

The Leopard's Paw by Jay Lake

Standing against a deafening roar, Jacob Ervin slammed his fists, hardened weapons as powerful as any product of the metalsmith's art, into the head of the leaping cat. Fangs longer than his index finger brushed so close to his face that he could smell the rotten meat on the creature's breath. But his shattering blow had done its work. The head was already stove in.

He moved quickly, unsheathing his ancient poniard. The weapon kept a marvelous edge that belied the brutish neglect of its late owner. Ervin worked the point in under the sabretooth leopard's front right shoulder and gutted the beast in one great swoop. Long practice in the woods of Colorado stood him good stead under the alien sun as he skinned the cat.

The meat he abandoned for the carrion eaters already circling close. Let the hyenas and the vultures have it. Ervin had taken his trophy in single combat, a fair fight of muscle against muscle, backed by a superbly trained human intellect set against highly evolved predatory instinct. He could afford to be generous to those who would someday clean his own bones.

Carrying the bloody hide, he smiled into the glare of the setting sun. It would be a long run to his current camp, but the moon was rising and the smell of the cat upon him would ward off all but the most foolhardy animals.

###

He spent the next few days scraping and curing the hide. Ervin had picked this particular cave for his campsite because of the saline deposits nearby. He was not sure which of the local plants would be a good source of tannin, so he'd fallen back on the old frontier method of salt-curing. The thing stunk enough to bother even his prodigiously indifferent nose, but Ervin stayed the course.

This sabretooth leopard was key to his plan to enter the lost city of Redwater.

The Borgan tribal king had broken his word to Ervin. Betrayed by a savage! No American man could stand for such treatment, not if he wanted to look himself in the mirror again. Not that Ervin had seen a mirror since coming to this world, but the principle was the same.

The mountain-walls to the north were a boundary to everyone save those black buzzard-men who raided all the local tribes. He had yet to find a way across the rocky barrier, but he would. In the mean time, Ervin needed to settle his position among the savages once and for all. He had no ambition to be their king, but neither would he be subject to their whims and foolish taboos.

The leopard was coming along nicely. He'd boiled the skull, for the sake of being too hurried to bury it. Ervin had never chanced to study the taxidermist's art, but he had some notion of what he was about. He'd already set aside a pair of opals stolen from the Borgans to use for the leopard's eyes. Shame that he had no flashlight or other way of making them glow from within. Now that the skin was drying under its load of salt, Ervin worked on the wicker frame that would make it stand out from his body. This would transform him into a great cat padding through the night.

Redwater was where the last temple of the leopard priests had stood, before the savages had rebelled and thrown them down amid fire and but blood. The curses laid upon that benighted place were legendary. But curses meant nothing to a man as hard-driven and unforgiving of self as Ervin was.

###

A week to the day after he had hunted and killed the great predator, Jacob Ervin was ready to wear its pelt. The Borgans and their fellow tribes believed that the leopard priests had been skin changers,

walking the night with claws and fangs to punish the disloyal and slay the unwary. Ervin knew the secret of skin changing right enough—it was here in his hand.

He slipped the wicker frame across the shoulder and lashed the legs to his upper arms. The skull fell down over his forehead, while he had left the skin of the neck open to provide additional concealment as it dangled. The leopard's pelt was heavy, but he knew the aspect he presented to any man or beast watching was ferocious.

Ervin padded into the night, using a sort of crouched run he had practiced. It was as close as he could get to the bounding gait of the one of the great cats, but he reckoned that not many were going to stick around to criticize his errors.

Only a man could stand against the leopards of these hills, and not many men at that.

He made his practice run by night, to avoid betraying details out of place. Tall grass which Ervin the man could simply look over swatted Ervin the leopard in the face. A real cat would have stopped and sat up, or maybe taken a great leap, but neither was an option for him. He cursed the slashes the sharp plant blades opened in his skin, but kept running. He was not a man to shirk or set aside a task once committed to it.

Jacob Ervin was a near-perfect specimen of human development. His physique had been the envy of anatomists at the university in Boulder when he attended college, before all the trouble started. But the human body is not designed to run long distances bent double, especially not with forty pounds of wicker and hide pressing down upon it.

By the time he reached the little creek which marked the edge of what Ervin thought of as his front yard, his hips were like to kill him, and his hands were bloody from supporting his weight. He knew he'd need to take a few days to let the palms heal, and make some sort of hand-shoe. Running gloves.

He stopped to drink, careful to bend down and lap like a cat, his face to the water.

When he looked up from his refreshment, Ervin saw another sabretooth leopard watching him carefully from the other bank, not ten feet distant. An easy pounce for such a creature.

This was peril indeed! His poniard was back in his cave-camp. With the wicker bound to his upper arms, Ervin could not throw the bone-crushing punch he'd used to kill the cat from which he'd taken the skin. That had been a carefully-set ambush, too, baited with a wounded antelope check staked out and crying. He had been at his most prepared.

