

THE LAST HUNTER

By Jeremy Robinson

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Prologue

1911

Douglas Mawson tasted blood. The chapped skin of his lower lip peeled up like flakes of shaved coconut. The cold had started the injury, and then it worsened thanks to his habit of chewing the skin from his lip. But he was careful about it, nibbling at the still dying flesh like a preening bird. It was the sneeze that split the lip, tearing it down the middle. The sting cleared his mind, but the blood made him hungry. He looked around, hoping to see something that might take his mind off food, but he saw only white ice and blue sky.

Three hundred fifteen miles separated Mawson and his two men from camp; three thousand more from civilization. No man had ever ventured further from home, and only one of them would make it back.

Mawson, commander of the expedition, stood before a white glacial expanse. His angular face, typically clean-shaven but now covered by an inch-thick beard, hid behind a dirty tan scarf. The scarf did little to protect him against the Antarctic cold, which grated his lungs. The rest of him, bundled in a thick, beige snowsuit, felt warmer when moving. Not so much when standing still.

Dr. Xavier Mertz had stopped. He was the point man, riding on skis while Mawson followed with a dog sledge team and Lieutenant Ninnis brought up the rear with a second team and the majority of their indispensable supplies. That Mertz had stopped meant he'd seen something. Most likely something dangerous, like a snow-covered crevasse. They looked solid enough until you put weight on them. Then they could fall through like a trap door.

“What’s the problem, Mertz?” Mawson shouted.

But the man didn’t reply.

Mawson removed his hood in case the man's words were being muffled. He asked again, "What is it, Mertz?"

The only sign that Mertz had not frozen solid on the spot was his head, craning slowly from side to side.

Mawson signaled for Ninnis to remain behind and stepped off his sledge. He petted the nearest dog as he passed, then headed for Mertz. His feet crunched over the snow and ice, signaling his approach. Still, the man did not move.

Five feet away, Mertz finally responded, his hand snapping up with an open palm. The sudden movement sent Mawson's heart pounding. But the message was clear: *Don't. Move.* And he didn't. Not for three minutes. Then he spoke again. "Bloody hell, Mertz, what is it?"

Mertz turned his head slightly. "Saw someone."

"Saw something?"

"Some-*one*."

Ridiculous, Mawson thought. They were the first human beings to set foot in this part of the world. So sure was he of that fact that he spoke his mind aloud. "Ridiculous."

He stepped up to Mertz's side. "The land is frozen. Not only is there no way a man could live here, there's nowhere to hide."

Mertz turned to Mawson. "He wasn't wearing clothes."

Mawson frowned. Mertz had a reputation for being a humorous fellow. "My lip is split. My knees are sore. My stomach is rumbling. I'm not in the mood for jokes, so let's go. I want to be off this glacier before dark."

"His hair was red. As red as the blood staining your beard. But his body was pale." Mertz returned his eyes to the snow. "Wouldn't have seen him if not for the hair."

Mawson's patience wore thin. "Mertz," he growled more than said.

The man turned to him and Mawson saw wide-eyed fear. "I'm *not* joking."

With his eyes shut, Mawson took a deep breath. The energy he'd exert losing his temper would drain him later on. He'd need that strength to survive. Calming his voice, he said, "Mertz, look around. What do you see?"

He glanced at Mertz, who was indeed looking. "White. From horizon to horizon. White! There is no one there. Not now. Not before. And if we stand here one more minute, we will—"

A sound like a howl rolled across the frozen plain. Mawson's voice caught in his throat. It sounded...human. But it wasn't. "The wind," he said quickly, noticing the deepening wrinkles on Mertz's sunburned forehead.

Why hadn't the man covered his skin? Mawson thought. Before he could ask, a second, louder howl echoed around them.

Before Mawson could once again dismiss the sound, Mertz spoke. "There's not a breeze to speak of."

Mawson held his breath. Mertz was right.

Mertz looked at him again. *I told you so*, his expression said. But as he turned away, his head spun back around, past Mawson, toward Ninnis. His eyes popped wide. His arm reached out. A high pitched, "No!" shot from his mouth.

Mawson turned around in time to see the last of the sledge dogs pulled toward a hole in the ice. It whimpered, digging its claws into the ice. Then it was gone. Ninnis, six dogs and the sledge had disappeared. The glacier had come to life and swallowed them whole.

