

“You will, Barry. Soon. I’m pretty sure if we took the time to look carefully at those engines, we’d find some damage, and they probably wouldn’t even start. It is what I’d have done if I were in their shoes. Anyway, I wanted to make sure they obtained their fuel from us. Let’s just say I had Billy uh... *improve* the fuel before we handed it over. They’ve been cheating on us, and I don’t like it. I don’t feel bad giving cheaters a taste of their own medicine.”

A lorry with an in-built crane arrived to load the Blue Squad boat and equipment onto its flatbed. The boat was quickly strapped down, and the load was driven away. As it departed, the cadets from Red and Green Squads came out of their garages. They could do nothing but stare in awe, amazed Blue Squad had finished so quickly.

A second truck with bench seating and a canvas roof arrived to transport the Blue Squad cadets. As it drove off, Billy Leeds was hanging out of the back yelling insults at the other cadet teams. “Hey, what is taking you useless dorks so long? You couldn’t even put a train set together unless your mummies showed you how!”

Unfortunately for the boy, there was some soft mud nearby, and one of the Cheshire cadets was in their junior county cricket team. The dollop of mud in Billy’s face soon silenced his insults.

Brian Harrison chided his cadet, “It serves you right, Cadet Leeds. We are going to beat them by our team actions, not by childish insults. Talk is cheap. Results speak the loudest.”

When the flatbed arrived at the riverbank, a Foundation officer inspected Blue Squad craft to make sure it would be safe on the water. He called Brian over. “It looks safe enough to me, Sergeant Harrison. Remind your cadets that they must wear life jackets at all times when they are close to the water. I don’t see how you are going to succeed without an engine or oars, but that’s your call. You have plenty of time. You do realise you must take everything across the river and not leave anything on this bank, correct?”

“Yes, sir. We are ready to go. Where is the load we have to collect?”

The man pointed to a small wooden crate by the riverbank. It was approximately sixty centimetres square and thirty centimetres high.

“Is that all? Is it really one tonne? It looks like a knee-high washing machine crate.”

“Oh, believe me, Cadet Sergeant, big things sometimes come in small packages. The crate is filled with lead ingots, and it really weighs one tonne. If you guys drop it in the river during your commute, you will have to get into diving gear to recover it, and the water is really cold right now.”

“No problem, sir. With your permission, we’ll get moving.”

Brian gathered the Squad and assigned roles to the cadets. Adam had already discussed with his squad leader what needed to be done to transport the load using their limited equipment. Brian still had doubts that it would work, but Adam had never let his squad in the past. He addressed his assembled squad of cadets. First, he assigned the tasks to each cadet, and then he summed up, “This is where we work as a team to win, men. The river is wide and fast, so let’s look after each other, and we will succeed. Be careful with the load. It might look small, but it really does weigh one tonne. Most of all, we don’t want anyone getting hurt. Any questions?”

No one responded with questions or concerns, so at his signal, the Blue Squad sprang into action. They first launched the boat on the river, making sure it was well secured at the riverside. Then, by swinging one of the scaffold pole A-Frames into the upright position near to the crate, they were able to lift the box of ingots in the air using ropes attached to the frame.

The cadets then used a second A-frame to move the crate closer to their boat. Repeating the process several times, they walked the crate, suspended from the frame, to the river edge close to their boat. Its weight of one tonne made it too heavy for the cadets to lift by hand, but the leverage from the A-frames solved

this problem.

They carefully lowered the crate into the bottom of their boat and then manhandled the frames onto the boat before the squad climbed in as well. The combined weight of the crate and boys was easily within the load capacity of their improvised boat.

“Okay, Adam, this where we get to see if your plan to get across the river without any power really works. Have you done this kind of thing before?” asked Barry.

“Not exactly. It’s kind of adapted from a canoe paddle stroke and some stuff I read about in a pirate adventure book.”

“A pirate book? You are not exactly inspiring confidence here, mate. We could end up out at sea if it goes wrong.”

“Ah, well, here goes nothing then, Barry. Let’s set the first anchor and let those mooring ropes loose.”

