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KRONOS RISING
KRAKEN (vol. 1)
by
Max Hawthorne

Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoy the following excerpt from **Kronos Rising: Kraken (vol. 1)**, book two in the *Kronos Rising* sci-fi action-adventure series.

Feel free to share it with your family and friends.

Best,

Max Hawthorne

The *Gryphon* was on the hunt.

As he lounged in his oversized captain's chair, crew at his booted feet, and waiting for information to lead them to their next kill, Garm Braddock felt more like a barbarian king on his throne than the commander of an ORION-class Anti-Biologic Submarine. At six-foot-four and a muscular 245 lbs., the twenty-nine-year-old ex-athlete figured he could probably pass for a Viking berserker, even without his dusty rep.

Garm rested his chin on the knuckles of one hand, surveying oncoming seas, the occasional clumps of seaweed and driftwood swatted away by their powerful bow wave. As he spotted an approaching school of *Petrodus enchodus* split apart and scatter, Garm pondered the changes their oceans had undergone over the past few decades. Known to anglers as the "sabretooth salmon," the swift, five-foot predators, with their tiger stripes and sharp fangs, were one of several Cretaceous survivors that had escaped into the sea with the fracturing of Diablo Caldera, some thirty years prior. Like many other "extinct" species the volcanic island preserved in the confines of its stony prison, the salmonids adapted well to Earth's predator-depleted oceans. In fact, their numbers had exploded.

At least they grill up tasty, he mused.

Garm inhaled slowly, holding the air deep in his chest and feeling the pressure build before letting it out. He was weary. Not just from finishing their two-week patrol, which technically ended two days ago, but the Saurian War in general. The government still labeled it a "suppression exercise", but like most prolonged conflicts marked by high body counts on both sides, it was a war. A bloody one, which had been going on for nearly seven years now.

Garm had been waging it non-stop for the last five.

The call to arms began in a most unexpected fashion. He was only eighteen when the first "scout" – as he referred to it – was captured. It was a young male *Kronosaurus imperator*, maybe twenty-eight feet in length, which had gotten entangled in a long-liner's cables. The predator had been cherry-picking tuna off their hooks when it got snagged. By the time the astonished boat crew realized what was dragging their floats under, the frantically struggling marine reptile had wrapped itself up like a mummy. It was completely exhausted and helpless.

The story of the creature's capture hit the airwaves like a lightning bolt. A living pliosaur of any size, twenty years after the shocking Paradise Cove Incident and resultant death toll, was front page news. A bidding war among the wealthiest aquariums in the world promptly broke out, with *Oceanus* ending up the winner and purchasing the traumatized animal at an unheard-of price. It was quite the coup and enabled the struggling theme park to fill its long-abandoned Orca tank with something far more entertaining and lucrative.

With the media frenzy continuing unabated, Oceanus's PR reps milked their pricey captive for all it was worth. Garm remembered watching the parade on TV, gawking like the rest of the world at the size of the military motorcade. No expense had been spared. They had a battalion of rifle-toting marines on foot, armored personnel carriers running point and bringing up the rear, and even anti-tank choppers hovering overhead. All were there to escort the double-wide, extended and reinforced tractor trailer as it crawled past the hushed throngs lining Main Street. The truck's forty-foot Lexan water tank was plastered with promotional banners, leaving only a few, strategically placed gaps, so onlookers could catch a tantalizing glimpse of the prisoner. All the while, loudspeakers blared a prerecorded circus barker routine, going on and on about how dangerous the *Kronosaurus imperator* was and the unimaginable risk to humanity if it should escape.

They made it seem as if the bewildered reptile was going to somehow break out of its indestructible prison, magically sprout legs and wings, and swoop down to devour them all.

Of course, animal rights groups like *Sea Crusade* were right in the thick of things. Lawsuits were filed and the creature's rights under the ESA came under fire. Eventually, and despite heartbreaking testimony from the families of the last pliosaur's victims, its status as an endangered species was upheld. It was decreed illegal to kill, capture, or harass the animals in the wild, under penalty of international law. The current specimen, however, due to its value as a "scientific oddity," and the fact that Oceanus researchers presented expert testimony that it was too distressed to be released back into the wild, was permitted to remain in captivity.

