

WERE-WRATH

by Andre Norton

Krobie meat! Krobie meat!

She who had once been the Lady Thra and was now a brown bone of a woman as worn as one of the carrion birds she snarled at in a harsh whisper, dug her fist into the muck at the foot of the first forest tree. A sharp stone cut into her palm. She welcomed that pain as she made herself watch the scene in the valley below where a man kicked his way into death's peace.

Rinard, shy, slow spoken, hard of muscle if slightly dull of wit, one of that fighting tail who had broken out of Lanfort at its taking, riding and fighting at her back. Now he, the last of them all, was gone at the hands of these haughty, cruel northerners who would have no more refugees to threaten their own private raids and wars. She was all alone.

A black running hound on a blood-red banner—she would remember that. Oh, aye, she would hold that in mind and some day—her hand closed into a tight lock upon the stone, taking the hurt of it to seal the vow she made—though she might have little chance to keep it.

The forest was her only chance. They had cut her off from the open lands. It was both dark and thick and there were storm clouds gathering. She arose, settling her sword belt more easily, shrugged the weight of her pack straight.

There were rumors that some made a living in this place of grim dark trees. But it was evil-mouthing by most. Though she had seen greater evils caused by men with blood reek and fire, and the dusk beyond seemed to promise shelter.

Men were alien to this forest, that she had also heard. Well enough. In her heart she felt alien to her own kind, no beast could present a greater threat.

Her face was sharp featured beneath the shadow of a cap over-sewn with metal rings, and she had long forgot the luxury of clean linen, her present world was a harsh one. But there was a path opening before her, a narrow slot marked here and there by paw or hoof but with no trace of boot track.

The silence here brought odd thoughts to mind. This was a place in which to hide, aye, but one with a secret life of its own so that now and then Thra glanced over a shoulder seeking something she felt lurked and watched. Her uneasiness grew the stronger with every step she took as she listened keenly for sounds of pursuit.

Now the trail widened, and, in spite of the clouds and the gloom beneath the trees, more light showed ahead. She came out into a glade where two of the giant trees had crashed and now lay together, the tangled mass of branches of the one twined past any freeing with the upturned roots of the other.

Backed to this root-branch maze was a hut rough and yet sturdy, part of it being walled with stone, and its roof looking strong enough for a storm shelter.

To her right a basin had been formed of the same stone and into that poured a gurgle of water, welcome sight for her dry throat and dusty body.

Thra, screened by bushes, studied the scene before her. There was a crude chimney on the cabin but neither scent nor sign of smoke. Two dark slits, hardly wider than her own hand, flanked the bark-covered door—she sensed no life here.

A large butterfly spiraled down, its brilliant golden wings banded with sable. Out of a tangle of small plants sprang a gray beast, but its leap was not quick enough. Not until it landed, baffled of its prey, was Thra able to identify it as a cat.

The beast settled on the fallen trunk of the nearest tree, elevated a hind leg to wash with the meticulous care of one uninterested in butterflies. Thra took an impulsive step into the open. The cat looked well fed, its presence here argued habitation. Pausing in its washing the cat eyed her speculatively. Into Thra's mind—

"Two-legs—a new two-legs—" There was critical appraisal in that.

Nor was she completely startled by such an invasion. Since she had entered the forest anything seemed possible. This place had its own life. But—she wet her lips with the tip of her tongue—the thought of addressing this furred creature as she might one of her own kind was difficult to accept.

The cat looked from her to the cabin and back again before she ventured hoarsely:

"Someone lives here?" To her own ears her voice was too loud.

"The den is empty—now,"

Thra drew a deep breath. To be answered so! She advanced to the side of the basin, went down on one knee, her right hand still near her sword hilt, as she cupped water into the other, half lapped at its freshness.

The cat continued to watch as she pulled forth her water bag, dumped what remained of its murky contents and filled it. Having made sure of that future supply, Thra settled herself cross-legged to face the cat. There was a slumberous content in this clearing which subtly eased both her mind and her body. She was aware of herb scents borne by the rising wind and yawned—to catch herself sharply.

Sorcery wooing her? She had fled too long from danger to trust anything or anyone. Pulling to her feet, she went towards the cabin still keeping eye on the cat.

Its gray body made no hostile move, the ears were not laid back against the skull, no warning hiss sounded. Thra set hand to the door on which no latch string dangled out in welcome. However, at the pressure of her fingers, it swung inward, moving easily.

In spite of the storm clouds the clearing light reached now within, spreading before her like a carpet. A single room. To her right was the rough fireplace. Board formed a bunk place. Over that was a shelf. There was also a box or coffer, a section of log hollowed out. More shelves supported an array of mugs and bowls, some of wood, others lopsidedly fashioned of fire-burned clay.

Yet there was another piece of furniture in the room and it was enough to center full attention. All the rest was ill made, without true craft. This armorie might have come from a high lord's castle. Fashioned of reddish wood it was carved with the skill of a master artist, following no general pattern, rather with a story deep chiseled. The carving hid the opening of the door for she could discern neither crack nor hinge.

Twists of leaf garlands formed frames for squares, each of which embodied an intricate scene. Some of the tiny people so depicted were no taller than her fingernail. Here rode a company of men with hounds in the full cry of a hunt. While that which fled before them—

Thra stooped closer. Even in the cabin's gloom the carven pictures were visible. That which fled hunched its shoulder, and the head did not seem altogether human in outline.

She shivered. There were old tales aplenty in Greer. Men and women—in ancient days they were said to have shared lordship with—others. That which fled here, which was partly like unto herself—was also something else. Thra turned quickly to the next picture.

The squares were allied. Here that which ran had dropped to all fours, upper limbs had become shaggy, the hands were paws.

What of the upper panels? Thra straightened to look. Here was one of a forest glade containing a pool beside which lounged a youth bare of body. He dabbed one hand, leaning over to gaze into the water's mirror. So skillful had been the craftsman who had wrought this that Thra never doubted he had taken a living likeness for his model. The scene was one of peace and content.

However in the next square the head of the lounger was up as if startled, he might be listening. In the next—the beginning of the hunt. One saw so well pictured the baying of hounds one could almost hear their cries—

"Found! Found! And away—!"

So the boy from the pool changed. Still, oddly, as Thra followed the pictured story from one square to the next, she found nothing threatening or wrong in the alteration. Rather her sympathy was all for the pursued. He was the hunted—even as she herself had been. She found herself scratching with a fingernail at the foremost hound as if to claw it away.

Now she squatted on her heels to see the finish the better, unaware that her heart was beating faster, her breath came raggedly as if she too ran that course.

A sharp hiss jerked her attention from the last scene. The cat stood just within the open door, staring in turn at the armorie. Thra looked back to the cupboard. In the last square the runner had thrown up a desperate forepaw to hook claws about a loop of low-hanging vine.

"Two legs," Thra spoke aloud, using the cat's designation, "or four legs?"

