

BOOK TWO OF THE ANTARKTOS SAGA

THE LAST HUNTER

PURSUIT



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THE LAST HUNTER

By Jeremy Robinson

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For the real Solomon, my son and inspiration

Acknowledgements

I realized that I actually forgot to include acknowledgments with Book 1 of the series (if you haven't read Book 1, do yourself a favor and read it before continuing). Happily, I have the exact same people to thank this time around, so let's just count this for both books. That said, I'm going to make this brief.

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Prologue

Lieutenant Ninnis was once a proud man. An adventurer with a scruffy beard, blazing blue eyes and swarthy disposition akin to a pirate—the nice sort. But that man died long ago. Or at least the parts of him that understood things like love, friendship...and forgiveness did. The latter of the three had vexed him for the past several months.

Little Ull, the hunter he had kidnapped, broken and trained, had turned against their masters. And in a final conflict with the boy, whose memories of his life before Antarctica had returned, had left Ninnis wounded, inside and out. The pain from the broken arm and several snapped ribs paled in comparison to the shame that boiled his insides and kept sleep at bay.

As punishment for his failure to recapture the boy, Ninnis's wounds were left to heal naturally over time, rather than accelerated by the blood of the masters. This not only heaped hot coals of disgrace on his head, but also kept him out of the ongoing hunt. No one knew Ull better than Ninnis, and without him, they would never find the boy. And if they did, they wouldn't stand a chance, not without the knowledge Ninnis possessed.

First, the boy had some kind of power over the elements. At first Ninnis had thought it was a side effect of being bonded with the body of Nephil, but Ull had always shown a strange resistance to the cold. Second, the boy's memory had returned. He knew he was really Solomon Ull Vincent, not simply Ull the hunter. So his choices and strategies would vary greatly from those of a typical hunter. And third, some part of Nephil did indeed reside in the boy. He'd heard it in the boy's voice when they last met. That made him unpredictable and more dangerous than Ninnis wanted to contemplate.

But none of this weighed as heavily on Ninnis's thoughts as the three simple words Ull had scratched into the stone wall. Ull could have left Ninnis for dead, having knocked him unconscious in the freezing Antarctic air. But he didn't. The boy had dragged Ninnis underground, laid him in a tunnel and left a message for him to find upon waking.

I forgive you.

Ninnis had scratched the message away, but it had been etched into his memory, haunting him every time he closed his eyes. After everything he had done to the boy—taken him from his family, starved him, broken him, stolen his memory and treated him like a dog—Ull had *forgiven* him? It didn't make sense. Even with the boy's memory returned, what kind of a person could do such a thing?

The strength of that gesture frightened Ninnis more than anything he'd faced before, but it also enraged him. He had little doubt that the message was left to taunt him. It made him look weak. Fragile. Like an old man whose mind and actions were not his own. Poor, poor Ninnis.

It was time to set the record straight.

It was time to find Ull.

He would bring Ull back and break him again, or kill him.

Ninnis sat on a stool, checking over his equipment. Satisfied, he wrapped his belt around his skinny waist and tied it tight. He carried a water skin, binoculars, the trusty knife he'd had since his time in the British Army and an empty pouch for food rations he would hunt along the way.

Ninnis looked around his small room covered with symbolic graffiti left by the hunters who had occupied this space during the thousands of years before his birth. After spending months recuperating

here, he loathed the place. He was a hunter. Meant to roam the underground, to seek out and battle the enemies of his master—not to nurse wounds. He stood, walked to the door and yanked it open. A massive foot greeted him.

Ninnis stepped out of the room and looked up into the large eyes of a giant. He gave a bow and spoke his master's name with reverence. "Lord Enki."

"Rise, Ninnis," Enki said, his voice resonating in the tall hallway that held two rows of doors to the quarters of other human hunters and teachers. "You join the hunt?"

"If it pleases you, Master."

"It does," Enki replied. "You have handled your punishment with strength and character, as I knew you would."

"Thank you, Master."

Ninnis stepped back, surprised by Enki crouching before him. "I have something for you. A gift I think will come in useful." He held out a sword that glimmered in the flames illuminating the tunnel. It reminded Ninnis of a machete, but longer.

Ninnis took the offered blade and tested its weight in his hand. It felt good. Light. He swung the blade noticing how little effort it took. But it would not do. "Master," he said carefully, "It is a blade without comparison, but its size will slow my progress through the underground. I cannot use this."

"An assessment I knew you would make," Enki said with a nod. "But you are wrong."

The giant took the sword, pushed a small switch Ninnis had not noticed and gave it the tiniest twitches. The blade curled in on itself, snapping into a tight roll of metal that would take up very little room.

Ninnis's eyes widened. A grin spread on his face.

Enki handed the sword back to him. "Test the blade," he said. "On my flesh." The giant held out his forearm. "The blood that spills is yours."

Sword in hand, Ninnis toggled the small switch back to its original position and shot his arm out towards Enki. The blade unfurled quickly as it arced through the air, fully extending as it passed by the master's arm. A two inch deep, ten inch long slice opened up on Enki's arm, but only a single drop of blood emerged before the wound healed.

"I will call it Strike," Ninnis said. "As it resembles the serpent."

When the drop fell, Ninnis reached out for it, and caught the purple fluid on the sword's blade. He brought the weapon up to his mouth, paused for a moment, and looked up at the giant. Enki gave a nod and Ninnis licked the blood from the blade.

A moment later, the old hunter fell to the stone floor clutching his stomach. The intense pain felt like a fire raging inside his body. But then, just as quickly as it began, the flames subsided. Ninnis stood, feeling stronger than he had in years, and when he looked up at his master again, a newfound malevolence had entered his eyes.

"Now go, my hunter. Find Ull and bring him back to us so that his body might be bonded with the soul of my father. Do anything it takes. Do you understand? *Anything.*"

Ninnis nodded. He did understand. There were laws in this kingdom, and even Enki, who ruled the warrior clan, was subject to them. But he had just given Ninnis permission to break them if need be. That meant Ninnis could kill anything or anyone that got in his way, whether another hunter, a watcher, a gatherer or even a warrior. Ninnis and all his fury were to be unleashed on the underworld for the first time. He smiled at his good fortune and thought, *Your forgiveness will be your undoing, Ull.*

I am coming.

