

The Wolf of Tebron

(Book 1 in “The Sacred Sites” Collection)

A Fairy Tale by Susanne Lakin

“Some day you will be old enough to start reading fairy tales again.”

C.S. Lewis

Exhausted and battle-weary, the wizard chose his footfalls carefully amidst the sharp granite crags. Daylight barely squeezed through the dark shroud of morning; a few renegade stars dotted the horizon. The sentinels of mountain hugging 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 wove his way through cracks and crevices, fatigue making him stumble. Cold air burned his nostrils as he breathed. He paused to catch his breath. From the cliff outcropping he could make out his lone cottage burrowed under a ledge of rock, a thin wisp of smoke from a leftover fire rising and twisting slowly into the cold 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 closed his eyes tightly, 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 that warmth, peel off his filthy clothes, heat water for tea and bath, and fall into the arms of Rhianne. Later he would assess their losses; later he would mourn his fallen companions. He

brushed the visions of the slain and 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 heart, caught in his steamy breath. His throat clenched shut. 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 semblance 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 soup; 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 his throat burned.

Wading through the thick gloom with outstretched arms, he cast scraps of words he frantically gathered around him, remnants of the spell so tightly woven and draped over her. But they were torn to pieces, useless. His words were siphoned into the roar of the storm. And he had no name by which to call this malevolence, to draw attention

away from his wife. In horror, he watched impotently as Rhianne startled, flailed, fists pummeling the air, the distance between them uncrossable.

Harnessing magic, the wizard hacked through the void and fell onto the pillows, finding no one. He screamed in anguish, stumbled backward. 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. Quickly, he threw himself over the cradle, frantically weaving a new spell as the chill surged the room. As blackness enveloped him and his sight failed, he repeated his liquid 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, 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 could sense 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. Stiffly, 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 delight. A small hand grabbed his two fingers and yanked. Mindlessly, he stroked his son's wisp of hair, 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 down 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 gently placed him in 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 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 become 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, all of 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 enormous 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 best as bears 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 stammered, 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. Yes, you know what to do. 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 out of 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 stepped down the rock faces to the canyons below. He did not turn away his gaze until her body diminished to a small brown speck against green fields, the sun high in the sky, and bird sounds 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 in the hillside village of Tebron, with the ribbon of cart-road winding down, down out of the isolated village toward the rest of the world.

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Part One

The Lunatic Moon

A dark bird, no more than a shadow, circled overhead. Joran looked up into a night in which stars refused to show. Although his clothes were dry, he knew he was immersed in water, the wind bobbing him roughly across the surface of the sea like a skimming rock. Waves caught in timeless repetition, trapped by the Moon's whimsy, slapped a distant shore as she tugged at them to lull her to sleep. The Moon glared her defiant and harsh light down upon him as the bird snipped at her hair, pulling threads of gossamer, like pulling worms from soil. Joran watched, fascinated, as the bird spread the threads across the expanse of water, like a diaphanous blanket. The ocean then turned into a million shards of glass, reflecting broken bits of Moon in a shimmer so bright Joran had to avert his gaze.

Imposing sandstone cliffs loomed up before him, crumbling, laced with pebbles in erratic ribbons. Obsidian rocks with jagged teeth barricaded the shore, with sea lions draped like discarded blankets, their barking puncturing the silence of the night. Joran stared up the steep wall of sand; eons of erosion had carved deep fissures into the cliff, chiseled by the Moon's persistence and single-mindedness. Waves carelessly tossed him up onto the beach, tumbling him to a stop at the base of the cliff. Looking around him, he realized he had been here before.

Stretching up perilously above him was a sand castle—a structure of stones, grit, and broken shell melded together. One window, as if dug out of sand, faced the sea and seemed composed of tumbled sea glass, misty and frosted—whether from salt spray or

cold, Joran couldn't tell. Bleeding heart vines trailed like a messy braid of hair down the cracks of the cliff from the castle atop the bluff.

In slow motion, Joran reached one hand over another, grasping vines that surprisingly held his weight. Digging toes into the side of the hill, he edged his way up, swaying and righting himself, seeking purchase in the loose, uncooperative sand. He heard the Moon chuckle behind him. Anxiety grew the higher he climbed, until Joran's woolen tunic sagged from a heavy sweat. The wind kicked up, sending a chill through his limbs, sending the bird reeling and screeching. Now his clammy hands slipped along the vines, ripping green heart-shaped leaves to litter the beach below.

Determined, Joran dug his nails into a ledge and pulled himself up, breathing erratically. Finally he lay perched on the bluff, next to the sand castle which leaned precariously toward the sea, as if yearning to fall in. Here the clamor of the waves grew to a deafening roar—almost as loud as the pounding of his heart. Joran forced himself to stand, gripped with an unwarranted fear of falling. He hastily stepped back from the dizzying edge and approached the castle.

Joran breathed onto the window as he rubbed it with his hand. He pressed close to the sea glass, aching to see in. The Moon laughed and hid behind a cloud, and Joran rubbed harder, strained his eyes. His emotions tumbled, like rocks caught in the riptide; fear rolled over anger, anger toppled hurt. Night wheeled around him in a frantic pace, and Joran felt his world giving way under his feet. His hand stuck to the glass, fingers to fingers, and Joran gasped.