If the other cat leapt now, he was dead. By God, he'd show it a thing or two! Ervin tilted his head back and roared, the astonishing projective power of his massive lungs creating an unholy screech that woke the night-roosting birds amid the nearby reeds.

The other cat roared back at him, then turned to pad off into the moonlight.

Victory, even without force of arm, was still victory. Ervin's steps were lighter on the way back to his fire, though he took more care with his hands, avoiding the tall grass as much as possible.

By damn, he *was* the leopard, wasn't he? Sometimes a man had to allow himself a little pride, he thought.

#

Six days later, at the new moon, Ervin stood on a ridge and looked down upon his goal. Redwater's

cyclopean ruins were no more than bulking shadows by starlight. The river that threaded out of the shattered city was a darker line amid the black grass.

Ervin had brought his leopard skin here by travois, two day's march. It had taken him the days between to heal his hands and make the hand-boots. Now he shrugged his way into the wicker frame with practiced ease, lacing the arm stays. He saved the hand-boots til last. He was rather proud of the leopard spoor he'd worked in the palms.

Now, he thought, to the city.

The Borgans had believed with a passion that no man walking upright could enter Redwater. It was surrounded by curses, and everyone knew the ghosts of the leopard priests had the cold jealousy of the dead. Ervin himself had seen three Borgan youths race toward the walls in broad daylight, passions aflame with dares and counter-dares, before dropping dead in the grass. Older warriors had crawled in upon all fours to drag them forth.

The boys had no marks upon their bodies.

He reasoned that while the idea of a curse was plain foolery, it was possible some strange weapon from the ancient days existed within the ruins. Perhaps it threw a line of force at the height of a running man's beating heart. Perhaps it knew the shape of a man, through the workings of some dimly clever electromechanical eye. The Borgans and their brother tribes were charmingly primitive and downright obtuse, but it was clear enough to Ervin that an industrial civilization had once stood here.

Someone had the means to raise the great slabs which comprised the ruins of Redwater, after all. It would take more than crowds of slaves to do such work.

By going crouched within the skin of a leopard he would twice over fool whatever defenses lurked within. Further, if the Borgans were spying on him as they so often did when he descended from his solitary hills, they would see him go in as a leopard. To be known to those savages a skin changer could only stoke their fear of him. That in turn would build respect in their simple minds, and give Ervin the freedom of action he required for his longer-term plans.

He slunk through the grass, moving in his best approximation of a leopard's loping bound. The hardest part of this rig was seeing right before him. He accomplished this by tossing his head and looking beneath the fearsome teeth which framed the opening in front of his face.

The walls were close before him. Ervin's sense of direction had not betrayed him. The hand-boots were saving him great trouble and pain as well.

He loped onward, through the massive gates which had stood unbarred for three generations since the downfall of the city.

###

The streets were paved, which was strange for this world. Few went mounted and there were no carts or carriages here, let alone motorcars. Stranger still, the pavers were hexagonal. The effect was that of running across a vast stone honeycomb.

Ervin's goal was to steal the leopard's paw. It was the most sacred relic of the leopard priests. Legend said that the attack on the city had failed to breach the great temple, which was defended by skin changers. The Borgans and their temporary allies had burned out the city instead before retreating as the curse was laid down.

He reasoned that the paw would still be inside the temple. The priests were certainly dead, and their savage cult with them. There had been not so much as a balefire inside Redwater since the city was destroyed. With the widespread belief in the cure, no one would have come to steal it. With the leopard's paw in his hands, Ervin could bring the tribes to his word. Not to mention extract satisfaction from the troublesome Borgans.

He found his way to the center of the city, stopping only for the briefest glimpses from beneath his mask. The streets were clear at the centers but the verges were a jumble of rubble and dirt. Redwater seemed to be built on a radial plan. This was just as he had expected from looking at the city from a distance. Not to mention being consistent with the psychology of a religious center.

Running on all fours, Ervin found that he was more adapted to the curious gait. He trusted his finely-honed body to meet any challenge required of it. This was near his limits, though. He was pleased how well he was settling in.

Let the Borgans fear the leopard!

Soon enough he was in the central plaza. The dim light of the moonless night meant the temple bulked large as if it were new-built. It was difficult to see the signs of ruin here.

He bounded up the wide, shallow steps toward gaping black maws which had once been doors. Inside he would shed the skin and move deftly on two feet, as man was meant to. Ervin paused at the top of the steps, turned to face the empty city, and on an impulse released a great roar which echoed over the stone rooftops.

Much to his surprise, there was an answer to his challenge from nearby.

His blood ran hot. His vision flashed red a moment, while the hair on his body stood up. Once more he was confronted with a true leopard while unprepared to fight like man or beast! He had not considered that the scene by the creek might repeat itself.

There was nothing for it but to roar out his challenge once more.

This time the animal trotted into the square. The creature was a lighter shadow in the inky pools of blackness. He could see it pause, settle onto its haunches and issue another mighty challenge. The cat was insolent, he would give it that.

