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opening extract from

Cry of the Icemark

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CHAPTER 1

Thirrin Freer Strong-in-the-Arm Lindenshield carried her names with ease. She was thirteen years old, tall for her age and could ride her horse as well as the best of her father's soldiers. She was also heir to the throne of the Icemark. Her tutor might add that she was attentive when she wanted to be, clever when she bothered to try, and had her father's temper. Few compared her to her mother, who had died when Thirrin was born. But those who remembered the proud young woman of the fierce Hypolitan people said that Thirrin was her double.

The soldier riding guard over her didn't care about any of this. They'd been hunting in the forest since dawn and he was cold and tired, but Thirrin showed no signs of wanting to go home. They were following a set of tracks she insisted were werewolf prints, and the soldier was afraid she might be right. He'd already eased the spears in his scabbard and had been riding with his shield on his arm for the past hour.

Werewolves had been banished from the Icemark after the Ghost Wars in which Thirrin's father, King Redrought, had defeated the army of the Vampire King and Queen at the

Battle of the Wolfrocks. Probably the werewolf she was tracking was just a loner in search of easy hunting in the cattle pastures, but you could never be too careful. With any luck she could capture it, she thought, and take it back to the city as a prize. And perhaps, before it was executed, it could be made to give useful information about The-Land-of-the-Ghosts.

"Listen!" Thirrin said urgently, waking from a pleasant daydream about winning her father's respect and gratitude. "Just ahead – I can hear snarling!"

The soldier took her word for it and levelled his spear. "Pull in behind me," he said, forgetting all formality in the moment of danger.

But before they could move, the thick undergrowth that lined the path burst open and a huge animal leaped out. It was vaguely man-shaped but extremely hairy, and its face was a strange mixing of wolf and human. For a moment it stared at them, its eyes full of hate, then it charged. It easily dodged the soldier's clumsy thrust and headed straight for Thirrin, but her horse was battle-trained and it leaped forward to meet the attack, lashing out with its steel-shod hooves.

Taken by surprise, the werewolf took the full force of the kick, but it only staggered back for a second before growling with fury and attacking again. By this time, Thirrin had drawn her long cavalry sabre and in one fluid movement she wheeled her horse about, leaned from the saddle and hacked deeply into the werewolf's arm.

The soldier had recovered by now and he charged, knocking the wolfman off his feet. Before he could get up, both horses drew in shoulder-to-shoulder, snorting fiercely and lashing out with their hooves.

The creature scrambled to its feet and retreated into the thick undergrowth where the horses couldn't follow. For a moment it licked at its wounds with a long red tongue, then it emerged from the thorny bush and without warning threw itself at Thirrin's horse, knocking her from the saddle. Her charger blundered away screaming in terror and she lay on the path dazed and badly winded. For a moment she seemed to be watching a silent and tiny picture of the world from a point high above the action. She was dizzily aware that there was danger of some sort, but what it was exactly she couldn't quite remember. She watched as a soldier attacked a huge wolfman, but the creature broke his spear and the soldier's horse reared and galloped away as he clung on desperately. Now the wolfman was turning back and walking slowly towards her.

Reality crashed back. The world filled her head to the brim again and with a start she remembered where she was. The werewolf was approaching with slow deliberate steps as though it was enjoying the moment just before the kill, like a cat with a helpless mouse within easy reach.

Her sword lay close by, and grabbing it, she leaped to her feet. The creature stopped and drew back its lips over enormous teeth, almost as though it were grinning. Thirrin didn't hesitate; shouting the war cry of the House of Lindenshield, she attacked.

Before it could react, her blade bit deeply into its shoulder and it fell back, surprised by her ferocity. But then her boots slipped on wet leaves and she crashed to the ground. Immediately the creature pounced, and wrenching her sword away it sat astride her, its massive weight crushing the breath out of her lungs. Thirrin's fighting spirit still roared within her though, and as the creature lowered its jaws towards her throat

she punched it hard on the nose. The werewolf shook its head and sneezed, taken completely aback.

