

Cat and Mouse by Miyako Jones

Corin idly examined the wares of various merchants on his way to an inn that one of the shopkeepers had recommended. There was a crowd at one stall where a merchant was making a passionate appeal to passersby. Against his will, Corin found himself moving closer and nearly tripped over a person who was moving away. When he turned to apologize, he had to look farther down than usual to see the person's face. At first he thought she was a child, but her face was too mature for that. Her eyes were too aware. There were a few other childlike things about her. Her dark hair was short but it curled over the tops of her ears, giving her a pixie-like appearance. He was tempted to check for pointed ears. The woman's hands were small and delicate.

His attention diverted, he left the marketplace soon after. The inn was beyond the bustle in a quiet section of town. Only a few tables were occupied in the main room since it was between lunch and dinner. Corin made his way over to the bar.

"A mug of ale, please," he told the barkeep. He reached into his right pants pocket for the small pouch of money he kept inside, but couldn't find it. A quick check of the pocket on the other side yielded the same result. Corin checked the bag he carried his camping supplies in and the inner pockets of his cloak, but couldn't find even a single coin. The barkeep placed a large wooden mug on the bar, its contents slightly foamy. Corin looked longingly at it before telling the barkeep that he had changed his mind.

He quickly came to the conclusion that he had been robbed. Between the time he asked the shopkeeper for the recommendation and arriving at the inn he had not even considered making a purchase, so it was unlikely that he had lost his money pouch somehow. It must have gone missing when he was in the marketplace.

When he thought of the marketplace he thought of the tiny woman he had almost tripped over. He had not noticed her before that moment, which wasn't normal for him. From his years on the road he had learned to be observant of his surroundings. It made him think that she had intentionally concealed her presence. Why would she do that if she had not intended to rob him? He was sure that if he could find that woman then he could recover his money.

Adversity wasn't new to him. He had been on the road for three years in search of a place from a dream. Prior to that, he had been working for a man who used him to protect his illicit merchandising operation. It was not a job that he had chosen, he had been manipulated into it. The dream was what encouraged him to terminate his employment despite the fact that it might put his life at risk. It had filled him with a sense of peace he had not felt since coming to that city.

The dream had taken place in a small village where the residents lived simply and honestly. Even though he had never fully interacted with anyone he had felt that their lifestyle was one he could easily follow. When he woke up he knew that he had to find that place. As soon as he was able, he set out in search of it. He hadn't dreamed about it since.

Without money it would be difficult to continue his journey. He had come to rely on the inns and shops he encountered during his travels. Though he could provide food and shelter for himself, he would have trouble providing equipment. The more he thought about delaying his journey, the more irritated he became. Corin was determined to find the woman and take back what was rightfully his.

He returned to the inn to ask the barkeep if he had ever seen anyone matching the woman's description. In his opinion, she was very distinctive. The man immediately asked him why he wanted to know, which made Corin think he had something to hide. However, further questioning yielded no results.

He returned to the marketplace. The crowds had thinned due to the onset of evening which left it looking slightly pathetic. The large area looked almost abandoned without people filling the space. Merchants with weary expressions watched over items that looked picked over. He questioned the person in charge of the stall closest to him and made his way around until he had spoken with them all. There were people who honestly hadn't seen the woman he was after, but there were some who, like the barkeep, seemed to be withholding information. They frequently gave vague responses to his questions or tried to distract him by offering up items for sale. Due to the considerable number of people who seemed to know about the woman, he concluded that she was a resident of the town. This should have made it easier to find her, but he had a feeling that it would be more difficult than he'd thought. If she was one of their own, the townspeople were likely to be uncooperative if only out of loyalty. The fact that she had robbed him might not even be a consideration.

Corin left the marketplace feeling discouraged. His feet tried to automatically take him back to the inn and this renewed his anger toward the thief. By the time night fell, he had settled in the woods just outside town. He had caught a small rabbit, which was roasting on a spit over his campfire. He was tired not only from interrogating various townspeople, but also from hunting down the rabbit. This would be the fifth consecutive night he spent sleeping outdoors and he didn't like that at all.

