

A Basquet of Cats

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Chapter 1

Gentza hopped onto the windowsill, stopping right before the invisible wards, and glanced back at his companion. “What do you mean, again?” he asked. “You enjoyed hunting last time you and your mage were here.”

“I did.” Kitty followed easily, her green eyes reflecting the evening sun. “It was fun—last time. Let’s do something else today.”

Gentza swished his well-groomed tail. “Something else?” A broad cat grin spread across his face. “Right. I forgot you’re here because of my handsome face and my charming conversation.”

“You wish,” Kitty said, grinning back. “I’m here because Isabelle wants your human’s help in training her apprentice. And I spend time with you because we’re friends. Let’s do something meaningful, or at least interesting.” She nudged him on their perch on the windowsill. “You need to leave this wilderness of yours for a change. You and the Archmage can come visit us in Bayonne next time, and I’ll show you what I mean.”

“My human doesn’t like to travel,” Gentza said, his ears twitching, “and neither do I.” Besides, cities like Bayonne were noisy and smelly. They meant chaos, harried humans, no real space for cats. Here? Here he was Gentza, king of the hill, with all the treats from the neighbors and all the cuddles from his own special human he wanted.

That human reached out to him now through their bond, the mind-to-mind connection between a mage and their companion cat. *I saw you two slipping out*, the Archmage thought, his mind voice as warm as his real one. *Bored?*

A bit, Gentza thought back. *And you don’t really need us for anything when you’re teaching the boy.*

I always need you. Gentza felt the smile in Zumar’s mind voice and smiled back. *But you are right about today. Have fun out.* The direct contact with his human companion receded, the bond lingering as a slight buzz in the background of the young black tomcat’s mind.

He sniffed the summer breeze. It was warm and heavy, carrying a salty ocean scent. To the north, dark clouds were gathering over the Bay of Biscay. The night might become uncomfortable, but he didn't mind, in fact, he welcomed it. The clouds were why the farmers had hurried to bring in as much of their grain harvest as they could this afternoon, draft horses straining with fully laden carts. Full carts meant full stores and fat rodents. He grinned again. No, hunting wasn't a consolation prize, it was the bonus for living here!

"Do you hear the thunder?" he asked. "There will be a storm tonight."
"Those clouds look angry," Kitty said. "In fact, they feel angry."

Gentza nodded. "It will be a real summer storm. The mice should be out right now, gathering as much food as they can. Hunting will be great today in this wilderness of mine, Kitty. Believe me, you will enjoy it even more than last time. Dinner, here we come!"

The young tom licked a barely visible speck of dust from his left shoulder—it wouldn't do to look unkempt, he had appearances to keep up, after all. Then he tiptoed through the wards on the windowsill, Kitty shaking her head and following in his tracks. The wards were there to keep intruders out, and he knew where they were and how to navigate them. The two cats jumped out and ran down the hill. Behind them, the tower was a black silhouette against the evening sky, a symbol of the respect they commanded, he and his human. Gentza's heart swelled with love and pride at the thought. The Archmage Zumar Etxartea wasn't just the most powerful human mage in existence. He was also the best companion a cat could imagine, considerate, kind, and attentive. Even when he was deeply absorbed in his studies, he always had a hand free to scratch a feline friend between the ears.

"Why do you even need to hunt?" Kitty asked. She obviously wasn't going to let it go. "It's not as though you're a feral or a farmhouse cat. Just tell your human to feed you."

Gentza sighed. "I don't need him to feed me," he said. "I like hunting; it's what cats do. It keeps me sharp."

He considered the light. It wasn't dark enough yet for his inky black

fur to make him naturally invisible, so he concentrated, and his coat adjusted, bending the light just enough that mice wouldn't be able to detect him. He left his eyes as they were, almost black, the perfect hunter's camouflage. Then he checked the breeze again. Also perfect: it was still coming from the front, carrying their scent away from their potential prey. Nodding to himself, he padded toward the fields and the faint smell of rodents.