"Both—neither—"

The answer was instant but one she could not understand. The cat still watched the armorie.

"Both, yet neither?" Thra shifted to view the right-hand side of the armorie. Only there was no continuation of the hunt such as she had expected to find.

Rather she looked at a small, deeply incised scene of a room, as if she were a giantess spying through a window. Here was no hunt, not even a peaceful lounger.

Instead, stretched on a bed was a woman, attendants gathered about her. A maid fed wood to a fire on the hearth over which hung a kettle. Such was the detail of the scene. Thra could near hear the bubbling of the water. What she saw was a bold representation of a birthing.

Quickly she sought the next square. Here the babe had safely arrived, held up for the mother to view. Only there were expressions of aversion, horror, on the faces of all those gathered there, even upon that of the mother.

A child so greeted—why? Thra hurriedly went to the next square. A man was now present, one of high degree by his ornamental robe. His face was stern set, and, plainly by his orders, one of the nurses was placing the blanket-wrapped baby in a rush basket.

The fourth scene—another man, a huntsman by his clothing and gear, was mounted on one of those ponies used for transport of game. This rider stooped to take the basket from the nurse, while the stern-faced man watched. Now a forest—which suggested by the skill of the carver just such a one as held Thra now—dark and secret. Here was the

hunter leaning sidewise once more in his saddle to drop the basket into a stand of rank growth.

So far the story was plain enough. She had heard, even in the south where life had once been easier, old and grim tales. Men did not slay those of their own blood, but a newborn babe conveniently left in a wild place—gone before being presented to the Kin—Yes, that might well have been done. She returned to that earlier scene—horror—truly that had been also in the mother's face. This babe must have been recognized at once as something monstrous.

Left abandoned, then what? Thra traced with her finger the vine wreathing the hunter at his cruel task. Some fault in the wood had here produced a streak of darker hue and the artist had taken advantage of it to add to the somberness of the picture.

Then—next—from a bush showed a face, or was it a beast's eager muzzle?

Man or animal, or both together? Next that lurker had come into the open and the mixture was plain. A furred, animal-like head with pricked and large pointed ears, supported on human shoulders giving way to a woman's full breasts.

She who advanced out of hiding appeared more human in the next scene where she had gathered to her the babe so that a small eager mouth had found one of her nipples. There was peace, joy, on the animal woman's near human face.

In other scenes the baby grew with its foster mother, played, lived seemingly happy and content. Until in the last scene of all a boy, at that age between youth and manhood, stood staring at a huddled body on the ground, a body from which stood a cruel arrow.

Thus he had been deprived of a mother and then—on the fore of the armorie—hunted himself. Thra was not aware that her jaw had set grimly and her hand had gone to sword hilt again. What of the panels on the other side—she hurried to look.

Here were the wreathing vines again dividing the familiar squares but all of those were blank! Except for the very first one where there were only scratches, perhaps marking out a general sketch of a scene yet to be completed. She squinted closely at those, feeling cheated of the rest of the tale. So much so that she thudded her fist home on the meaningless marks.

As flesh met wood there sounded a sharp sound and the well-concealed door of the armorie began to swing open, folding back.

Light! At first, bemused, Thra thought there must be a torch inside. Then she saw that radiance issued from the wooden walls which had been highly polished. To her nostrils came a clean scent such as she had once known to be used in the laying up of fine clothing.

The color of the inner wood was a clear ivory. There was no hint of mustiness nor dust. Nor could she, on investigation, see any hinge or latch.

However, it was what hung within which caught her full attention. Two pegs set at her own shoulder height were there, one on either side. From one depended a sword. The hilt was plain of any gem setting, seemingly made of the same ivory which lined the cabinet. Its pommel was wrought into the head of a beast—such as was neither man nor animal. A plain scabbard shielded the blade—and the belt was of white leather studded with small yellow gems.

Against the opposite wall was looped a second belt. This was of sleek black fur—thick and plushy, so shiny it might still be a part of the coat of some well-kept, cleanly beast. It was near four fingers wide, and, though it supported no weapon, there was a large clasp for its fastening made to match the head of the sword pommel. Save that this human-animal countenance was snarling, its open mouth revealing curved tusks ready to rend and tear.

Though the metal of the buckle was dark other colors played across its surface, red, orange, like flames, icy blue, the gold of the sky at sunset.

Thra put out her hand, then snatched it back, for, as her fingers passed within the armorie, they tingled and smarted. There was some protection here she could not understand.

Power—the power of a blade which could become awesome when the hilt fitted a hand trained to wield such a weapon. The other—more power she did not understand, from which she shrank. How long had these hung here waiting—and for whom?

The bare side of the armorie was frustrating. She shivered, it would have been better for her had she never stumbled upon such a mystery. Even though the cabin was shelter. Still she was not uneasy enough, as yet, to leave that. There was—

Thra sought the right word—waiting! Aye, that was it! Here hung these waiting—but not for her. Someone else—who?

On impulse she looked to the cat. It no longer lounged at ease. The light from the open door of the cabin had grown less. Was this an early coming of evening or the storm at hand? The animal gazed into the open, the tip of its tail swung slowly back and forth.

"Four-legs—" she began. Instantly the cat looked to her. "Whom do you wait?"

"Wait?" The cat's head lifted a fraction. "Two-legs-four-legs—both pass in their own time."

"But you remain?"

"I remain," the shared thought concurred.

There had been no cat picture in all that carving. Still Thra was sure that the animal before her had some part in the mystery. The cabin looked long deserted—

"Who?" This time her voice sounded unnaturally loud but not loud enough to drown out a roll of thunder. At least she would remain here until the storm was over. She shucked off her pack.

If she expected any answer to her half question, she was to be disappointed. The cat withdrew to face out again into the rain. Thra, used to making the most of any meager comfort, moved swiftly past the crouching animal to pull grass, break off small thornless branches, to be dumped into the bed place. She would sleep this night in better ease than she had for some time.

There was even a stack of dusty wood lengths by the hearth and these she used for a fire. Honest flames leaping there banished some of the strangeness of the cabin. The roll of thunder grew louder, there came a crack of lightning so near the jagged light seemed about to probe inward for her.

Thra pushed shut the door as rain slanted across the floor. The fire provided only a palm-sized light, yet in the dusk the interior of the open armorie gave off a continuous glow.

The cat had not moved, its head still pointed towards the door. While that feeling that she awaited some portentous happening fed her uneasiness. To steady her thoughts, her shaking hands, Thra dug the last of her trail rations from her pack. Two journey cakes, now near stone hard, were there. She hammered a piece from the larger with the pommel of her belt knife. Her other provision was a short stick of hard dried meat, that she cut into thin slivers.

One of the clay pots from the shelf gave her a chance to crumble the cake and meat into some water, forming a mess she hoped to find more palatable than it looked. Thra spun out these preparations as long as she could, the cat paying no attention to her actions.

