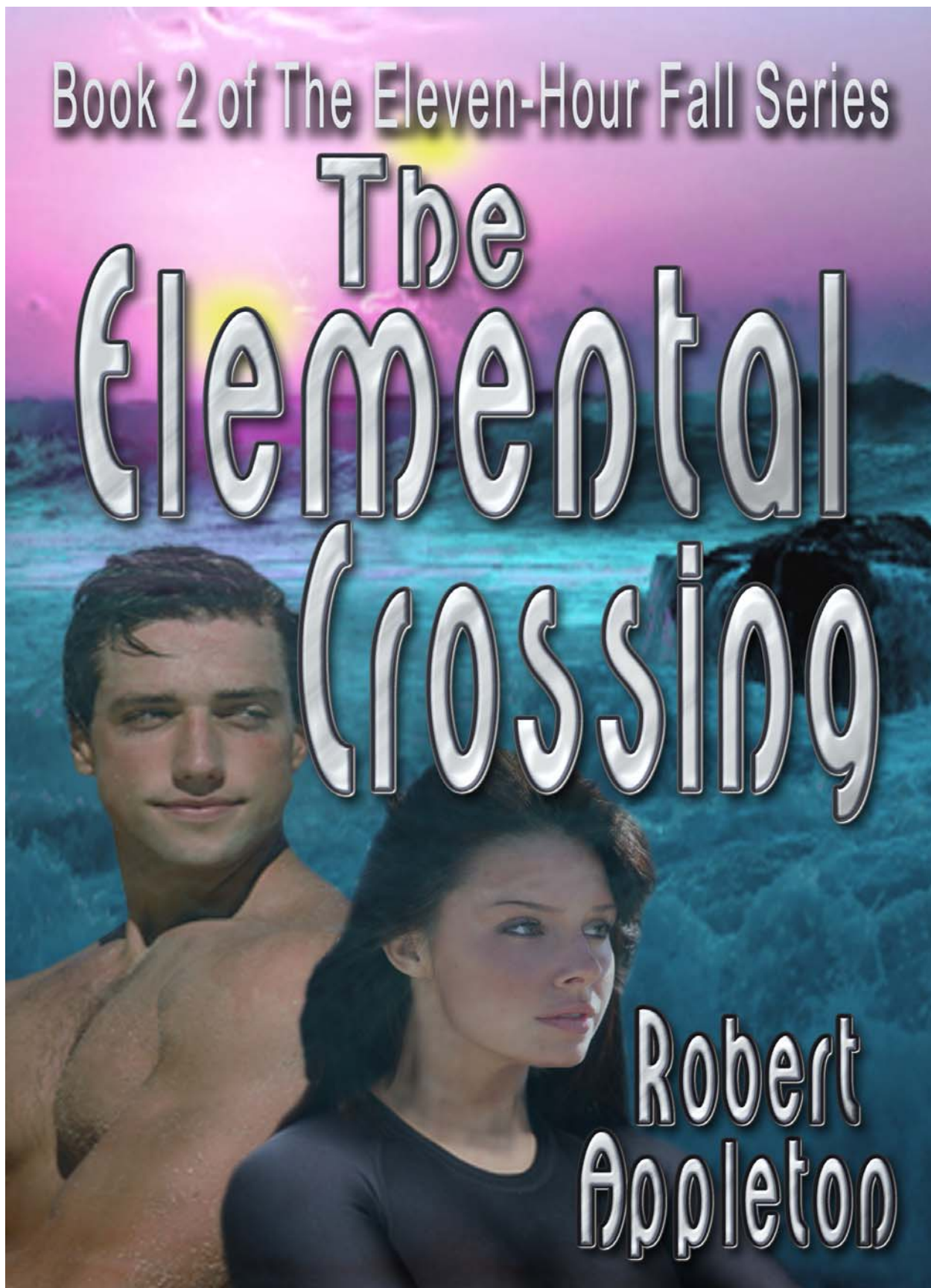


Book 2 of The Eleven-Hour Fall Series

# The Elemental Crossing

Robert  
Appleton



# *The Elemental Crossing*

She screamed at the top of her voice, 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 the dread welled up like hot oil in her gut. Her eardrums rang. She fought giant panic 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 drenched 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!*

*Robert Appleton*

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## *Acknowledgements:*

I'd like to acknowledge Steven Callahan's extraordinary book, *Adrift: Seventy-Six Days Lost at Sea*. Not only was it a true, vivid account of survival at sea, it explored the core of human endurance and spirituality and became the inspiration for this voyage into the oceanic unknown.

## *Chapter One*

### *A New Mode of Travel*

"Keep that line taut!" Jason yanked his own rope back to straighten the sail.

As the wind picked up, they skimmed over shallow sand drifts, the keel of their craft barely touching the ground. The faster they went, the farther back Jason had to lean in order to keep them upright. His control of the sand yacht was by two ropes, one in each hand, which tilted the sail accordingly. It required not only every muscle, but an incredible concentration at all times.

"I said keep that line taut!" he snarled.

"Shout at me one more time. I dare you!" Kate screamed back. But he didn't seem to hear, so wholeheartedly was he at the reins of his contraption.

*Boys and their toys, she thought. Well, this was all your idea, sweetheart...*

The wind speed had increased enormously since those first kick-starting gusts. Jason's ingenious creation—the wing and beak of a dead giant eagle, rigged with ropes—shot across the desert. Kate's whole body now shook with the strain and the bitter cold.

"How long has it been now? Half an hour?" shouted Jason. "I'm telling you...this is amazing, bloody amazing!"

He had adapted so quickly to the steering that Kate wondered if there really was genius at work, or whether he'd simply done this before.

*Either way, he's too damn reckless!*

"That's it!" he yelled down to her through the wind. "You've got it, Kate! Hold that line! Now is this awesome or what? I'm telling you!"

Kate shifted position to raise her butt for the next big impact. *Thud!* The keel slammed into a steep dune, slid up it, and ricocheted down the other side.

*He's out of control! If he crashes us, it won't be the impact that kills him...so help me!*

The giant wing dragged them across a mile-long, level plateau, scraping their keel over a bed of tiny rocks, all the while picking up speed. Its skin caught every gust; Jason seemed to tilt the rig intuitively for optimal propulsion.

*How fast now?* thought Kate. *Thirty, forty miles an hour? This is crazy!*

They hurtled toward a sandy incline at the far edge of the plain. It was shallow but continued to rise—exactly how high, they couldn't tell. Its peak masked the entire desert beyond.

"All right, you can stop us any time now!" she yelled.

No answer. Jason leaned farther back, wrapping the two ropes around his knuckles. The yacht slowed for a moment before a firm jab of wind hit diagonally from behind, flexing the sail's leathery skin. Kate elbowed his shin and screamed, "Stop! Now! What the hell are you doing?"

Leaning forward, she made ready to jump off, but something held her back. *He needs you, damn it. Hold on just a bit longer...*

Kate's stomach heaved as they accelerated up the slope. Suddenly, the ground fell away, revealing an undulating surface fifty feet below. She hadn't seen the peak coming. Rocketing through mid-air caused her to grip the ropes with every ounce of strength. The two halves of the giant beak chattered. The sail dipped sharply, jerking them forward, then shot up, wrenching them back. Kate's heart sank as she realised her man had no control at all over the sand yacht.

Jason's right arm shook wildly under the strain. The wind eased momentarily, causing them to plummet. But at twenty feet, a powerful gust kicked the sail through forty-five degrees. The tendrils holding Jason's feet tore loose. He had to let go of his left-hand rope. Now flapping through the air at the end of a single line, his whole body creased under sickening shockwaves, as though he was the tip of a whip enduring crack after crack.

"Let go! Jesus!" cried Kate, horrified that he still chose to cling.

At that moment, the sand yacht began to wheel into a final diving spin.

*We're going...going...shit! Jason!*

Letting go of the stay rope, she wrenched her feet free and flung herself at him. The impact knocked the wind out of her and was enough to break Jason's hold on the wild line. They landed in a tangle ten feet below, on the crest of a windswept dune. Jason watched in horror as his great invention veered sharply, corkscrewed, and then crash-landed into a nearby trough. The wing tip stabbed the sand. The beak stood upended at its side. It looked remarkably like a bird corpse half buried in the desert.

"That could've easily been us!" Kate gave Jason's arm a firm punch. "I hope you're satisfied."

"Too right," he replied, still shaking with adrenaline. "That was unbelievable! Unbelievable! How about another go?"

Kate gave a long sigh and, seeing in his sparkling eyes that he meant it, shook her head. "Men."

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## *The Elemental Crossing*

As they dragged the sand yacht to the summit of a large slope, another sandstorm hit without warning. Visibility shrank to just a few metres, but the wind was not especially fierce. Kate decided to press on for the ocean.

"The longer we wait for this thing to clear, the more dehydrated we'll be," she said, stepping into her survival suit for the umpteenth time on Kratos.

Jason had stopped trying to second-guess her. Though she offered him the democratic veto on most decisions, he knew Kate Borrowdale was the most qualified, the fittest, the most intuitive terrain scout he had ever come across.

*That's a decent marker,* he thought, glancing back to their giant wing wedged high on the peak. *Good thinking, Kate. We'll be able to find it again in no time.*

Their belts tied together with a twenty-foot rope, the couple shielded their faces to trudge through a swirling semi-dusk. The desert surface drifted all about them. The occasional coarse gust stung Kate's ears and tried to unstitch a wound on Jason's chin; by the time the winds eased, both were red raw. The sky, too, bled reddish purple between blue clouds.

*Bruised in the aftermath,* thought Kate.

Jason suddenly scooped her off her feet from behind and, holding her close, pressed his cheek against hers.

"We've made it," he said softly. "The only sand from now on is beachfront property."

Kate closed her eyes and sighed. Swept up by the man of her dreams, her lift was physical, spiritual, vital. A week ago, in the desert, she had started a survival cycle for two; here, on the mysterious shore of a green-blue ocean, the cycle had come full circle. *Jason Remington... Jason and I.* Though fate had raised its skull and crossbones more than once on Kratos—most tragically to sink the *Fair Monique*—Kate had in fact won everything she'd wanted: her man, her life, and a chance to explore a hidden world. But in the bargain, just as many questions, if not more. Their journey to the ocean was now complete...

But in a survival cycle, she knew nothing was ever complete.

The seascape was an elemental brew, a dark green wilderness settling after a hurricane upheaval. It tossed columns of spray from the crests of its swells. These danced and merged like feverish loners in an icy rave. Two miles to the north, the giant precipice curtailed the ocean for as far as the eye could see. This straight line amid the chaos haunted Kate. The idea of an entire ocean being little more than a puddle on the surface of a giant craft made her swallow self-consciously.

"If you had to guess, how far would you say it stretches?" Jason asked.

"Well, how far can we see to the horizon?"

"Hmm..." He shrugged. "Say about five times farther than on Earth."

"That's conservative," she replied. "Kratos is proportionally a lot bigger than that."

"Yes, but our eyes can't see infinitely through this atmosphere," added Jason.

"I know—the electromagnetic anomaly we were told about. Something to do with gravitational distortion."



"Let's just say if there wasn't an anomaly, we'd never have made it through the E.M. shield. The biggest planet ever explored, in terms of circumference; I can't even imagine the gravitational forces we *should* be experiencing right now."

"We're miraculous survivors on a miraculous world," she said vacantly. "And you can make a note of that for our epitaph."

Jason chuckled and kissed her on the cheek before setting her down on the sand.

He resumed his walk. "So what's the plan?"

"I thought this was the plan," she replied.

"I mean what now? Saying we can make a go of it here for a while—if there's a permanent food supply—what next, Mrs. Miraculous Survivor on a miraculous world? Where do we go from here?"

Kate smiled. "Haven't the foggiest."

That they couldn't even see a way around the ocean didn't seem to matter. They knew it was a finite problem with a finite solution, begging to be solved by rational minds.

As they traversed the last steep dune, Kate heard a series of low clicks. Training her ears on the motion of their suits, she quickly decided it was something else. Something farther away.

"Jason, stop a minute. Can you hear that?"

"What?" he whispered.

"Listen...click, click-click, click...then a rash of clicks. I don't know. I can barely make it out. But there's definitely something..."

He whipped his head to the left and began to creep with measured strides. "I heard it, too. There's something alive this way."

Kate wanted to grab his collar and yank him on toward the ocean, but she also knew the potential importance of each and every discovery.

*Like the old man said, she referred back to her Mars mentor, Yuri Yeltsin, real survival is ten percent planning, ninety percent improvisation.*

The clicks grew higher in pitch and more chaotic as Kate and Jason approached a long, hidden trough in the lower sand drifts. Though they had a Tasker apiece, only three harpoons remained between them.

*One each, at least.*

Attaching spear-tip to Tasker produced a click not unlike those coming from the trough, and each sound of the loading mechanism provoked an agitated reply.

"It's definitely alive," agreed Kate, "whatever it is."

Suddenly, the tip of something long and slender wound high in the air and struck down like a lash. They jumped back with a start. Sand tossed from the trough curled high into the breeze. Kate readied her Tasker. As they inched round the incline, two huge rubbery tentacles rose out of the sand. Coiling like snakes ready for the strike, they wound until taut, quivering, and then snapped forward to the ground. Three more followed a similar projection, a few feet apart. All appeared to aim for the same target. Kate and Jason stepped out into the trough to see the full horrific nature of what they'd discovered.

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It was not a single monster like a hydra or a squid. The tentacles appeared sentient, in competition. Their skin was grey but for a crimson tip and sandy veins at the root. Two banks of these monstrosities faced one another in the trough, about twenty feet apart. The way they whipped the sand reminded Jason of regimental beatings he used to witness in the military academy, when an offender would have his bare back lashed by ranks of towel-wielding colleagues. He'd suffered one such beating, and it made his blood simmer even now.

"Bastards!" he hissed. "Cruel bastards!"

*Click-click, cli-cli-click-click.*

"What is that?" asked Kate, trying to see inside the thumps and churned sand. "Am I seeing things or is there something there? Looks almost like...like a ghost."

"There's definitely something," he replied. "Definitely...something."

Jason walked slowly toward the plant-like tentacles, his Tasker aimed at the nearest root.

"What are you doing? Jason! Jason!"

Kate watched helplessly as her man stalked the deadliest-looking sand creatures she'd ever seen. Why? What possible advantage could it serve? They'd be at the water's edge in a matter of minutes. Easy, no obstacles. But this...this was going out of their way to find trouble.

*He must be able to see something I can't, she thought.*

But Jason couldn't see any more than she could. The apparition in the sand was no clearer as he approached than it was from Kate's safe vantage point. Just a phantom shape, struggling, clicking to break free.

"Nothing should have to suffer like that. Nothing!" He took aim.

Kate crossed her fingers. His Tasker's crosshairs locked on the tentacle root.

*Cli-click, cliiiiick, cli-click.*

Jason answered the poor creature's distress call with a satisfying shot. The harpoon buried deep into the tentacle, and with it came a loud pop, rather like a bursting inner tube. The horrid thing flailed for a few seconds before snapping backward, twisting, and slowly furling into a sandy grave. The victim still wasn't free, however. Two tentacles must have taken turns anchoring it to the ground, as when the first died, the second clamped itself horizontally over the ghost-like creature.

"Okay, try this!" Kate fired her own harpoon at the attacker.

Bullseye! The tentacle soon came to the same violent end as the first. Jason nodded and threw his fist in celebration.

