

# Cat and Mouse

A Mortaran Tale

by Madelaine Taylor



## Part One: Tin Heads



Terrin had been wearing his well shined, regulation city guard helmet when he spotted the young girl. She couldn't have been more than nine years old and she was a skinny little thing. Dirt hid the freckles on her pale skin and her greasy auburn hair was knotted. It would have been easier to sniff her out than to see her. He *had* seen her though, this time, with a couple of apples she hadn't paid for. He had her bang to rights now and he wasn't about to let her go.

"Hey. You there! Stop! Thief!" That had been his first mistake. As a general tactic, shouting 'stop' at a thief, especially one that is so clearly out of your reach, very rarely works. In fact, more often than not, the thief in question grabs what they can and legs it. That is exactly what happened on this occasion.

"Hey! I said, stop!" Terrin's brow furrowed in a moment of genuine surprise that she hadn't followed his orders and waited to be caught. "Oh, bugger." He adjusted his helmet and shouted again. "Clear the way! City guard. Coming through." A few of the market shoppers turned to look at him and shook their heads, rolling their eyes, before going back to what they were doing. No one moved aside.

The girl was on the other side of the square now, flitting in and out of the crowd. She ran, almost unhindered, across the market place and down a side alley. Terrin pushed aside the plump woman in front of him and started a march toward the alley, drawing his short sword as he went.

"Clear. Clear. City guard. Coming through." He repeated it, over and over as he marched, like a mantra. Though it had little effect on the crowd. Those he pushed aside tutted and shouted insults as he passed.

"Gonna report you! Bloody tin head. Push me, will ya?"

"Ere! Watchit nabber!"

"Clear out of it will ya?! Bloody chicken chasers always pushin' in where you ain't wanted."

Oh how he longed to be back in the central circle of the city, people there had respect for the law; they were happy to be protected. Besides, in the central districts, with the lords and ladies of the city, there was very little in the way of crime to bother him. Walking the streets, the clean streets mind, of the central districts was a joy. He would take a leisurely stroll from the guard house to the great library, passing the parks, green and pretty to look at with their trees and blooming flowers. He'd saunter by the manor houses of the rich where he would flirt with the housemaids as they went about their tasks.

In retrospect, he thought, that might actually have been his first mistake.

The mature woman had caught his eye, she was a little older than him but he wasn't one to discriminate. She was bent over picking carrots in the garden as he passed.

"Evenin', dahrling." He said as he slapped her behind. "Like a bit o' carrot in the evening eh? Enjoy a bit of a root as it turns dark?" He laughed at his own joke, thinking it incredibly risqué, and winked as she turned to face him.

"I beg your pardon?" The lady looked horrified and prodded him with a carrot. "Do you know who I am?"

He didn't.

When he found out it was at the official hearing. He was fined a moons wages and sent to the barracks in the outer circle. They may as well have put him in a cell, he thought. At least that would have been cleaner.

How was he to know the woman was a countess? What kind of nobility picks their own veg? He asked himself that question a lot as he squelched through the dirty streets of the market area. He was grumpily asking himself again, mumbling under his breath, as he rounded the corner and caught his head on the rope stretched across the alley. He fell with a splash into a dirty puddle and his helmet rolled back into the square. A passing shopper kicked it away and the helmet disappeared up the street with a clatter.

The girl laughed. She was sat on the rooftop up to his right, her legs dangling over the edge of the building.

"Get down from there at once!" Despite all of the evidence to the contrary, Terrin was not ready to give up on his belief that shouting orders was the best way to catch a thief.

"Shan't!" She threw an apple core down, hitting the top of his balding head.

"Do as you're told, child. I am a city guard, a representative of the Tay."

"See, the problem wiv you tin heads is, you think you control the city and we all will just do what you say. And mebbes folk might, in there." The girl pointed dismissively toward the central circle. "There, where all the toffs live. But out 'ere, in the outer circle? You haven't got a chuffin' clue what's goin' on. Out 'ere Keikon's in charge. And we all knows you can't do nothing 'bout that. Out 'ere you aint nothin' but clowns in, well, in tin hats."

Terrin growled, he hated being out here, he hated the people, he hated having to deal with actual crime. More than anything else though, he hated this girl.

He knew this girl, he had been sure she was a thief from the moment he saw her and he had stopped her three or four times before without actually catching her doing anything. This time... This time she was in possession of stolen goods, actual stolen goods, and he couldn't catch her. He was furious.

"What ye chasin' me for anyway? Ain't there somethin' better you can be doin' than chasing hungry girls round the city?." The girl took a bite from the second apple.

Terrin scrambled to his feet, pushing the rope out of his way. "I'm going to count to three and if you don't come down 'ere by then I'm coming up there after you."

The girl stood and did a little jig on the edge of the rooftop. "Come on up then, tin head. I'm waiting!"

It took Terrin a good few minutes to clamber up the side of the building. He was puffing and panting as he placed his hands on the roof edge, his face bright red, his knuckles white. The girl dropped the remains of the well munched apple down onto his head again before taking a few steps back for a run up and leaping over the gap to the roof of the building opposite.

Terrin pulled himself up and lay on his back breathing heavily.

"Lookit you!" The girl laughed from across the alley. "I don't reckon you could catch a tree! Mebbes you aught to retire."

Terrin tried to sneak back into the barracks, he had lost his helmet, torn his breeches and scraped the skin on his knees, elbows and, somehow, his nose. He was still red faced and breathing hard. Sadly, for the already unhappy guard, Captain Crurith was stood in the courtyard and spotted his entrance.

“Terrin! Come here, now!” Terrin’s head dropped and he walked over to his commanding officer, hesitantly.

“Sir?”

“What happened to you, Terrin? Was there a riot?”

“No, sir. I errr, I was chasing a thief, sir.”

“Where is your helmet, Terrin? You know it is part of your official uniform, to be worn at all times when on duty.”

“Well, sir, I err... Well I lost it... See, I was chasin’ the thief and they ran round a corner, see, and then I ran round and there was a rope, see, and I caught me head on it and me helmet... well, it rolled away.”

“So you lost it? You understand that you will need to purchase another? You cannot go on duty without a full uniform.” Captain Crurith was almost barking out his words now.

“Yeah... err, Yes, sir.” Terrin sighed, his face scrunched tight.

“And this thief, where is he?”

“Well... I errrr, I didn’t actually catch ‘em, sir. They was on a roof see and then when I managed to get there they errr. Well, they legged it.” The guard wasn’t about to correct his captain and admit that it was a nine year old girl that had caused him so much trouble.

“And you didn’t pursue them?”

“Well, I was...I was a bit errr..”

“You were, unable?”

“Err yes, Sir. Unable, sir.”

“You will buy a new helmet and you will repair your clothing before you report for duty in the morning. I expect a full report on this matter by the end of the day tomorrow... Out of interest, what did this thief steal?”

“Oh, well, it was... Well, it was fruit, sir.”

“Fruit?” The captain looked him up and down, assessing the cost and work that would see him presentable for duty again. The helmet alone would cost him a weeks wages. “You allowed yourself to get into this state over fruit? How much fruit exactly?”

“It was apples, sir. Two apples.”

“You are dismissed, Terrin.” The captain barely managed to hold in his laughter as Terrin trudged into the bunk house, sulking.