

Diablo

Kronos Rising: prequel

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Dedication



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Kronos Rising: Diablo is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales, is entirely coincidental.



For my brother Stephen, who shared in my own, personal hell as I struggled to write the very first draft of KRONOS RISING, all those many years ago. This one's for you, big guy.

Chapter 1

Reminiscent of a Rodin sculpture come to life, Artek sat motionless on the hot sand, his back pressed against the rough-but-reassuring bark of a tall palm tree. High overhead, the sun shone down with unusual fierceness, and he was grateful for the limited shade. Stretching out his rawboned frame, the young shaman shielded his eyes in an effort to gain a better perspective on the life-or-death drama unfolding before him.

In appearance, Artek was striking. Tall and broad-shouldered, with an athletic build, his blondish hair and blue-gray eyes contrasted sharply with his mahogany-colored skin. His angular features were decidedly Caucasian, yet seemed somehow out of place. Had an ambitious geneticist been given the opportunity, he or she could have achieved overnight fame by “discovering” him. Him and the rest of his kind, that is.

The tribal priest and his people were unique in that they were a relict population of mankind, undiscovered by modern explorers or anthropologists. Isolated on the dormant volcanic island they called home, and shielded from a series of Ice Ages and glacial periods that had come and gone, they were true, unadulterated examples of the original Cro-Magnon race. Sheltered from the outside world by the caldera's treacherous reef system and concealed by its shrouding mists, their primitive society had lived on, unchanging and uninterrupted, for the past 20,000 years.

Theirs was a harsh and often savage existence, something the young shaman understood all too well of late. However, as his late predecessor had taught him—oftentimes at the tail end of a brutal lashing—although life's lessons were frequently hard, they were designed to ensure the survival of those best suited. Or,

in some cases, the survival of those the gods favored. Those who were not well suited or had fallen out of favor with the divine ones usually paid the price.

As the land crabs were doing now.

Artek had been watching the grisly spectacle for almost an hour. It was a welcome distraction from the more morose ponderings of his pending duties. Looking about, he scanned the beach and surrounding cliffs. Many of the wave-spattered reef formations were covered with hordes of supposedly-extinct Caribbean monk seals. The six-hundred-pound bulls, with their distinctive eyes and broad muzzles, were in mid-rut, and bellowed constantly at one another as they bluffed and brawled for the most cows and the best possible nesting spots.

Due to the steep, volcanic slopes that formed the exterior of the island, there were almost no beaches to be found along its forty-mile perimeter. In fact, the paltry two-hundred-yard stretch of sand and trees where Artek reposed was practically the only level portion of the entire place. It was also the only spot that provided unimpeded access to the sea and, as a result, the orange-colored land crabs had no choice but to utilize it.

With a leg span of twelve inches or more, the thick-shelled crustaceans were well-adapted to terrestrial life. Omnivorous by nature, they kept to the shelter of the island's crescent-shaped rainforest region by day, emerging from their protective burrows at night to scavenge for food. Their reclusiveness, combined with powerful pincers and an aggressive nature when cornered, kept the crabs' list of natural predators low. But like others of their ilk, when mating season was upon them, the big arthropods had no choice but to migrate en masse down to the pounding surf and immerse their roe and sperm-laden bodies in the churning water.

Caught out in the open, and this time in broad daylight, they ran a deadly gauntlet of adversaries which took full advantage of the crabs' procreative urges. Seals, seabirds, and the caldera's resident population of large monitor lizards wasted no time in seizing upon the opportunity to pounce upon exposed and otherwise-occupied land crabs. As the ravenous Frigate birds were now doing.

Circling like a malevolent cloud overhead, the gorging black petrels' high-pitched screeching could be heard for a quarter-mile or more. Swooping down, they made strafing runs on the hapless crustaceans, scooping them up with their long, curved beaks and then smashing them against the nearby reefs, so hard their protective shells were reduced to near-powder. The crabs were being slaughtered by the thousands. Out of the legions that emerged in orderly columns from the nearby crevice, less than one in three would be fortunate enough to make it to the shelter of the sea.

Not that the surrounding waters were any safer, Artek thought grimly.

Besides the region's treacherous currents and strong undertows, the waters surrounding Diablo Caldera were patrolled by ravenous bull, mako, and tiger sharks, as well as an extremely large and aggressive strain of barracuda. Swimming around the outskirts of the island was strictly forbidden and attempted only by the bravest or most foolhardy, or by those with a bona fide death wish.

Not that it mattered to Artek or his tribe. Sharks or no, they would never consider leaving the island. Besides the fact that the gods expressly forbade it, it was simply too dangerous, even in one of their dugout canoes. The tempest-tossed

seas surrounding the caldera were a veritable maze of jagged reef formations. Some were visible, most were not. No ship or boat could come within two miles of their shores without having its hull gutted. The seafloor surrounding their seeming paradise was littered with the remains of hundreds of vessels, many of which the shaman and his people had watched sink.

Actually, for some years now, the white craft had stopped appearing. Popular opinion was that it was fear of their gods that caused them to avoid the island. No one knew for sure where the alien vessels came from or what manner of people piloted them. But then, as far as anyone could remember, no human being beside members of the tribe had ever pressed foot into their sacred soil.

That was, except for the two strangers who emerged from the sea a few years back...

Suddenly, the baritone bellow of the ceremonial horn echoed off the rocky escarpments, interrupting the young priest's ponderings and drawing him back to the here and now. Clambering to his feet, Artek brushed away the cream-colored sand that clung to his loincloth and legs and turned back toward the nearby crevice.

Martika was standing there waiting for him.

The young priestess was an imposing sight, statuesque, her feet spread apart and her shimmering mane of platinum hair wafting in the morning breeze. She was his promised mate and had been since they were children. Tall and curvaceous, with nearly perfect features, she was one of the most sought after women in the village. What made Martika far more desirable to Artek, however, was the way she followed him around with those enormous, sapphire-blue eyes of hers – eyes that stared with a combination of devotion, desire, and undisguised awe. Even the blindest of elders could tell right away that the young priestess was hopelessly enamored with the athletic shaman.

The fact of which made it all the more disturbing that, lately, she couldn't even look him in the eye. With her cerulean orbs fixed on the sand at her feet, Martika wordlessly handed Artek his feathered ceremonial robe. He gazed at her for a moment, waiting for her to look up or at least acknowledge him in some way. Annoyed when she did not, he turned and walked briskly into the crevice, his promised bride following wordlessly behind him.

The crevice was enormous: a four-hundred-foot-deep crack in the exposed wall of the caldera that split its craggy surface from top to bottom like a blow from some titanic axe. It was narrow at the bottom, perhaps only ten feet across, but then quickly opened up as it went, until, at the summit, it formed a crumbling gap over one hundred feet wide.

Had the people of the village known that the massive cleft in Diablo Caldera's wall was actually the product of an active fault line running beneath their tiny island home, or that the same fault line was also responsible for the violent tremors that shook the place more and more frequently, they might have been alarmed. At least they would have, had they the capacity to understand the implications of such a thing. Blissfully ignorant, however, the islanders simply viewed the jagged opening in their mountain as what it seemed to be: a valued portal that gave them access to the bountiful sea outside.

Artek stepped through this portal, minutes later, emerging from the sheltering shade and coolness of the crevice into the blinding blast furnace that waited on the other side.

Before him lay the village. And the lake.

Artek's tropical home, normally peaceful and quiet, was a veritable bee hive of activity as every member of the tribe prepared for the upcoming funerary ritual. Situated within the sandy northern portion of the inside of the caldera, and adjacent to its lush rainforest, the village was nestled within a grove of towering palm trees. It consisted of nearly a hundred huts that housed almost as many families. In general, the huts were mainly made of rough-hewn wood and thatching, although several of the larger ones had support beams and frames made from the lashed-together bones of some colossal, long-dead creature.