The storm continued to loose its fury. Thra heard a distant sound which must have marked the fall of another of the giant trees. She crowded closer to the fire, holding her sun-brown hands to the flames, though she shivered more from what she guessed might happen than from any cold.

At last she drew both sword and knife and laid them close to hand, for the cat's doorwise stare added to her disquiet. Also she edged farther around that she, too, might watch that portal. Once she arose and strove to move the armorie itself for a barrier, but its weight was beyond her shifting.

She ate the unappetizing mush with her fingers, found it no worse than much of the food she had eaten in the immediate past. Putting the bowl to one side she sat waiting, her hands loosely clasped about her knees. Unable to stand her own imaginings any longer she asked aloud:

"Who comes?"

For the first time the cat turned its eyes toward hers, "Long waited, perhaps come at last. Take you that sword, two-legs?" Distinctly it nodded towards the weapon hanging in the armorie.

"I hold by my own steel." She dropped hand to her blade. "What or who comes? Tell me, four-legs!"

The cat had turned its full attention to the armorie.

"There hangs power—"

"Still I hold by what I know!" Thra repeated. To be sitting thus, exchanging thoughts with a cat—had some fell fever fallen on her when she entered this misbegotten woodland, or was she indeed ensorcelled? Patience she had learned in a hard school during the past years and patience only might serve her now, until she discovered more.

That feeling of otherness which had been with her since she had come beneath these trees was growing sharper even though the storm seemed to be retreating. The cat showed no fear—perhaps that curiosity which men said was a strong trait in these beasts kept it here to watch her blunder into some web unknown to her.

Thra might not be forest wise but she had stood sentry too many nights, every sense alert, to be mistaken now. Something was outside. There came a snuffling, faint but unmistakeable, as if the nose of some creature swept close along the bottom crack of the door.

She arose, sword in hand, her dark brows asowl as she edged over to set her back to the arrnorie, ready to front whatever might force a way in. The lips in her gaunt face flattened against her teeth as if she could snarl like her furred companion. However the cat, itself, faced the door with no sign of anger or fear.

That snuffling ceased, but, as surely as if she could see through the door, Thra believed the other still crouched there. As the cat, it waited.

"You speak of power," she said, "Is it of claw and fang now out there?"

"Perhaps." To her astonishment the cat leaped straight for the armorie, brushing past her. Its teeth fastened upon the belt of fur, but all its energy could not pull that free from the peg on which it hung.

Hardly knowing whether she was reckless and foolhardy, or doing what was only right Thra braved the warning prickle in her hand and reached inside to slip free the strip. It seemed to her that the fur arched upwards to meet her touch as might an animal seeking a caress.

The belt fell, still tight-held by the cat, and that animal backed away from the cupboard dragging it towards the door. Did it seek to deliver that prize to the lurker? With a stride Thra gained the door, her sword pointed at the cat.

"I do not know what game you would play," she said. "But here I am master—"

"You are but one sent." Words near as sharp as her own blade cut into her mind. "There is but one master!"

She could have easily spitted the animal, or kicked it aside. There was no good reason to let it outside to what waited. Save within her brute force still did not entirely rule. So she slipped along the wall to be sheltered from the door as it opened and then pushed to let in a burst of rain-sweet wind.

From without sounded a strange cry, one which sent a chill along her half-crouched back. Thra wanted badly to see what stood there in the storm dark but she did not move, only gripped her sword the more fiercely.

As if that sound was a summons, trailing still the belt from its jaws, the cat sprang into the dark. Thra waited tensely. The light from the fire was small help and the edge of the door a screen.

Someone stepped within. She could strike now and make sure. Even as that thought came to her the cat flashed once more into the full warmth of the fire, shaking itself vigorously.

Wet leather, her nose wrinkled at that acrid scent, also a strange musky odor as if he who wore such garments had lived unclean for a long time. For this was a man, not topping her in height more than an inch or so. He might be facing the cat and the fire, but Thra was. sure he was well aware of just where she stood.

Aware but not alarmed. That realization awoke in her a spark of anger. Woman she might be, and wanderer without a following, but she was still a force to be reckoned with—as he would discover!

His arms hung loosely by his sides, there was no sword, not even the gleam of a knife hilt at his belt. As her own, his clothing was leather but worse worn. On the shoulders tatters had peeled away, as they had also about his legs and thighs. His feet were bare, splotched with mud which he tracked on the floor.

Around his slender waist was the belt—its length of silky fur in contrast to the rest of him. For his hair was a tangle of greasy strings knotted with dried leaves and small twigs—he might have rooted in a thicket for weeks on end.

Thra fought to bring up her sword, aiming its point between those rack-thin shoulders. She had seen before men sunk to this extremity of neglect—many in the south. They could not be trusted, nor could one call them beasts, for beasts were far more cleanly and merciful than such.

Still, though Thra was sure he knew she menaced him, he did not turn his head, rather dropped to his bony knees before the fire, raising both palms to the heat. She had a confused memory of how men had once knelt so in places of worship. Did this refuse then worship fire—or only what it signified—shelter, food, warmth—plunder?

That he continued to ignore her meant one of two things—that he was not alone, but the forerunner of a party of like outcasts—or he possessed some means of defense which did not depend upon weapons.

Those outstretched hands, was there something odd about the nails—were they not unusually long and sharp? Thra wanted him to turn his head so that she might clearly see his features—human—or strange?

The cat settled on the hearth, its back to the fire, tail curled over forepaws. Thra could wait no longer, her voice was unnaturally loud in the room.

"Who are you?" She was not sure of her question until she had voiced that demand.

He glanced back over his shoulder at last, showing her three-quarters of his face. She had expected to see a tangle of beard as wild as the crop on his head but his cheeks were smooth as a boy's, though weather-browned to a dark shade. There was an oddity about his features. Perhaps it lay in the slantwise set of his brows, the narrow, forward thrust of his chin. His frowsy hair grew downward in a peak between his eyes to nearly meet the brows.

Those eyes—green or yellow—or a mixture of both? Thra had never seen their like in the face of any man of Greer. While his mouth looked too wide, his lips very dark red and glistening. Small points of teeth showed against those, almost as if he had fangs sprouting from his jaws.

Yet for all its alienness it was not a face to disgust one, nor did it bear the signs of degradation or idiotic mindless-ness which she had expected to see. When he spoke his voice was not only low-pitched but calm, even gentle:

"You have my thanks, Lady of Lanlat—"

Her sword quivered in her hold. Who in this northern land could still call her by that name? Was he some other refugee? Had she once met him long ago at some feastings? No, once met this man could never be forgot.

"There is no more Lanlat—" she returned harshly. "But I have asked—who are you?"

His hands moved in a vague gesture she could not understand. "I do not know—"

Some drifter from a lost battle? She had heard of men head wounded so they could not remember, but were afterwards like new-born children, having to learn again how to live.

"How came you here?"

At least he should be able to answer that, unless his wits were so disordered that even recent events were lost to him.

