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Opening extract from

Wereworld: Rage of Lions

Written by

Curtis Jobling

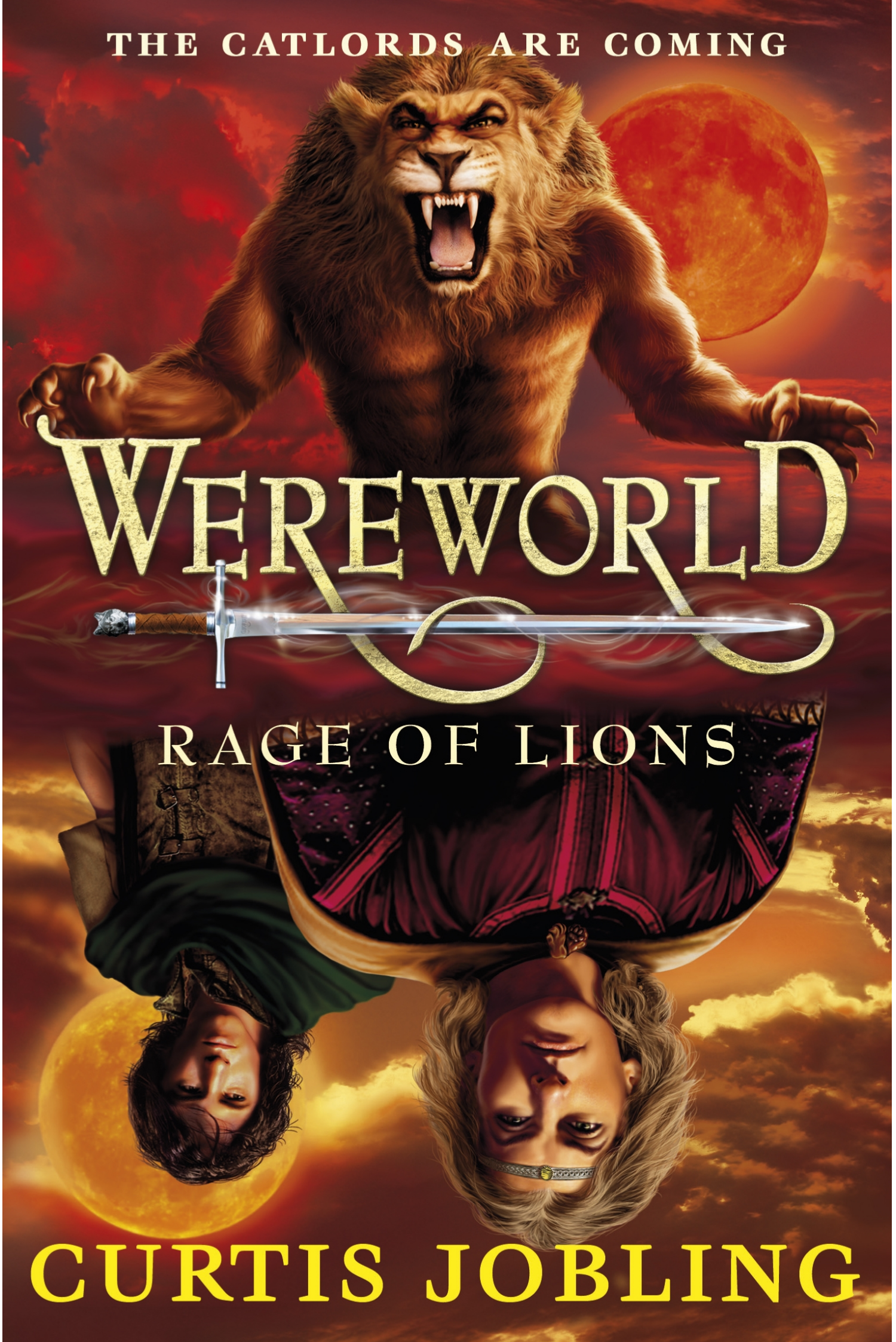
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THE CATLORDS ARE COMING
WEREWORLD
RAGE OF LIONS
CURTIS JOBLING

PART II

The Talstaff Road

Chapter 5 - Shelter from the Storm

The firewood clattered to the ground as Drew sprinted towards Whitley's scream. He tore through the undergrowth, hurdling fallen trees and ducking beneath branches as he closed on the campsite. As he ran he could feel the change taking him; canines growing, limbs transforming, stride lengthening as his human gait shifted into that of the Wolf. By the time he burst into the camp he was the beast born of tooth, claw and terror.

A large figure straddled Whitley on the forest floor, the girl struggling beneath its weight as the attacker wrestled with her, teeth snapping at her face. Incredibly, Whitley was holding her own, keeping the assailant from biting her. Drew didn't waste a moment, and with a mighty kick sent the figure clear of his friend. The brute staggered to its feet as Drew positioned himself between it and Whitley. He winced, his ankle aching where it had twisted with the impact. He pulled the Wolfshead blade free from its scabbard and focussed on his enemy.

Big and bald, the attacker had been a northman once, but no longer. Its eyes burned with a pale blue fire that reminded Drew of Brutus; the risen dead. This corpse had been communed with.

