

BOOK FOUR OF THE ANTARKTOS SAGA

THE LAST HUNTER

LAMENT



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**THE LAST HUNTER
LAMENT**

By Jeremy Robinson

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FICTION by JEREMY ROBINSON

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Prologue

Lieutenant Ninnis watched his life from the inside out. He could sense the world around him, but he could no more interact with it than if he were trapped in Tartarus. His body and its actions, no longer belonged to him.

They belonged to Nephil, lord of the Nephilim. In his arrogance, Ninnis thought he could control the dark spirit that now possessed him, and for a time, he did. His strength and will proved powerful enough not only to contain the darkness, but also to direct it. And for the first time in thousands of years, since the Sons of God lay with human women and bore them immortal—but soulless—half-human, half-demon children, the hordes of Nephil were led by a human being.

Fused with the power of Nephil, Ninnis had set out on a quest for vengeance against the hunters, including his daughter Kainda, who betrayed their kind to follow the memory of the boy named Solomon Ull Vincent, the Last Hunter. As the first and only human child born on Antarctica, Solomon was imbued with a supernatural bond to the continent that not only protected him from the harsh elements, but also gave him dominion over them. The earth, water, air and fire of Antarctica were his to command, though not without a physical toll.

The boy had proven resourceful in the past, but when he stepped through the gates of Tartarus, Ninnis believed his former protégé to be trapped in that land of torture for all eternity. Three months later, he discovered his mistake. Solomon had escaped from that awful place, and during their last conflict, the boy had harnessed Antarctica's katabatic winds and flung Ninnis miles through the air. When he landed on the rocky Antarctic coastline, Ninnis was broken: body, mind and soul.

The Nephilim blood coursing through his veins, fueled by the spirit of Nephil, stitched his body back together. But the repairs had a side effect. So ruined was Ninnis's mind that when it was reformed, it was made anew, free of the damage caused by his time as a hunter.

Many hunters, with the exception of those born hunters, like Kainda, were comprised of men and women who had been kidnapped, either from the outside world or from the surface of Antarctica. Their future mentors dragged the kidnapped victims underground and violently broke them. All memory of their lives before were blocked out and forgotten, hidden behind a mental wall forged by torture and starvation. Once broken, the victims could be remade into hunters, loyal to their Nephilim masters.

Ninnis kidnapped and broke Solomon. The boy became Ull the hunter, serving the Nephilim also known as Ull, son of Thor, son of Odin, leader of the Asgard warrior clan. But the boy's memory later returned, and though damaged, Solomon became himself again—something that had never happened to a hunter before.

But it happened once since.

When the blood and spirit of Nephil healed and took control of Ninnis's body, there was an unforeseen side effect. Memories of a life before Antarctica returned as flashes.

A smiling face.

A gentle kiss.

And a name.

Caroline.

His...wife.

His *real* wife.

Ninnis had been given a wife—a fellow hunter—in the underworld, but he did not love her. He did not

love *anything*. She bore him a child, Kainda, but that was all. However, the woman he now remembered—Caroline—he loved her. Nephil claimed Ninnis, body and soul, but Caroline had done likewise long before.

The memories flickered through his mind as images, words and feelings that he couldn't hold on to for more than a moment. He remembered Caroline. Her aquiline face. Her soft touch. Her existence. But he could not remember everything. Where they met. When they married. If they had children. And why he left such a woman to join the ill-fated expedition to the South Pole that brought him to Antarctica in the first place.

The incomplete memory of something so...beautiful caused him intense pain, far greater than anything he'd ever experienced. Because he detested it. Despite his reforming memories, he was still Ninnis, the hunter.

Ninnis had been the greatest hunter, feared and renowned by all others. For a time, he contained the very spirit of Nephil. He had attempted to exert his will over the spirit again, but it was no use. His weakness had been exposed.

Caroline.

The name came to him as a whisper, but not in his ear. It was the voice of Nephil, in his mind. Taunting him.

Caroline.

The emotional weight her name carried struck his heart like a sword. It filled him with regret. Made him weak. Controllable. But it also infused him with a deeper hatred than he had ever experienced before.

