Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Opening extract from

Blade Of Fire

Written by

Stuart Hill

Published by

Chicken House

All text is copyright of the author

Please print off and read at your leisure.

CHAPTER 1

At the Hub of the World, Queen Thirrin was in the Leopard Hold watching the finishing touches being added to the coming victory feast. The alliance of human, Snow Leopard and Wolf-folk had defeated the fearsome Ice Trolls in a vicious battle, and the victors were assembling, ready to mark the event with mountains of food and rivers of beer.

Much had changed since the first time she and Oskan had come to the capital of the Snow Leopards almost twenty years before. For one thing, the Royal Court now held its gatherings in this massive ice cave deep within the everlasting snows of the Hub Mountains. Not only did this provide shelter for the human ambassadors and other dignitaries who visited the Kingdom of the Snow Leopards, but it also added greater majesty to the Royal Court.

The cave was packed with long tables around which sat leopards, humans and werewolves, all talking and laughing at once, filling the air with a tangle of voices and a frosting of breath that wafted like vaporous banners[HJ1]. In the centre of the cave a huge fire roared, its heat and light erupting into the freezing air before climbing higher and higher into the roof, which arched [HJ2]over the feasters [HJ3]in a single elegant leap of ice that no human architect could ever hope to equal. Here, the firelight ignited a thousand glittering reflections on the surfaces of the ice, while [HJ4]at floor level, the entire cave glinted and sparkled with braziers and torches that spiralled out from the central fire. The effect on the eye was that of a mesmeric, never-ending cascade of light.

Thirrin wondered why the flames didn't cause a localised thaw, but one glance at the misted breath of the leopards and humans in the hall made the answer all too

obvious. It may have been warmer inside the cave, but the temperature was still barely above freezing. Even the large central fire could make little impression on ice that had been frozen for thousands of years.

In fact, Thirrin could hardly believe she'd ever be truly warm again. Wearing her sumptuous furs of State, she sat next to her own personal brazier, yet still her feet seemed as cold as the icy floor beneath them. Next to her sat Oskan, wearing his usual black robes and looking as relaxed and comfortable as if he was in the Great Hall at home in Frostmarris. Only Thirrin knew that under his tunic and cloak he wore about ten layers of furs, all fluffy side inwards, and more socks than she'd ever realised he owned. She reached over and took his hand, and was almost gratified to find that it felt like a glacier, even through both their gloves.

"Do you remember warmth?" she murmured so that none of the other guests would overhear.

"I've heard it exists somewhere," he murmured back. "But I think it's one of those silly legends, like dragons and leviathans." He caught her eye and grinned, reminding her sharply of the boy she'd married when they were both still so painfully young.

A sudden fanfare crackled on the frigid air. Thirrin and Oskan rose politely to their feet to welcome their hosts, along with the hundreds of other humans, leopards and werewolves who were guests at the feast.

Tharaman-Thar and his mate Krisafitsa-Tharina now processed into the Leopard Hold at a magnificently dignified pace, followed by the tumble and tangle of the Royal Cubs.

There were five altogether: the eldest, Talaman, was the Pro-Thar and carried himself with immense dignity, spoiled somewhat by the youngest cub, Kirimin, who

had her eldest brother's tail gripped firmly in her teeth and was doing her best to drag him backwards. Being less than a quarter of his size she was failing miserably, but true to her character she fought gamely on. The other three, Tadadan, Krisilisa and Thuraman, gambolled and rolled about in front of a long line of human chamberlains who were carrying ornate platters and trenchers brimming with an array of different foods. The servants, with an air of long practice, gravely stepped over the cubs playing in front of them, and tried not to be jostled backwards into the barrels of beer, wine and mead that the werewolves were carrying in behind them.

Thirrin watched Tharaman, Krisafitsa and their cubs approach the raised dais where she and Oskan were waiting. The Tharina was as tall as her Royal mate, but her head and shoulders were far more delicate, and she walked with the grace of flowing water. She and Oskan shared the same slightly waspish sense of humour and often giggled together over the peculiarities of one or other of the courtiers, but her favourite human was Thirrin. The young Queen had attended the Snow Leopards' Royal Pair-bonding, and afterwards, at Tharaman's invitation, she had extended her official State visit. It was then that she and the Tharina had forged their friendship, spending the long dark of that winter discussing many things, including their mates. "Just like ordinary young wives with no worries of State or Government to bother them," Thirrin had said. They'd found the male animal was remarkably similar whether human or leopard, and had laughed affectionately over their funny ways.

