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Opening extract from

# Last Battle of the Icemark

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Published by

**Chicken House**

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# CHAPTER ONE

The gentle crackle of burning logs was the only physical sound that disturbed the peace. Outside the window the cold autumn night sparkled and glittered with stars, and the moon ladled a silver puddle of light across the floor of the darkened room. It was the night before Samhein, or Halloween as some of the older country folk still called it, and the veils between the physical and spirit worlds were so thin that Oskan Witchfather could clearly hear the whisper and echo of voices beyond.

As a warlock and wielder of magic, none of this held any fears for him; he knew he was simply listening to part of the natural – and supernatural – order of the Cosmos. His ear automatically sifted through the various calls and voices of the ether, identifying and categorising each and every phenomenon it encountered: ghost, banshee, Undead, demon, angel.

He rested his mind for a moment in the peace of the Spirit Realms; its sounds of birdsong, the perfume of flower-scented breezes and the gentle sibilance of falling silver rains marked it as the residence of the Goddess and the place of Heavens such as Valhalla and the Summerlands.

He slowly drifted towards sleep, most of his powers veiled in that protective state that kept them safe from the clamour and noise of the living and unliving worlds. But then a sudden gust of wind breathed around the stonework of the window, the rush of air finding a voice in the cracks and crevices and softly wailing with a note of such despair and omen that it shook the Witchfather from his rest. Oskan fully opened his mind again, searching for signs of danger. Immediately his head was filled with the entire tumbling, tangling cacophony of the spiritual and natural worlds, and he listened carefully.

He soon found what he was looking for. An unmistakeable ‘voice’ calling in the Darkness, and growing stronger day by day. A tone that was deeply evil … and familiar. Medea!

A time was fast approaching when he’d need to face this new threat, and either destroy it or be destroyed. He sighed and settled back into his seat, trying to recapture the peace that had fled. There was always time enough for confrontation, and he wasn’t ready yet for the struggle that would come. He needed to gather his strength and prepare his powers before he would be ready for battle. And, if he was completely honest with himself, he had to admit that he was more than a little afraid of what he’d found.

For the time being, he wanted to rest from the dangers of the world and the Cosmos, and for the next two days or so he was determined to enjoy the celebrations of Samhein. He closed his psychic ear, and listened instead to the physical activities of the palace around him.

The kitchens had been busy all day, preparing food for the great feast that would take place the following night, and the faint clatter of pots and pans reached him as the chefs and scullions hurried about in a desperate attempt to spread the heavy workload over two days. Of course, most of the cooking would need to be done on the day of Samhein itself, but some of the cakes and pastries would actually improve if left to mature for a few hours in a cool pantry. And many of the cold meats and pickles would take no harm if stored away carefully.

Dozens of guests had already settled into the citadel, and, most importantly, Tharaman-Thar and Krisafitsa-Tharina, the giant Snow Leopard monarchs of the Icesheets far to the north, and their daughter Princess Kirimin, were due to arrive in a matter of a few hours or so. But there was still time for peace in all of the joyous

chaos, and the threat of new powers arising in the Darkness. He decided to steal a few minutes' sleep before the demands of the festival became too great.

He'd just wriggled his shoulders deeper into the cushions and composed himself for rest when an unmistakeable sound floated into his consciousness. Outside the firmly closed door, the huge expanse of the empty Great Hall echoed like a bell. The servants had finished decorating it for the Samhein feast and were wisely keeping all the housecarles and werewolves out until the actual day of the celebration, so the crunch and tread of a pair of chain-mailed boots as they paced across the flagstones sounded almost as loud as an entire advancing army. With great determination Oskan ignored it, but the noise was getting closer and closer until, with a rattle and bang, the door was wrenched open and his wife and warrior queen, Thirrin Freer Strong-in-the-Arm Lindenshield, burst into the room.

"Arse, arse and arse again!" she shouted.

The Witchfather was used to this sort of drama, so it was only reluctantly that he opened his eyes and watched as his wife, dressed in full armour, busily handed her shield and weapons to one of the housecarle door guards.

