

THE HUNTING OF LORD ETSALIAN'S DAUGHTER

by
Clare Bell

A sharp wind from the heights whirled flurries about the fringes of my ears. Ahead, filling with snowdrift, were the tracks of my prey, the lord Etsalian and his daughter. I read in those marks of how the pair had struggled through mounting hills of white while I, my wide paws cushioned by stiff fur beneath, glided over the top. Without slowing stride I lowered my muzzle to study their track. The man's boots had made deep wells in the powder. His daughter's prints were smaller and irregular, as if she had begun to falter. Here her cloak had dragged and caught on thorns, leaving a crimson rag fluttering.

I paced by, twitching the end of my long tail. Etsalian must have failed to see the betraying scrap or he would have torn it off. I knew he had already begun to suspect I was more than a hunger-driven snow cat; I had betrayed myself by hunting him with single-minded hatred.

Did he know, this lordling of Estcarp, that these paws had been the work-roughened hands of a kitchen drudge and these eyes had watched his eyes at play? Did he know that what burned in my brain and my belly was not the fire of hunger but the molten desire for revenge?

I strode onward, feeling the supple power in my loins

and the points of fangs that lay against my tongue. No longer did I, the witch-maid Megarti, wear a form that woke the lust of men. No drunken noble could seize me and hold me pinioned while using me as viciously and as recklessly as he would a tavern whore.

My whiskers trembled as I paced. My tail whipped back and forth with rage as I called the memory forth. I had shrieked aloud at the breaking of my womanhood, but that was not the worst pain, no. What struck deepest was the death of my witch-gift. In that instant of defilement, I felt it wrenched from me, leaving an empty, bleeding shell of the Wise One I might have been. Even as Etsalian had me and then flung me like a used rag into the midst of his carousing warriors, he bellowed his triumph over witchery. The others were only to be sure that my power was indeed slain.

Did he know that in robbing me of my gift, he had also struck a wounding blow to the Council of Wise Ones who protected Estcarp? True, I was not yet an adept, only a novice whose ability had begun to waken, but this was within a year of the horning of Karsten and the sealing of the Border, a task that heavily depleted the strength of the Council and indeed of all witches in Estcarp. The lack of my contribution might not have been noted in earlier times, but now the loss was keenly felt.

I could be thankful for only one thing during that horrible night. Etsalian knew neither my name nor my family, only that I was of the Old Race. The tavern lights were low and the lord so awash in wine that he did not remember my face. Knowing that, I dared to further my plan for avenging the rape by seeking employment in his household as a common household drudge.

Long were those months and years of enduring and waiting. During that time I learned that Etsalian had been wed and his wife had died young, leaving only one child, a daughter. He cherished the girl Chrina beyond all his other possessions. At first I thought cynically that his devotion to her was merely that of ownership, as of one who is privileged to hold a rare gemstone between his hands. But I

saw, to my surprise, that his love was real and I discovered how deeply I could wound him.

The rattle of ice-bound branches startled me. Wind lashed the pines on the mountain slope above. The storm was growing into a blizzard, aiding me in my hunt by slowing my prey. Etsalian's and Chrina's tracks showed where the pair had lurched and floundered, their separate trails coming together as one. I thought of how they must have been clinging to each other, the lord sheltering his ten-year-old daughter against his body, wrapped in his cloak.

The two were mine now. Etsalian and Chrina had no hope of rescue, for I had cut them off from their guardsmen and put their horses to flight. My eagerness grew as I heard their footsteps ahead. Instinct told me to attack from above. I left the trail and circled past my quarry, seeking an overhanging limb from which I could fling myself down on my prey before Etsalian could draw steel.

As I went, I thought of Toriswithe, my sister. Had she aided me further by bringing this storm down from the north? I knew well this was not yet the season for winter gales and so had Etsalian known or else he would not have chosen to travel these mountains.

Toriswithe. It was the bond of kin that made me go to her and the once-shared bond of talent that made her aid me. Shame and envy held me back, for she had preserved her ability and nourished it to full flower. I, in letting myself be taken, had seen only the opening of the bloom before it withered.

It was now only a day since we had met in a cave not far from this trail. Toriswithe had gone first, to make preparations. I had come after.

There was no snow on the ground when I had approached our meeting place. I saw only dead leaves stiffened by crystals of frost. Near the threshold, in a patch of rimed mud, lay the track of a snow cat. Warily I ducked beneath the shadowed overhang into the cave entrance. Picking my way across the rock-strewn floor, I reached the orange circle thrown by the fire.

