

CRATER LAKE EVOLUTION

by Jennifer Killick



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Battle Royale

‘Die, loser! Die!’ Chets’ voice screams through my headset as he pulls off a 360 no-scope with the majesty of a leaping panther.

‘Is that your thirteenth kill, Chets? What happened? Bandito9000 has turned into a savage!’

‘My time as an alien wasp changed me, Lance. You don’t experience something like that without growing from it. I think it activated some dormant skills that I never knew I had.’

‘Gaming was literally the only thing I was better at than you,’ I groan as I take a hit. ‘Do you have a med kit?’

‘On my way, StarshottA51,’ Chets says. It’s so good to hear his voice. ‘And you’re amazing at lots of things.’

Standard Chets, trying to be kind, when we both know it’s not true. ‘Yeah, I’m amazing at

doing lousy in tests, getting detention and making my mum stress.'

'Is she in the hospital today?'

'No, actually.' I am frantically building to get some height so I can kill some dude called RabidMilson2006 who is apparently desperate to get me out of the game. 'She's home. She seems better.'

'That's great, Lance,' Chets says, as Bandito9000 effortlessly takes down RabidMilson2006, leaving me looking like a noob.

'Thanks, mate,' I say. 'She's been so ill since our Crater Lake Year Six school trip-slash-fight for survival in the summer. I'd forgotten what it was like to have normal mum around the house. She's smiling and singing again. It's nice.'

'It wasn't your fault, you know,' Chets says.

'Feels like it was.' Mum's illness can get triggered by stress, and let's just say that what happened at Crater Lake made her lose her mind with worry. You can't blame her, really. She thought she was sending me on a Year 6 residential where the scariest thing that would happen would be a bad zip-wire landing, or falling out of a canoe. Nobody expected Crater

Lake activity centre to be the HQ for an alien takeover.

There's just us and two other duos left in the game, now.

'None of us asked for it to happen, and if it wasn't for you, we'd all be creepy bug creatures, now.' He pauses and I swear I can hear him shudder at the same time I do. 'Like Digger. How are you sleeping now? Any better?'

Sleep has never come easily to me, and it's been even worse since Crater Lake. The crater contained the remains of a meteorite which released invisible spores into the air. Sleeping at Crater Lake allowed the spores to use your body as a host, turning you into an alien slave. When sleep means the end of your life as you know it, it becomes the enemy. And that's not a fear you get over easily. The CPAP oxygen machine I use every night helps with my sleep apnoea, but it doesn't take away the nightmares.

'You know, same as usual,' I say, because I don't want sympathy. We've all struggled with awful memories of our residential.

We take out another team.

'You'll always be a hero, Lance,' Chets says. 'No

matter what happens, you'll always be the one who saved us.'

As much as I'd love to take all the credit – the respect I got after defeating the alien hordes and stopping them from taking over the world was the high point of my life so far, and I will almost definitely never get that kind of glory again – winning at Crater Lake was a team effort. Everyone had courage, and everyone had skills. Chets with his smarts and tech genius; Kat with her kindness and insane talent for climbing; Mak with his prepper survival knowledge and bear-like strength; and Ade with her mega-brain and super-speed.

'We all saved each other, Chets. You, Katja, Mak, Ade and me.' I glance at the screen. 'They're not coming, are they?'

'They might still,' Chets says. 'They're probably just running late.'

'VenomAde has joined another party.'

'Is Adrienne still hanging out with that new group? The ruffians?'

I smile. Only Chets would use a word like ruffians. 'Yep. She's so different now.'

'And she and Katja haven't made up yet?'

I glance at the screen. No sign of xKittyGrimeX. No texts from Kat on my phone. ‘They haven’t spoken to each other for months. And when I tried to talk to Kat about it, she got so mad. She won’t speak to me anymore either.’

‘Do you miss her?’ Chets asks.

Like the polar bears miss their melted icecaps.

‘Nah. Well, maybe a little sometimes.’

‘I always thought you two would end up...’

I fake a coughing fit to hide my pain. I know he’s trying to help, but I really don’t want to hear this right now. My screen turns red. *You were eliminated by UglyPugly1985.* ‘Sorry, Bandito,’ I say. ‘I suck today.’

‘It doesn’t matter, Lance. It’s just a game.’ He says this, but I can hear the frustration in his voice. He’s become way more competitive lately, and Chets hates doing badly at anything. Not that he did badly – I totally dragged him down with my lameness.

‘You’d have been better off with MakKarnage,’ I say. ‘But I think we’ve lost Mak for good.’

‘You never know. Nobody can predict these things, especially those of us who are inexperienced in matters of the heart.’

In spite of everything, I splutter out a laugh.

‘He got his ear pierced,’ I say. ‘I’m not sure there’s any way back from that.’

‘Is it golden, like a pirate’s?’

‘It’s a giant diamond. It sparkles in the light so you can see him twinkling from the other end of the corridor.’