It starts with a shriek. The hunt. High pitched wails follow. Breaking branches. The pounding of panicked feet. A squeal and then silence. I've grown so accustomed to the sounds that I can sleep through them; I know, because I sometimes discover kills I did not observe, which is rare, because here, in this massive cavern I now call home, I know *everything*.

The hunters are a pack—fourteen strong—of meat eating dinosaurs I call cresties, and not because they have clean teeth. A large boney crest rises up behind their yellow serpentine eyes, giving them an ominous appearance. At first I believed the crest was involved in attracting a mate, but since both the male and female cresties have crests, my assessment makes little sense. And it's the females that cause the real trouble. Not only are they the hunters, but they're also far larger than the males. The pack's leader, who stretches thirty feet from snout to tail and stands fifteen feet tall, is the only creature here that really poses any threat to me. She's built like a T-Rex, but more agile. She has razor sharp talons, teeth the size of butcher knives and the disposition of a—well, of a meat eating dinosaur I suppose. She is constantly nipping the others and once eviscerated one of the males who mated with a lesser female. I suspect she is unloved by the others, but she is respected.

I named her Alice after the Allosaurus from *Land of the Lost*, one of my favorite TV shows before coming to Antarctica. I can't remember how long ago that was now. My brain tells me it was two years ago, but my body, weary from life a mile below ground, says it's been longer. But time works differently here. What feels like two years to me could have been five on the surface. Maybe more. But I'm fairly confident my two year estimation is close to the mark.

The hunt has ended. The herd of oversized subterranean, hairless, albino goats has stopped bleating and returned to their non-stop grazing, confident that the cresties have been satiated for the moment. I can't see them from my cliffside perch where not even Alice could reach me, but I can hear the sound of tearing flesh and breaking bones. Inside of twenty minutes there will be nothing left but a blood stain. The cresties eat everything, including bones and horns.

I roll over on my bed of palm fronds. The dry leaves crunch beneath me and I long for my bed back home. I turn my perfect memory to that place. The home in Maine. My second floor bedroom. The window next to my bed looked out into the backyard. I used to lie there during springtime rainstorms, feeling the water as it splashed through the screen window. It smelled of new grass and wet metal. A childhood scent. The memory breaks my heart and a tear drops from my eye.

I had promised myself I wouldn't cry while living in this new world, but I wasn't myself then. I was Ull the hunter, vessel of Nephil, Lord of the Nephilim. But before that, for most of my life, I was Solomon Ull Vincent, son of Mark and Beth, friend to Justin McCarthy and all around bookworm with a perfect memory. But I was born here on Antarctica. The first and only Antarctic. And that made me special. More special than *anyone* realized, even Ninnis, the man who stole me and brought me here.

I think of my parents. Of the night I was taken from them and dragged beneath the snow. I still feel the pain of losing them, my perfect memory repeating the events again and again, searching for ways things could have been different. But how could I have known that a race of half-human, half-demon monstrosities—the Nephilim—lived beneath the surface of Antarctica. How could I have known that these heroes of old, these men of renown, who used to pose as the polygamist gods of the

ancient world, would know about my birth? How could I know about how their spirit entered me upon my birth or about how they wanted my body to house the soul of their leader Nephil, the first Nephilim, who is currently trapped in Tartarus in the depths of the earth?

I couldn't.

It's insane.

But it's my life.

I have to live with it, and the awful things I did as Ull. I know it's not all my fault. I was broken, beaten, starved and forced to do awful things to survive. In the end, my mind was not my own and the memories of my former life were masked by a haze of hatred and violence. I hunted. I killed. And I kidnapped Aimee Clark, the woman who welcomed me into the world at the moment of my birth. She is the wife of Merrill Clark, the man who named me, and the mother of Mirabelle Clark, the daughter—whose photo I carry with me at all times. Mira is my hope. I think of her every day and cling to her memory. Not only do I long to see her again—she brought out the best in me—but I wish to reunite her with her mother. I know the pain of losing a parent and my chest aches from the knowledge that I did that to her. *I took Aimee. I brought her to the Nephilim. And I left her behind when I escaped.*

After consuming the physical essence of Nephil—a partially congealed dollop of his blood—meant to strengthen my body so that it might contain the giant's soul, I ran. Being born on Antarctica filled me with the “spirit” or magic of the Nephilim, but it also bonded me to the continent, to the earth, air and water. They are mine to control, though I do not understand how, and the effort often drains my body. But I was able to use this ability to conceal my flight, filling the underground with a snowstorm. I escaped from the Nephilim citadel of Asgard, named for the city of the Norse gods, in a dramatic form, killing the real Ull, son of Thor, son of Odin, and the giant who I called ‘Master.’ I ran far and deep and eventually came across this subterranean oasis.

I once was just a boy. I became a hunter. And now I...am the hunted.

Although none of the hunters have discovered me yet, I can sense them out there. Searching. I am far too important to their cause—the destruction of the human race that cast them out so long ago. And the hunters will find me. Eventually. Until then, I'll build my strength, test my abilities and come up with a plan.

And the plan so far? I have no idea. But I'm central to their plot and without me, they're stuck. I know that's not enough. I'll eventually have to do more, not because I *want* to do more, but because I *can*. The honest truth is that I'm terrified. I'm afraid that I'll be caught, that Ninnis will break me again, that I'll become Ull once more. The idea of facing another Nephilim makes me sick to my stomach. While I have physically adapted to this harsh world, I am not cut out for it. I would like nothing more than to leave this place, find McMurdo Base and fly back to Maine and my parents. I could be home in a month. But no one else can fight the Nephilim. And then there's Aimee, held prisoner somewhere. I can't leave without her. And she won't leave until the Nephilim are defeated. And that's what scares me the most; knowing I'll one day have to face my fears, most likely before I'm ready, and against my will. Someday I'll have to face the darkness inside me, the ancient malevolence called Nephil that seeks to consume me. I'm almost certain I will lose.

