



# *The Dwarf and The Bear*

Thomas Woodland

Magic, Supernatural

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The tree was the only thing that broke the otherwise flat landscape. It stood alone, leafless and naked, its branches twisted and bare. The snow lay unbroken on the ground and swirled thickly through the air, any distinction between the two impossible in the maelstrom of white. The tree, its wood black and knotted, almost appeared to be floating in a sea of white, as if the storm had pulled it from the ground and tossed it skyward to float eternally among the clouds.

The paw that crunched into the snow was wide and flat, the fur covering it a deep brown. Flakes had settled among the dark hairs and frozen them together, creating rigid clumps that stuck out like spines. As the bear took another step onward, it left behind a frying pan sized indentation in the snow, the latest of many that stretched back through the whiteness. The creature was huge, more than six feet high at the shoulder and stretching almost eleven feet from snout to stubby tail. Stood on its hind legs, it would have towered above even the tallest man. Its size was exacerbated still further by the dwarf riding on its back.

Törven Dobrac peered through the white curtain that hung and danced before him, obscuring everything. His cheeks and nose had long since passed into unfeelingness, his fingers only spared by the thick leather gloves that gripped the deep fur at the bear's neck. Ice had stiffened his beard, a frozen inverted flame that swung from his chin like a bell. A hood, lined with wool and several inches thick, covered the top of his head, the cowl hanging down over his forehead. He knew he had to be going the right way. Snowstorms made navigating by map impossible, and even the sailor's method of using the stars was out of the question. But it held no power over the compass that was affixed to the saddle he was perched upon, the bright red needle vibrant in the blinding white. As long as he kept heading north, he wouldn't stray far.

He reached down and checked the straps that ran down Noha's sides, coming together under her warm belly. They were still secure, the leather frozen stiff but holding firm. He relaxed a fraction. There was still time. The

package was secure, and the storm appeared to be easing off the tiniest bit.

And then he heard the howls.

Just one at first. Then another. Within five seconds, there were six distinct voices calling through the white air, the sound piercing and chilling. Törven's heart began to thump in his ears. Beneath him, Noha tensed, sensing the danger. She hardly needed the encouragement of Törven yelling, 'Go!' before she was off, battling through the driving snow, wind tearing at her eyes and racing through her fur.

Törven gripped the bear's fur tighter as she lumbered along, past the tree that stood like an empty gallows, its boughs dead and gnarled. He could hear the howls still sounding behind them, a call and response conversation that steadily grew louder. He knew that Noha, try as she might, could not outrun them, not with him on her back.

He made a quick decision, then pulled on the fur and brought her to a confused stop. Grabbing his bag from its place on the saddle, he hooked one foot into the ladder that hung down the bear's side, descending rapidly until his boots crunched into the snow. Stood at ground level, the top of his head barely reached her knee. Noha looked round at him, concern in her eyes. Törven walked forward, and gently stroked her snout, looking into the beautiful hazel eyes behind it.

"I need you to go on ahead, Noha," he said softly. Despite the shrieking wind, his voice was low and gentle. "I'll stay here and hold him off. That should give you enough time to make it out of this storm and back to the castle."

Noha moaned, a deep and awful sound full of sorrow. She'd understood every word, but didn't want to listen to it.

"It's the only way. You know that. If he gets his hands on her, who knows what he'll unleash. You have to go now, girl." He smiled, a sad smile, a knowing smile. "I'll miss you Noha. But it has to be done." He leaned forward, and gently kissed the bear's cheek, burying his face in her thick fur. Noha groaned one last time, nuzzling up to Törven. "Go on, girl. Get her home safe." Noha gave him a final look, then threw back her head and roared. A long, loud, heartrending roar. The sound of an animal in pain. And then, she was off, thundering through the snow and disappearing as if a curtain had been drawn.