*Jesus, this means a lot to him, she thought.*

A shape neither of them expected scurried out from the cloud of sand. They both jumped back. It had six legs—four close together at the front and two, thick and muscular, at the back. It was eight feet long and resembled a large salamander. Instead of scales, it had smooth, oily, chameleonic skin that adapted to the colours and contours of the desert. But it was clearly a solid shape. Kate and Jason reeled back, not from the creature itself, but what preceded it.

*A spectral twin?*

Kate rubbed her eyes to make sure she wasn't seeing double. As the salamander ran, a phantom extension of itself seemed to predict its every turn and movement. The actions were not simultaneous, like those of shadow and host. Instead, the ghost moved before the body, leading it over the sand as a kind of precognitive double.

"What the hell is that?" asked Jason, knowing full well he wouldn't receive an answer. "Looks like it's chasing itself."

Kate felt dizzy just watching the thing. It stayed low to the ground as it ran. Its head was wide and flat, resembling a stingray's, though not as extreme. From what she could tell, a black halo embedded on top of its head was some kind of sensory function. *Total sensation*. A three-hundred-and-sixty-degree blink occurred, in a wave of skin across the halo, every twenty seconds or so. The thing had no nose or ears, but three eyes, each as black as the halo, in the middle of its head. Kate could only guess at the complexity of alien biology inside.

Just before the creature stopped on the next slope, its spectral twin retracted. The clicking ceased. The salamander waited there, fifty yards ahead on the way to the ocean, just staring at Kate and Jason.

"What's it thinking?" she asked.

"Curiously," he replied. "It's never seen people before."

The thumps eased behind them, and Kate wondered whether the creature might be waiting for something. *Or someone?* Glancing round, she felt a lump in her throat. Four or five large mounds emerged as the sand cloud vanished in the centre of the trough. The giant tentacles coiled backward, perhaps waiting for their next unsuspecting prey. Or had they fed enough for one day?

"He wasn't the only one." Kate pointed Jason to the mounds. "That was probably his family. Poor thing, he's really suffered."

Jason stared into the eyes of the salamander. Beaten down, stripped of its family, saved by strangers from certain death, it had more in common with him than he'd realised.

"Poor lad," he whispered.

As they walked toward it, the creature's ghost turned sharply away, but the creature itself only flinched.

*Is it rebelling against something? Jason wondered. Against instinct? Is that what the phantom is – instinct?*

He hoped his new friend would stay with them a while. To his relief, it waited. And when he bent down to touch its oily skin, turning pale pink like his own, and saw its three deep, inquisitive eyes looking right back, he hoped it wouldn't leave him any time soon.

## *Chapter Two*

### *Beyond the Dunes*

It wasn't the shoreline they expected. Pale sand, yes, and greenish water; but the place held a dull, antiseptic feel, like a class trip to a sterile industrial plant. Apart from three or four clusters of white seaweed, there was no evidence of life. Kate immediately thought back to Dolphin Reef and the sublime atmosphere the creatures shared there. She shuddered. This was as far removed from that joy as a funeral from a wedding. A cold gust brought with it a sickly smell, rather like rancid dairy products.

"Zombie beach," she said. "No other way to describe it."

"None," agreed Jason.

Even the salamander looked the other way as it came to rest between them.

"Ladies first," invited Jason with a courteous sweep of his arm.

Kate didn't care for the gesture and, frowning, marched down to the desolate beach. Dark green water bobbed as a million dancing shoulders. She knew it would take a while to settle after the storm. So inhospitable was the view that Kate looked southwest across the coast, back over their original route.

*Anything's better than this, she thought. Maybe we should try for Dolphin Reef again. Hmm...but the slugs! That posse was wiped out, but how many more are there? We can't risk another manhunt. But that spot is paradise. This is more like the anti-paradise.*

The others joined her a few moments later. Jason bent down to rub the salamander's back whenever he remembered. It loved that. In return, it kept one of its three eyes on him at all times.

"You'd better think of a name," said Kate, smiling at their new companion.

"I like 'Mandy'," he replied. "Mandy the salamander."

The creature's black halo blinked in a swift circumferential motion. They had no clue what the gesture meant, but it seemed benign. And as the salamander had displayed nothing but affection for Jason, Kate perceived the bond as instinctive.

*Gratitude? Loyalty? We saved its life, and now it's bound to save ours...or something. Yes, just like the eagles. There's an intelligence here – we've seen it in a few species: the eagles, the dolphins, and now this fellow. It isn't like Nature to repay good deeds, though, at least not the Nature we know. Better face it, Katie girl, this eco-system is playing by a whole new set of rules.*

"But not all." She rubbed her empty stomach.

"Not all what?" asked Jason.

"Um...not all bad news. Mandy might know where to find food. Of the three of us, she's the only one who lives here, after all."

"So he's a she now, is he?"

Kate laughed. "Hey, sexist pig, you came up with 'Mandy'."

"I'll be sexist. You can be sexy." He smirked. "And we'll let the salamander decide whether it's a boy or a girl."

"How do we do that exactly?"

"We each throw a boot in the same direction, and whosever boot Mandy fetches determines the gender."

"Okay, that's dumb on so many levels," she replied, "but here goes."

They each removed a boot and, after counting down from three, hurled it across the beach. Mandy looked up at Jason, then over to Kate, paying no mind at all to the flying footwear.

"Go on, Mandy! Go fetch!" Jason urged, pointing with both arms to the boots. "Go on, boy!"

The bemused salamander dropped its head and slinked over to Kate, who hadn't given a word or gesture of encouragement.

"I think that's settled," she joked.

Mandy lay motionless at her side, watching Jason as though he'd just scolded them both. As Kate bent to stroke her, the gentle salamander turned a light purple colour, mirroring that of the sky. She seemed utterly content.

"It's the beginning of the end," said Jason. "Two, I repeat two, females to contend with!"

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While mammoth cloud swirls gathered high in the atmosphere, the weather on the surface stayed fine. Rather like the day they landed, Kratos seemed to consist of separate realms—realms dictated by altitude. What happened high above them often had no bearing on the surface, and vice versa. A hurricane in the heavens might stay in the heavens; a desert storm might have its ceiling well under the main cloud strata. It was a world of many layers.

"Underwater?" asked Jason. "How are you underwater?"

"I hold six records," replied Kate matter-of-factly.

"What's your longest dive?"

"Free dive – four minutes and five seconds. Yours?"

He pretended not to hear that last question. His ego was at stake.

"Four-o-five, huh? Not bad, Borrowdale. Not bad at all. Let's see how you do, then."

"I'm first?"

"You're first."

She pulled a face and dipped a toe in the green water, trying to see under the surface. Nothing. It was translucent, but no signs of life or even flotsam were evident. She waded out until her thighs were submerged. Warm, viscous, reeking water. An oily film covered the surface a little farther out.

"It's like a goddamn toxic pond!" she shouted.

"What can you see underwater?" came the reply.

*Bugger all, she thought, and that's all we'll ever find here. But you'll never know till you try, Katie girl...never know till you...*

She used the vacant thought as an opportunity to take the plunge—an old tactic she'd learned from Yeltsin. A warm rush flooded her mind for a second. Being fully submerged was pleasant, soothing. All the mechanics of underwater exhalation returned, as if she were still in the training pool ten years ago, a thousand light years away. *Step by step, Katie girl...step by step.*

While the seabed was mostly sand, the occasional bare spot revealed smooth metal. Whenever Kate saw this, it took her breath away. The awesome implications of an ocean on the hull of a giant craft would not let her relax. And as she found nothing but seaweed and a few shrimp-sized organisms, Kate returned to the beach dejected, her eyes aching and bloodshot.

"Nothing?" asked Jason.

She shook her head.

"Maybe she'll have better luck."

"What?"

"Yeah, Mandy went out shortly after you. Whether she'll come back or not...well, I hope she does. If not, I don't know what we're going to do for food."

Kate sat next to her man on the pale beach, her tatty vest and shorts dripping wet. He put his arm round her and gave a deep sigh. The two then watched the artificial ocean, waiting, hoping for Mandy's return.

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An overcast sky dampened the suns over the horizon. Kate stopped watching. She lay back on the sand, her arms folded under her head. Jason remained deep in thought.

*What are we trying to achieve here? What's our ultimate goal in this place? To reach the lowland – what then? Did we ever have a goal? Is surviving itself goal enough, reason enough to try? No, but Kate is. Correction, Kate and Jason...Mr. and Mrs. Remington.*

Daniella's face appeared more vivid than ever over the ocean. High cheekbones and big, sparkling eyes; hair dyed strawberry red; long lashes; exotic, eastern European

symmetry: she was the most purely feminine thing he'd ever encountered. Tears streamed down her cheeks, just like the time he'd asked her to marry him on a bench on the *Fair Monique's* C-deck observatory. It had seemed more romantic at the time.

As her tears fell, a sudden violent spark erupted from the ocean. Jason blinked and sat up quickly.

*Violet and violent. What the hell?*

"Kate, look at this! Quick!" he insisted.

"What is it?"

The purple spark shot up and plumed like a spectacular firework. It burned for a full minute before dying to leave a violet swath over the surrounding sea. A few seconds later, another firework lit to its left, just as impressive. When that burned out, another erupted, and so on until half the horizon glowed purple.

"Ideas?" asked Jason, rubbing his half-bearded cheek.

Kate stared on. The millions of sparks slowly spread over the ocean. She thought of their inhospitable shoreline. No signs of life. But *this*. This was something new—something full of mystery...and possibilities.

"We have to go out there," she said.

"And fry?"

"And try...try to find out what intelligence is behind it. Those aren't naturally occurring geysers."

"And they're not exactly friendly geysers either."

"Listen," she continued, "that sequence was set at perfect intervals. Perfect. It might be a form of communication or part of some machine or some kind of celebration—like New Year's Eve—for all we know. The point is there's someone, or something, causing it. And we need to make contact. As soon as possible. Jason, we're dying."

The notion hit him hard and deep. And that Kate said it so matter-of-factly doubled its impact.

*We're dying, he thought, and we've no choice but to attempt a crossing...while we've still got enough strength. This is it, then; this is where it all ends. On a goddamn alien sea!*

"The sand yacht," she said, looking him square in the eyes. "Now we'll see what you can really do with that thing."

"But it probably won't float."

"No, but we'll have to figure out a way to make it float or find something else that will."

"Like what?"

"Beats me, but it's either that or walk round—and risk being stalked by those slugs we love so much."

"Kate, that thing won't float without some serious buoyancy."

"So get thinking."

"Yes, ma'am!"

An hour after the fireworks, Mandy returned with two eel-like creatures in her mouth. As she dropped these on the sand, one at Kate's feet, one at Jason's, they realised that even with the salamander's best efforts, there wasn't enough food to

sustain them here. Mandy had been gone half a day. The eels were disgusting and hardly filling.

"Thank you anyway, girl." Jason praised the salamander by rubbing her pale yellow back. "You did good."

"Good girl, Mandy," added Kate, coughing as she swallowed a slimy tail. "But eating-wise, not so good."

That evening, the twin suns segued into the violet horizon and vanished in the time it took for Kate and Jason to retrieve the sand yacht. Their suits defeated the bitter chill. Despite its crash landing, the rig was in decent shape. And as the storm had drifted sand over any rocks between yacht and ocean, they decided to drag it by the beak, letting the wing-sail simply trail behind.

Navigating by the purple glow over the ocean, they finally reached the coast. The yacht barely floated as it filled with water. Just as they'd guessed, it was nowhere near seaworthy. While they pulled it back ashore, Mandy rushed into the sea.

*She is amphibian, after all, thought Kate. Not like our clunky sand-surfer.*

It was the last thing she remembered that night before collapsing next to her man and seeing him pull the giant, leathery wing over them.

The following afternoon, she woke alone. Jason was not there. Nor was he on the beach nearby or in the sea or even behind her in the dunes. Kate didn't panic, though. *Mandy's gone, too; she never goes anywhere without him. Hmm, we're on a beach...what about footprints?*

Sure enough, she found two sets of tracks leading away to the southwest, along the coast. It was another grim, metallic day. The horizon's mysterious purple glow had disappeared, leaving a pastel, green-blue expanse of calm water. Kate's eyes followed the coast until she saw three tiny shapes at the water's edge. Two she recognised immediately; the third was long and thin. *What the heck's that?* Her curiosity swelled as Jason appeared to lift its end and drag it across the beach.

*Something to eat? A piece of flotsam we can use for the yacht? Either way, it was well spotted.*

Jason heaved his catch off his shoulder as he reached the yacht.

"A tentacle?" queried Kate. "You've brought us...a tentacle? How nice."

"Hey, I walked all morning to find this while you had a lie-in."

Thick rubber, scaly, twenty feet long, the thing was identical to the creatures that had killed Mandy's family in the dunes. The salamander herself merely scurried along at Jason's side, paying the dead beast no mind.

"Let me show you something." He dragged it into the water, leaving it to float in the green shallows.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Yes what?"

"There, on the water," insisted Jason. "Floating on the water. Kate, it floats!"

"I can see that."

"Kate, the tentacle's dead and it's floating."



"Good for the tentacle."

He laughed. "You really don't see it, do you?"

"I might if you had something for me to see."

"All right, remember when we shot them with harpoons, to save Mandy? Remember the sound they made?"

She nodded. "A tiny explosion. Like something burst..."

"There you go." He smiled.

The idea finally dawned on Kate. The tentacles were buoyant, and from the effort Jason had to put in to hold his underwater, extremely buoyant.

"Remind me not to lie-in so long in future," she said, shaking her head. "So...how many of these for the sand yacht?"

"I'd say a couple more."

She puffed her cheeks and let out a sigh.

By dusk, they had the vessel fully rigged for the voyage. Mandy wouldn't go near the nest of tentacles where her family lay buried. Kate and Jason managed to detach the two they'd already killed by tying ropes around the roots and wrenching them free. It proved easier than they'd expected, as the other vines appeared unresponsive, perhaps asleep.

Jason discovered the tentacle's body was segmented, rather like a worm's; even with a puncture, there was still more than enough buoyancy in the other sections to keep it afloat. It had gradually contracted to become a taut, rubbery flotation tube, and it floated amazingly well.

Next, Jason wrapped the three tentacles around the giant beak, experimenting with buoyancy and the waterline. A top-heavy yacht would be disastrous, as would one constantly submerging. The deck measured about fifteen feet from port to starboard, and near twelve from bow to stern. Jason had to use far more rope this time. As the voyage would be stop-start, perhaps for weeks, the sail now had to be rigged as part of the boat itself. No less than eight lines secured the mast at various heights, making any movement by the crew across the deck a tricky affair.

A heavy sky pressed low as Kate and Jason racked their brains to cover each and every contingency.

"Drinking water?" she asked.

"It'll have to rain."

"Fishing?"

He threw Mandy a glance. "I've got that covered."

"What about weapons?"

"Hmm, the Taskers are low on ammo. What else?" He frowned at the empty shoreline. "We'll just have to chance it."

Kate sighed.

The prospect was daunting, yet unavoidable. The danger of risking their lives to the temper of an alien sea only upped their concentration. They focused on the minutiae. Worked toward the safest. Planned for the unseen. Prepared for the worst.

*The Elemental Crossing*

"I think we're good," Kate said finally, adjusting her suit collar with one hand, stroking Mandy's back with the other.

Jason scooped up a handful of dry sand and let it run through his fingers. The wind wasn't strong but flew in the same direction as always—east to west. His boots sank into the sand as surf pooled about them. In his beard and battered survival suit, he felt like Robinson Crusoe on Mars.