Kitty bounded ahead of him, stopping him in his tracks. "I'm serious, Gentza. Hunting is what normal cats do," she said. "We aren't normal cats. Normal cats don't have the same kind of magic as we do. And they don't talk to their humans, or at least their humans don't understand what they say. They just live in their little world, day to day."

This wasn't going to work if Kitty didn't get into the spirit of the hunt soon. The white splotches in her tuxedo fur were clearly visible, and her bright green eyes stood out almost like lanterns. "It's not the cats' fault their humans aren't like ours," Gentza said. "Besides, what's wrong with living day to day?"

Kitty snorted. "Don't you feel we are destined for more? Cats are smart and resourceful. We have humans who take care of our needs, we have magic at our paws, there's nothing we can't do if we set our mind to it." She shook her head. "Don't you have any dreams? I do. I want to sing to the world." She released a high-pitched note, not the usual meow or call, but a clear tone, more like the instruments Gentza had heard traveling humans play. It sounded quite nice.

And it warned away their prey. "Shhh."

Kitty chirped a cat laugh. She repeated the note, adding two more in a little melody. "Make me."

Two loud barks startled her out of her perfect pitch, and she glanced around wildly. They had almost reached the neighboring Zubiondo farm, where two of their dogs were now hurtling toward the cats. While the beasts were usually all bark and no bite, they were also enormous, and Gentza preferred being safe rather than sorry. In a split second, he cloaked

himself to turn fully invisible and adjusted his body odor to smell just like the grass he was walking on. He was now undetectable to dogs.

His friend didn't have the same presence of mind. With a snarl, she bolted for the nearest tree and scrambled up to the middle branches. There she sat, hissing and spitting at her two canine pursuers, her whole body shaking.

Gentza watched her with another grin. He had told her to be quiet, but had she listened? He briefly considered letting her get out of the mess herself, then decided against it; a good host didn't leave his guests stuck in trees. Besides, she seemed really scared. No, he had to help.

He cocked his ears. There was no reaction from the farm; the humans could probably tell that the dogs were not responding to any real threat. Gentza reached out with his mind toward the house, just a tendril of thought, seeking Seme, the oldest son of the family. The Zubiondoas were nice; the farmer, Unai, and Seme sometimes helped the Archmage with odd jobs at the tower in exchange for some magicks such as charms or wards. And the boy would be susceptible to cat magic—he could often be persuaded to give Gentza fresh cream, some treats, or a scratch in places that were hard to reach. And, more importantly for Kitty, the boy could call back the farm dogs. Gentza opened his mind farther.

As he did that, he became more aware of his bond with Zumar, a presence in the back of his mind, like a persistent low voice that he could focus on or ignore. Right now, he sensed the Archmage talking to Kitty's human, Isabelle. The two humans were in the tower somewhere, probably in the study, poring over an old tome together, or discussing the latest enchantment, any of those boring things human mages do when they don't have need of their companion cats to help them with serious magic.

Everything all right? Zumar thought.

Gentza gave him a mental nod. *Just hunting.*

He reached out to Seme again. He pictured the barking dogs, then sent the image with a slight push. Again, he waited. Sure enough, the farmhouse door opened, and the boy came out with a lantern. He

whistled, and the dogs obediently trotted to their master. With the two beasts out of the way, Gentza released his invisibility and stepped into the edge of the light. Might there be some cream in this after all? But Seme just smiled at him, waved, and went back inside. Maybe next time.

Kitty was still shivering in the tree when Gentza hopped up to the branch she was sitting on. “Didn’t you say you aren’t a normal cat?” he asked. “Looked like just another day of getting chased up a tree to me.”

She glared at him. “I’m afraid of dogs, thank you very much. And you could have warned me that you have some nasty neighbors!”

She disappeared.

So much for attempting to be a good host. He’d need more practice with that. “I am sorry,” he said to the empty space. “Come back? Please?”

No answer, and besides the scent impression where she had sat on the branch, not a trace of her presence remained, sight, smell, or sound. Not bad; she should have cloaked this thoroughly a moment earlier for the dogs!

