

RITE OF FAILURE

by

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The gates of Arvon had locked against them. Under unfamiliar stars, the Packbrothers bayed their exile as the shaman led Aurek into the ring of standing stones. Some were cracked, others broken or toppled. Glassy slag on one slab twice Aurek's height showed him the Wereriders: weathered men in travel-stained furs and leathers. Their eyes were feral, and their shadows, beneath the greenish candles of the Weres, were strange.

A rough gray slab lay half-buried in the circle. At the shaman's command, Aurek laid aside mail, sword, and leather jerkin, and stretched out upon the frigid granite. The shaman bent over him and held his hands out over Aurek's face. He hissed and tensed, sure that the hands would claw at his throat, until he saw himself reflected in the shaman's eyes: lean and blond, with amber eyes that darted this way and that. His lips trembled, and he set them in a thin line that he hoped would make him look older.

He might be too young for the rite that would give the Wereriders a second shaman. In that case, he would not live to see dawn. Huran's fingertips touched his brow, then straightened Aurek's shoulders, arms, and legs on what might be his bier. The risk was worth it, he told himself, and drew long, deliberately steady breaths. Though he only

showed it in the care with which he moved and his great weary eyes, Huran was so old. He had spent himself to ensure the Riders' safe passage out the gates of Arvon, the ancient home that cast them out.

"It seems we have a choice," came a sardonic mutter from the dark—*Halse*, thought Aurek—"two priests, if the youngling survives, or none."

Huran crouched and whirled, ready to defend the student and foster son now lying quiet on the slab.

"Quiet, brother," ordered Hyron, the leader. He padded forward, a censer of acrid incense swinging from the chain he held. The Pack closed in. Huran bent forward, and Aurek's senses were engulfed and whirled into the Other World.

The mists of that place rose about him. He was alone there. He rose from the stone slab, and looked about. *You will wait*, Huran had warned him. *You will Change and take whatever venture comes to you. And if you live till dawn, you will be as I am.* The old man's eyes had been haunted as he spoke. For an instant, he had looked every century of his real age. But weighed against the welfare of the Pack, what were Aurek's fears—or Huran's for his cub?

Seconds later, the Change struck him. Aurek dropped to all fours, squalling at the unaccustomed pain of it, which set him writhing on his belly until the fire died. He raised himself, growling a little, and began to lick smooth the thick tawny fur, stippled with amber, of his Were self. Never before had he dared the Change from man to golden pard in the Other World; and he had never ventured there without Huran to ward him.

The pard's tufted ears twitched at hoots and chitterings, and his nose caught the scents of water and blood. Pale belly brushing the withered grass, he stole toward the water, crouched on its bank, and lapped at it, blurring the reflection of the great cat, deep-ruffed and deeper-chested, that he had become.

That blurred reflection saved his life. Even as he saw the black-furred shadow launch itself from a tree branch, Au-

rek hurled himself to one side so that his attacker sank fangs only into the ruff guarding his throat. His muzzle twisted in a snarl of fear and fury, as he tore free, and backed up, his fur bristling on his long spine and powerful haunches.

It was a panther, thin and half-mad with hunger. He lashed his tail and yowled, and his eyes glistened like a blood moon. When the panther opened his jaws and screamed, starlight splintered against his long fangs. Hot vapor, heavy with the taste of blood, steamed from his jaws. Half again Aurek's size, the panther's notched ears and glowing eyes, one half hidden by scar tissue, showed its age and fury.

Instinct demanded that Aurek go belly-up in surrender, or back away, then flee squalling. But Aurek the man knew that if he exposed his throat or showed his back, the panther would leap on him and rend him. He whined a little in his throat. The last time he and Huran had come this way, they had been the hunters, not the prey.

Strands of saliva dripped from the panther's jaws. *Mad*, Aurek suddenly feared. The thought broke him, sent him leaping for a branch, fleeing from limb to limb with a speed lent him by terror until he spotted a stream, splashed through it as if its peaceful water could hide the stink of panicked cat. The water calmed some of his terror, akin to the warfetter the Weres laid on foes, and he padded downstream, to go to ground in a convenient trench.

"Even kittens have courage," contemptuously, the thought flicked out as his pursuer squalled challenge.

Aurek crouched in the undergrowth. His claws extended and his fur fluffed out.

"More courage than Weres." Perhaps the test was self-control. His enemy sought to anger him, to make him betray himself. Again, the cat-shriek of fury and contempt rang out.

"I am Danior! No Werecoy can withstand me!" The mental voice drew closer. Aurek's whiskers twitched, and he sensed, rather than heard, the pad of huge paws in the

shadowed leafmold. Danior: an ominous name. Occult tradition, which assigned meaning to every name, taught that Danior meant "born with teeth." Well, just a little closer . . . and he would ambush this Danior. What good would those teeth do him, when he lay stretched and broken-necked on the damp ground? A few steps forward, fool and braggart! He bunched powerful muscles and sprang onto Danior's back.

