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KRONOS RISING
KRAKEN (vol. 2)
by
Max Hawthorne

Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoy the following excerpt from **Kronos Rising: Kraken (vol. 2)**, the third novel in the *Kronos Rising* sci-fi action-adventure series.

Feel free to share it with your family and friends.

Best,

Max Hawthorne

The desolate remains of Diablo Caldera's long-dead village – a depressing collection of crushed huts, buried beneath towering mounds of petrified ash – had an almost otherworldly feel emanating from it. There was no avoiding the ghostly vibe the place gave off; it leached into the bones of any who saw it, and Natalya could feel it even through the surveillance drone's insulating lens system. Every so often she had to stop and look away, to distance herself.

She'd been recording the dwellings of the dead for the last twenty minutes. Fortunately, apart from one partially buried skull, she'd come across no significant human remains. At least, on the surface. The military drone's ground penetrating radar scans, however, were another story. Those results, and they were substantial, would require intensive analysis from the lab rats back in Tartarus. For her team, identifying whatever sub-species of humanity once called the caldera home was impossible. They lacked the equipment, the personnel, and, most importantly, the time.

Still, the evidence of their existence and the lives they'd lived was there, and in abundance. The shattered remnants of a miscellany of thick-hulled ceramic vessels could be seen, here and there, peeking up like dilapidated grave markers, amongst rotting piles of fallen palm fronds. And the burnt-out hull of what had to be an ancient dugout canoe was plainly visible, not ten paces from the rows of rotting pilings that extended out from the beach.

Natalya imagined the pilings had once supported a pier of sorts, used by the peaceful villagers to catch fish, no doubt. It would certainly have been safer than taking a tiny boat like that onto a lake that was populated by monsters. More likely, the dugout was carried outside, to reap the bounties of the surrounding sea.

They would never know.

"Hey, captain, how you doing?" Bender prodded from fifteen yards away. He was still wearing his tinted goggles, even though he'd been lurking in the shade of the *Remora* since Archer and Sato left. His eyes were supposed to be on the screen of his drone's remote module, overseeing its efforts to map Diablo's saltwater lake, but the tilt of his head betrayed where they really were.

"Ees fine," Natalya intoned. "People are all dead, burned to death thirty years ago. Definitely a great vacation spot."

"A shame," Bender offered, licking his lips as he scoped out her curves. "Can you imagine an entire race, living in this place and surviving for tens of thousands of years, and then one day, BOOM! The place does a Pompeii on you? Nobody would see that coming."

Annoyed by his continued scrutiny, Natalya said nothing. She just nodded and arced the surveillance drone around for one final pass, before programming it to return.

Bender cleared his throat. “Trivia fact for you: dolphins sleep with one eye open. Did you know that?”

She whipped her head around unexpectedly, catching him in mid-ogle. “Ensign, I know all the sweat ees making eet look like I’m contestant in, how you say, ‘wet t-shirt contest?’” She indicated her cantaloupe-sized breasts, starkly outlined by her clinging tank-top. “But, eef you don’t stop staring at my boobs, *you* are going to be one who sleeps weeth one eye open.” She raised her own goggles and gave him her most lethal stare. “Last warning. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Bender said, flushing a deep scarlet. His involuntary headshake spoke volumes, and he touched a control on the drone remote before setting it down at his feet. “I’m, uh, I’m gonna go take a leak. It’s on autopilot for now.”

Natalya drew a breath and held it, the same way she held her temper. Now was hardly the time or place to deal with the horny Irishman, but enough was enough. He needed to be taught a lesson. It was hardly her style, but if Garm was still alive, she’d be sorely tempted to ask him to—

She stopped and sighed. *Poor Wolfie . . .*

A minute later, with the blazing sun beginning to get to her, she programmed her own drone to return to base and stepped down from the low dune she’d chosen as her vantage point. As she paused to take and relish a much-needed drink, she heard a splash and spun, just in time to see a geyser-like explosion erupt from the lake, fifty yards out. A moment later, the heady smell of fish oil wafted in on the breeze.

Looks like something just had lunch.

It wasn’t a *Kronosaurus imperator*, of course. Maybe a *Xiphactinus* or one of their mystery sharks. She hadn’t seen a pliosaur since they got there, and Bender hadn’t been able to locate one, either, even using their drones’ long-range thermals to penetrate the water. She began to wonder if the adult female that escaped into the Atlantic during the previous eruption – the one that started it all – had been the last of her kind.

She shook her head. It was a marvel, that a single animal could reproduce so efficiently that its descendants had all but taken over the world’s oceans. Then again, the prevailing theory was that all extant cheetahs were descended from a single pregnant female that crossed over from North America before the last Ice Age. Anything was possible.