"Good evening, dearest," he said deciding to use quiet irony as a shield against her noise and bluster.

"And arse yet again," she answered. "And a mucky one at that!"

"Yes, I'm very well, thank you. And yourself?"

"I'm thinking of banning all messages and news over the Samhein period. At least that way I'll be able to relax and enjoy it."

"Yes, it is a lovely evening, isn't it? The stars and moonlight are truly splendid."

"I can't imagine why we thought the werewolf relay was a good idea. All it does it tell us of war and death and chaos."

“Yes, I love the night before Samhein too. It’s so peaceful. The lull before the chaos, I suppose – but still, it is pleasant.”

Thirrin paused and looked at him. “What are you wittering on about, Oskan? Here I am worrying about the latest reports from the Polypontian Empire, and all you can do is whine on about moonlight like some love-struck teenager!”

He sighed, his attempts to hang on to at least a semblance of domestic peace completely defeated. “I know all about what’s happening in the empire. I heard the reports.”

“Fine!” said Thirrin, taking off her mail shirt and draping it over the back of a chair. “So what are we going to do?”

“Watch events carefully, and see what happens,” he answered wearily. “It’s all we’ve ever been able to do.”

She drew breath to reply irritably, then paused before finally saying, “You’re right, of course. When has the Icemark ever dictated events?” She crossed to a chair that stood facing Oskan’s on the opposite side of the hearth, and sat down heavily. “But wouldn’t it be nice to be in control of events, just once? I mean, here we are, the defeaters of the Bellorum dynasty, the breakers of the Imperial host, and all we can do is watch while the Polypontian Empire destroys itself fighting dozens of internal wars, and wait to see who comes out on top!”

Oskan nodded. “And by the looks of things, whoever does finally get to be top dog will be a threat to us … again.”

Thirrin leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. “But we already know who it’ll be, don’t we? Erinor of Artemesion and her unstoppable hordes.”

For a while he didn’t reply, and just sat gazing deeply into the flames of the fire.

“I somehow get the impression I don’t have your undivided attention!” Thirrin snapped. “I mean, is there any real point continuing this conversation?”

He looked up and smiled apologetically. “I’m sorry, Thirrin. I’m a bit distracted.”

She threw up her hands in despair. “Ye Gods! What can be more distracting than the break-up of the Polypontian Empire and the possibility of a war with Erinor and her invincible army? Come on, man, spit it out!”

Oskan shuddered as all of his instincts suddenly screamed at him that the moment had come. He would have to tell his wife the secret he’d been harbouring, the very subject he’d been trying to avoid for months. He looked at her quietly as he gathered the strength he’d need to tell her the terrible truth.

“Medea,” he finally replied, and the name seemed to fall like a lead weight into the middle of the room.

“Medea?” said Thirrin quietly. “But … but she’s dead.”

A silence developed, deepening as Oskan turned back to the flames. “The Icemark and the allies banished her … no, no. Let’s be honest, now that we’ve come to it; *I* banished her to the Darkness after the last war. And by all the laws and rules of normality, she should have died.” Oskan looked up and held his wife’s gaze. “She *should* have died, Thirrin. But our daughter is beyond the laws and rules of normality.”

“She’s alive?” came the reply in a horrified whisper. “Medea’s alive in that dreadful, hideous place?”

He nodded. “But if it’s any comfort to you, please don’t think she’s in any sort of torment or pain. Oh no, not our dearest daughter! If anything she’s the tormentor; she’s the inflictor of pain!”

Thirrin heard almost none of this. Her mind was in turmoil. Medea was alive: their child, the daughter they'd raised and loved. Medea, the traitor who'd disrupted her own country's war effort and who'd tried to kill her own brother! Medea, the Adept who could have helped to defeat the empire, but who instead had plotted against her family and helped the enemy!

Thirrin was racked by a tumult of conflicting emotions: undeniable joy that her child had cheated death and still lived; seething anger for the crimes that child had committed. But at the base of it all was something else: a terrible crushing guilt that she'd never been able to relate to the child who'd had no interest in the military and warfare. Could her neglect, her inability to reach out to her strange, aloof daughter, have somehow pushed her towards the Darkness? Could she, Thirrin, be responsible for her embracing evil?