"Make it quick, wolfman, and make sure all the wounds are in front. I don't want anyone saying I died running away," she yelled, managing to keep the terror out of her voice.

The creature lowered its head towards her face again, but this time its eyes were filled with an almost human expression of puzzlement. It stayed like that for nearly a minute, seeming to scrutinise her. Then without warning it threw back its head and howled, its voice climbing to a high chilling note before falling slowly away to silence. It looked at her again, its eyes so human that Thirrin felt she could almost talk to it. Suddenly it leaped away leaving her to gasp for breath, its enormous weight gone.

Slowly she struggled to a sitting position and watched as the werewolf picked up her sword and drove it point first into the thick forest litter. Then it did something that amazed her: the huge creature bowed, folding one of its arms across its torso while the other swept out before it in a delicate gesture, like the most fashionable of courtiers.

Despite everything Thirrin almost giggled. The werewolf threw back its head again, and a rough coughing and growling noise burst from its mouth as though it was laughing. Then it ran off through the trees, leaving nothing behind but shaking branches.

Thirrin climbed to her feet and collected her sword. She was trembling with shock, but fascinated. Why didn't the werewolf kill her? Could such creatures think and make decisions? And if so, did this one actually decide to let her live?

She was astounded. Everything she'd ever been told and all of her beliefs and ideas about the Wolf-folk were shaken by

this. She'd always thought they were mindless killers, as unthinking as any other primitive and evil creature from beyond the Icemark's northern borders, and yet the wolfman had shown . . . what? Compassion, perhaps?

A crashing and thrashing in the trees interrupted her thoughts, and she levelled her sword ready for a renewed attack. But it was only her soldier escort. He'd regained control of his bolting horse and had come charging back ready to die in her defence. Better that than die as a punishment for not carrying out his duty properly.

Thirrin had to endure almost ten minutes of him checking her over for injuries, and a long and detailed explanation of how he had had no chance of controlling his horse when it bolted. But at last she was allowed to mount his horse and they started the slow journey home. Silently she thought through everything that had happened. Could she really just reject all she'd ever accepted as true about werewolves? Her quick mind continued to puzzle through the amazing possibility that the Wolf-folk were thinking, and even *feeling*, creatures as she continued her journey home.

After a few minutes of Thirrin riding pillion her own horse reappeared, trotting out of the trees, whinnying with relief to see them.

"Fat lot of good you were," Thirrin said grumpily. "I should have let the wolfman have you."

They took the most direct route homeward and eventually the dense tangle of trees opened up into small clearings and woodcutters' camps as they reached the eaves of the forest. Then the trees gave way completely and the land stretched out before them. They reined to a halt and stared out over the wide

plain that surrounded Frostmarris, the capital of the Icemark. The land was a patchwork of hedgerows and fields, orchards and gardens, all green and fertile in the country's short summer, while directly ahead the city rose out of the surrounding farmland like a huge stone ship in a sea of golden wheat.

Each of its massive gates faced the direction of one of the four winds, and over the south gate hung the huge Solstice Bell, its polished bronze gleaming in the bright sunshine, seeming to beckon Thirrin and her escort home. At the centre of the settlement she could see her father's fortress dominating the streets from its position high on the hill. The royal banner of a fighting white bear on a blue background was clearly visible, as a cool breeze stretched it flat and snapping in the air as though it were leading a charge of King Redrought's cavalry.

Thirrin spurred her horse on, already recovering from the shock of the battle and anxious to tell her father about the wolfman. They thundered across the plain, raising a cloud of dust on the summer-dry roads, and soon she and her soldier escort were riding through the gates of the city and up the main street. It was market day, and country people from the surrounding villages and farms lined the way with their stalls, selling everything from vegetables and cheeses to eggs and newly slaughtered meat. It was hot, and swarms of flies had been drawn to the blood and offal, making Thirrin's horse skittish so that it snorted and sidled as they moved slowly through the crowds.

