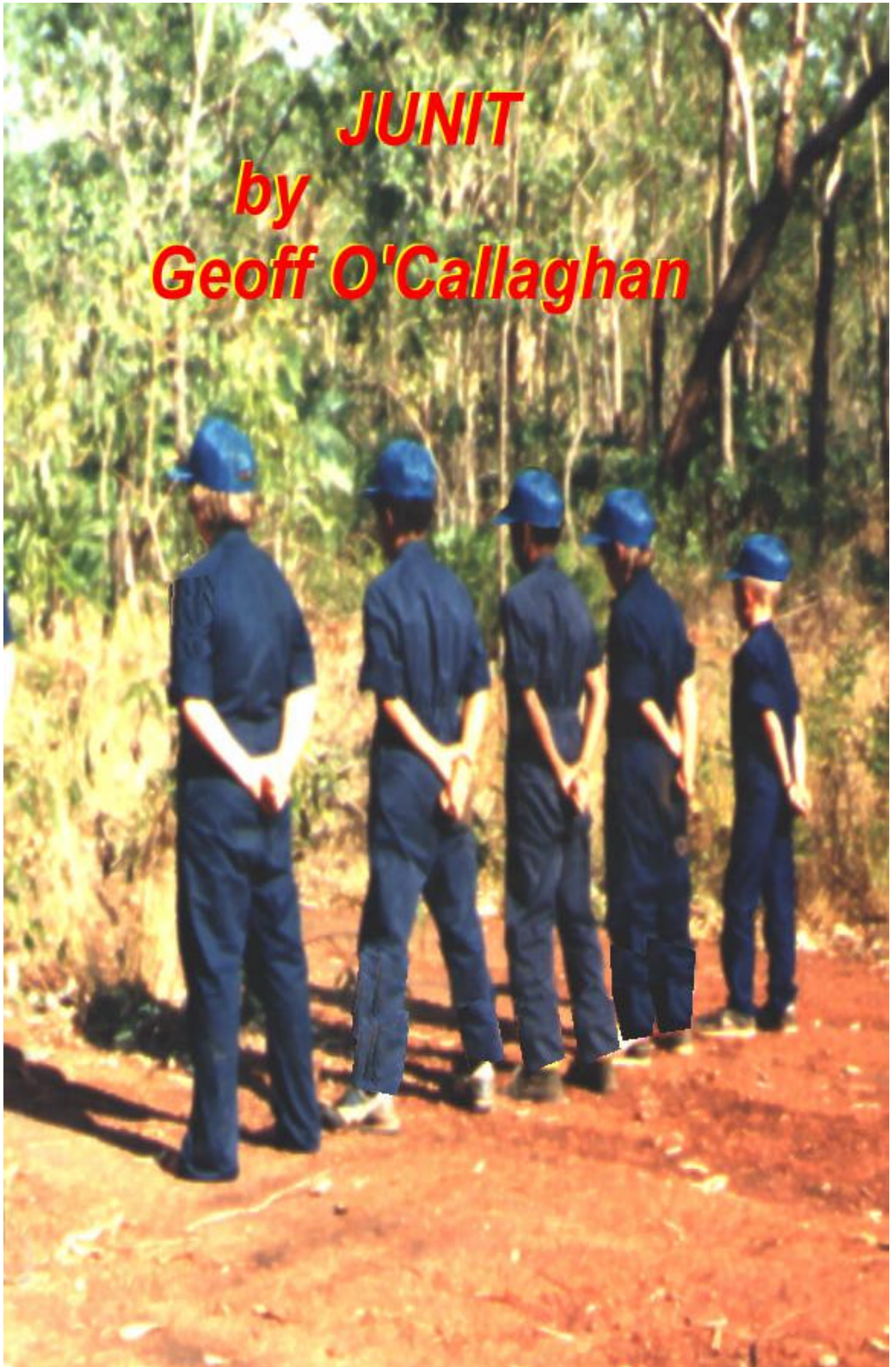


JUNIT
by
Geoff O'Callaghan



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Chapter 1

The Orphan

Daniel Holland felt cold and pulled the blankets more firmly around his shoulders. The snoring of the fat boy in the bed next to his was keeping him awake. He looked at the dormitory windows. They were ghostly grey, half illuminated by the street lights outside. The door opened, and a dark figure entered with a flashlight.

Father John went from bed to bed, checking each boy carefully. Daniel didn't pretend to be asleep.

"Problems sleeping?" the priest asked softly.

Daniel sat up and put his hands around his knees. His eyes were sore from crying, and he felt totally miserable.

"I'm scared of sleeping," Daniel whispered back.

Father John found that comforting his young charges, was the hardest task at the orphanage. There were very few happy stories - most of the boys were miserable.

"It's hard when the parents who love you are wrenched away so suddenly," the man said, kneeling by Daniel's bed so his face was level with the boy's head. "God has given us free will, and accidents happen."

"I don't blame God," Daniel said. "The truck driver was drunk, and speeding."

"Your parents were good people, Daniel. They are with God now. Would you like to pray with me? Prayer often makes things seem better."

The boy got out of the bed and knelt with the priest. Father John was a good man. Daniel liked him. John prayed earnestly. "Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord; and let perpetual light shine upon them. May they rest in peace. Amen." He concluded. Then he patted the boy's head. "Back to bed with you, lad, and sleep tight," he said.

Daniel noticed that the windows were much brighter and there was the clattering mumbling noise of boys moving about. It was morning. The boys removed their pajamas, wrapped their towels around their waists and headed for the showers.

Breakfast was adequate, but hardly filling, two wheat biscuits in a bowl of milk and sugar. They had toast with butter and jam and cups of tea.

The orphans stood on parade in lines, small boys in front, and older ones behind, ranked according to their school grades. They were dressed uniformly in black shoes, long grey golf socks, grey shorts and grey flannel pullover school shirts with the sleeves folded up neatly above their elbows. Someone in the laundry had removed the top collar buttons to use as spares when boys lost theirs. Their collars were open to the light cool breeze that drifted over the bitumen parade ground.

"Just because you're orphans, doesn't mean you have the right to drop litter all over the grounds," Brother Stephen said from his wooden dais in front of the boys.

"The world doesn't owe you a living, and regardless of your circumstances, you have to make the best of it. Our duty is to teach you all to cope. Neatness and tidiness are skills that will keep you in good stead. After lunch, you will spend your free hour doing a rubbish sweep."

There was a stifled groan from the boys. Brother Stephen could swing a mean strap, and nobody crossed him willingly. Some did by accident and always tried hard not to repeat their errors. The boys walked into the classroom block, one behind the other, in as neat and orderly a fashion as they could.

The grade six classroom, like all the others in the orphanage school, had well worn single wooden desks in cast iron frames with an attached form. There was a shelf under the desk for books, and a hole for a ceramic ink well took precedence over a long horizontal pencil groove. Ink was no longer in use. It was messy and a nuisance. Ballpoints had replaced the wooden pens with steel nibs of the distant past.

Brother Stephen flexed his lawyer cane between his hands and tapped on the ancient blackboard. "There are five sums to get your brains working. Addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, and a percentage problem. You have fifteen minutes. One stroke for each sum you get wrong or do not finish. Those who do finish quickly may read quietly."

He sat down and looked at his charges. They put their heads down, not looking at him, and proceeded with the task. He liked the sound of silence. His pupils

feared him, and this was an advantage. Nobody dared call him a poor disciplinarian, yet the boys knew him as a fair man, who had a ready ear for any problems they might have. After another stern look around, he opened the roll book and checked each boy as being 'present'. As nobody had reported sick, and all the boys were in class, it was a routine task, but the State demanded it be done each day. School funding was tied directly to attendance.

There was a knock at the door and Father John entered. He whispered something to Brother Stephen, who turned to the class. "Daniel, you are required at the main office. Put your books away and go with Father John."

Daniel looked up and hesitated.

"Hurry up, Daniel," Brother Stephen said.

The boy closed his book, put it under the desk with his pencil case, and stood up. Father John smiled at him, and Daniel followed him to the orphanage office.

A man and woman were waiting for him. They smiled and led him to a long seat, watching as he sat down.

"I'm Mister Longley from the Child Welfare Department, and this is Miss Weatherall, my secretary," the man said. "We have some good news for you, Daniel."

Daniel hadn't had much in the way of good news since his parents were killed in the auto crash. He looked at the two officials with interest.

Miss Weatherall smiled. "Your parents were insured. They also left a will. This has taken a while to reach

our attention. Insurance companies are sometimes a bit slow, but your family solicitor has sorted things out at last. He wants to have a talk to you."

Daniel swallowed. "Am I rich?" he asked.

"Oh, no," Mr. Longley said. "But I believe you are comfortable."

"I say, that's a bit of luck, Daniel. You won't need to stay with us, then."

Daniel turned to the priest. "It hasn't been too bad here, Father. I know the brothers care for us."

"It's our job, Daniel, Caring for orphans and the less fortunate."

"We would like to get Daniel to the solicitor this morning," Mr. Longley said. "He has court business this afternoon. It's all right for us to take him then?"

"If he moves, we can arrange to get his things later. I expect it might take a couple of days to settle him," Miss Weatherall said.

Father Daniel saw the trio to the door, and Daniel was helped into the back of a black government fleet car.

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"And that was the last you saw of him?" Detective sergeant Gerry Hallam asked.

"You must think I'm very foolish - a couple of phone calls and we could have checked, but I didn't think ..."

"If 'ifs' and 'buts' were fruit and nuts, what a feast we could have," the detective said, closing his

notebook. The abduction was odd - the government car, the identifications, bogus, of course, the personal appearance which could lead to an I.D. Sketch identification - Why on earth would anyone want to kidnap an eleven year old boy from a Catholic Orphanage? It didn't make sense. Much too risky. Anyone wanting a child could easily pick up a street kid. It happened all the time. Why this particular boy?

The solicitor did not exist, Miss Weatherall and Mr. Longley did not exist, and the number plates on the black government car were faked. The boy had vanished. The police investigation ran into a blank wall.

Hallam wanted to take the case further. It was obvious to him that foul play was involved in Daniel's disappearance. Boys were a marketable commodity in some sections of the underworld, and his abduction seemed to be part of a well organised operation. He held grave fears for the boy's safety.

"I can't understand it, Sir," he told his senior. "The use of a government car and official looking identification implies a much more powerful organisation. There is loose talk - call it a conspiracy theory if you like - that some members of the government are involved in nasty dealings with little boys..."

"That's all it is - conspiracy theories. Goes with Alien Abductions and other nonsense. Fact is, the Daniel Holland case is being downgraded in terms of priority. File it away. We want you to take over a much more important duty. There's a vacancy at Inspector

level in Drug Enforcement. Upstairs wants you to fill it. In six months, the promotion becomes permanent, Hallam. Don't let this opportunity pass."

There was no way that Hallam could forgo such a chance. Waiting for promotion was often called 'Waiting for dead man's shoes' it came so rarely.

"Oh, no, Sir. Golden opportunity," Hallam said. "Sometimes we get lucky, eh?"

"Just so, Sergeant ... I mean, Inspector. Sometimes we do get lucky." The commander said, shaking Hallam's hand as he showed him out. He still held the boys' files, and he placed them, with slight misgivings, into his 'out' tray.

Daniel's files were expedited rather quickly to the Cold Case section of police archives. It wasn't that Hallam was stupid or too ambitious for his own good, but rather that long experience in the force had taught him to read between the lines. Office politics governed much in police routines. Whoever was burying the Holland case was very powerful indeed, and one would be foolish not to heed the signs. Perhaps the boy had fallen in with an influential nonce, or a gang of them.

Hallam could have kept the case active. That could risk his being transferred to Traffic in some small, remote community. He could end his career as a little known detective sergeant processing minor crims. He'd been around for long enough to know the score.

Poor Daniel, he thought as he cleared his desk. What has become of you, boy?

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Chapter 2

Preparation

Daniel stood by the metal hand-rail overlooking the long jetty which poked out into the small boat harbour. There were no boats, and the island airstrip behind him was deserted. He could go wherever he pleased, if he returned to the long row of sheds beside the wharves for lunch. He scanned the open sea with a pair of field glasses that Longley had given him, noting a line of grey hills of the far distant shore. Swimming was out of the question. He heard the crunch of Longley's feet on the gravel path and turned to the man.

"There are lots of sea birds here. It's a sanctuary," the man said. He stood next to Daniel and rested his forearms along the rail, lowering himself so his head was level with the boy's.

"Why am I here?" Daniel asked. "You said you'd take me to a solicitor, and I'd get lots of money for insurance."

"Sorry, but there is no insurance. Your parents hadn't gotten round to making a will. You see, nobody expects to die young."

"So, you lied to get me here. I'm lonely."

Longley smiled. "You are here, because you are lonely," he said. "You have no relatives, and nobody wants you, or cares about you. That makes you valuable."

"I'm valuable because nobody wants me?"

"Funny, isn't it."

"So I'm kidnapped. What are you going to do with me - sell me as a sex slave or something?"

The man laughed. "Not at all. Nobody tied you up or belted you about, did they?"

"No," Daniel said, defensively.

"We have been kind to you?"

"Yes. Except I'm here, miles from anywhere on a deserted island."

"An offshore military base, to be exact. Emergency landing for aircraft that can't land on an aircraft carrier. The Navy doesn't want it any more, so they've given it to the Army for special projects."

Daniel and Longley leaned on the railing looking out to sea. The man put his arm across the boy's shoulders affectionately.

"My Dad used to hug me. He told me not to be too friendly with strangers," Daniel said, dropping his shoulder and moving away from the man.

"You're safe with me," Longley said. "I'm not into little boys, besides - you've been with me for a month. Have I ever done anything to embarrass you?"

"No."

"My job is to look after you. Don't be frightened of me." He put his hand on the boy's shoulder again, and this time, Daniel didn't pull away. When Longley hugged him across the shoulders, Daniel leaned against him and

cried softly. "There, there," Longley said. "It's been a very rough time for you. Let go, you'll feel so much better, after a good cry."

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File Note:

If there are no relatives, to speak of, the subject will be taken to a location of our choice. Further tests for vulnerability will be conducted at this location. If he passes these tests, he is then brought to Level 1 hypnosis where specific instructions are "written" (placed through hypnotic commands and suggestions) into his personality and he is given diverse small orders.

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Daniel sat in a comfortable arm chair looking at doctor Jones, who had flown in especially to see him. He wasn't sick, but Longley said he should have a medical check-up anyway. It was all routine - blood pressure, temperature, eyes, ears, mouth, teeth, and some blood was taken from his inner right elbow.

"I want to do a simple reflex test," Jones said. Hold your hands together like this." He demonstrated, linking his own fingers together. Daniel complied.

"Look at your thumbnails. Concentrate on them. In a little while, you'll find your fingers are sticking together. They feel strange as if there's something magic in them." Jones voice became more commanding. "You will soon feel your fingers sticking, grinding together, harder and harder, sticking tighter together with every word I say. Now you can feel your fingers sticking, grinding together, harder and harder, sticking tighter together. Your fingers are so tightly stuck together that - no matter how hard you try to release them, you

can't. Try. Try. They're tightly stuck, and you can't pull them apart."

Daniel tried to pull his hands apart, and was amazed to find they were tightly stuck. The doctor tapped him on the hands, and, as if a magic spell had been broken, the boy's hands separated.

"How did you do that?" the boy asked in wonder.

"A good trick," Doctor Jones said. "I'll show you another. Stand up."

Daniel stood and was subjected to several more tests, during which the doctor locked his mouth wide open, made him fall forward as stiff as board, and made his arms very strong and stiff.

"OK," the doctor said. Now I've got an eye test. Sit back in the chair."

Daniel did as he was told, and watched as the doctor produced a white card with a red spiral on it. It was a strange symbol, and the boy looked at it as the doctor moved it about in a clockwise direction.

"Look at the spiral. Watch as its arms seem to move about. As you watch, your eyes are getting heavy and you're feeling very sleepy. Breathe deeply, and let yourself fall deeper and deeper asleep. . ."

The world faded away, and it was dark when the boy woke up in his bed in the Nissan hut that served as his quarters. He looked around, confused. He must have been dreaming - some sort of nightmare, perhaps.

In the ways of men, small mistakes are sometimes made in the best planned operations. When the doctor took a

sample of Daniel's blood, he'd placed a small bandage onto the needle wound at the elbow. It was a routine thing to do, but Daniel's pullover had been adjusted so that the sleeve, which had to be pulled up to do the test, was taken down again, over the bandage. The doctor had forgotten to remove it.

Daniel looked at the small bandage on his elbow.

"So, I haven't been dreaming," he said sleepily, removing the give-away object and placing it in his pajamas pocket.

File Note:

It helps increase the hypnotic spell's command power, if the subject is given a second personality. This persona can become the vehicle for inducing very deep trances. The persona is given another name and personal history. It is suggested that the persona is highly susceptible to hypnosis, can be hypnotized against his will by his case workers, can be made to do anything he is told to do, is totally obedient, and is not remembered when the subject wakes up and resumes his real personality.

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"What's your name?" the soldier asked the boy dressed in a judo gi.

"My name is Peter John Walsh," Daniel said. He scraped his feet along the heavy canvas, remembering to keep them in contact with the floor.

"How old are you, Peter?" The soldier asked, adjusting his black cloth belt around his heavy white duck judo tunic.

"I'm nearly twelve years old."

"Been at this long?"

"About a year. I have a junior brown belt."

They approached each other. The soldier took the boy's arm and placed his right hand on the boy's

shoulder, surprised to find his opponent allowed himself to be pushed backwards. Without warning, the youngster jumped forward, striking the man's knees with his small shins and pulling him forward. The instructor began to fall forward, but the boy's feet hit him in the stomach as he dropped, then straightened suddenly. The powerful soldier placed his right hand up and executed a perfect forward roll.

He expected to stand and turn to congratulate the boy on his skill, only to find the youngster had followed through with a roll of his own. His small hands crossed and took hold of the man's collar, twisting so that he had a full carotid block.

The last thing the soldier saw as he lost consciousness was the youngster grinning at him as blackness clouded his brain and he became deeply unconscious.

"Enough, Peter!" came a command from the side of the Tatami. A huge Japanese wrestler entered the ring, pushed the soldier's inert body to a sitting position, and belted the unconscious man firmly between the shoulders. The soldier coughed, shook his head, and looked astonished.

After a couple of minutes, the dojo swung into focus again, and the man looked at 'Peter' who was kneeling on the mat, meditating.

"A bloody frog-throw. It's not even in the book."

"Life moves on," Peter said.

"Ni Reh!" Sensei said. Peter flowed to his feet in one coordinated movement and bowed deeply to the

soldier, who returned the gesture. They both bowed to the Samurai, their Sensei.

"Your duty," the Sensei said to the soldier, "Is to teach the boy unarmed combat. For real. To level five."

"What's level five?" Peter asked.

"A technique from which the recipient has little chance of survival."

"Killing techniques?" the boy asked.

"We do not call them that." Sensei said sternly. "If you apply a killing technique to someone, who subsequently dies, you are guilty of murder." Sensei said. "But if you use a level five technique on someone who subsequently passes on, it is an accident."

"So if I push a knife into someone's throat at the carotid arteries and push it forward to open up the throat and let the blood gush out, it is an accident?"

"Yes," the Sensei said, grinning at the boy's wit, "but a very messy one. I do hope we can teach you to be tidy."

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Chapter 3

Training for War

Sergeant Barton, The soldier chosen to train him sat opposite Peter during tea. They both wore brown camouflaged cargo pants and matching camouflaged sweatshirts.

"Where do you come from?" Barton asked.

"I don't know. I had some sort of an accident and went into a coma. Woke up here, and life began. I could walk and talk, but I had to learn to read and write again. Most of the time, I do physio-therapy and school work. Some of it seems familiar. I was up to speed with reading and writing in a couple of months. Six months for mathematics."

"And you don't know anything else about yourself?"

Peter looked at Barton carefully. The hardened commando was shocked to see the boy was looking at him with a face filled with an expression of total malevolence. It was as if evil had taken over Peter, although his face seemed almost bland.

"Curiosity can be deadly in this business. Seek no more."

The boy looked back to his meal and continued eating as if nothing had happened. His face had relaxed and become boyish again. Whatever had possessed him had gone. Barton was unnerved by the incident. For the rest of the meal, they talked about fishing and sport.

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"He's very good at what he does, Peter. You'll learn a lot from him," Longley said. "Actually, he's not just good. He's the best - that's why we've chosen him."

"He asks too many questions. It makes me feel - uncomfortable. I don't know the answers."

"What do you want to know?"

"What was the accident I was in?"

"A car accident. I've told you - your parents were killed. That's why you've got amnesia. You were trapped in the car with them for over an hour while they cut you out. It was very traumatic. There was enough insurance to make sure you had the best medical treatment. It's private treatment and very expensive."

