

THE CRY OF THE  
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MARK  
STUART HILL



2 PALMER STREET, FROME, SOMERSET BA11 1DS  
WWW.CHICKENHOUSEBOOKS.COM

Text © Stuart Hill 2005

First published in Great Britain in 2005

This edition published in 2019

Chicken House

2 Palmer Street

Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS

United Kingdom

[www.chickenhousebooks.com](http://www.chickenhousebooks.com)

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Cover and interior design by Steve Wells

Cover illustration © Staffan Gnospelius

Designed and typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

ISBN 978 1 912626 53 3

eISBN 978 1 909489 12 7

*To Kathleen Hill, the real Thirrin, and Clare Hardy  
for the faith and support.*

*Also to the G and G, and to TM, TG and all the Ts.*



## CHAPTER ONE



**T**hirrin 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.”