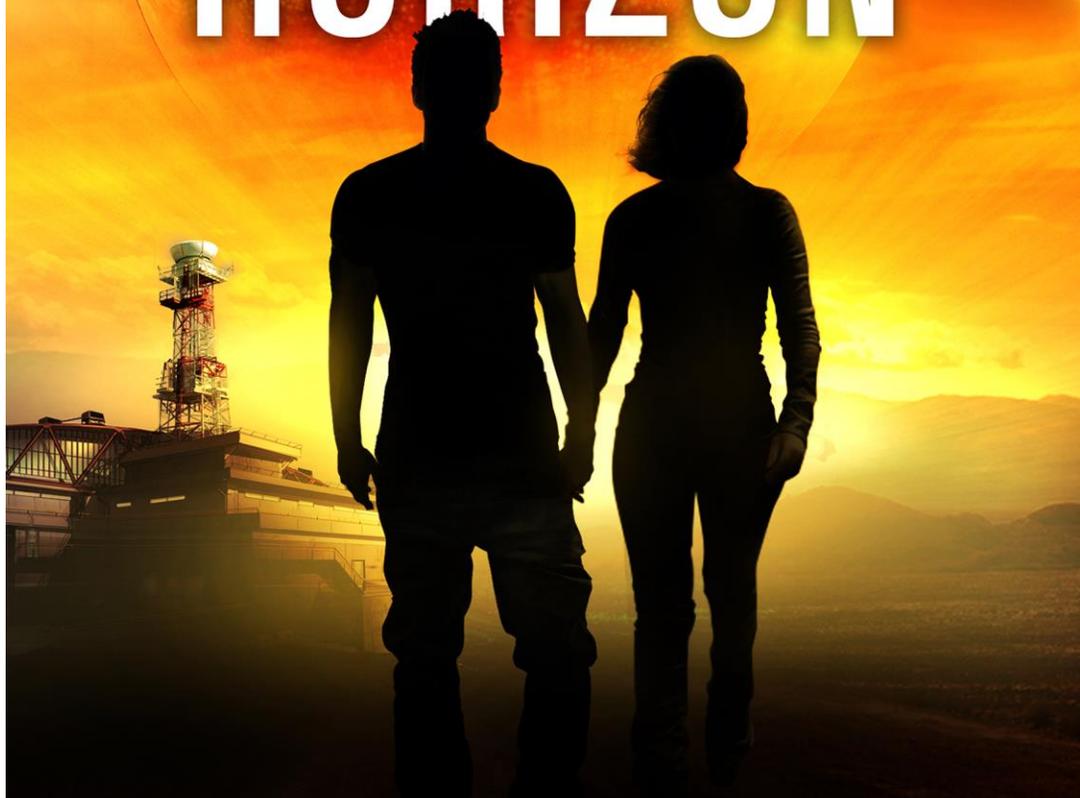


A SHORT PREQUEL TO
CRYSTAL DECEPTION

CRYSTAL HORIZON



DOUG J. COOPER

Crystal Horizon

A Short Prequel to *Crystal Deception*

Doug J. Cooper

Crystal Horizon
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Crystal Conquest (Book 2)

Crystal Rebellion (Book 3)

Crystal Escape (Book 4)

Crystal Horizon (Short prequel & sampler)

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For Jim
with love



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About this Prequel

Crystal Horizon, a short prequel to the books of The Crystal Series, is a mini-adventure that provides a sampler for new readers and a fun diversion for fans. Set five years before the start of the saga, it tells the backstory of Sid and Cheryl.

In *Crystal Deception (Book 1)*, Cheryl is introduced as the captain of a Fleet space cruiser, and Sid as a covert warrior for the Defense Specialists Agency. Along the way we learn that the two have a shared history—a romantic connection that somehow went awry. In this story, we join Sid and Cheryl on the day they first meet and we live that shared history with them.

Crystal Horizon

Doug J. Cooper

Sid climbed the steps of the aging fitness center and a shadowy flicker caused him to look up. Squinting, he contemplated the massive Kardish vessel—small to the naked eye—as it passed overhead in its orbit around Earth. Huge, silent, lingering, the alien spaceship had been a fixture in Earth’s sky for the past fifteen years.

The Kardish had never done anything threatening or aggressive. In fact, it was their silence that made Sid wary. His intuition screamed that they would someday transition from visitor to enemy. He couldn’t see a different outcome.

And that’s why he’d accepted an invitation to attend Fleet’s talent development school—a place called “camp” by those who knew of its existence.

Stepping through the door at the top of the steps, a muscular instructor in a too-tight T-shirt caught Sid’s eye. “Welcome to camp, Lieutenant.” The instructor tapped a locker with his index finger. “Get into pads and move out to the floor.”

It was his first day at the elite facility, and Sid took his time changing so he could absorb the rhythms of the place. He dressed in the flexsuit he found in the locker, then touched his toes, rotated his torso, and stretched his arms to confirm that the protective pads gave him a full range of motion. As he passed from the locker room out into a large hall, the same burly instructor handed him a wooden pole about as long as he was tall.

“You’re with her,” he told Sid, nodding toward an attractive woman wearing similar gear. He pointed to an area on the far side of the room. “Take that spot. Warm up a bit. You’ll be sparring with each other in a few.”

Sid and his sparring partner looped around the outside of the room to avoid the waving sticks of those who’d arrived ahead of them. They reached their destination and turned to face each other.

“Hi. I’m Cheryl.”

He nodded politely but remained silent, studying her calm resolve as she squared up in front of him. He judged her to be in her late twenties—same as him—and he could see enough of her face and figure through her pads to conclude she was not only pretty, but also had the tight body of a natural athlete.

She held the stick in one hand like a spear, and her unpretentious manner disarmed him. *It’s her first day, too, he thought. Go easy on her.*

The instructor clapped his hands. “Let’s spar, folks. Work up a sweat. Convince me that it’s real.”

Cheryl threw some swats and jabs at Sid, and he blocked her stick in a series of practiced moves. The physical activity warmed his tall, broad-shouldered frame, and he welcomed the sensation.

Sid’s priority was to learn everything he could about camp, so he went through the motions of defending himself while he scanned the room with his peripheral vision. He saw Captain Dooley chatting with a couple of instructors, and stopped his visual sweep to watch.

Cheryl goaded him for his lack of effort. “C’mon, sport. Are we fighting or dancing?”

When he didn’t respond, she slipped her hands together at one end of the stick and swung it at his head, much like she was swinging a bat at a ball. As the stick accelerated, he heard a growl from the back of her throat.

Amateur, he thought, disappointed with her tactic. He timed the stick’s motion and, dropping his chin, ducked forward so it would swing by overhead. Her momentum was about to expose her midriff and he’d use the opening to execute a “take down and kill” sequence.

As the arc of her swing developed, she pivoted her stick while maintaining the power behind its motion. In rapid sequence, she twirled, dropped to one knee, and lowered her shoulder to protect her midsection. Her stick veered down on a new path and she swept his legs out from under him.

By the time Sid realized what was happening, he was flat on his back. *I got suckered*, he thought, scolding himself. He looked up from the ground and saw her smile.

“I am so sorry, champ,” she mocked, projecting a lightness that suggested humor.

Hopping up, he reassessed both her and his strategy. He didn’t give a moment’s thought to the fact that she’d dropped him in front of a crowd. Instead, just as he’d done at the beginning and end of more than a thousand sparring bouts, he brought his feet together, pressed his hands to his thighs, and bowed at the waist. He wasn’t surprised when she returned the formal gesture.

She assumed a fight-ready stance, crouching ever so slightly as she centered her body over her feet. Shifting the stick to her side, she held it parallel to her body, one hand next to her waist and the other up near her shoulder.

He’d trained hard for more than a decade on a variety of martial arts and other fighting forms, and recognized her classic *bojutsu* stance. Adrenaline spilled through his veins, causing his skin to tingle. *This is gonna be fun*, he thought.

He assumed a ready stance that was not identifiable to any particular school or style. But anyone watching would have no doubt he was proficient with hand-to-hand combat and staff weapons.

They began to circle each other. A hush developed in the room as the pair drew attention. Everyone, including Captain Dooley, drifted in their direction and formed a ring around them. Neither Sid nor Cheryl noticed.

The muscular instructor appeared between them, raising his hand high to stop their movement. He looked at Sid and caught his eye. Turning to Cheryl, he did the same. After a brief pause, he called, “Ready,” then dropping his hand in an arc between them, shouted, “fight!”

Cheryl leapt forward and unleashed a lightning-fast attack sequence. The air was filled with a *click-clack* staccato of impacting sticks as Sid struggled to block and parry the onslaught. He retreated several steps during her opening flurry to protect himself from her weapon.

He soon deciphered her patterns and methods, and fell into an easy rhythm, alternating between attack and defense. During the bout, Sid landed several sharp jabs to the pads on her chest, stomach, and thighs. His own suit protected his shoulders and forearms from some vicious slices. *Not bad*, he thought, having met few opponents who could touch him in this sport when he was fully engaged.

The battle raged for twelve minutes, then the instructor appeared and yelled, “Break,” to end the bout. Both dropped their guard and bowed again.

Sid leaned on his pole and took deep breaths. Cheryl sat on the floor and sucked in air. Still breathing hard, she lay back on the ground and splayed her arms wide.

“Nice work, slick.” She smiled for the second time.

He sat next to her and continued his recovery. “I’m Sid,” was all he could think of to say.

* * *

The next morning, Cheryl swam into the tube-like entrance of an underwater obstacle course. She wore space coveralls that had been modified with foot fins, added to give the swimmers greater agility in the liquid environment.

Pulling herself through the lake water, she advanced into a labyrinth of looping and intersecting tunnels. Colorful geometric shapes—boxes, balls, cylinders, and cones—were attached above, below, and on either side along the passageway, providing handholds and hiding places as far as she could see. With her com disabled, she heard only the background thrum of filters keeping the water clear.

Sid, her same partner from yesterday’s sparing bout, trailed behind in a gold-colored suit that matched her own. He swam up next to her and, using hand gestures, signaled that he was taking the leftward path at the intersection up ahead. She nodded and signed that she’d go right. She smiled encouragement through her clear hood, but he’d moved ahead and didn’t see.

Other teams were spread throughout the maze, and the challenge they all faced was pretty much a kid’s game—the last team standing at the end of the exercise won the bout. Everyone in the game had a short baton as their only weapon. If she touched an opponent’s head or torso with the tip of the baton, their suit would glow, confirming their “death.”

I’m not sure splitting up was such a good idea, she thought as the branch she was in channeled up a level. She quickened her pace, anxious to rejoin Sid so they could protect each other. At the next corner, the tube continued up yet another level.

Cheryl looked back the way she’d come, hesitated, and decided to keep going forward. A movement through slits in the tube wall attracted her attention. Peering through a narrow gap, she looked into a largish open chamber that served as an intersection for several passageways.

