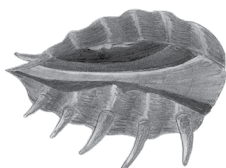


# DEAD TIME

*(Preview)*

D.L. ORTON



*Between Two Evils*  
*Book Three*



## CHAPTER I

### *Diego: Lockdown*



The sun is just coming up when I limp into the airlock at C-Bay, still wearing Shannon's blanket from the plane. The others are already through, but C-Bay has me strip, breathe three minutes of bottled air to clear the virus out of my lungs, and then they cycle the air again. I stand there for another three minutes, waiting for the all-clear, and then I put my clothes back on and walk through the inner door, wishing the wackjobs who beat me up had finished the job.

Our rescuers are paramilitary, and more men in uniform are waiting inside. Matt is already there, and the instant the door behind me shuts, one of the uniforms steps forward and gives me a crisp salute. "Welcome to C-Bay. I was told that you are in need of medical assistance, Mr. Crusoe. Would you like a wheelchair?"

I shake my head. "Your guys already patched me up, but thanks."

"Very well," he says. "I'm sure you're tired and hungry, so if you'll follow—"

"I want to speak to Mr. Kirk," I say. "About sending a rescue party to Catersville."

He gives a curt nod. "I can assure you that Mr. Kirk is well aware of Miss Kai's plight. Now then, if you'll follow me, I'll show you to your quarters."

Matt and I stare at each other, trying to decide what to do.

"Mr. Crusoe," the uniform says, glancing at his clipboard, "your appointment to have blood drawn is at thirteen hundred hours. It will be followed by a radiology exam, a biometric assessment, and a psychological evaluation." He turns to Matt. "Dr. Hudson, you are sched—"

"Excuse me," I say, "but I wish to speak with Mr. Kirk. Right now. If you would be so kind as to take me to him, I would appreciate it."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Crusoe, but that is not possible. As I said, Mr. Kirk is being kept up-to-date on the hostage situation, and he will be handling it as he deems appropriate."

I start to protest, but he holds up his hand in warning.

"Although I understand your concern, Catersville is no longer your problem. As I'm sure you're aware, your ability to survive Outside is of the utmost importance to everyone in this biodome and possibly the world. I have orders to let you sleep for five hours and then escort you to begin testing. I intend to follow those orders, Mr. Crusoe, and I advise you to do the same." He glances over at Matt. "Dr. Hudson, if you'll follow me."

Matt hesitates and then steps closer to me. "I'm with Diego, and I think your best bet would be to wake up Kirk and tell him to get his arse down here. If he wants us to cooperate, then we need to know how he plans to get Shannon back."

"I see." He nods at his men, and before we can react,

they have us handcuffed. He turns back to us. "We're all on the same team here, boys, and I'd appreciate it if you'd start acting like it. Take them to their quarters and make sure they get something to eat."

Two men grab my arms from behind and start pushing me down the hallway.

"Wait." A woman's voice comes from the shadows, and the uniforms freeze.

Something about her voice makes my heart race, but I'm too exhausted to think straight.

"Let me see his face," she says.

"Of course, Dr. Kirk." They muscle me around.

She steps out of the shadows, tall and thin, with straight blond hair in a bun at the base of her neck, a fifty-something Evita.

"Bring him here." She speaks with undeniable authority, and the uniforms hustle to obey her, dragging me along.

Fifties or not, she is quite striking.

She stares at me, her gaze flitting across my injured face.

"Who are you?"

The uniform in charge answers. "Diego Crusoe, ma'am. We just brought him in."

"I know that, you idiot." She doesn't take her eyes off me. "What's his real name?"

The military guy pokes me in the back. "Speak up, son."

I shrug. "I don't remember."

Her eyes get big and then she tips her head, squinting a little, and lets her gaze roam from my eyes to my cheek, down my jaw to my chin, and come to rest on my lips.

I swallow, and her eyes dart back up to meet mine.

"So it is... *you*." She spits the last word out like an accusation, and it is at that exact instant when I realize who she is.

“Isabel?”

She slaps me hard across the face, and I stumble against the guy on my right, tasting blood.

When I manage to look up into her sea-green eyes, they’re full of hatred.

“Get him out of my sight.”



I’m awakened by a knock on the door, and a nurse bustles in carrying a tray of food. “Good afternoon, Mr. Crusoe. I’ve brought your lunch.” She sets it down on the bedside table and nods at a stack of clothing on a chair. “If you’d like to take a shower and get dressed, I’ll be back in thirty minutes to change your bandages and escort you to have your blood drawn.” She gives me a saccharin smile. “We can’t sleep away the whole day, now, can we?”

“I’m not going anywhere until I talk to Kirk.”

She frowns, a hairnet pressing into her forehead. “I’m just a nurse, Mr. Crusoe, not a magician. Mr. Kirk is a very busy man, and when he gets a chance, I’m sure he’ll be over to speak with you. Until then, I suggest you cooperate. Handcuffs can be such a nuisance.” She turns on her heel and walks out.