For Solomon.

The only time Ninnis found himself freed from the influence of Nephil was in his dreams, and his subconscious envisioned detestable violence against a sole victim. The boy.

There would come a time, he knew, when Nephil and the Nephilim warriors and hunters he once again commanded would find the boy. When they did, the dark spirit would leave Ninnis's body to claim young Solomon, whose unique abilities had earned him the high honor of being deemed the true vessel of Nephil.

In that moment, when the spirit of Nephil fought to control Solomon again, the boy would be defenseless. That was when Ninnis would strike, and Solomon would die. Nephil might die along with him, but it was a sacrifice Ninnis would gladly make to have his revenge. Nothing else mattered.

So he stopped fighting for control.

He ceased replying to Nephil's voice in his head.

And the beast forgot about him.

Ninnis watched Nephil's progress through the underground, as he led a troop of hunters through the subterranean realm, searching for some sign of the boy's passing. He listened to the plans being made, the reports being delivered and the battle plans that would bring destruction, first to the humans who had dared set foot on the Nephilim continent, and then to the rest of the world.

I could have found him already, Ninnis thought to himself, careful not to let the boast reach Nephil's consciousness. He had seen several clues already. A scuffmark on a cavern floor. The faint scent of the boy's passing several days previous. He knew Solomon better than any other hunter. Most of the skills the boy employed had been taught to him by Ninnis. But Ninnis could not help Nephil. Offering advice would reveal he wasn't as defeated as he seemed. So he waited.

And he watched.

Nephil, in the body of Ninnis, stood in a wide cavern, deep underground. Five hunters stood by his side. One of the men crouched by a shallow river that ran through the center of the cave. He sniffed the air.

"They've been through here," he said.

Nephil smelled the air. Ninnis detected Solomon's scent, but Nephil knew nothing of tracking. "When?" *Days ago*, Ninnis thought.

Perhaps distracted by the god in their midst, the man said, "They're just hours ahead of us."

"Very good," Nephil said.

The hunter brimmed with pride.

A lie, Ninnis realized. The hunter sought only to elevate himself in the eyes of Nephil. So he

exaggerated his claim, not realizing that he was merely sealing his own fate. The hunters who had failed to track down Solomon earlier had all been slain. *This group is not long for the world, either*, Ninnis thought, *unless...*

“Which way?” Nephil asked.

All five hunters scoured the cavern, searching for tracks—there wouldn’t be any—and smelling the air for a scent, which they found.

“Downstream,” one of them pronounced. The others quickly agreed.

Dead men all, Ninnis thought.

Solomon had simply sent some article of clothing downstream, scoured himself clean in the river and then headed the opposite direction from the easily followed scent trail. It was a simple tactic. Had Nephil sent these hunters in pursuit of Solomon on their own, they would have seen through the ruse. But with lord Nephil in their midst, they were all but useless.

As Nephil looked around the cavern, Ninnis noted the glitter of glowing crystals, their light blue coloration and the rounded stalactites hanging from the ceiling. He knew this place. The river ran for hundreds of miles, casually snaking its way through the subterranean realm and ending at the great feeder graveyard where the bones of countless meals were discarded. As Solomon’s scent trail neared the graveyard, the overpowering stench of death would conceal it. The trail would end there, far away from the boy.

As Nephil followed the hunters downstream, Ninnis turned his thoughts in the other direction. If Solomon wasn’t heading downstream, he was heading upstream. Ninnis followed the path in his mind.

Olympus, he thought. *Solomon is headed to Olympus*. He couldn’t conceive of a reason why, but if the boy could be caught within those ancient halls, surrounded by the likes of Zeus, Poseidon, Apollo and the worst of them, Ares, there would be no escape.

But Ninnis would not reveal himself or what he knew. He was a patient man. He believed he could wait for his vengeance. But he was wrong. Every step away from the boy fueled his outrage. When he could no longer contain his vehement disapproval for these hunters, Ninnis settled on a course of action, or rather, inaction.