My train of thought disturbs me, so I sit up and stretch. The cavern is bright, but not with morning light. It's always bright, lit from the small glowing crystals that cover the walls and ceiling. In other caves, like the pit in which I was broken, the crystals are spread out and twinkle like stars in the darkness. Here they're so tightly packed that the cave is lit like dusk on the surface.

The sounds of the feast have faded. The albino goat is no doubt consumed. The cresties will talk

another before the day is through. It's a good thing the goats reproduce like rabbits and grow fast. Otherwise the cresties would have burned through the cavern's main food source long ago. I don't eat the goats. I tried once, but the cresties took exception and nearly killed me. If not for a sudden rainstorm—something these subterranean dinosaurs had never seen—Alice would have gotten me for sure.

I'm hungry and I search the perimeter for movement. The lake is one hundred yards to the left of my perch. It supplies me with fresh water and an abundance of fish, which has become my staple diet along with an assortment of mushrooms, leafy plants and the occasional oversized albino centipede. "All the nutrition a growing boy needs," I say.

I focus my eyes in the distance, searching the canopy of lush trees that somehow manage to grow green in this underground tropical Shangri-La, far away from the sun—a subterranean rainforest, safe from the rain. Despite my genius intelligence and photographic memory, I have yet to figure out how this is possible and have chalked it up to being one more magical mystery that is the underworld. Trying to understand how grass, trees and flowers can grow green without photosynthesis from a scientific perspective is maddening. I gave up the task long ago.

Movement catches my eye. That's when I see her. Alice. Her head, shaped similarly to the large palm fronds, stands fifty feet away, her yellow eyes staring at me. Despite my being here for some time, she still sees me as an intruder. Perhaps it's because I escaped her wrath before, or maybe it's the scent of my hair. Originally a stark white blond, my shoulder length hair turned dark red, like the Nephilim's, as I was corrupted by them. A blond streak had emerged—some of my innocence recaptured—but for the most part, my hair is still blood red. And the scent of it, of the Nephilim in me, offends the cresties.

And there is Nephilim in me. The spirit of Antarctica. The physical body of Nephilim. And I became one of their best hunters, serving under the Norse house. They transformed me into Ull, and while I was him, I reveled in their violent, mankind-hating culture. And a part of Ull still lives in me, calling for blood and for dominance. But far more frightening than that dark side of myself, is Nephilim. His voice, buried deep, surfaces in my weakness and in my dreams. He is hunting for me, too.

Everyone is. "Including you," I say to Alice, letting her know I've seen her.

With a snort, Alice ducks back. I hear her feet pounding away. She prefers to ambush prey. And I'm pretty sure she realizes that's the only way she'd be able to kill me.

"Someday, Alice," I say, "you and I are going to have it out."

A distant roar responds. I don't know if she heard me or not, but I find humor in the moment, and allow myself an uncommon smile. Then I jump from my cliff-side hideaway and drop thirty feet to the ground.

A sudden wind kicks up just before I land, slowing my fall. Then I'm on the ground and running. Staying still in this cavern, other than on my perch, invites trouble. My scent is strong and easily tracked by the cresties, who have come to know it well. But they've just eaten and are no doubt lounging with full bellies.

Except for Alice. She never seems to rest.

But even she can't follow where I'm going.

Low hanging tree branches slap me as I pass. Brush clings to the leather clothing I wear. The best phrase I can think of to describe it is a loin cloth, but I find the term embarrassing, even in my own subconscious. If the kids at the high school I attended—several years ahead of time—saw me now, their teasing would never end. Not that it ever did, but it would be magnified to a scale I can't even comprehend.

Would it? I wonder?

My body is strong now. Athletic. I can kill (and have killed) dinosaurs. What would a few stupid jocks be to me?

Nothing! The voice of Ull shouts from inside me. *They would bow before me.*

Images of football players strung up and filleted fill my mind's eye. But these thoughts are not from Ull. He would simply run them through. I fought with the dark thoughts conjured by my imagination long before coming to Antarctica, but since taking in the body of Nephil, they've reached a new level of depravity.

The graphic images cause me to stumble for a moment. I pause, sucking in a deep breath. I'm growing accustomed to the images, and I'm sometimes able to push them away with thoughts of Mira, Aimee or my parents. When all else fails, I look at the photo.

I pull the Polaroid photo out of the watertight pouch I made for it and look at the two smiling faces. The first blond haired kid is me, sporting an uncommonly genuine smile. The second blond with pouffy hair and dark skin is Mira. She's the first girl that took an interest in me, and we came close to kissing once, though it was accidental. Still, the sight of her squeezes my chest even after all this time.

The darkness fades and my thoughts clear. *I'm me, I remind myself. Solomon. Not Ull. Not Nephil. I am in control.*

I secure the photo back in its pouch and set out again, but I don't have to run for long. The lake is just ahead. I normally come here to fish these waters, but not today. Since arriving in this underground sanctuary, I have searched for a way out. The walls here are as solid as they are vast, and I have been unable to locate a single tunnel leading out. The only obvious exit is the one I came in through—the waterfall pouring into the lake from two hundred feet above. But even with the wind at my beck and call, I haven't been able to leap high enough nor scale the cavern's polished walls. I believed myself stuck in this place forever, until this morning.

The waterfall pours a continuous stream of water into the lake—thousands upon thousands of gallons every hour. But the water level never rises. And the air in the cave is far from humid. There is an exit beneath the water. I'm sure of it.

I just need to find it.

Which is easier said than done because the lake is nearly a mile long, half as wide and deeper than fifty feet (which is the deepest I've swum).

I plunge into the water and relax. Other than my perch, this is the safest place in the cavern. There are no large predators in the water—only fish. A mix of albino species I've never seen before and some ocean dwelling species, like Cod, that seem to have adapted to living in fresh water far below the Earth's surface. I kick out into the lake, hoping to feel the tug of a current. I never have before, but I wasn't paying attention until now. In the middle of the lake, I lay on my back and float, staring up at the crystal covered ceiling.

And...nothing.

