

JUSTIN'S SPACESHIP

by Clarence E. Shellito

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Published 2007

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About the Author

Clarence E. Shellito was once among the good men and women of the United States Navy and has since retired, married and begun to write. Some two decades later, (maybe more, maybe less) he has even decided to share his books with the world, at least those which are purely fiction, potentially plausible and possessed of hidden meanings within the structure of the books themselves.

He does support <http://www.writersweekly.com> and does encourage people of all walks of life to dare to express themselves in the literary arts, in drawings and other good, non-harmful forms and venues of self expression.

Clarence's list of self written books include:

*****SPACE RABBIT SERIES*****

Justin's Spaceship
The Purple Spacebunny
When the Stars Call
A Rabbit in Rome
Space Marines Rising
One Rabbit Hunting
The Quiet Season (STILL IN PROGRESS)

*****BLOODFIRE SERIES*****

Bloodfire One
Bloodfire Two
Bloodfire Three (STILL IN PROGRESS)

Clarence has other books which have yet to be finalized to the point of a title.

Clarence resides somewhere in Toledo, Ohio with his wife, Juanita. To contact him, albeit rather indirectly, post your e-mail to: jcts001@yahoo.com. If you want more of the books he has written, send BAEN PRESS a postcard asking them to take on a new author. Be sure to specify the titles you want (and the author) so they can get back to the author and the two of them can work something out.

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AUTHOR'S PAGE AND DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to those who seek the stars and do so with the quiet knowledge that they might not succeed.

This book is also dedicated to every veteran of every war, declared and undeclared alike.

But, more than most would believe, this book is dedicated to all those who made it possible, especially my quasi-cousin George, who has and still does faithfully listen to every word I write when I read the books to him over the telephone. Of course, he is a veteran himself but his value to me as a patient, understanding friend cannot be overstated.

The Author.

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Prologue

It was a library to envy, the five thick, overbuilt shelves that lined one sixteen foot long wall burdened with dissertations on mathematics and physics ranging from the simplest of children's primers to the mind wrenching subject of quantum theory, including printed copies of all six versions of String Theory as outlined by the masters themselves. Yet mixed into that heady collection of a mathematical genius were the tomes that revealed so much more about the library's owner.

Those volumes dealt with machines of all kinds. From the compendium of Heron of Alexandria to the latest Chilton's manuals, every kind of engine was represented, although the Chilton's manuals were by far the most worn from repeated use. It was not the typical room of any young child. That truth was further highlighted by the immaculate canopy styled twin bed with its tough nylon side netting and foam padded, durable steel frame and then given emphasis by the neatly ordered array of models that detailed every facet of the Space Battles fantasy theme, the fictional vessels and figurines of heroic and evil characters each accorded select, defined value.

Split V-Wing Skim-Fighters were the most abundant, each detailed and precisely painted. But they were the static, permanent items on the shelves and desk, as the dust upon each evidenced. The transient items were far different. Those various items were the traces and evidence of the denizen's true genius. The dissected components of rechargeable batteries of all kinds were everywhere, each claiming one tiny spot on any horizontal surface. From the study desk which was otherwise a neat and tidy place for writing letters to the trophy shelves that supported the drained and opened lead acid automotive batteries, the nature of power storage in the applied sense was most obviously being contemplated by that rare and remarkable mind.

Yes, the small inhabitant of that spacious room was indeed a mechanic born and self taught, one busy with the true marvel of his genius in expression. The true marvel that those young hands undertook with tweezers and electrically charged circuits beneath the scanning tray of the hand built electron microscope tucked into his otherwise spacious closet was only just being born. The microscope was his own design and proof of his mechanical genius but it was far beneath the scanning tray and deep within the disc stolen and built up from battery parts where the reality of the world he knew traded places with the unknown that the best of minds could only theorize about.

Still, with the childish faith in the superior intellect of adults and the innate genius for making things solely by reason of obsessed, sometimes insane inspiration, the work of delicate tools yielded the tiny disc made of eleven inner components. The electron

microscope's functions were then called upon with the dutiful attention to every subtle nuance to merge impossibly small gaps while he studied the visual display without blinking once. Then, in that grand, brief instant so profound and momentous, the gain was born there in the dark of night long past his rightful time to be asleep and for a mere moment of awe, he gaped as the disc beneath his scanner sparkled with unexpected brilliance.

While seeing only afterimages of white on white in the aftermath of that brief surge of phenomenal energy, he leaned back and exhaled wonder at a theory proven, one that explained itself in so many complex formulas but still came down to just one fact. For just one second or two, he had tapped into the hitherto mythical domain of another dimension. He had attained the valid proof of a rogue, disreputable mathematician's least believable theories. More vital and amazing, for that half second, as evidenced by the dead microscope and the darkness brought on by burned out light bulbs and utterly dead digital clocks, he had even managed to draw energy from it. He blew out his cheeks before forcing himself to think logically and with the consummate care of a cautious engineer, he turned off his microscope's dead system and pulled the chain that switched off his irrevocably burned out overhead light.

But even as he surveyed his passion filled models of split V-wing Skim-Fighters by wan moonlight while climbing into bed, he knew the world had forever changed. And that, he told himself as he forced himself to rest in the fearful, terror inducing darkness, was the ambition of any mechanic.

He just had to figure out how to make it happen. . .

CHAPTER ONE

He could think through the effects and mind twisting influences of the latest hellish narcotic he had been given for his own good, if in a slow, fractured way. Consequently, the world around him seemed to rush by at unbelievable speed while he moved far more slowly in every sense, both in mind and in body. The lights of fluorescent tubes were fractured halos and the white walls were odd domains his clumsy hands touched, the textured surfaces eliciting moments of true madness. Worse yet, he was being herded slowly into that terrifying realm by those he trusted, his tall, lean, handsome father and plump, pretty mother.

Elevators were the worst offenders by far, the noises of the lifts crazed and subtle while the confining space crushed his spirit and elicited a whimper despite the new and already failing drug that had made just this entry into the hospital itself possible. He knew vaguely that he had even soiled himself as the elevator lurched upward but as he had only just alleviated himself fifteen minutes before in the main lobby's bathroom, the result was simply dampness.

So upward he went while trying to scream without success and then the doors opened, he the one to lurch forward and fall as wheelchairs rolled by. His father assisted him in the long, slow rise and then in the steadying on his rubbery, reluctant legs but then it was for him to walk again, to turn left because his father's hands on his shoulders gave him no other choice. It was just one more small, gentle lesson that he was ever to improve himself, even if the step to improvement was terrifying.

He obeyed like a turtle that could not move his limbs as nurses appeared from doorways where children in colorful print pajamas were being attended by doting, careworn parents, some fighting off the hands that sought to help them undress while others turned into screaming balls of resistance. Yet for him the fights were long over and resistance had been burned away, purged over the years by the always changing drugs that grew increasingly more potent and unpleasant.

He knew he had once fully understood the logic of the reason as he was coaxed into another terrifyingly small space filled with far too many things but defining the problem and actually remembering the logical arguments was beyond him. So, too, the memory of the name of his disease was well out of reach. He was soon parked gently in a corner and handed a figurine that summoned torn memories of pleasure and fancy, a plastic image of a pilot wearing a gold helmet and a flight suit.

It was distraction enough when combined with the potent drug he could not pronounce that ruled his behavior so that when the wide, short doctor entered, he did not become another

coiled up ball of living flesh that shook like wind blown leaves. This short man moved past him without a word and pulled open white file cabinets to extract a plain manila folder as thick as a Chilton's manual that soon thudded on his cluttered desk while the doctor surveyed his guests without expression.

The white robed doctor then settled in his elevated chair as the boy's parents silently sat down in the plain, blue and brown chairs that were so impersonal and rigid. The graying doctor then surveyed the entries in that tome of Justin's life, the paper clips marking developed tolerances to all the drugs he would have chosen and hundreds more he would not have, not until he reviewed the concise synopsis of the patient's illness and worked through the final outcome when the last regimen ceased to work at all.

Finally, in the transference of the file from one side of the folder to the other, a single yellow sheet was lifted and held out for Kyle Brunheldigon to take, the document a summary prognosis that he and Justin's mother Betty read in seconds and handed back. The black haired man with such friendly eyes blinked in surprise.

"Did you read it?"

Hearing words left Justin truly dazed for the sounds split apart and recombined in all their possible ways at speeds his mind could not properly cope with. The figurine fell from his stunned fingers and he fell backwards into the corner, his thud a sound his parents both looked at simply to be sure he was still alive, breathing and at least marginally aware. That necessity, after all, was just one of this final drug's many inherent risks. Kyle spoke with quiet dignity and an aloofness borne of his many professions while Betty kept watching Justin as Justin realized so slowly that the treasured figurine was not in his hands. But his father's words were just as traumatic and so his mind recoiled as his small hands opened and closed in the search for the prize.

"We are both able to read and assess text at above average speeds. We are also aware of his status as a rare type B adaptive and equally aware of his one or two options remaining before we are left with no options but confinement. Additionally, we know that you are granted certain types of access to experimental drugs which are in controlled, limited human trial studies and we are most capable of discretion."

The doctor just stared at the thick file and then at Justin, who was still recoiling from the spoken word and still questing for the figurine on the floor before him. The doctor finally sighed with a wince and spoke to Justin's distress, the gleaned facts in the file at odds with what his eyes could discern.

"This is a child of seven or eight but certainly not twelve headed for thirteen."

Betty spoke up then, her polite calm direct.

“Reference the narcotic Bentheterosteril Methylhydrose as delivered four years ago when the last of the normal sedatives and tranquilizers ceased to be effective. He suffered an immediate seizure to the frontal lobes and went into anaphylactic shock. Remediation with Sucoral Nitrite kept him alive but he has not grown since. Additionally, as referenced on the supplemental notes, he was then discovered to be immune to an entire range of Nitrite sedatives that would have been less unpleasant than the drugs that were administered to remediate his unreasoning terror of people, spaces and enclosure.

We know that there are perhaps three or four more drugs available for short term remediation and likewise know that they are decidedly unpleasant to say the least. They are, however, more easily dealt with than the alternative, which is to send him to an impersonal, unloving and uncaring institution where he will never stop screaming in absolute terror because they would seek the least energetic solution. For him, Doctor Radamacher, the drugs are preferable to being tied up in body restraints and locked in a dark padded cell for the remainder of his life.

Once was more than enough and it took a year of legal battles to get him back. We are willing to explore experimental treatments and quite capable of following through.”

Kyle leaned down and the figurine was slipped into Justin’s hands, cause for a slow smile as the doctor sighed heavily, the tome of Justin’s life flipped through with less speed. The doctor then spoke absently as he read the names of drugs and studied the durations of effectiveness.

“There is an experimental drug nearing clinical trials but the usual procedure is to work with adults only. The doctor is one Alvin Munroe, Medical Doctor and Crisis Remediation Psychologist. The clinical trials are for type B Adaptives only and the drug’s side effect list is extensive. He is in the region and he is reachable by phone.”

Kyle responded without a pause.

“Please make the call.”

The doctor closed Justin’s extensive file and lifted the handset to his telephone, a number long memorized tapped into the keypad.

“Please close the door and then I can put you on speaker.”

Kyle complied, Justin stiffening when the door closed. The doctor then tapped another button and the sound of a ringing telephone was heard, one answered by a friendly voice.

“Yes, Armin?”

Radamacher spoke briskly.

“I have another type B for you to consider. The catch is that he’s a child of twelve years with a physiology of a seven to nine year old. He hasn’t grown since given a narcotic named Bentheterosteril Methylhydrose, which triggered anaphylactic shock and was remediated with Sucoral Nitrite. The parents want to try anything at all to keep the boy out of lockdown in an institution. Extreme fear of spaces, people and enclosure of any kind. He is currently on something called Demhedrin Fulminate Hydrochloride.”

The sigh on the other end of that telephone call was deep and then decisive words returned.

“Armin, we are going to bend the rules a bit if you have a room. Demhedrin is a last sane resort for any type B and what I’m about to propose if you have a room is pretty much torture. The two alternate treatment options are both combination therapies with short duration effect and require clean delivery for iffy success and you are not going to clean him out for the first of them. Look in his file to see if he’s immune to Apronsylinocane. If he is, check and see if he’s immune to Ritomansandil.

They are both extreme knockouts that stun the metabolism while inducing prolonged but debilitating endorphin highs that normally quell most nightmare events. The durations for both are listed in the forty-eight hour range and delivered by body weight, ten cc’s to a pound in the fatty tissue, preferably the more the better. You can go upwards by one cc per pound so it’s flexible. In his case, that leaves the seat of the pants just above the thigh. The aftermath is messy and the boy won’t have any control of himself for most of a week after he comes around, either in motor reflex or hygiene.

The bad part psychologically is that when he comes out of the near coma, he will be conscious and unable to move or speak. But, once he comes around, you will already be administering a thousand cc’s of Benthemerol in combination with two thousand cc’s of a mild, long duration sedative called Meptrasim simultaneously in a slow drip. Be sure to cath him and don’t let him eat anything. You can also add glucose to the regimen but insert the shunt to the thigh rather than the ankle and belt him in on all four points.

The interactions of the two slow entry drugs with the leftover Demhedrin will create a surreal mood that is deep and normally soothing in most cases. It won’t eliminate the terror but it will bring it down to manageable levels. Additionally, the combination and drug interactions will speed his metabolic processes well beyond listed specs and that will put his ability to react on par with my arrival time of fifty to sixty hours. If he starts to

rash, administer liquid Benadryl by injection as opposed to oral as oral Benadryl just doesn't work well with type B adaptives in this situation. Do administer the Benadryl opposite the glucose and never in direct combination with it.

That would trigger a nasty allergen reaction to the glucose and the outcome is ordinarily fatal. That brings us to the legal issues, especially since he is a minor and this is definitely experimental medicine. I'll need the parents on hand with release forms and guardianship permits as well as medical liability clauses and release of information forms due to the clinical study's extensive terms and conditions. I'd also like them on hand to keep the boy reasonably sane until the combination settles him down so I can give him an interview.

Also, you need to do a cognitive and relative age in development profile with the allowance for his undeveloped physiology. Since he reacted badly to the Bentheterosteril Methylhydrose, as some type B adaptives do, just chart him as age of body as opposed to age of years with a reference to actual age in parenthesis and a citation on artificially induced primordial dwarfism as a research query. If he has the genes in a recessive state, they may have been triggered by the Sucoral Nitrite, hence the extreme reaction to that particular drug.

We'll know the code and if his cognitive and behaviors align more with a twelve year old then we'll treat him accordingly. Otherwise, for all of our internal needs, intents and purposes, he's whatever developmental age he turns out to be. Can you do it?"

Radamacher sighed impersonally then, his action of writing out the instructions added to with a response full of distraction.

"I do have a room handy. It's number six in the isolation wing. I can let the nurses know that the parents are allowed at all hours. It's rather unusual but doable."

Betty spoke up briskly.

"We intend to stay for duration, although in shifts. Kyle can recite languages and I can recite Justin's favorite dissertations on String Theory and applied physics."

Munroe's exhalation was slow and stunned.

"Justin is bilingual and dealing with advanced mathematics in his mental state?"

Kyle's aloof voice was tinged with pride.

"Justin is certainly not his brother but he is versed in eleven languages and has studied higher mathematics since the age of three. He and his mirror twin are both extremely

capable minds and while severely impaired by the medications, Justin has held his own academically through home schooling when he could cope with reading and writing. Despite all of his obstacles, Doctor Munroe, Justin has proven himself in remarkable ways. He is at the eighth grade level overall and we included elective studies in the applied arts and other fun courses.”

Munroe responded slowly.

“To what extent is his mirror twin? I estimate college levels, given the home schooling and your apparent grasp of numerous languages.”

Betty replied, her note of pride almost joyous.

“Earnest is not home schooled. He attends the rural public school in his home town for socialization reasons and is at senior level in all of his studies, versed in twenty languages, programming and sociology at a college level. He is relaxing a bit and is trying for Novell certification, although the legal age for certification is eighteen. Since the testing is not enough to give him legal certification, he is simply assuaging boredom and working on interactive role playing games.

We are encouraging him to advance his programming skills beyond conventional security grids and into the gaming arena so that he can taste the joy of seeing his work in stores. The complication is that he lacks Justin’s imaginative bent and without the initial inspiration to work from, he simply cannot design an intriguing or exciting game from scratch. Justin, on the opposite hand, has a wild and fanciful imagination, although he is deeply fixated on the Space Battles theme.

I think his figurines and models are more real to him than people. He is also extremely adept with mechanics when he is not so drugged that he cannot think and he built his own electron microscope at the age of six, although it burned out shortly thereafter. He does wear glasses when he is rational enough not to break them and that since the age of seven after an as yet unexplained blackout of power hit our town in the middle of the night. Kyle and I suspect he was the causative agent but we simply can’t figure out how.

We were awake when the low level electromagnetic pulse hit but he was in bed when we found candles and checked on the boys. Additionally, the epicenter was our farm and the military, the EPA and the Department of Energy have been all over the house and grounds a number of times since with a wide range of detection equipment Justin studied intently and later duplicated when he was rational enough to do so. Admittedly, his works are crude to the eyes but Kyle and I did test the gear out at Scandia Labs.

The range of sensitivity for his hand built equipment was demonstrably better than the equipment they were using. As good parents, we had the designs patented and his trusts established with the proceeds from the royalties. He may not be rational often but when he is, the nature of his genius immediately reveals itself.”

Munroe responded after a short and silent pause while doctor Radmacher just stared at Justin.

“You mentioned mechanical aptitude. To what extent is his mechanical ability when rational enough to handle tools?”

Kyle spoke ever so quietly and in the reply the arrogance and aloofness of habit was purged by pride.

“He can tear down and rebuild a hybrid vehicle in less than thirty hours. Late model vehicles take roughly twenty. As a note, he completely disassembles the vehicles and repairs the body panels as well as the engines and transmissions. All the vehicles are much quieter and markedly more efficient when he is finished with them, some with percentile changes as high as thirty percent. He has a certain passion for machines which he does not evidence with people while Earnest is a people person to an extreme.

Additionally, Justin is rather careless with exposure while Earnest is very self conscious of his appearance and state of dress. We have had a long, difficult struggle with Justin in this regard and the addition of the drugs he needs to cope makes it all the more so. We attribute it in majority to Dylan and then all the medications he has been put through with all the necessary handling they required. Our compromise with him is a set routine that he has come to view as fairly normal.

When coming into the house, he showers and puts on boxers, which he will wear until he goes to bed or when puts on his coveralls to work outside. The complication is that he will not wear anything else and when he has accidents, there is often a fight to get him into the shower again. Admittedly, we don’t understand why. He hates being soiled or dirty to any degree, although not in a psychologically unsound fashion.”

Radmacher was the one to respond, his eyes still on Justin as Justin turned the small figurine over and over.

“He’s been through a deep trauma and the establishment of a rigid routine means that the routine is never supposed to change. To him, the routine is set and immutable, regardless of whatever happens afterwards. The proper way to deal with the situation is to check him often or to take him into the bathroom and make him wait it out. The fights come from the

routine being upset. Showers happen when he comes into the house, not while he is already inside the house. Any additions, Alvin?”

Munroe chuckled warmly.

“All of that will change in just sixty hours. All I need to do at this point is to pick up the Capriacil and arrive at your location. All you need to do is to follow those instructions to the letter. Do be advised that this is a three to six month operation but all expenses will be paid by the clinical study. After that, we can go over known behavioral shifts which will impact his life from that point onward. Of course, you do have the option to say no, in which case I would recommend a padded room and restraints.”

Betty and Kyle quickly accepted the unbreakable promise. . .

CHAPTER TWO

Justin felt the terror break apart and lessen as it sometimes had when potent drugs had been administered with needles he had grown accustomed to. He stopped trying to move and fight the restraints his eyes could not quite see but he could and did feel oh so clearly as constrictions of dominating resistance that bound his ankles and wrists to the side rails of the small bed. Indeed, he could assess the benefits of the three clear bags that fed the new drugs slowly into his small body, drugs he measured for effectiveness in that first cycle of rational thought so rare.

And while he could not actually move much at all, the gain was the slowest of grins and a long, gentle sigh of relief as he finally relaxed and let the grand dreams rise, visions of himself flying his own split V-wing Skim-Fighter though the endless abyss of space in the bid to hunt down the Rebellion and then to restore the sovereign rule of the Empire throughout the galaxy.

His change of being was noticed at once by his pretty, blond haired mother and she rose from the nearby chair to check on him without delay, his state of mind soon discerned and a gentle kiss delivered to his forehead. She then checked his condition beneath the sheet and ever so gently she retreated, her appraisal made and given to the new person who entered with an aura of genteel presence.

“Shh. He’s sleeping.”

The stranger bearing a small thermal cooler snickered with a knowing grin and a pleasant tenor that broke through Justin’s dreams as a voice that was both familiar and not, the voice of someone who was neither a friend nor family but not a stranger, either. He was therefore drawn to alertness just to listen and every word was understood.

“While the ideal state of mind, it is, unfortunately, rather short lived. By the way, I am Doctor Alvin Munroe. The combination is effective and the effect will deepen to some extent but it only lasts for about a week and can only be repeated four or five times before he becomes wholly immune. On other matters, his file is exactly as I expected it to be and he is well within acceptance guidelines in every respect except age, which we can account for with the appropriate waivers and emergency custody forms.

Yes, I did bring the relevant forms with me and your remarkable husband is now reviewing them at a fascinating speed, although I hardly think he needs to refine them due to their intent, scope and purpose. You do need to be aware that a clinical study with a

small target pool is always fraught with unknowns. The drug Capriacil has some permanent side effects but most of the others clear up in a year or two. He will always have an eye lid flutter but it can be remediated as needed with a touch of Lidocaine or other topical numbing agent.

His whole body will be extremely sensitive to sensation, possibly to the point of debilitation, although again remediation by a topical numbing agent most often works. There is no permanent solution beyond that, although we are working on the problem. One complication is the real chance that he will become severely touch avoidant with everyone and everything, including himself. Thermal issues are a real concern as Capriacil does change the way the metabolism responds to environmental stressors.

An advantage is that he could literally go outside naked in the Arctic and feel only a little chill. The opposite is more troublesome as he will tend to get extremely sluggish in hot environs due to the slowing of his metabolism in an attempt to cope with the heat. Again, this is a study parameter. Proper attire in environments above sixteen degrees Celsius should be thin, preferably loose clothing of pajama materials and fitted with Velcro closures or snaps.

Elastic will cause fierce irritation and the irritation can become a real issue over time. Pullover shirts are also acceptable. Buttons, however, are not. We don't understand why but Capriacil recipients simply cannot work buttons for themselves. Some are astoundingly adept with their hands and can utilize any number of tools but when it comes to buttons for either themselves or others, they have to admit failure and do so with marked reluctance.

Color perception is another concern as roughly half of all Capriacil recipients encounter a color perception shift of one hundred and eighty degrees. Red becomes blue and so on with green being the only color that does not change. As our compensation, green is the color we ordinarily use for anything that needs to define another color. Also, he will heal from bumps and bruises with remarkable speeds but head injuries are of grave concern for the next year or so, even minor thumps.

My best advice is a safety helmet with extra interior padding, especially for the next six months or so, even if he refuses to wear anything else. This is due to the ways in which Capriacil is metabolized into lasting inert compounds that merge with the DNA. A benefit of this event is his immunity for life against all known retroviruses and a cleansing of the DNA itself of all prior retroviral insertions to the DNA. Additionally, this extends his life considerably.

Also, he will age far more slowly than normal and, when combined with the lack of growth caused by other drugs, this has its complications socially, especially for him. This

is one of the study parameters specific to his case and the primary reason why all his medical expenses are paid for as long as he lives, even if that happens to be three hundred years. Negatives that he must always live with include sub dermal tremors that can be annoying.

They do not actually impair motor skills or conflict with anything we consider important and he might not even notice them. He will develop the inability to remediate headaches with conventional over the counters. In a headache situation, the best remedy is a trusty shot of Benadryl into the upper thigh at one cc per pound, so his weight charting is, therefore, essential and to be part of his daily routines regardless of his desire for no routine at all.

The reason is due to the probability that the headache is allergen induced and his allergen response will be both rapid and sometimes extreme. Also, he will have to give up peanut butter and all other nuts, even coconut. We will provide him with a comprehensive food allergen review which takes almost two months. But, Misses Brunheldigon, you must understand that there is a two percent chance that his body will attempt to reject the Capriacil and such an event will prove lethal.

It might be best if you go read the summaries your husband has likely memorized down to the flaws of my printer. Additionally, a final discussion should take place between the two of you before I give Justin the same choice. You might be his parents and legally responsible for his choices in this matter but he is the one who has to live with the outcome. Since he is the one living with the choice, only he has the right to make it and that, Ma'am, will be the final decision made."

Justin heard his mother's departure and then the way the stranger came closer, the almost depleted bags of clear fluid ever so gently disconnected and the shunts removed in moments of pain that were insignificant. The doctor named Alvin Munroe then pricked him with another needle less harsh than the others, a gift in a drug that seemed to set fire to his body and burn away the inability to move, to react, to speak. It was the best of all freedoms.

Then, with care, the restraints were undone one by one and Justin was set free, he the one to first curl up and then to stretch out with a sigh of relief while the catheter was tolerated. Doctor Munroe spoke quietly as if they had always known each other, his peculiar voice soothing but firm.

"Justin, I need you to think through everything I told your mother. All of those things are the common effects and benefits of Capriacil and everyone who gets it reacts just a little differently in some ways. You might be one of the top one percent who gains an added fifteen to twenty percent in reflex speed and agility. You might be one of the ten percent

who never quite adapt to being free of the terror. You might even have to wear diapers for the rest of your life or only from time to time.

Capriacil will end the horrible fear but it might not eliminate it completely. You might be one of the five percent who always retain an uneasiness with the fear triggers, the things that made you so afraid. And, as you might be aware, you haven't grown any in four years because of some bad reactions to dangerous medications which almost killed you and actually should have. Capriacil, in this situation specific to you, might keep you from ever growing up.

You might be stuck for the rest of your very long life in that never changing eight year old body. It can happen and you need to think about that risk. Also, you will be here in this hospital for as long as six months before you come out of the confusion Capriacil causes initially. In that time, certain behaviors will sort of soak into you and stay forever. I can't tell you what they will be because I don't know. Each person is different.

But, I can tell you that this will change your life. It won't be easy and it won't always be pleasant, especially when I give the shots. Capriacil is cold and there's a lot of it, four big needles of it that has to go right into your bottom. But, for now and for a while after the shots, you can stay in bed. In fact, bed will be the safest place for a while. But I won't give you the shots unless you want the terror to stay away forever. There will be a lot of other shots and you won't be able to think them through like you can right now.