"OK, here goes," he said quietly.

*One, two, three!*

His huge effort slid the yacht from sand to gentle waves. The vessel bobbed and nodded as he pulled himself up onto the stern. Mandy settled beside him, her black halo giving a slow three-sixty blink. Why the ocean was so restful they didn't care to question as the yacht inched outward, ever outward. The name scratched across its starboard side read..."Elemental".

## *Chapter Three*

### *Maiden Voyage of the Elemental*

#### *Day 1*

At thirty-one, Kate Borrowdale was in peak physical shape. Months of circuit training, practice on the climbing wall's steepest overhang, yoga, aerobics, swimming, and other habitual exertions aboard the *Fair Monique* had put her at the forefront of competitors, both male and female. Even Jason, himself no slouch, remained a distant second in all areas of physical fitness. And as she had proved over the past two weeks, very few obstacles perturbed Kate. She could think, push, pull, run, jump, climb, or fight to beat anything in her way. But drifting on the ocean was a different matter entirely. Those myriad attributes she boasted, and which she relied on, counted for nothing. Absolutely nothing.

The hard, smooth deck was about as comfortable to sit on as a rock. Taut lines holding the mast in place resembled webbing all about her. The odd breeze nudged the *Elemental* forward but Kate, parched, famished, and miserable, felt like dead weight.

"I can still make out the shore," she said. "How long's it been, do you reckon?"

"Couple of hours or so," replied Jason, adjusting the last spearhead onto the line of his Tasker.

"How's that thing coming?"

"Well, the theory's sound, but it all depends."

"On what?"

"On how dumb these fishes are," he quipped.

## *The Elemental Crossing*

The idea was all Jason's. As they'd banked on edible life existing at a manageable size in the deep, this was to be the crux of their voyage—fishing with the Tasker. If it failed, they would probably die.

"Talk me through it again," said Kate. "I felt a bit dizzy the first time."

"What's wrong?"

"Just hungry, I think...I hope."

"Okay, but if you feel anything else, let me know right away," Jason urged. "We'll get through this thing, but we'll have to do it together."

She nodded and blushed.

"Right, Tasker Fishing 101," he explained. "It's a highly scientific and laborious exercise involving dangling a line with a hook at the end into the water. And sitting there like a cold cadaver until you snag dinner. Any questions?"

"Yes, what if you snag Moby Dick?"

"Then it's bon appétit...for Moby Dick."

The green ocean settled further that afternoon, but Kate sensed they were still drifting, despite there being no wind. Mandy the salamander observed Jason's antics with intent curiosity, eyeing the fishing line and responding with a low click whenever it jerked in the water.

"I bet she's thinking, 'How the heck did you two last a day on Kratos?'" Kate laughed.

By late evening, they'd caught nothing. Worse still, there had been no signs of fish of any size, no vegetation floating by, and no rainwater for them to collect. Kate looked at Jason, then to a dark violet blanketing the heavens.

*Time's not the only thing in short supply,* she thought.

### **Day 2**

"You want to play rough?"

Jason had knelt upright for an hour to keep a firm grip on the Tasker, his sore back buckling under the strain. Whatever the catch was, it was momentous but, with each passing minute, proportionately outweighed by his ego. Kate knew he'd never let go until one end of the line out-pulled the other.

*Great,* she thought, doing her best to stay out of his way. *Playing tug-of-war with the Nautilus!*

"Why don't you give it up?" she groaned. "You're hungry. It's not obliging. Can't you try for something else? Come on, let it go."

"Shut it!"

She yawned and rubbed her eyes. "Aye, aye, Cap'n...Ahab."

The Tasker did winch something up that afternoon, but it wasn't what Jason expected. Around two hundred feet of white, elastic slime, dredged from the seabed, spilled from his hands as he gathered it up like a spaghetti fathom-line. His excitement slipped as he pulled and pulled, hoping to see a creature attached at the other end.

Nothing. Only slime—endless coils of slime. When he finally gave up, sinking onto his back, Kate shook her head and smiled a superior smile.

“Bolognese with that?”

Through all the commotion, neither of them had noticed the third crew member, the sedentary salamander, slink over the side and disappear into the toxic-looking depths. Mandy had deserted them, but why and for how long?

“She did find food last time,” Kate said.

Jason added, “And we found it barely edible.”

“Who are we to grumble, though? If it stays down, it goes down with thanks—that’s my motto.”

“Hmm...what was that you used to love? Orange biscuits?”

“Wow, apple biscuits,” she corrected. “Crumbly apple biscuits. I’d die happy if I only had a few packs of those. I’m telling you, the space gods eat those wherever space gods go to eat. Divine taste, divine biscuits!”

She closed her eyes and remembered the first meal she’d chosen after being rescued from the barren planet Dakota Prime, years ago. In the field, astronaut and terrain scout provisions were always synthetic, non-decomposing food squares; back on board her ship the *Santa Maria*, Kate Borrowdale had been given free reign to choose her next week’s diet from the organic orchards—her reward for a job well done. Mangos, bananas, pears, strawberries, grapes, and apples: she’d never forgotten those tastes, not even after years of synthetic diluting.

Kate hadn’t been scheduled to take part in this particular scouting mission in the peaks of Kratos. She had volunteered, much to the surprise of her superiors. Itching to get out there, they’d said. Itching to be near him, she’d thought. The request wasn’t unprecedented, but it was highly unorthodox. As was the last thing on her pre-drop itinerary—a sneak sojourn to the *Fair Monique’s* orchards on G-deck, specifically the apple orchard. G-deck was off-limits, but she’d tiptoed in wonderment through the verdant greens and ankle-high grass, while the constant whirring of fans provided a soothing breeze. Like Eve, she took a single apple, half of her anticipating the taste, the other half anticipating what it would be like to kiss Jason Remington.

She diced that apple minutely. Her friend on the catering staff, Alice Bevan, agreed to prepare a dozen “extra special” biscuits using Kate’s fruity contraband. Those smuggled treats had sustained Kate for days on Kratos. But the *Fair Monique* was long gone, Alice was long gone, and the apple biscuits were long gone. Yet each was now vivid in her mind. The sterile comfort of her quarters, the smell of popcorn as she and Alice would queue for the movie theatre on B-deck, the eerie, magical silence of the orchard. Whenever she swallowed, that organic apple flavour fizzed like juicy acid over her tonsils. It was a remnant taste of a past life, the residue of Earth.

Jason checked the buoyant vines wrapping the *Elemental* every hour or so. He found no signs of decomposition, corrosion, or other defects. The vessel itself wasn’t much of a seafarer—the shape resembled a misshapen egg—but it stayed afloat, took its jabs of wind, and nodded politely toward the great horizon.

“You going to try again?” she asked, referring to Jason’s fishing.

He sighed. "Let's wait and see if Mandy brings us anything. I don't fancy wrestling with any more gloop today."

"You want me to have a bash?"

"In a while," he replied. "Something's telling me we're still not out far enough to catch anything worth eating."

As they waited, the twin suns tag-teamed through roving clouds in the western sky, lightening the green ocean and offering a clearer view of what lay in store. Endless, endless water. Kate thought she spied a few notch-like shadows on the horizon, but nothing she could pinpoint. The northern precipice glimmered every now and then—the edge of the world, as Jason liked to call it. Its metal rim was perhaps millions of years old, yet still managed to sparkle through the shallow troughs between swells.

The *Elemental* rocked minutes later, a series of low clicks announcing Mandy's return as she clambered aboard. Water cascaded from her glassy-green back and streamed across the deck. Hanging from her mouth were five limp stems of an undersea plant, a foot-long orange bulb attached to each.

"What's this, Mandy?" asked Jason in his softest voice.

The salamander stared at him, her head tilted up, her stingray-like mouth gasping for air as she dropped the plants.

"This is what you've brought us to eat?" asked Kate.

The sensory dome on top of Mandy's head blinked rapidly, and it seemed to Kate that the poor creature was spent.

The lack of conviction in Jason's expression as he picked up an orange bulb made Kate laugh. She imagined him as a food taster at a Borgia soiree.

"It feels...like an egg without the shell," he said.

"See if you can pierce it."

A runny red liquid streamed out as Jason pricked the soft surface with his fingernail.

"Okay, it's bleeding now," he said worriedly. "I think you should..."

"Oh no you don't!" Kate interrupted. "This one's all yours."

He sighed and, with a yank of his wrists, tore the bulb open. Inside was a honeycomb of brown, papery skin, with a red filling rather like watermelon. He inspected it closely, took a deep breath, and...

"Not...not inedible," he admitted, chewing a small chunk of the watermelon. "Hardly any taste. In fact, no taste whatsoever."

Jason paused for a moment to manoeuvre his tongue around a piece of the brown skin.

"I've found it. Okay, the fruity part is bland, but the skin itself is sweet. Bizarre. See what you think." He handed her half a bulb.

"It'll do," she agreed, sucking on a piece, "until we die or find something better." And, nibbling the celery-like plant stem, "But we need a refund on that."

They agreed it was wise to save two bulbs for the next day, in case Mandy couldn't find any. They ate one apiece and gave the last to their loyal huntress, who lay between them on the hard deck seeming utterly contented.

"If only she could speak," said Kate. "We'd have a lot to talk about."

Jason smirked. "And if I know women, it's a good thing she can't."

## *Day 5*

Sunrise. Waxwork clouds loomed heavily over the most brilliant burgundy dawn Kate had ever seen. The ocean was almost flat calm. The gentle squeak of vine against keel whenever a swell tipped them forward was the only sound for miles around. Kate and Jason snuggled together in front of the mast, their knees tucked up to their chests as they sat wondering, imagining what might have been had things happened differently.

"It's strange having so much time to think," said Kate. "There's always been something there to distract me—exercise, reading, movies, what I've got planned for tomorrow. It's quite frightening, really. I don't know why it hasn't sunk in before. There's no one...*no one* else coming. Jason, we'll never see another person as long as we live. You know, survival training can teach you everything, but it always has the same objective, the same goal—to keep you alive so that you can be with people again. It's a means to an end. The tools to bring you back to civilisation, I guess. Only I've never been what you'd call the sociable sort, not unless I've no other choice. Always done things on my own, you know; never liked to rely on anyone if I could help it. I suppose that's what made me so good at survival. Except now I've found someone I want to rely on and, as it happens, I need to rely on. Strange. All very strange."

Jason remained silent for a moment before answering, "Yeah, I see what you mean. You've just given up more information about yourself in two minutes than I've learned in two weeks. I'm liking it."

He pecked her once on the cheek, then quickly on her lips, before settling into a sublime, hungry-yet-patient, dizzying kiss. Free for a moment of the long yesterday and of tomorrow, Kate gave herself completely to the man of her dreams. *This is all there'll ever be*, she thought.

"Mm." *This is all there'll ever be!*

The *Elemental* drifted for two more days. Mandy's diligent hunting kept them stocked with ocean vegetation. Liquid from the orange bulbs slaked their thirst, though Kate often grumbled about the lack of real water. For exercise, regular swimming to and from the yacht proved invaluable. Mandy would often dive with them, her magnificent agility through the water a constant source of awe for Kate and Jason. Their routine was one of companionship—friends, lovers, colleagues in survival. And that they relied so much on Mandy kept them ever appreciative of what they had.

On the evening of the eighth day, Kate swore she saw notch-like shadows on the horizon ahead, silhouetted against the last of the two suns to set.

"I don't see anything," replied Jason, squinting.

"Well then, I've got better eyes than you. I can see a whole line of thin notches."

"Okay, how far away, if you had to guess?"

"Next dumb question," she groaned. "The horizon could be a continent away, and you can't even see them."

"Then we'll just wait."

*The Elemental Crossing*

Kate looked at him and grinned. "Don't mind if I do."



## *Chapter Four*

### *Nemo's Menu*

#### *Day 10*

Spectacular! The underwater visibility improved dramatically. Jason felt as if they'd crossed a purifying meridian. The partition between pale, murky green and glassy emerald stood out a mile, as clearly defined as night and day. Kate dipped her hand in the new water.

"It's balmy," she said, wide-eyed.

"Shall we try it out?" asked Jason.

"Immediately!"

Kate hung from the starboard side, Jason from the port. They submerged to view the secrets of the transparent ocean. From between clouds, capes of sunlight wavered across the deep, highlighting minute formations of sea life no bigger than fingernails and introducing enormous, roving shapes that spread and contracted like bloating submarines. Slender white shoots stretched up to within a hundred feet of the surface; these were identical to the spaghetti slime-line Jason had snagged during his fishing debacle. Quite where they originated from he still couldn't fathom.

The farther they drifted across this new ocean realm, the more it teemed with life. Jason and Kate lifted their heads to breathe every couple of minutes. The sunlight intensified over the next hour, penetrating deeper into the aquatic. Enormous mandibles clasped shut far below, sending whirligigs of plankton up toward them. Kate even spied a dolphin, identical to those they'd befriended back at the reef. It dodged between a school of tiny lights and a spinning starfish.

*Amazing, she thought, what evolution, unchecked, can produce!*

After taking another breath, she pressed a hand to her stomach. Something wasn't right. A sharp, sickening jab of pain. She waited a minute without moving. The pain didn't return. In its place, only mild discomfort.

"It's just a slight stomachache," she said, doubling up on the hard deck.

"We understand the word 'slight' differently," replied Jason. "Either you've got stomach cramp or it's something you ate. Right, no more exercise for you today."

"Does this mean I need a sick..."

She immediately winced and clutched her lower torso. Her face lost all colour. The pain seemed to twist inside as a jagged, rusty blade. All her senses merged into one and surrendered on the spot. Her world shrank to the throb of an agonising epicentre. All Kate wanted to do was rip into her flesh and purge her innards. The pain was relentless. Her fingertips felt like brittle icicles whenever she lifted them free. Jason held her as dearly as he'd held anyone in his life while she trembled, screamed, convulsed, and cried and cried in his arms.

The *Elemental's* sail caught a few jabs of wind. Kate, no longer able to stand the pain, finally passed out after minutes that seemed like hours. It was the worst suffering Jason had ever witnessed.

"Thank God," he whispered, his voice shaking. "She's not feeling it any more, at least. Thank God."

Bitter realisation welled inside him.

*Alone? he thought. What if this is it? What if she never comes to? Oh my God, there's no...alright, don't even think that. Take what happens if and when it happens. Anything else is poison. Alone has no meaning while there's two of you. Keep talking to her; keep talking to Kate.*

"So it's the sunniest day we've had so far," he started. "The *Elemental's* moving at a fair clip, and..."

His words hardened like cement in his throat. He sank to his knees and sobbed against the mast. The flexing sail thrummed in his ear. He looked down at Kate. Her small, lovely face was white. Her perennial frown of concentration had lightened, and she lay peaceful, unaware – the tepid core of a raging flame.

He guessed it was food poisoning. Inevitable. Earthly biology digesting an alien diet. How soon would it be before *his* illness kicked in? Which element in the vegetation was the cause? Not that it mattered if Kate died. Not a jot. He'd end the voyage then and there and be happy to do it. Drown, probably, or swim for the goddamn precipice and throw himself over, just for the hell of it.

"Some survivalist you are, Remington." He recalled the words exactly as Kate had spoken them. "There's time yet."

He sat by her side for hours that dragged like millennia. The wind picked up, blowing them steadily on toward their vague destination. An uneven rhythm crept into the boat's rocking when, early that evening, Mandy returned from her hunt.

