

BOOK TWO OF THE ANTARKTOS SAGA

THE LAST HUNTER

PURSUIT



JEREMY ROBINSON

AUTHOR OF *INSTINCT* AND *THRESHOLD*

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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.

Hilaree Robinson (my amazing wife) and Ed Parrot, you are fantastic first readers whose suggestions are always on target. Kane Gilmour, your edits continue to help my books shine. Stan Tremblay, your unwavering support is always needed and appreciated. My daughters, Aquila and Norah, your boundless energy and creativity are things even I aspire to. And Solomon, my son, I am dedicating each and every book in this series to you because I have never met someone so kind, giving, and loving. Without your example, *The Last Hunter* would not exist.

Table of Contents

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 01](#)

[Chapter 02](#)

[Chapter 03](#)

[Chapter 04](#)

[Chapter 05](#)

[Chapter 06](#)

[Chapter 07](#)

[Chapter 08](#)

[Chapter 09](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)
[Chapter 25](#)
[Chapter 26](#)
[Chapter 27](#)
[Chapter 28](#)
[Chapter 29](#)
[Chapter 30](#)
[Chapter 31](#)
[Chapter 32](#)
[Chapter 33](#)
[Chapter 34](#)
[Chapter 35](#)
[Chapter 36](#)
[Epilogue](#)
[About the Author](#)

Prologue

Lieutenant Ninnis was once a proud man. An adventurer with a scruffy beard, blazing blue eyes and a 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 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. Frail. 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 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 of 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.

1

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 a way 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, their 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 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 take 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, sans 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 Nephil. 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 Nephil. 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 puffy 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 ninja 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* them. 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 cresties are hunting, but they’ve only just recently 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 wet 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 as 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 think 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 shouts 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 see 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 at 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 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