

WERE-HUNTER

by

Mercedes Lackey

It had been raining all day; cold, and dismal. Glenda trudged through it, sneakers soaked; beneath her cheap plastic raincoat her jeans were soggy to the knees. It was hours past sunset now, and still raining, and the city streets were deserted by all but the most hardy, the most desperate, and the faded few with nothing to lose.

Glenda was numbered among those last. This morning she'd spent her last change getting a bus to the welfare office, only to be told that she hadn't been a resident long enough to qualify for aid. The supercilious clerk had taken in her age and inexperience at a glance. If he had begun processing her, he'd have been late for lunch. He guessed she wouldn't know enough to contradict him, and he'd been right. And years of her aunt's browbeating ("Isn't one 'no' good enough for you?") had drummed into her the lesson that there were no second chances. This afternoon she'd eaten ketchup and crackers—there was nothing left in her larder that even resembled food. There were three days left in the month; three days of shelter, then she'd be kicked out of her shoddy efficiency and into the street.

When her Social Security orphan's benefits had run out when she'd turned eighteen, her aunt had "suggested" she find a job and support herself—elsewhere. The suggestion had come in the form of finding her belongings in boxes on

the front porch with a letter to that effect on top of them.

So she'd tried, moving to this place near the university; a marginal neighborhood surrounded by bad blocks on three sides. There were no jobs if you had no experience—but how did you get experience without a job? Her aunt had never let her apply for a job. Her meager savings (meant, at one time, to pay for college tuition) were soon gone.

She rubbed the ring on her left hand, unthinkingly. That ring was all she had of the mother her aunt would never discuss. It was silver, and heavy; made in the shape of a crouching cat with tiny glints of topaz for eyes. Much as she treasured it, she would gladly have sold it—but she couldn't get it off her finger, she'd worn it for so long.

She splashed through the puddles, peering listlessly out from under the hood of her raincoat. Her lank, mouse-brown hair straggled into her eyes as she squinted against the glare of headlights on rain-glazed pavement. Despair had driven her into the street; despair kept her here. She could see no way out of this trap—except maybe by killing herself.

But then a chill of fear trickled down her backbone like a drop of icy rain, driving all thoughts of suicide from her, as behind her she recognized the sounds of footsteps.

She didn't have to turn around to know she was being followed, and by more than one. On a night like tonight, there was no one on the street but the fools—and the hunters.

One thing in her favor—she knew this neighborhood intimately; curiosity had kept her poking into every corner when job leads ran out. That curiosity had paid off in material things—as the old people who lived around here died off or were sent to nursing homes their belongings often ended up piled in the alleys. Glenda had made more than one windfall find in those dusty old cartons.

These scavenging hunts had also given her a mental map of every possible bolt-hole for use in an emergency.

There was only one such attainable at this hour—hiding in the backyard of the “witchhouse” wasn’t appealing, but the alternative of facing those who dogged her heels now was less so.

The rain would help; she quickened her pace—not running, as that would only set them off, but moving just a tiny bit faster than they were. She dodged around a corner, taking a few steps at a run, then resuming her fast walk. The rain lashed her face; she stumbled but kept moving.

Around another corner; dart across the street just under the headlights of a car—squealing brakes and a string of obscenities marked that her pursuers were delayed just a few more seconds. She glanced back—there were five of them, wearing dark jackets with gang-symbols painted on them. She ducked around another corner; the mouth of the alley she sought was just ahead.

It wasn’t much of an alley. *They* might not know it was there—even if they did, they couldn’t know what lay at the end of it. She dodged inside, feeling her way, until one of the two buildings gave way to a seven-foot privacy fence.

She came to the dead end, the high board fence on the left. She listened, straining her ears for sounds behind her, taut with fear. Nothing; they’d passed the alley by, or hadn’t reached it.

Quickly, before they could find the entrance, she ran her hand along the boards of the fence, counting them from the dead end. When she touched the sixth one, she gave it a shove sideways, getting a handful of splinters. But the board moved, and she squeezed through the gap into the yard beyond, pulling the board back in place behind her.

Just in time; echoing off the stone and brick of the alley were harsh young male voices. She leaned against the fence and shook from head to toe, clenching her teeth to keep them from chattering, as they searched the alley, found nothing, and finally (after hours, it seemed) went away.

“Well, you’ve got yourself in a fine mess,” she said dully.

"Now what? You don't dare leave, not yet—they might have left someone in the street, watching. So now you get to spend the rest of the night in the backyard of a spookhouse. You'd just better hope the spook isn't home."