If for any reason at all you don't want the Capriacil, just say so and I'll go away."

Justin let the words soak into his mind and then let the past rise through them as he sighed in the grant of rational thought free of the numbing terror that only medications had tamed. To him the time of letting the words and his past flow together and then separate into logical elements was almost eternal. To him, that analysis of himself took forever before the elements which had separated out reformed in every possible way to settle into a choice, one with questions to ask before it was fully decided.

To the doctor his mental deliberation seemed swift indeed, merely the length of an inhaled breath released again. Justin's sweet voice nervously sounded, the slight numbness of his tongue caused by the drugs coursing through his veins unavoidable and causing a slur in his careful English.

"Will there be any other drugs to knock me out when I'm a problem or people want me to go to sleep?"

Munroe responded quietly and honestly.

“There are seven emergency sedatives affectionately called knockouts which may be needed from time to time but they are not for regular use as they can only be used a set number of times before your special body adapts to them completely.”

Justin sighed and opened his eyes, the tall man studied and his brown skin considered as his next question came forth in an unintended language while he thought he spoke English.

“Are there any other drugs left if I don’t take the Capriacil?”

Those brown eyes twinkles and Justin heard the Spanish, the language the doctor used rusty from disuse but tinged with pleasure.

“You are on the very last cycle of the drugs you have left. They will last six weeks at best.”

Justin slowly sat up and nodded, the risks measured against the gains in ways that few could ever achieve and all in mere seconds. Yet his final question came out hesitantly in Spanish, a hope instead of a concern.

“Will I be able to fly?”

Munroe mused at the unexpected value which was clearly as important as any choice between madness or its lack and quietly he assessed it, his reply careful but direct, yet in Spanish that now held a trace of joy in use.

“I don’t know. Planes frighten me so I drive everywhere. I can’t say that you can and I don’t know if you can’t. I am sure that you are astute enough when clear headed to find ways around obstacles that impede your dreams. But, Justin, that is my personal belief, not a fact verified and validated by empirical data.”

Justin nodded and voiced his choice with a quiet dignity.

“I want the Capriacil. My logic is that there is no other tenable option and my validation is the clearly defined need to eliminate or severely reduce the mind numbing terror that denies rational thought, pleasure and the accretion of knowledge useful to my life agenda.”

Munroe could not repress his grin and gently he urged Justin down, the pillow adjusted and the catheter tube checked before the sheet was restored.

“You just rest up for the shots while I go see your parents. We have to work through the legalese so that none of us go to jail for a very long time.”

Munroe gave him a pat on the head then collected the cooler, the trek out of Justin's room a quiet departure with the door swung almost closed. Justin felt the momentary flash of alarm that took time to master and slowly the tensions were forced into submission, conquered one by one. By the time the door opened again to admit his parents and a short man with no sense of other languages than English, his calm state had returned.

All three came close, the doctor casually checking Justin's arms and thigh before withdrawing an empty syringe that was used to deflate the inner ball holding the catheter in place. The shock of its removal was breath stealing and the pain after the event was unpleasant but both of his parents gave him smiles as his reward for not crying out or shedding more than a few tears. The sheet was soon balled up and dropped in the chair and as the implements of pain were pulled away from the bed, doctor Munroe entered with the cooler.

"However brave he may be and however used to needles he is, he will need all three of you to hold him still once I start the shots. So, lower the rails and Justin, on your stomach, hands all the way to the head of the bed. Doctor Radmacher, take his feet. Misses Brunheldigon, you take his arms, preferably at the forearms so you can pull him taut if he tries to curl up. Mister Brunheldigon, you take his back and also his legs, as needed. I am more concerned with the legs as we are trying to avoid excessive tissue tear and to control spasms and reactive jerks. While you all get ready, I will prepare the syringes."

Justin rolled over as directed and as he stretched out, he heard the rails click and the cooler snap open. His fears spoke for a moment and then the desire to fly rose, the joyous hope to someday touch space within a vehicle of his own construction. The dream calmed him and in that rational state induced by drugs, he burrowed deeply into the dream's mechanics. He sought refuge in String Theory and quantum mechanics as the first injection began, the jolt of pain felt but his body only twitching.

He dug more deeply into that unreal vision and let the needs of his dream speak, his entire mind called into the effort as that first needle's probing and shifting with frigid cold delivered beneath his skin continued. It took all of his will to cling to the dream as that first delivery was achieved but in the moment's pause between the first and the second just like it, the dream embraced him as a chance reality, a possibility that could be if only he persevered.

He was dazzled by that sense of being that came from simply trusting in a dream and pain meant nothing, not when the known elements of technology were studied in every aspect and then enhanced step by step at lightning speeds. It was the first step to seeking glory among the stars and that rapture erased sensation. In that wondrous place so far removed from any mortal event, there was only the dream and the steps to achieve it, each step needing nothing more than definition to exist.

He did not know that he had become a startling sight, his body not reacting at all to the large needles that pumped the thick yellow syrup which was cold indeed into place beneath his fatty tissue. He knew only that the dream was slowly invaded by a fuzzy kind of haze, masked and veiled, hidden from him while the rest of him slowly spiraled into the chaos and confusion of a mortal shell caught up in the tempest of change. Even then his body was utterly limp and tame, docile to the whims of others.

Indeed, he was astonishing to the professional doctors who had seen grown men react with violence to much lesser pain. They could not understand that he had tasted heaven and found it sweet and they had no idea that he had found his way to return.

They only saw his transcendent, peaceful smile...

CHAPTER THREE

The path of least resistance was the key to surviving the chaos. Being tame and docile was the means of attaining the soothing, almost scentless cream that cut away half his insane complications and so he stumbled blindly through the hospital ward, the one twisted face and voice necessary for success sought by sound, by smell and by the hues of his distorted visual halo. Naked or dressed, the success of the word his thickened tongue could make with fair clarity always yielded something that helped.

Sometimes it was a brisk shower and other times it was a massage that helped to break up the confusion. Most often there was a flurry of action with him forced into thin, hot, chaos heightening pajamas with Velcro closures he had learned to manipulate. He had only to say the word and the ointment would arrive, although this time there was no usual flurry or any attempt to shove him into attire, a shower or anything else. The sound of latex gloves snapping was all and then the faint but discernable noise of the tube itself being opened, then the touch of white cream on his skin as he stood still with arms spread and feet apart.

Words were spoken and his mind, in the time of relief, caught them and held them, the brisk words familiar and defined as his father speaking.

“Does he track you everywhere with the same regularity?”

The reply was amused and patient, words that came into Justin’s mind to be trapped, studied and grasped in that slow way of chaos realigned from its elements. They were even identified as Doctor Radmacher’s, although further definitions failed.

“Oh, yes. He’s been in every room and been seen by all the other patients. In fact, the other patients have gotten used to him just pushing his way in and they actually look forward to his, um, visits. It’s clockwork precision, every twelve hours. On my days off he finds Kathi with the same precision. She usually runs him through a shower and puts him in pajamas but the pajamas don’t stay on long. The other kids find them and bring them to us and we all play a sort of game of find Justin.

He’s usually in the playroom handling the toys and yesterday he had the Lego locking blocks assembled in rectangles all across the game table. He’s also starting to eat more than a few bites of food here and there and Doctor Munroe said he’d be in for a few days to observe the behavior dynamics to see if we are overlooking something stupidly simple like temperature or humidity or some other environmental setting. He also wanted one or both of you to listen to his rants to see if his gibberish is actually him talking.

If so, the key thing is to respond to him as well as you can, although it is likely that he's using single words. He'll start up about ten or fifteen minutes after he's fully oiled down and once he does, he makes rounds all through the ward and doesn't care if the doors are closed. He does leave them open, though and that does cause some short lived excitement the other kids like.

We've had to actually lock the outer door to keep him from the main halls and he's still managed to escape twice. The older kids and parents in the prosthetics labs were understandably quite shocked. He was gone a whole ten minutes and managed to open every door down the left side of the main hallway to the isolation wards and was on his way back on the other side when we caught up with him. My nurses handled it decently both times.

After hearing the issue of his current home and that he's still adjusting to a very potent medication, most of the parents were kind enough to explain it to their kids. The new ointment is Ipracaine, a rather potent topical that's capable of numbing your hands with even minimal exposure. It's really strong stuff, by the way. He's tried to play with the ointment but only once. His hands went numb and he couldn't use them for almost eighteen hours.

Alvin thinks that might have been a soak behavior so plan accordingly. Soak behaviors are the behaviors that won't ever change. In this case, even when rational and logical, he'll never bring himself to do his own remediation, gloves or not. Munroe says it happens in about six percent of his cases and it's so imprinted that the affected clients don't even think about it. Oh, we've run him through the Magnetic Resonance Imager and done all the allergen tests, blood work, CAT scans, neural charting and X-Rays.

Alvin is actually considering release if you can keep him contained all the way home and then can deal with him in the home setting."

The release from his insanely sensitive skin's many innumerable tales continued front and back, from head to the soles of his feet and then to his fingers. With his fingers numbing and useful again, Justin simply drifted, his direction set to a pattern still unclear. Soon the dream came back, the now twisted but still treasured moment of heaven tasted, the full reach of what could be there in memory and only needing to be dug out again, unearthed, dusted off and then implemented.

His mother was the one to speak from behind him and her words stopped his recitals of numeric values and physics formulas.

"The language is Arabic and the subject matter is physics with a mix of quantum mechanics in an applied form I don't quite follow. Love, I think he has defined new

technology or is at least trying for validation. He is defining Gravitons as negative and uses the premise for applications in physics, something about dense dynamic interpolar resonant frequencies.”

Kyle sighed with open pride.

“It seems he is working on force fields, Doctor Radamacher. Do keep in mind that math was his first formative language value and Arabic was second. English was fifth and a struggle six months long. As Earnie mastered English first and then Chinese, the difference was quite unsettling to us, although Earnie seems to think Justin learns by defining the core elements and then realigning them mentally into workable mathematical constructs in the same way that Earnie himself realigns his other languages to English.

Admittedly, when Justin reads through a language text, it does take him a week or two to start using it. But, when he does, he has perfect fluency to the limits of the textbook itself. He also has a sense of languages when talking to people, a sort of instinct that tells him when a person is bilingual. As he dislikes English, he goes for the alternate language with an accuracy of almost ninety-seven percent. People who know more than three languages have always confused him so family gatherings usually have him hiding somewhere while he tries to sort out who he can talk to.”

Radamacher sighed hard.

“Is your whole extended family genius level?”

Betty responded with surprise as Justin found a closed door and properly opened it to a shriek and an exasperated sigh.

“Not at all. The actual percentage comes to about four percent at MENSA level. Everyone else learns multiple languages just to keep up, normally Arabic, which is the easiest for the children to learn overall, English, for interaction with normal society and Mandarin Chinese for extended, private discussions among family. Most of the extended family winds up in translation jobs for local relief agencies, social workers and the legal system as a result, at least as a primary starter career that then expands to other areas of expertise like law, police work and so on.”

Justin made his round of that invaded room and then left, the door left open while the sound of a curtain rattling through a track was heard. The next room to invade brought a pair of words in a shy voice and his blue eyes focused, for a moment seeing the boy covered in a white sheet who was trapped as he had been in a bed with intravenous tubes running to his arms and another tube leading to a catheter. Something spun in his mind

and the chaos that ointment had calmed started to fit, to settle into logical elements as he spoke back in English while advancing on the bed.

“Hello, Ruben.”

Visual facts were further defined and then the world made sense, especially when curious lines of blue so faint were seen as spider webs running across the arms and a casual inspection beneath the blanket revealed more all across the young boy’s body. Data from his own past rose to be accepted once the labels on the plastic bags hung on tall hooks were read and his words were logical.

“The Themsterizol and glucose seem to be remediating your psychosis effectively, although I would ask the doctor to reduce the Themsterizol drip rate by two clicks to more accurately account for your body mass of fifty-one pounds, four ounces and the fact that your kidneys are working overtime. I would also ask the doctor to add a Benadryl regimen while cutting out the dairy products to remediate the rash and for a check of the balloon for the catheter, if only to secure it more effectively due to leakage.”

It was equally natural to casually turn and leave, the door left open in his wake and the rounds of the day changed only slightly by conversations with each patient. Rademacher was the one to rush after him with exasperated amazement as the insights of a naked, unusually pale and very hairless child became validated time after time. Munroe arrived to see the final stages of that event and while fascinated, he was also keen to the unspoken questions in the eyes of frazzled parents who were now told by a patient better ways to adjust the potent psychiatric medications and personal comfort.

Like Radamacher, he became a shadow with charm as Justin simply headed into the play area called the game room to methodically examine each toy before assembling the map of his home with nimble fingers out of Lego blocks. His parents surveyed his work as he put every toy into its proper place, the Poppit games inspected and the misshapen pieces found, returned to their slots and the games slid into their shelves.

Kyle spoke in Greek ever so casually.

“You can’t go outside naked and you have to wear the pajamas all the way home, no matter how uncomfortable they get.”

The Greek words were fully grasped but in hearing the terms, Justin just frowned in confusion. His return Greek was smooth and perfect.

“I’m not naked.”

Munroe arrived moments later and Betty spoke to him with blended pleasure and consternation.

“The Legos are arranged to map the main parts of the house and Kyle just told him in Greek that he has to be dressed to leave. His reply is that he is not naked and he is rather confused. Admittedly, so am I. Is this another soak behavior? I’m not worried about him naked in the house but outside where the government watches is an entirely different issue.”

Munroe grunted softly and spoke to Justin with the full confidence that his much improved Spanish would be understood.

“How do you know you are dressed?”

Justin sighed in the conflict of himself against the trust he had in his parents as he replied in Spanish.

“I can feel the clothes.”

Munroe sighed with relief and his Spanish improved due only to that emotion.

“Justin, you are not dressed and have not been for most of your time in this ward despite our numerous attempts to teach you modesty. You are naked and perceiving the residual oils of the ointment as clothing. Your skin is very sensitive, even when numbed so extensively by the ointment that helps you think. Look down at yourself and see the proof. Validate your state of being naked or dressed. Tell me what you see.”

Justin obeyed and felt the world lurch in a peculiar way, one that ripped apart balance and sent him crashing into the table. Lego blocks flew into the air as he panted in the aftermath, the chore of catching his breath impossible and that glimpse of the truth, however twisted and out of perspective, proof enough. He slowly rose from the table and spoke in Spanish, his mind still at odd with the proof for he felt the snug attire that did not exist.

“My skin says I am dressed. My eyes say I am not. I don’t know which to believe. I also fell over and I don’t know why. Does this mean I have to stay here? Can I go to bed and figure this out?”

Munroe was plainly startled but the reply was delivered with that friendly smile and gentle Spanish.

“It will take a long time to figure out which to believe, your eyes or your skin. It will also take a long time to learn to cope with straight downward views. For a very long time,

looking at your feet will cause you to fall over. I want you to go home and you want to go home. The way we achieve that is for you to put on pajamas by yourself. You and no one else will put them on so you know you are wearing them. It will not be easy and you will have to go slow.

Putting them on is much harder than taking them off. I won't make you put on underwear because that would be too much all at once. The pajamas are enough and I think that, for you at least, it will be very hard to keep them on the whole way home. I admit very honestly that I have never faced this particular situation with any of my clients but you. Your mother will go to help if you really need it and if you make mistakes, she will talk you through them rather than do the work for you.

So, as there are pajamas in your room, go to your room and see if you can put them on. If they feel funny, tell your mother how they feel funny and she will ride in the back seat with you to help you keep them on during the drive home."

Justin nodded and walked away, his mother behind him and the mobile patients like him curious to see what was happening. They were the witnesses to his long struggle with the thin red pajamas with Velcro fasteners that were finally pulled on after a long, hard struggle and as he felt the stinging of the cloth, he spoke softly in Arabic.

"They are too hot and they make me itch."

She frowned and checked beneath his shirt, the proof seen beneath the pajama top where pale, alabaster white skin was already turning pink. She sighed softly and rose from her crouch, Justin soon herded into motion and out of his room in a search for Munroe or Radmacher.

It was just one of many minor issues to cope with...

CHAPTER FOUR

The lethargy and unfocused state of mind that lingered after awakening in the back seat of the black and red van took more than an hour to erase with coffee sipped from a white mug with his name imprinted upon it in what appeared to be blue lettering. In that time his brother Earnest arrived in the kitchen wearing a neat three piece suit that highlighted his sun darkened skin and a briefcase that settled into the table.

The latches opened with efficient speed and papers were taken out, as was a manila folder. Justin could not react well but he still had the means to think and he could tell that Earnest was tense, nervous about something. The folder was passed to Kyle and the man who had sired them both read its contents several times before he rose from the table and walked out of the kitchen.

As the lethargy lifted and the unfocused state faded, Justin took over the cup and that freed his mother to read the documents on the table for herself. She exhaled with a shake of her head in a tired way then calmly refilled Justin's cup with more strong, hot black coffee, the documents hidden by the folder's cover and spoken of only once as the folder was handed back to Earnest.

"Earnie, the folder goes to your father's file cabinet and is filed under M for Marts. Did she give it to you at school?"

Earnest's blue eyes hardened with the most terrifying kind of anger.

"She had me pulled from my Novell certifications tests to go to the Principal's office and now I have to wait six months to take it again. Why does she keep on messing with my life?"

Betty sighed sadly but the sigh was also old and tired.

"She never forgave us for winning the custody battle that caused her to be looked upon as overzealous and rash. She feels that she needs to keep us aware of her supposedly superior place as a Children's Protective Services caseworker. Her contact with you is simply to remind us that she still views us as inferior parents. She also feels that Justin belongs in a place like Daylan and that, perhaps, upsets her the most."

Earnest lifted the file and headed out of the kitchen as Justin rose from the chair, the four cups of coffee finally working to ease the lethargy and free his tongue.

“May I go outside? I need to see my workshop.”

Betty absently adjusted her plain blue skirt before responding, her words quiet and firm.

“Look only and put slippers on.”

Justin nodded and headed out of the ordered kitchen, his still surging mind focusing on two tasks, the slippers and his dream. He found the slippers in the bedroom sized mudroom which was arranged like its five companions, the washer and dryer recessed and the bins of boxers and laundry soap set to the side next to the open, curtain free shower he had used countless times. His coveralls were clean and waiting, clothes he changed into before slipping his feet into a pair of socks that was challenging indeed when every truly downward view left him unbalanced and dazed.

But in fairly short order his boots were on and while he felt undeniably hot and his breath was now shallow, the world seemed much friendlier and the door opened, his escape into the late afternoon almost joyous. His eyes swept across the wheat fields and then took in the rows of solar panels that fed the house electricity, the ancient, century old barn spotted and advanced upon with anticipation. His feet crunched across the gravel driveway and opened the side door, the dark interior soon awash with light once the light switch was flipped upward.

He then surveyed his tools which were neatly arranged and ready for any use, just as an old Buick waited for redemption, the gray vehicle so needy ever so patient. He obeyed his mother as he studied the long workshop and remembered the past when drugs alone had made using this place possible. The colors were different but he simply changed them in his mind, the correct values others saw memorized one by one as he surveyed the small bins of parts gleaned from all the vehicles he had repaired.

He studied the hoist for engines and transmissions that rested above his head on yellow steel tracks and smiled to himself. He was home. He spent the afternoon just studying his belongings and as he did so, his ears caught the sounds of vehicles coming and going, some lingering while others just turned around and left again. Finally he retreated from the barn, the lights turned off and the door closed. He headed for the house with an eye on the new vehicles parked in the driveway, one a sleek green Cadillac with a bent front bumper that he could have fixed in just twenty minutes.

He entered and followed the old routines that were his correct thing to do, the greenhouse full of flowers now a place of beauty instead of terrifying. He shed and showered before finding boxers to wear, that pair blue with toy cars printed on them. Entering the house was to intrude on adults gathered around the coffee table made of glass supported on steel pillars and silence was instant among the eleven men his father had been speaking to.

He just surveyed the thick stack of manila files with dozens of names on the indexing tabs and headed into the next room, the conversations behind him resuming as he sought the computer room with a massive hundred inch projection screen where Earnest was busy with a world map in the Mercator style displayed on the blank wall. He watched as the computer his brother used yielded up a trove of visual images that were added to the program, the nested values tested before the next layer in the next pixel was added in.

He studied the program strings he had only minor experience with and made a suggestion in his new, slow way.

“Why not simply assign self updating references to the nested layers and let the computer do the work?”

Earnest’s fingers paused as his blue eyes narrowed and on that thin, young face which was already more matured than Justin’s, shock was seen. The suggestion was then tried with the creation of a new program that came to be with startling speed, the Mercator projection flickering madly as the hum of computers was heard. Soon the Mercator map projected on the wall by the overhead projector was done and Ernest impressed by the outcome that was vastly better than his own previous work. Justin watched it all and then watched Earnest save the huge metafile.

He, though, was remembering again, the fragments of his life before Capriacil ransacked and compared with a need before he spoke again.

“You could make some sort of survival game where the player has to get through all kinds of social problems and challenges. If you need inspiration, look at my life.”

Earnest frowned in that expression of narrow eyed shock a second time and closed the saved metafile, a blue screen full of programming codes called up. Justin watched for a short while longer then retreated to the library, the spacious room full of books studied and a text of psychology which he had never read pulled down with care. He moved to the table and opened the book, the words swimming before his eyes those first few seconds before stabilizing.

His mind soaked in the pages as the pages turned but when the book was finished, he found it made little logical sense and would not fall apart to recombine as mathematics or physics would. He replaced it on its shelf and quietly departed, his head aching unpleasantly but not in any fashion that was truly unbearable. He finally returned to the computer room where Earnest was truly focused, one of the four computer stations slid into and the screen saver disrupted with a tap to the keyboard.

In just seconds he was connected to the famed internet through a browser window and scanning files on space suits, the familiar PDF format flaws and issues known and the dissertations themselves memorized, each yielding up construction elements that other files lacked. It was a slow process to gain the crucial fragments of a relatively secret technology but in the end he felt the sudden surge of delight that always had been and still was the ultimate reward.

His body stiffened as the grand sigh sounded and from that point onward the files broke apart, the sum turned into their smallest mechanical values before uniting into the suits currently used by NASA. He did not know that he was shaking like a leaf as he rose, the rolling chair toppling as he reached for the empty notebooks on the shelves opposite the computers and the ever present mechanical pencils he had always preferred to anything else.

His capricious, quixotic genius had awakened and as perspiration beaded on his skin, Earnest muttered odd words in three different languages before taking flight from his laptop while Justin snatched that notebook and grabbed those mechanical pencils. The grand madness was then unleashed on the blank, line free pages held in place by coiled wire spirals. The drawings in fine gray were meticulous and precise, yet they were just the first of the many to come.

The suit everyone knew broke apart to become something new that he could only render as a change from the original which lay by itself on the sheet. One new creation became another, each added to with supporting text in whatever language worked best. Greek and Arabic were sometimes side by side with Chinese characters in the same sentence but that did not matter in the least. Physics was added in as well, the defining needs of the part fleshed out by what he knew so that others would know how to build the vision in his mind.

The new speed of his body was expressed, his hands a blur as his body trembled. Each combination brought forth new combinations until the last suit was rendered, it the final outcome of what already was. In that moment hours after the beginning, the shock of exhaustion hit with unkind force and the adrenaline ebbed, he the one bodily lifted from the floor by his father and tenderly showered in his own shower. He was numb and spent, unable to protest or even speak as he was gently deposited in his own bed with a single sheet to hide him and the old, truly worn black bear with long limbs he used to carry everywhere tucked in place beside him.

He slowly curled around that familiar thing and exhaustion birthed sleep, the dreams of the space suit grand because in it he was among the stars.

It was another taste of his personal heaven...

CHAPTER FIVE

He was dazed and clumsy, perplexed by the lethargy and the unfocused nature of his mind as he thumped into the walls of the long hallway and stumbled into the kitchen where his mother gently helped his distress without a word said about his lack of attire or the way he flinched from contact due to skin that was screaming with sensation. In the sound of Latex gloves and the relief granted by the topical's active ingredients, sanity returned.

Betty was ever practical and with her small show of love that never changed, Justin found himself the possessor of pungent coffee that warmed his stomach and broke apart the lethargy. Gradually he became aware of the stranger sitting at the round kitchenette table and slowly he realized that the man had seen every step in his vital treatment. For a short while he was not sure of what to do or if leaving was appropriate since this stranger was unknown.

The man was wide in the shoulder and the austere black three piece suit with its white shirt was intruded, one pen replaced with another and the first pen set aside because it had been depleted. The legal pad of yellow which seemed oddly orange to Justin was given another long notation and a question was asked quietly in a rumbling tenor.

“Does he require the ointment to function?”

Betty responded honestly as Justin's needs were finally attended, the provision of breakfast a casual affair of simple oatmeal with cinnamon and a sprinkling of brown cane sugar.

“Yes. He is also part of a clinical study that pays all of his extensive psychological and medical expenses for life. His problem is that he, like Earnest, adapts to medications with startling speed and therefore remediations that work for the majority fail in short order. Also, oral medications like Tylenol or Advil are useless and most over the counter drugs don't work at all.

When he has any kind of headache, the proper action is to inject him with Benadryl in liquid solution directly into the upper thigh as the headache is likely an allergen reaction. Another problem the foster home will have to truly understand is that Justin thinks the ointment is clothing and does often forget to put anything else on. Heavy clothing is more or less a form of torture.

Anything with elastic causes localized irritation which can and has led to painful lesions and buttons are the height of cruelty since he cannot manipulate them at all. He will also

take everything off if he feels warm or itchy, which is well documented at the Children's Caring House in Halseyville due to his behaviors. Oh, the ointment is extremely potent and while he was recovering, he tried to remediate himself.

The outcome is that he will not even try to treat himself and the psychologist overseeing his case, a doctor Alvin Munroe, said the behavior was likely permanent. He also showers before he comes inside, which is why we have all the mud rooms and bins of underwear ready. Sometimes he remembers to put a pair on and sometimes not, although he is usually thoughtful enough to do so."

Coffee was sipped and the unfocused state undone, the man focused on and his hidden linguistic ability sensed. He heard his words sound in Spanish and the man started, his brown eyes widening.

"Why are you doing this to me again? If anything happens to me this time, there's no fallback treatment but lockdown and no safety net."

The man scowled and his reply returned in English.

"How many languages does he speak?"

Betty kept the pride tamed, although doing so was a clear struggle.

