



# The Eleven-Hour Fall

Robert Appleton

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## Chapter 1

### *Falling for Remington*

**S**pindrift from a nearby cornice curled out over the edge of the mountain. Kate lost her footing in the snow and toppled straight onto Remington, knocking him flat. She helped him up and wiped his visor clean, but soon recoiled. After all, it wasn't exactly what she had in mind for sweeping him off his feet.

*Katie girl, you've just done the dumbest thing since volunteering for this hike. Stay calm. Say something, quick.*

"You OK?" Remington's no-nonsense tone was still evident through the crackling reception.

"Ask me again when we're some place warm," she replied.

What she really wanted to do was warm things up then and there. To hell with the mission plan. Kate Borrowdale was the most qualified, the fittest, the most competitive terrain scout of the group, out-matched by only one thing - her love for Jason Remington.

*He can't fail to notice that hint.* Kate cursed herself for blowing her chances.

Remington stepped closer and, to her amazement, grinned through his helmet.

Kate smiled back, fighting the urge to tear off both their suits. The insanely low temperature, high altitude and lack of oxygen might have dissuaded her, yet it was still a close call.

The wind speed picked up as Kate fell back in line. All she could think about was the tall, stern man a few steps behind. The indigo sky grew deeper; her head felt lighter than the atmosphere at any peak.

"Alright, the weather's turned. We're putting up the shelters," blurted a voice over the com-link.

Remington immediately broke back to join his expedition partner. Kate ploughed ahead through the knee-deep snow. Her designated partner was Jill Qualen. Kate trusted Jill about as much as she would a loose crampon. It was therefore imperative to take charge of the shelter before the weather hit. She knew full well the dangers of a blizzard at high altitude.

Soon, the last hint of sunlight was blanketed by clouds hurtling overhead. Violet and violent. Kate gritted her teeth against the wind blast. Resistance to her every movement grew rapidly. Their destination, the west ridge itself, faded in moments under a swathing swirl of ice.

She shot her tent clamps into the rock and, hustling Jill inside the shelter, fastened it shut behind them.

The two women checked their equipment in silence. Kate had done this a million times before, but knew it was the most crucial part of any expedition. Oxygen...fifteen hours' worth. Suit integrity...fine. Suit temperature...fine. Altitude...still no reading. *I wonder how high we really are?* The ship's probes had only managed to explore the highest peaks of the planet. Electromagnetic interference in the thick layers of cloud had scrambled any data retrieved from the few probes able to penetrate this lower strata.

*For all we know, we might be setting a record for the highest ever climb. I'll bet we are. Largest planet ever explored...near the top of a high mountain...eat your hearts out Geary and Musampa! Olympus Mons was kitten play.*

Jill gave the thumbs up, and Kate winked in reply. The only sound they heard was the muffled howl of the wind.

"How long will it last?" asked Jill, a few loose strands of blonde hair sticking to her forehead with perspiration.

"There's no telling," said Kate. "I was in a blizzard that lasted nearly two days on Dakota Prime."

"What was it like there?"

"Not unlike Earth. Deadly terrain, though; we lost a girl on the way back."

"No kidding. I guess you just can't imagine yourself being beaten by a bit of wind. Or snow."

"So why did you choose terrain scouting?"

"I needed a change. It sounded more exciting than shining an office seat with my ass."

Kate had never thought of Jill as the thrill-seeking type, but she couldn't imagine her behind a desk either. "So, you find scouting appealing?"

Jill grinned. "Don't you?"

"It's a living. Climbing, surveying, searching for minerals? Like you say, it's better than the alternatives. We go where they send us, but the rest is up to us."

Neither spoke another word on the subject. The shelter's taut fabric bulged inward. Kate kept an eye on the tent cords behind Jill. As the wind buffeted them from that side, those would be the first to snap. *Maybe I should've double-pegged.*

"Everyone sit tight; the pick-up's on its way," said the voice over the com-link. "Until I give the word, stay inside the shelters. Command says the entire hemisphere's about to white out. Wait for my signal."

Jill closed her eyes and, clasping Kate's hands, began mouthing a prayer.

Kate sighed, recalling the direst moments she herself had endured on Dakota Prime. *A couple of minutes and already Hailing Mary. Save some for when it really gets rough, sweetheart.*

Another ten minutes passed. The tent cords held, but Kate didn't like the ferocious strain. Though she'd seen them hold a brick house suspended in mid-air, she was less sure of the shelter's fabric. And the thought of Remington only made her more anxious. *But won't he be the calm one?*

Finally, the team leader broke silence: "Twenty seconds! I want everyone out and re..."

The order was interrupted by a loud thud. A deafening furor of crackling and staggered screams followed over the com-link. Kate didn't panic. Instead, she sprung to her feet, wrenching Jill up with her. As she unzipped the door, the tent caved in behind them. Jill was propelled into her, knocking her flat. As Kate turned to see what had struck them, a boulder the size of a work shed crashed on top of Jill, crushing her completely, before spinning out into the blizzard. Another struck somewhere close behind. Kate looked skyward, scrabbling to stand upright. Through a brief break in the wind, she saw two more rocks hit the mountain side by side. They smashed square into the rock face and shook the entire ledge.

*That's no avalanche!*

Hidden by the wind-driven snow, Kate felt a torrent of massive rocks batter the ridge from above. What wind could be so powerful? In Hailing Mary, had Jill instead hailed this unimaginable force from the heavens? Kate knew there was only one chance for survival. To jump!

She wiped the specks of bloodied snow from her visor, blanking Jill from her mind. Kate leaned into the wind and inched toward the ledge. It wasn't until the orange tent flapped about her helmet that she noticed the body lying nearby on rock scraped clear by the force of the storm.

Another missile shook the ground, followed by another. One passed between her and the body, almost rolling in from the sky, not quite touching the ledge. Kate knelt over the body. It was Remington! He wasn't moving, but the instrumentation on his suit showed he was still alive. Thank God! How badly injured was he?

Kate didn't need time to think. With a tremendous effort, she dragged him to the very edge of the cliff and pushed him over. It was a sheer drop. Without even gathering breath, she flung herself after him. It all occurred so matter-of-factly in her mind that the transition from climber to free-faller didn't register at first.

Jolts of wind torqued her this way and that. A few huge rocks flew by, missing her by inches. Kate knew her chances of survival had just increased, but from zero to what? Her gaze remained fixed on Remington as he drew closer through the barrage of icy pellets. Her suit shielded her from the impact of this onslaught. But something wasn't right. She'd skydived before, but here it felt...different somehow. *Is there some kind of updraft at work here?*

Kate struggled to remain streamlined in her dive posture. The chaotic air currents had other ideas. She flung an outstretched arm toward Remington, almost reaching him. Two more attempts fell short. On the fourth lunge she caught him by the ankle and pulled herself close.

Kate wanted to feel relieved. He was already married, but so what? She'd thrown the man of her dreams from a cliff and caught him on the way down. Yet, hope remained in her parachute, fastened to the back of her survival suit. All she could do now was hold him tight



and wait...

Face to face, helmets chattering together, they fell through whirl after whirl of violet cloud. Kate had clipped them both together by the waist, but also kept her arms and legs wrapped tightly around him. *I could open his chute for him, but might never see him again; the winds'd rip the canopy to shreds. Same for mine. If only I knew how high we were back on the mountain. If only I could see the ground - just for a second. If only I knew when it was time to open. If only...*

It was the least romantic clinch of her life. Kate knew it was imperative to think of Jason Remington only as an unconscious patient in her care. Nothing more. At a time when they'd never been closer, they were never farther apart. Twenty minutes lapsed. Ice no longer pelted them.

*We've passed through the blizzard, at least. Kate checked her instrumentation again. Still no altitude reading! We must be getting close now, though. Still too much goddamn cloud. Something's definitely not right - I should've seen the ground by now. I'm going to have to chance it soon, however high we really are. If the chute fails, it fails! We've always got another.*

Kate decided to set the next cloud layer as her parachute deployment point. After that, the wind speed would make or break their survival. If it was too harsh, the rig wouldn't hold. Even though they had a second chute, she knew this first would be the crucial one; the fate of number one would likely spell that of number two as well.

It was hard for Kate to get any kind of bearing. At times, it seemed that they plummeted at an alarming rate, then sudden updrafts caught and held them suspended. At least Remington's extra weight kept her faced downward most of the time. A quick glance here, a fleeting glimpse during a barrel roll there: Kate's knowledge of the world below was snatched from a dizzying descent.

\* \* \*

The violet sky streamed as colors in a fresco, running while still damp. Tremendous jets of gas washed up from below, pluming to giant mushrooms from tornado slivers.

*We're in for a rough ride down there. Whichever sadist chose Kratos for us to scout should be here instead. What goddamn mineral's worth all this?*

*Psammeticum? New energy catalyst? Like we need another one of those. Sheer profiteering; sheer waste. But who are you trying to blame, Katie girl - no one ordered you on this frozen rock. You've got what you came for; he's just in a coma, that's all. Next time, next time, next time...*

Her clock read 15:34. The fall had lasted how long? An hour and five minutes? That couldn't be right. They seemed no nearer to the swirling cloud below. Another updraft caught them and Kate felt like they were floating again.

Kratos was a large planet in terms of circumference, yet physicists knew very little of its topography. The range of mountains in the northern hemisphere, the peaks of which Kate's party had partially surveyed, suggested mind-boggling geography. Scans, however, had failed to penetrate successive cloud layers. Experts cited an electromagnetic anomaly in the atmosphere as the reason for this. As a result, estimates of the height of those peaks varied by many miles. The surface of Kratos was, as yet, an unexplored world.

*After all their bullshit, I'm the one left praying to a parachute.*

Kate tried to relax through a fairly deep breath. Her shoulders ached. The fall now seemed smooth, consistent, almost gentle as they stopped spinning. Her throat was dry and

ready for cracking. A terrible hunger began to swell inside as she tasted inviting flavors in her saliva, or at least thought she did. Remington never so much as twitched in her clutches.

18:51. Four and a half hours had brought them no nearer to her parachute deployment point. Kate's mind wandered back to her quarters on the ship, where a family photograph stood proudly on her bedside table; her mother and two sisters grinned like sunflowers, but she managed only half a smile. For some reason, that had always bothered her. Was she really that defensive? Is that why she had never had a real boyfriend to speak of, when everyone else seemed to boast a directory of conquests?

"You're not one for shallow romance," her mother once told her. "You're a one-man girl, like me, and you'll win him over when you least expect to, just like I did."

*Mum, I hope this isn't what you meant by that.*

A continuous updraft cushioned them as Kate's mind drifted further away. The shades of purple and red in the sky blended as though brushed by a master dreamscape painter. In all her scouting experience as mineralogist, mountaineer and loner, Kate had never felt so ineffectual. Her reputation for an iron resolve now seemed almost coy, so utterly was she at the mercy of invisible forces. Her mindset, together with all notions of practicality, began to slip. Staring lovingly into Remington's face, she struggled to stay alert.

*How many times did I almost tell you? How many different futures have I mapped out for us? If I'd asked you sooner, where would we be now? What would our life be like together? Or would you have turned me down flat? Hmm...one way or another, I'm going to get us through this. Just look how handsome you are...do you even know I'm unattached? Unattached...ha! That's funny. Katie girl, you'll laugh at this whole thing one day. Mr. and Mrs. Remington - engaged for a matter of hours, inseparable, fell for each other on cloud nine, landed on their feet and lived happily ever after. Mum would be proud.*

Kate traced her finger over his visor, following the contours of his face. Boyish but stern, Remington preferred the unkempt look. Kate found his heavy stubble and longish black hair incredibly enticing. Even unconscious, he exuded her ideal image of masculinity. *Yes, we're going to get through this.*

At around 20:05 a number of dark streaks appeared in the sky. They'd climbed from below and now appeared to keep pace with Kate and Remington. Swirling in elegant patterns some distance away, they drew closer. Soon, the disparate streaks merged into a snake-like procession. Kate held onto her man tighter than ever. *Some kind of flying creatures? They'd better keep their distance. We can't exactly fend them off.*

Spinning to look once more at the aim of their descent, she felt again the pangs of despair as the lower cloud cover appeared not an inch nearer. They might as well not have been falling at all.