"You said there wasn't any insurance."

"Motor Vehicle Accident insurance - not personal. It covered your private medical needs."

"Yes. Very private. Private Island, private tutors, private physiotherapist, private psychiatrist, and now my very own private martial arts instructor, who can teach me level five techniques."

"Are you unhappy here?"

"Yes. I am lonely. Very lonely."

"I'm hoping we can do something about that. There may be other children who have been traumatised and lost their memories. We're set up to handle that sort of thing. I think it's time we expanded our work," Longley said, giving Peter a firm hug across his shoulders.

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"Does he know who he really is?" Longley asked Doctor Jones.

"No. It's hard to bury someone's identity, but I do believe we've done it. Daniel Holland firmly believes now, that his name is Peter John Walsh. He must retain

that identity during his training. When he is returned to the community, it will be as Daniel Holland. Daniel will have forgotten everything about Peter. The same with the other boys."

"Why do they specify boys, I wonder."

"Pre-pubescent boys make the best hypnotic subjects. If they are insecure - lost their family or have strong emotional problems, they are looking for security at the unconscious level." Jones said. "After puberty, the hypnotic control drops off very sharply. It is difficult to build a simulacrum = alternative personality. We don't know why."

"Five little Fumanchu kiddies under agency control."

"That's what you want, isn't it?"

"It's exactly what we want," the agent said.

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True to his word, Longley brought four more boys to the facility. There were changes. They slept in a small dormitory - arranged bed, locker, bed, locker and so on. Captain Barton was appointed to look after them. His quarters were a self contained flat at the end of the hut. Peter felt vaguely familiar with the new environment, and didn't mind. He thought he'd lived this way before. His new companions were Jordan, a thick-set twelve year old, Nathaniel who was a small, thin, the same age as Daniel - Twelve. There was also Bobby who was eleven, with red hair and glasses, and Travis who, at ten, was the youngest.

The boys were given uniforms - navy blue cotton drill pullover shirts with epaulettes, navy blue drill trousers, black belts, combat boots, and navy blue baseball caps. Colonel Weldon, head of the unit, imposed a strong military regime, insisting on tidiness in lockers, tidy uniforms, drill, inspections, lots of cleaning and polishing, and little time for relaxation. The boys looked forward to school in order to be away from him. Their mornings were spent on academic subjects, and the afternoons devoted to physical activities - gymnastics, athletics, judo, unarmed combat and blade work - fighting with swords and knives. They learned how to ride motorcycles and drive cars. They learned how to shoot rifles and use pistols.

Free time was between three in the afternoon, and six in the evening, when the boys had tea in the mess. On weekends, they had the freedom of the island, exploring the airfield and hangars, storage sheds, and unused houses. They often went camping and fishing. Usually Sergeant Barton came along to see they were safe, and not getting into too much trouble. Sometimes they went out on their own.

Peter never got to know the other boys personal lives. They were friendly enough, and they could work well individually, or as a team, but none of the boys could talk about themselves or remember their past. Their families, whether they had brothers or sisters, parents, or what schools they had attended were subjects of mystery. There was nothing - a blank past, and it was difficult to talk about nothing.

Longley was happy. The project was working. Five boys, each without a past or identity, were being trained, military fashion, as if they were warriors. None of them thought his life was strange. Life was very comfortable. Discipline was strict, but fair. There was no corporal punishment or cruelty. They had their own motorbikes, fishing and camping gear. They were being very well educated and became extremely fit. In many ways, it was an ideal boy's life. Despite the tough training, they enjoyed being in the facility, whatever it was.

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Chapter 4

Hunters and Hunted

Soon, the boys were bigger from a good diet and lots of physical training. Daniel and Nathan were now twelve and a half years old. It was a good time - childhood's end.

"Sometimes, people commit dreadful crimes," Longley said to the boys during one of their Monday briefings.

They sat in comfortable chairs with desktop armrests that could be swung in front of them whenever they had to write in their notebooks. Dr. Jones and Colonel Weldon, the Unit Commander, sat at the back of the room watching and taking notes. Sergeant Barton was absent.

"Such as what, Sir?" Travis asked.

"Serial Killers?" Nathaniel asked.

"That sort of thing," Longley said. "As part of your training, you must deal with the fact that - on occasions, you may have to kill people."

"You mean - dead?" Travis asked, eyes wide open.

"Yes, Travis. Kill them dead."

Travis swallowed. "I think I'm too young for that sort of thing," he said.

"Yes. You are too young, but you can help us."

"How?"

"The government has found out that there is a group of citizens who like killing other people. They set their victims loose on an Island and hunt them. It is their idea of sport. Some of their victims are boys - your age."

"Why not just arrest them and charge them?" Peter asked.

"That's the problem," Longley said. "We have no direct evidence against them, and these men come from powerful families. Some of them are high up in political life. One is a senator. We have to catch them red-handed in the act of hunting you - then we can lay charges."

"You!" Jordan exclaimed. "You aren't thinking about letting them hunt us!"

"Think of it as an exercise," Colonel Weldon said, walking to the front of the group. "Remember your

training. They will think they are hunting Travis. Actually, you will be hunting them."

"So we catch them and hand them over to the police?" Nathaniel asked.

"Not really."

Bobby, who was normally the quietest of the five took his glasses off and pointed at Weldon. "You want us to kill them. No political fuss - no involvement of the press. No 'fallout'?"

"They simply disappear?" Peter asked.

"All you have to do, is leave their bodies where you ... terminate them. We'll clean up afterwards," Longley told them.

"Why not do the whole job yourselves?" Bobby asked.

"It's a 'dirty' operation. It involves a senator. We have to keep it a secret - even from our own agents. "

"It's illegal?" Peter asked.

Longley nodded and looked seriously at him. "Sometimes, people have to die - without benefit of justice. In this instance, application of justice would lead to a lot of unwelcome publicity. If you're going to become - undercover agents - you're going to have to be blooded some time."

"OK. I'm happy to do it," Peter said, noting Longley's surprise.

"Count me in," Nathaniel said.

"Me too," Bobby said, putting his hand up.

"And me," Jordon said.

"And I'm the bait," Travis said, grinning. "Do I get a Ruger or a Browning?"

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A month later, they initiated the operation.

An undercover agent was to deliver a boy who had been kidnapped to the hunters. Travis was chosen as the bait. He was restrained with two sets of handcuffs. One set went around his ankles, and the other secured his wrists behind his back. He was gagged and placed in a Hessian sack, then dumped on the bottom of a small boat. There was the sound of a marine motor, the rocking of the vessel, and the strong smell of fear. His fear.

After a couple of hours, he felt himself being carried and was dumped onto solid wood planking. It wasn't rocking, so he assumed it was a jetty of some sort. The top of the sack opened and he was able to look up at the six men who stood around him. Five wore camouflaged hunters clothing and carried hunting rifles across their shoulders.

At the sight of the terrified youngster, wearing a white polo shirt and white boxer shorts, the men laughed.

"A bit small, isn't he?" one of the men asked.

"Looks fit. Eleven years old, you said?"

The undercover agent nodded.

"He'll give us a good run," one of the men said, producing a key and unlocking the boy's handcuffs and fetters. "And he'll be easy to see in the dark."

Travis stood up. He didn't have to pretend to be terrified - he was, as he put it later, 'shit scared'.

Agent Thompson, who brought him to the island on the small motor-boat took his envelope of money, checked it briefly and returned to his craft. The rest of the men checked their rifles.

"It's like this, Kid, we are hunters. Boy hunters, if you like. It's a sport. We are going to try to shoot you."

"You ever seen the head of a deer on a shield in a trophy room? Well that will be you. But we're going to play fair. We'll cut you loose on the island and give you an hour to get away. Then we'll hunt you down. If you can survive here until tomorrow night, we'll sail away and leave you in peace. If we see you before then, you're dead. There's a gate in that fence over there. Off you go. You've got an hour on us. Then it's hunting we will go.

The men joined in:

"A hunting we will go,

a hunting we will go.

Ho hi the merry oh,

A hunting we will go."

They were liquored up, and their behaviour was bizarre. Travis didn't wait. He headed to the small gate that was a gap in the fence, running for his life.

He heard the boat pattering away into the darkness. For a moment, he wished he could jump into the water and swim after it, but that would mean cocking up the whole

operation. No, he'd have to let undercover agent, Thompson, get right away. Somewhere in the darkness, his friends were waiting for him. He headed along the unused track that led to the rendezvous point.

Before the operation, the boys had spent a week on the island, exploring it carefully. There was even a fail-safe point in case things went wrong - a dug-out bunker hidden by bushes in the side of a hill by a dry watercourse. All he had to do, was lead the men across the island. Easy - peasy, Colonel Weldon had said.

The other four boys were waiting for him. They had hidden in long grass beside the track, a hundred metres short. He hadn't seen them, but was relieved when they jumped out of the grass onto his back and pummeled him happily.

"I got the bait," Nathaniel said.

"Get off me," Travis said.

"They made you wear white," Jordan said. "That's not fair."

"We've got your uniform here," Peter said. "Better get those off and darken up. A few minutes later, Travis changed into his navy blue work shirt and long trousers with a black leather belt. Bobby painted his face with dark green and black, and Peter handed him his sidearm.

"It's a Heckler & Koch so it should keep you happy."

"We're supposed to strangle them," Travis said. "A bit hard if they keep together." He went through his

pistol drill and clipped a full magazine in place, then placed it into his shoulder pouch.

"A hunting we will go,
A hunting we will go,
Hi, ho, the merry oh,
A hunting we will go."

The boys looked at him, thinking he might have flipped his lid. "Oh, don't worry - they sang it to me - so I'm just getting back on them."

"Quiet!" Peter hushed, looking through his night glasses. "They're coming." He could see the men in his night glasses. They were looking at the ground, trying to follow Travis by his tracks - not an easy thing to do in the dark.

"Cover our tracks," Peter said. The boys used bushes to obliterate where they'd been.

"They've spread out in a wide line. We'll take the one on our far left first, and work in from there."

The boys dropped into the long grass and melted into it in the darkness.

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Konrad Bleacher was a wealthy dentist with a love of hunting and firearms. It had become boring - deer hunting in the deep forests. He'd been to Africa and Manchuria, where he'd spent a lot of money to little effect. It was only by chance that he'd discovered this sport - 'Cub Hunting', they called it. They never chose the same locality twice. Their prey was human - usually

a derelict or homeless boy or teenager. The victim was told what was about to happen, and did all things possible to avoid capture. Some fought back. This made the hunt even more exciting. Nobody expected this little boy to resist, but he was small, so he would probably hide himself well.

A flash of white at the corner of his eye distracted him. He adjusted his night vision glasses and looked. It was the boy's T-shirt hanging draped over a low shrub beneath a tall pine tree. At least the boy had the sense to get rid of it. He looked about with the night vision glasses. Everything seemed quiet. He approached the bush and tried to remove the T-shirt from the shrub. It seemed to be stuck, so he tugged it. A ground level noose closed tightly around his ankles, and a branch of the tree which had been pulled down swung upwards. He was hoisted into the air. In his panic, he dropped his rifle. Desperately, he cried out and after a few helpless swings, grabbed for the sheath knife pouched on his belt.

His hand was knocked aside and he found his face was inches from the small boy he had been sent to hunt.

"Surprise," Travis said.

Konrad tried to grab the boy, but Jordan and Nathan grasped him by the arms. Travis looped a thin cord around Konrad's neck. It was a noose made of a slip knot at one end, and a thumb knot tied at a strategic point along the string. The boy pulled and the thumb knot slipped through the slip knot which tightened to prevent the noose loosening. It had pulled tightly

around the man's throat. Travis tied it off, and the man found himself choking as he tried to breathe. It was a losing battle. The last thing he heard as he blacked out was the sound of a small high voice singing, "A hunting we will go," in a soft high voice. Four minutes later, he was brain dead. It was all over.

"Quietly done. You know, Travis, you're not really too young to kill people," Peter said. "Now for the next one."

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Chapter 5

Dead Men Tell no Tales

"It's a Remington," Peter said knowingly, examining Konrad's bolt action rifle. "Very accurate, especially with this night sight. I'll bet he's zeroed it in."

"I'm a better shot than you, so I should have it," Nathaniel said. Peter handed the rifle over. "You only get one shot - then the other three will know someone's after them."

"We got one quietly. I doubt if we can do another silent kill," Bobby said.

"That shouldn't stop us trying," Jordan said. "I think the exercise is supposed to be silent."

"Where are they?" Travis asked, looking about nervously. "We should always know where they are."

"Don't worry," Peter said. "They've grouped together on the beach. They're brewing a quart pot on a small campfire. It must be their rest point."

"I could do with a coffee," Travis said.

"You could always go over and ask them," Peter said, jokingly.

"What if I called out and ran off," Travis said. "That might make them run after me."

"Totally out of the question," Peter said. "It would get you shot for sure."

The boys decided to reconnoiter the beach approaches. There was a gentle path in one spot, that the men had obviously used to reach the sandy shore. There was no place to lay a trap, and it was too sandy to make any sort of trip hole, but the boys were able to get close enough to listen in to the men as they talked.

"No sign of Konrad. He should be here by now, he knows the schedule." Senator Brett Whittlebrek said.

"He might have picked up the kid's trail, Senator."

The boys withdrew quietly. They didn't want to be detected, and it was dangerous to get too close. When they felt they were far enough away, Peter pointed them towards their bunker. The boys decided it was safe enough to use the hidey hole, which was behind a disguised metal door in a steep bank. It was hidden by thick bushes.

In the bunker's red night-vision lighting, they brewed coffee and ate from their ration packs. Loud

conversation could give them away, so they spoke quietly.

"We have to get them while it is dark. I don't think we can do it in daylight," Nathaniel said.

"We have to reduce their numbers. Four men against five boys. I don't like the odds." Peter agreed.

Their observation of the men on the beach paid off. One of the men, Jake, decided to go in search of Konrad. He tossed his coffee into the fire, pulled his rifle over his shoulder, and headed up the path away from the beach. He had moved out a few hundred meters when he noticed something white moving through the trees. Quickly, he sighted through his rifle's night scope. He decided to chase the figure, which was actually Travis's T-shirt being pulled along by a cord.

The men on the beach looked up when they heard a shot.

"Jake's got something," Brett said. "Come on, Ed, Walter."

The men ran up the path with their rifles at the ready. In the far distance, on a low hillock, a small light was flashing. The men moved forward, not concealing themselves, but cautiously. They saw something swinging from a large pine tree. As they got closer, they saw it was someone - Bleacher's body - hanging by its ankles.

"What in all of hell . . ." Brett said as the men examined Konrad's corpse. Stunned, they crept to where the light was flashing. It was a small, flat signaling device sitting squarely on Jake's chest. A neat bullet

hole showed at his nose, exiting through a fist sized cavity at the back of his skull.

"We're not alone," Walter said. "Someone else is here, Senator."

"Bastards," Brett said. "They're on to us."

"Why the light?" Ed asked. There was a sudden jerk of his head and he flipped backwards. The sound of a shot echoed around them.

"Down!" Brett said, pulling Walter to the ground. Ed flipped around on the ground, then lay still.

Brett placed his hand on Ed's neck and felt for his carotid pulse. There was none, and the man's head lolled about in a bloody mess.

"Special ops? Why?" Walter asked.

"Isn't it obvious? They don't want a scandal. Get rid of us, and they get rid of their problem."

"So they know about us. Where does that lead us?"

"Nowhere," Brett said. "Let's get back to the wharf. We can leave by boat in the dark. Keep low."

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From where they lay watching, the boys watched as the two surviving men ran doubled low towards the wharf. Peter smiled. "They know we're here," he said. Now they'll try to run. They've got a speed boat at the wharf.

"A way of escape. We should have disabled it," Nathaniel said. "Should we wave 'goodbye' to them?"

"I don't think so. They've still got their rifles. We should go back to the bunker. We'll be safe there"

As they climbed up the steep hill bank towards the small bushes that hid the bunker's entrance, there was the sound of a motorboat leaving the island.

"Seems they got clean away," Travis said, disappointed.

"Can't win them all," Peter said. "Let's wait in the bunker until daylight." There was a bright flash from the ocean, and a while later the noise of a distant explosion.

"We didn't do that," Jordan said.

"I think the agency must have had a backup plan," Nathaniel said, "In case we screwed up."

"We didn't screw up," Peter said. "You can't cover everything. We hit three of the bastards."

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Weldon was very pleased with the operation. "You boys did a great job," he said. "Just remember that it isn't always possible to achieve everything in an operation. Those men went hunting and disappeared. They must have had a boating accident. That's the official story."

Later, as he was debriefing the staff, he was able to tell them that the boys had succeeded in killing three men without feeling any sense of guilt or trauma.

"They seemed to enjoy themselves," he said. "If its an important mission, they'll terminate anyone we target."

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File Note:

It is important to give subjects a triggering signal that can be activated in the future to send them on operations that we have decided on well in advance. It may be the destruction of infrastructure, or the assassination of a well protected person. Whatever it is, the person must take on the persona allotted to him. It may be necessary for the operative to contact his case-manager for instructions. A problem may occur if a sleeper waits for a long time before being involved in a covert operation. We suggest that a verse from a poem is a suitable trigger, especially if the poem is not well known:

“There is a cluster far away
Of stars where alien children play,
Who see the lights of stars above
And wish that they could also rove
Between the fields of asteroids
And other things beyond the voids.”

“I think I know it now,” Daniel said sleepily.

“Peter has gone. He is buried deep into your unconscious mind, where he sleeps until someone wakes him with that poem. Until then, Peter does not exist. Do you understand?”

“I understand. Peter does not exist.” Daniel said sleepily.

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“I’m very pleased with the results. Double-blind hypnosis. It’s always been theoretical, until now. Your little assassins are almost ready for action,” the doctor said. “I think it’s time they got back into the real world. We have to engineer their cover. The idea

is to foster them with trusted people, and let them live normal lives until we need them."

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Chapter 6

The Roamer

The sign said,

Watson Clinic for Neurologically Impaired Children

"What is your name?" Doctor Anderson asked.

"I am Daniel Holland, An orphan. My parents died in an accident, and I went into shock. I have made a full recovery."

"Perfect. Open your eyes and sit up, Daniel."

Daniel shook his head and opened his eyes.

"How do you feel?"

"Good."

"Do you remember anything?"

"Yes," the boy said, looking faintly puzzled. "The accident. It was pretty gross, but I can think about it now without getting upset."

"You're a very good patient, Daniel. That's why you've made such a good recovery. Relaxation counseling is a very useful treatment for Post Traumatic Shock Syndrome. I've helped you to dull your memories of your accident, and your time here, but you'll find that none

of your schoolwork is missing. You'll still get As for Algebra."

Daniel laughed. "Thanks, Doctor. I guess I'll miss this place - a bit."

"I'd have liked to have treated you for a bit longer, but the merger has come through, and we're being taken over by The Wellington Medical Corporation, so I'm not sure what is happening to our work here."

"Everything changes. Mr. McCallum is coming to collect me. He's my child welfare officer. I'm being placed with the Wardley family."

"I hope you do well there, Daniel."

"He says they're nice people."

"I haven't met them, but I believe they are. I'm told they have a son your age, and a daughter who is a little older."

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"Do you like it," Sarah Wardley said, putting her hands on Daniel's shoulders as he inspected his new bedroom. It had a low wooden bed, white painted walls, a window with pale blue patterned curtains, a wardrobe and a side board. On one wall was a book case, and there was a student desk covered with a laminex map of the world.

"It's very nice," Daniel said. "Thank you."

"We haven't overdone it?"

"It's much better than hospital blues and grays," Daniel said.

"It must have been terrible," she commiserated.

"Actually, it was all right - for an institution."

She squeezed his shoulders and left him to unpack his small case. He opened the drawers of his dresser and put his clothes away neatly. 2 white shirts, ties, various coloured T-shirts, assorted shorts, pullovers, jackets, underwear, long trousers on a hangar, two pairs of navy blue jeans, a yellow T-shirt and a couple of flannelette shirts with long sleeves. He removed his clothes and hard shoes, then changed into a plain green T-shirt and grey shorts.

He tried the bed, lying on the smooth cover. The mattress was soft, but firm. He liked the feel of it, and pulled the pillows down under his head. Then he sat on the side of it and pulled on his sox and sneakers.

"Come and meet Jack and the kids," Sarah called from the top of the stairs. Daniel went down to the living room, where Sarah had prepared a light morning tea. Small cakes and cookies, cordial in jugs, and coffee.

Jack Wardley was a large man, powerfully built and tall. He was distant, yet affable, and Daniel wondered if fostering was his favourite occupation. Sarah, on the other hand was gushing with enthusiasm.