"Eleven. He prefers Arabic and dislikes English due to the nature of English in a mathematical sense. English doesn't quantify its verbal values like most other languages and was the language most difficult for him to learn. Additionally, subjects have to have a hidden mathematical value or he just doesn't understand them. That is why he is at an eighth grade level while his twin is approaching college through the high school's distance learning program.

The classes he needs to learn in order to advance aren't mathematical enough to understand. Oh, he can memorize the books and pass the multiple choice questions on the standardized placement tests but that isn't learning."

The pen made more notes and the long sheet of lined yellow was flipped into place with thirty others. The pen finally rested as the tall man sat back, Justin studied intently before he reached into his jacket and pulled out a cellular telephone which was held up casually.

"Mind if I make a call?"

Betty kept her fears hidden.

“By all means.”

The thin silver telephone opened and one number was dialed, Justin hearing the beeps and then the low sound of a ringing buzzer soon answered by a brisk, bored woman.

“This is the Child Protective Services Department, Regional Office, Elaine speaking. How may I direct your call?”

The man frowned at Justin as he answered.

“Elaine, it’s Mark. Put me through to John.”

There was a click and then a deep bass voice answered.

“Yes, Mark?”

“I’m at the Brunheldigon place and the summary of the field report is pretty simple. The kid Rachel is out to protect, Justin Lucas, is really messed up but he’s not being abused or taken advantage of. In fact, this is one of the most stable and supportive families I’ve ever seen since I started field evaluations. Additionally, Justin has medical treatment needs that none of our foster homes could cope with and he wouldn’t do well with normal public schools due to his learning issues and behavior norms.

The boy is borderline savant as Rachel Marts claimed but he is being treated decently and he is learning what he can. As to the disparity between him and his twin Earnest Tyson, the parents are going for understood education as opposed to rote memorization. As to Rachel, we might want to examine her personal reasons for pushing so hard on this family and evaluate her fitness as a first contact caseworker with pull rights.”

The man named John was heard to sigh but his bass voice was composed.

“Her biggest issue was developmental and exposure related. The boy apparently doesn’t keep himself decent, even in public.”

Mark responded with a hint of amusement.

“Kid gets a skin numbing topical to help him cope and he thinks its clothing, so when he feels hot or itchy and has something else on, he sheds and doesn’t think or care about where he is at the time. Developmentally, he is arrested at five with an action to reaction norm in most behaviors but does have some grasp of society and external authority. Educationally, he’s advanced compared to peers at eighth grade level all around and peaks

in physics and theoretical mathematics with eleven languages learned and understood, English the least favorite, so he speaks in any other language first.

By the way, his Spanish is better than mine.”

John grunted thoughtfully.

“All right, foster care is out of the question. Normal schools won’t work for obvious reasons and home schooling has reached the limit all around. Do you think a boarding school would help or hurt?”

Mark responded with an intrigued note to his voice as Betty refilled Justin’s coffee cup.

“It might work if we find the right kind of boarding school. I have some friends in California and they might know a suitable place to send him on a trial basis. Anything else?”

“Not on my end.”

Mark casually closed the phone and laid it on the table. Justin reacted, the phone lifted, turned over a dozen times and then opened, its liquid crystal display examined as fragments of technological knowledge rippled through his mind. He closed it and replaced it with care in the exact spot it had been taken from as Mark watched the whole affair without making a sound while Betty winced.

He blinked as Mark spoke to Betty and learned a fact about himself as Mark posed the question without anger or frustration.

“Does he always talk to himself when he handles things?”

Betty calmed herself and managed a grin full of relief.

“He only does that when faced with new things. He has never seen a cell phone and that was his primary analysis of it, a sort of defined starting point by which he can assess and understand other cell phones. The apparent gibberish was actually all of his languages and mathematics plied in meaning as opposed to the emotive or descriptive values we normally use. I was afraid he was going to tear it apart to see and study the inner components in the same fashion as that is what he would normally do, although when he reassembled the cell phone, it would probably work as well or better than previously.

You mentioned a boarding school as potentially suitable and that does have me both alarmed and intrigued. I went to one and my husband went to another.”

Mark chuckled weakly as Justin sipped his coffee.

“Well, the best way to help Justin with his behaviors at this point is a structured environment with layered routines and behavior expectations but not with a denial of coursework or penalties for not understanding the events going on around him. That would help him learn to wear clothing and interact with others more effectively than the current system does and it would also give him a societal reference more in line with the one his brother has.

What he has in his head is just hospitals and home with nothing else upon which to base behaviors or to learn different behaviors from. In both settings, no one has made it a declarative necessity to actually learn why clothing is socially important or why modesty is expected, if only due to the hospitals being where he gets taken care of medically and home being the place where he can relax completely from the routines of the hospitals.

But, and I stress this, not any boarding school will do. Most boarding schools in the States are unsuitable for various reasons, mostly due to mixed gender admissions or by reason of relaxed disciplinary standards. You need one that will have no gender mixing, either in the student body or the staff, a machine shop which could be used as a reward and punishment option and an instruction staff capable of coping with his developmental issues effectively.

For boarding schools, that is a pretty stiff arrangement which causes financial hardship due to a lack of applicants with financial backing. Additionally, the appropriate school might just close down due to funding or staffing shortages and that could happen just when he starts to benefit from the school’s structured environment. As a setback, it would be very hard on him and twice as hard on you because at such a point in time he would not actually know how to behave.

He will go through that period anyway but in the right setting the period of uncertainty would be handled by the instructors and peer groups more effectively than you might think. Also, there is the chance that he wouldn’t benefit and would instead cling harder to his current behavior norms. The staff of the school has to know what they are so they can cope with the situation and find solutions to it.”

Justin studied the words as he placed his cup on the table and with honest curiosity he thought of Earnest disappearing to school in the mornings and returning at night. His own stays at hospitals were then called up to counter the notion of being home and finally he frowned, the blended outcome spoken in Spanish with just a touch of alarm.

“Would it be like going to the hospitals?”

Betty prepared to answer but before she could speak, the caseworker responded seriously. The gleam in those dark eyes, however, was one of respect and surprise.

“A little, but different. You would stay at the school all the time and learn like your brother does. It will be a strange place with lots of strange people and lots of funny rules to learn.”

Justin frowned as he thought of hospitals as blended with the library where so much had been learned already, the room crowded with faceless people. It was a problem to work through as he casually wandered into the mud room, his coveralls pulled on and his boots donned. Mark followed as he headed for the barn with a head full of riddles and the caseworker watched him settle into a routine that was by itself calming and methodical.

The latest late model Buick to come his way from a salvage yard was stripped down with his remade air wrench, the body panels swiftly and efficiently stripped of paint and the rust tended, the holes filled in with delicate weld spots as few mechanics could achieve. His actions were fast and habit, the panels redeemed and set aside as he turned to the motor and the transmission in the proper time for each.

Somewhere in the middle of the engine's teardown and reassembly the caseworker vanished but he never noticed. This was his passion, his refuge from confusion.

Mechanics was his personal salvation from insanity...

CHAPTER SIX

It was nothing less than the desire to escape the rising, inexplicable tensions among his family that led him into the barn and into the work he knew best and therefore found so restful, the taxing, meticulous teardown and rebuild of the last vehicle in need. It was an old jeep left over from the Korean War and from bumper to bumper the teardown began, first the body panels and then the engine, the rhythm he so desperately needed finally found and savored.

In that fluid, waltz-like expression of his competence, his equipment took on the roles of ever changing dance partners. Step by step the vehicle was redeemed with methodical precision and efficiency, the obsolete, no longer available parts simply cobbled together from other parts with the same end functions, parameters and dimensions. Some of those parts were hand built from liquid weld compounds or carbon fiber matting as Earnest watched from the barn's wide doorway.

A few were simply the original parts cleaned up, the metal tabs cleansed of corrosion and the parts tested with micrometers, oscilloscopes and his other electronic testing gear to be certain of accuracy. Earnest just stared in absolute fascination and when Earnest's friend Eric arrived, the taller, lean senior was just as spellbound by the way Justin managed the machine shop he had built in majority from scraps, junk and the occasional purchase.

The jeep, which seemed impossible to repair to them, was ever so simple to Justin and in barely twenty hours of steady work that let his mind ply through so many personal issues, the jeep was rebuilt. When the transmission was finally hoisted into place and every bolt secured, Justin tossed the solitary key to his brother and grinned smugly. Earnest jumped into the driver's seat which had been thoroughly refurbished to the original specifications and the key turned in the ignition, the jeep purring with barely a sound to the shock of the freshman Earnest liked more than most others.

But the two boys were not the only witness to the long renovation and into the garage stepped a lean, tall man in an olive drab uniform laden on the left with bright ribbons, he the one to survey the shop critically before his eyes fell on Justin's filthy coveralls and recently shorn head. The brown haired man seemed to chew his inner lips as he unceremoniously touched the milling machine which looked unfit for service but he had seen its function when Justin had employed it with a skill rare in the world.

He spotted the locked door and pointed to it meaningfully as he spoke in a voice that dared Justin to challenge.

“Open it.”

Justin met the stare evenly and responded with a polite tone.

“No.”

The clash of wills was instant and finally the man blinked, his hard face warming with a smile ever so frail and short lived.

“I assume you are Justin Lucas, the mechanic.”

Justin responded, his words in English slipping just a little with the speed of his seemingly slow reply.

“I am.”

The man tapped Earnest and Earnest reluctantly climbed out of the jeep. The tall man climbed in and the jeep was cruelly thrown into gear, the vehicle lurching backwards at breakneck speeds to jolt forward as gears again shifted and the steering wheel turned sharply. Justin frowned at the harsh treatment to his newly redeemed work but he was the one to reach the doorway of the barn to watch the jeep perform as it never had before.

The jeep finally ground to a halt in the snow a mere six inches from Justin’s shins and the man turned off the ignition, his examination complete and his private smile quick to hide as Kyle Brunheldigon appeared. The exchange was casual and the tone almost void of passion but in Kyle’s equally relaxed inflections the sons of the father realized that here was a friendship far older than themselves.

“I don’t think he’s Academy material, Kyle. The other boys would eat him alive.”

Kyle responded smoothly.

“He has his mother’s backbone and none of my vengeful nature, Ben. We could try him over the spring and summer sessions to see if the school is beneficial or not. Incidentally, the Academy is not a long term intent, merely a stopover between where he is and where he needs to be. He has never built a plane, Ben. I think the challenge would keep him occupied for weeks.”

Ben eyed Kyle and glanced back at Justin for all of two seconds before he responded.

“He’d be the same kind of trouble you were and I’m no Jordain Messenbaum. Besides, I don’t like the way that doctor of his rattled my nursing staff. They’ve argued against him

ever since. Besides, we've gone to a less mechanical approach in the past twenty years. Mechanics is now an elective earned on grades and good behavior. Shots in the rear with a two day downtime would count against him and the boys tend to take things like that real personal."

Kyle sighed with sudden grimness but he did not shy from the task of tromping through the ankle deep snow as Justin closed the barn and locked it up after turning out the lights.

"He needs you, Ben. Give him one try. Three months."

Justin sensed the importance of the answer and studied this stranger intently as Earnest and Eric ducked quickly out of sight. Ben sighed slowly and spoke again, more formally.

"We don't ordinarily take problem kids on a short term, or the long term, for that matter. Give me a logical reason to."

Kyle's face lit with a smile that was undeniably rare.

"He's a genius and sometimes able to assess technology from infancy to maturity without needing to sit and build every element between the beginning and the end item. He's been handicapped by psychological traumas and in and out of hospitals since the age of five. The problem itself is fixed and now we need to address socialization issues in a controlled setting. A normal school was considered but he's not ready for that. He needs you."

Ben exhaled explosively, his breath a cloud of vapor visible in the light from the greenhouse windows.

"What kind of tech?"

Kyle mused proudly.

"Space related. He just recently filed more than a thousand patents for space suit components and completely redesigned the space suit itself to a layered metal and carbon fiber matting with thermal inserts and some supporting gear that even I don't quite understand. The actual catch is that modern industry has to play tag for a very long time to catch up to him. He isn't worried about his grades and your school can test him for where his academics are weak.

He needs people, Ben, especially those his own age. The only children he has dealt with for any length of time are those in the hospital or his cousins during family reunions and Earnest."

Ben exhaled in thoughtful shock, his new study of Justin intense and measuring.

“I’d need the usual medical waivers, guardianship forms and liability waivers. Is he insured?”

The hard stare ended as Justin realized that opportunity had just presented itself and like his mother, he exhaled softly, the battle almost won. He was going to go to school, if differently than Earnest did. Kyle grinned pleasantly but the time of friendship and pleading was over.

“I have the forms inside, all of them signed and in need of your signature before he packs his essentials.”

Ben paused in the turning to the house.

“Essentials?”

Kyle started to respond but Justin spoke out, although in Japanese.

“Diapers, pajamas, underwear and personal soap free of additives and so on.”

Ben winced and shook his head at the sound of a foreign language. Kyle pursed his lips at that ominous sign but Ben did the surprising thing by turning to Justin with a hard scowl and a flat tone as well as flawed but workable Japanese.

“I am Sir, if spoken to, Cadet Brunheldigon. Go pack your things and report to me wherever I might be in your father’s house when you are finished, the gear in hand. We will work on saluting later.”

Justin found himself obeying due to the tone and the scowl, yet as he entered the house to shower there a final time and then to garb himself in boxers before compliance was achieved, the whole issue of his response to emotion was analyzed element by element. He did find his mother busy with his things, the diapers set aside for freshly laundered olive drab clothing that he claimed and put on with the stiff, new combat boots slowly laced.

Oddly, she sniffled and then hugged him tightly before he quietly took over the chore of packing the rest of his belongings into the long, drab duffel bag that matched his Velcro adapted shirt. He, in turn, was as silent as she, the duffel bag hefted and ported out of his room, it the bundle holding everything essential to a prolonged stay elsewhere. He found Ben and his father busy with the final legal release forms that Kyle had written to the letter

of the law in every sense, forms that were scowled at by the instructor before he spoke without noticing Justin in the doorway.

“I’ve never seen release forms like these.”

Kyle responded quietly as he handed over two vital cards ever so solemnly.

“These are his, the top one his identification and the bottom his medical insurance. With the bottom card and a thumb print, he can be treated at any suitable hospital. The emergency contact information is on the card and I admit I haven’t thought of an emergency alert tag until now. Additionally, he can’t do buttons and when he showers himself, he only rinses. Scrubbing him down takes a second person. We added a Velcro strip to the uniform I bought in advance and he is capable of doing the same to the rest of his clothing once they are purchased locally.

Also, Doctor Munroe will be bringing a cold storage knockout to your school in a day or two as a contingency. It is a controlled substance and therefore needs a locked refrigerator and a designated member of your staff to deliver it when necessary.”

Ben sighed but he was committed and when he saw Justin transformed, his eyes widened in disbelief.

“Is that Justin or the other one?”

Kyle turned to grin smugly.

“Justin. His eyes tend to flutter when he needs his ointment. He has enough to hold him over until Doctor Munroe brings in more.”

Kyle quietly crossed the room and opened a utility drawer, a manila folder taken out. The legal forms were sorted with the habitual preference for order that his sons had adapted to and soon the documents so important to Justin’s future were secured, the folder wrapped with a large rubber band and two massive paperclips. Ben sighed as he accepted the folder and then, quietly, he spoke to Justin as an equal instead of an adult dictating to a child.

“Cadet, secure this folder.”

Justin did so without a sound, the zipper of his duffel bag almost silent as it opened and closed again with the folder inside. Ben spoke with forced irritation that was rather gentle.

“Cadets always speak when spoken to and every adult is a Sir. Is that understood?”

Justin saw through the illusory irritation and managed to keep his knowing grin checked as he replied in English.

“Yes, Sir.”

Betty arrived a few seconds after that exchange had become a memory and with gentleness she draped a steel chain bearing an enameled red emergency alert tag over Justin’s head. A moment later a similar bracelet was secured around Justin’s left wrist and with a wan, nervous smile she kissed his forehead, her surrender thereby made. Ben responded with curiosity that proved intense.

“How old is he, again?”

Betty replied ever so calmly but Justin knew what would come when she found herself alone.

“Fourteen in March, although developmentally he fits more into the seven to nine year old range. Earnest, by comparison, fits closer to the proper age, although he’s behind by roughly a year or so physically, like I was. Justin has been given so many kinds of medications over the years that he’s been slowed down a lot all the way around.”

Ben sighed tensely as Justin thought of the one thing he had forgotten and quietly helped himself to the bottom drawer and a box of latex gloves that were soon added to his duffel bag as Ben frowned and spoke.

“Did they specify a reason for this growth problem?”

Kyle responded quietly, the reply composed, well considered and precisely articulated.

“Genetic, although due to the extensive impact of the medications he has literally adapted to. The current belief is that he might eventually start growing again and if so, he will eventually attain a normal stature and full health. He will simply do so more slowly than Earnest and therefore much more slowly than other children will, with the natural, logical outcome that entails.

The other school of thought is that the identified dwarfism genes which were recessive turned dominant in time to stop further physiological development. If the first theory is to be found valid, the final growth estimate is one year grown for every three to four lived as dated from the methyl derivatives he became tolerant to almost three years ago. Admittedly, he does not remember the six month interval well, although his Japanese, as learned during that time period, is flawless.”

Justin barely hid his surprise and managed to veil his shocked exhalation as the sound of effort while he hefted the duffel bag onto his right shoulder, his readiness to depart declared and Ben looked to for direction as easily as he had so often looked to his parents. Ben finally fell into the role as custodian, his latest ward faced and spoken to as he would have spoken to any student.

“Are you ready, Cadet Brunheldigon?”

Justin nodded before remembering the new definition of a proper response and ever so hesitantly he even tried a salute, his right hand flat and brought to touch the skin above the ridge where his recently shaved eyebrow had been.

“Yes, sir.”

His mistake was noted and corrected at once, this just the second lesson of the Maxey Military Academy and what they expected of any Cadet, regardless of age.

“Cadet Brunheldigon, the right hand is properly flat but it hovers with the middle finger just above the eye brow, not in contact with the forehead. Try again.”

Justin blinked in surprise and obeyed, the salute much improved. Indeed, with just that one lesson, the salute was almost perfect. Ben silently considered the mind behind those blue eyes before speaking again.

“Cadet, head to the black van with the eagle symbol on both the driver and passenger doors. It is unlocked and you may stow your gear in the back seat.”

Justin saluted as he anticipated outcomes, his crisp salute accompanied by the expected words of “yes, sir”, words that elicited the glint of pride and the smallest of grins that vanished as swiftly as Kyle’s so often did. He then headed away without any discipline in his lopsided stride and as he vanished through the kitchen, his heightened ears caught words that made him pause at the mudroom door.

“You mentioned that he had some sort of account for personal expenses.”

Kyle responded quietly.

“This is his debit card, pin of five one three two. It has six thousand dollars and his accountant will verify all expenses in duplicate, once by verifying with Justin and once by verifying with you. If there is a discrepancy and no receipt or verification of need, the debit naturally devolves to you.”

Ben mused in surprise.

“That’s a lot of cash for a kid of any age. What do I suggest he buy first?”

Betty responded ever so practically and sounded amused as she spoke.

“Hygiene items. Do read his restrictions and pass the duplicate dietary guidelines on to the cooks unless you want him quite ill for days.”

Ben was chastened by that calm reply and soon brisk as he collected his hat. Brisk words then sounded, words aimed at his longtime friends.

“See you in three months, Kyle, Betty.”

Justin resumed motion, the door opening to let him out to the cold world of winter with the moon’s radiance setting the snow alight in marvelous ways. It was the world that never changed and yet always did, a world he was now facing bravely and without fear.

He had no idea how immature that lack of fear was....

CHAPTER SEVEN

Six hours in a comfortable seat with no distractions was cause for imagination's summons. Six hours passed by and the old dream of building an Adventurer Seven filled his mind with all of its known complexities. Three stops for the use of rest rooms in travel stations were equally useful, although only when he realized the value of maps and then of distances traversed as defined by his origins and then by where he was at and then only when the legend of scale was intently considered.

In the last he frowned at the layouts that he had read of in his mother's many broken lessons on cartography and now that knowledge made sense, the roadmap of the entire county behind the Plexiglas frame astounding, particularly when he imagined the scale. He exhaled in awe as Ben Yonilin came closer to get him.

"Is something wrong with the map, Cadet?"

Justin snapped into the expected salute as he responded, the odd quality of awe in his voice peculiar to the stern man's ears.

"No, Sir, not that I can tell from the map, although printing issues must be factored and the margin of error is plus or minus three point one percent for line width, as rendered."

Ben grunted with the dread of what was to come when a mind like this one hit the average minds in his school. He scowled in that future problem and spoke in the present, one point of curiosity mentioned before he became an authority figure again.

"Can you tell me exactly how far it is to Susanville?"

Justin's mind lurched and his body trembled, yet even then he was grinning from ear to ear as he saluted the Plexiglas again to speak.

"Sir, there are three Susanville locations. Which is the target?"

Ben frowned in surprise and quickly inspected the map, the third Susanville found only after a prolonged search well into Oregon. He finally tapped the one in Northern California and Justin saluted the map again, the answer given in a way Ben Yonilin was not prepared for.

"Sir, with the official speed limits obeyed and periodic stops for hygiene and food accounted for, we should arrive at roughly seven pm, pacific time, although increasing

forward velocity by five miles an hour and rerouting down highway thirty will bring us there forty minutes ahead of the estimated seven pm, pacific time.”

Ben blew out his cheeks and preempted the future by speaking now.

“Cadet, you are going to be facing other children like yourself who lack your ease in figuring things out. If you help them too much, they will forget how to do things themselves and that is not the Maxey way. When asked for an answer by an instructor, you are to give it. When you are to complete tests, do your best but don’t let other Cadets see your work if you can help it.

In some cases, hiding the fact that you are a genius is an act of self protection and when you meet the other students at seven forty-five tonight, I want you to protect yourself.”

Justin turned with a truly puzzled frown and a hazy memory of Ernest crying after coming home from school with a blackened eye and a bloody nose. It was a hard to capture memory but in it he remembered his father’s soothing and his mother’s patient explanations of what to do next, instructions that followed these fresh, easy to remember words rather closely.

His eyes blinked rapidly for a few moments before they calmed again and with a salute given precisely thanks to slight nudges to align the hand at previous stops, Justin spoke solemnly.

“Yes, sir.”

Ben frowned nervously at the eye lid flutter and posed the other issue.

“Do you need ointment?”

Justin shook his head and saluted with a grin.

“Not yet, sir.”

“Then back to the van.”

“Yes, sir.”

They returned to the van and as Justin strapped himself in with clear excitement, Ben found it hard to be only authority, especially with such innocence in his care, innocence that experience would burn away like dross in molten gold. He managed to check the old desire to turn around, to drop this new Cadet off at his home and never return. Instead he

turned on the engine and sighed with his personal choices, the van urged into motion as Justin spoke again.

“Sir?”

“Yes?”

“Sir, the motor and transmission needs a rebuild. Third cylinder is missing and the automatic transmission is grinding slightly when it shifts from first to second. You could drive it another hundred thousand miles with additives to the oil and transmission fluid but eventually you’ll eat the gears and blow a gasket. I could do the work if the machine shop has the proper tools and the gaskets and plugs were on hand.”

Justin noted Ben’s sudden silence as the van headed onto the entry ramp and into traffic but his own concerns for the motor were apparently unimportant and certainly not an immediate threat. He just sat back without concern as they merged with traffic, his eyes catching the identities of license plates and his mind sorting each as a new fact added to the rest. Indeed, when that next grand understanding came, he spoke out quietly, his shyness much like Ernest’s in that barely remembered month when his sibling had struggled with hiding his genius without denying himself in the process.

“Sir?”

Ben cleared his throat absently before he spoke.

“Yes, Cadet?”

“Sir, I see a pattern in license plate nomenclature.”

Ben’s grin was helpless and his reply was forced into a sterner tone than needed.

“Of course there is, Cadet. That’s how the police use it to track different suspect vehicles.”

Justin responded tersely, his momentary lapse in protocol almost missed by his new headmaster.

“They should standardize across the country instead of using state by state encoding methods.”

Ben responded with a note of relief.

“You forgot Sir. Say it again with my title used.”

Justin sighed softly and complied smoothly.

“Sir, they should standardize across the country instead of using state by state encoding methods.”

Ben responded with amusement.

“That would violate the legal authority of states to self regulate and additionally, that would increase the federal government’s already shoddy performance in other areas. Do you know anything about the separation of powers in governmental structure?”

Justin shook his head before responding honestly and shamelessly.

“Not exactly, sir. Mother taught me governmental structure when I was on Saspiacim Hydride and it’s all fuzzy. I know it when I see it on a test, though.”

Ben snickered and spoke with sudden pleasure, the gain in an answer somehow vital.

“Perfect. Cadet, you are going to be tested without a test handed to you and while a long and boring process, we will see what you remember well and what the medications screwed up. That’s how we figure out where you need to be and what classes you need to take, unless just reading the textbooks can fix the problem.”

Justin sighed at the thought of reading the way Ernest claimed to and grinned at once.

“Sir, I would like that.”

The new round of silence began and Justin again memorized the license plates, the traffic intriguing. Eventually they passed through yet another small town and Ben pulled off the expressway, a restaurant sporting a crown wearing mouse called the Mickey-D pulled into. The van came to a complete stop and as the ignition disengaged, Justin hopped out, his stomach empty.

Ben followed him into the restaurant as he charged the one attendant, his voice loud enough to be heard over a fry timer and another beeping that was unclear.

“Sir, I need to see an ingredient list for the Squeaky Burger and a cup of coffee, regular, medium sized.”

The attendant peered down at him and smiled warmly while glancing at Ben, who nodded. The ingredient list was delivered and with a shake of the head at a child drinking coffee, so was the Styrofoam cup and lid. Justin memorized the ingredients to all the menu items and his young head tilted to the side as he scowled in alarm.

“Um, Sir, I can’t have the Squeaky Burger.”

The attendant ever so smoothly deleted the queued item and Ben eyed the pamphlet before posing the proper, logical question casually.

“What can you have, Cadet?”

Justin scowled as he returned the menu and spoke authoritatively.

Sir, if I could have the Sticky Fries plain and the Squeaky Burger with no cheese or mayonnaise, I could have them. If not, a salad with no dressing and bread rolls.”

Ben’s reply was thoughtful.

“Is this your first time inside a Mickey-D?”

Justin nodded honestly.

“Yes, sir. Mother boycotts the restaurant due to environmental impact and Father doesn’t like eating out.”

Ben’s reply was heartening.