That notion woke Kate like a swill of ice water. *How can one tell if one is actually falling? Sky-diving training includes jet cushions a few feet off the ground; it sure feels like falling, only you're not. The force of air keeps you suspended. What if that same principle is at work here? Are those incredible updrafts keeping us aloft? Alright, so what now? Do we have to tango up here forever? Kate looked at the flying creatures. They flew up here. How do they get back down?*

She watched intently as the dark procession approached like a funeral convoy. Soon, their enormous wing spans were visible. Dark brown beaks came into view next, not long and slender but wide and half-conical. Tendrils flapped beneath them like braided beards. As they

drew closer, she could see that their bodies were covered with short fur instead of feathers. Their tails, the length of city blocks, were thin, streamlined. Kate made as little movement as possible. Were she to categorize the creatures at all, it would be as a cross between a stingray and a bat. Unearthly creations...heading straight for her!

The leader came to within ten feet. It eyed them for a moment before opening its massive beak. Kate embraced Remington one last time, and closed her eyes. "At least I tried," she whispered to him.

She felt her legs being gripped, and waited for the crunch. And waited. *Why's there no pain?* Opening her eyes, she was shocked to see the creature's great beak simply holding the two of them as it flew. It had no teeth. Its hold was firm, but hadn't pierced either of their suits. *Where the hell is it taking us?* Kate's head began to spin. *It must know a way down to the surface. Where there's life, there's a chance. Just get us down in one piece.*

She checked her oxygen gauge. Just over seven hours left. The monstrous bird flapped its wings once every few seconds; Kate was lulled by the hypnotic rhythm. The creatures moved so gracefully through the sky, it was hard to imagine them living up to their horrific aspect. *Likely they're the eagles of Kratos, or the condors. But if we're not food, then what does it want with us? Unless we're a meal for the nest! Right, well either way we'll be out of the sky - let's take it from there...one step at a time.*

Despite not knowing for certain where the creature was taking them, Kate began to focus on ways of fending off an attack from the ground. She itemized, from memory, all the resources in her supply belt. Food for three days; plenty of rope and cams for climbing; incendiaries for lighting fires; two flares; and best of all, a 'tasker', the multi-tasking climbing apparatus designed specifically for scaling difficult terrain. *But no real weapon, damn it! Time to play dead, Katie girl; surprise is all we've got.*

Her mind jolted out of faux nightmare scenarios for what seemed days on end. Kate struggled to stay limber in the beak of the giant bird. Her thighs, sandwiched between Remington's lifeless body and the tough, sinewy lining of the creature's jaw, grew very sore. A girl in a shell within her shell, she had never felt as restricted or restless. Remington now seemed more distant than ever. Every so often, she'd feel his arm pat against hers, nudging her from tenterhook thoughts, and each time her hopes rose. But he didn't wake.

00:30 came and went. Almost ten hours since the jump! Kate could think of nothing except how thirsty she'd become. Swallowing saliva now caused her physical pain; her throat was acrid dry. The sky did lighten, though. The winds eased. There remained only a slack updraft from beneath.

The creature suddenly veered to one side and began a dive that scythed through the air. Kate held her breath. The purple hues quickly converged into a jiving spiral, an enormous chimney into which the birds now flew. Downward, the whole flock spun and twisted like the spine of a tornado. The force sucking them in was quite unlike anything Kate had experienced. If she hadn't closed her eyes, she would've blacked out for sure.

*We're in a gas jet! The wake of a huge gas jet. It's vanished and left a vacuum. So this is what happens in a vacuum...Christ!*

Like a g-force simulation gone haywire, the descent inside the funnel racked her against the creature's beak with sickening pressure. Only a cycle of stubborn thoughts staved her panic. *You've trained for this. No one else could even survive it. You're the only one. Think of the story you'll be able to tell.*

The creature held them firm in its bite. Kate's stomach flexed and retracted as though it was a slinky on a never-ending staircase. From the time they eventually left the vortex, her mind wheeled on for another fifteen minutes. She was one revolution away from throwing up

when her legs suddenly lifted free. Without warning, the creature let go. They plummeted once more. Kate had to embrace her man all over again in freefall. Glancing up, she discerned two separate clusters of dark streaks, one chasing the other. Was her escort now embroiled in its own flight for survival? What titanic avian combat was underway above them in the skies of Kratos?

Kate regained her composure. The pins-and-needles in her lower legs hardly registered as she hurtled through a layer of settled clouds. Then, as if it had been there all along, waiting just beneath, the ground filled Kate's vision like an instantaneous sunrise. Pale yellow desert stretched as far as the eye could see. The roving shadows of clouds spilled faint blues and purples onto the landscape. Far away to the right, a long, dark ridge snaked across the desert. Kate deafened herself with a cry of joy inside her helmet. "We've made it!"

Though she hadn't parachuted for some time - with the abundance of landing craft, there simply wasn't any need - her training clicked into gear in an instant. Flipping the protective casing, she pressed the function on her wrist and assumed a taut position. In seconds, the canopy spread itself open and jerked them into a gentle float. Kate checked the time. 01:26. *An eleven-hour fall! That's one for the history books!* As the sherbet contours below drew nearer, she thought for a moment of the vast continents she'd encountered on a dozen different worlds, and of the crippled man in her arms. *Right, this is it now, Katie girl; playtime's over. Your life's back in your own hands. You've a home to make and a man to see to, married or not. You didn't hang on to him all this time for nothing.*

Maneuvering them toward a flat basin between two large, yellow sand dunes, she braced herself for a painful touchdown. Despite trying for a skid landing, her knees buckled like a marionette's on impact. Crumpled and weary, she unclipped herself from Remington for the first time in eleven hours. She rested his lifeless body onto the sand, but could taste no affection for him. He seemed to blend easily with the pale dust and rocks of this alien valley. Kate wanted to cry, but couldn't.

*Has he been my patient for too long? Is he ever going to wake up from his coma? And if he does, would he not be better off asleep? I wish I could sleep. You've got a million things to do, Katie girl, and only a few hours to do them in. Get up, get up right now!*

Spindrift from a nearby dune curled high above the gold horizon. Kate struggled to her feet and took the first human steps on this hidden world. *First thing first*, she thought. Their mission briefing had identified oxygen around the mountain peaks, but not enough for them to breathe. Kate hoped the oxygen down here would be adequate, otherwise, in a few hours time, they'd suffocate. Their chances of being rescued were close to nil. What risk, then, was there in gambling with the air right now? She unfastened her helmet to taste the new atmosphere. Without the tint of her visor, her eyes squinted at the bright yellow sand and purple sky. Kate took in a massive breath...then exhaled...breathed in again...then out. She opened her eyes and managed a wry smile. *There's always a chance.*

The air was extremely humid, yet clear and held a slight hint of salt. Kate wasted no time in stripping down to her shorts and green vest. She thought for a moment Remington might be watching, or perhaps she wanted him to watch. Her long chestnut hair clung to her face and shoulders as perspiration glazed her pale, lightly freckled skin. She helped herself to a few bites of an apple-flavored biscuit from her supply belt. Forcing her dry throat to swallow even those few morsels of food was painful. But it was worth the effort. Delicious!

Many miles to the right, there appeared to be a dark region of the desert. Kate made up

her mind to reach it post haste. And Remington? She knew she had to carry him, or drag him, until they found shelter.

If it occurred to Kate how hopeless her situation was, she didn't give it another thought. Proactive thinking was the staple of every survival lesson she'd ever received. After half a day in a cocoon, she now stretched her limbs and felt surprisingly loose - ready to begin a survival cycle for two.

## Chapter 2

### *The First Shelter*

Fashioning her parachute rig into a harness for dragging such a heavy body as Remington's proved simple enough, and the yellow sand gave easily under their weight, but Kate, after cushioning her man for the journey, frowned as she took her first step. He weighed close to two hundred pounds. That, combined with the anchor of a pair of survival suits and belts, proved far heavier than she'd reckoned. *I'll not get far like this.*

Yet, what could be left behind? The entire desert panorama revealed no hint of precipitous obstacles, yet they'd just fallen from the highest peaks ever discovered by man. Kate wrestled with a quote from her first instructor, "Always doubt the horizon; it changes with each step, and each step is where your thoughts should be."

*Hmm...but if Kratos is as big as they say, the planet's curvature will be almost negligible to the human eye. I'd be able to see infinitely farther than on Earth. On the other hand, the farther I can see, the smaller the topography will appear. It looks relatively flat, but so would the Himalayas viewed from a great enough distance. Alright, enough homework, I'm going to play it safe.*

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Kate worked up a massive breath, gritted her teeth and took the strain. She leaned forward and dug into the sand with her molded silver boots. Remington was heavier than she'd guessed, but she quickly found her rhythm. She grew accustomed to her shadow on the yellow sand. It seemed to glide, the opposite of her lumbering travail. This smoothed her temperament, and the more she concentrated on the next step, the easier the shadow seemed to achieve it.

It was through this simple meditation that Kate Borrowdale crossed miles of desert that first day, to reach the first brown rocks she'd seen upon landing.

There she collapsed, utterly exhausted, parched and famished. Rocks of every shape and size, up to thirty feet high, lay strewn for miles ahead. This darker terrain seemed to drain color from the sky, which now grew ominously grey. The temperature dropped with it. Looking back, she could make out no sign of the helmets she'd left behind as markers for a lucky landing craft. Their trail arced through the sand but appeared somewhat jagged where they'd crossed uneven ground. It resembled a crescent zip through the desert. That Remington had still not made a peep troubled Kate, as his coma had now lasted almost a full day.

*Come on, man, open those eyes. I can't do everything myself.*

Kate left to find a suitable shelter but almost fainted as she rose. Her throat and stomach felt dry, sculpted from inside. One particular rock caught her eye. It was too heavy to lift yet displayed a strange pattern. Neither carved nor painted, the anomaly was in the shape of a bizarre, fossilized creature in the rock. A closer inspection revealed a horned skull and six limbs protruding from a curved spine, rather like a scorpion without its tail. This evidence of life she found encouraging, but not its insect shape. *I hope they're extinct!*

She happened on a much larger boulder. Round the side was a hollow in the ground. It was more than deep enough for them to spend the night. *Hollows like this don't make themselves, but we've no choice; it's getting too cold to stay outside. We'll have to risk meeting tonight's tenant, if there is one. Pity we've no weapon. Hmm... there's always fire!*

She dragged Remington and their supplies with great difficulty over the rocky obstacles. Though utterly spent, she rolled everything into a tight bundle and let it slide down into the hollow, herself collapsing in after it.

As there was nothing to burn, Kate gave up the idea of lighting a fire for protection. The cave, barely high enough for her to stand upright, was black beyond the few feet in front of her. No telling how deep it actually went. Kate tried to sigh, but managed only a bitter shiver. Unable to keep her eyes open, she barely had enough wherewithal to cover herself for the night: first with her survival suit, then with the canopy itself.

A sickly, muffled groan woke her with a start. If her eyes hadn't smarted, Kate would've checked to see if they were open, as the cave was utterly without light. Even the entrance was impossible to find. She felt for her hip torch, but it was not there. Ripped loose in the bird's beak? And Jason didn't have one either. *No bloody luck!* She felt high along the cave wall in an effort to locate the exit. Another groan rose behind her – very close indeed. *What's there? Let me see, for*

*Christ's sake!*

Her hands scraped about, but all she felt was a smooth, hard surface. *That can't be!* Her fingertips suddenly dug into something soft, damp. Thinking only of Remington helpless at the mercy of a creature she couldn't see, Kate tore away at the ceiling until daylight flickered in. The glimpse was brief but telling. A rock now partially covered the hole and, during the night, a mortar of wet sand had plugged the gaps. *Either that was done deliberately, or we missed a helluva storm last night. Right, Katie girl, on three; one...two...THREE!!*

She forced the rock up on her back and shoulders, spitting wet sand. With an incredible push, she tried to up-end it at arms' length. Her shoulders and biceps shook wildly as it teetered on the brink. She shifted her footing to secure the final leverage when, in an instant, it all came tumbling down as she slipped on a layer of sand. The rock gashed her leg. Kate winced. Another groan from behind spun her around. What creature had arrived? She almost threw up as she saw.

