*

Jesse's mind raced, a million thoughts a second as he tried to figure out what to do. *That's right. They mentioned they had a third companion, Bitter. He must be disguised as a normal townsman to smoke out anyone not fully controlled. My best bet is to not even respond and hope that he thinks I'm controlled by the rest.*

Jesse stood, motionless and unresponsive, for what seemed like an eternity. Eventually, the man behind him, Bitter, took his hand off of Jesse's shoulder. Stepping around Jesse until he was in front of him, he studied his face before stepping back, a grin of satisfaction plastered on his face. "I knew it! You aren't controlled either, are you? I was out of the town fetching some wood when those two wierdos showed up, and I hid in a bush until they passed. I must have been out of range of whatever they did to everyone here, so I came in to see if anyone else was still themselves."

Jesse had to stop himself from reacting to this news, a feat much harder than he would have thought possible. *Even the slightest reaction might give the game away. My eyes widening, or even the pacing of my breath changing. It could be anything. And if it weren't for that other person, Sour, mentioning Bitter's existence, I probably would have fallen for this act. But I can't give the game away. He wouldn't be putting on this act if he knew I wasn't controlled, so he isn't sure and is hoping for a reaction. I just have to do my best, and then escape as soon as possible.*

While Jesse was thinking this, a long silence filled the air, with Bitter staring at Jesse, searching for any sign of a reaction. "Hmm. Maybe I was just paranoid. We've been doing this long enough, so we should be good enough to catch everyone and not leave any stragglers for me to ferret out." Bitter stepped back, shrugging his shoulders and turning away. *I guess I was worried for nothing. This whole business is bad for my heart.*

As Bitter turned away, Jesse looked forward. *It's now or never. I'll knock him out and make a break for it. These people probably won't chase after me on their own, and if I can make it to the nomads they mentioned are following them, I should be able to get their help.* As he was about to rear back a punch and deck Bitter, Jesse froze. A feeling of indescribable horror descended on him, as if he was being watched by a being whose existence he could not fully comprehend. He stopped himself short of moving his arms, and instead began walking, away from Bitter. *I don't know what that feeling was, but I need to be extremely careful right now. I should head back to the house and prepare, before I try and leave the town.*

Like all of the other townsfolk, Jesse walked through the town, acting normal, as though nothing was different, besides keeping his mouth shut and his head down. Alcott had become a town of living ghosts, controlled by a mysterious group with no discernible goal in mind. His only chance of survival at this point was to escape the town, but in order to do so, he would have to spend an indeterminate amount of time acting as a part of the larger group, waiting for his chance to leave.