"Are you listening to me?" Oskan asked, breaking into her thoughts and dragging her attention back to the present.

"Yes … yes. Medea, she's alive."

"More than that, I'm afraid—"

"Why didn't you tell me?" she interrupted quietly. "Why didn't you tell me my daughter's still alive?" Then, with sudden suspicion and a rising tone, "How long have you known?"

He turned away again to look into the fire. This was another question he'd been dreading. "I've known for certain only a short while. But I've suspected for some time."

Thirrin slammed her hands down hard on the arms of her chair. "Why didn't you say? I'm her mother, I have a right to know!"

"You know now."

“Not good enough … not nearly good enough! You should have told me when you had the first inklings of a suspicion! Not wait until you knew for sure and needed to talk about … about … well, about what, exactly? How glad you are, perhaps? How relieved you are that she’s alive; how sorry you are that you were driven to send her into the Darkness in the first place?!”

“No. None of that. I’m not relieved she’s alive or sorry I exiled her,” he said quietly. “Exactly the opposite, in fact. I regret she survived and I’m only sorry the Darkness didn’t finish her once and for all. But sometimes that … *place* reacts in ways that even I can’t fathom.”

Thirrin leaped to her feet, a raging outburst rising in her throat. But then she stopped and stood quietly instead, fully aware that her anger stemmed from her own terrible sense of guilt. “What can we do?”

“I’m not sure. We need to make a decision, but to do that you need to know all the facts.”

Thirrin sat down again and rested her head against the high back of the chair. “Go on.”

He paused, uncertain how his wife would take what he was about to say. But then, taking a deep breath, he plunged in. “She’s evil, more evil than you can ever imagine. And her power has grown enormously. I’ve been watching her ever since I first detected her unmasked mind and recognised it. I’m not entirely sure what she’s planning, but we must be on our guard, she still hates the Icemark, in fact even more so since her exile, and I think she’s after revenge.” He poured it all out in one breath and waited for her response.

“Is there no hope of rescuing her and perhaps … well, I don’t know, making her see sense?”

Oskan laughed despite the terrible nature of the situation. “She doesn’t want to be rescued, Thirrin. Don’t you see? In the Darkness she has status and power. She’s almost a queen. And she has only one more test to pass and she’ll have proved herself the most powerful Adept in the domain. The most powerful of all, save for one …”

“Save for one? And who might that be, exactly?” Thirrin asked, catching the significance of the phrase, and then she watched as he drew into himself, unable to go on. It was almost as though a huge weight had been levered onto his shoulders and his skeleton was being crushed under the burden.

“My father,” he finally answered quietly. Suddenly his head was filled with a raging fire of sensations, as light and sound, rich scents and terrible stenches flooded his senses.

Thirrin screamed as he slumped forward in his seat, but then stood back when she recognised the symptoms of the Sight. All she could do was wait and hope that he came out of the trance quickly.

But deep within his head, Oskan was feeling completely in control. After the initial explosion of sensations, he was now standing on what looked like a hillside under a sky that was grey, but bright with a soft light that spilled over the world in a gentle wash of brilliance. He watched as a figure walked towards him through a glowing mist that was slowly gathering in rolling banks. As far as he could tell the figure was female, dressed in flowing robes and with long golden hair that waved and rolled in a wind that Oskan couldn’t feel at all. Obviously, whoever or whatever the figure was, she had some significance in his vision, so he waited quietly until she was near enough for him to call out politely. But before he could say a word the figure was suddenly standing before him.

“Oskan Witchfather,” she said in a beautiful, musical voice. “I am a messenger sent by the Goddess herself. Listen well to what I have to tell and show you, because the decisions and actions you must take afterwards could change everything you have ever known, and ever will know.”

Oskan opened his mouth to ask exactly what she meant, but before he could speak his head was filled once again with a raging fire of sensations. He seemed to be falling from an incredible height, tumbling over and over as he desperately tried to regain some sort of control. His vision was nothing but a blur of speeding colours as he fell, and his ears were stuffed with a roaring wind. Then he hit the ground with a jarring, bone-breaking thud that drove through his spirit form and left him almost senseless.