Two of the cadets threw an improvised anchor over the side of their boat. It was carefully attached to a long length of rope that was firmly attached to the steel frame of the boat. Other cadets held the anchor rope tightly, paying out extra rope as the river current caught their boat and pulled it away from the shore. A rudder, fabricated from plywood board, was mounted at the front of the boat, angled to increase the sideways motion caused by the water pressure of the river as the anchor held the boat from moving downstream.

Once the first anchor rope was fully stretched and the boat had stopped moving sideways, Adam signalled to the cadets to release the second anchor over the side of the boat. They were now about a quarter of the way across the river. After temporarily lifting the rudder blade, six of the cadets pulled against the first anchor rope, pulling the boat upstream towards the original anchor position. Soon the first anchor lifted from the mud, instantly losing its grip. At the front of the boat, Adam lowered the rudder back into the water.

The river current grasped the boat and rushed it down the river

until the second anchor gripped the mud on the river floor. They had now managed to move the boat halfway across the river before it halted. By repeating the process a few more times, the Blue Squad successfully crossed from one riverbank to the other.

A final chuck of an anchor onto the riverbank allowed the cadets to pull the boat close to the bank and secure their mooring. Most of the cadets jumped out, and a team grabbed a rope to pull the boat back up river to the ramp, where instructors were waiting on the bank. Ten more minutes' work with the A-frames saw both the heavy crate and the boat lifted out of the water and resting on the bank.

Brian assembled his squad and approached the Foundation officer. "Blue Squad, South Bucks, are now safe, dry, and secure, and the cargo has been delivered, sir," he proudly declared, giving a nod to Adam.

"Well done, Blue Squad. Sergeant, you may dismiss your squad and take your cadets over to the mobile canteen for tea and sandwiches. I heard on the radio that the other two squads have completed their construction and are on their way. Your squad will be able to watch the fun."

Adam and his friends stood by the mobile canteen and watched as a flatbed lorry arrived at the other side of the river. It was loaded with the Red Squad hovercraft and the Green Squad boat.

"Their hovercraft looks pretty good, Adam. I know we've beaten them by getting across first, but they must really know what they were doing to build something so good looking. It's almost as if they had a kit."

"Yeah, Barry, it does look good, doesn't it? But having a kit would be cheating surely. We built our boat right from the basics but still managed to beat them. They wouldn't have been able to start if we hadn't let them have the fuel."

"I've been meaning to ask about that. What did you mean when you said Billy *improved* the fuel?"

“Never mind that. Look! They’ve just started their engine. Gee, it’s pretty noisy. I wonder how they’ll load the crate onto the hovercraft. Look the Greens. They’re still miles behind, working on their boat.”

The Red Squad loaded the heavy crate of lead ingots on to their hovercraft using a combination of rollers and planks on the ground. They revved the engine, and the hovercraft lifted the load, but as soon as more than four cadets climbed, on it was clear that the craft could not take weight of the combined load, even at maximum power.

“They are in real trouble now, Sergeant!” yelled Billy Leeds excitedly.

Red Squad Leader Neal Allan signalled to the driver to cut the engine. At his instruction, they unloaded the lead crate and loaded four of the cadets onto the hovercraft. With a roar of the engine, it took off again and this time rushed down to the river and across the surface at quite a high speed in a cloud of spray to the opposite bank where the Blue Squad waited. The Red cadets jumped from the hovercraft, and it swiftly turned to go back across the river to collect its load.

The remaining Green Squad had just launched their boat and had fired up their motor. They were using a winch driven by the motor to drag their load to their boat along some scaffold planks. The race for second place was on between Red and Green.

Whilst this activity was going on, one of the recently landed Red Squad cadets walked up to Brian Harrison and saluted him before presenting a clear plastic bag containing a golden slurry. “Sergeant Allan presents his compliments and says he’s not the kind of fool who would fall for the trick of sugar in the fuel you supplied to us. We easily filtered it out. He said that with sly Cranford among your cadets, he expected nothing less.”

Brian took the plastic bag, raising an eyebrow in the direction of Adam. “Do you have anything to say, Cadet Cranford?”

