

EVIL IS RISING...

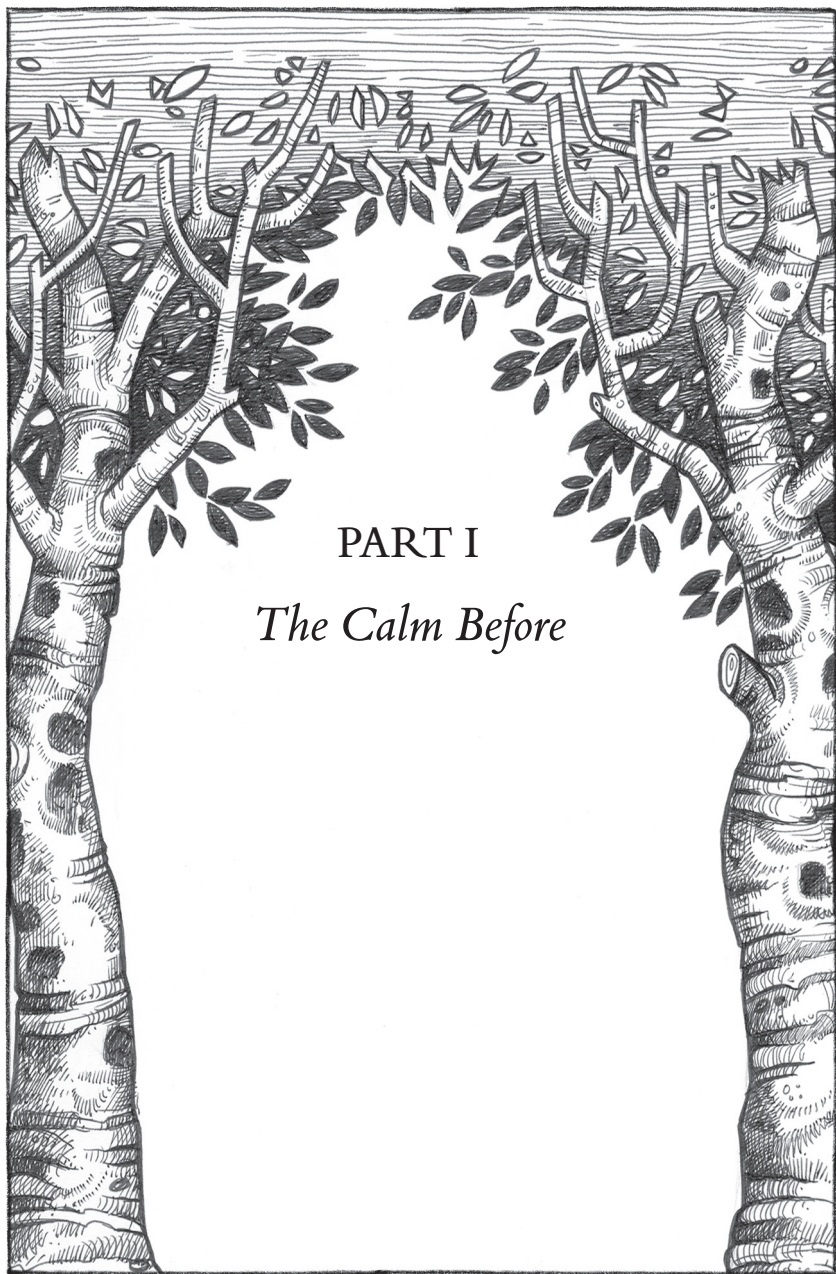
# WEREWORLD



NEST OF SERPENTS



CURTIS JOBLING



PART I

*The Calm Before*



## I

# *Take No Chances*

‘Did you hit him, master?’

The Lionguard scout lowered his bow, ignoring his apprentice. He stared out across the Longridings, squinting through the twilight at the evading Greencloak. Gradually, the rider began to slouch in his saddle as his mount slowed, weaving up a rocky incline. The Bowman grinned as he saw the distant figure keel to one side, sliding from his steed and hitting the frozen earth in a crumpled heap.

‘Have you ever known me to miss?’ the scout finally replied, stowing his bow alongside the quiver on his saddle before clambering back on to his own horse.