Shrieking, the panther twisted and rolled so fast that only a convulsive half somersault saved Aurek from being pinned. He opened his muzzle to its widest, biting down on his enemy's ruff, trying to snap bones. But Danior tossed his head wildly. For an instant, Aurek's grip was loosed, and Danior's jaws snapped on what was nearest—Aurek's right paw.

Aurek shrieked with the incredible fire of his agony and slashed his other paw across Danior's muzzle. They both recoiled and leaped apart. But it was Aurek, tail between his legs, who fled, limping on three paws, a bloody spoor dripping behind.

Somehow, he crawled whining into a low overhang formed by three mossy rocks near a pool and lay there while the night passed in delirium. He was not worthy to live, he knew that now. He would die with the dawn. The thought brought its own twisted peace.

The mists of the Other World rose about him, then faded to an ashen rose as dawn came . . .

And the Change from beast to man convulsed the creature stretched on the stone as the beast became a youth again. He was naked, except for the blood that streaked his limbs, especially his right arm. For a moment, Aurek lay numb to all but the thought that he had failed, yet was still alive. Then the pain of his wounds hit him and he screamed. Huran dropped to his knees beside him, a steaming beaker in his hand. Aurek gulped the hot, bitter drug. The pain retreated somewhat, though Aurek

flinched. "Peace, coward! or was Danior right?" as the shaman inspected his . . . no, the cruelly gnawed thing he raised was not a hand! It was a paw, cruelly bitten. Its claws were broken, and its once-golden fur was matted with hard, bloody spikes.

He had failed to complete the Change! This was worse punishment than death. For the rest of his wretched life, Aurek would be part man, part beast. The dawn struck his face, and he moaned and fainted.

Reddish sun filtered through the cloth of a crude shelter as Aurek woke. Memory came back to him with the dull throb of agony in his . . . his right paw, and he clenched his jaw, then turned his face to the wall. Sensitive as always to Aurek, Huran turned from the blackened pot he used for his potions. The fire did not smoke, but the potion must be a strong one. Huran's eyes were red and swollen.

"Master?" he whispered, not daring the more familiar "sire" or "father" he had been permitted ever since the shaman claimed a plump orphaned cub for his own hearth.

Huran's hand extended, hovered over Aurek's hair, then dropped onto his knee.

"Better I had died," Aurek muttered. The shaman shut his eyes. So he agreed, Aurek thought, and at that thought, something in him did die.

"Now what? Will you cast me out?"

"If it were just a matter of the body's death, you might leave here," said the shaman. "Indeed, it might be a kindness to remove you from those who remember your . . ." He fell silent and Aurek relived his anguished humiliation in the ring of standing stones. "But for your soul's sake, if we Weres have souls, I dare not. That brute . . ."

"Danior." The name rasped out of a bruised throat, and he gulped avidly at the wooden ladle Huran held for him.

"He will pursue you, and you have not the strength to stand against him. I must think what is best to do."

Forgive me. I failed you. I meant to ease your way and now I am just another burden upon you. But his voice

failed before he could speak those words. Huran laid a cool hand on Aurek's head.

"Sleep and heal," he ordered.

And Aurek did.

In two days, his bruises faded to yellowish stains. In a week, his right paw ached, stiffened, then began, slowly, to flex. It was a miracle—or Huran's doing—that it had not festered from Danior's fangs. Still, he lay on his pallet in Huran's tent until he called his reluctance to face the pack by its proper name and forced himself to rise, to dress, and to walk outside among the men he had known lifelong, but who refused now to meet his eyes. Huran would set him small tasks, appropriate, he thought, for a useless one.

Huran had told him he dared not go. But when Halse saw him coming and spat on his shadow, or Hyron, who had always greeted him respectfully, leader to future shaman, turned aside, he knew he could not stay.

He avoided the night's council around the fire where the Weres began to argue where they would start their wanderings, and returned to the shelter from which Huran was too merciful to evict him. Outside the tent, he heard voices raised, howling, hissing, or baying in favor of the Waste, this Dale or that, or even the fabled sea.

His strength had returned, as much as ever would: What was he waiting for? Aurek gathered his few possessions and stole outside. Hand and paw slow and clumsy with the buckles of saddle and bridle, he led his brindled horse to the edge of the camp where only a few Were candles gleamed.