The thing was so repulsive it beggared belief! Around three feet tall and four long, its body was slug-like and tapered to a quivering, forked tail. Its skin was an oily brown, patterned with black streaks that splayed outward from the neck all the way down its spine. Worst of all, though, was its front: with no eyes, two saber fangs curving upward from a large mouth, two slimy trunks protruding from its chest, and one as its snout, the creature was a miracle of hideous design. Two more crept up behind.

Kate clenched her fists as she realized how close the things were to Remington. "Bastards! Get away from him!" She was ready to tackle the brutes with nothing but her bare hands. To her surprise, they shuddered and, after a chorus of groans, slunk back into the shadows.

*What did I do?*

She wrapped all the supplies with Remington in the canopy and wasted no time in hoisting the bundle up through the hole. A loose stone clattered into the hollow behind them. Its echo elicited further groans from inside. *It's noise they're afraid of...loud noise. Without eyes, they must rely on other senses - probably sound and touch. And subterranean creatures like that won't be used to anything loud.*

Kate's heart lifted at this minor victory. But when she turned to scout the landscape, her hope quickly sank again. The plateau she'd spent half a day reaching, while still dark, was now indistinguishable from the ten miles behind her. Most of the rocks were covered by a tide of wet earth. She was in the middle of a storm-swept terrain that appeared to stretch forever in all directions. So much for dragging her man to safety.

The air was fresh, the sky clear and only faintly purple. The majority of clouds huddled far behind them, in apology for what Kate described as "a mother of a hurricane." She had deemed their landing site the centre of Kratos, and their initial heading north; the storm, therefore, was many leagues to the south.

The two suns looked almost conjoined on that second day. Kate couldn't remember their names, but knew their orbits were somewhat chaotic. Kratos



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itself spun slowly on its axis; the planet's day was around forty hours long. Yet, with binary stars to revolve around, daylight time on the surface elongated concurrently with the distance between suns. Kate pulled the bundle to a safe distance from the creatures' lair. She then feasted on a "pickled onion meatloaf" that tasted more like vinegar on rye. *If there's any justice, the idiot who prepared this is laid up with food poisoning right now. As if things aren't tough enough!*

Suddenly, Remington's arm twitched at her side. She checked his breathing and his pupils. No change. "You're wanting to come round, aren't you. Well, now's the time. I can't keep this up for much longer. It needs both of us."

Having climbed the tallest boulder she could find, Kate scrutinized the distance for signs of vegetation, water, or even animals. Nothing. The only shape she discerned was a rock wall roughly north-north-east, many miles away. "It's worth a try," she said aloud. "At this point, anything's worth a try."

Pockets of water on the various rocks were slightly bitter to the taste, yet went a long way to revitalizing Kate. She managed to channel some into the fold-up water pouches which detached from the legs of her survival suit; from these she cupped a few handfuls into Remington's mouth, more in hope than anything. The rest she saved for the day's walk, pleased that the suit would keep it relatively cool for her. It was extra weight, but she'd rested, fed and taken on liquid. *Not a bad way to start a hike.*

The temperature remained constant for a while. By the time they stopped for their ninth rest, she looked back over their path through the wet sand, and smiled. The canopy's trail had erased her footprints. She then stared ahead to the rock wall. Its contours were almost visible, and for the first time since landing, the terrain scout sensed they were finally making progress.

## Chapter 3

### *Zenterhooks*

"Toss me a cigarette; I think there's one in my raincoat...we smoked the last one an hour ago...so I looked at the scenery, she read her magazine...and the moon rose over an open field..."

The few hundred yards ahead were completely flat. The sand beneath her feet gave very little. It seemed almost concrete as Kate stopped to take in the grim grandeur of the cliff in her path.

"...counting the cars on the New Jersey turnpike - they've all come to look for Am-e-rica..."

Simon and Garfunkel had played in her head for the best part of seven hours. It quickly faded. The rock wall was over fifteen hundred feet high. Dark brown and sheer, it looked nigh un-scalable for a woman with such a burden to carry. Kate tried to figure a possible route up. *One, two, three decent ledges early on...hardly ANY foot holes at all. Let's see - that gets us three hundred feet up...after that it's another two hundred to anything remotely workable. Without the Tasker, it's touch and go. There HAS to be a better way up, or perhaps through...*

## *The Eleven-Hour Fall*

After a brief stop for refreshment, she scouted the cliff base to the west, where she found no pores or chinks whatsoever. No way through. Similarly, any easy route up the wall never reached all the way to the top; large, precipitous gaps ruined any chance at every conceivable point along the mile she studied. Kate was furious. *I've never seen the odds stacked so high against anyone.* She pursed her lips and swore not to give up until her luck turned. This meant a sojourn to the east, which, to her dismay, met a similar result. *The bastard's been put here just to infuriate me! To hell with it. I'm not trying to walk around. We're giving it a shot right here.*

The moist air and damp sand conjured uneasy memories of Kate's sister burying her up to her neck mere inches from the incoming tide. That was at Southport beach; here, there was no one to bury her, not even if she fell, and no tide to rescue her either. *I wonder if Annie can see me now. Hmm...shaking her head, telling me I've taken a dumb turn, as always...telling me I should get a new wardrobe...like nothing's changed. I hear you, Annie, and I totally agree.*

"But here goes," she said aloud, digging into her survival belt for a final inventory before she planned the ascent.

The crux of her climb was to be the tasker, an ingeniously compact grappling gun. It fired a taut, thread-like cable attached to a harpoon at the end. Given that everything was miniaturized, the device, used by rock climbers for decades, had been perfected by British science researchers into a truly amazing instrument. A sighting display on the gun contained a targeting lock; digital cross-hairs, fixed on a desired spot on the rock, relayed precise coordinates to the spearhead. Once the trigger was pressed a first time, the coordinates were set in stone, as it were, and the tasker would never miss.

Though she had two at her disposal, with five spearheads apiece, Kate decided to use the taskers only when all else failed. After a final sip of water and a nibble of her favored apple biscuit, she began the climb. Her plan was a simple one: reach half way, then hoist the bundle; reach the top, then hoist the bundle. *There isn't enough rope otherwise. At least this way I'll be able to concentrate on my own climb almost completely. You've done this a hundred times, Katie girl; there's nothing to it. Let's see what we can find up top.*

She fastened one end of the first rope to her survival belt and the other to Remington's chute, which she'd folded into as tight a package as possible. Kate decided to save the spare rope for use with the cams. She looped it alongside the other on her belt, bent her knees and then leapt for the first hold. A sidestep to the right. The next, directly above, required every inch of her reach. After several uneasy grips, Kate soon hit her stride. She'd always maintained free ascent was the toughest of sports to master:

"Almost every muscle in the body is engaged," she'd once said, "and even then there's no guarantee of picking the correct route. It's problem-solving on the verge of exhaustion; the very best climbers operate more by intuition than science."

Kate made short work of the first few hundred feet. Each cam she used

became her new anchor; this simply involved unthreading the rope from the previous cam and feeding it through the new. By this method, any fall would be saved by the loop of the rope, as the cams were strong enough to stay a weight many times greater than Kate's. She dubbed the cliff 'Babylon Wall', after the high perimeter of that ancient city, hoping that beyond it would be a feast for the eyes. *It's the least I'll deserve after this!*

Just before the half way mark - a great overhang visible from the ground - a firm wind scoured the cliff. Kate was forced to cling even closer to the rock. After almost missing her footing twice, she decided to wait it out. *As soon as it dies down, I'll start the lift.* She peered down to the ground, about seven hundred feet below, but couldn't see Remington at all. A cloud of sand had enveloped the bottom of the cliff, which meant he was exposed to something potentially dangerous - drifting sand. *He'll be buried alive!* The thought sickened Kate. She wrenched the tasker from her belt, affixed both harpoons and took careful aim.

Click! The cross-hairs locked on the wall around eight feet above and three to the right. Click! The first harpoon shot straight out. She glimpsed it for a split-second in mid-air as it about-faced and belted magnetically toward the cliff, close to her knee. Ping! *Nice shot. No time to wait.* Click! The second harpoon hurled its cable much farther out, curled back like a whip and cracked into the rock above. Ping! *Nice one.* The lower projectile extended its shaft which splayed into a silver platform. Kate stepped on. She attached Remington's rope to a spool on the tasker and, pulling the harpoon cable taut, clicked a switch to hoist him up from the ground. It required no effort on her part; the upper harpoon and the tasker took all the strain. She decided to rest awhile on the fan-like shelf. *I think we've got this thing licked.*

A constant gust slashed about her ears and drowned the whirr of the tasker. Kate began to shiver. The wind shot underneath her vest, chilling her to the bone. All she could do was sit and hold her knees to her chest. Minutes inched by. The rope swayed and jerked. When the bundle finally rose to within grabbing distance, it scraped against the rock for the umpteenth time. Kate swung it onto the platform. She checked Remington for signs of life. "Thank God," she whispered. "You nearly made her a widow."

She lay him flat against the wall and attached the tasker's cable to her belt as before. *Okay, I'll not get far in this weather. Tasker, it's all up to you. We might be fish on a hook, but don't let us down.* The great overhang was twenty feet to her left. Kate estimated another eight hundred feet to the top. With four harpoon pairs left in her belt - she loathed the idea of using those from the second supply - the calculation was a simple one. Two hundred feet a shot.

The next two spearheads hurtled out of sight like bullets. Moments later, Kate felt the cord pull tight on her harness, and she was lifted at a very fast speed. As soon as she reached this higher platform, the winching operation resumed. Remington, still oblivious, waited on each subsequent level a matter of minutes. The ascent continued like clockwork. Kate finally stood astride him on the final platform and looked up. Her heart leapt. She could almost reach the cliff roof.

## *The Eleven-Hour Fall*

It was now extremely cold. Pressing her teeth shut to stop them chattering, she kicked her right leg high into a foothold and sprang onto it. She crouched on the summit. Hoisting Remington the final few feet proved tough; her strenuous early climb had taken its toll. With one last effort, she managed to drag him to safety, and there she lay beside him on the roof of Babylon Wall, a conqueror of height and of rock. *Alright, Katie girl, you'd better pray it's all downhill from here.*

## Chapter 4

### *The Nest*

For a brief moment, the name she'd chosen for the wall took on a bizarre significance. The rock summit was relatively flat as far as she could see, yet never exceeded a few hundred feet in width. A crevasse around sixty feet wide bisected the rock. Kate was struck by the dimensions of this gap, which appeared so linear as to have been hewn by a masterly hand. The Babylonian significance was in the parallel walls, famously erected around that great city, one on either side of its moat. "That's eerie," she said.

The gap narrowed at only one point, a quarter mile away, but still left a space of over twenty feet. By now, the canopy was badly torn. A low rumbling rose from below. She peered into the crevasse and tried to determine how deep it went. Too dark. She lit a mini-incendiary and let it fall. The flame illuminated both sides as it fell, and fell... The walls were smoother than she'd imagined. Just before the light vanished altogether, she glimpsed an incredible sliver of dark blue and white. *It HAS to be a river!!*

She glanced at Remington and sighed. *I've found what looks like a water source; I've happened on two signs of life, so there must be some kind of food*

*chain. There's a chance I could make a go of it here. But with him I'm halved in every way - I'm doing everything for two. What if he never wakes up? Am I supposed to nurse him, feed him, protect him indefinitely? He's already married after all. What if I...* Kate shook her head and gave her face a slap, feeling utterly ashamed at having even entertained such a selfish thought. Nonetheless, her lack of compassion for him left her perplexed. *You'd think that after all we've been through...*

The wind eased. The purple sky remained light. "There are advantages to every environment," she said, recalling a popular notion among terrain scouts. Beyond the far edge of the cliff stretched another interminable desert, yet she caught a series of glints far away to the northeast. They appeared close together across a single latitude. *Some kind of lake, or glacier? Perhaps just a reflective element in the rock. I'd give anything for a damn telescope!*

She shrugged and switched her mind to the immediate problem - getting Remington across the crevasse. Though only twenty feet wide where she stood, the gap, while straightforward for her to cross using the tasker, posed a tricky problem for the bundle. She couldn't throw it, nor could she use the tasker without Remington smashing against the far wall. Her solution was to anchor a rope to both sides; then, suspending the bundle from it, pull Remington along the line, over the drop.