"I have always been—" His voice trailed away as he continued to regard her with a kind of eager curiosity. In his clear eyes she could detect nothing of a sleeping mind but rather eager intelligence.

Her sword point touched the pounded earth of the floor. In spite of his foul clothing, wild appearance, he had such a quiet air of certainty that he could be one wearing a disguise.

His hands had gone now to his belt where he ran fingers back and forth across the sleek fur as one might caress a beloved animal—or reassure himself that a treasure long denied, long lost, had been safely returned.

"Always been?" Doggedly she kept to her point.

He nodded. An errant lock of hair fell across his face and he brushed it aside. Not soon enough. Thra held her breath for an instant. Just so—her eyes flickered to the door of the armorie and away again. No—this was no refugee from her own land. He was—she moved her shoulders along the wall, setting more of a distance between them.

"What are you?" Her voice was a whisper. Still, among the wild thoughts now churning in her mind, there was no fear—rather wonder. This surely—grown somewhat older—was the youth of the carving—the one who had fled the hunters.

"Why do you ask that?" It was his voice which rang loud and sharp. "When you already know—if you allow yourself to face the truth." His head inclined the slightest toward the open armorie door.

Thra moistened lips with tongue tip. "I have seen that," she, too, indicated the door. "You are like the hunted one. But—"

He raised hands from his belt, flexed his fingers full in the subdued glow of the fire. Those were claws with wet earth clinging to them, not overlong human nails.

"You have heard of my kind?"

Thra could not answer at once. What were old legends compared with this? Though the forest had such an ill name her mind refused to connect such tales with this slender young man. Legend suggested that such as he were a dark menace of sorcery, yet in her there was no shrinking. She had met many of her own kind who carried with them a far greater stench of pure evil.

His lips drew back so those fang-sharp teeth showed clearly as he stood there straight and tall, as one facing an enemy about to make an assault on a poorly defended last redoubt.

"I am were." He might have been shouting a battle slogan against all the world which she represented.

Silence, one so deep that she heard a leaf flutter across the floor inward from the open door. Once more his tongue swept across his lips. He looked almost sly—dangerous. Still in her she felt no menace and she held his gaze locked to hers.

"Do you not understand, Lady Thra? Or are our kind not known in the south for the dreaded thrice-damned stock we are? Do you lack cursed forests there?"

Her sword point scratched a half-remembered protective pattern on the well-packed earth. But what had such to do with turning aside the possible wrath of one who claimed his blood?

"You put your trust in steel?" Those slanting brows near vanished beneath the fringe of rough hair. "Ah, but steel, no matter how cunningly forged, cannot harm us. Though hounds may chase to pull us down, yet no true arrow nor spear can kill. We can feel pain but not death—save by silver. Silver or," his hands quivered, "fire."

"Yet you warm yourself by that," Thra returned. "Is this not your home? Yet you bring your enemy fire into it."

His wide mouth stretched in a wry smile.

"You see me in a guise wherein fire is servant not master. Ah, Grimclaw," he addressed the cat, "who have you summoned here? A lady who shows no fear, does not tremble nor look upon me as if I differed from those of her own kind, one who walks—"

"Two-legged?" Thra interrupted. "How is it that you greet me by my name, stranger? I am new come into these lands, only this day into your forest." She still held the thought that he might be one who had lost his wits from some battle injury.

"This is my talent—" Even as the cat had before him, he projected his unspoken answer into her mind.

That her thoughts could be so invaded was, to her, a kind of ravishment, such a blow as she had never taken before. She stiffened against showing outwardly her repugnance but rage rose icily within her.

He no longer even looked in her direction, instead he moved a little closer to the armorie, gazing intently at the sword still hanging there. But, if that weapon was his as the belt seemed to be, he made no attempt to arm himself with it. Perhaps he had run four-legged so long that he clung to fangs and claws as his proper weapons.

"I have to thank you." Though he spoke aloud this time she thought that was a concession on his part. "I have been long afield and there are those to whom I am welcome prey. That you have brought me this much freedom," his fingers once more sought the circlet of fur about him, "is almost more than I had dared hope for. Perhaps there is some meaning in this. We are only the playthings of strange forces. And you chose a poor refuge here, why, my lady?"

Need he ask when he could read her mind and she could not shut him out? Thra longed to turn her sword on him—to banish so this—this thing who could know her in a way so unnatural. Was her every thought and feeling open to him now?

"I cannot enter where you hate—" His voice was low. "It was when I skulked outside and must know who or what waited here that I did that. We have our own oaths which we do not break!" There was high pride in him, such pride as matched her own, and she felt herself responding when she did not want to yield. "Do you wish such an oath from me, lady?"

What did he awaken in her—feelings and beliefs she thought long slain? She shook her head, instead accepting this self-confessed forest monster as she would one of her own rank in the old days.

"So—what brought you here?" He returned to his first question.

"A beast pack which marches under the banner of a running hound—" she spat forth the words and thumped the point of her sword into the earth. "My freedom was hard bought—the last of my liegemen hangs from a tree in the valley. Your lords hunt to ill deaths."

His eyes glowed flame bright for an instant.

"A running hound—aye!" Once more his lips shaped a snarl which was feral. "Roth is abroad then or—" he scowled, "since time moves different here within the wood and years sometimes speed without noting—one of his get. They live with fear as (heir armor and their weapons, but lately they have not tried the forest ways. Perhaps now the hounds will course again—on your trail, lady!"

He showed no sign of uneasiness, rather spoke eagerly as if he looked forward to some contest.

"It might be so." She did not enlarge upon that, wondering if she would also be considered prey by some of the forest dwellers.

"This is a place of fear," he continued. "My brothern lair here, and yet even we do not know all the dark dangers which pad the trails." He weighed her with a bold and fierce gaze but she was not to be eyed down so. Instead she returned her sword to its sheath, showing him hands as bare as his own.

"Devils and dangers I have seen amany and the worst of them are two-legged and name themselves men." She laughed harshly. "You have made free with my name, how then are you called?"

"I am Fame—and there is another name, only that your throat cannot voice. Grimclaw here is my marshal, the holder of my castle. I have not recently been resident in this part of my domain. Lady Thra, I offer you guest right."

He stooped to catch the lower end of one of the smaller branches half-consumed by the fire, holding it aloft so that flame sprouted from its tip as it might from a wax taper.

"I light you to your chamber," he began formally and then laughed. "I fear you shall have to take us as we are, which is in ill condition. But at least—" Still holding his improvised taper he passed her to the door, to return a moment later swinging by their feet a brace of wood fowl.

"Even Roth might relish these—"

"Roth?" That was the second time he had mentioned that name. "His badge is the running hound? Roth of—" She waited.

"Fame," he had settled on his heels before the fire drawing from a break between stones a knife with which he set about cleaning the fowl. "What is a name? It can be given to a thing, a place, a woman, a man. Those with the old knowledge claim that a name has power—that it can be used for or against that which bears it. But who truly knows?"