Törven turned and began to make his way back the direction they'd come, following the prints left by Noha's huge paws. With his right hand, he reached under his thick leather jacket and drew out a dagger. The weapon was elegantly simple, a silver blade and a fabric wrapped handle, devoid of any fancy ornamentation. As he gripped it in his gloved hand, he muttered a few words in a language long ago lost to obscurity. The silver crosspiece of the dagger began to glow faintly, the light wrapping itself around Törven's hand. When the glow

faded, a sphere of metal remained, joined to a steel band encircling the dwarf's wrist. Even with numbing fingers and thick gloves hindering his dexterity, it was impossible now for Törven to drop the dagger.

He saw a dark shape stalking towards him from out of the white haze. It moved slowly, confidently, with the air of a hunter closing in on its prey. A second later, two more appeared. Then another two. They were all grey, their coats thick and matted from the wind. Their eyes were yellow or ice blue, full of cold pleasure. One drew back its lips into a snarl, exposing the curving teeth, more yellow than white, set in gums of the palest pink. A laugh drifted by on the breeze, dancing among the snowflakes and circling around Törven's head. It was a terrible, hollow laugh, empty of any humour or warmth.

"I know you're here, Kaldion!" Törven called out to the emptiness. "Show yourself."

"As you wish." The words, spoken from nowhere, sent a shiver racing down the dwarf's spine.

A figure stepped out of nothing, the white simply forming into a hooded man. The man was clad in robes that were every bit as colourless as the landscape around him. Little of his face could be seen behind the long cowl, pointed like an eagle's beak, but the lips were pale and bloodless, the skin around them like that of a corpse. The figure floated a foot above the ground, his feet touching nothing but the snowflakes that darted around them. He raised a hand like that of a skeleton, a single finger pointed towards Törven.

"You have something of mine, dwarf." His words were somehow colder than the frozen air around them, each word sending goosepimples racing over Törven's skin. "Return it to me."

"She is not yours," Törven shot back defiantly. "You cannot have her."

"Do not stand in my way," the necromancer warned. "I will have that girl."

"Then go. Take her." Törven spread his arms wide. "But I will give every last drop of blood in my veins, every breath of air in my lungs, every beat of my heart, to ensure that you will never lay a finger on her."

Kaldion smiled a chilling, terrifying smile.

"I believe you."

The sixth wolf, larger than all the others, flew over the wizard's head, a black shape with red eyes that seemed to suck all light into its colourless fur. Its jaws opened in a terrible snarl as its fangs reached for the dwarf's head, ready to tear flesh from bone.

They found only empty air.

Törven had reacted with incredible speed, rolling forwards underneath the leaping creature. As he came out of the roll, he reached upward with the dagger, feeling a surge of satisfaction as the tip cut into the underbelly of the wolf. Blood pattered down into the snow, the only spots of colour in an otherwise empty landscape.

Törven turned to face the other five who were closing in on him, angered by the injury to their alpha. Another

one charged him, snapping at his legs. Törven landed a square kick to its muzzle, knocking it aside as he brought the blade down. The silver flashed through the grey fur, splitting the skin beneath it and sending a gushing geyser of red bursting forth from a severed artery. The wolf howled, staggering around in the snow before collapsing to its side.

The dwarf, deceptively agile, even in the thick snow, danced around another two who tried to come at him from different sides, spinning left around them with elegant ease. Before the closest one could stop him, he'd leapt up onto its back, grabbing hold of the scruff of its neck. The creature's legs couldn't support the added weight of Törven's stocky frame, and gave out, sending the two crashing into the snow. Törven grabbed the wolf's muzzle with his left hand, clamping its jaws shut. He snaked his other arm around the animal's neck, and wrenched the two limbs in opposite directions. There was a stomach-churning crunch as its neck broke, and it stopped its struggling.

Törven stumbled back to his feet, only to be knocked flat on his back by the alpha. Its paws landed square on his shoulders, pinning his arms to the ground. Its huge weight bore down upon him, pressing him into the snow. He struggled desperately, trying to free his arms, but it was no use. The wolf leaned down towards him, its clouding breath blowing into his face. It carried the smell of death itself. Törven could see the cruelty in the creature's eyes, the satisfaction of the kill.

One second later, and that look was gone.

