Be very, very quiet,’ whispered Renn. ‘Any sudden noise and it might wake up.’

3)

Next morning, they’d climbed the flank of the ice river and started north.

It was madness to walk beneath the ice cliffs when at any moment a snowfall might obliterate them, but they had no choice. The way to the west was blocked by a torrent of meltwater that had carved a deep blue gully.

It was impossible to move quietly. The snow was crisp, and their boots crunched loudly. Torak’s new reed cape crackled like dead leaves; even his breath sounded deafening. All around, he heard weird creaks and echoing groans: the ice river murmuring in its sleep. It didn’t sound as if it would take much to waken it.

Strangely, that didn’t seem to bother Wolf. He loved the snow: pouncing on it and tossing lumps of ice high in the air, then skidding to a halt to listen to lemmings and snow-voles burrowing under the surface.

Now he stopped to sniff at an ice chunk, and patted it with one paw. When it didn’t respond, he went down on his forepaws and asked it to play, whining invitingly.

‘Sh!’ hissed Torak, forgetting to speak wolf.
‘Sh!’ hissed Renn up ahead.

Desperate to quieten Wolf, Torak pretended to spot some distant prey, by standing very still and staring intently.

Wolf copied him. But when he caught no scent or sound, he twitched his whiskers and glanced at Torak. Where is it? Where’s the prey? Torak stretched and yawned. No prey.

What? Then why are we hunting?
5) *Just be quiet!*

Wolf gave a small, aggrieved whine.

‘Come on!’ whispered Renn. ‘We’ve got to get across before nightfall!’

It was freezing in the shadow of the ice cliffs. They’d done what they could while camping by the lake: stuffing their boots with marsh grass, making mittens and caps from Renn’s salmon skin and the rest of the rawhide, and a cape for Torak from bunches of reeds tied with marsh grass, then stitched with sinew. But it wasn’t nearly enough.

Their supplies were getting low, too: one waterskin and only enough dried salmon and deer meat for a couple of days. Torak could imagine what Fa would say. *A journey in snow is no game, Torak. If you think it is, you’ll end up dead.***

He was painfully aware that he didn’t actually know much about snow. As Renn had said with her usual unflinching accuracy, ‘All I know is that it makes tracking a lot easier, it’s good for snowballs, and if you get caught in a snowstorm you’re supposed to dig yourself a snow cave and wait till it stops. But that’s all I know.’

The snow deepened, and soon they were wading up to their thighs. Wolf dropped behind, cleverly letting Torak break the trail so that he could trot in his footsteps.

‘I hope he knows the way,’ said Renn, keeping her voice down. ‘I’ve never been this far north.’

‘Has anyone?’ said Torak.

6) **end**

7) She raised her eyebrows. ‘Well, yes. The Ice clans. But they live out on the plains, not on the ice river.’

‘The Ice clans?’


‘No,’ he said wearily, ‘I don’t. I don’t even –’

Behind him, Wolf gave an urgent grunt.

Torak turned to see the cub leaping for cover beneath an arch of solid ice. He glanced up. ‘Look out!’ he cried, grabbing Renn and yanking her under the arch.

An ear-splitting crack – and they were overwhelmed by roaring whiteness. Ice thundered around them, smashing into the snow, exploding in lethal shards. Huddled under the arch, Torak prayed that it wouldn’t collapse. If it did, they’d be splattered over the snow like crushed lingonberries . . .

The ice-fall ended as abruptly as it had begun.

Torak blew out a long breath. Now all he could hear was the soft settling of snow.

‘Why did it stop?’ hissed Renn.

He shook his head. ‘Maybe it was just turning over in its sleep.’

Renn stared at the ice piled around them. ‘If it wasn’t for Wolf, we’d be under that right now.’ She was pale, and her clan-tattoos showed up lividly. Torak guessed that she was thinking of her father.

Wolf stood up and shook himself, scattering them with wet snow. He trotted a few paces, took a long sniff, and waited for them to join
him.

‘Come on,’ said Torak. ‘I think it’s safe.’

‘Safe?’ muttered Renn.

As the day wore on and the sun travelled west through a cloudless sky, puddles of meltwater appeared in the snow, more intensely blue than anything Torak had ever seen. It grew steadily warmer. Around mid-afternoon, the sun struck the cliffs, and in the blink of an eye, the freezing shadows turned to a stark white glare. Soon Torak was sweating under his reed cape.

‘Here,’ said Renn, handing him a strip of birch bast. ‘Cut slits in this and tie it round your eyes. Otherwise you’ll go snow-blind.

‘I thought you’d never been this far north.’

‘I haven’t, but Fin-Kedinn has. He told me about it.’

It made Torak uneasy to be peering through a narrow slit, when he needed to be on his guard – when every so often a slab of snow or a giant icicle thudded down from the cliffs. As they trudged on, he noticed that Renn was lagging behind. That had never happened before. Usually she was faster than he was.

Waiting for her to catch up, he was startled to see that her lips had a bluish tinge. He asked if she was all right.

She shook her head, bending over with her hands on her knees. ‘It’s been coming on all day,’ she said. ‘I feel – drained. I think – I think it’s the Nanuak.’

Torak felt guilty. He’d been concentrating so hard on not waking the ice river that he’d

forgotten that all this time she’d been carrying the ravenskin pouch. ‘Give it to me,’ he said. ‘We’ll take turns.’

She nodded. ‘But I’ll carry the waterskin. That’s only fair.’

They swapped. Torak tied the pouch to his belt, while Renn looked over her shoulder at how far they’d come. ‘Much too slow,’ she said. ‘If we don’t make it across by nightfall . . .’

She didn’t need to add the rest. Torak pictured them digging a snow cave and cowering in darkness, while the ice river heaved and groaned around them. He said, ‘Do you think we’ve got enough firewood?’

Again Renn shook her head.

Before heading for the scree slope, they’d each gathered a faggot of firewood, and prepared a little piece of fire to bring with them. To do this, they’d cut a small chunk of the horsehoof mushroom that grows on dead birch trees, and set fire to it, then blown it out so that it was just smouldering. Then they’d rolled it in birch bark, pierced the bark a few times to let the fire breathe, and plugged the roll with beard-moss to keep it asleep. The fire could be carried all day, slumbering quietly, but ready to be woken with tinder and breath when they needed it.

Torak judged that they had enough firewood to last for maybe a night. If a storm blew up and they had to dig in for days, they would freeze.

They trudged on, and soon Torak understood why the Nanuak had tired Renn.
Already he could feel it weighing him down.

Suddenly Renn stopped, yanking the birch bast away from her eyes. ‘Where’s the stream gone?’ she breathed.

‘What?’ said Torak.

‘The meltwater! I’ve just noticed. That gully’s gone. Do you think that means we can get out from under the cliffs?’

Taking off his own birch bast, Torak squinted at the snow. He couldn’t see for the glare. ‘I can still hear it,’ he said, moving forwards to investigate. ‘Maybe it’s just sunk further under the –’

He got no warning. No crack of ice, no ‘whump’ of collapsing snow. One moment he was walking; the next, he was falling into nothingness.