

The LOCH: Heaven's Lake

by

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This novel is dedicated to

Kelly Rollyson

An amazing assistant,
a dedicated MEGhead,
and a true friend.

PROLOGUE

Lake Vostok, Antarctica
Post Mid-Miocene Warming
14.6 million years ago

It was easily the largest body of fresh water on the continent, stretching 160 miles from east to west, its north-south shoreline set 37 to 50 miles apart. The lake was also quite deep, its basin—shaped like an oblong doughnut—plunging 1,100 feet around a central rise which broke the surface to form two small islands linked by a shallow everglade which ran parallel to the lake's two forest-covered shorelines for nearly sixteen miles.

Two million years ago the valley had been a massive magma chamber known as a super volcano or caldera, and when it erupted it had ejected nearly half a million square miles of ash into the atmosphere. This triggered a brief greenhouse effect which raised global temperatures six degrees and ushered in a rare Antarctic spring that became known as the Mid-Miocene warming.

Over the next 400,000 years rainwater and glacial runoff from the snowcapped mountain range which occupied the valley's southwestern horizon eventually filled the basin, giving the lake's crystal-clear waters an emerald-green tinge. But it was the lake's two island refuges and the temperate marsh that linked them which supported an abundance of unusual foliage and prehistoric wildlife.

Bizarre trees rose out of the mangroves, their smooth copper-colored trunks balancing on fingerlike roots. Functioning more as a bird perch than a means of shade, the growth split into a pair of thick horizontal branches, each twisted appendage reaching out like arms across the

waterlogged, insect-infested terrain, the limbs supported by their own sets of roots. Thermophilic bacteria kept swarms of horseflies slow and plump, the buzzing grape-size insects laying their eggs in clumps before being plucked out of the air by the beaks of gray and pink seabirds.

A deepwater stream wound its way across the landscape, the waterway forged when cooling magma had split open into a chasm before the basalt rock could solidify. A frenzy of predatory trout leapt blindly from the olive-green waterway at the banquet of flies, their sharp fangs skewering three or four at a time. Occasionally one of the five-foot fish's barbed teeth would latch onto an unintended beak or wing, the eighty pound fish dragging the protesting bird into the frothing stream with it.

Farther downstream, the waterway widened into a deepwater pond populated by the island's largest mammals—a herd of Stellar sea cows known as Sirenia. Three times the size of manatees, an average adult could grow to thirty-three feet in length and weigh ten to twelve tons. Most of that was fat stored in their rotund bellies. The females were half the size of their counterparts and were divided into harems of fifteen to twenty cows and their assorted young. Two mature bulls and an adolescent male managed to sire a dozen young each mating season.

Only one in six calves survived to birth their own young.

Primarily herbivores, the Sirenia fed in the pond's shallows by day off an entanglement of surface vegetation which descended as thick curtains of kelp. The pond was relatively safe during the day but at night the mammals retreated into a labyrinth of underwater caves—the island's two apex predators being nocturnal, both drawn by the pungent scent of their warm-blooded quarry.

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Small waves lapped along a shoreline of mud. Farther inland dry sand gave way to tall

weeds bordering an everglade—the habitat of *Purussaurus*.

The super-croc emerged from the swamp, her belly flattening sharp strands of sawgrass growing along the edge of the wetland. Forty feet from snout to tail, she weighed in at a solid 14,000 pounds. Her mate was quite a bit larger; their species more closely resembling their bulkier modern-day cousin the saltwater crocodile than the extinct *Sarcosucchus*, a longer caiman but nowhere near as fearsome – the *Purussaurus* jaw able to deliver a bite force greater than a T-Rex.

The female paused, allowing the water to channel down her thickly scaled back as she raised her snout to the unusually cool midday air. For a time she remained statuesque, listening for disturbances in the glade, her keen sense of smell searching for any unwanted challengers.

