

BLOODSPELL

by

A. C. Crispin

Huge-girthed trees surrounded the forest glade where the young man knelt, laving his face in the chill crystal of a tiny brook. Leaves rustled in the gentle breeze, seemingly whispering in some arcane tongue he heard but could not understand. Allowing the water to still, he bent down, lapping at it, neat as any cat. Even after his thirst was gone he continued gazing at the shining surface, watching his own features form in the ripples, frowning.

There was nothing readily apparent about his countenance to elicit such displeasure: black hair growing into a peak on his forehead topped an oval face, pointed of chin, the jaw strong and determined. Eyebrows angled upward above level eyes the color of the new spring leaves surrounding him.

With an angry hiss, the youth's hand moved, slapping down on his image, shattering it. Absently he rubbed his wet fingers against his furred breeches, then looked up as his ears discerned a sound. His nostrils widened as he tested the breeze, ignoring the rich odors of the flowering trees, the sun-baked earth, the stream—concentrating instead on the musky, heady scent coming from the other side of the screen provided by an ancient weeping willow.

Soundlessly, he stood, narrowing his eyes, and made out the figure of a doe, heavy with young, nibbling at the leaves

of the thickets beyond. Her black nose crinkled as she chewed hungrily, her ears flicking back and forth as she listened for any predator's approach.

Instinctively the young man bared his teeth, feeling the first stirring of the Change begin—the heightened rush of blood in his veins, the melting, dizzying *shifting* within him, bringing a sharp pleasure-pain—

No! he thought, forcing control over his body, fighting the Were part of him that wanted to Change, so he could hunt four-footed. *The deer is young, and we have plenty of meat now. Let her live to bear her fawn.* He struggled for a moment, then stood once more wholly human—at least to the outward eye.

“Herrel!”

The shouted summons sent the deer crashing away. The youth whirled to see another man, slightly taller and heavier of body, push impatiently through the brush, not bothering to seek out the narrow path. “Daydreaming again, Wronghanded? By Karthen’s Swordarm, aren’t you ever where you’re supposed to be? Hyron has called Pack council—he sent me to find you. Treyval, Overlord of the Silvermantle Clan, has come to bargain for our services.”

Herrel’s mouth thinned. How like Hyron, Herrel’s sire and the leader of the Wereriders, to dispatch Halse to summon him. His father could hardly have missed the fact that Halse the Strongarmed had even less use for his half-blood son than he did. Without a word of acknowledgment, Herrel started back toward those gaunt Gray Towers he still could not count as “home”—even after some ten years within their sorcery-rimed walls.

Despite his greater bulk, Halse moved with the deceptive speed of a charging bear, catching him up easily. “What were you doing, Wronghanded? Trying to bolster your ounce of Power with meditation? Philosophy can hardly be counted as part of our sorcery.” His jeering words cut deep, but years of practice in hiding his hurts

had made the younger man well shielded—at least outwardly—against his Werekin's jibes. He ignored Halse.

The Strongarmed grunted, sounding almost like his Were alter-ego, the bear. "But when one is desperate, any den in a storm, I suppose . . . anything is better than having a yearling cub at his side in battle, especially one who can scarcely control his Changing. Better you should have never left the Redmantle hold . . . and your slut of a mother."

Herrel's lips tightened fractionally, but he did not rise to the other's bait. Why should he defend a mother he barely remembered, one to whom he had been an embarrassment? The Lady Eldris of Car Do Prawn had been summoned by Hyron's love-spell to his bed-furs, but no true liking had ensued from that brief liaison. When their body-passion died, she had left, and Hyron had not naysaid her going—perhaps because her father had paid sword ransom for her return.

When she had been brought to child-bed, her brother Kardis had granted the infant Herrel full rights as his heir, in keeping with tradition. Hold Daughter, the Lady Eldris had a right to choose the father of the heir she was expected to produce for Car Do Prawn, and none could question her choosing. And the baby seemed fully human . . .

So it was that for the first seven years of his existence, Herrel had led the typical life of a young clan lord—rarely seeing his mother, and then only at a distance. One young man-at-arms, Pergvin, became the closest thing to a friend the young Redmantle lord could claim, teaching him to ride (though that was no easy thing, for no horse, no matter how placid, was ever at ease when the boy was within sight or scent), and instructing him in the rudiments of sword-play.

Then one day when Maleron, Margrave of the Heights, came visiting, Herrel's life changed forever. As the boy

crossed the courtyard in the company of Lord Kardis and the rest of the nobles, the formal guesting-cup borne before them by the Lady Eldris, the Margrave's gray war-stallion scented him. Screaming and frothing, the horse reared, snapping its reins, then plunged to attack the child standing helpless in its path. Shrieking, Herrel had cowered away—

—and an instant later the enraged stallion swerved aside, blood streaming from a clawed nose, while a snow cat cub crouched on the stones, squalling and hissing, shaking itself free of the boy's best clothes.

Herrel closed his eyes for an instant, remembering the Lady Eldris's expression as she had faced her brother, her words coming with slow deliberation as she disowned her son. Then she had ceremoniously ripped his red cloak—a smaller version of the one draped over the Lord's seat in the Great Hall—in two, casting it from her.

The next day, the boy, accompanied only by Pergvin and a bag of his clothing, rode out of Car Do Prawn. The Lady Eldris did not appear at the leave-taking.