Other than the small waves created by the water fall, my body is the only thing stirring the waters. *It must be deep*, I think. *Maybe too deep.*

I tread water again, laying out a mental search grid. I'll dive as deep as I can again and again until I find it. I wonder if I can use my abilities to aid the search—maybe create an air bubble around my head or propel myself through the water like I do through the air.

Twenty feet away, the surface of the lake ripples. The movement catches my full attention. The waterfall is far away. And I am the only thing in this lake that should be disturbing the surface. None of the fish grow over ten pounds, nor do they school. Which means something else—something large—is in the water with me. And I suddenly feel vulnerable.

I am confident on land, against cretices, Nephilim warriors and unknown dangers. I can hold my own with the best of them one on one. But I've never had to fight in the water; my movements will be slowed and my coordination will be thrown off by the need to stay afloat.

Don't back down, Ull says to me. *Fight!* And for once we agree. Fleeing is rarely the right choice in this underground realm. Turning your back on an enemy means certain death.

My weapon of choice is called Whipsnap. It's a shaft of highly flexible wood with a spear tip on one end and a spiked mace ball on the other. The original had a bone blade and a stone mace, but it was upgraded when Ull—*when I*—was accepted into the Nephilim ranks. I usually have it wrapped around my waist and clipped to my belt, ready to spring into action. However, the blade tip and mace make staying afloat a chore, so I've left it back at the perch.

That leaves me with my climbing claws. I made them myself, as well. Inspired by Justin's ninjitsu magazines, the claws have three triangular, shark-like, "egg-monster" teeth on the palm-side that are great for climbing. On the knuckle-side are three spiked teeth that make convenient slashing and puncture weapons. Whatever side of my hand you get while I'm wearing them is going to hurt. I pull them from my hip-pack, slide them onto my hands and cinch the leather tight.

The water ripples again, this time just ten feet away. Whatever this thing is, it's showing no fear, which is typically a very bad sign. It means it's never had a reason to be afraid before; never known a reason to be wary.

Until now, Ull says.

Not now, I think back. *Let me focus.*

And he does, because in the heat of battle, he often surfaces as the dominant personality. Usually just for a few moments, but he is part of me. The part that hunts and kills—and takes pleasure in it.

Weapons in place, I let out a breath and slide beneath the surface.

The creature is large and only feet away. For a moment, I'm filled with dread. How can I fight something so big with just climbing claws? Then I see its black eyes and recognition slaps me in the face. We surface together, eyes locked.

He lets out a steamy breath that smells of fish. His way of saying "hello," I suppose.

“How did you get here?” I ask, not really expecting an answer. He is a Weddell seal after all. The creature’s brown skin pocked with gray spots makes him nearly invisible under the water’s surface. His ten foot length is imposing, but his upturned mouth makes him appear as though he’s constantly smiling. But that’s not why I let my guard down. I suspect this is the same Weddell seal that saved my life so long ago after I plunged over a different waterfall into an even bigger subterranean lake bordering the ancient ruins of a city the Nephilim call New Jericho. My perfect memory scans every nuance of the seal’s face and confirms my suspicion. This is the same seal!

The creature just stares, his whiskers twitching.

I sense he recognizes the claws as weapons, so I take them off and put them away. He moves closer and some part of me tenses. But I know this creature. He is the first and only thing I’ve met in this underground world that I trust.

“You need a name,” I tell him, running through a list of options. He’s a male. I can tell from the broad head and muzzle, which with seals, like with dogs, helps in identifying the males without getting personal. Dr. Clark would have named him something ancient, but given the number of ancient names already littering the underworld, from gods to cities, I scratch those options off the list. I decide to stick with my 1980s pop-culture references. This time I choose the *Herculoids*. “I’ll call you Gloop.”

The seal sniffs me and my hair, his whiskers tickling my skin and getting a laugh out of me. Then he moves back with three gentle twitches of his flippers, sliding away from me.

“Gloop, wait,” I say. “Don’t go.”

And he doesn’t. Instead, he turns to the side as the water all around us comes to life. A second Weddell seal surfaces. Then another and another. They keep on coming until fifteen seals, two of them pups, hover on the surface.

They dance around me, swirling through the water, spinning their large bodies in an act of play that is innocent and makes me smile. After a moment of watching, I join in, slipping through the water, twisting around the seals’ bodies as they slide by mine. It is an elaborate dance with no leader but when it ends I realize it had meaning. We are bonded. Like family. For some reason, these benign creatures, perhaps the only benign creatures in the underworld, have chosen to accept me.

Which is strange.

After seeing or smelling my red hair, most denizens of the underground flee or attack. But these creatures seem to see right past it, to my core, and they know I’m no threat to them. Ull would have been, but he’s not in control right now. He’s buried in my subconscious, pouting about not being able to kill anything.

With the dance done, all eyes are on me.

My mother sometimes referred to strange moments or coincidences as being “cosmic.” I think she got that from the sixties. But for the first time in my life I feel the word makes sense. Because this is cosmic. I can feel these seals. Not just the pressure their bodies exert on the water around them—the water I’m bonded to—but I can feel them in my mind. In my soul. They’re not speaking to me. Not like the Nephilim gatherers, who can communicate directly mind-to-mind. But I *sense* their feelings. Their desires. And I understand, somehow, that they came here for me.

Why? I wonder. Then ask aloud, “Why?”

A distant shriek replies and I understand. The creatures are hunting, but they’ve only just recently been eaten which means—

A shout echoes in the chamber, feminine and angry.

I am not alone.

The others have found me.

~~The hunters are here.~~

I start for shore, but I'm blocked by several large bodies. The seals sense the danger and they want to keep me from it. But I can't leave Whipsnap behind. While I'm dangerous without it, I'm not at my best. If I don't retrieve my weapon I will regret it.

Gloop rises in front of me, pleading with his black eyes. I reach out and put my hand on his forehead, which is softer than I was expecting, and say, "I will be quick."

I can see he's not happy about it, despite the perpetual smile, but he slides beneath the surface and disappears. The others follow his lead and within seconds it's like they were never there.