Three month had passed since the pregnant caiman had deposited more than fifty eighteen-inch-long speckled brown eggs into the six-foot-deep trench she had dug in the soft sand by the lake's shoreline. Tonight's full moon would crack open the hatchlings' shells and she would be there, her hind quarters digging – her young following the vibrations to the surface.

Flies swarmed, landing on her eyes and nostrils. Insects buzzed. Birds chirped and screeched; a chorus of wings taking flight.

In the distance she heard a low guttural growl.

Opening her mouth, the *Purussaurus* answered her mate and then continued on, heading for the shoreline, the afternoon sun low in the sky, the temperature dropping.

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The super-crocs had only one challenger in the ancient lake and it was as deadly as they came—a reptile whose ancestors had crossed the land bridge that had briefly connected Antarctica with South America before the last ice age had sent the cold blooded creatures

underground.

The brown and yellow diamond-shape head moved silently along the surface of the glade, the predator's soulless black eyes and nostrils positioned atop its skull to allow it to swim without exposing the rest of its girth to its quarry. Reaching the water's edge, its head and neck rose upon its forward haunches, its eyes peering out among the cattails. A narrow forked tongue slid from out of its mouth to flick the cool late afternoon air—

--the sensory organ immediately detecting the female *Purussaurus* by its chemical trail.

A direct descendant of the monstrous carnivore that ruled the wetlands of South America tens of millions of years ago, the *Titanoboa* was sixty-feet-long from its flaring nostrils to the tip of its serpent's tail. Its mid-section was as thick as a tree trunk, its muscular coil pulling three tons through the muddy bog.

The killer snake's head emerged from the tall weeds, its body hydroplaning along the lake's shoreline, its undulating form leaving behind overlapping parallel lines in the wet sand. Tracking the caiman's scent trail, the serpent spotted the big croc twenty yards inland. Poised on all fours, it was straddling a patch of soft sand, its green eyes appearing slightly crossed in a trance-like state.

The Boa moved closer, its tongue flicking in defiance mere inches from the croc's snout—the two apex predators' muscles coiled like tight springs—each waiting for the other to strike first.

Retracting its tongue into the sheath located along the inside of its lower jaw, the *Titanoboa* opened its mouth and released a long, deep *hissssss*.

In a fraction of a heartbeat, *Purussaurus* went from sedentary to full attack mode as it launched itself at the source of the disturbance. Barely missing the serpent's retreating head, the

caiman's powerful jaws clamped down upon a section of the serpent's neck and whipped its own skull back and forth from side to side with such voracity and power that the snake's entire sixty-foot-frame went airborne, its overlapping sections jerked one way and then the next.

The entire expenditure of energy lasted less than twenty seconds, ending with the serpent landing in a heap of twisted coils. More disoriented than injured, the distressed serpent attempted to unfurl itself—

—the movement further antagonizing the already agitated croc. Lunging at the source, *Purussaurus* bit into a thicker midsection of torso and once again flung the big snake from side to side like a rabid dog, its energy bottoming out before it could fling the serpent back to the tall grass and away from its nest.

Spent, the caiman eased its weight onto its haunches, its belly resting in the cool mud, its powerful jaws clenched tight around its enemy's midsection. Unable to draw blood from the dense appendage, *Purussaurus* eased the tension in its thick jowls—

—bitin harder the moment it felt its enemy attempt to pull itself free.

Its plan of attack momentarily delayed, the boa engaged a diversionary tactic. Curling the tip of its tail into a tight ball, the snake raised it over the right side of the croc's head and caused the knot to dance in the big reptile's peripheral vision, baiting it.

Mistaking the ball of flesh for its enemy's head, *Purussaurus* released the coil in its teeth to snatch the lump of skin from the cool dusk air, catching it in the deep right pocket of its jaws—the most powerful section of its hinged mouth.