“Order as stated, no cheese to either the Sticky Fries or the Squeaky Burger and no mayo on the burger. Also, add a Trapper sandwich and another cup of coffee, medium. The order is for here. Is the play room open?”

The attendant queued the order then totaled the bill as she replied.

“No, sir. We had to close it when one of the safety nets broke and we don’t have a new net in yet. The bill is six dollars and forty-one cents, sir, and the coffee is at the condiments station.”

Justin turned around slowly then, the play room seen and memorized before he reached up and snatched both coffee cups with the rote politeness delivered.

“Sir, how do you like your coffee?”

Ben snickered.

“Black, no cream or sugar.”

Justin found the challenge of achieving unspilled coffee worthy of a doctorate in the analysis of height discrepancies in the applied sense but in the end he achieved success and by then the meal was in Ben’s hands, a meal never before tried. He sampled the burger with a small bite and then took a larger when the tip of his tongue seemed to melt in delight. Ben watched the whole affair with a grin and as Justin expertly swilled the steaming coffee tempered with chilled cream and two sugars, he had to rethink his views in this one instance.

”When are you supposed to have coffee?”

Justin swallowed after chewing well, the utterance in Japanese and missed entirely as a language other than English until after the fact.

“Sir, I am supposed to have it mostly in the mornings when I wake up or I don’t wake up fast but I’m allowed coffee whenever I want it. That was one of Mother’s reasons for keeping me out of the Academy.”

Ben sifted out another area worth remediation and quietly the next question came in Japanese.

“How many languages does this little boy know?”

Justin frowned at the syntax and responded with a grin.

“Sir, this little boy knows eight languages as spoken and written with five more known as spoken. Ernest knows twenty but they have been pushing languages on him for months due to a lack of adequate classwork in school.”

Justin then bit into his sandwich and devoured it, the coffee gone by the final bite. Ben let him finish then devoured his own with less speed, his coffee savored as Justin surveyed the walls and the glass panes, the lighting fixtures and then rose from his seat.

“Is something wrong, Cadet?”

Justin responded honestly, in Japanese and then deliberately.

“I need the bathroom.”

Ben nodded and Justin headed down the narrow hallway, the door with two symbols, male and female, picked. He entered to find a disaster and settled his issues without delay, the bathroom remembered as a cesspit. He hastily settled his new uniform as Ben poked his head inside and in Japanese he spoke his revulsion quietly.

“Sir, this place is a mess.”

Ben looked around at the tissue bits on the floor and the water standing on the sink counter and then, as if seeing what Justin was, he inspected the mineral stained toilet, all reviewed before he spoke in English and flatly.

“Not our problem. Are you done?”

Justin sighed grimly.

“Yes, sir.”

“Let’s go.”

Justin gave the horrors one more glance then followed his new superior out into the warmer clime of northern California, the rugged terrain scanned as he climbed into the van and belted himself in. The next three hours were silent but in his mind the filth was being analyzed, the bits of tissue and spots of built up grime elements to the unknown that finally brought him the most astounding of revelations.

It came as the van was turning into a driveway framed by brickwork pillars and ancient wrought iron gates that other Cadets pulled open and as Ben and the sentries traded the exchanges he would come to learn himself, the marvel unfolded in mathematical concepts that had formerly only explained quantum particle behavior. It was the glorious, seldom celebrated wonder of the next creation and in that inner mystery he saw all of his previous mistakes with dimensional taps.

He grinned like a fool for the flashlight that flashed across his pale face and when the coarse jokes made of innuendo he could not fathom were made, the excuse to laugh set his spirit free. The van picked up speed again and soon the van stopped within a garage holding three other vans no different than the one he was inside and only then, when gasping for air, did the laughter fade. Ben climbed out and he did the same, the gleam in his eyes the dangerous kind that few ever understood and fewer yet ever possessed.

But even then he was seeing this new world as a rich trove of intellectualism and so boldly he unloaded his modest burden and fell into step behind his superior, the path into a long,

three storied building central to eight others taken. Ben knew that he was shadowed but he was again aloof and distant, the salutes Justin saw in the twilight hour always practiced and efficient, faster than his own.

Justin listened and learned as his mind quieted but the secret to a mystery remained his as he was led up tiring steps to a long, common bunkroom with twelve low cots ruled by two male nurses busy with a thick sheaf of photocopied documents.

“Is that the new kid, the one with problems?”

Ben grinned in silence and merely nodded as Justin eyed the beds and wondered which would become his. Ben then spoke, words of surprise to Justin’s ears.

“Get him treated and have one of the wing patrols escort him to his assigned barracks. Two man rule.”

Both nurses nodded sagely and Justin frowned in confusion, his Japanese employed to the consternation of both nurses and a boy of twelve who popped his head out of a storage closet hidden by a curtain.

“Sir, why not here?”

Ben turned with the most controlled of frowns as he replied in kind.

“That would defeat your reason for being here.”

After such a grand revelation wholly in the realm of applied quantum physics, he was suddenly transfixed by the purest kind of disbelief. He did not move for several heartbeats and when he did, it was to drop his duffel bag, one that the two duty nurses took from his possession, the release forms in the manila folder sifted through to their amazement when terms and conditions were finally grasped as all inclusive for a limited three month timeframe.

The plain white curtain was then slid on its ceiling track around one narrow cot like all the rest and Justin, numbed and docile, was casually herded into its shelter. But even with remediation he was stunned by reality, slow to redress in his uniform and still dazed and slack jawed when a muscular, red haired man of fifty-one and a younger man of thirty came in to note his name and the proper military time in a log book with no other purpose.

By then his duffel bag had been searched and his gloves and ointment removed, his other things pared down to necessity and then handed back as he absently tied his laces with unruly, slow fingers. He followed the adults who collected him simply because that was

what Ben had said to do. Like a lost puppy without a home, he found himself inside a dormitory with five other boys far taller than himself, most pared down to underclothing and already feigning sleep.

His duffel bag was dropped on a bed frame holding one well worn mattress and all Justin could think of as the two men left was the need for a notebook and pencils. He opened his duffel bag and out came everything until the notebooks were found, the mechanical pencils last but oh, so vital when freed of the package and pressed into service. The madness of numbers rose in that final, fateful moment when the truth in his mind was to be tried by the fire of logic and then condensed to mere symbols with every step logically defined and all his previous mistakes undone.

He never remembered the instant when the notebook opened or when two mechanical, blue pencils clicked, the tips pressed onto the blank, line free pages and the equations begun in proofs of origin based entirely on the Theory of Relativity. From then onward numbers and logic were the absolutes, the all consuming flames that blazed in his mind. They flashed onto paper, the arguments sound, derived from all the known masters who were beyond rebuke.

In the end the final quantum equations were written and as he lost his grip on the pencils from the strain of achievement in the realm of the mind, he was aware of someone holding him as he shook as if chilled. Soon, though, the prick of a needle came to his seat and as the shock of awareness hit, so too oblivion. But even in that realm so far removed from even the impressions of life, the grand victory was remembered, savored as the gain worth the price of dignity.

And all of it was owed to a filthy bathroom. . .

CHAPTER EIGHT

Breakfast was a slow affair begun two hours before the rest of the school stirred to the static filled, appalling, speaker announced call to reveille. The routine shower and skin remediation were blurs in his mind and the coffee now given as he sat in a chair in the spacious, drafty cafeteria meant for adult bodies was cold, far too sweet and colored with cream to a light brown hue.

He still drank the unpleasant brew and then the next that followed it, the caffeine important. His mind slowly focused and the instructors seen as people as opposed to mere influences to obey blindly. By the fourth cup of coffee he was aware and his mind clarified as he studied the blue light from the ceiling above. Mentally he translated the blue light to red and in doing so he saw the different color values which turned the walls a dull green and the tables to dark brown.

A fifth cup of coffee was procured from the huge stainless steel coffee pot and a lined notebook slid in front of him with mechanical pencils. The questions began, careful, nervous requests for him to draw out diesel powered engines and generators with outputs in the two gigawatt range. It was not at all what he expected but obedience came quickly, the problem useful in breaking up the lingering lethargy as the lights changed from red to white after dimming down ominously.

He managed to fill the notebook with his sketches of pistons and tappet rods, alignment variables and engine block parameters before the first stumbling Cadets in olive green uniforms arrived to pour coffee and then circle the cafeteria with trays soon burdened with mass prepared scrambled eggs and toast, sausage and bacon. The notebook he had successfully written in English alone was then quietly disappeared and Justin coaxed into rising, an instructor at his side while he was urged to follow the example of the nearly grown Cadets who were settling into groups at the tables with their meals eaten and coffee consumed.

He was soon eating and seen by the almost graduated Cadets as an aberration, someone up and active hours before he should have been. Yet with an instructor as a shadow he was not spoken to or commented on loudly, although he was referred to as a problem child and his issues became gossip riddled with puzzling jokes and snickers far beyond his means to understand.

His notebook's value was soon seen as those same Cadets were issued a stack of photocopies. The engine parts were studied with grudging amazement and then the scale was seen, cause for disbelief and then anticipation. He saw the rendered copies of his

mind as he sipped a plain black cup of properly hot coffee and as he watched the sorting out of talents, options flashed through his now sharpened, quick mind.

He tugged on the sleeve of the instructor beside him and when the man leaned down he whispered quietly.

“Sir, the generators depend on external flash energy which can be simulated with a small permanent magnet on a hand crank or possibly driven by a high speed starter from any mass produced late model internal combustion vehicle. After the initial excitation during the generator startup, the design they have will automatically maintain the bleed fields for the internal electromagnetic primers. If they’re going to build the generator assembly, then I need to draw the variants so they can make it work.”

The instructor said nothing as he broke away but another lined notebook was soon in Justin’s hands, one Justin used to draw out the modifications to his recent spate of brilliance. The notebook vanished as the first had and the modifications were translated to single sheets handed to Cadets. Justin watched it all as he finished his meal and rose, the tray carried to a window where other Cadets were busy running dishes and trays from the night before through powerful sprayers and then old belt fed dishwashers.

He climbed up into the window to watch for his mind was flickering, the core of his imagination ignited. He dropped down and got out of the way as the seventeen year old Cadets muttered curses out of irritation but he just ignored the curses as he smiled grandly. He felt one Cadet just bump him to the side and spoke as that Cadet shoved his tray onto the stack of others that younger Cadets dealt with skillfully.

Earnest had often treated him like that, especially when he had been younger and his skills with engines had been contested.

“Have fun with my generator sets.”

All too late he realized that he had spoken in Arabic and the sotto comments were full of snickers as the belief that he had cursed at them was formed and strengthened. He was then led into the wide halls that led to classrooms and offices, the instructor beside him speaking normally.

”What did you actually say to them?”

Justin shrugged as he spotted the next group of Cadets who were sleepy and hungry, some still adjusting blouses and buttoning buttons.

“I just told them to have fun with the generator sets. What do I do first?”

The instructor mused.

“We go to supply to get you more uniforms and then you learn how to properly stow your gear.”

It was the beginning of a new chapter in Justin’s life and while tedious and full of complications, the outcome was his return to his shared room with him busy with a sewing kit and a spool of Velcro, scissors and uniforms. While it looked strange to see him sewing at arm’s length, every stitch was tight, small and durable, just as his mother had taught him.

His roommates came in and left between their classes while he worked on his own, each uniform modified before he stowed them in his locker on hooks with his new school books pulled down and thereby opened, memorized and returned before the doors were closed and the latch slid to keep them secure. Twelve long hours had thereby been spent and exactly one hour before the scheduled evening meal, an instructor stepped in to speak his name with quiet authority.

“Cadet Brunheldigon, come with me. Bring shower gear.”

He complied without delay, the new ditty bag he had arranged and packed with astounding neatness withdrawn from his locker and the path to the showers taken as the busy halls revealed another rhythm of the school that was never spoken. Soon he was inside the wide bathroom and peeling off his uniform as the older Cadets scrubbed away grit and grease, metal shavings and ordinary grime.

He noted the lesson of place and apparent rank as the still dressed instructor sifted out soap and joined them, Justin’s cleansing as opposed to theirs cause for them to mutter new vulgarities. Justin’s remediation was thereby exposed and when the curious questions began without his inclusion, the instructor spoke honestly about skin sensitivity. Justin said nothing as his eye lids were finally touched with just enough of the white ointment to null the rapid fluttering and as he dressed, the maturing teens finally asked a relevant question speculatively.

“Sir, where did the designs come from? We know from the prints that they were sketched in a notebook because some of the blue lines came through.”

The wide instructor spoke with a grin.

“Cadet Brunheldigon drew them at breakfast to settle his head. Oh, the apparent vulgarities you were so worked up over was actually a good luck comment. He speaks

several languages and sometimes gets his Arabic confused with English. We're still sorting out his class schedule and exercise periods but he should be settled into a routine by the end of the week. Until then, he's a floater. If you see him and he seems lost, figure out if he's awake and if he isn't and you can't tell what he's after, get one of us.

Kid has issues, yes, but he's also a genius. He's here to learn how to deal with people. His normal way of dealing with people is to hide in a machine shop. By the way, how long to system initiation?"

The young seventeen year old spoke with clear pride.

"Sir, the first generator set is milled and we plan to have it up and running in two days. At the same time, we have two more units under construction and are tapping the spent grease and old oil as fuel supplies. The current generator units are a close design match down to the supplemental mods so we only need to clean the wires and test oil pan integrity, maybe make a patch here and there.

We should have enough power to cut from the grid for a limited test by Thursday."

Justin heard it all and scowled as he stared at the pale yellow tiles that had once been white before speaking out in English.

"What kind of power does the school need to generate?"

The lean Cadet responded casually but his peers were now curious as to why a senior was chatting with a newcomer.

"Four gigs, most of it fed to the grid with a payback on credit. We've been limping along on two since the spare diesels were being used as parts to keep the two good ones running. The full power mode is twenty gigs on an intermittent, need based call from the power company through demand load switching. The credits from the energy company pay for the diesel fuel and the extra goes into the general account."

Justin's mind pulsed and as the momentary madness hit, his grin formed. He even heard himself speaking in English, a list of components that were peculiar and odd to all but himself. The instructor pulled out a pocket note pad and a pen that Justin snatched, the tools silencing his throat as he wrote out the list in small letters of exceptional precision. He knew that he was panting and that he perspired enough to soak his undershirt but the list was the vital thing, the note book he had filled with items and quantities handed to the Cadet while the pen was returned to the instructor.

The lean Cadet flipped through the odd items and when he found the tiny drawings of bus bar carriages, he quietly snickered.

“The list will take a week or two to fill, Cadet. What will all that junk do?”

Justin sat down on the changing bench and stared at the doorless lockers which provided the visual barrier for the showers, his breath slowly mastered and his state of affairs faced, especially his soaked feet and the unexpected numbness of his muscles which had nothing to do with the needle--like prickling of his skin which was every fine, virtually invisible hair rising.

“They enable me to make vacuum energy taps with variable outputs and a limited lifespan of something like five to ten years. Most of the stuff is what I need to build microscopes and the taps themselves. The rest are the parts I need to balance the surges from the taps while enabling a safe draw of the energy in a useful form.”

The instructor frowned as he realized the physical cost and with a sigh of frustration he turned to the reliable Cadets so close to graduation.

“He’s in room B Seventeen and locker eight. He needs to get cleaned up from top to bottom. I’ll go get him a new pair of boots. See if he’s messed himself. He has diapers if he needs them but if he doesn’t, don’t bother with one. After that, we’ll see about dinner.”

In that defining moment Cadets made a choice and Justin was helped through his issues and dressed in new clothing, herded to the sink for tooth brushing and then swept out with his freshly named, sweat soaked clothes dropped into the laundry bin. It was the beginning of the whirlwind that saw him through a dinner filled with discussions on engine specifications and generator outputs.

The whirlwind ended with him settled in a chair in a game room lounge while a small television displayed a bland sitcom and table games were played, the games of pool unreal and the sounds of pinball alien. He finally caught up with himself and settled into the chair as his father arrived, Kyle musing with interest as he carried in the bag of blank notebooks and several packets of disposable mechanical pencils.

Cadets mobilized without hesitation and Justin’s new property was swept out of sight with the old notebooks he had filled with physics brought back in the same jute handled paper sack. Kyle was then provided with a chair of his own and rapidly updated on Justin’s personal affairs, down to the way his socks had become saturated by perspiration in what appeared to be a seizure event.

Kyle mused at this sign that his son was safe and responded gently with the truth, one Justin himself had not known.

“Justin isn’t going through a seizure. He is just so used to having very little rational time that he goes as fast as he can. That is due to all the hospitals he has been in and all the potent medications he was treated with. That problem is one I think you Cadets can really help him with while he stays here. He needs to learn that he doesn’t have to go a mile a second to keep up.”

Kyle was then as silent as Justin for the remainder of his visit, a tall man who studied the game room and how the noise bothered Justin in ways Justin himself did not notice. Kyle finally shook Justin’s hand and said his farewells before carting the bag of note laden notebooks away. Justin, in turn, leaned back more yet in the chair. His eyes closed and his deep sigh was noted, the signals of exhaustion responded to by Cadets as instructors watched the whole affair.

Justin was prodded from his seat and herded back to his room, his bed the final place where his eyes closed fast to send him into dreams of energy equations, flying space ships and the times in hospitals.

He did not realize that he had made friends...

CHAPTER NINE

It took four weeks to settle into the routines of the school and two months more to adapt to the way his classes constantly changed. Verbal academic tests became morning affairs in the cafeteria after alertness was verified and his early hour of hygiene and remediation long over. The instructors were adept and the graduating class proud when his academic status leapt from eighth grade overall to tenth grade level in majority with his mathematics and mechanical aptitudes well beyond any means for them to chart.

With that final proof of his mental abilities the other routines of the school were his to learn gently, from games of basketball to routine push ups, crunches and even gymnastics, although with a padded helmet worn and extra mats laid out. Physical workouts had surprising effects on his mental prowess. While his mind slowed only a little in the creative outbursts that could and did fill lineless notebooks with rendered drawings, his perspiring and ensuing exhaustion lessened markedly.

More impressive yet was the way his small body adapted to the regimens that took more of his time than scholastic endeavors. Despite working out and following the routines that amassed muscle on other growing bodies, he merely hardened, his muscles unchanged in size but as powerful as those of his older peers and growing more so the harder he pushed himself to find his own physical limitations. He also adapted to the part time presence of the doctor who would call him into the medical wing for a thorough physical with tests on his neural state.

Cadets were concerned at first but when Justin was not taken from their midst they relaxed and included him in the rigorous sports of Paintball wars and stealthy games of hide and seek in the changing landscape of thicketed glades and rocky terrain. He, in turn, redesigned the air pistols and rifles that fired the balls of paint for greater efficiency and range and, when they proved less than ideal, he redesigned them again. In like fashion the designs were turned over to his father and patented, soon made available on the open market as the premier tools of that popular sport.

Compared to that grand adventure in which he finally excelled as one of the best hide and seek Paintball assassins they had ever counted among their own, the renovations which began at the main entryways to the school's hundred year old halls were insignificant. That engineers came in during recreation times to rewire the school with fiber optics and heavy cable with minimal impact was unimportant, as was the lighting system renovation which replaced fluorescent fixtures with brighter, more efficient light emitting diodes in specialized configurations.

Indeed, while the other Cadets were surprised one spring afternoon to find computer terminals in their rooms and also in their classes, he was not. What fascinated him were the new doors made of matted carbon fiber reinforced with special kinds of wire mesh and soaked in resins, each splitting apart down the center to slide into housings with speeds he could appreciate when the palm print reader was activated.

It was just like home and his adaptation to the new gain was almost instant. The technology spread day by day and then the more vital updates to the school began, the outer wings of the fortress--like building first to be remade with the flavor of the past while housing the technology of the present down to integrated plumbing. Historical context was preserved and new additions in paintings and statuary simply appeared without explanation, all museum reproductions worthy of comment and some earning more than a few lewd jokes.

The library underwent the most noticed changes. Magazines ceased to be eclectic and took on a militaristic perspective before new magazines intended for genuine soldiers appeared, just as posters detailing the core elements of firearm design and munitions advances appeared on various walls. Books were updated to include lofty dissertations on theology and the old books were catalogued, the shelves modified with radio tags, spring loaded retaining clips and motion sensors so that every precious book could be tracked by the computers according to student.

Recruiting posters appeared outside the counselor's office and instructors began to change, the lessons and lectures on tactics and logistics in general gaining a military perspective that was added into the socially critical paintball wars and found valid. Justin just kept with the program that was showing him valid successes and finally the day came when he tried to get out of his shared room and discovered that he could not.

The group terminal awakened when he slapped his left palm against the reader and with the beep heard, he turned to see his schedule and the query for his name. His peers took notice as he typed in the answer and the door opened, his data vanishing from sight with the return of the race car screensaver currently so popular among the students. He headed to the transformed bathrooms and adjoining showers to find Cadets busy ripping out the old lockers, the new benches the graduating class installed built in after the new four foot riser of translucent glass blocks was cemented in place.

He just made his use of the facility and wandered off for the game room, the proof of change seen there as well. The television was no longer a man portable cube plugged into an outlet but was instead a hundred inch flat panel mounted to the wall it nearly filled and currently in use as a gaming medium for a game of Survivor as written by his brother. Pinball games no longer asked for quarters and most of the ten available games were new.

The old, warped and nearly useless pool tables had been replaced with modern ones made to withstand rough use and darts, ever popular, were in full swing, the new boards electronic. Electricians and computer technicians were seen in the final struggle to build the new internet kiosks, one already graced with a line of Cadets eager to send electronic mail or to surf the internet for the allowed twenty minutes as posted in black letters on a particle board glossed with paint.

Ben Yonilin was intent and busy pestering the foreman as to the source of the funds but the busy man just ignored him and kept on working. Justin winced at the sound of electric drills and slipped away, the more distant retreat of an always busy machine shop and automotive lab entered and his peers greeted. He did notice the pristine tools that had simply arrived, the full compliment for any task great or small contemplated thoughtfully before he headed for the small corner declaratively his, the tubs of carbon fiber and resin hardener invaded and his stash of components raided, all recombined in his declaratively secret ways to manufacture another six black rods capped with copper that were left to cure.

He then settled into the long chore of rewinding an electric motor, the bushings and other components set aside in small trays. It was relaxing work and as the windings were finally completed, one sixteen year old who had been wholly fascinated by Justin's speed spoke up.

"Any idea who our nameless benefactor is?"

Justin responded in his slowed way, English resignedly used.

"No. He has to be rich, though. He's putting in all kinds of updates and paying the construction teams double wages for male only workers."

It was the one time he was asked that question by his peers and as he assembled his electric car from the leftovers from airplane kits, Ben Yonilin came in to ask him the same question. His reply was no different, although the wording was more polite.

"No, sir. I have no idea who is paying for the remodeling of the school."

He then immersed himself in the construction of the motor housing and when his peers saw his intention to build a full scale electric car, they jumped in without delay with their own skills added to his. The sleek black car took shape and finally the single rod was inserted, the car itself given initial energy through a battery. The car's electric motor wound up and then burned out in a puff of acrid smoke, Justin left scowling in frustration.

The rod itself was soon pried out of the bus carriage and snapped into place in an ancient, truly obsolete fuse box as if it were an ordinary bus fuse, the dead man's switch flipped into the on position to add its power to the grid as a Cadet rushed in to tell him he had a visitor.

He sighed and spoke to his peers as Ben Yonilin listened.

"I just can't make it produce less than a point one terawatt. We'll work on better batteries instead."

He then headed for the main building with caution for the muddy terrain and found his father waiting with a new briefcase. The usual load of notebooks had already been exchanged and as the briefcase was open, Justin scowled with some trepidation. A manila folder was then handed to him, it replete with the two massive paperclips and traditional rubber band.

He settled into one of the new chairs that had simply arrived without explanation, the folder invaded. Ben appeared with folders of his own handed over to Kyle as Justin read the Chinese symbols that were truly unexpected. The deeds in that folder were summaries of his first genuine corporation, every penny accounted for and spent well on the school's renovations. He read them several times before finding the letter his mother had written in the same format, her Chinese neat but imperfect.

"Dear Justin, by now you have seen where all of your early gains have gone. It was a major endeavor that brought back many fond memories and for the remainder of the life I gave up, I thank you. I have resumed work as a part time translator for a social remediation unit attached to the Family Planning Center here in Halseyville and your father has resumed part time work as an attorney. Ernest and Eric are enjoying the house when we are not here and we have secured the barn where your Adventurer Seven frame is hidden away.

We are somewhat concerned by your slow socialization but in light of your history during the formative years, it seems to be far better than we had ever dared to hope for. If you choose to come home, you are free to bring a friend who would be welcome. I have arranged the room across from yours to that end. Ernest is on game six with the marketing of game two beginning this coming December and while your corporation sends only half of the profits your way, I understand that research and development is in full swing.

So, son, you are richer than Ernest and this has driven him to beat your benchmark. He is jealous, yet not in a violent or destructive way. He simply sees your achievements as more lasting and visible than his own and is now trying to compete by taking on far too much at

the tender age of nearly fifteen. I will send an approved care package to you on your Birthday and inside will be my carefully thought out suggestion for your power cell.

Keep your head shaved. With love, your mother.”

He tidied the contents of the folder and replaced the paperclips, the rubber band snapped into place before the folder was handed to his father. Kyle took the deeds and laid them on top of the pile he had sifted as Ben posed the question quietly.

“Did you pay for the renovations, Kyle?”

Kyle’s eyes twinkled joyously as his face gained a grin and the documents on Justin’s progress were settled in the briefcase, all reviewed and found satisfactory.

“No, although I do know who did. The problem is that I can’t tell you due to legal considerations.”

Kyle then rummaged through the pockets of his briefcase and extracted a blue folder which was handed to the headmaster with casual words.

“There is your new charter and all the relevant guidelines your anonymous benefactor has determined vital to your post as well as the renewal of Justin’s guardianship. Since he is progressing at a steady rate, there is also a permission form for his lessons in flying and a liability waiver for weekend excursions into town just in case he should react in a negative fashion and commit to property damage.”

Justin watched the headmaster scowl as Kyle closed the briefcase and collected the sack of notebooks Justin had filled with rendered motors of all kinds, some to be made of a metal alloy that had yet to become reality. Across the room the grand television screen changed from a Survivor quest with the game saved, the evening news now the venue and the target of muttered curses filled with irritation.

The controls traded hands and the news was shut out with the Survivor game reawakened, an event Kyle studied with private pleasure as Ben sighed hard.

“I need to know the benefactor, Kyle.”

Kyle shook his head with a smug grin and a calm reply that held a subtle hint of unyielding steel. Justin did hear that emotive element and learned from it the lessons he could understand.