The villagers, themselves, were all similar in appearance to the young shaman, albeit of assorted ages. Irrespective of gender, they hustled about, performing various tasks and chores. Some gathered food. Others carried large water containers on their backs or across their shoulders, moving to and from the nearby mountain streams. Some chopped wood, while still others made clothes or cared for infants. All appeared eager to perform their appointed tasks with the utmost of efficiency and, despite the oppressive heat, there was an air of unspoken anticipation throughout the place.

As he neared the village, Artek paused to study the lake. At the moment, their god's home was far from placid, with whitecaps lashing the surface of the eight-mile-wide body of landlocked seawater.

The shaman craned his neck as he gazed upward. The jagged, stone walls of the caldera towered high above him, soaring nearly five hundred feet into the air. Eons ago, those same walls had been four times that height. But sixty five million years of erosion had proven to be a powerful force.

Martika still in tow, Artek stopped by the edge of the water. There, on the end of a crudely constructed stone jetty, two teenage boys were fishing. Or rather, they were struggling to haul in their catch. Only a few years younger than him, one of the boys had used a traditional lure made of white fibers and attached to a string to tease a large fish within striking distance of the other's thrown harpoon. It was a tried and true technique, one the shaman himself had used as an adolescent in years past.

After a minute-long struggle, the outcome of which was constantly in doubt, the excited youngsters pulling on the harpoon's braided rope finally managed to haul their violently struggling quarry out of the water and onto the pale sand. Flopping about, the six-foot, fanged fish weighed as much as either of the pubescent anglers. The harpooner, seizing onto the exposed portion of his weapon's long handle for leverage, struggled to keep the fish pinned to the ground while his comrade dispatched it with several sharp blows to the head from a knotted wooden club.

Artek smiled as he watched the scenario unfold. It was a well done feat. He turned to go, but then paused to scan the wind-whipped waters of the lake once more.

The boys had luck on their side. Their fish was a formidable adversary. But considering what else dwelt within the lake's dark, foreboding depths, such

exploits were not without their share of risks. Experience had taught the members of the tribe early on that it was all too easy for an ambitious angler standing too close to the water's edge to suddenly find himself as bait.

Fortunately for the boys, their god was nowhere in sight.

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Four miles away, near the center of its crater-shaped lake, the object of Artek's concern laid basking on the surface, relishing the warmth of the morning sun.

The creature was enormous: nearly eighty feet in length from the tip of its stubby tail to the end of its battle-scarred jaws, and weighed well over a hundred tons. Its body, covered with rock-hard scales, was dark bluish-gray on top and pale below. The counter-shaded pattern was that of a traditional pelagic hunter. The dark dorsal region of its body allowed the beast to blend in with the sea bottom as it stalked its prey from below, while its creamy undersides kept it camouflaged while it sunned itself on the surface, the lighter color matching the dappled sunlight from above and helping to shield it from predators.

Not that it had any.

Even the most amateurish of paleontologists would have recognized the creature as some sort of enormous pliosaur, an extinct marine reptile from the late Cretaceous period. In truth, the animal was remarkably similar to its distant forebears: the pair of *Kronosaurus imperator* that had been trapped within the caldera, eons ago. In their day, the titanic creature's ancestors had been the dominant carnivores of the prehistoric seas. Their ferocity was virtually unmatched in the history of the animal kingdom, and nothing that swam their primeval oceans was safe from either the killing power of their jaws or the immense appetites that fueled them.

If anything, given sixty five million years of continued evolution, Nature had only improved upon its deadly design. Unfortunately for the creature, however, even the most perfect of killing machines could not stave off the inevitable.

Since the fall of the dinosaurs, the population of pliosaurs imprisoned within the caldera had varied from one millennium to the next. Ranging in number from four dozen to over one hundred adults, they had survived the eons, adapting and improving over time in their speed, power, and hunting skills. They had even begun to develop a rudimentary intelligence of sorts.

Over the last ten thousand years, however, the pliosaurs' situation began to grow bleak. Generation by generation, their numbers gradually declined. The problem wasn't climate related; the heated waters of the caldera pool had enabled them to stave off even the last Ice Age without ill effects. It was their food supply.

The creatures' main prey items—the teeming schools of giant fish and squid that populated the lake—were slowly-but-surely dwindling in number. With meat becoming increasingly scarce, the ravenous flesh-eaters eventually went after the only readily available food source: Each other.

They turned cannibalistic.

The pliosaur's five-foot young, normally safe from predation by the adults in the crater, suddenly had more to worry about than the predatory fish that kept their numbers in check. In fact, juveniles of any size risked their lives once they left the comparative safety of the shallow portions of the lake. To make matters worse, it

soon became apparent that even the adults weren't safe from being eaten. A *Kronosaurus* that appeared vulnerable, either from advanced age or injury, more often than not found itself beset upon and ripped to pieces by one or more of its more powerful brethren. Soon, the pliosaur's normally stable population began to dwindle, until only a dozen of the hardest specimens were left. The situation for the giant reptiles was growing desperate.

In the end, it was human beings that made the difference. Having inhabited the island for almost 20,000 years, the primitive villagers—alarmed by the creatures' dwindling numbers and increasingly cannibalistic tendencies—took action. Both industrious and innovative, they took it upon themselves to become the pliosaurs' official guardians. Using fire as a motivator, they herded entire harems of the well-fed monk seals that occupied the cliffs bordering the caldera down into the crevice, then forced the panic-stricken creatures at torch-point into what appeared to be sheltering water.

Oblivious to what was waiting for them, the blubbery animals sought refuge in the lake, only to become nutritious, calorie-rich meals for the rapacious marine reptiles. From that point on, from generation to generation, the natives made regular, monthly contributions to the pliosaurs' diet. Seals, sea lions, and even netted sharks or tuna, once dragged inside, were all on the menu. The tribe worked hard to keep the monstrous creatures that dominated their lake healthy and content.

They were more than happy to do so.

After all, the pliosaurs were their gods.

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With a loud snort and a blast of compressed water vapor that echoed across the surface of its lake, the creature surged to life. A steely-hided killing machine designed to feed upon sharks and other marine reptiles, its existence consisted of eating, battling for territory, and mating. There were no more competitors left to fight, however, nor was procreation any longer an option. That left the creature with one thing and one thing only: its never-ending need to feed.

And it was hungry.

Filling its cavernous lungs with oxygen, the titanic reptile closed its watertight nostril flaps and plunged beneath the surface. With its four dugout-canoe-sized flippers propelling it silently forward, it began its search for prey.

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Dismissing Martika with a wave of his hand, Artek strode purposefully toward his dwelling place. Trepidation furrowed his normally-smooth brow. For untold centuries, the giants of their lake had been the guardians of the populace. It had been so for generations beyond count. The gods' battles with the evil spirits that resided under the lake and mountain were the stuff of legend, often shaking the very ground upon which the village sat.

The creatures kept the spirits at bay and the people safe. In return, the villagers fed their god-beasts with each new moon to keep them strong. Sea mammals from the island cliffs and fish from the surrounding waters were readily given to them. Even the tribe's dead were sacrificed to the giant reptiles, as were condemned criminals and stillborn infants. Conceptually, it was considered an honor to be

offered up to the gods, although in his innermost thoughts, Artek believed the dead cared not. The still-living sacrifices, on the other hand, had varied views. Some went willingly, others did not.

In the end, it made no difference. It was the way of things.

Pausing outside his hut, Artek stood tall and pondered the lake and village. The smell of seasoned fish roasting tantalized his flared nostrils and his stomach began to rumble. Down below, a growing crowd was gathering by the dock, eager to have a decent view of the upcoming festivities. As usual, the god was nowhere in sight.

The shaman sighed heavily. *One... just one.*

That was all they had now and it was the last of its kind. Once, there had been many gods. In fact, less than a year ago, the caldera had literally resounded with the calls of almost two dozen of the mammoth creatures.

