

WERE-FLIGHT

by

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I

Khemrys

Many times have I heard how my mother rode into the small abbey at Rhystead with a babe at her back, and a dying warrior across her saddlebow. They tell me that he bore the scars of many battles and that there were many fresh grievous wounds. But of this my mother never spoke. Also, Dame Rimia, who had helped her care for him, talked of his appearance and garb, saying it was unlike that of men she had seen. Some of the Dames thought he was from the south, of which we know very little. On that day, a part of my mother died. The remaining years granted her were spent as though she were always listening for a call that never came.

She was Lady Tirath, daughter of a house fallen to the invaders we call the Hounds of Alizon. When their strange machines of war destroyed her family's holding, she escaped turning north to join some kin. Once, as though speaking to herself,

she told of how she met my father, Herwyd, in the fens. She was sick nearly unto death from a fever, and he had cared for her as tenderly as he would his own blood. That year they exchanged vows and rode the far Dales, seeking news of her kin and of the fighting brothers from which he had become separated. In time, I was born, and shortly thereafter had come the battle from which they fled to Rhystead. This was the closest I ever came to hearing of my father. She never mentioned this part of her life again.

Most of the Dames were beyond middle years, and they made much of me, undertaking my upbringing with great zeal, fussing over mother and me. She would smile faintly and read to me many of our old tales, which was quite a relief to one as inundated with stories of the Cup and Flame as I. I remember that she always smelled of roses.

At times I walked with Dame Rimia, the stillmistress, and learned the uses of herbs and their lore. Others I spent with one or another of the Dames, learning to figure accounts, to embroider and to mend, to read, to cook and too oftentimes to pray. Our little abbey had so few visitors and was so far from any keep or village I wondered how it had ever come to be.

So fiercely had my mother ridden into the abbey's life, and so quietly she faded out of it. When I had been there eleven summers, she left this life. She had been too ill to rise from her cot, and the community and I had despaired of any change. One day, however, she rose at dawn and dressed herself as though awaiting a bridal. She bedecked both herself and our rooms with flowers, and from deep in the recesses of a chest brought out fine jewels—jewels she had never worn in all our lives at the abbey. They were most unusual in design, being made of amber and deep golden moonstones, shaped like fantastic beasts. I was entranced. Why was she wearing them now?

After breaking fast, I returned with her to our rooms. For the first time in my life, she looked at me with her full attention, as though she were truly seeing me. With one careworn hand, she smoothed back an unruly lock of my dark hair where it fell over the peak at my forehead. The gesture seemed so natural and familiar. I hoped she was at last on the mend, and that things would be different between us now. I sat on a small

stool near her feet, and she settled as though waiting. Perchance she had heard of visitors arriving, although I had seen no sign of any messenger.

At last the silence was broken. "Khemrys, I will not be here tonight. All that I have will be found in the chest under the eastern window."

I was familiar with it, and I looked up expectantly. Was our kin coming at last?

The ruddy fire crackled and popped as Tirath spoke again. "I have not been much of a mother to you, and I cannot remedy that. Mayhap you will think kindly of me now and then. You are growing much like your father in looks, and I think that the day will come when you may want to leave the abbey and seek his people. All that we can leave you, daughter, is in the scroll you will find near the bottom of the chest."

She paused, and I waited in dismay. Was she leaving me to seek for herself? Why did she speak as if she were not coming back?

As if in answer to my unspoken question, she sighed and went on.

"I wish that I could tell you more, but it is not permitted me. I *can* tell you that your father and I loved you very much indeed. I remember well his joy the night that you were born. I had been afraid that he would be disappointed that you were not a son to bear the sword. He laughed aloud and praised the Goddess for you. I saw him digging through his gear pack, and when he came back to the fireside, he was bearing these jewels I now wear. A few scant months later he was taken from me—from us, I should say. I hope you will find the happiness that once I knew."

This was the longest speech I had ever had of her, and also the last. She rose and walked nearer the window. Afraid suddenly, I moved closer to her. She looked at me and seemed to be about to speak again, then her gaze rose above my shoulder. Her eyes widened in gladness and recognition. "Herwyd!" Her voice pealed like a bell. "I've been waiting!" Turning, I hoped to find a visitor, but there was no one to be seen. All at once I felt odd and chilled, and looking back to where my mother stood, I saw her crumple to the floor with a sigh. Her face was

younger and more beautiful than ever I had seen it, and it wore a look of joyous greeting. I called for Dame Rimia, but by the time she could reach us, Mother was beyond her help, leaving me conscious of a loss of something wonderful. I feel certain that she had some foreknowledge, and that my father did come to her.

For the next three years at Rhystead I became more of a favorite than ever. There were no other girls, and the ladies were all growing older. I did not wish to pledge myself to Cup and Flame, and so I stayed as a sort of boarder. My life was a pleasant one in this quiet backwater, and I rather enjoyed being petted and spoiled.

Mother's chest had held the familiar articles of clothing and linens, but at the bottom I found a badly nicked and dented sword. It was polished to a silvery gleam and wrapped in a cloak that had been much rent and most carefully mended. I knew at once these must be things belonging to my father.

The sword had a most curiously wrought hilt and quillions, being a leopard's head with jeweled green eyes for the pommel and two incurling tails for the latter, most life-like. Even the cunning eyes seemed almost to wink at me.

However, the rune scroll was rather a disappointment, as it was no more than that collection of the bardic tales from which she had read to me as a child. Nowadays I fancied myself quite a woman grown, too old for stories of moss wives, shape-changers, dragons, and the like. I kept it close though and showed no one, not even Dame Rimia, of whom I was exceedingly fond.

Near the end of the Year of the Sphinx, the abbess, who was very old, passed to Flame. We all rather expected that Dame Rimia would take her place, but word came one day from the outside that we were being sent a new abbess. I was disappointed that my old friend had not been selected, but I was excited, too, over the thought of a new face and stories of outside life. Little did I think that my world would change so drastically.

The new abbess was Rosera, and it was rumored that she was the daughter of a very wealthy and powerful family in the south. I wondered if perhaps she knew of my mother's kin, or

mayhap of my father's. I had accepted the consensus that he was likely from the south as well. We here in the far north had very little idea of what peoples from other places were like. There was an air of gentle urgency as we cleaned and hung the walls with banners bearing the bright emblems of Cup and Flame. These last Dame Katreen had spent many hours on, and the appliqué work was beautifully done. We cut fresh reeds to dry for the floors, and each of us vied with the others producing some dainty thing to please our new abbess.

Dame Seralda came forth one day with a tiny but exquisite carpet that she had brought with her to Rhystead over seventy years ago. It was a prized possession, although admittedly it had seen better days. We placed it next to the Mother Abbess's bed as a crowning touch.

Late one eve, a messenger came bearing tidings of Rosera's arrival on the morrow. Each of us thought of a number of things that must be done before morn, and our abbey fairly buzzed with activity. I had planned an early expedition to gather sweet-smelling herbs to strew underfoot, so I retired rather earlier than was my wont.