She winced at having to use any further spearheads, so decided to use just one. Ping! It clamped firmly on the opposite wall. Kate tied one end of the rope to her belt and secured the other with a cam locked in the ground. Here goes! She pulled the tasker cable taut until she tiptoed on the edge, then let her weight fall into the crevasse. Her stomach heaved. The line swung her forcibly into the far wall. If her legs hadn't broken the impact, she'd have broken a great deal more. The tasker then hoisted her up for phase two.

Fixing her end of the rope to another cam, so it was now a taut line over the drop, Kate inched herself across, back to Remington. She lowered him onto the rope, tied another line between them, shimmied once more to the far side and then proceeded to pull him across. Kate felt dizzy after all the to-ing and fro-ing. "That's another one you owe me," she whispered in his ear, "and I intend for you to make good."

Kate held her fist in quiet celebration after peering over the far edge of the summit. Instead of another precipice, she found an uneven but gradual decline in the rock, incredibly rugged but honeycombed with caves. A number of different routes to the ground appeared before her. The sun had baked patches of the desert dry. This created a striking contrast between the yellow sand and dark brown rock. After being cold for so long, Kate found herself looking to the desert with a delightful envy. *Never thought I'd be pleased to see yellow sand again.*

Perched with her legs dangling over the edge, she lay back, head on hands, and took a long, deep breath of cool air. It was sublime. The cloud layers she'd fallen through were little more than frivolous wisps in the sky. The binary suns thus reigned unhindered over the whole of Kratos. Kate held out her arm. It now

cast a double shadow. A rogue cloud obscured the first sun, but the shadow acceded to the angle of the second. *Kind of like Kate and Remington.*

She imagined their ship, the Fair Monique, gliding on its orbital path - its great umbrella collecting energy particles for a return voyage to Earth.

*They can't leave for another month; there's always a chance a craft might make it to the surface. Yeah, the atmosphere's almost clear for the first time in God knows how long - they'll never let this opportunity go begging. If it stays like this, you never know...we might see something yet.*

Kate knew it was wishful thinking, but it lifted her spirits all the same. Remington and the equipment seemed much lighter as she dragged them onto the first steep slope and lowered them down. A wedge of sand cushioned their fall. Negotiating innumerable ledges and jagged declines, she eventually came to the first cave entrance. It was around fifteen feet high, seven wide and surprisingly light inside. The ground was moist and slippery. Her eyes widened as she noticed a faint undercurrent of noise, a low rumbling, though from which direction it came she couldn't tell. *Must be the elusive river.*

The passage curved into the rock. Javelins of daylight penetrated the wall diagonally from above. A slight breeze from behind tickled strands of Kate's hair across her cheeks. After the first right turn, the passageway opened into a splendid inner sanctum. It appeared to be about sixty feet high and eighty in diameter. A pleasant smell of sawdust and wood-shavings greeted her.

A number of other passages fed into this cave from various points around its walls. All of them were pitch black, except one on the right. This led out to the rocky descent and smothered the chamber with a blanket of sunlight. Kate decided here was the perfect place to leave Remington and explore on her own for a while. "Hold the fort for us, soldier."

Despite lighting her way with a mini-incendiary, she came to a dead end at each of the first three passages. They became too narrow for her negotiate without sliding horizontally. The floor of the fourth gave way to a fathomless drop after just a few feet. *Hmm...this was a good idea. So much for a Journey to the Centre of THIS Earth.* At that moment, a horrid cry rang out from behind. Kate sprinted back to the chamber, where she found Remington safe and unharmed. The piercing cry resumed, but this time fell to a sickly croak. *What the hell is that!?* The sound came from outside, through the daylight passage. It was soon joined by a cacophony of awful scrapes and shrieks. Kate pulled her tasker to hand and affixed the leftover harpoon.

The sawdust smell was now pungent. Her heartbeat quickened, while her steps toward the din remained slow and stout. A large shape scurried past the entrance. She couldn't quite see what it was. Another followed. Then, as if from nowhere, one of the slug creatures she'd encountered the previous night landed at the mouth of the passage. It sprang up again with amazing force. Twice the size of the others, its motion shocked Kate to the core. Contorting its body like a ripple in a whip, from the tail forward, it left the ground as though a grenade had exploded beneath it.



## *The Eleven-Hour Fall*

No sooner did she set foot outside than her disgust at these creatures grew to a deep hatred. The slug had in its jaws a baby eaglet, whose shape was identical to those she'd encountered in the sky. While as tall as Kate, the infant was outmatched by the monster in every way. She saw the wreckage of a butchered nest behind: feathers, fur and grey foliage strewn across dark pools of blood. *The bastard didn't give them a chance!*

Incensed, she tore after it along the blood-spattered ledge. Remembering the creatures' aversion to loud noise, she screamed. But if the cries and shrieks of the eaglets hadn't repulsed it, what could hers hope to accomplish?

Around the next corner she found the creature ready to pounce on the last remaining hatchling. *Right!* Taking quick aim, she fired the spearhead. The slug cracked its tail and jumped; in mid-air, it flopped to ground, dead.

Kate switched her attention to the poor, cornered eaglet. Its pathetic shrieks struck right to her heart. Thrashing its immature wings against the rocks, it was for all the world doomed to suffer the fate of its brethren. Only, it had survived. But what would that mean if it couldn't yet take flight? Surely there'd be more predators thereabouts. For a moment it stopped flapping. Its large, oval eyes looked Kate over from head to toe. *I wonder what it makes of me? A new species? A new predator? Only I've just saved its life.* A nasty cut stretched down one side of its breast, but it seemed otherwise unharmed. Cream-colored down covered its body from head to tail, and its posture was magnificently regal. After glancing at the broken nest, then back at Kate, it turned and scurried away down the rocky decline.

"Poor thing," said Kate, "I hope it makes out okay."

She jogged back to the cave. Her plan was to drag Remington on until they found access to the elusive water source. But when she reached the chamber, he was gone! The canopy, already in bad shape, lay in tatters, unfurled. The rest of the equipment lay strewn about. Kate sank to her knees. A bitter despair took hold.

*It's all been for nothing; they've got him. I'm sorry, Jason, it's all been for nothing.* She blamed herself for everything that had happened: Jill's death, the fall, leading Remington to his end...everything. *What did you think would happen anyway? There never was any hope of escape. You should've stayed there on the mountain to be crushed with the others. At least that would've been quick.*

A low scrape jolted her to her senses. Its origin...the dim passageway through which they'd first entered the chamber. *Right, that's it, these bastards are extinct as of right now!* Loading her tasker once more, she crept to the wall and shuffled along until she could almost peer round the corner. She gave no sound, nor did her enemy. Just before darting into attack, she glanced down at her feet. *Oh, hell.* Kate shivered as she saw her distorted shadow stretch across the passage in full view of her foe. The last thing she felt was her head crack against the rock wall.

## Chapter 5

### Not Alone

"Borrowdale! Can you hear me? Borrowdale!" Those words repeated in her mind with a vague familiarity, rather like the blur of a spectator to a rider on a merry-go-round. Kate tried to turn onto her side, sure that she still had a few minutes left before final wake-up call. Her head throbbed. What had hit her so hard?

"Borrowdale?"

The voice suddenly stabbed through her dizziness. *This isn't on board the Fair Monique!* She blinked again and again. Scrawled contours of the cave sharpened into focus. The pit-pat of dripping water seemed to blend with the dank taste suspended over her tongue. In a split-second, everything flooded back: Babylon Wall, the nest, the slug-creatures and...the empty canopy.

A gentle hand touched her forehead. Kate jerked upright. "Who...?"

"It's me - Remington: the idiot who almost killed you just now. I'm so sorry."

Kate's heart began to race. The man's face was pale and rough - in fact, he looked a fright - but it was really him. "Remington! What? That was you?"

"Guilty, I'm afraid," he replied.

She wanted to throw her arms round him. "You! Do you know what I've been through to keep you alive? And after all that, you nearly kill me." She nursed the cut on her head. "Thanks."

"Sorry. Where the hell are we, anyway?"

"Two days nor-nor-west of nowhere, on the far side of Babylon Wall, in the middle of a desert."

"I see. And how did we get here? Or is something telling me that's one for the memoirs...the memoirs I'll never get to write."

Kate looked him in the eyes and smiled. "You hit me like that again," she said, "and I'll see to that myself."

## *The Eleven-Hour Fall*

For the next half hour, as they drank and ate, and chose which supplies to take along, Kate relayed her tale, beginning with their remarkable eleven-hour fall. Remington shook his head often, barely believing what this young woman had accomplished all on her own.

"How on earth did you drag two-hundred-and-fifty pounds?" he asked.

"On Earth? Hmm...I'd have left your ass for the coyotes on earth. But on Kratos...well, I needed at least one guy to kick around, didn't I? A girl can't last long without that."

Remington laughed, cupping his black hair back behind his ears for the umpteenth time. Kate liked that particular quirk of his. It resembled a kind of cute preening.

"Whichever way you spin it, Borrowdale," he said, "no one else could've even dreamed of doing what you've done. It's above and beyond, and then some."

He reached across and kissed her cheek. Kate took it politely and no more, for that was all it was.

"Just one thing. Borrowdale and Remington?" she said, shaking her head. "How about Kate and Jason?"

He held out his hand. "Pleased to meet you."

"Oh," she replied, "the pleasure's all yours."

It was the first time they'd spoken together non-professionally, or beyond the odd cordial remark, and they found one another's company agreeable. Still weak from his long inertia, Jason asked Kate to help him out of his survival suit, the inner lining of which was suckered to his legs. He jumped to his feet, but felt his knees immediately buckle.

"So much for recovery," he said, picking himself up after the sharp dizzy spell. "I'd better leave the rough stuff for a while, Kate, if it's all the same with you. Agh...if my head weren't empty already, I'd say the grey stuff's ready to spill out of my ears at any moment."

"Now you know how I feel," replied Kate, rubbing her head.

The utter absence of sympathy in her voice took Jason aback, but he accredited it to her dry sense of humor. She's earned the right to be a little testy, he thought.

"OK, about this river," she said; "I'm almost certain it runs between the two halves of the cliff, at the bottom of the crevasse. What do you say we try and find it further down?"

"But what about those ungodly slugs you mentioned? Doesn't sound like we'd have much chance if we came face to face with a couple. I'm no coward, but I'm betting this shelter, together with that water source, is a cornucopia for those bastards. Let's take another look at those glints you saw in the distance. I reckon we say San fairy Ann to this place."

Kate frowned for a moment, and didn't reply right away. *Who does he think he is? He's been mollycoddled for two whole days, while I've been to hell and back keeping him alive. And now he wants to start giving his two cents. You'd better leave the thinking to me, sunshine, before you go and leave a*

*yellow streak all the way home.*

"Hmm...we'd be better off at least finding the water first," she insisted. "There isn't much left in my suit, and, who knows, it might be a while before we find any more. Even if the river is alive with God-knows-what, at least we'll have something definite to come back and fight for if needs be...if the glint in the desert turns out to be nothing."

Jason's gaze flicked to and from her a number of times before he finally assented. Kate despised these absurd little power games that men always seemed to bring to the table whenever a woman had the temerity to take charge. *No big deal. He'll soon get used to it. If he ever wants to see his wife again, he'll get used to it. Mark my words.*

"Okey doke," she continued, "you re-pack what's left of the canopy - we might need it if the weather turns - and I'll see to the rest."