Then, disaster had struck.

After a long period of seeming peace, the spirits of the mountain attacked the lake's god-beasts with a savagery their worshippers had never before seen. The underwater battle must have been ferocious. The entire island shook to the point that it seemed it would tear itself apart. Avalanches of rock tumbled down into the lake and the waters in its center began to glow and churn with a fury beyond imagination. The scalding heat generated by the deepwater melee could be felt even on the village shores.

When it was over, the waters were littered with the bloated bodies of the gods. Of the nearly two-dozen, only two had survived the clash with their invisible enemies. The carcasses of the rest, young and old alike, floated on the surface, their enormous, fanged jaws spread wide in horrific visages that bore silent testimony to their agonizing deaths.

The people of the village were horrified at the sudden loss of their protectors. But Nornak, Artek's predecessor, had assured them that, with proper prayers and offerings, the two remaining gods would soon mate. They would produce a new, even stronger generation that would continue to shield the tribe from the unseen forces that threatened them.

Unfortunately, that was not to be. Within a few months, another powerful tremor shook the island. This time the waters did not boil over, but a deadly landslide of stone and rubble destroyed the shallow portion of the caldera that was the gods' nursery. The unborn hatchlings were annihilated, dashing the peoples' hopes and prayers.

The spirits were on the verge of winning.

The final blow came weeks later, when one of the two remaining gods disappeared. No one could say for sure what had happened. Its body never surfaced. Nor had the earth shaken as it was prone to when the unseen forces attacked. But judging by its mate's behavior, there was no doubt the great creature had perished somewhere in the depths.

The people were devastated. The gods had fallen and their offspring been treacherously slain. Finally, the village's last, desperate hope had vanished along with the lone one's mate. There would be no new generation of gods. When the last of the huge creatures perished or was slain the people would be alone.

The spirits had won.

Turning away from the scene below, Artek strode past the suddenly attentive guards who stood leaning on their spears outside his dwelling. As he entered the ceremonial hut, he focused on clearing his mind, trying to put aside, at least for a moment, the mountain of recriminations he carried.

Inside, amidst a cloud of incense, his acolytes were preparing Nornak's body for the ultimate honor. His much anticipated union with their god.

Chapter 2

The god was on the move.

Barreling along a hundred feet beneath the surface, the giant predator gained swiftly on its prey. Fifty yards ahead, a school of chrome-colored fish fled terror-stricken before it. Measuring close to twenty feet in length, the enormous descendants of the prehistoric fish *Xiphactinus audax* were, themselves, top predators, each tipping the scales at over three thousand pounds. Compared to the whale-sized nightmare that pursued them, however, the toothy, tarpon-like creatures were little more than a snack.

With a sudden burst of speed, generated by all four of its barnacle-tipped flippers, the god plowed through the center of the school, scattering its victims with the monstrous pressure wave that preceded it. With a lightning-fast snap, it seized the nearest fish by the head and gill region. Closing its jaws, it drove sixteen-inch, ridged fangs, backed by a bite force that would have registered fifty tons per square inch, deep into the *Xiphactinus's* body. Like stepping on an egg, the pliosaur annihilated the fish's thick skull and spinal column, killing it instantly.

Shaking its prey so violently that the surrounding waters were obscured by a cloud of scales and blood, the islanders' god-beast gradually adjusted its vice-like grip. Finally, it seized the still-twitching fish by the head, gulping repeatedly as began to swallow it whole. It was a slow process and the skin of the marine reptile's throat stretched to accommodate its enormous meal.

Pausing for a moment to let its stomach settle, the scaly colossus rose to the surface to spout before plunging back into the depths, still hungry.

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As his eyes adjusted to the dim lighting of the ceremonial chamber, Artek took a moment to observe the progress of Nornak's funerary preparations. The old shaman's spirit had only just fled his body in the middle of the night, yet already he was adorned in full regalia for the upcoming ceremony. Working furiously, the four acolytes put the final touches on the dead priest's face paint, while simultaneously adjusting the tough palm frond ropes that kept his body snug against the ornately-carved sacrificial chair.

They moved quickly and efficiently, for time was of the essence. The god preferred its meat fresh.

Satisfied with the quality of their work, Artek moved to a side door that opened to a wooden deck and stairwell. Two of the village elders stood waiting, a large, earth-colored ceramic container with rope handles between them.

The elders bowed low as Artek approached, greeting him in their guttural tongue. The shaman nodded in response and raised the lid of the twenty-gallon container so he could examine its contents. His head snapped back involuntarily as a foul smell assailed his nasal passages. It was the pungent aroma of monk seal blood and melted-down blubber, combined into a noxious mixture. Closing the lid tightly, he gave the two elders an approving half-smile and complimented them on their work. The summoning liquid was perfect. Its powerful scent would help draw their deity in close for the fast-approaching ritual, and the taste and smell of fresh seal blood permeating the water would ensure something else as well.

The beast would be hungry when it got there.

Instructing the elders to oversee the dispensing of the bloody stew into the appropriate region of the lake, Artek re-entered the ceremonial hut. Passing his acolytes, who by now had attached the sturdy carrying poles to the bottom of his predecessor's chair, he disappeared through a nearby doorway into his private chambers. As he reached for his ornamental headdress, the young shaman espied the silver-colored canisters hanging from one wall. Reaching over and pressing his calloused palm against the cool surface of one of the shiny metal tubes, Artek's mind wandered back to the unexpected arrival of the two strangers, several years prior. They had literally come out of the surf, staggering awkwardly onto white sands that no foreigner had ever despoiled.

There were two of them, one tall, one short. Both had brown hair and eyes and ghostly pale skin, almost like ivory. They had the heavy, metallic tubes strapped to their backs, and were garbed in bizarre, ceremonial masks and odd black garments that stretched like squid skin.

Within minutes of their arrival, the intruders were set upon by a hunting party and taken prisoner—practically without incident. They seemed both thrilled and astounded to discover human beings on the island, and chattered excitedly back and forth in their strange language. The taller one appeared to have some sort of vision problem, as he was continually closing one eye and struggling to peer through a palm-sized, metallic device that was pierced by a tiny window.

Both the shaman and the tribal elders were perplexed by the arrival of the intruders. Not just by their speech and manner of dress, but how they seemed to have just walked right out of the sea.

One of the foreigners, the shorter one, had suffered a vicious barracuda bite on one arm and was badly in need of the tribe's healer. While the injured man was being attended to, Nornak and the elders deliberated as to what was to be done with them. Certainly, it was argued, they could not stay on the island. It would have been blasphemous. Their pallid complexions and strange mannerisms notwithstanding, they simply were not members of the tribe. Nor could the council allow them to be released back into the sea. The waters around the island being what they were, that would have been tantamount to murder and, thus, was flatly against their laws.

After much deliberation, the council concluded that the strangers must have been passengers of one of the noisy white boats that occasionally circled the

caldera, cruising outside the reach of its treacherous reef system. Perhaps they were from the one that had erupted into a fireball and sunk that very morning. Of course, that didn't answer the far more pressing question as to why they had come...

In the end, it was decided that the sharks and other sea creatures had intentionally spared both men's lives so that they might present themselves as an offering of atonement to the gods. After all, why else would the intruders adorn themselves completely in black and wear flipper-like footwear, if not to simulate the appearance of the seals that were the giant creatures' favorite food?

The decision was made. Despite their vehement protestations and a surprisingly fierce struggle, the strangers were summarily stripped of their unusual garments and gear, bound, and then taken to the raft.

Over two years later, Artek could still hear their screams of terror and astonishment as the gods came for them.

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Like a levy under pressure, the surviving god's appetite continued to grow. Arcing up toward the surface from its thousand-foot dive, the voracious *Kronosaurus imperator* cast about for something else to appease its growing hunger. The surviving members of the school of chrome-colored fish had made good their escape while it devoured their hapless comrade. They were nowhere to be found. Frustrated, the great beast decided to dive deep in search of the pugnacious squid that prowled the ten-thousand-foot depths of its saltwater lake.