It’s a false trail, he thought calmly. The phrase was simple and lacked any trace of his true emotion. He thought it again and again, repeating it like a mantra until it filled the small portion of his mind to which he had retreated. He let it seep out slowly with the hope Nephil would notice the phrase and treat it as an original thought, rather than as Ninnis’s inner voice. If Nephil could just speak the words, these hunters would see the truth.

It’s a false trail.

It’s a false trail.

It’s a false trail.

“It’s a false trail,” Nephil said, seven days and nearly two hundred miles later. In the minutes that followed his realization, Nephil tore all five hunters apart and turned around.

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“Get down!” I shout, but the warning comes too late. A ten-foot long albino centipede lunges from a hole in the cave wall, its mandibles flexed open and ready to snap shut on Kat’s face.

But Kat, aka Katherine Ferrell, is far from easy prey. In the short time I’ve known her, I learned that in the world before the cataclysm that rotated the Earth’s crust, repositioned Antarctica to the equator and killed several billion people, Kat was an assassin. She is a skilled fighter, but is most dangerous from a distance, with a sniper rifle. In the modern world, she is a killer without match, but underground without a rifle and being tackled by an oversized monster unknown to her, she is out of her element.

Nevertheless, she reacts with skill and without fear. Falling backward under the long creature’s squirming girth, Kat takes hold of its mandibles, forcing the centipede away from her head, and keeping the deadly pincers from snapping shut.

Em, aka Emilee, the closest thing I’ve ever had to a sister, draws one of her many knives to throw at the creature, but she’s stopped by the actions of Steven Wright, who insists we refer to him by his last name.

Wright tackles the centipede and grapples with its body, but he’s unable to move the creature and ends up just hanging on while the thing bucks him around.

I raise my hand toward the melee, intent on separating the group by controlling the wind and smashing the centipede into the wall. But Kainda places her hammer—a human sized version of Thor’s mighty Mjölfnir—on my arm and pushes it down.

I turn to her. “Why?”

“They need to learn,” she says plainly.

Through grinding teeth, Kat growls, “A little help!”

Kainda moves the hammer out in front of my chest, but it’s not needed. I don’t move. She’s correct. If Wright and Ferrell are to join us in the underground, they need to learn how to survive it, and overcoming this obstacle, which Kainda, Em and I could handle without breaking a sweat, is their violent initiation.

A knife appears in Wright’s hand. He jabs the body, punching the blade through the pale carapace. Thick, white innards seep through the puncture holes, but the creature is undaunted. Wright sweeps the blade along its body, severing fifteen of its limbs, but all he accomplishes is making the body slick with gore and removing his handholds. The centipede flings him to the floor, leaving Kat to face the beast alone.

With a grunt, she shoves the centipede back, draws her own knife and slices the thing’s throat. Only, it’s not the creature’s throat. It’s a sack of fluid the thing uses to predigest its food. Like saliva but far fouler smelling. On the bright side, nothing will pick up her personal scent for weeks.

“Ugh!” Kat says, as the fluid spills onto the black military fatigues that she wears. But she doesn’t slow. As Wright regains his feet and starts hacking at the creature again, Kat withdraws her blade, redirects it and plunges it up through the bottom of the centipede’s head, finding its small brain.

The centipede curls back, taking the knife with it, and flinging Wright to the cave floor once again. It twists and coils, writhing around in death throes before falling still.

Wright gets to his feet quickly and jumps to Kat’s side. “You all right?” he asks, his voice full of concern for his wife. They had kept their relationship secret from the outside world. Wright was an Army Captain and Kat was a contract killer. Granted, she killed for the same team, but their love was forbidden. Of course, down here, marriage between killers is common. I look at Kainda, who is grinning at Kat’s messy misfortune, and I think that our relationship isn’t all that different from these two, except for the marriage part.

Kat shrugs away from her husband and stands up with a scowl on her face. I know that look. Things are about to get ugly...er. Kat pulls the knife from the centipede’s head and points it at me. Kainda and Em tense.

“Why didn’t you help!” Kat shouts.

“Keep your voice down,” Kainda says.

“Keep my— Girl, someone needs to beat a little sense into you.”

