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KRONOS RISING

by

Max Hawthorne

Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoy the following excerpt from **Kronos Rising**: book one in the Kronos Rising sci-fi action-adventure series.

Feel free to share it with your family and friends.

Best,

Max Hawthorne

“Thanks, Willie. I’ll be up in twenty.”

Reaching over to shift some of her weight onto her nightstand, Amara tried and failed to make it to her feet. The pain was intense – worse than normal. She shook her head, taking in a few more breaths before struggling upright. Her bed sheet cascaded to the floor, leaving her covered by nothing but her sleep shirt and panties. It was chilly in her quarters and her skin registered the sudden drop in temperature, but she was more concerned with keeping her balance as she staggered drunkenly toward the bathroom. The normally comforting sway of the ship was now a serious impediment. At the start of the day, the stiffness of her injury made her feel like the Tin Woodman minus his oil can.

Amara made it to her tiny bathroom, grasping the doorjamb for support as she worked her way inside. She plopped down onto the toilet, grateful for the cool respite, her hands repeatedly massaging the jagged scar that decorated a good portion of her left hip as she tried to restore lost circulation. When finished, she washed up, brushed her teeth, and limped over to the tiny stove and sink that made up her kitchen.

The sound of tap water hitting the inside of the metal teapot drummed like raindrops on a tin roof in Amara’s ears. She turned on her miniature propane stove, set the tea to boil, and turned on some relaxing jazz music in an effort to take her mind off what was coming.

As she rolled out her yoga mat for what must have been the three thousandth time, Amara wondered once again what it would be like to be normal, to wake up each day pain free and fully functional. To not have to groan and strain and chip away at the arthritic adhesions that clung to her hip like rust on a hinge.

She sighed. *Maybe I’ll have it easier in my next life.*

As she eased herself down onto the thin mat and began forcing herself through her regular morning routine of ballistic and static stretches, Amara gritted her teeth. The grueling positions that enabled her to go through her day without looking and feeling like a cripple were always painful. She counted silently, forcing herself to relax as she bounced slowly up and down in a full straddle split. Her breathing began to grow labored, more from the pain shooting through her complaining leg than from the actual intensity of the exercises. Sweat began to flow down her brow and into her eyes as she glanced up, blinking repeatedly to clear her vision. She focused on the nearest wall, grunting aloud as she shifted position to work her weaker leg.

Amara looked at her calendar as she stretched. It was sent by one of the wildlife organizations they did business with. The current month featured a baby Harp seal peering forlornly into the camera, its fluffy white coat and large black eyes looking utterly adorable.

She found herself smiling involuntarily at the photo of the tiny pup. The icy crispness of the picture's wintry scenery looked so inviting, the animal so soft and cuddly, that it wasn't until the baby seal's high-pitched shriek resonated through her subconscious that she unexpectedly found herself pulled back in time.

Suddenly, it was twelve years ago, a few weeks after her eighteenth birthday. After months of cajoling, she'd finally convinced her father to take her along on one of his adventures. He was a fiery Sea Crusade activist with five years under his belt. His daring exploits, coupled with an unnerving willingness to place himself in harm's way, had made him a legend within the ranks of the well-known animal rights organization.

Amara's exuberance at being able to join her father and Sea Crusade was beyond description. To top it off, her initial assignment involved something she'd supported for years: an expedition to protect Canada's baby Harp seals from being slaughtered by hunters during the annual pup roundup.

Hikaro Nakamura tried repeatedly to prepare his headstrong daughter for the harsh realities of the upcoming hunts. Amara chose to focus instead on the majestic natural scenery they would be witnessing. She naively romanticized the entire situation. She thought it would be more along the lines of what picketers experience when working a site in some major city; carrying signs and banners and chanting slogans. She half expected the seal hunters to be intimidated by potential media coverage and simply pack up and go away.

Their six hundred-ton mother ship, Sea Green, entered the Gulf of St. Lawrence via the Honguedo Strait, chugging stealthily along between the south shore of Anticosti Island and the Gaspé Peninsula. Under cover of darkness, they acquired a near-shore anchorage, an advantageous position to launch their operations, with the plan being to intercept the approaching hunters at first light. It was day one of the legal hunting season, and they wanted to make a big impact.

