

GROK AND THE NIGHT OF THE LOONS, 499,992 BC-
(another story about cavemen)
By Paul Lambrecht

Grok went to check on Milos and his young family. They lived by themselves in the woods. Milos's wife, Mary, was a suspicious and craven shrewish woman. In their hut of sticks, whenever a visitor appeared, she was paralyzed in her tracks. When the visitor left, she returned to her compulsive shufflings, aimlessly absorbed by her four cubs and other assorted chores. Milos was a good man though. Had been an exceptional hunter once, before he'd taken off into the woods.

Grok was in the woods near the lake, which was down the hill from the hut. He was surrounded by thick undergrowth and scrubby brush. Dense pockets of wrist-thick alders. A pair of eyes were watching Grok from the forest. He felt the eyes searching him over, on his skin like heat. Grok felt the gaze relax as he loosened his bowels for the final push. He grunted appreciatively, unburdened, and splashed his hands in a nearby puddle. The eyes belonged to an ancient curious intelligence. Grok picked his way through the thigh-high ferns to the edge of the lake shore. He saw a lone loon on the lake, red-eyed and metallic-blue feathered. He watched the loon glide back and forth scanning the waves beneath the surface and periodically diving beneath the waves. Suddenly more loons were landing on the lake. More and more and lots more.

The loons came by the thousands to meet in the middle of the lake. Before each was allowed to land he had to fly over the already gathered mob and present his plumed underbelly to them all.

If the other loons granted their approval of the candidate by flapping their wings on the water, the loon was permitted to land. Then he seamlessly melded in with the mob.

Grok had never seen such a thing from a supposedly stupid bird.

Past a certain point, no more birds were allowed to land. They flew off, most likely to some other lake. The birds on the lake now formed themselves into a big open ring. They neatly encompassed a darn near perfect circle, as large as the near and far shores would allow. Then into the middle of this open circle, descended a strange large red loon, red as a cardinal.

The red loon stood about a foot taller than the rest of the sleek blue-black loons on the perimeter. There was a long silence, then several minutes of rhythmic wing-pounding on the water, then the large red loon let out an enormous shriek. Grok clapped his ears closed. He was starting to feel a little afraid now. He doubted the birds wanted a witness to their seance.

Now the large red loon tore back and forth in the open circle, splashing up water and churning up foam.

The large red loon then plunged under the surface of the waves and didn't emerge for a long time.

When he did finally emerge, he had a silver fish shimmering and flapping drooping from the edges of his beak.

The other loons bashed on the water with their wings again.

The large red loon now started at one part of the circle, and paddled past all of the loons, who stickled up to attention, their highest height, and he observed their appearance and decorum with the fish in his mouth, still squirming.

Grok was crunched down in the mud, obscured by reeds, as the large red loon approached his portion of the circle. He experienced a tingling in the pit of his backside when the loon was just before him, large, crimson as a coxcomb, impressive.

He tried even harder not to be seen, not to exist, yet he couldn't look away from the scarlet-feathered beast before him. His ruffled vermillion feathers.

There was a storm now coming out of the north. It settled down over their heads and beat rain down on them. Lightning clattered against the swirling wispy clouds and deep black canvas of stars, as sharp and clear as a pair of glistening eyes.

And then it was suddenly very cold. The loons stood still and stoic throughout the storm, bravely enduring the pelting rain. Grok couldn't be sure if this was part of

the ritual or not. But the storm was soon gone and the sky and air were fresh and clean, but it was still cold.

And then there was a tremendous crashing noise and a large flare across the vault of the heavens. The enormous ball of light roaring beyond their heads looked like the devil offspring of a sun and moon pairing. Grok's hair stood straight up, his eyes agog, peeled like potatoes from their skins by the spectacle.

The loons now bashed their wings in the water appreciatively. Shockwaves and sonic booms rumbled the water and the trees and the sky now.