"Make way for the Princess!" her escort shouted, spurring ahead and using his horse to force people aside. Unused to seeing royalty, some of the country folk who rarely came to the city stared as Thirrin rode by. Some even pressed

forward to touch the hem of her tunic or her riding boots as though she were a holy relic of some sort. This embarrassed her deeply, and she immediately unslung her shield and rode along with it on her arm, hiding behind the mask of her status.

"It's the Princess! It's the Princess!" The whisper ran ahead of her through the crowd of country people. Thirrin found herself wishing she'd worn her helmet and not just the simple iron cap she usually wore for hunting. At least in her war gear she had a noseguard that hid part of her face. She could only hope the crowd of bumpkins thought her blushes were simply the high colour of a warrior.

At last she reached the outer gates of the upper city, and the guards on duty barred the way as required. "Who seeks entry to the King's presence?" the soldiers demanded formally. Thirrin stared at them in silent pride and waited for her escort to answer for her.

"His daughter and heir, Princess Thirrin Freer Strong-in-the-Arm Lindenshield."

The guards snapped to attention and Thirrin rode through into the castle. As soon as she'd crossed the wide courtyard she dismounted and left the reins of her horse trailing on the ground, knowing that a groom would run to collect the animal. Then she strode into the Great Hall of her father's fortress.

Just inside the yawning archway of the doors, she paused for a moment to let her eyes grow accustomed to the dim light. Slowly the battered shields of long-dead housecarles – the army's professional soldiers – and the banners of old wars emerged from the gloom, and she once again strode forward.

Before her, the flagstone floor seemed to stretch away forever into the shadows, but here and there small islands of

light pooled on to the age-scarred stones as sunshine lanced down from smoke vents high in the roof. At the far end of the hall she could make out the raised dais where a throne of black oak stood. Its arms had been carved to represent the forelegs of a bear, and its feet into those of a dragon. And above it hung the battle standard of the Icemark: a standing polar bear, lips drawn back in a vicious snarl and claws outstretched. This very standard had been carried by Thirrin's father when the army of the Vampire King and Queen had finally been defeated at the Battle of the Wolfrocks.

Nobody was sitting on the throne, and when Thirrin reached the dais she quickly walked behind it and ducked her head to enter a low doorway. Beyond it lay a small cosy room where King Redrought Strong-in-the-Arm Lindenshield, Bear of the North, mighty warrior and wise king was soaking his feet in a wide basin of water. He was leaning back in a chair stuffed with plump cushions and his eyes were closed. But Thirrin knew he was awake because he wasn't snoring, and a small wizened man had just finished his move in a game of chess.

"You're cheating again, Grimswald!" the King's voice snapped.

"Oh, was I? I'm sure I didn't mean to. I must have made a mistake. I'll put the bishop back, shall I?" the little old man answered in a reedy voice.

Redrought opened a bloodshot eye and glared at Grimswald.

"Yes, I'll put the bishop back," the little old man concluded.

At this point the King noticed his daughter. "Ah, Thirrin! Come in, come in! Just top up the basin will you? My corns are really bad today." He nodded to a kettle steaming gently

on a spirit stove and Thirrin dutifully crossed the room, picked it up and poured the hot water into the basin.

"Put some cold in first!" Redrought bellowed, snatching his feet from the water and sloshing much of it across the floor.

"Sorry," Thirrin said meekly, and mixed hot and cold water in a large pitcher before pouring it into the foot basin.

"Ah, that's better!" Redrought boomed again. In fact, the King only ever seemed to bellow, boom or shout, no matter what his mood. But nobody seemed to mind too much; at least he never had to repeat himself.

As he settled back into his cushions Thirrin noticed that his huge red beard – that spread across his chest like a fire in a mountain forest – had started to swing and swirl, and she watched in fascination as a small tabby head appeared and blinked at her.

"Ah, Primplepuss, there you are!" the King cried, seizing the kitten in his huge war-callused hands. "I knew I'd seen you earlier. I must remember to comb out my beard before I go to bed. I don't want to squash you, do I?"

Primplepuss gave a tiny mew in reply, and Redrought watched her fondly as she proceeded to wash a paw.

