

CRISPIN Origins  
By H.E. Roulo  
[hroulo@hotmail.com](mailto:hroulo@hotmail.com)

"If I were younger I'd join up myself, make a real difference in this world. This is how a man becomes a man." Dad tapped a thick finger against the newspaper in front of him. His voice boomed over the room, "There wouldn't be anything to stop me from doing what it took."

Crispin looked up reluctantly, shaking soft brown hair out of his eyes. His hand slid protectively across the page he'd been working on. His father wasn't looking directly at him, nothing so obvious as that. He pointed to Crispin's brother Reese, three years younger and just reaching his full height. "Look at you, Reese, you're going to really fill out. You're practically big as a man."

Crispin dropped his head again and saw that he'd smeared the charcoal drawing. He pulled his sleeve back, shaking off bits of black dust and carefully re-drew the soft curve of his mother's weathered cheek where it touched the cherubic cheek of his youngest sister. He pulled out the page and got to his feet from where he'd been lying on the floor. He held the drawing out to his mother, and when she didn't take it he held it in front of her so she could look at it without disturbing the baby. He bit his lip and waited. She pulled a smile from somewhere and nodded gently. Her eyes told him that she liked the picture. Behind him, his father slid his chair back from the table and came around. Crispin stood silently as his father took the page and barely glanced at it. "You should wash your hands, son. All you boys!"

Crispin nodded. "Yes, sir."

He joined Reese and Sammy at the sink, letting the water run for a moment to clear itself. The pipes chugged softly and finally fell in a thin clear stream. Reese shoved his way to the water and soap first, liking the way his bulk could give him a little advantage over his older brother. Crispin didn't care. When it was his turn he washed the soap carefully along the side of his hand where the dark charcoal had left powdery smudges, then let the thin sliver of hard soap rub over this palm and knuckles. It scraped dully without producing lather, but got his hands clean. He then used his soapy hands to rub Sammy's and put them under the bite of the cold-water stream.

At the table his father had picked up the paper again. Crispin took his sister from Mother so she could get the food. They said a silent prayer and waited. Father carefully divided the bread and potatoes into portions. Crispin's portion wasn't the largest, wasn't even as large as Reese's. A flare of hunger tightened his belly so that he couldn't hide a resentful glance. His father caught it, somehow sensitive to this sudden rebellion. His hand hit the table, making everyone jump back. Sister began to cry in her highchair. Crispin let his hair slide over his eyes, with his head bowed over his plate. Looking down at all of them, and at the small piles of food, his father's rage poured out.

“You can’t say I don’t feed you. You want to do something about it, you get out there and break the blockades. Bring back the economy, why don’t you? Get some fresh seed in here for the fields. There’s only so much a man can do.”

Mother made soothing sounds from the other side of the table but he wouldn’t be soothed. “It’s those aliens out there! They’ve taken all the jobs a decent man can do, and then they get us in this war. If I didn’t have the lot of you to support, I could do something about it, but I’ve got five mouths to feed and on what? You want portions as big as your brother? If you did some real work you’d fill out and I’d say you needed a man’s portion.”

Crispin cleaned his plate, as they all did. That night he lay on his thin mattress and felt the hunger pulling at his stomach. His problems swam in his mind. He wanted to be grown up, to do the work his father mentioned. Eventually, he made the decision his father wanted. He’d join the Federated Army. Reyle wasn’t even part of the Federation, but he could run away and join so he could fight the enemy and break the blockade. Maybe they needed someone who could sketch. Maybe he’d learn not to be so discontented. There would be food, and he’d get exercise to fill out, like his Dad said. He’d be a real man.

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Crispin sat up in sweaty sheets. He’d been having fever dreams about home again, although he hadn’t talked to his family more than once a year in the last five years. He’d joined up the next day, saying goodbye to his brothers, mother, and his father. The baby had been too little to really say goodbye to. His father had been proud, blown up in the chest and had slapped Crispin on his thin back. It stung, but made the tears he’d been fighting go away so Crispin was glad for the ache. He hadn’t hugged his mother, deciding he was too mature for that. She’d cried into the baby’s hair.

Crispin sat forward on the metal bed to flex an arm, feeling the thickly corded muscles clench. He’d filled out soon enough. Three square meals a day and hours of training had hardened him until he barely recognized himself in the mirror. His fine brown hair had been cut short, so it never fell in his eyes. He had some new scars, too. His hands, calloused and blunt now, pulled back the dressing that adhered to his side. A smooth red ribbon was all that was left of the laser blast that had taken him out. He’d been in full combat armor, slow but forceful, ransacking a moon base when something pretty powerful found his side. He’d still gotten to the command center, blasted through with his squad, and turned off the life support. With the hole in his suit he’d figured he’d go fast, but the durapatch they’d slapped over the wound must have held long enough to get back to the troop carrier and up to the battle ship orbiting above. All-in-all, not a bad time. He thought of how he’d share the exploit with the others, maybe Crissy in Blue Squad would like to look at his scar.

