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THE LAST HUNTER

ONSLAUGHT

(BOOK 5 OF THE ANTARKTOS SAGA)

JEREMY ROBINSON

BREAKNECK MEDIA

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For the real Solomon, my son and inspiration

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My wife, Hilaree, and my two girls, Aquila and Norah, your imaginations and energy keep this family imagining, passionate and pushing the boundaries of creativity.

And Solomon, my son, upon whom *The Last Hunter* is based... When I began this series, I wondered if the attributes you possessed as a three year old—kindness, gentleness, forgiveness—would remain as you aged. You're now six, and I am astounded by the person you are becoming. Solomon Ull Vincent is a fictional character, but you, my son, are very real and are even more compassionate, kind and gentle-hearted than the character I've created. I hope that when you're old enough to read this story, you will approve of how I've used your name.



PROLOGUE

“Belgrave Ninnis, come inside this instant, before Death himself decides you are too easy a target to pass by.”

Lieutenant Ninnis leaned back in his chair, “Just a moment more.” He took a slow drag from his pipe, allowing the warm smoke to thaw his lungs a touch. Momentarily relieved of the cold air’s sting, he set his charcoal to the page once more and lost himself in the image.

He didn’t notice that the gray cloud coming from his lungs with each breath wasn’t pipe smoke. He didn’t notice the brightness of the stars overhead or the thin crust of ice forming atop his water glass. The cold suited him. Always had. It was part of the reason he’d been selected to join Douglas Mawson’s Antarctic expedition—that and his father of the same name was the Inspector Surgeon General of the Royal Navy and a member of the Vice-Admiral’s Arctic expedition that explored the coasts of Greenland and Ellesmere Island. His father’s legacy was more inspiration than pressure, but Ninnis couldn’t deny a desire to

outdo his father. Antarctica was further, colder, more dangerous and far less explored.

The charcoal, reduced to a nub, crumbled between his fingers. He lifted it from the page and looked down at his hands.

“Lord,” came a sweet, but concerned voice. “You’re shaking.”

Ninnis watched his hand twitching back and forth, stricken by the cold. “So I am.”

“I don’t understand why you’re out here, tonight of all nights,” she said.

Ninnis turned back to his wife of four hours and smiled. She was wrapped in blankets. Her brown hair hung in ringlets, recently freed from a braid. Her deep brown eyes mesmerized him. “To prepare myself,” he said.

“A full year will pass before you leave my side,” she said. “Prepare yourself when winter returns.”

“I was not speaking of my future adventures at the bottom of the world, or of the frigid lands that await me there,” Ninnis said. “Rather, I was speaking of the warmth this night yet promises.”

A grin formed on her lips, followed by a shiver that ran up through her body. “Devil.”

“The devil could not love one as fair as you,” Ninnis said, and then leaned to the side, revealing his drawing. “For you, dear, sweet Caroline. My wife.”

When her hands went to her mouth, the blankets fell, revealing that the braid was not the only wedding decoration she had shed. She now wore delicate undergarments that both hid her body and accentuated it. Stunned by the sudden revelation, he was still in a stupor when she took the page from his hands and

stepped inside, off of the balcony and away from the chilled London air.

He watched her walk away with the sigh of a man who knew, without a shred of doubt, that he had somehow won a lottery in Heaven and had been given one of God's finest creations. He lifted his water glass to his lips and tipped it back. When no fluid reached his mouth, he looked down, saw the layer of ice and laughed.

Shaking his head, he stood and looked out from the Cavendish Hotel's penthouse balcony. The lamp-lit streets, homes and businesses of London surrounded him, a sea of orange lights beneath a sky of white stars. Normally, he might gaze at the view, searching for interesting details or listening to the late night revelers defeating the cold with liquor, but the woman waiting for him inside was far more interesting. He spun on his heels and entered the suite, closing the doors to the balcony behind him.

The heat greeted him first, prickling his skin. The room felt like an inferno, though he knew it was just because he was so chilled. The fire had dwindled to a small flicker, and a new log would be needed to accommodate a late night. Half way to the fire, he paused when the heat became unbearable. Scratching his itching skin, he turned to his new wife and watched. Noting his attention, Caroline met his gaze.

"How did you do it?" she asked, holding up the portrait. "It looks so much like me, but I wasn't posing."