Distracted by her ponderings, Natalya ended up getting her bootheel caught up as she stepped back. She uttered a grunt of surprise as her feet went out from under her. A split-second later, she landed with a painful thud, right on her broad backside. She uttered a vile curse in Russian and regained her feet, praying that

Bender hadn't seen.

Relieved that he hadn't, she glanced down to see what she'd tripped over.

It was a dirty white cord of some kind, protruding from the sand like a foot-long tripwire. Curious, she pulled on it, only to discover it was far lengthier than she'd expected. It was connected to a partly-decayed, once-white fabric of some kind, buried beneath hundreds of gallons of sand.

She began to tug on the trapped cloth, gritting her teeth as the slippery material resisted her efforts. She managed to get a yard or so free, only to discover that it was very large and had many other cords connected to it. She snapped her fingers as realization set in.

It was a parachute.

Natalya looked around to see if Bender was back yet, then snorted annoyedly and moved to investigate on her own. Gauging the buried chute's position underneath the sand, she started working her way down along its projected length, looking to see what it was connected to.

She expected it to be some sort of harness, and was surprised to find a hard piece of metal protruding from the ground. Her eyes shone with inquisitiveness, and she started digging with her hands.

Whatever was buried there was large and definitely manmade. It was smooth to the touch, a dull gray in color, and had rounded edges, like a desk or table. She grasped the object by its nearest corner and pulled.

It wouldn't budge. Determined, she spread her feet wide and dropped down into a Sumo stance, trying to deadlift it free. Her jaw tightened, and her powerful back and thigh muscles flexed, as she heaved with every ounce of her considerable strength.

Damn. It's bigger than I thought and too deeply buried.

Pausing to catch her breath and wipe away the sweat that streamed down her face and chest, Natalya sat back on her haunches and mulled over her discovery. What could it possibly be? And how the hell did it get there? Was it trash, jettisoned from a passing plane? Maybe it was a piece of space debris, like one of the old command modules they used, during the early days of the Space Race?

She dismissed that last possibility. Whatever she'd found, the materials and technology used in its construction were modern. Her lips crinkled up in the quirky way they did when she grew frustrated, and she shook her head.

She was about to give up and settle for a few pictures, when she noticed a second, similar object.

This one was protruding from the base of a nearby dune. It reminded her of a truck's bumper, poking out after the rest of the vehicle had been buried in a sandstorm. Intrigued, Natalya loped over and dropped down to examine it. Using her

palms, she swept away the sand that covered the exposed corner.

It was definitely the same as the last one – same metal, same construction. Encouraged, she began to dig. Using her callused hands like scoops, she pulled away big armfuls of sand, exposing more and more.

Suddenly, Natalya stopped and stared. She'd managed to exhume a good third of the mysterious object. Any more, and the dune above it began to cascade down, negating further progress. She'd uncovered what appeared to be the top; she could see the connection points for the chute cords.

She estimated the object's total length to be about eight feet. It appeared to be a coffin of some kind. No, not a coffin. There was a heavily tinted window of some kind toward the top, at what would've been eye level.

Natalya scratched her head. It was a capsule of some kind. But what kind? She checked to see if it was a freezer pod, like the kind used to cryogenically preserve specimens, but discerned that it lacked the appropriate tech. It was more like a sealed container of some kind, and yet, it was not airtight. There were gill-like vents on the sides, to allow whatever was inside to breathe.

She stood up and stared down at the capsule, her hands on her hips. How did this thing – make that these *things* – get there? She looked around, trying to see if there were more of them.

There were.

Now that she knew what to look for, she saw telltale signs indicating many more. An exposed piece of chute cord here, a piece of fabric or a telltale mound there . . . She calculated there were at least a dozen of the containers within forty yards of her position, all concealed beneath Diablo's windswept sands.

Natalya snorted irritably. "Who the hell ees dumping these--"

Her gray eyes widened as she noticed something on the side of the one she'd partly unearthed. It was a laser-etched insignia of some kind. She dropped down on one knee to take a closer look.

The disc-shaped crest was faded yet familiar.

She raised her tinted goggles and shielded her eyes, trying to make sure. A moment later, her head pulled back on her shoulders and she let out a tiny gasp. The familiar trademarked logo, with its characteristic Greek-styled lettering, was unmistakable.

It was GDT: Grayson Defense Technologies.

Natalya stood up and dusted the sand off her pants, trying to make sense of her find. Why was GDT tech being dumped inside Diablo Caldera? It couldn't be to get rid of obsolete hardware. That could be done anywhere, not to mention, flying covert missions to parachute the pods inside the volcanic island – a huge violation of Cuban airspace – was risky and must have cost a fortune. So, why do it?

She was in the midst of reaching for the mike button on her goggles' polycarbonate temple, when she heard a twig snap behind her.