Her senses on edge, she watched as the two members of the red team swam into hiding places among the obstacles scattered around the walls of the chamber. *Nice place for an ambush.*

She studied the different features of the intersection so she'd recognize it if she ever made it to that location. A flash down a tube on the far side of the open space lifted her gaze. Something yellow was advancing toward the chamber. Squinting, she studied the object and felt her pulse quicken. The color was more gold than yellow. *Sid's swimming into the trap!*

Cheryl controlled her breathing and willed her heartbeat to slow. With confident, focused movements, she kicked and pulled herself deeper into the maze. A fork came into view and she swam left. After another turn, the passage brightened from light coming up through a hole in the tube floor.

Edging up to the lip of the hole, she peered into an open area. *The chamber!* The red team members were barely visible in the recesses bracketing the tube where Sid would emerge. From her vantage point at the top of the compartment, she couldn't see her partner. Using her memory of his position and progress in the tube, she made a guess as to when he would appear.

The challengers, focused on the tube holding Sid, had their backs to her. Pulling herself through the hole and into the chamber, she positioned her feet against the edge of the opening and drew herself into a tight ball.

Her instincts told her it was time to go. With her arms pressed against her sides, she extended her legs and pushed as hard as she could, flying into the top of the chamber. The resistance from the water slowed her to a drift before she'd traveled three body lengths.

Dammit. Stroking and kicking, she descended behind the red team, watching to see if her flailing limbs attracted their attention. When she was level with them, she turned and approached cautiously, studying their backs for any sign that would indicate awareness of her presence.

She'd made it most of the way across the chamber when Sid poked his head out of the tube. The two reds attacked. Cheryl felt a moment of relief when Sid somehow broke into the open chamber without being eliminated from the challenge.

Swimming forward with her baton out in front of her, she watched for an opening that would let her engage the opponents and help Sid. He had the two reds on the defensive and, as she approached, she sought a pattern in his actions so she could time her strike. The water provided so much resistance to movement that the fight played out in a slow motion dance.

Punch. Kick. Block. Block.

Trying to catch Sid's eye, she sidled up behind the nearest red. She chose to act and, snapping her arm out, touched the opponent on the side of his torso. His suit glowed, and as he turned his head to glimpse his vanquisher, he dropped his hands and disengaged. The glow of light caused the other red to lose his concentration for a brief instant, and Sid used the opening to eliminate him from the game.

Swimming over to Cheryl, Sid gave her a one-armed hug. As they rotated together in a circle and looked into the tubes, he leaned his hood against hers and yelled, "Nice work, partner. This is a good spot. Let's hang out here and wait for our prey."

Over the next hour, they ambushed the orange, green, and blue teams. They waited for a bit, agreed they'd won the challenge, and worked their way to an exit. Swimming into the open lake, Cheryl's com activated.

“You two aren’t done.” She recognized Captain Dooley’s voice. “There’s still another team.”

Sid, apparently having received the same message, canted, and using strong strokes, swam back toward the tunnel. Her gaze shifted to activity past where he’d just been. Two people dressed in black suits separated from a group and entered a tube farther along the maze. Clenching her jaw, she swam hard to catch Sid. He was deep in the labyrinth when she got close enough to tap his leg.

Pulling up next to him, she leaned her hood against his. “The black team is camp instructors. We’re being set up.”

Sid nodded. “I saw. Let’s get to our ambush room before they do.”

Cheryl’s arms ached as she worked to match Sid’s pace. She breathed a private sigh when they spilled into the open chamber.

Giving her another one-armed hug, Sid touched hoods. “Which tube will they come through?”

Trusting her instinct, she pointed. “There.”

“I agree.”

“How about me there and you there,” she said, choosing the tubes on either side of the one they’d agreed would deliver the instructors.

Sid nodded, released his hold, and swam toward one of the passageways she had identified. Cheryl swam to the other. Pulling herself about ten body lengths deep, she turned to assess her view. *Too far*, she thought when she realized she couldn’t see into the tube where the instructors would appear. Hugging the tube wall to get a better viewing angle, she edged back toward the chamber.

Satisfied with her position, she looked across the open space and, perplexed by the sight, scrunched her eyebrows. Sid had positioned himself at the opening of his tube with his head protruding into the chamber. *He may be able to see them better this way, but they can see him, too*. She waved her hands to catch his eye, but he either wasn’t looking or chose to ignore her.

Then her heart rose in her chest. Sid opened his suit, wriggled his way out into the open water and, dressed only in his shorts, swam into the chamber. *You’re mad*, she thought. There were no air pockets anywhere that she could see.

He moved along the chamber wall and positioned himself above the tube where the instructors would appear. She started counting seconds in her head. *He can hold his breath for maybe two minutes*.

She reached twenty in her count when the two instructors popped into view. They moved without hesitation, dashing for Sid’s gold suit lying in the adjacent tube. Sid caught them both by surprise, dropping behind them and “killing” them in rapid succession.

One of the instructors swung his elbow when Sid’s baton touched his abdomen. Arguably the instinctive reflex of a trained combatant, his elbow caught Sid on the side of the head. Sid went limp and began to drift. The two instructors, engaged in an angry exchange that included finger pointing, didn’t seem to notice.

Cheryl watched her partner's motionless body for a full heartbeat before she reacted. Straining every muscle, she raced through the water in his direction. Her body screamed in protest as she struggled to increase her speed.

Reaching Sid at the one minute mark, she got behind him, wrapped her arm across his chest and, kicking and pulling, tugged him toward his suit. Small relative to the big man and hindered by her space coveralls, she moved him at a crawl. He hadn't exhaled—yet—and she knew that the air in his lungs was his only resource for survival until she could get him to his suit.

Her frantic efforts attracted the attention of the two instructors, and her hope grew when they rushed to help. They hooked arms with Sid's lifeless body and pulled with practiced efficiency. Swimming ahead, she lifted his suit and exposed the emergency mouthpiece tucked beneath the front collar.

The moment he was near enough, she pried open his jaw, slipped the air tube into his mouth, and pinched his nose. Eyes closed, he drifted without moving, edging her toward panic. *C'mon, Sid.* She moved behind him, wrapped her arms around his chest, and tightened in a short, hard squeeze. Repeating the motion, she appealed to the instructors with her eyes. *Help me.*

With her third squeeze, Sid convulsed. Bubbles burst from his mouth, and then his chest rose. He inhaled, then inhaled again. His eyes fluttered and she exhaled a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

She studied his face as his eyes focused. Seeing her, he formed a broad grin around the mouthpiece. Relief washed through her when she understood he was out of danger.

Resuscitated to the point where he could assist with his own rescue, Sid wrapped his arms around his suit and let the instructors help him down the tube and out of the maze. Cheryl followed.

For the second time that day, her com activated when she emerged into the open water. "You're the first team to beat the maze since I arrived at camp twenty years ago," said Dooley. "Let's see if you can continue your success in the weeks ahead."

"Yes, sir," she replied.

Looking up, she watched Sid and the instructors disappear into the glistening diamonds of the sunlit lake's surface. She followed, trying to decide if her partner was brilliant, crazy, or stupid.

* * *

Cheryl stopped in the doorway and scanned the briefing room, her stomach gurgling as it rebelled against the breakfast she'd gulped down just minutes earlier. About a dozen of the twenty or so chairs were occupied, and not seeing anyone she wanted to sit with, she sat in a chair at the end of a row. Over the next couple of minutes, stragglers scurried in to fill a few more seats. She checked the time. *Six hundred hours on the mark.*

Jasmine, a camp instructor whose tough persona stood in contrast with her petite frame, strode through the door and marched to the front of the room. Sid slipped in like a shadow behind Jasmine and plopped into the chair next to Cheryl.

“Good afternoon,” Cheryl said to him, keeping her eyes forward and wondering if her unveiled sarcasm pierced his consciousness.

Dressed in the all-black, formfitting athletic suit popular with instructors, Jasmine began the briefing. “Today marks the first day of week three.” She crossed her arms behind her and made a show of studying the group. “You’ve been through a rotation of partners and a series of challenges. Six of you are clustered at the top with outstanding scores. That will change for at least four of you this morning.”

Cheryl snuck a glance at Sid, who was slumped in his chair with his eyes closed. He seemed to be scowling. Checking her com for the team assignments, she learned they were partners for the day. They were also two of the six with top scores.

“Will you be awake by the time this starts?” she whispered to him.

His scowl turned to a smile, but his eyes remained closed.

“Today’s task is simple, folks,” said Jasmine. “The theater has been staged with the layout of a space freighter. You’re to start from the ship’s command bridge and make your way to the engine room. The clock stops when you cross the engine room threshold. Shortest time wins.”

A hand went up in front of Cheryl. It was Qi—a middling talent in this year’s class. “Do both team members have to cross the threshold, or is it just the first one across?”

Good question. Cheryl looked at Jasmine.

“Clock stops when the first one crosses.” Jasmine paused, adding drama to her next words. “Of course, three opposing teams will be spread throughout the ship, and they’ll be hell-bent on stopping you from getting there.”

Looking down at her lecture panel, she said, “Check your com for your offense and defense schedules.”

Cheryl scanned the room and counted eighteen people, not counting Jasmine, then looked at her com. “There are nine teams total. We’re on defense for runs one, two, and five,” she whispered to Sid. “We’re the last team up to make our scoring run.”

Jasmine watched the group with an impassive expression, and Cheryl imagined her counting seconds in her head. After most of a minute, she resumed her instruction.

“There’s an extra twist to our exercise this morning. Last week we upgraded the simulation capability inside the theater with a third generation SmartCrystal. This model supposedly brings artificial intelligence to a whole new level. The techs who installed it swear this AI crystal has a reasoning ability like that of a human.”

She looked up at the ceiling the way one might when addressing a disembodied presence. “Three-gen, it’s your show.”

The head and shoulders of a clean cut, forty year old man appeared as a life-like three dimensional image floating above Jasmine’s lecture panel. “Hello, everybody.” The three-gen smiled as it scanned the room with its eyes.

Jasmine looked at the group. “The crystal will manage the competition today. You may ask it questions for the next twenty minutes.”

Qi’s hand shot up and Jasmine acknowledged him. “The teams who go later will know what works on offense. Doesn’t that give them an advantage?”

“I will be changing the ship’s layout after every challenge,” replied the crystal. “Strategies that are successful for one team may not be so for another, and may even prove detrimental to a winning outcome.”

Hands raised across the room, and the next questions sought hints and information useful in the upcoming challenge. *Not bad*, Cheryl thought as the AI answered them all without divulging any secrets.

The tempo of the questions slowed and she raised her hand. “You’ve surely analyzed probabilities and know the likely winners. Won’t you be tempted to tweak the competition so your prediction becomes prophecy?”

“No,” said the crystal.

A moment passed, and then Cheryl realized that was its complete answer. Before she could follow up, Jasmine clapped her hands. “Time’s up, people. Let’s move down the hall to staging.”

Tables arrayed with munitions and gadgets lined the staging area outside the theater. Jasmine had explained that the armaments were set to dummy mode, but in the theater, the crystal would use projected image enhancements to make everything seem real.

Cheryl picked up two Fleet-issued firearms and slapped one on each wrist, then hefted an engine cannon and returned it to the table. “What are you bringing?”