Oceanus's executives wasted no time in making the most of their opportunity. The initial plan had been to put the young *Kronosaurus* on display. But once it recovered from its ordeal, the park's trainers discovered something unexpected. The creature was more than just a crocodile with flippers; it possessed a rudimentary intelligence. After a few days, it recognized its handlers as the source of its food and stopped trying to attack them.

It was also surprisingly agile. It could jump through suspended hoops, swat a ball with its flippers, and even balance one on the tip of its snout if the mood struck it. They found that, with enough patience and given ample rewards, it could be taught to do tricks, just like the killer whales that occupied those same cramped quarters, a decade earlier.

For the park's Board of Directors, the decision was a no-brainer. Why put a sea monster on display for people to gawk at as part of the price of admission, when you could charge them one fee to enter the park, and another to see it perform?

Garm and his family were invited to Oceanus as VIP guests for the grand unveiling. "Chomper", as the juvenile male had been named by the nation's

schoolchildren through a masterfully orchestrated publicity campaign, had been well trained. He performed flawlessly during rehearsals, receiving a fresh yellowfin tuna for every trick he completed. With tuna stocks at an all-time low, however, it wouldn't do for the aquarium to showcase their prize predator wolfing down another endangered species. Frozen Crevalle Jacks were substituted during the actual performance.

It was a bad move. Chomper promptly rejected the offerings, spitting them out, and even flung one toward the stands. All the while, the Orca-sized reptile emitted loud snorts to communicate his annoyance. The trainers had no choice, however; the show was like being aboard a jumbo jet during mid-takeoff – there was no way out. A few minutes later, in front of ten thousand in attendance and another half a billion watching on PPV, things went awry.

Chomper refused to perform his big finale – accelerating into a high speed underwater roll before leaping straight up to pluck a fish from a trainer's hand. During practice sessions, they'd perfected the stunt. The saurian's seven-ton body landed with a prodigious splash that, if properly positioned, would shower the first twenty rows of gleeful guests with a deluge of pliosaur-scented brine.

As the head trainer blew her shrill whistle, instructing him to begin, Chomper remained submerged. To encourage him, the whistling was amplified through the amphitheater's loudspeakers. He still refused to surface, laying on the bottom and shaking his head like a petulant child. His angry sonar clicks echoed throughout the stadium. Then, when the annoyed trainer began smacking the surface of the water with her hand, he actually stuck his man-sized jaws up out of the water and hissed at her. The trainer, although understandably nervous, played off his behavior as if it was part of the show. The crowd ate it up.

Finally, after a relentless barrage of noisy whistles and palm slaps, Chomper relented. He went deep, spiraling down to the bottom of his tank, and then turned back. Up he swam, his four flippers pumping like pistons to build up speed, until he exploded out of the water. His target was suspended from the top of a crane: a ten-pound fish dangling from a male trainer's hand, thirty feet up.

The crowd watched, spellbound, as Chomper's glistening form rose in seeming slow motion. His toothy jaws opened as they approached the frozen Jack. At the last moment, his head snapped sideways so fast it was a blur, missing the fish entirely, and clamping down on the stunned trainer's chest instead.

There was a split-second of hang-time – just enough for the astonishment to sink in – before the pliosaur yanked his scaly head back in the opposite direction. The trainer's heavy belt and chain, designed to keep him from being “accidentally bitten” and pulled from the crane's basket, held fast. But they didn't save him. Between the pliosaur's tooth-lined jaws and the irresistible pull, he managed one

blood-curdling shriek before he was torn in two. The audience gasped in collective horror as Chomper dropped back down, his gory prize gripped tightly in his mouth.

The front rows of the amphitheater got the deluge the promoters were hoping for. But it was one mixed with blood, brains, and bits of intestines, as Chomper shook his head from side to side, voraciously devouring the trainer's still-twitching upper half.

Garm could still taste the bile in his mouth.

The attack seemed to be a rallying cry for pliosaurs the world over. No sooner had the media storm over what Oceanus deemed a "tragic accident" begun to die down, when the sightings started. Pliosaurs of every size imaginable, from five-foot hatchlings to seventy-five-foot adults, were being spotted in almost every ocean of the world. At first, the reports were dismissed as hoaxes or mass hysteria. But when video clips started popping up all over the web, reality set in. History's deadliest predator was far from extinct.