He lay unmoving for what seemed like hours, but gradually sensation returned and he looked about him at a grey, lowering sky and a stark landscape of twisted, tortured rocks. Immediately he knew he was being granted a vision of the past, of the *deeply ancient* past. He somehow knew he was looking at a place from before the world was made; before the universe had been shaped and moulded from the chaos; before even time itself had been made and calibrated and set on its infinite way. This was the domain of the Goddess, from a time when Creation had hardly begun.

Then suddenly the mysterious messenger was with him again, a gentle and sad smile playing around her lips as she looked at him. “Come with me, Oskan Witchfather,” she said.

Silently he took her hand and allowed himself to be led to a rock that rose out of the plain. In the distance he could see a gathering of figures, and closing his eyes he felt himself being taken closer. When he opened them again, he gasped aloud in awe and fear. He was looking on the Goddess herself.

Thirrin looked on in mental agony as Oskan squirmed in his chair, but there was nothing she could do other than watch and wait. Dragging her chair closer, she sat and gently took her husband's hand, taking care not to disturb the trance.

Meanwhile, deep within his vision, Oskan noticed movement. A group of fifty or so figures were being brought to stand before the Mother Of All, and realising the huge importance of the vision, he steeled himself to watch.

"Who are these who stand before Me?" a voice of polished clarity asked.

"You know well who we are, and you know even better who *I* am," a voice answered. "We are the spirits and angels who were brave enough to stand against the tyranny of the Goddess. We are they who challenged your power and right to rule; we are they who made the very foundations of Heaven itself tremble."

"I stand not in judgement over you, but offer instead forgiveness," the gentle tone continued. "Come back to Me, accept My love, return to the perfection of unity, and all dissent will be forgotten."

The mild good reason of the voice flowed like cool wine slaking a raging thirst, and Oskan waited, confident that its offer would be accepted. Then, as he watched, almost all the rebel angels and spirits moved forward to be welcomed and embraced by the light and benevolence of the Goddess.

But seven figures still stood in defiance, outfacing the Goddess. Then at last the leader of the rebels spoke.

'You have destroyed my army, and reduced my allies to broken-spirited cravens. But I will not give you the pleasure of seeing me beg for mercy. I defy you still! I will defy you forever! Victory may be yours today, but tomorrows will dawn when you will know the bitter savour of defeat. Look to your walls and ramparts, and arm your

angels and sanctified dead, for one day you will see the banners of Cronus riding against you again!'

The Goddess remained silent for a long time after that, and when she replied it was with actions rather than words. With a deep cracking sound, the ground beneath the feet of the seven figures gaped open and they fell.

Wails of despair and rage rose up to fill the ether, and suddenly the scene disappeared as Oskan too began to fall. Once more his senses were overwhelmed as the wind of his speed filled his ears with a roaring sound, and he seemed to be tumbling and rolling through endless miles of air.

He was filled with a deep, unending agony of despair as he felt the emotions of the defiant spirits. The Goddess had rejected them! Despite her promise to forgive, she'd withdrawn her love and compassion and now the rebels were falling through aeons into a black and empty exile. Oskan could feel their rage and sense of betrayal as it burned their souls with a livid fire. But then, out of the pain, a towering hatred grew, and a ravening need for revenge.

Thirrin watched as her husband writhed and struggled in his chair, and, unable to help herself, she gathered him up in a restraining hug as she tried to calm him.

But Oskan was aware of nothing other than the Fall he'd just witnessed. The spirit who had openly defied the Goddess in his vision had been Cronus himself. The mighty one whose power was only just a little less than that of the Mother Of All; he was the Evil One; the maker of wars and hatreds, the enemy of Heaven.

Oskan opened his eyes and found that he was lying on the hillside again beneath the glowing sky, and nearby the messenger stood watching him with concern. "So,

Oskan Witchfather, now you too have experienced the Fall, and know of the rebellion against the love and judgement of the Goddess. What have you to say?"