Her face, just inches from the glass, stared vacantly at him. Encased in ice, embedded in time, Joran could make out her tinge of fear, a plea, a cry caught in mid-

throat. Cracks in the ice spread around her face, and as Joran tried to pull his hand free, the cracks deepened and lengthened. The eyes staring back at him betrayed panic. Joran pulled harder. Finally, with a shock of pain as flesh tore from his fingers, Joran broke away and fell back, releasing a spray of icy water, broken pieces of glass hitting his face and neck. His feet peddled uselessly under him as he plunged off the bluff and fell, screaming, toward the beach below.

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Joran's eyes lurched open at the thud and smack against the window. He abruptly sat up in a tangle of covers and straw, cool morning sun spilling through the glass. He squeezed his eyes and rubbed his throbbing head. Where was he? The familiarity of the barn loft, smells of hay and goat, helped him piece himself back together. It was Tuesday. He was sleeping in the barn again. And as the nightmare returned in wisps, he scowled. Why was he plagued with these images every night?

His thoughts were interrupted by a high-pitched moan that seemed to echo his own.

Ooh. Achin' head! Ow.

Joran, puzzled, looked around him, lifted blankets and then, remembering the thud, unlatched the transom and peered out. A tiny frych, in brilliant emerald with a ruby head, lay on the dirt by the barn door. He could hear the goat in the back stall calling to him.

What was that? You slept late again. My udder is about to burst.

Joran found his pants and put them on, pulling strands of straw out of his pockets. *A bird hit the window. Sorry, I'm coming.* He climbed down the ladder and laced up his

boots. He shook his head, trying to chase away the shards of nightmare that lingered. His body felt stiff from the uncomfortable and disturbed sleep. Now he was late for work—again.

Anger filled his heart, a feeling growing more familiar each day. Charris's face came to mind, her wavy long hair, her sage green eyes and thick lashes. Joran forced the image aside, striking the air, as if that somehow helped. His heart hurt, thick in his chest, a crushing weight, an anvil breaking his ribs. He threw open the barn door and a blast of cold wind assaulted him. Clouds gathered in the north, over the woods—thick, dark clouds heavy with snow. He heard a flock of songbirds welcoming the morning and smelled winter on the air. Joran shivered with cold but he didn't care. The gloominess fit his mood.

Joran reached down and picked up the frych. The little bird's head wobbled in a struggle to face Joran.

What hit? Who? A sing-song voice.

I'm Joran. You seemed to have crashed into my barn. Can you move your head?

The frych slowly turned her head from side to side. *Hurts. But ok. I think. But, ow.*

I have no time for this, Joran mused. He carried the bird into the barn, dumped out a wooden nail box and bedded it with straw. He placed the bird in the box and patted her gently. *Okay. No flying for you today. Here's some chicken feed and a soft place to rest. I will check on you later, when I get back. I'll put a dish of water next to the box, here.*

Oh. Thanks. Okay. Will stay here. The little bird settled down peacefully into the straw and pressed her eyes closed.

Joran smiled; he knew just how the frych felt. Distracted, he milked the goat, drank some of the musty milk with a chunk of stale oat bread and a block of cheese. He packed a sparse lunch in his sack and let the goat out into the yard where Charris's horse was pastured. She muttered her thanks in between bites of grass.

Smelled that wolf again. When's Charris coming home? She's a better milker than you...softer hands...

Joran ignored the old goat. He looked up at the rolling meadow behind his cottage to the sharp-toothed ridge outlined against the sky. He scanned for the familiar shape, the lone hunter pacing steadily, or sometimes still as a statue. Often, Joran could sense him staring at him—but more likely his goat drew the wolf's attention. He had never lost any livestock to the wolf, but he heard tales from his neighbors of missing chickens, geese, cats. Sure, he was too far away to mindspeak him, but Joran wondered if a creature like that would even stoop to converse with a human. Well, however curious, he certainly wasn't going to try to get close enough to find out. Today, he saw no wolf, but Joran knew he was out there, somewhere.

Joran's gaze traveled back down to his cottage. Since Charris left he'd taken to sleeping in the barn loft. He knew he was being stupid—abandoning a warm feather bed and a toasty hearth for the damp, smelly loft. But, he couldn't bring himself to sleeping in *their* bed; even walking into the house assaulted him with memories of Charris. He could smell her scent in the rooms, and there were her clothes and drawings and spices in the kitchen. Everything in that house stirred anger and pain, so he stayed away.

After washing up and shaving at the pump, Joran dunked his head in the wooden trough and rubbed it dry with a towel. He smoothed his curly hair, smoothed his wrinkled clothes and felt barely human. It would have to do. He slung his pack over his shoulder and headed down the dirt lane that led to the cart-road.