There was so much more she wanted to learn. What of the tale carved on the armorie of the babe abandoned in the wilds, the youth later hunted. Was it His story which was thus portrayed?

"The sword—" She pointed to that which hung in the cupboard. "Is that also of Fame?"

His head turned so suddenly she blinked and dropped hand to knife hilt. Then he voiced a throaty sound like a growl, while the cat hissed.

"What have you heard of Fame?"

"Nothing save your own words," she replied. "I saw the raiders at their work and lost a good friend to them. But yonder does hang a sword and its pommel is a head which is strange. While on two sides of that armorie is carven a tale clearly enough. Therefore I ask—does that blade fit your hand?"

"My heritage? Perhaps, lady, when the time is right. For now I wear that which is closer to me." He touched the furred belt. "That," he nodded to the sword, "has a purpose which will come." He arose from where he had set quarters of the fowls on improvised spits and went to the armorie.

"A purpose into which Fame enters?" Thra prodded him.

His shoulders tensed. She had a momentary feeling that this was all a dream. Then he caught at the door and with a sharp push sent it shut.

"Let it hang! I will not have it yet—perhaps never. There are traps and traps, and those who are hunted learn to sniff them out—or die."

Their meal was sizzling and he divided it fairly, laying it in the bowls from the shelf. Thra licked fingers scorched by hot grease before she began to chew the meat avidly from the bones.

Night had come fully but Fame made no move to close the door. Also he paused now and then as if to listen. Perhaps his ears were better attuned to the normal forest sounds so he could detect the unusual. Thra heard the squalling cry of some furred hunter that had missed its prey, the hooting of an owl. And always there was the drip of moisture and the rustle of branch.

When he had finished Fame went to that crude tree-trunk box against the far wall, pawing through its contents to select an armload of fresh clothing. Saying nothing he went out into the night.

Thra licked her fingers well and fed wood to the fire. She was tired and this was shelter. She looked to that bunk she had filled with bedding. The cat was washing its face, though now and then its ears twitched as it picked up some sound.

There would soon be need for more wood if the fire was to burn through the night, but there was no use seeking that in the soaked outer world. Fame—a part of Thra wondered at her own calm acceptance of him. There were the old tales—she had heard more of them as she and Rinard had prowled closer to the forest.

They had been seeking more knowledge of this very wood as well as supplies when they had been trapped in the raided village. Thra had believed Rinard close on her heels, but the poor fool had stood his ground, apparently believing that he served her so, as she had discovered too late. Rinard—forcibly she put him out of her mind now. Had the raiders sighted her, tracked her later?

"Hunters—" Thra was not even aware she said that aloud until the cat answered her.

"Not yet. But a hunt comes, yes. Those others seek always for him!"

"Often?" she pressed.

"Often enough. Until he chooses—" But there were no. more mind words added to that. Thra felt that in another place a door had closed—firmly. She would learn no more—at least for now.

Those stories of the werewolf were awesome. And Fame might be only one of many. She shifted uneasily as the were appeared to materialize out of the dark. He was dressed in fresh leather as sleek as the belt he still wore. Twigs and mud had been brushed out of his hair, the grime washed from his hands and face. He walked with assurance, and with that same air of authority he began to question Thra about the raid upon the village.

"It would seem that Roth, or he who holds the Hound rule, grows overbold," Fame mused when she had done. "To this shelter—" he gestured with one hand, "you are welcome, rough though it is. But I would advise you not to remain here in the forest." He added that decisively and Thra knew resentment. There he stood fingering that belt of his and looking at her as if she were a green girl who had never heard an alarm bell.

"The forest—" He hesitated. "Oh, yes, there are those who have sought refuge here but mainly they are the unwary, the ignorant. Tomorrow I shall show you a trail leading westward out of Roth's way, and so see you free of this land. But tonight I have that which I must do." He turned on his heel and, with no other farewell, was gone again into the dark, the cat bounding after him.

Thra crouched in a dusk which was hardly thinned by the light of the dying fire. Her body ached with fatigue, her eyelids were heavy, yet in this place dared she yield to sleep? Tonight there was no Rinard to share the watch turn about.

She fed the last of the wood to the fire and laid down close to the hearth, drawing both sword and knife, to place them where her hand could fall easily. Thra closed her eyes knowing that, trust or no trust, she could not continue without rest.

However she dreamed and in that dream she fled, a hunted thing without any defense against the force on her trail. Yet within her rage flared so hot she felt as if her whole body was aflame. There arose before her a dark wall of vines much interwoven and the terror of the chase flung her full at that. The vines writhed and wreathed, reached, clutched her in an unbreakable grip. She fought and tore at that growth, her hands rent in turn by thorns. Now she was held fast as the din of the hunt drew nearer and she heard a triumphant blast of horn.

Blast of horn! Thra opened eyes—not upon a mass of imprisoning greenery, though the dream seemed still real for a second or two and her hands were up and out flailing the air. This was a dim and shadowed room—the only light, wan and limited, came through two narrow slits of windows.

As she pulled herself up, her body slick with sweat beneath her worn garments, she heard it clearly—a horn!

Hunters! On her own trail or merely loose in the forest? She dared not remain where she was lest she be trapped, yet to seek a path through the wood without a guide was also a lost cause.

She stumbled as she stooped for her weapons, and her hand, flung out to balance her, slapped the side of the armorie. For the second time the door swung open.

No furred belt—where was that now—and its wearer? But the sword—Her own blade would be the better for a smith's sharpening and it was well worn. Since Fame had chosen not to take this then why could she not arm herself the better?

Thra listened. The horn sounded once again and she could not deceive herself—its blatant blast was closer. She must be out and away. Slamming her own weapon into its sheath and kicking her pack towards the door, she reached for the armorie sword.

Her flesh tingled almost as if flames licked at her. But she had set weapon swinging back and forth. Only when she tried to grab for it her hand had no strength, fingers numb, with that numbness spreading up her wrist into her arm. She who had scoffed at tales of sorcery was helpless. Fear pushed her away from the slow swing of that sheathed blade.

A third call of the horn and now it was answered by a clear bay and then a second. Thra shivered. Men she could and had faced when necessity drover her to it, but hounds—with them she would have little chance. She swung around to survey the cabin. One entrance, those narrow slits of windows—it offered defense of a kind save there was no bar for the door and she had nothing to build a barricade. Only to venture out—with

hounds ready to trail-Knife, sword, she had no other weapons, she pushed aside the pack and shut the door. No bolt—it could be easily forced.

Thra fingered her knife. There was a way of escape if it came to a last desperate moment—by her own hand. To wait to be ravished by hound or huntsman—was that a coward's choice? How could she—?

A loud baying with a note in that deep belling which startled her. Eagerness, such cry as a hound might give when its prey was in sight. Yet that had not come from just without the cabin as she had expected, rather it was farther away—to the west. It was answered by a chorus of other cries trailing away from her. She hardly dared to believe that the hunt had turned. Now her shoulder grazed the armorie.

