

Cat and Mouse

A Mortaran Tale

by Madelaine Taylor



Part Two: The Sorcerer



Keikon's house was actually a sprawling maze of passageways and chambers under the outer circle of the city. There were many entrances and many escape routes, all of them secret and known only to the people living within, some so secret only Keikon himself knew of them. Lots of children lived in the sprawling home, all street urchins, abandoned by their families or 'rescued' from them by the older members of the house.

They lived under the strict rule of the large and hairy Keikon and his duplicitous wife Adney. Both in their forties, both stern, both happy to use the lost children of the city to give them a luxurious lifestyle.

Today was Caitlin's birthday, well, it was the anniversary of Caitlin being taken into Keikon's home anyway. She didn't actually know when her birthday was, she didn't know who her parents were and couldn't remember where she was from. Adney had found her as a toddler on the steps of the 'Olde King's Dog Inn'. She had been wrapped in an old, heavy wool blanket and had a single country copper in her hand.

As a gift of celebration Keikon had allowed her a day in which she would not need to bring anything back to the home in tribute. A rare occurrence and one that Adney had protested against. The thief master had taken a shine to Caitlin, he saw her as a perfect tool, slight but athletic and with a mind that raced as fast as the fastest galloping horse could. Adney on the other hand had grown to despise her, she was receiving too much attention for Adney's liking and the quick tempered queen of the underground had often struck the girl or denied her food in spite. On this occasion Keikon had put his foot down and Adney had no choice but to agree with him. And so, with a grimace and a glare she wished Caitlin a happy birthday.

"Enjoy your day, little cat." The words had been spat maliciously, the tone of them threatening that this might be the last day she could enjoy for some time.

Still, she was out in the fresh air of the city now and determined to make the most of it.

The market area was quite a way from the main street and a much poorer part of the city. The dirty streets were in a state of disrepair and broken cobbles were a hazard that could trip you without warning. The food that was available to buy was that which couldn't be sold on the main street the previous day and the other objects, clothes, tools and houseware, were rejects or second hand belongings that were being sold on at a cheaper price.

Caitlin slipped her hand through the small gap between two shoppers and picked an orange from the basket at the front of one stall. It was a couple of days past it's best and wouldn't have cost a lot but she had no money at all. Having grabbed the fruit she twirled away and melted into the crowd, peeling her prize as she went.

"Cat! Over 'ere, Cat!" Caitlin recognised the voice, it was Tom, a boy from the home. He was a year or two older than her, at least that was the thought, and they had often worked the market place together, taking food and coins from unsuspecting city folk.

“What’s up, Tom? I got given the day to me self, thought I’d go off to the centre and sit in one o’ them fancy parks.”

“Nah, Cat. You don’t wanna do that. Listen, I’ve heard there’s a magician on the main street. We should go see ‘im. I ain’t never seen no real magic before. Plus there’s a chance we can dip into the crowds while they’re watching ‘im and make some stuff vanish as if by magic too!” The boys smile was wide and infectious, his eyes glistened at the mention of magic and Caitlin knew he was far too excited to be put off the idea. But she tried.

“Is there really magic though, Tom? I ain’t seen no magic ever and even the stories reckon the sorcerers all vanished hundreds o’ years ago.”

“Yeah, well s’not like they died. Sorcerers can’t die, see, they only sleeps. They reckon this one comes form some island what’s made from the bones of a dragon and can only be got to on a blue moon. That’s why he’s here, to get a ship back out there but it’s too early yet so he’s doing his magic to pay for his lodgings.”

Caitlin sighed, she didn’t believe in magic. She knew the fae could do things humans couldn’t but even they couldn’t do half the things they were supposed to have done in the olden days. She was sure it was all just down to old men drinking too much and making their tales sound more exciting than they aught to be.

“I ‘spose we could go see. But if it’s just some con man tryin’ ‘is luck outside of a tavern yer gonna owe me for wastin’ my special day.”

“Yeah, alright. Here, I promise, if it’s just some schemer I’ll give ya half me takings tomorrow so’s you can just go sit in a park and give what I get as yer tribute.” Tom didn’t wait for an answer, he grabbed hold of Caitlin’s hand and pulled her off, enthusiastically, toward the main street.

