

A Stormhound's Christmas in Wales

by Claire Fayers

(with a little help from the cats)

Egypt. A long time ago. No, even longer than that.

Ra, king of the gods and ruler of the sun looked at his daughter in disbelief.

“You want a what?”

“A holiday,” Bastet repeated, licking her paws to clean behind her ears. “I’ve defeated the evil serpent Apep – again. I’ve placed my children in households all over Egypt to protect against disease and famine.”

“Your ‘children’ seem to spend most of their time sleeping and eating,” Ra commented. “They are growing lazy.”

“And that,” Bastet said, “is the problem. They need entertainment and there is precious little here. I propose a quest.”

Ra sighed. He pulled the sun across the sky every single day and no one ever heard him ask for time off to go on quests.”

Bastet fixed him with a long, unblinking stare.

“All right!” Ra burst out. “You can have a week off. Just stop looking at me like that. Where are you going on this quest?”

Bastet smiled. “The future.”

It was Christmas. This was a good thing, Storm had decided. Much as he enjoyed life with his human family in Wales, there were drawback. Weather, for example. No one had warned him about human weather, which could change six times a day and was often wet. Or the dangers. He’d just about got used to traffic, but then there

were delivery people who banged on the door, holding strange boxes. How was he supposed to know which ones were safe and which were wizards in disguise? The human homes were full of things that beeped or buzzed, and outside wasn't much better because every human seemed to carry a device which could suddenly make a noise and demand their attention. Then, of course, there'd been the strange months of quiet, when schools and shops and everything else was shut and people stayed in their houses. Jessie's Dad had been doing something called 'working from home' which mean he stayed in his bedroom all day and Jessie and Ben crept around downstairs reminding each other and Storm not to disturb him. Storm had been on serious high alert since last summer and it was exhausting.

But Christmas had returned and it had brought lights and fires, fights and feasts – a poor imitation of the feasting and battles that happened in Odin's Halls, but it wasn't a bad effort for humans. Today was called boxing day and it had begun with sausages and then a run around Abergavenny Castle. Storm and Jessie returned home, both panting.

Now, Storm lay in front of the fire in the back room of the Price's home, while Dad read a book and Jessie and Ben argued over whose turn it was to use some strange device made of plastic and glass.

Then Storm heard it – a faint noise outside, like the crackle of faraway lightning. His ears pricked. None of the humans seemed to have noticed it.

Magic, Storm thought. He'd been tensed up and ready to fight magical threats for so long that it was almost a relief to know the threat had arrived. First things first – don't alarm the humans. Storm rose carefully to his feet and padded out of the room to the kitchen door.

“You can’t need the toilet again already,” Jessie said. “We’ve only just come home.”

Storm gave an ‘I need to empty my bladder’ whine, which was guaranteed to get the humans moving. As predicted, Dad hurried to open the door.

Stand back, human, Storm commanded. This may be dangerous.

He stepped outside. A small, black and white face looked up, past him and straight at Dad.

Are you going to let me in? The words were spoken with a sense of quiet command and accompanied by a little squeak.

“It’s a kitten!” Ben said, rushing past Dad and scooping the odious creature into his arms.

Dad made a strange noise, somewhere between ‘ooh’ and ‘aaaaw’. It was a most unseemly sound.

Storm let out a low growl. *Bastet, goddess of cats. What are you doing here?*

Research trip, the kitten said. I shan’t be staying long.

Too right you won’t be. I am Storm of Odin and this house is under my protection.

The kitten hissed at him. *Oh do be quiet. I know who you are. That’s why I chose to come here. This house is already touched by magic. It will suit me nicely.*

No it will not! Go and find your own magic house. You’re not welcome here.

The kitten blinked her golden eyes slowly. *I am Bastet, the queen of all houses, she said. I am welcome everywhere.*

Storm barked. The humans ignored him.

“She’s shivering,” Ben said, stroking the kitten’s head. “We can’t leave her out here.”