I get up and check the door, but it’s locked.

*Mierda, what have I gotten myself into?*

I take a shower in the small bathroom, carefully removing the bandages on my face, knees, and feet, and washing with liquid soap out of a pump bottle—something they didn’t have at the Bub. After I dry off, I comb my hair, tie it back with a rubber band from a stack on the counter, and put on the clean clothes. They fit surprisingly well.

My backpack is in the corner, so I take out Shannon’s jaguarundi drawing and stick it up on the wall using Band-Aids

from the medicine cabinet.

*I'm sorry, Shaz, but I'll get you out of there as soon as is humanly possible.*

I make the bed, sit down on it, and set the food tray on my lap. Lunch consists of three dry brown disks, a glob of greenish goo that reminds me of spoiled guacamole, and a glass of tepid water. I take a bite of the cookie-like thing and then spit it out. It tastes like salted cardboard with traces of heavy metals in it. I don't even try the Soylent Green.

At precisely one o'clock, Nurse Ratched comes in pushing a wheelchair. Her eyebrows rise when she sees that I'm dressed, but fall again when she sees that I haven't eaten anything. "The seaweed baked with ground fish bones is very nutritious, Mr. Crusoe, and now it will go to waste." She clicks her tongue. "Need I remind you that we have lots of people to feed and very few natural food sources?"

"Give it to them with my compliments."

She purses her lips and rolls the wheelchair around to the bed. "Are you going to cooperate, or shall I call security?"

*Shit.*

I sit down in the wheelchair and cross my arms, wondering if Lani knows about Shannon yet.

*Christ, what am I going to tell her?*

I spend the rest of the day being tested for diseases, deformities, and defecation. I'm poked, prodded, and interrogated about my early childhood toilet training, but not one person asks me about the biotech devices in my blood.

That evening, I'm brought back to my hospital room, where yet another round of Soylent Green is waiting.

"Good night, Mr. Crusoe," Nurse Ratched says, waiting for me to get out of the chair. "I will be back in the morning at eight o'clock sharp. I would appreciate it if you were ready." She leaves, pushing the wheelchair and securing the

door from the outside.

The lights in the room go off at nine. I do twenty push-ups, brush my teeth, and then climb into bed. There's a light in the bathroom that I can't turn off, and I lie awake, staring at Shannon's jaguarundi drawing on the wall. When I finally fall asleep, my dreams are full of huge reptiles chasing her, as I stand frozen, unable to do anything except watch.

In the morning, the lights come on at seven, and breakfast is waiting when I get out of the shower. It's the same as lunch and supper. I'm getting pretty hungry, so I force down as much of it as I can stomach—which is not much.

The nurse comes in precisely at eight pushing her wheelchair. She takes one look at my tray and gives me a disapproving glare. "That's very wasteful, Mr. Crusoe."

"I wasn't hungry."

She lets out a humph. "Suit yourself. You have a very busy schedule today, so let's get to it. First up, Proctology."

*Proctology? It's like someone is trying to torture me.*

"I'm done taking tests," I say.

She stands there staring at me, her hands on her hips, and I get the feeling no one's ever told her no before.

"Goddamn it, you've done everything except chop me up into little bits to see if my legs regrow. I'm not submitting to any more tests until I talk to Captain Kirk."

She crosses her arms. "I'm sorry we're not living up to your expectations, Mr. Cru—"

"I want to talk to Kirk. Now."

She snorts, her lips puckered like a caricature of a telephone operator. "I see."

"And would a goddamn sandwich be too much to ask?"

"Unfortunately, this is a hospital not a resort hotel, so I strongly suggest you eat what you're served." She glances at the breakfast tray on my bed, turns the wheelchair around,

and pushes it out the door. “Things would go better for you if you kept that in mind.”

Ten minutes later, Dave Fucking Kirkland walks in and offers me his hand. “I’m David Kirk, head of C-Bay. I hear you wanted to see me.”

I stare at him for a minute—unnerved by how much he looks like his double in my world—and shake his outstretched hand. “Diego Crusoe. Thanks for coming.”

“My pleasure. May I call you Diego?” He doesn’t wait for a response. “I would have gotten here sooner, but I’ve been tied up looking through the blueprints for the Catersville dome. I know you must be worried about Shannon, but believe me, I want to get her out of there just as much as you do.”

“You know her?”

He laughs. “Of course I do, I’m her godfather. Lani and I go way back, and there’s nothing I wouldn’t do to protect them.” He pulls up the chair and sits down. “I wish Lani would have consulted me before sending Shannon out here with the two of you—I could have had my private jet stop by next month—but that’s water under the bridge.” He gives me a warm smile. “So what can I do for you, Diego?”