“No, you don’t, particularly because the benefactor demanded secrecy above all else. By the way, due to that benefactor’s influence, your curriculum is in review by several nationally acclaimed colleges for admission into their distance learning programs as well as for seamless credit transfers for leisure sports, physical training classes and the previously discounted electives in general mechanics, piloting and aviation design.

It’s all in those papers.”

Ben glared at the inch thick folder and wandered off as Kyle spoke quietly in Arabic.

“Son, don’t tell anyone where the money for the updates came from or show anyone how to build a vacuum energy tap. As things stand, the Department of Energy is looking into the school’s power generation and the stock response is that the students built the diesel generators as final examinations for machine shop classes.”

Justin thought of the forms and summaries he had just read and switched to Chinese.

“The accountant forgot to mention where the other half of my net income goes.”

Kyle switched to Chinese with a grin.

“College funds and retirement annuities, all buried as deeply as legally possible. Watch out for Ben. He’s an obsessive compulsive and he doesn’t like riddles.”

Justin sighed wearily before posing a question in Japanese.

“What do I do if he pushes on me?”

The response was in Italian and both smooth and cool.

“Just keep it quiet and inform me as you can. No one else needs to know. Do you have any issues or problems with the other Cadets?”

Justin sighed heavily and responded in Greek as Cadets noticed the change of languages and glanced at them.

“No, sir. My roommates don’t like being woke up at zero four hundred for when I go remediate but they haven’t complained much and everyone tries to be quiet. I haven’t even needed the diapers more than a time or two and the ointment still works. I do best with the older Cadets since most of us have lots of time in the machine shops. We’ve built two Cessna airplanes from kits and both are four person able, two as pilots and two as passengers.

We'd like an airport of our own and flight instructors but that might be too much to ask for. We also need plane inspectors to go over the planes so we can actually run test flights of the engine modifications we want to try out."

Kyle responded in Japanese that some of the other Cadets did know.

"I'll see what I can do."

Justin heard the pledge and thought of his money as he met the eyes of the four Asian students who could follow Japanese well. He switched to German without a pause, it another slightly known language two Cadets listened to as they used pool sticks to direct pool balls into felt lined pockets.

"I would like Mother to know that I don't miss Mister Bear so much. He can go back in the memories chest. I do need two more uniforms and I want side zipper boots so I'm not fighting with the boot laces. I keep falling over and when I fall over, I can't think right. I don't know how to compensate."

Kyle frowned then, his hip pocket invaded and a cellular telephone drawn out. The unit opened and one number in its database was initiated, the low ringing Justin could barely hear soon answered by a familiar voice.

"Yes, Mister Brunheldigon?"

Kyle spoke quietly in English to the good, friendly doctor Munroe.

"Justin is still having issues with balance, especially when tying his boots. His only descriptive is that when he falls over, he can't think properly. He admits that he has no idea of how to compensate."

Munroe responded with worry that was checked and kept tamed.

"Have him stand and examine his neck, specifically his left side. You are looking for any abnormalities but mainly for hard lumps at or near the jugular."

Kyle complied and Justin sighed as his snug blouse of olive drab was undone to expose his neck. His father's fingers probed and in one spot he felt sudden, sharp pain that just grew stronger as the logical aspects of the world itself shattered. The crazed nightmares that rose to fill the void were all ghostly impressions of moving, of needles and panic. People were terrified and he learned the smell, yet that was all he gained until logic returned, the time of madness over.

He awakened ever so briefly to see his mother's face then fell asleep to dream sane dreams with Mister Bear talkative and oddly warm as opposed to being a simple antique stuffed bear with numerous patches.

He had no idea that he had almost died...

CHAPTER TEN

He awakened ever so slowly to the discovery that he was bound with extreme thoroughness to a bed far different from all the others he had ever known. His body then began to speak despite its oddly numbed state, the tale of his condition cited and every needle finally known while he struggled to open his eyes and learned in doing so that even his head was secured by a durable forehead strap that did not allow him more than a millimeter of flexibility.

The left side of his neck hurt and his mind was still hazed by a lack of caffeine but he was aware. He even knew his mother was close and that he was no longer at Maxey Military Academy. He inhaled and felt the other tubes strung into his small body, especially the nose clips that fed rich, always available oxygen while he breathed. Nurses came in with gloves and ointment and as his needs were partially met without undoing his restraints, his eyes finally opened.

He gathered himself and spoke in English, a frog-like word far different from his normal child's soprano.

“Mother?”

Betty responded without interfering with the nurses in any way.

“Yes, Justin?”

His questions were called up and the need to ask them just strong enough to bring about the use of his changed voice once more.

“What happened?”

Betty sighed with relief and when the nurses were done with the ointment that tamed down only the top half of Justin's body, she drew close with a mother's love and a gentle tone.

“You had a series of slow moving blood clots which needed removal. Doctor Munroe performed the surgical procedure to remove them and you have been on Cumidin, a blood thinner, ever since. The incision itself is very small and will heal without a scar. Also, once the Cumidin regimen is done and you are run through the magnetic resonance imager upstairs, that regimen will stop.

Doctor Munroe was quite surprised when you woke up on the operating table and started talking in several languages to Mister Bear about social reforms and why they were necessary in some cases and detrimental societal events in others. The anesthesiologist was understandably terrified and it took quite a dose of sleeping gas to knock you out again.

Doctor Munroe is now going over your school records and conducting interviews with your classmates to determine the extent of your physical development and to figure out how you survived the blood clots themselves. It seems that this is an unknown side effect of the knockout drugs and therefore they are no longer to be used. He replaced them with an Albuterol inhaler and you should be back in school in no time.

By the way, happy birthday. I brought a gift, although it seems that you can't enjoy it for a few days."

Justin watched the curtain slide around his bed as the nurses left and while feeling only mildly nervous, he still asked for change.

"Can you move the curtain? It bothers me just a little."

The sheet was gently restored and the curtain slid to the head of the bed, Justin thereby given a peripheral view of the other bed's slumbering occupant, a red haired boy who was half curled around a stuffed tiger, one arm tied securely and the glucose bag's contents almost depleted. Justin sighed and marshaled his strength a third time.

"How long have I been here?"

Betty mused with a mother's love.

"A week. Earnest is here as well, although busy with a programming seminar. You were brought by chopper and immediately run through surgical. Doctor Munroe will be here soon to check on you. He always comes at four in the afternoon to sit by your bed and hold your hand while he rests from all his driving."

Justin let his eyes close and his mother retreated, she the one to stare out the windows at the scene of Susanville's traffic. Eventually four o'clock arrived and Alvin Munroe glided in, the white garbed man quick with a cotton swab to test sensitivity as Justin opened his eyes. Munroe just as quietly grinned at him as the Cumidin bag was discontinued while a second glucose bag was started.

Finally the man spoke quietly.

“We need to run you through a few exams before I consider releasing you to school and only one exam requires you to be awake. So, as that test does not need hand to eye coordination, we can begin it.”

Simple, ordinary flash cards appeared from a smock pocket, each colorful and peculiar.

“Just tell me what you see and what the main colors are.”

Justin rallied and his frog-like voice rendered the cards to sometimes imaginative creations and colors. The cards then vanished and Munroe claimed the padded blue chair, the man exhaling with relief as he cited the results to Betty while closing his eyes to rest.

“The brain damage seems to be minor and centered in the linguistic regions. I’ll know more once I see the MRI results and the CAT scan should show any abnormal blood flows. But, since he’s a fighter and rock hard stubborn, I expect him to make a full recovery with only a few lingering and decidedly temporary issues in language recognition. Those should pass once his brain regenerates in the damaged areas. I’ve already ordered a meal from Dietary and while I can’t let him try to feed himself just yet, the meal should settle any nausea or hunger pangs.

It’s just grape jelly and banana pudding due to the tests he’s headed for but its carb loaded and carbohydrates are what he needs.”

Betty responded quietly as the other boy stirred, she the one to slide the curtain to give visual privacy.

“Exactly how close to death was Justin?”

Munroe answered without opening his eyes, a testament to his weariness.

“Extremely. He almost died at school and only the delivery of Cumidin during the airlift saved his life. We have determined that it is a form of immune response to the knockouts and part of the Capriacil adaptive cycle but he’s just not going through the same stages as the others. For example, he has been astoundingly active physically. That is opposite the others by almost one hundred and eighty degrees. Add that to his heightened mental activity and the lack of any form of metabolic slowdowns and the disparity widens by leaps and bounds.

He’s also in majority control of his hygiene, other than ointment applications, which is well beyond the others. Adaptively, he is figuratively miles ahead of the rest. I cite that with special significance since he lacks entirely the ability to grasp several of his current studies by reason of missing emotional values the rest of us learned as infants to toddlers.

He knows the material and can recite it word for word but actual understanding just isn't there.

He doesn't grasp the nuances of mortality or the zeal of historical heroes. He sees things as either appropriate or not, with the definition of appropriate changing in every interaction as based on the known school rules, indicating that he is very dependent on location for his personal interactions and ethical directives. It's an institutional reaction and deeply engrained, more deeply than you might imagine.

He might possibly surpass it in time if we do our part to expand the reach of ethics and his sense of legal propriety to something more able to approximate society as a whole but most people in his situation don't manage to adapt beyond a well defined point where they mask the real problem with layered protocols and a hierarchy of what rules have which priority in what setting or application.

Therefore, he should continue at Maxey due to its structured living and because they have accepted him as is. In fact, the relaxed atmosphere of going home for any extended length of time might be long term detrimental. He's prospering at Maxey because he's getting his psychological needs met at school in ways that he can understand and adjust to while taking in new information, regardless of his actual understanding of that new information.

I did make some adjustments to his class schedule to slow things down academically. He's going too fast to study what he has already memorized. He should have one textbook at a time with a week or more before the next textbook so he can work his way through the data. Sociology and social sciences don't make any real logical sense without the emotive values added in, so I'm discontinuing them for now.

However painful to hear, Misses Brunheldigon, he actually needs to stop learning for a month or three, if not six. He is not Earnest. He does not have Earnest's emotive intuition and he also needs a lot of time to process what he already knows or he'll crash like a freight train hitting a broken rail. He needs the right amount of time to tear apart the data to the fundamental elements which he can occasionally assign mathematical variables or values to for comprehension so he can build the math construct for that source data and pushing more data on him is like setting up an avalanche.

When he does make the critical emotive connections, if ever, too much data will make sense all at once and he might not be able to cope with the outcome without extensive therapy. While not seizure territory, it would cause him to react in the same fashion, namely heavy perspiration, shallow breathing, violent reactive behavior norms and so on. I do strongly suggest that he remains at Maxey and that he attends his last classes over and over like everyone else does.

The repetition might slow down the data avalanche when it does hit and it serves the legal purpose of keeping him in school until he hits eighteen, if not longer, due to physiology issues and behavior needs. I further recommend that he be listed as a ward of Maxey on an indefinite basis, at least until he proves his ability to interact with society on a reasonably independent basis without collateral damage, mental lockups or outright terror.

That is my professional assessment.”

Betty sighed and took up the duty of staring out the window again.

“And your private assessment?”

Munroe chuckled weakly.

“My personal view is that when he grasps emotions in a workable form, he’ll either shut down to a reactive state for years or jump so far ahead of the rest of us that we will be the ones who won’t know how to cope. He already advances technology well beyond conventional norms, so much so that we have to catch up to him and then will spend decades, if not a whole century, in doing so.

By the way, I did pass on one of his linguistic codifiers to a linguistics professor in San Diego. The tentative results are that he is missing emotive connections with most of the word values, although the work itself is extremely valuable as a programming assist which I tactfully referred to Earnest. The outcome here is that Justin is being considered for a number of honorary degrees ranging from linguistic analyst to mathematical theoretician.

The look on Professor Daeidlin’s face when he heard how old Justin was will stay with me forever. And, Misses Brunheldigon, Justin is giving the warning signs that he isn’t coping well with all the added data. His mathematic output is increasingly word based with the words reduced to mathematical elements for the audible frequencies and the amount of math itself has doubled in the last three weeks with fewer technological extrapolations.

He is also taking longer to wake up and subsequently is taking longer with other behaviors and has apparently ceased to touch himself altogether during shower regimens while parroting the motions themselves. His roommates have added that he is more restless while asleep now than only a few weeks ago, which coincides with his introduction to sociology and political science, neither of which are logical throughout, and history, which is definitely more emotion than logic by any measure that I can think of.

In technical terms, he is trying to validate his schoolwork as logically sound so that he can cope with it and then successfully apply it to his own life and personal experiences. Don’t mistake his inability to work with the data as a sign of failure on his part. He is doing an

excellent job of rote memorization and can cite any part of the memorized texts with ease. He just can't emotively relate to the data and that is the key problem, as evidenced in how long it took for him to master English.

Even now he prefers other languages due to the emotive nature of English and how sloppy English actually is mathematically. To him, English seems chaotic and irrational, like quantum gibberish on a chalkboard. Arabic, by contrast, is mathematically smooth and Spanish, while a rocky road mathematically like all the majority Latin derived languages, lacks the rogue spikes that English has.

Chinese has its bumps but do notice that he avoids the words with high emotional values in favor of less effective words with lower emotional connotations and literal value."

Munroe fell silent and the boy on the other side of the curtain spoke up, he curious and mystified.

"You mean that kid who wrote the Survivor game can't understand feelings?"

Munroe chuckled as Betty sighed.

"His brother can't understand, Toby. Earnest Brunheldigon has no trouble at all with his emotions."

The reply was a low noise.

"Oh. Can I see his brother?"

Betty sighed again but she was the one to pull the curtain back against the wall so that Toby could see Justin's thorough captivity.

"Did he get in a wreck?"

Munroe sighed with another chuckle as he looked past Justin to see the signs of an allergen reaction.

"Nope. Blood clots. We're flushing him out as we speak with all the glucose and the saline solutions. How's your head?"

Toby sighed as he lay back down, the sheet pulled up over his bare, red spotted chest.

"Still hurts."

Munroe rose from the chair and casually departed, returning minutes later with another doctor who quickly checked Toby with a small pen light and then studied the medication Toby was receiving intravenously. The call button was then pressed and the curtain pulled for visual privacy as the doctor requested Benadryl and other simple remedies to a mild but still unwelcome allergic reaction.

Justin just lay still because he had no choice and as he closed his eyes when Toby whimpered, his schoolwork was called up. Slowly he faced the problems of defining every word into mathematical elements and then let it fly free in imagination, the sum uniting into new associations time after time with nothing derived as useful.

It was another proof that Munroe knew best...

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Justin Lucas Brunheldigon arrived at the Maxey Military Academy to be surprised by a welcoming home party replete with kazoos and confetti. It was a combination birthday party as well and the cake, plain chocolate with sweet white frosting, was abundant. He was soon engulfed in the chaos of being a celebrity and thereby left groundless, adrift on the ever changing terrain of emotional surges he simply did not understand.

In that one celebration that everyone took part in, the routines and behavior norms he had come to trust as immutable were no longer so. It was a shock to his mind which left him numbed to the shoulder claps and the normal pleasure in opening gifts which were in majority tools like flashlights or rain gear for standing watches in unpleasant conditions. However significant the gifts that heralded his entry into the expected rigors of night watches and sentry duties, the delivery by this ritual was a terrible trauma.

He was shaking from shock by the time the party took on its second life without him and his disappearance to the showers where he stood beneath the spray actually went unnoticed for more than twenty minutes. They found him working through the motions of a self cleansing without soap while fully dressed, his eyes seen as closed and his respiration truly shallow and rapid.

They saw only the outer signs of mental illness. They could not see or feel the connections being made in his mind, the most tenuous linking of emotional, illogical pleasure to the people in history, the multitudes given a new definition beyond a nominal, grudging presence and existence as a logical abstract. The psychologist called Kyle and Kyle relayed the call to Munroe, who assessed the physical events with true calm before telling them all to be gentle as they put Justin to bed.

So, with faith in Munroe and a vague awareness of the changes taking place in Justin's mind, they pulled him out of the shower and put him to bed. His nightmares were vivid works of imagination, the barest understanding of pleasure and its opposite added into his sketchy historical understanding of prehistoric societies and continued all the way to the party itself. Yet even in that mental madness of conjured, half real humans without names or realities past numerical existence, routines remained.

While he did not truly sleep, the measure of time kept onward, the time when he was supposed to rise for necessary care reacted to blindly by heading for the showers after entering his code into the terminal. Cadets who were later than custom by merely two or three minutes found his sweat soaked bed already stripped and the bedding tossed onto the

floor in a compact mound. His locker, normally neat in enviable ways, looked ransacked, yet all they could find missing was the ditty bag full of hygiene items.

One Cadet had the presence of mind to snatch a uniform, latex gloves and a tube of ointment before he headed to the showers where Justin stood beneath the spray, the soap in Justin's small hands working as habit dictated, yet not by touching his skin. His peers chose to straighten up Justin's belongings as Justin reached the brutal Roman Empire with all of its extremes.

It was not the emotional detonation that Munroe had described as an avalanche but to Justin it was more like an explosion of understanding in the most elemental sense as the need for emotive nuances gave rise to the logical acceptance of passions with varying intensities and then to other passions he knew of first hand but had not considered as being applicable to others. Justin was seen to freeze beneath the self timed spray of water and then to shake as if hit by unseen fists as the Roman Empire was grappled with, infused with understanding and buried again in memory.

It was the point of transition that left Justin busy with the fall of the Roman Empire and all the wars afterwards but they were trivial and his mind could again register outside influences like the Cadet who was afraid to pull him out of the shower. So he was aware of two things and reacting to both as he stepped out of the warm spray to dry himself ever so slowly, his peer studied and emotive values derived as the expression of another reality into his own.

In that assessment his mental domain lurched for every human was now a different reality, one separate from all the rest and yet interconnected and co dependent. Oddly, that determination calmed him more than assigning emotive values alone had but as sanity returned and a ritual progressed, the logic was clear and the math, when tried as complex equations that soon swept into the quantum realm of String Theory where alternate dimensions existed, was utterly sound and easily verified.

His new sigh was deep and the struggle over, the weariness within him faced and met as the vital ointment finally touched his fluttering eyelids. He spoke to the surprise of his fellow Cadet and while his voice still carried the frog-like croak and its uneasy quiver, it was much improved.

"I need notebooks. Lots of notebooks. I need to define humanity as a single mathematical construct with infinite variances."

Justin was offered his clean uniform instead and when he reacted to it too slowly, he was helped along without his input and then herded to breakfast and coffee. The food was the usual scrambled eggs but today oatmeal was part of the regimen while bacon was taken

and toast denied. The coffee helped as much as the meal did and soon enough the needed notebook was slid into place with a mechanical pencil. And, as he was given just the one notebook to write in, the formulas to define human existence mathematically were written first, not proven valid until that formula had filled a third of the notebook despite his expertise in writing such extremely small characters.

It was a backwards approach in his mind but one notebook soon held his new theory and six proofs that defined the first as valid. He reviewed his handiwork then closed the notebook, the mechanical pencil tucked into his left breast pocket as he sipped coffee. He watched his peers examine the mathematics so neatly written and knew from their scowls that it was well beyond their understanding.

He spoke quietly then, his reality impacting theirs with so many unknown outcomes.

“I’m not even sure I understand it.”

One Cadet stared into his eyes as he spoke a question that sought two different auditory frequencies at the same moment.

“What is it?”

Justin just stared at the notebook for a moment before realizing what he had done with pure theoretical math. He grinned helplessly as he spoke the answer in that famed, well known deadpan tone.

“It’s me in a mathematical context. I found out that I don’t sum to zero in a balanced way. I’m missing some crucial supplemental non zero derivatives normally called emotions and I compensate with mechanics and technological advances.”

Instructors arrived and the notebook was taken, squirreled away where all Justin’s notebooks went between visits by Justin’s father. Justin did not mourn the taking and he rose from his littered plate, the orange tray carried to the window and watched as it and the dishes were cycled through the dishwasher and racked to cool before finding their way out onto the cafeteria utility racks again.

From there he returned to his room and accessed his schedule, the changes Doctor Munroe had promised seen and contemplated before he restored his locker and carted the damp bedding to the shower room where laundry bins waited patiently for such things. New bedding was secured from the supply closets and his world was righted. He even changed his ditty bag slightly, adding soap, a pair of latex gloves and a tube of ointment.

The zipper closed and the bag was hung neatly on its hook. He studied the change and closed the doors, the lock slid closed before he faced the long road of physical recovery head on with the full knowledge that he would succeed by one means or another.

After all, he was as stubborn as his mother...

CHAPTER TWELVE

The rapid pops of released paintballs that morning of April fifth were the only sounds in the recreation glade which had borne the brunt of multihued paints on tree trunks, rocks and otherwise bare patches of bermed dirt. Justin was the one firing the paintballs and from on high, his gymnastics in the branches were as amazing as the fact that he did not plummet to the ground.

His foes, Cadets older and younger than he, were hit in both the head and chest by paintballs in rapid succession, leaving Justin the final victor and the only one allowed to move until the instructor's whistle blew and the final score summed. The outcome was easily tallied when Justin's slightly modified camouflage outfit bore no signs of paint despite the initial, numerous claims that he had been shot more than once and was now cheating.

It was his third strange victory in a row, stranger yet because everyone had known where to fire but he had been missed each time. So, because this was a riddle, the other Cadets had called in the professionals, namely those instructors who had trained in the military for operations just like this game. The instructors fanned out, the five men studying the high branches spattered with paint.

Knowing the field and where Justin had begun his daring feats of seemingly impossible gymnastics without a safety net, they did the logical thing. They studied the trees he had used and found them all to be pin oaks, one of the toughest in the woods. They contemplated angles of fire and had to smile as they learned a nuance of Justin's mind. Justin had simply adjusted to the angle of fire from the ground with the trees for cover and then had leapt like a flying squirrel from one pin oak to the next while firing his pistol from the hip in mid air.

It was an outstanding example of reckless daring and undeniably effective, especially since his path above the others had been complex and methodical. They returned to the starting point and spoke the unwanted answers and outcome with merry eyes.

"Cadet Brunheldigon just thought through the dynamics of every shot while he was airborne. His windows of opportunity were generally one to three seconds long and he made full use of them. We will, however, enforce a ground to ground rule as he could have killed himself jumping from tree to tree like he did and however brilliant, we can't allow such reckless behavior.

Admittedly, it was as reckless as it was brilliant. Call it a day and see if you have town passes. If you don't, come to the instructor's break room and let one of us know. Cadet Brunheldigon, you are due in medical for blood work but I'm told they don't need much."

It was the end of two hours of play and the weapons of choice were either holstered or slung over shoulders as the troop of thirty-one headed towards the fortress--like school and all of its outbuildings. They entered in the new fashion with palms pressed against the clear scanners and as they parted ways to their own dorms to change uniforms, Justin had a notion that was spoken before everyone was out of earshot.

"Let's make a new school uniform."

There was a pause after his words but no return answer so he turned to the left and headed to his room, the paintball pistol he favored over rifles carefully dismantled in the bathroom sink, wiped dry and reassembled in under three minutes. The pistol was then transferred to the bench where he and others piled clothing for showers and without delay he, like his peers, was busy purging away sweat.

A nurse came in with a Vacutainer syringe and four medium test tubes and waited until Justin was done before speaking quietly.

"Blood call."

Justin gave the man a grin as he drew close, his arm held out and the points where scars existed bared. The nurse sighed and shook his head.

"Nope. We need arterial blood first, then venous. Have a seat and stretch out one leg."

It was an unusual request but Justin obeyed, the momentary discomfort ignored as his slow voice posed a question full of new curiosity.

"Why arterial, sir?"

The nurse responded casually.

"They are doing oxygen comparatives and a hemoglobin function track so I need venous blood, too."

The man's smock pockets held everything and while annoying as well as a shock to the other Cadets who watched in utter disbelief mingled with true apprehension, the end result was eight vials of blood taken and he the one left to watch as his tiny wounds closed with

astounding speed, each developing the hard lump of scar tissue that would fade away in just a week's time.

He finally rose to dress in his sweaty boxers while dumping everything else but his pistol into the laundry bin. From there a new olive drab uniform was the goal and on entry into his room, his father was seen perched at his desk with another manila folder. He grimaced at the necessity but acted in accordance with time honored ritual, the folder opened and the pages memorized.

They were startling and unexpected so he read them again. And since he did not grasp them even then, he read through them a third time before he questioned them as valid or trickery.

“Are these right?”

His Arabic was flawless and his father's use of the same language was just as skilled.

“The accountant was as careful as always. Most of the money is coming from the government contracts of Spacesuits Limited but the sums from paintball equipment are catching up fast. It's a good beginning to a very long life.”

Justin shook his head and brandished the sheets in question, the summaries of his accounts by far less important.

“No. These. The honoraries and the Nobel.”

Kyle mused as he glanced at the Chinese symbols.

“They are valid and supported by your expertise in mathematics, especially your dynamic definitions of the human psyche in a mathematical form, ostensibly intended to help quell civil unrest and to promote peace. I did take the extra effort to patent the formulas as copyright exclusives with lecture rights granted by request and Earnest has found it extremely useful in developing more realistic personalities for his Survivor game.

He and about nine others, yourself included, are currently the only living minds who can actually grasp the deeper uses of the formulas. Professor Thaddeus Kemp, for one, is still in shock. He was one of three mathematicians who believed it absolutely impossible to quantify a personality as exclusive from the emotive being while that isolated emotive being is quantified as an interactive polar negative entity.

I understand that the whole formula is being considered for a Nobel. If granted, you would be the first from this school to do so and that would seal you as famous among the alumni.

Additionally, you would be the youngest recipient ever and known around the world as a rare mathematical mind. Needless to say, Earnest is a bit touchy on the issue but he's managing most of the time.

Your mother is citing how long the theory has been cooking in your drug warped and sedative twisted mind and that, more than anything, has cut the vulgarities down to a minimum. He sees the emotive side of the award more than he sees the logistic and the sum for gaining the Nobel is actually trivial. He's looking at the politics and you are just trying to cope with reality."

Justin read them a fourth and final time before returning them to the folder and restoring the folder to its unread state. He felt terrified and even then mathematical formulas were quantifying the mood and memory was rising, the sum of all he knew added to and clarified because a new emotion was grasped and validated.

"Should I accept the nominations?"

Kyle mused then, his weariness as a father with a very troubled child finally seen, if only for a few rare seconds before the old walls were mended and the aloof arrogance durable. The words that followed were Chinese and softly spoken, they the outpouring of one man's honesty and concerns for a less than perfect child in peril.