"They have wards up." The voice was deliberately quiet, but it brought Aurek down into a fighting stance, his left hand reaching for his swordhilt, his paw raised to slash. Herrel the Halfing! Ever since Aurek had been able to remember, Herrel, quiet and resigned to a life as a Were whose spells failed and whose prowess was set at naught, had been the failure that other Weres sought to avoid. It had not seemed to bother him. His face wore always the

same expression of calm endurance that the sickle moon showed Aurek now.

"They won't hunt me," Aurek laughed bitterly. "I'm not worth it."

Herrel raised a dark brow quizzically. "I could give you time," he offered. "Oh, my powers will hold to that much. I can repair the break in the wards when you leave."

"Why?" asked Aurek. They were not swordbrothers or cupfriends, had never done more than nod at one another.

"Why for? Because we are kin," said Herrel. "You and I, when we Change, we are of the cat tribe. That makes a bond between us. And because we are both maimed, I in the Craft, you in . . ." He gestured tactfully at Aurek's paw, the claws in-drawn now that he knew he faced no attack. "But there is a difference. I have been content to accept life on what terms have been tossed at me. You, though, you have always been shown fair fortune . . . until now. I think you will be content with nothing else. Perhaps your fortune will shine more brightly away from the Pack."

Aurek bowed his head lest the shine of tears in his eyes betray him. He swung up into the saddle.

"I shall hold the wards as long as I may," said Herrel, "though I am little use against the combined strength of the Pack. But fare fast, and farewell . . . brother." He bared his right hand, and raised it to clasp Aurek's arm, and his fingers slid down the wrist to grip his paw without revulsion. He turned quickly aside and faded into the shadows with the stealth of the snow cat that was his other guise.

"Farewell, brother," Aurek whispered, then pressed knees against his horse's flanks, and headed away from the camp, bending low to seek out a trail in unfamiliar woods.

While the sickle moon shone, he made what haste he could. Then clouds blew before it. For precious moments, they gleamed too, and he rode faster. Then the moon sank.

That was when the howling began in his heart. The Pack! The Wereriders had discovered him gone and would pursue. His horse neighed and bucked. Few beasts, save those

specially bred by and for the Wereriders, could endure them, and even those must be soothed by herbs and spells, spells which, as his horse's panic showed, had been lifted. Maddened by nearness to a rider who smelled of dried blood, smoke, and shadowed Power, the creature bolted, and when Aurek tried to check-rein him, his right paw, pulling shrewdly back on the reins, snapped them, and he fell forward, clinging to his mount's neck. His paw scored the horse's neck. It screamed and headed for a closely grown stand of trees where it tried to scrape him off, but Aurek clung, crooning reassurances that the beast could not hear.

The horse bolted now, heading uphill. Abruptly, it stopped, planting its hooves and trembling, head down. Aurek dared to lift his own head.

The horse bucked, again and again. Aurek went flying. And when he struck his head, light burst and whirled in patterns even less familiar than the strange stars of the Weres' exile, and the pain was worse than the bite of Danior's fangs.

Hands were tugging Aurek through a red-tinged haze of pain. He heard voices muttering in concern, prodding him with it. He cried out and twisted, retreating to a fastness inside himself where the voices were reduced to buzzing, then silence.

Much later, faint chimes lured him out of himself. The air was full of noises. Above him swayed branches hung with blossoms like fragrant white bells, tilting back and forward with each breeze. In the Wereriders' rough camp, it had been cold—the last gasp of the Ice Dragon. But here grass and leaves flourished with the vigor and sweetness of early summer: promising rest, strength, and heart's ease. Somewhere nearby bubbled a brook. Aurek sighed, and his breath caught like that of a child who has been punished, has wept, and is now forgiven.

"Awake now? That is very well." The voice was soft and low-pitched; and it came from right over his head. He tried

to snap back to full awareness, but it was too pleasant to lie, pain forgotten for time, with his head pillowed on the speaker's lap, and warm fingers reaching down to test brow and throat-pulse for fever. The light touch sent a thrill of renewed energy and awareness through him.

"Lady?" His voice came out hoarse.

"I am Derora, daughter of Beval. No need for other titles." She bent forward so he could see sun-gilded features, arched brows, and deep, wide-set eyes above pursed lips. Her hair was not braided in the manner of the Ladies of Red or Blue Mantle, but hung free over her shoulders, restrained only by a cap sewn with fine crystal beads of amber, green, and white. One lock dangled near Aurek's face. It smelled like clover or honeysuckle. Without thinking, he put out his left hand to bring it to his lips.

Derora laughed and patted his shoulder. "Enough of that!" Steps thudded beside him, and scooped him from where he lay, hurling him onto the soft ground. He rolled over and blinked at his assailant whose silvered hair and beard made him look older than Huran until Aurek noted his ruddy, unlined face and remembered the strength in the arms that had hurled him from Derora.