Kronosaurus appearances increased, with the creatures becoming steadily bolder as their numbers grew. With Earth's oceans virtually emptied of sharks and whales, there were few natural predators to keep them in check. Some experts estimated their population eventually reached over one million. Native, blubber-rich or slow-moving species, like basking sharks, porpoises, mantas, and manatees were among the first to suffer. Unable to match the speed of the ravenous marine reptiles and defenseless against their powerful jaws, they were butchered like cattle. Countless other species were similarly decimated, and as the number of adult pliosaurs increased, even the mighty blue whale came under siege.

With an international panic on their hands, the governments of the world hotly debated the issue. Some recommended implementing a culling program, whereas others wanted to maintain the species' "endangered" status and leave them be. They believed nature would balance itself out. That position changed when the attacks on people started.

As whales were killed off or fled to cooler waters, the number of confirmed human fatalities increased exponentially. Wading into the surf at your favorite beach became tantamount to committing suicide. And being on a surfboard or Jet Ski was no safer. Charter fishermen and their clients were being snatched out of their boats or rammed and devoured as they floundered in the water. And it wasn't just pliosaurs. Other supposedly extinct animals had also escaped the caldera and begun to proliferate, including primeval fish and squid that also viewed people as prey. Native fish stocks crashed worldwide as the expanding presence of Diablo Caldera's former inmates began to alter the ecology of the oceans.

The financial implications were grim. The beleaguered boating and fishing industries went under and the market sank with them. Oil prices and inflation ran

rampant. Many insurance companies were forced into bankruptcy and premiums from those that stayed afloat skyrocketed. Travel by water became almost nonexistent and, when unavoidable, it was considered insane to board any unarmed vessel that wasn't made of steel and destroyer-sized or better. The death toll continued to rise, with disappearances so common they hardly made the news anymore. It was estimated that, over the previous ten-year period, somewhere between one hundred and two hundred thousand people had been killed worldwide, with tens of millions more dying from the resultant food shortages and famine as fish stocks dried up.

The media was calling it "Judgment Day".

Finally, an emergency session of the UN was held. It was decided that humanity's needs outweighed those of nature's most efficient killer. The human race would fight to retain its place at the top of the food chain. *Kronosaurus imperator's* protected status under the Endangered Species Act was repealed and an open season was called for on the giant reptiles, with rewards handed out and no size or bag limits. Despite the assorted "police actions" being fought against terrorist regimes and religious fanatics, who used their ideologies as a license to murder and rape, the nations of the world would unify and focus their collective military might on the menace that had all but taken over three quarters of the planet.

For the first time since they survived the asteroid strike that wiped out the dinosaurs, pliosaurs found themselves targeted for extermination. Slogans like "It's them or us!" and "Send 'em back to the Cretaceous!" made the front page of papers worldwide.

The military mobilization was impressive. Old or new, every vessel that possessed suitable capabilities was called into play, from the Navy's old hunter-killer submarines to aircraft carriers and destroyers – even Coast Guard cutters got in on the game. Several military planes were adapted for use and new, specially designed anti-materiel helicopters, like the stealthy GDT Bearcat, took the field.

It was a slaughter. Targeted from thousands of feet up, spouting pliosaurs were helpless against the barrage of cruise missiles and high-speed rounds that tore them apart. The mightiest killer in the sea had no defense against depleted uranium rounds fired from a mile away. The carnage grew and the revenge-hungry public, as always, swayed by the media, reveled in every measure. As the news carried more and more, Hollywood jumped on the bandwagon. Fighter pilots from one carrier, famous for their highly publicized efforts at hunting down and eradicating suspected man-eaters, ended up with their own reality TV show: *Pliosaur Wars*.

Perhaps the most ironic testimony to mankind's fear-driven desire to drive the huge marine reptiles to the brink of extinction and beyond came in the form of a popular kids' breakfast cereal. "*Kronosaurus Krunchies*" consisted of crispy

“people” clusters with soft red centers. On top of that, the cereal made tiny squeaks as it was chewed. Hence the company’s popular tag line, “*Kronosaurus Krunchies* – they scream when you crunch ‘em!”