Ninnis tapped his head. "There isn't a detail of your face I do not have committed to memory. That is my true preparation for the expedition. When I miss you, and I will, I can recreate your

face on the page. In pretending you are gazing back at me, as you are now, I will find peace..." He shivered and grinned. "And maybe a little warmth in that barren world."

His grin widened when Caroline all but swooned at his words. She placed the page on the nightstand and lay back on the thick blanket. He moved to the fireplace, adding two more logs to the fire, and prodding the embers with a wrought-iron poker until the fresh wood caught. Satisfied that the fire would burn through the night, he turned to the bed.

Caroline smiled at him. "It's nearly time."

He smiled widely. "I know."

"You have to go," she said.

Ninnis paused, his shirt half lifted. "Go? Where?"

"Back," she said.

"Did you leave something in the hall?" he asked. "At the church?"

"Belgrave," she said. "You *know*. You remember."

Tears pushed at his eyes. An invisible hand clutched his throat. He sat down on the side of the bed. "I hoped it had been a nightmare. A very long, detailed nightmare."

She sat up next to him, hand on his back, tracing the contours of his shoulder blade. "I wish it were so."

Ninnis looked at her, his tears running freely. "And you? Are you real?" He looked up at the sketch, a perfect memory of his Caroline. "Or are you just a memory?"

"Look at me," she said. "Do you think you can remember me this well?"

His eyes traveled up and down her form. Every part of her was perfectly realized. “You’re right,” he said, “I’m not Solomon.”

Ninnis gasped. Saying the boy’s name solidified that this was a fantasy and the very bleak reality, where Caroline was long since deceased and his body had been kidnapped by an evil spirit, awaited him. His head sagged toward the floor.

“Chin up, Belgrave,” Caroline said in a tone that was far more chipper than seemed appropriate.

Ninnis stood and stepped away from her, offended. “My own fantasy taunts me?”

Caroline frowned while still maintaining some form of smile on her face. The expression was new to Ninnis. She slipped from the bed and stood before him, reaching out a hand.

Before her fingers reached his chest, Ninnis stepped back. “This isn’t real. The boy is real. The masters are real. It’s all darkness. And death! And evil! And—”

Her hand reached his chest, flattening over his heart. He collapsed to his knees, wracked by sobs. She fell with him, clutching his body to hers, steadying him. “I *am* real, Belgrave. I am not a conjuring of your imagination. We are not even within the confines of your mind.”

Ninnis snapped to attention at this, wiping the tears from his eyes. “Where are we then?”

“Where you needed to be.”

Ninnis looked around his honeymoon suite. He had never felt as loved and safe as he had on the first night he spent in this room. He thought he understood, but a question nagged. “If I must leave, will I see you again?”

“I...do not know,” she replied. “All I know is that it is possible.”

“But...how?” he asked. “I am...my life is...” He shook his head. “I do not deserve any of this.”

“You’re right,” she said, “you didn’t deserve to be taken from me, or to be broken and made into a monster, or to be the architect of Solomon’s transformation.” When it was clear that Ninnis was far from convinced, she added, “Do you think the boy is the only one capable of forgiving you?”

Ninnis raised his eyebrows and looked her in the eyes.

“You have lived a long life, Belgrave Ninnis, but you still have so much to learn.”

Tears, now of hope, fled from his eyes. “Then teach me.”

She reached out and took his hand. “There is no time for that. I can only show you.”

He resisted her pull toward the balcony door. The cold now reminded him of his frigid prison. But she didn’t relent, and soon, he found himself standing before the door.

“Open it,” she said. “And look.”

He found himself reaching for the door handle. When his skin touched the metal handle, it did not sting of cold. Instead, it felt warm to the touch. He twisted the handle and pulled.

Warm air washed over him.

The night was gone, replaced by a brilliant, deep blue.

He stepped onto the balcony.

London was gone. In its place was—

“An army,” Ninnis said.

And at the army's core stood a man—barely a man now—who was at once intimately familiar and wholly alien. Ninnis pointed to him. “There I am.”

Caroline stepped up next to him, resting her hands on the railing. “Not you. Him. Ophion.”

“*Nephil*,” Ninnis said.

Caroline nodded.

He looked at her. “Tell me what to do.”

1



“Gone? How could she be gone?” It’s a stupid question with a thousand different answers.