Törven brought his foot back down, the three-inch blade protruding from the toe now slick with blood. Activated by curling his toes in the right way, the hidden weapon had saved his life more times than he could count. The black wolf let out a howl of anguish, staggering sideways. His arms freed, Törven lunged upwards with his dagger. The blade plunged into the soft flesh underneath the wolf's chin, and carried on up, finally lodging itself in the base of the brain. The alpha gave a dreadful cry, and collapsed. Törven did the opposite, forcing himself back to his feet as the other three wolves stalked towards him together.

He was trapped.

He couldn't focus on any one of them without the others coming at him. He couldn't run, or they would all get him.

So he chose the third option.

In a single fluid movement, his left arm reached over his shoulder, grasping the wooden stock that protruded from behind his head, his gloved finger sliding through the metal ring. Before the wolves could move, he'd pulled the weapon free, brought it round and, resting it on his right forearm, fired.

The blunderbuss roared impossibly loudly, drowning out the moaning wind for a split second. The metal balls

tore through the three wolves, ripping through their hide and sending them tumbling over themselves before coming to rest in the snow, red slowly spreading around the corpses.

Törven allowed himself a brief feeling of pleasure, but froze when he heard a soft roaring form behind him. He tried to turn and dodge but he was much too late.

The ball of black fire caught him square in the back, sending him cartwheeling forward to faceplant in the snow. He couldn't move. His world was spinning, his body screaming from every nerve.

"An impressive performance, Törven." The voice of Kaldion, soft, mocking, coming from a mile away. "But all in vain. I'll have that girl, and my revenge. And you? Nothing, but an icy grave." The necromancer gave another terrible laugh that faded away into the wind as he turned and stepped into nothingness.

Törven tried to get up, but the effort was too much. Around him, white darkened, passing from grey to charcoal and finally, peacefully, into black.

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Warmth.

That was the first thing Törven became aware of as his mind slowly thawed out of the frost of unconsciousness.

Not a faint, indistinct feeling, but an enveloping, loving heat, like a mother's arms wrapped around him.

Slowly, he cracked his eyes open, fully expecting snowflakes to sting his eyeballs. But none came. Light, soft and mellow, rather than harsh and white, filled his vision, soothing away the darkness that clouded his mind.

As strength returned to his muscles, he gently propped himself up, and looked around him.

He was lying on a bed in a small, comfortable room, the walls bare brown rock. There was a chair set in the corner, on which his leather coat and breeches were laid. His thick boots sat neatly beneath the seat. On a table beside the chair, his dagger, blunderbuss and bag sat patiently. There were no windows and no obvious source of heat or light. Rather, the air itself seemed to radiate energy, as if it were alive with microscopic flames.

Törven slipped out of bed, his thick woollen socks hitting a stone floor that should have been cold, but instead was pleasantly warm. He could hear no sounds from outside the wooden door before him, so quickly dressed again, sliding his equipment back into its holsters. As he turned to leave, the door suddenly opened, seemingly of its own accord.

"Wait, Carrier." The gentle words came from nowhere, the very air itself seeming to speak.

"Who are you?" Törven called out, more than a little unnerved. "Where am I?"

"We are the Zimnae," came the response.

"The Zimnae? The snow spirits?" Törven shook his head. "I thought you were just a myth."

"We have allowed ourselves to fall out of memory, so that we may go unnoticed." The words filled the air

around him, coming from everywhere and nowhere.

“You saved me. Why?”

“Kaldion must not be allowed to claim the Culzo. If he does, he will raise an army of the dead, and lay waste to the land. You and your beast must reach the castle safely with the Culzo. If not, no thing, living or dead, will be safe.”

“How can I defeat him? He’s an undead sorcerer of immense power. I’m nothing more than a messenger.”

“You must look to your heart, Carrier. There will you find the power you seek.”

“That doesn’t make any sense! What do you mean?” But the spirits provided no answers.

“You must go now, Carrier. Your beast struggles onwards, but Kaldion grows ever closer. We can help to hold back the storm from your path, but the necromancer’s magic is strong. You must hurry. Farewell, noble Törven. May the winds carry you ever onwards.”