What now? Gentza eyed the sky and the approaching storm and decided against continuing the hunt on his own. He wasn’t really hungry anymore, and despite what he had told Kitty, he could always ask Zumar to feed him. Sitting alone on the branch, he pondered their conversation. Why did he like to hunt? He couldn’t say, exactly, except that all parts of it felt right, normal, cat-like. Stalking, pouncing, toying with his prey, then killing and eating. He even sometimes left presents for the people he liked.

Did he have dreams? He shook his head. Why should he? Before the Archmage had found and bonded with him two years before, he had lived a few miles to the west, in Donostia—what the Spanish called San Sebastián. He hadn’t liked it there, too noisy, and too many humans and other cats. Here in Hondarribia it was better, quieter. His human was the same way. That’s why they fit together so well.

He mentally reached out. The Archmage remained in conversation with Isabelle. *I’ll be sleeping outside tonight*, Gentza sent.

Are you sure everything is all right? It sounded like you had a run-in with the neighbors' dogs.

Don't worry, everything is fine. Kitty startled them by singing.

Ah, yes, Isabelle told me she does that. Interesting.

It sounds nice. I don't think the dogs approved, though.

Amusement. I am sure you handled the situation. Bloody noses?

I did, and their noses are unscratched. But Kitty is mad at me.

Oh. Did you laugh at her? You shouldn't do that, she's a city girl and not used to our rustic ways.

Pfft. She chased away all the prey.

Gentza!

I know, I know. I do feel bad about it, and I'll apologize tomorrow.

You do that. Pause. Are you sure you don't want to come in before the storm hits?

No, I'm good. I know some cozy places.

Alright. Sleep well.

The Zubiondoas had used the dry days to bring in their hay. Entering their barn, Gentza climbed into the hay loft and settled into a comfortable position.

No, Kitty was wrong. His life wasn't boring, it was just right.

Chapter 2

Kitty was still shaking when she jumped up to the open window, the same one they had left through earlier. How she hated dogs! She wove through the invisible maze of wards as Gentza had taught her and stopped on the inside ledge.

Taking several deep breaths, she waited for the shaking to subside. Something else was bothering her, like an itch she couldn't scratch. She thought back to earlier, to the angry-looking storm clouds. Had they evoked this feeling of unease, or had it been there before? She wasn't sure; during the stroll with Gentza it might have been hidden beneath the banter. Teasing him had been good fun—he was such a stick-in-the-mud! An immensely talented cat, and all he wanted to do was stay in this hamlet and do ordinary things. What a waste, when the whole vast song of life lay ahead of him. She and Isabelle came here once a year, and Gentza had only been around on the last visit. Strange, she had the feeling she had known him longer. Maybe because he did his best not to change—at his three years, he still seemed like an overly large kitten. It wasn't as though at five she was an old cat herself. But even so.

She hummed to herself. Making music always tended to soothe her, but this time it heightened the feeling of unease. She stopped, and it receded. Had her earlier singing caused it?

The room she entered was dark. It was on the raised first floor, its window six feet from the ground, no big deal for a lithe cat like her. She padded to the staircase. The rhythm of conversation floated from the floor above, from the Archmage's workshop. Her sensitive ears pricked up. "Yes," the Archmage was saying, "I agree that it would be helpful if we had more allies on the Council. But the others will never go for it. The only reason why they even accept you and me both is because they are afraid of you."

"You mean because of my family's influence. They would never be afraid of a woman." Isabelle's voice was harsh, bitter.

“You sell yourself short, Isabelle. These are modern times; the 13th century is not the Dark Ages anymore.”

Isabelle snorted. “I wish everyone saw it as you do.”

They were talking human politics again. Isabelle spent way too much time with that nonsense, and when she did, she mostly ended up being grumpy. Which then made Kitty grumpy and wander off on her own to sing quietly to herself.