From behind the blaze Toriswithe rose to meet me. She was dressed in a simple robe held by a silver clasp at the waist. One hand lay on a rough-hewn cage lashed together with leather thongs. Inside, a trapped snow cat shifted and flattened its ears, fixing me with ice-green eyes.

As the cat bared its teeth in a snarl, I flinched.

“Do you fear the beast?” Toriswithe asked.

“Yes.” I could not get the quaver out of my voice.

“Yet this is what you wish to become.”

“Do you seek to dissuade me?”

“No, Megarti.” Her tone softened. “Only to make you understand what it is that you do. Kneel before the cage.”

I did so, bringing my head to the level of the snow cat’s. Once, when I still had my gift, I had begun to feel a kinship with the animals and to sense the alien flicker of their thoughts. Now I had nothing except resolve. I met the snow cat’s eyes through the rude cage bars, trying to see something beyond the cold gaze of a predator. Yet what had I expected to find? And was I not as merciless a hunter? It was that desire I shared with the beast.

“How did you bring the animal here?” I asked, wondering if she had captured the creature herself or paid a huntsman.

Toriswithe’s smile had an edge of scorn. “Have you forgotten how the gift grants control over beasts? I lured her. It is my power that secures her, not those clumsy bars. I made the cage to reassure you, Megarti.”

A little sullenly, I asked, “Why do you need the snow cat itself. Will you not merely reshape the substance of my body?”

“Yes, but without the instincts and knowledge that must accompany such a new form, you would be as helpless as a newborn. From her”—Toriswithe pointed at the snow cat—“I will draw what you need. Are you ready?”

Mutely I nodded. With chalk in the flickering light of the fire, she laid down a pentagram with myself and the caged snow cat at its center. At each point she set candles which she snapped into flame with an imperious gesture. Chant-

ing, she circled us, bearing in her hand a charm of braided fur from the snow cat's pelt. As she fastened it about my neck, I smelled the fragrance of herbs woven into it and the musk-sharp odor of the creature itself.

"The transformation will last as long as you wear this as a collar," Toriswithe told me. "Tear it off and you regain your shape as a woman, when and if you choose."

She chanted again, throwing back her unbound hair and uttering yowls and snarls among the words of her incantation. I felt her seize my hair and knot it in her fist while her other arm shot into the cage, gripping the snow cat's ruff. Both I and the beast jerked with pain and outrage, but Toriswithe kept her hold, dragging the two of us together against the cage bars, nose to muzzle.

I was forced to breath the moist exhalation of the snow cat or choke. As I inhaled the creature's breath, so too did I draw in the essence of her nature; the things in her mind that made her what she was. Even before I felt the transformation begin in my body, I knew what it was to be such a creature. I felt the goad of hunger and the bliss of satiety, the quiet joy of raising young and the fierce exhilaration of the hunt. I knew the pain from wounds given by horned and hooved prey and the desperate frustration of seeing a needed meal bound away beyond reach. But I did not, as I had feared, encounter blind cruelty or savage lust for blood. Those characteristics so frequently attributed to animals were true only of humankind.

Thinking of my purpose, I felt the sting of shame, but that was quickly countered by the memory of my violation and the greater crime done to Estcarp by depriving the Council of an adept in a time of great need. Rage strengthened me. I willed myself into the Change.

As clay is molded in the potter's hands, so then was I stretched in one place, squeezed in another, drawn nearly to breaking, re-formed and remade. Whether the outward signs of my transformation were horrific, I don't know, for although Toriswithe watched, she gave no outward reaction.

With an odd twinge, whiskers sprang from both my cheeks. A carpet of fur rolled all over me, setting up an unbearable tickling. Sharp pains in my knuckles and the tops of my feet told me that claws were sprouting while fingers and toes curled under, altering into pads.

And then I was on all fours, switching the tip of a still tingling tail and shaking my silver and white pelt. My feline sister in the cage lay still, barely breathing.

"She is in trance," said a voice above me. I had to shake my head hard before I recognized the rhythm of human speech. I sat on my haunches, looking up at the now strange form of Toriswithe towering above me. So strong were the snow cat's instincts that I had to fight the urge to lash out.

Toriswithe stooped down beside me, her brows bending with concern. "Are you there, little sister?" I summoned a shaky purr to tell her all was well. Her hand stroked my ruff. I let her pick up a forefoot and squeeze one toe to extend the claw. She guided it to hook gently into the charm-collar, now buried in the thick fur about my neck. "Remember. This is your release."

I tried it once myself to make sure I could tear off the collar when the time came. Then, with one last backward look at Toriswithe, I left the cave and set out on the trail I knew Etsalian had taken. That had been a day ago. Now . . .