There were easier meals to be had. Stretching thirty feet from caudal fin to tentacle tips and weighing several tons each, the thick-bodied cephalopods were ferocious predators in their own right. Their razor-sharp beaks and toothy tendrils were a fearsome arsenal. In fact, the pliosaur's huge head was cross-hatched with scars from the squids' saw-like suckers. Still, they were an important part of its diet.

Sounding like a modern-day whale, the marine reptile quickly located its quarry, lurking above one of the searing thermal vents that connected the caldera lake with the surrounding sea. Jaws agape, it rushed in to seize and incapacitate its prey before it had the chance to flee. Unfortunately, the squid spotted its ancestral enemy at the last possible moment, and the carnivore's jaws ended up closing on a foul-tasting mouthful of ink instead.

Breaching the surface now with a deafening blast of water vapor, the god paused. Its huge flippers began to undulate, enabling it to hold its position as it scanned the surrounding area.

A series of low, throbbing sounds began to assail its sensitive outer ears. The pulses were amplified by the water, and thus easily absorbed. They were converted into signals—signals that triggered the memory regions of the predator's brain. There was something familiar about the repetitive thrumming... something that stimulated the creature's taste buds and adrenal glands.

It represented food.

With the pulsing sounds continuing to call to it, the pliosaur began to swim toward the source of the stimulating rhythm. It moved slowly at first, then faster. Then, a mile or so later, a new stimulus began to call to it. It was a tantalizing

scent and flavor, oozing enticingly through the water. The scent was quickly analyzed by the creature's stereoscopic olfactory system. It knew immediately not just what the familiar smell was, but also where it came from.

With a thunderous snort, the god began to travel even faster through the water, powerful strokes from all four of its paddles propelling it toward its destination. Soon, it reached full attack speed. It was ravenous now and oblivious to all else. Its entire being was focused on finding the source of the delightful taste it had discovered: the taste of blubber and blood.

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The funeral ritual had begun. Immersed to their knees in the seaweed-strewn water at the edge of the lake, the burly drummers pounded out a steady rhythm. Their booming bass tempo reverberated throughout the caldera, the bowl-shaped structure causing it to echo back and forth and amplifying it. From a distance, the sound was reminiscent of the pumping of an impossibly large heart. The lower portions of the tall, hide-covered drums the men used were embedded in the lake bottom, enabling them to transmit their signal directly into the water. The drummers, themselves, were soaked with perspiration, both from the oven-like heat of the day and the endless toiling of their calloused palms. Seemingly tireless, however, they labored on, their muscular brown frames glistening in the sun.

All around the northern edge of the lake, the crowd was gathered. As he stared down from his elevated hut, it appeared to Artek that the entire population of the island had gathered for the anticipated festivities. The old, the injured—even the nursing mothers were present.

It was a significant day for the fledgling chieftain. Besides the importance of the funerary ceremony in terms of uplifting the peoples' waning spirits, it also marked his ascension to power. It was his first official act as the new tribal leader and he wanted to make a lasting impression.

Casting a quick glance over his shoulder to make sure everything was in order, Artek paused to check his reflection in one of the wall-mounted, silvery canisters. He cocked his head to one side, adjusted his tall, feathered headdress, and then looked again. Satisfied with his appearance, the young shaman took a firm grip on his ornately carved staff and began the procession down toward the nearby dock.

Stretching out some sixty feet along a shallow point, until it submerged at the drop-off, the ten-foot-wide launching dock was anchored into the lake's sandy bottom via massive pilings, hand-hewn from the largest palm trees on the island. At the shore end of the dock, it connected to a forty-foot-wide deck of sturdy driftwood planks with a short set of sand-strewn steps leading up to it. Permanently set into the center of this deck was a huge, two-man winch, wound with heavy palm-frond rope as thick as a grown man's arm. Attached to the end of this cable and resting at the top of the downward-sloping dock was the raft.

With the sound of conch horns echoing all around, the funerary procession made its way along the baking sand and toward the deck. Artek led the way through the crowd, followed by the ten council elders and a score of acolytes, half-a-dozen of whom struggled mightily under the combined burden of the sacrificial throne and former shaman Nornak's colorfully ornamented corpse.

Stepping solemnly up onto the deck, Artek faced the expectant throng. He raised his staff for silence and then began his rehearsed speech. As his words rang out, he made it a point to catch and hold each and every listener's gaze in turn.

The young shaman had the gift of oratory, without a doubt. His deep voice resonated with comfort and reassurance, as he strove to allay his audience's fears that the gods were lost to them and that the spirits of the volcano would come to take them all. He hinted at the possibility that a few of the young godlings might have escaped the recent avalanche. Or, perhaps, there might be other secluded nurseries that the people didn't know about. Desperation was his eager ally and he soon had them enthralled. It was all smoke and mirrors, of course, but the people needed something to believe and to cling to. In truth, Artek thought mirthlessly, he wanted to believe it as much as they did.

His rhetoric complete, the young leader took a brief respite before gesturing for the throne to be brought up to the launching dock. The elders made way, moving to reserved spaces within the now jubilant crowd that gave them the best possible view for what was to come.

Carefully working their way up the creaking stairs and past the enormous winch, the struggling group of acolytes set the decorated chair and its deceased occupant down into pre-cut grooves in the raft, tying it in place with ropes already attached and removing the ones that bound the body in place.

The raft, or serving tray, as it was jokingly referred to by children and adolescents, was essentially a ten-foot by ten-foot wide platform of wood, resting atop a pair of huge, chiseled logs some twenty feet in length. The logs were tapered on the ends, giving them the appearance of wooden pontoons nearly three feet thick. Bridging these pontoons were one-foot-wide, three-inch-thick palm tree planks that were sturdily connected by means of lashings and heavy wooden dowels, hammered into place.

The raft's paired pontoons rested in well-worn grooves that ran the length of the dock like inverted railroad tracks, vanishing into the murky water. The raft was a gravity-based affair; the dock upon which it rested sloped intentionally downward, its angle increasing as it approached the deepwater drop-off.

The thick rope wound around the six-foot winch was primarily used to retrieve the raft—or what remained of it—after it served its purpose. The rope was attached to the raft's bow section, with the chair and its occupant facing the crowd. At the given moment, and via considerable manpower, the entire assembly was pushed backwards down the blubber-greased tracks, its speed increasing until mass and momentum took over and sent it careening down, to end up in the water with a tremendous splash.

The rest, as they said, was up to the gods.

Raising his hands for silence, Artek turned and studied the water behind him. The wind had finally died down and the foul-smelling mixture of seal blood and blubber had dissipated, leaving behind an oily stain that spread across the surface of the lake. There was no sign of their invited guest, but the shaman knew from past experience that the creature would come, probably soon. One thing about this particular god: when it came to its food, it was very predictable.

Turning back, Artek surveyed his audience. Suddenly, he espied Martika, mixed in with the elders in the front row. Unlike those of the rest of the crowd, her eyes

were not fixated on the lake, nor were they on him. She was staring up the beach at an ornate hut a few paces from his.

Artek's lips tightened and he frowned as he studied his promised bride. Finally, he shook his head and, with a heavy sigh, gestured to the nearest elder. It was time to initiate the portion of the ceremony he'd been dreading night and day.

The elder gave a quick bow and then turned away. He worked his way through the gathered throng, then turned up the path leading toward the huts and disappeared into the one beside Artek's. He emerged a short time later, accompanied by two towering guards. Between them was a woman of average height. She was ornately dressed, as if for a matching ceremony.

She was Rakela, Nornak's widow.

It was obvious even from the beach that the woman, despite being middle-aged, was still quite attractive and desirable. The now-hushed crowd parted as the elder and the three newcomers approached.

