

## CRYSTAL WARS: EPILOGUE

The cool tunnels were a welcome relief from the desert heat, she thought to herself, crouched in the entranceway, shielding her eyes to adjust to the gloom. Desert winds swirled grains of sand around her soft leather boots as she methodically cleaned and checked her daggers, then her pouch and backpack. No living being had set foot here for many years, but networks of rusty pipes, and bundles of strange wires adorned the hallway, thrumming with power. Still, nothing surprised her any more in this job.

She fought hard to control her breathing as she stole down the hallway, a ghost flitting through dusty shadows. Years of training kept the shreds of her self-control together and her cloaking field up, keeping her alive, undetected, and most importantly, keeping her moving. Time was of the essence now, and she was cutting it far too close.

Like all good hunters, the crystals were in her blood now. Even a small, weak crystal would call to her, sing to her blood in a way that only a veteran of the crystal wastes might understand. But this place; it was drenched in that energy, it reached down through all her mental shields and tore them away, joyous, alien and furiously demanding.

But she would resist. Too much was at stake to fail now, and she had seen the consequences of failure. She had witnessed first-hand the ravages of crystal addiction, travelled through the ghost-towns of the tribes of the deepest desert, hidden, shaking with a cold fear she could not explain as mutated, bestial Pariahs hunted for her in the ruined valleys of the wastes. She had been there before and she would not go there again.

By the time she neared the portal at the end of the hallway, she was herself again. She crouched low, slithering under a pair of explosive wards that would have incinerated a less competent agent. They glittered briefly, blood red and incandescent and she froze instantly. Impossibly long minutes dragged by, the hum of the machinery in the background drowned out only by the thump of her heart pounding in her ears, until she was sure it was safe to carry on.

The rune-etched frame of the portal cast a deep shadow and she melted into that, breathing hard. She finally relaxed and dropped her cloaking field, trusting in the dark embrace of the shadow to keep her hidden as she turn her practiced eye on the locking mechanism. It was unlike anything she had seen before, but then – this was a mission unlike anything she had done before.

She ran her fingers over it slowly. Even through the soft leather she could feel it, the tingle of crystal energy. So. It was true. A facet-refraction algorithm. Her enemies were prepared, but fortunately so was she. Light glinted off her blade in the gloom as she worked quickly, quietly to pry the protective plate off.

From within her pouch, she took out the small device her employer had given her. Removed from the insulative shielding, it crackled with the energy in the air and unfolded in her palm, clicking and chittering into a grotesque metal spider. Its head waved to and fro, evil, sentient, as though sniffing the air. It scented the energy signature of the lock, and with a mechanical fluidity of movement that seemed unnatural and repulsive, it skittered across her palm and into the air, landing on the portal frame.

She had to look away as it clamped itself, swollen and obscene, to the lock and began to pulsate, shafts of impossibly coloured light spraying through the air as it fulfilled its malign purpose. Suddenly, it let out a plaintive wail and was done, falling backwards off the wall, colours streaming off it. She moved to catch it, hands sure and steady, but it was disintegrating too fast, and she caught nothing but a fine grey dust, which she shook off, disgusted.

Ozone crackled through the air as the portal began to power up, the effects of the decryption device spreading through its system. The air inside the portal frame exploded into light, warping and bending before resolving itself into a shimmering gateway. Gathering her thoughts, she moved fast. They would have detected that energy spike from the decryption of the locking algorithm, and would doubtless have someone, or *something*, along soon to investigate. She focused her mind once more, wrapping herself in a protective cloaking field, and eased through the portal, silent and invisible.

Raw crystal energy slammed into her like a tidal wave. She stumbled and fell, hands and knees on the cold metal floor, whimpering in cloaked terror as the energy in the room burned through her mind. Her fingers began to twitch and she clenched them tight, flexing them and then working them in a pattern she had memorised for many years. Her hands began to glow as her spell neared completion, and as she stammered out the last syllables of the power words, the glow coalesced into burning white flame.

Teeth gritted, blood streaming out of her nose, she raised her hands, wreathed in ethereal fire, and pressed them to the sides of her head. She gasped as her own spell tore through her mind, stripping her energy away and re-sculpting it, sealing off her mind with a formidable mental barrier. Instantly she flooded back to awareness, her spell winked out, the incessant whispering in her mind forced back to the very edges of her consciousness. She stood up and angrily wiped the blood on her face away with the back of her glove, eyes flicking open, taking in the room.

A nest of oily cables sprawled, seemingly endless, under the serpentine metal walkway she stood on. Sparks of blue, red, and piercing white snaked along them, filling the air with the crackle of electricity and the palpable hum of power. The room seemed to stretch out to eternity in all directions, but her target loomed

clear, monolithic in the distance. In the centre of the room it rested, a massive, blood-red crystal spire. No wonder she'd been overcome – she'd never seen a crystal of that size. She hoped her little spell-trick would hold – burning her own energy away may have stopped the pull for now, but it was risky business. She made a note to double her price when she returned.