Jason smiled. "You're more domineering than I remembered, Borrowdale...I mean Kate. But for the record, I've no problem whatsoever with a lady calling the shots. Honestly, I'm glad you're here."

She replied, "Well, that makes one of us, but thanks..." and, throwing him her synthetic pickled onion meatloaf ration, added, "I bet you're good at hunting. Am I right?"

"Depends what I'm hunting."

"Alien beasts?"

"Alien beasts, no. But women..."

Kate played coy, shaking her head playfully. *I'm being too hard on him. He's sweet in a schoolboy sort of way. If he plays along, I'm sure we'll get along. Funny, though - if he'd have flirted with me like this on the Fair Monique, I'd have been his in a heartbeat. What's wrong with me? It's this situation. He's being nice because he has to be; there's no more to it than that. Yes, he's obviously still very married...so be it.*

The sky remained clear as they picked their way down the rocky slope. It seemed to Kate that they traversed hundreds of feet in mere minutes, so light now was her load. The thought of her painstaking journey across the desert, to the top of Babylon Wall, made her chuckle; what a crazy effort it had been! Checking behind occasionally, she grinned at the sight of her companion, though never when he was looking. For all her stubborn jealousy regarding men and command, she now felt twice the woman, and doubly alive.

After peering into four separate caves that led nowhere, they reached the desert floor. Jason suggested they search for passages to the left. They went right. Kate pretended not to hear his wolf-whistle as she bent to adjust her boot. Luckily, their path through the lower boulders soon met a deep scar in the cliff. It was tough to reach; its entrance rested atop a thirty degree scree incline. They each sported numerous cuts after scrabbling like goats against a landslide.

Inside, the seven foot wide slit zigzagged as it narrowed. Kate lit an incendiary. A distinct rumbling assaulted their ears, and deepened as they walked. They soon found themselves shuffling sideways past sharp, slate-like

edges. The lowest few feet, however, proved far less perilous, and Kate suggested they crawl.

This brought them out into a vast barrel-shaped tunnel, a hundred and twenty feet in diameter, parted along the roof by the huge crevasse. No light reached here from the top of Babylon Wall. The noise was tremendous. Kate brought Jason alongside her in case they had to communicate quickly. The river roared by at a white-water clip. In times past, thought Kate, the deluge must've reached the full height and width of the tunnel, expanding it with millennia of incredible force.

Spots of spray peppered their faces, while the surface became very slippery underfoot as they neared the river. Jason dipped his hand first. *Wow!* The current almost whisked it clean away. *Now that's what I call rapid.*

Kate didn't bother trying to cup any for a drink; instead, she held her outstretched palm as a dam across the water's edge and savored the ferocious spray on her face. It was just what she needed.

Jason tugged her vest, pointing her downstream. The flow remained at a similar level as far as it was lit, and so did the walk space they were on. Kate shook the incendiary in her hand as if to say, "We've only got so many of these, and we don't have a clue how far this thing goes." Jason replied by motioning his hand as if to curve round a bend, then held up a single finger. She knew exactly what he meant: "Let's give it a try, but if we don't find anything round the next corner, we'll call it a day." Kate nodded.

Though only in their shorts and vests, they delighted in the unceasing draught brought down by the river. It was surprisingly warm, unlike the chilly water, and they each wondered what the source of this current might be.

A mind-boggling waterfall, thought Kate.

A reservoir the size of the Pacific, thought Jason.

Jason stopped them dead at a winding left turn. He pointed to a wet trail which led perpendicularly from the water's edge.

Kate found another just beyond, and another. She grabbed him by the shoulders and shook her head firmly. It was time to leave. No sooner had they turned, however, than the horrific shapes of five full-sized slugs barred the way. A sixth dropped from the ceiling right in front of them. As it landed, a spurt of slime shot from its underbelly and dribbled down Jason's leg. Revolted, he sprang to one side, before kicking it back with interest.

Turning to flee, they ran into three more monsters. These bowed in unison, ready, as Kate well knew, to strike. She screamed until her larynx almost caught fire, and this had a slight effect; the slugs recoiled, but only for a moment. Loud noise obviously had little effect on these larger brutes. The posse behind crept closer. Kate's grip on the incendiary began to shake. The two groups converged. Kate reached into her belt for the tasker. Jason stopped her and, pulling her by the arm, bolted for the river. With boiling surges of adrenaline and deep intakes of breath, the two hurled themselves into the rapids and were swept away.

## Chapter 6

### *When Hope Came Crashing Down*

Devilish sub-currents yanked her this way and that like slipstreams in the wake of a supersonic jet. Kate gripped Jason's wrist, but this left her only one arm for buoyancy. The heavy belt around her waist kept pulling her under. The volume of water she gulped was enough to quench a year's thirst. No sign of life breached the darkness as the river wound its way for what might've been a hundred leagues through the tunnel. Kate rejoiced in the sublime sliver of daylight following their course from far above. *We're in the moat between two Babylon walls.*

She tried not to imagine hideous slugs clinging to the roof and walls of the tunnel, or other ghastly apparitions drinking the water mere inches away. *Maybe we should've crossed the desert like he said, and THEN come back if the glints turned out to be nothing. Ah, but you have to go with your instincts, Katie girl; you can't depend on anyone else's. It was a risk worth taking...I hope...*

The violent flow hurled current against current, from bank to bank, and the soapy foam spat up from this rendered the river a torrential brew. Jason was snatched under at one point, Kate at another. That they never once let go of each other was something they later found hard to believe. Indeed, as the river widened to a slow drift, brightly lit from above, and they swam to safety on the right hand bank, the first thing they did after crawling ashore was hold hands.

## *The Eleven-Hour Fall*

Neither of them said a word. They were too exhausted.

Dots and dashes of sunlight entered through cracks in the wall, as though communicating something in Morse code. Kate and Jason followed them for a quarter mile by the river that was now a lagoon. Finally, to their immense relief, Babylon Wall discontinued, and they stepped out onto a twilight reef of ocean pools and green alien coral. The vista was more breathtaking than anything they'd imagined, but potentially more dangerous as well.

After dumping their belts and suits in a heap, they sat side by side, digesting every facet of this new landscape in harsh, pragmatic chunks. Kate recalled a passage she'd memorized from her mentor Boris Yeltsin's textbook. It seemed apropos. "The art of survival is skilled, but a survivor is not much of an artist. The landscape is his canvas, the elements his tools, and his own life the work in progress. Yet, nowhere in this toiling is there room for an aesthetic, save the occasional glow after going stroke for stroke with Nature, and winning. Survival is little more than sketch over death: faintly memorized, improvised, monochromatic and easily erased."

To Kate, purple glints swashing like buccaneer blades simply indicated the width of lakes barring her path. To Jason, aisles of plush green carpet were nothing more than possible routes through the tricky maze. The setting suns were harbingers of cold hours ahead, while metallic-violet clouds spelled unpleasant weather.

"A poet'd have a field day here," said Jason.

"A poet'd be hot lunch by now," replied Kate.

He laughed.

She paid him no mind, and began unfolding their suits. Jason noticed her sudden frown of concentration. "What is it?"

"Those shimmers," she replied. "They're more than just sparkles on the water. Look how deep the purple is; the pigment in the sky isn't that deep. Besides, the water here is blue, not purple. Check it out. There's another element at play."

Jason focused hard on the flickering hue. It did seem incongruous. He thought for a moment then held his breath. "Psammeticum?"

"Exactly! That purple...yes, there...see for yourself." She handed him a sleeve. "The cuff sensor says it all. It's still programmed to detect Psammeticum. We located a few deposits in the peaks, if you remember, but nothing on this scale. Look! The gauge's turning cartwheels. I'd say we've hit the mother lode of Kratos!"

As if boasting, the coral betrayed its precious secret through a phantasmagoria of purple glints, stretching as far as the eye could see. The import of this, for human science, was beyond measure. Psammeticum promised an elixir of energy for eons of future space flight.

"The storm in the atmosphere passed long since," continued Jason. "They must've seen this by now. With any luck, they'll send the whole armada; who says greed never pays! Send all the ships you've got, I say – send 'em all!"

"We'll just hang around till then. You reckon?"

"You bet your sweet-shaped buns I reckon," he went on. "So this is what we came a hundred light years for. There's no way they'll blow this chance. No way. We'll just wait it out. In the meantime, though, it wouldn't hurt to try and find some food. Looks fairly lifeless, but what food ever advertised itself as food? Come on, Kate – on your feet – we've a Kratosian menu to write."

\* \* \*

"I don't like those shades of cloud," said Kate, hopping from dry rock to dry rock, trying hard to keep up with Jason.

"Yeah, nasty...very nasty," he replied. "I dare say we're about to be dowsed; and given what this atmosphere's capable of, so are our chances of rescue. Christ! It would have to start up now, wouldn't it!"

Sunlight skimmed across acres of shallow pools as they turned without saying a word to pick their way across the pocked coral, having not found a single fish or crustacean for supper. Looks like we're in for a long wait, thought Kate.

As they rushed inside the shelter of Babylon Wall, the first heavy drops hit. In moments, their vantage was reduced to a few grey feet of torrential downpour. The temperature dropped far too low for bare skin. The scouts wasted no time in putting on their survival suits. The ground was soon awash, the water level climbing.

"How about there?" shouted Kate. She pointed to a wide ledge fifteen feet up the inner wall. They reached it by climbing several collapsed rocks. Once there, they made themselves comfortable.

Hours later, Jason woke to the gentle lap and swish of water against the walls. *Oh, great – still here.*

Kate was already up. Gnawing on an oat biscuit, she waded knee-deep into the temporary sea, and seemed so unfazed by the whole scenario that Jason wondered for a moment which species had reared her. Amphibian? Bird? Some kind of desert dweller?

*She's something else, that's for sure. If you ever had a chance of surviving at all, she's it. A pity she doesn't trust you; even a Valkyrie needs someone to lean on now and then. Best play along, and just pull your weight till she really needs you. I wonder what Daniella's up to...sweet wife...wish she was with me now...but not HERE...God, no! She'd hate not knowing what happens next...and yeah, she'd hate Borrowdale. Not feminine enough. She is though, just not homemaker feminine. Hmm...but I could do with both girls: one for right now, the other for when this is all over. Huntress and soft perfume.*

He joined Kate in the water, where they each looked skyward. "At least it's settled," she said.

"Clear enough for them to see," he replied, "even if the treasure has been swamped for a while."

Only a few green coral fingertips were visible above the surface. No glimmers



of Psammeticum remained. "They should be able to make it; my gauge can," he added, showing her the pulsing dial on his cuff. The sky was pale but clear. Diffused light from the suns washed the atmosphere in a murky maroon, rendering objects on the surface ill-defined, ghostly.

They tramped on, hoping for signs of marine life, but none appeared. An hour passed. Two. Still nothing. "What do those slugs fe..." began Kate, quickly cut off by Jason's cry of, "Look! Coming from the sun! What *is* that?"

She stared upward and held her breath. The larger sun, slightly higher in the sky than its sister, spat a fiery tongue from its centre. It whipped this way and that, dancing like a live cable. The show lasted over a minute.

"Solar flares?" said Jason.

"I didn't know they could be that violent. Nor that visible in broad daylight."

"Stars are confoundingly unpredictable," he replied, "twins even more so. They can pull at each other in subtle ways."

"You're kidding...a bull in a lasso has more subtlety."

"Indeed. Um, you were about to ask what the slugs feed on," said Jason, pacing his hand on his shoulder.

"Yeah."

"Us!... Babylon Wall, six o'clock."

Kate spun to see a dozen black shapes converge in the water far behind. "Not those bastards again!"

After joining, the convoy began to track Jason and Kate across the flooded reef. Adrenaline pricked Kate into action. "They're headed right for us." She stopped wading and stepped onto the higher levels of coral. The two bolted like pond skippers, using coarse rims and submerged ledges as stepping stones. Despite the occasional slip, they felt safe enough to rest after a few miles.