For a moment he could say nothing, and simply shook his head. But then he looked up. "They were fools," he answered simply. "The greatest of all fools. Who else could have rejected such unconditional forgiveness?"

The messenger smiled as though relieved. Stepping closer, she sank down to sit beside him. "Yes, they were fools, but even so, they were powerful and a threat to all Creation, and they remain so to this day." She fell silent and Oskan waited, knowing more was to come.

"And now I must give you a warning, Oskan Witchfather: you must know that a time of terrible danger is approaching, a time when the very fabric of all Creation itself could be ripped apart and made again into something hideous and corrupt. And you must also know that only you can stop it."

The terrible burden of her words settled over him with a crushing dread. "Why me?" he asked at last. "Why can't the Goddess destroy them?"

"Because the Goddess is the Mother and Creator of all; she doesn't destroy her own children! But she recognises that unless the evil ones are stopped, all of the Cosmos is endangered. Therefore she has appointed you, Oskan Witchfather, to stand against this threat, and to stop it before all that is good and beautiful is ended."

Panic engulfed him as a sense of such hideous, boundless responsibility ripped aside all semblance of self-control. "But … but how can I stop them?" he asked in despair.

The messenger took his hand and gripped it firmly. "I am to tell you that the Goddess will give you a weapon: a means of breaking the power of this enemy and defeating it once and for all. But you must also know that this weapon has no physical

form; it is neither blade nor gun, fire nor explosion. It is a weapon of knowledge alone, and you will find it within yourself. But before I give you this knowledge, you must also know that it can cut both ways. The biter can be bitten, and a terrible sacrifice will be asked of the one who uses it."

Oskan shuddered, but after a time of silence he looked up and said, "Tell me."

The messenger said not a word, but placed the knowledge within his mind, and immediately he collapsed as all the terrible implications hit him.

"But how can I use such a thing?" he whispered, appalled.

"To stop the evil ones and their allies, you must. But the Goddess, even now, does not command you to use it. When the time comes, you must make your choice."

Oskan nodded, accepting that he could never truly understand the reasons behind the decisions of the Goddess. She had chosen him and he must make of it what he could. But when the battle began, he would have to choose what to do.

"There is one thing more you need to know," the messenger said, interrupting his thoughts. "All knowledge of this weapon must be kept secret. No one must know, not even your closest and most beloved; not even Queen Thirrin. Its power lies in the fact that no Adept, whether evil or not, has ever known of it. In this way the wicked have been kept under some control down the millennia. But if ever its secret is revealed then all of its power will be lost; it will be rendered useless. Know too, Oskan Witchfather, that only you, of all Adepts who have ever lived, have been given this knowledge, such are the times that we live in. The final confrontation is almost upon us, and the Warrior of Light must stand forth."

Oskan was rendered speechless; the responsibility was too great. If he could have, he would have run away, far from the Goddess and her messenger, and far from what was being asked of him. But before he could think or act further, the world suddenly

shifted and swirled around him and he felt himself falling again. On and on he fell, until at last he shuddered to a halt as his spirit entered his body again, and he drew a deep breath. His head whirled as he opened his eyes and saw Thirrin anxiously watching him.

"Oskan, are you back; are you with us again?"

He nodded, and immediately regretted it as a deep pain drove through his forehead.

"Here, drink this," Thirrin commanded, and held a flask of some burning spirit to his lips. He coughed and spluttered, but then everything seemed to swing back into place and he was able to look around without feeling dizzy.

"Well, was it the Sight? What did you see?"

Oskan nodded weakly. "Yes, it was the Sight."

"And …?"

"And? And I witnessed my father being banished from Heaven," he said almost lightly, hiding the thoughts that clamoured in his head.

Thirrin looked at him sharply, but knew she'd get nothing more from him until he was ready. "Well, sit still until your head clears properly and I'll see if I can get one of your witches to make up a draught to help."

He watched silently as she left the room, and breathed a sigh of relief as he was finally left alone with his thoughts.

In many ways he'd learned very little that was new, but often the quality of information was more important than the quantity.