Adam shrugged his shoulders. “No, Sergeant. I just want to congratulate Red Squad on the quality of their hovercraft build. I hope it didn’t cost them too much. As to the fuel contamination, I can’t really say. Perhaps we should have checked the containers before we used them. Who knows what happens in a scrap yard?”

The Red Squad cadets scowled at Adam but saluted Brian before leaving to await their hovercraft, which was now laden with the lead crate.

The Blue Squad leader smiled at Adam. “It’s a bit unusual for one of your tricks to be discovered so easily.”

“Oh no, Sergeant. I expected them to find that. The sugar in fuel thing is just a myth. It doesn’t damage the engine. It only clogs up the fuel filters on the engine until it is washed out. It was only there to divert them from the real stunt I pulled. I’ve defeated Sergeant Allan before so he would expect something from me.”

Across the river, the Green Squad had just succeeded in loading their crate into their boat and preparing to set off. This spurred the remaining Red Squad cadets to hurriedly load the crate onto the hovercraft. The remainder of Green Squad jumped onto their craft. At maximum engine revs, it was able to support the weight of cadets and the crate and edged towards the ramp down to the river.

Realising that they might lose, all of the Green cadets piled into their boat and pushed off. Their coxswain revved the motor engine, and the boat set off across the river. They were no more than halfway across when their motor suddenly misfired and stopped. They’d not noticed the sugar in their fuel when they had charged their tank. There were cheers from both sides of the river as the current started to take them downstream.

Meanwhile, the hovercraft charged down the slope into the river, almost submerging at first under its heavy load. Neal Allan kept the engine screaming at maximum revs.

The safety boat that had been standing by set off to give assist-

ance to the Green Squad. In the drifting boat, the combined load of the crate and nine cadets had increased the water pressure on the plug of icing sugar paste that Adam had forced into the hole he had made in the hull, and it wasn't long before the Green cadets felt cold river water gushing onto their feet. Their boat was starting to sink.

The hovercraft was just five metres from its destination when the engine screeched to a halt with a loud *BANG!* and a cloud of black smoke. Deprived of the air cushion beneath the craft, along with the heavy weight of the crate, the engine, and five cadets, it quickly sank beneath cold, muddy waters of the river.

Fortunately, Foundation cadets were trained to swim well. Coupled with their life jackets, they soon reached the riverbank, cold and wet but safe. The Green cadets suffered a similar fate when their flooded boat suddenly capsized.

After the rescues were complete, assisted by Blue Squad, Brian gathered his cadets around him and rested his hand on Adam's shoulder. "Come on! Tell us what you did. I know you must have done something. If there is a trail of carnage and Adam Cranford is around, there is usually some connection."

"Oxford Red Squad was cheating once again, and the Cheshire Squad was taking advantage of that, too, so I decided to teach them that cheating doesn't pay. You already know about the sugar in the fuel, and I don't think Green Squad noticed it. That's why their engine stopped halfway. As for Red Squad, they'd arranged for a hovercraft kit to be hidden in advance in the scrap yard. They even had full plans on how to build it. That is why they sabotaged our quad bike. They had to delay us from getting to the yard and finding their essential kit parts. The Green Squad must have known about it too."

"So what did you do to their hovercraft?"

"I just tipped some sago pudding granules in their radiator. Not much happens when the water is cold, but as the water gets hot, the sago swells up into a gel. It must have clogged up their engine cooling system. When they were running flat out, it overheated and just went kaboom."

“That’s why you sent Cadet Leeds to the shop, to buy the sago? But what I don’t understand is why the Green Squad boat sank.”

Adam smiled sweetly. “Hmm. Maybe they overloaded it.”

“I’m going to have to report this, Cadet Cranford. I can’t have us winning by cheating.”

“Excuse me, Sergeant, but we didn’t win by cheating. We won fair and square. We didn’t mess around, and we built our craft quickly. I just added some instant punishment to those who cheated. By the time they’ve recovered the lead ingots from the river, it will be a lesson they won’t forget. As their hovercraft was built from *scrap*, it wouldn’t have cost them anything. Besides, they won’t be able to prove it was me.”