To Amara, an aspiring photojournalist, the Gulf of Saint Lawrence turned out to be everything she expected and more. The world's largest estuary, the sprawling beauty of its limitless ice floes was wondrous to behold. Hundreds of the region's population of breeding Harp seals had already gathered on the nearby pack ice, the larger, darker mothers popping in and out of their air holes like oversized prairie dogs as they returned from feeding to nurse their constantly mewling offspring. The Excerpt from KRONOS RISING by Max Hawthorne, ©2005, updated version ©2014 Far From The Tree Press, LLC, all rights reserved.

babies themselves, with their dark, supplicating eyes staring out from a background of soft, white fuzz, made Amara want to pick them up and hug them. As she took picture after picture of the hungry pups, she wondered to herself how anyone could bring themselves to hurt such helpless animals.

The first skirmish took place earlier than expected. Not on the ice floes, as expected, but rather, out on the surrounding waters. Amara's father got the radio call: one of the commercial sealer ships, annoyed with the Sea Crusade inflatable's attempt at fending them off, rammed one of the animal rights' scout ships, capsizing the eighteen-foot Zodiac and nearly drowning several members of her crew. By the time the sealer ship's longboats made landfall and the hunters hit the ice, Hikaro, Amara and nearly two dozen other angry activists were gathered and waiting for them.

As soon as the first hunters approached, Amara felt a cold quake of fear. The men were big, grim, and armed to the teeth with knives, rifles and clubs. From the tips of their gloved hands to the soles of their spiked boots, they were dressed to kill. Their cold weather gear was permanently stained a dull, rust color, the remnants of dried blood, forever embedded in the fabric from year after year of butchering countless animals. Their eyes were the dark, deep-set eyes of men who spent their formative years working in slaughterhouses: cold and hard and unmoved at witnessing death.

Infuriated with the activists' attempts to interfere with their livelihood, the seal hunters went on the attack the moment their landing craft's prow touched the pack ice. Uttering profanities, they hurled buckets of baby seal's blood and organs directly at the protesters, painting them a horrid blackish-scarlet and staining the surrounding ice for a dozen yards in every direction.

Amara, holding onto her father now, gagged uncontrollably as seal intestines struck her in the face. She lost her grip and her balance as she dropped to the ground, shaking and vomiting uncontrollably. Enraged, Hikaro snarled and threw himself on the hunter responsible. Savagely wielding a broken sign handle, he began beating his daughter's attacker about the head and shoulders. Several of the man's comrades rushed to his aid, and in seconds it was a melee. Hunters not involved in the brawl took instant advantage of the situation. Outnumbering the protestors four to one, three score of them flooded the football field-sized ice floe, their heavy clubs raised as they charged the nearest group of seals.

At first, the growling mother Harp seals held their ground, their teeth bared as they shuffled awkwardly forward in an attempt to defend their helpless brood. A few

well-placed rifle shots quickly dispersed them, leaving two of their number lying dead and several more sliding into the water to bleed out and drown.

Still clutching her heaving stomach, Amara twisted her aching head to one side. She tried repeatedly to spit the fishy taste of seal guts and bile from her mouth, her blood-streaked hair soaking into the crimson ice beneath her. Unable to move, she watched in wide-eyed horror as the butchery began. She could hear the sounds of the hunters' boots crunching into the frost as they nimbly surrounded their quarry. The crackling noises their feet made were quickly overshadowed by yells and cheers.

The men methodically performed their task, herding the baby seals into tightly knit groups. Immobile and defenseless, the tiny, white pups could only utter high-pitched, bleating cries as, one by one they were clubbed and beaten to death. Most of the hunters, not wishing to risk ricochets off the ice, slung their rifles over their shoulders and used homemade clubs, baseball bats and hakapiks to do the job.