"That, my son, is the question. Do be aware that turning down a Nobel is more newsworthy than accepting one, especially at your age and with your physique. Most won't see a fifteen year old who likes paintball and tactical simulations with reasonably pure mathematically derivatives. They will see an eight or nine year old boy in a photograph and wonder how you did it.

In fact, as your mother pointed out last night, there is no way to tactfully handle this situation with proper discretion and privacy. If we decline for reasons of psychological health, the school will be overrun with curious reporters eager to learn all of your personal secrets. If we accept, the same thing will happen for a shorter time with the intent to learn your past as a biographical annotation in history.

In either outcome, you are pulled out of the comfortable, safe shadows and thrust into the harsh, unkind light of public scrutiny. In fact, it is already beginning. The list of nominees was made public before I was aware of your name being included. Fortunately, your fellow Cadets are rather adept at deflecting unauthorized entry and the doors into the school have highly accurate combination hand and weight scanners with room for more biometric parameters such as retinal imaging and voice.

I have gone on the offensive as I used to in the United Nations where I conducted security operations for notables. I have called in a few lingering unpaid favors and I know your mother has done the same with her old associates. Earnest, however, feels left out and somewhat helpless in addition to his jealousy, more so after the explanation he received on the hidden costs of fame.

Ben, though, is a real problem. He wants to exploit your sudden notoriety to bolster the school's enrollment and thereby free the school from a rather complicated anonymous benefactor's influences. Good mister Benjamin Andrew Yonilin is no longer the best candidate for the leadership of the school but finding the right man who is seems to be impossible as the good men are all taken.

Additionally, in the ways of evils great and small in Washington DC, there are rumors that you are being viewed as a national asset or treasure and while still only a rumor at the water coolers, this is an added complication I cannot work around in any sense. Your mother and I are politically adept but we are not gifted politically like your brother. Where you can pick out a person's linguistic ability, he can sense aspects of a person's political motivation, especially those points of interest which hinge on attitudes and beliefs that you simply do not grasp or understand as more real than an abstract equation concerning a stray quantum particle which has come into existence for only a moment.

In his hands, your definition of the human consciousness as a mathematical quantum construct is a very potent tool. In his hands, that remarkable mathematical tool is becoming a delicate surgical scalpel and he already has the basic finesse to use it as skillfully as you use air wrenches and arc welders. So, as your mother and I cannot see a solution and your brother has the skill, do sit and call him on the back door routines built into the computer program while I go tell Ben that you cannot go on today's outing into Susanville."

Kyle rose and stepped past his son without a pause and Justin sighed with frustration for that gently spoken denial was as firm as a mountain. He settled into the warm seat his father vacated and typed in the terminal codes for his peers, the list called up and his message sent.

"Can't go to town. Sorry."

He pressed the enter key and watched the text vanish. Seconds later, thirty-one windows appeared, all variants on a single question of why. He sighed again and typed in a routine his brother had long ago made standard in the home network and his face was transmitted along with his spoken words while their faces appeared in tiny windows.

“Father said that it’s not safe for me to go out. It’s some sort of mathematics award that I don’t fully understand as anything more than a complicated mess. I can’t properly accept the award and I can’t tactfully decline it. It’s all outside what I know how to handle.”

Their surprises at his visual in their terminals was expressed as a host of questions on how to duplicate the feat while they considered his problem and spoke with other Cadets whose duties had included guarding the main gates. He winced in the resulting chaos of too many voices at once and simplified the pleas into a single response that was mere text covering the simple routine itself.

He then sat back and waited as the voices of the other Cadets silenced, their personal queries in this chat session now scrolling across the bottom of his screen like the banners on the Total News Now Network. The final summation and outcome was a reluctant avoidance of the public by all and one by one the windows closed, his own the last. He ended the use of the protocol but seconds later the terminal beeped and tapping the space bar called up his brother’s face.

He smiled at once.

“Hi.”

Earnest, though was thoughtful and intrigued as opposed to jovial, not to mention using Greek.

“I noticed the traffic. Rather interesting mess.”

Justin defended himself preemptively.

“I didn’t plan to screw things up.”

Earnest grinned and those bright blue eyes twinkled.

“You never do. It just happens to you. What you do is to react first without thinking of the outcomes. I think of the desired outcome first and then act accordingly so that my actions ensure the outcome is what I want it to be. So, since we have a mess of huge dimensions, the only thing we can do is to minimize the damage and limit the chaos. Think of the publicity as a quantum particle flux from a neutrino burst with the reporters all emergent quantum particles aimed at a destination and the need is for you to retaliate with a neutrino burst of equal strength and particle constituency.

When you are there, tap the space bar.”

Justin closed his eyes and let the parameters rise, the mathematical sums building, shattering and realigning in new combinations without showing a solution. He sighed with frustration and Earnest spoke, his brother intrigued and a little alarmed.

“What’s wrong?”

Justin replied in a thicker slur than normal without being sure of what language he used. Even he could tell that something was wrong and knowing how fast he was breathing did not help.

“There’s no viable solution. Quantum particles in the emergent states cannot be countered by other quantum particles in an opposing, opposite emergent state. The net sum is zero and the universe remains cohesive but both sets of particles still exist and still make impact with the neutrinos, so there is no derived solution to parse the outbursts to a null state at the quantum level because the null state was never actually changed.”

His breathing grew more shallow and rapid as other mathematical variants rose and his brother’s face grew vague, it a halo in false colors as the madness grew more intense. He vaguely remembered his hands in motion as vision failed and all his ears heard were the clicking of keys. The insanity of equations seared and the logical flames raged, sometimes intruded upon momentarily by voices that did not matter.

The madness finally derived order as chaos theory spoke and in the moment of the defining equations that restored rational values to his mental universe, he saw the outcomes and started laughing. The taste of Albuterol was then delivered in four short, choking puffs and reality faded out, the coming darkness so sweet added to with the prick of a needle and someone’s bland assurances that all would be well before the known domain of oblivion was again entered.

He did not mind in the least as all consciousness ended in that familiar way for his brother had just helped him to solve the most pressing of his personal problems.

He now knew how to simulate gravity itself...

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

To hear the mathematical formulas of quantum particles in controlled states of flux was not at all strange. To grasp the marvel of atoms repulsed by the subsequent energy fields thereby enacted was not at all a surprise. He had dreamed it all and hearing it aloud was simply the testing of the formulas themselves, for even in that quixotic state between consciousness and unconsciousness he knew his own voice.

But so, too, strangers talked, voices that did not yet matter as more than annoyances. The math was everything and more precious than life.

“Is he like this often?”

The cool, weary reply to that intrigued, disturbed bass voice meant something to Justin as the formulas went on.

“No. This is the longest mathematical run of his life and, as you can hear, the formulas are exceptionally complex and quantum based. In other words, Professor Daeidlin, he is still dreaming. Perhaps now you can see why we tried to withdraw his nomination for the Nobel and why we wished to keep him out of the public spotlight. He doesn’t think in emotions like the rest of us.

In fact, he has a very hard time with emotive responses and public exposure would overwhelm him, possibly even crush him flat. His quantified definition of human consciousness was not an attempt to outshine the rest of the brilliant minds in your field. In his case, Professor, it was an act of simple, blunt necessary survival and the work itself was him telling all of us how he thinks and why.

In another expression, we define him as a borderline savant due to his lack of emotional tolerance and his fixation on fictional characters seen in science fiction movies. He has been in and out of hospitals for months at a time due to psychological trauma since the age of five and he may have just cracked permanently. As he is a rare type B adaptive metabolic who has already adapted to all the available remediation sedatives and therapeutic tranquilizers, the remaining treatment options are extremely limited and are considered barbaric by modern medical standards.

In his case, they consist in majority of restraints, intravenous glucose and saline solutions. And, as you were told, he will want notebooks when he finally does come around so that he can write out the solutions or the word form counterparts. My request for a peer review

of his mathematical construct was purely medical as I needed to know if Justin had slipped mentally and was no longer defining reality correctly.

In a third expression you might best understand, he sees numbers as more real than people and while he does have exceptions, they are limited to family. More relevant to his psyche, each interaction is a unique, mathematically defined equation and therefore has its own proper and improper outcomes apart from society, law, ethical norms and so on. Maxey was chosen for a number of reasons, one of which is the fact that it is an all male school from the headmaster to the entry student, thereby minimizing exposure related incidents that he would not understand in the least as either embarrassing or inappropriate.

Again, this is the result of a lifetime in and out of psychiatric hospitals and innumerable bouts with intravenous treatments and being restrained in almost all cases. Additionally, with the grants and loans from the anonymous benefactor, the school's security was updated along with the buildings so that he could be monitored as closely as he would in a psychiatric ward.

We do not deny his genius expression and we do want him to benefit from it but that expression must be discreetly presented, not lauded across the world in ways that are most demonstrably detrimental to him."

The bass voice responded after a short silence and it was amused.

"He's not defining rogue quantum particles in uncontrolled collision."

Justin found a name when that tenor responded with careful caution. It was Munroe.

"Excuse me?"

Daeidlin's reply was more amused yet as he explained more clearly.

"He's defining quantum states, which is obvious by the formulaic expressions typical of quantum particles. Anyone with a solid base in physics can figure that out. The problem is that he is defining Gravitons as slightly negative when Gravitons are mathematically proven to be neutral entities and further extrapolating that the derivative quantum energies can be manipulated to repel these normally negative Gravitons through controlled subatomic energy exchanges.

In other words, Doctor Munroe, he is citing some of Abraham Kleinlinger's disproven early works and that tells me he's very well read and probably in contact with the old crackpot. Kleinlinger loves to corrupt young, bright minds with utter garbage, especially if

they show any hint of talent. Are you even sure he understands politics beyond a passing awareness that the subject exists?"

Munroe sighed thoughtfully before replying.

"He knows it exists as a non logical element of society and is therefore an influence to avoid with all due care on self preservation grounds. Beyond that point, no one knows. Justin does like reactive, minimal contact sports, especially ones with easily defined solutions. His favorite is paintball and the next is laser tag in Susanville, although recent situations have made us rethink laser tag in his case.

The instructors had to change the rules of engagement due to his sudden recklessness in the treetops. Would that disqualify him?"

The bass voice was irritated but only mildly.

"No. You've already defined him as problem issue, physical limited and psychologically defective but he's still rational enough to work out an apparently impossible to derive solution that has innumerable applications in peaceful conflict resolutions. He's still up for the award and more likely to get it now than before I knew anything of his background. Disadvantaged mathematicians tend to get more concessions than the advantaged ones.

Besides, the peer review is in full swing and since nobody found a bad equation, much less a character out of line, the work is solid, verified and already being applied as a new model template for KLT's prototype interactive robotics. Given the royalty terms for end use and the vast array of applications for the formula, he's rich or will be in short order. He may be messed up and definitively dysfunctional but he's smart where it counts and that's all that really matters."

Munroe sighed with more frustration but was calm in moments.

"Might I ask for a delay with the award ceremonies so we can work with him to help him through the affair? It will be extremely stressing and we don't know how he will react."

The amusement in the bass voice was plain.

"We've done distance awards before so all he'll have to do is talk to a camera and maybe a reporter. You can go over the questions beforehand and pull out anything you know to be detrimental. His father and the Headmaster here can provide the outline of his academics and we can have a PR man put a gloss on the whole thing to make it tidy and neat for posterity.

The alumni dinner afterwards can be informal and held here, although some won't come due to the military theme. That cuts out the six or seven who would glom onto him and try for politics without caring how it does damage. So, problem solved. I would brighten up the uniforms and put a better museum gloss on the place, though. This place looks a lot like a Survivor game menu board.

Any questions?"

Munroe responded smoothly and with amusement of his own.

"None at this point. Now, if you don't mind, I need to check his skin for evidence of rash and perform other medical functions."

"Sure."

Shoes were heard clicking on tile and finally the math came to an end, a time of silence in which Munroe spoke quietly to someone else.

"Get it all?"

Earnest's voice responded with an assessment full of private irritation.

"He's an ass. He's after the extra publicity Justin will generate for the Nobel alumni. Want me to contact the Kleinlinger fellow? He's in Israel and his work isn't far off Justin's track. I'm working up the personality model as we speak and so far the old geezer fits fairly well to the template norms, almost down to some rather strange security issues and concessions.

Kleinlinger's work has preeminence in Justin's library at home so the old bast-, um, professor is something of a hero. They might even get along. Dad says it's your call."

Munroe sighed wearily.

"Is he a Nobel laureate?"

"No but he was nominated for several other kinds of awards in applied mathematics. He's no idiot. He has five masters, seven bachelors and about twenty lesser associates in various applied fields, including chemistry, organics and so on. His recent retirement work is in applied String, quantum states and mostly on the chemical side, although most of it gets buried by the Israeli Defense Ministry.

Rumor has it that he's trying to prove practical alchemy on an atomic level. He does seem to have a playmate, though, a twelve year old protégé named Elim Breunhau. Elim's a brilliant kid with six published papers and an honorary masters in applied math but rather shy. No public photos of him seem to exist and Israel seems to view him as a military item.

Also, the old man doesn't go anywhere without him. Dad thinks you might want to consider a similar arrangement for Justin, although after determining the real interplay between the paired arrangement to find out if it is real, a lie or something just to keep the old goat controllable via coercion or scandal."

Justin sighed and shifted, the long work ended and the mathematics verified just enough for real, deep sleep. It was a quiet repose edged by Munroe's conversation with his brother and when he stirred to fight the restraints in a mere stretching operation, the doctor came to his bedside with a grin and that wonderful friendliness that was so comforting when needles and the catheter were being removed.

"Damage control is in full swing and you get a Nobel. The public was informed this morning in a full media event and Earnest pulled off a marvelous feat of public relations while your father and your headmaster cited school and legal security issues for non contact with the press. By the way, how is your Hebrew?"

Justin remembered the conversation heard just before drifting to sleep and responded reluctantly.

"Decent. I take it that Elim and Kleinlinger are guests?"

Munroe was a bit startled but quick to calm.

"They are due to arrive any minute in a discreet black sedan full of Israeli security. We did ask for men only and they were oddly willing to comply, doing so without so much as a raised eyebrow. Think you can handle it?"

Justin stared at the new ceiling tiles that baffled sound while providing a restful mosaic of reds and greens.

"Do I need a chaperone?"

Munroe sighed slowly but his honesty was laudable.

"We're still considering it. For now, though, the answer is no. The other Cadets fill in as needed and we know what happens in your life most of the time. We're even adding

discreet cameras which you apparently didn't like to the school grounds for game reviews and interaction studies."

The restraints were next and then the side rails dropped. Justin faced the familiar as boots and Hebrew were heard in the hallway outside and as he slid from the bed, serious, dangerous men swept in, the pair swift to survey the fully equipped but compact medical ward and then its two occupants. Moments later the animated, eager youth whose high voice was rattling on about the school's military theme and defensive aspects appeared, an olive skinned youth with a shock of white hair and a disheveled suit with several tears and a broken belt that dangled free.

The old man listening to the speedy discourse was patient and grinning faintly, every word clearly important no matter how seemingly insignificant. By then Justin was sliding to the floor and as his feet touched the tiles of white and green, his mind spoke a complex pattern that absorbed the youth named Elim's words and turned them into equations not far removed from his own.

He slipped and fell as that wonder hit and as he rose on his own when the conversation halted, his own Hebrew sounded, the same mathematical encoding employed with equal finesse. The words themselves did not matter for the code was all and in that formulaic expression, Justin told that youth so special that his clothing was a mess and his belt broken.

The youth just stared at him in utter amazement and Hebrew changed, a slower, unencoded form that was clearly a struggle.

"And you are naked."

Justin shrugged and took his slow steps to the corner shower, his deeds of cleansing methodical and shameless. Elim followed, the point of contention spoken again like a litany as Justin showered, the boy only stopped when the old man so spry stepped close to grab his shoulders and then to spin him around. Munroe saw the classical signs of institutionalization and spoke in English, his hope in being heard as well as understood well veiled.

"Justin is not political in any sense and his reactionary profile is quite literally need based. If he needs a shower, he takes one and has absolutely no issue in being observed by anyone while he does so due to his many times in hospitals and other issues. I do see that Elim is much the same and given Justin's past, I am curious."

The old man so short and lean sighed and spoke in heavily accented English.

“Elim was almost killed by his parents because he made no sense to them. I was fortunate enough to realize what was to happen and paid the family to take him from them. He and your child seem to have connected and the exchange, as well as I could tell, was that Elim is wearing rags. Elim, though, does not understand hospitals. Perhaps you and your boy could provide medical care and then they will both feel equal and have the chance to talk between themselves.”

Munroe was surprised but the two Israeli security guards actually breathed sighs of relief and nodded when Munroe included them through glances. Justin was therefore much more hasty in his shower and as he stepped out, he spoke in that confounding string of Hebrew to tell the boy named Elim what to do and why while hunting for the uniform he was used to.

Munroe sighed warily as the whole affair became logical and as he grasped Justin’s intent, the storage closet was invaded and a blue uniform with crimson trim drawn out. By then Elim was turning to his mentor and protector to see the careful nod and then, with peculiar reluctance, the boy disrobed, his scarred chest and legs exposed. Justin garbed himself in the white boxers and then in the white undershirt while continuing the discourse and guidance that Elim could understand more completely than ordinary language.

Soon Elim was being examined and Munroe’s quiet voice was citing medical facts. Justin settled into his new attire and the guards came close to inspect his crimson buttons, the Velcro closures a surprise but their questions withheld as Justin was translating. Justin changed the lessons as Elim was guided through the first steps of a medical baseline, the equipment detailed in apparent gibberish that gradually contracted in defined mathematical steps into his own linguistic components for Hebrew itself, all through initial character variables and by voice alone.

Elim was dazed and properly still for the fifteen minutes of an MRI and when the sliding table came out again, his eyes were wide, the understanding in those brown orbs deep and all encompassing. Even Abraham was amazed and shocked breathless when Elim slowly sat up to speak without needing the extrapolated encoding.

“You are Justin?”

Justin breathed his own sigh of relief and grinned with a nod. Normal Hebrew was now possible for this stranger from abroad and that grasp of language would undoubtedly change his world radically.

“Yes. I am Justin Brunheldigon. You are Elim Breunhau. The man who cares for you so much is Abraham Kleinlinger. The man measuring your health is Doctor Alvin Munroe. He has many more steps to walk you through before he can say if you are sick or not. The

other two men who protect you are men I cannot name. But now that you can understand them, they can tell you what to do while I go eat real food.”

Elim released a terrified exhalation and spoke nervously in that new, comprehensible way.

“Please stay, Justin Brunheldigon. I may need help.”

Abraham was dumbfounded and both security men forgot to blink. Hebrew sounded from the old man’s lips, an almost terrified question.

“How did you work this miracle?”

Justin sighed and responded quietly, the long struggle over. He was calm and honest, the answer oh, so simple.

“Hebrew is a mathematically simple language with few emotive peaks and was one of my early languages. Since I knew the formative mathematical elements needed to process Hebrew into Hebrew, and as he was already using them in another form, all I had to do was to teach him the easier way of speaking his intentions. My problem is that emotive languages are hard to learn as I think in mathematics and if a language has too many emotive peaks, I can’t compensate.

Swahili, for example, is a language that took me months to define and I still don’t speak it well. It has too many emotive peaks and way too many equally emotive drops. If my brother is willing to divulge the family secrets of constituent formative linguistic values, Elim could even learn other languages with relative ease due to his nearly photographic memory and well developed emotional references.

Also, I’ll go see if Cadet Corben has some clothes he’ll part with so Elim can wear something that isn’t torn.”

Abraham chuckled and two security men frowned speculatively.

“You seem eager to escape.”

Justin sighed with the truth expressed meekly.

“I’m hungry.”

Abraham mused with a grin and a shallower sigh.

“Then perhaps we might think of what is good for us both. I am partial to cheese and vegetables, although lamb is sometimes liked more than cheese sandwiches.”

Justin studied the situation and knew in seconds that he was trapped. He sighed harder yet and turned to the computer station, the blank black screen awakened and Cadet Corben paged. The response was the sudden influx of a game room full of action, more new games glimpsed in the background as one Cadet shifted for another that came close to Elim’s size and build.

Languages switched at once.

“Need a favor.”

The grin was reckless and that mouth riddled with missing teeth.

“What?”

“I need a shirt, underwear and pants for my guest since his clothes are torn up. You’re the closest visually so I thought I’d ask. I was thinking the white button down short sleeve and the dark slacks you complain about because of the rise, which won’t bug Elim in the least. He also needs a belt but I never see you wearing one, so I thought you might know someone else who does. I’d also ask another favor in a tray of bread and cheese brought up, coffee too, since I’m translating for Doctor Munroe. Six cups.”

The new vogue answer came back with a second lopsided grin.

“Call it good.”

Justin ended the link and typed in his brother’s name as one of the security men heard Abraham’s tale of new clothing and a clearly impressive security grid. Justin just pressed the enter key and an hourglass appeared, one that vanished into Earnest’s slightly older face.

“Need a favor. I need a Hebrew based version of our linguistic codifiers in mathematical context for Elim. He needs English, Arabic, Latin, Swedish and whatever else you might think a math wizard needs. For now, though, just the English here at the doctor’s terminal. Doctor Munroe needs to be able to talk to him without translations.”

Earnest mused with a nod and an appraisal before noting the security guard and switching to Hebrew smoothly.

“Sir, I need Elim to park himself in front of the terminal for a very fast language lesson in basic English as Doctor Munroe will need direct conversation capability due to some of the more comprehensive reaction tests. It does serve a medical purpose as it will define his learning speed through a memorization index and then his cognitive processing speed by application. It is a more comprehensive cognitive response test than Doctor Munroe would normally use and I do have the scale calibrated to his needs.”

Abraham came closer and so, too, Elim, the boy quick to settle down in the plastic chair without a thought to decency. Earnest’s face vanished seconds later and the hourglass reappeared, one that transformed into Hebrew with numerical values for each declarative vowel and consonant placement as well as for every written symbol. The alphanumeric text then began to scroll and Elim tapped the space bar to speed up the lessons until the text was a blur to all but Justin and difficult for even his eyes to follow with accuracy.

Then Elim sped up the lessons more yet, his eyes ceasing to blink and his whole body going rigid as his mind focused with desperation and at its peak. Munroe quietly joined the group now clustered around the terminal and with just one glance at the speed index in the lower left corner, he chuckled to himself and caused Justin to turn with curiosity.

“What is so funny about a lesson?”

“You go just as fast when you need to write or draw. It took us a while to determine the relative speed from the video files but once we had the initial tables, the cognitive side of that test was easy to define. He’s at least as brilliant as you and your brother and impaired only by an inadequate grasp of linguistics, possibly less inclined in one arena or more in another, depending on actual talents.

His emotive reactions to environmental stimuli and situational events are well within the norm and once he speaks English, the rest of the tests are rather easy, if tedious and slightly painful.”

Cadets in the new uniforms arrived with Justin’s requests and Justin examined the clothes, the new belt and the food with equal intensity as the offerings landed on an empty bed. Abraham broke away from his study of a language quantified to mathematical values for a cheese sandwich and Justin bit into one of his own, a cup of coffee sipped. Abraham then inspected the clothing thoughtfully, the thin shirt frowned at before a finger casually tapped Justin’s chest and accented English sounded.

“The Velcro strips. Why do you wear them and the others not?”

Munroe responded quietly as he took advantage of caffeine.

“Justin has cognitive issues and balance problems when looking downward at angles steeper than eighty degrees. Buttons on himself or others are impossible and shoelaces a definite challenge so the compensation is Velcro and side zippers. Also, given American values, he has not had anyone to practice on to learn how to work buttons on other people with some new tools we’ve developed, although it is possible he may never attain the skill even with practice.

The lack of ability in personal care, even with these adjustments, is a justifiable reason for considering an aide or attendant, preferably one with a reasonable medical background, something similar to your own with Elim. For now, though, his fellow Cadets assist when he needs it.”

Abraham scowled and eyed the Cadets who were lingering in the doorway and then spoke in Hebrew to the security men.

“Galit, Asaf, we are safe here. Go to the main office and see if they accept foreign students. Elim would do well here, I think, once he knows the way to speak his mind.”

Only one of the two men broke away and Justin spoke to the Cadets he considered friends.

“Benny, the soldier needs to go to the Headmaster’s office.”

Justin watched the salute return and then Benny, lean and growing fast, led the soldier from Israel down the steps and out of sight. Justin devoured the last few bites of his sandwich and settled on another empty bed, the coffee cradled as he spoke in Hebrew.

“I was told you are a crackpot and that you are trying to prove alchemy.”

The old man joined him with a grin and one cup of coffee taken for himself.

“I can prove the quantum transition of one element into another but I cannot define how to make it so. I hear that you define people as conscious entities in mathematical form, also something thought impossible. Yet, they accept youth and set aside the aged.”

Justin mused, his own ambitions dared hesitantly with a premise copied from his brother’s numerous ways of approaching others. Yet even with Earnest’s example, he was as tactful as a brick.

“You are right in the alchemical approach but wrong in the application. The quantum state is more easily manipulated and the momentary particles more willing to form into the desired elemental states than a physical change at the atomic level. The key is raw energy itself, preferably from a stable, inexhaustible supply like an N dimension.”

Abraham mused and then chuckled softly.

“So you wrote that glorious, unsigned paper on parsed dimension taps. Did you define Gravitons as slightly negative, to the value of negative one three one to the eighth? The actual value was not included in the thesis I read and adored.”

Justin shook his head seriously.

“Three point five at ten to the negative nineteenth. It was the highest stable value when I compared the Graviton field flux with known gravitational values as determined by NASA and the peer groups in general. I just went through the first level of validation for antigravity and I think I could have a working prototype in a few months. While it wouldn’t do much but go up and down, it would be controlled and stable. I have the energy to achieve the goal so all I need is sensors to detect the Graviton field and emitters of some kind that can put Gravitons out in the appropriate densities.

As for lab sites, we have a fully equipped lithography lab, decent microscopes and the latest in mechanical fabrication gear. Our chemistry department is a bit behind the times but we’re adaptive Cadets and we can build or buy what we don’t have.”

Abraham chuckled again and glanced at Elim, his words amused and evidently a joke.

“You need cyclotrons and particle accelerators.”

Justin considered the words seriously and finally shook his head after they were analyzed, sifted and settled in his mind.

“No, I need emitters with a field output at the N dimension boundary that is stable and repeatable with an applied surge of energy at two point four seven terawatts. The use of a cyclotron would only give me intermittent flashes of Gravitons that would be almost impossible to detect and the particle accelerator is totally useless.”