At first, when Herrel had come to the Gray Towers, Hyron had seemed glad of his presence, though the Pack leader was never one to openly demonstrate liking or approval. But as the years went by, and it became increasingly apparent that Herrel's Were heritage was, after all, truly that of a half-blood, then his father's silences grew cold, his glances stony.

Many times Herrel had thought of taking his Were-bred stallion, Rowan, and riding out of the gates to seek a new life. But what kind of a life could he make for himself, alone, shunned by those of full human blood? Better even the grudging company of his Packmates than complete loneliness . . .

My courage is as flawed as my Power, he thought bitterly. I am a coward.

His self-contempt was halted by the sight of the silver-

blazoned guest banner flapping from the central, biggest Tower. Herrel risked a question of Halse: "Has Treyval said aught of his reason for coming here?" The man's need must be great; few humans would willingly come within a half day's ride of the Wereriders' sorcery-steeped Towers.

"No," Halse said curtly. "But it's to my mind that the Pack has grown soft . . . we need action."

Herrel knew that most of the other Wereriders would agree with Halse's judgment. Ever since the Adept who had created them had vanished through one of the legendary Gates leading to another world, the Pack had ridden in the forefront of any conflict. Bred and born for war, they fought with a beast's savagery—even when they battled in their human forms.

When the two Riders reached the council hall, they found the rest of the Pack assembled, nearly twoscore of them. The Wereriders sat in high-backed seats arranged on either side of a mammoth fireplace, placed so that no Rider's seat was above that of his fellows. The massive hall itself was stone-walled, hung with tapestries depicting hunting scenes (though if one studied those hangings closely, one realized that it was inevitably the *beasts* who were hunting the men). Baskets that gave forth a greenish glow hung on chains, providing a wan illumination.

On the opposite side of the room from the cavernous fireplace was a star, five-pointed with curling runes in its center. Its deeply graven lines were a dull brownish-red, as though those grooves had been traced in long-dried blood.

In the center of the hall, facing the Riders, were two seated figures. One, from his guesting tabard and dagger-of-ceremony, was plainly Treyval, but the other figure went shrouded in a gray cloak and hood, so that it was impossible to make out any features.

Herrel and Halse hurried past the Silvermantle Lord and his unknown companion to take their seats. "The Pack is

assembled," Hyron said formally. "You may state your proposition, Lord Treyval."

The taller of the two seated figures rose, holding the argent cloak of his Clan over his arm. Treyval was dark-bearded, well into middle years, with heavy shoulders and too much girth; but the Overlord still bore himself like a fighting man.

He gave the assembled Pack the abbreviated bow used by a noble facing those equal in rank. "My lords, I come here on a matter of gravest urgency to my Clan. Penmyre of Goldmantle has annexed the village of Farmarch, which lies on the western border of my lands. He has done so freely, with the consent of the village council and the folk of Farmarch, and Goldmantle men-at-arms now patrol there to prevent my forces from taking back what is rightfully mine." The Clan Lord's voice was calm enough, but Herrel did not miss the steady tightening of his fingers upon the silver mantle he held.

"And what do you wish of us?" Hyron asked.

"That you retake the village, defeat Goldmantle's forces, and teach those Farmarch traitors that Treyval is not one to overlook insult. For this I will pay in gold, or you may have your pick of our harvest supplies for your next winter's keeping."

"Do you wish the Farmarch council captured and brought to you?"

"That is not necessary, as long as they pay with their lives. Let a few villagers live so they may spread the tale and prevent such insurrection from happening again."

"I see," Hyron said. "Very well then, we must confer. Withdraw to the guesting chambers and we will inform you of our decision."

The Silvermantle Lord bowed, then headed for the entrance, accompanied by that cloaked other. Something about the way that shrouded body moved made Herrel's eyes widen. *A woman? Why would Treyval bring a woman here? Is she his leman? Or his daughter?*

As the two passed the end of the row where Herrel sat, the woman turned her head slightly, and her eyes met the young Rider's. A physical shock raced through him at the force of that dark gaze. He could see nothing of her face, but, somehow, he knew she possessed beauty beyond any that he had seen before. He watched her walk out the door, discerning within the gray folds of cloak a graceful form that was unmistakably female—and the awareness of her sex was as a new-laid fire within him.

The Riders had little to do with women. Occasionally one would leave the Were holding, driven by the demands of his flesh to lurk outside a village or keep, casting a love-spell that would summon some willing partner to share his bed-furs. Such liaisons were short-lived and, until Hyron's encounter with the Lady Eldris, fruitless.

Even Herrel had left once on such an errand, but here, as in so many other things, his Power proved flawed. His love-spell had faltered, lacking in strength and conviction. This failure, though he did not realize it, was chiefly due to his innate distaste for the idea of so using another for his own gratification.

Instead he had Changed, roaming the hills in his snow cat form, letting the animal portion of him have the greater sway, and there he had found a female and mated.

"Are you going to grow roots? Become half tree as well as half Were—and *all* simpleton?" A hard shove accompanied the harsh query, and, startled from his reverie, Herrel turned to find the other Riders staring at him, nudging each other, grinning at Halse's wit. "Wake up, Wrong-handed. Didn't you hear Hyron's summons? We're to discuss Treyval's offer while we sup."

Herrel hastened toward the dining hall. There, amid the good smells of roasting meat and fresh-baked bread, he chewed and swallowed mechanically, absently heeding the discussion that rose and fell around him. He could not forget the woman's dark eyes, and wondered, with a shiver,

if she were a sorceress who had cast a spell over him.

