The fury of the ice river broke upon them with terrifying force.

Torak had to lean into the blast just to stay standing, and clench his cape to stop it being ripped away. Through the streaming snow, he saw Renn pushing forwards with all her strength; Wolf staggering sideways, his eyes slitted against the wind. The ice river had them in its grip and it wasn’t letting go. It howled till Torak’s ears ached, and scoured his face with flying ice; it spun him round till he could no longer see Renn, or Wolf, or even his own boots. At any moment it might hurl him into an ice hole . . .

Through the swirling whiteness he caught sight of a dark pillar. A rock? A snowdrift? Could it be that they’d finally reached the edge of the ice river?

3)

Renn grabbed his arm. ‘We can’t go on!’ she shouted. ‘We’ve got to dig in and wait till it’s over!’

‘Not yet!’ he yelled. ‘Look! We’re nearly there!’

He battled on towards the pillar. It shattered and blew apart. It was nothing but a snow cloud: the ice river’s vicious trick. He turned to Renn. ‘You’re right! We’ve got to dig a snow cave!’

But Renn was gone.

‘Renn! Renn!’ The ice river tore her name from his lips and whirled it away into the gathering dusk.

He dropped to his knees and groped for Wolf. His mitten found fur, and he clutched the cub. Wolf was casting around for Renn’s scent.

4)

But what could even a wolf pick up in this?

Amazingly, Wolf pricked his ears and stared straight ahead. Torak thought he saw a figure gliding through the snow. ‘Renn!’

Wolf leapt after it, and Torak followed, but he hadn’t gone far when the wind threw him against solid ice. He fell back, nearly crushing the cub. He’d blundered into what looked like an ice hill. In its side was a hole just big enough to crawl through. A snow cave? Surely Renn wouldn’t have had time to dig one so quickly?

With one bound, Wolf disappeared inside. After a moment’s hesitation, Torak followed.

The clamour of the ice river died down as he crawled into the darkness. With ice-caked mittens he felt out his surroundings. A low roof, so low that he had to crouch on hands and
the corpse – and to touch the dead is to risk terrible danger. When the souls leave the body, they can be angry, confused, or simply unwilling to embark on the Death Journey. If one of the living strays too close, the disembodied souls may try to possess it, or follow it home.

All this rushed through Torak’s mind as he stared at the dead man.

His lips looked chiselled from ice; his flesh was waxen yellow. Snow had drifted into his nostrils in a cruel parody of breath, but his ice-filmed eyes were open, staring at something Torak couldn’t see: something that was cradled in the crook of his dead arm.

Wolf seemed unafraid, even drawn to the corpse. He lay with his muzzle between his paws, gazing at it steadily.

The dead man had worn his long brown hair loose, except for a single lock at the temple, matted with red ochre. Torak thought of the Red Deer woman at Fin-Kedin’s clan meet; she’d worn her hair the same way. Had this man been of the same clan? The same clan as Torak’s own mother?

He felt the stirrings of pity. What was the man’s name? What had he been seeking out here, and how had he died?

Then Torak saw that on the brown forehead, a shaky circle had been daubed in red ochre. The thick winter parka had been wrenched open, and another circle drawn on the breastbone. Torak guessed that if he were reckless enough to remove the heavy, furred boots, he’d find a similar mark on each heel.

Death Marks. The man must have felt death coming for him, and put on his own marks so that his souls would stay together after he died. That must be why he’d left the slab ajar too: to set the souls free.

“You were brave,’ said Torak out loud. ‘You didn’t flinch from death.’ He remembered the figure he’d glimpsed in the snow. Had that been one of the souls setting out on its final journey? Could you see souls? Torak didn’t know.

‘Be at peace,’ he told the corpse. ‘May your souls find their rest, and stay together.’ He bowed his head for his dead kinsman.

Wolf sat up, pricking his ears at the corpse. Torak was startled. Wolf seemed to be listening. Torak leaned closer.

The dead man gazed calmly at the thing cradled in his arm. But when Torak saw what it was, he was even more puzzled. It was an ordinary lamp: a smooth oval of red sandstone about half the size of his palm, with a shallow bowl to hold the fish oil, and a groove for the wick of twisted beard-moss. The wick had long since burned away, and all that remained of the oil was a faint greyish stain.

Beside him, Wolf gave a high, soft whine. His hackles were up but he didn’t seem frightened. That whine had been – a greeting.

Torak frowned. Wolf had acted like that before. In the cave below the Thunder Falls.

His eyes returned to the dead man. He pictured his final moments: curled in the snow, watching the small, bright flame as his own life flickered and sank...
Suddenly, Torak knew. *Coldest of all, the darkest light.* The darkest light is the last light a man sees before he dies.

He had found the third piece of the Nanuak.

Gripping the rushlight in one hand, Torak untied the ravenskin pouch with the other, and tipped the box into the snow.

‘Uff!’ warned Wolf.

Torak slipped off the hair cord and lifted the lid. The river eyes stared blindly up at him, nestled in the curve of the black stone tooth. There was just enough room beside them for the lamp: almost, he thought, as if Renn had known how big to make the box.

With numb fingers he pulled on one mitten and leaned over the dead man – being careful not to touch him – and lifted the lamp clear. It was only when he’d got it safely boxed and back in the pouch that he realised he’d been holding his breath.

It was time to go and find Renn. Quickly he tied the pouch to his belt. But as he turned to push the slab aside, something made him stop.

He had all three pieces of the Nanuak. Here, in this snow cave, where he was safe.

‘If you get caught in a snowstorm,’ Renn had said, ‘you dig yourself a snow cave and wait till it stops.’ If he ignored that now – if he braved the wrath of the ice river to look for her – he probably wouldn’t survive. The Nanuak would be buried with him. The entire Forest would be doomed.

If he didn’t, Renn might die.

Torak sat back on his heels. Wolf watched him intently, his amber eyes quite un-cub-like.

The rushlight wavered in Torak’s hand. He couldn’t just leave her. She was his friend. But could he – should he – risk the Forest to save her?

As never before, he longed for Fa. Fa would know what to do …


Wolf tilted his head to one side, waiting to see what Torak would do.