Shortly before dawn, I dressed and went forth, hoping to be back long before breakfast. The Dames did not think our newcomer could possibly arrive before second devotions were done, so I felt quite safe. There was a heavy dew, and I was soon wet through both my kirtle and my underskirt. I worked as quickly as I could, and also I found some lovely dog-roses to brighten the rooms. I saw by the sun that it was now more than two hours past First Flame, and gathering up my skirts, I ran back with my baskets to Rhystead.

Once home, I set my herbs inside the outer door to the still-room, and I had just taken off my muddy shoes when there came the sound of many horses. The abbey emptied, as all were anxious to meet Rosera, and in the excitement I completely forgot what a sight I made in my filthy working garb. As the party came through the large double gates, I was amazed to see at least three times the number of persons we were led to expect.

Besides the usual outriders and escort, there were two or three dozen ladies, most of whom were dressed in the dull col-

ors of the Dames. Some also wore the garments of servants, but there were three among them who were most brilliantly arrayed. These were young girls of noble kin who were being fostered among us until such a time as their families could arrange suitable marriages for them. All were mounted on most splendid horses, the like of which I had never seen.

As they drew rein in the courtyard, various of the Dames went forward to catch the bridles of these fine steeds, I among them. Dame Rimia, as highest ranking, carried the guesting cup. As I approached the horses, they began to shy and to sweat nervously. I thought perhaps they knew I was unaccustomed to such as they. Steeling myself, I grasped the bridle of the young rider closest to me. Her palfrey began to neigh shrilly with eyes starting and ears laid back. It was all the girl could do to keep her seat.

Attention was most suddenly focused directly on me, and all at once I became aware of my state of dress. Frightened and embarrassed, I tried to edge away, but my path was blocked by a stately woman wearing the emblem of the Sacred Cup.

A voice rang out, "Who *is* this wretched urchin and where does she belong?"

"I am Khemrys, an orphan fostered with the Dames," I answered meekly. I hated to incur displeasure right at the start.

A reassuring arm was laid about my shoulders as Dame Rimia's voice broke the disapproving silence. "It was the wish of her mother that Khemrys be fostered here until such time as she is old enough to have a marriage made or to take upon herself the vows of Cup and Flame."

"Who are you who speaks for her?" queried Abbess Rosera.

"I am Stillmistress Rimia. Your Reverence," came the soft reply. I could see the lady immediately recognized the name and was marking dear Rimia as an upstart and would-be abbess. Since no house-name had been mentioned for me, I was probably to be labeled as well.

"See that you keep her away from the horses. One can tell that such as she is unfit to deal with fine blood-stock. And for Flame's sake, can you not clean her up a bit?" I could see already that I was not to enjoy my former state under the rule of this new abbess.

The girls to be fostered at Rhystead along with myself were new to Rosera as well. Alois was a typical Dales beauty, with her hair bright as corn and sea-blue eyes. She came from a coastal family that had doubled its holdings after the defeat of those same Hounds of Alizon who had cost my mother's kin their lives.

Serilla was the second, with hair of a less bright hue and dark eyes that I thought held a rather sly gleam. That first night at sup, she managed to "accidentally" spill her broth across the front breadth of my best dress. I believed it no accident and resolved to watch her most closely.

The third was Lysande, who said very little to anyone. She was dressed as finely as the rest, but to my eye less ostentatiously. Seeing my dismay over the mess made on my only really good gown, she leaned across and whispered that she had another that she would be most glad to give me, as it was in a color not particularly to her liking. I barely had time to murmur hasty thanks before one of the new Dames was shushing us.

After dinner, she caught up with me. "I do not wish you to think that I would try to foist upon you an unbecoming gown, but the fact is, I have never thought it suited well my coloring. If you would come with me, I will show it to you, and you may decide if it will do." I thanked her and followed along to her chamber.

The gown was lovely. It was a deep rust, cut in a fashion I had never seen before. It had a wider and deeper neck than those I had previously worn, and it was fitted closer to the body as well. The over-gown was a rich brown, and both neck and sleeve were bordered with gems and embroidery. I had never viewed anything half so fine. For a moment I feared Lysande was only teasing me and had some other thing in mind as a gift, but she seemed to sense this, and she assured me that she had many others equally as nice and many more that were grander still.

Showing me these, I had to agree. I believe that Lysande had more clothing than the Dames and I combined. And the shoes and belts! Each dress was complete with its own accessories.

Lysande was nearly as dark of hair as myself, being a very

deep brown. Her eyes a deeper blue showed against skin as fair as mine was brown.

I had never thought much of my own black hair. While my own green eyes with their tiny golden flecks brought to mind a cat's, I never had that perfection of coloring as the new girls showed. This matter was a thing to trouble me.

Our talk was broken by the bells rung for lights out, and I hurried to my room. Only arriving there, I found my belongings being spilled into the hall in an untidy heap. It appeared that by the new order, I was to move to a different room, nearer the herbarium. This had always been used as a drying room for certain herbs. It made only a cramped bedchamber. Sighing, I attempted to tidy my belongings as best I could.

We continued to discover that there were to be a great many changes for the abbey. The first afternoon, Dame Seralda's precious carpet was found on the rubbish heap, where it had been flung after the Mother Abbess's own new carpet had been spread. With a cry, one of the older Dames gathered it up and shook it off. We told Seralda a polite fiction, and she seemed to believe it.

The next large change was in the way that the home farm itself was to be run. New plowing horses were purchased, while the old ox that had formerly done such labor was slaughtered. The fowlyard was completely changed to house fine new hens. For the first time, we had swine to keep as well. Our sheep were pronounced to have too coarse wool, and were sold to make way for another breed. And the small vegetable garden was plowed up to nearly five times its former size. Even new barns were raised.

The Dames of Rhystead assumed that the new Abbess had a long purse. But soon it became apparent that this was not the case. We heard rumors that Rosera had been sending missives begging monies to both the new keeps and the villages springing up in the area. Also, from time to time small personal items would be found missing—these presumably being sold for whatever they would bring. The second time this occurred, I took the sword, jewelry, and other things my mother had left to me and fashioned a case for them from oiled skins. I am ashamed to say that I stole these from the stores room, but I

could see at the time no other alternative. This I buried a little way outside the gates in a grove where Lysande and I were wont to retreat in our meager leisure time.

Her Reverence was a great organizer. She had a chore for every waking moment and made no resting allowance for even the stock. Lysande, Alois, and Serilla were exempt from these, as was herself, but none of the others were, and most particularly not me. As the older Dames who had been in residence at the time of her arrival in due time passed to Flame, Rosera replaced them with ones who had been under her rule at Ulmstead. Thus, it seemed as time went on that I had fewer and fewer friends.

Serilla took great delight in reporting every slightest mistake or happening to Her Reverence, being one of a disposition to thrive on others' misfortunes. Alois was not as cruel, but rather stupid, as if a trait had been sacrificed to make that pink and gold outer perfection. Lysande was kept away from me by dint of service in the sewing room, for she could fashion the most intricate broideries and was much in demand for such by ladies of the neighboring keeps.