*Cli-click, cliiick, click, cli-click.*

Jason looked to the stern. A phantom head and neck preceded the salamander as she scrambled frantically aboard, not pausing for breath. Pale pink skin, a human hue, covered every inch of her body. Jason wondered what that meant. *She wants to be near*

*us, perhaps? She's afraid and she needs us?* As Mandy scurried the short distance to him, her ghostly twin was more protracted than ever. It preceded her by half a second. The poor creature was, quite literally, beside herself.

"Come here, girl," he said, comforting her as she gave Kate a close inspection. "You can calm down now. At least I have an inkling of what that remarkable instinct of yours is all about. Coping with fear, some kind of adrenaline perhaps. It's for survival, isn't it? I wish mine could dodge danger in advance like that."

He gripped Kate's hand as he spoke. Just then, Mandy spun to face where she'd climbed up. Like a watchdog sensing an intruder, she sprang from side to side on the deck, clicking madly.

"What the hell is it, girl? What's there?"

Jason ducked under one rope and strode over another before peering past the buoyant vines, into the ocean. Transparent, shimmering dark green and...He suddenly jumped back as if something cold had scooped his bowels. A heaviness pressed him to the deck and the *Elemental* to the water. He dared to look again. No mistake. The shadow was gigantic under the keel, five times the size of the biggest whale on Earth. Jason stared in horror. Specks of white light spangled its edges like diamond studs. As a mass, it propelled in thrusts, similar to the dome of a jellyfish. The force and scale of each movement conducted straight to Jason's heartbeat. The behemoth's shape was elliptical—a shadow hundreds of feet below the surface.

*Christ! How big would it be at close quarters?*

Mandy's panic now made perfect sense. Jason looked around for inspiration. The Tasker came to mind, but what effect could a harpoon have on *this*? Kate shivered under the survival suit he'd covered her with. Three bulbs on their stalks hung from the starboard stay rope. Apart from that, the *Elemental* was a bare vessel, and the way it bobbed in the water more closely resembled a buoy than a boat. If the leviathan decided to attack, he could do nothing to stop it. Their fate now rested with the appetite of the beast.

## *Day 11*

The giant stalker wandered now and then but always returned, territorially, to the shadow of the *Elemental*'s drift. Inconstant breezes staggered their westward progress. Jason spent a full day resting at Kate's side, with only Mandy for company. The salamander moved the least of the three, so petrified was she at the thought of entering the water.

*So that's that for food, Jason thought, until the bastard lets us be.*

Kate sweated pounds in the grip of her fever. Her chestnut hair remained as soaked near the roots it had been underwater, and Jason habitually dabbed her forehead with his vest. A long day with no beginning, no middle, and no end in sight.

**Day 12**

Two more behemoths! A hunting party of three now circled the yacht, always at the same distance beneath the surface. An aquatic archipelago in motion. Jason watched them closely throughout the morning and eyed them occasionally during the afternoon.

"What do they want? Are they even going to attack? Hmm, they sure gave Mandy the heebie-jeebies. Two days without touching water; I'm no biologist, but for an amphibian, that can't be good. What do you say, Mandy? Are you as dehydrated as we are? Don't answer that...I'd rather not know. Just let me know when...I don't know...when the coast is clear. Put that precognition to some use for once. It didn't exactly do you much good ashore."

He realised he was talking nonsense. His mind felt as empty as his stomach, and the constant, barbed fear of the last two days suddenly swelled inside. Edgy, frustrated, Jason carved another notch into the mast with the tip of his harpoon—number twelve—before exploding into a series of star jumps on the deck. It was the first real exercise he'd had since Kate's ordeal, and he found the vigorous pace exhilarating. At the three-hundred-and-twenty count, however, he stopped, mid-crouch.

*Fizzzzzzzz...*

The noise was quick, low as a mosquito's buzz, and rose past his left ear. Another sounded behind him, then one more again to the left. He saw only a flicker in the corner of his eye. A frown as intense as anything he'd seen on Kate's face etched into his brow. There! He caught the next one square in his sights to the right. But what the hell was it?

"A streak of light?"

Rising from the sea at some speed, the thing shot up like a spark from a bonfire. It didn't dissipate, though. Its trajectory altered mid-flight to home in on the *Elemental*. No bigger than a human thumb, the bizarre creature bounced off the wing-sail and headed straight for Mandy. She'd already leapt up as per her precognitive instruction, but even that was not enough. The tiny spark veered and struck her on the back. *Cli-cliiick!* Mandy raced over to Jason and cowered between his legs.

"What the devil?"

The entire ocean around them suddenly illuminated. Peering over the side, Jason froze at the sight of a leviathan, its diamond areas brilliant white, ablaze in the deep. If he hadn't wrenched his head back, a dozen sparks would have hit him. He rushed straight for Kate. The survival suit covered her body but not her head. *Please let her be safe now*, he thought, adjusting it accordingly. A volley of streaking lights fizzed upward on all sides of the *Elemental*. In moments, the vessel was enveloped by brilliant white light. Jason tried to reach his own suit in time, but the first barrage of incandescent creatures hit him like a hailstorm of static shocks.

"Shit!"

His entire skeleton clenched. The bastards were electrically charged! Two more struck his neck, and he bit his tongue. As he looked up, a cavalcade of lights ricocheted down the sail, heading straight for him. "Shit!" He grabbed his suit and swung it up, knocking dozens of sparks into the sea. Countless more got through, however, and his

scalp burned amid a blizzard of spinal jolts. Ducking under the sail, thrashing wildly with his suit, Jason hardly noticed the blitzkrieg poor Mandy endured.

Each hit was comparable to the stinging thump when touching an electrified fence. Shockwaves pulsed right through him, from ears to toes and vice versa. In an act of sheer instinct, he dived to ground and, lying on his back, held the suit over his crouched posture to deflect the cascade. It worked.

"This is insane. Oh my God! Mandy!"

Hit with enough volts to fry an elephant, she crawled in agony toward Jason, who willed her on with every inch of his shaking body. The salamander jumped and jolted with each strike, and there were now dozens per second.

"Mandy, come on! Please!"

Jason wanted to cry as he looked into her wounded, pleading eyes. Her halo blinked like a lighthouse beacon, but she couldn't move. The hailstorm grew even more intense. Sparks shattered on top of her as molten monsoon rain. He watched her mouth quiver open for the last time before light seemed to blanket her from existence.

"Mandy!"

*All three behemoths at once?*

He closed his eyes and wanted to die. *All three at once.* But the thought woke something inside him—his own spark of defiance.

"Bastards!" He rolled forward onto his feet while still shielding his head with the suit. He sidestepped over to Mandy, the smell of the electrical charge heightening his every sense. The heavy *fizz, fizz, buzz* of creatures bouncing off his umbrella rose above the tidal downpour all around. The illumination was so intense he could barely see the deck. Mandy lay flat on her stomach. A noxious, gaseous discharge revolted Jason as he tucked her tail in and slowly stretched himself, and the suit, over the rest of her.

*No pulse, no heartbeat, nothing. Mandy!*

He breathed heavily over her sensory halo. The loyal salamander didn't even twitch. Jason found it tough to inhale through the heat, but nonetheless endured the electrical blitz for a further five minutes. When it finally ceased, he stayed undercover with her in case of another eruption.

"Never heard of anything like this...disabling prey with an electrical volley. Some eels on Earth give off a charge, but this...this is insane. Must be even more lethal in the water, though. Hmm...that's why you were so afraid to go back in, Mandy. I see it now. These giants must be the wreckers of the deep, swimming low and shooting their load upward, killing everything above. And if there's a few of them, it'll be like a fishing trawler, only upside down, where nothing can escape the electrical barrage.

"They mustn't have known what to make of the *Elemental*, Mandy. They followed us for ages without making a move, didn't they? Must have decided we were a big new fish after all. The joke's on them, though, if they try to swallow..."

He cursed himself for being so logical. *It's like any trapper: kill first, come to collect later.*

The thought spurred him up. On wobbly legs, he shook with his own type of fever—the electrical kind. He ran a hand through his hair. Yes, Einstein without the smarts.

Thousands of tiny white organisms littered the deck. No longer lit, they resembled spinning jennies piled on a forest floor. Boomerang-shaped oddities.

"So that's how they were able to change direction in flight."

The notion that they might still be alive angered Jason. Not keen on touching them, he shovelled them over the side with his boot.

Kate's shins were exposed but, luckily for her, they lay directly under one of the stay ropes. Most of the parasites had made for her body, which was shielded to the millimetre. Jason kissed her forehead, suffering for his love with a slight static shock. He managed her into her suit and clipped her belt to the stay rope. This last part was a precaution should the boat be tipped. To his great relief and surprise, the sail itself remained undamaged.

A potent, sickly smell lingered over the *Elemental*. He swallowed hard, imagining what he might have to face should the behemoths come to claim their meal. "Bastards, and cowards to boot." Yet, shuffling about the deck in a hyperactive daze, Jason was hardly in a fit state to fight with any kind of composure.

"To hell with it! I'll have to go out swinging!" He jerked into his suit and snapped the final harpoon to the Tasker. Glancing back to Kate and Mandy lying motionless on the giant beak, he added, "They'll have to come through me first!"

The ocean seemed unaffected by the onslaught. The tiny organisms had sunk back to the depths. All appeared as it had been during the first leg of the voyage—the maiden voyage of the *Elemental*.

Jason stood in anticipation like a Viking at the prow of his longship. In Norse mythology, the kraken was a feared leviathan of the deep. With three such beasts to contend with, each of a scale to dwarf even that monster of superstition, reality sucked hard at the terrain scout's courage. Minutes roamed by. His knees shook now not with adrenaline but diminishment. An absolute fear bled his will to stand. Nothing in his training had prepared him for this!

The dark shapes heaved by below. Rhythmic, tectonic masses. The shadow grew bigger still. He mistook the fabric of his suit for his own skin, itching a thick seam over his elbow. The vessel was now in a lake of shadow. He swallowed. His heartbeat thumped the drums in his ears.

*Squeak!*

The stern lifted slightly, a few feet in the water. The buoyant vines scraped against the hull. Jason steadied himself as the whole vessel now rose and fell with a splash.

*They're feeling us out. They still don't know what to make of us.*

Suddenly, the bow leapt into the air to a forty-five-degree angle. Jason's stomach heaved, and he barely clung to the nearest stay rope. Spinning to check on Kate, he sighed with relief to see she was still attached.

*But Mandy!*

Mandy was gone. The tilt had tipped her into the sea, where she now descended to a deep, watery grave. Jason had no time to mourn her. Another jolt spun them sharply anticlockwise, throwing foamy wash from all sides of the vessel. He saw the giant beast

up close for the first time as it eased out of the water, its tough, sinuous membrane almost black.

He froze.

The giant mouth opened a few metres wide directly beneath him. He peered inside but couldn't see very far. Black, cavernous, with an awful decaying smell. He felt utterly beaten. The stern vines squeaked again. A low scrape followed. The deck suddenly vibrated. For a moment, Jason closed his eyes tight. Another scrape woke him with a jolt.

His toes and fingertips tingled with dread as he walked toward a hideous sentinel stalking Kate. Four feet tall, it appeared like the chewed-up spokes of a bicycle wheel, without the wheel. Its limbs dripped slime onto the deck as it rolled toward sleeping Kate. Jason wanted to throw up. The thing was offensive, a starfish unlike any he'd ever seen, able to "walk" upright.

"Get away from her!"

He pounced in front of it and crouched to unleash a haymaker to the eye between its limbs. The thing flew overboard like a cartwheel from a cliff.

"Have that!"

No sooner had he thrown a fist in victory than six more crept up from the stern, using the vines. He stepped back. They'd seemingly learned from the first encounter, as their motion across the deck was quicker, more supple through the ropes, more purposeful. Jason stood over his beloved Kate and gripped the Tasker. Last harpoon. Last chance. He waited until the left-hand sentinel was almost upon them. *Bang!* The harpoon shot straight through its middle, showering the deck with black liquid, and stuck into the deck behind. Jason then ran across the next two creatures, snagging them in the Tasker's cable, and sprinted to the stern, yanking the line with him. This momentum launched them powerfully over the side. Two more down.

"Kate!"

Three of the remaining four made a beeline for her. Jason, throwing all strategy aside, flew into them in a frenzied bloodlust. He lifted one by the legs and tore it apart. Another wrapped itself around him, its spiny feelers digging into his back, mandibles gouging from its central mouth. He screamed and jumped backward to the deck. As it tried to crawl from under his weight, he unleashed a reverse headbutt. The thing scurried away like a flattened crab.

One pulled at Kate's arm with frightening force, the last helping it by yanking at her leg. The stay rope holding her buckled and snapped loose. They had Kate! Dragging her through the rigging, they left behind a trail of colourless slime. A deafening cry erupted from the captain of the *Elemental*. He tore after them, but tripped on a line as he did. The sentinels slid their prey over the side before he could get to his feet.

"Kate!"

Fully ready to leap after her into the massive mouth, he stopped at the port edge of his vessel. Kate lay directly beneath, just a few feet away. The sentinels rolled hell-for-leather toward the gaping crevasse. Jason, so relieved to see his girl unharmed, couldn't believe his eyes as he saw a black shape race after the horrific predators!

"Mandy! It's Mandy! She made it!"

Heaving Kate back aboard, he gritted his teeth at the thought that all his efforts had been in vain. The battle won, but what of extinction? The behemoth still had them in its



clutches. How many more acolytes did it command? Or what if it simply bit down...hard? Retrieving his last harpoon from the deck, he waited for Mandy to return. And waited.

Jason heaved a shivery sigh. As he did, the giant mouth twitched, rocking the *Elemental*. He held Kate tight in his arms. She still breathed, but showed no signs of consciousness. A warm, bitter spray showered out from the creature's lips, soaking them both like a fine sea rain. Another tremor, this time more violent, rattled them onto the ocean once again.

"What's happening!" he yelled in sheer, blank frustration.

Without warning, the colossal creature vanished back into the sea. For what, and why, he couldn't guess. No more prayers. No more tears. Just wait and see what happens, then overcome it—the pure survival instinct. Jason knew that whatever else happened, he'd proven himself worthy to stand alongside Kate Borrowdale. His Valkyrie. And as the last part of the leviathan submerged, he thought he saw a small, lithe shape ram it head-on.

The boat bobbed for a while on the clear emerald water. The suns were still bright, the air still warm, their destination in the west no nearer. Jason traced the lovely curves of Kate's face with his fingertips before cupping her hair back from her forehead. He was dying to tell her everything that had transpired.

"Now I know how you feel—"

Before he knew it, he was underwater! A mind-boggling surge sucked him down with the force of a sinking supertanker. Like a serviette in the Titanic's wake, he was wrenched, powerless, into the deep. His lungs almost exploded as he fought for the surface. His thoughts imploded exponentially, a faint kernel of light the only thing keeping him conscious. *A hard nudge. Moving fast. Pushed...from below. Must breathe...no air...must...*

Purple erupted all around him! He swallowed the sky in a single gulp, before spitting the ocean in exchange. He wasn't sure what kept him afloat. He glanced down to see two dolphins—just like those from the cove—holding him safely on the surface, one under each arm. But why? What were they doing there? What had happened?