Artek studied Rakela as she was brought closer. She moved slowly yet with surprising steadiness. Although, as shaman, he could never say it aloud, he was impressed with both her stolidity and composure. Considering that her husband had just perished in the middle of the night, she demonstrated tremendous courage and devotion to their ways. Especially taking into account what was about to happen.

The guards and the elder stopped a few paces from the deck. Rakela paused and looked around, her tired eyes deftly searching the now-subdued crowd. Spotting Artek's promised bride, she smiled sadly, gesturing for her to approach. Martika moved quickly to Rakela's side, her stony exterior cracking and then crumbling. The two women embraced, holding each other tightly while exchanging quick, whispered words. With tears running down her face, Martika finally tore herself away. Then, with her eyes once more to the ground, she returned to her previous position.

Artek studied her intently. But Martika continued to avoid his gaze.

With a shrug of resignation, he stepped sideways on the deck and gestured for a nearby group of acolytes. The chosen four came forward and, with appropriate gentleness, took hold of Rakela's hands and arms, escorting her up the stairs.

Passing Artek, they guided her toward the raft.

As Nornak's widow, the law concerning Rakela was explicit. Unlike the bride of a normal member of the tribe, the life-mate of a chieftain or elder was considered irrevocably bound to her spouse, both in body and spirit. If her mate perished before her, as was often the case, the woman was not permitted to find a new partner. Rather, she found herself in the unfortunate position of being forced to join her deceased husband as he made his glorious final journey.

Along with her mate, she would be sacrificed to the gods.

As they reached the raft, Rakela turned one last time. She looked around, searching for and finding Artek. There was a long, unspoken moment between them as her sorrow-filled eyes bored into his. The young shaman met her gaze but then recoiled. He wasn't sure whether it was pity or disapproval he was seeing, perhaps both. Regardless, and despite himself, it was he who looked away.

Visibly shaken, Artek turned his back to the woman and faced the crowd once more. Behind him, Rakela allowed herself to be willingly tied to the raft. The

crowd, adrenalized by what they knew was coming, began to grow boisterous, and as he studied their collective faces the young chieftain suddenly realized something that struck him to his core.

Martika was staring at him. Or rather, she was *glaring* at him.

Glinting in the sun, her big blue eyes stood out from the crowd like brilliant aquamarines. Artek actually flinched as their gazes locked. It was not the fact that she was looking at him for the first time in twenty-four hours that unsettled him. Rather, it was what he read behind his promised one's stare that was so unnerving. It was a combination of two things. The first might have been described as wariness. The other was anger... mixed with loathing.

Averting his eyes, Artek sighed heavily. Regardless of his personal feelings, he had no choice in the matter at hand. He was the tribal leader now. His duty was his duty and the law was the law. He could not, and, more importantly, would not shirk his sworn responsibilities. In the young shaman's mind it was all very simple: The gods came first. Nornak had known it. Rakela knew it. And in her heart Martika did, too. It was the way of things.

Still, he should have seen it coming. Martika and Rakela had always held a tremendous fondness for one another. The older woman had doted on Artek's promised since she was a child and, after Martika's mother's passing, some ten years past, she had raised her as one of her own.

It was common knowledge that Martika's affection for Rakela was nothing short of love. And now she was watching Artek sentence her to death.

From the look on her face, he could tell that she would never forgive him for what he was about to do. Worse, she would never trust him enough to become his bride or even his consort.

Artek's burgeoning brow lines creased up at the thought. It was incredibly frustrating, but the young shaman was forced to admit that he couldn't blame Martika for despising him, or for distrusting him, either. After all, how could he?

The woman being secured to the raft was his own mother.

* * * * *

The god drew steadily closer. Cruising just under the water's surface, the huge creature had covered the four miles from the center of the lake to its northern tip in just over five minutes. The shoreline was in sight. Caution kicked in as the ten-thousand-foot depths beneath its scaled belly began to grow shallow and it slowed its approach. Moving stealthily forward, it remained submerged as it continued to follow the pungent trail of phocine blood.

Despite the fact that this particular god had, over the decades, devoured dozens of the bipedal mammals that, for some reason, seemed to willingly offer themselves to it, it continued to stalk even this most helpless of prey. The creature had learned to associate the strange, thrumming sounds with a readily available source of food, but when it came to hunting it could not be conditioned. Regardless of circumstance, its predatory instincts remained sharp and strong.

Five hundred yards out, the titan surfaced loudly for air. As it did, it both heard and felt the tremendous crash that signaled the entrance of prey into its aquatic domain. Displacing tens of thousands of gallons of seawater as it cruised forward, it closed the distance between itself and whatever waited.

* * * * *

The raft had been successfully launched. Backed by cheering crowds and a thunderous drum beat, the weighty construct had barreled noisily along down the dock's creaking tracks, building up speed until it and its passengers entered the lake with a watery explosion.

The backward-facing position of the dead shaman, along with the slender ropes that held him in place, had saved Nornak's corpse from the humiliation of being prematurely launched into the lake. His widow, however, had suffered far worse treatment. Even though she knew what to expect, Rakela's frightened grip failed her on impact and she was tossed, feet first, over the edge of the raft. Only the braided rope that tethered her to the back of the ceremonial chair kept her from slipping completely beneath the surface of the choppy green waters.

Kicking and clawing her way back onto the slippery platform, the battered woman rose awkwardly to her feet. She waited for the worst of the swaying to subside, then moved unsteadily forward on the raft. A moment later, she resumed her assigned position behind Nornak, her hands now resting on her dead husband's rigid shoulders. Leaning forward, she kissed the back of his head. Then, with her eyes closed and chin held high, she awaited her fate.

Artek could tell the wait would not be a long one. Moments earlier, he had spotted the distant spout of the approaching monster. As predicted, its senses had led it infallibly to its quarry. The god would arrive within moments to claim its prize.

With a quick signal to one of his acolytes, the shaman turned back toward the crowd. On cue, and not missing a beat, the drummers changed their rhythm from the pulsating heartbeat they had been steadily pounding out to an even louder, more regimented cadence. His muscular arms raised high overhead, Artek's powerful voice carried across the beach, leading the divine one's congregation as they began to chant its legendary name.

Gronn... Gronn... Gronn...

As if it heard them, the god-beast arrived. Surfacing next to the bobbing raft with a ferocity that sent waist-high waves surging up to scatter those on the beach, the creature revealed itself. Rakela's high-pitched scream was annihilated by the titan's throaty bellow as its scale-covered head rose up out of the water to the height of a tall palm tree. Streaming saltwater, its ruby-colored eyes blinked once as it gazed down at the insignificant life forms tied to the flimsy raft.

Rakela, previously calm, appeared to go insane with fear as she stared up at the face of her "god". She began to bite and gnaw at her bonds, yet at the same time seemed incapable of averting her eyes from the nightmarish apparition looming over her. Then, with a loud snort, the creature slipped back beneath the waves. On shore, the villagers held their collective breath as they waited for the spectacle to unfold.

Spurred on once the creature was no longer in view, Rakela worked feverishly to free herself. Using her tongue to add saliva to her already bloodied wrists, she managed to free one of her hands from its restraints just as the raft was bumped hard from below.

Caught off guard, Rakela was thrown roughly to the unforgiving wood. Her grunt of pain was punctuated by a loud splash. As she glanced toward the front of

the raft, she realized the chair she was tied to was now empty. Nornak was gone, propelled over the side by the impact. She could see his body bobbing on the surface fifty feet away, his plumed headdress protruding from the water like a peacock's crest.

Struggling to stand atop the bobbing platform, Rakela watched in horror as the god circled back toward Nornak. Its gigantic jaws, lined with dagger-like teeth, barely broke the surface as they opened in a nightmarish yawn. A split-second later, the creature swallowed the dead shaman whole and submerged from sight.

The crowd cheered.