After the war's end, when the invaders had been pushed back to the sea, there were many empty keeps, also many men with an eye to becoming powers in their own rights. The south was broken and its rich lands needed much reclamation, but here at Rhysdale there was much land that had never been worked by men. Also, Mother Rosera was making Rhystead over in the image of those great abbeys of the south, and we were in a fair way to becoming a power to be reckoned with in the north.

Our lady was never satisfied with our efforts, however. She complained constantly that things were not at all what they had been in Ulmstead or Norstead, and many of the Dames could be found after twilight devotions in Dame Rimia's chamber. Rimia never did aught than let the discontent have an ear in which to speak. She was a gentle soul and spent much of her time trying to soothe the ruffled feathers.

One morning, though, when Dame Katreen went to rouse her for dawn contemplation, Rimia did not answer her tap. Entering her room, she found that this good woman had passed to

Flame sometime during the night. As Rimia was in apparently good health the previous evening, I secretly feared that Rosera had found some way to make an end of her. But there was no proof of such.

My sixteenth name-day passed unnoticed by any save Lysande, who had fashioned in secret a lovely kirtle of amber shade. This I found on my cot when I went to change before our twilight devotions. I had been feeling miserable, for Her Reverence was bringing a good deal of pressure to bear on me. She wanted me to swear to Cup and Flame or else leave Rhystead altogether. I was now old enough to marry if I would, but no kin had stepped forward to make a marriage. Life permanently under Rosera was unthinkable, and my lot would likely be as hard if I married one of the village boys. Also, I had no liking for such a joining with one whom my heart had not chosen.

However, at sight of the amber gown, my spirits lifted, and I decided to wear it for the remainder of the evening. I knew it must be Lysande's work, for who else could ply a needle with such skill? And who else would do as much for me?

I was nearly late for service, so I slipped in the back and seated myself out of sight in one of the alcoves kept for visitors. Midway through devotions, I became aware of voices from the seats to my far right. Annoyed, I tried to shut them out, but they persisted. When I heard my name spoken, I unabashedly strained to listen.

"Rosera thinks she is bastard get." That was Serilla. "All that is really known is that her mother rode in with some nearly dead man. For all we can guess, the woman may have picked up some wounded man-at-arms to lend credence to the story she had gotten up. And who can know whether she was nobly born herself? From what I have heard, the Dames merely took the woman's own word for that. And did you see the garb she was decked out in tonight?"

My face burned hotly in the blanketing dimness. How I wished it were possible to make her pay dearly for those words! I heard Alois voice in turn her opinion that my name was most likely stolen, and I could bear it no longer. Rising silently, I edged back to the rear door and slipped out.

Anger moved me until I was in the open. Twilight here soothed my raw soul. Even knowing that I would pay later for having left services, I felt no guilt at seeking the twilight. *As well hang for a sheep as a lamb*, I thought.

The moon was nearing full that night. As I slipped through the grass, I could see each blade. The leaves' rustle and the insects' sounds nearly deafened me. My legs felt heavy as well, and I wondered if I had begun to ail as I hurried to my beloved grove.

Once there, I sought my favorite seat. The air, so mild earlier, felt chill to me. Perhaps it had not been wise to come away like this. I must have dozed, for I suddenly felt stifled by the weight of that same dress that had been too light such a scant while before. I pulled it off awkwardly.

All at once, the world about me shifted, and when it tilted back again it was not in the same place it had been before. I struggled to rise, but my legs would not serve me. Then I caught sight of my hand, and hand it was no longer.

A pard's paw was there in its place! I tried to scream with fright, but my voice came out as a yowl. Not knowing what I was doing, I ran, feeling a cat's lean muscles ripple beneath my skin, a pard's long, loping strides.

I do not know where I went that night nor what I did, save that I awoke naked and shivering with chill shortly before day-break. I did not want to think about it. I dressed hurriedly and crept in through the small door leading to the herbarium. Lying in my bed, I tried to recall all that I had ever heard of shape-changers, and I felt I must be cursed. So I resolved to stay indoors the following nights, thinking that if the full moon's rays did not fall upon me I would somehow be safe.

However, this was not to be. For two following nights when I retired to my room after twilight prayers, I assumed pard form. So changed I would leap out the narrow window into the courtyard, from there to the outer world. Each night I returned before dawn, as it was much simpler to reenter armed with a cat's senses and stealth. As the change came quicker and easier, I enjoyed the freedom it gave me.

On the fourth night, I made the excuse of needing to harvest moon-flowers to allow me to legitimately leave the abbey pre-

cincts and stay out until sunrise. Moon-flowers can be picked only beneath a full moon. Once this one waned, there would be no other freedom for another month. Mother Rosera was for once in complete agreement with me, as she liked a tea made from these blossoms before sleeping, claiming it soothed her nerves. I knew I could gather quite a few before shape-shifting, and I had in mind to try a little experiment of my own. I thought to consciously will myself back into woman-form, and I wanted to make sure that there could be no witnesses.

I nearly had my basket full when I became aware that I was not alone. I sensed the change-time and hurried off into the grove fairly flying toward a bright patch containing the moon-flowers needed to make my harvest complete. They were there but also stones set out in a pattern vaguely and irritatingly familiar. I felt somehow that I should know it, but those voices sounding closer drove such thoughts from my mind. Serilla and Alois, who was never far behind her, were ahead of me.

"I think she ran this way," Serilla said. "Doubtless she is meeting a man. The last two nights when I checked her room, the bed was empty. That is why Her Reverence gave me permission to follow her tonight."

So! It was no wonder the abbess had been so agreeable earlier! More than ever I must keep control tonight. Now I shivered, thinking how narrowly I must have escaped detection.

"I cannot understand why any man would want to lie with her—she is as thin as Dame Camelda's washboard, and not nearly so attractive." Alois's faintly whining voice made answer.

Moon rays shone directly overhead. Those stones about were returning an answering bluish green glow. I crouched lower than ever among the flowers. To my horror, I could feel the excitement that heralded the beginning of my transformation.

Trembling with fear of being discovered, I fought for control. A wild rhythm sang through my blood, and the very stones' light pulsed to match the beat of my heart. I sensed somehow that those could help if I only knew the key.

At any time now I would make the Change. Trembling with the effort, I felt I had done no work harder in all my life than hold control.

Just then, Serilla spied me hiding among the plants and pulled me to my feet with cries of triumph. Where was the man I had come to meet? All protests were in vain. I shook off their hold and paid little mind to such accusation. It was far more important to keep Khemrys-shape.

Serilla's voice was tight with anger. "What more could be expected from slut's get?" as she slapped me across the face.

I felt her rings tear my cheek and lip. White-hot rage rushed through me in waves. I lost my hard-held control. Before their horrified gaze, I changed. The beast-madness in me wanted to rip Serilla's throat out, so end her taunting forever. I snarled. Only fearing if I gave into my rage I might be forever trapped in pard-form, I struggled against beast anger.