The two men ran for the spot where Ninnis had been. They stopped short, sliding on their feet as the ice opened up before them. Ninnis had parked the sledge atop a crevasse. Had they but continued moving, he would have made it across.

Mawson lay on his stomach, dispersing his weight, and slid to the mouth of the gaping hole. One hundred and fifty feet below, on a ledge, lay a lone dog. It twitched between

whimpers, its spine broken. Ninnis and the other five dogs were gone, disappeared into the darkness beyond.

“Ninnis!” Mawson shouted. “Ninnis! Lieutenant! Can you hear me? Are you alive, man?”

There was no reply. He suspected there never would be. But they couldn't just leave him. For three hours the two men shouted until their voices grew hoarse. They tied all their ropes together, but the line wasn't even long enough to reach the now dead sledge dog.

Distraught over the loss of their colleague and friend, Mawson and Mertz didn't want to give up hope. But they had no choice. Ninnis had fallen with most of their food, their tents and warm weather gear. To survive the three hundred fifteen mile journey back to base camp, they couldn't spend one more minute mourning the man.

Mawson peeled a frozen tear from his cheek and returned to his sledge. They needed to move.

As they maneuvered the remaining sledge, and dogs, which would later become their food, around the crevasse, neither man heard the muffled cries coming from below. They left without pause, on a journey that would claim the lives of all six dogs and Mertz. Mawson alone would survive the journey and eventually return home to England.

But Ninnis would outlive them both.

Had either man thought to descend the rope they'd fashioned, they would have found their man tucked inside a hollow hidden by an overhang only fifty feet from the surface. After regaining consciousness, he'd tried to call out to them, to reach for the rope, but some unseen force pinned him down. An hour after Mawson and Mertz gave up the search, a hand so white it was nearly translucent, came away from his mouth.

“Welcome home, Ninnis,” a voice whispered in his ear, the breath smelling like rotten, jellied eel.

Ninnis filled his lungs and let out a scream, but the sound was cut short as he was taken by his collar and dragged deeper into the ice.

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I scream.

I'm too terrified to do anything else. My hands are on my head. I'm pitched forward. My eyes are clenched shut. Every muscle in my body has gone tight, as though clutched in rigor.

The monster knocks me back and I spill into a pile of bones and old skin. But I feel no weight on top of me. No gnashing of teeth on my body. The thing has missed its tackle, striking a glancing blow as it passed, but nothing more. Perhaps because I bent down. Perhaps because it can't see well in the dark. I don't know. I don't care.

I'm alive. For now.

And I don't want to die.

But I'm certain I'm going to and the events of the past few months replay in my mind. I can't stop it. I can't control it. And in a flash, I'm back at the beginning.

I've been told that the entire continent of Antarctica groaned at the moment of my birth. The howl tore across glaciers, over mountains and deep into the ice. Everyone says so. Except for my father; all he heard was Mother's sobs. Not of pain, but of joy, so he says. Other than that, the only verifiable fact about the day I was born is that an iceberg the size of Los Angeles broke free from the ice shelf a few miles off the coast. Again, some would have me believe the fracture took place as I entered the world. But all that really matters, according to my parents, is that I, Solomon Ull Vincent, the first child born on Antarctica—the first and only Antarctic—was born on September 2nd, 1974, thirteen years ago, today.

Of course, I don't buy my parents' seeming lack of memory when it comes to my birth. When I broach the topic they start ducking and weaving like spastic boxers. What I'm sure of is that something strange occurred when I was born; something that frightened them enough to bury all record of it. And they've done a good job. I've searched in and behind every drawer in this house. I've scoured the attic and the basement. I've even flipped through every one of the thousands of books they have on shelves around the house in search of a hollowed-out core. I've found nothing. But occasionally, at a Christmas party or get together, someone who heard the story slips up and reveals a tidbit before covering their mouth and offering an, "Oops."

They think they're protecting me, but all they're really doing is making me feel like a freak. More of a freak, I should say. Everyone else I come into contact with thinks I'm weird, too. My parents just feign ignorance.

In celebration of my uncommon birth, my family is celebrating in the most common way imaginable: a quiet dinner at home. In attendance are my parents, Mark and Beth, and my only real friend, Justin McCarthy. We eat in silence, first enjoying the hot orange grease of Maria's Pizza, and then the fudgy, chunky center of a Dairy Queen ice-cream cake, all polished off by tall glasses of Cherry Coke.