Rakela's fear-widened eyes remained fixed on the swirling waters where her husband had just been. She began to violently tremble and clung desperately to the top of the ornate chair, squealing in terror as the raft was nudged again and again.

On shore, Artek and the villagers watched in grim silence.

Annoyed that its repeated attempts to dislodge the balance of its meal had failed, the pliosaur raised its toothy muzzle up out of the water in an effort to gauge Rakela's position. The pupil of its nearest eye dilated as it zeroed in on her. Then, with a sideways snap of its crocodile-like head, it attempted to envelope her in its jaws.

The scaly titan's sheer mass was its enemy at this point. The wall of water it displaced as it struck nearly upended the raft and it missed the shrieking woman by inches, crunching down on the ceremonial throne instead. There was a sharp cracking sound as it wrenched the weighty chair free, followed by a thunderous snap as it slammed its jaws together, reducing it to kindling. A rumble of displeasure escaped its scaly lips. Furious at being denied its intended snack, the pliosaur spat out the distasteful pieces of wood and submerged once more.

For long moments, the water remained calm. Then Rakela, teetering on the brink of insanity, suddenly realized she was free. The god's destruction of the throne had severed her remaining bonds. Soaked to the skin and bleeding from her nose and one ear, she made it back to her feet. She could feel the gnarled surface of the slippery wood between her toes as she fought to balance herself.

Eyes wide with dread and stammering uncontrollably, Rakela eyeballed the surface of the lake. There was no sign of the huge reptile. All of a sudden, a hundred yards away, the water began to churn across a large area. With a crazed look on her face, Rakela dropped down on all fours and dug her broken and bloodied nails into the floorboards of the ravaged raft as best she could. She gazed back at the shore, some forty yards away. The raft was still connected to the dock by the thick winch rope, but she knew there was no chance her tradition-obsessed son would order her to be brought back in.

Her fate was decided. At least as far as Artek and the elders were concerned.

As she closed her eyes and focused on clearing what remained of her mind, a cold fury unexpectedly descended upon Rakela. Her eyes scrunched up and her teeth clenched. She decided she was sick and tired of the hand fate had dealt her. Having seen the last god-beast up close, she began hatching a desperate-born plan.

Lying completely flat against the raft's bottom, she pressed herself tightly against the musty wood, willing herself to become one with it. Based on its

previous behavior, she reasoned that the god would probably bump the raft a few more times, perhaps even bite at it. However, once no edible offerings manifested themselves, the behemoth would weary of the game and swim back into the depths in search of more rewarding prey. At least she hoped it would.

If that occurred, their laws were explicit. The deity would have formally rejected its offering. Her life having been spared, Rakela would be a free woman once more. The tribe would have no choice but to accept her back, in accordance with long-standing tradition. It was a small chance, she knew, but it was the only one she had.

Unfortunately for her, the pliosaur had other ideas.

It had already seen the woman on the raft. It *knew* she was there. From the scent of her blood and urine in the water, to the heat her body generated, to the pitter-patting of her frantically-beating heart, every aspect of its myriad senses told it so. It merely had to figure out how to bring Rakela into its watery realm so she could be consumed.

Swimming directly under the raft, the god contemplated the thick cable suspended below it. In its predator's mind, the palm-frond rope was reminiscent of the tentacles of the giant squid it hunted. With a quick lunge, it seized the cable in its titanic jaws and gave it a downward wrench.

The raft was instantly inundated. There was an awful sound reminiscent of a tree toppling as it turned nose-down. A split-second later, it was pulled completely under, and Rakela with it. From their position of relative safety, the crowd on shore uttered a collective gasp as their neighbor's tiny sanctuary was torn out from under her. For a brief moment, many of the onlookers, sympathizing with her plight and deducing her plan, had clung to the hope that their god-beast might actually spare her.

They knew now that was not to be the case.

Fighting her way free from the sunken raft's powerful pull, Rakela surfaced, sucking in desperate breaths. She wasted no time and made for the safety of the shore. She swam with adrenalized strength, her weary limbs flailing frantically at the water in a last-ditch attempt to stave off the agonizing death she knew was coming for her.

And it was. Turning gracefully in the direction of the delectable morsel that had, thus far, managed to evade it, the god closed on its slow-moving victim. Just beneath the surface it came, its jaws agape, the distance between them narrowing with frightening speed. One hundred feet shrank to fifty... then to nothing...

Bone-weary but paddling with every ounce of strength she had, Rakela could feel the water pressure change as the giant jaws surrounded her. She knew now there was no escape. Resigned to her fate, she closed her eyes, waiting for the crushing demise of a hundred spears penetrating her body.

Then the explosion struck.

Chapter 3

Nine miles away from Diablo Caldera, a submerged stratovolcano erupted with astonishing force, sending scalding clouds of seawater and ash over ten miles up into the atmosphere. The marine volcano's bursting magma reservoirs—linked directly with those of the caldera—exploded into the surrounding sea in a searing mass of lava that killed tens of thousands of fish and marine mammals before cooling.

All but ignored by volcanologists on nearby Cuba, the two neighboring volcanoes had been stable for eons, their systems interconnected by vast, subterranean lava tubes. A thousand centuries earlier, the largest of these formed a wide fault line that collapsed part of the overlying stone that formed Diablo's exposed slopes. It even managed to fracture the ancient caldera's heavily eroded, lip-like shell, forming a visible crevice.

Far the larger of the two, magmatic pressure from Diablo's growing reservoir had escalated until, finally, eruption was inevitable. The main eruption vent occurred not at Diablo, however, but at the submerged volcano, which had been slowly draining away the larger, older one's magma reservoirs. The effect on the caldera, however, was dramatic. The remaining, crater-like depression, with vertical rock walls that towered five hundred feet above sea level, suffered a sudden loss of structural support as a result of the sudden removal of such tremendous volumes of magma.

In geological terms, the result was simple: With thunderous fury, Diablo Caldera started to collapse in on itself. Then, its already ruptured outer wall—the one closest to the neighboring volcano—split violently apart. In an instant, the ocean rushed in and, with tsunami-like force, inundated the bowl-shaped island's Cretaceous-era lake.

After sixty-five million years, the sea had reclaimed its own.

* * * * *

Artek was running for his life. Despite the deafening shower of rock and stone, he could still hear the cries of his people as everything they knew and loved was destroyed by the unseen spirits. The dark forces were cunning and had chosen the funeral ceremony as the time to strike.

The god must have sensed its enemies' intentions at the last possible moment, as it spun off from its attack on his mother just as it was about to consume her. Instead, the monstrous beast abandoned its meal and plunged powerfully into the depths, to face the tribe's hereditary nemeses head-on.

Hidden from view, the titans were clashing with phenomenal force.

For Artek and the villagers, it was Judgment Day. The very walls of the caldera began collapsing in on them, burying their homes and anyone inside them under thousands of tons of searing rock. The section bordering the crevice had been the first to go. Before the shaman's astonished eyes it split apart, forming an immense trough that extended all the way to the sea. The ocean needed no encouragement, and with a thunderous hiss came crashing in, eager to merge the lake's saltwater with its own.

Artek uttered a pain-filled grunt as he was pitched sideways and ended up on a jagged pile of rocks. He clutched at his side and grimaced, cursing at the realization that the impact had cracked, or perhaps even broken, some ribs. He

caught a glimpse of Martika, struggling to pull an exhausted Rakela from what was rapidly becoming a giant, bubbling cauldron. While the remainder of the people had fled to the refuge of their homes, Artek's promised had dove into the steaming water in a fearless attempt to rescue her adopted mother.

Painfully regaining his feet, Artek realized this attack was by far the worst he'd ever seen. All around them, the water was rising, even as the walls came crumbling down. Next, the ground below everyone's feet began splitting apart, forming wide chasms that revealed the fiery bowels of the earth, an inferno the likes of which he had never imagined.