Alois lifted a rock crumbled from one of the standing stones. She flung it to catch me behind the ear. I was dazed for a moment.

Serilla caught up my discarded gown as they fled. All the Dark fears might be at their heels. My long pard legs carried me to the hills and safety. There could be no going back after this night.

The sky began to lighten once I was high above the village. I lay down to await my transformation back to Khemrys-shape. Only that expected Change did not come. As the day dragged on, I went a little mad at the realization that I was trapped in pard-flesh. For several days I wandered hungry and thirsty, before I gave in to the beast nature. Catching a small reptile I gulped it down. The animal must remain uppermost for my survival.

Nightly I fought to will myself woman, nightly I failed. The place of the Old Ones must have held a power to thus imprison me.

About many of the ancient places of another race there is a feeling of either good or ill. The stones I had come upon that night had not threatened, so I could not understand why I was unable to assume my true form. Perhaps the Old Ones do not like us to tamper with their secrets.

Several months passed and I was drawn to Rhystead, the only home I knew. Most importantly I wanted to see if returning to the stones would at last bring about the Change.

During the day I skulked on the outskirts of the village, wanting no sharp-nosed hound to sniff me out. Near dusk, I crept beneath the open windows on my way through the streets, listening to the talk of those within.

My lips stretched back in the semblance of a smile as I heard the tale of my shift into many forms, finally settling on the guise I now wore. Though I hissed when they spoke of Serilla's bravery in the face of my savage attack. It was accepted that I had been warded off by sight of an amulet of Gunnora, or one of the talismans the Dames had blessed, though none agreed as to which. Most folk were of the opinion I had gone to join the Dark Ones, though a few suggested I had crept off to die of wounds. All had seen Lysande's beautiful gown with the telltale hairs on the inside—that had been ceremoniously burnt in the Cleansing Flame by none other than Abbess Rosera herself. I was saddened by this, thinking of the long hours spent in its making. Why punish the garment for the sins of the wearer?

At last the darkness was complete. I made haste to the standing stones. As the moon was waxing near to full, I hoped for success. I felt unhappy knowing there would be no means of contacting Lysande even in my true form. Had she turned against me also?

So it was with great surprise that I discovered her seated on one of the fallen stones, apparently awaiting me. I drew back, fearing a trap, but scented no one else. As though she were aware of my presence, she rose and called me by name.

Hesitantly, I came forward. She shrank back a step, then she moved toward me, calling in a low voice: "Khemrys?"

I rolled onto my back in the grass and summoned forth a rather rusty purr. My action brought her to gingerly stroke my fur.

Lysande spoke. "Khemrys, there be powers and powers, as all know. I felt a call tonight to come here, and I could not escape that. Only I did not expect to find you still a beast, and so brought clothing, which will be of little use. But also, I brought food, which perchance will."

I rubbed my head hard against her hand, as a kitten will in a playful mood. She looked at me with surprise.

"Can it be you understand? If so, rub your head against my

hand once more." Could it be that Lysande, all, thought me no more than a beast now?

I did as she asked, rubbing against her cheek also for good measure. Lysande smiled.

"Sister, you must leave this place at once. Go into the Waste and hide. For I have heard talk of a man sent to track you. They mean him to slay you, if you are taken, as one possessed of the Dark Old Ones. I will find means of sending word to you if it is ever safe for you to return."

I growled. How could I ever evade such a hunt?

Lysande guided me to where she had concealed the food. Bits of fowl and bread I devoured with great relish, and I wished that I could take away with me the hard journeycake she had so thoughtfully provided. It was thick with dried meats and fruits, to sustain life for quite some time. After this hour I must be vigilant always. Would there never be rest for me? I had not regained my Khemrys-self!

II

Harlyn

The late afternoon sun slanting through my visor near-blinded me. I had no relish for another night's wilderness camp. Summer had crept by at a snail's pace while I was eager to see home once more.

Some distance ahead stood a fine keep nestled in the rolling hills of Rhysdale. Surely its lord would welcome a weary traveler. Thinking longingly of a soft bed and food not half charred, I urged Keldar on. Perchance visions of a stall and rich grains to fill his belly drew him as well.

We had ridden far these last years, Keldar and I. From the Waste south even unto Trevamper, site of the Great Fair of the Dales, we had journeyed for days at a time without seeing another human face. I had a great curiosity to visit other places

and peoples. For a space I sold my sword to one lord or another, fighting men being much in demand in these troubled times.

At the gates, receiving the customary challenge, I raised my shield for the warden to see the device emblazoned there. "I am called Harlyn, and I wish lodging for the night. I serve no house, and I swear to bring no ill to those within."

This seemed to satisfy him, and he bade me enter. I removed my helm, tucking it beneath one mail-clad arm as we advanced into the shelter of the bailey. Men came to bring me the guesting cup, and I gratefully drank the bracing mixture of hot wine and spices before I dismounted, leading my horse to the stables. The grooms stood willing to see to him. However, knowing the stallion would suffer no other's touch, I dismissed them, saying that I would attend to all that was needful.

Here the great hall was impressive. The tables had been already set up. Upon these, torches burned with a clear and steady light. Those making ready the meal were cheerful and well clothed. About all was an air of peace and plenty.

A plump, motherly woman showed me guest quarters and offered me the use of a bath. This last appealed to me, as I feared I greatly needed one.

Leisurely, I soaked away the grime of long travel. Hard soap was an unexpected luxury, while hot water eased my knotted muscles and soothed the places where the byrnie had rubbed. Hearing the bell sound for the evening meal, I made haste to dry and dress myself. I was curious to meet the lord of this well-ordered place.

Before the High Seat, I offered greeting. "For the welcome of the gates, my thanks. For the feasting on the board, my pleasure and good wishes. To the lord of this roof, fair fortune." This time I sincerely meant the oft-used words.

A tall man rose cup in hand. "To the farer on far roads the welcome of this house, and may fortune favor your wandering."

At the close of the meal the master of the house gestured for me to join him. He pulled up a stool like his own, saying, "We have not had speech other than formal, Lord Harlyn. I would not wish you to think me an ungracious host."

I assured him that he was anything but that. Noting that all called him Malgwyn familiarly, but with an air of respect, I thought this man was above petty titles, and the liking within me grew.

At length the talk turned to things of general interest. I listened to news of local doings with but half an ear. However, when mention was made of a shape-changer, my attention was caught and held. A few months past, a maiden from the abbey had become a Were and attacked two girls one evening. They only just managed to fend off her attack and drive the beast away.

Interested, I pressed for further details. Few such were forthcoming. The name given of the unfortunate maid was Khemrys. Prior to the incident, there were no known manifestations, and from most accounts she was of good, though mysterious, blood. No other sightings had been confirmed. All thought her dead or else fled afar.

