

WARNING: COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL

KRONOS RISING
KRAKEN (vol. 3)
by
Max Hawthorne

Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoy the following excerpt from **Kronos Rising: Kraken (vol. 3)**, the fifth book in the *Kronos Rising* sci-fi action-adventure series (not counting the prequel *Diablo*).

Feel free to share it with your family and friends.

Best,

Max Hawthorne

The Devil had come home to Tartarus.

Seventy-five yards from the Vault's partially-submerged entrance, Natalya Dragunova watched with disbelieving eyes as the *Octopus giganteus* continued its frenzied assault. The sounds of straining metal and the shrill cry of claxons repeatedly rent the air, and she grimaced and clamped her hands over her ears. All the while, she struggled to wrap her head around the enormity of the threat posed by this new and unexpected enemy.

The octopus – legends be damned, it was definitely *not* a squid – was impossibly huge and powerful. The frantic docking crews had been lucky; they'd managed to close the armored submarine bay doors in the nick of time. But from the look of things, the yard-thick titanium-steel portals were doing little more than slowing it down. The mollusk's rock-hard tentacles, in some places as thick as the main cables of a suspension bridge, appeared tireless, and the unrelenting pressure they were exerting on the Vault was slowly but surely overcoming the straining actuators that kept the reinforced gates closed.

Suddenly, an unpleasant smell invaded Natalya's nostrils and her head snapped back hard on her shoulders. She looked, did a double-take, then still couldn't believe it. There was actual *steam* rising from the places where the Kraken's arms had attached themselves above the waterline. The surrounding metal began to bubble and deform.

One of the strongest alloys on the planet, and the cephalopod's manhole-sized suckers were eating into it.

Bozhe moi!

She shook her head and blew out a breath through bowed lips. Whatever superacid the thing secreted was no joke. It was *definitely* not something she'd care to be exposed to.

Natalya's indecisive wallowing ended abruptly, as the panicky screams around her rapidly increased in volume. The military tactician in her rose to the fore and she took in her situation. Judging by the warning lights that lit up the nearby podium like a Christmas tree, the Vault's recently upgraded system of oversized gears and hydraulics was fast-approaching the point of failure.

Already, the once hairline gap between the sixty-foot bay doors was a yard wide and spreading. She didn't know much about octopus' anatomy, but she'd seen a video once where a four-footer squeezed its entire body through a three-inch pipe.

They didn't have much time.

"We've got to get out of here!" a nerdy maintenance tech cried. His eyes were emu eggs as he gaped at the encroaching monster. A moment later, he tucked tail and ran. On cue, scores of rubbernecking dock workers – including the remaining sad sacks who had originally manned the podium – followed suit. Uttering bleats of panic, they abandoned their posts and fled.

Like a cycling foghorn, the dock's claxon continued to sound. Tartarus's normally organized landing was now in shambles. An assortment of supply-laden delivery trucks, their drivers catching sight of the invading colossus, had screeched to a halt. They sat there abandoned, their keys in their ignitions and engines running. Twenty yards away, an upside-down MarshCat began to smoke, then its undercarriage burst into flames. Natalya snorted in disgust. Through the smoke and fire, she could see the idiot responsible, holding his bleeding head as he was transported to the infirmary.

It was the podium's lead technician. The moment the first of the Kraken's greenish-gray tentacles had squeezed between the failing Vault doors, the coward had screamed like a frightened schoolgirl and flagged down a passing ATV.

Shouting obscenities, he'd yanked the vehicle's startled driver out from behind the wheel and flung him to the ground, then hopped in himself. He was in such a panic; he inadvertently put the MarshCat in reverse before flooring it. A second later, he crashed full speed into the edge of a nearby support column, flipping the amphibious ATV and nearly killing himself in the process.

As she watched the med-techs and their patient disappear down a nearby tunnel, Natalya looked around. Her expression grew grim. Soon, she realized, she'd be left alone on the docks, and with a very pissed-off sea monster. And, of course, the submarine bay had no defensive armaments capable of dealing with the damned thing.

She glanced down at the comparatively paltry weapons she carried and felt a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Nyet, this is not good.

Natalya weighed her options, then started to back away. There was no choice. She needed to find shelter ASAP, before the monster made its way fully inside.

Just then, her ears were greeted by the gravelly sounds of two-dozen pairs of combat boots. She smiled, hardly able to believe her luck. The intruder alarm had been answered by an entire platoon of Grayson's black-clad Last Chancers. They must've been either intoxicated or bored to tears because, despite what they were about to face, they appeared in high spirits.

Natalya studied the guards from a distance. The majority were armed with standard-issue pump-action shotguns, with a smattering of M18 double-barreled carbines, like the one she had slung over her shoulder.

It was a lot of firepower, she admitted.

She doubted very much that it would be enough.

As if emphasizing her point, an otherworldly groan echoed across the expanse of Tartarus's half-mile-wide dome. Accompanying it was a tremor that rattled the concrete under her feet like a subway train passing by.

The Vault's actuators had breathed their last.

