Torak jarred his knee so painfully that he cried out.

2) ‘Torak!’ whispered Renn from above. ‘Are you all right?’

‘I – think so,’ he replied. But he wasn’t. He’d fallen down an ice hole. Only a tiny ledge had stopped him tumbling to his death.

In the gloom he saw that the hole was narrow – he could touch its sides with his outstretched hands – but fathomless. Far below, he heard the rush of the meltwater torrent. He was inside the ice river. How was he going to get out?

Renn and Wolf were peering down at him. They must be about three paces above. It might as well be thirty. ‘Now we know where the meltwater went,’ he said, struggling to stay calm.

‘You’re not that far down,’ said Renn, trying to encourage him. ‘At least you’ve still got your pack.’

‘And my bow,’ he replied, hoping he didn’t sound too scared. ‘And the Nanuak.’ The pouch was still securely tied to his belt. The Nanuak, he thought in horror.

What if he couldn’t get out? He’d be stuck down here, and the Nanuak would be stuck with him. Without the Nanuak, there would be no chance of destroying the bear. The entire Forest would be doomed: doomed because he hadn’t watched his step...

‘Torak?’ whispered Renn. ‘Are you all right?’

He tried to say yes, but it came out as a croak.

‘Not too loud!’ breathed Renn. ‘It might
send down another snowfall – or – or close up the hole with you inside . . .’

‘Thanks,’ he muttered, ‘I hadn’t thought of that.’

‘Here, try to catch hold of this.’ Leaning perilously over the edge, she dangled her axe head first, with the shaft strap wound around her wrist.

‘You couldn’t take my weight,’ he told her. ‘I’d pull you down, we’d both fall . . .’

‘Fall, fall,’ echoed the ice around him.

‘Is there any way you can climb out?’ said Renn, beginning to sound shaky.

‘Probably. If I had the claws of a wolverine.’

‘Claws, claws,’ sang the ice.

That gave Torak an idea.

Slowly, terrified of slipping off the ledge, he unhitched his pack from one shoulder and checked that he still had the roe buck antlers. He did. They were short, and their roots had jagged edges. If he could tie one to each wrist and grip the tines, he might be able to use the roots as ice picks to claw his way out.

‘What are you going to do?’ asked Renn.

‘You’ll see,’ he said. He didn’t have time to explain. The ledge was getting slippery beneath his boots, and his knee was hurting.

Leaving the antlers in his pack until he needed them, he took his axe from his belt. ‘I’ve got to cut notches in the ice,’ he called to Renn. ‘I just hope the ice river doesn’t feel it.’

She did not reply. Of course it would feel it. But what choice did he have?

The first axe-blow sent splinters of ice rattling into the chasm. Even if the ice river didn’t feel that, it must have heard it.

Clenching his teeth, Torak forced himself to strike another blow. More shards crashed down, the echoes rumbling on and on.

The ice was hard, and he didn’t dare swing his axe for fear of toppling off the ledge, but after much anxious chipping he managed four notches at staggered intervals as high as he could reach, with about a forearm’s length between each one. They were frighteningly shallow – no deeper than his thumb-joint – and he had no idea if they’d hold. If he put his weight on one, it might give way, taking him with it.

Shoving his axe back in his belt, he took off his mittens and felt in his pack for the antlers and the last strips of rawhide. His fingers were clumsy with cold, and tying the antlers to his wrists was infuriatingly difficult. At last, using his teeth to tighten the knots, he managed it.

With his right hand he reached for the notch above his head, and dug deep with the jagged edge of the antler. It bit and held. With his left foot, he felt for the first foothold, just a little higher than the ledge. He found it and stepped onto it.

His pack was pulling him backwards into the ice hole. Desperately he leaned forward, pressing his face into the ice – and regained his balance.

Wolf yipped at him to hurry. Snow showered down into his hair.

‘Stay back!’ Renn hissed at the cub.
Torak heard sounds of a scuffle – more snow trickled down – then Wolf gave a peevish growl.

‘Just a bit further,’ said Renn. ‘Don’t look down.’

Too late. Torak had just done so, and caught a sickening glimpse of the void below.

He reached for the next handhold, and missed, snapping off a crust of ice that nearly took him with it. He fought for the handhold – and the antler bit just in time.

Slowly, slowly, he bent his right leg and found the next foothold, about a forearm higher than the one he’d stepped onto with his left. But as he heaved himself onto it, his knee began to shake.

Oh, very clever, Torak, he told himself.

You’ve just put all your weight on the wrong leg – the one you hurt in the fall! ‘My knee’s going,’ he gasped. ‘I can’t –’

‘Yes you can,’ urged Renn. ‘Reach for that last handhold, I’ll grab you . . .’

His shoulders were burning; his pack felt as if it was filled with rocks. He gave a huge push and his knee buckled. Then a hand grabbed the shoulder strap of his pack and he was half-pulled, half-pushes out of the hole.

Torak and Renn lay panting at the edge of the ice hole. Then they heaved themselves up, staggered away from the ice cliffs, and collapsed in a drift of powdery snow. Wolf thought it a huge game, and pranced round them with a big wolf smile.

Renn gave way to panicky laughter. That was far too close! Next time, look where you’re going!

‘I’ll try!’ panted Torak. He lay on his back, letting the breeze waft snow over his cheeks. High in the sky, thin white clouds were stacking up like petals. He’d never seen anything so beautiful.

Behind him, Wolf was clawing at something in the ice.

‘What have you got there?’ said Torak.

But Wolf had freed his prize and was tossing it high and catching it in his jaws, in one of his favourite games. He leapt to catch it in mid-air, gave it a couple of chews, then bounded over and spat it out on Torak’s face. Another favourite game. ‘Ow!’ said Torak. ‘Watch what you’re doing!’ Then he saw what it was. It was about the size of a small fist: brown, furry and oddly flattened, probably by an ice-fall. The look of outrage on its little face struck Torak as inexpressibly funny.

‘What is it?’ said Renn, taking a pull at the waterskin.

He felt laughter welling up inside him. ‘A frozen lemming.’

Renn burst out laughing, spraying water all over the ice.

‘Squashed flat,’ gasped Torak, rolling around in the snow. ‘You should see its face! So – surprised!’

‘No, don’t!’ cried Renn, clutching her sides.

They laughed till it hurt, while Wolf pranced around with a joyful rocking gait, tossing and catching the frozen lemming. At last
he tossed it extravagantly high, made a spectacular twisting leap, and swallowed it in one gulp. Then he decided he was hot, and flopped into a pool of meltwater to cool down.

Renn sat up, wiping her eyes. ‘Does he ever just _fetch_ things, instead of throwing them in your face?’

Torak shook his head. ‘I’ve tried asking him. He never does.’

He got to his feet. It was turning colder. The wind had strengthened, and powdery snow was streaming over the ground like smoke. The petal-like clouds had completely covered the sun.

‘Look,’ said Renn beside him. She was pointing east.

He glanced round and saw clouds boiling up over the ice cliffs. ‘Oh, no,’ he murmured.

‘Oh, yes,’ said Renn. She had to raise her voice above the wind. ‘A snowstorm.’

The ice river had woken up. And it was angry.