"What are your thoughts on the matter, Herrel?" Hyron demanded, after all the other Riders had commented upon the Silvermantle Lord's proposal. "By Pack right, each must have a chance to speak before we vote."

Herrel swallowed hastily, his thoughts racing. Many of the Riders had supported the idea of taking service with Treyval against Farmarch, but not all. He hesitated, half tempted to agree just to avoid the ridicule he would undoubtedly receive from Halse (who was pushing for Pack acceptance of Treyval's proposition), but a sudden sharp memory of the little market town outside the Redmantle Overlord's keep decided him. He had lived among people like those villagers for too many years. *If Halse names me "soft" again, then so be it.*

"It seems to me," he said, not raising his voice, "that the Pack has too much honor to undertake a commission that would only result in our disgrace. We are fighters, are we not? Armed warriors are our proper antagonists, not helpless old people and children—nor yet farmers and tradespeople who have never held a weapon, never marched to battle. If we accept Treyval's offer, it will become a blot upon our reputations that could never be erased. All of Arvon will say—and rightfully so—that the Wereriders are no longer soldiers but have sunk to the level of common cutthroats."

As he finished, Herrel heard approving murmurs from several of the Riders. "The lad speaks well," Harl, who wore an eagle helm when he went into battle as a man, and an eagle body when he fought as a beast, said, rising to address the others. "His words echo my thoughts, better than I could have expressed them. I know how *I* shall vote."

Herrel's eyes widened as the murmurs of support grew into near-shouts, so loud that Hyron must needs pound his tankard on the board for silence. "Let us show hands on

the question," he announced. "Halse, to you the count of 'ayes.' Herrel, the 'nays.' First, the ayes."

Hands went up, but not nearly as many as Herrel had expected. Then Hyron called for the nay vote, and the young Rider was busy counting.

"That settles it, then," Hyron said. "Thirty-one opposed, seven in favor. I will tell Treyval of our refusal in the morn."

Despite the softness of his bed-furs, sleep eluded Herrel that night. He lay staring into the darkness, familiar questions scuttling across his mind, questions that had no answers.

Why am I here? How is it that I came to be? The Pack was created to be the perfect weapon—a fighting force to defend the Adept who once held this stronghold. He brought Hyron and the others into being by his sorcerous melding of loyal armsmen with wild creatures of this land . . . that is why we are tied to Arvon, attuned to it . . . but, why me? The only spawn of a race never meant to breed true, I am naught but a flawed weapon, as much as any broken sword or warped bow . . . full possessing neither Power nor courage . . .

The thought of the woman's dark eyes touched his mind again, and he turned over, thumping savagely at the feather-stuffed bolster. *She is here, in this building. The guesting quarters are not far away . . . does she lie awake, too? His mouth twisted. Of course not, Wronghanded, she sleeps, and knows nothing of your wakefulness. She sleeps—*

"No," whispered a voice from the doorway of his chamber. "I am not asleep."

Herrel sat upright with a jerk that made him dizzy. "Lady?" he whispered, reaching out a hand to the Wereglobe hanging on the wall by his bunk. Just in time, he remembered his nakedness, and, fumbling, drew on his breeches. *Then* he activated the light.

She stepped into the room and drew the door closed behind her, soundlessly. She was wearing naught but a silken nightrobe, and her hair, palest platinum in the Werelight, tumbled unbound down her back. "Lady?" he whispered again, hardly able to believe she was here. He surreptitiously moved one bare foot off the fur rug, and the icy touch of the stone floor reassured him that he was, indeed, awake.

"I would apologize for waking you," her voice was sweet and clear, with an undertone of breathless laughter, "except that I know that you were not asleep. I am Gwenfar, Treyval's niece."

"I am Herrel," he said. "What can I do for you, Lady Gwenfar? Is aught wrong?"

"Nothing, save that I am cold," she said with a sudden shiver. He saw the tiny points of her breasts beneath the thin silk. "And I hoped here might be a place where I would find warmth, and welcome."

Stunned, Herrel sat unmoving as she approached him, placing her small hands on his bare shoulders. *She can't mean what she seems to mean!* he thought wildly. *She—* but his thoughts broke and scattered like chaff before an autumn wind as she leaned down to place her mouth full on his. Her hair fell around them like a curtain, shutting off the world.

Hesitantly, still unable to believe she was here, Herrel responded to her kiss, reaching up to draw her down on the bed beside him. His head spun with the silken feel of her body, the scent of her hair.

Finally he pulled away a little, his breath coming in ragged gasps. She smiled, running her hands across his chest. "Sweet," she said. "You are very sweet, Herrel. And so young."

Young? he thought dazedly, daring to lay hand on her hair, gather it up into a fistful of fragrance, and bring it to

his lips, *I am young? But she is young, as young as I . . . a maiden, surely?*

But her caresses were too skilled to be virginal, he realized, with a sudden, cold honesty. He leaned forward, looking intently into her eyes, and knew suddenly that this woman, despite the air of innocence and youth her face and slender body gave her, was considerably older than he.

And so? he thought, reaching to pull her close again, kiss her eager mouth, *what if it is true? She is therefore truly a woman, and has a right to take her pleasures where she wishes . . .*

But even as he bent her back until they were both lying on the bed, he felt disquiet growing within him.

She moved beneath him, one leg hooking over his, her arms strong across his back, nails digging in. She was kissing his shoulder now, and he felt her teeth nip his flesh, at first gently, then hard enough to sweeten his pleasure with pain. Her thigh was bare beneath his hand, and urgency mounted within him, but at the same moment, his unease grew. Growing, even though he tried to stifle it. It was as though his body were building up a charge of energy, of strength—of *youth*.