Several newcomers joined our group, the first a tiny woman with close-cropped hair the shade of an autumn leaf. She carried a battered lute as tenderly as one would a babe. Her companion moved with a dancer's tread, though he was of a size I would not care to quarrel with. His expression was shielded by a drooping mustache and a clipped beard. I noted that he marked all possible exits by quick glances and sat protectively close to the lady.

Cries of greeting were raised, and at once she was begged for a song. All sound died save for the hiss of the fire as she began. Old favorites were called for, and others came to widen the circle. The singer had a pleasant, rather husky voice, with a gift for freshening the old and familiar.

Then the woman sang tunes of her own devising. The final dealt with the matter of the shape-shifter spoken of earlier. It was a haunting melody, and surprised all by being sympathetic to the plight of the girl.

She was still singing as I left that merry company for the peace of a bed.

I awoke reluctant to leave this keep. This puzzled me, as such a scant time before I had been so anxious to ride north. In the armory, I put a finer edge to my sword and pounded

out the battle-dents in my shield. My dart-gun I reworked, spending several hours refletching darts and fashioning new ones. During the late afternoon I practiced my skill with the men-at-arms in the bailey.

All this time, the tale of the young shape-shifter lay in my thought. Unable to shake that, I found to my surprise the resolution to hunt her down had grown in me.

My announcement of this was made at the evening meal. Some of that wished to join me. But I wished this to be a solitary quest, and some time passed before all were convinced.

At length I sought my chamber. My stripped shield leaned in the corner, awaiting a fresh coat of paint. I stooped to right it, while doing so I caught sight of my face on its polished surface.

I was startled at the haunted eyes. Herein I had the look of a man under geas!

A soft tap at the door broke through my thoughts.

The minstrel of yestereve stood there when it was opened. Tonight she wore soft dove-gray, with milky moonstones on brow and breast. Her circlet was in the shape of the Horned Moon. This was a woman of Power!

I stepped aside to grant her entry. "What seek you here, wise one?"

"You, I know for what you are, but I carry no quarrel within these walls," the answer came. "The need has been laid upon me to come hither. What you would do is needful. Though your kind have little dealing with The Lady, this pattern is of her weaving. Your hunt will be long, and the way difficult, but you will find the one you seek. This I have Seen. Prepare yourself, for the trail will be laid soon. No more has been revealed to me, save this, you ride with her blessing, and mine."

Her hand made a graceful gesture in a pattern that hung in the air with a glow of blues and greens.

When I looked away from it, thinking to ask more, the room was empty. All was as if she had never been. It was long e'er sleep came to me that eve.

Word spread quickly of my quest. When I rode forth three days hence, the few I met along the track to the village bade me good fortune in the hunt. Keldar picked up a stone as I passed

through the marketplace. I dismounted and set about prising it free.

The feeling of an unseen watcher grew in me. Whirling, I marked a pair of eyes. Glowing emerald in the near darkness, yet with points of golden flame in their depths, the eyes of a pard regarded me.

For an instant we stood thus, gazes locked, till the beast with a cry turned and fled. It was the matter of moments for my task to be completed. So I rode hot on the trail of the great cat.

III

Khemrys

Replete at last from my first good meal in some time, I stretched my length, claws needling into the soft ground. A full belly made me lazy. I rested my heavy head in Lysande's lap and straightaway began to doze. Her hand caressing me grew slower and slower, and at length her head drooped to rest upon my flank. The moon alone guarded our slumber.

I was roused by a persistent shake that would not go away. Raising a paw with claws extended to slap away the annoyance, I suddenly realized where I was and came full awake. The stars overhead were dimming as the sky began to lighten, and I must make good my escape.

Lysande knelt and kissed my forehead. We parted thus, not knowing if we were to see each other again. I blinked a bit as tears rose in my eyes. I wondered if true beasts ever cried.

When hastening through the village, along a street still empty in the dawning, I heard hoofbeats close at hand. Frantically, I looked for a place to hide, finding it beneath a cart.

From my refuge, I studied the stranger. Some instinct in me warned that this was the hunter sent to bring me down. His helm was looped over the saddlebow. I wanted to study this one, the better to escape his grasp.

What I found there, in other circumstances, would have pleased me. He was well favored, with hair as dark as my own and a finely chiseled face, the firm set of which told me this man owned no master. Fine lines graven about his eyes spoke of a man used to all weathers. The ones at the corners of his mouth argued good humor.

I forced myself to face the unpleasant truth I would have to kill this man, or die myself. As if I had shouted this, he spun, his eyes seeking my hiding place.

We stared so at each other for the beat of a heart. Then I made a great leap past hunter and horse. Breathlessly I fled to sanctuary in the hills, and from there I reached the Waste.

The Waste is a place of dread to lawful folk of High Hallack. A twisted, barren place, it is inhabited by outlaws and creatures more at home in a nightmare. Though the thought chilled me, this must be my hiding place.

Also, there were to be found there by report many places of the Old Ones. Perchance one of these would help me to become Khemrys once more.

My pads were worn and bloodied by the relentless pace. I raced up hills and down, seeking to shake the hunter from my trail. At times it seemed that I had succeeded, and I would have time to catch some unwary creature to satisfy my ravening hunger. After, I would drop, exhausted, to sleep until the pounding of hooves heralded the coming of my pursuer.

At length I reached the place where the Dales joined the Waste. Fall had fled, and Year's Turning, so the land was locked deep in the grasp of the Snow-Bird. Harsh winds slashed at me. Ice balls collected in the tufts between my pads, and I must needs stop to bite them free. Sighting some shelter in the form of outcrop some yards ahead, I hurried on.

The half-blocked wind blew less chill here. Perhaps the storm had erased my trail, and I had eluded him at last.

I was lean indeed, the bones rising sharply beneath my skin. My coat might have faded to the color of parched earth. However, the muscles that served me were still supple, hardened by the long pursuit.

My mind was sharp and clear. I had learned much from the beast. The constant struggle to maintain that part of me that was Khemrys had eased a little. I might tap the resources of the pard for my flight, but the strategies I used were my own.

My musing was interrupted by the sharp scent of a burrower among the stones now sheltering me. Scooping out the soil and smaller rocks protecting it took only moments. Soon the tasty meat filled the cavern of my belly.

A little while later I dug out a den of sorts. Fitting myself into it, I slept.

I awoke to the dazzle of sun on snow. This harsh land was softened by the blanket covering it. Skeleton fingers of the twisted trees pointed skyward, the only sinister note. I romped kittenlike through the drifts. No windborne scent of hunter spoiled my frolic.

Tracking a hare, I dispatched it before it was aware of me. Two days now I had had food and shelter. Regaining my den, I drifted into slumber once more.

This unexpected luck held throughout Snow-Bird, even into the Month of the Frost Sprite. My flanks filled out, and my coat lost its sere look. Roaming the hills, I chanced upon another of those places left by those who knew the land of old.