Sid slapped a firearm on each wrist, the distinctive *snap* punctuating his words. “My secret weapon.”

She eyed him, waiting for him to expand on the cryptic remark, but he acted like he didn’t notice. Moving to the end of the row of tables, he sat on a packing crate near the wall. She selected several items, distributed them among her pockets, and sat next to him. They watched their competition sort through the weapons, and then they waited for the action to begin.

They were on defense in the first round, and Sid “killed” both members of a top-ranked team in under a minute. They weren’t on the schedule when the other top-ranked team took their turn, and one of them made it across the engine room threshold in six minutes and eleven seconds.

Teams rotated in and out of the theater as the morning progressed, and Sid and Cheryl returned to their crate whenever they weren’t part of the action. As their time on offense approached, Cheryl’s nervous anticipation grew.

“Want to hear something pathetic?” she asked, picking an imagined piece of lint off her sleeve. “Two years ago, I told my dad I wanted to be captain of a Fleet ship by the time I was thirty-five. He said it was impossible. No one had ever done it.”

She caught Sid’s eye. “I want to win today to stay on track for that goal.”

“You’re here to prove something to your dad?”

“There’s no deep psychology, Dr. Freud,” she said, shaking her head. “My dad and I are great friends. It’s just that we bet a bottle of Scotch on the captain thing. He gloats so much when he wins.”

“So you’re doing this for a bottle of Scotch?”

“It depends. What kind?” She laughed and bumped her leg against his. “I’m having fun, Sid. This is where I want to be.”

He nudged her leg in return. “No worries, then. We got this.”

Their names were called, and Cheryl’s heart raced as she led the way into the theater. The spaceship was staged as a combination of real physical objects—floors, doors, consoles, and chairs—enhanced by three-dimensional projected images. The projections were sophisticated tricks of light that added life-like illusions of reality. The crystal would use image projection to update the set as events unfolded.

Moving behind the ship’s main operations bench—the starting point for their run—she exhaled through pursed lips, seeking to dispel the tension from her body. “Six minutes ten wins it,” she said as she primed her wrist weapons.

They lowered themselves to the deck and sat back against the ops bench, their shoulders touching, as they waited for the horn that would signal the start of the clock. Tilting sideways, Cheryl peered around the corner and surveyed the room.

For their run, the command bridge was configured with a navigation bench and a communications bench positioned halfway to their first goal—either of the two passageways that led off the bridge. She eyed each passageway entrance in turn. *They start us off pinned down, and our only way out is through choke points.*

She sat up straight and looked at Sid. “They’re waiting for us in those corridors.”

“Yup,” said Sid, folding his hands in his lap and closing his eyes.

She nudged him. “The horn is about to sound.”

“We got this,” he said for the second time.

Before she could respond, the clock started. *Booop.*

Cheryl peeked around the corner. “I’m gonna try for the nav bench.”

She rose up into a squat and poked her head out. *Zwip. Zwip. Zwip.* A fusillade of energy bolts—bright but harmless—passed all around her. Jerking back in reflex, she fell behind the ops bench and sprawled on the deck, her head landing on Sid’s thigh.

“How’s it going?” he asked, looking down at her.

“I’m confused.” She raised up on her elbows. “What are you doing?”

“Maybe we shouldn’t try for the passageways.”

“What are we going to do, go through the walls?”

He winked, then leaned forward and kissed her on the lips.

Cheryl shoved his shoulder and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “Seriously? That’s where your head’s at?”

She rose to a crouch and looked him in the eye. “You should’ve asked first.” Shuffling to the corner of the ops bench, she used her com to look around the corner. “So where’s your secret weapon?”

“I’m looking at her.”

“Stop with the games, Sid.” She let her tone reflect her determination. “I told you this was important to me.”

Digging into her weapons cache, she pulled out a red demolition disk and a blue smoke disk. She knew the wall behind her would be part of the outer hull on a real ship. All paths forward required that they move toward their opponents.

“Right or left wall?”

“Right.”

She glanced over at him. “So I’m going alone?”

He nodded. “There’s a team waiting in each of those passageways. If I stay here, they will too. For a while, anyway. That means it’s you against two. You can beat those odds.”

With time short and options limited, her adrenaline-driven frenzy transitioned into a clock-slowng calm. *I can do this.*

Setting the disks on the deck in front of her, she armed the smoke disk. She counted to five as she scanned the bridge, and then armed the demo disk. Sliding her arm in a smooth motion, she sent the smoke disk skimming across the deck, cheating it toward the passageway entrance on the right. A *pop* signaled its detonation, and as smoke clouded the far end of the command bridged, she thrust the demolition disk at the right wall.

Boom. She’d pulled back and taken cover, but the noise and bright flash still caused her to blink. Peering around the edge of the ops bench, she squinted through the growing haze. The crystal had updated the projected image of the ship. A large, jagged hole was visible in the right wall.

She rose, crouched at the edge of the bench, and readied for a dash. The acrid smell of smoke gave a surreal quality to the drama.

“Good luck,” she heard as she pushed off and sprinted for the opening.

Zwip. Zwip. Energy bolts landed all around her. Determined to get through the hole as fast as possible, she returned fire during her dash but didn’t take time to aim. The thickening smoke and Sid’s cover fire bought her the precious seconds she needed.

When she was two body lengths from the right wall, she lifted her arms and dove head-first through the opening. Tucking a shoulder, she rolled once and let her momentum bring her to her feet. She understood from the narrow walls that she was in a side passageway. *Engine room is down and aft.* Dashing away from the bridge, she searched for a route to her goal.

She approached a turn in the passageway and slowed. Sidling up to the corner, she bobbed her head forward and snapped back, then processed the memory of her glimpse. *Empty.* She looked back the way she’d come and saw no signs of pursuit. *Nice work, Sid.*

Turning the corner, she stepped into an alcove that held a ladder leading down through a hole in the floor. She grasped the vertical rails with her hands, took a short hop, and pinched the outside of the rails with her feet, squeezing to control the speed of her fall.

Craning her neck for signs of danger, she hit the lower deck with a solid thump and resumed her sprint aft. *There are two people between here and the engine room.* She knew that was a bold assumption and she should prepare for other scenarios, but with time growing short, restraint wasn’t a winning strategy.

And for reasons she couldn’t explain, she wanted to live up to Sid’s confidence in her. *Focus,* she thought, scolding herself for letting her attention drift.

Looking ahead, she saw the hallway had two branches exiting off to the right before dead-ending at a wall. She stopped at the corner of the first branch and snuck a peek. *Clear.* Peering

down the side branch as she raced past, she perceived it to be a short connector that linked to a broad, brightly lit corridor.

The second branch loomed and she edged up to the corner and stole a glimpse. It, too, was empty, and like the other it connected to the same lighted corridor. Moving into that second branch, she crept to the end and used her com to survey the scene.

Looking right, she detected the arched opening for the first branch she'd passed. Her heart rate spiked when, to her left, she saw the distinctive shape of a muscular blast door. *The engine room!*

Studying the layout in that direction, she identified a half-dozen cubbies and corners along its length. *They're waiting for me somewhere in those hidey-holes.*

With limited options, she scurried back to the first branch—the one farthest from the engine room—and moved to the end near the brightly lit corridor. Dropping to one knee, she retrieved her last demolition disk and smoke disk, set them on the deck, armed them, and retreated for cover.

Time slowed as she waited for the detonation. *Boom.* Moving into the blast zone, she surveyed the damage through the thickening haze. The smoke disk, now resting in the middle of the broad corridor, hissed like an angry snake as it spewed dense fumes into the confined space.

This either works or it doesn't. With the opaque cloud as her protection, she stepped into the corridor, pressed her back against the wall, and waited.

The thick smoke tested her. Tears streamed down her face and she blinked repeatedly in a vain attempt to soothe her stinging eyes. Her throat and lungs burned from the harsh vapors. Lifting the front of her shirt over her nose and mouth, she fought the urge to cough.

Resolute in this course of action, she counted seconds as she battled impatience, doubt, and pain. *Voices!* Drifting toward her from the direction of the engine room, she strained to hear the words.

"Do you think they blew themselves up?" asked one. It sounded like Seth. They'd been partners in a challenge earlier in the week and she'd enjoyed the experience.

"You go straight," said the other. "I'll swing across and come around from the back."

Cheryl smiled. *Yes.*

She lifted her weapons and, taking deliberate strides down the hall, moved toward her opponents. Materializing from the cloud, she imagined herself as the mythical phoenix rising from the ashes.

Zwip. She nodded at Seth as she hurried past him, his glowing suit signaling his death. Reaching the mouth of the second branch, she shot Seth's partner before he even knew of a threat.

Then her reflexes kicked in. Taking steps that lengthened with each pump of her arms, she sprinted down the hall. She didn't know if more danger lurked ahead, but at this point it didn't matter. This was her make-or-break play for the win.

Reaching the blast door, she coded it open and stepped across the threshold. A display inside showed the elapsed time. Five minutes and eighteen seconds.

She hadn't just beaten the other team, she'd *crushed* them. Lifting her arms over her head, she shuffled her feet and swiveled her hips in an impromptu happy dance.

Exhilarated, she wanted to share her joy. Exiting the engine room, she started a slow jog through the theater and back to the command bridge. Seth gave her a good-natured smile and they slapped hands as she passed.

Reaching the bridge, she flashed a broad grin at Sid and performed an abbreviated happy dance. She sensed a somber mood lurking beneath his smile and stopped celebrating, letting her arms drop to her sides.

He stepped to her, studied her face as he moved a wayward strand of hair off her forehead, then enveloped her in his arms. She stiffened as her rational thoughts battled her emotional desires. *Don't be stupid.*

Ignoring her well-honed defensive mechanism, she hugged him back.

"We did it," she said.

"*You* did it," Sid whispered in her ear.

They sat on a corner of the ops bench and she recounted the details of her winning run, enjoying his undivided attention from start to finish.

"What motivated you to throw this on my shoulders?" she asked as they walked out of the theater together.

"My intuition. I've been trusting my gut instincts more and more." He put his arm around her and gave her a squeeze. "I'm on an amazing lucky streak, so far anyway."

She looked up at him. "What does your gut say about our time here at camp?"

Before he could answer, Captain Dooley came around the corner, eyeing them as he approached.

* * *

Over the next weeks, Sid found himself paired with Cheryl on a regular basis. Sometimes it was just the two of them, and other times they were part of a larger team.

In a relentless progression of missions, they were challenged with hypothetical situations that tested their leadership, team building, and strategic skills. They also confronted heart-stopping physical obstacles, like scaling the face of a cliff on a rainy day, and traversing a dense forest on a moonless night.

They proved to be a great team, and they or their group usually prevailed in those scenarios structured to have winners and losers. Observers saw Sid as a fierce competitor who carried the day, but in his head, he attributed a significant portion of their success to Cheryl.

As they grew closer, she revealed an irreverent streak that he thoroughly enjoyed. His first exposure was when she mocked a way-too-serious instructor behind his back. They laughed out loud in the middle of what was supposed to be an important exercise. The instructor rewarded their antic with a scathing glare, and this served to deepen their bond and feed their shared delight.