She peered through the dark at the shapeless bulk of the tri-story town house, relic of a previous century, hoping not to see any signs of life. The place had an uncanny reputation; even the gangs left it alone. People had vanished here. But the police had been over the house and grounds more than once, and never found anything. No bodies were buried in the backyard—the ground was as hard as cement under the inch-deep layer of soft sand that covered it. There was nothing at all but the sand and the rocks; the crazy woman that lived here told the police it was a "Zen garden." But it didn't look like any Zen garden *she* had ever read about. The sand wasn't groomed into wave-patterns, and the rocks looked more like something out of Stonehenge.

There were four of those rocks—one like a garden bench, three that formed a primitive arch. Glenda felt her way toward them in the dark, trusting to memory to find them. She barked her shin painfully on the "bench" rock, and her legs gave out, so that she sprawled ungracefully over it.

She sat huddled on the top of it in the dark, trying to judge what time it was. Dawn couldn't be too far off. When dawn came, and there were more people in the street, she could probably get safely back to her apartment.

For all the good it would do her.

Her stomach cramped with hunger, and despair clamped down on her again. She shouldn't have run—she was only delaying the inevitable. In two days she'd be out on the street, and this time with nowhere to hide; easy prey.

"So wouldn't you like to escape altogether?"

The soft voice out of the darkness nearly caused Glenda's heart to stop. Then the voice laughed, and oddly

enough, the laughter seemed to make her fright wash out of her. There was nothing malicious about it—it was kind-sounding, gentle. Not crazy.

“Oh, I like to make people think I’m crazy; they leave me alone that way.” The speaker was a dim shadow.

“Who—”

“I am the keeper of this place; not the first, certainly not the last. So there is nothing in this city—in this world—to hold you here anymore?”

“How—did you know that?” Glenda tried to see the speaker in the dim light reflected off the clouds, but could make out no details, just a human-shaped outline. Her eyes blurred. Reaction to her narrow escape, the cold, hunger; all three were conspiring to make her light-headed.

“The only ones who come to me are those who have no place *here*, yet still have the will to live. If another world opened before you, would you walk into it, not knowing what it held?”

This was surreal. Well, why not go along? “Sure, why not? It couldn’t be any worse than here. It might be better.”

“Then turn, and look behind you—and choose.”

Glenda hesitated, then swung her legs over the benchstone. The sky was lighter in that direction—dawn was breaking.

Now she *knew* she was hallucinating—for framed within the arch was no shadowy glimpse of board fence and rain-soaked sand, but a patch of reddening sky, and another dawn—

A dawn that broke over rolling hills covered with waving grass, grass stirred by a breeze that carried the scent of flowers, not the exhaust-tainted air of the city.

Glenda stood, unaware that she had done so. She reached forward with one hand, yearningly. The place seemed to call to something buried deep in her heart—and she wanted to answer.

“Here—or there? Choose now, child.”

With an inarticulate cry, she stumbled toward the stones—

And found herself standing alone on a grassy hill.

After several hours of walking in wet, soggy tennis shoes, growing more spacey by the minute from hunger, she was beginning to think she'd made a mistake. Somewhere back behind her she'd lost her raincoat; she couldn't remember when she'd taken it off. The situation was frustrating, maddening; there was food all around her, on four feet, on wings—surely, even some of the plants were edible—but it was totally inaccessible to a city-bred girl who'd never gotten food from anywhere but a grocery or restaurant. She might just as well be on the moon.

Just as she thought that, she topped another rise to find herself looking at a strange, weatherbeaten man standing beside a rough pounded-dirt road.

She blinked in dumb amazement. He looked like something out of a King Arthur epic. He was stocky, blond-haired; he wore a shabby brown tunic and patched, shapeless trousers tucked into equally patched boots. He was also holding a strung bow, with an arrow nocked to it, and frowning—a most unfriendly expression.

He gabbled something at her. She blinked again. She knew a little Spanish; she'd taken German and French in high school. This didn't sound like any of those.

He repeated himself, a distinct edge to his voice. To emphasize his words, he jerked the point of the arrow off back the way she had come. It was pretty obvious he was telling her to be on her way.

“No, wait—please—” She stepped toward him, her hands outstretched pleadingly. The only reaction she got was that he raised the arrow to point at her chest, and drew it back.

“Look—I haven't got any weapons! I'm lost, I'm hungry—”

He drew the arrow a bit farther.

Suddenly it was all too much. She'd spent all her life being pushed and pushed—this was the last time *anybody* was going to back her into a corner—this time she was going to fight!

"Damn you!" She was so angry she could hardly think. "You stupid clod! *I need help!*" Red flashes interfered with her vision, her ears began to buzz, and her hands crooked into involuntary claws. "*Damn you and everybody that looks like you!*"

He backed up a pace, his blue eyes wide with surprise.