She reached the first-floor landing. Someone had cut little cat-sized holes in all the doors near the bottom and fitted them with a piece of wood and a hinge that allowed the flap to open both ways. Clever, and very convenient for the cats. Why hadn't Isabelle thought of doing this in their home in Bayonne? She always had to leave doors or windows open for Kitty to come and go when she wanted. Only sometimes she forgot.

Kitty pushed the flap and entered the workshop. It fell back with a loud thunk, and the boy, Alan, startled. He looked toward the door but not directly at her. Oh. She had been holding on to her cloak of invisibility all this time since leaving Gentza on the tree, and she hadn't even noticed. Not bad! If all it took was an annoying tomcat to make magic easier, then magic should be very easy indeed!

She let go of the cloak. “There you are,” Isabelle said. “Where have you been?”

Out. Tail raised, she sauntered to the humans and rubbed her flanks on them in greeting—Alan first, then the Archmage. *We need cat flaps back home,* she sent at Isabelle.

“Beg your pardon? What flaps?” Isabelle de Montfort was an imposing woman, standing taller and wider than most men, with her hair kept short in a man's style. She was the youngest daughter of an English nobleman in the Duchy of Gascony and granddaughter of one of the greatest military commanders of the ages—or so Kitty had heard other humans describe her. She was also the only woman on the mages' Council of Five, and was considered a powerful practitioner of magic, probably only second to the Archmage himself. With a companion cat as black as Gentza, instead of a tuxedo like herself, Isabelle might even have

been stronger than the Archmage. Although, who knew. “My mage is a real Basque,” Gentza had told her more than once, proudly. Basque was the language of magic, and they said Basque cats were the strongest, so probably Basque mages were too. And a deep black Basque cat like Gentza would be the strongest of all. If he ever decided to do something with his life.

The boy Alan had bent down to pet Kitty. Maybe he wasn’t a boy. A young man? She was a bit fuzzy about human age brackets. Alan was Isabelle’s apprentice, so he couldn’t yet be an adult by human standards. He was a nice human, with a round face, brown hair and a stubby nose, almost like a cat. She liked his company, he was always cheerful and listened when she talked to him, though she knew he couldn’t understand what she said. He even sang sometimes when he thought no one could hear; he was a terrible singer.

The Archmage smiled at Kitty. “Our cat flaps are great, are they not?” He was clean-shaven, short, black hair, strong frame, deep, melodious voice. Young, for a mage. To Isabelle, he said, “You can ask my neighbor how to make them. Gentza loves them.”

Isabelle snorted. “I am sure the rats and other vermin would love them back in Bayonne too.”

The Archmage chuckled. “There are no rats in here. Gentza would be mortified.”

Of course he would. If necessary, Kitty probably could keep out the rats back home—every cat knew how to hunt, she just didn’t want to most of the time. She’d just have to convince Isabelle on the trip home to try out the flaps. Yeah, right. She sighed and stalked under the workbench.

The Archmage turned toward the other humans. “So, should we do one more demonstration, or continue tomorrow?”

“Let’s do one last one,” Isabelle said. “One of the reasons for coming here is the boy’s education, after all.”

“Of course, my dear.”

At the Archmage’s words, a flash of affection pulsed through the bond, and it wasn’t directed at Kitty. Isabelle tended to be guarded, but

when your minds are directly connected, emotions are hard to hide. In this case it was alright; Kitty liked the Archmage too.

“Take a look, my boy. Closer to the table.” Alan approached, and Kitty also jumped up to watch. Mages’ workbenches all have a similar layout, so she knew exactly where she could be without disturbing a spell. When nobody was looking, back at home, she even sometimes balanced between the power lines of the glyphs, feeling the magic, stepping lightly, like a game of hopscotch, only with higher stakes. Although she didn’t know what would happen if she made a misstep—she never had so far.

Being closer to the glyphs reminded her of the uneasy feeling. It still hadn’t receded, if anything, it had become stronger.

“Meow,” she said.