"Father!" she protested. "The stranger was hurt, wandering in our forests. Surely he means no harm . . ."

"Surely he means no harm?" echoed Beval. "He brings his own harm with him! Just look at what he bears instead of a proper right hand! There is evil magic on this one, and I will not have him touch you."

"Sir?" Aurek ventured to look up from where he sprawled on his belly. He had an idea that this Beval would object to titles like mage or lord. "I am Aurek, once of the Weres, and now a clanless man."

"Man? not with that paw," accused Beval. He crouched down, so that their heads were more on a level. Aurek met his eyes, then wished he had not, so great was the depth of wisdom and rage that shone in them. "Aurek, you call yourself. Crowned with gold. But names, and men, have betrayed me before. When my daughter was a babe, and

her mother but recently laid in her gravemound”—a gesture to a hillock glowing with violets—“I found a cub in the wild. It was hard to tell how old he was. He looked no more than two or three months old, but already, he had his teeth. I brought him home, brought him up with Derora here . . . he spat and would not keep clean, so I put him to cutting wood and other rough work. When he reviled us, I tried to reason with him. How did he repay me? By trying to violate her!” He rose and, going to his daughter, took her hand protectively.

“I fought him off!” Derora cried. “And then you prisoned him in the Bleak Grove. This man, though . . . look at him, Father. He is ill, worn . . .”

“Truly, sir,” Aurek cut in, “I owe you my life. Evil repayment it would be if . . .”

Beval held up a hand for silence. Now that Aurek saw him and his daughter together, he could see their resemblance, as much a matter of vigor and health as of likenesses in eyes or chins. Derora was such a maid as drove a Were to fashion a cloak of furs and embroidered gems, a love-spell to wrap her lifelong. He envied the large, black-and-white cat that rubbed its head with abject affection on her bare ankles, then sat, tail primly covering forepaws, and shot him a baleful green gaze. *Peace, little brother*, he thought at it, but it yawned and turned its face away. And Beval—the Rider Aurek had been thought to drop on one knee and proffer the hilt of his sword in fealty. He gathered his limbs beneath himself to do so.

“Hold!” ordered Beval, and Aurek found himself unable to move. “As my daughter says, I shut that traitor up in the Bleak Grove. So now, I am in need of someone to hew wood, and clear stones from streams. That paw of yours will not hinder you too much in this.”

“Father, he is gentle; you can see that,” argued Derora.

“My mind is made up,” said Beval. “Enough!” He waved a hand, and abruptly the green glade, the angry father, and pleading daughter disappeared. Aurek stood before a hillside. Gouged into it was what looked like a small

cave that had been enlarged to form a kind of kennel. Within were fresh straw, coarse but clean blankets, and food—a wood platter of thick-sliced bread and cheese, a huge flagon of what turned out to be cider.

Since there was nothing else to do, Aurek ate, drank, and stretched out on the pallet he made of straw and blankets. Even here, the music of wind, blossom, and brook reached and lulled him. He yawned. A cub with teeth, he mused. Danior? Though Derora had fought him off, and Beval had imprisoned him on this plane, Danior roved free in the Other World. He started to his feet. Beval might intend to make Aurek his bondsman, but his daughter had taken him in, treated him gently . . . *and she was so fair*, Aurek thought.

Rest. The word seemed to float with the breezes into Aurek's consciousness. He recognized the voice as Derora's, and he rested.

What seemed like only seconds later, a shadow fell across his face, and he scrambled into alertness, his hand reaching for a missing sword. Beval stood before him, and he was wearing it. In his hands, however, was an axe which he presented to Aurek and pointed toward underbrush that he wanted cut back, wood he wanted cut, and a variety of chores that Aurek calculated would take him till midnight to complete.

He suspected that protest was useless. When Beval vanished as suddenly as he appeared, he shrugged, and shouldered the axe.

In the bright days when Aurek still had two hands (instead of one hand and one paw), he had handled reins, sword, and flail. The axe felt awkward to unaccustomed muscles. His claws slipped on the polished axe-handle.

"Surely a woodsknife would serve you better," said Derora, and held one out to him. Aurek wiped his hand on the stained linen of his shirt before taking the blade and chopping at the underbrush. "You look pale, and you stagger when you turn quickly," she observed. "I think my father is very harsh."

"If I had a treasure," Aurek said, "I would risk being called harsh rather than risk it." Though Derora used none of the allurements of the maids of Arvon, enough of whom used to hover about Wereriders to give them a good opinion of their prowess with women, she drew him more than any woman he had ever seen.

"You are barely well," Derora continued. "I have done this work before. Let me do it now, while you rest."

Aurek pulled the woodsknife away from her slender fingers. "I am not feeble, lady," he said more harshly than he wished.