This place of the Old Ones differed from the one I had stumbled upon at Rhysdale, being in better repair. Only a few of the pillars had tumbled. Beneath one of these I found a hollow for a hiding place. There was a floor in shape like a five-pointed star, a low, circular wall enclosing the whole. All were made of the blue-green stone I now associated with magicks and mysteries. Though here was one feeling of peace and security.

My moon waiting came to an end as the waxing was full within a fortnight. At the back of my neck fur bristled with anticipation. A crushed herb smell was around as I approached the temple-place—for I was sure that such it was.

I strode across the floor, halting where the arms of the Great Star joined. Moon beams woke the sleeping pillars, thus they, too, gave forth radiance.

Being raised in the abbey, I was unsure how to proceed. Cup and Flame are apart from the Mysteries, and our poor library

had contained few scrolls dealing with such. I closed my eyes, searched memory for what I had read.

The tale-scroll of my mother had dealt with this! Feverishly, I tried to recall the words one used in addressing those Powers that Be. Alas, that was miles away. I could not consult it directly, but I could almost hear my mother's voice reading aloud the parts.

I *could* hear it aloud! Her voice rose in formal chant, and another, deeper voice echoed her words. They shaped names that fit no tongue of High Hallack, beseeching those who dwelt here to aid me. I felt power flow into me as a man fills a drinking horn. All that they had been, they now gladly gave, to aid me in what I now must do.

Stretching my tawny length to its fullest, I stood with head up. From my throat came a low croon, my petition to those who listened. In my mind I formed a picture of myself, of Khemrys. This would be! I put all newly strengthened will into that wordless cry.

To feel that rippling of flesh and sinew that heralded the Change! I watched my claws shrink, widen; my paws spread, each toe lengthen to a finger; the fur withdraw so sun-browned skin greeted my gaze. I was woman once more!

My hands I pressed to my face, my body, before I dropped to my knees to give thanks to she who had granted this. Though snow lay about this land, I did not shiver or feel its bite, even unclad as I was. Her hand kept me safe and warm throughout that bitter eve.

Morning came, and I examined myself once more, still unable to believe that my quest had ended. A tangle of clothing lay beside me, and lifting it I found a sturdy outfit like unto those that hunters wear. Being of leather, with breeches in place of skirts, I would have a freedom of movement not customarily granted to women. There were thick boots as well, with linings of soft fleece. I pulled them on, the scent of faded roses clung to their folds.

Thinking of the likeness to hunter's garb brought to mind he who tracked me. I wondered whether he had called off his search. Realizing for the first time my vulnerability as Khemrys, I shivered, and prayed he had.

Berries and herbs grew about the temple of the Old Ones in plenty. The winter blast never reached this place where I gathered fruit long out of season in the Dales. To my harvest I added certain herbs of Power and healing, and an armful of stunted heads of grain. These last I patiently ground between two stones until I achieved a coarse flour. Mixing this with water, I formed the mealy cakes that give sustenance to the traveler, liberally spicing them with the dried berries.

More herbs I placed in the sewn-in pouches of my tunic against future need. Gratefully I thought of Dame Rimia and her patient wisdom in pointing out the name and uses of each. How glad I was now that I had listened.

At moon's waning, I had a most frightening dream. I seemed to *see* the hunter, as though from a great height. He and his mount picked their way carefully across the muddy plain. Both looked thin, and their heads drooped against the lashing wind. This land had not been as good to them as me.

I realized of a sudden that I *knew* this ground they were now upon. It was but a few hours' ride from my refuge! All I saw was so real that I woke in a cold sweat.

This dream was surely a warning. I entered that star-guarded place, saying, "For this shelter, the feasting provided, my gratitude." I could not use the address one gave to a human host, but I hoped the watchers here would read my heart.

I stooped to drink at a tiny spring bubbling up behind the temple. Its waters were sweet and chill. There was no means to carry any water with me, and I knew not when I would find another such.

I left on foot, hoping that human tracks would not arouse any suspicion in my pursuer. The melting snow took the pard marks, such as he would search for. Would that my luck held!

IV

Harlyn

I sniffed the pard's sharp musk on the breeze. She was running hard before me into the hills of Rhysdale, I close upon her heels. Now and again I lost sight of her in the dense brush

above the town, but the trail was clear to read. The beast made no effort at first to conceal her passage. Later, she grew much more wary.

She had a speed born of fear and utter desperation. I had the geas, that compelling command that will let one do naught else, to guide me.

Through summer's end, past the time of harvest and leaf-fall did we run, Keldar, the pard, and I. I fear none of us had much rest or food until Year's Turning. The Harpy was past, and the Year of the Orc at hand when I marked Keldar favoring his near-side foreleg. I had not yet saddled him for the day's chase, and I moved closer to check it. The tendon was much inflamed, and as I watched, the swelling grew greater. I took out certain herbs and dug roots to make a poultice. There would be no chase for us for some time to come.

The forage was better here than farther on, so I constructed a rude shelter. I did not want to permanently disfigure the area.

Turning from my task to Keldar, I removed the now-cold poultice. The leg was not so hot and puffed as it had been. I applied another at once.

I never left my friend hobbled at night. This had amazed some. Most fighting horses of the Dales are hobbled or taught to ground-tie when the reins are released. But Keldar was far more intelligent than those. He never wandered far in night's grazing and was ready as I for the road each morning. Woe be unto any who attempted to steal or harm him! He was amply able to deal such.

Hares were plentiful in this place. I snared several, roasting one and preparing the others in strips to dry. The night was still, and no stars shone. A prickling at my neck told me bad weather was rising.

Later snow began to fall. Softly at first, then feather masses swirled in a cloud so thick I could scarce make my way to the shelter I had contrived. My saddle and gear were inside and I flung great armfuls of dead, dry leaves in after them. These would provide me with more protection than my single blanket. I made fast the saddle blanket about Keldar to give him what aid I could. The snow continued falling. I suspected we would be trapped here for some time.

Morning came, gray and chill, and still the snow continued. I floundered seeking the buried ruin of last night's fire to rescue the strips of now-frozen meat.

Snow fell throughout the day, obliterating the landscape and utterly covering my makeshift home. At midafternoon I pulled aside the covering of the doorway and crawled out into the dim light to see how my comrade fared.

Keldar had found sanctuary beneath the overhanging branches of a great evergreen. Heavily laden limbs drooped near the earth under the massive blanket of snow they bore. The horse was glad to see me, whickering gently as I stepped inside.

"Ho, friend! Would we were both in Jurby port, eh?" My hooved companion snorted an appropriate sounding response.

He was near invisible in the twilight beneath the branches—for gray-black dappled coat was patterned like shadows on a forest floor.

We ventured forth together, he to forage for what grazing could be found, I to try to locate wood for fire. I spied tracks of a hare in the area where I had had such success previously, and I constructed another snare to lay near its burrow. After gathering masses of deadfall, I checked Keldar's foreleg, finding it much improved.

Days and nights passed much the same for near a fortnight. The trail of the pard would be impossible to pick up, and I despaired of ever hunting her down. What happened to one when a geas was left unfulfilled? I did not like to think of that.