"I can hardly make 'em out," said Kate, panting. "They'll only follow us so far...surely."

"Probably, but we'd best keep moving in any case. You said they can leap through the air? Well, they move slow enough through water, but I'd rather be out of sight by the time they reach dry land."

Kate nodded. They resumed their flight, at a more venerable pace this time. Before long the black posse was indeed out of sight.

Jason stopped. He glanced behind them, then to the right, then high behind them, high to the right.

"What's wrong?" asked Kate. Jason didn't answer. His mouth gaped but no sound emerged. She followed his gaze to the sky. There, cutting through a spindly joint between two clouds, was a fiery streak, hurtling horizontally to ground. "What do you think it is?"

"For God's sake! Look!"

She'd never seen Jason as frightened. The sheer urgency in his voice forced her to focus. *OK, I can hear the rumble now. He must think it's more than a meteorite. There's definitely something dark and solid at the head. Alright, what else could it be? It's more or less directly above this Psammeticum...no, it*

*couldn't be that. What else? Oh, my God! It is!*

"The Fair Monique?" Fear flooded through her body.

"The Fair Monique," he replied. "She's going to crash."

Kate's knees began to buckle. The roar overhead grew to a staggered thunderclap. But she had to look! The inverted umbrella – the giant particle collection dish attached to the nose of the vessel – had completely melted away, leaving only the thin, oblong trunk to blaze. Giant sparks burst from the projectile as though it welded its way through the atmosphere. It fell and fell. Kate and Jason covered their ears as it tore past above them. Its steep trajectory began to flatten. *They're attempting an emergency landing!* A horrid trail of smoke blotted the suns. Random chunks of the ship's exterior splashed into the sea; a large panel cut vertically into the coral not fifty feet away.

"Pull up! Pull up!" they both shouted as the Fair Monique nose-dived toward the horizon. For a split second it vanished completely, before a column of flames and putrid smoke leapt high into the air. The muffled boom hit seconds later. Neither of them said a word. Utterly alone, both closed their eyes and let their heads drop. Finding Psammeticum had raised their hopes. Those hopes had just come crashing down.

## *Chapter 7*

### *Dolphin Reef*

Clusters of brown, Yucca-like plants, the roots of which reached many meters below thin layers of water and sand, proved extremely useful. Kate was the first to discover a colony of little crustaceans, similar to the fossilized scorpions she'd found that first night. They thrived on the outskirts of the coral reef, inches before a sandy incline that rose a few meters above sea level. The creatures, even with their pincers, were harmless to Kate and Jason, but revealed a stunning animosity toward one another. Whenever two crossed paths, they would fight for the right of way. The death toll was so high Jason wondered how the species could last a single day. "Good eating, though." Jason cracked one last shell open – his twenty-third – before lowering the succulent meat onto his tongue.

The fire was down to demonic black nostrils spitting the odd spark or flame. Kate threw on a few more Yucca leaves. The heat curled them inward. Their skins ignited like a coil of white firecrackers, before settling into a slow

burn. Jason arrayed a few dozen crustaceans inside the ash, to cook in their shells for future meals. They both then lay back on the rim overlooking the reef. There was still no sign of the pursuing slugs.

"They've given up on us, Jason." Kate yawned. "Even the slugs have left us. I feel like we're a gazillion miles from a friendly face, I'm telling you." She realized how insensitive that sounded. After all, Jason had just lost his Daniella. She wanted to say something profound to make amends, but a grim, absurd chuckle was all that escaped her lips.

Jason wasn't going to chastise her for snatching any desperate humor. *Likely she's lost someone close to her as well. We all react in our own ways, I guess.*

In point of fact, Kate cared for only one citizen of the Fair Monique, and he lay right beside her. The crash had hit her hard, as it would anyone with a heartbeat; but the greater tragedy was what it now meant for her own future.

"We're not leaving Kratos, are we?"

"No," replied Jason. "No, we're not."

"Fourteen thousand people...gone...just like that," she clicked her fingers, "and only two survivors – we owe it to them in a way, I reckon, to live on as long as we can."

She closed her eyes in shame. That sounded so false. *My God, you haven't got the smarts for it, so don't even try for anything meaningful. Just keep quiet from now on, Katie girl. If he wants to talk, he will.*

The suns overhead were at their furthest distance apart. Though it was close to mid-day, Kate's double shadow trailed her like a forked tail as she walked. The sky was clear and virtually colorless. Every now and then she swore a huge shadow followed them over the terrain, but it was never more than a glimpse, easily dismissed.

In the distance – exactly how far they couldn't tell – a continuous exhaust pumped smoke high into the atmosphere. The Fair Monique's funeral pyre! Jason insisted they reach it, if only to dispel any uncertainty from his mind. And to say a farewell prayer for Daniella. *Sweet Daniella!* In truth, he had never prayed in his life, nor had his wife. Incomplete memories of her and the Fair Monique rotated in his mind. He realized it was shock he felt, not loss. The reality still hadn't hit him.

An eight-hour uphill hike met cool gusts and the odd cluster of Yuccas. After climbing a particularly steep dune, Kate and Jason stopped in their tracks. They saw a magnificent sight – an endless sea that swept out to the west from a crescent headland. The water was still as a duck pond as far as the horizon. Patches of green and blue alternated across its surface like painted marble, suggesting hidden goings-on beneath. Closer to shore, a strong current pushed and pulled the shoreline as if it belonged to a different sea altogether. The coastline tapered to a narrow cove a hundred feet below them, and it was here that the two forgot, at least for a moment, their terrible ordeal.

"It's magical," whispered Kate. A slick grass-covered shelf just beneath the surface partitioned the cove around seventy feet from shore. This orange grass

swayed with the tide and provided a slippery cushion for the most remarkable water sport either of them had ever seen. The practitioners were white fish about the size of a man. Longer than a dolphin but bearing a resemblance in both snout and head shape, they glided across the grass as though it was their entire *raison d'être*. Two slender canals flanked the shelf, allowing them to swim back for more. Kate counted twenty-nine surfers.

"It's magical," she repeated.

"No," answered Jason, tears filling his eyes. "It isn't magic...it's paradise." And to himself, *It's paradise, Daniella...*

There, overlooking the most perfect yellow beach, listening to purrs of dolphin delight of a frequency almost too low for the human ear, they embraced. Jason cried like he hadn't since he was a small boy. The seawater arched, thumped ashore, then hissed a retreat – an impossible siege. The white dolphins merely swayed on its shoulders, gliding over the spongy reef, truly going with the flow.

Are we somewhere between the two? thought Kate. Stubborn yet graceful? We'd have to be; the odds of us having made it so far are astronomical, but it's more than luck that's got us here. More than luck.

Minutes passed. "We've been going hard at it for days now," she said softly, "and we're pretty sure those slugs have given in. I think we're due some R&R. What do you say we try a little reef surfing ourselves?"

Jason palmed his tears across his temples, sniffled a few times, then nodded. "Sounds good."

"I was gonna say we should've brought our bathing suits, but we're already in them."

"Hmm...that's what you think," replied Jason as he removed his vest and dropped his shorts before running, stark naked, down to the beach.

Kate savored her eyeful for a moment. "What the hell," she said, trembling with excitement as she stripped. "Who's watching anyway?"

\* \* \*

The fish kept their distance at first. They slid in two groups, one on each edge of the reef, leaving the centre open for their strange new acquaintances. Kate and Jason were wary, too. They found the water surprisingly warm. As they reached waist depth, a sudden swell lifted them from their feet and dragged them like writhing flotsam over twenty feet. They had to tread water. A few moments later, it rose again and heaved them onto the shelf. The grass was slick as wet plastic, tough as leather. The slide across proved fast, juvenile and thrilling.

Kate nodded at Jason's signal for another run. They needed strong strokes to swim the cliff-side channel back to the starting point. The second drag proved even more exhilarating. Each wanting to burst out with glee, each fiercely attracted to the other, they nonetheless kept to an intense, private excitement. The perception was tacit. Anything further, considering the recent tragedy, would be inappropriate. Stolen glances had to suffice.

After two more runs, the dolphins mingled freely with Kate and Jason, buffeting them about on the grass, nudging them impatiently along the channels. The creatures' skins were coarse but fleshy to the touch. They had no teeth. Instead, their mouths were lined with barbs all the way down their throats. These, together with the ability to suck water in with great force – often jetted out through their tails for propulsion – rendered them lithe and efficient hunters, according to Jason.

"I could do this forever," shouted Kate.

"Let's!"

"Don't tempt me," she added, before sliding over the grass on her stomach.

Jason hadn't quite swum the channel in time for that particular surge. Those few moments alone allowed his thoughts to drift back ashore. *Actually, I'm getting a little tired. We've been at it for a few hours. Time for a rest. Soon as she swims round again, I'll tell her.*

But Kate didn't show right away. A few minutes passed. He thought about either swimming back up the channel or surfing the shelf to find out. And no dolphins either! *What's happened?* Just then, Kate appeared at the far end of the channel. She clung to the rock face with one hand, while motioning vehemently toward the shore with her other. Jason spun round. As he looked up, his blood froze. "Bastards! They tracked us all this way!" Atop the sand bank, a dozen black slugs rummaged through their clothes and equipment. *That's some sense of smell they have!*

Kate waved for her to join him at once. He didn't hesitate.

"Well," he whispered, "what do we do now?"

"We wait!"

"For what? You think hiding here'll dissuade them? They've tracked us across water and desert for God-knows-how-long. What's a few more feet?"

"Alright then, let's go back and see if they'll mind not eating our heads first! That about right for an alternative? Hmm?" she snapped.

"I say we just swim for it," said Jason, "like those dolphins did."

"Where to? There's nowhere to climb up."

"There might be along there," he said, pointing across the cove to the coastline that stretched perpendicularly from the cliff.

"Alright then. They are slow swimmers," she thought aloud. "As soon as they make a move, so will we."

They waited there, warm as the sea heaved beneath them, their pruned fingers soon aching as they clung to insufficient grooves in the rock. The posse didn't budge. Had they had the same idea – to wait for their prey to make a move? Despite a beastly appearance, how smart were they?

The strange war of attrition continued. A lonely shadow roved across the cove. Not more rain, thought Kate. Then another sped by, and another. *What? No cloud moves that fast.* A deafening shriek pierced the air. The slugs cowered, while Kate and Jason tilted their heads skyward once more.

## *Chapter 8*

### *The Wings of Change*

“**D**ive under!” cried Kate. Enormous wings swooped above them, filling her with terror. She and Jason each took a deep breath, plunged beneath the surface and waited there, on the sea bed, until their chests were ready to implode.

They resurfaced together, gasping. The entire beach erupted into a chaos of darting shapes, flying sand and vicious combat. Seven slugs lay disemboweled atop the slope. The rest were engaged at various points on the yellow sand by five giant birds – exactly like those Kate had encountered during her eleven-hour fall.

“Keep low, keep still,” she said.

The wings flapped and thudded like sail-sheets flexing taut. They kicked up clouds of sand that masked much of the slaughter from Kate and Jason. The birds’ stingray tails slashed through the water. Their bat-like fur bristled on their bodies. All that identified the slugs was a low, constant groan. This sound finally ceased, and the birds folded their wings to peck, side by side, at their victims’ corpses.

Kate gave a sigh of relief. *So that’s the end of the posse! Let’s hope these new predators haven’t noticed us.*

The creatures turned to face the sea. Jason noticed an extremely low series of purrs exchanged between them. “They’re communicating,” he whispered. “Can

you hear it?"

Kate spied the tendrils suspended beneath their beaks. They appeared to quiver where there was no wind. Their heads, even more horrific than she'd remembered from her hours-long side view, swiveled in languid motions, not bird-like at all. They're searching for us, she thought. Grabbing Jason by the shoulder, she motioned for them to hide behind the shelf. No sooner did they start than one of the creatures saw them, leapt vertically into the air and dove after them.

"No! Under again!" cried Jason.