His companion, a youth yet to see eighteen summers, grinned with delight. For one so young, he’d seen more than his fair share of bloodshed, having served his apprenticeship in the Lionguard scouts under his master’s watchful eye. The

boy wasn't shy about getting his blade wet: that would serve him well in the coming months as the Catlord armies mopped up the remnants of their enemies' ragtag force, scattered across the Seven Realms.

The scout had served in the army of Westland for three score years, his bow having accounted for enemies of Wolf and Lion alike as they had fought for the throne. As a mortal man, he could never truly understand the noble therianthropes – their might, their majesty and the old magicks – and it wasn't his place to question. His lieges may have changed over time, but the role had remained the same: a life spent in servitude to the shape-shifting Werelords who ruled Lyssia.

'Let's see what we've bagged,' said the scout as he spurred his horse on, his young protégé riding close behind as they raced across the barren slopes towards the fallen Greencloak.

Travelling apart from their comrades allowed the scout and his apprentice to move swiftly and stealthily across the Longridings, deep into hostile territory. Powerful as the Catlord army was in the south, the grasslands were still untamed, harbouring the enemies of Prince Lucas throughout. Many of the Horselords had fled to Calico, hiding behind the coastal city's enormous sea walls, while others remained in the wilds. The Werestallions weren't the only danger to the Lion's forces in the Longridings: the travelling people known as the Romari had sworn fealty to the Werelord known as Drew Ferran, last of the Werewolves and the sole reason why the Seven Realms fought this terrible, bloody civil war. The Romari were unpredictable and unconventional: they waged war through subterfuge and terrorism, striking the Catlord

forces on their fringes, at their weakest points, before disappearing back into the grasslands. The scout and his charge had expected to run across the Romari: stumbling upon a Greencloak had been a surprise.

‘What’s a soldier of the Woodland Realm doing out in the Longridings, master?’ called the youth from behind, his Redcloak clapping in the stiff winter breeze.

‘A straggler or deserter, perhaps,’ the man cried back. ‘Maybe he was left behind after the taking of Cape Gala.’

‘He could be a spy from Brackenholme!’

It was well known that the men of the Woodland Realm were aligned with the Wolf, which made this fool fair game in the eyes of the scout. They had encountered one another by chance, the two Lionguard soldiers spying the lone rider as each had crested hillocks in the grasslands; they were dangerously close and within hailing distance. While the Greencloak had spurred his horse away, the scout had leapt down with practised ease, his bow quick to hand, and sent an arrow sailing on its way. He had only taken one shot: he rarely took more.

‘Whoever he was, and wherever he was heading, his message won’t arrive.’ The man began to slow his mount as they neared the fallen woodlander, bringing their horses up the rock-strewn slope to where their enemy lay. ‘His war’s over.’

Twenty feet up the slope, the Greencloak lay motionless, face down on the frozen earth, his horse nearby, its head bowed solemnly. A quarterstaff lay beside the body, hinting at the soldier’s profession: *a scout, perhaps?* The old tracker kept his eyes fixed on the fallen foe, although he could sense the

movements of his companion in the saddle beside him, keen to investigate. He heard the dry *shlick* of the young Redcloak's hunting knife sliding out of its leather sheath. The apprentice jumped down and began walking forward, shifting the dagger in his grasp as he approached the still woodlander. The thick green cloak covered the body like a death shroud, the hood obscuring the back of the man's head, only the scuffed brown leather of his boots visible, poking out from the hem of the long emerald cloth. A sharp whistle made the youth stop and turn. His master's bow was drawn and aimed at the body on the floor. With a sharp *twang* the arrow whistled into the body, joining the earlier one, buried deep in the Greencloak's back. The apprentice's eyes widened momentarily before he nodded.

'Best take no chances,' said the scout as the young Redcloak covered the remaining distance to the body.

The apprentice kicked one of the fallen rider's legs, and the booted foot wobbled lifelessly. He looked back at his master and smiled. It was a brief moment of contentment, followed swiftly by a sensation of pure horror as the leg he'd just kicked lashed out, sweeping his own from under him and sending him crashing to the ground.

The scout's horse reared up, suddenly alarmed as the felled Greencloak jumped into action. The old Lionguard let go of his weapon, the saddle quiver spilling its contents as bow and arrows clattered to the ground. The rider snatched at his reins in panic as the youth and the woodlander wrestled on the ground. The apprentice lashed out with his dagger, and his enemy raised a forearm to deflect the blade. In the split second before the weapon struck home, the Redcloak caught sight

of his opponent's face. It wasn't a man at all, but a girl, her big brown eyes wide and fearful as she fought for her life. The hunting knife bit into her forearm, tearing flesh and scoring bone. The girl let loose a roar of pain.