She was filled with fury that grew past controlling—she couldn't see, couldn't think. Suddenly she gasped as pain lanced from the top of her head to her toes, like a bolt of lightning—

—her vision blacked out; she fell to her hands and knees on the grass, her legs unable to hold her; convulsing with surges of pain in her arms and legs. Her feet, her hands felt as if she'd shoved them in a fire—her face felt as if someone were stretching it out of shape. And the ring finger of her left hand—it burned with more agony than both hands and feet put together! She shook her head; it spun around in dizzying circles. Her ears rang. There was a sound of cloth tearing—

Her sight cleared—distorted. She looked up at the man, who had dropped his bow and was backing away from her slowly, his face white with terror. She started to say something to him—

—and it came out a snarl.

With that, the man screeched, turned, and ran.

And she caught sight of her hand. It wasn't a hand anymore. It was a paw. A leopard's paw. Scattered around her were the ragged scraps of cloth that had once been her clothing.

Glenda lay in the sun on top of a rock, warm and drowsy with full-bellied contentment. Idly she washed one paw

with her tongue, cleaning the last taint of blood from it. Before she'd had a chance to panic or go crazy back there when she'd realized what had happened to her, a rabbitlike creature had broken cover practically beneath her nose. Semistarvation and confusion had kept her dazed long enough for leopard-instincts to take over. She'd caught and killed the thing and had half eaten it before the reality of what she'd done and become broke through to her. But raw rabbit-thing tasted *fine* to leopard-Glenda; when she realized that, she relaxed and finished it. Now for the first time in weeks she was warm and content, and for the first time in years *she* was something to be afraid of. She gazed about her, taking in the grassy hills and breathing in the warm, hay-scented air with a growing contentment.

Becoming a leopard might not be a bad transformation.

Ears keener than a human's picked up the sound of dogs in the distance. It might be that the man she'd frightened went back home for help. They just *could* be hunting her.

Time to go.

She leaped down from her rock. Her sense of smell, so heightened now that it might have been a new sense altogether, had picked up the cool of running water off this way, and running water was a good way to break a trail; she'd read that.

Reveling in the power of the muscles beneath her sleek coat, she ran lightly over the slopes, moving through the grass that had been such a waist-high tangle to girl-Glenda with no impediment whatsoever. In almost no time at all, it seemed, she was pacing the side of the stream that she had scented.

It was quite wide, twenty feet or so, and seemed fairly deep in the middle. She waded into it up to her stomach, hissing a little at the cold and the feel of the water on her fur, trotting upstream until she found a place where the course had narrowed a little. It was still over her head, but she found she could swim it. The stream wound between

the grassy hills, but there was rarely any more cover along them than a few scattered bushes. Something told her that she would be no match for the endurance of the hunting pack if she tried to escape across the grasslands. She stayed in the watercourse until she came to a wide valley. There were trees here; she waded onward until she found one leaning well over the streambed. Gathering herself and eyeing one broad branch, she leaped for it; landing awkwardly, having to scabble with her claws fully extended to keep her balance.

She sprawled over it for a moment, panting, hearing the dogs nearing.

Time to move again. She climbed the tree up into the higher branches, finding a wide perch at least fifty or sixty feet off the ground. It was high enough that it was unlikely that anyone would spot her dappled hide among the dappled leaf-shadows, and afforded to leopard-eyes a good view of the ground and the stream.

As she'd expected, the humans with the dogs had figured out her scent-breaking ploy, and had split the pack, taking half along each side of the stream. She noted the man who had stopped her, and filed his scent away in her memory for the future. The others with him were dressed much the same as he, and carried knives and bows. They looked angry, confused; their voices held notes of fear. They looked into and under the trees with noticeable apprehension, evidently fearing what might dwell under their shade. Finally they gave up, and pulled the hounds off the fruitless quest; leaving her invisible above them, purring.

Several weeks later Glenda had found a place to lair up; a cave amid a tumble of boulders deep in the forest. She had also discovered why the hunters hadn't wanted to pursue her into the forest itself. There was a—thing—an evil presence, malicious, but invisible, that lurked in a circle of standing stones that glowed at night with a sickly

yellow color. Fortunately it seemed unable to go beyond the bounds of the stones themselves. Glenda had been chasing a half-grown deer-beast that had run straight into the middle of the circle. She had nearly been caught there herself, and only the thing's preoccupation with the first prey had saved her. *That* had frightened her for a day.

Other than that peril, easily avoided, the forest seemed safe enough. She'd found the village the man had come from by following the dirt road; she'd spent long hours when she wasn't hunting lurking within range of sight and hearing of the place. Aided by some new sense she wasn't sure that she understood she was beginning to make some sense of their language. She understood at least two-thirds of what was being said now, and could usually guess the rest.