At week six, she suggested they sneak down to the lake after lights-out to stargaze. Lying side-by-side on the dock, they hung their feet into the water, took turns making up silly names for constellations, and talked about everything and nothing.

She pointed up at something he couldn't see. "Before camp, I was first lieutenant on the Fleet ship *Prospect*. We spent three months shadowing the Kardish in orbit. *Prospect* is now being provisioned for a trip to Mars Colony."

"Do you wish you were with them?"

"Definitely," she responded without hesitation, then her face creased with an impish grin. "But on the up side, I got to meet a guy whose gut tells the future."

They made love that night. Sid immersed himself in the thrill and pleasure of being with her. He didn't understand why she'd responded to his advances. He didn't care. He was happy.

* * *

It was the last week of camp, and Sid, alone in the cabin, sat on his bunk. He heard a single knock on the door and before he could respond, a tall, solid-framed man entered. From his rugged appearance, Sid judged him to be a battle-hardened soldier in his mid-thirties.

"May I help you," said Sid—a statement, not a question. He'd never seen the man before and this was no social visit.

"I'm Captain Sparrow," the man replied. "Call me Jack. May I sit?"

Sid thought briefly about the protocol of standing and saluting, but Jack was dressed in civvies, so he thrust his chin at the back of an empty chair.

Turning the chair, Jack looked around the cabin as he lowered himself into the seat. Shifting his gaze to Sid, he said, "I'm from a covert unit of the DSA—the Defense Specialists Agency. I'd like to chat with you about who we are and what we do."

You have my attention, Sid thought, though he remained silent.

"The DSA supports the needs of the secretary of defense. Our job is to be out in front for him, probing high-risk situations, gathering information, and delivering outcomes on his behalf.

"We're not fighters unless we have to be. In the perfect mission, we infiltrate, do our job, and then we're gone. If we do it right, no one knows we were there. Hell, we don't want anyone to even know we exist. But sometimes we end up fighting. When we do, we fight hard and we fight to win. Think super spy, Sid, only with broader skills, better toys, and fewer rules."

He stopped talking and studied Sid, who maintained a poker face and remained silent. A moment later, Jack continued.

"You've been through basic, officer's school, and special-ops training, and you've displayed characteristics at each stage that we find appealing. You don't know it, but you're here at camp for a final review. While a best outcome wouldn't have included a dalliance with Cheryl Wallace, your term here has been rated a success by those who matter."

Sid felt the hair on the back of his neck bristle at the mention of Cheryl and he worked to maintain a passive demeanor.

As if sensing Sid's displeasure, Jack sat back in his chair, creating more distance between them. "I know my comment about the lieutenant touched a sensitive spot. Your calm response right now is a trait I value."

"So you said that to test me?"

"No," said Jack, shaking his head. "In this situation, she's relevant."

Sid's instincts told him where this was headed, but he needed to hear it. "Help me understand."

"If you accept our offer, you leave here tomorrow morning. You can't tell anyone where you're going. You can't even mention that you're leaving. Not to anyone, Sid. Ever. That's why she's relevant."

Sid contemplated the word "offer" and all it implied. He pretended to study a scar on his wrist as he let the silence grow. Then he lifted his head and met Jack's gaze. "What exactly is this offer? Spell it out for me."

"We want you to become a covert warrior for the DSA. Defense specialists are the vanguard of clandestine intelligence and protection for the Union. Join us and you'll be involved in missions that can save millions of lives. Literally. I can't make you appreciate who we are and what we do using words. You have to live it to understand. But let me paint some big pictures for you.

"There are countries that have chosen not to join the Union. A few have become aggressive and their actions create dangerous situations for innocents. In the past year alone, my DSA team went into hostile territory seven times to assess a situation and perform sensitive—I'll call them 'tasks'—that changed the dynamic on the ground and saved lives."

Jack's com sent an alert and he checked it as he talked. "Right now, a high priority is the alien spacecraft that's orbiting Earth. The agency is spending a lot of resources trying to get actionable intelligence on the Kardish so the secretary has something to work with."

He looked Sid in the eye. "The offer is to become a member of my team. The offer is live, but I need an answer."

Shaking his head, Sid said, "Let's start by slowing down. I don't know you and I don't know what to make of your pitch. What you describe sounds interesting, but I'm not sure what parts are real. Maybe all of it. Maybe it's all bullshit. Your only credibility right now is that you're here inside camp. That's a plus given the security this place has, but it's not enough."

This time it was Jack's turn to remain silent. Sid mulled the situation and made a decision. "Give me some names, people I know and trust, who can back up your story."

"You want references? Really?" Jack looked at him for a long moment. "Okay, check your com. I've sent you three names."

I'm not going to look while you're sitting there, thought Sid. But he was anxious to learn if the story checked out.

He'd known from the start that doing well at camp led to big opportunities afterward. In fact, that had been an important factor when he decided to attend.

But he hadn't expected to hear about his options at an impromptu meeting at his bunk.

And beyond that, Jack was right. Cheryl fulfilled him in ways he never thought possible. *I'm crazy about her.* That complicated matters, and he needed to think things through.

“And I’ll take two nights to sleep on it. I’m not going to make this decision right now. I’ll check your reference list. If it flies and if I’m inclined, I’ll meet you here at eleven hundred hours two days from now.”

“Let me know if your answer is no. Otherwise, I’ll meet you in two days in the infirmary at seventeen hundred sharp. That building has its own exit road.” Jack got up and moved to the door.

“Hey,” Sid called. “Is it worth leaving everything behind? Did you ever look back?”

Jack didn’t turn around. “You’re a sophisticated warrior who craves adventure. It’s a dream come true.”

Sid played with those words as Jack exited the cabin.

The moment the door closed, Sid checked his com and considered the three names Jack had sent. Two of them were captains who’d mentored him from his earliest days. He had known them for years and trusted them.

The third name was an admiral he’d interacted with for a short period about a year earlier. He appreciated that Jack put a heavy hitter on the list, but he doubted he’d learn anything useful from the guy. Sid already understood that Jack had serious connections and this was an inside operation. What he wanted to know was if Jack’s words matched reality.

He called Captain Paul Stanley, his first choice on the list, and was pleased when the officer answered.

“Hey, Captain,” said Sid. “It’s good to see you. How are you doing?”

“Hi, Sid,” Paul said. “It’s been a while. You’re looking fit. I hear you’ve been made an offer you shouldn’t refuse.”

Sid studied Paul’s face. They’d been through a lot together and Sid felt confident he could read the man. “What can you tell me, sir?”

“Honestly, I don’t know much,” Paul said, shaking his head. “Whatever you got going, it’s connected. Two admirals and a government goon are telling me to tell you that it’s the right choice. I haven’t a clue what ‘it’ is, so I can’t provide you guidance. I can just confirm that they want me to use my good name to tell you that it’s real. I’ve seen a lot of stuff over the years, big guy, but this is weird. Are you in some kind of trouble?”

Seeking to keep the conversation on track, Sid pressed him. “Would you mind telling me who the admirals are?”

“I’ll tell you that one is O’Hara. The other is at Central Command and I’ll only say that I know him and believe he’s being straight. I don’t know the goon, except to say he has a clearance level higher than mine.”

“Why would they go to all this effort for me?” asked Sid with sincere innocence. “Part of me feels like I’m being played here.”

Paul laughed. “You got talents, bud, so it makes sense to me. If they’ve offered you something and it sounds like a fit, take it. When they go to this much trouble to recruit you, they’ll treat you well going forward.”

They chatted for a few more minutes, then Sid thanked him and signed off. He called the other captain on the list and the conversation was similarly supportive. His mentor reinforced that the Union was going to great lengths to have Sid feel good about the situation. He, too, admitted he didn't know any details about what that situation was.

Sid climbed into bed that night thinking that as technology evolves, it becomes ever harder to pin down truth. He could come up with a dozen ways an organization might orchestrate a group of people into reinforcing a thought or idea without them even knowing they were being manipulated. This whole thing could be a deception and he'd never know.

Yet one item seemed indisputable—powerful people wanted him to work for them. As he closed his eyes, he relaxed his mind, hoping an answer would come to him in his sleep.

* * *

Cheryl awoke next to Sid. They were a half-day's hike into the woods, and though the air was cool outside, it was warm inside their tent. They actually had two tents but never bothered to set hers up. It would have been wasted effort.

"*Mmm,*" she thought, snuggling against him.

Their training scenario—the last one of camp—was constructed much like a treasure hunt. They needed to decipher clues to find the next secret location, which held clues to the next location, and so on until they found the hidden treasure. The first team to find it and bring it back to camp won bragging rights for that year's graduating class.

The two didn't care about hidden treasures or bragging rights. They both wanted to use the time enjoying each other.

At the first hint of sunrise, he kissed her neck. Giggling, she turned to him and they lost themselves for a bit. Afterward, she lay in his arms and thought about this man who'd captured her heart.

He was kind and considerate in his daily life. She loved his quiet confidence and was honest enough with herself to admit she was attracted to the hint of danger that lurked beneath his surface. He brought out the best in her. It was joyous to be in his arms.

He interrupted her thoughts when he lifted his head. "Did you hear that?" he whispered.

"No," She whispered back. "What did you hear? Is it *someone*, or *something*?"

He sat up and started pulling on his clothes. "Let me go look."

Cheryl dressed as well. "I'm not sure which would be worse, finding a bear or Captain Dooley outside."

Sid opened a flap just enough to see into the morning light. "I think I caught us breakfast in my snare." She heard excitement in his voice, then she processed his words. "A snare? Yuck. I'm not interested in eating a little forest creature for breakfast." She was no longer worried about bears or captains.

"Quick." He spoke as if he were leading a campaign against the enemy. "Stay behind me while I check."

He crept out of the tent and worked his way toward some brush near a stand of trees. She watched him with a mixture of confusion, fascination, and anticipation. This wasn't part of the

treasure hunt exercise and it wasn't his characteristic behavior. *Enjoy his delusion*, she thought, entertained by the silly performance.

He crawled over the ground, staying hidden behind rocks and shrubs as he moved closer to the brush and his snare. Cheryl stayed on her feet and followed from a distance.

When he was a within reach of the trap, he turned and mouthed, "We got something big."

She tensed in excitement. He cautioned her with a hand sign, then reached forward and pulled back the brush.

"Breakfast is served, my lady," he said, lifting a restaurant pouch out for her to see.

"What the hell?" She moved next to him. "Is that from Smitty's?"

Smitty's was a small restaurant about three miles due west. They'd eaten there a few times over the months and loved their breakfasts. Opening the pouch, he reached inside and lifted out two coffees. Wrapping both hands around the cup, she inhaled the aromatic steam and took a sip. "Umm."

Back in the tent, they feasted on their bounty. "Eggs, muffins, fresh fruit! I'm in heaven!" Smiling like a child on her birthday, she sampled everything. He fed her a bit of waffle, and when syrup dripped onto her chin, she chased it with her tongue. She saw he was fascinated by her attempt at an impossible chin-lick maneuver and, unashamed, laughed out loud and tried again.