With its torso now free, *Titanoboa* rose on its haunches, its black eyes examining the battlefield as it maneuvered its midsection around the croc's belly and over its scale-covered back. Tightening its coils along the base of the croc's skull, it pinched its foe's carotid arteries,

stopping the flow of blood and oxygen to its brain.

Caught in a pretzel-shaped pattern of tightening limbs, the *Purussaurus* immediately launched itself into a barrel roll, a maneuver it used underwater to drown sea cows. Instead, it found itself belly-up in the dry sand, held belly-up in the Boa's crushing embrace. A cold numbing sensation made its way up its thick tail into its hindquarters, the caiman unable to move as blood ceased flowing into its extremities.

Cradling its victim, *Titanoboa* felt its foe go still, the croc's life force draining into paralysis. The battle over, the serpent began its own transformation.

Stretching its neck so that its head was positioned in front of the crocodile's burly snout, the snake stretched its jaws open a full 180 degrees, causing the skin around its neck to form a hood. Placing its upper jaw over the tip of the croc's nostrils—the lower around the caiman's lower jaw—it slowly began to work its mouth sack over the still-breathing prey's closed jaws.

Only two other species born on this planet possessed a bite as powerful as *Purussaurus*. One was *Dunkleosteus*, a long extinct ocean predator of the Devonian; the other was *Charcharodon megalodon*, a seventy-foot ancestor of the Great White shark which shared the Miocene with the super-croc. But while the caiman's thickly muscled jaw was designed to close with incredible force upon its adversaries, reopening its mouth was another story—the hinge held shut by a mere few pounds of pressure. And this was the reason *Titanoboa* hunted far larger crocodilian and consumed them snout-first—no matter how big it was, once a Caiman entered its gullet the battle was over.

Paralyzed in its enemy's crushing embrace, the last thing the seven-ton super-croc saw before its head was swallowed was the full moon as it slipped behind a cloud bank—
—its gravitational pull causing the eighteen inch oblong eggs buried in the soft sand to

reverberate.

Purussaurus heard its young calling for help. Through clenched jaws, the Big Mama croc unleashed a deep guttural growl from the back of its throat—directing its hatchlings to the surface even as its host squeezed and guided its skull down its outstretched food pipe on its one-way journey to Hell.

The boa constrictor's insides stretched wider to accommodate its meal's broad back, its internal muscles pushing the caiman's snout deeper inside its gullet. Hot digestive juices scorched the trapped croc's nostrils and head as its head entered the serpent's stomach.

And then it stopped.

For a long moment predator and prey remained motionless as *Purussaurus'* clawed hindquarters dug into the dry sand, the tortured reptile refusing to go any farther.

A patient killer, *Titanoboa* waited for its stomach acids to burn through the caiman's thick, scale-encrusted hide—

—when the massive snake suddenly felt a tearing sensation inside its anus and cloaca, the killer serpent's knotted tail still caught inside the croc's sealed jaws!

By consuming *Purussaurus*, *Titanoboa* had inadvertently eaten itself tail-first!

Venturing forward was no longer an option; there was no slack left in its looping body to drag either way and snakes do not possess a reverse gear.

The two entangled foes exchanged muffled grunts and weak tugs, both predators suffering, neither willing to release its grip on the other—an action that would have freed them both. Instead, they would have to wait until the other animal died.

And so they grunted and groaned ... and suffered.

Hap...hap.

Hap...hap.

The hatchlings had found their mother. Twenty-two inches from snout to tail, the newborn killers scurried over their partially digested parent, nipping at her exposed hindquarters with their sharp triangular teeth. As temperatures dropped precariously, a few baby crocs even managed to squeeze in between “mom” and her assailant while the rest found their way to the warmth of the glade—

—most would be consumed before dawn.

A heavy sleet turned to snow, burying the valley sometime around midnight as the Antarctic continent continued its 40 million year journey to the South Pole, its Eastern glacier sheet gradually burying the ancient lake beneath miles of ice ...