Morning dawned gray, but not rainy. The fire had burned down to ashes sometime during the night and he was feeling chilled as a result. He didn't bother to build another fire, deciding to eat a cold breakfast of trail rations instead. Though dried meat wasn't very palatable, it traveled well.

As Corin headed into town, he tried to come up with a plan that didn't involve questioning the townspeople. He didn't get anywhere the first time he tried it and doubted that would change just because the day did. He considered and discarded a few other ideas. Eventually, he settled on watching the marketplace. She was likely to return.

The marketplace wasn't nearly as busy as it had been when he was robbed. Many of the merchants had just arrived and were still setting out their wares. He tried to look inconspicuous as he loitered near the south entrance, but doubted his success because several people stared at him on the way by.

Time passed slowly. He tried not to fidget, but he was anxious to be on the road again. If he hadn't been robbed, he would have probably been several miles away by then. His eyes followed a few people as they moved around the marketplace just to have something to do. One of the people he was watching appeared to be haggling with a merchant. She held a small object in her hand and was shaking it to emphasize her words. When she suddenly flung out her arm, she nearly hit the person standing behind her but never noticed. That very same person shifted so that he or she was blocking part of the woman's body from Corin's view. A few moments later, he was hurrying off. Corin didn't hesitate to follow him. There was only a remote chance that this person was who he was looking for, but he'd take any chance he could get.

The suspect was very agile. He neatly avoided the people in the marketplace while Corin found himself constantly apologizing for getting in someone's way. He continued to pursue him after they left the marketplace, but it was much more difficult because of the many possible escape routes and hiding places. He often only caught glimpses of the thief as he rounded a corner. Corin ran down several streets and alleys; dodged various human, animal, and inanimate obstacles; and climbed over a wall at the end of an alley that was taller than he was. By the time he got over the wall, he had lost sight of the suspect completely.

Corin could think of only two more options: he could either return to the marketplace and continue his surveillance or he could give up. As he stood at the end of the alley feeling

frustrated, it seemed better to give up, but he wasn't ready to. Instead, he came up with a third option. He went to the magistrate's office to make an official report. He didn't think it would help, but he was out of good ideas.

Corin left the office after being asked variations of the same five questions for about an hour. It was clear to him that they weren't going to launch a serious investigation. He wanted to leave town as soon as possible and never return.

He headed directly out of town, alert to suspicious activity. No one came within several feet of him and that could possibly be because of the expression on his face. The gray morning was rapidly becoming a sunny afternoon. Corin paused to pack his cloak in his bag shortly after leaving town. Before he continued he also took a drink from his waterskin. He ran out of water after only a few sips. Since he was near the woods where he had spent the night, he decided to visit the small creek he'd found. It was easier than searching for a public well in town and would be much cooler.

The gentle burbling sound of the water soothed his temper. Corin crouched on the bank and held his waterskin below the surface until he was sure it was full. He splashed a little water on his face just because it felt good.

He was reattaching his waterskin to his bag when he caught sight of movement from the corner of his eye. The woman from the marketplace emerged from the trees on the opposite bank of the creek and froze the moment she noticed him. They stared at each other. Then Corin dropped his bag on the ground and splashed through the creek. The woman darted away like a startled deer.

He cursed profusely as he chased her. If he had been able to find her the day before, he might have been more inclined to stay calm. As it was, his temper had snapped due to irritation born from sleeping on the ground and hours of fruitless searching.

He should have known that things weren't going to be easy even though he now knew where she was. Not only was the woman quick, she knew the area far better than he did. He lost sight of her more than once. There were countless places where a small person could hide and many of them were difficult to see because they blended in with the landscape. Corin tried not to let frustration cloud his judgement.

When he started to think he might lose sight of her completely, Corin took a deep breath to calm himself and stood very still. He carefully listened to the sounds of the woods around him. He couldn't hear any birds but he blamed that on himself for startling them away with his running. Unfortunately, he didn't hear anything else, either. As quietly as possible, he hid himself behind a large tree with the hope that the thief would surface if she thought she had escaped.

