



## 6000 BC

The hunter's whalebone skis tore across the drift, carving up the surface and thrusting clouds of snow into his wake. The slipstream lashed his cheeks as he accelerated. His eyes watered. His muscles ached. Beneath the thick fur lining of his jacket he could feel the bite of his talisman, the tips of the three teeth probing at his skin.



He threw a glance behind.



Nothing; it was nowhere to be seen.

Ahead, the slope gouged a narrow aisle through the outcrops of rock before disappearing into the blizzard. The snowfall was thickening around him, the mist closing in fast. Gritting his teeth, he drove his ski poles hard into the snow and propelled himself onwards.

As he sped downslope, the storm fed him glimpses of the world ahead. And there was something there, at the bottom of the slope. Like a dark ribbon draped across his path, it grew wider, darker with every glance...

The hunter's eyes bulged with terror.

It was a gorge, wide and deep, hewn into the valley.

With no time to lose, he swerved away, calling on every last fibre of skill to keep his balance, to weave amongst the scattered outcrops now littering the way ahead...

...his ski ploughed into a talon of rock. There was a crunch



as the shaft split open. His heart sank, his legs buckled and he was slung forward. In the chaos that followed, the momentum toyed with him, twisting his limbs around his torso. As he hit the ground, his ski snapped off at the toe and the jagged splinter sheared into his gut.

He tumbled for what seemed like eternity. Then silence.

He blinked his eyes open. The world was now a brutal haze. Blood dripped from his nose and lips, freezing into trails in the snow. He waited, breathed, slowly unfolded himself. As the delirium subsided, pain flared in his stomach, sent a surge of adrenaline coursing through his veins.

He staggered to his feet. His ribs were fractured and his shoulder dislocated, but he had to keep moving. Instinctively he reached for the shaft of bone sticking spear-like from his gut. Then he thought better. Leaving it to plug the wound, he took off as fast as he could along the side of the gorge.



Up ahead he could make out a towering rockface. A low, narrow tunnel was worn into its base where the line of the gorge passed through. It wasn't much, but it was shelter. As he limped towards it, the world bucked suddenly and he was thrown forward. On reflex, he rolled straight over, straining for breath and clawing the snow from his face. He scanned around, his head darting from side to side with every imagined movement, his eyes wide, frantic. But there was nothing, just a thick curtain of white that suffocated his senses.



He glanced behind, searching out the tunnel. It was only a few strides away, and he prepared to drag himself to his feet—

A guttural hiss broke the silence.

The air froze in his lungs.

It was there. Right in front of him. Its head cocked. Its mouth cracked open. Watching. He had never believed the stories meant to frighten him as a child. But here they were: every tale, every description, every warning that he had ever ignored, staring down at him through the flurry.



Plumes of condensed breath fired from its nostrils as it slunk forward a pace, bobbing its head and shaking the snow from its back. Then it froze, its lips curling, peeling back to reveal the teeth emerging from its bloodshot gums. With its face caught in a snarl, it stretched its neck towards him and bellowed.

The hideous sound seemed to bite into his skull, and the hunter scrabbled to his feet in sheer terror. His hand jumped instinctively to the bag hanging from his belt. He fought with the lashings, desperately wrenching them free, until he could tear the fibre sack loose and hold it before him.

The creature's eyes flashed. It screamed out and lunged at him, sending the bag flying from his grip and skidding across the ice into the mouth of the tunnel. With the creature's frenzied screeching ringing in his ears, the hunter dropped to his knees and scrabbled after it, dragging himself in through the narrow folds of rock.

The cold seeped up into his palms. Then the gut-churning stench of putrefying meat wafted in from behind him. Pain erupted in his ankles and panic took hold. He screamed out, struggling as unseen teeth hacked into his flesh and stripped the strings of muscle from his bones. Clouds of steam billowed up into the night as his blood spilt out in rivers, and the freezing air congealed with the crunching of bone.

As the world began to fade, he reached forward and dug his fingers into the surface of the ancient stone. Then, with all that remained of his strength, he heaved himself on into the dark.