I dig into the water, swimming for shore as fast as I can. I know I'm heading toward danger, but based on the human shouts—belonging to just one human female—and the multiple dinosaur shrieks I think my enemies are preoccupied with each other for the moment. It's possible the hunters don't even know I'm here.

They will eventually. I can't mask my scent or the evidence of my campfires after being here for so long. But if they don't know I'm here, or how to get out, I should be able to disappear long before they realize how close they came to finding me.

I move silently through the cave's jungle and reach the base of my perch moments later. Climbing the perch might expose me. It's thirty feet high. But I need to risk it. Leaving Whipsnap behind would be like severing a limb. I scale the wall quickly and then lay flat on top. I gather my few belongings, including the telescope Ninnis gave me for my last birthday, and take hold of Whipsnap. My plan is to roll off the perch and fall to the ground, but I can't help sneaking a peek at the action. The sounds of battle get louder. I turn toward the noise and find the combatants on a treeless grassy hill.

I see only one hunter. A scout. But there are fourteen cresties. Not even Ninnis, who is a master hunter and killer, could face those odds and survive. I might be able to escape such a fight—I *have* escaped such a fight—but I could never win. Strangely, this hunter doesn't back down.

The telescope extends between my hands. I put it to my eye and feel my gut tense. The hunter is a woman. She's dressed as I am, in minimal leathers to allow free movement through the sometimes tight confines of the underground; her white skin glistens with a sheen of sweat. I blink, taken aback by my response to her...femininity. I'd never been interested in girls before. Mira was the first to stir anything in me. But just the sight of this one has me feeling nervous.

I'm older, I think. Then I groan. *Puberty. Great. At least the Weddell seals won't comment if my voice cracks.*

I put the telescope to my eye again. The woman is fierce, fighting a younger, ten foot crestie, and winning. She leaps in the air and strikes the dinosaur on the head with a large stone hammer.

I've seen the weapon before. Many of the hunters, who are fully human and subservient to the half-human, half-demon Nephilim warriors, mimic their masters by dressing the same (as I once did) and by carrying a smaller version of their master's preferred weapon. In this case, the stone hammer favored by my former master's father, Thor. The woman's name is Kainda. She's Ninnis's daughter. And she has a serious reputation. Worse, I offended her by turning her down as my bride—not to mention a few more insults I heaped on top of that. She is a woman scorned and she's no doubt out for my blood more than any other hunter. It's not surprising she tracked me down first.

The young cresty falls beneath the hammer strike, its thick skull crushed. Five other cresties move in for the kill, but they're stopped by Alice's roar. Kainda has killed one of the pack and Alice wants revenge.

The pack parts and Alice pounds forward, pausing for a moment to sniff the air, maybe testing the scent of Kainda's red hair. Maybe searching for my presence.

Kainda, to her credit, stands her ground in the face of certain failure. Even the Nephilim thing twice before taking on a fully grown cresty.

She wants to die fighting, I think. It is the Nephilim way. The hunter's way, too.

Kainda raises the hammer and charges.

Alice steps away, like she's surprised, but it's a feint. And Kainda falls for it.

The thick dinosaur tail whips through the air and strikes Kainda in the side, long before the woman has a chance to strike. She will not survive.

Alice, who has been my enemy for so long now, is about to help me without even knowing it.

I watch as Kainda pulls herself away, leaving a trail of grass matted down in her wake. Alice steps toward her, confident, but still wary. It will all be over in a minute.

Now's my chance. I slide the telescope into its pouch on my belt and leap from the ledge. The wind slows my fall, as always, and I run.

Away from the lake.

At first I don't even notice it, but when I do, I can't stop.

I'm headed toward the battle.

Toward thirteen meat-eating dinosaurs.

And I'm going to save her. Kainda. The woman who would love nothing more than to set my head upon the tip of a pike and roast me over an open flame.

I struggle with my sense of urgency. Could I really have feelings for a woman like this? What about Mira? My feelings for her have only magnified during my time down here. How is it possible that I've forgotten all of that? It's not.

That's when I realize these feelings don't belong to me. Well, not to all of me. They belong to Ull. In his eyes, Kainda is no doubt the perfect woman. The beautiful killer. Or do I just see something there I haven't yet realized? How much do Ull and I really share in common? It's all so confusing, so I decide to ignore the why and focus on the how.

I can't fight and kill all thirteen cresties, and a rainstorm might not frighten them off again.

Alice, I think. She's the key. Without her leadership the pack won't know what to do or whose lead to follow. I need to kill Alice.

The jungle clears, and I run up a knoll that leads to the battle. The high pitched shrieking that punctuates the climax of every hunt fills the air.

I reach the top of the knoll and leap. I imagine the cavern's air swooping up behind me and a moment later, it does. I'm carried high into the air, covering the distance between the knoll and Alice—nearly one hundred feet—in the blink of an eye. As I arc through the air, I see Alice opening her mouth to consume Kainda and I let out a war cry.

This time when Alice stumbles back, it's not a ruse. She was not expecting my approach, especially not from above. I grip Whipsnap, which is wrapped around my waist and attached to the belt, and I give it a yank. The weapon springs free, ready to stab, slice or bludgeon. A gust of wind bursts beneath me as I land in the grass between Kainda and Alice. A ten foot circle of grass bends away from my feet like an impact crater.

"Ull?" I hear Kainda's confused voice ask from behind me. When she realizes it's me, she should

with a voice like some wrathful god, "Ull!"

~~She'd no doubt try to strangle me to death while Alice chewed us both to pieces, so I don't step~~
any closer. But I shoot her a glance and say, "Kainda."

"What are you doing?" Her voice is filled with so much vitriol I think she's actually trying to kill
me with it.

Alice's anger matches Kainda's. She roars at my sudden appearance. The sound shakes the air
from my lungs and makes my head spin. If Alice knew this, she would have struck already. Luckily,
the beast isn't that smart. She simply stands her ground, instinct guiding her as she sizes me up.

"What's it look like?" I ask. "I'm saving you."

"Why?" This question is the first that's not tinged with hatred.

I answer by looking back at her again. When our eyes meet, my stomach twists, and she must sense
this, or feel it too, because she looks shocked.