These people seemed to be stuck at some kind of feudal level—had been overrun by invaders the generation before, and were only now recovering from that. The hereditary rulers had mostly been killed in that war, and the population decimated. The man who'd stopped her had been on guard-duty and had mistrusted her appearance out of what they called "the Waste," and her strange clothing. When she'd transformed in front of his eyes, he must have decided she was some kind of witch.

Glenda had soon hunted the more easily caught game out; now when hunger drove her, she supplemented her diet with raids on the villagers' livestock. She was getting better at hunting, but she still was far from being an expert, and letting leopard-instincts take over involved surrendering herself to those instincts. She had the uneasy feeling that every time she did this she lost a little more of her humanity. Life as leopard-Glenda was much easier than as girl-Glenda, but it might be getting to be time to think about trying to regain her former shape—before she was lost to the leopard entirely.

She'd never been one for horror or fantasy stories, so her

only guide was vague recollections of fairy-tales and late-night werewolf movies.

But—maybe the light of the full moon would help.

She waited until full dark before setting off for her goal, a still pond in the far edge of the forest, well away from the stone circle, in a clearing that never seemed to become overgrown. It held a stone, too; a single pillar of some kind of bluish rock. That pillar had never “glowed” at night, at least not while Glenda had been there, but the pond and the clearing seemed to form a little pocket of peace. Whatever evil might lurk the forest, she was somehow sure it was barred from there.

The moon was well up by the time she reached it. White flowers had opened to the light, and a faint, crisp scent came from them. Glenda paced to the pool-side, and looked down into the dark, still water. She could see her leopard form reflected clearly, and over her right shoulder, the full moon.

Well, anger had gotten her into this shape, maybe anger would get her out. She closed her eyes for a moment, then began summoning all the force of that emotion she could—*willing* herself back into the form she'd always worn. Whatever power was playing games with her was *not* going to find her clay to be molded at will!

As nothing happened, her frustration mounted; soon she was at the boiling point. Damn everything! She—would—*not—be—played—with—*

The same incoherent fury that had seized her when she first changed washed over her a second time—and the same agonizing pain sent blackness in front of her eyes and flung her to lie twitching helplessly beside the pool. Her left forepaw felt like it was afire—

Then it was over, and she found herself sprawling beside the pond, shivering with cold and reaction, and totally naked. Naked, that is, except for the silver cat-ring, whose

topaz eyes glowed hotly at her for a long moment before the light left them.

The second time she transformed to leopard was much easier; except for the pain. She decided against staying human—after finding herself in a perilously vulnerable and helpless form, leopard-Glenda seemed a much more viable alternative.

But the ability to switch back and forth proved to be very handy. The villagers had taken note of her raids on their stock; they began mounting a series of systematic hunts for her, even penetrating into the forest so long as it was by daylight. She learned, or remembered from reading, countless tricks to throw the hunters off, and being able to change from human to leopard and back again helped. There *were* places girl-Glenda could climb and hide that leopard-Glenda couldn't, and the switch in scents when she changed confused and frightened the dog-pack. She began feeling an amused sort of contempt for the villagers, often leading individual hunters on wild-goose chases for the fun of it when she became bored.

But on the whole, it was better to be leopard; leopard-Glenda was comfortable and content sleeping on rocks or on the dried leaves of her lair—girl-Glenda shivered and ached and wished for her roach-infested efficiency. Leopard-Glenda was perfectly happy on a diet of raw fish, flesh, and fowl—girl-Glenda wanted to throw up when she thought about it. Leopard-Glenda was content with nothing to do but tease the villagers and sleep in the sun when she wasn't hunting—girl-Glenda fretted, longed for a book, wondered if what she was doing was right . . .

So matters stood until midsummer.

Glenda woke, shivering, with a mouth gone dry with panic.

It wasn't just a nightmare. This dream had been so real she'd expected to wake with an arrow in her ribs. She was

still panting with fright even now.

There had been a man—he hadn't looked much like any of the villagers; they were mostly blond or brown-haired, and of the kind of hefty build her aunt used to call "peasant-stock" in a tone of contempt. No, he had resembled her in a way—as if she were a kind of washed-out copy of the template from which his kind had been cut. Where her hair was a dark mousey-brown, his was just as dark, but the color was more intense. They had the same general build; thin, with prominent cheekbones. His eyes—

Her aunt had called her "cat-eyed," for she didn't have eyes of a normal brown, but more of a vague yellow, as washed-out as her hair. But *his* had been truly and intensely gold, with a greenish back-reflection like the eyes of a wild animal at night.

