THIRTY-TWO

Torak dodged, and the axe hissed past his ear, splintering the ice where he’d been standing.

Hord wrenched it free. ‘Give me the Nanuak!’ he cried. ‘I have to take it to the Mountain!’

‘Get away from me!’ said Torak.

From the edge of the ravine came a grinding of ice. The bear was nearing the top.

Hord’s haggard face twisted in pain. Torak could barely imagine how he’d brought himself to track them through the demon-haunted Forest; to brave the wrath of the Spirit by venturing up the trail. ‘Give me the Nanuak,’ repeated Hord.

Wolf advanced on him, his whole body a shuddering snarl. He was no longer a cub; he was a ferocious young wolf defending his pack-brother.

Hord ignored him. ‘I will have it! It’s my twisted round and lunged for the Nanuak swinging from Torak’s neck.

Torak jerked out of reach. Hord went for his legs, throwing him backwards onto the ice. But as Torak went down, he tore the pouch from his neck and hurled it up the trail, out of Hord’s reach. Wolf righted himself with a shake and leapt for the pouch, catching it in mid-air, but landing perilously close to the edge of the ravine.

‘Wolf!’ cried Torak, struggling beneath Hord, who was straddling his chest, and kneeling on his arms.

Wolf’s hind pawsscrabbled wildly at the edge. From just below him came a menacing growl – then the bear’s black claws sliced the air, narrowly missing Wolf’s paws...
Wolf gave a tremendous heave and regained the trail. But then, for the first time ever, he decided to return something Torak had thrown, and bounded towards him with the Nanuak in his jaws.

Hord strained to reach the pouch. Torak wrested one hand free and dragged his arm away. If only his knife-arm wasn’t pinned under Hord’s knee . . .

An unearthly roar shook the ravine. In horror, Torak watched the bear rise above the edge of the trail.

And in that final moment, as the bear towered above them, as Wolf paused with the Nanuak in his jaws — in that final moment as Torak struggled with Hord, the true meaning of the Prophecy broke upon him. *The Listener*
gives his heart’s blood to the Mountain.’

His heart’s blood.
Wolf.
No! he cried inside his head.
But he knew what he had to do. Out loud he shouted to Wolf, ‘Take it to the Mountain! Uff! Uff! Uff!’

Wolf’s golden gaze met his.
‘Uff!’ gasped Torak. His eyes stung.
Wolf turned and raced up the trail towards the Mountain.

Hord snarled with fury and staggered after him — but he slipped and toppled backwards, screaming, into the arms of the bear.

Torak scrambled to his feet. Hord was still screaming. Torak had to help him . . .

From high above came a deafening crack.

The trail shook. Torak was thrown to his knees.

The crack swelled to a grinding roar. He threw himself beneath the overhang — and an instant later, down came the rushing, rampaging, killing snow, obliterating Hord, obliterating the bear — sending them howling down into death.

The World Spirit had heard Torak’s plea.

The last thing Torak saw was Wolf, the Nanuak still in his jaws, racing under the thundering snow towards the Mountain. ‘Wolf!’ he shouted. Then the whole world turned white.

Torak never knew how long he crouched against the rockface, with his eyes tight shut.

At last he became aware that the thundering had turned to echoes — and that the echoes were getting fainter. The World Spirit was striding away into the Mountains.

The sound of its footsteps faded to a hiss of settling snow . . .

Then a whisper . . .
Then — silence.
Torak opened his eyes.
He could see out across the ravine. He was not buried alive. The World Spirit had passed over the overhang, and let him live. But where was Wolf?

He got to his feet and stumbled to the edge of the trail. The dead cold had gone. He saw the Mountains through a haze of settling snow.
Below him, the ravine had disappeared under a chaos of ice and rock. Buried beneath it lay Hord and the bear.

Hord had paid with his life. The bear was an empty husk, for the Spirit had banished the demon to the Otherworld. Perhaps the bear’s own souls would now be at peace, after their long imprisonment with the demon.

Torak had fulfilled his oath to Fa. He had given the Nanuak to the World Spirit – and the Spirit had destroyed the bear.

He knew that, but he couldn’t feel it. All he could feel was the ache in his chest. Where was Wolf? Had he reached the Mountain before the snow came down? Or did he too lie buried under the ice?

‘Please be alive,’ murmured Torak. ‘Please.

I’ll never ask anything again.’

A breeze lifted his hair, but brought no answer.

A young crow flew over the Mountains, cawing and sky-dancing with the joy of flight. From the east came a thunder of hooves. Torak knew what that meant. It meant that the reindeer were coming down from the fells. The Forest was returning to life.

Turning, he saw that the way to the south remained open; he would be able to find his way back to Renn and Fin-Kedinn and the Ravens.

Then from the north – beyond the torrent of ice that blocked the trail, behind the clouds that hid the Mountain of the World Spirit – a wolf howled.

It was not the high, wobbly yowl of a cub,

but the pure, heart-wrenching song of a young wolf. And yet it was still unmistakably Wolf.

The pain in Torak’s chest broke loose and lifted free.

As he listened to the music of Wolf’s song, more wolf-voices joined it: weaving in and out, but never drowning that one clear, well-loved voice. Wolf was not alone.

Torak’s eyes blurred with tears. He understood. Wolf was howling a farewell. He wasn’t coming back.

The howling ceased. Torak bowed his head. ‘But he’s alive,’ he said out loud. ‘That’s what matters. He is alive.’

He longed to howl a reply: to tell Wolf that it was not for ever; that one day, he would find some way for them to be together. But he couldn’t think how to say it, because in wolf talk there is no future.

Instead, he said it in his own speech. He knew that Wolf wouldn’t understand, but he also knew that he was making the promise to himself as much as to Wolf.

‘Some day,’ he called, and his voice rang through the radiant air, ‘some day we will be together. We will hunt together in the Forest. Together-’ his voice broke. ‘I promise. My brother, the wolf.’

No answer came back. But Torak had not expected one. He had made his promise.

He stooped for a handful of snow to cool his burning face. It felt good. He scooped up some more, and rubbed the Death Mark from his forehead.
Then he turned and started back towards the Forest.