And that energy, that youth, will be transferred from me to Gwenfar, if I take her, he realized suddenly, fear washing over him.

“No!” he gasped, trying to disentangle himself from limbs that seemed now like silken ropes. “No!”

With a wrench he pulled away, stumbled back across the cold floor, his breath coming in great, panicky gulps.

“Herrel?” She reached after him, her expression so guileless that he wondered if he were mad to think such things about her. “What is it? Is it that you have never lain with a woman? I will guide you. All will be well.”

“No,” he said, his voice still shaky, but gaining conviction with every word. “I will not do this. You would take

something from me, something beyond my innocence. Is that how you stay so young, Lady?" His words hung in the air, as though they had been uttered under truthspell.

"I do not understand you," she said indignantly. "Come back here, and I will show you such delights—"

"*Dark* delights, perhaps?" Herrel spat, rage beginning to replace the desire and fear he had felt. "Just as you deal in Dark sorcery, from the Left-Hand Path?"

"What right have you to insult me?" She was angry now, too, her voice like honey poured over honed steel. "If you do not want me, say so, and I will leave. But point no ward-fingers at me! I am no Dark One!"

"You should become a mime in a traveling show, Lady," he snarled, "you play your part to such perfection. You are a sorceress at the very least—for aught I know you are one of the Adepts! Your Power is of the Dark, there is no mistaking it. Get you gone from my sight, and away from the Gray Towers!"

"What is it, little boy?" She made no effort now to disguise her fury—it stung him like a lash. "Are you simply a coward? Or do you confine your lusts to your Packmates?"

Enraged, Herrel did the only thing he could think of that would silence her—he Changed.

Were, his snow cat eyes could *see* the Darkness coiling around her like a smoky halo. He squalled, one paw going out, deliberately extending his claws, baring fangs that could rip flesh, crush bone.

Gwenfar gasped, scrambling off the bed as the snow cat began padding toward her. With a final silken flicker of her night robe, she was gone, out the door, her bare feet running on the time-worn stones.

A moment later, Herrel stood once more a man, her words echoing in his ears. *Coward . . . coward . . . coward . . .*

After much thought, Herrel did not report his encounter with the sorceress to Hyron. After all, nothing had really happened, he reminded himself. And he knew any confession he made to Hyron would likely reach Halse's ears—and he well knew the mockery that would bring down upon him. Halse would be quick to guess that Herrel had probably been “chosen” by Gwenfar because he, of all the Riders, had never known a woman—that his love spell had failed, as so many other things did for him. “Coward” would be the least of the jibes.

Seething, he prowled the corridors for the remainder of the night in his Were form, but there were no stirrings from the guest chambers.

The next morning, Lord Treyval and his niece rode out of the Gray Towers. The assembled Weres stood gathered as an honor-guard at their leave-taking, as Hyron assisted the Lady Gwenfar to mount. She wore her hood thrown back in the early spring breeze, and strands of her pale, silvery hair wisped around her face. She looked so young, so pure—Herrel found himself pressing the bruised circle of toothmarks marking his shoulder to reassure himself that he had not dreamed the events of the night before.

He could hear his fellow Riders murmuring among themselves, catching a word or two that left no doubt in his mind as to the subject of their conversation. Halse chuckled lewdly, only to be silenced abruptly by Hyron's glare.

Would that she had picked the bear last night, Herrel found himself thinking coldly. *Mayhap she would have done me a service, ridding me of Halse.* But then the woman's eyes, black and deep as an underground river, caught and held his. *No,* Herrel amended, *her embrace is something that I could wish on no one, no matter how much an unfriend he has been.* He forced his own gaze to remain steady, but couldn't repress the chill tracing down his spine like a long-dead finger.

Finally, just when Herrel thought he must break that

stare or run mad, the sorceress's mount sidled nervously across the courtyard, severing their eye-lock.

The young Rider watched her back as she rode forth from the Gray Towers, thinking that today he must seek out his private stream and bathe—even its snow-melted chill would be preferable to the memory of her hands on his flesh.

That night, tired as he was from his previous night's sentry-go before the guest chambers, Herrel stayed awake in his chamber, working with a handful of herbs he had purloined from the kitchen. He took pinches of angelica, basil, dill, rosemary, tarragon, and trefoil, crushing them together until they made a pungent powder.

When they were well mixed, he shook them into a small square of white silk, then added a tiny sliver of the blessed blue metal called *quan-iron*. Folding the cloth edges up, he tied them together with red thread, then braided and knotted the thread together until the herbal amulet hung from a red cord long enough to loop over his neck and hang beneath the collar of his jerkin.

Then he took the amulet, holding it in his hand, and breathed upon it. "Trefoil, angelica, rosemary, dill, hinder Dark sorcery—heed my will," he chanted, feeling half foolish. Herbal magic had little to do with the sorcery of the Weres—he was relying instead on human lore he dimly remembered from his childhood. Three times he repeated his clumsily rhymed charm, then concealed the amulet next to his skin.

He slept the dreamless sleep of exhausted youth.

Three days later, a carrier-hawk flapped to a perch on the battlements of the north Tower, a message cylinder strapped to its leg. Hyron broke the seal and scanned the parchment quickly, then looked up at the assembled riders. "Penmyre of Goldmantle asks us to accept employment as border guards for his lands."