As he turned toward what remained of his hut, Artek was distracted by a high-pitched scream. He turned back, just in time to see Martika and his mother holding one another as the section of beach surrounding them fractured into a spider's web of smoking fissures. The tribal leader's familial instincts finally resurfaced, and he managed three stumbling steps in their direction before the terrified pair, still clinging desperately to each other, fell shrieking into a burning chasm and were gone.

Dumbfounded, Artek cast desperately about. He knew that this was the end for all of them. What was left of the village was wreathed in flames, the remainder entombed. He turned toward his fiercely burning home and broke into a run, the hot ground beneath him shifting dangerously as he did. Giant chunks of red-hot stone began to cascade all about him and he stumbled repeatedly over the broken bodies of those he had known all his life. His body began to be wracked by uncontrollable coughing, and the shaman realized a blanket of thick, gray smoke was settling over the dying caldera. He was rapidly losing both visibility and the ability to breathe.

Racing to his hut with a speed matched only by his terror, Artek reached for a hand-carved dugout canoe resting against an outside wall, then turned back toward the lake. Suddenly, there was a tremendous roar, a magnitude louder even than the devastation that was already deafening him. His gaze was torn from the raging body of water that was their god's home, to where the crevice had been. The entire outer wall was gone, collapsed into the surrounding sea, and the ground beneath it had dropped hundreds of feet more. The ocean was filling the caldera right before his eyes. In mere moments, their island home would be no more.

Despite the pain in his side, Artek managed to press the heavy canoe overhead and carried it like a makeshift shield. Moving like a man possessed, he rushed through a heavy downpour of lethal debris, toward the churning waves that continued to spill over the vanishing beaches and clawed their way up the crumbling slopes. The seawater was unrelenting and unstoppable, pouring into molten chasms with tremendous hisses as it flooded its way across the fractured ground.

The choking smoke was everywhere. Despite its obscurity, Artek could still hear the cries of the wounded and the dying. He ran blindly now, ignoring them. He could not stop. He would not. Fear had completely consumed him. Fear and the overpowering desire to live. Still staggering under the canoe's weight and the unstable footing, he suddenly spotted one of the elders through the obscuring vapors. He was looking for a way out and leading a young boy by the hand.

Without hesitation, Artek moved to the older man's side and started shouting instructions. The cleric appeared uninjured, but he was clearly dazed by the nightmare that had enfolded them all.

Pushing the frightened child roughly aside, Artek screamed in the elder's ear, then grabbed him and shook him until he finally came to his senses. Assigning him the rear end of the canoe and with the boy struggling to keep up, the injured shaman led the way through a downfall of red-hot shrapnel, along the ragged slopes. Their only hope lay in reaching the comparative safety of the sea.

Just then, a sudden movement caught Artek's eye. Looking back, he watched through a veil of smoke as what remained of his ornate hut was leveled like a pile of twigs by a moving mountain of smoldering rock. The superheated avalanche washed over it and kept on going, pushing the shattered structure all the way into the lake until it vanished beneath the swollen waters.

Frantically striving to keep his wits about him, Artek stepped agilely over a rapidly-widening gap in the ground ahead. He took two more steps, then grunted in surprise as he found himself being pulled unexpectedly off-balance and backwards. As he glanced back, he saw the child was gone. Worse, the elder behind him had lost his footing on the crumbly earth and was beginning to teeter toward the chasm Artek had just avoided. Dropping his end of the canoe, the shaman lunged for the old man's hand.

He was too late. The elder's equilibrium was gone and he tumbled helplessly over the edge. For a moment, he seemed suspended and clawed hysterically at the air. Then he plunged into the bowels of the earth and was gone. Scarlet and black flames as high as the highest of trees roared straight up from the place where he had fallen, the heat they generated so hot that the surrounding air became stifling. Forced back by the fire, Artek recoiled as the nauseating stench of burning human flesh filled his lungs.

He knew then that he was in hell.

Wiping at rivulets of brownish blood that oozed from his scorched nostrils, the shaman picked up his little boat and staggered painfully on. Smoke from the collapse had all but blinded him, and his breath came in ragged gasps from the harsh grit and dust that was rapidly clogging his lungs. He stumbled like a drunkard, lost his footing on the heaving ground, and finally collapsed atop the canoe. If it wasn't for the pain in his side, he might have lost consciousness.

Suddenly, a loud splashing sound made it past the piercing whining that filled his ears. Artek crawled forward and began to run his hands up along the canoe's rough flanks, toward its prow. Seconds later, he was rewarded with the undeniable feel of lukewarm water.

Hope and his heart started pounding wildly in his chest. He had reached the lake. Now he had a chance.

With his hands grasping his canoe's sturdy lip, Artek waded to mid-thigh in the rising water and then leaned forward to launch his craft. A disbelieving smile creased his dust-caked features. The nightmare would soon be over. Martika was gone, but he was going to make it. It was the will of the gods.

Then, Artek's world turned black and scarlet.

The jagged hunk of rock wasn't particularly large—perhaps the size of a fist—but its velocity was deadly. Smashing into the young shaman's lower back with

the force of a swung sledgehammer, the stony missile shattered Artek's spine. His vocal-chord-straining scream became an asphyxiated gurgle as the stone's impact propelled him forward, pushing him face-first beneath the turbulent waters. His legs went numb and his footing was lost. Slipping forward with the surging current, the wounded shaman found himself helplessly adrift in deep water. Only his death grip on the canoe's gunnels kept him from sinking.

A moment later, Artek lifting his head up out of the sulfurous lake and sucked in an agonizing breath. He started to move, then clamped his jaw tightly closed to keep from shrieking. The pain in his back was exquisite. It felt as if a red-hot harpoon had been thrust completely through his body, torqued from side to side, and then pulled back out again.

On the verge of hyperventilating, Artek tried to hoist one knee up over the edge of the canoe so he could pull himself aboard. He was rewarded with even more pain, if that was possible, but that was all. His legs would not respond.

The stunned shaman knew then that his back was broken. As he held on for dear life, Artek realized that the tiny canoe was his only possible salvation. He had to get away from the caldera and outside, to open water. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he made a desperate lunge and managed to seize the dugout's opposite side. He stopped to rest, his head hanging, his breath coming in shuddering sobs.

Panic began to whisper warnings in Artek's ear. If he couldn't drag himself out of the water soon he would pass out and drown. It was inevitable. For a moment, he just hung on, his limp body suspended in the water, his forehead resting against the canoe's cool outer hull. More and more, the hopelessness of his situation grated at him. Through the smoke, he could hear loud hissing splashes as more fiery missiles plunged into the nearby lake.

Suddenly, a cold rage filled Artek's rapidly-beating heart. His face contorted with undisguised fury and his head snapped up. He sucked in a deep breath, uttered a guttural roar of defiance, and then flung himself forward. Miraculously, he somehow gained additional purchase on the inside of the canoe. Arm muscles bulging, the wounded priest dragged his useless legs over the craft's rough edges and collapsed inside its comforting interior.

Chest heaving, Artek lay there, wallowing in pain, but happy just to be alive. He sensed the canoe drifting on the water, but he was incapable of caring. The pain of his collective injuries was just too great. Endorphins began to flood his body and he sank into a state of semi-delirium. Time lost all meaning.

Gradually, the howling wind died down and the smoke and sounds of the eruption started to dissipate. As he glanced up at the reddened sky, the wounded shaman realized his canoe was outside the caldera now. He could feel it swaying gently on the waves, like a child nestled in its mother's arms. Barely conscious, he propped himself up on one arm and dizzily surveyed the devastation.

The village was gone, wiped away as if it had never existed. The entire twenty-thousand-year history of his lost tribe had been eradicated in minutes. As he studied the broken bodies that dotted the surface of the water, Artek knew with dreadful certainty that there would be no other survivors. Soon, even the island itself would be gone from sight.