*Where's Kate?*

Jason struggled free, desperate to find her. The sea was rough, frothy. He regained his bearings by looking for the glimmers of metal on the northern rim. There, just as he'd thought, a few miles away through the troughs of waves. At that moment, a leviathan surfaced two hundred yards to the south, pushing a large swell toward him. And another, away to the east, slightly closer. He felt sick and dizzy. A third surfaced, this time to the west. Jason's heart wrenched in two. Ahead, sailing away, driven faster by the wind than he'd ever imagined, his very own invention, the *Elemental*, raced.

"Fly, Kate. Fly!"

The dolphins circled him rapidly. He was too exhausted to imagine why. Jason closed his eyes, maybe with fatigue, maybe because he'd transmitted every synapse of hope he had left to Kate and the *Elemental*. She had to be on board, and that was all he wanted in his time left.

*The Elemental Crossing*

"Kate."

When he opened his eyes, the two dolphins had become twenty. In less than a minute, the twenty became two hundred. And by the time Mandy leapt out of the water, corkscrewing through the air to splash down at his side, the sea between Jason and the leviathans held ranks of aquatic allies numbering in the thousands.

"We're at war," he whispered, spinning slowly in the water to see dolphins completely encircling him. "They've started a war...for us?"

Mandy brushed up against him, arching her back for Jason to climb on.

"Okay, girl, I'm in your world now," he said, rubbing her neck. "I've done all I can."

## *Chapter Five*

### *Irony in a Storm*

It was like something from a Lovecraftian fever dream. The megalithic bullies of the deep had Jason in a triangulated trap. Their widening mouths pushed ripples across their black, fleshy bulks. Each monster was, in effect, nothing but a giant mouth. And as the three of them had stalked him for two days, they could never let him flee the pot, he thought, not in *their* ocean.

Mandy paddled strongly with Jason on her back. The miniature circle she repeated was concentric to those created by the dolphin ranks. He suddenly thought of the choreography in those old Busby Berkeley musicals—elaborate dance numbers, often shot from overhead. For an eagle of Kratos, it'd be quite a show.

Neither Mandy nor the dolphins made a sound apart from wave-making rushes. Jason nonetheless sensed they had a strange repartee. Whenever the salamander flicked her head to one side, the nearest dolphin repeated the gesture.

*Is she orchestrating all this?*

A few minutes into the bizarre standoff, as if lit by a fuse, the northern behemoth shot its first volley of sparks at the dolphin lines. Only a dozen projectiles to start. A test of the army's defence?

*Whoosh!*

Twenty dolphins flung their powerful tails from the water, throwing up a shower to knock the sparks off course. First round to the allies.

Next, mirroring the attack on the *Elemental*, the leviathan erupted its entire electrical arsenal. The other two followed suit. Jason went dizzy once more as he looked up to see the sky splinter into a million blazing particles. Mandy reared up, forcing him to cling tight, before she entered a strong, muscular dive. Her ghost shot out ahead. He kept his eyes open. All around him he saw dolphin brothers submerge, U-turn underwater, race

for the surface, and unleash powerful jets from their tails before breaking the surface again like dive-bombers coming to re-arm. The sky above dimmed quickly before a few limp sparks hit the sea. Whatever the dolphins' tactic was, it seemed to negate the electric volley.

Mandy swam deeper and deeper. Jason hung on, his arms clasped around her neck, his head wedged behind her halo dome. Deeper still. The pressure stabbed iron nails into his ears and hammered. He remembered to equalize. *Pinch your nose and try to exhale...then swallow.* His skull clicked through a grim, pulsing cloud. He prodded her flesh with his fingertips. Mandy levelled and started to rise. The pressure squeeze dissipated. His ears still hurt like hell, though, even with the nails removed.

They breached the surface and waited a few seconds. Mandy's halo blinked. Jason didn't dare to look anywhere but straight down at her light green skin. She reared up once more—the signal to dive. *So soon?* He took three quick breaths in preparation for the biggest he could muster. Down they went. It was warmer underwater than on the now-chilly surface. For a minute, Jason forgot all about the oceanic battle being waged behind them. He closed his eyes, entrusting himself completely to the extraordinary salamander.

Fast, graceful, her motion through the water lulled him into a peaceful yet blank state of mind. They surfaced whenever he pressed his fingers against her skin. How many breaths, he didn't care to count. Hours' worth? He barely managed a coherent thought, and by the time Mandy tipped him off her back for a rest, he panicked, not knowing where he was.

"Help! What's happening?"

He saw Mandy floating upside down on the rough sea, stretching her two rear legs into the air. His own lower back ached after hours in the same posture.

*OK, now I remember. But where the hell are we?*

A strong wind threw heavy rain from behind. It was constant, bitter. Burgundy veins bled through the grey clouds above them so low that Jason felt he could touch the open wounds if only he'd reach up. The ocean itself appeared desolate. Three hundred and sixty degrees of bare water waiting for the brunt of the storm. Gone were the leviathans and the dolphins. And there was no sign of the *Elemental*.

"It's just you and me, girl," he shouted through the wind.

Mandy kicked her six legs and flipped over onto her stomach.

"Ready," he said, resuming his passenger position on her back.

She waited until the trough of a huge swell dipped under them before nodding once more into the sea. As she propelled them with her tail and her six legs, Mandy watched the surface as it rolled above them. The waves were now thirty feet high. If the storm continued to grow worse, how big might they get?

But Jason could think of nothing except Kate and the *Elemental*.

*It's never been tested in severe weather. No reason why it shouldn't stay afloat, but in this storm...Come on, Kate, just a little longer. I'll find you...somehow.*

\*\*\*\*

The wind braced Kate's back and made her think the eleven-hour fall had never ended, that everything she'd endured on Kratos was in her mind. The desert, Jason's survival, the air being fit to breathe, discovering the giant craft, the sand yacht, even Mandy: it was all too far-fetched to be real.

She rolled from her side onto her back. Pins and needles tickled her right arm as she took her weight off it. Rain lashed her face.

*This isn't falling.*

Her brain had double-crossed her. The whole ordeal was real! As realisation flooded in, soapy seawater washed onto the deck, hurling her onto her side against the mast. The impact knocked the wind out of her. She doubled up, inadvertently tightening a loose rope that had snagged her belt.

*Did Jason tie that?* she wondered.

His face jammed into her mind like a hot chisel. Rubbing her eyes, she looked carefully over the *Elemental* for signs of him. White foam, dark water, but no Jason. And no Mandy.

"Without something to float on, he's dead," she said, curling up against the billowed wing-sail, utterly alone. "How long was I out?"

The ocean seemed to forge mountains as the *Elemental* rose high for a few seconds, then sank the same distance, again and again. And with the wind pushing her onward, Kate repeated the boat's name over and over in her mind. Though its honorary captain, she felt subordinate to each and every element.

The vessel itself was no seafarer. With the sail low to the deck and firmly secured—Jason had done a marvellous job rigging the stay ropes—it was not top-heavy, but nonetheless leaned forward from the wind. It also spun occasionally due to its incongruous shape.

What kept the *Elemental* afloat, though, were the buoyant tentacles. Tough, fastened tight, extraordinarily difficult to submerge, they maintained the boat's equilibrium as well as resisting the toppling effect of both waves and the wind. Such deadly creatures ashore, they had proven themselves lifesavers at sea.

The wind held Kate tight against the bony mast. She had no intention of moving anyway.

*If I'm still heading west, I might get to see what the notches are. If not, you might as well sink me here and now. Thirsty. So damn thirsty. Bloody saltwater—the wetter it gets, the drier you end up.*

That irony suddenly capsized in her mind. She held her hands high, shaping her palms and pruned fingers into a cup.

"Well, well!" she said, now on her knees to sip the rainwater she'd collected. "Trying to sink me *and* keeping me alive. How careless."

## **Day 13**

Waves towered a hundred feet. Whenever Jason tapped on Mandy's neck, it was with trepidation. He needed oxygen, yes, but not between collapsing skyscrapers and

### *The Elemental Crossing*

not if it was simply to prolong the inevitable. Yet the salamander proved herself a canny creature. Rather than dash up straight away at Jason's signal, she waited for the next lengthy trough in the aquatic peaks. Jason adapted to this by tapping while he still had air to spare. Thus, more frequent trips were needed, but Mandy's instincts now played a crucial role, too.

Tired, sore, dazed most of the time, Jason trusted his companion more than he'd ever trusted anything or anyone. Survival by the frayed end of a thread. Life pared down to the snatching of breaths — nothing more.

He hardly noticed when the storm began to subside. His eyes weren't open anyway. Waves calmed like the blips on a heart monitor, but Jason was only attuned to Mandy's constant pulse. His arms finally fell from around her neck as she surfaced. The salamander wriggled to wake him. No response. His head rested on hers, his legs straddling her back. No matter how bizarre the bed, it had been the longest day of his life.

Mandy simply lifted her chin, fastened her three eyes on the horizon, and paddled — in dogged pursuit of the *Elemental*.

## *Chapter Six*

### *Jason's Ordeal*

#### *Day 14*

Jason cursed himself for missing the opportunity to collect rainwater. He was parched. Saltwater sores appeared on his legs for the first time. He'd clung tightly to Mandy for two days, and his thighs in particular had rubbed against her skin whenever she had made a sudden move.

"I'm not hurting you, am I?" He sculled on his own while she rested.

Her adoring eyes—three dark gems embedded side by side—couldn't blink. She had the sort of stare that would unnerve anyone until they knew the love behind it, at which point it became sweet and loyal. Her underside was softer, not as chameleonic as her hide. Jason thought for a second how vulnerable she looked.

*Non-threatening mouth, tiny teeth, no claws that I can see—she doesn't look much of a predator. Doesn't have to be, I suppose, with camouflage like that. And smart, too.*

The grim weather finally lifted mid-afternoon. Jason looked to the horizon and held his breath. A mixture of excitement and dread rose inside him. On his belt, a depleted Tasker; a few miles ahead, a series of massive, dark chimneys set equidistantly apart in the ocean.

He remembered Kate's discovery. "The black notches!"

He tried to remain composed. Each was the size of the Washington Monument. And there were hundreds. Dark brown, metallic, surprisingly smooth given the ferocious elements to which they were exposed, the towers also appeared deserted, defunct.

No signs of life.

"There goes *that* theory," he said. "But they are still standing, and we did see fireworks. Hmm...maybe someone is operating a machine after all. What do you think, girl? Is this one big wild goose chase or not?"

As they swam closer, Jason saw erratically carved pores in the metal—a strange, unnatural design stretching right to the top.

*Some sort of ladder? What the hell kind of creature has limbs like that? Wonder if it's climbable.*

But Mandy steered clear of the chimneys.

"Come on, girl, let's have a closer look," he whispered, prodding her to the nearest one.

She declined stubbornly, even speeding up to get past.

"Have it your way." He shrugged.

He slipped off her back and swam on his own, smirking as he heard the salamander follow him after all.

Sunlight seeped through the clouds as Jason hung from the first pore above the waterline. It didn't penetrate the chimney. "Ah, bugger." He'd underestimated the gaps between handholds, as well as the size of the pores. The ladder was obviously not built for human limbs.

"So be it," he said as he programmed the Tasker at full magnification. He took aim. *Bang!* The harpoon shot up like a bullet, entered the chimney funnel, and grappled the rim as the line pulled it taut. "Okay, Mandy, I can either tie a rope round you and hoist you up later, or you can cling on to me. I'm pretty sure it'll hold us both."

The salamander looked up at the Tasker cable then straight at Jason. She hesitated for a split second before leaping onto the metal face. And in the most amazing display of agility he'd ever seen, she began to run—not climb, run—up the chimney!

"How the hell?"

His advanced technological toy suddenly seemed pitiful as he winched himself up, at half Mandy's speed, to the summit of the alien tower. A slight wind nudged him as he clambered onto the square, thick rim. Looking inside, he was disappointed by what he found. Warm, black nothing. The ocean painted a desolate picture. An eternity of translucent green now left Jason feeling sickly. No sign of Kate or the *Elemental*. Enormous shadows roved beneath him—restless harbingers of death.

He'd never felt so alone in his life. Kratos was empty in all directions. Teeming with life, yes, but empty.

"There's nothing left to do, Mandy," he said, looking into the chimney. "Nothing."

The salamander blinked. She turned and scurried down into the darkness, waiting twenty feet below for Jason to follow. He looked again. There was nothing there.

*But then again, he thought, nothing could mean anything.*

Down, down...like a bucket into a well. The seat of his survival suit pressed uncomfortably into his crotch, but he daren't adjust—the grappler was not embedded in anything above. It merely clung and might scrape loose if he wasn't careful. The purple sky shrank to the size of a pen nib. Warm, balmy air teased sweat from his palms and



brow. The chimney interior was utterly black. As the warning beep sounded on his Tasker, he swallowed hard. He was running out of cable.

*How deep is this thing?*

*Click!* Automatic lockdown! Jason now dangled in total darkness at the very end of his line. The Tasker wouldn't risk another inch. For all he knew, the ground might indeed be an inch away, but it could just as easily be a mile.

"Right, what now, genius?"

The walls were too far apart for him to climb down the old-fashioned way—brace and shimmy. *And too dark to see any footholds. I could winch back up, but then what? This is what the voyage was for in the first place...these bastard chimneys. Alright, Remington, think! What's the best way to find out how deep something goes...drop something? But what?*

Rummaging in his belt, he found a handful of sand and a shard from the splintered wing. He'd used the latter to make the *Elemental*.

"I'd rather not lose that," he said. "The only weapon I've got left."

*Okay, how about something even more basic.*

He gathered a squall of phlegm in his throat and spat it into the void. Several seconds later, he thought he heard a small pat. But it was far from conclusive.

*Okay, what else? Boots? Not ideal. Something I can do without...like...the vest. Hmm, what'll that accomplish—it's too light to make an impact. OK, how to weight it...handful of sand...probably not enough. What about sand, tying it into a bundle and then soaking it! The best way is either saliva—which would take ages—or what else? Urine? Worth a try.*

The delicate operation lasted a few minutes. He removed his vest after lowering the survival suit from his shoulders. Next, he relieved his bladder onto the vest he'd stuffed down his front, added the handful of sand, and then tied the bundle as tightly as he could. It reeked. He retched.

"It's not exactly in the manual, but here goes."

He didn't let it fall, he *threw* it down. The greater the impact, the more chance he'd have of hearing it.

The urine bomb he'd designed but never seen plummeted into the abyss. Jason opened his mouth in anticipation. His head poised, his ears the booms to record *any* sound, he waited...and waited...and...

*Splash!*

He jerked upright in the harness. The watery echo swilled about in his mind.

*Right, dilemma time. That sounded a helluva fall, but it's solid proof of water below. How deep, though? And how wide? The bundle might've hit lucky, while I might not. Oh, Christ! It's a leap of faith. Hang on while I send for the minister. Remington, make a decision...now! Empty ocean...or the abyss?*

A faint, tinny click came from far below. It didn't repeat, however.

"Mandy, is that you? Mandy!"

No reply. He waited a while, then called her name again.

"Mandy, I need to know if it's safe to jump."

Once more, no reply. Then suddenly, Jason heard the echo of a big splash. It sounded remarkably like the salamander breaching a watery surface.

*The Elemental Crossing*

"That's good enough for me," he said, putting his arms back into his survival suit.

*Right, this is it! Three...two...one...*

He closed his eyes, clicked the safety catch to *off* and unclipped the cable. *Ugh!* Falling sent a cold pulse right through him. His brain felt like a parachute that wouldn't unfurl. The sensation tightened his stomach and took the life from his limbs. He wanted to scream but couldn't. He regretted the decision to jump a million different ways all at once. Down, down, down...had he missed the water and found an endless drop? On the verge of opening his eyes, Jason felt a despair unlike anything he'd known.