My food supply dwindled, although occasionally I was able to supplement it with a hare from my snares. The journeycakes Lord Malgwyn had furnished were only a memory. I wondered if we two could survive until the weather broke.

At last a day came when the sun showed rather fitfully through the clouds. Thereafter began the slow process of freeze and melt that is so hazardous for travelers. Each night the loud *pop!* of trees exploding from their expanded sap broke the quiet like the crack of the herdsman's whip. To find a trail now would be impossible.

I chafed as each day that passed lessened the likelihood

of my ever picking up that trail. Keldar was eager to be gone as well. His leg was completely healed, making me thankful again that I had him instead of one of the less sturdy Dales horses.

Late one eve near moonrise, I sat musing near the fire, watching the twisting flames make patterns against the dark. Seeing them thus brought to mind my mother's face, bending her will to See what lay ahead in the scrying bowl. Like a sword thrust that struck. I could See my quarry thus using the fire! How could I have forgotten my earliest training? Too many years of concealing differences among Dalesmen had led me to overlook such a simple solution. Also, I could have alleviated so many discomforts of the past month with other teachings of my youth.

I made myself comfortable and began consciously to relax each separate muscle. Clearing my mind of all but thoughts of her whom I sought, I looked into the fire. Deeper, deeper into the writhing colors I eyed. The flames began to recede as another scene took their place.

It was night, as now, with a full moon overhead. I felt a sense of failure until I realized I was looking at a place other than that where I now dwelt. It was a temple of—no, I shall not call her name. It shone with a radiance not of this world, and at its center—the pard!

Dimly I heard chanting, words and names, though not from the cat. I saw no others, but an overwhelming sense of Power made the small hairs at the back of my neck stand upright. The creature's head was now flung aloft as it uttered a low, crooning petition. Bathed in moonglow, I watched her begin the familiar transformation to human semblance.

Now I was near enough to touch her from my point of vision as her features reshaped into those of a girl just entering womanhood. Her dark hair swept to her hips like a waterfall, concealing most of her slim body. Her triangular face with its wide-set eyes turned this way and that, in rapturous delight at her metamorphosis. She looked fit and lean. The storm just past had not marked her as it had me.

I tore my eyes away from the girl to mark the place. Certain landmarks led me to believe it but a few days' ride from my

shelter. The picture then began to fade, and the last sight I had was of Khemrys, (for it could be none other), arms raised high in thanksgiving. Then all was gone save the flickering of my now-dying fire.

As I drifted into sleep that night, her face still called me with a haunting pull strong as that of the geas laid upon me.

At dawn we headed north out of the valley, riding hard toward the place of my vision.

My supplies were near nonexistent, save a few strips of the meat I had managed to dry. So it was with great relief I came upon one of the cache-sites of a Waste-dweller.

These were dangerous to the uninitiated, as supplies are scarce and precious, so that the owners often set traps for would-be thieves. But I was in desperate straits and wary of the risk.

A rock heaved ahead in one place broke through a covering of lattice concealed by dirt and pebbles. Revealed below was a deep pit lined with row upon row of sharp spikes, tips coated with a green substance that I guessed as a deadly poison.

Once the trap was sprung, it was an easy task to remove what stores I required: some meal, dried fruits, and the seeds that would sprout into greens. I replaced the cairn as I found it. Even one beyond the law I did not want to rob, thus I left the greater portion for my unwitting host.

For near a week I followed the trail laid by the flame that night. Keldar and I picked our way carefully, as the ground was still sodden and nigh impassable. However, the fair weather held, and I had great hopes of cornering my quarry at last.

However when I reached the Star Temple, the girl was gone, and only the broken stems of herbs and a few distorted footprints bore mute witness to her sojourn. I had not truly expected to have the hunt end so easily, and I was, in an odd way, proud of the skill of my prey.

We camped there that night, for there was a sweet-flowing stream and good grazing nearby. I mounted the low steps to the star-form pavement to voice a wordless plea to those who once dealt here for aid in the ending of this quest. More

and more was I filled with rightness, a sense of a pattern nearing completion. Only the fulfillment of the geas would free me, and I began to find within myself the reason for its being.

Stooping to fill my flask with the clear water, I noticed a dark glint among the plants nestled 'round the spring. I knelt to better see and found a few brown hairs tangled in the woody stems. Gently I freed them and put them in my belt pouch. Mayhap they would be a lucky talisman.

The tracks leading out showed that the girl, for she wore that guise now, was heading north, farther into the heart of the Waste. It would have been wiser for her to remain in pard-form in this most dangerous country.

Not only those fleeing the law sheltered here. Creatures of Shadow and things of an earlier, grimmer age slunk about as well. The deaths such granted were not the clean ones of hunter's dart or arrow, but something more horrible, while death to the body did not necessarily follow. I hoped the girl would chance upon none such monster before I caught up with her.

V

Khemrys

The thick mud sucked at my boots with every step. At times I lost my footing in the mess and fell sprawling. In no time I bore the look of a moss wife out of legend. Why not? I thought. Were not Weres legends, also?

Now I longed for a pard's speed to cross the mire. But I feared to make the transition and perhaps be once more locked within the beast.

* * *

Thankfully I stumbled upon a shallow pool ringed by twisted trees. The water led me to make camp here. Cold as it was, I must have a clean body and clothing.

Brush gave me a fire. So far I had marked no signs of inhabitants in this desolate land. Only the ruins bore silent testimony of man's hand upon this region.

Taking advantage of the warm afternoon sun, I stripped and stepped into the chilly water. I swirled water over the oiled surface of my leather. Stretching them across a flat rock to dry, I returned to my own scrubbing.

I was glad to shape-change once I left the water. The air was growing quite brisk, as I took pard-form. Checking the damp leathers and finding them not yet wearable, in fur I settled in.

At sunrise, I became Khemrys once more, tending things only hands could do. The fire rebuilt, the leathers redonned, I heated one of the rough cakes on a stone to make it more palatable. As I sat crunching the coarse near-tasteless stuff, I thought wistfully of baking day at Rhystead, the tiny cookies rich with eggs and seeds, the mouth-watering smell of the hot bread fresh from the great ovens.

I was so lost in such a gluttonous dream I did not see the three burly forms slipping silently through the trees. As closer they edged, I finished the last of my crumbly stuff and stood, wiping my hands on the seat of my breeches. Even though those had been drying for nearly a full day, their dampness clung, chill and unpleasant to my skin.

A loud crack of a nearby twig revealed the lurkers. There was no time to flee for they were upon me, foul hands riffling through my pouch and clothing. Dumping my precious herbs to the ground, one lout crushed them to dust beneath his heel.

The tallest one spoke. "It were kind o' ye, gurrl, tae build us that beacon fire. So as to make the findin' of ye easy. Belikes t'come here lookin' for a man. No fine-livin' high lady comes to the Waste without she has a good cause."