The words died away, and the air seemed to vibrate, the energy pulsing through it growing stronger and more intense until it had built to a light that was all consuming. Then, suddenly, it was gone, replaced by the harsh whiteness of the blizzard. The snow lashed down at him, stinging his cheeks once more.

The dwarf turned, and saw a sight that made his heart leap. A large, dark shape was lumbering through the white towards him, fighting through the driving wind. A familiar roar rumbled through the gale to reach his ears as Noha barrelled towards him, the joy visible in her eyes as she reached him, nearly knocking him over as she nuzzled her head into him, moaning happily.

“Hello girl,” Törven grinned, rubbing her behind the ears. “I never thought I’d see you again.” Noha looked down at him, her eyes saying that she had thought the same. She opened her impossibly large jaws, and gently licked his face, leaving him wiping spittle from his bulbous nose. “I missed you to Noha,” he smiled. “But we have to move on. Kaldion is coming, and we have to get her back to the castle.” Törven swung his foot into the ladder, scrambled onto Noha’s broad back, and patted her thick neck. The bear roared, and thundered off through the snowstorm. As they went, Törven noticed that there almost seemed to be a corridor opening up before them, the swirling flakes darting out of their way, and he remembered the words of the Zimnae. He smiled, held tightly onto Noha’s fur, and urged her onward, through the white and toward civilisation.

They almost made it.

It didn’t seem fair to Törven. He could see where the snow and the storm ended, where rocks and grass poked through the thinning carpet. He could feel a warmer breeze, see the sun peaking from behind clouds.

Squinting into the distance, he could just make out the spires of the castle, see the banner flying from the tower.

And yet, floating before them, unfurling himself from the last of the whiteness, was Kaldion.

“You!” The necromancer spat at Törven, a voice poisoned with hatred. “How are you alive?”

“I had some help from some new friends.” Törven was already unsheathing his dagger and muttering the incantation, feeling the metal wrap itself around his wrist.

“The Zimnae.” Kaldion’s eyes narrowed with loathing. “I thought my master wiped them out years ago. But I always wondered if any managed to survive. No matter. They cannot save you now.” As he spoke, he raised his hands to the sky, bony fingers splayed. The snow swirled around him, the flakes darting about his arms. Then, suddenly, he shouted to the sky, his voice cutting through the shrieking of the storm. The words were alien, incomprehensible, and yet filled with an unmistakable evil. As he did so, he flung his arms out, palms flat, pointing in opposite directions.

Törven felt the blast wash over him, felt it tug at his beard and at Noha’s fur. The force of the spell, quite literally, blew the storm away. In an instant the air was cleared, the snowflakes that had choked it suddenly banished. The clouds that obscured the sun fled, letting light pour down onto the figures who faced each other. Snow still clung to the ground in a deep carpet, but otherwise it could have been a bright midsummers day.

“Your spirit friends will help you no more, dwarf,” the wizard chuckled. “Now, you die.”

Törven unzipped his jacket with his free hand, knowing he would soon overheat in the thick garment. He slung it across the saddle, peeled off his left glove, restrapped his blunderbuss to his back, and dismounted from the bear.

“Stand aside, Kaldion,” he ordered, doing his best to keep the fear out of his voice. “The child will never be yours.”

“That, my vertically challenged friend, is where you are wrong.” Kaldion’s face cracked into a ghastly grimace of a smile. “The girl, and this land, will kneel before me. The one true lord of both the living and the dead. You will not stand in my way.

“But,” he continued, with a hint of warmth creeping into his voice. “If you turn her over to me now, I will allow you and your...” he glanced distastefully at Noha, who was growling softly, hackles raised, eyes narrowed.

“Pet,” he concluded, “to live.”

“Is there anyone who trusts the word of a corpse?” Törven shook his head.

“But Törven, is it not said that dead men tell no lies?”

“You maybe dead, Kaldion. But you’re no man. Not anymore.” Törven raised his dagger. “I will never give you that child.”

“Then I will take her from your bear’s moaning corpse!”