"This is Sam," she said, introducing a thin boy with sandy hair. "And this is Annabelle."

"Sam, Annabelle," Daniel said, offering his hand. Hugs would come later, but the kids were friendly enough for a first meeting. They sat around the table, small talking.

"I'm starting Middle school next year," Sam said. Anne's a Freshman."

"I guess I'm starting middle school, too," Daniel said. "We had school in the hospital, and I managed to keep up, so I don't have to stay back a grade."

"Were you in hospital for a long time?" Sam asked.

"I'm nearly thirteen now, so it must have been two years. I don't remember a lot of it. Don't want to, really."

"So don't pry," Sarah said firmly to Sam. "Some things are better forgotten."

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Foster brothers were not the only curious people in Daniel's new world. When he got to school, his English teacher tried to quiz him about his past. He said he still had amnesia, and she hit a brick wall with him, so she tried investigating her new pupil by making a few phone calls. The Institute that Daniel was in during his hospitalization had been taken over by a larger private medical company. They were polite, but non committal.

"You must realise, Miss Malley, that we can't reveal confidential information about patients. We can say that Daniel was here and was successfully treated for traffic injuries, amnesia, and other problems." The voice on the 'phone said.

"I just wanted his school records," Miss Malley persisted.

"I'm afraid we're a medical company, not an educational one. Any school records would have been sent off to the appropriate educational department attached to the state where he resided. Have you tried them?"

"But I can't find out which state that was," Miss Malley said, exasperated.

"I'm afraid we can't help you, then. Good luck with your research, Ma'am. And thanks for calling Wellington Health Corporation. We are here to serve." The line dropped out. Miss Malley listened with some disbelief to the non responsive line, then put the receiver down with a slight slam.

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Daniel Holland had very little recollection of his time at the clinic. He was able to read, write, and do math, which satisfied his teachers. In fact, he was an above average student. He excelled at sports, which was a plus in terms of making friends. There was only one minor attempt to bully the new boy, but the miscreant found himself thrown roughly onto a concrete path, and rose to find his victim laughing at him. When the boys were accosted by the duty teacher, Daniel claimed he had merely tripped, and it was an accident. He was suitably sorry about the boy's gravel rashes. Daniel's profile rose considerably with the other students...

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A week later, Miss Malley was surprised to receive a summons to the principal's office. Two men in suits

were waiting for her. They introduced themselves as Captain Hallam, of the Federal Investigative service, and his assistant, Agent Robyn Bradshaw.

"Federal Investigative Service? You mean the F.B.I.?" Miss Malley asked.

"No," Hallam said. "If we chose initials, we'd be the F.I.S."

"That's one piece of alphabet soup I haven't heard of," she said.

"We do research into the activities of people who are not necessarily criminals or terrorists, but who may be worth watching, because whatever they are doing may not be in the interests of the country." Hallam said.

"Oh. I hope you aren't including me in that broad definition," Miss Malley said with a slightly nervous laugh.

"No, but you did telephone Wellington Health, asking about Daniel Holland,"

"I was only trying to find his school records. His enrolment was from the State Fostering Agency. He's staying with the Wardleys - nice people. We took him into middle school on their advice. He'd be a little too old for Grade School."

"S.F.A. does have another meaning," Hallam said with a light laugh. It broke the tension. "You were a lieutenant in the army, before you retired to become a school teacher. You do know about confidentiality - National security?"

"Yes."

"This is confidential. A bit over three years ago, Daniel was involved in a car accident, and his parents were killed. Daniel was trapped in the car with his mothers decapitated body. He wouldn't let go of her head when the rescuers finally got him out. They removed it from him eventually. He went into shock, and developed Post Traumatic Amnesia."

"I've heard of that one."

"Well - he was placed in an orphanage, but was abducted from it, by people pretending to be State Welfare agents. He vanished completely. There was no trace of him until two months ago, when he was found wandering the streets. He asked a policeman to help him. Of course, the State was overjoyed to find him. The recovery of kidnapped boys happens very rarely. If they're found, they're usually..."

"Dead?"

"Yes. We're not sure if it was a stereotypical kidnapping. There was no ransom demand, no evidence of any sexual abuse, and he had a couple of scars on his legs, but nothing indicating physical abuse. They could have been there as a result of the accident. Because he had no memory of what had happened to him, he was sent to the Watson Clinic - the one taken over by Wellington Health.

"Their report indicates that, during his absence, Daniel was kept in excellent physical health. He had superb reflexes, received first class dental treatment, and was well educated. Another thing they noticed was that he responded to military drill commands. How many

twelve year olds do you know who can stand at attention, ease, easy, and march - not only correctly, but precisely."

"He can use jiu-jitsu, too," Miss Malley said. "The other day, one of our school bullies, Jarvis Monk, tried to heavy him. I was watching from the classroom window. Quick as a flit, Daniel tossed him onto the concrete path. I thought I'd recognised the move. It was 'ashi-garuma' a loin throw. Not a beginner's technique, Captain. Mind you, he said it was an accident."

"So he might have been at some sort of military school," Bradshaw mused. "I'm puzzled as to why one would kidnap a boy to put him through military school."

"It doesn't add up," Hallam said. "I was supposed to handle his case when he disappeared, but I was quickly kicked upstairs to a desk job in D.E.A. Then I managed to get transferred into this job. I suspect some government agency is behind Daniel's disappearance, but it's not a regular outfit. It could be related to the military a sub-contractor. They're something of a closed shop - very secretive, and some of the things they do are not always strictly legal."

"I'm hoping you might help us, Miss Malley. We need someone to keep an eye on young Daniel. Try to be nice to him, be a 'pal'. A little bit of slight praise. Get to know his foster family. No favoritism, mind. Feel free to discipline him, but positively. Above all, get in touch with us if you feel anything is going wrong." He handed her his card. "Here's my contact details."

"I certainly will."

"And please do not mention us to the boy, his parents, or any of your colleagues. If anyone gets curious, just say we were asking you about something that happened during your active military service. You're only a witness, and it's none of their business."

"Once an officer, always an officer, eh?" Miss Malley said.

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Chapter 7

Jarvis

Daniel was surprised to find that Miss Malley wasn't the dragon he had supposed her to be. She praised his essay. "Your work is well set out, writing very neat, and you handle spelling and grammar well," she said. "Technically, excellent. Now try to get some good ideas. Write about your weekend - what you did, and sports you played. That way, you will begin to get good story ideas."

"Thank you, Miss Malley," Daniel said, taking his assignment and looking with some disbelief at the 'A-' she had given him. He wasn't quite sure about the minus. Did she mean he almost got an A?

"You got an 'A'?" Tessa Dewberry said in disbelief as she looked at his paper. "She hardly ever gives 'A's. Not to boys, anyway. Your handwriting is very good. That may be it. Most boys are grubs."

"She even smiled at me," Daniel said. "I didn't know she could smile."

"I think she likes you - because you're a spunk and you're sexy. Strong, handsome, good at sport, and you're getting zits."

"Oh, shit. Where?" Daniel asked, concerned.

"On your face. Only little ones. Perfectly normal."

Daniel laughed. He liked to be with Tessa. She was funny. They were becoming good friends. "Nothing a bit of skin-care can't fix," he said cheerfully. "What are you doing Friday night?"

"Why?"

"There's a dance at the youth center. We could meet there."

"You're asking me for a date?"

"Why not?"

"Then pick me up six thirty at my house and do it properly. That way, you get to meet my folks."

"But - I can't drive yet, and I haven't got a car."

"What are foster parents for? I'm sure yours will chauffer us."

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When he brought up the subject of the dance with Sarah and Jack, they were very supportive. Jack was recruited to be the official driver, especially as Sam and Annabelle were keen to attend. Phone calls were made, and the Dewberrys were pleased Tessa had a date with a boy from school. They knew Sarah and trusted her

judgment when she assured them that Daniel seemed to be a really nice boy.

The dance was well organised, with volunteer parents managing entry, supervising, and serving in the canteen. The disk jockey was already in action, playing "Freestyler" Most of the kids were on the floor dancing. Daniel steered Tessa into the group and they quickly blended into the scene.

Jarvis Monk had managed to smuggle a small flask of bourbon into the hall. He was careful to drink quietly, unobserved, but he was quite tipsy when he confronted Daniel and Tessa.

"How about it," he asked, slurring his words slightly.

"I don't think so," Tessa said lightly. "I'm perfectly happy with the partner I've got."

"Piece of trailer shit on welfare," Jarvis said, swinging his fist into Daniel's face. The punch was a complete surprise, and Daniel felt numb. His feet turned to jelly, and he fell to the floor semi-conscious, with a bad dose of concussion.

For a few moments, there was pandemonium. Jack grabbed Jarvis and pushed him out of the hall. Sarah and Tessa tended to the unconscious boy lying on the floor. Daniel was put into the prone position, and an ambulance was called. By the time it arrived, he was conscious and nursing a sore head on a seat in the canteen.

"We'll just get you checked out," Jack said as he helped him into the ambulance.

"I didn't see it coming," Daniel muttered.

"King hits are like that," Jack said. "Sarah's coming to the hospital with you. I'm taking the others home."

He spent an hour in casualty, being checked over. The doctors decided that he should stay overnight for observation. Sarah rang Jack and made arrangements to stay with him. She was given a bed in the next room.

Jack arrived at the hospital after midnight, so Sarah could be at home with Sam and Annabelle. She drove home, and Jack checked on Daniel before retiring on the bed. A nurse came by doing observations. She checked Daniel's temperature, blood pressure, pulse and eye reflexes, then told him to go to sleep.

In the morning, Jack and Daniel had breakfast together in his private ward.

"You know, we couldn't afford this normally," Jack said, "But you've got first class insurance cover."

"I'd share it with you if I could," Daniel said. "Mum and Dad were well organised - financially. I guess I'm sort of - lucky - in spite of everything."

"Oh, we're not jealous," Jack said. "Something tells me you've had a bit of a rough start to life."

"I guess," Daniel said, sipping on his fruit juice. "You know, the concussion gave me weird dreams last night."

"Concussion can do that," Jack said.

"I was on an Island. There were four other boys with me. We were training to do something - like soldiers."

"That's a strange dream. Boys often have adventures in their sleep - comes from reading exciting books."

Daniel laughed. "I guess. Miss Malley likes us to read adventure stories."

"You seem to like your English teacher."

"She seems strict, but when you get to know her a bit, she's O.K."

There was a knock on the door, and Jack was surprised to find two uniformed policemen waiting for him.

"Mr. Wardley?" one asked.

Jack nodded.

"I'm sergeant Cotter, and this is Constable Ackers. Can we have a word with you? In private."

They walked down the passage for a short distance.

"Where was your foster son last night, at about three this morning?"

"Here, of course. He was admitted for observation."

"Where were you?"

"At three, I was here. I took over from Sarah about two o'clock this morning."

"That's Daniel, isn't it?"

"Yes, Daniel Holland, my foster son."

"Did he wander about last night? Go to the toilet, for instance?"

"No. He was on a heart monitor," Jack said. "If he tried to get out of bed, alarms would have sounded."

"Your wife got home at about two thirty. The neighbours are light sleepers and heard her drive in."

"What's this all about?"

"Jarvis Monk was murdered last night - strangled," Cotter said.

"Shit," Jack said, shocked. "You don't think . . . Daniel . . ."

"No. We've spoken to the nurse and viewed Daniel's instrumentation recording. He was asleep here when the boy died, so there's no suggestion he did it."

"The point is, someone broke into his house and killed him while he was in bed asleep." Ackers said. "He was out to it - drunk by all reports and didn't put up any sort of struggle."

"I pushed him out of the disco," Jack said, "but wasn't unduly rough with him. I guess I should have reported him."

"Why didn't you? We could have charged him - Drunk and disorderly, being an intoxicated minor, and assault against Daniel."

"Hey. He's a kid," Jack protested. "Boys will be boys. I got into a lot of fights when I was his age. As far as complaining about the assault - that would be Daniel's call."

"Thanks, Mr. Wardley. We may want to see you again," Cotter said, shutting and pocketing his notebook.

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Chapter 8

Journey into Night

By Monday morning, after a very quiet weekend, Daniel was ready for school. He felt fine, and the warnings to report any blackouts or fainting spells immediately, were taken, but ignored. What was a smack on the head between friends? There was, however, a major problem. Jarvis Monk was dead. There was no getting around that nasty fact, and Daniel was able to talk about it during a special counseling session with his fellow students.

"I've been told to take things quietly for a month or so," he said to the class. "Jarvis was a bit of a bully, and I didn't like him much, but I'm sorry he died. The police checked us out thoroughly. Jack and me - well - we were in the hospital and all the nurses checked on us all the time, so it wasn't us."

"His dad's down the station now being grilled," Rodney said.

"And his two brothers. I don't think Tad would do it," Mary Enesleigh said. "He might be dumb, but he's pretty gentle, really."

"All right. I think we'll wrap this up," Miss Malley said. "If any of you want to talk to me about it, or find yourselves getting upset, then come and let me know. It's very important that we all express our feelings about Jarvis. Yes, Mary?"

The prim little girl in large spectacles stood up and looked around carefully. She was slightly plump, but

was popular - not merely for being a bit of a nerd, but she knew how to be friendly with everyone.

"Miss Malley, I know Jarvis wasn't all that popular, but - perhaps we could all bring flowers tomorrow and put them somewhere - for a day or so. We could put a photo of him - just to let everyone know we are sorry and he isn't alone?"

"I think that's an excellent idea," Miss Malley said. I'll talk it over with staff, and we'll find a suitable spot to make a flower memorial for him.

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The classroom was empty, except for Miss Malley and Daniel. He sat nervously swinging his legs back and forth.

"It's not so much a dream, Miss Malley. It's more like I'm remembering something," he said.

"Concussion can do strange things, and memories might not be reliable, Daniel."

"It might be possible for concussion to break my amnesia."

"That might not be wise," she said quietly. "Your amnesia might be protecting you from dreadful memories."

Daniel knew what she was getting at - in a most oblique way. It was weird for adults to talk about sex. They always skirted around it and made you read between the lines to get the message across. Tessa was an expert. She called the friendly female banter "cat" which meant that at every word a reputation died, and

books were written within glances or reputations destroyed at the upward twitch of an eyebrow.

"I got checked out pretty thoroughly. Any abuse leaves signs - especially in that area. I didn't have any signs of being abused."

"Abuse takes many forms," she said. "It isn't just physical, sexual, or mental. People can be abused by a power play. One reason I left the army was barracks politics. If that wasn't abuse, I don't know what was."

"I didn't know you were in the army," Daniel said, surprised.

"I was a lieutenant. Now I'm going to ask you some questions and want you to answer them without thinking about the answers. Stand up and face me. It's a sort of game, she said, standing in front of him."

He stood up from his chair. "O.K."

"An apple is?"

"Red"

"Good. A bird in the hand is worth two in the?"

"Bush."

"O Soto Gari is?"

"A leg sweep."

"Ne rai!" she said bowing her head.

Daniel bowed his head to her.

"Ich, Ni, San?"

"Shih!" Daniel shouted. He began to sweat.

"That's enough. Sit down," she said, resuming her seat.

Confused, Daniel sat and looked at her with his mouth slightly open.

"Where did you learn Judo?"

"I've never learnt it."

"Oh, yes you have. I saw you throw Jarvis with Ashi Garuma. That's a brown belt technique. You controlled the throw, so he didn't land too heavily."

"I'm going, now," Daniel said, standing up and walking to the door.

"Daniel, don't tell anyone about this," Miss Malley said. "Whatever you do, don't tell anyone you are getting your memories back. It could be very dangerous for you."

Daniel stepped out into the corridor and slammed the classroom door behind him. He felt angry - betrayed somehow. He wasn't sure what he was feeling. The corridor seemed to spin before his eyes, and he felt himself falling - falling - falling.

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Gerry Hallam sipped the last of his coffee and put his cup on the small side table. He leaned back and looked around Sandra Malley's living room. It was the sort of room a school teacher would have - older furniture in good condition, covered with samples of crochet. A few family pictures on the walls, and items of bric-a-brac on shelves. Sandra came in from the kitchen with a plate of assorted cookies.

"I don't get much opportunity to entertain people, Gerry. I'm glad you didn't bring your friend."

"It's nice to relax," Hallam said, "even if it's official business." He selected a chocolate chip and bit into it, chewing and swallowing before continuing. "We have given investigation into Daniel's abduction a greater priority. Our agency's mandate is the odd and unusual."

"A sort of Weird Case Files?"

"No. We don't look at spooky spookys or aliens. It's more of a curious watch-dog. Our investigations often reveal criminal activity, and we gather evidence which is used by the F.B.I., Police, or Security Service. They're flat out with cases, but we have the time to browse about. It's a bit of an indulgence, but we have often been useful."

"Daniel?" she asked.

"Daniel has raised a red flag. One - he was abducted. Two - he returned with almost total amnesia and that, in the absence of brain damage, is very rare. Three - someone who attacked him is now dead. Four - he has abilities that we don't expect in a twelve year old boy. He doesn't have X-ray vision, fly, or create storms, but he is - a bit like a young commando - a seal."

"The military training?"

"Exactly. Why would anyone put a kid through that?"

"A cult?"

"Maybe. Some sort of paramilitary organisation the government isn't supposed to know about? We have a long list of those."

"There's one organisation you haven't mentioned - the Government itself. The Military, or one of our security services."

"I don't want to think about that. Not for the moment. The military is a huge organizational maze. It protects itself. It runs covert operations, but they are all sanctioned by someone - usually a government committee. There's oversight - control."

"But what if - despite all the safeguards - Something slips through the safety net under the guise of secrecy, patriotism and national security? Remember Cuba? they tried to cover that up at first," she said.

Gerry took another biscuit. "Then - if it's a top secret, covert, operation, we could have a problem," he admitted.

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Chapter 9

Fusion

Daniel lay back on his bed cover and gazed at the ceiling. Judo. He knew Judo? That was impossible - he was never into martial arts. His sensei - teacher - who was it? How did he know a judo teacher was called 'Sensei'.

He let himself doze. He was tired, but not sleepy. Suddenly, he imagined a voice - a man's voice. He looked up to see a clear view of the man, Doctor Jones.

"What's your name?" the soldier asked Daniel, dressed in a judo gi.

"My name is Peter John Walsh," Daniel said. He remembered to keep his feet in contact with the floor.

"How old are you, Peter?" The soldier asked, adjusting his black cloth belt around his heavy white duck judo tunic.

"I am nearly twelve years old."

"Been at this long?"

"A year. I have a junior brown belt."

Another snatch of conversation: "What's level five?"

"A technique with which the recipient has little chance of survival."

"Killing techniques?"

"We do not call them that."

Barton. It was Sergeant Barton who taught him and the other boys. Colonel Weldon was their controller - in overall command. Who were the other boys? Jordan, Nathaniel, Bobby, and Travis. He could remember their faces.

He sat up, sweating.

His name was 'Peter'. They called him Peter. Doctor Jones called him 'Peter'.

The door of his bedroom opened and Sarah looked in. "Are you all right, Daniel?" she asked.

The room became clear and sharp.

"Yes. I must have dozed off." He said, getting up and stretching. "Do you have Miss Malley's phone number?"

"Why would you want to call her?"

Daniel looked at her for a moment. Was he imagining things? Sarah Wardley was his foster mother - surely he could trust her.

"I wanted to ask her about an assignment," he lied glibly.

"Well, it can wait until tomorrow. You're still getting over concussion. That's why you fainted at school. You must take things easy for a while. Teachers need their rest from students, too. Give her a break."

He was about to say "I can find it in the phone book," but he didn't. Her warning to him was very precise: "Daniel, don't tell anyone about this," she had said. "Whatever you do, don't tell anyone you are getting your memories back. It could be very dangerous for you."

"I think I should get a bit of exercise. Too much napping makes a boy fat. Besides, I'm neglecting my bike."

"Take it easy, then," Sarah said.

His mountain bike was new, purchased from his trust fund. Funny that, he'd been told by someone it didn't

exist, but it did. The bike wasn't flashy, but light and fast. He put his helmet on and rode off down the street.

"Be back by five thirty!" Sarah called out after him.

"Right!" he called back.

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He went North, then circled round the block before heading down College Road where Miss Malley lived. There was a white ford sedan parked in front of her house. He dropped his bike on the lawn, and knocked on her door.

"Daniel - what is it?" she asked when she found him shaking on her porch. He felt ill. He'd fainted at school and was cycling about as if nothing had happened.

"Who's your visitor?" Daniel asked.

"You haven't come all this way to ask me who is visiting me, young man. What is it?"

"I'm having some sort of flashback. I'm starting to remember things."

"You'd better come in, then," she said, placing her hand on his shoulder and guiding him into the sitting room. She introduced him to the thickset man sitting in one of her soft chairs.