"Father, I have some important news," Thirrin said, when she thought she could drag his attention away from the kitten.

"Well, it must be important, Grimswald," King Redrought said to the old man. "She only ever calls me 'Father' when she's done something wrong, or a disaster's at hand."

"I've done nothing wrong, Father."

"Then what's happened?"

"I fought a werewolf in the forest this morning."

"A werewolf, eh? You're not hurt, are you?" he asked, grabbing her arms and looking her over closely. She shook her

head, and after a few more minutes of careful scrutiny, he nodded his head and went on. "Well, we can't have the Wolf-folk making themselves at home, now, can we? Exactly where did you see it? And did you kill it?"

"Just beyond Peninsula Point, near the Black Peak, and no, I didn't kill it. It was only wounded in its left shoulder and upper arm, and it was pretty kicked about by the horses."

"Nothing to a werewolf. I'll have to send out a patrol."

"Yes!" Thirrin agreed looking up, her eyes alight. "But first I want to ask you something, Dad." She paused as she gathered her thoughts. "Can . . . can werewolves *feel* and *think*? I mean like people do. And can they . . . understand that we have . . . oh, I don't know, *thoughts* and *feelings* and *lives* to live?"

Redrought fell silent as he thought this through. He'd spent most of his life fighting the Wolf-folk, and other creatures from beyond his northern borders. He'd never had either the time or the inclination to wonder if they thought about anything. But he was a good king, and shrewd enough to know that something important lay behind his daughter's questions. "Why do you ask? What's happened?"

Thirrin took a deep breath. "The werewolf could have killed me today, but it didn't. It disarmed me and could have ripped my throat out. But when I punched it on the nose and told it to make it quick, it stopped and let me go. It even stuck my sword in the ground and left it for me to collect. And I don't understand why. If Wolf-folk can't feel and think, why did it let me live?"

Redrought didn't know, and at that moment he didn't care. He just felt an enormous sense of relief sweep over him. Suddenly he gathered his daughter in a bear-like hug that

made her gasp for breath almost as much as the wolfman had when it sat on her. "You will not take such risks again! Do you hear me?" he roared, his anger fuelled by the terrible realisation that his daughter could so easily have been killed.

"But, Dad, I didn't take any risks. Werewolves don't usually come into the forest. How could I have known it was going to be there?"

Redrought knew this was true, but it didn't make him feel any better. He released her from the hug and sat down again heavily. "I'll send a full patrol out immediately."

"And I want to lead it."

"Oh no, young madam. My daughter and heir will stay safely here in the castle. Let some other hotheads earn their spurs," Redrought said decisively.

"But they'll need me to guide them to the right spot. Nobody else knows the way."

"Apart from your soldier escort," the King said, a hint of triumph in his tone.

"Apart from my soldier escort," Thirrin was forced to agree reluctantly.

"Good! Grimswald, call in the captain of the guard. You can give him details, Thirrin, and then run along to your tutor. Geography today, if I'm not mistaken."

Grimswald piped at the door for the guard, who arrived in a clatter of armour.

"Captain Edwald. The Princess reports a werewolf close to the city. Take details and send out a patrol!" the King boomed, stroking Primplepuss gently. The kitten screwed her eyes shut against the huge blast of Redrought's voice, then as Thirrin and the captain withdrew to confer, she rubbed her tabby face against the King's enormous finger as it tickled her cheek.

* * *

Thirrin was furious. She should have led the patrol to find the werewolf, not that oik of a soldier! And not only that, but the patrol would probably kill the werewolf as soon as they found it, and she wasn't sure how she felt about this. She couldn't help remembering that it could easily have killed her if it had wanted to, and neither could she forget the way it had bowed so ridiculously and had seemed to laugh before it ran off. She stormed angrily along the deeply shadowed corridor to her tutor's room, striding like an avenging war goddess through the sudden bursts of sunlight beneath each window.