Törven hadn't even seen Kaldion form the flames in his hand, but the black ball was speeding through the air towards him before he knew what was happening. He had no time to react, no time to get out of the way. But the ball never reached him.

Half a foot from his chest, the dark flames burst apart, dissipating harmlessly into the air.

For a moment, nobody moved. Both men were too stunned to react, unable to understand what had happened. It was like a snowball being thrown against a stone wall. One second the sphere of death had been hurtling through the air. The next, it simply exploded, the last flickering flames twisting and disappearing in the blink of an eye.

"Impossible." Kaldion whispered. "How? HOW!" He howled at the sky.

Törven, for his part, didn't have an answer. He was completely shocked, unable to comprehend how he had just avoided death.

That was when he felt something cool pressing against his chest, just to the left of his sternum. He fumbled for the inside pocket of his tunic, and felt something had been slipped inside, something he hadn't noticed until now.

It was a snowflake.

A single, frozen snowflake, paper thin but the size of his palm. He could feel the coolness of the ice beneath his fingers. Despite its apparent fragility, the ice felt as hard and solid as steel, firm and unyielding.

"Look to your heart," he muttered, understanding now what the Zimnae had meant by their words. They had given him a tool, a charm, to protect him from Kaldion's magic.

Kaldion roared in anger, a furious wind rushing around him. As Törven watched, the white robed figure grew in size, spine stretching, arms and legs lengthening, until he stood at least eight feet tall and three feet wide, a giant of a man before the dwarf.

"Damn you and your damn fairies!" He screamed. "I will have that child!" The wizard raised his arms, palms upwards, and thundered out another spell, this one long and more terrifying than the last. The ground around Törven's feet began to rumble and shake, the vibrations traveling up his legs. Beside him, Noha whimpered, sensing the dangerous unnaturalness that was to come.

A skeletal hand burst through the ground, fingers that were more grey than white reaching for the sky. It was rapidly followed by another, and then three more. Within ten seconds, there were five reanimated corpses, each in various states of decay, standing around Törven and Noha. Their eyes (in those that still had them) were empty staring, no emotion or feeling behind them. They had been resurrected as nothing more than puppets, mindless drones with only one task: kill.



Kaldion flicked his wrists out, spitting out one final incantation. The air before his hands instantly froze, forming a long, icicle-like sword in his left hand, a shield of solid ice on his right wrist. The ice was a terrible, empty blue, the colour of death.

“Go! Bring me the child!” Kaldion commanded, pointing towards Nora with his sword. As one, the undead servants lumbered towards the bear. They made no sound, nor showed any emotion.

Törven readied his dagger, but before he could attack the first of the shambling minions, the giant Necromancer came at him, swinging his icy blade in great scything arcs. Törven dodged and rolled away, narrowly avoiding a strike that would, had it connected, have split his torso open lengthways. He came out of the roll and back onto his feet, already shifting his weight to lunge forward with the dagger. The dwarf's nimbleness and agility caught the necromancer by surprise. In his larger form he was much slower, and was unable to bring his shield down in time to prevent Törven's blade sliding between his ribs.

Blood, black rather than red, bubbled from the wound and dropped to the snow. But Kaldion barely seemed fazed.

“How can you kill a dead man, dwarf?” He grinned, slamming the shield forward into Törven's face. The hard, flat ice impacted with incredible force, knocking Törven back. He stumbled, his nose flattened, blood of his own streaming over his face and into his beard. He blinked back tears, knowing with a sick certainty that, while he had landed what should have been a fatal blow, it had done nothing to his opponent.