"Then let me help you," she said. By the Fane of Neave, one more word out of her and he would be groveling at her feet, more devoted than that surly cat of hers.

The clearing went rapidly with two pairs of hands . . . or three hands and a paw.

"Your father," Aurek began as they knelt by a brook to drink out of cupped hands. Seeing blisters red and puffed on his left palm, Derora broke aloe leaves and smeared their cool balm on the sores. Aurek wanted to raise her fingers to his lips, but forebore. He walked deeper within the forest, where the brush grew thick and tangled. "Where is your father?"

"Within," said Derora. "And by himself."

"What is it he does?"

"Right now," said the woman, "he carves. He is a shaper of all things, rocks, trees, the woods themselves. All that is fair here . . . it is his doing."

"Not all," said Aurek. Derora flushed and looked away, and his heart leaped. Side by side, they worked as the sun sank in the sky. Not even when he had helped to harvest the fields that the Weres had held near the Gray Towers now barred to them, the sun hot and comforting on his back.

"Not all is fair here," Derora said at length. They had come to a stand of blasted trees, which bore neither bark nor leaf. They were gray, and their branches looked hard

and needle-sharp. She shivered, and seemed to shrink in on herself.

Was this the Bleak Grove? Aurek dared to open to that other sense that had always been a part of him, forced himself not to recoil from the fury and hunger he felt.

"I have never felt the menace this strong," whispered Derora.

Aurek drew her against him with his left arm before he thought of Beval's reaction to the gesture. But Derora nestled against him.

"It is because of me," said Aurek. "The cub your father has shut up is one I know. His name is Danior, and he is my enemy. You are ill paid for your care of me, for I have brought danger upon you."

"Danger?" she asked. "The wild—even those parts of it that my father and I have taken and tamed—always holds danger. If you have brought more danger than before, then I trust that there lies within you what will defeat it."

Aurek stiffened with hurt. Derora could not be expected to know what a coward he was, fit only to drudge in the woods. She reached up and patted his shoulder.

"Coward?" she asked. "For failing a test you were ill-prepared to take? I do not doubt your courage, my lord Aurek, but your reason." She laughed as she spoke, and her voice seemed to caress his name. But just as he was about to ask her to say it again, the bare branches of the Bleak Grove rustled and shook, as if protesting. Some snapped, flinging sharp twigs upon them. A chill wind whipped up from nowhere, causing the high, spearlike trunks to sway and creak.

Aurek drew back, bending so that he protected Derora with his own body. "Can you take us back to where I first woke?" he asked her.

The girl nodded, crystals from her cap shimmering about her face. She took his hand, shut her eyes briefly—when Aurek opened his own eyes . . .

"The Power!" cried Derora. "It's been smothered!"

The wind rose, wailing. A branch as long and sharp as a spear flew by them and shattered against the ground.

"My father, we have to get to him . . ." She tugged at Aurek's hand.

"*Coward, cubling,*" he had heard that "voice" before. "*Come to let me finish you?*"

Supporting one another, Aurek and Derora ran through the forest, back toward the sunlit glade Aurek remembered. Once they stopped to disentangle Derora's skirts, and she kilted them high against her knees. Things they saw only as blurs flew at them, and Aurek batted them away with his right paw. He shouted with anger and it came out as a squall of rage. He was very close to Change.

When they reached the glade, both bore thin red weals across arms, legs, and faces. Beval was waiting for them. Though his face was somber, he sat quietly, his hands occupied with sharp knives and fine wood. A shaper, Derora had called him, but of what?

Clouds massed overhead, and thunder pealed out as it had in Arvon in the terrible days before the Weres had been cast out.

Beval looked sharply at Aurek. "This . . . uproar . . . is not of my making, nor is it a thing I can cure," he said.

Aurek stopped himself before he fell to his knees. "Are you saying that I brought it?" he forced the words out. If no place was safe for him—or safe from him—he might as well search out the nearest cliff and leap off . . . assuming he survived.

"I knew you brought some peril with you," said Beval. "Peril—and more than a little Power. This trouble is beyond my knowledge, save that I know that Danior seeks to escape his prison in this world as, apparently, he did in that Other Place. You met him there . . ."

"Lord," said Aurek, "I am the least of the Weres. Let me fetch my Pack. Perhaps, united, we can—" *We can*, he thought. What "we"? Huran, for one; Herrel, for whatever help he might be; Hyron, as a leader eager to stand on

good terms with Beval, who was clearly a power in this strange new land.

His horse was lost. It would take him days to cover the land he had crossed on horseback, if he went on foot. But if he went as a golden pard—Danior would sense that, would abandon his attack on Beval and Derora to pursue him. He had been warned, for his soul's sake, not to shift shape. But weighed against Derora, body and soul, the warning seemed a puny thing.