Kainda picks the most obvious reply. “She has legs.”

She’s right, of course. Mirabelle Whitney, daughter of Merrill and Aimee Clark, has legs. She could have walked out on her own, but when I saw her here, through the eyes of Amaguq the shifter, who had impersonated Mira and who would have killed me if not for the sacrifice of Xin, she didn’t seem hale enough to get far. The shifter had beaten her, near to death, before taking her form. That she survived is a testament to her strength, but escaping this cave in her condition doesn’t seem possible. Still, it did take us three days to reach the cave. A lot could have changed in that time.

Part of me is angry at myself for not arriving sooner, but we really couldn’t have traveled any faster. Grumpy and Zok, a pair of large cresties—my personal term for the green with maroon striped Crylophosaurs that populate the continent—moved at a

sprint for a full day before nearly collapsing. Kainda and I considered continuing on foot, but the ground covered by the cresties was far further than we could go on foot, even without resting. So we stayed with our dinosaur companions, traveling faster and conserving our strength.

The cave is a quarter mile below ground—a shallow hole by hunter standards, but it's slick with moisture and moss, and it's coated in jagged stones. If she managed to climb out, she will have left a trail.

I sniff the air first. The scent of vegetation decomposing is the strongest, followed by a faint trace of human blood—Mira's—and then something else. A lingering odor that is unfamiliar to my nose. I sniff again. "What is that?"

Kainda breathes in, long and deep, through her nose. She lets the air out, looking confused. "I have no idea."

This is disconcerting. Kainda has been a hunter far longer than me and has experience with everything this continent has to offer, both natural and unnatural.

"Something from the outside world?" she asks, smelling the air again.

I shake my head. The scent is decidedly non-human. "It's not Amaguq, either." I got a big whiff of him before I removed his head. I can detect traces of the shifter, but they're not strong. "I don't think it's just one scent." I try to separate the commingling tang. It's a bouquet of stink unlike anything I've smelled before—part Nephilim, part animal—like rotten milk and musk. It's far too well mixed for me to sift through.

"There were at least eight of them," Kainda says.

Surprised that she could get this out of the scents, I turn and find her crouching over a patch of moss.

“They weren’t too careful, either.”

I squat next to her and look at the moss. It’s been trampled. But the marks are confusing and unfamiliar. “What are they?”

Kainda just looks bewildered.

Looking more closely, I spot something familiar, but out of place. “That looks like a hoof.”

She nods. “Like Pan’s feet.”

We nod in unison. Pan, the Greek god of shepherds, flocks and music had goat-like legs and hooves. In that way, he was unique from other warriors I have seen. He kept a flock of human prisoners, eating them one by one until we freed them, gave them guns and sent them to the U.S. forward operating base. But Pan didn’t leave these footprints. The first indicator is that these prints are far too small. The second is that Pan is very dead. After Wright removed the protective metal band from Pan’s forehead, Em buried one of her blades in it—the Nephilim’s only weak spot. The only other way to kill them is to drown them...or cut off their heads entirely.

Thinking of Wright and Em twists my gut for a moment. Wright was a U.S. Army Captain who joined my small strike force along with his wife, Katherine Ferrell, a freelance assassin who worked, off the record, for the same government Wright served openly. Wright gave his life for our quest to locate the Jericho shofar, staying behind to fight an army of hunters and Nephilim while the rest of us fled. Katherine, who prefers to be called Kat, managed to forgive me for leaving him and was

eventually identified as my *Focus*, by the Kerubim, Adoel, guardian of Edinnu, the mythological Garden of Eden.

Then there is Em—my *Faith*, whose full name is Emilee, or so we thought. Adoel also told us her real name—Rachel Graham, which led to the startling revelation that Kat’s true maiden name was also Graham and that the pair were long lost sisters. And since Em is kind of my adopted sister, I suppose Kat is, in a way, my sister and Wright my brother-in-law. The bond between us all is too uncanny to ignore. There is a design in it.

As there is with Mira, my *Hope*. She and I were short-lived, but very close friends—kindred spirits, I suppose. A photo of the two of us kept me sane during several of my years underground. She doesn’t know it, but I owe her my life. I will do everything I can to save her, not just because of our friendship, but because the angel, who gave names to my hope, focus, faith and passion, made it clear that I would need all four to overcome the war about to be waged. Mira, my Hope, is all that remains.