*Thud!*

He thought he'd hit concrete. His legs collapsed beneath him, and his right arm smashed into his side. The pain was excruciating. He wanted to cry out, but instinct forced his breath to hold. Underwater! He'd splashed down from far higher than he'd reckoned. Jason spat salty water as he groaned in agony on the surface.

*Cli-click, click.*

Mandy eased herself under him. Though there was no light at all, she seemed to know where she was going.

"Sonofabitch!"

Jason knew he'd cracked a few ribs. Whenever he touched his side, a sharp pain splintered right through him. He couldn't raise his right arm and had to hold it, as still as possible, as though it was in a sling.

"I've gone and done it now," he groaned, as meek as a lamb, resting on Mandy's back as she paddled through the dark.

A warm air current blew across his face. He looked up. Not even a jab of daylight pierced the void.

*Past the chimney, he thought, but where to now?*

## *Chapter Seven*

### *Psammeticum Requiem*

#### *Day 15*

“Gray Lady Down...Crimson Tide...Ice Station Zebra...The Enemy Below...20,000 Leagues...Hunt for the Red October...um, U-571...The Poseidon Adventure...”

Kate knew the last one wasn’t a submarine movie, but it was her granddad’s favourite – they’d watched it together a dozen times – and it did take place underwater.

“You and your old submarine movies.” She smiled, remembering his old brown cardigan and his fondness for the genre.

Massive shadows roamed beneath her keel. They took on odd, ghostly shapes through the surface haze. Sea creatures of every design prowled out of reach. Were they oblivious to the *Elemental*’s clumsy drift? Kate followed them curiously. Whenever a shape appeared more than once, she gave it a nickname, no matter how tenuous the connection.

“Run Silent...Run Deep...ah, another Enemy Below...two Crimson Tides...a goddamn school of Das Boots...monsters, packed together like sardines...What’s that one...a Widowmaker?...Hmm, how droll.”

The sentiment stuck in her throat. She couldn’t get Jason out of her mind. A widow? He’d gone and made her something much more than that!

*The last human in the galaxy...still in love.*

His deep brown eyes scarred her vision as though she’d stared directly at the twin suns. Whichever way she looked, he was there. Every daydream brought an awful moment of hope, when she snapped to at the sound of vine on beak or the leathery sail flexing taut, only to find Jason was *not* there. Not ever. No matter how much she wanted it. No matter how vivid he seemed. The way a spouse turns to speak to a

partner of many years, forgetting he or she has passed away, Kate couldn't imagine him not being there. Not after all they'd been through. Two weeks spanned the rugged straits of a lifetime; she had loved him long before Kratos. Unrequited at first, perhaps, but since when did that matter? Real in the mind is as real in the body...as far as love is concerned. And cast adrift, which has greater import: the body or the mind?

The ocean had made her a widow. The very last of her kind.

"An endangered species," she said mournfully.

A quick swish of her hand through the water felt comforting. Warm. She repeated it a few times, each one slower. Relaxing. She shifted position to submerge her full forearm. The gentle current tickled her skin, and if a tiny shrimp-sized fish hadn't nibbled at her finger, she might have stayed there all day.

"Yow! Okay, it's a goldfish. Katie girl, you used to be tough. What the hell happened? What next, hiding from your own shadow?"

The thought festered in her mind. Since when was succumbing to fear, giving up, in a terrain scout's vocabulary? A hundred ordeals on a dozen different worlds had not perturbed her. Indeed, they'd given her a reputation. So what was so special about this one?

*But there's nothing to aim for. No goal. Even if I cross the ocean, I'm still the last human being within a thousand light years. Yeah, and? Since when is survival about the horizon? That's right...*

She recalled Yuri Yeltsin's infamous words of advice: *The horizon changes with each step, and each step is where your thoughts should be.*

"That's all well and good," she replied, "but how exactly does one make steps on a ten-foot goddamn buoy beak? I've been trying to catch fish for two days, and all I've caught is...well, it just caught me!"

She sucked a speck of blood from the bite wound on her finger.

"Nibbled...nibbled? That's it! That's it!"

From something so innocuous, the idea exploded in her mind. How to stay alive on a boat with no real hunting weapon, no fishing line, no way on Earth to catch food? Bait. The kind that even the tiniest Kratosian fish couldn't resist. But that would be too dangerous. No, she couldn't. It would have to be a last resort.

"Katie girl, you're kidding yourself. The last resort has been the only resort for weeks."

She slowly slipped into the water, her arm wrapped tightly around the starboard tentacle. Kicking like crazy, she imagined the bizarre ecosystem of creatures nosing curiously beneath her in the deep. The suit was watertight. A rush of warm water entered through the neck, however. She shivered as it ran over her breasts and pooled at her stomach, soaking her vest. A tingle of excitement rang from head to toe.

*Fear and necessity, she thought. Pretty crazy combination.*

Kate made as much commotion as she could in the water. Her goal, to attract food. She was the bait. The fish would come to take her, and that would be the end of fish, or so she hoped. The titles of a hundred submarine movies surfaced beneath her, but she forgot their names. Danger. And shadow. Her left arm clutching the boat began to

shake. Kate gritted her teeth. She kicked even harder as the horrors of the deep swirled into action. Snake-like monsters, shoals of darting fish, a yellow streak whirling ominously. She gripped the jagged splinter of wing-frame firmly in her fist. A meagre weapon.

"This was a bright idea!"

*I've never seen anything pierce a survival suit, though. And that's including some pretty major accidents. Hell, mine should be in tatters after the grinding it's had. Fingers crossed. Here we go!*

The first taker rammed her thigh with surprising force. She barely held her grip on the vine. A brown tail fin thrashed the water a few feet away, while something blunt and hard pinned her against the boat.

"Jesus, that's strong!"

Kate pulled her knees tight against her chest. The predator struck repeatedly. Its mouth, a miniature sucker, gripped her calf and rammed it against the vine. Kate knew she had little time to spare. She hacked and sliced the creature's neck with all her might. Slam! Another one smashed her left leg against the hull.

"Oh, hell!"

She kicked, hammered, stabbed. Time tightened around her like a boa constrictor. Either kill a snake now or climb back aboard before the heavy duty monsters arrive!

"Come on, bastard! Die!"

A powerful stab caught the nearest snake square in the side of its head. It flew into a mad frenzy, squirmed to get free, but Kate held on to her weapon. She ripped the creature's mouth loose from her suit. Holding it at arm's length, she saw it was the size of a moray eel; the way it thrashed, though, was more like a shark caught in a fishing net. The second creature now attacked from beneath. It lifted her legs and tilted her backward, headlong into the water. She felt her grip on the vine going, going...and...

"No!"

Kate hurled her right arm—knife, snake, and all—across her body and fully onto the *Elemental*. A desperate effort. She focused on gaining crucial footing, gritted her teeth, and clung insanely to the buoyant vine. The first snake flapped about on deck; she left it be. The second had her in its bite and wouldn't relent.

As she tried to kick the thing loose, a dark mass the size of a galleon rose beneath. Kate's mind froze, but she kicked on. The shadow appeared ready to swallow her *and* her vessel. Last chance! She threw both legs onto the deck and, using a lucky high swell, somehow found the momentum to heave her entire body aboard.

"Right, my turn!" she snarled, stamping her foot on the throat of the first snake. Each gouge of her weapon ripped life from its head. After a half dozen stabs, it stopped flapping. The second creature lasted twice as long. She finally knelt between them. Her blood thumped, coursed like battery acid. Her chest felt five sizes too small for each breath.

*I'll never do that again!*

There was no blood. Seawater streamed from the deck. The ocean lapped against the *Elemental* with an easy, soothing rhythm, as if nothing at all had happened.

*I hope the bastards are edible after all this!*

A sudden jerk pushed the boat a few metres through the water. It bobbed a little more than usual. Kate looked over the side and, seeing the enormous creature hurtle directly beneath her, crouched to the deck and buried her head in her knees.

*"Run Silent, Run Deep...Crimson Tide...The Poseidon Adventure..."*

She waited alone, cut off, subsisting. With her hands pressed hard over her ears, hardly any sound got through. Superstition or not, she daren't lift her head. Why *not* accredit her survival to her impenetrable, private cocoon? A world within a world, it was her own—the only place she had left. She waited for the best part of an hour, remembering the old submarine movies and the actors who played in them. Nothing happened to Kate or the *Elemental*. Her first attempt at fishing ended with an almighty sigh as she looked up...followed by a reflex lick of her lips.

## *Day 16*

"U-571 and U-572...not bad eating," she said as she tongued a stubborn piece of meat stuck between her teeth. "If only I could stomach more of you."

The U-snakes split easily into three parts. The outer layer was tough, sinuous, almost impossible to chew. Kate did swallow a few small chunks but couldn't discern any taste.

*"Only if there's nothing else."*

The inner membrane or core of the snake resembled a spine of pickled onions. Only they proved as tough to bite as elastic rubber. Instead of bones, the creature's skeletal strength was provided by a peculiar DNA-like configuration of this same material which spiralled through the body from head to tail. Kate guessed the elastic element must alternate between firm and flaccid states to enable such powerful locomotion.

Lastly, a brown meat constituted the remainder of the U-snake. While stringy, it was very succulent indeed. Kate spent a great deal of time picking it from the spiral "skeleton." All told, she had enough food for weeks.

*"Two on normal rations, four to be safe."*

That night, a cool breeze tickled the wing-sail. Only a few thin rashes of cloud obscured her view to the stars. She lay at the bow where Jason had joined her every night during the first leg of their journey. Her insides went soft, supple whenever she thought of him. A cold sponge of memory. The constellations seemed to wheel over a few degrees as she realised his hand didn't clasp hers. So where was he?

*Maybe it's best I don't know what happened. Then again, there's nothing worse than false hope. What if he went diving with Mandy...and the boat drifted too fast for him to make it back. He might've got cramp! Or maybe we were attacked and he was thrown overboard...unable to reach me. You've been over all this a hundred times, Katie girl! Face it, he's gone.*

*But what if...he made for the precipice...he swam for it...and he's there right now...looking for a way down? Hmm, false hope, no hope, there's nothing you can do about it. The farther you drift, the less chance you'll ever see him again.*

The “edge of the world,” an ever-present in her mind, hung fast like a trailing anchor on the jagged sea bottom. She knew that if the boat drifted just a little northward, a new bank of stars would emerge from that horizon. The notion that Jason, in desperation, would either have to swim for the precipice or drown wouldn’t leave her. Had he found a way down to the valley? In numerous *carpe diem* moments of clarity, she’d risen to her feet and contemplated the swim herself.

*No way to manoeuvre the Elemental. Instead of drifting forever, I should just rip the sail down and use it for a goddamn parachute!*

Suicide. Something always held her back. Even staring ahead to a lifetime of loneliness...that was what her whole life had been about anyway...the keystone of her genetic architecture—survival! To take that away when it mattered most was more alien to Kate than anything lurking beneath her hull.

The night exploded before her thoughts could settle. Behind. To the east. A spectacular purple detonation lit the entire Kratosian sky for a second. She spun round. There! There it was—the firework display!

“I couldn’t have drifted *that* far, could I? How long was I out? What if Jason...”

A second eruption plumed and showered the ocean next to the first. Purple sparks glittered the darkness, spreading over the water like far-reaching invitations.

“*That’s* why he got off! To investigate those notches! But he never made it back...or the boat drifted away too fast.”

The third upwelling hit her in the gut. She couldn’t breathe.

“If he was anywhere near there...then that’s that,” she said softly, folding her arms, feeling cold all of a sudden. “Purple element. Looks like Psammeticum. As if I care. There’s no way he could survive that...no...way.”

The chimneys lit in sequence. An amazing Bonfire Night display she couldn’t bear to watch. Every purple pulse over the dark sea was a bitter heartbeat that chilled her blood. She knew it was the end of her hopes. Of even false hopes.

“He’s gone.”

An image of the crashed *Fair Monique* haunted her. Crumpled, charred, nothing left but a funeral pyre of smoke and burning fuel. And no more Daniella. That had been the moment fate had gifted her the man of her dreams. Cruelly, but hers nonetheless. Jason Remington. A man to need, worth fighting for. Worth crossing a deadly world for.

“Some funeral pyre.”

Kate immediately thought of the *Elemental*. His invention, his pride and joy. Running her hand up and down the nearest stay rope, she sank to her knees and cried like she’d never cried in her life.

## *Chapter 8*

### *Jason & Mandy*

The solid ground gave nothing as Jason crept through the dark. An adamant metal in absolute blackness, the floor was grooved and level. Mandy had led him from the water channel into a realm of the imagination. Liquid with a smell he couldn't identify dripped from a ceiling he couldn't see to a floor he could only feel. Thousands of droplets echo-popped around him, a chaos in his mind. Were it not for the feel of Mandy's soft tail in his grip, he knew his sanity would crumble.

The belly of the craft reeked of salt and aniseed. Short, shallow breaths were all he could afford; his cracked ribs stabbed at anything deeper. The salamander kept a steady pace. Whenever Jason needed to rest, he tugged on her tail. But he never let go. Not even to sneeze – the most excruciatingly painful sneezes he'd ever experienced.

The question of how Mandy was able to see in the dark fascinated him.

*Another part of the spectrum? Infrared, ultraviolet, or something we haven't even discovered yet? And she seems to know exactly where she's going.*

He guessed they'd walked for over a day. Instinct. A gut chronometer. His thighs ached and his feet hurt, which usually meant off-the-scale fatigue, as Jason liked to think he was at the peak of fitness.

*Hmm, but you are undernourished...and dehydrated, among other things.*

Whether a million acres wide or fifty feet, the black sanctum shrank to a narrow corridor in Jason's mind. He tried to visualise a wall on either side—as plain and nondescript as possible, partitioning him from all prying eyes.

He closed his own eyes until they ached. Every time he stumbled, or his boots scuffed a groove in the metal, his blood chilled to minus forty. What if the floor suddenly fell away? What if the next step was a fathomless hole? What if the ceiling



suddenly lowered and his face struck solid metal? The salamander might not think of that; she was much shorter than he was.

*Christ, I can't go much longer without water. Come on, Mandy, where the hell's water? Christ!*

With one more step, his knees collapsed from under him. He stumbled back to his feet but decided rest was a better option. It actually made him giddy. Easing his tired limbs felt sublime, as if a warm fog seeped over those bones, blanketing him. His whole body chuckled. His ribs hurt like hell, but he couldn't stop. The ordeal suddenly seemed absurd—one long cosmic joke that he'd just found the punch line for. Lying on his back, he laughed maniacally. Pain bore into his side like a pneumatic drill. The sanctum's myriad drips disappeared in a cavalcade of gut hysterics. Even when he stopped, the echoes lingered. And he couldn't get over how great it made him feel.

"Man, o man, what a week! I mean is this insane or is it? All right, Remington, you've felt bad for the last time in this place. From here on in, it's brollies and margaritas. Savvy? If you can't laugh at this, you might as well say San fairy Ann right now. Come on, Mandy, best feet forward. There's a good girl."

He knew full well it was nothing more than his body releasing endorphins to lighten his demeanour, to avert fear. A defence mechanism. Human biology taking charge in the direst alien scenario. But what did he care? He was Jason Remington again, not some wilting weed dragged over concrete to a nook of a grave. As Mandy resumed her trek, he walked tall. Still favouring his right side, he nonetheless found a rhythm in his steps and in his breathing.