Aurek drew a deep breath and invoked the Change in heart and body. He dropped to the ground, the familiar pangs of his metamorphosis streaking along his limbs, then caught himself on three paws and a hand.

Limping, he fled the glade for the trackless forest. Danior howled on his track, but his need to find the Pack, to protect the maid he had known and cherished for but a single day, made him fleet. As he ran, he cast his thoughts ahead of him.

Nursing his shattered pride just as surely as his wounded paw/hand, he had abandoned the Pack. Now, as he ran, passing from summer into winter again with each yard he traveled from Beval's domain, he abandoned the pride that had sent him hence and cast his thoughts ahead of him, crying out to the Wereriders.

"Cubling." That was Danior, snarling on his trail.

"Aurek?" Huran's voice. *"Son!"* Aurek sensed the might of the Pack gathering behind that sure, powerful mental voice as a palpable mass both in this world and the Other.

"I have allies!" he sent ahead. That was not quite true; only Derora was what Aurek would call a friend. But an enemy's foe must be counted an ally. *"They need our help against Danior."*

"Our help?" The "voice" was Hyron's, and it was as cold as ice, with a stream bubbling beneath it in a waste. *"When you fled us, you forfeited the right to appeal to the Pack as brother-kin."*

Hostile words, Aurek thought, even as his paws sought safe footing, and he shielded his right hand from the worst

ground. But they sounded like the tests Hyron had always set the younger Wereriders.

"My help, then," he sent. *"If you do not grant me Pack-right, at least let me prove myself."*

"Why?"

Aurek squalled with a pard's rage and a man's reason. Tests, always tests. He had undertaken the rite that made Were into shaman prematurely and failed at the test. But he had failed it for the right reason, which had been the test of his loyalty to Huran, who had been teacher and father to him. His return now to the Pack to ask their help? That was another such test. Could he put pride behind him long enough to beg for help?

These questions Hyron asked . . . what kind of test were they? They were tests simply for the sake of testing. But he had the answer to Hyron's questions now.

"I must finish the ordeal I began . . . and aid the Pack."

Huran's roar of support warmed him, and he could feel the Pack-sense waver from Hyron's rage, shifting in his favor.

"You will finish the test," Hyron conceded. *"No Pack-right. But the Pack will defend your right to finish the test, alone as you began it."*

"In this world, not the Other," demanded Huran. The Pack's agreement cut through the cold like a fire on Mid-winter Night. Pack-sense shifted, spread out as the Wereriders formed a funnel to receive Danior and channel him toward where Aurek turned, waiting for his enemy.

This was Aurek's second chance. Curiously, he felt little fear, until Danior's snarls jabbed into his consciousness.

"Not a fight, cubling, but a hunt! The hunt we began, and that you fled from. If you win, you will dispose of me as you choose. But if I win, then you are mine, and Beval, and all that is his."

No such agreement should be made, Aurek thought. The quarrel between Danior and Beval was none of his making; Beval had had only harsh words and tasks for him. But

Derora . . . she had saved his life. Now he had a bare chance to repay her.

"I weary of waiting for you," Aurek told Danior.

Danior fell silent. He had the scent now, Aurek knew; and he had the taste of Aurek's blood in his mouth from their last battle. Belly brushing the ground, Aurek the pard slipped along the forest ways. He sensed, and was warmed by, a burst of friendliness from Herrel, and knew it when Hyron's reproof lashed out at the halfling. Then he shut from his mind all but the need to stalk, to be secret, crafty, and fierce.

The air chilled and shifted. Phantoms of fear, of times when Aurek had failed, or when he might, drifted through the air. He shrank from an image of Derora, shrieking in pain, and the fur on his back stood on end at another such picture of Huran, throat torn out. What did Danior think he was doing?

The thought jolted Aurek alert. It was the sort of mind-test that Huran had set him so many times to strengthen his reason and compassion. Danior had no thought of what he was doing. He was like a storm himself, all teeth and fury, and no motives.

Storms passed. They could not be stopped. But Danior could.

Danior, though, had no reason. Perhaps he could be tricked. Aurek doubled back upon his trail. Strong scents warned him of a stream nearby, and he headed for it. A stream . . . he padded into it as he had in the Other World. A certainty began to grow in him that this hunt would replay the initiation he had failed. Very well then. He spotted an overhang, mossy rocks above mud, and rolled in the mud to leave his scent there. The mud coated his fur, making him wrinkle his muzzle and flatten his ears in disgust. But it would make it that much harder for Danior to sink fangs into his flesh.

