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about 2,270 words

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RAT TRAP

by Mike Podgor

Henry Kielson stumbled out of the convenience store, a liberated bottle of wine in one hand and his last paycheck in the other. He looked at the bottle of wine, opened it with his teeth, drank half the bottle with a grimace, and chucked it back into the store. "Viva la Kielson," he shouted, thrusting his middle finger at the store. After he was sure the owner saw this, Kielson dashed down the street, giggling like a mad man. He tried to click his heels together and missed, winding up flat on his backside in a puddle of rainwater. The laughter stopped, but just for a minute, and then came back twice as raucous as before.

"So what if I have a rent to pay, at least now I get to keep my freaking soul," said Kielson, but before he could continue, a little girl and her mother stopped in front of him.

"Come on, honey," said the mother. "He looks like he has enough to worry about."

"No, mom," said the girl. "You said if we wanted to find Binton, we had to ask everyone, and he's an everyone." She walked over to Kielson and produced two things: a crayon drawing and a photo, both featuring an orange striped cat. She had eyes filled with hope. "This is Binton," said the little girl. "Have you seen him, mister?"

"I haven't seen any cats in at least a month, little girl," said Kielson.

The hope vanished from the little girl's eyes, and something deep within Kielson stirred and he realized that he had not only been lacking a strong sense of purpose in his life, but that the purpose he had not been seeking had, perhaps, been seeking him. He stood up and exclaimed, "I will be a cat finder!" A second later, when he realized there were only so many cats to find, he amended, "I will be a private detective!"

The girl was smiling at him as her mother hurried her away. Kielson nodded. "Yes. The life of a private detective is nothing for a young woman to witness. Now to prepare myself."

One trip to the pawnshop later, Kielson was armed with a magnifying glass and a flashlight. After searching for an hour, he discovered that either He went to a diner, ordered a cup of coffee, and used the complimentary crayons to sketch what he knew and what he needed to know on the placemat.

"Fact one. I haven't seen a single cat all night. Fact two. I might be terrible at this. Fact three. I should not go into art. Sheesh," said Kielson, looking at the placemat.

The waitress brought him his coffee while he mulled over these facts. She asked, "Anything else? Tonight's special is tuna casserole. It's actually just a tuna sandwich shoved into a bowl, but it's still pretty good."

Kielson slammed his fist on the table. "Hold on a second. Fish! That's it! Cats love fish! If I can't find the stupid cat, I'll bring the cat to me! How much was the coffee?"

"Dollar nine," said the waitress.

Kielson took out the rest of his paycheck. After the magnifying glass and flashlight, he was dangerously low on funds, but he wouldn't let his first case end in failure. He counted the rest of his money and asked, "How much tuna can I get for two fifty?"

"You can go down to the store and get ten cans of it for that much," said the waitress.

"Damn it, woman, time is of the essence! A life might be at stake!"

"I'll give you four cans, then."

He thrust his finger into the waitress's face. "A life, woman! A life!"

The waitress was unimpressed. "Five cans, then."

"Deal!"

Kielson finished his coffee, put the placemat in his pocket, and headed out with his cans of tuna, and went to work opening one. Eventually, he gouged a hole in the aluminum and, almost immediately, the smell attracted a small black and white cat.

"Here you go, little guy." Kielson opened the gash wider and poured the tuna onto the street. The little stray was overjoyed and eagerly lapped up the fish. Kielson knelt down and started talking to it, "So, uh, you see any orange cats running around?"

The cat ignored him, but its ears pricked up when a bat fluttered into the alley. It dived at the cat and eventually won its attentions. The cat pounced, landing empty-handed on the sidewalk. It turned towards its quarry again and the bat flapped away but kept close enough to keep the cat interested. Kielson did not know much about bats, but assumed that this behavior was not normal and demanded further investigation. He followed the

animals to a sewer maintenance tunnel. He stopped and shone his flashlight on the sand around the tunnel, finding hundreds of little footprints, all of them different sizes, but all of them the same shape: cat-like.

"Bingo," said Kielson, and he entered the tunnel, heedless of the possible dangers within. He almost immediately slipped and fell, sliding down the descending tunnel in what he hoped was just water. Since it was pitch black, he couldn't see what was going on, and was therefore surprised when he smashed through what sounded like a wooden wall. This retarded his velocity just enough that the second impact, into a brick wall, didn't hurt him too terribly. The thing that hurt most, really, was the broken cage that was jamming itself against his back. He pulled it out and stared at it, assuming that it had probably not been broken before he had smashed into it, and wondered why, exactly, a cage would have been at the bottom of that luge he had just experienced.

Kielson shone his flashlight on the dank walls of the sewer. This revealed absolutely nothing, and he continued down the corridor. There really wasn't very much there, save for a slight breeze that reeked of sulphur. Kielson wanted to avoid this, but since he had nothing else to do and nowhere else to go, he continued onward to find the remains of a subway station. Kielson could tell it was old, and he felt a certain amount of

kinship with this place. Once upon a time, it, too, had been crafted and gifted to the world with high hopes, only for it to fall on hard times and eventually wind up deep underground and smelling like cat urine.

