

The Wolf of Tebron

Prologue

Exhausted and battle-weary, the wizard chose his footsteps carefully amid the sharp granite crags. Daylight barely seeped through the dark shroud of morning; a few renegade stars dotted the horizon. The sentinels of mountain that hugged the vale were bathed in a lavender hue, their peaks pointing toward heaven in seeming supplication. Leaves, curled and crisp, frosted over with icing, crunched under his boots as he squeezed his way through cracks and crevices, fatigue making him stumble. Cold air burned his throat as he panted. He paused to catch his breath. From the cliff outcropping he could make out his lone cottage burrowed under a ledge of rock, a wisp of smoke from a leftover fire rising and twisting slowly in the chill air.

The wizard tugged his woolen cloak tighter around his neck. His silver hair, matted and leaf-ridden from days of fighting, fell around his face, stuck to his damp cheeks. His scabbard banged rhythmically against his leg—the one without the long gash, bound and oozing blood. His feet throbbed in their boots, the toes numb. But, his wounds disturbed him less than the ache in his heart. For this had been just one of many fierce battles against a force intent on annihilating all the wizard held dear.

He squeezed his eyes shut, and across the stream of time he could see the wake of endless conflict, stretching back beyond his mind's reach. And in its wake death, pain, and suffering. He sighed deeply. Only a little farther and he would slip into warmth, peel off his filthy clothes, heat water for tea and bath, and fall into Rhianne's arms. Later he would assess their losses; later he would mourn his fallen companions. He brushed the visions of the slain and the wounded out of

his thoughts. Those were weighty burdens he could not now carry in his heart if he hoped to make his way home.

He stopped suddenly. A gnawing sense of doom thumped against his chest, caught in his steamy breath. His throat clenched shut. He felt a pallor spread across his face. Without turning, he knew what pursued him.

Running as fast as his bruised body allowed, he skipped down sheer walls of slate and landed hard, ignoring screams of pain, pushing fear aside with all his might, willing himself to muster some scant reserve of strength.

It came first as a chill on his neck. Then, a cacophony like a myriad of squealing bats with thrumming wings sounded overhead, heading toward his home. Blackness engulfed pale morning light, thick as mud; even the stars were swallowed up in pitch. As he ran, dark funnels swirled in a frenzy, with a piercing hiss and the sound of a million claws ripping through silence, tearing his protection spell into shreds, his resolve into panic.

His cottage vanished before him into a void. Blindly, he fumbled for a door he knew should be there, threw it open, and ran to his bed where Rhianne lay asleep in peaceful ignorance. Rafters creaked and groaned from the weight of the invasion. Frost raced across floorboards, scurried up the cracks in the walls. The wizard gagged from an evil so caustic that his throat stung.

Slogging through the thick gloom with outstretched arms, he cast scraps of words that he frantically gathered around him, remnants of the tightly woven spell draped over her. But they were torn to pieces, useless. His jagged words siphoned into the roar of the storm. And he had no name by which to call this malevolence, to draw its attention away from his wife. In horror, he

watched impotently as Rhianne thrashed, flailed, fists pummeling the air, the distance between them uncrossable.

Harnessing magic, the wizard hacked through the void and fell onto pillows, finding no one. He screamed in anguish, stumbled backward, then glanced to his left. Black wisps regrouped, gathered force, and headed down the hallway with purpose.

Pale light seeped out from under the nursery door. There was still hope! Fueled by anger and desperation, the wizard outran the evil, sliced through it with sharp focus, and burst into the corner room, still warmly illuminated and undisturbed. He threw himself over the cradle, weaving a new spell as the chill surged into the room. As blackness enveloped him and his sight failed, he repeated his incantation over and over, his love, his joy giving him strands of power with which to fabricate a membrane, clear and gelatinous, to encase the young child. His ears rang from the shrieking and tearing of air around him, but he kept his eyes and heart on his son. The membrane wrapped him, the boy, and the cradle in a cocoon of thick light: pale, weak, but holding. All he could do now was lay there, his body limp, his heart oh, so heavy—and wait.