Mid-way to the bottom, two enormous beaks snatched them from the water and carried them to shore. They kicked hard, but to no avail. The birds soon dropped them, still naked, on top of the sand bank. Kate glimpsed the horrific black carcasses. She held Jason tight and shut her eyes. He wrapped his arms around her. Not a single thought pierced her bitter despair.

She felt something blunt hit her back. It made her grip Jason even tighter. Again, the same blunt impact, only higher up between her shoulders. *The bastards are toying with us.* After enduring a further four blows, she whipped round to end it quickly. The spin left her flat on her face. She looked up, perplexed. "What? You?"

Jason sensed a surge of hope in her voice. It lifted him slowly around. There, in front of them, was a six-foot tall bird, a hatchling, with a survival helmet gripped in its beak. Jason pulled Kate back. "Is this the one...?"

"Yes," whispered Kate. "This is the fellow I saved yesterday. Look at the scar across his chest. He must've made it to safety after all."

With a face as hideous as its seniors, the eaglet nonetheless retained a regal pose. Its wings tucked diagonally upward against its sides; it held its head and breast straight; its eyes looked into Kate's without blinking. It hopped forward and pressed the helmet against her face. She took it. Immediately, the eaglet ran back to the feet of its parent, where it was scooped up by a giant beak. Without sound, the entire flock lifted high above Kate and Jason, before gliding off toward the horizon, toward the smoke rising from the Fair Monique.

"What just happened?" asked Jason, slumping onto the sand.

"Hmm...it seems to me...reciprocity." Her eyes widened. She sighed once more. "I saved the baby's life; they've returned the favor. Those shadows I thought I saw following us over the lake... The wings of Kratos fly for us after all."

"Allies? Who'd have thought it on this godforsaken rock?"

"Yeah. We might not be the most intelligent species, after all."

"Well, that's a given where you're concerned, Kate, but as of right now, you might as well crown me King of Kratos. I'm feeling that lucky."

"Actually," she replied, "I'm thinking we just met him."

"Who? That fellow with the scar?"

She nodded.

"Well, he'd get my vote, too, but he's just left us in the middle of nowhere without directions, and a heck of a hike to anywhere safe."



## *The Eleven-Hour Fall*

Kate smiled, looking him over. "Some survivalist you are."

\* \* \*

Now in shorts and vest again, with his belt and suit (partially filled with water) slung over his shoulder, Jason threw a grateful salute to Dolphin Cove. "So far, it's the only place I wouldn't mind seeing again. Who knows...maybe one day..."

Kate shielded the sun from her eyes as she looked out over the ocean for signs of their aquatic friends. Not so much as a foam bubble disrupted the calm beyond the coastal current. *I wonder if they'll ever return...* The cove itself, having not long since teemed with the creatures of Kratos, disappeared beneath the cliff. *On such a huge world, you'd think there'd be at least one agreeable hiding place.*

Their destination was the Fair Monique's crash site. About forty miles away, she reckoned.

"More like forty-one," said Jason, trying his best to wind her up. Though the atmosphere was still gloomy, the suns' glares grew livid. A close stifling heat labored their breaths and halved their pace. They trudged for a few hours, hardly a word passing between them.

Jason exhausted his seafood reserves in a single meal, proclaiming them "tasty, but an insult to nouveau cuisine."

Kate devoured a synthetic gammon paste, followed by a handful of her completely crumbled apple biscuit. They each finished with a few swigs of fine Kratosian water – a kingly beverage on a day of such hot travails.

Far to the left, the light green ocean was still visible, though seemed on the verge of a wicked change. Deep violet clouds lay crouched on the horizon, ready to pounce at any moment.

"Looks volatile over there," said Kate.

"And we'll be exposed when it hits."

"Not if I've got anything to do with it."

Jason put his thumb to his forehead – an old-fashioned salute – which Kate saw from the corner of her eye. "I'm serious," she added. "You don't know how quickly this atmosphere turns. When we were falling, the updraft was enough to hold us in mid-air for hours. Just imagine meeting that kind of force on the surface." She stopped to look back. "And we've already seen what the rain can do."

"I agree. We need some shelter, pronto."

"Let me know if you see anything: a rock formation, a hollow in the ground, anything we might be able to use."

"Affirm."

"Good. The flyers went this way, so that's good enough for me," she replied.

"Perhaps."

"It's slender, I know, but you've heard of a woman's intuition?"

"Yeah, never contest a dog for its bone, or a woman's intuition."

She laughed and motioned to slap him, which he playfully sidestepped. The quick shuffle, however, lost him his footing, and he soon spat sand from where he lay. "See!" he groaned, "Hell hath no fury..."

Kate grinned as she helped him up. The inclement clouds piled across the sea. In minutes, the temperature dropped below anything they'd experienced so far. They emptied the water from their suits and hopped inside. Days' worth of dried sweat and the sodden inner lining threw up sickly smells of plastic and old rubber. The suns vanished behind a burgundy veil. A wind picked up. Loose rocks rolled and bounced by Kate and Jason, toward the coast. Swipes of sand stung their cheeks and eyes. Each step they tried became one half forward, two to the left; the gust quickly turned into a hurricane.

"It's no use," shouted Jason. Kate didn't hear him. He gritted his teeth, grabbed her by the arm and, spying a rock firmly embedded in the ground, let the wind carry them to it. The current began to lilt in a peculiar manner. It scooped rocks and sand diagonally into the air, as if they were on the outskirts of a tornado. They made the thirty feet in a single bound. A few seconds more and the power of the updraft would never have brought them back to ground. The rock was around four feet high and nine wide, yet shielded them well for the time it took to program the taskers. Kate saw Jason's lips move and his face contort. The wind, though, screeched by at ground level and roared up overhead. Not a single syllable met her ears. It didn't matter. She knew exactly what to do.

Jason fired first. The harpoon burrowed deep into the rock, pulling his cable taut. Right, my turn, she thought. About to take aim, she felt her shoulders grow heavy. Her lower back began to lift as she struggled to kneel. Jason looked her in the eyes from his crouched position, as if to say, "Come on, what are you waiting for?" But the quiet pull suddenly erupted. A terrific jerk wrenched her into the wind. The ground hurtled past like the tail of a comet; sand and grey rocks sublimed from the surface as a gushing river. Higher and higher. Her survival suit pressed even tighter to her chest. *It's the parachute! It's opened!*

Kate knew her only chance was to anchor herself to the ground. In their haste, she and Jason had accidentally switched suits. It made her furious. Her own parachute had saved both their lives at the end of an eleven-hour fall; *his* had just ripped loose for no apparent reason, hurling *her* into the wind instead. She held the Tasker at arm's length but struggled to keep her eyes open long enough to aim. The current lifted her higher still, and was stronger than ever. On the verge of firing blindly to ground, she glimpsed a smooth bedrock below. Fire! As soon as the cable began to un-spool, she clipped the gun onto her belt, and waited. *Please let me have enough line!* At the rate she flew, the harpoon might not have time to burrow sufficiently into the rock, if it even hit the rock.

Kate shut her eyes and ground her teeth together. *Please let me have enough line! Ugh!* An extreme jolt almost ripped her in two. If both harnesses had not been attached to her sturdy suit, her spine would've snapped like a wish-bone.

*It's anchored! Now to cut this bastard chute loose. C'mon, Katie girl...think! What cuts? What cuts? What...* The solution was so atypical, so ironic, she had to

## *The Eleven-Hour Fall*

run it through her mind three times. *That's it!* Squeezing her hand into the taut belt, she managed to pull out a single flare.

One...two...three...go!

In a single motion, she struck it alight, flung her arms behind her head and gripped the parachute cord. With this in one hand, she burned through it using the flame held in her other. Kate melted away her wings in no time. She then reeled herself in with the tasker. An endless stream of sand and rocks met her head-on. A single cable was all that defied the hurricane. She'd fired blind, and was still unable to look at her anchor. Shielding her face, Kate didn't realize she'd reached ground until she felt something hard press her knee. The tasker had reeled her in completely! She kissed the harpoon, curled up into a ball and concentrated on breathing rhythmically.

All the while she whispered, "Hang on, Jason...hang on!"

## *Chapter 9*

### *Finding the Fair Monique*

**W**e'd like to help you learn to help yourself...look around you...all you see are sympathetic eyes...and here's to you, Mrs. Robinson; Jesus loves you more than you will know...

A tranquil ring in her ears muffled the raging wind. Simon and Garfunkel once again filled that blank sheet in her mind. Kate couldn't remember all the words. Those she did were set in stone before the storm passed, like gospels; not written for piety or profundity, but simply for her to remember.

The rhythm comforted her like one of her grandpa's old cardigans – venerable, familiar, tobacco-stained. She wrapped herself in the playful guitar twangs and quaint melody of Mrs. Robinson, shutting out even the stings from rocks pelting her back. This was her meditation, her bridge between sanities, her secret survival formula...and it had never failed. Others rattled off lists from A-Z; some imagined themselves in idyllic places; Kate played her grandpa's jukebox, 1960's style.

When the winds finally passed, she burst into tears. Days of constant shock and release now eroded even the toughest barriers of her mind. A dire loneliness

flooded in. Though she stayed put long enough to finish her Beach Boys concert – Wouldn't It Be Nice and Surfin' USA – the lyrics stuttered, and she didn't listen to a word. If the thought of Jason hadn't hoisted her up, Kate might never have moved again.

*Some survivor! C'mon, Katie girl, you've failed completely at everything you were taught; how about changing a few things from now on. Right! First rule – listen to Jason. Second rule – listen to Jason. Third rule – you don't live for survival, you survive in order to live. Now get up and go find him!*

What seemed like an age passed before the two met. Jason had simply followed the wind direction. He appeared to the north. If the afternoon had been any gloomier, they might have missed each other altogether.

Up close, he noticed the dried tear streams on her dusty cheeks. "Next time there's so much as a breeze, I'm roping us together. Agreed?" he said.

"Agreed."

They embraced. After a deep breath, Kate settled against his chest with a strange new frame of mind. It was hard to describe. A sensation of, for the first time, belonging? The Fair Monique had never given her that; nor had a career of countless scouting expeditions in the company of faceless colleagues. *Is it just the extreme situation? Does some part of a lonely woman NEED to feel this? She snuggled closer. Or should I be asking at all?*

The thought eased her mind.

*Maybe you should just let go. Remember...you don't live for survival, you survive in order to live.*

Those words seemed designed for Kate Borrowdale. Indeed, that she'd coined them suggested a strong subconscious cry had been answered. Repressed longing? She'd delved so far into her nomadic profession that even hugging a man now opened a can of neurotic worms.

"We need to stop meeting like this," he said, letting go.

"How do you mean?"

"Relief at finding each other alive. It's damn-well bordering on traumatic. Look at me; do you really think I'd be able to last here on my own, ma'am?"

"Hmm, you are rather pathetic," she answered.

"Thank you. The feeling's mutual."

They both chuckled without finding it funny in the least. Kate described the sky through which they'd fallen days before, pointing out current similarities.

"It's layered – do you see? We're not beneath it any more, so you can make out the slow, swirling motion. And there, look - those huge slivers: gas jets or something, stretching right to the top of the updraft. We must've danced up there for hours without knowing it. Well, you didn't know anything anyway, but I sure as hell did. The whole thing's like a blanket of air."

Jason nodded. "Perhaps it's a gargantuan tornado of some kind. Maybe those slivers are its funnels, and the forces combine to create this general updraft phenomenon. Each mini tornado feeds off the others, like a cluster of twisters."

"Not bad."

"Not good either."

The deep violet storm covered one-hundred-and-thirty degrees of their vista to the west. The remainder of the sky was gloomy with pale and purple hues, affording the suns only translucent admission.

Kate and Jason started once again for the Fair Monique. The smoke columned diagonally to the west, owing to the strong wind in that region. The air was now fresh and cool. They walked at a relaxed pace. The warm, fidgety breeze was sublime. It wasn't until Jason found an entire seventy-foot section of the ship buried in the sand that he struck up conversation.

"I was going to suggest we try to salvage supplies, but it's not looking good." He gestured at the horrifically-melted exterior.

