

BOOK THREE OF THE ANTARKTOS SAGA

THE LAST HUNTER

ASCENT



JEREMY ROBINSON

AUTHOR OF *INSTINCT* AND *THRESHOLD*

THE LAST HUNTER
ASCENT

By Jeremy Robinson

© 2011 Jeremy Robinson. All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and should not be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For more information e-mail all inquiries to: info@jeremyrobinsononline.com

Visit Jeremy Robinson on the World Wide Web at:

www.jeremyrobinsononline.com

PROLOGUE

Lieutenant Ninnis looked at the blade in his hand. The bright sun overhead reflected off its surface, the intensity of its gleam burning his eyes. But the pain didn't bother him. Not because it was insignificant—even after spending nearly three months above ground, the sunlight still hurt his eyes—but because the pain delighted him.

Delighted Nephil.

The body and spirit of Nephil that resided in his body had been meant for another. Solomon Ull Vincent. A boy. The first and only child naturally born of a human being on the continent of Antarctica. The child bonded with the land on a supernatural level. Beyond understanding.

And now, beyond reach.

Ninnis turned his eyes away from the blade, and looked at the soft earth beneath his bare feet. His soles had become so thick with calluses from living underground that he couldn't feel the softness of the fresh leaf litter. But it smelled raw. Alive. He'd always believed that subterranean life was ideal. He'd never understood why the Nephilim—the half human, half demon ancients he once called masters—obsessed about taking the surface back from the human race. But after spending the last week feeling the burn of the sun, moving through the young forest and hunting in a way that's impossible underground, Ninnis understood.

The surface is wide open. Limitless.

And beautiful.

He didn't admire sunsets, flowers or the glimmering ocean that now filled the previously frozen bay to the north. He didn't watch the butterflies or birds that now filled the warm Antarctic air. He didn't marvel at the herds of underworld creatures adapting to life under the sun. None of this interested him.

A twitch brought his attention back to the man at his feet.

Blood flowed through the man's fingers and mixed with the soil. Hungry worms rose to the surface, feasting on the blood. Drowning in it. This is what Ninnis liked about the surface. The color.

Life underground was muted by darkness. Even when lit by torches, glowing crystals or the large electric bulbs in the Nephilim libraries, the world underground looked dull. But here, in the light, vivid colors danced with every shift of the breeze. And the blood—*the blood*—it glistened with the most delicious hue of dark red. The sight of it delighted him almost as much as the smell.

A tattoo of swirling spikes covered the large, bald man's head. Ninnis wasn't sure if they represented anything, but he was positive they were meant to intimidate. Covered with a splash of the man's own blood, they looked silly. He wore black clothing from the neck down and much of his face had been painted black. At night, or underground, the man would be hard to see. But in the light, reeking of sweat, the man stood out like a beacon. He carried two knives, a handgun and a long black rifle Ninnis had never seen, but recognized as a sharpshooter's rifle.

A soldier.

A hunter.

Ninnis chuckled at the thought.

Defeating this man had been no more difficult than defeating a newborn feeder. The man bore sharp blades, moved quickly and struck hard, but he lacked knowledge about the true world around him. Seeing Ninnis dressed in nothing more than tattered leathers had actually made the soldier laugh. The man mocked him in Russian before realizing Ninnis didn't speak the language, and then switched to English. Ninnis showed no reaction to the man's taunts. Instead, he circled the man, gauging this newcomer to *his* land.

They race to claim my continent, Ninnis had thought, only to find it already taken.

Fools.

When Strike appeared in Ninnis's hands, the shocked expression on the man's face was comical. And as the soldier fumbled to draw his pistol, Ninnis closed the distance, and eviscerated the man.