He lay down above the overhang to wait, and to plan the next step in his trap. He brought his right hand up in front of his muzzle, nipped at one finger, and allowed blood to

trickle down onto the rocks below. Then, carefully, he began to send emotions: "*Pain, weariness, panic . . . let Danior come and make an end; it would be a relief to die.*"

Danior's savage exultation rang out in Aurek's thoughts as he yowled in triumph. Now Aurek could hear him coming. He prayed that the linkage between them would not let Danior discern the trap he had set. A stick snapped under one paw as he hastened, assured now that his prey crouched in despair, waiting only the release of death. Now Aurek feigned the exhausted panting of a terrified animal. A faint whine escaped him.

A pebble lay close by his right hand, and he dropped it just where Danior would expect to find his quarry.

"Come out, cubling."

Aurek did not move.

"If you come out, I will be merciful."

Aurek's muzzle twisted in a silent snarl. The promise of a quick, merciful death was just part of Danior's game. He knew that cruelty, and felt and fought it in himself a thousand times. Now the dark panther nosed into the overhang. Head, shoulders, hindquarters . . . when the tip of his outstretched tail vanished beneath the rocks, Aurek screamed and leaped down, pounced inside the twisted space, and closed with his enemy.

Danior screamed, and the rocks magnified the sound. But Aurek was on him, his strong jaws reaching for the lethal hold at the back of the neck, left paw raking, right hand seeking to grasp his enemy's ruff and hold it.

As Danior had in the Other World, he bent and snapped his jaws—and his teeth closed on Aurek's hand.

He was prepared for it this time, and managed—just barely—to choke down the scream that would have lost him his grip on Danior's spine. Tears streamed from his eyes, and his hindquarters clawed convulsively at Danior's sides. They rolled from beneath the rocks into the icy water. From the way Danior thrashed, Aurek would almost think that he too sensed Aurek's pain.

It chilled his torn hand. He could feel strength flowing

out of him with the blood that made dark swirls in the water. If he did not act now, soon he would not be able to act at all. He forced his wounded hand farther into Danior's jaws and gripped with his own fangs. Instinct told him when he had the neckhold secure and helped him tighten his back legs around his enemy. A little more pressure, one more snap of powerful muscles, and Danior would be dead . . .

"And then what, Aurek?"

For as long as Aurek lived, he knew that that question, that final test, would haunt him. If he killed Danior, what did it prove but that he was a better killer than a wild beast? Did it shape anything? Would it make Derora one whit safer? Would it heal Aurek's torn hand?

Danior lay motionless, except for heaving sides, awaiting death. *"Go ahead, cubling. Use those fangs."* Pack-sense kindled within Aurek, hot and exulting. *"Take your prey, boy."*

Aurek tensed in mind and body and struck—not with his paws and fangs, but with his mind and emotions, tearing through the rage and terror in Danior's mind, scouring them out, down to a bare core. He heard a whimper, felt Danior go limp beneath him. Mortally weary, he unclamped his jaws, rolled off the black pard's body . . . and the Change came upon him.

His left hand braced against a rock, he levered himself up to his feet from his knees. He did not want to look at his right—no one would be able to tell now whether he had had a hand or a paw there.

Halse and Hyron stood beside him. Hyron held out a knife.

"Finish him off," the Packleader ordered, as Halse rolled Danior over with a kick of his booted foot.

The panther had shifted shape too. It was a young man with dark hair and pale skin stretched tight over his ribs that lay half in and half out of the water. His eyes opened, rolling back in his head. Awareness flickered in them . . . then nothing.

“*Kill!*” came the Pack-sense.

Aurek let the knife fall into the water with a splash. He had faced and mastered the ferocity and bloodlust that had so dismayed him in the Other World, had accepted them and the pain they caused, outthought and outfought them. He was their master now, truly a shaman for as long as he lived . . . assuming he lived, and did not bleed to death this very night. He sagged, and Huran and Herrel were there to support him.

He spat blood and fur, raised his chin, and met the Pack leader’s eyes. “No.”

Amazed contempt quivered in the Pack-sense.

“Danior . . . the spirit and the rage . . . is dead. *That* man lying there is not Danior. I do not know what he is now, or what he can be. His mind is stripped bare, now, like a babe’s. And like a babe, he might grow to be anything. I was trained to be a shaman, to revere life and promise and power. The Danior who was our enemy is dead. How can I snuff any potential that this creature might hold?”

He could not tell Hyron that Danior was a part of himself, a part he had mastered. Not when Hyron himself was a killer, and proud of his skill. Killing Danior—what would that prove, except that Aurek too was skilled in death-dealing?