Again I realized I had been distracted by memories. I paused, one foot lifted, knowing I was still human enough to dwell on events past. Fearing that reflection had made me delay too long, I sought an ambush spot and found it on the limb of an oak overhanging the trail. Quickly I climbed it and positioned myself so Etsalian would pass directly underneath. Even if he looked up, I would be one more swirl of white among many.

Below and behind me, I heard Chrina's exhausted sob. I stayed still as the two snow-mantled figures staggered beneath my branch. The man's broad bowed shoulders were my target. I dropped.

Even as my weight bore Etsalian down, his hand sought his sword. Fastening my teeth on the grip, I pulled the weapon from its scabbard so fast that he gashed his palm on the sliding blade. Clutching his bleeding hand to his chest, he made a quick roll away from me.

Chrina's scream cut through the hiss of the blizzard. She dropped down on her knees beside him, her arms around his neck. I watched the color ebb from his face at the sight of his weapon in my jaws.

"Stay still, child," he warned, his gaze never leaving me. He gripped her hand and I saw that he was shaking. "Don't run or the beast will chase you."

"Is it indeed a beast, father?" the girl asked softly. "It has taken your sword."

To that he had no reply. I laid back my ears, clamping my teeth hard enough to scar the grip, letting my eyes speak the depths of my hatred. With a disdainful toss of my head, I sent the blade whirling into a snowbank.

Etsalian's once ruddy face turned sallow behind his ice-crusted chestnut beard. He made an abortive motion as if to go after the sword, then groped among the folds of his cloak, bringing out a huntsman's knife. Shielding Chrina with the bulk of his body, he rose. I let him get to a half crouch before I attacked again. With a cry that was now a blend of rage and terror, the girl leaped back, wrenched an ice-sheathed branch from a tree, and tried to beat me as I mauled her father.

The lord lay on his back, defending himself with the knife and his feet. As he kicked out at me, I seized the back of his boot at the ankle, sinking my teeth through leather into the heel tendon beneath. A blow from his other foot dislodged me, but I tore away flesh along with the piece of his boot. He stiffed and shrieked in pain. He rolled onto his side, both hands clutching his suddenly crippled leg.

I let the girl harry me off, half admiring her fierce defense of her father. I could have struck the branch from her

hand and taken her by the throat, but such was not my purpose . . . yet.

With a childish baring of teeth and a threatening shake of her stick, Chrina left me and ran back to Etsalian. With her help, he bound up his wound with strips cut from the hem of his cloak. When he tried to stagger away, leaning heavily on his daughter, he fell at the first step, telling me I had managed to hamstring him on one side.

I could see the horror growing on the lord's face as I came creeping back. Sweat trickled down his cheeks and froze in his beard. "Chrina, find my sword!" His voice was shrill and half-strangled. "Quickly, girl, by the grace of Gunnora!"

Biting her lip, the child turned to plunge into the swirling curtain of white about us. I moved to head her off and this time her clumsy flailing with the stick did not deter me. Again, the fading human within me could not help but respect the child's courage. There was something else about her that had begun to disturb me. It was not her appearance, for she had a pale plain face with features too blunt for beauty, and her gangling body wrapped in a wind-whipped cloak held little promise for gracefulness. No, it was something else that lay within her I sensed and pushed away, for I feared it would distract me from my purpose.

Once I had driven the girl back to her father, I began to circle them both, darting in to slash at Etsalian's unwounded leg. Chrina I left untouched. Again and again I attacked and withdrew, watching the man flounder and crawl, leaving crimson smears to be swallowed by the deepening snowdrift. He raged at me.

"Kill me, curse you! Kill me and take your meat, hell-beast!"

But, as I continued to circle, I sensed he knew it was not just meat I wanted. I paused, fixing my gaze on the girl. The odd feeling I had about her was growing and her guess about my true nature had surprised me. She stared back at me, then gave Etsalian a solemn questioning look. "Father, have you ever wronged a witch?"

“Stop that talk, child. The beast is mad. Can’t you see?”

I growled and switched my tail. The girl eyed her father with a strange expression, then looked away. Etsalian raised his face to me. I could see the unwanted memory of the rape forcing itself upon him, for although he remembered neither my face nor my name, he knew he had taken a woman of the Old Race. His mouth curled, but fear made his face writhe, ending his attempt to sneer.

“You can’t be the witch-maid,” he muttered to himself as his eyes shone with a hectic glow. “Her powers were broken that night.”

I opened my jaws and screamed aloud in a voice that was almost human in its fury. My back fur bristled; my tail flared until I looked like the apparition he had called me. With a lunge I seized Chrina by her clothing and dragged her away. Etsalian moaned and tried to crawl to her, but I set myself between them.