A crowd gathered around the “Great Sorcerer of Dragon Skull” and watched in awe as he made brightly coloured balls appear and vanish to and from the air around him. He spun a tale as he juggled the ever changing number of balls, drawing the crowd deep into the hypnotic spell of his act.

“Three days after we set sail from the mystic city of Katharahara a great storm rose from the seas. The waves grew to the size of the legendary mountains of Pahindererha and the rains turned to hail. Hail as large as this ball.” With those words a giant white ball, the size of Caitlin’s fist, joined the carousel of colour juggled before the mage. It took two turns of the complex juggling pattern before disappearing completely from sight. The sorcerer smiled as the crowd gasped their astonishment.

“There I stood, on the prow of the ship, my clothing soaked and sticking to my body. My hair, blown wild by the frenzied winds, my eyes strained in the darkness of deepest night. And I saw it! The great sea dragon, rising from the depths, rising up to great heights above us. Our ship little more than a toy in it’s wake. And the dreadful beast took to the air with a beat of its wings that flipped the ship full turn. But I held fast and I stared that beast dead in the eye and I screamed above the din of the waves. ‘Be gone! Foul beast! For you will feast not on our bones. Not this day!’ And the dragon took to the skies and it circled our ship thrice.” A great round of applause erupted in the street as a dragon and a ship appeared in place of the balls. The dragon rose and fell from right hand to left and back again as the ship ferried between them.

“But the beast was hungry and driven mad and so it spat it’s fire at the ship.” An orange ball joined the juggle and the crowd ooh’d as one.

“And I drew upon the power of the sea and threw great balls of ice towards our foe.” White balls and orange flew from his hands and danced between ship and dragon and the crowd held it’s breath.

“The battles raged on for what seemed an age, the ship tossed and rolled, the sail took flame and the mast collapsed. But I stood tall. I called upon spears of ice and let loose! And they pierced that dragons hide and the great beast fell.” With a cheer from the crowd the dragon figure fell from it’s arc and hit the cobbled street beneath, exploding into a dozen small white balls.

“And thus was created Dragon Skull Isle. And so I made that place my home. A home of magic, a home of power, a celebration of my wisdom and my skill!”

As one the crowd cheered, and called for more, they were enraptured in the sorcerers act. Tom too was enthralled, his hands slapping together wildly in applause his mouth ajar and his eyes wide with delight.

Caitlin rolled her eyes.

“**T**hat was amazing!” Tom was shaking with delight as Caitlin lead him away from the crowds and down one of the side streets. “Did you see that dragon? And the fire? And the ship? There was a whole ship, right there and you could almost reach out and touch it!”

“Yes, I saw them, they were little painted sponges.” Tom didn’t react to Caitlin’s observation at all.

“And the dragon flew around the ship and it breathed all it’s fire and then the sorcerer threw ice at it and it fell and it’s an island now! An island that the sorcerer lives on. I told you it was real. I told you there was magic!”

Caitlin took one of the little white balls, that had appeared as the dragon fell, from her pocket and held it out to Tom, squeezing it. “See? Sponge, what he’s painted white. I reckon it was all sponge and he just had ‘em all squeezed up in his hands the whole time so’s no one could see em ‘til he wanted us to.”

Tom stopped walking and stood, stubbornly resisting Caitlin’s tugging. “Did you not enjoy it at all?” His face fell as he asked the question.

“I loved it, Tom. It was great. That stupid street clown had the whole crowd totally distracted. Here I got you this so’s you don’t need to do no work today and we can go to one o’ the parks and have a picnic.” She held out a little leather purse for her friend. The belt ties had been cut. It wasn’t very heavy but it held enough coin to buy them both food for the day and to give Keikon a decent tribute too.

“You should give this to Keikon yerself, Cat. I don’t wanna take all your coin from you.”

“All my coin?” Caitlin laughed and grabbed Tom’s hand again, pulling him away toward the central district and the sun filled parks.