

Wolf Mountain

As long as the snows covered the land Erik and his men stayed in the camp which they had built out of logs. By day they fished and hunted. At night they would lie awake listening to the howling of the wolves outside.

'They are starving,' Erik would say to his men. 'We are lucky to be safe in our camp. A man would be torn to pieces by such a pack.'

One day Erik and Sven the Strong chased a wild boar across the frozen hills, but it escaped into a black forest.

'We dare not follow it into that place,' said Erik, 'for the sun will soon be setting and for sure that is where the wolves have their lair.'

But even as the two companions turned to head back for the camp, the sun hid behind a cloud, and they heard – in the far distance, deep in the black forest – a wolf howl. Erik shuddered, and even Sven the Strong quickened his pace as they walked away from the dark trees.

'Let us make haste,' whispered Erik.

But the snow was deep, and many was the time they sank up to their waists, and it was slow going. And behind them, in the far distance, deep in the forest another wolf howled.

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Erik turned to Sven the Strong and said: 'Let us bind these branches onto our feet so that we do not sink into the snow.' This they did, but still the way was steep and the snow too soft, and many was the time they sank up to their chests, and it was slow going.

And behind them, in the far distance, deep in the forest, another wolf howled.

Then Erik turned to Sven the Strong and said: 'Let us cut across the mountainside. It may be harder, but it will be shorter.' So they turned towards the dark mountain, and struggled on through the snow.

As the way got steeper, the snow turned to ice, and many was the time they slipped and fell, but the fearful thought of those starving wolves spurred them on.

All at once a mist descended on the mountainside, and they could not see which way they were going and behind them, nearer now, they could hear one, two . . . three hungry wolves howling.

'I fear they have picked up our scent,' said Erik. 'We are lost in this mist and for certain we shall never reach camp, nor see our comrades again.'

But even as he spoke, a dark shape rose up in front of them out of the mist. It was a great grey wolf – as tall as a man.

Sven the Strong raised his bow, but before he could let his arrow fly, Erik put out his hand and spoke:

'Who are you, wolf?'

But the great grey wolf did not reply. Its eyes gleamed, and it bared its great yellow teeth and snarled.

'Who are you wolf? And what is your business with us?' said Erik.

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Then the wolf snarled again and finally it said: 'Who am I . . . Who are you? Do you not know that this is Wolf Mountain, and here you must obey the Law of the Wolves?'

At these words Sven the Strong raised his bow again, saying: 'That I will never do! For the Law of the Wolves is to tear each other to pieces!'

The great grey wolf lifted up its grizzled head and howled, and all around they heard the answering howls of other wolves. Then the wolf looked at Erik and Sven and said: 'That is not the Law of the Wolves and on Wolf Mountain, if you do not know the Law of the Wolves, you will be torn to pieces.'

'But what is the Law of the Wolves?' cried Erik. 'If you do not obey it, you will die,' said the great grey wolf, and just then the mist seemed to grow thicker, until Erik and Sven could scarcely see it, and then, suddenly, the mist cleared and the old wolf was gone.

Erik and Sven looked at each other, and then they looked behind them, and far away below them they saw dark shapes slipping out from the black forest.

'The wolves are coming to Wolf Mountain,' said Erik. 'We must be quick.'

So on they climbed, and the way got harder and steeper, and soon they were climbing with hand and foot. Then Sven the Strong took a rope and handed one end to Erik.

'Here,' said Sven, 'tie that round your waist.' Then Sven tied the other end round his own waist, and so they continued, and when the way got even steeper, Sven was able to pull Erik up with the rope.

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Not long after this they came upon a mountain goat hiding in a cleft in the rock.

'Mountain goat,' said Erik, 'you live on Wolf Mountain. Tell us what is the Law of the Wolves?'

But the mountain goat shook its head: 'I do not live on Wolf Mountain. I lost my way in the mist. But I can tell you the Law of the Wolves: it is to tear everything to pieces, to strip the land bare, and to show no mercy to any living creature. That is the Law of the Wolves.'

'Then we are dead for certain,' said Erik, 'for I cannot obey such a law.'

'No more can I,' said Sven the Strong, and the two men went on their way.

On they climbed, up and up, until all at once they came upon a black bear, crouching under a rock.

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'Black bear,' said Erik, 'since you live on Wolf Mountain, tell us: what is the Law of the Wolves?'

The black bear replied: 'The Law of the Wolves is to be always hungry, and never to allow your appetite to be satisfied. I do not live here, but that is the Law of the Wolves.'

'If that is the Law of the Wolves,' said Erik, 'it is not a law for men. We shall surely die here on Wolf Mountain. Sven the Strong nodded, and they went on their way.'

On they climbed, until they came to a sheer rock face. 'Now indeed we are lost,' said Erik, 'for we cannot climb that sheer rock face. There is neither foothold nor handhold.'

'I will try,' said Sven the Strong, 'and if I succeed, I will pull you up after me.'

So Sven set off to climb the sheer rock face. Straight up he went, clutching with his fingers, and straining with all his strength to stay on the wall of rock. Higher and higher he got, as Erik watched, and below them they heard the howling of the wolves getting closer all the time. And as he heard the wolves, Sven looked down for a moment, and he saw how high he was, and how little he had to hold on to, and his foot slipped, and he clutched with his hand, but the rock face seemed to crumble at his touch, and suddenly he was plunging down towards Erik in a shower of rock and ice.

As his friend fell, Erik thought to himself: 'Is this how we shall die on Wolf Mountain?' But as it happened, instead of landing on the solid ice and rock where Erik stood, Sven the Strong landed in a drift of

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new-fallen snow that lay close by, and Erik ran to him, and found that his leg was broken.