Abraham sighed with sudden weariness and the age of the man was plain in those dark brown eyes.

“You truly miss the value of humor. How sad. I did read the biography in the newspaper and the trauma of early youth is now validated. You have more in common with Elim than with me, regardless of how alike our math parses out.”

The old man sighed in that weary way then brightened as Elim gasped in the completion of his lesson. Munroe was soon at the boy’s side and gentle, not a word said until the boy

inhaled and exhaled, the work of learning done and then the smile of discovery found as he tested English.

“I sheak Enhnglish?”

Munroe mused, the time counter stopped with a tap on the space bar and the outcome studied before he spoke gently.

“Good. Practice makes perfect. We are going to move from the chair to a bed and then I will take blood samples. After that, you drink lots of water so I can take a pee sample.”

Elim gasped as his body started to catch up to his mind and he stiffened again, his English vastly improved by the doctor’s use of it.

“I pee now. I shake, too. Cold.”

Munroe mused with the definitive measure of that young mind and with speed seldom used, a urine bottle was swiftly offered. Moments after the flask was in use, Munroe draped a thin, metallic blanket around his new, momentary patient and Abraham responded with words in English far inferior to his protégé.

“He is afraid of needles and other sharp things. It is a deep fear.”

Munroe simply nodded and out of his smock pockets came the tools of his trade, one a capped test tube cap and the other a momentarily displayed handful of medium test tubes. Justin just grinned to himself and spoke quietly in Hebrew, his knowledge of Munroe better than most.

“Elim is in good, safe hands. In fact, other than the first prick, it is easy to forget.”

Justin then made himself another sandwich as Munroe ever so deftly trapped one of Elim’s wrists and neatly tied it down before Elim was done with the urine decanter. Elim then yelped as Munroe became a smooth, fast talker telling all, down to the nature of the blood work and why it was so necessary. Justin just ate and watched as Abraham realized that more was wrong with Justin than merely a lack of emotional perception. Justin was indeed different from all the other Nobel laureates.

He was the only one without compassion. . .

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Justin frowned as he studied the restored pool's placid, still waters and weighed proper and improper a thousand times without success while thinking of home for the first time since coming to Maxey. He finally settled for the compromise of sitting in one of the many lounge chairs and staring at the Plexiglas windows which showed the insides of the rebuilt greenhouses.

They, like so many other things in his life, had radically changed just months after the flowers and greenery had been seeded into the automated growing trays he had designed years before in one of his less lucid periods when he had thought trees and flowers were supposed to talk.. The flowers beckoned and the temptation of pleasant humidity called but he just lay back on the plastic banded chair, his future known with the outcome certain.

He was a Nobel Laureate. He scowled at the peaked rooftop and then closed his eyes, the bewilderment of youth his to endure simply because he did not know what was actually right. He sighed the difficult sigh as fellow Cadets already dripping from the entry showers bolted in screaming and shouting, their splashes into the pool cause for him to look at the ripples and see far more than water in momentary sprays.

His mind momentarily seized and then the mathematics surged forth, he the one to bolt from the lounge chair and topple headfirst into the pool without even noticing. He surfaced as the surge of mathematics ebbed but even then the equations were delirious enough to make it almost impossible to escape the warm, soothing water that had thoroughly soaked his uniform.

The other Cadets sensed something was wrong and with the care of those who dealt with madness often, they guided him to the shallows where narrow steps existed. He climbed out like a drugged, drunken fool and acted without thought, the need for notebooks and mechanical pencils a goad that tore away the fragile dignity he had amassed lesson by lesson since becoming a Cadet. He was lost to the math and driven, one followed by others who knew the hazards of impeding his path when his blue eyes held the glow of the unholy zeal rare among men.

He vaguely remembered an instructor blocking his path with something said but as the lean, tall man was translated so swiftly into an obstacle, he acted with his body and as efficiently as possible. The instructor reached out to grab him and he grabbed the man's hand, wrenching it out of his path and then using that slight forward momentum to flip the man out of his way before continuing on despite the sound of breaking bones or the new, low alarms that initiated almost instantly.

He had his only direction mapped. He had his needs aligned and ready for resolution. Indeed, even then the long equations were being worked out and by the time he reached the main hallway so close to his goal, the instructors who faced him were simply impediments. He summed the need and considered his base in a moment when the equations so vital changed from one set to another and when the instructors moved in, his actions were brilliant and oh, so simple in terms of levers and fulcrums as defined in the physics as mathematical values.

Yes, it was simple math and they toppled to the side with harsh injuries to their arms and legs as he just passed through their midst and entered his room. He knew exactly when he sat down at the keyboard and began to type those initial equations from memory with a speed that only Elim and those on Capriacil possessed. It did not matter that his door clicked in a new, disturbing way or that the fixtures overhead turned red while extremely tiny cameras extended from the nests of light emitting diodes to focus upon him.

The equations ruled all until his hands caught up to his mind and then the grand bliss of being dual in nature was his again, the imagined sense that he was flying, free of the world and well into space itself. Outside his room the nurses were quick to tend broken limbs and the questions cited from the air in his father's voice were never heard. For him it was one symbol after another until the long flight ended and then the weariness hit, a deep need to sleep, to try again to catch the moment if only in memory.

He went through the motions of undressing with sterling precision without achieving the deed and then laid down on his now wet, cold bed, the sheet forgotten and the joyous, timeless moment of utter freedom tried for again in the tormented dreams that came after the marvelous glory. This was a marvel of its own for in that mind trapped in a body as small as his, equations were changing into components.

Element by element he defined his needs and then designed, his eye lids fluttering and his fingers clenching. Technology advanced with swift haste once those parts he knew he could make were mentally built and each changed, the adjustments always small but the final gain a marvel indeed. By then the medical demands of emergencies were long over and the Cadets questioned intensely. His door beeped as it unlocked but in those grand dreams the sound was trivial.

Nurses braced for the worst rushed forward with restraints but in that state of mind he did not notice when the lockable bands of carbon fiber reinforced with tough plastic bound his hands behind his back or his ankles together. It was merely a distant sensation felt often in his life and when the gurney came to cart him to the medical ward, the actual moment was missed. Only the insertion of the catheter and the intravenous shunts had a place within the technological designs and by it he knew that he was safe, if only for a while.

But time passed and his busy mind came to the technological end of what he could achieve and so he slept the empty dreams so seldom his as new doctors arrived to examine his restraints and discuss his care with the nurses who did know him better than all but Munroe. The new psychologist and the new medical director settled in at the computer terminals and both reviewed his truly massive files as he slept so peacefully. Indeed, he did not move more than inches for a full day and then he awakened, his personal status assessed so quickly and the dark places of his past touched for a moment to call up vague impressions that left him unsettled.

He did shift then in the madness of too much sensation, yet only to roll over, the sheet thrown to the side and finally kicked away to the alarm of doctors who did not yet grasp his lack of concern for visual impact. He met their eyes and while his fluttered insanely due to a lack of ointment, his words, however slurred by what his skin spoke were clear enough.

“I need ointment. Lidocaine will work.”

The nurses moved at once to fill the demand but the doctor spoke flatly.

“No.”

In that moment the terminals flashed and the face of Kyle Brunheldigon appeared in the screens, the man self possessed and calm, aloof but committed. More impressive, Kyle’s voice came from the ceiling and the corners, proof of hidden speakers and merely the first hint of all the technology aimed on Justin for his own greater good. The doctor assessed that fact with one sweeping glance around the medical ward before replying in a strange way indicative of his values.

“I can’t risk having my nurses broken up by the patient, sir.”

An assessment was made by Kyle Brunheldigon and ever so calmly the question sounded.

“Are you by any chance an active duty soldier, doctor?”

The doctor responded with a hint of unconscious pride.

“That isn’t an issue, sir. The boy’s violence is. He broke up trained men, some pretty bad.”

Kyle smiled in a vicious, cold way and spoke to someone else ever so briskly.

“Ben, you are in default to the charter terms and you now have one hour to remove the active duty personnel from the staff roster and the school grounds or immediately owe the anonymous benefactor sixty--one million dollars and tender your immediate resignation. If the other doctor is also active duty, which I will know in a minute or two, the same terms apply.

There is no willingness for compromise and no room in the charter terms for negotiation. Do note that the clock is ticking.”

Ben’s voice sounded across the speakers and in that alarmed voice was tension indeed, not to mention shock.

“I had no choice, Kyle.”

“Fifty-nine minutes.”

Ben’s voice was suddenly tinged by panic.

“They said I had to or we’ll be shut down!”

Kyle did not flinch or pause.

“It will be their loss and give me one hell of a lawsuit worth roughly a billion dollars. Additionally, the anonymous benefactor has already planned ahead with another location just in case something like this took place and could not be resolved. Fifty-eight minutes. I was prepared for this contingency and it is still well within normal business hours for initiating lawsuits and contacting the media, so you have fifty-seven minutes.”

The medical doctor spoke up without fear.

“You can’t sue the government in a national security issue.”

Again the words went in all places and the response was peculiar. Kyle’s voice warmed in an odd way with excitement.

“I didn’t realize that the government took such a deep interest in children with developmental issues. I’m sure the media will just love that, especially since you openly denied treatment for a well documented ailment when the affected child was properly restrained and evidencing rational behavior. Oh, yes, the public will be very interested in that loving approach.

Fifty-five minutes. Doctor Breihies, as you are active military as well, do notice that your authority with the computer is hereby revoked and, gentlemen, when you are debriefed, inform your superiors that I now validate payroll fifty-seven layers deep and cross check background security permissives in an unspecified number of ways. Fifty-three minutes. Additionally, this whole issue will not go national.

It will go global. If you think the Iran affair was messy or Iraq a political nightmare, you haven't seen anything yet. You see, I know where all the closets are and I also have all the keys. Ben, do you remember the Bruno Maneuver?"

Ben replied tersely, his panic obvious.

"Yeah. It's one of the best football maneuvers known."

Kyle mused, the next question oh, so calm and innocent.

"Fifty-two minutes. Were you ever able to stop it?"

Ben's voice shook but the words regained some calm, if false.

"No. It can't be stopped unless you go for the penalty and bench a player. That's why they outlawed it."

Kyle sighed peacefully.

"Ben, I am willing to go for the penalty in a final strike. Fifty-one minutes. I won't win in the long run but it will be messy. Do be advised that the first telephone calls begin at forty-eight minutes."

Ben' responded with sudden decisiveness.

"File my resignation."

Kyle's calm did not break.

"Take the active duty soldiers with you. Fifty minutes."

Ben appeared in the medical ward with six ashen instructors and the two doctors traded glances before they calmly complied with dismissal. The medical doctor spoke as he headed for the door, the man calm, self assured even then.

“Your son is a national treasure, Mister Brunheldigon. This threat won’t stop us from protecting him.”

Kyle mused in that tranquil way.

“You aren’t protecting him. You aren’t even helping him with his skin sensitivity. You are no better than the doctors at Dylan who made a treatable event of trauma untreatable and worse because you lack concern for the damage you are doing to something you so quickly define as irreplaceable. Do note that I am fully aware of your actual Central Intelligence Agency rank and status, which I do find significant.

I also know your military designation to be a bald faced lie and do take careful note of that fact. Forty--nine minutes. Do notice that Dylan has been closed a very long time and that every doctor, nurse, aide and janitor who worked with Justin then cannot find long term employment anywhere in the country. But, gentlemen, you need to see the cage shake and I am willing to comply by shaking the cage.

I intend to give our government a mere glimpse of the definition of this indeterminate threat. Forty--eight minutes. The initial phone calls have begun and the relevant files are now in transmission to every affected politician and lawmaker in the country. Do enjoy your debriefing and Ben, good luck in finding another job. You have fifteen minutes to vacate with the two active duty doctors or you will never find long term work again.

And Ben, I will not forget that you violated my trust. Forty--seven minutes. I know why you did but that you did is unforgivable.”

The eight men moved out of the medical ward and the two nurses acted, the precious ointment soon soothing away madness and Justin thereby calmed. Voices came again, the dismissed medical doctor’s question to Ben and Ben’s quiet reply.

“Is he bluffing?”

“Kyle never bluffs, Lieutenant. The best you can hope for is a change of mind.”

Silence came next and for a while Justin savored the lessening of hell as the sheet returned but then voices sounded again, the Lieutenant disturbed when his voice was heard even at the gates.

“He’s gone too far with the bugs.”

Ben’s reply was sad and, oddly, weary.

“It’s all legal. This way, gentlemen. Kyle, ship our stuff.”

Kyle’s reply was as tranquil as ever and had even regained some of its aloofness.

“Of course.”

Silence came again and then Kyle’s voice sounded, yet only from the terminals on the computer desk.

“Erick, you will be receiving several phone calls which are apparently field inquiries from the military. They will try to insert another doctor with Doctor Munroe in Maine and the undisclosed pharmaceutical company responsible for Justin’s gains is about to call as well. The red light indicates a military call and the blue light is the pharmaceutical company. If the green light flashes at any time, simply hang up.

That indicator marks a compromised line. Hanging up the telephone triggers a rather amusing automated response to the undesired listener.”

Erick moved to the computer desk and as he sat down, a careful question was asked.

“Just how bad would bad have been?”

Kyle’s reply was almost void of emotion.

“Bad is relative and normally equated with severe social upheaval. In this case, Erick, bad would have been extreme and relatively long lived. You see, society is at its limit for governmental tolerance and law enforcement across the country, contrary to the news we all hear, is slowly shrinking due to finances. The National Guard has likewise been severely reduced by military ventures abroad and the military itself is shrinking due to the number and kinds of unpopular wars we have engaged in.

Petty crimes are on the rise and that is simply the first sign of the coming collapse or at least of a major resettlement. Also, mainstream society is tired of the cover ups, lies, clandestine deals with lobbyists, kickbacks and secret agencies, although some of these are necessary and therefore worth protecting. As they are powerless to affect the status quo through supposedly honest elections that are known to be rigged electronically, the general apathy is already close to a flashpoint.

Hurricane Katrina was an example of a limited societal breakdown and once you can imagine a fraction of the chaos, magnify to a national scale. Also, notice that the checking balance of the statute of limitations no longer applies in most criminal investigations and the accusation of being a terrorist destroys your life as effectively as any predation crime

while simply killing someone is now the least of the major felonies in terms of actual punishment or long term stigma.

In addition to these elements, our radically growing prison population is increasingly comprised of drug dealers, petty larceny specialists, vaguely defined sex offenders and similar crimes. We are already most of the way to a police state while claiming to be a democracy and being structured as a republic. By definition, there are three existing standards, namely the legal, the illegal and the unmentioned.

Additionally, criminal cases are increasingly seizure prompted due to the sale of the property at auctions and privately, due to the financial gains. I simply explained the dynamics of doing so to every politician and lawmaker in personal terms and then explained to each of them that the public would see the laws for themselves. Do note that a society that feels hopeless falls apart rather quickly and if America falls apart, the rest of the world will do the same to various degrees.”

The nurse mused with interest.

“Then why shun the military when they would protect Justin?”

Kyle sighed a weary sigh before that almost emotionless reply was given.

“There are a number of events taking place behind the scenes. Law enforcement agents of the federal variety decided a week ago that I was formally a terrorist and secretly funding various extra--national organizations, this after ten years of illegally monitoring my legal financial affairs down to the penny. My counter was the provision of all my financial records for the past thirty years, down to the penny, while being interrogated by some rather forceful federal agents and some skillful declarations on how aware I was of a number of clandestine taps on my telephones, computers, windows and so on.

The arraignment judge and the investigations committee heard far more than they liked, especially select audio files of their personal plans to confiscate my assets, especially when the press and my state representative were unknowingly included. My counter is now a lawsuit for a lengthy list of privacy invasion charges and other offenses that will most likely be thrown out of court and never quite allowed into the public domain where my peers might possibly see just how un-American the government has become.

It was too public for their pleasure and I am a well connected man, if one with a tendency for isolation. But, it is not beyond imagination to see that a declaration of personal assets might trigger a seizure of those assets belonging wholly to my sons. Earnest is versed in the law and the dynamics of those laws, enough so that he can manipulate them with

proper finesse and therefore protect his finances and other real property from similar seizure attempts.

Justin, however, is another matter entirely. He sees only machines and math, with everything we call real a mathematical derivation which either fits or does not fit the moment's equation. Attacking the obstacles in his path which we understood to be real, good and decent men was a mathematical necessity. He had to get to his computer and with that governing imperative, being stopped was not within the equations.

He, in other words, could not afford to be stopped. Admittedly, I was not fully aware of his true reflex speeds or his recently attained physical strength. Oh, leave him tied up for now. Also, you will see several metafiles highlighted on your terminal. These are all attempts to steal the school records and extensive medical files on Justin by illicit data transfers.

While I have the same files in my possession, yours should either be locked from general access or deleted with the blue colored programs as all contain highly classified data. The transfer, you see, is dual in nature and, in knowing the nature of data transfers as I do, pilfering the computers of the target destination was rather simple and extremely difficult to counter.

They, however, are as yet unaware of the event, other than that they have metafiles of pure gibberish due to line noise and other technical issues.”

The telephone rang, its new tone a mere beeping the nurse answered calmly.

“Maxey Military Academy, medical wing.”

Justin felt displaced as he heard the faint tones of a brisk man's demand.

“Doctor Breihies, please.”

Erick mused smugly as he responded as a gentleman.

“I'm sorry, but Lieutenant Commander Breihies and Captain Getties were dismissed for patient neglect, attempted data theft and other charges, including voyeurism with the school's integrated surveillance system and propositioning the students inappropriately in the guise of unscheduled medical examinations and topical applications reserved for just one student's needs.

As they are officially your men according to the active service profiles on record and likewise CIA in other files that were rather unmentioned due to our charter terms, I

assume that you will process the appropriate charges in a military courtroom so as to avoid a messy civilian lawsuit with unforeseen outcomes.”

The click was audible to Justin and then the rattle of a telephone receiver in its cradle. Erick sighed sadly.

“That just ruined two very good men for life.”

Kyle responded calmly.

“You knew it and still read the script.”

Erick replied smoothly as the telephone rang again.

“I value my future employment options. Yes, Doctor Munroe?”

Justin heard Munroe’s voice and it was faint, added to with static.

“Are you aware that the school is on the news?”

Erick replied with surprise.

“No. I’ve been rather busy. Justin went wild and broke up eight instructors after falling into the pool. We have him banded and in bed but I’m not sure when to release. He seems okay right now but his father advised to hold fast.”

Munroe exhaled hard.

“Describe the behavior as well as you can.”

“He was relaxed in the pool room on a lounge bed and quite still for hours. Other Cadets came in to swim and he bolted from the lounge chair, fell into the pool and was helped to the shallows and out. He headed for his room and when instructors with gear tried to remediate, he just plowed through them. He broke a few of them up pretty bad, rib cages, knees and arms.

Lots of math to the computer with the door locked. After he wrote out everything, he curled up on the nearest bed and passed out, fetal position, fully dressed and wet. Didn’t react when we went in with restraints and woke up maybe an hour ago asking for ointment. His voice was very thick, like his tongue was swollen.”

Munroe muttered an unintelligible curse of some kind before speaking on the news issue.

“It seems the paparazzi are out in force. I’m hearing something about a kidnapping attempt perpetrated by the military or possibly the CIA and allegations of misconduct and forged identities. I’ll call Doctor Rubius Thant as he’s closest to the school. Just be careful and monitor Justin very closely when they meet. Rubius is very dark skinned and has a similar physical profile to the most abusive attendant from Dylan.

He may not react well so leave him tied up for now, two glucose, one venous, one arterial and one saline on venous. Oh, give Justin a strawberry popsicle and my congratulations on gaining the Nobel. How close are you to him?”

Erick sighed, the distance measured as Justin thought of the popsicle and felt so much better.

“About twenty feet.”

Munroe changed tones at once.

“Justin, Erick is going to give you a treat for the Nobel you just got and a scary looking doctor is going to come in to go over your files and work with you while I am very far away in Maine. He’s a good man and he’s nice. We will keep you tied up so you won’t accidentally hurt him.”

Justin sighed without reacting, the issue begun but still in that unknowable future.

“I’d like the popsicle.”

Munroe sighed with a soft chuckle.

“Popsicles are in the second medical freezer, bottom, listed as organic samples. There are five varieties but whole strawberries are his favorite, preferably frozen. You’ll find those in the opaque round tub labeled Campralamacin Dextrose. Also, pull blood and run a comparative in the growth hormone from his last baseline. He should show a point zero one increase and his hemoglobin count should be depressed, probably by five to ten percent normal.

Last, change his profile. He now gets a blood draw every four hours, two tubes, one venous and one arterial, for growth hormone and hemoglobin level checks, separately conducted on each tube. Do be aware that they won’t match and the variance between venous and arterial is what we’re tracking. Justin, name me a medication that will ease my extreme fear without knocking me out.”

Justin frowned and shifted, Erick faced as the list of drugs he knew so well rose. The best of them all was then named in a thickened slur.

“Benthiamine Hydrochloride.”

Erick exhaled at that proof of keen ears and recited the drug.

“Benthiamine Hydrochloride. What’s his auditory range, exactly?”

Munroe chuckled.

“Don’t know. We haven’t included hearing profiles in the study due to caseloads. We do know that there is a slight increase in overall range somewhere around two to fifteen percent but it’s a wide variance among the clientele. The bad part is that he can’t shut out or really adapt to the added range or sensitivity due to the fact that auditory input is never static and therefore cannot be adapted to.

His coping mechanism is to discount most of what he hears so he goes the reactionary route while most of his counterparts go the other way with earplugs and avoidance. I’m dealing with a violent client now and finding quiet appliances out here is next to impossible.”

Kyle spoke then, calmly, although with volume so as to be heard by Munroe through the mouthpiece of the phone.

“Doctor Munroe, I and most of my blood relatives have unusually keen ears so we all buy from Jesson’s Used Appliances, in Daviestown, North Carolina. I can make the call for blind faith transactions and while the appliances are rebuilt for quiet operation, they are rebuilt from new appliances purchased at cost from other appliance stores local to Mister Jacobson.

He is discreet and I ask no details. The blind faith transactions would need your name as the purchaser and all the items would go wherever you specify within three to five days of the order itself. The funds would come from Justin’s emergency account but in light of his recent financial gains, the net depletion is insignificant. His gain is account activity, which keeps the account itself active and therefore keeps it from being closed to his irregular income deposits.

Consider it an emergency draw outside the normal channels for this and other like situations. Additionally, vehicles will be an issue and the remedy is either Justin or the Cadets who are rather adept at manufacturing very quiet, street legal vehicles from kits. If that direct route is inappropriate, refer to Traverstill Used Motors in Mariosa, Oregon. The

Cadets sell both cars and planes to an agent named Linda Reese and she seems discreet, although a tad greedy in the low buy-out and then in the high mark-up.

Again, Justin benefits financially and no end names are disclosed. The vehicles should carry a Cadet symbol of some kind but not one easily forged. I can have the arrangements settled in an hour or two and after that point, you or any other person you specify by name can make the call and buy to the need. In fact, Justin has been hunting for some way to show his gratitude for ending the horror.”

Munroe exhaled deeply in shock.

“That resolves a lot of my current problems. I have to go.”

The static ended and Erick cradled the phone before pressing another button.

“Maxey Military Academy, medical wing.”

Justin sighed softly and rolled back onto his side, thoughts of popsicles and strawberries goading him back into the domain of dreams as Erick spoke after a brief pause.

“No, sir, I cannot transfer you to Cadet Brunheldigon for an interview.”

It was the beginning of a true nightmare...

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The notebook the huge, wide black man without hair handed him was soon filled with rough sketches made without haste, conceptual designs for his favorite space vehicle, a Split V Wing Skim Fighter, specifically a short range Superluminal combat vehicle commonly referred to as the dependable Adventurer Seven. He drew it from every possible angle then grew more intent as he sat upright on pillows with the head of the bed raised while the intravenous tubes inserted into his thighs fueled his body with solute glucose.

The designs for truly simple circuits began as single light emitting diode arrays for pointedly mock lights and necessary console illumination but gradually expanded, the wiring of his dream soon complex indeed and radically transformed from the mock representation while not quite being the genuine creation.. Needles came and went in the obligatory blood draws and as he focused, the huge black man with such a deep, strange bass voice spoke quietly while brandishing an inhaler.

“You need this right now, just for a minute.”

He glared at the man but in those brown eyes lay steel and for a moment undefined terror left him paler than usual and utterly compliant. He took the four puffs of Albuterol and when the man was no longer staring at him, the mechanical pencil rose, the work resumed while the Albuterol’s effects began. The world of penciled lines turned into a blur and then his body so gently went limp, his mind slowed to the pace of a snail.

The bass voice spoke in disjointed, definable frequencies to someone else, although still quietly.

“Sir, circumcision will preemptively eliminate some future issues and make hygiene much simpler.”

His father’s voice returned, equally fractured and unreal.

“Alvin mentioned the issue and given his slow behavioral shift to a complete denial of essential self touch during shower events, Betty and I agree. Make it as painless as possible.”

The bass voice of Thant responded softly.

“Can’t. Albuterol only knocks him down part way and the knockouts cause blood clots. I could give him a shot of Benadryl and hope for an interactive numbing event but that only happens in fifteen percent of the clients. Additionally, if it works, he’ll sleep through the healing, about two days with his profile. Otherwise he’ll scream his head off and go into that terror reflex of his with any black person he sees.”

Justin heard the reply that was so broken apart.

“Try the shot and test for pain first. If it works, go ahead. If not, let a white doctor do it, although not for the reasons you might imagine. You do seem to be someone he likes more than he likes most people and I’d hate to see that ruined by a necessary medical procedure. After the test and, hopefully, the circumcision, I have a rather long file for you to review on his shower behaviors.

I parsed it to the relevant elements and blotted out the other Cadets when needed.”

Thant mused with interest.

“Isn’t that illegal?”

“So are financial seizures without proof of criminal conduct or illegal searches without proof of terrorism, tapping school internet services and trying to steal school security logs, student medical files and so on. I also noticed two attempts by the ATF to break in without being detected and acted in the best interest of the school while thinking of the best interest of the nation.

If the government is corrupt and that corruption is allowed to continue unabated, the tenets of justice cease to exist and we become another dictatorship. As a good, fourth generation American, I simply cannot let that happen if I can do anything at all to prevent it. Like you, Rubius, I have seen what dictatorships are like and I prefer not to live in one.

By now the last attempt is on the news, as are the faces of the men responsible where possible, their vehicles used and all the other relevant data I could pick out of the fence camera logs. TNN is going to wonder why news feeds keep popping across the screens in cutouts and banner lines. Earnest, go through the patch and see if you can track another path in.