She ghosted along the walkway towards the centre. Sparks, thick as tree trunks and burning too bright to look at arced through the air around her, earthing themselves in the conductors and leaving scorch marks in dented, buckled metal plating. As she got closer to the spire, she could feel its presence in her mind. It was old, strong and deeply powerful, and as she finally closed with in the range of its disruptive field, her cloaking field boiled away and she stood, exposed in the glow of its crimson light.

Her eyes wandered over its surface. Jagged and crooked, it seemed to defy the laws of geometry, twisting and turning with sharp, gleaming edges. She could almost make out figures and faces and shapes beneath its surface. Hands pressed against a crimson prison, faces transfixed in silent scream, they shrieked at her, desperate, demanding. Even through her cauterised mind, she could hear them. She could see her reflection too, but more; she saw herself as a child, saw herself ten years ago, hunting in the bloodfields, haunting, ghostly images ripped directly from her psyche. She saw herself, young, cocky, her first kill, her first completed contract. The world spun and she was watching herself die, watching her corpse crumble and her flesh rot, steaming, bloated, unnatural.

She stagged backwards, eyes wide in terror. *This wasn't just any crystal. It was... No. No, it can't be...*

“Oh, but it is, my dear.”

The voice cut through the air, dark, powerful. Her knives were out instantly, gleaming, and she spun around. A robed figure stood there on the walkway behind her, clad in sigils and runes. He was tall and thin and she could feel the power he was radiating. A mechanical arm protruded from his robe, and he held an arcane staff that crackled with energy.

“They were destroyed”, she stammered. “They were all destroyed.”

“Destroyed? You stupid, naïve girl. The ancient ones cannot be destroyed. Not by the Federation. Not by the foolish rebel conclaves, and most certainly not by you.”

“Don't be so sure about that”, she whispered. He watched calmly, impassively as she reached into her pouch, and took out a small, black orb, about the size of an orange. She pressed her thumb to the side and held it aloft, as it began to glow.

His voice was urgent, low, insistent. "A void stone? You're well prepared, girl, but you're a fool. Throw that in here and the mana detonation will kill us all. You'll make this a dead zone for centuries to come."

"You know as well as I do how dangerous a Precursor Crystal is! You can't control them any more than those fools two centuries ago could! Better that we all die here." She span, an instrument of grim purpose, readying to throw. But as she did, a blade of pure crystal cleaved through her arm at the shoulder from behind. The sharp crack of crystal contact with her flesh almost drowned out the blinding pain as her arm fell away from her, clutching the glowing void stone. She staggered and collapsed, watching as a plane of light opened up around the void stone, swallowing it whole. Above the robed figure's hand, another plane of light opened and the void stone fell through into it. He thumbed it off, and the light winked out of existence.

Behind her, a hulking Pariah stood, its mutated, crystalline blade-arm slick with her blood. The mutated tribesman, now more crystal than human, snarled and hissed but made no further move to strike. She could feel it staring at her, bestial and hungry, even through the mass of bandages and mutated, crystalline flesh that was its head. She whimpered and tried to press herself further into the railing as the robed figure approached.

"A valiant effort, my dear, but to no avail. Your employer must have gone to great lengths to get you this far. Of course, not as great as the lengths we'll go to when torturing you to find out who that employer was, but... well, you're a professional." He bent down next to her, face invisible in the darkness of his hood. "You know the way these things work."

Teeth gritted against the pain, she said nothing. Blood pooled around her from her shoulder, and she could feel herself growing faint. With her one remaining hand, she grasped her dagger and clicked a button on the handle, one she'd had specially made some time ago. The dagger began to vibrate in her hands and in one sudden movement, she slammed it into the walkway beneath her, looked up at the robed figure, and smiled.

The world exploded in a flash of light and she was up and moving. The robed figure and the Pariah staggered backwards, blinded as she vaulted towards the edge of the walkway and threw herself off it, plunging between the cables and into the infinite blackness below. Eyes closed, accepting of her fate, she made no sound as she was swallowed into the void.

Shaking his head to clear his vision, the robed figure realised what had just happened, and sighed. He looked over the side of the walkway, but of the girl there was no sign, only the hum of the machinery and the crackle of sparks. He turned to the Pariah who was crouched, sniffing at the pool of her blood that was left on the walkway.

“Fetch her corpse. We’ll get the answers we need from her, one way or the other.” The Pariah hissed and vaulted off the walkway, bounding from cable to cable into the darkness. The robed figure watched for a moment, then whirled around, cloak splaying out behind him, and strode off into the gloom.

In the depths of the crystal, a new face pressed itself against the walls, and screamed.