Thirrin smiled at the memory as the Snow Leopards reached the platform. The great cats inclined their heads and Thirrin replied with a deep curtsey, while Oskan bowed. Then, formalities over, Tharaman threw back his head and laughed enormously.

"Let the feasting begin! Ethelbold, send round the beer and wine!"

A supremely neat human chamberlain raised his hand and immediately servants scurried amongst the trestle tables in the lower hall, pouring drinks into waiting cups, flagons and bowls.

Tharaman fussed over his Tharina, making sure she was comfortably seated next to Thirrin and Oskan. Then he ushered the Royal Cubs into the keeping of their nurse – an elderly Snow Leopard who would have been the fiercest sort of headmistress if she'd been human. And finally, he lowered his Royal rump on to his favourite fluffy cushion and looked out over the feast. He purred thunderously, then catching sight of Olememnon sitting next to the Basilea and her Consort further down the table he bellowed, "Fancy your chances in a drinking competition, Ollie?"

"Whenever My Lord is ready!" the veteran warrior shouted in reply, and raised his flagon.

"Erm … before you get too involved in your competition, I'd like to clear up a few points about the Ice Trolls, if I may," Thirrin interrupted.

"Certainly, my dear," Tharaman said, turning to her politely. "My drinking bowl doesn't seem to have been filled yet anyway," he added pointedly, and raised a regal eyebrow at Ethelbold the chamberlain who hurriedly waved up a scullion with a wine jug.

Tharaman purred with satisfaction. "Now, what exactly do you wish to know, Thirrin?"

"Well, firstly, the Ice Trolls were carrying metal war-hammers instead of their usual stone clubs and antler spears, and I suppose it's pretty obvious they've been armed by the Polypontian Empire. I think we have to accept that Bellorum is up to his old tricks again. But why did they get the trolls to attack in the depth of winter, when the passes into the Icemark are blocked by snow and no invading army could attack

anyway? Surely it would have been better for the trolls to keep you busy during the summer so that no Snow Leopards could come to the aid of the Icemark when the passes are open and the Empire invades again?"

"That's quite simple, Thirrin dearest," the Tharina's beautiful singsong voice interrupted gently. "Ice Trolls hibernate in the summer; they can't abide daylight. It blisters their skin and blinds them, so during the six months of summer when the sun never sets they burrow down into the deepest levels of their caves and sleep until the dark and the cold return."

"Precisely!" Tharaman agreed. "They couldn't attack during the summer. No doubt old Scipio Bellorum hoped that arming the Ice Trolls, and encouraging them to send the biggest army they've ever mustered, would be enough to destroy us and leave us completely unable to send help to you during the campaigning season." The leopard paused to lap at his bowl of wine. "I don't suppose it occurred to him that our alliance is reciprocal and that you'd send human troops to help us in our war against the trolls. I'm sure he still thinks of me as some sort of giant palace cat that you keep as a useful pet."

Krisafitsa giggled. "And so you are, my dear. A big, soppy old pussycat that likes a comfortable place next to the fire."

Tharaman raised his head and gazed regally down from his enormous height. For a moment Thirrin thought he was offended, but the effect of Royal disdain was completely spoiled as pendulous droplets of wine slowly ran down his whiskers and a large tongue quested forth to lick them up. "A comfortable place next to the fire *and* a bedtime bowl of beer, if you don't mind," he said in his most refined and cultured voice.

"But of course!" Krisafitsa agreed. "How could I forget?"

The Thar suddenly called down the table, “Ollie! I’ve drunk one bowl. What’s your tally?”

“Hah! I’m on my third already,” Olememnon answered.

“Yes, well. You have me at a disadvantage, we’ve been discussing matters of State up this end of the table.”

The evening continued with a seemingly unending supply of food and drink, and soon the warriors were singing the usual selection of offensive drinking songs, led in the main by Tharaman-Thar and Olememnon.