She stood before the deep carving of the door. The were who had fled—the hunters who followed. Fame's trail, had it this morning crossed hers, setting a counter-scent to draw the hounds? She frowned, breathing a little faster as if, though she had not stirred from the cabin, she had indeed run a quarry's hard pace.

Farne—she did not doubt he had been hunted before. This was his country, he would know every rock, tree, shrub of it—be fully aware of any hole giving refuge. Yes, the sound was lessening—the hunt drew westward—she need only wait until she could hear no more and then head east.

Why had he done this? Had it been by chance? Somehow Thra doubted that as she reached for her pack again. By rights he owed her no favors. True, she had, by chance, opened the armorie and the cat had taken the belt—but was that so great a service—?

So far had her thoughts gone when she was startled by what was no hound's triumphant bay—rather a deep-throated howl. Not one of pain—rather anger and—fear!

It was drowned out almost instantly by the frenzied yapping of dogs and the shouts of men. Something—Fame?—was at bay. The shouting grew louder but she could not distinguish words. With bared sword in one hand she pulled open the cabin door.

Across the clearing leaped a flash of gray. The cat was within the hut before she truly saw it. Rearing up on its hind legs it pawed forcibly at the closed door of the armorie. Its ears were flat to its skull and it was snarling steadily. Now it turned its head a fraction and its eyes sought her.

"Trap!" The word sprang into her mind with the force of a blow.

That howl sounded again from the distance. Thra listened. This quarrel was none of hers. Fame, a were, was an enemy to her kind. That he had not harmed her—had offered the gesture of guesting rights—what difference did that make now? One sword against a hound pack and the men who followed it—what could that avail?

"Nothing—" she said aloud, to answer the pressure rising in her mind, what the cat would force upon her. "This is no ploy for me—"

There was no answer in words, instead for a moment which might have been lifted out of real time she saw—not this hut, the furious cat—but rather another scene.

A net which writhed with the wild struggles of what it contained, a beast with a foam-flecked mouth which strove to snap at the cords which so bound it and who flinched from that weaving. Now she could see that it was no true net, rather hide strips interwoven with linked chains which had a silver glint.

Silver!

Memory stirred as that picture broke. What had Fame said—the silver was the bane of his kind.

"That is so!" She saw no prisoner now, rather the cat still reared against the cupboard, its claws busy striving to rip the wood apart.

Guessing the secret of the armorie from her two former experiences Thra slapped the uncarven side and the door opened. The cat leaped, attempting to pull down the sword. But it could only set that swinging. Thra thrust the point of her own weapon within and caught the loop of the belt, pulling it towards her.

The sheathed blade slid down and the cat crouched before her snarling. Once free of the armorie the weapon appeared to draw light, and the eyes of the head which formed the pommel glinted as might the eyes of a living beast.

Thra let the weapon slip to the floor. She expected the cat to catch it up as it had the belt, but instead the animal stood guard, gazing straight at her.

"What would you have of me?" she demanded.

No reply flashed into her mind, no picture rose in answer. Once more the din of the hunt swelled—almost as if that was her reply.

"Take it if that is what is needed!" she urged.

The cat did not move. Though no words formed in Thra's mind there was a growing compulsion.

"No! Your Fame is no cup brother of mine, nor liegeman. What have I to do with him? One sword cannot stand against a hound pack and huntsmen. I shall not—"

Yet, even as she made that denial, there was rising in her something which she could not understand. Ensorcel-ment? She fought in vain but she stooped, utterly against her true will, to take up the sword belt.

The cat arose from its crouch and uttered what was undoubtedly a yowl of promised battle. It held her gaze for a long moment before it headed towards the door.

She turned as if another will possessed her, using her body awkwardly and against every instinct. Thra, her own sword drawn, the belt of the sheathed one in her other hand, followed the cat, at first stumblingly and then with the even tread of one who goes to face some act of sworn duty.

Grimclaw sped ahead, not taking the faint path which had led her here but rounding one of the fallen trees and heading straight through the brush which filled the small clearing.

The clamor of the hunt had not dwindled. Apparently the hounds and their masters were not on the move. As she went in that direction Thra continued to fight the will—the thing which forced her to serve its purpose. Sweat gathered at the rim of her ring-sewn cap, made tracks down her face.

She was one. Before her—how many? If she exhausted her strength in fighting this compulsion what might that cost her later? She abandoned that inner struggle, allowed that which possessed her full rein.

The din of the hounds slacked off but the voices of the men grew clearer. Someone was roaring orders to lower that, fasten this—get on with it.

Grimclaw stopped short to look back at her. Thra dropped to her knees and crawled forward through brush toward another clearing. With all the stealth she had learned during her wandering she covered that ground and used her sword tip to lift a branch of leafy shrub that she might see.

Five men, two of them now occupied with cuffing back the hounds, setting leashes to their collars. He who was doing the roaring stood to one side overlooking the labors of two of his fellows who were awkwardly striving to wind closer a net encompassing a still upright and struggling captive.

Thra recognized with an icy chill of full anger the badges these hunters wore—the running hound. But five of them and four hounds—against her—! She had no crossbow even, nothing except her sword—she could not attack these!

"Leave be!" ordered the roarer at last. He approached the captive to inspect the bonds tying the net to a tree.

"The beast is well caught and my lord will want to see the rest of it. Jacon, get you to camp, you and Ruff, taking those hounds. M'lord will not favor any who care not for them. And we do not know how many of such beasts slink hereabouts—"

" 'Twould be better to haul the were with us—" began one of those who had been busy by the tree.

Bull throat laughed. "It is well caught. M'lord truly had the proper secret for that after all these years. Silver they cannot break. See how it twists itself even now so that bare bits touch it not."

The prisoner so enfolded was writhing constantly, and, between the voices of the hounds being cuffed into order and those of the men, Thra caught desperate panting sounds which could only have come from the captive.

"Silver and—fire." There was brutal satisfaction in that strong voice. Aye, it was by his order that Rinard had been hung—with men shouting wagers on how long he would kick before death was merciful. Thra would have given all she possessed at that moment for a crossbow—he was so good a target standing there with his thumbs hooked in his belt, a grin stretching lips near hidden by a greasy beard. "There will be a handsome fire perhaps of m'lord's own lighting—and good ale drunk this night!"

The two men he watched stepped back from their captive. In spite of the seeming helplessness of the netted creature, they appeared to have little liking for being near it. Thra started at a cold touch on her hand and was fearful that she might have so betrayed herself. It was Grimclaw.

"Behind—" the word blazed in her mind.

Behind what? It was hard to believe that those restless hounds had not already scented her or the cat. Away—get away before they, too, were trapped. Part of her mind seemed to scream that, but to no avail.

"Behind!" The cat's order was emphatic. It crouched upon its belly, one paw advanced gingerly to draw it forward and then the other. So it angled away from her and the hounds. Also it was plain that she was expected to follow.