As they ate, Sid confessed that he'd walked to the restaurant and back in the early hours of the morning. "It was my pleasure, Cheryl."

He was acting way out of character, but she thought it was cute. They both knew that graduation was coming. She accepted that they would be headed in different directions. Modern transportation and communication services made long-distance relationships easier, but it remained a challenge. She appreciated that he was making their last days special.

They feasted, cleaned, and packed, then walked along a trail up to a ridge crest. With an open view of the valley, they could see a portion of the camp's lake in the distance. Sitting on an angled rock, Cheryl lifted her face and savored the warmth of the sun.

"Can you see them?" asked Sid, pointing into the valley.

She squinted in the direction he indicated and saw Sophie and Alstine, two of their classmates, walking in the distance.

"They'll be following that trail across the valley floor." He moved his arm as he traced the path with his finger.

Then he turned to her. "Cheryl, I've been ordered to return to camp. We've been instructed to meet up with those two. You'll finish this round with them."

She looked at him and frowned. *That's the second time he's called me Cheryl*. When they were alone, he always called her something silly, like Angel or Sweet Bun. It wasn't that she preferred the pet names, but she understood that everything was good between them when he used one.

Her other concern was that he'd been sent a change of plans while she hadn't. She checked her com and found the feed confirming his story. *It should've prompted me about such an important message*.

The morning's events were all off, wrong enough that her training kicked in. As she followed him down the trail, she reviewed everything they'd done together over the past week, searching for clues. The tension grew as his silence lengthened.

It took a couple of hours to catch up with Sophie and Alstine. When their classmates came into view on the footpath, Cheryl squared up and confronted him, "What's going on, Sid?"

He stepped to her, caressed her cheeks, and kissed her, holding it for a long moment. He squeezed her hands as he stepped back, and then turned and walked ahead on the trail, his pace quickening with each step. He nodded to Sophie and Alstine as he strode past them, and then the trail curved into the forest.

Following him with her eyes, she brought her fingers up and traced her lips where he'd kissed her. She stood unmoving until he vanished from sight. Her mind swirled in turmoil as she struggled to understand.

When Cheryl got back to her cabin that night, dread filled her heart. She looked for him in his bunk, and then checked his usual haunts. She tried calling him, but her com told her there was no such person. She asked their friends if they knew his whereabouts, and then she asked everyone she saw. She didn't sleep that night. She just stared into the darkness.

The next morning, she asked to see Captain Dooley. Following an aide into his office, she stood in front of his desk and, breaking protocol, asked him what he knew.

Looking at the work on his desk, Dooley compounded her anguish with a cryptic remark. "We've spent eight months training you to keep your eyes facing the future, Lieutenant. We don't dwell on history here." He lifted his head and said gently, "Dismissed."

She nodded and made a hasty exit. Back at her bunk, she spent the rest of the day working her com, trying to find out where he might be or how she might contact him. In spite of her substantial technical talents, as near as she could tell, Sid didn't exist and never had.

Confused and devastated, she curled up on her bunk and cycled through feelings of grief, anger, denial, and betrayal. Staring into the dark again that night, she started to cry. A few hours before dawn, completely exhausted, sleep came to ease her pain.

She attended the graduation ceremony that afternoon. Dressed in formal whites, she assembled with the class. Cheers and friendly jeers rang out when the winning hidden-treasure team revealed their loot. Cheryl didn't notice who had won or what the treasure was.

As was tradition, the ceremony ended with a roll call of next appointments for each of the graduates. Announced one by one, the class clapped and hooted in support of their colleagues. It was a heady day for the group.

"Lieutenant Cheryl Wallace is now Commander Wallace," announced Dooley. "She's the new first officer on Fleet ship *Pinnacle*. Congratulations, Commander Wallace."

She walked to the front, saluted, shook the captain's hand, then faced the class and accepted their accolades. As she waved to the group, she saw an empty chair where Sid should have been. It was a fitting metaphor for the void in her heart.

* * *

“Ohh,” Sid moaned. He opened his eyes and closed them immediately when a wash of pain radiated through his body. A welt on the back of his head throbbed in rhythm with his heartbeat. He reached back to explore the wound. Or tried too. His arms wouldn’t move.

He opened his eyes for a second time and peered into darkness. Wiggling both hands and probing with his fingers, he determined that his wrists were bound to the armrests of a chair. Lifting and twisting his feet, he confirmed that his ankles were fastened to its legs.

As his eyes focused, he detected a faint slit of light a few paces in front of him. *That’s a door.* The closeness of the ambient noise in the space helped him complete the picture. *I’m tied to a chair and I’m in a closet.*

With these cues, memories flooded back. He was on a small island in the Pacific Ocean—a rogue plot of land set closer to the Philippines when traveling from Hawaii. The island had switched owners at least four times in the past decade, and the different landlords all had two things in common: they were controlled by criminal syndicates hostile to the Union of Nations, and they used the prime location as a world-wide clearinghouse for arms trafficking.

This was his fourth field assignment for the Defense Specialists Agency. DSA Intel had learned that the syndicate boss was on a rare visit to the island. Sid and his team, briefed and deployed with just two hours’ notice, were to persuade him to close shop and leave peacefully, or be escorted off the island, feet first if necessary.

The mission was not going well. The crime boss had his own ideas about how events should unfold and, not surprisingly, they were quite different from those of the Union of Nations. The squad of soldiers he had with him supported his differing views.

The boss was staying at a walled-in estate on the island, and his soldiers jumped Sid as he was breaking into the main villa. Sid’s struggle ended when one of the thugs cracked him on the back of his skull. He had no sense of the time that had passed since that blow. From his thirst, he judged it to be several hours.

His thoughts turned to his two partners. Jack was team lead, and Jefe, who had just joined the DSA, was getting his feet wet on what should have been an easy in-and-out. Sid’s duty at this moment was to escape, rejoin the team, and complete the mission.

He struggled for most of an hour trying to free himself and, sore and discouraged, stopped to rest. His mind drifting, he flashed a half-smile when he recalled the teasing Jack had given him on the hike up from the lighthouse.

Members of DSA forward teams all adopted colorful pseudonyms; it was a tradition in the unit. Jack Sparrow, the same battle-hardened soldier who’d visited Sid at camp a few months earlier, was Wynn Riley in his civilian life. And Jefe Diablo—chief devil—had announced his name in a drunken ceremony just last week.

Sid had yet to choose a name and Jack was threatening to assign him “Wimpy” if he didn’t pick one soon. *I don’t think so,* Sid thought, resuming his efforts to break free.

He halted his struggle moments later when an “oomph,” followed by a muffled “thud,” drifted through the wall. Heavy thumps on the closet door itself spurred Sid to act.

He began rocking his chair back-and-forth, straining to gain enough momentum to rise up to a crouch, the chair riding his back like a tortoise shell. He hadn't thought through what he'd do if he got that far, and it didn't matter.

The door burst open and a man lunged through. Plowing his shoulder into Sid's chest, he drove Sid and the chair against the back wall of the closet. Sid tried valiantly to head-butt his assailant during the short ride.

"It's me," hissed the man.

Jack! Anxious to be free, Sid spoke with urgency. "I'm tied to this chair."

Jack untangled himself and released Sid's wrists. He leaned out the door and scanned the room while Sid freed his own ankles.

"There are four or five bad guys out on the villa grounds," said Jack. "There were three here inside."

Sid noted Jack's use of the past tense. He rose to his feet and, feeling dizzy, braced himself against the wall. "Where's Jefe?"

"I'm guessing he's locked in a different closet." Jack looked Sid up and down, then handed him water. "How are you doing?"

"Ready to go," he said between gulps, refusing to acknowledge he felt battered and weak.

"Good," said Jack. "You lead them east toward the coast. I'll go free Jefe and we'll head south. Extraction at the lighthouse in four hours." He shrugged. "We'll have to deal with this asshole another day."

Jack's words gave Sid a fresh surge of energy. "C'mon, Jack. We got this guy. Let's not go back empty handed."

Jack looked at him with a fixed expression that conveyed his authority. "I've called it. We're out in four." He picked his way across the room and glanced into the hall.

"We have any weapons?"

"Whatever you can find," Jack whispered over his shoulder.

Sid looked at his bare feet. "Or shoes?"

Jack stepped into the hallway without responding and disappeared from sight.

Contemplating the dead soldier on the carpet, Sid plopped to the floor, pulled off the man's boots, and squeezed his feet into them. He stripped the soldier of his military-style shirt and pulled that on as well.

Searching for a weapon, he checked the floor around the body and then patted the man's pockets. He stood and turned in a circle, scanning the furniture for signs of the wayward firearm. *Jack must have it*, he concluded as he made for the door.

Hurrying down the stairway, he peered through the front windows for signs of the soldiers Jack had mentioned. He didn't see any activity, and long shadows and glistening dew on the plants and statues told him it was dawn.

He hustled to a back door and, hugging the outside of the building, ran to a group of tall bushes at the eastern corner of the villa. Standing in the shrubbery, he surveyed the grounds.

On the far side of the property, a trail wound up a rise and vanished into craggy hills. He had a vague memory of a path that led up to a plateau, ran across a clearing, and ended with a perilous drop to the ocean. *I should pay more attention during mission briefings.*

He did know that the southern half of the island was covered in forest so lush it bordered on jungle. The northern half was a stark moonscape of volcanic rock. The estate, positioned at the cusp of these geographic extremes, enjoyed striking vistas formed by the contrast of landscapes.

A well-tended shed stood halfway to the trailhead and, running from bush to fence to tree, he reached it without incident. Lights came on as he slipped inside, drawing his attention to an intricate copper contraption sitting at the back of what proved to be a handsome single-room cabin.

A wall of built-in shelves to his left held elegant bottles filled with a clear, green-tinted liquid. Sid picked up a bottle and, holding it up to the light, admired the luminous potion. He opened the bottle and sniffed, and yanked his head away from the intoxicating vapors invading his nose. *This is an upscale hobby rig to make liquor,* he thought as he reassessed the space.

The room had a kitchenette along the wall opposite the bottles, and a gas stove stood between the sink and refrigerator. Firing up a burner on the stove, he let the flame dance as he bent over the sink and drank straight from the tap.

He walked to the door, peeked out to confirm he was still alone, and then, grabbing bottles two at a time, he broke them on the floor. With the liquid from two dozen bottles forming a shimmering puddle, he pulled down a note from the front of the fridge, lit a corner in the stovetop burner, and tossed the flaming scrap onto the bright green pool.

Feeding off the alcohol, the flame whooshed across the puddle. Sid propped open the cabin door to ensure there'd be plenty of oxygen to feed the growing blaze, and then started his dash to the trailhead.

It took about a minute for him to reach the edge of the estate grounds. Stopping just before the spot where the path ducked behind a ridge, he looked back and admired his handiwork.

The conflagration served its purpose. Four soldiers appeared from the front of the house, moving at a dead run to the cabin. Gathering a safe distance from the fire, they began to argue. One stepped back from the group and scanned the landscape. Sid waved. The soldier pointed and shouted.

