FIFTEEN

Torak came up spluttering with cold, fighting the river.

2) He was a strong swimmer, so he wasn’t too worried. He’d grab that branch jutting from the bank...
   The next one, then.
   Behind him, he heard Renn shouting his name as she tore through the brambles, and Wolf’s urgent barks. It occurred to him that the brambles must be very thick, as Renn and Wolf were dropping further and further behind.
   The river punched him in the back, smashing him limp as a wet leaf against a rock. He went under.
   He kicked his way to the surface, and was shocked to see how far he’d been carried. He couldn’t hear Renn or Wolf any more, and the waterfall was sliding closer with astonishing speed, drowning all voices but its own.

3) His jerkin and leggings were dragging him down. The cold had deadened his limbs to sticks of bone and flesh, working without feeling to keep his head above the surface. He couldn’t see anything except white-foam waves and a blur of willows. Then even that disappeared as he went under again.

   It came to him quite clearly that he would be swept over the waterfall and killed.

   No time for fear. Just a distant anger that it should end like this. Poor Wolf. Who’s going to look after him now? And poor Renn. Let’s hope she doesn’t find the body, it’ll be a mess.

   Death boomed at him. A rainbow flashed through the spume and spray... then the waves smoothed out like a skin and suddenly there was no more river in front, and it was hard to
breathe as he went over. Death reached up and pulled him down, and it was shining and smooth, like the moment of falling asleep . . .

Over and over he fell, water filling his mouth, his nose, his ears. The river swallowed him whole: he was inside it and it roared through him, this pounding power of water. Somehow he surfaced, gulping air. Then it pulled him down again into its swirling green depths.

The roar of the river faded. Lights flashed in his head. He sank. The water turned from blue to dark-green to black. He was languid and frozen past feeling. He longed to give up and sleep.

He became aware of a faint, bubbling laughter. Hair like green waterweed trailed across his throat. Cruel faces leered at him with merciless white eyes.

*Come to us!* called the Hidden People of the river. *Let your souls float free of that dull, heavy flesh!*

He felt sick, as if his guts were being pulled loose.

*See, see!* laughed the Hidden People. *How swiftly his souls begin to drift free! How eagerly they come to us!*

Torak turned over and over like a dead fish. The Hidden People were right. It would be so easy to leave his body and let them roll him for ever in their cold embrace . . .

Wolf’s desperate yowl cut through to him.

Torak opened his eyes. Silver bubbles streamed through the dark as the Hidden People fled.

Again Wolf called to him.

Wolf needed him. There was something they had to do together.

Flailing his numb stick-limbs, he began to fight his way back towards the surface. The green grew brighter. The light drew him . . .

He’d nearly reached it when something made him look down — and he saw them. Far below, two blind white eyes staring up at him.

What were they? River pearls? The eyes of one of the Hidden People?

The Prophecy. The riddle. *‘Deepest of all, the drowned sight.’*

His chest was bursting. If he didn’t get air soon, he would die. But if he didn’t swim down now and grasp those eyes — whatever they were — he would lose them for ever.

He doubled over and kicked with all his might, pushing himself down.

The cold made his eyes ache, but he didn’t dare shut them. Closer and closer he swam . . . he reached out towards the bottom — he grasped a handful of icy mud. He had them! No way to make sure — the mud was swirling thick around him, and he couldn’t risk opening his fist in case they slipped free — but he could feel the weight of them dragging him down. He twisted round and kicked back towards the light.

But his strength was failing, and he rose with agonising slowness, hampered by his sodden clothes. More lights flashed in his head. More watery laughter. *Too late,* whispered the Hidden People. *You’ll never reach the light*
now! Stay here with us, boy with the drifting souls. Stay here for ever . . .

Something grabbed his leg and pulled him down.

He kicked. Couldn’t get free. Something was gripping his legging just above the ankle. He twisted round to wrench himself free, but the grip held tight. He tried to draw his knife from its sheath, but he’d tightened the strap around the hilt before starting the crossing, and he couldn’t get it loose.

Anger boiled up inside him. Get away from me! he shouted inside his head. You can’t have me – and you can’t have the Nanuak!

Fury lent him strength and he kicked out savagely. The grip on his leg broke. Something gave a gurgling howl and sank into darkness.

Torak shot upwards.

He exploded from the water, gulping great chestfuls of air. Through the glare of the sun he glimpsed a sheet of green river, and an overhanging branch approaching him fast. With his free hand he reached for it – and missed. Pain exploded in his head.

He knew that he hadn’t been knocked out. He could still feel the slap of the river, and hear his rasping breath – but his eyes were open and staring, and he couldn’t see.

Panic seized him. Not blind, he thought. No, no please, not blind.