A slice at me with the huntsman’s knife only earned him a bitten hand. I turned to the child, who was lying quietly in the snow with her cloak spread behind her, breathing shallowly like a captured bird. She had the sense not to try and flee; she knew I would be on her in a bound.

I became aware of a gnawing hunger along with the desire for vengeance that now beat a triumphant pulse in my throat. Almost without knowing what I was doing, I began scraping the child’s arm with my rough tongue, drooling at the salty taste as abraded flesh began to bleed. Chrina whimpered.

A despairing howl from Etsalian drew my attention back to him. He was weeping now, his hands held out to me. “Mercy, Wise One! Yes, it was I who took a witch-girl that night. I was half out of my mind with drink and grief, for it was that day I had seen my wife buried. It was whispered that a jealous witch-maid had a hand in her death and I believed it to be true. If you want revenge, take it from me and leave my child, who has done you no wrong . . .”

I watched Etsalian cry and plead, drinking in the sight of his helpless abjection to slake the thirst of my cruelty. I was

not yet finished with him. Could he still have the arrogance to think that the suffering I had inflicted on him was fair payment for the evil done me? No. For one such as I, one of the Old Race, the loss of my gift had slain a part of me. I wanted Etsalian to feel the same death within his spirit so that he would understand the magnitude of his crime against me. His love for Chrina was the means by which I could rend him.

Paralyzed by chill and fear, Chrina made no effort to fight as I pulled her farther beyond Etsalian's reach. He stared at me in shock as I rolled her and clawed open the front of her blouse. Her head fell back. My muzzle brushed the swift pulse at her throat. Hunger and the need to kill seized me, battling with the last vestiges of revulsion for what I was about to do. In that instant, I nearly lost that part of me that had yet remained human.

My fangs broke the skin of the girl's neck, but my jaws did not close. Along with the warm throb at the base of her throat, I felt something else; a subtle but powerful energy that was more than the beat of life. I crouched there, shuddering in every muscle as the knowledge raced to my brain along with the taste of her flesh. Now I knew what had disturbed me earlier. The realization rang back and forth inside my head as if I had been clubbed on the side of the face. It burst on me, driving back my instinct to feed and my hunger for retribution. This child of an Estcarp lordling was gifted with a wakening power far stronger than any I might have developed.

I remembered then that animals could sense the presence of the witch-gift. Having taken on the form of a beast, so too had I acquired this unexpected ability. It was not something I wanted.

In bittersweet confusion, I retreated, eyeing the girl as she put her hand to the wounds at her throat. All were trickling red, but I had not bitten deeply enough to savage her. Her eyes were wide as she looked at me and I saw in them my choice. I could yield to my animal and my human desires and slay the child before the father's eyes . . . or spare her.

It was not an upsurge of mercy that forced me to this conclusion, but rather the awareness of a need far greater than mine alone. If I saved Chrina, I could claim her and see her trained as an adept to fill the void left among the witches of Estcarp by my failure to guard my gift.

Chrina sat up, drawing her torn cloak about her. She reached out suddenly to stroke my face with a clumsy hand and breathed, "You almost killed me, yet you didn't. Why?"

Even without the muteness of my feline form, I would have been unable to answer. The child shuddered violently, reminding me that my teeth were not the only danger threatening her. The storm's bite was growing harder with every minute. Numbed by exhaustion and disbelief, Etsalian lay nearby, still staring at us.

If I was to save the girl, I had to bring both of them to shelter. Killing Etsalian, for satisfaction or convenience, was out of the question if I was to gain Chrina's trust. With a low growl I tugged at her cloak, urging her to follow me. I gave the lord a nip on the hindquarters to get him started. I also took away his dagger and buried it in the snow.

We made a strange trio as we fought our way through the storm. Too weak to walk, Etsalian crawled after me. Chrina walked bent over beside him, trying to shield him from the lashing wind. I paced in front, growing worried by the storm's ferocity and increasingly exasperated by their clumsy struggles. It was more by luck than skill that I found a refuge large enough to hold all three of us: a hollow beneath a fallen tree. Once the lord and his daughter were settled against each other inside, I crawled atop them and spread myself, as a living blanket, to cover and warm them. Their shivering ceased. Etsalian and Chrina soon slept, as did I.

I woke to the sound of jingling mail and horn-calls outside. Pawing a hole in the drift-covered entrance, I saw the glitter of sun on snow crust and the figures of men searching. Chrina roused at the noise. Burrowing her way through the snow, she shouted, waving her arms. I was thoroughly alarmed and cursed myself for not reacting faster, but I could not stop Etsalian, stiff and weary as he

was, from following Chrina. I stayed within the den, listening to the voices outside.