And those eyes had been filled with hunter-awareness; the eyes of a predator. And she had been his quarry!

The dream came back to her with extraordinary vividness; it had begun as she'd reached the edge of the forest, with him hot on her trail. He had no dogs, no aid but his own senses—yet nothing she'd done had confused him for more than a second. She'd even laid a false trail into the stone circle, something she'd never done before, but she was beginning to panic—he'd neatly avoided the trap. The hunt had begun near midmorning; by false dawn he'd brought her to bay and trapped her—

And that was when she'd awakened.

She spent the early hours of the morning pacing beside the pond, feeling almost impelled to go into the village yet afraid to do so. Finally the need to *see* grew too great; she crept to the edge of the village past the guards, and slipped into the maze of whole and half-ruined buildings that comprised it.

There was a larger market-crowd today; the usual market stalls had been augmented by strangers with more luxurious goods, foodstuffs, and even a couple of ragged enter-

tainers. Evidently this was some sort of fair. With so many strangers about, Glenda was able to remain unseen. Her courage came back as she skirted the edge of the marketplace, keeping to shadows and sheltering within half-tumbled walls, and the terror of the night seemed to become just one more shadow.

Finally she found an ideal perch—hiding in the shadow just under the eaves of a half-ruined building that had evidently once belonged to the local lordling, and in whose courtyard the market was usually held. From here she could see the entire court and yet remain unseen by humans and unscented by livestock.

She had begun to think her fears were entirely groundless—when she caught sight of a stranger coming out of the door of what passed for an inn here, speaking earnestly with the village headman. Her blood chilled, for the man was tall, dark-haired, and lean, and dressed entirely in dark leathers—like her dream.

He was too far away for her to see his face clearly, and she froze in place, following him intently without moving a muscle. The headman left him with a satisfied air, and the man gazed about him, as if looking for something—

He finally turned in her direction, and Glenda nearly died of fright—for the face was that of the man in her dream, and he was staring directly at her hiding place as though he knew exactly where and what she was!

She broke every rule she'd ever made for herself—broke cover, in full sight of the entire village. In the panicked, screaming mob, the hunter could only curse—for the milling, terror-struck villagers were only interested in fleeing in the opposite direction from where Glenda stood, tail lashing and snarling with fear.

She took advantage of the confusion to leap the wall of the courtyard and sprint for the safety of the forest. Halfway there she changed into human for a short run—there was no one to see her, and it might throw him off the track. Then at forest edge, once on the springy moss

that would hold no tracks, she changed back to leopard. She paused in the shade for a moment, to get a quick drink from the stream, and to rest, for the full-out run from the village had tired her badly—only to look up, to see him standing directly across the stream from her. He was shading his eyes with one hand against the sun that beat down on him, and it seemed to her that he was smiling in triumph.

She choked on the water, and fled.

She called upon every trick she'd ever learned, laying false trails by the dozen; fording the stream as it threaded through the forest not once but several times; breaking her trail entirely by taking to the treetops on an area where she could cross several hundred feet without once having to set foot to the ground. She even drove a chance-met herd of deer-creatures across her back-trail, muddling the tracks past following. She didn't remember doing any of this in her dream. At last, panting with weariness, she doubled back to lair-up in the crotch of a huge tree, looking back down the way she had passed, certain that she would see him give up in frustration.

He walked so softly that even *her* keen ears couldn't detect his tread; she was only aware that he was there when she saw him. She froze—she hadn't really expected he'd get *this* far! But surely when he came to the place she'd taken to the branches, he would be baffled, for she'd first climbed as girl-Glenda, and there wasn't anyplace where the claw-marks of the leopard scored the trunks within sight of the ground.

He came to the place where her tracks ended—and closed his eyes, a frown-line between his brows. Late-afternoon sun filtered through the branches and touched his face; Glenda thought then that he had been totally fooled by her trick. He carried a strung bow; black as his clothing and highly polished, and wore a sword, which none of the villagers ever did. As her fear ebbed, she had time to think that he couldn't have been much older than

she—and was very, very attractive.

As if that thought had touched something that signaled him, his eyes snapped open—and he looked straight through the branches that concealed her to rivet his own gaze on *her* eyes.

With a mew of terror she leaped out of the tree and ran in mindless panic as fast as she could set paw to ground.

The sun was reddening everything; she cringed and thought of blood. Then she thought of her dream, and the dweller-in-the-circle. If, instead of a false trail, she laid a *true* one—waiting for him at the end of it—

If she rushed him suddenly, she could probably startle him into the power of the thing that lived within the shelter of those stones. Once in the throes of its mental grip, she doubted he'd be able to escape.

