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Opening extract from

Frostfire

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*I*n my dreams, the wolves come for me. I hear their voices echoing from the far-off mountains and the frost-bright stars. They sing of the hunt, and hot blood spilled on snow, and the scent of their prey's fear on the wind. My fear.

I am running. Always running. Shadowy fields blur past my eyes, the jagged skeletons of trees, frozen rivers marked in stark black by the unforgiving starlight. My bare feet sink into the snow, and the cold burns them. Breath crystallizes in the air before me. My heartbeat throbs through my body.

But no matter how swiftly I flee, they are always just behind me.



Prologue

The first time the Wolf took me I was eight.

Before that I had thought I was normal. Even though the other children taunted me sometimes, calling me “Fatherless”, “Nameless”, their words didn’t touch me, because they were not true. I had a father. He was the great hunter who had fallen to the fangs of the Demon Wolf before I was born. Everyone knew his name. I was proud to be the daughter of Garin Aeskaar.

I did not know then – no one knew – that he had left me much more than his name and his legend when he died.

I broke a pot that morning. The heat burned through the cloth as I made to pass the earthenware bowl to my mother, and singed my palm. I dropped the bowl, splattering the strong-smelling herbal mixture over the packed dirt floor. Shards of red pottery flew everywhere.

My mother’s hand struck out, and the right side of my face went numb.

“Useless, clumsy girl,” she said, eyes narrowing to icy black holes in her face. “You’re just like your father... No, don’t try to tidy up! You’ll only make it worse. Get out. Go on! Get out of my sight!”

I went at a run, belly turning over with a sick mixture of shame and defiance. My clumsiness had wasted a morning’s work and caused a mess, and I was sorry. But as the numbness wore off and the whole right side of my face ached and my hand stung, my guilt turned to anger. It wasn’t fair, because it had been an accident. And it would be useless to ask for any of Ma’s burn salve on the blister, or a bruise compress for my face. She never wasted those things on us. She sold them and hoarded the money in the hollow leg of the wobbly stool under the window.

The sunlight was bright enough to make my tearful eyes water even more, but the air was cold. I rubbed at the goose pimples on my bare forearms as my feet crunched on the frozen ground. Spring rain the day before had turned the village paths to churned-up mud, but the night had brought frost, and turned the squelching, foul-smelling mess into hard swirls of earth that dug into the thin soles of my boots as I walked between the squat, beehive-shaped houses.

I hurried past Elder Gallen’s house, where his wife was cursing their nanny goat in the front yard, and slowed down as I neared the blacksmith’s. Hot, iron-stinking air billowed out of the smithy, with the occasional burst of orange sparks. The rhythmic noise of metal bashing against metal was like music.

On a normal morning I would have lingered there, enjoying the warmth on my skin, watching Eilik the smith pound the glowing iron into useful shapes on his anvil. But I could already feel my face swelling up. He would see.

Eilik wouldn't ask questions. He never did. But I would see that look in his kind eyes, the look that made me squirm. So I kept on, skirting the blacksmith's yard and Elder Rangar's broken cart, which was waiting for its new wheel, and went into the trees.

It was quiet in the forest. A kind of companionable quiet. Birds called, bushes rustled, the wind played in the tops of the trees. None of them paid me any mind, and I liked it that way. I kilted my skirt up into my belt and wandered a little way, crunching through rotting yellow winter grass, letting my hands brush the rough red and grey bark of the towering trees.

I reached the little clearing where me and some of the other village children sometimes played in the summer, and sat down on a fallen log. Gingerly, I felt my face. The skin was hot and puffy, tender under my fingers. All except for one place. I traced the puckered curve of the scar. It was always cold, that place. Even when the bruise darkened my skin, the mark would stand out like a spray of white wax on my cheek. No matter how many times Ma hit it, the scar never got red, never got hot. Never went away.

It had been a part of me for as far back as I could remember. And for as far back as I could remember, Ma had hated it. She hated it when the villagers took to calling me "Frost"

because of it. She was the only one who carried on calling me by my real name, Saram.

Saram meant “sorrow”. That was what she wanted me called.

I reached into my shirt and pulled out the leather thong that hung around my neck. At the end of the leather was a sharp, curving tooth, the size of my index finger and marked with fine yellow-brown lines. A wolf’s tooth. A tooth from the wolf that had killed Garin Aeskaar. My father.

When I was little, before I started to grow so big and clumsy like my da, and Ma’s temper got so uncertain, I had asked her many times about the scar on my face. When had I got it? How did it happen? She only ever answered once. She said: “A wolf did it.”

And when I asked, “What wolf?” she said, “The Demon Wolf.”