At least that’s what the two human males heard. At Isabelle, she thought, *I need to talk to you. I have a feeling that something is not right.*

“What do you mean? Are you sure?”

Of course she was sure. Her human should be feeling the same unease through their bond. *It started when we went out earlier. Something dark.* Her tail twitched. *It felt like being watched.*

Isabelle didn’t answer, just radiated skepticism.

Kitty’s tail twitched faster. *I don’t know more. I’m sorry I’m just a stupid tuxedo.*

“What is it?” the Archmage asked. Isabelle repeated what the cat had told her. At least she wasn’t completely dismissing her concern.

The Archmage nodded. He tilted his head, as if listening. “Gentza is asleep. I know he is younger and more carefree than you are, Kitty, but he surely would have sensed something wrong, no?” He grinned. “Have you ever experienced one of our storms in August? Even though Bayonne is not far away, your weather is different. We are caught between mountains and the sea, and a storm can be quite a spectacle. That might be what you are feeling. Storms can be dangerous.”

He yawned. “You know, maybe we should do the demonstration tomorrow. The tower has good walls; let us sleep through the storm now.

Do not forget to close the shutters in your rooms, but you can leave the windows open. It should be nice and cool tomorrow morning. Have a good night.”

It sounded reasonable. Maybe he was right. He lived here; he knew the weather and understood the local dangers. And he was the Archmage. Why did she still feel uneasy? She had seen storms strong enough to tear tiles off roofs and break branches, and it had never felt like this.

She sat in the dark workshop after everybody had left and pondered. What could she do? She searched about, both with her normal and her arcane senses, but the only thing out of the ordinary was the approaching weather. Which might be bad enough if you were caught outside in the storm. She briefly considered going to look for Gentza. No, he probably knew every hidden nook and cranny around here for cases like this. Besides, she was still mad at him. A little bit at least.

She needed a cuddle. Going up to the next floor, she found that Isabelle was already snoring in her room. Just as well. Alan’s room was next door, and he tended to be more accommodating anyway. She slipped through the cat flap and hopped up on the bed of the sleeping boy. At a light nudge of her head, he turned to the side, allowing her to snuggle up to him.

The thunder started to roll in earnest.

Chapter 3

Kerbasi lay in the shadows of a bush. Not a whisker twitched. The huge, grizzled cat waited until the farm had completely settled. Then he silently emerged from his hiding place. He scanned the surroundings with all his senses. First, sight. Trees moving. Farther away, fields with late crops swayed in the wind. Some rodents were scurrying about at the edges of his vision. He ignored them. They were not important to his mission.

Next, sound. Kerbasi pricked his ears, the whole and the torn one. He heard perfectly with both. The sounds of night: owls, crickets, some frogs. Wind picking up, distant thunder. No lightning, he must have missed it. The world was getting restless before the storm. He ignored the sounds. They were not important to his mission.

Smell. Humans and animals on the farm. The young black male cat in the hay. The odor of the smaller tuxedo female still lingering. Pretty, that one. And she could sing, very interesting. But no matter, she was not his mission. He only needed to ensure they both did not get in the way.

Last, thought. Lightly, he reached toward each sentient mind in the vicinity. Drew back well before full contact, just checking each was asleep. He wasn't powerful enough to send them all dreaming if they weren't. Yet. So he was careful not to touch. He couldn't be seen. Bakar had trusted him with this mission. He would do it well.

All was quiet. Satisfied, Kerbasi crept toward the tower. He was a massive cat, almost as large as some hounds. A black and dark-gray tabby, he looked black in all but direct sunlight. He wasn't pure black, though. That meant he had less power. Too bad. But he was still good at this. Even without using magic, he was all but invisible.

He moved forward. Stopped every few paces to watch, listen, scent, think. The tower stood before him, an imposing structure. Made of thick stone, at least four stories high. Flat on top, with battlements. Glass windows, with shutters. He had rarely seen glass windows anywhere but

churches. He couldn't tell whether they were stained or grayed. Not that it mattered. Glass windows broke easily if they were not shuttered. He would have to do something about the noise, though.