Then they heard a terrible sound. The howls of the wolves were close below them and, as they listened, the howls changed from howls to frenzied barks, and they heard the bleating of the mountain goat as the starving wolves set upon the poor creature. Then Erik and Sven the Strong knew that the mountain goat had *not* known the Law of the Wolves.

Erik lifted Sven the Strong out of the snow, and pulled him back towards the rock face. And as he did so, they heard the wolves draw closer and closer, and they heard the black bear roaring and the wolf pack barking and snarling, and they heard the sounds of a hideous fight. Then all went still, and Erik and Sven waited and listened . . . Until one by one, the wolves began to howl again – closer than ever.

'The black bear did not know the Law of the Wolves either,' said Erik, 'and no more do we. There is only one chance for us.'

And with these words, Erik himself began to climb the impossible sheer rock face. Straight up he went, using every niche and every notch, and he never once glanced behind him. So it was that he did not see the first dark shapes appear on the ice-sheet below them, as the wolves slunk closer and closer . . .

'Hurry, Erik!' called Sven the Strong, 'for I see the wolves approaching!'

But Erik neither looked down, nor looked up. He just kept climbing niche by niche and notch by notch, and the wolves began to gather in their pack on the ice sheet below.

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'Hurry!' called out Sven the Strong. And Erik climbed, and the wolves drew closer. Once his foot slipped, and once his hand slipped, but up he went, . . . up and up, and then the wolves suddenly saw Sven the Strong as he lay there on the ice with his leg broken. The wolves stopped and glared and some of them snarled, and some of them licked their lips and showed their great teeth. Sven the Strong tried to stand, but he could not, for his broken leg was limp and useless.

Then the leader of the wolf pack lifted up his head and bayed, and the others started barking and snapping, and Erik heard them as he climbed higher and higher. But still he did not look down. Then suddenly the wolves were charging across the ice towards Sven the Strong. And Sven could see their hot breath bursting in the air as they raced towards him. He could see their eyes white with madness, and as they leapt at him he could see the blood of the mountain goat and the blood of the black bear red on their fangs and smeared on their sides.

But before their claws could tear his flesh, Sven the Strong suddenly found himself hoisted up into the air and saw the wolf pack dancing on the ground below him – leaping up – trying to reach him. He looked up, and there was Erik, pulling on the rope that joined them with all his might and with all his main. And below, the wolves snapped and snarled their disappointment, as Sven was hauled higher and higher to where Erik stood on the top of the rock face.

When Sven reached the top, Erik pulled him to safety, and then lay exhausted.

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'We are safe for the moment,' said Sven the Strong, but sooner or later those wolves will find another way up. You must go on without me, for I cannot move with this broken leg,' and he started to untie the rope that joined them. But Erik stopped him.

'I shall never leave you to die alone,' he said.

'Better that one of us should die than both of us,' Sven replied, and once again he started to undo the rope that joined them. But once again Erik stopped him: 'We are comrades,' he said, 'just as this rope around our waists binds us together, so our friendship binds us one to the other with an invisible bond that cannot be broken. . . .'

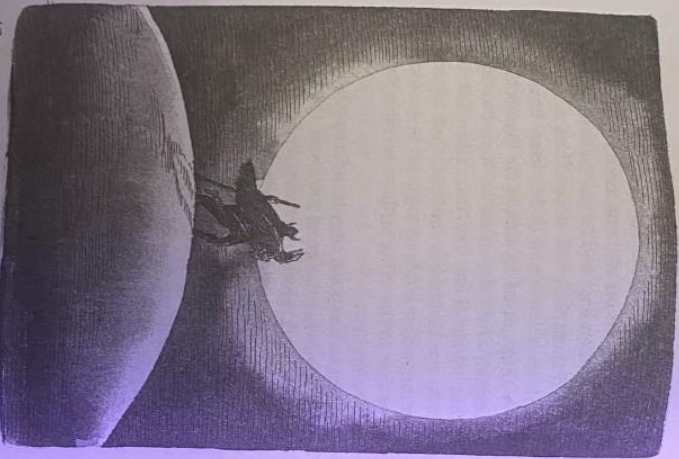
But even as he spoke, they heard a snarl and looked up, and there was the great grey wolf, tall as a man, sitting on a rock, glaring at them. And as they stared at the fearful creature, dark shapes began to rise out of the very rock, and soon there were all the wolves that had been on the ice-sheet below, gathered round the two men in a circle, their tongues hanging out, and their eyes watching.

'Perhaps this is all a dream from which we shall awake,' said Sven the Strong. But Erik shook his head.

'Not unless life itself is a dream,' he said. And the two friends embraced, and in their minds they took farewell of each other and of life, and waited for the wolves to tear them to pieces, limb from limb.

But they stood like that for some while. Then first Erik opened his eyes and then Sven the Strong turned to look . . . The wolves were all around them just as before, and the great grey wolf was sitting on the rock . . .

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'Come on!' cried Erik. 'We are not afraid to die! For we are companions in life or death.'
And the Great Grey Wolf lifted up its head and gave a howl.

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'That is how we live and hunt here on Wolf Mountain – each wolf bound to the other by invisible bonds so strong that nothing can separate us. Each of us lives and dies for his comrades. *That* is the Law of the Wolves.'

With these words, the wolves turned and slunk off into the gathering dusk. Erik lifted Sven the Strong up, and together they limped all the rest of the way back to camp, under the full moon and down the other side of Wolf Mountain.