Thra hesitated. As she did so the man who had given the orders slouched across to stand by the netted creature. He leaned down to pick up an end of the rope which clearly showed the silver knotted in it. With evil deliberation he thrust this toward the captive, inserting the end through the mesh of the net.

She both heard and felt—the cry rang in her mind worse than a wound, and a searing pain stroked her left cheek, leaving stinging agony behind. What was aimed at the captive had also touched her.

On hands and knees, using all the skulker's skills she had learned, Thra followed the slinking cat. They moved away from the clearing even as the men led away the leashed hounds, but only so for a short distance before the cat made a deliberate turn to the left. "Behind" was plain now, they were heading to the rear of those trees where the net had been anchored. She had to bite down upon her lower lip, call upon full strength not to betray herself as the transferred torture of the captive continued to scorch her own flesh.

Grimclaw halted. There were no more spurts of pain, maybe the hound master had tired of his game. She could hear a heavy breathing—perhaps from the prisoner.

Longing to be elsewhere Thra was still bound to obey that other will. Not too far away a twist of brown and silver was looped about an upstanding tree root—surely one of the anchors of the net.

With the blade of her own sword between her teeth, Thra reached for her belt knife. The rope was thick and she feared that, even if she could sever that, the metal within would not break. But, as the strands parted, the silver did not seem so hard as she had feared—it must be unusually pure and so more workable. She pried and pulled loose an end, twisting that back and forth until it broke.

As the rope end swung free Grimclaw reached up and caught it between ready jaws stretching it taut while Thra, with all the caution she could summon, started on the next.

"Two more—but two more!" No invasion of her thoughts by Grimclaw, that had come from the captive. Thra did not resent his message, rather threw open her mind as well as she could for a picture of what must be done.

She followed the rope to her left—there was a second loop to be loosened, then hurriedly knotted about a branch to give the appearance of being untouched. She was sawing at the third when there came a shout in the clearing setting both Thra's hands to tear frenziedly at the bonds.

"Netted, by the Fangs of Rane! Netted as any beast!"

Gloating in that voice—and it was not the bull roar of the hunters' leader. Perhaps this was his lord.

"Were—" The tone of voice made the word an obscenity.

"Kinsman—" That answer was Fame's, she could never have mistaken his voice even though she had already been sure he was the captive.

"Beast—devil begotten—"

"Begotten by your blood, kinsman—do you claim devil's blood?"

Thra laid hand to the last knot of rope and gave a jerk into which she put all the force she could summon. The silver mesh sawed at her fingers cruelly but she twisted, not caring. As she fought another voice broke in:

"Ware, m'lord. Perhaps there may be more of his breed nearby. On guard, you dolts, on guard!"

The cord parted leaving bleeding gouges in her fingers. She curled hand around sword hilt in spite of the pain. The sword she had dragged with her from the hut lay at her feet. Grimclaw burst from the bushes wild-eyed to stand before her.

"Give me the spell spear!" That was the lord's voice. "And you—stand near the brush toward any devils this one may summon. Give me room for a cast now—"

Thra staggered back as a body swung at her. He who had been hanging in the net was free. And this was not the man who had left her in the hut but a furred, four-footed thing which had no right to run in a sane world.

Without thought Thra aimed a blow at the creature. Its yellow eyes blazed as it skidded to a halt and from the hairy throat came a deep warning growl.

Could it possess her by its will? Thra set her back to the broad trunk of a tree. Between them lay the sword from the armorie. The yellow eyes shifted from her to that. The beast advanced a paw towards the belt and then drew back as if it, as well as silver, carried some malignant spell.

Then the lord of the hunters thrust through the brush, though he came warily, a spear held at ready. Fame, if indeed it was Fame, showed fangs. But the man's eyes had flickered on to Thra. She had but a moment to duck sidewise before that spear thudded between her arm and her side. Instantly she scrambled on, seeking to set the tree between them.

"There be another! This one yet unwitched!"

The bushes in the direction Thra had headed tossed and crackled as some one forced a path through to bring them face to face. Fame moved—was before her again.

She steadied herself against the tree. Better take a spear through her here and now than fall helpless into their hands. She was already damned in their eyes and wanted to die cleanly.

The man now facing her was much younger than the leader of the hunters. Slim and agile, there was that about him which proclaimed some kinship with Fame when the latter walked two-legged. Only the eyes were different. Beneath the edging of a helm his were as blue and cold as winter ice.

He was also armed with a spear but now he pounded the butt of that against the forest muck and whipped out a sword of light-colored metal. Was that also forged of silver?

He thought to take her alive then, perhaps for a fate like that promised Fame. Would his liegemen help to net her while she fought their lord? "So this one does not run on all fours. What does such a devil know of skill with steel?"

"M'lord, watch yourself. These creatures deal in foul witchery—" That was the leader of the hunters. "They can make a man see what is not—"

Thra kept silent. If they believed her were they would indeed be wary of ensorcelment and in their wariness might lay some small chance for her. Not, she knew grimly, that she would be fortunate to live through this encounter, but it was far better to die on steel.

"Watch you well!" ordered the lord. "Since this one would use a blade so shall I. Mayhap I can thus prove that such are not to be so dreaded as foolish tales would have us believe." He lunged at her with the confidence of one who has yet to meet his match.

Blade rang against blade. Thra saw a shift in those cold eyes. Had he truly thought to bring her down with that simple thrust? Was it ignorant self-confidence past belief, or knowledge that he had won many times before?

Her worn blade shivered with that contact and she feared meeting a second such blow would shatter that too-often honed length. That other sword from the armorie, how far away now did it lie? She thought of Grimclaw—could the cat drag it to her? The cat had [claimed the weapon from the cupboard yet her own hand had burned when she reached for it. Could one depend upon anything dark with witchery?

Thra fought defensively and kept the tree ever at her back. The point of that other weapon seemed to flicker in her very eyes and there was a sharp pain along her cheek. Where was Fame? She was sure he had been there at the beginning of this duel yet it would seem that the men had not sighted him— No time for that now—this battle was her own.

She fixed the picture of the sword in her mind. If Grimclaw read her thoughts now would he answer her? Then there was a flash of thought which did not seem aimed at her but did come like a third dancing blade to join the battle. Sword—to take the sword—to choose—

It was not her desire, something more powerful even than fear had awakened in her. There was denial, and anger, and yes, a touch of terror. The ancient enemy—the sword— No, rend, tear, take payment for the wrong thus. Fang right, claw right—those were best—always best!

There was no animal cry but out of the bushes sprang a form which fastened upon one of the watching men. For only a second Thra spared a glance towards that struggle, heard sounds from others in the brush. Payment for that glance came with a blow upon her shoulder, which drove the mail painfully inward, bruising, though it did not cut the rings.

"Thus and thus—" He who fought sent the point again flickering into her face. She countered his stroke and her sword snapped, leaving but a jagged fragment in her hand. He laughed then and moved in for the kill.