With his attention focused on the four soldiers, Sid didn't notice a fifth man off to his right. *Zwip.* The thug fired an energy bolt that missed Sid but left an impressive impact crater near his shoulder.

Diving to the ground, Sid crawled behind the ridge. Rising, he dashed up the trail, leading the soldiers eastward as instructed. With the guards chasing him, Jack was free to search for Jefe and escape to the lighthouse.

The trail twisted and turned as it climbed through a maze of natural and volcanic rock, providing him cover, but also making it difficult for him to track his pursuers. He raced along the trail for the next thirty minutes, determined to expand his lead on the soldiers.

Reaching a spot with a view of the terrain below, he traced the winding path with his eyes. He repeated his methodical sweep until he saw two heads bobbing along the trail. Two more ran a bit behind the leaders. A straggler, huffing and puffing his way through the rock maze, brought up the rear.

Six minutes, he thought, guessing at his lead. He denied his exhaustion and resumed his run, maintaining an aggressive pace until the trail showed signs of leveling. Jogging along a flat stretch, he glimpsed a natural structure that caused him to look up.

Tucked back in a side crevice stood two opposing rock faces, smooth and straight, that rose together to about four times his height. A ledge outcropping, positioned at the top of the columns, promised an unobstructed view down to the estate and the land around it.

He moved into the gap between the rock columns and, stretching his arms, pushed a hand against each vertical face. Lifting himself off the ground, he spread his legs and braced each foot. Alternating between his arms and legs, he crab-walked up the gap.

At the top of the formation, he leapt onto the flat outcropping and crawled to the edge. *Nice*, he thought, looking out across a geological wonderland that spilled into an endless blue-green ocean.

Then he put his thumb and index finger into his mouth. *Shweep*. His whistle projected like a piercing bark down from the hill.

He held his breath, his nerves on edge. *Hoot*. The deep, mournful call rose from below. Putting a hand behind each ear, he squared his head to the tropical expanse south of the villa. *Hoot*.

He pumped his fist in celebration. “Yes!” Two hoots. *Two on the move*. Jack and Jefe were clear and on their way to the lighthouse. No longer needed as a diversion, Sid began planning his own escape.

The ledge anchored back to the hillside he’d been climbing, and he moved that direction to rejoin the trail. Squeezing around a rock outcropping, he froze in place, the back of his neck prickling.

He stood on the edge of a grassy plot the size of a large room. The space, cozy and hidden, was edged with hanging vines and flowering plants. The tidy botanical presentation left no doubt that this patch received regular attention.

But that wasn’t what gave him pause. It was the tent, ominous in its silent presence, sitting at the back of the parcel.

Padding across the grass, he stood at the side of the tent and listened. Hearing nothing, he snuck a quick peek through a gap in the front flap. *Empty*. He opened the tent, rifled the bedding, and found a bag of dark bread and a pouch of water. Absent was his top priority—weapons.

He stuffed a piece of bread into his mouth and followed it with water. His eyes drifted downward as he chewed, and he froze for the second time in as many minutes.

The tent was a Belov 5000, two person, green camo, set in a west-to-east orientation, with ground anchors on the front corners but none in the rear. *Cheryl*. The scene evoked memories of their last night at camp, and Sid chose to let the *déjà vu* stir a sadness in his heart.

The day after Jack had visited him at camp, Sid's intuition had suggested that he could have the best of both worlds—he could join the DSA and experience the crazy life of a covert agent and, somehow, it would all work out with Cheryl.

But standing on this lawless speck of rock, being chased by five armed soldiers, and having just botched an important assignment, he couldn't imagine a sequence of events that might make that fantasy come true.

He kicked the ground in frustration, then lifted his head and hustled toward a footpath along the hillside. *Seven minutes*, he thought, guessing at his lead on the soldiers.

A wooden staff leaned against a rock near the footpath. Snatching it up as he dashed past, he swung it back and forth to gauge its balance. *Five thugs with weapons against me and my stick*. He had no doubt he'd win that contest.

The footpath led to the main trail and he turned away from the soldiers. Drawing on the energy he'd gained from the bread and water, he set an aggressive pace. The trail forked ahead, with one path continuing up to the plateau and the other zig-zagging on a second route down to the forest.

A shadowy flicker caused him to look up. The massive Kardish vessel moved above in its silent orbit around Earth. *I haven't forgotten about you*.

Having confirmed the flicker as an ordinary event, Sid refocused his attention on his escape. At the split in the trail, he took the path downward, tossing the staff over the side at the first curve. "We're not fighters unless we have to be," he called to the weapon as it bounced and tumbled out of sight.

The trail flattened for a stretch, providing him a glimpse of where the path met the forest below. Smiling, he pumped his arms and lengthened his stride. *I'll bet I can beat Jack and Jefe to the lighthouse*.

I hope you liked the story.

Why not try the first chapter of *Crystal Deception* starting on the next page?

Sample Chapter From Crystal Deception (Book 1 of The Crystal Series)

Peering into the secure booth through a thick glass window, Juice Tallette studied the object of so much effort. “You’re going to change the future of humanity,” she said to the crystal. She tried to focus on positive outcomes, but her mind kept drifting to the more worrisome ways it could all play out.

Expectations were through the roof for this new release from Crystal Fab. The four-gen prototype was so advanced, it should have the thinking and reasoning capability of more than a thousand human brains, all working as one in perfect harmony. No bigger than her fist, Juice saw it as a perfect geometric crystal wrapped in a fine lace mesh. Others might reasonably describe it as a cloth-wrapped lump.

She turned when she heard the lab doors hiss open and watched as Mick weaved his way through the maze of instruments filling the room. He carried a coffee cup in each hand and gave her one as he slid into his bench. He tapped the bench surface, and an array of colorful images lit up and floated in front of him.

“What’s the good word?” she asked, looking over his shoulder.

“I’m almost finished with the analysis. The prototype is green and clean on every spec. I should have the complete profile by the end of the day.”

“That’s what I want to hear,” she said, studying the images for a few moments more.

She turned back to the booth, sipped her coffee, and let Mick focus on his work. He was the best crystal technician in the business and had been at her side from the first days of the fourth generation SmartCrystal project. If everything continued to check out, the four-gen prototype would soon be ready for a real-world test drive.

The current project timeline was to finish the lab tests and, if rumors were correct, install the prototype in the operations center of a massive government complex for a final assessment. If it performed well in that setting for three months, the four-gen SmartCrystal would move into full production.

“The restrictor mesh looks good.” She put her face up to the glass to get a closer view. “Do you think it’ll work as advertised?”

“The crystal or the mesh? Either way, the answer is yes.” He turned to look at her. “Don’t you have a big presentation today?”

“It’s this afternoon. I present to the board, and then I meet with Sheldon right after.”

“You’re going to tell him?”

“I have to say it. I’m really the only one who can.”

Juice loved this job and believed that her work would prove beneficial to society. The politics of pleasing bosses and boards made it a little less fun, but she knew she was on the verge of something big. It was a great feeling.

She reviewed the notes for her talk one last time, and then went for her noontime run. In spite of the heat, she pushed herself hard. Running was her stress management tool, and with the stress of a board presentation followed by a possible confrontation with Sheldon, she needed the calming effect that her routine provided.

She ended her route with a short walk, hands on her slim hips, while she let her heart rate settle. Then, turning toward the gleaming Crystal Fabrications headquarters, she wound her way up the landscaped walkway and entered the front door, self-conscious of being in her exercise clothes in the building's public lobby.

"Hello, Dr. Tallette," called security as she scurried around the corner and toward the changing room.

"Hello," she called over her shoulder, though the security SmartCrystal wouldn't have cared if she responded or not.

She cleaned up, changed into what she thought was a smart-looking suit, and exited out a back door leading into a central corridor. She reached the conference room, grabbed a cup of water, and slipped into her chair just as Brady Sheldon started the meeting.

"Good afternoon, everyone," Sheldon said to Crystal Fabrication's board of directors. "Welcome to our discussion on the pending release of our fourth-generation SmartCrystal."

Sheldon, president and CEO, had founded the company twenty years earlier and been a key member of the original research team that pioneered the SmartCrystal concept. His belief in the idea, combined with his single-minded perseverance, had brought him to today, heading a company so technologically dominant there were no real competitors.

He moved through some general business and then shifted to the main agenda item. "I've asked Dr. Jessica 'Juice' Tallette to give us a technical status update. You all know that Dr. Tallette has been leading the four-gen crystal development program since its inception. Before she begins, please permit me this opportunity to brag about her."

He'd recruited Juice to the company and was now acting as her mentor. He believed in her vision, knew her success was his as well, and was anxious to help her move the project forward in any way he could.

"Juice joined us three years ago, right after earning her doctorate in engineered intelligence from the Boston Institute of Technology. Since her arrival here at Crystal Fab, she has pioneered the concept of using a cluster of three-gen crystals to orchestrate the design of our four-gen prototype. In my opinion, she's the world's leading expert in artificial intelligence crystals." He beamed as he motioned Juice to join him at the head of the table. "I've asked her to be brief, so we'll have plenty of time for discussion."

Juice stood at the front of the table and scanned the group. She was pleased to see that everyone's body language was friendly and welcoming. A few leaned forward, indicating a certain enthusiasm for her briefing.

“Hi, everybody.” She gave them an anxious smile as she willed her nerves to settle, then started her presentation.

“Crystal Fab has produced more than a million of our third generation, or three-gen, SmartCrystals. Each of these crystals has a synthetic intelligence that’s roughly equal to a typical person.

“They’re installed in operations that range from hospitals and sports arenas, to manufacturing plants and Fleet military spacecraft. For any of these, they’re assigned tasks in specialties ranging from security, communications, maintenance, financial, and more. With a million such implementations, SmartCrystals are impacting our daily lives.”

She paused and scanned the group to make sure she still had their attention. The members of the board could be placed into just a few categories. There were three techies—and they were already bored but would be patient with her. There were three business types as well. They only became excited when talk turned to things like cash flow and quarter-over-quarter growth.

And there were four members from what Juice called “the connected.” They had many politicians and admirals and CEOs as friends, and earned their fat board stipends simply by taking a moment at a party to introduce certain people to certain other people. This was the group Sheldon wanted her to focus on in this discussion.

“Years of experience have shown the three-gen to be predictable and compliant,” she continued. “We’ve never had a report of unexpected behavior as long as they were used as intended.”

“Wait,” said one of the connected. “Has someone used a crystal not as intended and had an adverse outcome?”

She paused, unsure how to answer, and Sheldon stepped in to rescue her. “Thanks for catching that, Robb. We know of no unreported cases. We do know that a three-gen was being used as a medical doctor in an antiquated clinic without any human supervision. The clinic is in a village somewhere in South Asia. Very mountainous and remote, I understand.

“Apparently, it’d been performing quite well for a few years, then it made a bad decision and someone died. Its success record was better than any of the clinics in the neighboring settlements. But the local population is antagonistic to technology. The mistake reinforced their beliefs, and we had no choice but to shut it down.”