Arriving at her tutor's door, she hit it once with her mailed fist and burst through. Maggiore Totus was just drinking a cooling beaker of water, most of which he spilt down his black gown as he spluttered his surprise. But one look at Thirrin's blazing eyes stopped him saying anything about good manners being necessary even for a princess. Instead he smiled in welcome, and waved her to a seat next to the window. "Perhaps Her Majesty would be more comfortable in a dress rather than chain-mail?" he asked, using the stiff formality of his speech as a shield against Thirrin's bad temper.

"No!" she snapped. But relenting slightly, she removed her sword belt and hung it on the back of her chair. It was Maggiore Totus's job to make sure she was as well educated as the heir to the Icemark throne should be. But only the lessons of the horse and weapons masters really held her attention. Everything else slowed time to a sluggish crawl for her, and she'd perfected the art of staring at her books while her mind galloped over the plains or sailed out on the grey Icemark seas.

Now, as Maggiore Totus sorted through his notes, she let

her mind drift away once again, imagining herself riding on the back of one of the huge Snowy Owls that lived on the winter icefields. From her vantage point on the owl's broad white back she could see the Wolfrock Mountains rising steeply from the northern plain, setting their jagged peaks like teeth against the cold blue of the sky, while to the south, the peaks known as the Dancing Maidens rose and undulated gently across the horizon then slowly descended as low green hills into the lands of the Polypontus Empire. Maggiore had told her that this strange name actually meant 'many bridges', and reflected the huge number of rivers that flowed through the rich green country.

From the height on the back of her imagined Snowy Owl she could see the multitude of rivers flowing across the Imperial land like fine silver threads stitched into a fabulous green cloth, embroidered with the regular field patterns of farmland and the dark splotches of forest, marsh and pasture.

Then she flew over the cities of this wealthy southern realm, their streets sprawling and grey below her. The settlements had grown so large they'd burst beyond their walls and threatened the green land around them with dark factories, that sent smoke thousands of feet up into the air as they filled the country's treasury with gold. With this wealth the Polypontus had built a massive army, which over the years had conquered a huge empire that stretched beyond Thirrin's knowledge to all points of the compass. The army was led by the fearsome General Scipio Bellorum, who had never lost one of his wars of conquest and had won every battle he commanded personally.

Thirrin's owl now flew lower over the streets of the Empire's cities. There she saw the people. Some were richly dressed and walked with a confidence that cleared a path

through the crowds thronging the pavements. Many were dressed as soldiers, ready to fight and die in the Empire's wars. But most wore rags, and a large number of these were slaves assigned to the factories that made the weapons the army needed for its wars in distant lands.

This was the reality of the Empire. People were just one more thing to be used by those few who ruled the massive territories. And if Thirrin had wondered if anything was truly different for the peasants of her own society, she might have argued that in the Icemark no one was called a slave and no one was forced to work in factories that poisoned the air and corrupted the land. The fact that the life of a 'serf' living on her father's land was little different to that of a slave would not have troubled her. At least their people lived in their own homes and ate some of the food they laboured to grow.

Then in the eye of her imagination her owl wheeled north until they flew over the Icemark once again, and below her the forests and pastures flowed like a green sea around the walled islands of its towns. It was only in the winter that the kingdom lived up to its name and truly became the Icemark, white and frozen from the Wolfrocks to the Dancing Maidens for seven months of the year.

Maggiore Totus watched Thirrin as her eyes gazed unseeingly into the middle distance, and he sighed. She was the most difficult pupil he'd ever had to teach, but she was also one of the cleverest. And it was this knowledge that kept him in the palace as royal tutor. Deep down in the recesses of his brilliant mind he harboured the hope that he'd awaken a love of learning in this warrior princess, so that one day the Icemark would be ruled by a scholar as well as a fighter.

But any hope of that seemed a very long way off, and in

the meantime he settled to the task of trying to regain her attention. "I think we'll postpone our lesson on the primary income source of the Southern Continent, and concentrate instead on the topography of famous battle sites."

Thirrin grunted and nodded her head, her mood slightly improved, and surprised herself by actually enjoying the lesson.