Gerry, this is Daniel. He's one of my students.

"Daniel Holland. Well met. I'm Gerry Hallam - regional director of the Federal Investigative Service."

"The F.B.I.?"

"No. Another agency altogether. We investigate things. - funny or strange things."

"Do you arrest people?"

"No. We hand that responsibility over to the law. We have no connection to the F.B.I. We deal with reality."

"Why don't you sit down, Daniel?" Sandra said. "Can I get you a cup of coffee or tea?"

"Do you have a cold drink?" Daniel asked.

"What about iced lemonade?" she asked.

"Yes, please," he said, and she went to the kitchen for a glass of ice and a can of Sprite.

He looked at the man, feeling uncomfortable. Gerry smiled at him.

"You said you investigated funny things," Daniel said.

"Yes. For instance, a couple of years back, I was a policeman. I had to investigate a young boy who was abducted from an orphanage."

"Are you still investigating him?"

"Only to make certain he's safe."

"What if he isn't - safe, I mean."

"Then we'd help him."

Sandra returned with a glass of iced lemonade.

"You can feel free to talk in front of Mr. Hallam, Daniel. Should we come clean, Gerry?"

"I think so," he said, looking at the boy. "It's no coincidence that I'm here talking about you to your teacher, Daniel. She has a security clearance, and your foster parents don't."

"What if you talk to somebody and you feel funny and black out. Is that drugs?"

"Did someone do that to you?"

"I remember a red spiral on a white card. I remember being called 'Peter', and being with four other boys. We were in the army - sort of. It so weird, it feels like a dream I had. But dreams don't make any sense, do they?"

"They usually change a lot," Hallam said. "Did this dream seem to be continuous - very long and about the same thing?"

"Yes."

"You could have been hypnotized."

"But that's all psychic nonsense, isn't it?" Sandra asked.

"We used to think so, but we know a lot more about it now than we did a few years back," Hallam said. "The military tried hypnosis - to produce super soldiers. It was during a project nicknamed "Artichoke". It didn't produce the goods, so they dropped it, but they may have been premature. Hollywood made a film about it, called 'Telephon'. About a group of sleeper spies activated by a poem. Someone got hold of the list and triggered them, but they went after old and useless targets."

Daniel looked interested. "A poem?"

"Yes. Why? Do you know a poem?"

Daniel closed his eyes and relaxed:

“There is a cluster far away,
Of stars - where alien children play,
Who see the lights of stars above
And wish that they could also rove
Between the fields of asteroids
And other things beyond the voids.”

He looked at both of them. His face had changed, especially the muscles around his eyes. “My name is Peter.”

“What is your other name?” Hallam asked quietly.

“My full name is Peter John Walsh.”

“Who are you really?”

“Daniel Holland. ‘Peter’ is my cover name, my alter ego, my alternative identity.”

“What is your function?” The man asked.

“I am an assassin. I neutralize targets. Enemies.”

“We should stop this here,” Hallam said. “Daniel, wake up. Wake up as Daniel, not Peter.”

Daniel opened his eyes. “I wasn’t asleep really - I was just - remembering.”

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Chapter 10

Revelations

“We have a problem,” Longley said.

“What sort of problem?” Jones asked.

"Daniel Holland has become sapient. He's remembering who he is."

"that's impossible. He was too deeply entranced. We used narcosis on him, as well as normal hypnotic techniques." Jones said

"Well you didn't count on one thing - someone belted him across the head and gave him concussion. Seems like it shook more than a few bolts loose."

"Head injury. We don't know much about the effect of that on hypnosis. How bad was it?"

"Nothing serious. Concussion. A schoolboy accident. Someone hit him."

"Well - it could have disturbed brain function enough to jolt his memories. He'll have to be de-commissioned then. We can't risk using him for any real operations."

"Decommission?" Longley asked.

"Self termination. We always implant that suggestion into our operatives, just in case. Do you know what causes most deaths in boys between the ages of ten and twenty-five?"

"No."

"Suicide. About twenty percent of boys that age, who die, kill themselves. All we need to do to vanish 'Peter' is to trigger him. He'll do it himself. No Peter, no problems." Jones said.

"I'm reluctant to terminate him. He was an excellent subject," Longley mused, "but he could do us a lot of damage - especially if he tells authorities about the death of Senator Whittlebrek and friends."

All right. I'll arrange it. I wish there was another way. What's the code?" Longley asked.

He watched as Jones consulted his notes:

"When angels fly from deep blue skies,
They take a leap into the air.
The one who sees the vision dies.
So he can join the angels there."

"You've been watching too many movies," Longley said.

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Daniel sat in the interrogation room facing a wide mirror that he knew was a one-way observation window, complete with a movie camera on the other side to record every word he said, and every expression he made. There was no desk in front of him, so every body-language sign he made could be recorded, and even his facial micro-expressions could be seen. Two men sat on chairs looking at him carefully.

"I am Mark McConnell, and this is Agent Desalle, We are commencing this interview at Two-thirty five. Daniel, for the record, could you please state your full name and age, please."

"My name is Daniel Thomas Holland. I am twelve, nearly thirteen years old."

"Daniel," McConnell said, "This is not a prosecution interview. What you tell us is protected by privilege. It can not be used in a court of law. Do you understand that?"

"Yes."

"This is being done to give you freedom to speak without fear, should you reveal any offences you might have committed. It's a system we use to get to the truth quickly."

"Otherwise you'd get bogged down with a lot of legal stuff?" Daniel asked.

"That's right. Whatever you tell us stays with us as a national secret. We cannot tell anybody what you say."

"O.K. Let's get on with it, then. When I was taken from the orphanage by Mr. Longley and Miss Weatherall, we went by car to the docks. I was surprised, but they said that the solicitor lived on an island, and boat was the quickest way to get there."

He carried on, telling them about the island he was held on, the visits by Doctor Jones, and the training in martial arts. He didn't mention the soiree on the island, the men hunting Travis, or their execution of the pedophile hunters. Despite their re-assurances, he didn't trust the agents that far.

Hallam looked at Doctor Benedict, their resident psychiatrist. "Do you think we have everything, Doctor?"

"I have the feeling he's told most of it. He's covering something up, but with boys that age, it's probably sexual stuff - their feelings for each other and stuff like that."

"You think they're gay?" Hallam asked.

"Hell no. but boys isolated like that at that age may have feelings for each other. I'd be surprised if they didn't."

"Barton, Longley, Jones, Weldon. Sound like pseudonyms to me. See how we go with facial reconstruction tomorrow. The boys foster parents want him home by tonight. I suggest we put a watch on the house - just in case."

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"I can't tell you much about it," Daniel said to Tessa as they sat on a swing seat in the back garden. "It's got to be secret until the government decides what to do about it."

"Are you in any danger?" she asked, concerned.

"I don't know. Don't think so. Most of the kids think I was kidnapped for - "

"Sex. But you're not gay or anything. The press can be real arse-holes. There was all this stuff about you when you were found."

They talked quietly until Mark Dewberry called by to take Tessa home. He got out of the car and noticed something in the letter box.

"Hey, Daniel. Something for you - looks like a card. You got a birthday coming up or something?"

He handed Daniel a white envelope. Daniel shrugged. "No, not for a month," he said, opening the envelope. It contained a birthday card, unsigned, and a plastic object, coiled up. Daniel read the card.

"What is it?" Tessa asked.

"Oh. That's a cable tie by the look of it," Mark said. "Funny birthday present."

Daniel looked at the length of plastic. It was serrated with grooves, and had a point on one end and a pass-through toggle on the other end.

"Weird," Tessa said as Daniel held the ends with both hands and flipped it over his neck. He inserted the pointed end through the toggle.

"Hey, be careful," Tessa said. You could choke on that.

As if on cue, Daniel pulled hard on the free end and tightened the plastic noose around his throat, then pulled again so there was no mistake. It was choking him in a fatal grip. He fell to the ground, twitching.

"Shit!" Mark said, reaching for the tie around the boy's neck. His face was turning bluish, and swelling. The man tried to undo the tie, but it was hopeless. Mark stopped kicking and lay still. His eyes bulged and his tongue poked from his lips grotesquely.

Tessa screamed. Sarah and Jack ran from the house to find out what was happening.

Mark pulled a penknife from his pocket and tried to cut the plastic, but it was reinforced with tough fibres.

"Bolt cutters in my toolbox. Call emergency," he said, tossing his mobile phone to his daughter. He ran for his car.

It took only moments for Mark to return with the cutters. Jack managed to get a finger under the cord and

Mark closed the jaws. There was a twang, and the cord came free, just as the two agents who were watching the house reached the scene. Sarah wasted no time applying CPR on the unconscious boy. With circulation restored, he was gasping for consciousness just as the sound of a distant siren was heard.

The injury to his throat made it impossible for Daniel to speak. Medically, he wasn't out of danger by a long shot - his trachea was bruised, as well as his vocal cords. Sarah held his hand as he was loaded into the ambulance. One of the agents jumped in with him and helped Sarah into the back of the van. The other agent was on the phone to Hallam. Then he turned to Jack.

"What happened?" he asked.

Mark showed the agent the card that Daniel had read. "It looks like a Birthday Card," he said. "It came in this envelope, with the plastic cable-tie."

"That's a plastic handcuff tie," the agent said. "Very hard to break. Cable ties are sold to the general public, and the ends come off if pulled too hard." He read the card. "Doesn't make sense," he said. He took a plastic bag from his pocket and sealed the evidence in it. "Contaminated with everyone's fingerprints, but you never know," he said.

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Hallam had Daniel moved to a Federal Psychiatric hospital as soon as the boy was able to travel. Daniel was annoyed, but the agency wanted him kept on suicide watch for a while. He had to endure being strapped down onto a bed and allowed up only under supervision. He was

told that it was for his own good. Professor Ford was assigned as his psychiatrist. He was a wispy old man with white hair and a thin face. He came with four large assistants.

"I'm Professor of psychiatry at Madden University," he told Daniel as he leaned over the boy. "Do you know why you're under restraint?"

"I'm trying to kill myself. And I'm pretty strong."

"That sums it up. Why are you trying to kill yourself?" he asked, reaching for a hypodermic that one of the male nurses had prepared.

"I don't know. I have to." He gasped, "I just have to do it."

"I specialize in hypnosis and narcosis. Now we are going to give you a shot of this stuff, and you'll feel funny. We'll ask you questions, and you'll give us all the answers we want."

"Is it scopolamine?" Daniel asked.

"Much stronger and safer. I can't tell you what it is, but it is very good at revealing the truth."

Daniel felt the prick of the needle as it penetrated his shoulder.

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The agent dropped Daniel's file on the desk. "So he was supposed to join the angels," Hallam mused. "Luckily we got there in time. How is he?"

"Quite chirpy now that Ford has exorcised his ghosts," Robyn said. "He's missing his girl-friend and

foster family, but understands why he has to be kept away from everyone. Whoever set him up is watching him, too. We have no idea who they are."

"Some of our own, I fear. It stinks of it. I've put in my report to the Secretary, who'll take the matter up with the National Security Agency."

"They'll bury it."

"I'm hoping that it's going to be handled quietly, and we'll hear very little more about the matter. Internal Affairs will deal with it. If it is a covert internal operation, it will be smoked out."

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Chapter 11

The Fugitive

Daniel sat on a plastic bench seat on the upstairs balcony of his private room, looking at the security railing on the balcony, that kept him imprisoned. He was sure that he no longer wanted to kill himself. He'd overcome the terrible auto-suggestion that Doctor Jones had implanted in his unconscious mind. Doctor Ford was very good. He even managed to get Daniel to tell him about the death of Senator Whittlebrek and his nutty boy-hunters. Ford had nodded wisely and taken notes. "The F.B.I. will be interested in this," he said. "I don't want you to worry, Daniel. Whatever you and your friends did, it wasn't within your control. I can vouch for that."

"Actually, while I was there during the exercise, I didn't personally kill anyone," he said.

"I'm sure they'll take account of that," Ford said. "You are unusual. There are not many alpha grade hypnotic subjects. It's very rare."

So he was an Alpha Grade Hypnotic Subject. That meant he was very open to suggestion. A good hypnotist, who knew what he was doing, could even hypnotize him against his will, or secretly, so he wouldn't know he was under a trance. Great. Just what he wanted - to be everyone's patsy.

He wasn't surprised when two agents came to see him next day. They were Agent Clyde Mersynsky and Agent Merle Spencer from the F.B.I. They stayed for a few minutes, introduced themselves and gave him a routine warning:

Agent Mersynsky said, "Tomorrow, we'll take you into the office for a regular interrogation into the death of Senator Whittlebrek and his friends. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to speak to an attorney, and to have an attorney present during any questioning. If you cannot afford a lawyer, one will be provided for you at government expense."

It was the famous 'Miranda Warning.'

"Then I choose to remain silent, and want my solicitors present when any interrogation happens," Daniel said. He knew it could take days for his solicitors to arrive at the Veterans Psychiatric Hospital. The agents stationed a guard outside of his

room and, on Doctor Ford's advice, left him alone. The sun was setting, and a male nurse arrived with his evening tea trolley and medications.

Daniel didn't want a scene, so swallowed the sedatives without complaint. He ate his plate of rice and chicken stir fry in a light ginger sauce. He carefully drank his hot coffee and ate the desert in its plastic bowl. The plastic spoon reminded him that the staff still didn't trust him. He placed the tray on the empty side table and lay back on the bed. A new face at the narrow observation window reminded him that the FBI guard had a change of shift. An hour later, three orderlies arrived and replaced his security straps.

"Sorry, lad, but we've got orders to resume the watch on you," one of them said.

"That's all right - You're just doing your job," Daniel said.

He closed his eyes and dozed. He was used to the restraints, and they didn't bother him.

He woke to a touch on his shoulder. It was dark outside, and the lights were dimmed. A hand closed lightly on his mouth, and he looked up to see Jordan - in black clothing - standing over him.

"Quiet. We're here to extract you," he said.

"You want me dead," Daniel whispered back.

"If we wanted you dead, you would be by now. Feel your forehead."

Daniel realised that he was free of the restraints. He felt that a small elastic bandage strip was glued

firmly in place on his forehead above his eyebrows. He tried to rip it off, but Jordan stopped him.

"It's a very small explosive chip," Jordan explained. Travis has his finger on the button, and if there's a problem, he sets it off. Your brain is splattered around the room. No more Peter. Now shut up, and follow me."

Daniel sat up and moved across to the balcony. Usually, it would be closed, locked, and an alarm would go off if he opened the sliding door leading onto it, but the extraction team had merely removed the door's security glass. It was lying neatly on the floor so it couldn't fall and create a noise. Jordan handed the boy a pair of gym shoes.

The wire on the balcony had been peeled back, and a climbing rope was visible.

Jordan pointed upwards. "I'll follow. I know you're good at this, so don't dawdle," he said.

They reached the roof without incident. "Now what?" Daniel asked.

"Our taxi out of here," Jordan said, pointing to the small helicopter parked further along the roof. It only had two blades and a small rear fan. Travis was waiting on the rear seat. He held a remote controller in his hand.

"That is cute," Daniel said, amazed at the small machine.

"It's whisper quiet, too," Jordan said. "Get in. We want to get out of here before we're noticed."

The army pilot went through emergency take-off procedure, and the chopper lifted quietly into the air. They were soon well away from the military hospital.

"I guess Longley wants me back." Daniel said.

"Yes. By the way, you can pull that bandage off now."

"It won't explode?"

"Never would. It's just a very sticky brand." Travis said, smiling.

"You bluffed me," Daniel said. "So who owns this helicopter?"

"Black ops. They do all sorts of neat stuff. We work for Colonel Weldon, now. That's not his real name, by the way," Jordan said. He took the bandage from Daniel.

"Talking of names, my real name is Daniel. Daniel Holland. I guess you guys have real names, too. You realise we've all been hypnotized That's how we're controlled. They can even make us commit suicide if they want."

"They really got to you, didn't they?" Travis said.

Jordan looked at him sympathetically. "Longley warned us that you would be brainwashed into believing all sorts of strange things," he said, "Tell you what - why not just tell them yourself. They aren't angry with you for ratting on everyone. They really want to talk to you, to find out what really happened."

The helicopter cruised on into the night. Daniel looked out to the lights of towns and cities below them

and noticed they had vanished. There was the glow of moonlight on water below him, and he realised they were traveling over the coast and out to sea.

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Chapter 12

The Missing Boys

Hallam and the task force sat around a large oval table in his conference room. They listened carefully as various reports were given.

"We found traces of skid marks on the roof of the hospital. Footprints in the dust were of small sized shoes. His little friends rescued him." Mersynsky said as he de-briefed Hallam and the team investigating Daniel's escape. "The bolt cutters used to breach the security wire were military grade - hardware stores don't sell that sort of tool. Diamond cutters were used to cut the glass from the door, and a suction cap was used to stop it falling inwards. A textbook commando operation. We have helicopters, bolt cutters, diamond cutters, and military type planning to indicate that someone doesn't want Daniel talking too much about what happened to him."

"Your conclusion?" Hallam asked.

"If these people want to silence him, you can guarantee it's been done by now." Spencer said.

"Is there any chance he's alive?" Hallam asked. "I mean - why go to all the bother of springing him out of there? Why not just kill him while he's asleep?"

"Forensics and crime scene analysis is very good these days. Killing him in the hospital could leave all sorts of clues that might lead to the murderer being arrested. No, they took him to dispose of him elsewhere. Using his friends - the boys he knew - would have made him feel safe with them."

"He was present at the killing of a major political figure," Spencer said. "That crime could be traced to the upper echelons of power. Whittlebrek was a first class slime-ball, but he should have been dealt with by the proper authorities. Then the whole rotten structure would have been revealed. His execution was designed to cover up - who know what crimes?" Mersynsky closed his file.

Hallam tapped on the table with his finger. "Listen carefully," he said. "You're acting as if this whole business is some type of child pornography thing. It isn't. There's far too much going on for that. I've been asking myself, why involve a group of kids in this business? and we keep getting back to the mind control angle. Why kids? Simple really - they are vulnerable to manipulation in a way that adults are not. At that age, they can be programmed for future use. They can become persons inserted into our national infrastructure - administration, the F.B.I. or N.S.A. Given enough time, they can enter politics, become congressmen, senators, even heads of cabinet, and who is to know?"

"Evangelicals are doing this all the time," Spencer said.

"The point is, it's transparent. We know who they are and what they believe," Robyn said. "Sleepers don't know their own agenda until they are triggered. It's known as the 'Fu Manchu' effect. Years ago, the army tried out hypnosis - mainly to find out if the Soviets were using it. It was called 'Project Artichoke'. They used adult subjects, and for the most part, the experiments failed. The subjects were given the code description 'Clear Eyes' if they fulfilled certain criteria. Results were spotty, to say the least, and the research was abandoned."

"Someone has resurrected it," Hallam said. "What we are facing, is a group of 'clear eyed' boys. Unlike their predecessors, these kids are well trained and a clear and present danger to our country. They must be found, brought under our control, and de-programmed."

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Daniel knew they had landed on an island with a hilly centre, and the workings of a mine. There was a well maintained entrance into a shaft dug into the central hill, and several out buildings for workshops and mine management offices.

Longley was waiting for him. He reached forward and welcomed Daniel with a fond hug. "We are going to call you Peter, because that's the name everyone knows you by," Longley said as the boys entered the main cabin. It was large and comfortable, with a kitchen, three bedrooms, and a central common room.

Nathaniel and Bobby were waiting for them. Everyone was pleased to be together again as a group. Daniel found that he was the centre of attention. Even Doctor Jones patted him on the back and handed him a strong cup of coffee.

"You'll be as good as new just as soon as we get those canvas pajamas off you and get you back into uniform," he joked as he led the boy into his office and closed the door.

"So am I 'Daniel' or am I 'Peter'? the boy asked.

"We've decided to continue with 'Peter', Jones said. "It's easier on the other boys." He threw a newspaper photograph onto the table. It was of a teenager wearing orange coveralls, handcuffed to a belly chain, and wearing shackles. "Do you know this boy?"

"He shot up a school."

"Actually, he didn't shoot anybody. His friend did. He was eleven years old. That's him at sixteen. He's worn that outfit for five years. They call the coveralls and chains a 'four set and peels'. Do you want to join him? You'll be like that for the rest of your life. If they try you as an adult and give you life without benefit of parole."

"No."

"Smart kid."

"Are you going to hypnotize me again?"

"No. It probably wouldn't work a second time," the doctor said, sitting down and motioning Peter towards a chair. "But Daniel is dead. We're going to put a bullet

hole in your pajamas, and some good arterial blood, which you will donate without hesitation, a bit of your skin and hair on a baseball bat - to create a classic crime scene."