Thirrin and Oskan, like everyone else, ate enormous amounts in an attempt to keep out the ever-present cold, but there were limits to what anyone could eat and eventually they slumped back in their seats and held their hands protectively over their distended bellies. They were relaxed and happy; the Ice Trolls had been defeated, and a winter of peace stretched before them. Even so, the dangerous problem of the Polypontian Empire was still very much on their minds. This was only a short enjoyable respite before they’d have to travel home across the Icesheets to begin preparations for warding off the growing threat.

In the years following Scipio Bellorum’s defeat in the war with the Icemark, many nations under the control of the Empire had seized the chance to rebel against it. If a small country like the Icemark had been able to beat the General and his enormous army, then so could they! It had taken the Polypontians almost fifteen years of constant fighting to crush the rebellions in every part of the Empire. But the last guerrilla army had finally been defeated, and in the ensuing five years Bellorum had reorganised his forces *and* added two new territories to the Imperial possessions. These last two campaigns had obviously been a warning to the known world that he was well and truly back and was looking for new lands to conquer.

Then, a little over a year ago, werewolf spies had picked up information from the birds and animals beyond the southern border of the Icemark: the Polypontian armies were once more starting to muster. Immediately, Thirrin had ordered the spies to seek more information, and the werewolves had slipped over the border like the shadows of thought. Travelling only in the dead of night, and following the most secret and wildest of ways, they had spoken to the watchful creatures of the land and discovered that Bellorum was preparing a war of revenge.

In response, Thirrin had moved her own forces to defend the border, and put them on a permanent state of alert. But so far, nothing had happened.

"Well, if Bellorum himself invaded tonight he'd have to wait until I'd slept off supper," said Oskan, patting his belly tenderly.

"Don't even joke about it!" Thirrin managed to snap. "It was only because the borders were frozen solid that I dared send our troops to help Tharaman."

"Don't worry. When the sea freezes as far south as the coast of the Polypontus, and pine trees explode because their sap has frozen, *no* army can march."

"*We* managed it, and fought a war," Thirrin pointed out sharply.

"Yes, but we had warriors with long experience of cold conditions, Snow Leopards to ride over the frozen wastes, and Ukpik werewolves to draw sledges loaded with supplies. Bellorum has none of these advantages. He'll have to wait for the thaw, and then we'll be ready for him."

Thirrin grudgingly nodded[HJ5]. But when it came to Bellorum, she was always wary of trusting to luck and the weather. The Polypontian General was completely unpredictable, and she'd only be really happy when she was back home, personally supervising preparations for the coming war.

“Iphigenia!” she suddenly called down the table to the Hypolitan Basilea. “How long before your soldiers are ready to march?”

The young Basilea had to lean a long way over the table to see round the massive bulk of Taradan the Snow Leopard, Second-in-Command. “Three days, Ma’am.”

“That long? Make it two,” Thirrin said gruffly.

“But there’s equipment to clean and pack away, transport to be arranged for the wounded, and everyone needs a rest after that last battle.”

“Two and a half days, then,” came the reply. Then turning to look beyond Oskan, Thirrin said, “Urik. How long will the Wolf-folk need?”

“We’re ready to march now,” the werewolf Commander answered. “We have no equipment, and the wounded will have to manage[HJ6].”

Thirrin nodded. “Two and a half days it is, then.”

“In the meantime, let’s enjoy the feast. The ability to take fitting pleasure in a task well done is the sign of a truly refined mind,” said Tharaman-Thar, his beautiful voice having a calming effect on the entire table.

“Hah! That’s my tenth!” Olememnon suddenly boomed, and hiccupped as he smashed his tankard down.

Krisafitsa giggled, and Tharaman’s eyes suddenly glowed with the light of battle as he nodded at the wine steward.

“Right,” he said. “We’ll see about that!”

Page: 1
[HJ1]BC edit.
Page: 1
[HJ2]Suggested to minimise repetition of ‘high’.
Page: 1
[HJ3]BC edit.
Page: 1
[HJ4]BC edit.
Page: 7
[HJ5]Suggested for conciseness.
Page: 8
[HJ6]Suggested.