"Bender," she breathed, whirling around. "You won't *believe* what I--"

Natalya's heart pole-vaulted into her throat and stayed there. Not ten yards away and standing by the water's edge was a pair of reptiles.

Make that *dinosaurs*.

They were theropods of some kind, tall and bipedal, with strong forelimbs and powerful hind legs, balanced by a long and muscular tail. They reminded her of the pack-hunting raptors from the old dinosaur movies she used to watch as a child. Except, these looked different.

They were big, over four feet at the hip, and nearly fourteen feet in length. She estimated each weighed a good 400 pounds but, judging by the way their padded feet adapted to the unstable sand, they appeared quite nimble. Their arms were muscular and long and ended in thick-based, hooked claws a good five inches in length, designed to impale and slash. Their hind legs were far larger and incredibly muscular, especially the thigh portions. The feet were disproportionately large, with long, broad toes. Three of the toes supported the animal's weight, but there was an innermost toe – like the dew claw on a dog – that ended in a curved black talon. It was carried off the ground like a cat's claw, presumably to ensure it stayed sharp. The talons looked like sickles and were nearly twice the size of the other toe claws, a good nine inches in length.

The skin of the two dromaeosaurs – and Natalya had no doubt that she was looking at some sort of Cretaceous holdovers – was not wrinkled and knobby, like she would've expected. There were finely-scaled, smooth sections on the flanks and upper thighs, but much of the animals' hides were coated with long, flat scales that stood up and out like hairs. The scales were so long in places that they seemed almost like feathers, but not quite. On the back of the neck, and along the spine, they were at their longest, forming an elongated crest that reminded her of the mane of a horse.

Their extended tails were completely coated with a fine layer of these protofeathers, and had an extra-long ridge of them on either side that flared outward, protruding for a foot or more. The elongated scales gave the tail the appearance of a long, flat blade or spatula. Natalya imagined they were used for balance, like a cheetah's tail. The raptors' huge feet had long, thick scales on them as well, particularly the outer edges of each toe, but these were carried erect and angled inward, towards one another, giving the feet a bizarre, crested look.

Although similar in terms of size and build, when it came to pigmentation, there were marked differences between the two animals. The one with the feathery "mane", which she deemed to be the male, was a bright teal or turquoise in color, with pale undersides and striking cobalt highlights that formed a zebra-like pattern.

Beneath his chin he had a bright red wattle, that expanded and contracted as he breathed.

The female had no lion's mane or wattle and was a less audacious bluish-gray in color, with pale undersides and whitish bands that broke up her pattern, like sunlight when it dapples the surface of the water, especially when seen from below.

Both animals had large, wedge-shaped heads, a solid two feet in length, and strong jaws, lined with rows of two-inch serrated fangs. Their eyes were a bright orange with vertical pupils, and those eyes zeroed Natalya.

She saw hunger there, and a cold, calculating intelligence as well.

The two raptors shifted from side to side as they studied her, and she felt goosebumps break out all over her body. The male uttered a loud hiss, then they both started making a series of low, chittering sounds, almost like a language. She got the distinct impression they were communicating.

The realization that she'd discovered what was in the capsules came to her, and she cast about, desperately looking for her M18. To her disgust, she spotted it, twenty feet away and leaning against the *Remora's* hull. She wouldn't make it three steps before the pair of dromaeosaurs were on her. In fact, any sudden movement might be taken as an act of aggression.

Or an invitation.

As the male raptor took a step, Natalya's hand crept toward the .454 Casull she had holstered on her hip. She considered trying to reach Bender on the comm, but then realized the fool wasn't even armed. Apart from using him as bait, her best chance was to try and double tap both reptiles in mid-charge.

The problem was, she wasn't confident her pistol rounds would stop them. Kill, yes, especially over time. But *stop* was another matter. And, there were two of them. If either was able to close the distance before it was lights out, well, she had no desire to find out what those lethal-looking foot-claws were capable of.

Natalya's heart kicked into high gear as the raptors continued to edge closer. Their mouths were open now and they were making loud, raspy noises as they inhaled. She realized it was a Flehmen response, like a lion does; they were smelling her, trying to make up their minds about attacking.

Something about her scent seemed to be holding them back, and each time the male – obviously, the more eager of the two – was about to pounce, the female issued some sort of warbling sound, restraining him.

Finally, the pair seemed to agree that Natalya was, indeed, a potential meal, and they began to separate. Soon, they were at her ten and two, their glistening eyes locked onto hers like orange-hued rifle scopes and backed with murderous design. She gripped her pistol and tensed, waiting to see which one would make the first move.

Suddenly, the breeze shifted and the two theropods stopped cold. Their heads popped up and they began to scent the wind, simultaneously vocalizing back and forth.

Then, the impossible happened.