And it is with Kainda, my *Passion*, that I will find her.

Kainda’s muscles flex as she leans out over the moss. “Three claws,” she says, inspecting a second footprint. “These aren’t the same creatures.”

She is one of the strongest hunters. As the daughter of Ninnis, the most renowned hunter of all, she had the best and harshest teacher for much of her life. She also had the most pressure to excel, which in hunter culture translates to brutality. But she, like many hunters, has shed some of her Nephilim corruption and even managed to fall in love.

With me.

And I with her.

We're an unlikely couple—me a former nerd, klutz and bookworm, her a lifelong killer born out of darkness and hate—but we've both been broken and reformed. We are new together and we're better for it. I was not sure how she would feel about risking everything to find Mira, who I admit, I loved in my younger years, but she was the first to volunteer. This revealed not just her deep trust in me, but also a keen understanding of what needs to be done to not just survive the coming war, but also to win it.

"There are no human prints here," she says, then inspects another patch of moss that would be impossible to avoid while exiting. "None."

When my head starts to hurt, I realize I'm clenching my teeth, and I try to relax. This is bad news. No human footprints, or boot prints, means that Mira didn't walk out of this cave.

She was carried out.

And neither of us know who, or what, took her.

"More," she says, pointing at another, larger print.

"It looks like a horse hoof," I say.

"What is a horse?" she asks.

I shake my head in confusion. "A domesticated animal. People ride on them."

"Maybe she rode it out?"

"Maybe," I say, but neither of us believe it. All signs point to Mira being taken. She might have been on the horse's back, but I doubt she went willingly. For a moment I think she's been kidnapped by a herd of random farm animals, but then I recognize another print that's not been trampled by the others.

Four wide toes, each tipped with a long claw, and a thick pad, twice the width of my hand. “This one is a lion.”

She nods. Apparently lions are known to the underworld, probably because they’re renowned killers. Horses, not so much.

We follow the trail up through the cave. I’m kicking myself for not seeing it on the way in, but I wasn’t looking at the floor. I was too busy rushing to the last spot where I saw Mira. Seeing the trail earlier wouldn’t have really changed anything, but it might have saved a minute or two.

When we reach the cave exit and step out into the light of day, we’re greeted by our dinosaur companions. They look up from the river where they’re drinking and then they look back at us. They’re massive creatures, stretching thirty feet from snout to tail tip. Grumpy’s green skin shimmers, like new growth leaves in the sunlight. The maroon stripes over his neck, back and tail seem to absorb the light, creating a pattern of contrasting color and brightness that helps him blend into the jungle. But it’s the tall crest over his eyes that distinguishes him from other dinosaur species—well, that and the fact that most other dinosaurs are now extinct. I say most, because this continent is full of surprises, the most recent of which is whatever took Mira.

The cresties go back to their refreshment when we walk past without speaking to them. The trail is easy to follow. It’s a mash of footprints, a mix of species, following what appears to be a game trail through the jungle. Whoever has Mira is either so confident that they don’t fear being tracked, or they’re completely naïve to what is going on. I realize there is a third option a moment before Kainda speaks it aloud.

“This feels like a trap.”

She’s right. The trail is too easy to follow. But that’s also the problem. “It’s a really bad trap.”

She frowns. “Obvious.”

“Right.” I look at her. “Not that it changes anything.”

“Trap or not,” she says. “We push forward.”

I stop and take her hand. “Thank you.”

She looks back, meeting my eyes with hers. Her dark brown eyes look almost black, perfectly matching her tied-back hair. “You would do far more for me.” She scrunches her nose and then corrects herself. “You *have* done far more for me.”

I want to kiss her. The moment is perfect. Her face looks soft. And her tan body, clad in the scant coverings of a hunter, has a sheen of sweat mixed with humidity that makes her glow. *Focus*, says the voice of Kat in my head.

Focus, I tell myself. *Mira is in danger.*

I pull my eyes away from Kainda and search the jungle around us. The trees—a species unknown to me—rise hundreds of feet into the air, their branches twisting and splitting into a thousand different directions. They remind me of when I used to drop ink onto a page and blow it with a straw. But the diamond-shaped leaves are sparse, and large patches of sunlight beam to the ground, allowing thick vegetation to grow. Moving through this jungle on anything but this path would be very time consuming...unless...