He now lay on the ground, clutching his belly to keep his insides from sliding out. Two seconds and one strike. The man had faced a god, and lost. As did anyone, or anything, that stood up to Ninnis. As the vessel of Nephil, he commanded the subterranean armies. More than that, he had the devotion of creatures that have lived for thousands of years before he was born, before he was taken captive in 1911 and turned into Ninnis the hunter, subject to Enki, son of Nephil. And now Enki, who along with his brother Enlil, previously ruled over the Nephilim, served *him*. They didn't realize this, of course. He contained the physical body and spirit of

Nephil, who'd been imprisoned in Tartarus and recently freed. The ancient spirit possessed unimaginable power, but it couldn't control Ninnis. Instead, he decided to take the power for himself and use it to lead the Nephilim to victory over the surface world. While his goals aligned with those of the Nephilim, he would age more quickly on the surface. Death would claim him eventually. To obtain immortality, he would wipe out humanity quickly, and become legend, remembered for eternity as the savior of the Nephilim.

He could feel the power eating at him from the inside out. Eventually, the spirit of Nephil would be released, most likely upon Ninnis's deathbed. Without the boy, Solomon, willingly offering himself to Nephil, the spirit would die. And there is nothing Nephilim feared more than death. Within the realm of Tartarus, the spirit of Nephil had existed in a state of eternal torture beyond comprehension. It was a place designed to contain and punish the Nephilim, who had so long ago corrupted mankind before being chased underground and buried beneath Antarctica's ice cap. Outside of Tartarus, if a Nephilim died, they simply ceased to exist. Their spirits were different from human souls. They lacked something, some kind of substance, and would simply fade away.

Ull, the Nephilim who had shared Solomon's middle name and become his master, had suffered such a fate after the boy killed him. No hunters other than Ninnis and Kainda knew about his fate, but...

Kainda.

Remembering his daughter brought a glimmer of discomfort to his chest. It was a kind of pain in which he did not delight. Because he didn't understand it. She betrayed him. Left with the boy, Luca, and his sister, Emilie—traitors all three. They were why he now stalked the freshly grown wilderness. Preparations to invade the outside world would continue in his absence. He didn't foresee humanity putting up much of a struggle. They had been devastated by the massive shift in the Earth's crust that had repositioned Antarctica at the equator and returned the land to the lush paradise it had been so long ago.

But paradise would be stained with blood. First, the man at his feet. Then any other outsiders foolish enough to try to claim Antarctica. And finally, Kainda and the thirty-six other hunters who deserted the underground and their masters. Only after he'd seen the life drain from their bodies would he give the signal to attack the rest of the world.

A sudden scratch of shifting leaves snapped Ninnis out of his thoughts. The soldier showed resolve. The man drew a blade from a sheath on his chest and sent it flying toward Ninnis, who did nothing to avoid it.

Four inches of steel pierced Ninnis's chest and slipped between his ribs, puncturing a lung. The intense pain would have knocked any other man to his knees.

Ninnis smiled.

Holding his gut with one hand, the man pushed himself away from Ninnis.

Ninnis twitched his wrist and Strike's blade rolled up. He attached the weapon to his belt, and looked down at the hilt of the knife sticking out of his chest. An expert shot. The man might have made a good hunter after all. But Ninnis no longer had any interest in breaking and making

hunters. Solomon had been the last hunter, destined to contain the spirit of Nephil, and that hadn't turned out as planned. Once the Nephilim reclaimed the surface, there would be no need for hunters, whose small bodies made them important assets in the underworld.

Ninnis clutched the knife in his chest and drew it out slowly. An explosion of pain radiated through his body. The blade came free with a slurp. Blood followed.

Purple blood.

Ninnis watched the violet plasma drip down his chest, fascinated by its color. Human blood—his blood—ran red. He'd been carrying a feeder skin of Nephilim blood, consuming it regularly so that its healing properties could help his human body endure the rigors of containing Nephil. It would also have no trouble healing this wound. But would it have to? Ninnis watched as the flow of blood slowed, and then stopped.

An intense itch surrounded the wound and then pulsed with pain. It felt like being stabbed all over again, but in reverse. And then, the wound was healed.