“What’s the clinic doing for a doctor?” asked one of the techies, who somehow thought the question was relevant for discussion.

“It’s being covered by a few caregivers who walk a circuit among the neighboring villages in a cooperative arrangement,” Sheldon assured him.

When Sheldon returned to his seat, Juice sought to speed things along. Too much time was being spent on background information. “As we considered our next release, we set our sights on a game-changing technology leap. The solution we came up with is simple and elegant. What we did was gang together one hundred of our three-gen crystals into a cooperative network and then tasked them with creating an improved crystal design.

“The ‘gang of one hundred’ as I call them, went to work. As a team, they designed the four-gen crystal template. Their creation is a thing of beauty. Our analysis indicates that our new

crystal is a thousand times more capable than a three-gen. We're in a final review period, and the four-gen prototype should be ready for live testing in a few weeks."

There were nods from most of the board members. Then one techie asked, "You said 'their creation,' as in, like, the gang of one hundred three-gens created this. Is this your design, or is it theirs?"

Juice pasted a smile on her face, but her mind was frantic. Here it was, the topic she wanted to talk with Sheldon about—but she wouldn't discuss it here. She was, first and foremost, a team player.

"My goal was to design a tool that could then be used to design the next tool." It was the best she could come up with on the spot, and she thought it sounded pretty good. "This is how technology has advanced throughout all of time." That last part was pure nonsense, and she hoped she wouldn't be called on it.

Seeking to change the subject, she pointed to a business type with his hand raised before the techie could press his line of questioning any further. He asked, "If a four-gen is equal to a thousand three-gens, will we have to charge a thousand times more to make any money? We won't sell as many if they're this powerful. What's the thought process here?"

Sheldon stepped up to handle this question. Juice was there for technical information. The board drifted into what became an hour-long discussion on the economics and business plan for the revolutionary new product. The momentum of the meeting shifted to a commercial focus, and time ran out before any more uncomfortable technical questions could be asked. Juice was relieved.

"Nice job back there," said Sheldon as they walked into his office. "Would you like some water? Coffee?"

"No thanks," Juice said, sitting down at a small table next to his desk. As Sheldon fixed himself a coffee, she weaved her finger in a circle around a lock of hair, twirling it up until it slipped off her finger and unraveled. It was a nervous tick she hated but couldn't seem to stop. She repeated the hair-twirling process over and over until Sheldon sat down.

She'd left the director's meeting satisfied she had avoided putting Sheldon on the spot in a public forum. Now that they were alone, she would voice her concerns and get his support for a solution.

He took a sip as he looked at her. "You made this sound urgent. You haven't been offered another job, have you?" He was only half joking, always worried about losing key people.

"Nothing like that," she said, shaking her head. "This is about the four-gen. You know I have reservations, and as we move closer to going live, they haven't diminished. I'm hoping you'll have some words of wisdom for me."

He watched her and waited. Given the investment by Crystal Fab to date, failure at this point would be financially devastating for the company. The four-gen wasn't just the most important project in the company's development pipeline, it was really the only one of any substance.

“The guy who asked if I’d designed the four-gen prototype scored a bulls-eye.” She knew he wouldn’t be happy with what she was about to say and sought to buy some time. “Can I have a glass of water?”

Sheldon retrieved a glass of chilled water from his service unit, setting it in front of her as he retook his seat. He did not talk, giving her the opportunity to say her piece. She liked that about him.

She picked up the glass, held it for a moment, and put it back down without drinking. “Think about it, Brady. We’re about to release a crystal that has the intelligence of a thousand human brains. We don’t really know what that means. And we both know that I didn’t design the template for the four-gen.” She shook her head as if both to state and deny a personal failing. “A room full of crystals did. I pretty much just watched. And while I worked hard to understand what they were doing, I can’t sit here and say that I’m in command of the details.”

He remained quiet, and she continued. “Once the four-gen goes live, we’ll have given birth to an entity that is a thousand times smarter than us. Even that number, the thousand, is made up. That’s how little I understand about this prototype. I feel certain that it’ll have conscious thought. It’ll become self-aware and then become self-directed. But how do we know if it’s operating properly? And how do we stop it if we decide it isn’t?”

Sheldon folded his arms across his chest. “Wow. You really undersell yourself. I’ve brought an endless stream of visitors to see the gang of one hundred development lab. That facility is technology leadership at its best, and it’s your work. I’m amazed at what you’ve accomplished.” He furrowed his brow. “So I have to admit I’m frustrated when I hear you say that you ‘just watched this all happen.’” He signed quotation marks in the air with his hands as he finished the phrase.

“I didn’t mean it like that.” She was determined to move the conversation back on track.

“So what’s going on? Are you saying it’ll go rogue on us?” He acted surprised, though they had discussed this concern before.

“No. I don’t think so. Not in my heart.” Her finger twirled in her lock of hair. “I’ve worked hard to understand the gang’s template. The three-gens are predictable and compliant, and this four-gen has a similar design. So I’m ninety-nine percent certain it will have a comparable disposition.” *Spell it out*, she commanded herself. “What I’m also saying is that there’s still that one percent chance that things could go wrong. In the unlikely event that things spin out of control, I feel it’s our duty to have thought through the options.”

“Isn’t this why we added the restrictor mesh a few months ago, at quite a significant cost I might add?” He was referring to the lace-like mesh that was wrapped around the crystal, added as a fail-safe system earlier in the year at Juice’s insistence.

The mesh, controlled by a simple switch, had three positions. Off, where it would do nothing and the crystal would function at full capability. It could be set to Isolate, where it would allow the crystal to freely scan the web for information but restrict it from sending any outbound signals, thus rendering it largely impotent. And it could be set to Kill, which was exactly as it sounded.

Juice took a quick breath, then plunged. “I was certain the mesh was the solution. But now I don’t think it will work as I’d planned.”

“I don’t get it. Three positions—off, isolate, kill. What’s not to work?” Frustration was creeping into his voice.

“Okay, suppose I’m the one at the switch. I’m watching its behavior, I grow concerned and decide to kill it.”

Sheldon nodded to show he was following, though he visibly winced when she said the word “kill.”

“The crystal will have access to the same information I have. It will see everything I see, know what I know, and conclude on its own that its behavior makes it a threat. It will *know*.”

“So what if it knows?”

“It’s much faster than me, Brady. In the fraction of the second that it will take me to decide I must act, the crystal will already know I am about to conclude that termination is necessary.”

“Again, so what if it knows?”

“It will stop me,” she said.

Sheldon sat back in his chair and stared at her. He kept at it until she broke eye contact and looked down at the table. “This would be your so-called god crystal.”

His tone was accusatory and she blushed. “God crystal” was a term she and Mick used privately in the lab. She didn’t realize their talk had made it outside the lab walls. “I’d never say that in public.” She found the strength to add some assertiveness to her words. “And I still think we need to plan for the full range of possibilities.”

Sheldon ran his thumbs back and forth along the edge of the table, seemingly considering her words. “Well, I don’t know if this is the planning you’re hoping for. Fleet has formally requested that we test the four-gen on their new Horizon-class ship. Their current ship design uses nine of our three-gens. I’ve been promoting the idea that using that many crystals distributed around the ship makes it expensive to build and cumbersome to operate. They’ve finally seen the light and realize that a ship based on a single four-gen offers simplicity and savings in construction. And they get more capability from the same craft because of the crystal’s incredible power.”

Her heart sank. She had come to him for solutions, and he was giving her a sales pitch. And instead of the take-it-slow rollout she was hoping for, he was moving in the opposite direction with talk of putting it on a military space cruiser. “What did you tell them?”

“I told them yes, of course. Fleet Command has paid for a lot of our development costs these past few years. What else could I say?”

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Sample Chapter of Time-Travel Suspense Bump Time Origin (Book 1 of the Bump Time Trilogy)

Warning PG-13: This book has cursing and mild sexual references

The man bumped shoulders with Diesel as the two passed on the sidewalk. Since foot traffic was light, Diesel assumed it was deliberate. He turned to see if the guy looked back—some loser in a brown hoodie and jeans. The guy kept walking without a glance, so Diesel did, too.

He was in Worcester, Massachusetts, interviewing for a promising job with a company he'd never heard of. They'd pitched him the opportunity a week ago, and when he'd said he was interested, they arranged his travel from the West Coast. The interview started in fifteen minutes; the map on his phone said he'd be there in ten.

Quickening his pace, he turned up a side street and found himself in an upscale neighborhood. Handsome red-brick row houses on either side of the street, refurbished to maintain the original character, all had the same tiny front yard trimmed with a crabapple tree and a hedge of boxwood. The houses ran all the way to the far intersection on each side, giving the place a homey feel.

Up ahead, maybe eight houses down, a guy marched in his direction. He wore the same brown hoodie and jeans and had the same husky build as the asshole from before, so Diesel slowed and studied him, curious about his behavior and unafraid of a confrontation.

The guy continued to advance, and then two men—same general build as Diesel but bulkier in the shoulders—stepped out from a stoop and faced him. Wearing baseball caps and light blue athletic jackets in the style Diesel favored, they stood shoulder to shoulder to block the sidewalk. Attracted to the drama, Diesel wished he could stay and watch, but he'd reached number one-eighty-nine, his stop, so he hustled up the steps instead.

At the top, a brass plaque on the wall identified the place as Bump Analytics. A small sign on the door invited him to ring the bell. He did so and waited, sure he was being watched, though no cameras were in sight.

When the door swung open, he stopped thinking about cameras and looked at his idea of perfection. She was mid-twenties, with lively green eyes and a generous smile, shoulder-length flaxen hair, a trim figure, and wearing black pants and a white blouse.

“David Lagerford, please come in.” She stood behind the door as Diesel entered, then reached to shake his hand as she pushed the door closed. “Welcome to Bump. I’m Lilah. How was your trip?”

Her hand felt soft and cool, and he wondered if he'd held it for too long. “Hi. Fine, thanks.”

Motioning for him to follow, she led the way down the hall, her swaying bottom giving him a morning lift. Halfway along, she stepped into a small conference room.

“Please have a seat. Can I get you anything? Coffee? Water?”

“Maybe some water,” said Diesel, sitting where she’d indicated.

She brought him a glass and a bottle of spring water. “Justus McGowan, the office manager, will be here...oh, here he is.”

“Hi, David.” Justus grabbed Diesel’s hand and gave it a shake. “Or should I say, Diesel?”

Diesel’s cheeks flushed and he gave a quick shrug. “Diesel is from my initials, D.S.L., which is for David S. Lagerford. They started calling me Diesel in grade school, and I guess it stuck.”

“Ha, I love it.” Justus sat in the chair across from Diesel. “Lilah, we should be about ten minutes if you don’t mind telling Twenty-Six.”

She made for the door and Diesel watched her go, waiting for her to make eye contact. His interest deepened when she left the room without looking back at him.

“Let me take you through some paperwork so we can reimburse your expenses for today’s visit,” said Justus as the door closed. Shuffling through a folder, he pulled out a few sheets. “So, first, happy birthday. I see you turn twenty-five today. That’s a good age.”