Nothing like massive amounts of fat and sugar to make you feel older.

Though the party, if you can call it that, is a subdued affair, I look at the gifts with great anticipation, the way a lion does a zebra before pouncing—hunter's eyes. I don't want toys. Didn't ask for any. Not interested, despite grandfather's continuous donations of G.I. Joes. My parents always know what to get me. Because despite their constant lies about my past, they're like me.

Smart. Uncommonly so.

Nerds. Geeks. Bookworms. I'd heard all the names at school. Being smarter than everyone in my class exacerbated the issue. No senior in high school likes to be upstaged or outsmarted by a thirteen-year-old with a cracking voice. Though I sometimes wonder if their real problem with me was my resistance to 1980's pop-culture; I don't feather my hair, wear friendship bracelets, or watch Music Television. It doesn't matter now. All that went away when my parents decided to home-school me. My nervousness, tension and boredom has been replaced by excitement, learning and stimulation. Not to mention a name-calling cease fire.

Well, almost. My parents call me Schwartz. The name evolved from my mother's first nickname for me: first and only, which was short for the "first and only baby born on Antarctica." They quickly shortened it to FAO and then, thanks to the FAO Schwartz department store, I became Schwartz. After the movie *Spaceballs* came out a few months ago, my parents stopped using the name in front of Justin because, almost as a Pavlovian response, Justin would say, "I see your Schwartz is as big as mine."

The first gifts I open are books—fiction and non-fiction, popular and obscure—I like them all. Next come three boxes of Robotix kits. I'll put the dinosaur-looking robot on the cover to shame with the creature I'll create. The biggest box comes last. I tear into the bright blue wrapping paper as Justin slurps grease from a leftover pizza slice.

The loud slurp stops short and grease drips on to Justin's plate. "Whoa," he says.

To Justin, this is a "whoa" moment. He likes to blow things up. To me it's a big letdown. My parents see my down-turned lips even as I fight to reverse them.

"You have to build it yourself," mom says.

"The box says it mimics the pattern of a real lava flow," dad adds.

I let out a grunt, wondering if my parents IQs have dropped. Or maybe they've finally given up caring? The gift is nothing more than a cardboard cone, some quick drying clay, a

pouch of red-colored baking soda and a small bottle of vinegar. This is the *big present*? They had gone on about how surprised I would be. About how incredible the gift was. This is...simple.

Boring.

Justin punches my shoulder. It hurts. I know he didn't mean it to, but I seem to feel pain more than other people. Justin's dark brown eyes are impossible to see behind the tinted sports glasses he always wears, but I know they're wide with excitement. I focus on that to avoid thinking about the pain in my arm.

"Are there any G.I. Joes we haven't melted?" he asks.

"A few."

"Let's go!" Justin dashes from the dining room and takes the stairs two at a time.

"C'mon!" he shouts from the top.

"Go ahead," mom says. "He has to go home in an hour. Mass starts at six in the morning."

Saturday morning mass is something I never understood. It's a sacred time. Not mass, mind you. Saturday mornings. A bowl of Cocoa Pebbles starts the morning. *Starvengers*, *Gaiking*, *Robotech* and more, followed by Creature Double Feature, which promises at least one *Godzilla* movie, fills my day until noon. It is a TV line-up so good that I am sure God skips mass for it too.

"May I be excused?" I ask with a sigh.

Dad chuckles. It's the kind of chuckle that's a substitute for calling someone stupid. I've heard the laugh enough to recognize the sound. "You don't need to ask after we told you to go."

I brush some of my long blond hair, which has garnered more than a few Einstein taunts, out of my face. Mom and Dad wear unreadable smiles. Like they know something I don't. I hate that feeling—I've felt it every day of my life—so I slide off the chair, pick up the large,

but light, volcano box and march it upstairs. When I hear mother giggle—just like the kids at school used to—a tear forms in my eye.

I'm such a wimp. No, wimp isn't the word. That's like calling someone a chicken. Means they're afraid to fight—which also describes me—but that isn't what I mean. *Crybaby*. That's the word. One laugh from my mother and I'm all weepy. Of course, the laugh combined with the silly present confirms that they don't take me seriously. And if they don't take me seriously, they'll never notice I'm not a kid anymore—if you ignore the fact that I'm about to bury a bunch of action figures in a miniature volcano—and that means they'll never reveal the mysteries surrounding my birth. I'm not sure why the day I was born interests me so much. You don't hear other kids asking about when they were born. But there is something in me, something raw, which longs to know more.