It seemed a heaven-sent plan; she ran, leaving a clear trail behind her, to the place of the circle. By the time she reached its vicinity it was full dark—and she knew the power of the dweller was at its height in darkness. Yet, the closer she drew to those glowing stones, the slower her paws moved; and a building reluctance to do this thing weighed heavily on her. Soon she could see the stones shining ahead of her; in her mind she pictured the man's capture—his terror—his inevitable end.

Leopard-Glenda urged—kill!

Girl-Glenda wailed in fear of him, but stubbornly refused to put him in the power of *that*.

The two sides of her struggled, nearly tearing her physically in two as she half-shifted from one to the other, her outward form paralleling the struggle within.

At last, with a pathetic cry, the leopard turned in her tracks and ran from the circle. The will of girl-Glenda had won.

Whenever she paused to rest, she could hear him coming long before she'd even caught her breath. The stamina of a

leopard is no match for that of a human; they are built for the short chase, not the long, and she was exhausted. He had driven her through the moon-lit clearings of the forest she knew out beyond the territory she had ranged before. This forest must extend deep into the Waste, and this was the direction he had driven her. Now she stumbled as she ran, no longer capable of clever tricks. Her eyes were glazed; her mind numb with terror. Her sides heaved as she panted, and her mouth was dry, her thirst a raging fire inside her.

It seemed as if her foe knew this section of the wilderness as well or better than she knew her own territory. She could not rid herself of the feeling that she was being driven to some goal only he knew.

Suddenly, as rock-cliff loomed before her, she realized that her worst fears were correct. He had herded her into a dead-end ravine, and there was no escape for the leopard.

The rock before her was sheer; to either side it slanted inward. The stone itself was brittle shale; almost unclimbable—yet she began shifting into her human form to make that attempt. Then a sound from behind her told her that it was too late.

She whirled at bay, half human, half leopard, flanks heaving as she sucked in pain-filled gasps of air. He blocked the way out; dark and grim on the path, drawn bow in hand. She thought she saw his eyes shine with fierce joy even in the darkness of the ravine. She had no doubts that he could see her as easily as she saw him. There was nowhere to hide on either side of her.

Again leopard-instinct urged—kill!

Her claws extended, and she growled deep in her throat, half in fear, half in warning. He paced one step closer.

She could—she could fight him. She could dodge the arrow—at this range he could never get off the second. If she closed with him, she could kill him! His blood—

Kill!

No! Never, never had she harmed another human being,

not even the man who had denied her succor. No!

Kill!

She fought the leopard within, knowing that if it won, there would never be a girl-Glenda again; only the predator, the beast. And that would be the death of her—a death as real as that which any arrow could bring her.

And he watched from the shadows; terrible and menacing, yet—he did not move, not so much as a single muscle. If he had, perhaps the leopard would have won; fear triumphing over will. But he was still, so it was the human side of her that conquered.

And she waited, eyes fixed on his, for death.

:Gentle, lady.:

She started as the voice spoke in her head—then shook it wildly, certain that she had been driven mad at last.

:Be easy—do not fear me.:

Again that voice! She stared at him, wild-eyed—was he some kind of magician, to speak in her very thoughts?

And as if that were not startlement enough, she watched, dumbfounded, as he knelt, slowly—eased the arrow off the string of his bow—and laid both to one side. He held out hands now empty, his face fully in the moonlight—and *smiled*.

And rose—and—

At first she thought it was the moonlight that made him seem to writhe and blur. Then she thought that certainly her senses were deceiving her as her mind had—for his body *was* blurring, shifting, changing before her eyes, like a figure made of clay softening and blurring and becoming another shape altogether—

Until, where the hunter had been, stood a black leopard.

Glenda stared into the flames of the campfire, sipping at the warm wine, wrapped in a fur cloak, weary and drowsy. The wine, the cloak, and the campfire were all Harwin's.

For that was the name of the hunter—Harwin. He had coaxed her into her following him; then, once his camp had

been reached, into human form again. He had given her no time to be shamed by her nakedness, for he had shrouded her in the cloak almost before the transformation was complete. Then he had built this warming fire from the banked coals of the old, and fed her, then pressed the wine on her. And all with slow, reassuring movements, as if he was quite well aware how readily she could be startled into transforming back and fleeing into the forest. And all without speaking much besides telling her his name; his silence not unfriendly, but as if he were waiting with patient courtesy for her to speak first.

She cleared her throat, and tentatively spoke her first words in this alien tongue, her own voice strange in her ears.

“Who—are you? *What* are you?”

He cocked his head to one side, his eyes narrowing in concentration, as he listened to her halting words.