The assembled Pack considered the offer, deciding to accept it. Within two days they rode for Goldmantle lands. Their route took them near Farmarch, and Herrel, as he sat astride Rowan, could not help remembering Lady Gwenfar, her silken body. He shifted uneasily in his saddle, wondering just what would have happened to him had he become her lover.

He shook his head, shivering despite the warm afternoon sun. Around the troupe of Riders, the plowed fields surrounding Farmarch smelled rich and earthy with their newly turned furrows. Ahead of the Pack rose the squat, two- and three-story buildings of the town. Herrel could see brightly colored skirts and jerkins against the cobbled streets and buildings, and realized it must be market day.

He smiled, thinking of Car Do Prawn, of the Sowing Festival he had attended once with Pergvin, of—

Herrel gasped, hand going to his throat, feeling a sudden heat from the amulet that lay there. It was almost as though he could *see* something reaching down toward him and the Pack . . . something Dark, malevolent. He summoned breath to cry out, but there was no time—no time!

The other Wereriders had no such warning of danger. One moment they were astride their mounts, weapons in sheaths, the next the entire Pack swayed in their saddles, and, one by one, began to fall.

Herrel barely felt the shock of hitting the hard-packed earth of the road, so intense was the pain sweeping his body. He shrieked, but the sound that emerged was more akin to the battle snarl of a snow cat. He writhed on the ground, convulsing, Darkness sweeping over him in waves of agony, barely hearing the snarls, screeches, neighs, and growls erupting from the throats of his Packmates.

Then the pain was gone, with a suddenness that left him too limp to do aught but lie on the road for long moments. But something within his body would not let him do that . . . instead he was up and padding (padding? Why

was he four-footed? He had willed no Change . . .) toward Farmarch.

Herrel's mind struggled to regain control of his Were shape, but the snow cat mentality held sway—he was trapped, helpless.

And, worse, he was conscious of a new, mounting savagery filling him, drowning the feeble spark that was—had been—Herrel. Bloodlust filled the snow cat mind, a cruel passion for killing that was far from the clean, innocent nature of the creature. The Darkness now filling the snow cat's mind was malignant, unclean.

Herrel, with a fading spark of self-awareness, had only a moment to notice that the Pack jostled around him as they entered Farmarch. A boar, two bears, three wolves (red, gray, and black), a wild stallion (that moments ago had been Hyron), a monstrous eagle, a mountain elk, another, spotted cat, a desert lion—each of the thirty-seven Riders had assumed his Were alter-ego. All the animals were far larger than their wild kindred, their eyes gleaming red as they strode purposefully along the cobbled village streets.

The young Rider glimpsed the terrified faces of the villagers as the Pack advanced on them. He made a last, huge effort to wrest control away from that Dark mind that was now fully controlling his snow cat body . . . but its Power was too strong.

The spark that had been Herrel gasped, then went out.

As if he were an observer outside his own body, Herrel watched the snow cat advance on an old woman who screeched at him, trying to fend him off with a garden rake. With one sweep of his massive paw, the tool went flying. The cat moved forward, then crouched, muscled hindquarters twitching in anticipation of the leap . . .

But there was something wrong . . .

The snow cat pawed distractedly at its throat with a forepaw, its rough pink tongue hanging out of its open mouth as it panted shallowly. The silver-gray flanks heaved

as the cat redoubled its effort to breathe, prey forgotten.

With a dizzying rush, Herrel was back in the snow cat body, just in time to share the waves of red-tinged blackness that were sweeping over its eyes. *Air! There's no air! I can't breathe!* He gasped spasmodically, realizing that something around his neck was strangling him, was still tightening—

Air! Can't . . . breathe . . .

With a final, convulsive gasp, the blackness became complete, sending Herrel sliding down into it.

He awoke, he never knew how much later, still in his Were form, but fully himself again. The amulet around his throat was no longer chokingly tight, but instead gave off waves of comforting strength and warmth. He lay quiet for a moment, eyes closed, hearing the shrieks of the townspeople and the battle cries of the Weres filling Farmarch. The hot smells of blood and death filled his nostrils.

Bracing himself, Herrel opened his eyes. The old woman lay sprawled beside him, her body ripped from neck to belly. His fur was clotted with splashed blood. Jumbled entrails, sticky-dark, steamed in the breeze. The huge gray wolf who was his Packmate, Hewlor, raised a stained muzzle from the corpse to glare at him from crimson, bestial eyes.

Herrel crawled backward on his belly, trying to make Hewlor see that the snow cat represented no rival for his meat. The wolf snarled, gobbets of flesh hanging from his jaws, but did not leap.

When he had put several lengths between them, the young Rider dared to bound away. He reached the inn, and leaped up onto the driver's seat of a farm wagon standing in front of it, a dead ox collapsed in its yoke. The extra height allowed him to see most of the street.

The carnage that met his eyes made the snow cat whimper sickly; if Herrel had been in his human form he knew he would have vomited. Torn, bloody bodies of

Penmyre's men-at-arms and villagers sprawled at intervals along the street, some still twitching in death-agony. Herrel saw the lion dragging a wailing infant from the limp arms of its dead mother. Even as he watched, it, too, was killed.

I'm too late, he thought wretchedly, feeling as though his only escape from the scene before him lay in letting himself sink into forgetfulness, into madness. *It's my fault . . . Gwenfar did this, I know it, I can almost smell her brand of Darkness . . . if I had told Hyron about her, this might not have happened . . .*

Consumed by guilt, he nearly bounded away, tempted to let the snow cat nature take over, become naught but an animal for the rest of his days, but then he saw a small knot of survivors huddled across the town square. A few of them had had time to grab weapons.