‘That sounds kinda nice, in a way. Festive.’

‘I’d love to agree with you, Chets, but it’s more like the Poundland version of Ronaldo. And it just doesn’t seem like, you know, Mak.’

Chets takes a slurp of drink. ‘I guess they really aren’t joining the party. I used to love it when we all played together every week.’

‘Me too.’ For a long time it was literally the only thing I looked forward to. We promised we’d carry on the tradition: every week, no matter what. ‘I guess everything changes, even if we don’t want it to.’

‘True say,’ Chets sighs, and I smile at that.

‘As they aren’t coming,’ I say, as carefully as I can, even though I know saying it carefully probably isn’t going to make a difference. ‘Would it be OK if I invite my other friend, FreshTrim?’

One, two seconds of silence.

‘Chets?’

‘Which friend do you mean?’ he says. He knows which friend I mean.

‘FreshTrim101, my friend from school: Karim. I told you about him a couple of times, remember? He moved to Straybridge over the summer because his parents are working on the SMARTtown project. He didn’t know anyone when he started at Latham High.’

‘I vaguely recall you mentioned a new ... acquaintance.’

Talking like he’s got something painful stuck up his butt. He gets like this every time I try to introduce him to Karim.

‘You’ll really like him, Chets – he’s a good guy. He’s funny.’

‘I’m sure he’s hilarious,’ Chets says. ‘But I think it sends the wrong message to have him in our party, just in case the others do show up. We don’t want them to think they’ve been replaced.’

‘No, we don’t,’ I say. ‘But having a new friend doesn’t mean anyone’s been replaced. It’s just a new friend.’

‘Hey!’ Chets says. ‘I’ve just thought of another thing you’re the best at. You always win at wing

roulette, because you're the only person I know who can handle the extra hot without crying.'

'Well yeah, that does make me a bit of a legend,' I say, knowing there's no point in pushing any harder. I don't want to lose Chets on top of all of the others. 'Duos again?'

'For sure, StarshottA51. Let's go.'

As we haul out, ready to parachute into another game, a tap on my shoulder makes me jump out of my skin.

'Jeez, Mum!'

'I was calling you for ages. I wish you wouldn't have that on so loud – you're probably damaging your ears.' She ignores my eye roll. 'After this game, I want you to come and decorate the Christmas tree with me. It's been sad and bare for far too long.'

'Who is sad and bare?' Chets says into my ear.

'The Christmas tree,' I say. 'Because apparently trees have feelings, too.'

'Hi Chets!' Mum shouts into my ear, and waves for some unknown reason.

'He can't see you, Mum,' I say.

'Hi, Mrs Sparshott,' Chets shouts back.

'Should I just give Mum the headset so you two

can chat?’ I say, and then, ‘Joking, Mum!’ when she reaches out to take it. ‘I’ll come down in ten, OK?’

‘If you don’t, I’ll come up again.’ Mum laughs and finally leaves my room.

‘Why haven’t you decorated your tree?’ Chets says.

‘It was delivered a week ago and Mum felt too unwell to do it,’ I say. ‘But apparently now she’s feeling better enough to hang some baubles, and ruin my life by trying to chat to my mates.’ I am a bit embarrassed, but it’s so good to have her joking around that I’m actually quite looking forward to doing the tree with her.

‘Right. Ready to drop in three, two, one...’

And then a boom thunders through the house, so loud that I hear it clearly over the game. So loud that the walls shake. The spare oxygen canisters for my CPAP rattle and clink together for a few seconds, and then go still.

‘Did you hear that?’ Chets says, as I jump out of my gaming chair, which is hard cos it’s really low, and I’m slightly lacking in core body strength. I dart to the window, forgetting that I’m attached to my console by the headset lead. It jerks me back,

and my headset thuds onto the carpet, at the same time as my mum runs back into the room.

Outside my window, the winter sky is the palest grey-blue, quiet and clear without even a bird to break up the view. I can see a way across Straybridge, beyond the shopping mall and church in the town centre, and across to the other side of town, where a plume of black smoke is billowing into the air.

I fumble my headset back on as my mum gapes open-mouthed at the scene outside. ‘You seeing this, Chets?’

‘If you mean the apocalyptic toxic cloud, then yeah, I’m seeing it.’

‘I’m going to look at the news,’ Mum says, heading downstairs. ‘You stay here.’

I grab my phone and start scrolling through social media. Within thirty seconds I’m seeing the same word over and over again. Explosion.

‘What is happening?’ Chets gasps, probably looking at the same feeds that I am.

I stare at the smoke churning and bubbling in the sky above my town: a town where literally nothing interesting ever happens, and I feel a creeping dread prickling in my chest.

‘I don’t know,’ I say. ‘But, to use the words of every great *Star Wars* hero, I have a really bad feeling about this.’

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Other books by Jennifer Killick

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Alex Sparrow and the Furry Fury
Alex Sparrow and the Zumbie Apocalypse

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