Before she can ask "why" again, a question to which I have no answer, Alice roars. I turn to face
her, happy for the thirty foot long, several ton dinosaur that could devour the elephant in the room had
it been a real elephant and a room instead of a giant cave.

Ull surfaces in that moment with a roar. Alice matches it. We charge to meet each other in
combat, both knowing that one of us will soon lie dead.

Teeth snap above my head as I slide through the grass beneath Alice. She can't bend over fully to the ground without toppling forward, and I'm not about to actually collide with a creature whose left arm weighs the same as me. As the massive cresty matriarch stomps past, I thrust Whipsnap up, intending to eviscerate the beast. I'd be covered in blood and entrails, but it would end the fight.

Unfortunately, Alice's underbelly is shielded by thick, dense skin that Whipsnap's blade can't pierce. I leave a long scratch across her lower abdomen, but nothing more.

Alice wastes no time and follows her charge with a tail strike. The giant dinosaur manages to do this so quickly that I barely have time to jump up and over it. If not for the wind carrying me higher, I would have certainly been struck.

Of course, being hit by her tail is preferable to being eaten. Before I've landed, Alice lunges. Her jaws open wide to receive my small body. I land a moment before she arrives and throw Whipsnap into her, accelerating the weapon with a gust of wind.

As Whipsnap enters her mouth, the jaws snap shut. For a moment I think the blade might have pierced the back of Alice's throat, perhaps even reached her brain. But then the beast yanks her head to the side and tosses Whipsnap away.

I slide on my climbing claws knowing that the blades are not long enough to do any real damage, but they're the only weapons I have left. Granted, I could rain hail down on the beast, but the effort would exhaust me. I'd be open to attack from the twelve other cresties, not to mention Kainda, who, while wounded, is no doubt still dangerous. I catch a glimpse of her sliding through the grass toward her hammer.

Alice charges. I match her again. But this time I leap. Her head drops down to meet me, and when her jaws open, I know her view is obstructed. She'll wait until she feels my body in her mouth before she clamps down. That's not going to happen this time, though. The wind carries me up and over her head, which passes just inches below me. I reach out with my clawed hands, find her neck and latch on.

The razor sharp teeth on my climbing claws bite into the skin of her neck. My body slams down as Alice rears up, but I wrap my legs around her and squeeze, locking my feet on the other side. I am stuck to her like a parasite.

Alice roars with a fury I have not yet heard from her, or any cresty before her. My presence, so close, disturbs her. For a moment, I wonder if she's as bad as I've made her out to be. Would she respond so violently to me were my scent and red hair not so tainted by the Nephilim corruption? There's no way to know.

What I do know is that if I don't kill her, she will kill me. And then the Nephilim will win for sure. Not that I've done anything to stop them. My incessant fear of facing them again has kept me a prisoner here for so long already. *Why?* I wonder. I can face down a thirty foot dinosaur, but not the Nephilim. *What am I so afraid of?*

My pondering nearly gets me killed. Alice bucks like a rodeo bull and for a moment, my hands slip free. Snapping back to the problem at hand, I reach higher and stab my climbing claws into Alice's neck. I then loosen my legs and pull myself up. For fifteen seconds, while Alice flails about in an attempt to shake me off, I pull myself higher, toward her head and snapping jaws...and sensitive

eyes.

~~Sensing my impending attack, Alice slams her head and neck into a tree. The tree falls, but not before knocking me senseless. I feel myself slip a little, but I tighten my grip before falling. Having felt my loosened grip, Alice repeats the technique, but misses the mark, slamming the tree over with her snout instead of my head.~~

As she lines up the next strike, I can see it will be more accurate. A voice shouts to me before I can brace for the impact.

“Ull!”

It’s Kainda.

I look toward her and see her hammer flying through the air at me. For a moment I suspect she’s trying to kill me, too, but the trajectory of the hammer’s flight reveals otherwise. She is arming me. We are working together.

For the moment.

Alice begins her strike.

I let go with my feet, place them on the back of her neck, and leap.

Alice hammers the tree over and then looks about, no doubt wondering if she’s knocked me free.

Above her, I catch the hammer. It weighs far more than I was expecting—*how on Earth could Kainda wield such a weapon*—but I put everything I have into controlling it. I line up my strike as she descends and put all of my strength into the blow.

The connection is solid. Stone and bone collide. The impact shakes my arms and the hammer falls free. But the damage is done. Alice falls limp, her skull crushed beneath the weight of Kainda’s miniature replica of Thor’s hammer, Mjöllnir.

I land in the grass next to the giant cresty, breathing heavily. Alice, however, doesn’t breathe at all.

My enemy is dead.

I know I should cheer or shout some kind of victory whoop, but with the fight over, Ull’s personality has gone missing. All that’s left is Solomon. I place my hand on the giant’s side and tear form in my eyes. She wanted nothing more than to kill me, but she was a force of nature. Killing her seems wrong somehow.

“You weep for your prey?” Kainda says, scoffing.

“I respected her,” I say.

“She was a beast.”

“And yet she was your better.”

I look at Kainda, still lying in the grass. She glowers at me, but does not argue. She knows it’s true. The cresty defeated her. If not for my intervention, Kainda would be dead.

“Her ilk may yet kill us both,” Kainda says.

When the first of the remaining twelve cresties, a twenty foot male, steps around Alice’s motionless form, I realize she might be right. The male is followed by the others, which form a partial ring around us. I could run. They’ve given me the opportunity. But it would mean leaving Kainda behind.

I’m tempted once again to leave and let the cresties solve that problem, but I can’t have killed Alice for nothing. I am here to save Kainda’s life, like it or not, and that’s what I intend to do—

The male steps toward me.

—if I can.

I look for Whipsnap and find it twenty feet away. With a focused blast of air, I can bring the

weapon back to me or send it flying into the neck of the male cresty. But I pause. Something about this cresty is different. Cresties shriek while hunting. They bare their teeth like wolves. They snip each other in anticipation of the kill.

None of that is on display here.

The male steps slowly forward again, lowering its head. For a moment, I fear it will pounce, but then I see its eyes, turned down to the ground.