Never one to back down from a challenge, Kainda steps forward. It’s my turn to stop her. I place my hand on her arm. “She has every right to be angry,” I say.

“You’re damn right, I do,” Kat says.

Em steps forward, hands away from her knives, and says, “You needed to learn.”

Kat rolls her eyes. “Learn what? How to kill a ten foot insect?”

“Chilopoda,” I say.

Kat’s burning glare locks on me. “What?”

“Chilopoda,” I repeat. “Insects are...”

Kat’s anger grows.

I raise my hands. “Sorry, sorry.” One drawback of having a perfect memory is the ability to spout facts like that. Of course, if I could keep my mouth shut, it wouldn’t be a problem. I decide to make up for it by explaining the situation. “The underground is full of these creatures. They used to grow to a few feet in length. They were the bottom of the food chain, and they posed little danger to anyone. But since the rest of the subterranean species fled to the underworld and they found a reliable food source—” I don’t bother mentioning the giant body of Behemoth, which the centipedes gorged on, “—they’ve become massive.”

“This is the first we’ve seen of them,” Wright says.

He’s right. The centipedes don’t normally hunt this close to the surface. Food must be scarce. “I once faced several thousand of them, some reaching thirty feet long.”

Kat’s not buying the story, but Wright, with whom I have a good rapport, blanches a little.

“Right,” Kat says. “How’d you handle that?”

I grin. “The only way possible. I ran like hell.”

My honest admission takes some of the fire out of Kat’s eyes. But she’s still not pleased. “Look, I get why you did it, but you’re kids. You’re not our parents. Or our mentors. If I ask for help, and you are able to give it, you will. Am I understood?”

Never one for tact, Kainda says, “No.”

Kat turns to Wright, “Please let me put her over my knee.”

I’m not sure if Kainda understands the parental spanking reference, but she knows a threat when she hears one. She takes another step forward, muscles tensing.

Wright stands between the women. “Kat, stand down.”

“That an order, Captain?” Kat says, oozing sarcasm.

“Actually,” Wright says, “I really don’t want you to get your head bashed in.”

Kat’s anger turns toward her husband. She doesn’t say anything, but I know what she’s thinking. To her, we’re kids. Amateurs. I might have impressed her with the demonstration of my abilities, but she has yet to see us in battle. It doesn’t matter that in surface years, I am actually her senior. I still have the body of an eighteen year old. But she’s going to have to get past that mental hurdle sooner or later.

So I let the second centipede, which is creeping up behind Kat and Wright, get a little closer. She needs to understand or she will never follow our lead. And down here, in our element, that will get her killed.

“Okay, Captain Know-It-All,” Kat says to me, “How would you handle a giant centipede?”

I look to Em. “Go ahead.”

In the blink of an eye, Em reaches to her waist like a gunslinger, draws a large knife and flings it with a snap of her wrist. The blade slices through the air, just missing Kat, whose eyes have just squinted with refined focus. I see her throwing her own blade toward Em, but I use the wind to knock it from the air, just as it leaves her hand.

Kat is about to rush in and press the attack when she hears the thump of a body hitting the ground behind her. She spins and finds a second massive centipede lying dead at her feet. Em’s blade is buried in the center of its head.

Wright steps back and whispers a curse. He had no idea the creature was behind them.

Kat just looks down at the dead creature. She bends, plucks the knife out of its head and wipes the gore

off on her pant leg. Just then, a third, smaller centipede that I hadn't sensed, launches from a burrow in the tunnel wall. Kat sidesteps the airborne centipede and brings the knife down, impaling its head and driving it down to the stone floor. She holds it there until it stops writhing.

The whole attack and killing takes just seconds.

She looks up at us and grins. "I'm a fast learner."

Kainda returns the smile. The two women who were ready to beat each other senseless just moments ago have found some common ground—the quick and efficient killing of their enemies. She nudges me. "I like her."

Wright recovers his dropped knife and sheaths it. "So, what's next?"