“You speak the speech of the Dales as one who knows it only indifferently, lady,” he replied, his words measured, slow, and pronounced with care, as if he guessed she needed slow speech to understand. “Yet you do not have the accent of Arvon—and I do not think you are one of the Old Ones. If I tell you who and what I am, will you do me like courtesy?”

“I—my name is Glenda. I couldn’t do—this—at home. Wherever home is. I—I’m not sure what I am, or where.”

“Then your home is not of this world?”

“There was”—it all seemed so vague, like a dream now—“a city. I—lived there, but not well. I was hunted—I found a place—a woman. I thought she was crazy, but—she said she knew an escape, and I saw this place—and I had to come—”

“A Gate, I think, and a Gate-Keeper.” He nodded, as if to himself. “That explains much. So you found yourself here?”

“In the Waste. I walked—I met a man—I was tired, starving, and he tried to drive me away. I got mad.”

"The rest I know," he said. "For Elvath himself told me of how you went Were before his eyes. Poor lady—how bewildered you must have been, with no one to tell you what was happening to you! And then?"

Haltingly, with much encouragement, she told him of her life in the forest; her learning to control her changes—and her side of the night's hunt.

"And the woman won over the beast," he finished. "And well for you that it did." His gold eyes were very somber, and he spoke with emphasis heavy in his words. "Had you turned on me, I doubt that you would ever have been able to become human again."

She shuddered. "What am I?" she asked at last, her eyes fixed pleadingly on his. "And where am I? And why has all this been happening to me?"

"I cannot answer the last for you, save only that I think you are here because your spirit never fit truly in that strange world from which you came. As for where—you are in the Dale lands of High Hallack, on the edge of the Waste—which tells you nothing, I know. And what you are—like me, you are plainly of some far-off strain of Were-blood. Well, perhaps not quite like me; among my kind the females are not known for being able to shape-change, and I myself am of half-blood only. My mother is Kildas of the Dales; my father Harl of the Wereriders. And I—I am Harwin," he smiled, ruefully, "of no place in particular."

"Why—why did you hunt me?" she asked. "Why did they want *you* to hunt me?"

"Because they had no notion of my Were-blood," he replied frankly. "They only know of my reputation as a hunter—shall I begin at the beginning? Perhaps it will give you some understanding of this world you have fallen into."

She nodded eagerly.

"Well—you may have learned that in my father's time the Dales were overrun by the Hounds of Alizon?" At her

nod, he continued. "They had strange weapons at their disposal, and came very close to destroying all who opposed them. At that time my father and his brother-kin lived in the Waste, exiled for certain actions in the past from the land of Arvon, which lies to the north of the Waste. They—as I, as you—have the power of shape-change, and other powers as well. It came to the defenders of the Dales that one must battle strangeness with strangeness, and power with power; they made a pact with the Wereriders. In exchange for aid, they would send to them at the end of the war in the Year of the Unicorn twelve brides and one. You see, if all went well, the Wereriders' exile was to end then—but if all was not well, they would have remained in exile, and they did not wish their kind to die away. The war ended, the brides came—the exile ended. But one of the bridegrooms was—like me—of half-blood. And one of the brides was a maiden of Power. There was much trouble for them; when the trouble was at an end they left Arvon together. Now we come to my part of the tale. My mother Kildas has gifted my father with three children, of which two are a pleasure to his heart and of like mind with him. But I—"

"You're the misfit? The rebel?" she guessed.

"If by that you mean the one who seems destined always to anger his kin with all he says and does—aye. We cannot agree, my father and I. One day in his anger, he swore that I was another such as Herrel. Well, that was the first that I had ever heard of one of Were-blood who was like-minded with me—I plagued my mother and father both until they gave me the tale of Herrel Half-blood and his Witch-bride. And from that moment, I had no peace until I set out to find them. For surely, I thought, I would find true kin-feeling with them."

"And did you find them?"

"Not yet," he admitted. "At my mother's request I came here first, to give word to her kin that she was well, and happy, and greatly honored by her lord. Which is the entire

truth. My father—loves her dearly; grants her every wish before she has a chance to voice it. I could wish to find a lady with whom—well, that was one of the reasons that I sought Herrel and his lady.”

He was silent for so long, staring broodingly into the flames, that Glenda ventured to prompt him.

“So—you came here?”

“Eh? Oh, aye. And understandably enough, earned no small reputation among my mother-kin for hunting, though they little guessed in what form I did my tracking!” He grinned at her, and she found herself grinning back. “So when there were rumors of another Were here at the edge of the Waste—and a Were that thoughtlessly preyed on the beasts of these people as well as its rightful game—understandably enough, I came to hear of it. I thought at first that it must be Herrel, or a son. Imagine my surprise on coming here to learn that the Were was female! My reputation preceded me—the headman begged me to help—” He spread his hands wide. “The rest, you know.”