As I near the top of the stairs I wipe my eyes dry and focus on the soft rug lining the stairs. It feels squishy beneath my socks. I find it comforting. Through the banister rungs I see Justin hunkering over a fishing lure case filled with odd toys. I scuff my feet, sliding sock against rug. I walk like that all the way to the bedroom doorway.

“Put out your hand,” I say.

Justin does.

I reach out a single finger and touch it to Justin's palm. A tiny blue arch of electricity zaps between us with a sharp crack. Justin yelps and flinches away, knocking over the box of toys. “Hey!” he shouts and then moves to retaliate with a finger flick.

I put the volcano box between us and raise an eyebrow.

Justin pauses. “Ugh, fine. Oh! I almost forgot.” He fishes into his pants pocket and pulls out a clear blue cassette tape. Then he closes the door. “My cousin made this for me. Said my mom wouldn't let me listen to it.”

He puts the cassette into the shoebox sized tape-deck and hits play. Loud music, unlike anything I've heard before, fills the room.

I place the volcano box on the floor and let Justin tear into it. I sit down on the bed hearing the music, but not really listening. My eyes turn to the wall, where a five foot by five foot poster of Antarctica is tacked up. I've marked all the active United States bases—McMurdo, Amundsen-Scott, Palmer, Siple, Willard—as well as some of the larger foreign stations. A bright green circle marks one of the few bases that no longer functions: Clark. Snow and ice buried the site within a year of my birth. How does something like that happen? Even on Antarctica. Just another one of the mysteries no one seems to know anything about.

Though I haven't been there since shortly after my birth, I miss the place. I've become an expert on the continent and hope to return when I'm old enough. There are so many interesting aspects of Antarctica I long to explore. The founder of Clark Station, Dr. Merrill Clark, is my personal hero. His search for evidence of a human Antarctic civilization—my geographic ancestors—captivates me. And I want to follow in his footsteps.

But it will be a long time before that can happen. I doubt my parents will let me go until I'm eighteen and they can't stop me. Of course, I do understand some of the reasons I'm not yet able to go. I might be smarter than most adults, but I'm also smart enough to know I have the emotional fortitude of an eight year old. Happens with smart kids, I've read. Understanding how awful the world can be is hard for someone without emotional defenses. I should be more concerned with the outcome of the daily ant battles waged on our sidewalk than the starving children in Ethiopia. I stopped watching the news a year ago. The images tended to fuel my imagination, which was not a good thing.

I'm painfully shy, especially around girls. I'm quick to cry, especially if someone is angry with me. And, though no one knows it, I'm afraid of the dark. Not just afraid, I'm *terrified* of

the dark. It's not a fear of what might lurk in the shadows, closets or under the bed. I'm afraid of my own thoughts. When my imagination is freed from the coils of intentional thought, it drifts to places far darker than deepest black. The horrors of school, of starving kids on TV, and of my parents' mortality are passing thoughts by comparison.

I sometimes wonder if the dark thoughts are a true reflection of what lies within. Of my soul.

The words of the music finally sink in. "What's a brick house?" I ask.

Justin shrugs as he places a volcano-shaped cardboard cone onto a sheet of plastic.

"Thirty six, twenty four, thirty six. Are those measurements? Is this a song about construction? Why wouldn't your mother—"

"They're measurements all right," my friend says with a fiendish grin, then holds his hands in front of his chest like he's gripping two baseballs. "For boobs."

My immediate embarrassment is multiplied tenfold when I hear mother clear her throat. I spin toward the door, mortified.

"Forty-five minutes," she says with a grimace. She closes the door behind her as she leaves.

"Thanks a lot," putting as much anger into my whisper as I can manage.

Justin, who is unfazed by these events, tugs open the pre-moistened bag of quick drying clay. "Just for the record, your mom is a brick house."

I rub my socks on the rug.

"Ok, ok!" Justin says. "Just help me put this together. We have forty-five minutes to blow it up."