The large red loon was nowhere to be seen. Out of the corner of his eye, Grok saw a flash of silver, temporarily distracting his gaze from the loud meteor above. There was a maimed fish flopping in the mud and reeds. The only thing more Grok saw that night was a jumping flash of red feathers, and heard a doleful song from the loons ushering him into oblivion like a lullaby.

When he woke up it was day again, and the lake was bare and empty.

There was a sea of red feathers about. He must have fought the beast a long time, but he hadn't won. No loon carcass to be seen anyhow. That would have been a trophy. Instead he gathered up a few feathers.

They'd never believe this story back home.

He showed the red feathers to Milos the next day. Milos pointed to the sky and made a deep-throated roar and made the symbol of a ball with his arms and elbows. Then he started thrashing the ground.

Grok nodded.

Milos had seen the spectacle before.

How could the stupid birds summon fire like that to rain down on the trees?

Surely that was a great power if you could drip liquid fire on your enemies.

Grok decided he'd stay with Milos a few moons and check out the lake some more.

He slept with Milos's wife Mary in the goat pen. She was a bony woman who smelled powerfully of her favorite goat. She didn't want to get pregnant again; she and

Milos already had four cubs. So she wouldn't let Grok onto her back. Milos didn't give a rip.

The four cubs were little black grimy monsters. Milos set them loose each morning to chase after and sometimes bring back marmots, squirrels, voles and other assorted mammalian varmints.

They delighted in irking Grok all day. Shooting arrows at him. Slinging rocks. Getting in between him and Mary at night.

Most nights he went to the lake to see if the loons were coming back. Each day a blank lake or maybe a duck and once in a great while, a solitary loon.

But never the fireworks display of the first night. Grok missed his tribe by now. There he got some respect, and some action now and then.

But the loons were still calling him. Winter came and the snow fell. The lake froze up and the loons flew away. In the winter, Milos buttressed his stick house with snowberms. This cut down on the draft and kept them warm enough. At night the four brats and three adults slept in a naked heap on the dirt floor. This was mostly intolerable for everyone, especially the brats who poked and kicked Grok all night. And both Grok and Milos

competed for Mary's attention, but not ardently, because no one, least of all the cubs, wanted Mary to get pregnant.

They ate mostly goat stew in the winter, and drank thistle tea, and lost weight. Grok stirred his tea with his great big red loon feather and gazed pensively over at the vast virgin snowfields where the lake used to be.

Grok thought he saw a flash of red on the lake one day which caused his heart to leap a little. But it was just blood. One of the cubs had gotten into it with a skunk and it was equal parts both their blood types on the ground.

He was chewed up pretty good and some of the wounds festered, causing the brat to get sick and feverish, and then chillish, and then feverish again, until Grok wished the little brat would die. Grok somehow got blamed for this happening, though he didn't know why. Mary and the other three cubs wouldn't even look at him anymore.

Milos seemed irritated and distant, as well. But at least the spring thaw was soon approaching.

The brat, Puku, died and Mary was so disconsolate she had sex with her husband. At least there was more food, thought Grok, even if he wasn't getting laid. The poor family was so sad, though, Grok spent most of each day hunting. And it was getting a little warmer out. The birds were starting to return, and each day more of the

lake was visible. Finally a duck plopped into it one day, and the next day a loon.

Milos and the three brats and Mary banded against him, now, and he slept by himself down by the lake in a bed of reeds on the hard mud.

Soon they had a muggy hot day and then the bugs returned, sprouting from their larvae buzzing, others of them chirping.

But no big red birds.

If it weren't for the feathers in his possession, by now Grok would have convinced himself that night's events and all they imported had never occurred. That night had felt like an ending of some kind. Perhaps that feeling, those characters, were not recapturable, would never come again.

Perhaps the end of the world didn't end with one man.

And one man didn't end with the end of the world.

And what about his family, his home?

And what about Puku? The world had ended for him.

Or had it? Was Puku fine, or had he just ended for them?

And where had the loons gone? Would they be back?

END.