"Where?"

A wharf - on the island that we used for Senator Brett Whittlebrek. They will search it again - on the off chance of finding you."

"So I disappear once again."

"Yes. One more thing. We are under investigation. No discussions with the other boys about hypnosis or triggers. We will remove their conditioning - because it's served its purpose."

"It can't be used for military purposes?" Peter asked.

"Yes and No. You are highly augmented, due to the hypnotic conditioning. Smarter and more physical than most boys your age. But good subjects are too hard to find, and the process is not fool-proof. You woke up, for instance. Projects 'Clear Eyes' and 'Artichoke' are dead, but nobody must know."

"So what happens to us?"

"You know too much. We could take you to an isolated place and keep you incommunicado, but the army wants us to keep you together and close. Under certain conditions, boys with your unique skills could be very useful. You will receive focused intelligence and combat training. You will not be exposed to general

field operations - it's far too dangerous, but you may get special tasks to perform.

"Once again, Peter, if you're caught, you'll be arrested as a murderer, tried as an adult, and spend the rest of your miserable life as a prisoner - a state slave - under lock and key and doing whatever you're told to do by any young guard they put in charge of you. Four set and peels for life. Do you really want that?"

"No."

"Will you join us - voluntarily?"

"Yes."

"Choose a surname."

"I've used it before - Walsh. I am Peter John Walsh."

"Welcome to 'Operation Deucalion', Captain Peter John Walsh.'

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Hallam looked at the bloodstained canvas pajamas in the plastic evidence bag. The baseball bat, discovered by hounds at the scene, cut rope that may have been used to bind Daniel's hands, a bucket of hardened cement with a chain set into the concrete.

"They fed him to the fish. Poor kid," he said. "He didn't stand a chance."

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Weldon looked at Longley and Jones sitting opposite him. "You're sure he has come over to us?" he asked carefully. "We must be sure of him."

"The F.B.I. has been most useful." Jones said, "They charged him with murder and cautioned him. After he escaped, they put out a full face 'wanted' poster for him, and he's listed on the missing children's database. Peter knows this. We couldn't have done a better job of scaring him into hiding. He is a very frightened young man. We are his only security now. He hasn't had a family for a long time."

Longley added, "He believes that all the processes he was put through when he was rescued were designed to incriminate him. He has no trust in the angels - they did a very good job of separating him from them."

"Does he trust us?" Weldon asked.

"We are his 'family', now. We received him back with open arms. He hasn't been punished for talking about us. We've forgiven him. We explained that they forced him to talk using subtle interrogation techniques - including narcosis. How could a young boy resist that? He's forgiven us for trying to eliminate him. Forgiveness - that's what families are all about."

"The other boys have been de-programmed and joined us, voluntarily. They had nowhere else to go, so we are now family? I like it," Weldon said. "Now, we must shred our documents and regularize this outfit."

The unit undertook a dramatic change. There would be no more attempts at creating a Fu-Manchu corps. Their task would be to create a specialized unit of young commando intelligence agents that could be infiltrated into situations that threatened National Security.

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chapter 14

The School for Scions

Saint Beadle's College was a boarding school for the rich and famous. The only boys who had a hope of attending were the sons of the filthy rich and very famous, most of whom had been enrolled long before they were born, or, in many instances, conceived.

Prince Darien of Abelard was one such boy. His father, Crown Prince Abelard was the major shareholder of an Eastern Bloc Oil conglomerate which supplied most of Europe, and a great deal of America with the precious black fluid. Although Abelard no longer held a kingdom, and the crown of Abelard no longer existed, the family retained the titles, which were genuine. They lived on a well guarded estate in a mountainous border region separating France and Switzerland.

Security on the family estate was controlled by Basque Bodyguards, known for their immense strength and athletic ability. Prince Darien was schooled by a succession of tutors until he was thirteen years old, and his parents decided that he needed exposure to the wider world. St. Beadle's Private College, set in the wilderness of Washington State, was their idea of a wider world. The school never advertised for students. It did appear, however, on the latest military satellite images.

Which was how Peter and Travis were looking down at it through stereo glasses from several thousand feet.

Colonel Weldon could have obtained better satellite pictures, but there was always the risk of someone wanting to know why he wanted them.

"Prince Darien is a potential target for tiger kidnapping," the colonel had said, in a very private briefing. "If they take the son, they control the father. Ordinarily, it wouldn't matter to us, but in emergencies, he provides us with an alternative source of oil. This prevents Middle Eastern Cartels from blackmailing us or upping the price of oil and creating economic meltdown."

Peter glanced at Travis, relieved to see the younger boy was coping with the Colonel's briefing. Travis was a very smart kid. He played chess well, and got top marks for math and science. This was why he was being chosen as Peter's partner for their assignment.

"The school is very secure, but it does relate to the surrounding community, and the boys often go camping, have ski trips, and visit Seattle for outings to concerts, etc."

"Are we to go as bodyguards or replacements?" Peter asked.

"You're jumping ahead of me," Weldon said. "We did consider replacements, with you, Peter, substituting for His Royal Highness, but you don't speak French or German well enough to pretend to be him. So we chose the first option. You are to go as his bodyguards."

"Do I get to take my Heckler and Koch," Travis asked. It was his favourite automatic.

"Sorry, sergeant, but you go unarmed - both of you."

"Not even gadgets?" Peter asked.

"You're not James Bond. Not even close," Weldon said with a grin. "What's wrong with your wits?"

"Nothing, but if it comes to agro?" Travis asked.

"Consider yourselves to be pawns in the greater chess game of world politics," the Colonel said. "The college has decided to award both of you scholarships. I take it you can play soccer?"

"Fairly well. We cleaned up the army-brats finale last year in Kansas, remember?"

"Crossed my mind. Darien is quite good. He's been professionally coached. He'll be on the college team. He also enjoys ice hockey."

"I don't think we play that, do we?"

"Mostly, it's fighting - in the guise of sport. We'll get you up to speed - with a French coach who'll work on your language skills. You've both been on these skill trips before. Work hard. Do us proud."

"What about the F.B.I.?" Peter asked."

"The only person in the country with the power to make the executive decision on the grounds of National Security - pulled your case yesterday. The F.B.I. is no longer interested in you. All documents relating to you are being destroyed. Daniel Holland is officially dead. You no longer exist."

"That person?"

"That . . . person."

"They uncovered too much information about us. Wanted to run an investigation and shut us down. I had to call in a lot of favours. Actually, it worked out very well. Operation Deucalion has to work under new and supervised conditions. Senator Ducatti chairs our 'oversight' committee. We are now legit."

"Have we got a name?" Travis asked, "You know - like F.B.I. or F.I.S?"

"Not officially, but because of the unit's special composition, some smart-arse has nicknamed you - 'JUNIT'."

Travis exploded with laughter. " JUNIT. I can't believe it. 'Junior Unit' - That's so - so us."

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The trees were bursting with the fresh green foliage of Spring, bringing the pristine beauty of Washington State to its full glory. The small black ribbon of road to St Beadle's College was well maintained, and sneaked through the huge forest which dwarfed everything human. St. Beadles was remote, hidden in a small valley beneath towering mountains that were still geologically active. Mt. St. Helens had erupted in recent times, and much of the area was a declared National Park.

Peter and Travis had joined the school a few days before semester commenced. This gave them a chance to become familiar with its layout. The Headmaster, Doctor Cameron, knew the real reason for their presence - bodyguards to Prince Darien. He was glad the Agency hadn't put a couple of gorilla like adult thugs into the school. I and Travis blended into the student-scape as

if born on the place. They had lived in dormitory type accommodation for a long time, and knew how to make friends quickly. They soon found their dormitories were 'different' - luxuriously different.

Falcon House was the dormitory for twenty four middle school students. It was more like a hotel, with private rooms, its own kitchenette, and a very comfortable common room. Travis would normally be too young for middle school, but he was being taken as an A.P. student, accelerated because of his advanced academic attainments.

"It's like a hotel suite," Travis said, looking at the bedroom he'd been allotted. There's a balcony with a view, and a toilet and shower."

"It's called an 'en-suite'," I said. "Mine's the same. Princey will be in the room between us. We have to call him Darren, not Darien, Princey, or anything that connects him to his father."

"I know. And he's not to know we're his bodyguards. I went to the same briefings you did, remember? Let's try out the gym."

The gymnastics complex was larger than Peter expected it to be. It was well equipped, with two basketball courts, an ice rink for hockey and recreation, workout room with weights and exercise machines, a climbing wall, gymnasium, and a dojo, made to competition standards. The heated swimming pool was built to Olympic standards, but with a 'deep end', accommodating two high diving towers.

They found the showers and lockers easily. Each boy had a locker assigned to him by name, and the arrangements followed their dormitory plans. They opened the heavy duty locks with the keys they had been given and were surprised to find each was provided with sports uniforms in their sizes. Their names were embroidered on tapes sewn onto an interior seam so the laundry could process used garments.

"Seems like they think of everything," Travis said. "No wonder it costs a fortune to come here."

"Well, if they can spend twenty billion dollars getting someone to the moon, I'm sure we're just a drop in the nation's money bucket," Peter said with a grin. "I'm not knocking the chance to get a good education."

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Chapter 15

A Good Education

Darren moved in later that evening, while the boys were watching television in the Falcon House dormitory's common room. They heard a helicopter pass over their building, and half an hour later, Doctor Cameron entered with the new student.

"I want you boys to meet Darren Ferguson," the principal said pointedly. "Darren, this is Peter Walsh, and his cousin Travis Jenkins. They're in year nine with you. Their rooms are on the same floor as yours, so you'll be seeing a lot of each other."

They stood to shake hands with the slightly built youngster. Darren was wearing a smart woolen suit, with a white silk shirt and blue patterned tie. I thought it was very 'European' to dress to the max, but knew that clothes meant status. His hair was long, black, and expensively styled.

"Peter, Travis, I am very pleased to meet you," Darren said rather stiffly, holding his hand out.

"Darren Ferguson," Peter said warmly. "We wondered who was living next to us."

"My cases are already in my room, so I don't need to go upstairs yet."

"I was about to tell Darren that all boys here have to do their own packing and unpacking as we don't have servants," Cameron said. It was a hint broadly given, with a sense of humour.

Darren looked down and smiled. "I do believe I am capable of that, Herr. Doctor. I have not been pampered."

"That's good, because we were thinking of having a cup of coffee before bed," I said.

"They are such slave drivers in this place that we have to wash the cups up, dry them, and put them away afterwards," Travis said, pointing out the small kitchenette that serviced the Room.

Cameron laughed. "Right. I'll leave you boys to get to know each other. Milk and cookies are in the refrigerator, cups and coffee things in the cupboard - I'm sure you'll find them. Lights out by ten-thirty,

please. Your house master will arrive tomorrow, and take charge. We expect a lot of boys in the afternoon. Until then, you're on your own. Behave yourselves."

Peter and Travis had been well briefed about Prince Darien. He'd had a sheltered life, being cared for by servants and tutors. He seldom saw his father, but his mother was affectionate. On no account were the boys to call him Darien, or try to help him with simple self care tasks. One thing he would learn at school was how to look after himself. He would have no servants.

Darren surprised the boys by volunteering to make their evening cups of coffee. He busied himself in the kitchenette discovering everything very quickly. "Biscuits?" he asked as the electric kettle boiled.

"Biscuits?" Travis asked back. "Oh, you mean cookies. Yes please, two. We call them 'cookies', Darren."

Darren put two steaming cups onto their side table with a small plate of chocolate chips.

"I have a lot to learn," the boy said, sitting back to watch the TV. "This is grit iron, is it not?"

"Well, football." Peter said, "The sports coach likes soccer, and there's ice skating in the winter."

"I like skating, and tennis, and golf."

"Do you like camping or hiking?"

Darren grinned at them. "Perhaps. These things I was not allowed. My friends were 'chosen' for me. This is the first time I am allowed to make friends on my own. No servants, no tutors, no nannies, and no bodyguards. I am free."

Travis and Peter looked at each other and smiled. At least Darren wasn't snobbish or opinionated.

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Within a couple of weeks, the boys were totally familiar with the school's routines. Their House-master, Mr. Ronald Kent, was a cheerful young man with a wife, and two children who were enrolled in junior school. The boys in Falcon woke at seven every morning, showered, tidied their rooms and went to the refectory for breakfast, dressed in smart, but casual clothes then attended a non-denominational chapel service before going to their classes. As year nine students, the boys were mainly concerned with passing their middle year International Baccalaureate.

Mrs. Elwood was their English teacher. Travis enjoyed English, and produced pages of imaginative stories. Peter was more conservative, and usually wrote what was asked of him, but not much more. His handwriting was neat, and his work looked clean - as if it had been written by a machine, but he was never creative. Mrs. Elwood said his work read like a journalist who had reported back on a foreign war. Nevertheless, she almost always gave him 'A' grades.

Afternoon lessons were reserved for artistic subjects such as music, dramatics, home crafts, sciences, and art. Sports were regarded as co-curricular activities, played after school. It was a good way to keep the boys busy between formal classes that ended at three o'clock, and tea which commenced at six. Peter and Travis managed to talk Darren into joining the junior R.O.T.C.

group on Wednesday afternoons. Which gave them a chance to practice the military skills they were familiar with, such as marching, shooting on the school's rifle range, and playing war games with paint-ball air rifles. Friday afternoons were devoted to club activities.

Major Winters, their instructor, was something of a martinet. The school had often won regional contests against other schools, and participated in the annual inter-college R.O.T.C. contest. He noticed that Peter and Travis were skilled in map reading, shooting, drill, and the general military formalities. He tried to access their records from their previous military academy, but ran into a brick wall. Apparently the school had suffered a fire and many of the student records had been lost, but he was assured that the boys were remembered as very good students.

"We were sorry to see them go, but apparently they've been admitted to St. Beadles with scholarships" he had been told by a 'Colonel Weldon'. "Lucky boys - Wish them luck from us," Weldon said, hanging up.

Sporting activities were constrained by the school's small size. There were not enough students to warrant a football team of the high standard required for competition, so Soccer was available instead, as was ice hockey during winter. The school also had a junior basketball team. Golf, tennis, and martial arts were regarded as co-curricular activities, done mainly for recreation.

Evening meals in the refectory were formal dress affairs, with boys wearing white shirts, school ties,

dark grey trousers and school blazers. Sunday evening tea was traditionally a roast, and there was much ceremony, with proctors sitting at the high table with staff, and the senior boy from each grade taking the proctor's place as head of table.

Peter (Spooky), Travis (Mouse), and Darren (Frenchie), were 'new boys' so sat at the end of the table. Peter was becoming popular with his classmates as they discovered his athletic abilities. Falcon House boys shared the same table. They were Benjamin (Scooper), Ronald (Goth), Seth (G-Man), Victor (Drac), Brian (Scrotes) , Kim (Blondie), and Robby (Ape-Face), who was elected Senior Boy - mainly because of his boxing skills. He was known to have a very fast left fist, so most of the boys shortened his nickname to 'Apie' which they assured him was a term of endearment. Nicknames are part of Boarding School tradition all over the world, nobody took offence, and if they did, they had to suffer in silence.

"Why do they call me Frenchie?" Darren asked puzzled.

"Well, it has another meaning in English," Travis informed him tactfully, "I'll let you find out that for yourself, but mainly it's because you come from France."

"Oh, that is O.K. then." Darren said innocently. "It is not too bad. 'Frenchie' it is."

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Boys who lived in Washington often went home during long weekends. Those who lived interstate, or from overseas stayed with foster families where this could be arranged. Darren, could not be exposed to any such risk,

so he stayed with Peter, and Travis at a nearby tourist resort, "Lake Bruin", which catered for hunters, and tourists enjoying water sports or fishing.

The boys were relaxing in the resorts cafeteria after a couple of hours water skiing. Peter noticed two people, a man and a woman, leaving their vehicle in the guests' car park. They walked up the steps as he was trying to place them. Their eyes met and recognition was mutual. The man stood absolutely still, as if in shock. The woman clasped his arm.

"Damn," Peter muttered. Surreptitiously, he placed his index finger up to his lips - a signal for silence. Travis and Darren were busy looking across the water.

"Got to see someone," Peter said, getting up and walking directly across to Sandra and Gerry.

"I'm surprised to run into both of you," he said.

"Not half as shocked as we are," Gerry said.

"I had to come over, in case you accidentally blew my cover. Are you still in F.I.S.?"

"Yes. I'm still sworn to secrecy," Gerry said.

"My current name is Peter Walsh, and I'm officially on assignment. Remember, Peter."

"You're supposed to be dead," Gerry said.

"Daniel Holland is dead," I said. "My uncle wants it so."

"Uncle?" Sandra asked.

"Sam," Peter said. "Now it's my turn. What are you two doing here?"

"Well," Sandra said, holding Gerry's arm firmly, "We're on our honeymoon. May we meet your friends? They're looking over at us - very curiously."

"You'd better come and meet them, then." Peter said. "Just remember I'm 'Peter', please."

"What organisation may I ask?" Gerry asked.

"JUNIT. Junior Unit. It's in Defence. Can't tell you much. We're Darren's bodyguards, and he doesn't know it. You taught me English at St. Marlins Military Academy. Got that?"

"Fine," Sandra said as he led them over.

The boys stood up politely.

"Guys, I'd like you to meet my former English teacher at St. Marlins, Miss - No, its Mrs. Hallam, now, and her husband. This is Darren, from France, and Travis."

Everyone shook hands, and Darren brought another chair to the table so they could sit comfortably. Travis pulled his beach towel closer around his shoulders.

"Been swimming? It's a bit cool in there," Gerry said.

"Water skiing, actually. Darren's just learning."

"Yes. I have never done it before," the French boy said. "But it is such fun."

"He'll be very good," Travis said. "Are you guys thirsty?" he asked, signaling the drinks waiter.

The Hallams ordered cappuccino coffees, and the boys, lime sundaes.

"So you're on exeat from St. Beadles?" Sandra said. "In my day they didn't have such things. You can't go home for the weekend, Darren?"

"Geneva is a bit far away, and my Father is somewhere off in the Pacific this weekend. This gives me a chance to water ski and look at all this beautiful scenery. Believe me, this is luxury." He said, lifting his frosted green glass before sipping it.

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Chapter 16

A day in the Woods

Travis was playing chess with Darren, who was rather good at it. The Television was covering the large scale demonstrations against the War in Vietnam. Peter and Travis often thought that, if it continued long enough, they'd be involved in it.

Peter slipped away from their condo to visit the Hallams. Sandra answered his knock on the door.

"Daniel - Come in," She said.

"Peter."

"Of course. Peter, come in. Sorry, I forgot."

She settled I in a comfortable chair. "Gerry will be out soon. He's just finished his shower. Would you like a drink?"

"Cordial?" Peter asked.

"In lemonade with ice," she said. "See, I remember."

"Thank you," he said.

Gerry came in drying his hair. "Ah. That felt good," he said. He shook hands with Peter, who stood up to meet him.

"Good evening, Sir."

"Well met, young - Peter? Got it right this time. What are your friends doing?"

"Vietnam on TV and chess."

"A good combination. How long before you go?"

"Four years. I'll be in Intelligence, I guess."

"Something has me puzzled," Gerry said. "Don't answer me if you can't, but what on earth is the army doing recruiting boys?"

"Well. Of course there's a lot I can't tell you. There was this project which experimented on boys to see if they could be mind-controlled."

"Artichoke - yes, I know. They mainly tried it on men - active soldiers, and some young orphans to see if age mattered."

"As I know you know. However, when it folded up, they had these boys. Us. We're all orphans, without family connections. They didn't want us out in the real world, in case we said too much. So they kept us. They look after us really well - it's like being in a family. Anyway, because of our special conditioning, we're a bit smarter than the average kid, a bit faster, better

athletes, faster and more accurate at shooting, driving, scuba diving, and martial arts.

Sometimes there are situations when a kid can get in, but an adult can't. We're smaller, not noticed, get through little holes and into tight spots, and can get out again. Like this job - body guarding one of the richest kids in the world. Can you imagine a couple of beefy marines in flak jackets tromping around St Beadles?"

"Whereas you two just happen to be his school friends."

"I've told you far too much. But, heck, I know you guys. You work for an agency, too."

"More cordial?" Sandra asked.

"No, thanks. I won't sleep."

"There's a path around the resort," Gerry said, "Wanders through the trees, climbs a bit, too. There's a magnificent view of Mt. St. Helens - that old extinct volcano. We're going to hike it, tomorrow. Would you like to come? The three of you."

"It would be fun. Sure. We'll bring lunches," Peter said.

"Make sure you have rain coats and warm clothes. The weather can change in a snap," Sandra said.