The outermost circle of five humans, men and women both, were armed with swords or bows. One woman brandished a pitchfork. Crowded into the center of the group milled a knot of old people and children, many with babies in their arms. The villagers were backing slowly toward the biggest of the Farmarch buildings, stone, with massive double doors, doors that were shut.

Advancing on them were Halse, the red bear; Hyron, the stallion, his forefeet spattered with crimson nearly to the knee; and Hessel, the boar, his tusks dripping with blood not his own. Harl, the eagle, circled above them, shrieking his battle cry. The black wolf, Helder, lay sprawled on the cobbles, throat pierced by an arrow.

If those doors are locked, they'll all be pulled down, Herrel thought. *I have to open them!* His snow cat muscles bunched, then strained to the utmost as he flung himself upward, onto the roof of the inn. His front claws scabbled frantically at the slate shingles, then he was able to pull himself up and over the rain gutter.

Snow cats are also known as mountain cats, with good reason. Herrel bounded from roof to roof as quickly as he

would have traveled the rocky heights of the Arvon border.

When he reached the building that was the survivors' destination, he leaped down where the roof was lowest, the shock of the drop nearly knocking his breath out. He could not help the townspeople in his Were form, that was obvious. He'd only earn himself an arrow to match the one that had killed Helder. Herrel Changed.

Human, he leaped for the doors, finding to his relief that they were not locked. He flung them open, then took one quick glance inside to assure himself that none of the Pack had flanked the villagers and were waiting, but the place was empty. High, narrow windows lined the walls. "In here!" he shouted, turning back to the villagers, using the common tongue of Arvon. "*Hurry!*"

The townspeople glanced back to see him gesturing, then, snatching up the smaller children, the unarmed ones raced toward him, leaving their outer circle to spread out, guarding their retreat. They piled into each other, pushing and shoving to get through. Once they were all in, Herrel slammed and barred the doors.

When he turned back to face them, the villagers were staring at him in amazement—naked, bloody, matted with dirt from the road, his hands bare of any blade. "Who are you?" one old man asked, stepping forward.

"Never mind that now," Herrel said. "Close the shutters behind me, fast! They'll be in the windows! Somebody stand by the door to let the others in!"

Turning, he raced over to the nearest window and Changed. Behind him he could hear shrieks of horror. Were again, it was but a moment's work to jump and scabble his way out the high, narrow window. He landed in an alley, Changed again, then ran around the side of the building, toward the beleaguered rear guard.

Two more of the Pack had joined Hyron and the others; the gray wolf, Hewlor, and the gigantic elk stag, Hathor. His antlers gleamed scarlet, as though some madman had

wrapped them with festival ribbons. The archer, Herrel saw, had been at work again—Hanon, the black bear, now lay sprawled beside the wolf.

But the defenders had taken a loss, too. One of them, a sword-wielding woman, had been pulled down and dragged some distance away. The Pack, except for the stallion and the stag, was distracted for the moment while they ripped at the body.

“Get inside, all of you!” Herrel snapped, grabbing at the battered sword held clumsily in the hands of a plowman. “You, give me that knife!” Such was the authority in his tone that the two men he addressed obeyed. “Now go!” They scuttled away, leaving two of their number to stand with the young Rider.

“You two, go also,” he ordered. “Barricade the doors behind you.”

“We can’t leave you!” The wiry woman on his right protested, holding her pitchfork at the ready. “As soon as they’re finished”—she gulped, then steadied her voice—“with Annalise, they’ll attack again.”

“I can hold them off,” Herrel said, testing the swing of the old sword. “Is anyone in Farmarch of Wise stock? Any Summoners here?”

“Granter Admon,” she replied. “If the ones we were guarding are safe.”

“They’re safe,” Herrel told her. “Tell Admon to call up such a Summoning as he’s never done in his life. Only one of the Voices could overmatch the ensorcelment the Pack is under.”

“How do you know?” the bowman on his left challenged. “How could you know what spell is at work here?”

“Because I was under it, too,” Herrel said, conscious of a grim humor at their reaction when they really *looked* at him. “I’m one of them. So get you back, and leave me to face them. You’ll not be abandoning one of your own kind.”

He caught the undisguised glance of hatred the archer turned on him, then the man went, dragging the pitchfork-woman with him, over her protests.

Herrel grasped the old sword firmly, his thoughts racing. Behind him he could hear the *thunk* as the villagers slid the oaken bar into place across the door. The sounds of dragging chairs and tables followed. What should he do now?

If I could just break the ensorcelment for a moment, some of them might recover their minds, as I did, he thought. For the first time he remembered the amulet that had saved him. Jerking frantically at its cord, he managed to drag it over his head. It was warm in his hand.

But could its protection extend to the other members of the Pack? How could its Power be strengthened?

Herrel thought hard, while part of his mind noticed that the boar, the bear, and the wolf had finished their grim repast and were turning back toward him. Hyron snorted, pawing the ground with a sharp hoof, his eyes gleaming maniacally, no recognition in their depths.

Strengthen the spell, Herrel thought frantically. *No Power comes without price.* That was one of the foremost redes of sorcery for both the Right- and the Left-Hand Path. *No Power without price . . . but I have nothing. Only these weapons, and the amulet—*

—and himself. His body, his blood. Blood was a means of strengthening a spell.

Not my hands, I need them to hold my weapons . . . not my legs, I have to be able to move fast . . . what then? . . . I have it . . .