Subservient.

I hear Kainda gasp behind me. She sees it too.

I step toward the beast and its head lowers even further, hovering below my chest. We're only five feet apart now.

Do they fear me now? I wonder. Have I become the pack leader by killing Alice? It makes sense in a strange underworld kind of way, but I don't think that's what's going on. I think...I think I'm being thanked.

During my time here I've watched Alice rule over this place like a ruthless despot. Everything both prey and family alike, feared her. And now she's gone. The queen overthrown.

I step forward again and reach out a hand, placing it on the dinosaur's snout. It looks me in the eyes and I realize I have made several more friends today. "I'll call you...Grumpy," I say, naming the dinosaur for the Tyrannosaurus Rex in *Land of the Lost* that constantly fought with Alice the Allosaurus. "Go, enjoy your giant goats."

When I smile, Grumpy stands tall, lets out a roar and turns away. The pack charges into the jungle without looking back. When they're gone, I turn to Kainda and find her wide eyed and stunned. The expression makes her look human—kind even—and for a moment I get a glimpse of what Ull sees in her. But the spell is broken by her words.

"You have made a pact with our sworn enemies."

I laugh. It's a silly thing to say really, though I suppose not to someone who has never known anything outside of the harsh subterranean hunter culture. Realizing that Kainda has never known anything else, I picture her being broken as a child and steeped in a culture of hatred and combat. Had she grown up in the outside world, she might have been an artist or a songwriter. She might have worn pretty dresses and smelled flowers, and laughed. Really laughed.

But she didn't. She doesn't even know those things exist.

I pity her.

A single cautious step toward Kainda is all I'm allowed before she takes up a defensive posture. "I'm not going to hurt you," I say.

She doesn't trust me.

"I just saved your life."

Her face remains rigid, her hands bent into claws ready to strike.

"Fine," I say. "But I'm leaving you here." I point to the bluff that was my home for the past few months. "There is a ledge over there. Thirty feet up. You'll be safe there if you can reach it. You left a scent trail, yes? For the others to follow?"

She doesn't answer, but I know she did. "They'll find you sooner or later. Though it might take some time for you all to find the way out."

I pick up her hammer. Alice's blood drips from its surface. "But I don't think they'll attack you while you carry this." I toss the hammer to her and she catches it. She's confused by my kindness, most likely because she's never experienced anything like it before.

"Why are you doing this?" she asks.

I stare at her for a moment, asking myself the same question. Is it because she's beautiful and some part of me wants to be with her? Is it because she's Ninnis's daughter and I feel a lingering obligation to serve him? I determine it's neither of those things. The realization that these people have been corrupted by an evil beyond their comprehension breaks my heart. They are slaves who believe they are free. They're blind and they don't know what they're doing. Not really.

So like Ninnis before her, I have decided to forgive her. And I tell her as much. "Because I forgive you."

"Forgive?"

She's never heard the word before. I quote the dictionary in response. "To grant pardon for or remission of an offense. To cease to feel resentment against an enemy." I add a personal touch, saying "I choose to love someone despite all of the awful things they have done."

She whispers the word "love" to herself and looks down at the grass. I can see she's lost in thought, but part of me can't help wonder if she's trying to delay me so that the others might arrive before my escape.

I snatch up Whipsnap, enter the jungle and sprint for the lake before she even realizes I'm gone.

The waterfall that constantly flows into the cavern creates a steady breeze and carries scents down from the tunnel high above. I sometimes catch whiffs of creatures lurking high above, some known, some unknown. As I approach the lake and feel the waterfall's mist on my face, I smell something foreign.

I pause at the edge of the trees, testing the air like a dog, sniffing quickly. The scents are new, but without a doubt, human. The hunters are approaching. Judging by the number of different scents, there are six of them.

I look up and see nothing. They haven't reached the waterfall's edge yet. But they will soon. The hunters are most likely following Kainda's scent trail. Thanks to the flow of water and wind that the waterfall generates, they won't get my scent until they've entered the cavern. When that happens, they'll smell me, Kainda and cresty blood. For a moment I fear they will assault the dinosaur pack, but no, with me so close, they won't waste the time. They'll give chase.

With Whipsnap attached to my belt, I run for the water. Gloop is there and barks at my approach, urging me faster. The seal can smell the hunters, too. I dive in, doing my best not to create a splash, and I swim out toward the rest of the pod. Apparently, I'm not fast enough for Gloop's liking. He gets under me and when I hold on to his neck, he puts his flippers to work and my speed through the water doubles.

As we get closer to the pod, they turn and head for the waterfall. The waterfall's roar fills my ears as we near it and I can now taste the hunters in my mouth. They must be standing in the water above us. I look up and see something I hadn't noticed before. A rope, dark and wet, dangles next to the falling water. This is how Kainda entered the chamber, and how the other hunters will soon follow. The pod reaches the waterfall before Gloop and me, and one by one they start slipping beneath the water. I sense we're going to follow and take three quick breaths. Then we're underwater. Not deep, maybe twenty feet. I look up and see the waterfall roiling the water. And then we're beyond it, sliding into darkness. We speed forward as strong flippers and a fast current accelerate our passage.

I'm blind now, which is a strange feeling, because I've grown accustomed to life underground. Then I remember that I've been living in a well lit cave for a long time. My eyes will have to adjust to the darkness again.

Spots emerge in the black and at first I think there must be glowing crystals or bioluminescent algae in this submerged tunnel, but when my chest begins to ache I realize that I'm close to losing consciousness. I tighten my grip on Gloop's neck and he seems to sense my panic. The water pulses past me as we push forward. The seal's back arches beneath me and our speed increases again.

Then we're free of the water. I gasp several times, sucking in fresh air.

I loosen my grip on Gloop's neck and give him a few gentle pats on his head. "Thank you, my friend."

The cavern is dark, lacking any sort of light. Happily, I haven't totally lost my night vision and can make out the vague shape of the place. I'm still nearly blind, but at least I'm not immobilized.