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Peter, Travis, and Darren set out early with Gerry and Sandra along the walking track that led to the lookout over the river valley and a long view towards Mt. St. Helens. The volcano still capped by the last of

the winter snows was magnificent in the distance. Darren had brought his 35mm Canon camera with him. He managed to set it up on a rocky ledge and used the timer to take a group photograph. He also took several individual photographs and let Travis take one of him and Peter. Gerry took a photo of the three boys, with Peter in the middle, and his arms around the shoulders of Travis and Darren.

A couple of miles further on, they settled down on a throw rug that Gerry had put into his back-pack and had a mid-morning snack. The track was beginning to follow a narrow part of the river valley. Steep rocky cliffs swept upwards, and the river tumbled steeply below them. The track was wide enough, so none of them felt unsafe.

"What's that?" Travis said, cocking his head. Someone ahead of them was screaming. A young woman raced around the bend towards them. She was shouting.

"Help, help, oh please, help us!" she called.

Gerry took charge, as Sandra helped the distressed woman to a rock ledge to sit down.

"I'm Lisa - Lisa Stanley. My fiancé and I decided we should climb the cliff. We got a long way up, but he slipped and fell - a ledge stopped him, but his leg is broken, and he can't climb down," she exclaimed distressed.

"We'd better have a look to see what we can do," Gerry said, as Sandra calmed the woman. She opened a thermos of coffee and it helped her get self-control.

They hurried along the path, and found the spot where the accident had happened. The injured man waved to them

from his ledge, but they could not hear him when he called out.

"How high is that?" Sandra asked.

"He's about seven hundred feet up. That's a long climb, for an amateur," Gerry said, "I don't know how anyone can get him down. I didn't bring the two-way radio, either. It's too heavy." He turned to the woman. "Lisa, why didn't you bring climbing ropes?"

"We always climb without assistance. Rock wall climbs - It's a very pure sport."

"We work out on the climbing wall at school," Darren said, "But we always use a safety rope."

Gerry brought out his map. He circled the spot where they were, and wrote a note on the white margin. "Which of you is the best runner?"

"I'll go," Travis volunteered.

"Right, honey. You'd better take this canteen," Sandra said. The map and the note will get help. They must have some sort of rescue service."

"Go 'scout pace' Travis." Peter said. Darren, you should go with him - just in case you come across a bear or something."

"What should we do then?" Darren asked.

"I don't know - sing to it. Don't let it eat you."

"Now you know why we do track work," Travis said. "Come on, Darren."

The two boys raced off towards the resort.

"It will take them a couple of hours. Two more to get something organised, and about four more before any rescue arrives. That's eight hours. It will be dark before anyone gets here, and very cold," Sandra said.

"I think I can get up to him with that blanket you brought," Peter said. "What do we have in first aid supplies?"

"A small hiking kit, that's all," Sandra said. "We have that solid fuel for cooking lunch, and matches."

She emptied her pack and began re-packing two of the backpacks with rescue gear. A torch, first aid kit, Picnic blanket, matches, hexabrix, small stove, two quart bottles of water, pot, three metal cups, packets of soup, pain killers, tubes of condensed milk, and packets of coffee.

"Hold on. We don't want more casualties," Gerry said. "You're staying put, Peter."

"Travis and I use the rock climbing wall at school all the time, without safety ropes or helmets. And we've climbed much more dangerous cliffs than this one."

"I should do it," Lisa said. "Walter is my fiancé."

"We'll go together," Peter said.

"I'll go," Gerry said.

"With all due respect, Sir," Peter said, shaking his head. "Lisa's rested, and I'm very fit. We should get to him within an hour."

"Think I'm too old?" Gerry asked.

"No, but I think an authority figure should meet the ground rescue party." Peter said diplomatically. "Let's get going, Lisa."

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Chapter 17

Unwanted Publicity

It was tiring for Travis and Darren, but they made the resort without incident just over an hour after they left the accident site.

Phil, the manager, was impressed when he looked at the map. "You've gotten back in near record time," he said. It wasn't long before he was on the phone to the rescue service at National Park Headquarters. A couple of staff began packing rescue equipment, and soon loaded four motorcycles for a rescue trip.

"You boys should rest up," the manager said.

"No way," Travis said.

"OK. Little guy on the petrol tank," he said, and pointed to Darren, "and you behind. Hang on,"

They managed to get onto the 250cc Honda and headed up the track behind the four motorbikes carrying support gear.

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"I'm afraid it's a compound fracture of the Tibia, and I'm not going to try to straighten it up here. It's

a hospital job," Peter said to the groaning casualty. "But if you listen to me, I can help you with the pain."

"What can you do?" Lisa asked.

"Hypnosis - to control pain, shock, and bleeding," Peter said. Give him some water. He's thirsty."

"Not if he's to have surgery," she insisted.

"Yes, but that's hours away. He needs hydration now. Within an hour and a half, any fluid we give him will be absorbed by the body anyway. It'll help control blood loss and maintain blood pressure."

"How do you know so much?"

"Junior R.O.T.C. first aid training, Ma'am."

"They teach hypnosis in R.O.T.C.?"

"No, Ma'am. My Uncle taught me that. Uncle Samuel - the hypnotist. You must have heard of him." Peter said with a smile. He turned to Walter and gazed into his face.

"Walter, I want you to close your eyes. Close your eyes and listen to my voice. I want you to imagine the pain you feel is a strange feeling, million miles away. It is no longer pain, just pressure. A tightness you can feel far off. You are on a lovely beach with sand and the waves of the sea are crashing against the shore. Listen to the waves. Listen to my voice. Go deeply asleep . . . "

Walter drifted off, and Peter soon had him deeply asleep in a hypnotic trance. Lisa watched with amazement as color returned to the man's face, his leg stopped bleeding, and he relaxed, free of pain.

"That's miraculous," she said, looking at Peter with surprise.

"It's just hypnotic first-aid," Peter said. "It's really useful."

"I hear motorbikes," Lisa said.

Peter looked down, satisfied it was the first stage of the rescue team arriving. The last bike had two passengers, Travis and Daren. "I knew they'd be back," he said.

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A doctor stabilized Walter with pain killers and a drip as he was placed on the Neil Robertson stretcher. A few whiffs of nitrous oxide and he was pain free. Dawn was breaking as Walter's stretcher was finally lowered the last few feet down the rope access that the national Parks team had constructed to where he lay injured. They were very careful.

Back at the resort, Gerry, Sandra, and the boys evaded the press pack that was having a field day reporting the rescue. It had been a quiet time in Washington State, and the news was starved of events. Besides that, the National Parks Service didn't mind getting the positive publicity. The boys retreated to Gerry and Sandra's unit, showered, and had an early breakfast - grilled sausages, tomatoes, fried eggs, French fries, toast, and coffee.

There was a discreet knock on the door. Sandra looked out before opening it to a reporter and photographer.

"Ezra Philpot from the 'Star' and this is Mike Todd. We heard you were involved in rescuing that hiker yesterday, and we were looking for a story.

Sandra knew that if she fobbed them off, the press would only become more intense. "Well there's not much to tell, really. Come in, then."

Ezra asked a few questions, and asked if he could photograph the boys.

"It must have been tough running all that way to get help?" he asked Travis and Darren.

"Oh, not really," Darren said.

"We are very fit," Travis added. "It was easier than a cross country run - a path all the way. We just did what had to be done, that's all."

"And you climbed up to the casualty," Ezra asked Peter. "Wasn't that dangerous. It took Parks and Rescue all night to get him down, I'm told."

"That's because they had to be very careful. The climb up wasn't too bad. Lisa - his fiancé - helped me. She'd been up there before."

"But it must have been dangerous? Those two are well known rock climbers. You're only a boy."

"I'm nearly fourteen. In about eight months."

Ezra laughed. "You're not even thirteen and a half. You're a young hero, and very modest."

"Sir, could you respect that, please. If you must take a photo of me, couldn't I just put my hand over my face a bit. Or wear sunglasses?"

"The hand," Mike suggested, "A good angle, Ezra. The shy schoolboy hero."

So the photograph of Peter that eventually appeared in the paper didn't really identify him. After they left, Gerry looked questioningly at Peter. "You used Neuro-Linguistic Programming on those men," he said.

"What's that?" Peter asked innocently.

"The use of language to get people to do what you want. You gave him two choices," he said.

"Yes. Sometimes I forget you're a trained interrogator, Gerry. Do you ever use N.L.P.?"

He laughed. "Never." He said, emphatically.

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"I've been asked to pass on to you boys the message that, despite your heroic rescue during the long weekend, the attentions of the press were not appreciated. Travis and Darren had their photographs in the paper, and you managed to wriggle out of being identified, but your photograph was still taken."

"Nobody knows Travis. Darren's real name wasn't attached to the story. Everyone knows about the school - it isn't a national secret. We did the best we could. Last thing we needed is the press getting curious and coming here to look for a story."

"Actually, I think you all did very well under the circumstances," the doctor said. "That's what I'm going to tell JUNIT. They should be proud of you."

"Darren thinks we're his friends, and we are," Travis said. "He's a terrific kid. If he finds out we're here

as his bodyguards, he'll feel terrible. He'll think we're being paid to be his friends, and that isn't true."

"I think," Cameron said, "You'll find that Darren isn't stupid. He's suspected you for a long time. Your rooms are on each side of him, you are both excellent at shooting, martial arts, athletics, and you keep him company whenever he leaves the school, and a lot of the time when you're all here. Been any moves to split you up?"

"No," Peter said. "Why?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake. It's an all boys' school," the doctor said.

"And at all boys schools, boys can be friends, but not that close?" Peter said. "In case it causes gossip."

Cameron smiled affirming. He went on: "I think you two boys are the worst kept secrets in the college. Why do you think they call you 'Spooky'?"

"I didn't know. Our parents aren't rich, or celebrities, but we're here. The boys have noticed - we don't fit in, really, do we?"

"I think you both fit in here fine. Personally, I'm delighted that you're here. Congratulations on a fine rescue effort, both of you."

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Chapter 18

End of Term

Darren was returning to Switzerland for his summer holidays, while Peter and Travis were scheduled to return to JUNIT headquarters. The last weekend of school, before it broke up for Summer was designated 'Parents Weekend' when all the rich and famous would come to see their youngsters - on display. Choirs rehearsed, bands played, spelling bees cavorted with verse speaking, and the Drama club acted out. Peter, Travis, Darren, and the boys in the junior R.O.T.C. were drilled to the max.

Everything was ready. The great day arrived, and so did the parents. It was really a great time. Darren's father came in his Rolls Royce limousine and it was parked beside all the other Rolls Royces.

"Father, it is my pleasure to introduce Peter Walsh, and his cousin, Travis Jenkins."

"The boys who helped you rescue the climber?"

"Actually, Peter rescued the climber. Travis and I ran for help."

"We're very pleased to meet you, Sir," Peter said.

"Are your parents here?" Abelard asked.

"No, Sir," Peter said.

"We are to be honour guard for a very important visitor," Darren said. "That is why we are in Junior R.O.T.C. uniform."

"Who is it?" Abelard asked.

"We don't really know, Sir," Peter said.

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Air force one, the presidential helicopter, landed on the college lawn which had been cleared for the event. Treasury men patrolled the area, and the visiting parents were kept back, along with the students. Doctor Cameron walked a pace behind as the Commander in Chief reviewed the Junior R.O.T.C. corps.

"Sir, may I present Cadet Captain Peter Walsh, Cadet Sergeant Travis Jenkins, and Cadet Darren Abelard" Cameron said as the three boys were brought forward. They saluted him, and the President pinned small medals on their uniforms.

"I'm presenting to you, the junior Star of Courage. These are in recognition of your participation in the recent rescue of the young tourist who came to grief at Bruin lake," he said. The boys saluted him and returned to their positions. The president went off to the refectory for lunch, and Major Winters dismissed the boys.

"Peter, Travis, there is one more duty you have to do," Winters said. "You both have to sit at the head's table with the president. You'll both be at the far end, but it is an honour, and your table manners will be impeccable. Right?"

"Yes, sir," Peter said. "But what about Darren - he was in the rescue as well."

"This has nothing to do with the rescue. Boys sit with their family during Parents Weekend luncheon. He has asked that both of you shall be at his table. I wonder why?"

Peter nudged Travis, who smiled back at him. "I think he's a sort of uncle, Sir."

"I knew there must be some reason that you two were at this school. Nephews of the president - of course."

"Not exactly nephews, Sir, but close. Can't say much." Peter said, tapping his nose with his index finger.

"Of course," Winters said.

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"The most embarrassing thing was that the President put his hands on our shoulders and we were photographed," Travis said later. "I am definitely going to join Treasury to be his bodyguard, when I'm old enough." He rolled over on his bed and watched Peter as he cleaned his automatic. "We don't have to worry about the rest of the boys now. We are definitely part of the 'in' crowd."

"Did you notice who the official photographer was?" Peter asked.

"Mike Todd, of 'The Star'. He's supposed to be very good - that's why he gets the job, every Parents' day. Oh, heck. He'll make the connection."

"He didn't seem to recognise us - because we were in R.O.T.C. formals. It's a pretty good disguise, really. Big hats, stiff coats. We might be lucky," Peter mused.

Satisfied, he placed the automatic in his leg holster and pulled his trouser leg down to cover it. "Do you realise that we're off duty now. Darren's gone home with his father."

"And we're on Summer Holidays" Travis said, "Back to JUNIT to march, drill, fight, run miles, shoot, and hone our skills. Nothing like hard work for a good holiday."

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A lieutenant met Peter and Travis at Atlanta airport, and they were driven in a dark green sedan to a nearby army base, and through into the officers' residential area.

"Colonel Harding is your billet for the moment. I'll get your cases," he said, getting out to open the boot. The light went on, and a man in civvies walked out to meet them. It was Weldon. He gave them a grin and picked up two of the cases. The boys grabbed the others and followed him inside, with the lieutenant.

"Put them down there, thanks," he said. As soon as the young officer left, he turned to the boys and reached out with welcoming arms. "Great to have you home, boys," he said giving them a warm hug.

Peter and Travis grinned. "Glad to be here, Sir," Peter said. "Looks like the Lieutenant just blew your cover, Colonel Harding, Sir."

"Had to happen some time," he said. "During ops, its Weldon, Shaw, Jenkins, right?"

"Yes, Sir," Peter and Travis said in unison.

"My wife, Janet," Harding said as Mrs. Harding came down the steps. "Janet, these are the boys I was telling you about. Peter, and Travis."

"Ma'am." Peter and Travis said.

"How was your term?" she asked, leading the boys into the sitting room. The table was prepared with a light snack of coffee, cakes, and cookies.

"They worked us hard, Ma'am, but it was enjoyable."

"My wife and I have no secrets, boys, so you can talk freely. Sit down. Would you like some cake? What about the Chocolate Slice? It's my favourite."

"Yes, Please," Travis said. "By the way, Darren is a terrific kid."

"So it was an easy assignment. That's good, because it's an ongoing one. We managed to get the other boys into good schools. No complaints, so far. You'll all be together after next Friday. I've got leave. How does a trip to Kennedy Space Centre and Disneyworld take your fancy?"

Peter and Travis couldn't believe the news. Their faces lit up with delight. "Fantastic," Peter said.

"Terrific," Travis added. "I was worried we were going to spend Summer Holidays marching and stuff."

The Colonel laughed. "Not this week, boys. Holidays are definitely 'play time' in your part of the army."

"We wouldn't want you to turn out to be dull boys," Janet said, "All work and no play."

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Disneyland was fairly new, having been opened twelve months ago, and Kennedy Space Centre was busy preparing for Apollo 17. The boys had a week of fun before getting back to their training duties.

"Survival - being able to live in a hostile environment, using basic tools and your wits. That's the object of this exercise, gentlemen," Barton said.

Peter, Travis, Nathaniel, Jordan and Bobby sat cross legged on the hard concrete floor of their utility shed, listening carefully. They wore camouflaged combat shirts and trousers, with matching caps, webbing, and black combat boots.

"You never know when you might find yourselves isolated, cut off from supplies, and with limited resources. What ideas do you guys have on surviving?"

"We could make bows and arrows," Travis said. We'd need sharp knives.

"Good point," Barton said. "You can fire an arrow with a length of string. Put a knot in the end of it, and use the string as a spear thrower. What about fire? You need fire for warmth."

"Spectacles?" Nathan suggested.

"Bright idea from comic books, but it doesn't work in practice. You need to make a fire drill and learn how to use it, a-la-boy scouts."

They discussed everything from snares to pit traps. Finally Barton brought them to their feet and stood them at attention.

"Thanks, gentlemen. You seem to be full of ideas. There's a helicopter waiting outside to drop you off on Falcon Island - the place where we train the Seals."

"But we get the chance to get ready, right?" Jordan asked. "We don't even have our sheath knives."

"As you are. We'll pick you up in a week and see what state you're in then. The best way to learn survival, is to do it."

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Chapter 19

Falcon Island

"So just what do we have," Peter asked as the boys watched the helicopter recede into the distance.

"The clothes we're standing up in, wrist watches, an emergency radio we mustn't use unless we have a real disaster. That's about it." Bobby said without enthusiasm. "They really swung this one on us. So what do we need?"

"Shelter, and a water supply. We don't need food for three days, although we will be hungry enough." Peter said. "They really swung this on us without any warning at all."

"That's the nature of survival," Jordan said. "One moment you're sunning yourself on paradise resort, and the next you're fighting off crocodiles in some stone-age swamp. Nothing can prepare you for it. It just happens."

"Hold it, guys." Travis said, "I've just spotted a dry cowpat over there. We need a fire."

"We're talking about surviving on nothing, and you're looking at cow crap?" Jordan said.

"Hold on, Travis is right. Dry cow manure might be just what we need. Look about for anything burnt. We

need carbon." Nathaniel said. "We need flint. Everyone look about for quartz rocks or something. Any bits of iron or steel lying about. Come on, Peter. You're the boss. Lead us on, great leader."

They walked towards a line of hills that showed a gap which might be the course of a stream or river. On the way, they collected various pieces of manure, some rocks, and lumps of charcoal from the remains of burnt trees.

Jordan sacrificed some of his uniform shirt to pound up with the dry animal droppings, cow manure, and charcoal. Bobby had found an old iron gate hinge that struck sparks against a white rock. There was a small stream in the valley between the hills.

By nightfall, they had erected a shelter of branches, drank their fill from the stream, and started a fire. Much of their time was spent gathering kindling and light wood for the fire. They scraped the ground clean to make sleeping pits, and filled them with leaves and grass for bedding. All in all, they felt they had done a reasonable job of preparing for the first night. To keep warm, they huddled together back to back and covered themselves with grass. It wasn't totally comfortable, but the night wasn't too cold, and they slept for a few hours.

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In the morning, they made stone knives using flint from the stream. They placed a bed of grass on the ground, and struck stones together to split them into long triangular blades. They managed to find vines that

could be pounded and twisted into strings and cords, and finally, Peter managed to split a large rock to make an axe blade. It wasn't as fine as Neolithic stone ware, but it worked as a hand axe, and they managed to cut down small saplings to make a long fence. Their idea was to force animals to run along it, and then hit them as they bounded through a gap.

Peter found a rabbit warren, and they managed to get a couple of them as they tried to escape when they lit a fire in front of one of the burrows. With berries they had gathered, the roots of grasses, and their game rotating on long sticks above the fire, they had a reasonable evening meal.

Bobby used some of the clay from the stream bank to make a couple of pots. "We can fire them in the old manure when they are dry," he said. Then we can store water. Manure burns hot enough to turn clay into pottery. We did it in art class."

"Glad military schools teach art and pottery," Bobby said. "Always knew it might be useful sometime."

Hunger gnawed at them, and they slept fitfully that night. In the morning, they twisted grass to make a long rope and used that to make another fence. They found the spoor of deer and followed the tracks to where they spotted them browsing. Peter tried to shoot one with his home made bow, but it was too weak, and the arrow bounced off its back, sending it careering off into the deeper forest.

Nathaniel had more luck. He was spotted by a wolf that began stalking him. He was alone, but felt no real

fear - after all, it was only one wolf. He rejoined the group quickly, however, when he heard another one baying nearby.

"Are wolves edible?" Bobby asked.

"I think so," Jordan said. "I believe that dog livers are poisonous to humans because they contain too much vitamin A. I learnt that when we were doing polar explorers in school."

"I could be the bait," Nathaniel suggested. "We only need one wolf. The rest can be driven off with staves and fire sticks."

Catching a wolf wasn't easy, but the animals were encouraged with rabbit bones, and entered the killing circle. It was a messy business, which Peter hated, but he realised they had to have meat. Actually, it wasn't too bad, but he wasn't sure he could put 'dog' onto his regular menu.

They managed to salvage the animal's skin, and the fur made a somewhat messy blanket, until they cleaned the fat and scraps of meat off it. Travis pegged it out on the ground and cured it with ashes from their fire. The wolves, however, kept well away from them from that time on.