Then it leapt forward, racing up the stairs. Ervin stood to meet it and found he could not. The wicker and the pelt bound him too tightly. He snarled and hurled himself down the stairs on all fours, tail lashing.

The two sabretooth leopards collided in a snarling ball of fur and claws and teeth. They rolled back down into the plaza, each seeking a grip on the other's throat. Ervin slashed with his claws, laying open his attacker's flank. Then he realized what was happening.

He had *become* the leopard.

Skin changer indeed.

Even in another body, his spirit was a finely-honed weapon, his intellect dedicated to fine and brutal arts of combat. His muscles seemed to know what was wanted of him in this new form. His human self within did not know how to lose. Someday, when death claimed him at sword point or bloody-toothed, Ervin would die winning.

She (for he was suddenly all too keenly aware that the other was a leopardess) caught her foreclaws in

his chest. His great back legs came into play and he hooked her in the belly.

They rolled again to fetch up against the broken base of some fountain. He snapped at her neck, just missing, as she tried to wiggle out of his hold. Then she bit at him, catching the skin.

Their muzzles nearly touched in an eerie feline imitation of a human kiss. With that thought he found himself in his own form once more. The sensation of the change was elastic and electrifying, much like the touch of arcane scientific forces which had first projected him to this world.

Was skin changing nothing more than some ancient weapon? Perhaps the same which imposed the strictures of the curse.

In that same moment the leopardess writhed and changed to a woman. She was voluptuous, with bosoms each bigger than the span of his outstretched hand. Her female form was completely unclothed save for a bath of sweat and blood from the scratches he had laid upon her.

As distracting as her scent and proximate nudity might be, Ervin did not for a moment lose sight of the fact that they had just been fighting a battle to the death. He pinned her, his strength in human form far superior to her distaff physique.

“You have the advantage of me, ma’am,” he growled, some trace of the leopard’s roar still in his voice.

“You are the outlander,” she replied.

“Jacob Ervin, at your service.”

She thrust her groin against him. “Truly?”

“Later, perhaps.” He grinned. Ervin was not a man to be distracted by the rushing of blood to his nether parts. “Why did you seek to kill me?”

“It was you who gave challenge.”

“Truce?”

She nodded. “Truce.”

They both stood, stretching sore and wounded muscles. Ervin’s own carefully constructed wickerwork and hide was shredded. The woman seemed to have nothing but her skin. She also possessed the refreshing unselfconsciousness of the primitive. Her beauty was clothing enough.

“It is my plan to go within and retrieve the leopard’s paw,” he told her. “Are you set on stopping me?”

“I am afraid I cannot allow that,” she said.

“Why do you defend this place? It is nothing but dead stone and ashes.”

She shrugged. “Why do you attack it?”

“Because those who care about it are too craven. I would make them an example of my courage.”

“Then be brave,” she said. She touched the bottom of his chin. “Do not throw away your life, Jacob Ervin.”

He stepped back, admiring her sweat-slicked form gleaming in the starlight. Had there been a moon this

night he might have seen every curve and fold of her glorious body, but this was enough. Ervin thought he understood who this woman was.

Turning away from her, he ignored his own turgidity. She would follow or not. He would deal with her or not. His hearing was as superb and finely honed as the rest of his physique, and so he listened as his foot touched the first step.

There was a sort of rustle. She was returning to form.

A second step, and he heard a rush of air as she sprung off her back feet.

A third step, and he knew she would drop to bite the back of his head, as these cats did.

Ervin spun around, swinging his mighty fist at the spot in the air where he knew her skull must pass. She snapped her great fangs, her breath hot and close enough to fill his nose, but the blow of his hammer hand broke her skull.

The leopardess collapsed into the steps in a steaming heap. She kicked twice, then melted, fading to old bones and tattered fur.

“No clothing, no fur,” he told the corpse as it receded through the generations of time back toward the sacking of the city. “A man needs scraps to become a leopard. But when a leopard becomes a man, well... You should have been less quick to fight.”

Such a waste, he thought. She had been beautiful in both her forms.

He turned his attention to the temple, stepping into the shadows within to search for the leopard’s paw.

###

Dawn found him walking from the ruins of Redwater upright as a man should. The leopard’s paw was heavy in his hand. It was a large nugget of gold, roughly in the shape of its namesake, with three white crystals where the claws might be.

His greater treasure, though, was the weathered skull he’d found on the bottom of the temple steps when he exited. She had aged her years in dying, and so this bone was three generations old. But when Ervin raised his standard and took the tribes north to make war against the buzzard men from beyond the wall, the leopardess would watch over him.

A shame, he thought. He should have sampled her kiss when he had the chance. Ervin was certain he’d never meet her like again.

He turned, looking at the city as it rose in dawn’s red glare, and gave one last, echoing roar. Thanks, apologies, tribute to a fallen foe. It was of no real account. Only the next battle mattered.