I stared at him with wordless hate. The second held my arms firmly pinned at an unnatural angle to my body. I dared not struggle, as the slightest movement caused me excruciating

pain. This one seemed gratified at an involuntary cry and twisted my arms a little harder. I bit my lip.

When the third one ran his eyes and hands insultingly over my body, I stiffened, trying to think of a means of escape.

The first ripped open my jerkin laces and commented on the smallness of my breasts. As he and the stocky, toadlike one roughly pulled my tunic over my head, I began steeling myself, willing the swiftest transformation I had yet attempted.

The clothing beneath the rudely questing hands changed to the sleek golden hide of the cat, the hands so painfully held to the sharp-clawed paws of a terror from the hills. My long form twisted in their grasp. Now the hunted became the hunter.

My would-be captors paled. The tall, hulking one drew a wicked-looking sword. I backed, snarling, ears laid flat to my head. The grasp at the nape of my neck still held by the third was a fatal mistake—for him. I writhed, thanking the power that be for the loose folds of skin there. Four deep gashes in his face and neck matched more on his pale chest. He gasped, clutching the burning, blood-welling stripes and freeing me in the process.

“Ye murdersome beast! Die, you!” the man with the blade snarled. I dodged neatly, knocking down the bulky one who made a warding-off sign at me as I ran past him. I managed a snap at the swordsman in retreat, then I turned tail and fled for my very life, leaving the no-longer-pleasant grove behind me.

I ran until I dropped from exhaustion. How could I have been so foolish as to light that fire? It was luck of a sort that nothing worse had been drawn to me by the beckoning flame. I must consider my actions hereafter, for every man’s hand would be against me.

As I lay panting, the distant thunder of hoofbeats sounded. Lifting my head and squinting, I could perceive the outline of a rider some distance away. The silhouette was vaguely familiar, and confirmation came on the wind. The hunter had returned. Leaping to my feet, I leaped ahead, disregarding the aching protest of every joint and muscle.

VI

Harlyn

The girl was clever. Although she had been in no little hurry, great care had been taken to make her track near invisible. Patiently searching each time it faded out, I was able to find a tiny branch awry, a crushed leaf, a bit of ash from a buried fireside. I was sure that these had been left by my quarry.

In spite of the tedious nature of the search, we were able to cover more than twice the ground of a single girl on foot. Soon, with any luck, I would have her in sight.

Near dark I came upon the stiffening body of a man. The scavengers had not yet begun their work, and I saw that he bore the signature mark of the pard. His face and chest had been raked to the bone by scimitar claws, one nicking the great vein of the throat. The tracks leading away told the tale of two others making a hasty exit.

The pard's prints were there as well, and I remounted, turning Keldar's head to follow. We must be fairly close now. Since I was certain the dead man and his companions had richly deserved their fates—I spared no further thought for them.

By starlight I raced. Recklessly across uncertain terrain and luckily without mishap I gave Keldar his head. Near false dawn I saw the prints had lost their evenness, as if their owner reeled with exhaustion. She could not be far ahead of me now.

I slowed my steed lest I betray my calling too soon. The rising sun revealed a small outcropping of rock in the near distance. Toward that the pull of the geas led me. The land where I now rode was familiar to me. Many times I had come this way hunting with my father and brothers. We were but a few leagues' distance from my childhood home, and the warring pull of home and kin-ties vied strongly with the compulsion of cornering my prey at last.

A tawny flash from the rock ahead gave me knowledge that

my presence had been marked. She fled unsteadily, as though her legs could no longer quite support her weight. Heading toward a deep crevasse, she sought to conceal herself and mayhap lose me once again in the process.

But this time, her luck failed her. For I knew the sides there rose smoothly vertical, and the entrance was the only exit. No escape for Khemrys this time.

Arriving at the narrow entrance, I dismounted, leaving my helm hanging from the saddlebow. Keldar snorted suspiciously, as though he were unsure whether I was quite aware about my action. I ruffled the thick mane where it hung over his canny eyes, and, turning toward the crevasse, made to confront this Were-girl.

VII

Khemrys

Stumbling, I leaped across the outcropping and spied a deep fissure in the rock ahead. I knew I could squeeze myself in easily, and from there either hide from his piercing gaze or else render myself invulnerable to sword thrust or dart blast, for no sunlight broke that gloom. There would surely be some means of egress, would there not? I tried hard to reason, but my mind was foggy with fatigue, and I knew it would be fate that would decide in the end.

Slipping through the opening, I made my way toward the back. Overhead, the walls were as smooth as the sides of a polished horn cup. I wished I had not been born with the Were-curse, for it had been my bane from start to finish, and though I would much miss the luxury of cat senses, I would most gladly forswear all to be able to live without the constant pursuit.

There was no exit other than the way I had come, and the jingling of harness and mail made certain my hiding place had

been discovered. I was trapped. With bone-chilling certainty I knew that this was the final confrontation that I so dreaded. I would have no chance unless I was able to slay this man. Now I feared that it would be I who was slain.

Dimness within became utter dark as the man's body cut off what feeble light reached hither. I backed until the wall was hard against my hindquarters ready to spring, but what I saw made me stop. The outline of a strong hand held a dart-gun pointed straight at me!

I froze, squeezing tight my eyes against death. A click of metal on stone made me open them again. The man had thrown his gun away! He drew closer, and I could see even in the minute light that he was smiling. Did he think to kill me with naught but bare hands?

Puzzled, I saw those hands spread wide, as though to show me he meant no harm. There was not a single sound as we stood thus, regarding each other. Then his smile widened, and his body seemed to lose its familiar outline like a heat-softened candle. The body crouched, assumed a lean length with smoke-gray fur sprouting like spring grass. Fascinated, I watched a tail form and lengthen, his strong nose and lean chin stretch forward into a cat's muzzle. I had never seen a transformation from the observer's point of view. How gracefully everything seemed to flow and change!

Then I shook my head as if to clear it. What was I thinking of at a time like this! This was no hunter sent to slay me, but another of the breed of my father and myself! I was not alone anymore.

Cautiously he approached me, as though not sure what sort of reception I would grant. He was larger than I and even more graceful from mottled head to smoky tail-tip. Nose to nose we stood until I flung decorum to the four winds and began to purr and roll. We tumbled about thus until we tired, and picking our way through the narrow opening, we lay at last in the sun-warmed grass at the very feet of the great horse. He did not seem to note anything unusual about our appearance, and I wondered, for it had always been my experience that all mounts feared me greatly.

As though he could read my very thoughts, the snowcat be-

came man once more. "Keldar's kind are of a breed our kin raise themselves, and they accept us for what we are. I am Harlyn, Wererider of the Gray Towers, and a merry chase you've led me, pretty lady."

His speaking voice was a rich baritone with an underlying rumble not unlike the purr of a great cat. Feeling suddenly shy, I too shifted back to Khemrys's shape, and I could not meet his eyes. Seeing my embarrassment and confusion, he tenderly gathered me close. I had reached safe haven at last.