“I want to help get Shannon back. I was hoping you would put together an expedition and go pull her out of there. Christ, they’re a bunch of religious zealots, and they’re planning to use her as a sex slave—”

“Whoa there, Hoss.” He holds up his hand. “You’re right about the place being a bit unusual, but they’re still people, and some of them are old friends of mine.”

*Shit, he knows those guys?*

“PC estimates that Catersville is down to fewer than fifty people, the majority of them men over sixty, so they could use another woman. Last time I checked, Shannon



was old enough to be making some choices along those lines.”

“What!?” It comes out as more of a croak than a word. “You want Shannon to stay with those wackos?”

“I didn’t say that.” He gives me a hurt look.

“And what the hell is PC?”

“Population Control, of course. Where have you been for the last twenty years? I’m not saying it’s a good thing they kept her, I’m just saying that if she’s anything like her mother, I don’t think she’s going to let a bunch of old white guys push her around.”

*Christ. He thinks she’s going to enjoy living there?*

“And like I said, as soon as I heard what happened, I started looking into ways to persuade them to let her go.”

I shake my head, not understanding. “So what exactly are you doing?”

“I built their fucking biodome, *Domingo*. I have access to their computers—even their air and water supply. In a week or two, they’ll be begging me to come get her.”

“So you’re mucking with their air supply?” I say. “What if something goes wrong? Something like what happened to the Lou?”

“Nothing is going to go wrong, and even in the highly unlikely event that it does, I’ll send in a few dozen armed men and get her out before you can say rescue hero.”

“Yeah? Well, I want to go with you.”

He laughs again. “You got a military background hiding underneath all that hair?”

He reads the look on my face.

“Didn’t think so. Lani’s right, you know, you’re too important to risk losing. We need you here where we can science the shit out of the stuff in your blood.”

“But I can’t just sit around waiting for you to bring her

back. She's my responsibility. I'm the reason she's in trouble, and she's like a daughter to me. You of all people must understand that."

"I do, and you have my word that I won't rest until we bring Shannon home, okay?"

I don't respond.

"Look, the best thing you can do is stay here and help us with the research."

I shake my head. "Not while Shannon is stuck out there with a bunch of wackjobs. I can't live with myself knowing what could be happening to her."

"We're all on the same side here, buckaroo, so use your head: I got a hundred well-trained, well-armed militiamen under my command, and I have the inside track on their life support. You got nothing but a guilty conscience and a well-meaning death wish. Who do you think is going to have more success getting her back?"

I take a deep breath, trying to think rationally. "Shit."

"You know I'm right."

"Okay," I finally say. "You're probably right."

"Good." He pats me on the shoulder like he's my dad. "Promise me you won't go running off after Shannon, and I'll convince Bella to call off the dogs and stop serving you that green shit," he says, nodding at the breakfast tray. "God Almighty, even the pigs won't eat that crap."

"That would be great, thanks. But who's Bella?"

"My lovely and talented wife, of course. Isabella is the head of the largest and best-equipped medical research laboratory in the world: this one. But I thought you two already met."

*Isabella. Oh my god. It is her.*

"I don't think we've been formally introduced," I say.

"Well then, you must come over to our house for

supper this evening.” He glances at the clothes I’m wearing. “I’ll have somebody drop off a suit and shoes for you this afternoon. How does 7:30 sound?”

Suit and shoes? Is this guy for real?

“Uh, fine, thanks. But I have one more question for you—a favor actually.”

“Shoot.”

“Is there any way I can talk to Lani—explain what happened and apologize?”

“Let me look into that. It’s pretty difficult to get radio time right now, but I could probably get your name on a list—maybe get you a couple minutes in a week or two.” He runs his fingers through his thin blond hair. “Of course, you could always write her a letter. That way you could explain things without her flying off the handle every other word.”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea, thanks.”

“Hey, if you get it to me tonight, I’ll make sure it goes out with the repair parts I’m sending to the Bub tomorrow.”

“I’d appreciate that.”

“It’s the least I can do.” His left eye twitches. “I got a question for you.”

“Sure.”

“Back before the world went to hell in a handbasket, were you involved with a government project hidden inside a mountain? Something to do with a time machine and a metal ball?”

*Shit. How does he know about that? Matt’s the only one who knows, and he promised to keep it under his hat for now.*

“A time machine?” I force a laugh. “You’re pulling my leg, right?”

“Right,” he says, looking like he doesn’t believe me. “See you tonight. I’ll invite our daughter and make it a foursome.”

*His daughter?*

I can feel my heart pounding in my chest. “Do you have a son, too?” I ask, attempting to make it sound casual.

“Nope. Only the one girl, but she’s a firecracker, just like her mother. Soleil runs the genetics lab here, and I expect you’ll be meeting her soon, one way or the other.”

*Soleil? Holy crap.*

He gets up, shakes my hand again, and walks to the door. At the last second, he turns around, the smile gone. “So, do you know my wife? I mean, from before?”

“Yeah,” I say, “but it was a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.”

He nods, half smiling. “That’s what she said too.”



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