The hakapik would haunt Amara forever. A five-foot long wooden handle, topped with a flat-faced steel hammer head on one side and a viciously curved spike on the other, the seal killer's favorite weapon reminded her of a medieval war hammer, something knights once used to crush helmets and split skulls. Still on her hands and knees, she gasped in horror as she watched. One of the hunters lunged suddenly forward, grinning broadly as he brought his hakapik down on the nearest pup's face and skull region. The results were devastating, with the poor animal's whimpering cries immediately silenced by a sickening crunch. The hunter then leaned over the still-twitching seal and used his gloved hand to palpate what remained of its skull, checking to make sure it was dead before he dragged it off and moved on to the next one.

A few dozen yards away, a less experienced hunter partially missed his mark. He didn't bother to finish off the wounded seal pup. Grunting in frustration, he seized it with rough hands and unsheathed a wicked looking knife. As Amara gasped in horror, he bent down and began to flay the frantically struggling animal on the spot. Its piteous screams as it was skinned alive pierced the air, causing even the most jaded of his fellow hunters to grimace and turn away.

As she tried once more to make it to her feet, Amara scanned the devastation around her. She realized that the entire colony of baby seals was being wiped out. The formerly wintry-white landscape was now spattered with blood, bits of brain and bone as her fellow humans' murderous rampage continued. The pups were all going to die for money, and there was nothing she could do about it. She saw her father and his fellow conservationists a dozen yards away, yelling and cursing as

they continued to battle back a sea of armed bodies. They were outnumbered, outmatched, and unable to do anything but curse and scream in rage and frustration.

Amara shuddered as she realized the majority of the seal pups were already dead. The few remaining began to squeal in utter terror. Their combined high-pitched distress calls, designed to summon their mothers through the ice, shrieked across the landscape and the surface of the frigid waters.

They went unanswered.

Amara blinked in surprise. Fifty feet to her left, she spotted a lone seal pup the hunters somehow missed. Cowering behind the still warm body of its dead mother, the shivering pup managed to remain unnoticed. As its cries blended with its suffering brood mates,' Amara knew it was just a matter of time before it was spotted and killed.

Sure enough, within seconds, one of the hunters turned in the baby seal's direction. At six-foot-four and built like a linebacker, he was a terrifying vision. With his hakapik held loosely in one hand, he stomped mercilessly toward his next victim. He was breathing hard in a heavy jacket encrusted with blood, deliberately rotating his free arm in small circles to prepare for the anticipated blow.

Teary-eyed and panicking, Amara realized she was the only one who could possibly help the pup. With a gurgled cry, she launched herself to her feet and lunged toward the distracted hunter. She was a dozen steps behind him and closing the distance rapidly. As he moved within striking distance, she gave a shriek that matched that of the wailing seals. Using pure adrenaline, she flung herself forward, her body soaring through the air. Sailing past the startled hunter, she landed hard, sliding across the blood slick ice and covering the baby seal with her body.

The seal hunter, already in mid-swing, was knocked off balance by her impact with his shin. His razor-sharp hakapik continued its deadly downward stroke and landed with a thud, its five inch metal spike ripping right through Amara's parka and bib pants, burying itself in her hip. Her agonizing scream overpowered the cries of both the protestors and the remaining Harp seals.

In shock, Amara lay gasping, paralyzed on her side, no longer able to cry out. To her amazement, the hunter yanked his weapon free to bash the hapless seal pup she'd tried so hard to defend. Using the hammer portion of his hakapik, he killed it instantly. The pup's crushed muzzle landed inches from her nose, its eyes boring into Amara's as life fled its tiny body. She saw the last of its frozen breath whisper from its bleeding nostrils and watched in detached horror as the hunter reached down with one gloved fingertip and gave the dead seal the 'blink test,' his bloody digit touching one of its large, black eyes to make sure it was dead. Then, with that same

gore-encrusted hand, he took hold of her chin, twisting her head to ascertain her condition.

Amara felt her heart pounding in her chest as she stared death in the face. She felt herself slip away as a wall of darkness closed in on her. Soon, she could see nothing: not the hunter, the dead seal's eyes, or even her father's distraught face as he relentlessly fought his way to her side. Everything had gone black, and the only thing she was aware of was the cries of the surviving Harp seal pups. Their shrieks seared into her brain like a steam whistle.

The whistle . . .