It took a surprisingly long time for her to make a move. His knees had become stiff and his feet had gone numb. She cautiously poked her head out of a hollow roughly 50 feet away. As much as he wanted to spring out at her, Corin waited for a few minutes longer. He didn't want to give her even the smallest chance to escape again. He waited until she was only a few feet away before making a move. His legs decided not to cooperate. He took one step and stumbled then fell on the ground. Corin clenched his fists and wanted nothing more than to scream a choice expletive for the entire world to hear, but he held his tongue.

The woman smiled down at him and said cheerfully, "I can't let such determination go unrewarded." She slipped off the small knapsack on her back, opened it, and rummaged around for a few moments. When her hand emerged, it was holding his pouch. "Here you go. It's all there."

Corin reached out for it, then hesitated. "You're just going to give it back to me? Why?"

"You've earned it." She handed it to him, but didn't immediately draw back. "My name's Malorie. What's yours?"

Though he thought her a little mad, he still shook her hand. "It's Corin. Why did you steal from me in the first place?"

"Why not? It's what I do, after all. Come on, I'll treat you to a drink." She offered her hand again, this time to help him up, and he took it. She hummed to herself as they walked back to town after a quick detour to pick up his bag. Corin wondered vaguely if he should be nervous. She didn't act like anyone he had ever met before.

Ironically, Malorie led him to the inn he'd intended to stay at the night before. Corin laughed to himself as she ordered ale for them both. He laughed again when he realized that the barkeep didn't recognize him. He was still laughing a little as they sat down at a table.

"Care to share?" asked Malorie.

"You have many supporters," was all that he said.

They drank silently for a few minutes. Corin didn't know what to say to Malorie; she was nothing like he'd expected. "Listen, I hope there aren't any hard feelings," she said suddenly. "I didn't steal your money for fun." He put down his mug and raised an eyebrow at her. "I'm telling the truth. I don't lie about things like this."

"If you didn't do it for fun, then why did you do it?"

"For the sake of the town. The king taxes us too heavily. Many merchants trade here and the king is very aware of this. I've heard that our taxes are three times higher than a similarly-sized town. So, I steal from travelers. Traveling merchants are off-limits, though. They pay a fee to set up a stall in the marketplace."

"If that's the case then stealing from me was unnecessary because I bought things from townspeople and was going to pay for a meal and a room at the inn. Surely that benefits your economy."

Malorie smiled. "Call it insurance."

"An honorable thief," he said with some surprise. "I didn't know such a thing was possible."

She smiled serenely. "I'm sure there are a lot of things you don't know." It took a moment for the words to sink in as the expression on her face made them seem as sweet as an apple dumpling. He rolled his eyes in response. "So," she said, "where are you headed, anyway?"

"I'm just traveling." He didn't want to tell her why. He could barely believe it himself.

"Wanderlust, eh? I would have thought a man your age would be past that."

"What do you mean 'a man your age'? I'm 27!"

"Really?" She laughed at the expression on his face. "Seriously, you usually hear boys barely into adulthood say something like that, not grown men."

"For your information, I'm not traveling aimlessly. I do have a destination, I just don't know what it is yet." He winced as soon as the words left his mouth. It was doubtful that Malorie wouldn't probe him for more information. The look on her face was one of blatant curiosity. "I had a

dream, alright?" He refused to say any more.

They parted ways after their drink. Corin checked to make sure he still had his money though he felt a little bad about doing so. It was too late to continue his journey so he decided to pay for a room at the inn. He was amused at renting a room at the same inn he'd missed out on the night before.

He was in good spirits the following morning and the clear blue sky enhanced that. He hummed a little to himself as he headed out of town. When he noticed Malorie's familiar form standing by the side of the main road, his steps faltered briefly. Taking a deep breath, he deliberately made his way over to her.

"Good morning," she said cheerfully. "I bet you thought you'd never see me again."

"It did cross my mind."

"Well, I've decided to go and explore the world a little."

"Right. What about the town?"

"It'll be fine. There are plenty of others to pick up the slack. In fact, you met some of them during your little adventure through town yesterday."

Corin couldn't believe it. "That was more than one person?"

"As you said before, I have many supporters. Hey, could I travel with you for awhile?"

She looked so hopeful that he couldn't bear to say no. He just hoped he wouldn't come to regret it.