Ninnis knew he was changing. He felt hungrier. More ruthless. More powerful. More hard-hearted. But he hadn't realized the changes were also *physical*.

"I am becoming Nephilim," he said.

The soldier at his feet continued to struggle, a pitiful whimper escaping his mouth. Ninnis looked the man in the eyes. "I'm changing," he said. "And hungry."

Ninnis brought the soldier's razor sharp knife up to his eyes and looked at his reflection through the smear of his own purple blood. He licked the blade clean, and smiled at the man. "My appetite seems to have changed." He cocked his head to the side. "I hope you don't find it rude if I make you watch while I eat."

The man filled his lungs to scream as Ninnis lunged toward him.

And ate.

1

I'm cold.

The thought has repeated itself in my mind a thousand times before I think to do something about it. It's been so long since I had to worry about hot and cold, that I'm confused by the sensation. While I remember a variety of ways to remedy the situation, my body has lost the instinct. My teeth aren't chattering. I don't rub my arms, or hop up and down. I just...stand. And wait. For something. I don't know what.

For it to end, I think. This nightmare.

I stand before the black gates of Tartarus, staring into the light absorbing darkness, hoping they'll open again. I haven't moved since I stepped inside, though I have replayed that fateful decision in between each and every, 'I'm cold'.

The Nephilim had me surrounded. Ninnis, possessed by the body and spirit of Nephil, stood before me. Powerful. Strong enough to take me. Maybe even break me. And that is a fate that neither I, nor the world, would like to see realized.

It would mean the end of all things.

Though I suspect the world might be doomed, anyway. If anyone could have challenged Nephil, it was me. I know that now. It took help, but I repelled Nephil from my mind and my body, and in a very real way, I defeated the powerful first Nephilim. It wasn't the first time Nephil had tasted defeat, of course. Someone put him here, in Tartarus, to begin with.

My hope, my only hope, is that someone on the outside knows how to get me out the same way Nephil got out. I'm certain no one outside of the Nephilim inner circle—Enki, Enlil, Odin, Thor, Zeus and the other ancient gods—has a clue, though. So my hope's eternal flame is more of a pitiful flicker. At best.

I realize I've been staring at the doors for some time now. How long, I really have no idea. Time seems irrelevant here. I could have been here a few seconds or a thousand years. I'm not sure. My world currently consists of the ground beneath my feet, the big black doors standing in front of me and the ever-biting cold that has now reached my bones.

Turn around, I tell myself.

But I can't.

I'm terrified by what I might see, not because I know what it is, but because I have no clue. Tartarus is a land of eternal punishment, created expressly for the punishment of Nephilim. The *Nephilim!* They're giants that delight in pain and heal instantaneously. Saying, "You want to go torture each other?" to a Nephilim is like if my friend Justin asked me to spend the night at the Museum of Science in Boston.

So how am I supposed to endure something the Nephilim find torturous?

I'm not.

I'm going to stand right here until the end of time and wait for this door to open.

Several minutes, or maybe years, later, my eyes drift. I see stone. Bleak, pale stone. But at least it's recognizable. It's something I can comprehend. Maybe this place isn't as otherworldly as I expected.

A tick of stone on stone snaps my head to the side. The small pebble rolls and stops at my feet. The bitter sting of a breeze eats away at my back. I catch a glimpse of the barren, rocky world behind me, and turn forward as the wind cuts into my face and whips through my hair.

I should be dead, I realize. Hypothermic at the very least. I look at my fingers, expecting to see the onset of frostbite. My hands look normal. They just hurt.

Without a conscious decision to do so, I turn around. I'm at the bottom of a short stone hill. Average looking rocks cover the surface. If not for the swirling orange sky, the landscape, as far as I can see it, could be mistaken for the American southwest. *Utah*, I think. *It looks like Arches National Monument*.

Despite the cold, there is no snow. No moisture in the air at all, actually.

Thinking of water makes me thirsty. More thirsty than I thought possible. The sensation moves me forward, up the rise. As I move away from the door, I take in my surroundings. I can't see far. More rocky terrain rises up to my left and right. And the gates of Tartarus are so large behind me that I can't yet see around them.