Truly, the evil spirits under the mountain had triumphed. Both the tribe and the last of the gods that warded them were gone.

All of a sudden, Artek's sixteen-foot canoe began to wobble from side to side. Looking fearfully down into the water, he spotted several large, ghostly forms speeding by under his boat. Despite his tremendous suffering he managed a feeble smile. It was a handful of the giant fish and squid that made the lake their home, fleeing into the open sea. At least something had survived.

Then, the familiar sound of a blast of water vapor turned Artek's sad smile into a hoarse cheer of joy. There, breaching the surface a hundred yards away, was the god.

The great beast had survived the final, epic battle, just as the prophecies had foretold. Artek's vision clouded and tears streamed non-stop down his filth-encrusted cheeks as he watched the magnificent creature make its way toward the welcoming deep. It began to build up speed until he could just make out its broad back: a blue-gray islet, awash amid the swells. A moment later, it submerged completely and was gone.

Lying back, Artek decided to close his eyes and rest. A welcome breeze kicked up, clearing the air and dissipating the heat of the day, and the creaking of the canoe's hull as it floated along was a veritable lullaby. He adjusted the position of his weary head against the hard wood and, in seconds, drifted off into a deep and dreamless slumber.

The shaman lay there for untold hours, he and his tiny craft floating along, two insignificant specks on the infinite sea. Taking advantage of the respite, his broken body struggled mightily to fight back against his horrific injuries and the strain of his ordeal. It was a losing battle, however, and a high fever soon came over him. Soaked with sweat, he began to hallucinate about fire and stones and screams and water...

Water.

Drawn back from the chaos of his fevered dreams, Artek felt a cool wetness beginning to envelope his arms and back. He raised a hand to his face and discovered it was soaked. Alarmed, he fought to raise his aching head and looked down. What he saw filled him with horror.

There was water in the boat.

The leak must have been caused by a falling stone that punched clean through the canoe's thin, wooden hull. The hole was by his feet and must have been tiny, or he would have sunk already. He'd been so distracted by the pain of his wounds and the overall catastrophe that he hadn't noticed it. Nor had he felt the seawater inundating his paralyzed legs until it reached his still sensitive upper body.

Artek quickly analyzed his situation. There was several inches of water in the canoe and the bow was beginning to dip from the added weight. Without intervention, his tiny lifeboat would be awash in minutes.

The situation was perilous, to say the least. Being made of more-or-less positively buoyant wood, the leaf-shaped boat would probably not sink from sight, but Artek knew he would be unable to right it once it foundered. Nor would he have the strength to cling to its submerged hull for very long.

Stifling a scream as he hauled himself into an upright position, Artek slid his partially-paralyzed body down the canoe's length by pushing and pulling against its gunnels. The prow dipped dangerously as he shifted his weight forward and he hesitated. He had to be careful. Too much mass or movement would cause the

bow to go completely under. Once that happened the fragile craft would fill in seconds.

After settling carefully in place, Artek began to feel gingerly about beneath the water, searching for the leak. He had just found it when something nearby caught his eye. It was something beneath the surface of the water... something dark.

Whatever it was, it had vanished from sight.

Dismissing what was presumably just another drifting piece of wreckage, Artek went to work. With a grimace, he tore a long strip of his loincloth free and began to bunch it into a tight ball, hoping to plug the hole and delay the intruding water.

Then he saw the shark.

It was a tiger—a big one, perhaps seventeen feet in length and weighing over three thousand pounds. Its two-foot dorsal fin moved silently along, slicing through the surface of the water like a knife. The arch predator was searching the floating debris field for the bodies its phenomenal sense of smell assured it were present. Tiger sharks were well known to the people of the caldera. They were aggressive and deadly and would eat anything they could sink their saw-like teeth into. Fish, seabirds, and even hard-shelled sea turtles were on their list of edible items.

They were also fond of dead bodies. Live ones, too, Artek thought grimly.

Unaware of his presence, the big fish circled the area, stopping every now and then to mouth an object to see if it was edible. Tearing his gaze away from the potential threat, the crippled shaman resumed the painful task of plugging the leak in what could easily become his coffin. Carefully pressing one hand flat around the hole, Artek brought his makeshift plug to bear. He pushed gently, trying to squeeze the tight wad of cloth into the tiny opening. The hole, he discovered, was just a tad too small.

A spike of panic shot through him. The water inside the canoe was reaching a critical point. Moving hurriedly, he readjusted his patch into a tighter, point-like shape, and shoved it forcibly into the tight opening. Once the leak was plugged, he would simply scoop out the rest of the water by hand and then decide what to do from there. Perhaps, if he paddled further out to sea, he might be lucky enough to encounter one of the mysterious white boats.

He was still pondering the idea when his hand went right through the hull.

Unaware of the deteriorated condition of the canoe's outer layer, Artek had exerted too much pressure. The thumbnail-sized hole in his craft was now the size of a melon. Paralyzed with shock and dismay and unable to stop the instant deluge, the young priest sat there in a stupor as the boat swamped and went down nose-first.

Only the cool dunking snapped him back to reality.

Screaming hoarsely, Artek lashed out at the surface in a frantic attempt to stay afloat. He was desperate. His legs were useless and he knew his arms would tire quickly. Once that happened, he would sink like a stone. His head swiveled hard on his shoulders as he searched for his overturned canoe. He spotted it ten yards away, upside-down and drifting. Although he knew that clinging to its fractured hull would buy him but a few extra minutes, his animalistic desire to live would not allow him to give up hope.

After settling on a modified dog paddle, the partially-paralyzed shaman struggled to make it through the swells, toward his foundered craft. Waves smacked him repeatedly in the face and he nearly drowned from inhaling seawater. Still, he would not give up. Ignoring the unbearable pain of his broken body, he concentrated on making those last few yards to the canoe. Foot by foot, inch by inch, he doggedly closed the distance.

He was almost there when the shark hit.

He didn't feel the actual bite. Paralyzed limbs didn't transmit pain impulses. But the tremendous tug that pulled him under was unmistakable. Regaining the surface with a sputtering gasp, Artek vomited bile and brine. His terror-stricken eyes were the size of saucers as he gazed in every possible direction. For some unknown reason, the shark had let go after its initial attack. Then, as he noticed the rapidly expanding cloud of crimson that surrounded him, he reached down to feel his useless legs and discovered why.

His right leg was gone. It had been bitten off just below the knee.

Shrieking in pain and horror, Artek thrashed wildly on the surface, still focused on reaching his doomed craft. Had he known that his flailing would only serve to entice the big fish further he might have been calmer, but he was already slipping into shock from loss of blood.

The tiger returned, cruising closer and closer. Defenseless now, Artek found himself growing steadily dizzier. It was hard to think and his movements were becoming jerkier by the second. He spotted something dark right beside him and spun in its direction, thinking it was his attacker.

Suddenly, a powerful wave of nausea and lightheadedness swept over him. His movements slowed, then ceased altogether, and he found it increasingly difficult to think. He could feel the blackness creeping over him as he slipped silently below the surface.

Watching powerlessly as the last of his air bubbles rose lazily toward the light, the mortally wounded shaman found himself face to face with the strange, black object he'd spotted earlier. He thought it was the shark, but it wasn't. As he gaped at it, fascination flooded his oxygen-starved brain. It appeared vaguely manlike in shape. As it loomed closer, its arms spread wide, as if it was reaching out to embrace him.

At the last moment, Artek realized the ultimate irony. It was one of the black, rubbery suits worn by the two strangers he and his people had sacrificed to the gods, years earlier. Dislodged from his demolished home and set adrift, the garment had come back for him.

A drowned chuckle slipped from the dying shaman's mouth as the windows of his eyes faded slowly to black. He could just make out the enormous shark as it closed on him. Jaws agape, the hungry predator plowed right through the drifting wetsuit and hammered into its helpless victim.

Mercifully, Artek lost consciousness before he was disemboweled.