“What—what will you do with me now?” she asked in a small, fearful voice.

“Do with you?” He seemed surprised. “Nothing—nothing not of your own will, lady. I am not going to harm you—and I am not like my father and brother, to force a one in my hand into anything against her wishes. I—I go forward as I had intended—to find Herrel. You, now that you know what your actions should *not* be, may remain here—”

“And?”

“And I shall tell them I have killed the monster. You shall be safe enough—only remember that you must *never* let the leopard control you, or you are lost. Truly, you should have someone to guide and teach you, though—”

“I—know that, now,” she replied, very much aware of how attractive he was, gold eyes fixed on the fire, a lock of dark hair falling over his forehead. But no man had ever

found her to be company to be sought-after. There was no reason to think that he might be hinting—

No reason, that is, until he looked full into her eyes, and she saw the wistful loneliness there, and a touch of pleading.

“I would be glad to teach you, lady,” he said softly. “Forgive me if I am over-forward, and clumsy in my speech. But—I think you and I could companion well together on this quest of mine—and—I—” he dropped his eyes to the flames again, and blushed hotly “—I think you very fair.”

“Me?” she squeaked, more startled than she had been since he transformed before her.

“Can you doubt it?” he replied softly, looking up eagerly. He held out one hand to her. “Would you—come with me?”

She touched his fingers with the hesitation of one who fears to break something. “You mean you really want me with you?”

“Since I touched your mind—lady, more than you could dream! We are mind-kin, I think.”

She smiled suddenly, feeling almost light-headed with the revelations of the past few hours—then giggled, as an irrelevant thought came to her. “Harwin—what happens to your clothes?”

“My *what?*” He stared at her for a moment as if she had broken into a foreign tongue—then looked at her, and back at himself—and blushed, then grinned.

“Well? I mean, *I* left bits of jeans and T-shirt all over the Waste when *I* changed—”

“What happens to your ring, lady?”

“It—” Her forehead furrowed in thought. “I don’t know, really. It’s gone when I change, it’s back when I change back.” She regarded the tiny beast thoughtfully, and it seemed as if one of its topaz eyes closed in a slow wink.

“Were-magic, lady. And magic I think I shall let you avail yourself of, seeing as I can hardly let you go skyclad if you are to accompany me—” He rummaged briefly in his pack and came up with a shirt and breeches, both far too large for her, but that was soon remedied with a belt and much rolling of sleeves and cuffs. She dressed quickly under the shelter of his cloak.

“They’ll really change with me?” She looked down at herself doubtfully.

“Why not try them?” He stood, and held out his hand—then blurred in that disconcerting way. The black leopard looked across the fire at her with eyes that glowed with warmth and approval.

:The night still has time to run, Glenda-my-lady. Will you not run with it, and me?:

The eyes of the cat-ring glowed with equal warmth, and Glenda found herself filled with a feeling of joy and freedom—and of *belonging*—that she tossed back her head and laughed aloud as she had never in her life done before. She stretched her own arms to the stars, and called on the power within her for the first time with joy instead of anger—

And there was no pain—only peace—as she transformed into a slim, lithe she-leopard, whose eyes met that of the he with a happiness that was heart-filling.

:Oh yes, Harwin-my-lord! Let us run the night to dawn!:

* * *

Afterword

This used to be a song; one now called “Golden Eyes,” although the original name was the same as the story’s.

Then came the invitation from Andre to come play in her world. . . . Well, this was literally a dream come true, for ever since I had first set eyes on Witch World as a lonely misfit adolescent, I had longed to go there. Failing that, I longed to be able to write something set there, something Andre might see—and, dare I hope?—like.

It occurred to me immediately that since there was far more going on in the original song that I had written, this would be a perfect plot—especially since of all the peoples and creatures of Witch World, I felt most drawn to the Wereriders. But there was a problem: the females of that group do not share the shapechanging powers of the males. But then again—Estcarp males do not share Witch powers . . . and there was my answer. As with Simon Tregarth, my heroine would have to come from outside—our world. I checked with Andre, who told me that although the Gates were set to drop travelers in one particular spot (so Simon's Gate was out) she was certain there were several connecting here and there. And for my hero—who better than an offspring of one of the other thirteen brides from Year of the Unicorn. I chose Harl and Kildas because they were the most sympathetic of the couples to Herrel and Gillan, and perhaps the most likely to have birthed another Were-misfit. So there you have it, misfit from our world, misfit from theirs, finding that together they aren't such misfits after all. And a fantasy-dream held for twenty years come true. Thanks, Andre.

—MERCEDES LACKEY