We've been slowly and carefully working our way toward the bowels of Mount Olympus. Our goal is to find the Nephilim known as Hades, lord of the Underworld, and friend—possibly *former* friend—of the Titan known as Cronus. Hades, according to Cronus, knows the location of the Jericho Shofar, which is supposedly one of the horns that brought down the walls of the Biblical city of Jericho. I'm not sure I buy that story, but when a several thousand-year-old Titan trapped in Tartarus tells you about a weapon that can turn the tide of battle against the Nephilim, you at least look into it. And honestly, I don't have a better plan.

But Olympus has to wait a little while longer. We've been so busy dodging waves of hunters scouring the underworld that we haven't eaten in a long time. We might have to fight our way into and out of the Nephilim citadel, nevermind the possibility that Hades will not be pleased to see us or to hear that Cronus sent us to him. We're going to need our strength.

I point at the dead Chilopoda. "Now, we eat."

A gentle breeze generated by my connection to the continent swirls around our group, keeping our scent, and the odor of our three kills, contained to this small portion of cave. A hunter could still stumble upon us, but they won't track us by scent.

Kainda separates five segments of the largest centipede and carves open the tops so that each resembles a bowl full of lumpy plain yogurt. She demonstrates how to scoop out the gelatinous flesh with her fingers and scrapes it off into her mouth before swallowing the dollop whole.

"How does it taste?" Wright asks. He's trying to sound curious, but the skin around his nose is pinched up in disgust.

"Like dung," Kainda replies.

"It's not that bad," Em says, trying to put our guests at ease.

Her efforts are undone when I laugh and say, "Yes it is." But I follow my statement with a demonstration of my own. I scoop out some of the gooey flesh. "It's fatty, full of protein and provides an energy boost. Oh, it's also great for wounds. Just shove some of this in an open wound and bandage over it. It accelerates healing and fights infection."

"That's...disgusting," Wright says.

"The trick is to hold your breath." I scrape the flesh into my mouth and swallow without chewing. "Mmm, Mikey likes it."

Wright and Kat both laugh lightly. Like me, they're children of the 80s and recognize the catchphrase from the Life cereal ads.

"Where's the beef?" Wright asks, mimicking the old woman from the equally popular Wendy's advertising campaign. When I got chicken pox, my mom bought me a "Where's the beef?" T-shirt. I loved that shirt.

As Kat and I laugh a little bit louder, Em and Kainda look at the three of us like we're crazy.

"They're television commercials," Wright tries to explain. "From when we were kids."

"I notice that he's including me in the, 'when we were kids' statement, which says he's starting to believe that my surface age is close to his. But his explanation is lost on my fellow hunters.

"They've never seen a TV," I say.

Wright's forehead wrinkles. "Never?"

"How long have you been here?" Kat asks, then scoops a wad of cream cheese meat into her mouth and swallows it down. She winces, but doesn't complain.

"I was brought here as a child," Em says, rubbing her head. Her brown hair, which is still two-thirds blood red, is just a few inches long now, but it's enough to cover the tattoo that was exposed when she shaved her head to pose as my wife. That double-ring tattoo revealed that she had been kidnapped as a baby and brought to Antarctica. It meant that Tobias, who raised her, was not actually her father. More than that, it meant that she might have family in the world outside Antarctica. Like me.

Wright and Kat look surprised by this, but Kainda's admission stuns them. "I was born here."

"Born here?" Kat says.

"The Nephilim have lived beneath the surface of Antarctica for thousands of years," I say. "During that time, they have routinely taken humans from the outside world. They use torture and violence to break the will and blind the past, if you're old enough to remember it, and turn us into hunters, servants that are small enough to reach portions of the underworld that are too tight for their large bodies."

"What about Aimee?" Wright asks. "Merrill's wife. She wasn't at all like you three."

The question twists my gut. "Aimee was a teacher. They don't break teachers. They use them to learn about the outside world. Our languages. Our customs. Our weaknesses." They haven't asked, but I feel that full disclosure is important with my new allies. If they discover the truth later on, they might have cause to

doubt my sincerity. “She was here because of me.”

“She was here with Merrill,” Wright says, scooping his first glob of centi-flesh onto his hand. He winces at the feel of it. “He told us the story. About the dig site. About how she was taken by the Nephilim.” He scoops the flesh into his mouth.