A wolfish grin still flitted around his gray eyes as a medical technician entered followed by someone unfamiliar, but Crispin needed only to see the rank indicators lined in a row up his sleeve to jump to his feet.

“Sit down, no need for that in the clinic.” The man said gruffly. Crispin settled back into a sitting position since he’d been ordered to, but his back stayed straight. He gazed forward.

“Recovering nicely, I see. No surprise there. You’re always up for more action, eh? I’ve read your record, and you’ve been a trooper.” He didn’t take breaths between sentences or seem to expect any response from Crispin. “Thought you’d be interested in volunteering for something special.

“This medic can explain it all to you, don’t ask me for the technical details. Knew all I needed to when they explained it could make a super soldier. The best ever. That’s got your attention, eh?”

Crispin glanced over at the technician, a pale figure who fiddled with a wireless tablet. Maybe he was checking Crispin’s status, or perhaps he was just nervous. Crispin turned his steely eyes back as the man spoke again, “Complicated process involved: speeds up your metabolism, your recuperative powers, ups the strength and reflexes. Better night vision, naturally, and I’m told there are camouflage properties to the skin, although I’d like to see that for myself.”

The technician’s enthusiastic pride drove him to interrupt, “Oh yes sir, we’ve developed a process where your own melanin in the skin can darken or lighten the skin. No fancy colors, right, not a man-size chameleon . . . Sorry, sir.”

“Right then, it also lets you forage better so you don’t need as many supplies. Accidental find, actually, all part of some natural infection we’ve been able to engineer further. Science relies on fortuitous accidents quite a bit, eh?”

The technician remained wisely silent under this criticism.

The pause invited comment. Crispin barely let his eyes flicker to the other man. “Sir, it sounds like a ground troop force?”

“That’s right,” the other said warmly, “we’ll hit their colonies and drive the enemy out of their own homes. It will be a new force, elite and swift moving. You’ll be more aggressive, too, we’ll give you the mental training to be the soldier we need. You’ll love it, the thrill of battle, it will make you a super-soldier. We need good men. You’d like that, eh?”

Crispin wondered why the man insisted on telling him what he’d like.

“You’re from an independent colony, aren’t you? Re—,”

“Reyle,” Crispin supplied. “Yes, I still have family there.”

“Outer world, they should accept Federation protection. Wouldn’t want to let the enemy get to them. Imagine the kiddies back home. You’d be doing everyone a favor.”

Crispin thought of his mother and father, and his siblings still struggling to survive on the meager existence they could eke out. He sent them funds sometimes. He'd sent a shipment of vegetable starts and seeds to his father, also, but with blockades there wasn't any way to tell if they got through. He hadn't talked to them in over a year.

"I'd like it, sir. I'd make a fine super-soldier. I'll be the best man you've got."

"Yes, I expect so. Sign here." The officer made a gesture and someone entered the room; he grabbed Crispin in a blurred instant and a burning sensation pierced his neck and shoulder. He cried out and fell limp.

"He's infected," he heard someone say, "We'll see if it takes."

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Crispin made the change. It took time, weeks or months he was never quite sure. They pushed his body to its natural limits and then beyond. He woke up in a hospital bed and could feel the difference. Crispin broke one of the overhead lights, since they hurt his eyes. A look in the mirror showed him he'd changed. His eyes were completely dark even at the iris now, and his skin had a pale white color that he thought he could darken slightly by concentrating.

The technician started when he entered the room and found Crispin watching him; Crispin had heard him coming down the hall. Muscles quivered for action. He watched the technician walk around the room, tentative and nervous as he moved. His thin, weak shoulder bones protruded against the white material of his gown. His slender fingers fiddled with tools before he turned back to Crispin with a faltering smile. Crispin looked back without smiling.

"Do you feel different?"

"Yes." Crispin found the sound of his own voice surprising. His sensitive hearing brought out nuances he hadn't heard before. He found himself modulating it into a smooth tone, "I'm feeling quite good. Powerful." He rose to his feet with the final word. The technician jumped again. The movement had startled him.

"Well, that's really good. There's training for you and your new squad. You'll get used to all your new abilities." The man's sweat smelled tart in the tiny sealed room. They were somewhere in the base of the ship, Crispin felt, and he could almost sense other figures in the rooms beside and above him. The warmth off the technician drew him a step closer. The tiny man looked so weak to Crispin, so pathetic and unable to take care of himself that Crispin felt almost bad for him. Was this how he'd looked to his father?

Crispin licked dry lips. "I'm a little thirsty."

"Oh, god!" The technician dodged for the door. Crispin stopped him without conscious thought. He pulled the man by his blouse up in front of him. He was puzzled. "Why are you running?"

The technician whined pitifully, the door opened and Security with stun batons entered. They must have been monitoring the room and had armed men ready.