He stopped and pulled out the placemat, writing down fact four: he smelled cat urine. There were no cats in evidence, though, and so he continued walking, easing himself off the mossy platform and onto the tracks, which dead-ended abruptly a hundred yards away, leading to a sheer drop into a massive cavern. The flashlight wasn't nearly strong enough to reach the other side of the cavern, or the bottom, but it could, unfortunately, reach the top. The light bounced off several hundred greasy little hairy things, with shining tiny eyes glinting in the light. He collapsed to the ground and backed away quickly, immediately averting the beam away from the colony of bats, and decided to explore his immediate area instead. To his left, there were only craggy rocks that were occasionally replaced by sheer shining stone. To his right, the remains of the subway track had fallen in such a way that made a makeshift ladder.

"I could stop now," muttered Kielson. "I could stop now. I'll probably never see that girl again, so it's not like I'll have to face her down. I could just go back to the real world, sell this stuff, get a drink, and look at the want ads. Maybe

have another drink. Then, I could go home, get comfortable, and enjoy my week or two of unemployment. Nothing says I have to find the cat. I don't have to deal with a weird cage at the bottom of a tunnel that leads to a subway system I don't recall ever existing with hundreds of bats in some cavern. I could go sleep and eat some of this tuna." He sighed and tested the first plank of wood. Despite its age, it seemed sturdy enough. "This is probably the most interesting thing that's ever happened in my life. If I stop, it's nothing but normalcy for the rest of my life."

Kielson had no idea how long it took him to get to the bottom, only that he almost fell several times and actually did fall when he was about seven feet from the bottom. He missed a foothold and tumbled down, rolling to the bottom of the cavern and dropping the contents of his pockets. This included the cans of tuna, and they hit the ground, creating a ruckus and causing the bats to freak out. For several minutes, the cavern was a flurry of activity; with Kielson trying desperately to gather his tuna while bats flew around him in a panic. He managed to pick up the final can and get into an area of relative safety as the first bat discovered the tunnel to the outside world and led his fellows to freedom. Kielson leaned against the wall and was about to take a deep breath when the wall gave in, revealing

that it was actually a door perpetrating a clever ruse, and deposited him into a room that was much smaller than the cavern but dwarfed the subway station. It was also very dimly lit, and for reasons unknown, filled with cats in mismatched cages. As soon as the first cat saw Kielson, it started meowing, and soon, all the other cats joined it. It was, very literally, a caterwaul.

"Quiet down, you," hissed Kielson, though he knew that this would not work, "Here, let me let you out of there."

As he went to open the cage, a dark brown figure fell from the ceiling in front of him and knocked him to the ground. Kielson, tired of lying on the ground, immediately got back up and put up his fists.

"All right, whoever you are. I want to know what you're doing with all these cats, and if it has anything to do with Chinese food, I'm knocking you out on principle. Come on, then. Oh, good Lord."

The figure had emerged from the shadows, and it was a humanoid figure covered in coarse brown hair with a long worm-like tail and long pointed incisors. The ears were rounder than a human's, and while his hands and feet were bald, they ended in scraggly claws.

"Yes! I am your lord," said the creature, "Soon, all men will bow before me!"

"What, you run out of turtles?" Kielson smirked.

The creature roared, "I never had any turtles! Only my colony of bats, which I trained to lure cats to my lair and to destroy my enemies with a single command!"

"Really? Why the hell would you do that?"

"Once I have destroyed all the cats in this city, my bats and I shall travel to the above world and seize upon your kind, and claim it for my kin and theirs! We shall rule!" The creature had gradually shifted from a dull monotone to an unearthly screech. The cats had continued caterwauling, and the noise was hurting Kielson's head.

"I think it'd be more than cats that would stop you, buddy," muttered Kielson. "Listen, why don't you give me a few of these cats and I'll leave you to it. Even a crazy guy like you can see that's a good deal. How about it?"

"You dare call me mad? All men call me mad, but I am not mad! I am the king of the rats! I am - " started the rat-creature, and Kielson interrupted him, "Rat Bastard!"

Rat Bastard screeched, "Enough! You shall now fall before my army's might! ANNHILATE!" He grinned, which was a very effective expression for a rat-creature, but the grin vanished as the bats failed to materialize. "Where is my army?"

"I got rid of them," said Kielson. "Why don't you make this easy on both of us and surrender?"

Rat Bastard screamed, "I surrender to no one!" He lunged forward, claws at the ready, and he slashed at Kielson's coat, causing it to erupt in a spray of tuna, bringing the cats to a deafening crescendo. The rat-creature, taken off-guard, caught some tuna in his eyes and screamed in pain. The rest of the tuna splattered his body, and the rat-creature stumbled forward and Kielson took the opportunity to punch him square in the face, slamming him into a bank of the cages and causing a domino effect that resulted in dozens of cats becoming free. Driven mad by captivity and hunger, they set upon Rat Bastard. Kielson stood and witnessed the fall of the world-be conqueror at the hungry jaws of what he considered his only obstacle. He grimaced and squinted as the rat creature yowled in pain, until his screams gurgled to a stop. The small black and white cat from earlier rubbed up against his legs. "Glad to see you're okay. Come on, let's let these other guys free and try to find this Binton."

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The next day, Kielson woke up in the begonias of the little girl's house. The two cats were gone, but he found a picture on his chest of himself with the words "World's Best Detective" scrawled in crayon. He smiled and started walking home, eager to sign up for some actual classes.

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