I sit down next to him and look at the materials. There's enough here to make three mediocre eruptions. All for—I look at the box—thirty bucks. There has to be a way to make sure my parents get their money's worth out of this thing. I smile as the idea comes to me.

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We finish forty minutes later. The quick dry clay is solid and authentic looking if you ignore the embedded action figures. *Nice knowing you, Snake Eyes.* But there are a few invisible modifications. First we expanded the internal cylinder that holds the red-dyed baking soda. Instead of three small eruptions, we will now have one large one. And to make things really exciting, we sealed the top of the volcano. This eruption will be as genuine as I can make it.

We both hold syringes pilfered from a chemistry set. Each contains six ounces of vinegar. “On the count of three,” I say. “One.”

“Is this going to explode?” Justin asks.

“Two.”

“Should we wear safety goggles?” He grins before touching his sports glasses. “Oh wait.”

“Three!”

We plunge the needles into the volcano and inject the vinegar.

The bedroom door opens. “Ok, boys. Time to—”

“Mom, get back!” I shout. But a loud hiss behind me signifies it’s too late. I turn around in time to see the entire volcano, which neither I nor Justin had thought to attach to something solid, erupt—from beneath. The entire cone launches off the floor, spraying red-dyed lava as it spins in the air like one of DaVinci’s airships. The cone tilts, shoots forward, slams into the poster of Antarctica, and explodes. Red gore splashes against the poster and the wall. It reminds me of the *Greatest American Hero* episode where the voodoo loving villain splatters chicken blood on the walls.

I turn to my mother. Her white blouse is covered in red streaks. There is no humor in her eyes as she looks at Justin and says, “Your mother is on her way,” and then leaves.

“What happened to you?” I hear my father ask. He pokes his head in a moment later, eyes wide behind his glasses. “Oh...geez.”

“Sorry,” I say, eyes on the floor.

When he doesn't reply, I look up.

He's trying to mask a smile, but failing miserably. “You're lucky it's your birthday, Sol.”

“How angry do you think she is?”

“Chernobyl, at least.”

Chernobyl is bad, but nowhere near as bad as super nova. If dad is right, she'll be over it by morning. I smile back at my father. “It flew.”

My father snickers, looking at the red stained wall. He rubs a hand through his curly black hair. “I can see that.”

The doorbell rings. “That'd be your mom,” Dad says to Justin before leading him from the room. He stops at the top of the stairs and turns back to me. “Clean yourself up and brush your teeth.”

“What about the room?” I ask.

“No amount of scrubbing is going to get that dye out of things. We'll worry about it in the morning.” He takes one step down and pauses. “Sorry about the poster, Schwartz.”

I hear Justin say a quick, “I see your Schwartz is as big as mine,” from the foyer before opening the front door for his mother.

I look up at the poster. The circle around my birthplace is smudged, the ink running. “Yeah...”

As my mother changes and my father explains the red dye on Justin's clothes to his mother, I enter the bathroom. Head lowered, I wash my hands and face. With water dripping from both, I reach out and take hold of a hand towel and dry myself. With the

towel still over my face, I sigh. I think about my gifts. My birthday. My age. My life in general.

I sigh again. *At least tomorrow is Saturday.*

I pull the towel from my face and look in the mirror. My skin is white, like snow. My eyes are bright blue. My hair is so blond it only contains a hint of yellow. But I've seen all this before and it doesn't hold my attention. That's when I see it. Something taped to the shower door behind me. An envelope. On it, the words, "Happy Birthday", have been written backwards so I can read them in the mirror.

The envelope is in my hand a moment later. I tear into it. My eyes catch sight of what's inside. I stumble back, sitting on the toilet. As I take out the contents of the envelope, my eyes blur over. I can't read the words, but I know what I hold. Plane tickets. An itinerary. A map that looks just like the ruined poster on my wall.

"Happy birthday," the voice of my mother says. I blink my eyes. She's crouching in front of me, dressed in jeans and a gray Phil Collins T-shirt. She's smiling.

I wrap my arms around her in a burst of emotion and say, "Thank you."

My father is standing in the bathroom door. I launch at him, hugging him around the neck, feet dangling above the floor.

When he puts me down, I sniff and wipe my eyes, feeling no embarrassment over the tears. "When are we going?"

"Summer in Antarctica begins in about seven weeks."

The tears well again, as a single thought repeats in my head.

I'm going home.