The exchange prompted Diesel to give Justus a closer look—a fortyish black man who, while dressed in business casual clothes, had the weathered face and strong hands of an outdoorsman. He was a little shorter and a little lighter than Diesel, but had a solid build.

“You just graduated with a degree in computer programming from Berkeley.” Justus looked up. “Congrats on that.” Then back down to his stack. “How do you feel about moving to the East Coast?”

“Great. I was born here in Worcester, and my mom still lives here, so I’m more easterner than westerner.”

“And if today goes well, when would you be available to start?”

“Immediately. I’d need a few days to close out my apartment in Berkeley and arrange to get my stuff moved. But my lease runs through the end of next month, so I can do that anytime.” He decided to test the waters. “And should it all work out, I’d hope to be reimbursed for the cost of moving back here.”

Justus nodded, set three pages out on the table, and pointed to a spot on the last page. “Is this your social security number?”

Diesel looked at the number as he signed his name. “That’s right.” He toyed with the idea of reading all the fine print, but a tap on the door caused him to lift his head. In stepped a tall man with broad shoulders sloping to a narrow waist. Short brown hair topped a pleasing face, and a rakish grin showed his dimples.

“Ah, Twenty-Six,” said Justus, standing and gathering the sheets. “That’s it for the paperwork. I’ll leave you to it.”

The door shut behind Justus, and the two men shook hands. The physical contact put Diesel on edge.

“Happy birthday to us,” said Twenty-Six as he sat across from Diesel.

“Let me guess. You turned twenty-six today.”

“I did.” He nodded, then leaned forward and studied Diesel the way a scientist might examine a lab specimen.

Diesel’s initial discomfort grew as he looked back. The man’s appearance, demeanor, and manner of speaking all connected with Diesel at an emotional level. “Have we met? Sorry, but I’m having this weird sense of déjà vu.”

“This is our first meeting,” said Twenty-Six, “but we do have something in common.” Twenty-Six stood, motioned for Diesel to stand, then moved next to him and pointed to a mirror hanging on the wall. “Have a look.”

In the mirror, Diesel stood next to his duplicate. “Holy shit.” He turned his head, looked at Twenty-Six in person, and saw a man with familiar features. But when he turned back and looked in the mirror—when he saw Twenty-Six the way he was used to seeing himself—he saw his twin.

“We have to be cousins or something,” Diesel babbled, struck by the coincidence. “Where are you from? My mom has a sister and nephew from Nashville. Are you from Tennessee?”

“No,” said Twenty-Six. “I’m from Worcester and my mom has a sister and nephew in Nashville.”

“You know the odds of that? Granddad must have been out sowing his wild oats like some sort of crazy man.”

“Look,” said Twenty-Six, sitting down and motioning for Diesel to do the same. “I’m just going to say it all at once. Rip off the Band-Aid, as it were. I don’t know a better way.”

Diesel waited.

“I am a version of you at age twenty-six. I’m here from your future.”

“Ha-ha,” said Diesel, feeling an odd tingling sensation that traveled up his arms and across the back of his neck. Looking around the conference room for cameras recording the joke, he said, “This is an interesting recruiting strategy.”

Twenty-Six slumped back in his chair. “This morning you jerked off to memories of Helena Costas. She danced naked on your balcony on the Fourth of July. You could just make out her silhouette in the gloom, and then a firework would explode and flash light across her body. It’s the sexiest thing you’ve ever seen.”

Diesel felt nauseous. “Do you have cameras in my hotel room?” Standing, he pointed at Twenty-Six and lashed out to cover his embarrassment. “You’re sick.”

“Stop being such a tool. This is why the older brothers dismiss us.”

Diesel rocked in place, acting like he was going to leave but not taking any steps.

“Cameras can’t see inside your head. I told you what you were thinking.”

“Were you watching back in Berkeley? How can you know this?”

“Sigh,” Twenty-Six said aloud. “Okay, more secret stuff you’ve never told anyone. You broke the kitchen window that Thomas got blamed for in seventh grade. You plagiarized your history paper in eleventh grade and still worry about getting caught. Your landlord reimbursed your security deposit twice last year and you kept the money.”

“He’s an asshole.”

“I agree. I kept it, too.”

“So if you are me, you know I’m not buying any of this.” Diesel started wiggling his foot under the table in a subconscious display of unease.

“I’m not you. I’m me and you’re you. You will be sitting here a year from now after having lived through the same experiences I did. But we are different people. That’s an important lesson to learn.”

“So when you were me, how long did it take you before you started believing?”

“I was never you, but when I was in your position, I started to believe in the probability of it all by the end of the day. It will be about three weeks before you’re at one hundred percent. You’ll test me and try to trick me. At some point acceptance happens because there’s no alternative to the truth.”

One of Diesel’s favorite movies was about time travel, and he drew on a scene from the film as inspiration to expose the fraud. Digging into his pocket, he pulled out a small multitool that included a knife blade. Placing his left hand flat on the conference table, he said, “Put your hand down next to mine.”

“I’m not going to let you cut me.”

“I’m going to cut myself. But if you’re really me, the scar will appear on your hand when I cut mine.”

“Sure. Let’s do this,” said Twenty-Six. He positioned his left hand flat on the table next to Diesel’s.

“Hey, you already have a scar.”

“Let’s do the other hand, then.” He switched to his right hand.

Diesel followed suit. Then, positioning his knife, he stared at Twenty-Six’s hand while he cut a small, deep gash into the back of his own. “Ow, damn that hurts.”

He looked around for something to stem the bleeding. Twenty-Six pushed a box of tissues in his direction, and Diesel pressed several against his wound. Then he leaned over to look at Twenty-Six’s hand.

“Ha, no scar,” he said in triumph.

“I am humiliated knowing someone as dumb as you is a version of me.”

Diesel took more tissue and pressed it on his wound.

“I was pretty clear that we have different experiences. What you do to yourself doesn’t impact me or the brothers up the line.” He shook his head. “One year from now, you’ll be sitting here as Twenty-Six, and unlike me, you will have that scar on your right hand.”

“That’s not how time travel works,” said Diesel. “I watch a lot of science fiction and you’re busted. So how are you doing it? How do you know those things about me?”

“No way I was this pathetic.”

“You didn’t cut yourself when you were sitting here?”

“Yes, you idiot.” He held up his scarred left hand. “What do you think this is from?”

“Wait. When you were in my position, did your Twenty-Six have a scar?”

Twenty-Six nodded. “Yup, this year, anyone with a scar on their left hand is an even age, and a scar on the right hand means an odd age. Next year it flips; you become Twenty-Six and all

left-hand scarred become odds. It can be useful information. If you aren't sure if you're talking with Thirty-Five or Thirty-Six, check his scar hand."

"And next year I watch the new guy cut his left hand?"

"Yup."

"So is there even a job?"

Twenty-Six tilted his head back and groaned. "Stop being so stupid. I just told you I'm back from the future, and you're concerned about a job?"

Diesel did feel a little sheepish when Twenty-Six phrased it that way, but since he wasn't buying the whole time-travel thing, he didn't feel too bad. Then he pushed back. "Talk about dumb, I would never start calling myself a number. It's so lame it hurts your case."

"You're Twenty-Five, I'm Twenty-Six, there's also a Twenty-Seven, Twenty-Eight, and every number up to Fifty-Nine. That makes thirty-five of us in all. Maybe we should all call ourselves Diesel. Wouldn't that make for fun meetings?"

"You have meetings?"

Twenty-Six nodded.

"How come Sixty doesn't come?"

"There is no Sixty, or he doesn't come if there is."

"Whoa. You just told me I die at sixty! You have the worst recruiting strategy. What happens?"

"I didn't say you die. I said Sixty doesn't show up."

"Why not?"

"It's one of the mysteries we're chasing."

"Does everyone time travel in your world?"

"If by 'everyone' you mean all thirty-five of us, yes, we all time travel. If you're asking about all of humanity, then no, it's just us."

"Wow, you just told me I time travel! You said I'm one of the thirty-five, and you said we all do it." Diesel stood up. "Now this is good recruiting. Show me how to go ahead a hundred years. No, let's do ten years. I want to practice first."

The conference room door burst open, and two huge guys in light blue athletic jackets, their baseball caps pulled low, entered, shouting, "Happy birthday!"

"Happy birthday," said Twenty-Six as he stood. "Forty, Forty-One, this is Twenty-Five."

One of the newcomers held up his hand and showed the scar on his left hand. "I'm Forty-Two." Then he turned to Diesel. "Kiss my ass, Twenty-Five. You suck."

"There's no need for that," said Forty. He leaned forward and motioned Diesel to come closer. Diesel obliged, and the man whispered in his ear, "Kiss my ass."

Forty and Forty-Two laughed as if they'd heard the funniest joke. When the laughter died, one of them said, "Kiss my ass!" and it started all over again.

"How did it go out there?" asked Twenty-Six.

"The Brown showed up as scheduled and we sent him packing," said Forty.

"They're showing up more and more, and it's too much," Forty-Two said with a detectable whine. He looked at Forty. "Let's head back. I got stuff to do."

“Show him before you go,” said Twenty-Six. “C’mon. Give him a thrill at the start of his journey.”

Forty and Forty-Two looked at each other, shrugged, and then removed their caps with a dramatic flourish. With a clear view of their faces, Diesel saw two hard-chiseled, older versions of himself. Twirling in a circle, they peeled off their jackets and lifted their arms as they spun. Bulging muscles rippled through their tight shirts.

“Is it wrong for me to think they’re hot?” Twenty-Six asked Diesel.

“Okay,” said Forty-Two, concluding his spin. “That’s it. Gotta go.”

Forty followed him out. “Welcome aboard, Twenty-Five. Oh, and kiss my ass.”

Diesel heard them chuckling as the door shut.

“That was good old-fashioned hazing,” said Twenty-Six. “You’re the new guy and they’re just having fun. It’ll happen a bunch of times until the Big Meeting in three weeks, then it ends. Try to have fun with it because you don’t have a choice.”

“So what’s with them? Is that supposed to be us?”

“It turns out that at every age, we have a role to fulfill. At age forty, our job is to be lead muscle for the rest of us. It takes a few years to build up to that, and then they stay buff for a few years after. Usually Thirty-Nine, Forty, and Forty-One can handle the demand between them. It’s rare to see Forty-Two out working the calls.”

“They get in fights?” Diesel had been in his share of scrapes in the past, but he sought to avoid physical confrontation as a general rule.

Twenty-Six shook his head. “No. The point of the muscle and teamwork is to make it so the opponent chooses to walk away. And just so you know, that dance routine you just saw, though weird, is to get us psyched up. You don’t just wake up at forty years old and suddenly you’re all muscles. It takes three years to get bulked like that, which means you and I will have to start working hard at thirty-seven and keep it up for years.”

“Isn’t forty on the old side to be a tough?”

“Why don’t you bring that up at the Big Meeting?”

Diesel heard the sarcasm and ignored it. “What’s a Brown?”

“You ask too many questions. Let’s get you ready to interview with Lilah.”

“So there is a job?”

Twenty-Six groaned again. “Every time you talk I feel worse about myself.”

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