"Thus!" he cried for the third time and that was a sentence of death, or so she hoped. Instead his blade cut painfully across her fingers so she dropped her hold on her broken weapon.

"What I promise I do. Do you take this one—" He turned his head a fraction to give that order.

Thra's knife came up toward her own throat. She was ready to press the point home when pain shot through her head and she would have fallen had not the tree supported her.

No pain of body—no—a deeper, stronger pain, such as her kind had never been meant to bear. She heard a voice cry aloud in torment and despair against a fate which could not be denied—but the voice was not hers.

Nor did Thra appear to suffer alone. The lord who had bested her staggered, his sword fell from his hand as he put both to his head. His mouth twisted in a wordless scream.

From where the brush had been beaten down by Fame's charge someone rose. He flung up his head, sending his hair back from his face, a face which wavered and changed even as they stared at him. Man not beast now, he leaped forward and in his hand was the other sword clear of its sheath, its blade giving off a reddish glow as if it were a shaft of Hell fire.

There were cries. Men ran but Thra did not try to move and her knife was still ready in her hand.

The lord half twisted to face the swordsman. He visibly drew a deep breath and stooped to seize again his own weapon as if he had already regained full control of body and mind. Of his followers only one flaccid body remained on' the ground.

"Well met, ill met, kinsman!" Fame smiled slowly. He stood waiting attack even as she had earlier done.

There was a wild rage in the other's eyes. Thra thought that for this lord of the hounds the whole world had suddenly narrowed to confrontation with this single man-beast.

The glow in Fame's blade spread. His fingers, locked about the hilt, reddened, the flush wreathed about his wrist, reached up his arm. In Thra a fire seemed to burn. She caught her breath and choked down a cry of agony. If this was the cost of using the weapon to her who only stood aside, what must it be to Fame himself? For she was certain that what she felt was a reflection of that he had to bear now.

Instead he cried aloud on the edge of human rage yet still with an animal note. If the young lord thought that he faced easy meat he was made speedily aware of his mistake, for the fire blade kept play in a way which Thra, with all her knowledge of weapons, marveled to see.

Only for seconds she watched and then she remembered the others. What of the men who had gone with the hounds, the rest? No matter how skillful Fame might be he could not hope to stand against four or more of them.

Dropping her sheared sword she leaped for the body in the brush.

Red ruin above a torn throat, she looked no higher. But she had her hands on a spear haft. Above the clash of weapons behind her she heard a stifled moan.

There was a second man in the bushes. He half-lay, face stark, a mangled arm across his breast, looking at her wild-eyed as she came to him, his good hand awkwardly fumbling with a short hunting sword. She took that from him easily, wrenching it free, for her own arming.

While he spat meaningless words at her she staggered back, still afire, straight into the path of another running to the fight.

"Die, devil!"

She was still not at ready and he was about to cut her down when he shrieked aloud and threw up his hands, the wounded man echoing his cry. This pain in her head—she could hardly see. However on hands and knees Thra scrambled away as a heavy body crashed down. To make certain of his helplessness she brought the heavy pommel of the sword on the nape of his neck as his helm loosened and rolled away.

For a moment she simply crouched, sobbing for breath, hardly daring to believe she yet lived. The pain was now no longer a torment; rather a steady fire which strengthened her in a way she could not understand.

Out of a tangle of tall grass came Grimclaw. As he passed the legs of the man before her a paw aimed a quick blow claws out. Thra used the spear to aid her to her feet where those other two still fought with skill and desperation. Thrusting the hunting sword

close to hand in the ground she stood with the spear at ready, to hold the lists. Grimclaw stationed himself beside her.

Mastery of steel—Thra knew that she watched two evenly matched fighting men of top skill. And they could almost have been brothers from one birthing. That strange cast of Fame's features had faded away. He was smiling slightly, yellow eyes alight—only the color of those differing from his enemy.

The blaze from his blade now formed a nebulous glow about his whole body through which the sword moved like a darting tongue. Were they so evenly matched that they might fight forever without giving way? Thra could detect no sign of fatigue, no lighting of the clang of weapons.

She had no more that thought then when the flame-wreathed blade appeared to turn of itself in Fame's hand. The weapon might command the man not the man the weapon. There was a hard clang of sound and the lord's sword spun out of his grip to strike against the trunk of the tree where Thra had sheltered. He stood bare handed, with no change of expression, as if he now waited stocially that thrust at throat or breast which would put an end to him.

As the fire blade turned point down Fame caught and held those other chill eyes.

"Blood calls to blood," he said slowly.

The other's mouth contorted. He spat and the spittle flecked the trampled leaves by Fame's boots.

"Beast calls not to true man!" He flung up his head in harsh pride. "Kill if you will but think not that aught between us can ever be altered—runner in the night!"

Fame swung the sword, not towards the other but as if he weighed something in his hand and that weight dragged heavy upon him. He shook his head.

"Run no more," he said slowly. "The choice has been forced upon me at last. I may well have lost more than I gain—"

"I do not understand you," broke in the other impatiently. "Kill me—you win nothing, beast—"

Fame, to Thra's surprise, nodded. "Nothing," he agreed. "Did you think I challenged your rulership with tills?" Again he waved the sword.

That light which had blazed along it was gone. But the strangeness did not return to his face. Now he stepped back and away from the other.

"This much is true. You live, kinsman, by my leave."

The other scowled and took a step forward as if he wished to drag Farne down by strength alone.

"Also," once more the forest man shifted his grip on the sword, "I have at last come into my inheritance. No, kinsman, do not fear that you shall be dispossessed of your lands, your ill-ruled people—not yet. But the 'beast' you have been pleased to hunt is gone. Try your tricks again at your will, they shall net you naught. Take up your liegemen and get you gone. This forest has an ill name among your kind that was not lightly earned, nor shall it be forgot."

Deliberately he sheathed the sword and held its belt in one hand. The other he put to the wide buckle of the furred belt.

As Fame's fingers touched that buckle it burst open. The metal over which the strange colors had played flaked away. Fur loosened from scaling hide and shifted through the air, the hide itself slipped and fell from about his body, to lie in bits upon the ground. Then he fastened the sword belt in its place.

The lord watched through narrowed eyes.

"You have given me quarter—I asked it not, I shall not accept it!" His voice was harsh challenge.

"Accept or not as you wish," Farne shrugged. "You stand on land which I know and which knows me. I have made my choices—yours shall be yours only, and you shall answer for them."

He turned his head to look to Thra. What he had just said, she thought, was meant in its latter part as much for her as for the lord.

She swallowed. Life was always choices and somehow she knew she faced a mighty one now. As she settled the sword she had taken into the empty scabbard at her belt she saw on the ground a wisp of dirty fur.

Two belts and a man, there was a meaning she could guess at. But in this forest one need not be surprised at anything. She made her choice.

As Fame moved forward she fell in at his right hand, Grimclaw padding into the shadow of the great trees at his left.