Then the darkness lifted. It was faint at first—a trace of a distant hue. Jason mistook it for a trick of the mind.

*Purple. Growing brighter. Thank God, it might be a way out!*

"You hear that, Mandy? It might be the way out!"

The salamander wriggled for a moment and started to click wildly.

"What is it? What is it, girl?"

The purple light now blazed brilliantly, though it was still a long distance away. Jason had to squint. He let go of Mandy's tail for the first time as he rubbed his eyes. It was the only light he'd seen since entering the chimney. He looked down at his loyal companion who stared back with three black, adoring eyes. Her black skin slowly adopted a smidgen of violet.

"Nice to see you again," he said, wincing as he bent to rub her back.

The inside of the craft was cavernous! Fifty feet from floor to ceiling, the full dimensions of the place remained unknown. After two hundred feet, shadow masked the view. Likewise behind him. The metal ground was perfectly grooved without a rivet, seam, or bolt. The liquid droplets, obviously transparent, appeared to fall through tiny pores in the ceiling and reflect the purple light.

"What is it with this planet and purple?"

Something made Jason recoil from the light ahead. He shielded his face.

"Wow!"

*The Elemental Crossing*

The intensity grew in increments as though someone was playing with flash shutters and light filters. Now as bright as the sun, it also seemed much larger in size.

*They're like sparks igniting closer and closer. What the hell? Purple sparks?*

"Purple sparks. Fireworks!"

The realisation jerked him into action. He looked feverishly about the now well-lit surroundings. Nothing different. Just longer, farther in.

*Ah, hell!*

Mandy thrust her tail for him to grab. He didn't hesitate. She'd taken him this far through the dark, why not into the light? Jason stared at the floor or else he'd go blind. They no longer walked, they ran. *Toward* the fireworks! He never doubted Mandy's instinct for a second, only his chances. Boiling. Adrenaline tightened his body into a pure survival mechanism. He was aware of the sharp pain from his ribs at every step, but that, too, spurred him on.

"Christ!"

The next spark threw off light like a nuclear furnace. He felt no heat, just blinding intensity. He pursed his lips and shut his eyes tight. Mandy kicked their run into a sprint. Another spark blazed purple *through* his eyelids, onto his retina. He felt the source was yards away! A loud roar hurt his ears. Lactic acid gripped his left shoulder and squeezed. Bright purple invaded his deepest, most secret retreats. Unbearable. Nowhere to hide. Nothing left, only Mandy's tail jerking him forward, wrenching him on...

*Splash!*

Salt water gushed up his nose, down his windpipe. He sputtered and choked. He'd fallen into another channel? Shockingly cool, then sickly, the water felt alien until he surfaced and coughed it out. The light was still as bright. He panted. Mandy quickly grabbed his leg and, allowing him a split second to take a deep breath, yanked him under. Jason sensed something warm rush over his head and neck before submitting completely to the salamander's pull.

The light ahead was dimmer when they resurfaced. A purple canal now lit the way as far as the eye could see. Behind, blistering intensity stepped slowly but surely away until it dimmed to the same benign glow. Jason sat on the side, exhausted, his legs dipped in a pool of purple residue. The firework display they'd admired from the beach had just encored...big time!

"There goes your discovery, Kate. Let's just say I got a ringside seat this time."

Mandy beckoned him to climb on her back.

"Well, no point hanging around," he said, sarcastically. "Nothing to see here."

The slightly viscous residue seeped down the narrow walls. Jason and Mandy were no longer in the sanctum, rather an arterial waterway joining one to the next. As they swam under a chimney, Jason looked up and saw a nib of daylight at the top. Its fading walls ran with the same slimy, purple residue. Whatever had ignited the monstrous geysers, he felt sure it took place far below.

*Psammeticum is an energy catalyst. Maybe some part of the craft's engine still functions, and there's a buildup of this stuff. Then once every couple of weeks, it explodes. And I'm walking right over the hot coals.*

"What next?" he yelled up.

The water channel stretched a quarter mile. They seemed to traverse it in no time. Mandy scurried onto the metal platform leading to the next sanctum and lay down. Somewhat recharged, Jason took the opportunity to explore. A short, nervous stroll.

He stopped a hundred yards from the water. No change in the décor, but something else. A horrid feeling of being watched. He listened closely. A distant scrape followed the squeal of an enormous hinge. The hairs on his neck bristled.

*A door? Some kind of cage? Definitely on a hinge, whatever it is.*

He raced back to Mandy. Heavy, thumping footsteps vibrated through the metal floor. From behind...

Jason noticed residue streaming from the water channel, across the floor, perpendicular to the direction they'd been heading.

*Off to the right. It's running downhill. We can head downhill!*

He immediately thought of the valley he and Kate had wanted so desperately to reach. Was this the way to it? In suggesting the chimneys, had she been right all along?

*Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud!*

That squeal of a giant hinge. What had it unleashed? What on Earth would be in a cage that big? On Earth...no, on Kratos! The scale of the place suddenly hit him. He doubled his pace. Mandy already waited for him at the water's edge. He saw her halo blink twice in quick succession. No longer waiting for her lead, he firmed his right arm above his ribs and followed the course of the residue...downhill.

"Come on, Mandy! Follow me!"

She scurried silently to his side as Jason realised the salamander had probably never had a way out.

*Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud!*

Her heartbeat matched Jason's pulse for pulse as they fled.

## *Chapter Nine*

### *The Big Pour*

#### *Day 18*

A chevron formation of birds streaked across the sky. Kate counted twenty-six. She shuddered at the memory of being clamped in the huge beak during her eleven-hour fall, awaiting the crunch, with no way to defend herself or the man in her arms. How quickly horror had turned to hope.

Clouds parted overhead like a stratospheric Rorschach, morphing the heavens into a shape she'd only ever seen rendered by computer-generated imagery. She lost her bearings for a moment, forgetting the direction of the *Elemental's* drift.

*Yeah, east to west, but which is which?*

Kate couldn't find the impetus to get up and check. Though bone-dry bodily, her resolve was damp. Two days of lying on her back in a floating limbo had atrophied her every motivation. Eating, exercising, planning ahead, making even the tiniest decision now felt beyond her. At the nadir of existence, it was theoretically the peak test of a survivalist's aptitude. But she couldn't get over how cruelly fate had played its hand against her. Remorseless. Sadistic. From the bottom of the deck.

Just before midday, the *Elemental* turned slowly through forty-five degrees. The sensation wasn't severe, but Kate felt it.

*There's no wind. Some kind of current?*

She instantly forgot her maudlin marathon and shot across to the port side. The water *was* on the move; as she dipped her hand, it rushed through her fingers.

*"Strong current, too!"*

No signs of life below the surface, submarine-sized or otherwise, only a full-depth, concerted gush toward the northwest. Toward the precipice!

*The entire ocean?*

"Okay, think. What could be causing this? Something on the seabed? Yes, but it's not the seabed, it's the roof of the craft. Giant craft, roof, precipice...water...emptying?"

Her throat tightened. She swallowed consciously between deep breaths.

"Okay, it's like Jason said—this is through the looking glass the other way, quantitatively off the charts. Think scale. Think water in a metal bowl. Why would it gush toward the rim? Hmm...if the bowl was tilted, or the rim was lower at that point. Yes, that storm must've raised the water level to an overflow. If there's a dip in this side of the craft, voila! A big pour. A bloody big pour!"

Something walked over her grave. Any trace of the purple Psammeticum behind her had long since dissipated. And with it, Jason. Now on her toes, thinking of the best way to secure herself to the *Elemental*, Kate's brain suddenly clicked into gear.

"My God, if it's not a sheer drop, if the waterfall isn't vertical, you might get to see the valley yet, Katie girl."

She realised her best chance to avoid capsizing was to cut down the mast. With no wind, it served no purpose anyway. Without it, the vessel would resemble a lifeboat, albeit an improvised one.

She began slicing through the stay ropes with her splinter. It proved taxing, and the wing itself almost collapsed on top of her as the last line snapped. The operation took an hour. Kate watched the sail float alongside in the water for a moment before it upended and fell behind.

Two hours later, the rumble was as loud as a Harley Davidson's engine ticking over. The throttle hadn't yet been turned, but her ears felt the grip. White mist boasted a full rainbow and reached high over the precipice. Kate tested the lines securing her belt one more time. One fastened to each of the four cleats—more than enough.

"It might be for nothing," she whispered, "but nothing *could* mean anything..."

She shook her head.

"A bit late for optimism, Katie girl."

Her heartbeat quickened as the noise increased. The sea's current now seemed rapid, incontestable. Still no view of the precipice through the mist. Only the nonstop fall of thunder. Billions of tonnes of water pouring into oblivion.

The depth of the ocean did not appear to lessen. She could still see a fair way down. *The whole thing's moving this way!* On Earth and other planets, she'd seen waterfalls fed by either a river or a lake; here, a sea at least the size of a continent overflowed. Kate could barely hold her hand steady enough to scratch an itch on her neck. As the first specks of spray peppered the *Elemental*, the cascade roared with the power of a rocket launch.

She screamed at the top of her voice, 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 glide more rapidly and quickly through the water, and the dread welled up like hot oil in her gut. Her eardrums rang. She fought giant panic breaths with all of her pride.

## *The Elemental Crossing*

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

*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 steep 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!*

Down, down inside the roar. A broad-arm current heaved the boat to one side until she was sure it would capsize. But the buoyant vines were stubborn. The spray eased long enough for Kate to see a breaker the size of the Statue of Liberty explode onto a massive metal wall. Each drop of watery shrapnel could have filled a swimming pool. The *Elemental* barely escaped a blitzkrieg.

For the next minute, Kate was able to keep her eyes open. Wide open. An arcing torrent—half a whirlpool—shot her round a dark brown column that scraped the sky. A series of underwater humps the length of Tower Bridge accelerated her until g-force creased her cheeks and her stomach felt completely detached inside.

She caught glimpses, snapshots of the full-scale pour. To her left, a dome-like metal shield repelled the surge, throwing up a riot of white debris. *Any* such resistance yielded the same result. Even farther across, the slope of the craft dropped almost vertically; the water thus fell into a deep, mile-wide chasm. A mind-boggling waterfall—beyond comprehension. Kate tore her eyes away. For some reason, that abyssal drop left her panicked. Was it the suddenness? Perhaps the sheer size of the hole? Or something deeper in *her*—a genetic, ingrained fear of the void?

The *Elemental* listed dangerously. Sideswiping rapids thrust her into a cauldron between two semi-circular structures. Buffeted about in the foam, Kate cracked her head on the deck. The impact splintered through her brain, then throbbed. Heavy spray pounded the boat. Through it all, her mind was a blank. An instant eraser of any and all horrors.

A spindrift avalanche tossed her from the cauldron onto a long, steady slide that fed into a deep trough two football fields wide. The momentum increased. Her neck and jaw muscles ached with constant tension. Her biceps shook to preserve the hold.

*It's all part of the craft, she had to remind herself. If the water can get down, you can. Nothing but obstacles on a slalom!*

*"Ah, hell!"*

She braced herself for a huge impact. Gathering velocity on the slide, she hurtled toward the trough at a sixty-degree angle.

*"This one's gonna be rough!"*

She accelerated still further. The silver-green flow appeared smooth and metallic. With three hundred yards to go, the *Elemental's* keel hit something underwater. *Crack!* The huge beak ripped in two, hurling Kate sideways into the cascade. Water flooded up her nose until her brain felt like splintered chipboard. Cool water pooled inside her suit,

making her feel twice as heavy. Meanwhile, half the boat was still fast on whatever had impaled it. She quickly came to and pulled the emergency knot to untie the lines holding her belt.

*Splash!*

She met the level trough at seventy miles an hour. It knocked her for a loop. The slow-moving current seemed akin to drifting backwards. Her hands bled and stung in the saltwater, but she still managed to swim for the nearest tentacle. Nothing else entered her mind. It was the last trace of their vessel. A lifeline. She wrapped the vine three times around her waist and tried to fight the current. No good. Giving up felt like she'd taken too many sleeping pills; she simply sighed and acquiesced to the drift—a long, semi-conscious netherworld of autumn and Oregon timber lakes.

*This is it...one more obstacle and you're done for. You gave it a heckuva try, though, Katie girl...one for the record books. Rest for a moment now. You've got all the time in the world.*

The thunderous noise might have drowned her shout, but it couldn't touch the voice inside her head. Kate smiled at the idea.

*That's one thing they can't take from you...from Kate Borrowdale.*

Memories of the past few weeks flashed by, merging together in her mind. Two stood alone, though she couldn't understand why. The first was of her lying on the deck of the *Elemental*, doing nothing but tell herself how stupid she'd been to fall ill. Food poisoning, of all things. The second—her fight with two barracudas to procure a much-needed meal—made her shudder.

*Surely there are better things to remember than that!*

But nothing else sprang to mind. The easy, constant drift soothed her, and she grew fond of the stillness. In the midst of hell's torrent, a breather.

Realising she'd spun to one side, Kate jerked herself round on the surface. She bobbed there for a moment. Suddenly, the lull let go...

She plummeted, full speed ahead! This slide skimmed inches over the metal surface. Still as steep—fifty to sixty degrees—it nonetheless felt more tactile, more real to Kate. Her boots and the butt of her suit occasionally scraped the metal. The sensation made her feel both giddy and powerful. No longer on the shoulders of an ocean pour, she could now touch the spout, as it were, and engage for the first time, however ineffectually, with the flow.

But the exhilaration didn't last long. Another enormous vapour cloud loomed below. For as far as she could see, miles across, the slope began to concave. The inches quickly deepened to metres. The slick film of water converged into a white-water torrent. Kate spun and bounced like a tyre on the rapids, thanks to her buoyant lifebelt. She swallowed the Amazon and spat back the Nile. Mountains of water piled onto her, while a hundred currents met simultaneously to jet her forward. Into a raging fjord. No sky, no air, just an ocean spilling its full fury on top of her.

Then the mist broke. She saw a purple sky. The deluge seemed to spread beneath her like fizzy soda. Colours fought through the torrent's final spits. Kate barely remembered where she was as the current settled into a steady, flat stream.

*A river? Is this...is this the other side?*

*The Elemental Crossing*

Her eyes made out a vague reddish expanse. Tired limbs weren't much help as she paddled to the left bank. The buoyant vine wouldn't let her break free of the current, so she untied it. A series of coughs and sickly breaths followed her final exertion—hauling herself onto dry ground. The first in nearly three weeks. Her tired head sank onto a firm, dusty surface. As her heavy eyes finally closed, red dirt under her fingernails reminded her of nail varnish. The kind women used to wear...a lifetime ago.



## *Chapter Ten*

### *Indigenous*

"So this is the real Kratos."

A starless, purple twilight.

She knelt upright and stretched until her arms and shoulders felt tight as leather. An otherworldly perfume scented the air. It piqued her senses as she inhaled. On this side of the river, hundreds of skittish tumbleweeds wandered a rouge dustbowl which stretched from the mist behind to an orange forest many miles ahead. Not much of a celebration after her ordeal.

*On the other hand, she thought, the dead celebrate even less.*

The river continued to widen as she walked, forcing her northeast, until it grew so large Kate decided it qualified as a sea, or at least a big lake. No sign of life breached the surface, and she didn't care to inspect closer.

*I've seen enough goddamn ocean for a lifetime. Hmm...and desert for that matter!*

She found herself steering farther and farther from the water. Why not? She couldn't drink it, anything in the water would undoubtedly be hostile, and it had nearly killed her on numerous occasions.