Mounds of recent snow piled along the sides of the road, and the bare branches of alder and aspen reached out like needy arms. Fueled by agitation, Joran picked up speed and began to trot down the road. It wasn't until he got to the old Baylor Farm that he slowed down to catch his breath. Bile rose in his mouth as he surveyed the homestead with its small creek running through the field. A derelict water wheel turned slowly next to a dilapidated hay shed. A small cottage with rotting steps leaned against the barn, paint long peeled away. He searched with his eyes, struggling between wanting and dreading finding someone there.

Joran fumed and quickened his pace, pounding the ground beneath him with keen intent. As he rounded the bend and crossed the small bridge that forded the creek, he looked up, sensing something. On the hill, atop a brushy butte, stood the wolf. Joran halted.

Joran had seen wolves on occasion, heard them baying on warm autumn nights. But this one was unlike any other. His thick, silver coat gleamed in the light, reflecting hues that made his image waver, like a mirage. His haunches were huge, his paws massive. And always a keen gaze, almost a knowing manner in the way he often watched Joran through the seasons.

In his youngest memories paced the wolf. Joran did not know how long wolf's years were, but this one was at least twenty cycles. This one, for some reason, did not

fear being seen by humans; and, Joran guessed, showed an interest in the affairs of men. Joran felt the wolf's gaze upon him. *What are you thinking, my mystery wolf? Do you laugh at us and our failures?*

Joran turned from the wolf and picked up his pace again. Failures. Joran cringed thinking what would happen once the entire village found out about Charris. He was kidding himself imagining he could keep up a charade in a town where everyone knew your business before you did. But he had to live here, work here. He knew his brothers would pry. The Weaver's Guild would inquire why Charris stopped coming. He hadn't even thought up any good lies—if any could be called good. There was nothing good about her leaving. Where was the good in goodbye?

Field turned to forest as Joran marched down the road. Flakes of snow landed on his coat, stuck in his eyelashes. The woods flanked him on either side of the road, tall trees with their tops in the heavens, and trunks so thick it would take ten men to circle. He had lived in the village most of his life, but the forest of Tebron had always beckoned him from his youngest memories.

While his childhood friends had run about town, playing stick ball in the streets and building forts in the narrow alleyways, Joran would disappear into the thickness of trees, embracing the solitude that resonated with his heart. For some reason he felt more a part of the woods than the bustle of human society, and he thought perhaps that is why he had developed such a kinship and communication with animals. He spent many peaceful hours just sitting quietly, observing the birds as they chatted to one another, watching the little denizens of the woods, the foxes, the hedgehogs, the badgers, amble past him, burrowing and snuffling for grubs. But today he barely gave the forest a

glance. They were just solitary trees standing in judgment of him. He hung his head and sped up, and nearly collided into the goose woman.

“Take a care there, little cub.”

Joran, startled, stopped. The tiny, stocky woman looked up, straining her neck to study Joran’s face. A patterned scarf bound her hair, and in her gnarled hand she gripped a staff of burlwood, that was topped with a knob rubbed smooth from years of use. Geese honked around her, wandering in mindless circles, waiting for coaxing. Joran recognized her from the marketplace, where she displayed her crate of enormous oblong eggs. He was surprised to see her walking along the road.

As if hearing his thoughts, she spoke, her voice gravely and deep. “We live up there,” she gestured into the forest where the ancient trees hugged the hillside. “We saw you coming.”

The woman walked around Joran, stepping much like her geese in a jerky, halting manner. She wore oversized shoes that appeared to be made of wood, and her pale smock hung straight to her ankles. She reached into the pouch around her waist and pulled out a handful of feed, then scattered seed on the ground, which set off a loud honking and bluster of goose movement.

Joran sidestepped the birds and nodded respectfully to the woman. “I apologize for not seeing you. I’m late for work, though. I apprentice with Elder Tabor, the blacksmith...”

“Yes, we often see you there.” The old woman blocked his path, gripping his arm tightly. Joran stopped. “We see your dreams.” Grabbing his collar, she pulled him down to meet her gaze. “You have taken her and trapped her, you have.”

Joran abruptly pulled back. He felt a shiver dance across his neck and hugged his cloak tighter. Geese surrounded him, hemmed him in. What was she carrying on about?

“Little cub, don’t you understand? You must save her before the sand slips through the glass. You cannot save her unless you loose the three keys and open the lock. You will have no peace unless you do this thing.” The small woman gazed up at him, her rheumy eyes flitting and darting. Joran smelled rancid breath and rotting teeth. He drew back, disgusted.

Joran pried her fingers from his cloak. “You must be crazy, old woman. I have no idea what you are talking about.” He pushed through the maze of geese and readjusted the sack on his back, knowing she laughed at him with her eyes. This woman was loonier than his mother! What was she going on about—three keys and sand through the glass?

The woman called after him as he hurried down the road. “It is you who have trapped her. Between Moon and tide. Anger burns cold, but it will leave only ashes.”

Joran covered his ears to shut out her cries. How could she see his dreams? Was she talking about Charris? And how would she know anything about him or his life? Joran quickened his pace, trying to focus on the day’s work ahead. But as he neared the village, her words rattled around in his head like the stones in his dreams, tumbling in the waves, rolling and colliding, leaving him no peace.

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