That was the first time she hit me.

My father and the Demon Wolf had killed each other before I was born. The Wolf could never have bitten me. But I liked to pretend that it had for the same reason that I wore its tooth around my neck. It made me feel closer to my father. I imagined sometimes what things would have been like if the Wolf had not killed him; if Ma had not left my father’s home in the North – where the grey eyes I got from him would have been normal – and made us live here in this village with people who whispered and looked at me sideways. But mostly I imagined that one day I would be strong enough to take his great

axe, with its double-blades, down from its resting place above the mantel.

One day I would be as strong as my father had been.

My fingers clenched on the tooth, and I relished its sharpness. One day no one would hit me any more.

“Oh, look! It’s Frost Eyes!”

I groaned under my breath and stuffed the tooth back under my shirt. Ulem Gallen.

“What are you doing out here, Fatherless?” I felt a shock of real fear when I heard the second voice. That was Marik Ersk, Ulem’s best friend. “Who said you could come into our forest?”

I stood up and turned to face them, blood tingling. Ulem was bad enough on his own, but at least he was slow and stupid and he got bored easily. Marik was something different. He had hated me and Ma since we hadn’t managed to save his mother from the fever last winter. He couldn’t hurt Ma – but with Ulem on his side he’d made hunting me into a sport. I’d had a black eye, pulled hair, kicked shins and ripped clothes from them, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. Ulem’s father was in charge of the village. No one would take my side over his.

They were coming at me from opposite sides of the clearing. I swallowed hard, my gaze darting everywhere as I searched for a gap in the trees.

“Get away,” I said. I wanted the words to come out strong and angry, but they sounded thin and weak. I tried again. “Leave me alone!”

“Listen to that!” Marik said mockingly. “Giving orders. We don’t have to do what a stupid fatherless girl tells us. You’re nothing. No one has to listen to you.”

Ulem laughed. It was mean, flat laughter and it made his cheeks flush an ugly red. His small eyes were gleaming with excitement. “Your da died just to get away from you! Even your ma calls you Saram. No one wants you, Frost Eyes.”

“Maybe we should do everyone a favour and get rid of her,” Marik whispered, creeping closer.

I could hear Ma’s voice hissing in my head: Don’t fight them. Don’t annoy them. Stay quiet. Stay out of their way. We can’t upset the elders. Be a good girl and stay out of trouble.

How, Ma? How am I supposed to get away without fighting now?

I sucked in a deep breath, turned towards Marik – and ran. I shoved past him, shrugging off the hand that tried to grab the back of my shirt, and leaped down a shallow slope. They shouted angrily behind me. For a moment, I thought I’d made it.

Then my foot went into a hole. My ankle turned. I toppled over, hands scrabbling uselessly at the undergrowth. I shoved myself back up, ignoring the throb from my leg – but it was too late. Ulem and Marik were at the top of the slope behind me and I’d never climb up the other side with this ankle. I was trapped.

Marik’s eyes were angry and cold, the way they’d been

every day since the priests had lit his ma's funeral fire. He had a rock in his hand.

I cried out with pain as it bounced off my chest. I clutched the bruised spot, anger driving Ma's cautious voice from my head. "You throw rocks at girls now? Coward!"

In answer, he stooped and hurled a piece of fallen wood. I jerked aside, but I couldn't avoid the stone that Ulem threw at the same time. It smashed into my shoulder. I felt something crack and I screamed – but the sound was cut off as another missile slammed into my sore cheek. The pain made me dizzy. I fell to my knees, angry, frightened gasps choking me.

Don't fight them. Stay quiet. Stay out of their way.

Something warm slid down my face. Warmer than tears. It dripped on to the back of my hand, where my fist was clenched in the dirt.

It was red.

Somewhere near by, a wolf began to howl.

I stared down at the gleaming, scarlet drops on my hand. Rocks and clods of frozen mud and branches were still falling down on me. I couldn't feel them any more. A deep, convulsive shudder moved down my spine, making my muscles twitch. The skin under the droplet of blood began to change. Silvery-white patterns like scars – like frost – curled across the brown skin.

Shivers quaked my body. I was cold.

So cold.

The wolf was howling. Closer now. It was coming.

*Didn't Ulem and Marik hear it? They should be running.
Why weren't they running?*

*The howling drowned out everything else. It hummed
through my bones, made my sight blur and my teeth chatter.
But Marik and Ulem still couldn't hear it.*

Only me.

*And I realized: It wasn't out there. It was inside. The wolf
was inside me.*

Do not fear, my daughter, it howled.

I am here.

I will protect you.