

Blackquest 40

Jeff Bond

Jeff Bond Books (May 15, 2019)

Softcover \$12.95 (348pp)

978-1-73225-522-7

Blackquest 40 is a compelling thriller rich in intensity and suspense.

Jeff Bond's action-packed thriller *Blackquest 40* incorporates technology and politics into its intriguing mix.

Deb is a young programming genius whose fiery attitude hides a heart of gold. Though she had her pick of start-ups and tech giants to work for, Deb took a job at Codewise, who promised that she could set her own schedule and would have time to work on her pet project, an application called Carebnb that helps homeless people find shelter when they need it.

When Codewise plans team-building exercises through a company called Elite, Deb wants nothing to do with them. As the exercises get more bizarre and related restrictions get more severe, Deb uncovers a plot that goes way beyond simple coaching. Using her resourcefulness and IT prowess, Deb has forty-eight hours to save herself and her coworkers from an international disaster.

Deb is smart, sarcastic, empathetic, and self-aware. Guided by her relentless moral compass, viewpoints regarding sexual identity, homelessness, and xenophobia are reflected in the way she acts and talks. Her work with Carebnb is inspired by her own childhood homelessness, revealed in flashbacks and emotional inner monologues. Her technology and programming skills are captured with expertise, though some related lingo is confusing. Imaginative robots that she built play a big role in the story's unpredictability.

Other characters are a diverse mix, captured via physical descriptions and details regarding their unique mannerisms. They include Jim, the lead trainer, whose military background is apparent in his attitude and tone; Susan, Deb's boss; and a handful of coworkers. The training team's severe methodology and dark secrets allude to America's relationship with Russia and are the main source of conflict. Revelations about Jim's past, and his interactions with Deb and her coworkers, are exciting.

Susan is Jim's opposite. She is idealized by Deb and is expected to save Codewise from Elite's intrusive and untrustworthy plans. Deb's evolving relationship with Susan touches on themes of loyalty, disappointment, and self-delusion.

Most of the novel takes place over a two-day period, and its action is exhilarating. It takes place within the Codewise office building most often, and the isolated setting heightens its tension. Unpredictable developments arise in every chapter, and chapters typically end on cliffhangers. While the end resolves most of the plot points, Deb's actions in it conflict with her established personality.

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DELIA STANLEY (May 15, 2019)

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