Bracing himself, Herrel drew the blade of the dagger across his belly. The taut flesh parted almost without pain, then blood welled into the opening and began dripping. He looked back to find the Pack advancing on him. The urge to Change, to bound away, free, was nearly overwhelming.

Instead, he pressed the amulet against his wound, letting

warmth trickle over his fingers, steeling himself, concentrating all of his Will, every vestige of his Power. *But I am the Wronghanded, the coward, the failure*—some treacherous part of him protested. *Against the whole Pack I can never—*

“Stop!” he shouted, more to himself than to the Wereriders. His voice boomed so loud it startled him in the silence. *Concentrate! You can do this, you must believe to make it so!*

“Brothers we are!” he called, seeing every muzzle pointing in his direction. “Brothers in blood, bloodkin! Look upon me, and fight the Darkness that is making of you worse than beasts! By the Light, by the Cold Steel, by the Rowan, by the Candles of the Weres! Stand as *men* once more!”

He flung his arm aloft, the crimson-dyed amulet dangling from his fingers. “I conjure you, by the blood we share, by the blood I have shed, stand as *men* once more!”

A green mist swirled between them, doubly bright in the westerling rays of sunset. When it cleared, the Pack stood two-legged. Each of them swayed, looking dazedly around. Herrel heard mutters of disbelief, then groans of unwilling comprehension as they took in the carnage. Harl collapsed onto hands and knees and was thoroughly sick.

Herrel himself was feeling light-headed from the strain of holding his Will focused at the amulet. *Can I stop now? Is the spell gone?* He blinked, sweat stinging his eyes, thinking that soon he would have to halt, or he would collapse right here onto the cobbles—

You may cease your efforts, young Rider, echoed a voice inside his head. *We have removed the ensorcelment.*

Startled, Herrel swung around to see two men step out of the now-open doorway behind him. Though they wore different jerkins and breeches, their faces seemed to have been cast in one mold. One wore his hair cropped short, and it was a strange mixture of black, gray, and brown

—like unto the pelt of some exotic animal. The other's hair was black and sleek, clipped into a short tail at the nape of his neck.

"Who—" Herrel began, then realized the identity of the strangers. He had never imagined that the Voices, those greatest of Adepts, might wear such an ordinary guise. "My lords." He bent knee stiffly, staggering a little as he got up. The earth seemed none too steady.

"Careful, young Herrel," the brindled one on his left said, putting out a hand to catch his arm. "Now is not the time for ceremony. I am Neevor, and this is my brother-in-spirit, Ibycus. Admon Summoned us. It seems Farmarch owes you a debt."

Herrel shook his head. "Not so, my lord. I am to blame for this, for keeping silent when I should have spoken. If I had, the trick to lure us to Farmarch might have been uncovered, and this . . . slaughter . . . prevented." His voice broke a little on the last words. The enormity of what had been done this day washed over him, and for a moment he could not speak at all.

"We know," Ibycus said, coming over to put his hand beneath Herrel's other arm. "We sought the Lady Gwenfar first, but she is gone from Arvon. There has been a troubling in the fabric of this world, and it seems likely she has departed through some Gate. We shall seek Treyval and summon him to an accounting."

"But this was mostly Gwenfar's doing," Herrel whispered bitterly. "She deserves death for what she did. If she were still here, I would hunt her down—"

"But she is not here," Neevor reminded him. "Come, we must see to your wound." Gently, he and his brother laced their fingers together, then laid them over the slash. Herrel felt a sudden warmth and strength filling him, and when they drew their hands away, there was naught but a thin, seemingly long-healed scar.

Later, clad in a pair of hastily borrowed breeches, a

cloak pulled round his bare shoulders, Herrel, with the other Riders, gathered in the Town Hall to hear the judgment of the Voices.

The townspeople were not there, though the Riders could hear them outside, in the darkness, hunting by torch and lantern light for their dead. The soft, keening wails of the women made Herrel want to stop his ears with his fingers, but he forced himself to listen. At least he did not have the memories the others did. Even Halse sat still, his shoulders slumped, staring down at his hands.

“Wereriders,” Neevor said. “Since your creation, you have been a thorn in the flesh of Arvon. Your willingness to fight under different banners for hire has enabled those who would not otherwise risk themselves in honest combat to war upon their neighbors. We live in a Shadowed land, and the Dark has many faces. Now that you have been touched by it, you may well fall under its Power more easily next time. This we cannot allow.”

When his brother paused, Ibycus continued, as though they were both halves of the same being. “The penalty for what you have done today, by rights, is death. But, knowing that you did not consciously slaughter, but were merely a tool in the hands of another, we extend you mercy . . . partly for the sake of the young Rider, Herrel, without whom there would have been even more killing.”

Halse roused from his stupor enough to cast Herrel a glance of undisguised hatred.

“We therefore enjoin you,” said Neevor, “to leave Arvon. Now. Tonight. We exile you, that you may learn, during the time of separation, that those who are willing tools for death have no place here.”

Hyron raised his head. “How long, my lords? We are blood-tied to Arvon . . . exile for us may be even crueler than clean death.”

“For answer, you must follow us,” Ibycus said. Silently, the Wereriders filed after the Adepts, out into the night.

"Look up," Neevor instructed them.

Herrel stared, seeing the familiar star-patterns of the Plow, the Hunter, the Lady . . . the Bull. Suddenly they shifted, moved before his eyes, making him sway dizzily. Then they steadied, realigning themselves, into different shapes. Herrel blinked, but even with his eyes closed, those sparkling pinpoints seemed etched in his mind . . . he knew he would never forget them.