A young deer wasn't so lucky, and its meat provided them with an ample supply of food after they smoked it and hung large chunks to dry.

"That should last us until Friday," Travis said.

"Listen!" Nathaniel said. "Helicopter."

"They're coming for us early," Travis said. "Should be getting us on Friday, not Wednesday."

"We've been careless," Peter said. "It's not a military helicopter, it's the State Fire Service."

"They must have spotted our smoke. They're coming in."

"They've got no right!" Nathan said. "This is a military training area."

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Within a few minutes, the boys were surrounded by yellow uniformed firemen, who put their fire out with extinguishers and confiscated the deer meat.

"What on Earth do you boys think you're doing? You've lit a fire in the forest, against all fire regulations, and all wildlife here is protected." The senior officer said.

"The fire is properly contained, and we're doing a survival exercise." Peter explained.

"Survival exercise for whom?" The officer asked. "You're far too young to be in the army. Are you in the scouts, or something?"

He got no answer, and this only made him more frustrated.

"There's no I.D. on these boys, but they have got a military grade radio," one of the men said. "Everything else has been hand made."

"Can I have the radio, please, to call someone?" Peter asked.

"Oh, no. It's evidence. You boys have committed a lot of serious offences. We're taking you back to town, to be charged by the proper authorities. Your parents must be worried sick about you."

The boys were made to sit on the ground and wait. An hour later, a police helicopter landed, and the boys were handcuffed and placed in it for removal.

There was a disturbance, and the boys noticed that the men were looking up into the sky. A few minutes later, swirls of dust appeared, and the police helicopter was unable to take off - a large military helicopter hovered overhead. It moved laterally, and dropped an officer with two armed servicemen in full combat kit from a descent rope. They walked over to the State Police.

One of the policemen took the boys out of their helicopter and removed the handcuffs. "Seems to be some sort of mix-up here," he said.

The boys lined up and saluted.

The officer returned the salute. "We'll have to abort the exercise and return you to base," he said. "Up you go."

Slings were dropped, and the boys soon found themselves being pulled to safety. They were thankful to back on home territory. The officer and commandos joined them, and soon they were heading back to base.

None of the boys said anything. They stared to the front, making no comment. The exercise had been aborted.

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" platoons went in after you left and cleaned the area. They reported that you did an excellent job of establishing a survival base and providing food, water, and shelter."

"But sir, it was exposed by the civilian authorities. Doesn't that make it a failure?" Peter asked.

"By no means. We have learnt a valuable lesson. In future, hide yourselves from the air. Make your fires smokeless. Nobody could have foreseen that the exercise would be rumbled by the State Forest Fire Service. They've got new detection equipment that spots fires. It's very sensitive, and they do have permission to enter our area and fight forest fires."

"Are they going to make reports and things?" Travis asked.

"No. The local commander has smoothed things over. We said that you were to be rescued by a group of Seals as part of an exercise. Luckily, we monitor all radio frequencies in this area and heard what was going on."

He paused and gave a slightly evil smile at them. "Now the good news is, that you've got complete medicals to go through. Part of the survival exercise is to find out how your bodies have coped with exposure and so on. We're particularly interested in Lime Disease - caused by the local tics. Also, there's a bunch of fauna you might have collected from the wild game, and untreated stream water. Worms and things. The army medics want to see."

"Blood samples - Not again!" Peter said, rolling back on the hard cement floor and putting his hands over his

face. He was quickly joined by the other boys as they protested, but to no avail.

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Chapter 20

Second Semester Starts

From the air, the shed looked like any other Russian fisherman's boat house, but it was part of a complex that was heavily guarded and surrounded by electric fences and security wire. On the inside, it was very different. Electronic equipment, mostly transmitters and radar repeaters lined the walls.

The men meeting inside were not fishermen, either. They were part of a soviet elite armed forces group known as 'Spetznaz' or commandos, similar to the American Seals forces.

"Orders have come from higher up, that we must perform a very dangerous mission," Major Vassily said. "Comrade Ilyitch, you will be in charge."

"That is an honour, comrade. What do you expect us to do?"

Vassily turned on a slide projector, and displayed a head and shoulders photograph of Prince Darien. He was wearing an R.O.T.C. activity uniform - camouflaged t-shirt "Retrieve this young boy from an American boarding school. This means, you will be operating on American territory, without their knowledge. Fortunately, the school is in Washington State, which is mountainous, rugged, and lightly populated. The boy will not come

willingly, so he will have to be sedated and transported. He must be recovered alive and in good condition.."

"Why this boy, Comrade?" Ilyitch asked.

"His father controls the East European Oil Conglomerate - much of the world's oil not controlled by the Arabs, or the Soviet Union." Vassily said, "So far, he has managed to be beyond our reach, but he has made a mistake allowing his son to be exposed. If we get the boy, we can control him."

"Forgive my asking, Comrade, but this seems to be a highly risky operation. I could say that in stronger terms," Ilyitch said with a smirk. He wasn't afraid of Vassily, but he knew what the man was capable of.

"We have managed to place an agent in the school - someone that nobody will suspect. He will organise for a group of students - junior military cadets - to have a weekend camp in the mountains."

"How do we get there?"

"A small, attack submarine will take you in. It is very fast, and runs silently. However, it can only stay long enough for you to penetrate the coastline. Fast in, fast out, before they can react. You will be retrieved the same way. You have spent years training in the American Simulation Towns. Once you are in place, you should blend into the population. You have been trained.

Captain Ilyitch looked around at his men. He was confident in their ability.

"Agripin - you will be second in command. Demyan - I want you as my communications officer. Gavril, Grigory, Ilya and Vitali You will be our support troops. You are physically strong, so I will entrust you to carry the container." Ilyitch said.

"Explain the container, comrade?" Grigory asked.

"It will contain the boy. He must be totally immobilized, but we can't risk using drugs. Grown men have died when abducted using drugs. They choke, or their breathing stops. He must be kept conscious all the way."

He displayed a white plastic cylinder 500mm in diameter, and 1500mm long. It held smaller tubes for Darien's arms and legs. "This is his size. He is slid into this, and when the base and top are on, he can do nothing. The rectangular hole is so we can monitor his face and ensure he can breathe."

"What if he screams or shouts?"

"The capsule will be wired - If he becomes difficult, or makes a noise, he will get a high voltage shock. Don't worry - we have used this system before. It is very efficient, and easy to carry," Ilyitch explained.

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Mr. Fenster, nicknamed 'Fester' by the boys, was in fine form during the first day of semester. It was not that he was sarcastic, exactly, because teachers had a code to follow, but his wit was self centered in that, when he applied it to a boy, he was the only one laughing.

"So tell me, Mister Walsh, is your titration good enough to trust? The solution contains hydrochloric acid and sodium hydroxide. Are you certain it is now salty water?"

"You've always said, we should never ingest anything in the lab." Peter said. "Do you want me to drink it?"

"No. You could end up in a terrible pickle. Could you suggest any way of testing your solution?"

"I would evaporate it, and dissolve it in distilled water to make a super-saturated solution," Peter said, "Then I'd allow it to crystallize. The crystals should be pure sodium chloride."

"I'll accept that," Fenster said. "A pity your written account of the process was not as crystal clear. Maxwell, what was the result of your titration?"

Peter looked at the classroom clock. He'd have preferred to make nitrogen iodine and put a decent lump on Fester's chair. Unfortunately, one of the students had used an ounce of solid iodine to make the contact explosive. That was far too much. He nearly destroyed the laboratory. Dangerous chemicals were subsequently locked away.

"Watching the clock, Walsh?"

"Doesn't seem to make it run any faster, Sir." Peter said, with such a sigh of regret, that even Fester had to smile - slightly.

"You can re-write your assignment. Your work has fallen off in neatness and in quality. I can only suspect that, in your holidays, you met a young lady and

you have allowed your neurochemistry to suffer accordingly."

"I wish," Peter said.

The electric bell, signifying a change of period, rang briefly. Darren looked over at him sympathetically. "How was your holiday, Peter?"

"Disneyland, Kennedy Space Centre, Camping in the woods, getting arrested for lighting camp-fires. Nothing too exciting. How was your holiday?"

"I went snow skiing in Australia. It was very good."

"Don't be stupid. All there is in Australia is deserts, kangaroos, and sheep. It's stinking hot."

Travis came out of his classroom at the end of the corridor. "Monsieur Darren. Comment allez vous?"

"Tres bien," Darren replied. "Your French has a terrible American accent."

They wound their way down the spiral steps towards the ground floor and walked to the refectory for lunch.

"Nobody's perfect. You still doing cadets, this semester?"

"Wouldn't miss it. September camp is coming up. We get a whole week off school, playing soldiers."

"There's one thing I like about school cadet camps," Travis said. "Everything is laid on. Tents, meals, fun activities and counselors we can tease the life out of."

"You wouldn't?" Peter said.

Travis gave an evil laugh.

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Chapter 21

Cadence

"At St Beadles we are marching
In Junior R.O.T.C.
Plant your feet and step out lively
Put them where they ought to be.
In the night or early morning,
"Hear us as we march along -
Never shirking never tiring
As we sing our marching song.

"Left, right, left right,
Swing those arms and get it right.
Marching with a steady beat,
Swing those arms and lift those feet.

"Alpha Company, HALT! One two" Peter said as he brought the boys to a precise stop. "Company will turn to the Left! Left Turn!"

He turned to face Major Winters, then saluted him.

"You are about to commence a live firing exercise," Winters said in his normal shouting 'I am telling you' voice. "That means we shall be using live ammunition. Real bullets that can go right through you if you are careless. I do not need to paint pictures. You will ensure that your rifles point to the front all the time. You will not pick them up and swing them about in a gung-ho manner. I don't care how many rabbits you shot

on your farm over the years, Here, you will do as you are told! When you are told!"

Each platoon took turns at shooting on the two hundred yard range, then the targets were examined. Winters wasn't surprised to find Peter and Travis had scored the highest, with very close groups. He went through the targets, explaining finer points of marksmanship, then sat the cadets in a semicircle. Two of the Senior students erected targets twenty yards in front of the group.

"Jenkins, and Walsh will give a demonstration with nine millimeter automatic hand guns," He said, producing a wooden box. "Travis, you can demonstrate the standard NATO stance," He said. "Groups of three. You have nine shots. Rapid fire."

Travis adjusted his ear muffs, faced the front, Did a quick safety check and pulled the slide back, arming the automatic. He grasped his right wrist in his left hand, and sighted down the Beretta's simple battle sight. "Ready, Sir."

"Commence firing," Winters said. There was a sharp 'rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat' and Travis brought the pistol up and cleared it.

"Weapon cleared, Sir."

Winters took the pistol, examined it, and placed it in the box. "Shaw. Demonstrate the French Cavalry Stance," he said.

Peter turned to the left and checked the Beretta, then adjusted his ear muffs. He placed his left hand on his right shoulder, rested his chin on his left wrist

and pointed the pistol to his right side. It was an unusual stance, but steadied his aim at the target. "Ready, Sir."

"Commence firing," Winters said. There was almost a continuous 'Rat-a-tat- at-a-tat- at-a-tat' He cleared the pistol and handed it to Winters. The cadets examined the targets eagerly.

"What do you notice?" Winters asked.

"The French Cavalry stance seems more accurate, Sir," Seth said, "Although both of them chewed out the torso, but it seems awkward - I mean, you'd have to be very exposed to take that stance."

"Good comment. What do you think, Captain Walsh?"

"The Beretta is a beautiful pistol, Sir. Simple, and easy to maintain and clean. I like the battle sight because it's easy to use. As for the stance, I agree with Seth. Personally, I prefer the intuitive one-hand style. A bit like 'Cowboys and Indians', but very useful if one can master it."

"Really?" Winters said, opening the box and placing another magazine into one of the pistols. "Show us."

The target was placed up on its easel again.

"Head shots, just to make it a bit more difficult," Winters said. "Watch, boys, and learn."

Peter checked the safety, adjusted his ear muffs and stood casually in front of the target holding the pistol in his right hand. "Ready, Sir."

"Fire at will."

Peter turned his hand so the pistol was sideways. He fired the shots one after the other, instead of grouping them in threes.

"That's shooting like a New York gangster," Winters said derisively. "I'd hate to see that style in general use," he said, taking the pistol ensuring it was cleared and placing it back in the box.

The target was brought forward. Peter had placed a round through each eye, one in the center of the forehead, one in each nostril, and four across the mouth.

"Showing off," Winters said. He looked appraisingly at the boy, "Well done, Shaw. A good demonstration."

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"Where did you learn to shoot like that, Peter?" Darren asked that night as the boys were sitting in their pajamas on Peter's bedroom balcony. It was getting colder at night, and the boys were rugged up in their dressing gowns. Sipping hot chocolate.

"Military school," Peter said. "They had a small arms range."

"Same here," Travis said. "They were very big on safety."

"Will we be taking rifles to camp?" Darren asked.

"No. There are no range facilities, and it's near the National Park. There's always the risk of a bear getting shot, or something. I think the fines for shooting wild-life are pretty high." Peter said.

"Will you be taking your own pistols?"

There was a very long silence.

"The three of us have become really good friends, Darren. That's the most important thing," Travis said. "Like the 'Three Musketeers'." He looked at Darren "And yes, we will be the only ones at camp with concealed fire-arms, and you mustn't tell anyone about them. It's our business. Nobody else's."

"I suppose I should be grateful that my Father didn't put heavyweight Basque bodyguards to trample all over the school."

"It's been a bit of a walk in the park for us, Darren." Peter said, "I can't see any threats to you here, So we've been able to relax and enjoy being at school. Which reminds me, I've got to hand that assignment in to Fester tomorrow. Damn him."

He stood up, stretched, and walked into the bedroom to begin the task. "I guess that's a call to bed-time," Travis said, standing up. Darren stood up and placed his hand on Travis's head, which came up to his chest.

"I should be guarding you?" he said.

"We look out for each other," Travis said. "That's what friends are for. All for one, and one for all."

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The ultra secret K162 submarine had no name - only a number. It lay in a concrete pen on the Pacific coast, unseen by orbiting American satellites. Ilyitch, Agripin, Demyan, Gavrill, Grigory, Ilya and Vitali stowed

their plastic wrapped suit cases into lockers. They had to stoop in the narrow confines of the boat.

Captain Virden was very proud of the vessel. It had a Titanium hull, and could go deeper and faster than any American submarine. The K162 was a prototype. If it concluded its missions successfully, many more would be built. The idea of penetrating the American coastal zone with the latest hi-tech vessel and smuggling a crew of commando spies onto the mainland was almost unthinkable, but it would be a great test of the sub's abilities. He was sure they could hide successfully. The fact that he was to retrieve the commandos and a special package after the operation, was added spice to the dangerous mission.

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Chapter 22

The bivouac

Peter, Travis, Darren, Benjamin, Ronald, Seth, Victor, Brian, Kim, and Bobby, were amongst the group responsible for setting up their camp in a quiet section of the Mt. St. Helens national Park. The school had a long standing agreement with the Rangers that they would look after the area they were using, and clean it up after their annual bivouac.

There were twelve heavy canvas tents to erect, including a large marquee which acted as a cooking tent and dining area. A company of regular soldiers attended to ensure the campsite was well constructed. Much of

the work was quite heavy. In Autumn, there was always the chance of early snow, or powerful storms.

Rations, including drinking water, had to be loaded onto trucks, and off-loaded at the camp site. Forty-four gallon drums were dropped onto used tires, rolled to the water storage area, and righted into position. Wood for the wood-burning stoves had to be neatly stacked. There would be no open fires, except for the official camp fire which would be held at the end of the camp.

A first-aid tent was erected, with four bunks. It would be used for minor medical situations. Anyone seriously ill or hurt would be evacuated. The command tent was for the Teacher-officers who would be running the camp.

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Monday saw them back at school doing regular lessons. They were asked to write an account of their bivouac preparations as an English assignment. Mrs. Elwood had a word to Peter before he started. "Try to describe your feelings for the place, Peter. The reader does not want to know how many pine trees there were in the forest, but wants to know your feelings about pine trees."

"I love the smell of pine trees in the morning?" Peter asked helpfully, looking up at her with raised eyebrows.

"That's the sort of thing, but what is special about them?"

"If they weren't in a National Park, they'd be turned into paper?"

"Have you ever hugged a tree?"

Peter pouted thoughtfully. He shook his head. "No," he said. "I'd prefer girls any day."

"Why not imagine the trees as if they were beautiful girls and try to project your feelings," she said, handing him his assignment folder.

"For you, Ma'am, I'll try," he said.

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Darren had received a parcel from his father. It contained a black box with an electric power cable, and a cable that could be fitted to any TV set. There was also a hand held console with a black knob and button.

"What is it?" Apie asked.

"My father calls it 'Pong' because that's the sound it makes. You plug it into the TV and it becomes a game."

"Let's try it then," Goth said. He pulled the Television set forward and plugged the wires onto the antennae screws, using his Swiss army penknife.

"We need a double adapter for the power," Darren said, getting one from the kitchenette. Remember to replace it, or we won't be able to have toast and coffee later."

The screen came up with a large black rectangle with white lines at each end and a slot to let a small white ball enter, if it was hit with a paddle. There were other games, too, and the boys settled down to play.

"You should all be in bed," Mr. Kent said, when he did his late night rounds. "What on earth is that?"

"It's Pong," Darren explained.

"May I have a go?" the house master asked."

He found the game intriguing, but finally put it down and turned the television off. "Very amusing, but I don't think this sort of activity will take off. Boys should be outside playing baseball and football for real - not trying to do imitation games on a TV set."

"My father thinks it will be a big thing in the future," Darren said.

"Bed," Mr. Kent said, pointing them to their rooms. "Nobody will ever make money out of this sort of nonsense."

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Wednesday morning came, and the Junior R.O.T.C. climbed into the back of two large trucks driven by regular soldiers. They wore camouflaged caps, jackets, trousers, and carried back-packs, which they stacked at the front of the rear trays. They sat on side benches and did their best to look important as the vehicles drove out of the front gate and turned towards the road leading to the national park. Major Winters, Captain Kent, and Lieutenant Rogers followed in a 4wd Toyota behind.

"This is more like a tourist resort," Travis muttered as the vehicles drove between two large white poles into their camp ground. "They even have kennels".

"That's the dog squad," Peter said. "They must be exercising them - or it's in case one of the kids gets lost."

The tents were in perfect lines, and a gravel path had been laid in front of them. The parade ground had been leveled, and a large flag pole was erected.

"Not like our camp," Peter said, patting his partner on the back.

"Fall in!" Winters roared, and the boys lined up in their platoons.

"A company present and correct, Sir!"

"B Company present and Correct, Sir!"

"C Company Present and Correct, Sir!"

"A word to the wise!" Winters said, "The army has put a lot of effort getting this tent camp up. There will be no fooling about in the tent lines. No running between tents, no raiding parties, no fooling about at all. A boy running through the lines got a tent peg impaled into his chest two years ago, and nearly died. Not at our school, I hasten to add."

Captain Kent took over. "A company will be in tents two to four. B company shall use tents five to Eight. C company will use tents nine to twelve. Normally, we expect you to keep together as platoons. However, as there are nine boys in a platoon, and these are eight man tents, you may choose your own company during this camp."

"I'm bunking in with Apie and Goth," Darren said.

Peter was surprised, but it was time for Darren to branch out with other friends. "Sure," he said. "That's fine with us."

"You two won't be 'minding' me?"

"This is a perfectly safe activity, Darren" Travis said. "We're surrounded by the military, and I don't see any hired guns, kidnappers, or assassins hiding in these trees."

"Yes. Have fun, buddy," Peter said. "We intend to relax and play soldiers for a week. Suggest you do the same."

After settling in during the morning, the boys had lunch in the mess. Travis and Peter ate in the Sergeants and Officers mess, while Darren sat with his classmates in the larger marquee set aside for 'other ranks'. After mess, they had an hour for casual activities, then an activity parade. They were told to bring their empty backpacks, and wear cloth hats, shorts, T-shirts, and hiking shoes. They would also take a plastic raincoat and windcheater, in case the weather changed unexpectedly.

"This afternoon, we shall do a familiarization exercise, a brief hike," Captain Kent said. Each boy will carry a sandbag weighing five pounds, and one gallon of water in his backpack. Make sure it is on your shoulders properly."

"Sir?" Apie asked, "What do regular soldiers carry?"

"A heck of a lot more," Kent said. "As you are cadets, we don't expect you to kill yourselves. Not

today. Our line of travel is along this watercourse for about six miles. Again, not too far."

"Walk in the park?" Travis said. He'd carried far heavier loads during real training.

"Last time we went for a walk, we got involved in rescuing tourists," Peter said.