I look up. “Let’s take the high road.”

Scaling the tree’s craggy bark is a simple thing. Soon we’re moving through the jungle faster, more silently and without any

fear of being set upon by an ambush. Not that we see one. It appears that whoever left the tracks is just sloppy.

Twenty minutes and a little more than a mile later, the trail splits ninety degrees in either direction, skirting the base of a cliff. We climb down to the jungle floor and inspect the tracks.

“They head in either direction,” Kainda says. “And they’re all equally fresh.”

“She could have been taken in either direction,” I say.

“We need to split up.”

I don’t like this idea, at all. Not because I don’t believe Kainda is capable of rescuing Mira on her own, or that I don’t trust she really wants to. But there are some things in the jungle that she can’t handle alone, and if I manage to find Mira, but lose Kainda, I won’t be any better off than I am now. Before I can say any of this, I spot something that keeps me from having to.

I quickly inspect the tracks on one path, and then move to the second.

“What is it?” she asks.

I ignore her, and move back to the path leading up to the T-junction. “There they are,” I say.

“What?”

“The lion tracks.” I point to the large paw print.

“I’ve been thinking about that,” she says, while I move to the path leading to the right. “Do you think this could be the lion from Edinnu? What did you call him?”

“Ookla,” I say, before pointing to the path. “No lion prints.”

I move to the path leading to the left.

“Do you think this could be Ookla?” she asks. “And other creatures from Edinnu?”

“No,” I say. I point to the path. “No lion prints.”

“How do you know?” she asks, sounding frustrated at being dismissed so quickly.

“Because,” I say, stepping closer to the rock wall and looking up. The cliff rises higher than I can see, stretching up into a bank of clouds. “I don’t remember Ookla being able to fly.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

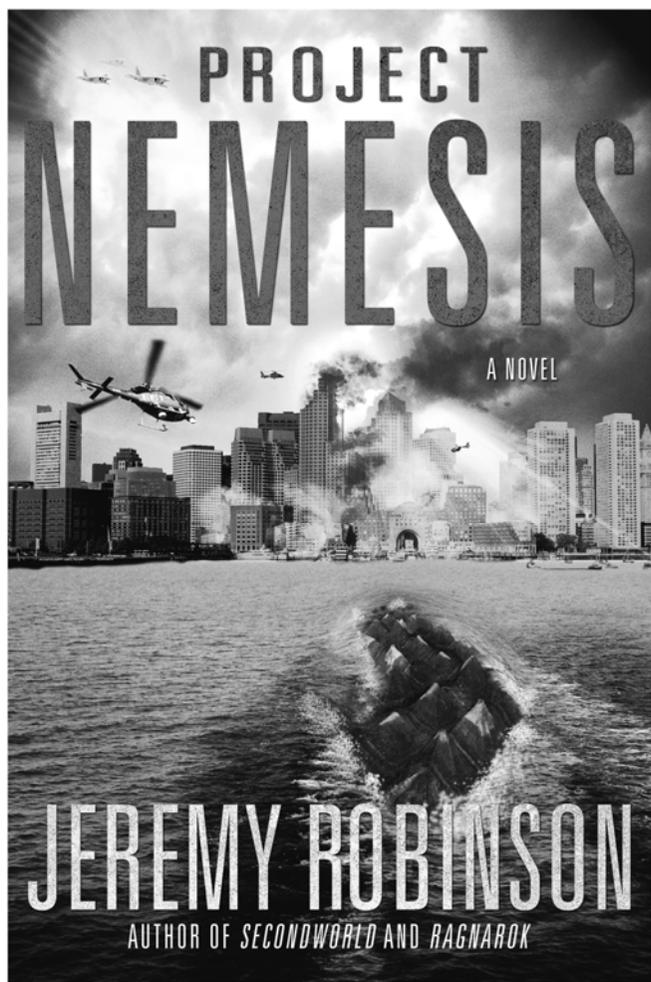


JEREMY ROBINSON is the author of thirty novels and novellas including the highly praised, *SECONDWORLD*, as well as *PULSE*, *INSTINCT*, *THRESHOLD* and *RAGNAROK* the first four books in his exciting Jack Sigler series. His novels have been translated into ten languages. He lives in New Hampshire with his wife and three children.

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