Crispin felt puzzled still, but not afraid. He didn't really want to hurt them, but when they moved against him he felt a certain satisfaction in stopping them. A moment later the two guards lay with their helmets smashed. The technician gave up whimpering on the floor to dash out the open door into the hallway. Crispin checked the bodies of the prone men. The first one was quite dead. The second one wasn't, but bled from a wound on his temple where he'd hit the floor. A vivid pool of red sent crisp tangy notes into the air. Crispin put a finger into the liquid and brought it to his lips. He was very thirsty. When he left the room, the second man was also dead. Crispin took one step out the door into the hall and found the military man there again, flanked by two other men. They weren't Security Crispin knew, because they didn't have the helmets and batons, but his hackles rose at the sight of them and he swallowed a growl. The officer didn't give off any nervousness. "He won't understand if I tell him to stop, but he'll understand if you stop him," he said to them.

Crispin met their charges with a vicious glee. He felt heavy blows strike his shoulders and the second man held his arms before he had time to turn, so he lunged with his teeth, wanting to feel them bite in. They controlled him finally, and he stared into the deep black eyes of the soldiers who had him. They stared back malevolently. They were like him, super-soldiers.

"We'll take it from here." The one holding him said in a smooth timbered voice. He wiped Crispin's mouth and met the midnight stare. "He's one of us now."

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There was war, in fact there was nothing but war now. Crispin paused in the laughing flicker of a burning building and raised his head to scent the air. It smelled good, better than the air on the ship but all planets had air that smelled better. This night smelled particularly good. He found what he was looking for, the trace scent of hiding figures, and sprang across the open square to the next building where they must be concealed. His leap scared them into the open, a screaming mess of noise and hysteria that he quickly silenced. The crackle of the buildings and the sounds of his mates killing in the distance were all he heard here. It was another night with an especially simple mission. They were here to burn and pillage. They would cause terror to the enemy, the special terror that his kind could bring. And news would spread.

He let his skin darken so that would fade into the night and blend into the deep shadows around him. He felt something pulling him on in the distance through the crash of breaking windows and hopeless cries. He started to run. It seemed the fights were endless, finally coming close together with only dull troop movements in between, but those were forgettable. It was the chill wind of the dark planets and the hot flesh of the enemy that filled him now. He raced through the streets on silent feet. He was quick now, never weighted down by heavy battle armor since he could strike before an enemy could fire, could dodge whatever they launched at him. He'd been injured, surely all soldiers were injured, but he barely bled and there were ways to replace it. His light-sensitive eyes avoided the flare of more flames and he skirted the empty

buildings. They'd probably had the sense to set up a barricade somewhere by now. Predictably, they'd think they could hold out. Crispin bit his lip and let instinct take him. It pulled him along feverishly, filling him until he found more people, a whole cluster of them, huddled in a lone building outside the proper edges of the small town. He entered easily and the small ones were the first to go, then the next. The victory of it filled him with power. He had been through it all, but the thrill didn't wear off. He finished almost instantly with one combatant, soft and unable to hurt him, and turned to find only one left standing. He felt a flicker of something, puzzlement, shiver down his spine. This was different. Why was he doing that? He let his ears open to words, the man's words. They weren't in standard but he recognized the dialect. What dialect was it, Reylan? He stood out of a crouch, a surge of recognition piercing him, it was his name, too.

"Crispin, my God Crispin." It panted over and over again.

He looked around himself. It was a wooden house, his wooden house. He stared at the broken bodies of his siblings, and there was mother. The Federated Army had changed wars, switched sides, and he'd never even realized it. He was now fighting against his people. His family?

"Dad?" Crispin asked. The blood lust faded. He stared at the aged figure of the man in front of him. He had always been thick, but now he was bent at the shoulders. His hair had gone gray and thinned. Had it been so long that his father had time to grow old? He hadn't thought of them since his change.

"Stay away from me! What you are now, it isn't my son," Dad yelled, fumbling in the bureau behind him.

"It's me, Dad, I'm a soldier."

"No boy of mine! No soldier! You're not even a man." Dad was crying, and furious, and his hands had found a weapon, the aged buzzing buckshot he'd kept for years. He pointed it and pulled the trigger.

Crispin stood over his father's body in the first real conscious thought he'd had in many years. He stared around the room as if looking for answers. That must be Reese, fully-grown and still living here to look after them. The woman could be Reese's wife, or maybe baby sister. What had her name been? He crossed to the faucet to wash his face and hands. On the wall above the sink was a faded piece of paper. His specialized eyes could see it clearly in the dark. It was the sketch of his mother and Anna. The baby had been named Anna. Had they wondered what happened to him? Had his mother recognized him, there at the end? He wondered with a sort of remote horror. The water chugged fitfully before starting in a thin stream. Crispin rinsed his mouth and spat into the sink. The sketch looked tiredly back at him.

He lit the house on fire, with their bodies and the sketch still inside. It flamed up, as if it had always been more suited to burning than living in. He moved away from the smoke and waited for feelings. They didn't come easily. Finally, he had a thought he wanted to share with his father. You're right, Dad,

he thought to himself, I'm not a man. A man would have stood there and let you shoot him for what he'd done.

But what I've become is something different.

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