"Somehow I don't think we're going to see any tourists on this trip. It's too far from anywhere. We might come across a bear, though. I notice Winters is wearing his sidearm."

"I'm not sure .9mm will stop a charging bear," Peter said. "At least his is a .45 revolver."

The boys had decided not to bring their automatics to camp. For one thing, their kits might be searched, or rifled through, and for another, there weren't many places they could conceal them. They decided that there was little point in being armed. After all, the military was running the camp. It was probably the safest place in Washington State.

The track they followed was not well worn, but had been used over the years, so it could be followed easily. It was defined more by the absence of trees or undergrowth, and rocks that had lain on the path had been moved to one side.

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Chapter 23

Night Games

Their hike was made without incident, and the boys returned as the sun was setting, ready for an early tea.

The army cooks had excelled themselves and the boys lined up to mashed potatoes, vegetables, a choice of roast meat or chicken, and thick brown gravy, followed by ice-cream and port wine trifle (non alcoholic) or assorted cakes swimming in custard or cream.

That night, Winters placed a lamp in the woods. It could easily be seen by the boys, shining amongst the distant trees.

"The idea of this game," Lieutenant Rogers said, "Is to extinguish the lantern by lifting the glass and blowing it out. If you break it, your team loses. Some rules apply - you must sneak up to it. No charging as a group. If challenged, stand up and be identified straight away. No cheating. C Company will take their places as guards. After the first game, B company will guard, then A company last. You all know how to play 'Stalk the lantern' so have fun.

"What if we run into a bear or a wolf?" Seth asked.

"Tell it to report to the mess hut," Victor said.

"Actually, the army is using our camp as an exercise," Winters said. The dog squad is patrolling further out with the sentries, so any bears will be sent packing. Don't worry about them."

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Peter and Travis split up and stalked in carefully. Both boys wore black sweatshirts and tracksuit pants. They smeared their faces with soot from the wood fires. Nevertheless, they hadn't gone far when they were spotted.

"Walsh, I see you," came the call, and a torch beam lit up his area. He stood up and surrendered. Boys who were 'caught' had to return to a bench at the start of the exercise area. A few minutes later, Travis joined him.

"How did they see us?" Travis asked quietly. "I thought we were supposed to be trained for this sort of thing."

"Maybe it was bad luck?" Peter said.

Suddenly, the light went out. "Game over!" someone shouted. The winner was identified - it was Darren.

"Frenchie beat us!" Peter exclaimed, "It's not fair."

The boy was brought forward, holding the lantern. It was then that the boys noticed that Darren was wringing wet. He'd slipped into the river and swum past the guards and come into the lamp from behind.

"Well done," Winters said. Someone handed Darren a towel so he could dry himself off. "C company come forward and identify yourselves. Let's see what you've got."

The boys walked in with their torches. They were wearing helmets with large night vision glasses.

"Night vision - that's not fair," Peter said.

"What do you know about night vision glasses, Walsh?" Major Winters asked.

"Nothing, Sir. They're still classified," Peter said with a grin.

Winters looked away and the subject changed. The next company didn't use the glasses, and the game ran its regular course.

"Where did they get them, I wonder?" Travis asked.

"I suspect they got them off the sentries," Peter said. "The ones guarding our camp from bears. Well it stands to reason they'd want them tested, and how better than to use them in one of our stalking games?"

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Darren wrung his wet clothes out and changed into a warm t-shirt and long pants. He managed to hang his black windcheater and tracksuit pants on a line behind the mess tent.

"Who goes there!" a voice challenged.

"Ferguson, Sir. I'm just hanging out my wet clothes."

"Darren Ferguson?"

"Yes, Sir."

"That's all right, then." the soldier said. "Lucky I found you. I need a volunteer - someone to help us set up tomorrow's activities. We must keep quiet about it and not tell anyone. It's a surprise."

"All right," the boy said. "What do you want me to do?"

"Come on, I'll show you," the soldier said, moving down a path into the woods with Darren following.

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Darren was not missed until reveille the next morning. A quick check revealed he hadn't slept in his camp bed. His wet clothes were still hanging on the line behind the cook-house. There was no sign of a struggle, or anything amiss. The boy had vanished.

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"Maybe he took a walk, and got lost. He must be out there, somewhere," Travis said.

"I doubt it. Darren knows the risks. He isn't stupid." Peter said.

The boys had returned to their tent and hanged into combat clothing - camouflaged pants and jackets, strong boots, and camouflaged caps. Their wallets held a special compartment that contained an official 'Department of Defence' shield and I.D.

"Guess we have to blow our covers," Peter said.

"Can't be helped, I guess," Travis said.

Major Winters had called a parade of all the boys. The soldiers guarding the camp had paraded short of two of their members. Soldiers searching for them reported back to their C.O., Major Pannier.

"We've found them, Sir. Both dead - dog, shot. - must have been a silencer." The young soldier said.

"Secure it as a crime scene." Pannier said.

"Two boys want to see you, Sir. Say it's urgent."

"I've got no time for kids now. We've got a missing boy, two dead sentries, and a guard dog. Wait - they may have information. Bring them in."

Peter and Travis were ushered in to see the Major. He had kept out of sight during the camp, dealing with the regular army soldiers who were maintaining the camp. The boys saluted him crisply, and showed him their shields.

"Agents Shaw and Jenkins," the Major said. "JUNIT. I wasn't briefed about this. I should have been briefed, damn it. How can I secure an area properly if I'm not told there is a threat."

"Nobody thought this bivouac was a threat, Sir. It was just a week of camping in the woods." Peter said. "We must contact JUNIT immediately."

"Sergeant Meyers - take this boy to the radio room, and help him contact his commander. It's a radio phone. Know how to use it?"

"Yes, Sir," Peter said.

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Within an hour, top level meetings were taking place across the country. State police put up road blocks to check vehicles traveling towards the coast. A group of C.I.D. officers from Fort Lewis arrived at the camp to survey the murder scene. The boys from St. Beadles College were evacuated on trucks, back to the school. Peter and Travis stayed so they could be interviewed by the military police detectives.

The dead dog was brought into the mess tent, and two army vets performed an autopsy on the unfortunate animal. They produced the bullet which had killed it.

"Well, well. Surprise is everything. This is an SP-2 bullet. Fired from a silenced rifle and only available to our Spetznaz friends." The C.I.D. officer, Colonel Pascoe, said.

"Soviet troops in Washington State?" Travis asked. "That means this has been a snatch operation. We were briefed on the outside possibility of it happening - that's why we were assigned." He turned to place his forearm across his eyes and leaned on one of the tents poles. Tears flowed freely. "We've failed, Sir."

Peter put his hand on Travis's shoulder. He felt just as depressed.

The Colonel stopped looking at the bullet, replaced it in the evidence bag, and walked over to the boys. "I'm sure you've done a fine job, over all," he said kindly. "How old are you? Thirteen, fourteen?"

"We're undercover agents, Sir."

"I know that. I've seen your badges. Nobody expects kids your age to go up against the toughest commandos in the world. What you've got to remember, is that the bad guys usually get in first. They plan these things very carefully. We don't always get it right. Our work is usually reactive, not pro-active.

"The soldiers were killed by a silent attack from behind - their necks broken. Only expert commandos - Spetznaz or Seals could do that. One of the soldiers was stripped. We believe the kidnapper wore his uniform, and lured Darien away from the camp. One good point is that the boy is no good to them dead. They want to transport him alive. He won't be drugged. Anesthetics

are dangerous. He'll be tied up, probably gagged, but conscious. They have to walk him, or carry him. More good news is, We found their vehicle. Well, we think it's their vehicle. It contains a suspicious object - some sort of plastic pipe. that means they're probably hiking towards the coast somewhere."

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Chapter 25

A Rough Journey

They were: Ilyitch, Agripin, Demyan, Gavril, Grigory, Ilya and Vitali - Darien had memorized their names. They had moved through the forest in single file. Now they rested. Ilyitch compared Darren's face to a photograph he carried. They knew Darren's real name, and made no pretense of their purpose.

"On your feet, Prince Darien, your highness," Agripin said, sarcastically, pulling the boy up from where he sat against the trunk of a tree. Darren was exhausted. He felt as if he'd been running for hours. His hands were secured behind his back with gaffer tape, but they hadn't tied his feet or gagged him. He'd tried to slow them down by tripping and stumbling, but Ilya produced a pair of needle-nosed pliers from his pocket and squeezed them on the skin over his elbow. The pain was indescribable. Darren screamed, and nearly choked with inability to breathe.

"Try it again, and I'll let him loose on you," Ilyitch threatened. From that moment on, Darren tried his best to keep up with the men. If he did slow down,

Ilya produced the pliers, and clicked them near the boy's ears.

Now they were off again over a route marked on their map, but never used by man or beast before. Logs and branches were strewn over the ground along with young undergrowth, so they had to step over obstacles all the time. It was exhausting work.

"Carry him," Ilyitch commanded. Agripin turned and lifted the boy over his shoulder. Darren had a bouncy ride, looking down at the branches as he was jolted about. The commando was enormously strong and carried him as if he was as light as a feather.

"Gavril, Vitali, race ahead and make sure the vehicle is secure, We hid it well, but we've been away from it for two days. I'll be glad to see this parcel well wrapped up,"

"So will I," Agripin said. "He's been well fed."

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"If we lay a trap for them, they could kill the boy. It only takes a squeeze of the trigger, or the slice of a knife." Colonel Pascoe said. "We need to slow them down. Remove the pipe, take any valuables, disable the vehicle, and make it look like the work of thieves and vandals. Get that pipe back here. I want to look at it."

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"What do you mean, Stripped!" Ilyitch said, amazed and angry at the news. I thought you'd hidden it.

"Yes, comrade colonel, but that was the problem. Whoever did it could not be seen from the road. If we had parked the car in plain view, most people would have driven past it."

"Thieves. This is a nation of thieves, Ilyitch said. We must plan an alternative way. Put the boy down."

Agripin let go of Darren, and he fell onto the ground in a heap. The boy lay still for a moment, then stretched out.

"It would be easier if you could untie my hands," he said. "Then I could walk easier, and you wouldn't have to carry me."

"You could run off," Agripin said. "Then I'd have to shoot you,"

"What if I promised not to run off?"

Ilyitch laughed. "Nice try. For a moment, you tempted me."

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An aide entered the room with a folder that he handed to the General. He read it and tossed it onto the floor in disgust. "Damn and Blast it!" he exploded. Everyone in the Tiger Team conference room stopped what they were doing and looked at him. He placed his hands on his hips. "We can't use regular troops. If we have a fire-fight with these intruders, it could start an international incident."

"Officially we can't recognise that Soviet Troops are on American soil." He explained, then picked up the clip board and its offending folder. "That could easily lead

to upgrading the situation, and we could lose control of what's happening. We have to leave this up to the F.B.I. and the State Police. They will treat it as a kidnapping case."

"They will be outclassed," Colonel Harding (Weldon) said.

"The Commander in Chief doesn't want to start World War 3, so officially, the Spetznaz commando do not exist. That means we can't place a couple of divisions across their path and wipe them out." General Ferris said, tapping the map projected onto the white screen.

"Seals? On a covert mission?" Pascoe suggested.

"I'm sure we can match their abilities," Colonel Sherman said, "But it would be one-on-one all the way. Sooner or later, they'll decide to 'lose' the boy. What we need, is something that doesn't seem to be threatening."

"If they're hiking out, we've bought time," Pascoe said. I don't envy them walking overland to the coast. Let's get some more maps here. What we need is bit of luck. Now let's see. They could take a route to the West. They must have a time schedule. They'll want to get out quickly."

Sherman thought they might take the Rose Valley route, but General Pascoe favored the Kalama River Road. Both headed towards Kelso and the Lewis Clark Bridge. Another thing in their favor was the Columbia River, which didn't have too many crossings.

"If I was in charge of that outfit, I'd steal a vehicle. They wouldn't want it reported, so they might

hit a small farm or cabin. In that area, there are plenty to choose from." Pascoe said. "The fastest routes out of there are Rose Valley or Kalama River roads. Now I've been thinking about this. They could head North to Canada, but it's a long way. They could go South and get out through Oregon.

"The point is, they are handicapped by the kid - their prisoner. Stereotypical kidnapping gets his throat cut and he's dropped down a deep hole, but why would Mummy Bear go to all that trouble? A sniper could have exed him. No. They want him alive. That way, they can pull the strings on the oil cartel. My bet is, that they'll cut across the Columbia at Kelso. Once on the coast, they can put him into a speedboat to an offshore freighter, or hide him in a container - there are dozens of ways of getting him out of the country, including dropping him from a plane on the end of a parachute."

"A bleak picture, General. So we stop them on the road somewhere?"

"I'm going to stick my neck out and suggest we put JUNIT across the Kalama River route." Colonel Harding said.

"But we've been ordered not to confront them with the military," Pascoe said.

"Strictly speaking, gentlemen, 'JUNIT' isn't a military group. We don't have child soldiers in the United States. They are - intelligence agents attached to the Defence Department." Harding said.

"Do you really think we could always turn our backs on the whole situation and let them take the kid - pretend it didn't happen." Harding suggested.

"You're putting a bunch of kids against highly trained Spetznaz commandos?" Sherman asked.

"We could go as a boy scout troop, Sir," Peter said from the far end of the table where he and Travis sat as observers. "Who would suspect us?"

The members of the 'Tiger Team' convened in emergency session to deal with the problem looked at the two boys.

"Didn't anyone ever tell you, never volunteer?" Pascoe asked. "JUNIT. What if we renamed you 'Gopher Patrol' and camped you guys out across their escape route?"

"We don't have much time, Sir," Peter said.

General Pascoe gave a low growl. "No," he said. "We'll take the Gopher Patrol option. Deploy JUNIT."

Chapter 26

The Claws of the Tiger

Ilyitch, drove the front vehicle with Darren in the back, sandwiched between Demyan and Gavril. His hands were free, and he was not gagged, Gavril used a torch to look at his map of the area. Grigory, Ilya and Vitali were following.

They had been delayed by the loss of their Toyota. It had been modified to carry the seven hunters and the cylinder, but it had been vandalized and the cylinder stolen. They had hiked for a day through thick pine forest, and had to carry Darren when he became too

exhausted by their cracking pace. Finally, they cut his hands free and allowed him to walk with them unsecured. Darren had no intention of running off. He would quickly become lost, and he knew there were wolves and bears in the woods.

They came across the cabin - set back from the road they were following in a parallel line. It was dark. Ilyitch had spoken to Grigory, Ilya, and Vitali. They had sneaked into the house and sheds. They made no sound. Then lights in the cabin flicked on and off.

Darren didn't ask any questions, when two vehicles drove down the path to the waiting commandos. Vital wiped blood off his long thin knife with a soft cloth, before placing it in his sheath. It was a gentle, and careful action that made the boy's blood run cold.

It was dark, and the road wound about the ridges, following the river down, down, towards its destination, the sea. Their journey was slow, but they should be able to reach the coast by the next nightfall. One of the men Demyan, sitting beside him, made a remark in Russian.

"Speak English, Fool!" Ilyitch snapped from the front seat. "We aren't home yet."

"As I said, Comrade, There are lights over the ridge."

"Think I'm blind," Ilyitch said. "If there's trouble, we break Right - into the hills. Boy, if you don't follow us, you're dead. Got it?"

"Yes, Sir," Darren said woodenly. After what he had witnessed at the cabin, he knew these men were capable of anything.

A Park ranger waving a torch stopped them in a queue of vehicles. He smiled affably. "A bit of a rock slide just ahead," he said through the slit of the window that Ilyitch had rolled down a crack. "Shouldn't take more than a few minutes," he said, ambling back along the line of cars. Ilyitch watched him carefully.

"I think we're clear - he's not interested in us."

At the end of the line of vehicles, which banked up slowly, the Ranger made sure he was out of site and removed a Walkie-Talkie radio from his belt. He spoke into it. "Two vehicles seven men. Boy's in the front vehicle back seat."

"Let them go to the next block. It's twenty miles further on."

The road ahead was cleared and the squad of Seals masquerading as road workers watched as the cars moved off.

"We could have taken them, Sir," one of the men said.

"No way. Seven simultaneous killing shots without the chance of hitting our own or the boy - no chance. We've got to educate these guys that there are a lot of stops on this road. Then when it really happens, their guard will be down."

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Flashing lights were ahead of them. A police car partially blocked traffic as a road accident was dealt

with. There was an ambulance in attendance, and vehicles had to slowdown to pass the scene. The policeman gave them a friendly wave as they passed him, waving his hand to urge the vehicles to move on.

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Peter, Nathaniel, Bobby, Travis, and Jordan stood by the overturned logging truck that had spilled a load of pine logs across the road. They wore badge bedecked khaki scout jackets over t-shirts on which 'Gopher Patrol' was emblazoned. Around their necks were bright scout scarves. Their belts had official looking buckles, and they wore long khaki pants with pockets that had no pockets, but a slit to their leg pouches, each holding a 9mm automatic safely stowed. Their scout leader was Mr. Weldon, otherwise known as 'Beaver', and the other leader was Mr. Barton, or 'Kite'. Their bus was parked by the side of the road, on the other side of the roadblock. It concealed a command post manned by Seals. A lone roads worker advanced to meet oncoming traffic, sending cars into a parking area. That had been created by the road.

"Two minutes!" one of the Seals called out.

"This is it, Lads. Look smart."

The boys stood in a small circle and placed their arms on each other's shoulders. They said in unison:

"There is a cluster far away
Of stars where alien children play,
Who see the lights of stars above
And wish that they could also rove
Between the fields of asteroids

And other things - beyond the voids."

They broke up, and 'Beaver' looked at them with interest. "I'd forgotten that poem," he said. "Hope it works."

The boys milled about as if in disorder. Peter and Travis pulled their caps down to hide their faces.

"The last thing we want is for Darren to recognise us and give the game away," Peter said.

The two cars approached the road worker. He waved his sign at them and explained about the blockage on the road. "We're waiting for a light crane to help clear the logs," he explained. There were police here, but they've been called to an accident further up the road.

"So who are the uniforms?" Ilyitch asked.

"A scout group - you know, Baden Powell, Dyb - dyb - dyb and all that. They'll guide you into a spot where you can wait in comfort."

"They've got a bus," Demyan whispered in Russian, leaning over. "There are no police here - it should be easy. Five children and three adults."

"They're getting out of the cars," Travis said. "Careful."

The men went through a pantomime of stretching and walked casually over to the boys.

"Look out! They've got guns!" Darren screamed.

The men turned to look at their captive. He was struggling with Demyan. Gavril was out of the car. He lifted his machine pistol.

The boys of JUNIT were quicker. Peter fired one shot into Demyan's head from the side window, splattering blood all over Darren, who was white with shock and shaking. Travis shot Gavril through the throat. It wasn't neat, but it was effective. The other men died where they stood as five other shots rang out, almost as one. Each one was aimed with deadly accuracy, in ascending trajectories to avoid collateral damage to anyone who was a bystander.

Within seconds, the Seals surrounded the boys. They placed confirmation rounds into the heads and chests of each of the soviet commandos, and cleared the area.

One of the seals pulled Demyan's body from the car's back seat. Travis and Peter opened the other rear side door and sat by the young boy, who was shaking.

"Breathe slowly," Travis said.

Darren sucked in air and gasped. He was sure he was going to die. He couldn't allow the commandos to kill the scouts. He had to warn them, even if it did mean his own death. Demyan had turned towards him with his machine pistol and was about to place it against his forehead. His face was that of death, but then Demyan's head exploded.

"You saved me," he said to the boys who were looking at him with concern for his safety."

"Yes. That's what we do," Travis said, putting an arm around Darren's shoulder and letting the boy's tears

flow uncontrollably onto his t-shirt. "Sorry we couldn't get to you sooner."

"We hadn't forgotten you," Peter said, rubbing his back consolingly.

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Darren stayed at St. Beadles College, where he became head proctor and valedictorian. He was always to be found in the presence of his friends, Peter Shaw and Travis Jenkins. After college, he joined his father and is believed to be a global banker and financier.

JUNIT was disbanded after Operation Tiger Claw. Although it had proved to be useful, there were not enough operations where it could be used to effect. Many people in the government were opposed to using teenage boys in positions of danger. After changing his identity once more, Peter joined the F.I.S. as a cadet agent. We have no further information on his career. Travis got his wish to become a treasury agent, guarding several presidents, before forming his own security company. He was killed in Iraq while escorting a convoy. Jordan and Nathaniel became officers in the Army and Marines. Bobby chose to leave the defence forces and became a surgeon.

Mt. St. Helens exploded on May 18th1980. St. Beadles College was evacuated, but the college was buried under huge pyroclastic clouds. No trace of it remains.

The End