“She wasn’t taken by the Nephilim,” I say. “She was taken by me.”

The admission makes Wright take a breath while the fatty meat is still in his mouth. He tastes it instantly and nearly spits it out. He clamps his mouth shut, swallows the bite and chases it with a mouthful of water from his canteen. “Ugh.”

“Care to explain that?” Kat says. The edge has returned to her voice.

“I wasn’t myself at the time. I had been broken and remade into Ull, the hunter. She was my final test. So I took her.” My eyes drift to the floor. “But she saved me. Freed me. I was born on Antarctica. My parents were part of Merrill’s original expedition. Aimee helped deliver me. I have a perfect memory and hers was the first face I ever saw. When I saw her face again, I remembered everything. I became Solomon again.”

Telling the story in such a compressed way reveals the nearly fate-like quality of those events. If I hadn’t taken Aimee, I wouldn’t have been set free from my bondage. I would still be Ull, and I would have willingly given myself to the spirit of Nephil. There would be no resistance of hunters. Nephil would be stronger than ever. And the human race might very well be wiped out. But none of those things happened, all because I kidnapped Aimee. The realization helps remove some of my lingering guilt over the act.

“When they passed us on the river, I was on my way to help them escape. Aimee’s freedom and the Clark family’s safety has always been part of my core. Without them, all of them, I would have been lost to this place.”

Kat’s only response is to take a fresh scoop of flesh and swallow it down.

Wright grimaces at the ease with which she eats the meat. He looks at me. “Sounds like the three of you have been through a lot.”

“You’ll get a taste of it soon enough,” Kainda says.

“I’d say we had a pretty good taste already,” Wright says.

Kainda is about to argue. And I understand why. The endlessly violent and hate-filled life of a hunter is probably impossible to imagine without experiencing it firsthand. But we’re not here to compare scars.

“You encountered the Nephilim?” I ask. I know the answer, but not the details.

Wright gives a nod. “Several times.”

“Killed them, too,” Kat adds, scooping another wad of flesh into her mouth. She takes a chew, which even I think is gross, swallows and then notices the three stunned expressions staring back at her. “What?” she says a little defensively. She motions to her half empty segment of centipede. “This isn’t that bad.”

“You...killed a Nephilim,” Em says. It’s not a question, but it’s full of disbelief.

“More than one,” Kat says. “Once you get those metal bands off their heads, you can just pop them in the head like anyone else. She looks at Whipsnap, Kainda’s hammer and Em’s collection of knives strapped around her waist and across her chest. “You guys really need to upgrade your arsenal.”

“Could you do it again?” I ask.

“If you can get me a gun, sure.”

Kat’s confidence, similar to Kainda’s, is refreshing.

Em’s eyes brighten. “I know where to find some.”

“We don’t have time to go somewhere else,” I say. “We need to get to Olympus.”

“They’re *at* Olympus,” Em says. “The warriors keep the weaponry of those they capture in a cell on the prison level. I’ve seen it.”

Kainda nods. “They do the same in Asgard.”

“We’d be a hell of a lot more useful if we had some weapons,” Wright said.

I mull the options around in my head. The distraction wouldn’t add too much time to our journey. And we might not find Hades where Em believes him to be. We might very well have to search all of Olympus. And if that’s the case, it seems likely that we’ll encounter some kind of resistance. It would be good to have

all of us armed, especially if the husband and wife team are able to take down Nephilim warriors. Before meeting them, the only two people to kill a Nephilim, not counting the ancient stories, were Mira, who slew Enki with a grenade, and me, when I killed my master, Ull, with his own arrow.

I take a dollop of flesh and eat it. "Weapons it is."

JEREMY ROBINSON is the author of numerous novels including PULSE, INSTINCT, and THRESHOLD the first three books in his exciting Jack Sigler series, which is also the focus of an expanding series of co-authored novellas deemed the Chesspocalypse. Robinson also known as the #1 Amazon.com horror writer, Jeremy Bishop, author of THE SENTINEL and the controversial novel, TORMENT. His novels have been translated into ten languages. He lives in New Hampshire with his wife and three children.

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