“Take her inside,” Dad said. “She can’t have come far. I’ll go and ask the neighbours.”

“She looks hungry,” Jessie said. “Let’s see if she’ll eat some turkey.”

The three of them walked back inside.

Bastet met Storm’s gaze and delicately poked her tongue out at him.

Told you. Welcome everywhere. She closed her eyes, tilted her chin up against Ben’s hand and began to purr.

“Bad news,” Dad said, coming into the house the next morning, holding a pink box with Bastet in it. “No one’s reported a lost kitten and she’s not microchipped so the vet can’t trace her owner. I’ve left our details, just in case.”

Jessie and Ben were busy designing Found Cat posters using Dad’s computer.

Storm thumped his tail on the carpet to get their attention. It didn’t work.

“We should give her a name,” Jessie said.

Ben grinned. “I’ve already got one – Sunny. Storm and Sunny!”

Oh no. Don’t you start treating us like we’re some sort of double act. This is not a normal cat.

Bastet/Sunny stepped out of her cat carrier, arched her back and looked around.

“I’ll print some posters to go up,” Dad said. “Sunny better stay with us until we find her owners. But don’t get too attached to her – she doesn’t belong to us, remember.”

None of them seemed devastated to have a cat under their roof. In fact, Ben looked disappointed at the thought that the creature would not be staying long.

Jessie went to the window. “Dad, what are all those cats doing in our garden?”

What did she mean, cats? There were more? Storm’s coat bristled as he padded to the door to see.

He’d never learned to count so he had no idea how many cats were there. One... two... three... four.... lots. Nutmeg from next door, the fluffy white cat from the house at the end of the road, the ginger Tom from across the park, the tabby who owned a family of authors, and a whole load of extra cats that Storm had never seen before. They prowled around the garden, digging up the flowerbeds, sniffing at the lawn, scratching the old oak tree.

Storm barked. *Begone cats!*

Bastet jumped into Dad’s arms. He stroked her head, his eyes taking on a glazed look. “Be quiet, Storm. There’s nothing wrong with a few cats.”

Are you kidding me?

Bastet sneered at him, jumped down and pawed the door.

“I’ll take her,” Jessie and Ben said together.

Storm watched as his three humans scrambled to open the door and accompany the kitten outside, leaving him standing abandoned and alone in the kitchen. He sighed. He didn’t want to go outside, anyway, not with all those stupid cats about. He chewed the table leg – his usual way of expressing his displeasure – but the wood seemed tasteless today and he gave up and made a flying leap to the draining board so he could get a better look outside.

Bastet jumped down out of Ben’s arms and every cat in the garden lay down, even Nutmeg who should have known better. Bastet strolled among them, touching noses with them all, her tail upright and quivering. Storm quivered too, in rage. This

was his home, his human family. He was not about to share it with anyone, definitely not with a cat.

Two days passed. *Oh look, we have matching food plates*, Bastet said. *Isn't that nice?* She finished her last mouthful of fish and sat back to wash herself.

Storm suppressed a growl. The humans didn't like him growling at the kitten for some reason. *All right*, he said, *what do you want? You said you were here to research. Maybe I can...* He almost choked on the word... *can help you. If it means you'll leave sooner.*

Bastet blinked at him. *Toys*, she said.

Toys?

Yes. Playthings, amusements. We are bored in Egypt. You help me find the best amusing toy and I shall leave you in peace.

Storm felt the fur on his neck rise. *You invaded my house because you were bored?*

Bastet twitched her ears. *I heard you left Odin's halls and became mortal for the sake of crunchy treats.* She snatched one off Storm's plate.

Hey! That is an exaggeration. It wasn't just the crunchy treats. It was Jessie too, and Ben and their Dad. And Storm had been younger then and knew less about the world.

Ben appeared, dangling something long and shiny. "Mrs Williams next door brought you a toy, Sunny."