It had clearly been a military man in life, its torso clad in a tabard and chain shirt that hung below its groin. Its neck flapped loose beneath the jaw, a great savage hole running from ear to ear across the throat, its chest soaked dark with a vast stain of blood. Drew squinted at the crest on the torn cloth, faint but visible – a rampant lion. What appeared to be the blunt end of a rusty metal spike protruded from its breast, buried deep in the corpse's heart. Drew pointed at the walking corpse.

'You work for Lucas?'

The bald cadaver worked its mouth, fat lips smacking, as if unfamiliar with the notion of speech. Its teeth grated, bits of flesh catching between them as it worked its jaws, its voice gurgling.

'In life . . . and death. Serve Lion. Kill Wolf.'

The conversation was over as swiftly as it had begun, the dead soldier moving deceptively fast as it surged towards the Wolf. Drew wasn't as quick as he'd have liked, thanks to his ankle sprained from the kick. He lunged forward with his

sword, running the dead man through the belly, the blade buried to the hilt. To Drew's horror the soldier didn't slow, instead backhanding Drew across the clearing. It may have been a corpse but it was as strong as an ox. The Werewolf crashed into a tree trunk and hit the ground with a crunch.

The dead soldier reached down to snatch at the transformed therian, the sword still lodged in its stomach, while the Wolf was still stunned from the impact with the tree. Before the corpse could bite into Drew's throat it felt the jarring rattle of Whitley's quarterstaff across the back of its head. The soldier's already torn throat ripped further as the head cracked to one side, sending it careering away from her friend. Whitley stood over Drew as he gathered his senses, the dead creature letting out a gurgling cry as it came straight back at her. She jabbed the staff forward, crumpling the corpse's ruined face further, but it kept on coming, knocking the staff aside.

The ghoul snatched her up in its grasp, teeth gnashing at her as it struggled to bite her. If Whitley could get hold of the sword she might be able to stop it for good. She grabbed the handle of the Wolfshead blade and pulled, the monster's innards sliding out of the dark exit hole with the sword. Before she could raise it to strike, the corpse squeezed her hard with a bone crunching hug and the sword tumbled from her hand.

Drew leapt up from the floor, his senses fully returned, and not a moment too soon. The corpse had Whitley in its arms, a deadly embrace that was leading towards a hungry kiss at her throat. The Werewolf launched himself at the two of them, jarring his friend from the dead man's grip and sending them both in separate directions. He snatched up his sword from the ground as the soldier charged once more, showing no sign of slowing.

Drew brought the Wolfshead blade around, the steel flying towards the dead man's neck. The corpse brought its left arm up defensively, the longsword biting through flesh and bone as it broke the limb in two. Such a blow would have killed a living man, but the ghoul let the arm go, the parry having slowed the blade and allowed it to take hold of Drew with its remaining arm.

Drew felt the air escape his lungs as the dead Lionguard embraced him, the two of them crashing to the muddy floor, the big man on top of him. The Wolfshead blade was gone from his grasp, useless now, as Drew raised his claws around the dead man's shoulders, struggling to grab hold through the mud. The soldier's jaws snapped away, relentless, the good arm behind Drew pulling him in while the gory stump of its left arm battered at Drew's chest.

It took all Drew's dexterity to protect his fingers – the lost little finger from his fight with Vanmorten was a daily reminder of the dangers of battle. The teeth strained closer and the stench of death was overwhelming. Foul black drool spattered Drew as he turned his face, avoiding the bite. Quickly, he worked his left arm forward, catching the beast under its jaw. He shoved the head up, the torn neck

flapping open to reveal the man's severed windpipe. The head was barely hanging on, lolling on its shoulders. Bringing his right arm back, Drew launched a well-aimed punch.

The head landed ten feet away in a shower of dead leaves, the blue lights gone forever from the fallen soldier's eyes.

Drew dashed over to Whitley, his limbs and features already beginning to return to normal. She staggered to her feet, her face a mask of shock and exhilaration as they hugged one another.

'Did you see that?' she said, struggling to regain her breath after the battle. 'I managed to change! The Bear, it was there; it was with me, while we fought that monster!'

'I know, we made quite a team didn't we?' he grinned. 'Are you all right?'

'I'm fine,' gasped Whitley, wheezing. Her face was white, her body still coursing with adrenaline and the Bear. 'You're injured though, Drew.'

She pointed at his chest. Drew examined the blood on his leather breastplate, wiping it away, expecting to find the hole in the armour underneath. He hadn't felt the dead man's blow and didn't recall receiving a bite. The blood smeared away, revealing undamaged leather beneath. He felt across his chest and neck; no injuries. He looked up.

He could see the blood on Whitley now, rising from the collar of her jerkin. Her face was paler and he saw her eyes beginning to flutter. Drew hopped forward and caught her before she collapsed. As her head fell to one side it revealed a deep wound in her neck. She winced.

'I'm so sorry, I should have stayed with you,' Drew gasped as he inspected the bite. 'We need to get that seen to and quickly. It might go bad . . .'

Drew put a hand to her neck, trying to staunch the blood. He felt it pumping, pulsing between his fingers. Hopefully her therianthropic healing would set to work shortly. Drew cast his mind back to the rotten, disease-ridden mouth of the soldier.

'I know where we can go,' said Whitley, as if reading his fears. 'I know who can help us.'

Now enter the Seven Realms of Lyssia and let the heartstopping adventure continue . . .

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