A burst of frigid wind slams into my face as I clear the top of the rise. I push against the wind with my thoughts, but it's no use. My link to the continent is gone. Unless, I realize, I am no longer on Antarctica. *This is some kind of supernatural realm or alternate dimension*, I think. It's a ridiculous thought. Before returning to Antarctica, being kidnapped, broken and turned into Ull the hunter, I was a bookworm in love with science. There isn't a single theory in the books I read that make a place like this possible.

Of course, they wouldn't make sense of the Nephilim either and I have long since given up wondering how half-human, half-demons are even possible, never mind the supernatural forces that gave birth to them.

I wipe the wind-born tears from my eyes, tilt my head away from the wind and step over the top of the hill. The bitter wind tugs at my feeble clothing—just a belt and a Tarzan-like leather loincloth—and I realize I still have all of my belongings. Whipsnap is attached to my waist, though I don't remember putting it there. I have a knife, telescope, sunglasses and a flint stone for starting fires—not that there is anything flammable here. In subterranean Antarctica, I would have used dried dung to create a fire. Here, in this barren place, I don't even have that foul resource.

The wind dies suddenly, as though finally accepting my presence. When I look up, I don't see fire and brimstone. There's nothing inherently Biblical or hellish about the place. An endless expanse of barren hills and gorges laid out beneath an angry orange sky. I can't see any sun to speak of. This could be another planet. It could be underground. Or it could be something beyond my understanding.

I crane my head side to side and see nothing. Endless nothing. A deep sense of loneliness twists around inside me and makes a nice spot for itself in my gut. A shiver rises from my legs and shakes through my core. My body, it seems, has just remembered how it's supposed to respond to freezing. My muscles twitch so hard I find it difficult to stand.

What's the point of standing? I think.

There is no place to go. Despite the cold, I'm not going to die. In fact, I might already be dead. So I should probably just sit down, grit my teeth and wait for eternity to end.

A moment later, I shake so bad that I don't have a choice. I fall down to my butt and pull my legs in close. But there is no escaping the cold. Nor the loneliness. This is the fate I chose when I stepped back into the gates of Tartarus. This is the sacrifice I made to save Luca. As I begin to weep, a shift in the orange sky at the horizon catches my attention.

There's something there. Something different from the endless rolling stone hills and swirling sky. It's sharp. And vertical. *A tower*, I realize.

I stay rooted in place. In this place, the tower can't be a good thing.

But it's something.

Where's Ull? I wonder. Ull is my middle name, given to me by Dr. Merrill Clark, a friend of my parents, husband of Aimee Clark, whom I kidnapped and delivered to the Nephilim, and the father of Mirabelle Clark, the first girl I had any kind of romantic feeling for. But Ull became my one and only name after I was broken by Ninnis and turned into a hunter. I served the Nephilim Ull, son of Thor, before killing him, too. But 'Ull' is now how I identify that dark side of me—the side that enjoyed being a hunter. He is part of me, but also separate from me. In fact, we generally loath each other, though we worked together to force Nephil from my—*our*—mind. But I have yet to sense his ferocity, his strength. I fear that aspect of my personality has either been suppressed or removed. Ull's passion would help me now, and I suspect helping someone, even a split personality, might be against the rules of this place.

With shaking hands, I dig into one of my pouches and take out the telescope given to me by Ninnis on my birthday, back when I was still Ull. I fight to extend the frozen metal as it clings to my skin. But I get it open and peek through the lens, careful not to let my eyeball touch, and flash freeze to, the metal. The tower comes into view, still distant, but clearer. It's not natural, I think. Someone built it. But why? And when? And for what purpose?

Where Ull is passionate, I am curious. And in this case, the resulting action is the same. I push myself up against the cold and set out toward the tall tower. I could probably figure out how far away it is, but have no need to figure out how long the journey will take.

I have eternity.