Bastet patted it disdainfully. *You call that a toy?*

Ben's eyes filled with disappointment.

Oh no you don't. I don't care if you're the goddess of cats. You don't come here and mess with my humans.

Storm grabbed the toy out of Ben's hand and ran off with it.

That is MINE! Bastet shrieked. She tore after him. Storm raced up the stairs, the toy dangling from his mouth. Bastet leaped over the banister and overtook him. Storm swerved around her.

I thought you didn't like this toy?

I don't. I hate it. But it's mine. Give it back!

Storm ran back down the stairs. Bastet bounced off the lightshade, turned a somersault and left claw marks all the way down a wall as she landed. A chair fell over with a crash. Storm leaped over it and caught the edge of Jessie's art cupboard. The door sprang open and pens, pencils and craft materials tumbled out.

"Storm!" Jessie yelled.

Why is this my fault? Blame the cat.

He turned and saw the cat pawing at a ball of wool.

What, pray tell, is this? she asked.

Storm shrugged angrily. *It's wool. It comes from sheep. Jessie uses it to hang her pictures up.*

Bastet sniffed the ball then rolled on her back, wrestling with it.

Jessie laughed. Bastet snagged her claws into the wool and pulled out loops of it turning the neatly wrapped ball into a sorry mess.

I approve, Bastet said.

The next morning, the kitten had vanished.

Ben and Jessie spent the morning searching the house for her and calling her name all along the street. Storm wished he could tell them not to waste their time.

Bastet had returned to her own world. She'd always said she wouldn't be staying here long.

The house was normal again. It was... quiet.

"She probably got out of a window in the night," Dad said. "Let's hope she found her way home."

She did. But Storm knew the humans couldn't understand him – and even if they could, he had a feeling it wouldn't cheer them up much to know the cat had gone forever.

The 'Found Cat' posters Ben and Jessie had put up on all the lampposts became soggy in the rain. Dad put the extra food saucer back in the cupboard. "We could think about getting a cat," he said.

Ben shook his head. "I don't want another cat."

Storm sighed and wandered into the kitchen. He knew Bastet would be trouble, but he hadn't realised she'd hurt his humans by leaving them.

Then he heard a faint sound, like the crackle of faraway lightning, and something small streaked through the garden. Storm's ears pricked and he barked.

"Sunny!" Ben shouted, running to the door.

It couldn't be, but it was.

A small, black and white kitten looked up at him and mewed.

Bastet! Storm said.

The kitten shook her head. *No. Bastet took my form when she visited, but this time it's really me. I don't like it in Egypt. It's too hot and everyone keeps building pyramids. I liked our queen's stories of this house so I decide to move here. If you will let me – Bastet said I had to ask permission.* She gazed at him, wide-eyed. *Bastet said you were the most impressive stormhound she ever met.*

She did? Storm watched as Ben raced into the garden and picked the cat up, then as Jessie ran outside too, and Dad came down the stairs with a big smile on his face. Storm's tail began to wave.

There will be rules, he said. No eating my food. No bringing dead things into the house. No sleeping on Jessie's bed – that's my spot. No breaking stuff. No...

Wow, rules! I love rules! What's for breakfast?

The kitten jumped out of Ben's arms, bounced off Storm's head and skipped into the kitchen where she gulped down the last piece of turkey that Storm had been saving for later. Then she curled up in the middle of the kitchen table and purred with a sound of distant thunder.

"Sorry, Storm," Jessie said, patting him.

Storm licked her hand. Funnily, he didn't mind – not too much, anyway. He'd enjoyed being part of this family. Maybe it was time the family got a new member. As the humans were so fond of saying, Christmas was a time for sharing.

(A Stormhound's Christmas in Wales, ©Claire Fayers, December 2021. If you enjoyed this story and would like to find out how Storm arrived in Wales, check out Storm Hound, published by Macmillan Children's Books and available in libraries and bookshops.)