Hyron took a deliberate step forward, his eyes chill. *Another test I failed. He thinks I am not bloody enough.* Considering the blood that spattered him—his and Danior’s both—the idea struck him as absurd. He suppressed what would have been an hysterical giggle and let his head drop against his teacher’s shoulder. Herrel muttered something about cautery and tightened his grip in a way that left Aurek terrified of the burning to come.

He could hear footsteps. A muffled oath confirmed that the iron to sear off the blood flow from his right hand was hot enough. Huran and Herrel tightened their grips.

“Hold.”

Just that one word. Aurek opened his eyes. Before him,

stood Beval, robed in deep blue and green, a wreath of leaves crowning his silvered hair. At his side Derora stood, wearing a white gown sewn in crystals that matched her jeweled cap. Beval removed the leaves from his head and, walking forward, bent to place the crown on Aurek's brow.

Time and place blurred and shifted. When Aurek awoke, it was bright day, and he lay on the summery grass of Beval's glade once more. Derora tended a small fire, and Beval stood, deep in conversation, with Huran and the leader of the Weres.

"Don't move, Aurek!" Derora called, not troubling herself to turn around. Her cat stretched, then moved away from her to stretch out on his chest. Derora took no chance that he would disobey her instructions.

"That is your last word on it, then?" Hyron snapped at Beval.

"I am caretaker here. Danior's violence is no longer a problem; he is under my warding. That leaves your Wereriders. If your Pack cannot control its will to violence, man and beast, then you must depart." Beval measured Hyron with a gaze more daunting than any the leader had ever managed. "I see that your decision has been made. You may depart."

The air rippled, and Hyron was gone.

"But you, master," Beval turned to the Weres' shaman. "You are not like the other Wereriders. It was you who had the teaching of young Aurek there. I would welcome you if you wished to stay. You might help me restore Danior-that-was, help him grow up right this time."

Huran shook his head. "Aurek has found his own path, it seems. But if you think that he is my only charge, you are wrong. Every man in the Pack is as dear to me as a cub of my own hearth—and, as we saw, they too must be helped to grow up cleanly. I cannot leave them."

"And Aurek?" asked Beval. Derora turned and tensed.

"He is a shaman now, with the Power to guide him," said Huran. "He is free to go or stay."

"I am a one-handed man," Aurek said. "What way is

there for such a one? Surely, nothing among the Weres . . . and you, master, lady . . . what use could you have for a cripple?" Tears stung his eyes, then rolled down his face. For the first time in his life, he was not ashamed of them.

Derora was kneeling at his side, dislodging the cat to pillow Aurek's head on her knees. Her tears fell onto his face and mingled with his own. "I must be a worse fool than my father has called me at times. And my wishes are quite humble. I want no other—or no better—man."

Beval walked over to them, holding out a curiously carved object. "When your wounds are healed," he said, displaying a cunningly wrought wooden hand, "I shall fit this to your arm. My daughter—yes, child, I watched you—has told you I am a shaper of living things. If I can repair Danior's twisted mind, surely, I can shape your hand anew as well." *So Beval's wrath had been a test too; one Aurek had passed!*

Huran knelt beside Aurek and laid a hand on his brow in blessing and farewell.

"You are certain you will not reconsider?" asked Beval.

"You would not respect me if I abandoned those whom the Power has put in my charge," said the shaman. "I pray you, return me to them."

"As you will," said Beval. He raised his hand and drew a complex curling symbol in the air. Huran's fingers made similar motions. Both symbols glowed sapphire, then faded. "Go with blessing and ward upon you," he said. "You will, I promise you, bring those you guard to a safe home."

As if reluctant to depart, Huran's form faded slowly from sight. For an instant, Aurek could see the outlines of trees in his thinning shadow. A sob caught in his throat, and he choked, turning his face away.

Derora caught his chin in her hand and made him look at her. The welcome that glowed in her eyes made him think that he would never grieve again.

Afterword

Even now, twenty-five years after I wandered into Andre Norton's worlds, simultaneous thrills of discovery and homecoming make me want to echo Miranda's joyous cry in The Tempest, "O brave new world, that hath such people in it!"

That discovery was the surprise; everything since then has proceeded with a fair (although somewhat offbeat) degree of logic. Including the creation of my own Witch World characters, whose names came from a book of names that Andre Norton herself supplied. Because "the name is the thing, and the true name is the true thing" (an axiom that applies to the Witch World as well as to Earthsea; and, if you don't believe it, quick, name me some witches other than the ladies of House Tregarth!), the names I chose seemed to manifest their own characters; and, once "alive," those characters told me what they wanted their story to be.

Ironically (but again logically), it turned out a whole lot like The Tempest, crossed with some material from Norse mythology, and with a walk-on role for my cat Merlin, who sticks a polydactylous paw into most of what I cook up.

—SUSAN SCHWARTZ