“My lord, a snow cat attacked our horses yesterday and we feared it was stalking you. We are still seeking the beast.”

My hackles rose. If Etsalian wished to betray me to his huntsmen, I would have no chance. I heard the dull growl of his voice, yet I could not make out the words. Had he spoken to them of me? I thought of the last instructions Toriswithe had given, although they were curiously hazy in my mind, as was the memory of my woman-form. I raised a claw to my neck, seeking the charm-collar, but it was so buried in the deep fur of my ruff I could not easily catch it.

Unable to wait any longer, I sprang out of the den only to be met by leveled speartips and drawn bows. With the thought that he had indeed betrayed me, I sought his form within the circle of men, but just as the nearest huntsman was about to loose his arrow, I heard Etsalian’s roar. “No!”

To his men he must have looked a pitiful sight, down on his hands and shins, but the commanding tone in his voice was the same as if he had been upright. Taut bowstrings eased, bristling spearpoints withdrew. Chrina stumbled to her father and raised him to his knees, both fixing their eyes on me as if they could see through my silver and white pelt to what lay beneath.

“Lord, why show the creature mercy?” asked a burly figure in mail who appeared to be the party leader. “Chrina bears the animal’s toothmarks at her throat and you have been bitten.”

“The snow cat gave us these wounds, it is true, Pagant,” Etsalian answered him. “But she spared my girl and led us to shelter, otherwise we would have died in the storm.”

Several of the soldiers and huntsmen exchanged glances, as if they thought their lord’s mind as badly wounded as his body. For a brief moment I wondered if that might be so after all I had put upon him. The look he gave me was strange as he said softly, “Why you saved us, Wise One, I do not know. Perhaps it is too early for me to be grateful. You may still have a payment to exact for my ill-use of you.”

While Etsalian's men prepared a litter for him, I stayed nearby, and when they raised the wounded man to bear him away, I followed. After a slow journey from the mountains down to his keep in a nearby valley, Chrina led me into a stone shed, saw that I was provided with clothing and left in private to make my transformation from beast to woman. This time I was able to hook my claw in the charm-collar. I drew it off.

Much later I faced Etsalian within his keep in my true shape, wrapped in robes that had belonged to his dead wife. His leg was bound and he leaned on crutches. For a long interval neither one of us could summon words to address the other. At last he said, "My healers tell me I have paid in flesh for my crime. I will always limp."

I straightened my shoulders. "I too will never be whole. But the injury done to the witches of Estcarp can be reversed. Etsalian, hear me. Your daughter is gifted. She must be trained."

I had chosen the briefest way of saying that the wounded man must face another loss. Etsalian's face took on a large range of emotions and colors. He swayed on his crutches, his voice fallen to a croak. "Chrina? The witch-gift? How can that be?"

"I do not know. I care only that she has it and it must be put in service to Estcarp."

"Is that the reason you saved us?"

I was unable to answer at first. "It was reason enough," I retorted. I leave for Es Castle in two days. Prepare her to journey with me."

His face grew florid and his eyes blazed. I knew he could kill me to stop me from taking Chrina, if he so chose.

"You are sure," he growled.

"Yes."

He looked at the floor between his crutches. "You well know I am not a man to favor witches, but I am one who honors debts."

"When you kept your men from slaying the snow cat," I

answered, "you honored your debt to me. You still have an obligation to the Council."

When he raised his eyes again, grief had carved new lines in his face. I knew then he understood he had indeed lost his daughter.

"I never wished this for Chrina. Never to marry . . . never to know a husband or children . . . If you take her, will I ever see her again?"

"After she has completed her training, she may choose to visit you. That is her decision."

He hesitated. "Does she know what it was . . . that I did to you?"

"No. She knows some of the truth, but is too young to understand it completely. She is aware only that she has the Power and must be schooled in its use."

"Then do something for me, Megarti," he said, startling me by using my name. "Don't tell her. When and if the time comes, let her hear it from my own lips."

I had been prepared to refuse any last such request, but I heard my own voice soften. "I will tell her nothing more. When her training is complete, I will send word to you. That is all I can promise, Etsalian."

"It is enough," he answered, and I left the room to make preparations for the journey to Es Castle.

Afterword

This story was written for someone who encouraged and helped me in my first attempts at fiction, namely Andre herself. Her Witchworld also offered me a chance to write about two of the things I enjoy most—big cats and magic. Andre's snow cat was a wonderful creation and I decided that it would be a challenge to bring the reader inside the skin of