Admittedly, Garm mused, he’d eaten a few bowls of the stuff. It wasn’t half bad and came in handy when circumstances dictated a serious sugar rush was in order. Plus, the galley stocked it . . .

Month after month, the war for earth’s oceans raged. Within a year, it was estimated that over 500,000 of the dangerous reptiles had been eradicated. Coastal attacks had been reduced, but were far from eliminated. The siege continued. Then, problems began to crop up.

As *Kronosaurus* numbers dropped, targets of opportunity became less frequent. In addition, the surviving animals appeared to be learning by observing, or perhaps sensing, the deaths of others of their kind. Some compared it to great white sharks fleeing an area after Orcas killed one of their kind. A few researchers promoted the theory that pliosaurs had the ability to genetically pass on knowledge to their offspring. Whatever the case, the creatures grew more cautious, breaching and spouting less often and remaining at the surface for shorter periods of time. To reduce spiraling costs, the President authorized their newest combat drones to finish the job, while special teams of beachcombers were discretely assigned the distasteful task of finding and destroying *Kronosaurus imperator* nests before the young could hatch.

The autonomous drones found their task more difficult than anticipated. The pliosaurs’ protective counter-shading made them difficult to spot from the air. When viewed by satellite they blended with the sea, reducing the ability to target them over a vast expanse of ocean. Their body temperature was also problematic. Although they possessed a core temperature higher than that of the surrounding water, their peripheries were a match, making them all but invisible to infrared and thermal targeting systems.

Wiping out the nests was more successful. Tens of thousands of the two-foot, spherical eggs were dug up and crushed or burned, and catching the occasional mother *Kronosaurus* hauling herself out of the surf under the cover of darkness was a nice bonus. But soon, even locating nests grew difficult. The pliosaur cows, as if sensing the threat to their young, did something unheard of among marine reptiles: they changed their nesting sites. Remote and often uninhabited islands were randomly chosen – some so tiny and obscure they didn’t even appear on maps. The predators appeared determined to endure.

With aerial surveillance continuing to drive costs higher, and with drone kills only marginally effective, the military decided to increase the role of their submarines. The Navy was given the green light. Their hunter-killers would track

the monsters down and bury them in their own backyards. Armed with the latest hardware, the subs were successful, at least according to news bulletins. Their state-of-the-art rocket-propelled torpedoes were lethal. Traveling at speeds no marine life – or ship for that matter – could match, once they locked onto a target’s sonar, they stayed on it until detonation.

Unfortunately, cumbersome nuclear attack submarines, designed to hunt and destroy other subs in deep water, were ill-suited for chasing smaller, more agile adversaries around the coastline. The costs associated with each confirmed kill were astronomical and every battle was a game of Russian roulette. Sub commanders soon discovered pliosaurs could turn and attack in the blink of an eye, oftentimes while pursued by the very same sub’s torpedoes. Losing a multi-billion-dollar war machine for every *Kronosaurus* put down was a financial equation no Navy accountant could balance.

Inevitably, the Coastal Defense Force, or CDF, with its own breed of anti-biologic submarines, was born. Forged in the fires of humanity’s fury and quenched in the blood of untold thousands, the ORION class and its predecessors were the country’s ultimate solution to the pliosaur menace. With minimal crews, they tirelessly patrolled the waterways, from the surf all the way to the fringes of the US’s Exclusive Economic Zone. Any animal that violated those waters was chased off or eradicated, with confirmed rogues mercilessly hunted down and destroyed.

The moment he’d laid eyes on the *Gryphon* in dry dock, Garm Braddock knew destiny’s plan for the remainder of his life. What happened to the rest of the world was beyond his control; they could go to hell in a hammock as far as he was concerned. His course was set. There would be no white picket fence in his future. No wife or children. He would be *Gryphon*’s captain, and she his iron mistress. On the bridge of his own command, he would track down the deadliest predators in all of Creation and confront them on their own terms.

He was going to kill every lizard he could find. And when the end finally came, he would leave the world the same way he came into it.

Bathed in blood.