Finally, with a shudder, the house settled. Not daring to look up, the wizard sensed the blackness lift, disperse, and seep out of the room. He felt more than heard the calmness of dawn return to his mountain. Below him, his son fidgeted, hot under blankets and his father's sweating body. The wizard lifted himself off the cradle and reached in to pick up his child. He looked into the gray eyes that laughed back in innocent delight. A small hand grabbed two worn fingers and yanked. Mindlessly, he stroked his son's curls, caressed his cheek. He removed his cloak, feeling his age and the burden of his defeat. The room thawed and warmth returned. Quiet settled like a warm current, with Rhianne's absence more palpable than her presence ever was.

The wizard wept.

Holding the child, he sat in the rocker, beautifully carved of alpine cedar, Rhianne's favorite chair. Heavy sobs shook his chest as hot tears dripped onto his son's nose. The baby tugged on the silver beard with chubby fingers. Through the window a weak sun was rising over the crags, splintering light in all directions and illuminating a day that had no business dawning.

After rocking the baby back to sleep, he lowered him into the cradle and ambled down the hall to the front stoop of his cottage. Cold morning air assailed him and for a moment he stood there, immobile. Resolve came slowly but deliberately, until it faced him down like another indefatigable foe.

Anya. Anya. In his mind he crystallized an image of the thick, lumbering bear. He saw her sleepy, curled up in her musty den piled with cypress branches and tufts of dead autumn grass. *Anya!* He poked her with his thoughts and she twitched, annoyed. Finally, she stretched her large bulk, hung her head, and arched her back. It took her a moment before she understood.

Coming, my lord . . . sleepy . . . what?

The wizard prodded her. *Please, Anya, make haste!* He felt her grow more alert now, recognizing her den and sniffing the morning air. She shook her massive bulk, tossing off dirt and debris. Snips of questions flitted through her head, which the wizard ignored. Explanations could wait. He went back into his cottage and rummaged through a large trunk by the door. Pulling out a cloth satchel, he began stuffing food, clothes, blankets, toys. When finished, he sat on the stoop and waited. Soon, he could make out the brown shape climbing up the ridge in a steady, methodical rhythm. Anya's bulk swayed from side to side as she took deliberate steps with her giant paws, wending her way around ponderous boulders and cautiously fording small creeks. When she arrived at the cottage, the wizard buried his face in her neck, rubbed her small ears.

My lord, how may I serve you? She made a clumsy bow, as good as a bear can manage. The wizard found a smile.

My sweet girl, I need your help. It is no longer safe for the child to remain here. I cannot remain, either. I had hoped this day would not come; come it has. He paused, then took a deep breath. *I have to find a way to rescue Rhianne and the others. Where I am going, the child cannot come.*

The bear lowered her head and nuzzled the wizard's palm. *My lord, I will take the child. I will take him to the woods of Tebron.*

Yes. He will be safe there until I can retrieve him. The wizard stroked her silky coat. *I am eternally grateful, my friend.*

The wizard attached the satchel to the bear with a linen sash, tying it across her back and securing it with metal hasps. He went into the nursery and gathered up his son, then fastened him to the bear's warm chest, against her heart, with a long panel of curtain yanked down from the kitchen window. When all was secure, he ducked his head under Anya's snout and kissed his dozing son on the crown of his head. Anya suppressed a yawn, shook sleepiness from her head.

He is precious to me; take good care of him.

Lord, he is precious to me too. Do not trouble your heart. I have kept many cubs from peril.

With a tender, reluctant pat he sent Anya on her way, watching as she cautiously padded down the rock faces to the canyon below. He did not loose his gaze until her body diminished to a small, brown speck against green fields, the sun high in the sky, and bird songs returned again to the bushes beside his home.

Far beyond the green meadows, green even in winter from the mild winds and flowing creeks tumbling out of Logan Valley, the mighty trees of Tebron Wood rose stately and crowded against the towering cliffs behind them. And beyond that, the wizard could make out the tiny cottages nestled in the hillside encircling Tebron, with the ribbon of cart road winding down, down, out of the isolated village toward the rest of the world.