When he opened his eyes again, the stars were back in their proper positions.

"You may return to Arvon," Neevor said solemnly, "when the stars take on the patterns we have just shown you."

So long! How can we live for that long away from here? Herrel wondered, hearing the dismayed mutterings around him. "My lords," Hyron said. "May we not even return to the Gray Towers to gather supplies . . . our belongings?"

"You have heard our judgment," Ibycus told him.

"But you know that all that has happened here tonight is the witch's fault. *She* should be the one to suffer. We offered her guest-greeting, and she betrayed us. To live, for all those years, away . . . with *this* on our consciences," the Wereleader half protested. "I—we—cannot bear it . . ."

"We grant you one boon," Neevor said. "Your memories of the events of this day, and of Arvon, shall be dulled when you ride out of this land, to help you endure your punishment. Now get you to your mounts, and ride. We shall guide you."

Herrel turned away from the Voices with the others, only to have Ibycus touch his arm. "Wait, Herrel."

"Yes, my lords?"

"Since your hands, alone of your fellows, are unstained with innocent blood, you may remain in Arvon, if such is your choice."

Herrel stood for a long moment, thinking of this land that he loved, of his secret glade by the brook, of the

mountains he had roamed four-footed . . . of Arvon, his home—the only real home he could claim.

Finally he sighed, shaking his head. “The fault for today is still partly mine,” he said. “That I did not take part in the killing does not change that. And, though they often remind me that I am naught but half-blood, still they are the only kin I have. I will ride with them, my lords.”

“You have courage, young Rider,” Neevor said. “It is your decision.”

“Courage?” Herrel echoed bitterly, following after the knot of Riders, once more alone. “Me?”

“You,” Neevor said firmly, falling into step on his right. “You weigh yourself too lightly, Herrel. You are more than you know. Someday, you will learn the truth of what I say . . . just as you will learn to value yourself.”

“Perhaps,” Herrel said hesitantly, “I was not a coward today, but . . .” He shrugged. “It has gained me nothing in the sight of the Pack. I am still alone. I will always be alone.”

“Always is a long time,” Ibycus said, sounding faintly amused. “Especially when one is young. Are you then a Voice, to foretell the future?”

“No, my lords,” Herrel said, discomfited. “I did not mean to contradict you. But have you seen my future? Do you know if I—”

“Have done, Herrel,” Neevor said. “You know we cannot reveal what we may have seen. Simply speaking aloud the course of a life-path may cause it to change, and such direct meddling is forbidden, even to us.”

Herrel nodded, accepting it, feeling his momentary eagerness drain away, the old loneliness rise to replace it.

Ibycus cleared his throat. “I will tell you, though, Herrel, that I foresee for you a time when there will be one you can turn to, trust, one who will company with you, even unto a place lying beyond the bounds of death.” He paused for a moment. “But it will not be soon.”

They reached the horses, and Herrel busied himself dressing, then, after checking the girth, swung onto Rowan's back. Hyron gave the signal, and the Pack turned to follow Neevor, who had mounted himself bareback upon a shaggy mountain pony that had appeared at his whistle. Ibycus, astride on another such beast, brought up the rear.

Herrel touched Rowan with his heel, and the stallion moved out willingly, rested after his long wait. "Ibycus," Herrel said suddenly, urgently, his voice pitched low in the darkness. "I would ask one boon of you, if I may."

"Ask," the Voice said.

"When you draw the veil over our memories, can you . . . leave the one of your foretelling? It would help me during the times when . . ." He hesitated. "It would help," he repeated.

"Very well," Ibycus said.

The long column of silent horsemen rode steadily onward, heading east, toward the mountains and whatever future lay beyond their rugged peaks.

* * *

Afterword

"Bloodspell" was a story I wrote to satisfy my own curiosity. Andre first introduced the Wereriders in Year of the Unicorn, which told the story of how Herrel and his fellow Riders were finally allowed to return to Arvon . . . after spending thousands of years exiled to the Waste near High Hallack.

Nearly two decades after first reading Year, I had the honor of meeting Andre when she graciously asked me to

collaborate with her in the Witch World (we co-wrote one book, Gryphon's Eyrie [Tor], and are currently working on another, Songsmith [also Tor]). During a break in one of our recent plotting sessions, I confessed to Andre that, next to Kerovan (our hero in Gryphon's Eyrie), Herrel had always been my favorite Witch World hero. Then I asked her why the Wereriders had been exiled in the first place. "I don't know," she replied. "I just knew that they had been, when I began writing the story."

"They must have done something pretty terrible, to merit such a severe punishment," I said. "Yes, I suppose so," Andre replied, then she added, with a twinkle, "If you really want to know, why don't you write the story of what happened for the new anthology? Then we'd both know!"

My mind was off and running. When Andre had first mentioned my doing a story for this volume, I was delighted at the chance to return to my favorite fantasy universe, and determined to write a humorous piece—but from its inception, "Bloodspell" was obviously not going to be in that vein (sorry 'bout that).

Massacres of innocents have occurred throughout history; My Lai was highly publicized, but hardly unique. My theme, as the storyline developed, became one of responsibility in the aftermath of tragedy.

Gwenfar still has to receive her just due. Andre and I have discussed writing a sequel to The Jargoan Pard someday. Maybe . . . just maybe . . .

—A. C. CRISPIN