The remainder of the squad gathered ‘round in support of Adam. It was a subtle change in mood, but Brian realised that if he reported Adam, he could lose support from his squad. They all knew Adam’s true rank of captain and that Adam’s deference to him was out of courtesy. They had seen results from Adam’s actions, while all Brian had to offer cadets as squad leader were words and rules.

The potential confrontation was interrupted by the sound of a large black Range Rover arriving at high speed. It stopped by the mobile canteen vehicle, and the driver jumped out. He wore the uniform of a Foundation journeyman. After talking to the uniformed instructors, he hurried over to Blue Squad and stopped and saluted Adam.

## Chapter 3

The hungry grey city pigeons squabbled and jostled each other in their attempts to reach the cake crumbs scattered by the elderly man on the paving stones. Nelson's Column towered above the granite stone bench seat where the two men were seated under the dull grey winter sky.

Alpha One had chosen the location carefully, and he knew there were no cameras observing the bench. He had to arrange the meeting at short notice; the place was conveniently close to his office. No one would take notice of the two inconspicuous office workers chatting casually during a shared lunch break.

"Alpha Two, I hope you are carrying your passport. I need you to fly out to Tehran in Iran this afternoon. We've booked a flight for you from London Heathrow to Zurich. Someone will meet you in Zurich with documents and tickets for Tehran."

"Why do you need me in Tehran? They are not exactly friends of ours."

"We have an opportunity. I need a man on the ground out there to meet with their leaders. They are willing to talk. It may be possible that we can find common aims so we can help them as they help us. Your recent involvement with the drug gang suggests avenues attractive to our joint aims of destabilising countries. You are the ideal man for the job."

"Fine, but why is this so urgent?"

"There is a major power struggle in their country at the moment and a congress of their leaders next week. It is the ideal time for us to become involved."

"What can I possibly contribute? I know nothing about their politics."

"You must leave now. There will be a briefing document for you in the pack handed to you in Zurich Airport. You will have plenty of time to read it on the flight. The car is waiting for you

on Northumberland Avenue.”

Alpha One stood, dusting crumbs from his trousers. As he walked away, he scattered the pigeons at his feet. He did not look back. His subordinates in Reality had learned to never question his instructions.

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“My apologies for the interruption, Captain Cranford, but an urgent matter has arisen, and London Headquarters need you to come right away. You will be briefed on the way. We will have someone take care of your personal things back at the training centre.”

Adam faced Brian Harrison and saluted. Adam knew things must be urgent if the Foundation Headquarters office chose to so openly interrupt his cadet training. “I’m sorry, Sergeant, but it looks like duty calls. I must request permission to leave.”

He turned and walked to the Range Rover. He was conscious of the astonished looks from the Oxfordshire and Cheshire cadets.

“Let’s go, Journeyman.”

## Chapter 4

The man held the car door open for him, pointing out a package on the back seat. It was sealed with red tape and a red wax seal. “Your briefing is in the package, sir.”

As soon as Adam was seated and had clipped on his seat belt, the car pulled away. The boy broke the wax seal and opened the package. Inside the package he found a note, a pair of sunglasses, some headphones, and a notebook computer bearing the insignia of the Foundation. He read the note:

*Dear Captain Cranford,*

*Your briefing is on the enclosed notebook computer. You will need to use your Foundation ring to activate the briefing. Please connect the headphones before starting the briefing. The contents must be treated with absolute secrecy.*

*Regards,*

*Sergeant Quartermaster of the Foundation*

Adam lifted the notebook from the package and connected the headphones. He opened it and found the power button. The starting the screen displayed a request that the user should authenticate himself. Adam touched his Foundation signet ring to the reader located in the eye of the dragon motif and typed his personal password. There was a *bleep* of affirmation, and a video recording started to play. Adam immediately recognised the image of the sergeant quartermaster. The white-haired old man was at the centre of operations of the Foundation of Honour.

“Captain, let me first apologise for the public interruption of your training. Unfortunately, we have to transport you as a matter of urgency to catch a flight at a private aerodrome. The plane is waiting for your arrival. We will advise your parents that you will be away on Foundation business for a couple of days. You will find clean clothes, money, and a mobile phone awaiting you at the plane. I hardly need to tell you that this mission is at the direct request of the Council of Elders.