Meanwhile, Noha was taking on the five skeletal warriors. Had they been capable of feeling anything, they might have been utterly terrified at the roar that she let out, the sound tearing across the landscape through the now clear air, bouncing off hillsides and echoing through distant caves. She brought up one giant paw, claws like sickles protruding from between the toes, and swiped at the nearest of the shuffling creatures. The corpse was knocked aside like a ragdoll, deep gashes torn across its face and neck. Any man would have been killed by such a blow. Indeed, the force was strong enough to partially detach the thing's head from its neck, leaving a great rip in the flesh. But the unwilling servant simply picked itself back up and came at her again. Noha roared in disbelief, then launched herself at another two who were marching side by side. One massive forepaw pinned each of them to the ground, ribs cracking under the immense weight. But again, the two figures seemed unperturbed. One reached up and slashed at Noha's chest with fingers that had lost all their flesh. The bone scratched the flesh beneath the thick fur, sending a few droplets of blood pattering to the snow. Noha roared, then sprang forward, jaws yawning open to then close around the torso of another possessed body. Her teeth, each one as long and sharp as a dagger, sliced easily through the decaying flesh and closed around the spine. Holding the body against the floor with her paws, she pulled upward, ripping a section of the

bony column out with a hideous tearing sound. Now, only a thin band of flesh connected the upper and lower parts of the thing's body. It tried to stand, but its top half flopped sideways, pulling its legs back to the floor. Törven saw none of this, as he frantically tried to avoid Kaldion's onslaught of stabs and slashes. The huge figure was relentless, attacking from every angle, using the shield to try and cut off the dwarf's evasive manoeuvres, forcing him to back away through the snow. He was tiring, and the magician knew it. The snow impeded his movements, his nose was still streaming blood, and the dagger was feeling heavier and heavier in his hand.

He tried to switch it up and go on the offensive, but it was hopeless. Kaldion easily turned the blade aside with his shield, the razor-sharp tip not even scratching the ice. The necromancer followed it up with a strike from his sword hand, the hilt of the weapon slamming into Törven's head. The dwarf was knock onto his back, crying out. Before he could recover, Kaldion darted forward, raised his blade, and brought it down.

The ice passed cleanly through Törven's forearm, just below the elbow. The dagger, still wrapped around the wrist, fell into the snow. Törven screamed, a terrible, horrible scream. Blood gushed from the severed limb, steaming as it hit the snow, staining it a deep crimson. Above him, Kaldion laughed.

"I appear to have 'disarmed' you," he gloated. "Next it will be your bear. And then, the kingdom." He raised his icicle blade above his head, the blue shining terribly in the sunlight. "Goodbye, Törven." The blade began to plunge down.

Then, suddenly, Noha barrelled into Kaldion out of nowhere. The wizard was caught completely by surprise. The bear's full bulk powered into him, knocking him to the ground. The sword was sent flying, spinning away into the snow. Kaldion hit the ground beside Törven, struggling as Noha tore at his face with her teeth and carved chunks from his chest with her claws. But even this could not hurt him mortally. He was, after all, past mortality. With a snarl, he pushed the bear off him, sending the mighty beast rolling over the ground. He pulled himself to his feet, and stalked over to her, lying on her side. He could see wounds across her chest and sides where his minions had attacked her. A shame they had been unable to retrieve the bundle that he could see strapped to her belly.

"And now, you are mine," he whispered to the bundle.

"No she's not."

Even as Kaldion spun round, Törven thrust forward with his remaining left hand. In it was clutched the enchanted snowflake the Zimnae had given him. It was much too late for Kaldion to react. The snowflake connected with his forehead, and burned there.

The necromancer screamed, a terrible, howling, wailing scream of pure anguish. He thrashed around, hands

tearing at his brow. Something terrible was happening to his body. The flesh was rotting and falling off before Törven's eyes, as if some terrible disease were eating away at it. His robes now hung off bones, his eyes staring out of skull.

The skeleton opened its mouth as if to utter one last spell.

And then it collapsed into the snow.

Törven collapsed beside him. Blood still pumped from his recent amputation, but he no longer felt anything.

No pain, no suffering, no anger. Instead, he just felt tired.

So very, very tired.

Noha came over to him, nuzzling gently at him.

"Thank you, girl," he whispered. "Thank you."

Noha moaned, her eyes filled with sadness.

"Go on. Get to the castle. Get her home."

Noha howled, a pain-filled howl that seemed to split the very air.

"Leave me. Take her home. Take her..."

Törven's eyes closed.

He never felt the jaws that closed gently around his midriff. Nor did he feel the jolts and judders of the beast that was carrying him charging across the countryside, looking for someone to help save a life.

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