I climb out of the shallows and onto a smooth, stone shore. The underground river flows past, curving through the small chamber and exiting through another tunnel. For a moment, I wonder if this is merely a pit stop for air, but the pod is already moving on, following the flow. Gloop slides away.

from me, staring into my eyes.

~~Then he glances beyond me. I turn and find a small tunnel, just big enough for me to crawl through. When I look back, my mammalian protector is gone.~~

“What’s the rush?” I say aloud, but a scent carried on the water entering the chamber answers my question.

The hunters are still near. And if their scent has made it here, they have reached the lake. A dreadful thought occurs to me. I was stuck in that cavern for so long because the elusive exit was unknown to me. But the men and women hunting me have lived in the underworld for some time. They know these tunnels even better than the Nephilim, who are too large to fit. They won’t have to look for the exit, they’ll already know where it is! Not only that, they’ll know where it leads, and since they are physically unable to follow through the water, they might very well know where this route will take me. They’ll have no trouble escaping the chamber using the rope.

I dive for the small tunnel, slipping inside the tight crag and pulling myself through the Earth like a worm. I’m only one hundred feet in when I hear a disturbance in the water behind me. They’re here. They’ve found me.

I move as quickly and quietly as I can. At this range, my scent is impossible to mask. They know I’m close. But I don’t want them to know *how* close.

A scraping sound fills the tunnel behind me and I wonder why they’re not trying to mask their presence better. I test the air and smell only one distinct scent. Only one of the hunters is giving chase. The others must be searching the cavern while this one moved ahead, just in case. I glance back and see something sliding through the tunnel, moving like a snake. It’s an amazing technique for moving through the underworld, and if I don’t keep moving, I will be caught by this snake man long before I reach a larger tunnel where I can put my feet to good use.

After ten more minutes of scurrying through the small tunnel, I can hear my pursuer’s breath behind me, each one a hiss as though he’s determined to play the role of a snake. Just when I think he’s close enough to reach out and snare my ankle, the tunnel opens up. I stand and sprint, confident that my stride can outmatch his slither.

When I hear the pads of his feet slapping the stone behind me, it’s clear that he’s also a fast runner than I am. He’s going to catch me.

I focus on the air behind me and imagine it surging back. My hair billows around my head as a gust of wind surges past me, but does not affect me. The man behind me, however, is struck full force. I hear a grunt, and the sound of a body hitting stone. My defensive strike worked, but only momentarily. The sound of feet slipping on stone returns a moment later.

Hunters only give up when they’re dead. Ninnis told me that once. But I don’t kill people. Animals? Yes, though only for food or in self-defense. Nephilim? Absolutely. People? I can’t do it. Not even in self-defense. It just feels...wrong. So I’ll have to immobilize this hunter somehow.

The tunnel floor disappears beneath my feet and I fall forward. My instincts generate a gust of wind beneath me, and it saves my life. I twist my body around a large rib bone that would have skewered me if not for the wind, and I land on my feet.

Glowing crystals pock the cave wall, helping me see. I’m surrounded by bones, some larger than my entire body. There are cresty skulls, albino goat horns, and an assortment of limbs, and bodies many of which I do not recognize. And most of them are large. I run around a pile of bones, looking for a way out and I’m faced with a cavern, the enormity of which I cannot fathom. It’s like seeing the Grand Canyon in reverse. The floor stretches out past the horizon where I see what looks like white mountains. I take out my telescope as I run and take a peek.

The mountains are *bones*. They’re everywhere, even beneath my feet, where I suspect the

powdery white dust coating the floor is pulverized bone.

~~Before I can ponder this mystery I hear a rattle and grunt behind me, and I know that the hunter has lunged. I dive to the side, roll and yank Whipsnap from its place on my belt. My weapon twangs into place, clutched in both of my hands.~~

The hunter stands ten feet away, no weapon in sight. He's tall, at least seven feet. That's big for a hunter. But he's also incredibly lean. I look at his skin. He is pale, like me, like all hunters, but there's a strange sheen to his skin, almost reflective. His face is hidden behind a black veil that looks like it's actually been pinned to his forehead.

Hoping to get some hint of who I'm dealing with, I ask, "Who is your master?"

"I have no master."

No master? How can a hunter not have a master?

We circle each other. I feel Ull at the fringe of my consciousness, ready to take over when the attack is pressed. And I'm grateful for his presence.

"Why do you hide your face?" I ask.

"I am shunned."

He feints an attack and my blade keeps him at bay.

"You are a hunter?" I ask.

"No, but I will be when I bring you back."

"What are you now?"

"A tracker."

This creature being a tracker makes no sense. Hunters are expert trackers. We can sense things in the underground that no one else can. Our sense of sight isn't hampered by the dark. And we can hear and smell things few others can.

A bit of Ull emerges, scoffing at his claim. "How can you track better than a hunter?"

Because I can follow your thoughts.

The voice is in my head!

My foe reveals himself, pulling the veil up over his head. His face is white and noseless. In some ways he reminds me of a gatherer, egg shaped head, almond-shaped oversized eyes and a small slit for a mouth. But his eyes are not solid black, they're bright yellow with a black, cat-like slit for a pupil. That's when I see his skin for what it is—scales. White scales, which combined with the yellow eyes is similar to the seekers, a class of Nephilim closely related to gatherers.

Your escape route is admirable, Ull. Bold. The others will not follow you here. But you did not count on me. I am Xin and I will be your undoing.

A pressure builds in my head as he stares at me. It keeps me from pondering *why* the others won't follow me here. I push back, but find the effort far more painful. He's in my head, searching my thoughts.

His small lips turn up. I can hear him laughing in my head. *You are not Ull at all!*

He digs deeper.

Solomon? That is your name. Solomon Ull Vincent.

I see what he sees. My past replayed for his amusement. My youth. My parents. My kidnapping. Ninnis breaking me. Me saving Ninnis's life. Then Kainda's. But he has failed to see the only memory I fought to block: Aimee. If he learned about her, they would no doubt threaten her life to bring me in. And it would work.

So full of compassion. Your forgiveness is your weakness.

The pain bursts inside my head and I fall to one knee.

Xin charges.

~~I do the only thing I can. I let Ull loose.~~

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