With a deafening roar, the shiny portals were wrenched apart. A heartbeat later, the victorious Kraken spilled into the main canal like a fleshy avalanche. It was so huge, its monstrous body cast up a wall of seawater that overflowed the nearby docks, and its gnarled mantle looked like a freshly formed volcanic island as it broke the surface. It took a moment to settle in, then began extending itself, its eight arms spreading out one by one, like the points of some Lovecraftian compass.

Natalya took a whiff of the resultant breeze and regretted it. She smelled salt, rotting meat, and something altogether alien. She stood on tiptoe, trying to see better, then blinked in astonishment. She could make out the octopus's outline through the now-murky water. Its tentacular span was astonishing, a full two hundred feet, if not more.

It is impossible! No mollusk can be that big!

Undeterred by the size of their watery adversary, however, the lead Last Chancer uttered an enthusiastic cry of, "Boys, we're having sushi tonight!" and directed his men forward. Stopping barely twenty yards from the barrel-like hump of the cephalopod's nearest tentacle, they shouldered their weapons and fired.

As the combined report of the guards' guns reverberated throughout the docks, Natalya was reminded of the archival footage she'd watched during her time in the Academy – part of the media's documentation of the original pliosaur's razing of Harcourt Marina, some thirty years earlier. In it, a group of gray-uniformed state troopers – men far more disciplined than the motley collection of cutthroats gathered before her – had bravely stood their ground against the enraged saurian as it prowled the shallows of Paradise Cove.

The results were pretty much the same.

The security guards blasted away at the only portions of the Kraken's body they could see: the glistening mound of its mantle and the curling portions of several of its arms, where they broke the surface like ambushing anacondas. It trembled and recoiled as the burning barrage of bullets and buckshot tore into it, but only for a moment. Then, as if it had taken the measure of its enemy and realized they posed no threat, it did what any superior force would do when fired upon.

It fired back.

Rearing up out of the water like hundred-foot sea serpents, two of the cephalopod's rough-skinned tentacles lashed out. The first one came down like a falling redwood, slamming into the guards' dead-center and turning seven of their number into meaty pancakes. The rest took one look at what had befallen their luckless comrades and scattered. Their flight was short-lived, however, as the second arm struck sideways a split-second later, plowing into anyone still standing like a sickle slicing through wheat stalks.

The attacks had devastating results. The same corrosive enzymes that had enabled the creature to dig into the super-slick metal of the Vault continued to exude

from its voracious suckers. Anyone who wasn't pulverized outright by the weight of its five-foot-thick arms hammering into them dissolved on contact.

Natalya grimaced, watching as the docks were systematically plastered with steaming piles of paste that had once been human beings. She saw a single survivor – ironically, one of the two men who had stalked her earlier – on the ground and crawling for it. He was dragging his liquified legs behind him, and alternated screaming hysterically and crying for his mother.

The Kraken, its yard-wide yellow eyes peering eagerly above the churning surface of the canal, heard his cries. It wasted no time and started slithering forward. Its nearest tentacle broke the surface and arced back, like a sea serpent poised to strike. It paused unexpectedly and, for a moment, Natalya feared it had spotted her.

Luckily, that was not the case. The octopus was focused entirely on the downed guard. It had realized its mangled prey could not escape and was merely taking its time.

Rising up from the canal, its lethal arm unfurled and extended with deliberate slowness. It was suspended ten feet above the ground as it crept gradually closer, oozing brine and death.

Natalya's hand covered her mouth. *My God, is it savoring its kill?*

As the maimed guard glanced back, he realized the gravity of his situation. An animalistic desire to live kicked in and, despite his horrifying injuries, he started using his intact forearms to haul himself forward at an impressive pace. Behind him, a gory snail's trail marked his passage.

All at once, he spotted Natalya. Their eyes met and he mouthed the words '*Help me!*', one hand stretching beseechingly in her direction.

Although it made her sick to her stomach, the veteran submarine captain shook her head and averted her eyes. There was simply nothing she could do. She was not about to throw away her life, not to mention the life of the person she'd come all this way to rescue, for some doomed career criminal.

Undeterred by her reluctance, however, the mutilated guard changed direction, heading straight toward her. Fifteen yards behind him, the Kraken's slime-coated tendril drew nearer, its bandoleers of hungry suckers glistening in the overhead lights.

Natalya's heart froze in her chest as she watched the ghoulish race reach its inevitable conclusion. The guard was barely ten yards away when the octopus finally claimed him.

Like some nightmarish garage door coming down, the enormous tentacle descended. She'd expected it to slap down hard and pull back, like an iron on an ironing board, smothering the ex-con's cries and smearing him like spackle. Instead, its elongated tip snaked its way around his torso like a seatbelt and started pulling.

The octopus must have had precise control over its acidic secretions, she

deduced, because the wailing guard's body didn't come apart like she anticipated. Instead, he was hauled away with inexorable force, bound for the bloodstained waters of the canal and what lay beneath them – the behemoth's gnashing meat grinder of a beak.

It was going to eat him alive.