The scout heard it, clear as a bell. The cry was deep, animalistic, primal. He'd heard it before, on the battlefield long ago, back in the time of the last Werewar. He'd switched sides, taking the Red at the first opportunity, and swearing fealty to King Leopold as the Lion seized Westland from Wergar the Wolf. The scout had been there when they'd brought Duke Bergan, the lord of Brackenholme, to his knees at the gates of Highcliff. That roar and this one were unmistakable. They were the roars of a Bearlord and they chilled him to his core.

Whitley had struggled to imagine if there could be any greater agony than that which accompanied an arrow in the back. She hadn't had to wait for long, with a second arrow joining the first as the Lionguard scouts approached her motionless form. Gritting her teeth, she thanked Brenn that the thick cloth of her cloak had hidden the telltale trembling of her shaking body. By chance, the arrows had missed the vital organ of her heart, her leather armour having slowed the momentum of the shafts as they'd lanced through her torso. The injuries wouldn't prove fatal to a therian such as Whitley, but regardless, the pain was immeasurable. She could feel the blood pooling inside her breastplate, against the flesh of her belly, hot against her cold skin. The boot to her leg had told her it was time to act, her survival instinct kicking in as she brought the man to the ground in a tangle of limbs.

These two were dangerous, no doubt; scouts, just like her, searching for her friends. The Romari settlement wasn't a great distance away, full of women, children and old folk: if the Redcloaks were to search the wider area they'd be bound to come across her comrades. Whitley wasn't only battling for her life: she was fighting for the future of her friends. While the older Lionguard struggled to control his horse, the younger man came at her fast with his knife, the blade jabbing straight for Whitley's neck. With only a moment to react, she'd brought her arm up defensively. She could see the knife wasn't silver – potentially deadly to a therianthrope like her – but it would still cause enormous damage if it struck her throat. The knife hit her arm, the steel ripping through muscle, blade squealing, scraping against bone like fingernails upon slate. The roar that escaped her throat was monstrous, a cocktail of pain and fury which heralded the arrival of the beast.

She snatched the Redcloak's hand in hers, the blood pumping from her torn forearm as they wrestled for control of the knife. Her knuckles popped and cracked as her hand contorted, shifting in size as her palm began to smother the Lionguard's. Whitley gritted her teeth, which were sharpening all the while, her gums slick with blood as the sweat beaded on her brow. The young soldier brought his other hand round, snatching at her transforming limb, trying to prise it loose as claws tore free from her flesh. His fingers splintered, crushed by her shifting hand as she ground them against the grip of his knife. He struck her across the face with his free hand, stunning her momentarily, loosening her grip enough to yank his maimed hand clear.



The hunting knife fell to the ground, and the Redcloak dived for it, snatching it up in his good hand and lunging at Whitley once more. The girl was already moving, though, reaching for her staff where it lay nearby, grabbing it by a steel-shod end and swinging it back at the young Lionguard. As he dived at her, the quarterstaff arced through the air, striking him cleanly across the temple and sending him spinning away. The Redcloak went down hard, his head hitting the nearby rocks with an awful, wet cracking sound, his body instantly still.

Panting hard, Whitley struggled to her knees. *Where was the other one?* She couldn't allow him to escape: if he rejoined his companions he'd return with more men, more Redcloaks. All would be lost. Her eyes scoured the surrounding slopes frantically. She caught sight of a billowing crimson cloak as the Lionguard tried to put distance between himself and the injured Bearlady. Wincing, she scrambled down the incline to where the rider had dropped his weapons, every painful movement reminding her that arrows were still buried in her back. She picked up the bow, her hands already shifting back to human form, her fingers fumbling for a missile. A good bow, well made, almost as good as the ones the Woodland Watch carried back in Brackenholme. It would suffice until she finally returned to her home in the Dyrewood. Raising the weapon she nocked an arrow, picking out the rider as he raced desperately, and ultimately vainly, to safety.

The bowstring sang, and the whispered words escaped Whitley's lips before the arrow struck its target.

'Take no chances.'