Towers like this had originally been built for defense. Someone must have added the windows later. He had no idea what it had defended, nor did he care. There were no soldiers inside it now, only mages. That probably meant wards. He would have to be careful.

The three mages in the tower were still awake. One, a boy, not yet fully a mage. The second, a woman. They had arrived that day. He didn't know them, but the woman might be one of the other leaders. She fit the description his scouts had given him. She was not important for now. Just a threat to consider. Possibly also an opportunity.

The third was Zumar Etxartea. The Archmage. His target.

A sound, on the edge of his hearing, like a cat jumping. The tuxedo? A window was open. Careless to leave a window open. Or was there a ward? But the tuxedo and the black hadn't triggered it.

Kerbasi considered the problem. Only the target and the male cat lived here. The others were visiting. Would the target have wards that opened for visitors and triggered for everybody else? Maybe. He had never understood human magic. Not when he had been chained, not now. No matter. Look forward, not back.

He slowly circled the tower, unseen, unheard, undetected. There were more windows on higher floors, some open, some closed. He might be able to reach one of them. The stones were old, with enough chinks for his claws to catch. If they had set wards, they would be expecting humans. Mages didn't see cats as a threat.

The old injury in his hip was beginning to twitch. The coming storm. He decided it wouldn't bother him, the mission came first. Battle scars could be tended to later.

Kerbasi settled in to wait.

Finally, the tower was asleep. Sight, sound, smell, thought, all confirmed it. Yet Kerbasi checked again. You could never be too careful.

Once more, he considered the options for entering the tower. Should he use the open window on the lower floor? Or risk making a sound while he climbed higher up? He wasn't a garden dormouse who could scale sheer walls with ease. And even dormice made noise; he'd made a meal of more than one careless rodent himself. No, all things considered, a potential ward would be less of a hazard.

He jumped up to the windowsill and concentrated. Nothing. Even though he was powerful, cat magic was of no use here. He would have to rely on his normal senses.

He sniffed the windowsill. There it was, a faint spoor that tickled his nostrils. It was more pronounced where cat paws had stepped. Not once, but many times, and just recently. He followed the scent, carefully placing one paw after the other, with pinpoint precision.

Twelve steps. Fourteen. Two more, and he would be through.

His old wound betrayed him. His hip twitched and a hind paw slipped from the path. A searing pain shot through his hind quarters, and he smelled burning fur, skin, flesh. It took all his control to stifle a yowl. Inhuman control, yet he managed. He wasn't a human, after all, he was a cat. Better, stronger, hopefully wiser and kinder. His rage at the humans, at their mages, had long gone, had been replaced by a cold determination. They would make the world a better place, Bakar and him.

The thought calmed him, helped him manage the pain. His breathing calmed, his heart rate slowed, he became a statue, as only cats can. When he was certain his body was under control, he moved forward again, taking the last two steps without a hitch. The ward had been triggered; maybe it was now disarmed, maybe not. He hoped it was—he might have to leave this way in a hurry. But that was a matter for later. Now, he would continue with the mission.

Kerbasi crept through the tower, stalking his prey, a silent shadow of death.

About the Author

Christian Bieck fell in love with the fantastic after following Lucy through a magical wardrobe as a boy. He also loves animals, which is why he lives in a secret compound in southwest France with his wife, two cats, two dogs, two alpacas, and a big flock of chickens. One day almost 20 years ago, he decided to combine those two loves into stories: you are holding one in your hands right now. *Basquet* is his first novel; before that, he published several short stories in English and German (his French isn't good enough yet) in various anthologies.

Christian recently retired from his day job as a futurist—what he called “writing speculative non-fiction for business executives”—to focus on the good life in France, which besides the obvious includes making music, teaching tennis, and of course writing more stories starring cats and other magical beings!

Find his collected author pages at Linktr.ee/chbieck, and his blog at www.bieck.fr, where you can also read a graphic novelette featuring *Gentza* for free.