"No love lost."

Except one.

She blanked the past utterly from her mind and trudged on. The sun rose low in the west. How long had she been asleep on the riverbank?

*No, don't think about the past. Ahead. Look ahead.*

The orange forest was still many miles away. Exertion and the heat made her sweat. Stopping for a rest, Kate climbed out of her suit. Cocooned for days, her legs suddenly felt limber and revitalised. She removed her vest. The warm breeze wafted across her back and her breasts as she twirled, eyes closed, like a tired ballerina. There was no joy

in the sensation, only relief at it being different. Fresh. Unrestrained. After feeling so ineffectual for so long aboard the *Elemental*, a tingle of freedom suited her like no body-caste survival suit ever had.

"So this is the *real* Kratos."

She folded her suit and vest and slung them over her shoulder. Walking was now a pleasure. No real hope. No expectation.

*Just don't dwell in the past. No good'll come of it.*

Despite the caveat, Kate did glance back from time to time. The alien craft's mind-bending proportions demanded it. Even though mist covered two-thirds of the big pour, she could still make out individual obstacles and the white water breaking on them.

*How in the hell did I get through that? It's like white water rafting...on the slopes of Everest. Hmm, better make that Olympus Mons! Luck doesn't even begin to cover it.*

Either side of the cascade, the craft appeared perfectly sturdy. Its walls stood vertical beneath the rim, and Kate surmised that an entire panel of the exterior must have collapsed outward to create such a long chaotic slope for the pour.

*Ripped open during the crash landing?*

Whatever the cause, she couldn't quite get her mind round the idea of all that water—a dozen oceans' worth—collecting like drainage in a puddle on the roof of a manufactured object. She remembered Babylon Wall and the fast-flowing channel inside. What was the source of that flow? How many tributaries fed how many rivers to this ocean? Might there be even bigger oceans on the craft? If so, how big *was* the craft? And if that volume of water could gather on an artificial surface, what would a *real* Kratosian ocean be like—one occurring naturally? And what might she find in those depths?

Kate's imagination sent her dizzy.

*Alright, seriously, no more of that! Brain tranquilizer needed pronto. Come on, Katie girl, focus! What was that cheesy jigsaw metaphor Yeltsin used to trundle out...something about the big picture. "Keep your mind off the big picture and on your little piece...one at a time." Or something. You might as well recite a goddamn nursery rhyme. Did that guy ever get to go out in the field? Because he sure came up with some shit!*

The suns arced three-quarters of the way across the sky in the time it took Kate to exhaust herself. Still on the dusty plateau, she now saw definite shapes in the orange tangle ahead: giant blue pulsing things hung, like arboreal hearts, on a web of vines and ventricles; bizarre brown drapes dangled from the tree roof, darkening every ingress. It was a forest the likes of which she'd never imagined.

"But why am I not surprised?" she sighed, putting her vest back on. "When this place seems normal, maybe I'll start to worry."

Food, water, shelter, companionship. Kate shrugged, realising she had none of those basic survival means.

"Time to improvise, then. Come on, Katie girl, it can't be that dire. It's bound to rain sooner or later, the forest has all kinds of potential for food and shelter, and you're not in bad shape." She fingered a bruise on her lower back. "The place is an open book."

But Kate couldn't drum up much enthusiasm. The rumble of the waterfall had slowly disappeared behind her. An eerie silence filled the plateau. She looked back over her footprints in the red dust. *Looks familiar*, she thought, recalling her endless trek across the high altitude desert and the number of times she'd shaken her head at those higgledy trails she'd left. *Too bloody familiar*.

Something made her look toward the river. Perhaps to distract from dry memories. It was a half mile or so to her left, creeping like an emerald glacier. Kate guessed its width had nullified the current almost completely.

But her eye caught something on the bank. First a line at a tangent from the flat course, then an incongruous shape jutting up. She rubbed her eyes and slowly pulled focus.

*Couldn't be a part of the Elemental, could it? No, it's too big – the deck split in two. The wing-sail? Nah, it's way too big for that. What then?*

"Whatever, it's worth a detour," she said, now quite curious.

Her heart pounded as she approached. It was a charred metal shell, partially silver, partially scorched to a crisp.

*A fragment of the alien spacecraft?*

No, the metal bore little resemblance to what she'd seen either under the desert or under the big pour. Warped, riveted, a different colour entirely, this needed another explanation.

Kate knew at the back of her mind what it *could* be, but she'd long since buried that part of the expedition. It would complicate things too much. There was an easier-to-swallow, flippant answer. There had to be.

*But it's the right size and...and it's charred like the Monique. But how...?*

She traced the nearest blunt edge with her fingertips. Solid, smooth, silver. Only tactile physical contact seemed to forge any real connection in her mind.

*A landing craft?*

She stepped back with a start. Where currents veered around the object, one or two constant gushes betrayed the silence of the slow-moving river. If this craft escaped the *Fair Monique*, who escaped with it? Did they survive the crash? If so, where were they now? If not, might they still be inside?

Kate dropped her suit and dove into the water. Her eyes smarted as she opened them, but the craft had clearly ripped open on impact. An entire side was missing, and water now filled the interior. But she found no sign of any dead bodies.

Back ashore, she sat cross-legged, rocking forward and back as she looked out over the river. Everything suddenly seemed so uncertain. Like a twist at the denouement of a play, finding the landing craft forced her to reconsider everything she'd felt over the past three weeks.

*How did they escape? Why didn't you see them escaping? There was so much debris, but even so...maybe if you'd kept a sharper eye. All this time! Hang on, though...who's to say they didn't just die on impact? The craft ripped open, they floated out, hasta la vista! Yeah, but they might've survived. They might have.*

## *The Elemental Crossing*

Whenever Kate tried to simplify it, to decide once and for all what had happened, she ended up shaking her head.

"Dilemmas. Nothing but goddamn dilemmas!"

*Jason would know what to do, she thought. If only he...*

"Yeah, a lot of help that is right now," she said, angry with herself for thinking of him so flippantly.

Dusk nodded. She pressed on toward the forest, her head a pinball machine of regrets and sunken hopes. And every now and then, the feeling that she was not alone nagged her.

It occurred to Kate survivors would leave footprints, but also that weeks of wind and storms would have erased them. Being unable to determine anything made her furious. Especially after feeling so carefree during the day.

*Okay, playtime's over. First thing first, you need to find yourself a weapon. Nothing doing without a weapon.*

Kate chewed her lip as she approached the tall, densely tangled forest. The orange trees were more like buttressed beanstalks – without bark or boughs or branches of any sort. In the fading light, they resembled drooping wax figures, cursed to hold the entire forest roof on their shoulders.

"Atlas trees," she dubbed them.

She chose to steer clear of any blue webbing – the pulsing centres looked ominous – and made her way to a large opening that appeared to stretch quite a distance inside. The mossy white floor felt damp as she stroked her palm across it. It also wiped away very easily.

*Kind of hard to stay inconspicuous, she thought. Not exactly the...*

A trail caught her attention a few metres to the right. The moss was badly damaged, as if something big and clumsy had walked through it. The hairs on her neck tickled. Metre-wide prints lay adjacent to the trail on either side. As far as she could tell, it was a heavy two-legged creature with a sizeable tail.

*As big as a dinosaur!*

She'd tracked game animals before as part of her interactive survival program, but nothing bigger than an ibex. The gait of this creature suggested it took massive strides while always keeping its tail on the ground. Something about the tail's motion didn't quite sit right, though. Kate bent down for a closer inspection.

*What are these indentations over...almost over the trail? If they were made by something attached to the tail, then why do they occur outside its groove, and why are they indents and not drag-lines? It's almost like they're separate prints...made by another creature entirely. Let's see... She tiptoed alongside the tracks. Tricky but constant rhythm...looks like six prints repeating...It's a smaller, scurrying creature...has its own tail that hits the ground occasionally.*

*What about the bigger creature? Definitely two legs. Its tail seems erratic, though – no kind of rhythm. And there are zigzagging grooves inside the trail! What the hell?*

She followed the tracks deeper into the dark forest. A humid atmosphere developed under the translucent roof. The perfumed air grew more intense, forcing Kate to muffle a few sneezes. The light stayed surprisingly adequate, however, due to the white moss

reflecting it at every turn. Almost like snow. She saw no movement through the Atlas trees and none on the path ahead.

Deeper.

No hint of the red dust remained, not even in her own footprints. A few light thuds, pulses of the blue hearts-in-webs, distracted her whenever she stopped.

*Out of sight, out of mind.*

She pressed on, undaunted, on the trail of the creatures. The path narrowed slightly. Black creepers squeezed some of the thickest Atlas trees, some even reaching between two trunks, visibly pulling them together with iron will. It gave Kate an idea.

*They could make a decent weapon...the material certainly seems tough enough.*

She managed to snap a length free, but it took an almighty effort, and the black vine quickly coiled and petrified in her hand as she let go.

*Stubborn bastard!*

Not willing to accept defeat, she snapped off two more lengths and, using all the strength in her wrists, twisted them around one another, tying the ends with shreds of orange skin cut from the trees. When the vines tried to recoil, they tensed into each other. They thus twined, hardened into an extremely solid weapon. She banged it into her open palm and winced. She even coiled another, slimmer vine around one of the ends, making it into a deadly club. Kate had to use both hands to wield it, but the extra weight was more than worth it.

The path curved to the left. Kate kept one eye on the tracks, the other on the shadows ahead. Her heart now thumped loudly against her chest. She imagined herself in a Brothers Grimm fairy tale for a moment, before the trail grew chaotic at a sharp bend. The larger creature's tail had scraped an arc in the moss totally inconsistent with its footprints.

*What the hell? It's almost like something's being dragged. And another creature scurrying in pursuit.*

Kate didn't see the clue until it was two feet in front of her. She froze. Dead silence. Not even a breath. Her temples throbbed with the weight of a thousand denials.

Was her mind playing a trick? She shifted position and read the word over and over.

"Kate."

*Kate.* Her name. Written in the moss. *Her* name written in the moss. It *was* her name. As clear as her own footprints behind her.

She gasped. "That's me!"

The forest suddenly opened up like an artery. Jason's athletic figure sprinted through her mind. She saw him after the sand yacht, before his full beard, when the possibility of crossing the ocean had lit a fire in his eyes. A fire for her.

"He's here!" she said, her voice breaking with emotion. "Jason...he's here," she repeated.

Kate sprinted. The moss proved quite slippery, and she fell. But it only made her more determined.

*He must've made it inside the chimneys. Survived the fireworks. Made his way under the ocean. Maybe the big pour is the only hole in this side of the alien craft...Maybe it was inevitable*

### *The Elemental Crossing*

*that we'd both emerge in the same river. So why didn't I see his footprints before the forest? OK, they might've easily been covered by the wind. I was out a long time.*

She thought about Mandy, his trusty companion who never went anywhere without him.

*Yes, that accounts for the second creature! The second tracks in pursuit. Jason was dragged by something, and Mandy followed. That's all there is to it!*

Kate had never been as excited in her life. Nor as terrified. That Jason was likely in the clutches of huge predator filled her with dread, but the creature had also dragged rather than killed him. A thread of hope, then, but enough to hang her rekindled excitement on.

Kratos had flipped again for Kate. A graveyard one minute, perhaps inhabited by human survivors the next, desolate once more, and now this!

*Forget the big picture, she told herself. He's the love of your life!*

Over a hundred yards on, she found his survival suit festooned on the creepers between two Atlas trees. Her heart sank. She feared the worst, but only for a moment. The damaged moss had recorded a chaotic struggle, scrape by scrape, after which the tracks continued exactly as before. Two giant, clawed prints, Jason dragged behind, struggling, and loyal Mandy scurrying in pursuit. She knew it was Jason by his second message scribbled in the snowy moss: "Find me Kate. J."

She pursed her lips and raced on. Lactic acid tightened her shoulder, but the adrenaline didn't abate. Her fingernails dug into the club in her grip. All she could see were the tracks in the moss and her black weapon jerking forward as she ran.

*"Jason," she repeated. "Jason, I'm coming!"*

Then, at the next bend, another white passage spilled into her path from the left. She kept her course, but not without pausing to swallow. As the light dimmed further, she could hardly believe her eyes. Instead of three tracks, there were six. Three new sets of footprints had joined the chase, adjacent to the others.

Human footprints.

## *About the Author*

A sometime poet from the hills of Lancashire, England, **Robert Appleton** now writes science-fiction stories. His survival romance series, set on planet Kratos, includes *The Eleven-Hour Fall*, *The Elemental Crossing* (both published at Eternal Press), and *Kate of Kratos*. He also writes the imaginative Esther May Morrow series as Arthur Everest. A keen footballer and kayaker, he has traveled far but loves the comfort of reading books or watching movies at home. His inspiration is the night sky.

Catch up with him at <http://robertbappleton.blogspot.com>

*Available now from Eternal Press*

# *The Eleven-Hour Fall*

*by Robert Appleton*

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...

Coming soon from Eternal Press

# *Grandiloquence*

*by Robert Appleton*

Through the automatic sliding doors, a narrow, blue-carpeted corridor wound to the left. It smelled of fresh ink or some strange detergent. Transparent panels, set at equidistant points along the ceiling, offered staggering glimpses of the elevator shaft – a gargantuan tower that rose above the atmosphere itself.

“Anyone afraid of heights?” she muttered.

One of only thirty-two on the planet, the giant tower was over sixty years old. Project Dreamcatcher – an exoskeletal framework over Earth – had recently been completed to the tune of many trillions of dollars. In terms of interstellar freight and logistics, the project was expected to save corporations many times that amount in the long term. The amount of fuel required to pull a shuttle free of the earth’s gravitational pull was prohibitive, especially when multiplied by tens of thousands of shuttles per year. Despite global opposition, the exoskeleton did constitute a sound long-term investment. Entire industries had emerged on the giant framework over the planet. A cooperative venture hitherto unprecedented in human history, the Dreamcatcher itself had required the exhaustive mining of eleven planets in neighbouring systems.

*In the olden days, this would all be science fiction, she thought. Too bad all I’m using it for is to get laid.*

She adjusted her handbag strap on her shoulder and untangled the other two straps: one belonging to her black tank top, the other to her purple bra. Rummaging in the pocket of her denim skirt, she retrieved a stick of gum. *Bland flavour. I wonder if it'll last me to the top*, she thought, glancing up to where the tower met the clouds in a vague blue hue.

*Available now from Eternal Press*

*Esther May Morrows Buy or Borrow*

*by Arthur Everest*

Reclining, deflating against his stack of pillows after a long day, he smiled as her familiar profile came to life. The backdrop only fidgeted, but Olivia herself, arguably at her most ravishing, began to walk toward him with breathtaking fluidity. She hoisted her dress slightly to prevent it snagging on the uneven ground. She watched her footing over stiff clumps of grass. Her smile bloomed into sweet dimples whenever she looked up. And as Olivia stood within inches of him-the close-up of all close-ups-he turned to walk with her. A beautiful, innocent piece of programming. Courtesy of Sexual Fantasies, Inc.

Rex tapped the pause button with Miss Olivia staring directly at him. What a remarkable technology, he thought, that inks in the pixels to approximate beauty. Her round, angelic face, flush cheeks, big eyes, butter-wouldn't-melt smile with a hint of naughtiness behind the teeth. The visor had got her exactly right in every detail. Except one.

It wasn't really Olivia.

And Rex was in love with the real Olivia.