"Yeah, it's been burning for a long time now. I'll be surprised if there's anything but shells and cinders."

"We'll see."

"I still can't believe that solar flare, though," she added. "How could it have knocked her out of orbit like that? She had safety precautions up the proverbial."

"Hmm...those solar flares, though, don't take kindly to anything man-made. The one we saw must've been a real sonofabitch."

"And we were saved by the planet's electromagnetic shield? Whereas anything outside must've caught a broadside?"

"Sounds that way."

They fell silent. The landscape was softer underfoot, more powdery, given to hiding sharp rocks just beneath the surface. As they approached the smoke, it blotted out the suns. The atmosphere thickened with a sickly smell.

"So much for the Fair Monique," said Kate as she stared out over the wreckage.

The scale of devastation dwarfed any emotion she could conjure. Not a hint of silver remained on the mangled metal segments that lay crumpled, torn from one another, like the remains of a giant centipede. Its impact had raked a shallow crater about three hundred yards wide. The separate segments lay at crazy angles: one was split apart down its centre; most were flat inside the crater, while two, having somehow spun off on their own, were twisted and upended like a croquet hoop.

The storm had blown tonnes of sand across the crash site. This partially buried the black remains. Here and there, Kate saw molten swamps of sand mixed with rocket fuel. These bubbled and gurgled, coughing up awful grey smoke.

Jason rubbed the acrid smoke from his eyes. He felt grim. The entire area resembled a hellish, aborted funeral. Half cremated, half buried, the wreckage bore no resemblance whatever to the graceful Fair Monique.

Daniella isn't here, he thought. She died up there. This is an empty grave. There's nothing here.

The idea of his wife never falling to ground, somehow remaining in the heavens, brought a bittersweet smile to Jason's face. "There's nothing here," he

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repeated aloud. "Let's go."

"Yes, let's."

He clasped Kate's hand and began the long walk round the wreckage – hundreds of acres – while trying to disavow all memory of life aboard the Fair Monique. Instead, he focused on the horizon. It blended with an endless clear sky like a beach with shallow ocean. He felt lucky, not ashamed; hopeful, not glum; neither alive nor a ghost; something forgotten. That was all there was to it. He and Kate had simply slipped by, sugar-stealers in the breeze. They weren't meant to see such sights. They were accidents, and death had somehow miscounted.

Well, at least for the time being, he thought.

## *Chapter 10*

### *The Heart of Kratos*

“It’s up to you,” said Kate, spitting the noxious taste from her mouth. “I’ve led us this far, and it’s not exactly improved our situation, let’s face it. For all I know, south might’ve taken us to the garden spot of the whole planet. I think it’s your turn to pick a path, Jason.”

“No pressure, then,” he replied.

“Ha! Nope! No pressure.”

“Well, see if you can follow my reasoning.” He cleared his throat and concentrated on the panorama. “West leads to the ocean, which has its possibilities – food, maybe water from tributaries. On the other hand, we don’t know what predators live there. It’d just be my luck to run straight into a giant squid or some damn thing. East looks about as inviting as a Turkish prison – long, hot and miserable. South is out, obviously. I’m intrigued by this ‘horizon’ ahead; it’s getting closer with every step, almost like we’re approaching the edge of the world. North, I say, Ms. Borrowdale – I’m sticking with your plan. Now... aren’t you glad you asked?”

“Oh, indubitably.”



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The smoke column was no more than that of a small bonfire when she glanced behind. They'd walked for some four hours since bidding the Fair Monique farewell. The declining desert stretched a mile ahead, after which there was nothing, just as Jason said. The edge of the world? *Not unless you're standing at the prow of a long-ship, with a name like Olaf.* It was a bizarre phenomenon, but one with a scientific explanation. Of that much she was certain. *But if this is the desert AND sea level, then how can there be a sheer drop?*

"It's the scale of this place," said Jason, answering her puzzled expression. "We're thinking in terms of Earth and the colonies – the topography there. This is through the looking glass the other way. If something appears to make no physical sense, it's only because we haven't seen the whole picture. Take our fall from the mountain. You thought we were plummeting to ground like we would on Earth, but there were bigger forces at work, winds on a far larger scale. And something tells me we'll kick ourselves up ahead, when we solve this 'ere mystery."

"And if it turns out to be the edge of the world, I'm kicking you over it."

"So it's like that, is it?" he said. "I get to make the choice, but I get the boot if it goes belly-up?"

"Yup."

"I'm so glad you're finally starting to trust me."

"Don't mention it. I told you I couldn't manage without a guy to kick around."

"Ouch! You're all heart, Borrowdale."

The sand became rock-solid underfoot, and incredibly even. The shallow decline to the precipice was unusually smooth. Two hundred yards from the edge, Jason stopped to make a bare patch in the sand with his boot.

*What the...?* Kate frowned as she crouched to inspect it.

"It looks metallic," she said. After widening the uncovered area, the two looked at one another. Their eyes widened.

"Crafted metal?" said Jason. "But what's it doing buried at the end of the world?"

Their final steps toward the horizon were delicate, apprehensive, precarious. Hundreds of light-purple clouds roamed the sky like jellyfish. The depth of their number increased with each forward step. The sensation, as if spinning slowly upside down, tickled the hairs on Kate's neck. She held Jason's arm for fear of losing her balance at any moment. Each reverent step might've been down the aisle of a church, so close together were they, and so quiet. A faint lime rose from the edge, followed by streaks of dark blue. The colors were wispy, pastel, ethereal. Another step brought a swath of reddish-brown into view. A rainbow through the clouds, thought Kate. The next area of dark blue, however, covered a significant area, and was far deeper than the sky above. Outlines of shapes were now distinct, along with scrawled borders and boundaries. A three-dimensional grey area reminded her of...a mountain! *Yes, it's a mountain range...far below.* Her perception shifted. No longer wheeling on the verge of nothingness, she looked down to a distant valley thousands of feet below.

Jason tugged at her vest and pointed straight down. She leaned over, steadying herself on him. It was an overhang – a metallic overhang – beyond which she made out grooves and straight edges as far as the eye could see. An enormous cylindrical shape jutted out hundreds of feet from the vertical grey surface. *A ship?* Peering right and left across the precipice, Kate perceived the full dimensions of the phenomenon. She gripped Jason by the shoulder and then fell to her knees, sickly.

“Take a minute,” he assured her. “You’ll be all right.” In the meantime, he leaned over the edge once more and counted a further five cylinders, each half a mile apart across the metal drop. He nodded and turned to face the desert. *Our whole route?*

“You want to hear something mind-blowing?” he said.

“Hmm.”

“I think every step we’ve taken, ever since we landed, has been on the roof of this thing.”

“Excuse me?”

“Think about it. A craft as big as a continent...crashed millions of years ago...buried by countless sand storms and geological upheavals...and we’ve been exploring its surface for four days.”

She stared at him. “How do you account for Babylon Wall, the river tunnel, the ocean? How do you get rocks to grow from a spaceship? Or enough water...”

“How do you get rocks on top of a spaceship? We should know that better than anyone. Remember that day on the mountain...the storm that started this whole misadventure...boulders the size of houses hurled through the sky like pellets in a blizzard?”

“That doesn’t explain Babylon Wall, or the tunnel,” she insisted.

“I think those might actually be part of the craft. That would explain the circular tunnel and the sheer cliff you climbed. Maybe the rock is really just a crust on the shell of the ship, formed by millions of years of violent atmospheric conditions. Maybe the sand was congealed by super-hot temperatures. Who’s to say? Each of those cylinders is about the size of the Titanic, and I’ve counted five already. And we’re standing on the rim of the thing, thousands of feet from the valley floor.”

“The ocean might just be rainwater collected in a dip in the surface...a dent the size of the Atlantic...over millions of years,” added Kate, now coming to grips with the awesome implications.

“And the Fair Monique crashed on top of a crashed ship.”

A sudden gust blew sand in a spindrift over the edge. Kate cast her mind back to the snowy mountain pass – days, years, worlds ago – with infinite curiosity. What was she like back then? What was Kate Borrowdale really doing on Kratos in the first place? As she glanced back over the desert, her moods and past secrets seemed buried, out of reach in the sandy trail behind her. The floor of one world, the ceiling of another. Was the alien ship hollow? If so, what magnitude of emptiness had she walked over? What might this discovery be like if she was

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alone?

She shuffled over to Jason and, tilting his head toward her with both hands, kissed him slowly. Her cheeks flamed red.

His hands roved across her shoulders and back. It felt beyond perfect. She knew he wanted it, too.

Jason had to steady them. "We're on a roll," he said. "How about we find somewhere a little safer?"

"After you."

They rose together, overlooking a valley of vague colors and incredible possibilities. Hand in hand, neither of them had the faintest idea of how to reach it. What seemed like tiny trickles of water from the precipice to the west Kate knew were massive waterfalls plunging from the ocean rim. She saw scores of giant birds circling the landscape far below. The pastel greens and blues under the clouds suddenly reminded her of Earth. The reddish-brown swath appeared to snake toward the mountain range, as though it was an enormous, migrating herd. Whatever might happen, the valley was where they needed to be.

"It's not unlike home, is it?" he said.

"No," she replied, looking up at the twin suns drawing closer together. "It is home."



## *About the Author*

**Robert Appleton** is a multi-published poet, recently turned fiction writer. Drawing inspiration from early science-fiction novelists Verne, Wells, Burroughs, and later Richard Matheson, his work tends toward horror and exciting adventure. Readers will often find themselves in atmospheric settings - past or future -where human survival plays an instrumental role. A native of Bolton, England, he is proud to present his first novella, the science-fiction romance *The Eleven-Hour Fall*, by Eternal Press.

*Watch for the sequel to The Eleven-  
Hour Fall*

*Coming soon from Eternal Press—*

*The Elemental Crossing*

*Robert Appleton*

She screamed, but no sound escaped.

*Oh, Christ, this is it!*

The veil of no return. A film of cool moisture covered her hair, face and neck. Visibility was now that of a white, backward balaclava. She felt the boat move quicker and quicker through the water, and dread welled like hot oil in her gut. Her eardrums rang. She fought giant, panicked breaths with all of her pride.

The *Elemental* now hurtled faster than it had ever surfed as a sand yacht. Kate's hair flapped wildly, and the spray forced her eyes shut. Still louder, still faster, then suddenly...

*Ugh!*

Her stomach vaulted. The boat took flight for a second, and a raking wind lifted her bodily from the deck. On landing it spun and skidded at a sixty degree angle, sending a shock right through Kate. She spread-eagled her legs and lay back as the current swept her down the steep gradient. All she could do was grip the ropes and hang on. Saltwater flooded over the raw, peeling skin on her palms and fingers.

*Hang on, damn it! Just hang on!*

*Also coming soon from  
Eternal Press—*

*Café at the Edge of Outer Space*

*Robert Appleton*

Our gentle footsteps seem invasive, illegal somehow. The dark tunnel effect is dizzyingly effective as we tiptoe out onto a three-hundred-and-sixty degree stellar walkway. I hold my breath, and if Emma's hand wasn't squeezing mine, I'd be head over heels off balance instead of head over heels in... liking her a lot.

*Hotshot.*

It's a deep-bone thrombosis of stars and gravitational attraction. Body to body, orbit to orbit, me to her. We're cosmic trespassers, and I feel just as transparent as the window encasing us. She looks right into me, her warm breath reaching my cheek where it lingers. Utter silence. My heavy breathing now feels part of oblivion; hers a solar wind from light years away. We're together now, though. So together. She roves her flat palm from my side across the front of my t-shirt. I take it. Her fingers pulse magic as we draw near, and her breasts press against my rib cage. Near. No fear. We're...

Butterflies in my stomach rise warmly, fireflies to the roof of my chest. I bend, she rises. Our lips join atmospheres. Eyes closed, I'm not thinking, I'm tasting, and it's café au lait with the most alchemic sweetener ever created. As I feel up and down her back, I want more. It is levity and gravity vying in a rolling, tumbling moment. No way am I going to stop. She runs her hands through my hair, and it's amazing.