Slip in as a producer this time and call up a reporter queue to go to the school to make a physical presence and visit her ear mike to tip her off on a gate breach. Doctor, I’ll linger to see the result of the Benadryl and then cut to the news.”

Not long after his father fell silent, the distant sensation of a needle was felt. The darkness to follow was slow but it was oblivion with just a few impressions of pain ever so brief in that most tender of all places. Gradually the darkness lifted and the sounds of news was intriguing, men and women screaming as strange pops were heard while an excited man spoke the narrative.

“And it’s wild down here, Mark, absolutely wild! It looks like the ATF has called in the National Guard to push the people back from the gates and now they’re using tear gas. I can even see the tanks moving down the road and I think they plan to crash the gates, Mark.”

The narrative continued and gradually he felt the difference, a lessening of feeling in his personal place. He shifted to inspect the change punctured by a catheter and then timidly touched the freshly healed line of still pink scar. He did hear the distant boom of something with force enough to make the building shake and gradually his eyes turned to the distant terminal, its screen watched avidly by Thant and the scene a shock.

The school’s gates were being fired upon by a military tank and the gates, which were no longer decorative wrought iron but instead thick steel layered with carbon fiber and other materials, simply buckled by increments with the shells caught. It was utterly amazing and humbling in some respects. He was given reason to think and then his voice sounded, it again frog-like and unpleasant.

“Am I really that important to them?”

Thant responded with his accented drawl.

“Apparently. They tried cutting power a few hours ago and shut down most of California for about an hour or two. They’re claiming an illegal nuclear pile and the media is mixed. You have one hell of a family and I’m suspecting a lot of secret supporters in the military besides. That tank’s been having so called issues for almost six hours, at least right up to when the Governor ordered the driver to fire. How long until they breach the wall?”

Justin frowned as he measured impacts and spoke the outcome.

“Two more hours, although the gates seem to be comprised of an electrically repolarizable substrate like the one I was working on years ago to make my space ship. I abandoned it due to the weight, flash polarization effect and the micrometeorite impact spread variables. Additionally, it’s an energy flash, not the energy sink I needed, so I let Father have it for general security construction needs.

It's durable but it needs a current of one point three terawatts for repolarization and when it repolarizes, they will probably fuse shut. The benefit is that the added mass of the shells would be absorbed into the new media and the new media made in the fusion event is more than a thousand times stronger than the core materials due to the heavy mass of depleted uranium they are firing to breach the gate itself.

That was the other problem. Once it repolarizes and fuses, I couldn't work the resultant material with conventional tools. I derived it from Abraham Kleinlinger's primary works on alchemical transmutation but that's as far as the math would go."

The news cut out to show Justin his father's face and the man was smug.

"Thank you, son. How do you feel?"

Justin frowned and responded honestly.

"Groggy and funny. I don't hurt down there as much."

Kyle breathed a sigh of relief.

"Good. That's exactly what we wanted. Son, the gates. What would cut them open if they fuse solid?"

Justin scowled hard as the past works he had abandoned came to mind and finally he shrugged.

"A focused plasma arc of ten thousand degrees as thick as the gates when repolarized but it would take forever due to the energy dispersal factor and I couldn't ever make a stable plasma cutter capable of lasting that long."

Kyle chuckled oh, so coldly.

"Son, are you up to reading an interview? Your brother wrote a special script for you to read when you are in uniform and out of bed. We know it would be hard and a lot of work but we need this if you think you can do it."

Justin glanced at the catheter and sighed at the coming pain.

"Is it one of his political speeches? I don't do well when I try to sound like him."

Thant moved from the chair and strode to the bed, his massive hands startlingly gentle and the catheter pulled with almost no discomfort. Justin was shocked and shocked more yet

by his uniform and the deft assistance Thant gave him in getting into it. In just a few minutes he was seated before his father's image and ready to make the futile attempt to be his brother for a few minutes. Kyle's face than vanished, replaced by a dark haired woman smeared with smoke and far from her preferred state of neatness.

She just stared at him in amazement and he stared back solemnly, no prompts at hand. He finally broke the silence.

"Um, hi. I'm Justin."

Her shock coalesced into a toothy grin and a hissing for someone else to get close. He finally saw the bedraggled camera man with a shoulder camera aimed at him but the whole affair was peculiar and no visual prompts appeared on the screen to guide him. She composed herself and spoke with the authority all adults seemed to have and became again a reporter with an exclusive.

"Hello, Justin. It's rather busy out here and it's all because of you."

He frowned seriously and posed one question quietly.

"Why?"

Her eyes widened as she realized the same truths that most adults gleaned early on and her manner changed, her personal shock translated into new questions.

"Do you know why the government is trying to get inside the school?"

Justin nodded with rising confidence.

"They want to kidnap me because I invent things they want, even if they can't make them for another century or two."

Thant moved to the other terminal and the sounds of Justin's words echoed until he turned down his volume and then plugged in an ear piece. The reporter gave him that false, supposedly gentle smile and posed her soothing question while her eyes gleamed with excitement.

"Like what, Justin?"

Justin pursed his lips and thought of the power issue, his reply more confident and his manner calmer than moments before.

“Like the N dimension tap that provides California, segments of the United States and some of Canada with about eleven terawatts of power. It’s an adaptive power supply now that I fixed the feedback issue, so it’s fairly dynamic and somewhat load responsive. With the right interfaces and relay connects, it could even supply the whole country but Father says that doing that puts people out of work and the economy needs to be kept viable so people can consistently work to improve themselves.

I’ll pay to keep them employed and that’s because the power supplies are finite due to the starting materials. The free power will only last for about seven to nine years and with all the cutouts the government did this morning while I was being circumcised, the strain on the N taps has likely halved that.”

Her eyes closed with the rise of embarrassment and then the calm returned.

“Is it nuclear?”

More confident, Justin managed a grin.

“Sort of. The tap to an N dimensional domain is a quantum state that crosses barriers normally transited only by quantum particles themselves and so, in that sense, the power is nuclear by a very broad definition. In the more practical sense, though, it is not nuclear as the power is derived from the N dimension without using radioactive elements of any kind. In fact, my early work was almost abandoned due to naturally occurring radioactive elements in the materials I was using and I had to build the appropriate tools to figure out the problem in addition to figuring out how to get rid of the radioactive elements from the media on the atomic scale.

Once that was done, the final test tap was successful.”

Her shock was strange and her next question irritating.

“So there is no nuclear pile inside the school or on its grounds?”

He shook his head at once.

“No, not unless you count naturally occurring trace uranium that decays into Radon and the Americium in the smoke detectors. In fact, the background sweeps I did with a standard Geiger counter Cadet Frickerstein built as a science project came back lower than average.”

“So the government is lying to us?”

Justin frowned again but was honest.

“Definitely, if they are asserting a nuclear stockpile of any dimension, scale or size. I heard the ATF tried to get in, too, although that was before I was knocked out for the circumcision.”

Finally words appeared at the bottom of his screen and in seeing them he grinned, this first prompt by his brother a reassurance that his faith in soldiers had not been mistaken and the words spoken for no other reason.

“If you watch the gates, you’ll see a flash event which disqualified the substrate of the gates as a space capable shipbuilding medium, although it does validate a different application as regenerative armor for things like tanks and fortress building structural elements, although in majority more for tanks. Father used it in a few structural applications but this is the first field test of its regenerative capacity while under kinetic assault or mass loading.

We are about to test the material’s regenerative properties with a single terawatt pulse and determine if the material actually does what it’s supposed to as defined by the theoretical compositions tables and subatomic interaction equations. The flash should be radiant in high end white light and the outcome will be the internalized particulate dispersal of the increased mass of spent uranium from the tank rounds, which the National Guard has generously provided as requested.

Naturally, with all the hassles of the government interrupting our testing of materials, the National Guard really didn’t want to give the wrong impression. They, unlike the ATF and the police, aren’t actually trying to get inside.”

She whirled and flagged her camera man to bolt in that direction and moments later the school’s lights dimmed as he heard the outcome in a loud thrumming that hurt his ears even though the sound came from the other terminal. She exhaled awe as her ear mike told her what had happened and the excited chatter from the other terminal was telling in and of itself.

He, though, did not speak because the words on his screen told him to keep silent until the camera man returned. The lights returned to normal brilliance and the camera man returned, his awe plain and the camera slow to settle on his shoulder. His brother’s prompts posed one detailed question to ask and then vanished so when the camera man was composed, he trusted his brother.

“How was the field test? Did the depleted uranium rounds properly diffuse into the layered substrate with minimal visible ripple? The substrate transition should have resulted in something much like polished obsidian, although more gray than black.”

The other terminal display turned to show him the replay, first as a moment of panic followed by something far different than his calculations had expressed as reality. There was no blinding white flash and the gates as well as the high, defensive walls which seemed stone glowed, turning a strange shade of blue his mind translated as red without the intense brilliance he had expected as the depleted uranium was caught in the energy driven reaction.

He watched the metals and carbon fuse as predicted, the rounds fired into the gate melting into the whole before the glow died and the gates, remarkably, split apart for a mere half second. That set his mind into mathematical chaos and Thant reacted quickly, the man deft as Justin’s whole body slacked into the chair and those bright blue eyes just closed. Thant was gentle and vocal to the reporter, a true gentleman, a man who truly believed the words he now spoke in that Louisiana drawl..

“Cadet Brunheldigon is trying to reprocess the physics and quantum states in mathematical constructs to account for the transitional phasic realignment of atoms in matrix due to seven terawatts of power as seen rather than only imagined. In other words, Ma’am, he’s in shock, although not in the conventional sense.”

Justin was half aware of being lifted from the chair and then deposited on the bed fully dressed, Thant casually lifting the rails of the bed before returning to the truly stunned reporter. Justin heard the resumption as a ghostly woman from nowhere posed a numbed question.

“Does that happen often?”

“It happens less now that he’s getting more time in a classroom where the actual results can be seen as opposed to pure extrapolation from mathematical models. He is a MENSA mind but not MENSA grade. He has to translate our reality to his reality with math in order to understand our reality and MENSA just can’t cope with that. Open classrooms with unregulated freeform discussions just send him into shock, as the instructors here have learned.

Mathematics was his first formative language and when it was his only means of coping when accidentally locked in a traveling chest by his cousins in a game of hide and seek at the age of four, the behavior became permanent. But, if Child Protective Services had not immediately remanded him to a now closed long term psychiatric center, the behavior would have eventually sorted out with normal therapy.

Instead, due to a lot of bad choices made in the name of his best interests during that time by good intentioned people, he's been in and out of hospitals almost all of his life. He's only just starting to interact with his peer group in more than minimal ways and the interference of the government at this time is definitely detrimental to his genius and his derived output.

In other words, he needs to be left alone as much as possible to best develop his genius to its fullest potential. Unfortunately, the government has now forced us to show him visual military data with definable physical properties his mind can and is quantifying into comprehensible physics and he just might stop working on space flight and turn to the weaponry he prefers to dream of.

We did have it under control with limits on paintball guns but now, after seeing the tanks in operation, I don't know what to expect and neither does anyone else. That's the key reason why we have him here where we can control what he sees and learns. He doesn't watch much television due to his inability to define real from fiction and due to the fact that he tries to emulate what he encounters.

Maxey was the only all male school with the appropriate one to one capacity to cope with his social, medical and situational needs. His admission was one of the reasons the school rewrote its bylines and operational charter to exclude any and all active service personnel, due to his ability to single out military mindsets with an uncanny precision nearing one hundred percent.

To him, active military personnel have a certain kind of attractive or possibly addictive mathematical difference from discharged veterans and as the discharged veteran is almost neutral, he normally complies with the rules. Now, who knows? All we can do is to ask the government to back off so we can cope with the damage and try to remediate. After all, he is a child, not a weapon or a thing.

An example of his mind is easily stated in the fact that he knows he won the Nobel but has no concept of what that means. I do have a few more minutes before I have to take care of him."

Justin was caught up in the mathematics as the woman replied, her voice unreal yet intrusive.

"Is he unfit to be outside Maxey?"

Thant's reply was just as intrusive, yet unreal.

“He can’t yet handle real world exposure in more than limited doses and even in his trips to Susanville, we don’t let him go anywhere but straight into the gaming centers from the vehicle due to his issues with interaction, ethics, morality, etcetera. So, in that sense, he has never been in Susanville itself but has instead been inserted into buildings within Susanville and then just as carefully extracted.

Our reason is that he doesn’t have a grounded sense of proper and improper yet. His sense of appropriate behavior changes from second to second and with every interaction. The actual definitions of right and wrong or ethical and unethical are so variable that a normal social event would be utter chaos. This is due to the fact that he sees the world as a mathematical construct with constantly changing equations.

He didn’t actually see you as a woman or a reporter but rather defined you in a mathematical form so that he could interact with you in ways that he could cope with. Again, the government has just changed many of those underlying, unconscious equations and we don’t know what to expect as a result.”

The next question was purely political and deliberately sharp.

“Is Maxey a glorified lockdown?”

Thant’s chuckle was smug indeed for he could see through the ploy and when his horrible face broke into a grin, his reply shattered her bid to create division and more contention the country simply did not need.

“In some ways, yes. Given the hazards of sending children to school these days, most schools are tentatively defined as lockdown centers by local law enforcement agencies and most civil disaster planning protocols do consider them as such for certain contingency planning events. In that aspect, Maxey is the most secure lockdown facility in the world, high security prisons and secret military bases excepted. As an example, we have seen innumerable attempts by outsiders to insert drugs and weapons into the school environment and all are being prosecuted.

That’s just one reason why we have cameras and audio transmitters almost everywhere and one of the main reasons why biometric data is required for entry throughout the school. Until the windows were replaced with a new type of Plexiglas Justin had formulated but never created for whatever reason, we had some daring drug dealers breaking in through the back of the greenhouse to plant illicit seeds.

Fortunately, their biometric data did not exist in the databases and the security protocols locked them in long enough to capture them and then remand them to the local authorities. We are thinking of updating to a more comprehensive biometric combination but the

technical bugs are a complication due to the interactive element on the program level and the data conflicts that result. I can take two more questions.”

“The last Headmaster resigned. Was it political?”

Thant exhaled tiredly.

“Mister Yonlin resigned as opposed to being fired due to his failure to protect students from personally known hazards with the two doctors he included to the staff. He was given the option of resigning as the hazard was the presence of two active duty CIA operatives masquerading as medical professionals in close and constant proximity to Cadet Brunheldigon and these two men were forced on the Headmaster with a threat of school closure.

The first red flag was the thirty-seven attempted transfers of Cadet Brunheldigon’s very personal medical files to undisclosed locations in Nevada, Washington DC and other unspecified locations. The logs of every file access are routinely screened by independent eyes and those eyes noticed the transfer requests in time to negate the transfers themselves due to a protective authorization protocol that works throughout the school, from standard internet terminals to the data transfer between students.

The second was the ways the two doctors were packing tightly controlled and difficult to acquire topical ointments and other medical supplies specific to Justin in tote bags after going through his lockers to see if he had civilian street clothing, which he does not have, and in making rather discreet contact with unmarked transport vans that were deflected at the gates due to a lack of clearance.

The following flags were neglect of care and so on, all due to the conflict ready mindset and contingency evaluation that particular mindset goes through. The premise was to declare Justin unfit for continuance and therefore see him taken to a less secure location for a military vanishing act worthy of the movies. We haven’t had the time or the liberty to actually assess the psychological impact of that attempted kidnapping by our illustrious government and we hope he didn’t notice, which, as fantastic as it might sound to you and I, is a very real possibility as, again, he does not think as we do and does have to connect to us in a mathematical sense to interact successfully with our form of reality.

We are, however, looking for a new Headmaster with the proper qualifications in leadership, discretion and so on, with preference to officers who are now demonstrably proven to be veterans. No female veterans need apply. Last question.”

Justin finally found the original flaws in his early physics and in so doing, the new mathematic profiles realigned smoothly, the new extrapolations matching the visual

expressions his eyes had seen. He exhaled all at once in that peaceful moment, so much so that incidents took place. By then the last question was sounding, the reporter keen to the fact that opportunity was slipping away.

“Everyone wants to know if he chose Maxey or if his parents put him there.”

Thant’s reply was a real voice again, solid and durable.

“His father reviewed the options and the needs then let him look the data over from the logic perspective. He then picked the most mathematically sound option. From that defining preference, Mister Brunheldigon initiated contact with the school and its anonymous benefactor to make things happen. As a result of the partnerships with the school and the anonymous benefactor, Justin is now more able to cope than ever with the bright hope that his progress will continue.

That concludes the interview. I hope it was helpful.”

Thant then tapped a key and Kyle’s voice sounded, the man pleased indeed by the outcome.

“Excellent work. How bad is the shock?”

Thant’s reply was casual.

“He just went through a full relaxation which says he found his mistake. He’ll be a little hard to handle due to the relaxed state itself but its manageable. Velcro makes one hell of a difference. How was his side of the interview?”

Gentle hands invaded and Justin felt safe, as safe as he had always been at home. Nameless fears broke apart and died forever as Kyle responded.

“Innocence has its brilliance and Earnest was able to patch it to all the major networks as breaking news. The people see an extremely vulnerable little boy under siege by the government because he is a genius and the government is most likely rethinking its next attempt to kidnap him. When they do so, certain campaign and lobbyist involvements will suddenly appear all over the news and on the internet.

Such revelations will be complete with telephone numbers, personnel rosters, funding paths, complicit ambassadors, and sexual preferences, etcetera. It should be educational, especially to the President. He has the most to lose from close public scrutiny.”

Justin found it easiest to do nothing as he was cared for and Thant sighed with the merest hint of frustration before responding to Kyle.

“Will that be bad for the country?”

Kyle sighed tiredly.

“A political nightmare with ugly, vicious tentacles reaching everywhere, even into the Pentagon and beyond, this despite the neutral stance the military has tried to maintain all along. With this situation, they can’t do that any longer and it becomes a very complex game of cat and mouse with no one sure of who the cat is or what the mouse is actually going to do next.

Betty and I can’t factor in the public reactions adequately and Earnest goes into shock when he tries. I thought he had outgrown the reaction to data loading but I now see that I was wrong. We expect mass riots and looting in all of the major urban centers as well as collateral fallout from overseas, especially in the investment markets and stock sellout projections. The political outcomes are too varied to settle out, even on the local levels. Also, we will have to vanish for a while, possibly a year or two, unless there are unexpected radical shifts we haven’t thought of.

All the models show that. We left out breadcrumbs for Justin just in case. I’ll make contact from an alternate site once we’ve settled in and you let the Cadets experiment with computer tech in closed loops. The complication is that they have to build the technology from scratch, including the computer lab building, which also has to merge well visually and functionally with the other school buildings.

Stocks of composite are in the old bomb shelter and in the underground tunnel annex. Stone is available down there, too, although only by mining. The reasons are in the school guidelines file and on the news. Oh, a list of potential candidates for the position of school Headmaster is at your disposal due to medical seniority, although Munroe has more than you.

As that senior medical director who is present, you have the chore of picking the best future Headmaster knowing that I haven’t done more than a cursory affiliation check and a solid background profile. Do note that none of the ten have made offers or filed petitions so they might need to be coaxed. Earnest and I left a metafile with guidelines and contingencies just in case things get bad and someone from my legal office should be dropping off a very thick bundle of papers.

Last, with ten minutes and counting, the next probable kidnap attempt is going to be from the air.”

Thant exhaled hard but Justin's cleanup did not slow and Justin felt oh, so safe.

"That's way out of my job descriptions. Tell me when Earnest adapted to data loading and what the symptoms are."

Kyle was swiftly composed and finally the sheet settled over Justin and Thant retreated to the terminal.

"Data loading began at about two when both boys realized that books were like alcohol and reality could change for short periods if they read the right material. Earnest went for the pretty pictures in our travel magazines and famous places library while Justin went for the funny pictures of physics. Symptoms are typical drunken behaviors because the knowledge acts like alcohol.

The blackout never actually happens but it does induce a state of being just like you are coping with now, although in this case, he trusts you completely. I'm not sure if that's actually good. The last time he trusted anyone like that, we had to cut relations because he'd stop doing anything at all for himself when around that person and the behavior issue was interfering negatively with hygiene training.

Earnest exhibited the same type of behavior until he was about three and then he just stopped but he was like that with any authority figure. Justin was extremely person selective and still is, which has caused some issues inside the family. For example, if I were to put him with his aunt Galinda right now, he would do for her exactly what he is currently doing for you, which is being utterly malleable, even after all this time.

Earnest's trust issue is still an issue but his trust problems tend to rotate from person to person and lasts for short periods as long as a month or two. Justin, oppositely, does not trust many people but the trust does last forever and is all inclusive."

Thant exhaled frustration but responded calmly.

"You are describing savant behaviors which are not properly referenced anywhere in Justin's files. That's a big issue with the way we do the selections and the follow-ups. You cheated the system."

Kyle responded with the baring of his soul for just a moment.

"My son needed a miracle and you had the miracle. I'm going to sign off. I'll post a small file for Justin to read when he's ready."

Thant sighed and Justin just drifted, his mind almost empty and all things truly calm.

It was the calm before the storm...

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

He sighed with private irritation as other Cadets simply appeared while he scanned titles on the books that lined the technology augmented shelves. They were his friends as much as anyone could be but in the moment when he wanted privacy, their presence was annoying and therefore his fingers touched the wrong title. The light emitting diode blinked and the book was released from its pressure clamps, the tome then sliding out as its radio tag transmitted its identity to the library computer and therefore to his academics file.

So, the tome on basic architecture was reluctantly taken and opened where he stood, the pages on building design memorized. The outcome was one book of four down and his head stuffed with data that he considered both useless and beneath him as the book was reshelfed, its light emitting diode again turning blue before going dark. So he hunted for something more to his tastes and glided into the military sciences section.

He nervously eyed the basics of military thought contained in so many books as one tall senior finally braved the gap and closed in.

“Doc Thant says we can do paintball in the halls.”

It was a tempting offer and Justin considered it as he dared the book and read the science of warfare, logistics and battlefield planning. The data split apart and recombined as he reached for another, one called the Art of War by a Chinese tactician now dead for hundreds of years, a man humbly named Sun Szu. It was extremely thin compared to the others but it was worn and well read, a book used much more than the others in the library.

Reading it took only twenty minutes but the effect was profound, his mind reeling as the nuggets of gold that book contained transformed wildly to touch off connections with dormant, previously incomprehensible dissertations on tactics and then worked its way into biology and animal science. The book fell from his hands as he lost track of reality, the thumping into the shelves known but not.

The Cadet winced and routines that had been discussed were initiated, the silent alarms triggered as he caught Justin and gently tried to herd him in a straight line while librarians moved to recover the book. The world turned to a haze and Thant’s personal odor was caught twice in the ensuing chaos. He had the recollections of voices that meant nothing and then the data recombined in strange new ways, air and space added to the ancient details of ground troop movements.

The chaos in his mind twisted into scenes from his five favorite movies and the twelve documentaries on military history he had seen in entirety. Mathematics flashed and slowly the concept of war was gained, although at a cost. It happened when he was being herded without shame for the showers by a total stranger who was stocky and muscular, the man daring the always warm showers in full uniform to make sure Justin was cleansed and then treated with a pungent new topical that truly stole sensation from his skin for several long seconds.

His eyes finally focused as the former soldier helped him into his underclothing with patience and skill, the man himself, sun darkened but green eyed, merely resigned by the situation. The dark blue uniform was new to Justin and the bright ribbons were startling, true combat ribbons like those he had seen on wall charts in the military sciences classroom.

He reached out and touched each while imagining space battles which justified each, that his best understanding. His blue eyes blinked as the five foot eight inch man spoke quietly in an assessment that was cool and quiet.

“I don’t like Cadets who imbibe any substance to their detriment.”

By then Justin saw the oak leaf pins at the man’s neck and knew his rank and last name in military terms. His father’s fears rose for a moment but he did not share them, not now. War was nothing less than a dance of ideologies and strategies with only the options of winning or losing left when the defining conflicts of all kinds came to resolution. Here and now there was only the outcome to consider, one that would either lead to new battles or to a time of peace without them.

It was the most perfect of all the realities within his mind and the closest match to his own personal reality. His mind shifted and the new balance was found, the balance of one who now knew his place in the universe, if only in the most rudimentary sense.

“Am I kidnapped, Colonel Aflek?”

The sodden man shook his head as those bright green eyes flashed with amusement.

“No, but you did miss the air assault. It was quite a show. The gates and the outer walls have an interesting property when polarized by huge amounts of electrical energy.”

Justin’s mind pulsed and his small body stiffened with the shock of data surging to answer the military need as well as the physics. Books once glanced at simply for the sight of his dream ship came to mind as his eye lids fluttered insanely and a question sounded, one terse and clipped, full of mental pain.

“What type of aircraft?”

The colonel mused with the lack of title as he responded.

“Two silent run AH—Sixty-four Apaches with four men each plus pilots. It was quite a show when they crossed the line.”

Justin’s mind twisted and he slipped, balance lost as his voice cited clipped words so calmly.

“High energy influx triggered by atmospheric discharge due to momentary field inversion by reason of air movement and the vehicle’s electrical signature. The helicopters were caught in a dense electrical field of near zero current but of sufficient intensity to debilitate on board systems and cause both helicopters to shut down in controlled crashes. Humans discharging from the polarized vehicles were then stunned as by a Tazer due to instant depolarization of their persons in a normal, unavoidable grounding event.”

The recollection of his manners and protocol came as he realized he was on the wet tile floor and staring at knees.

“Sir.”

He just sat there and recovered, the rise to his feet slow and full of old cautions, lessons and stately grace. He was not helped on that long journey and when he was on his feet again, the Colonel spoke quietly.

“Feel up to walking?”

Justin inhaled the needed breath and composed himself mentally, the world seen in that new way of contingencies and fall-backs not much removed from paintball games or the now denied game of Laser Tag. But even then his mind was working and his eye lids fluttering, the unknowns so numerous.

“What was the counterstrike, sir?”

Aflek mused as Justin dared the step and swayed precariously.

“The counterstrike was the exposure of certain campaign and lobbyist involvements for every politician and Supreme Court Justice in Washington, complete with telephone numbers, personnel rosters, funding paths, complicit foreign ambassadors, secret sex preferences and quite a bit more, especially in the legislations forced through during secret

sessions. The interesting part is that it's all public information if one knows where to dig and every source is documented with visual databases and audiovisuals when possible, even the Pentagon connections.

The Cadets had fun with the telephone numbers while your doctor was interviewing me. TNN and the other national broadcasters shut their transmitters down forty seconds after the counterstrike began but then the same data started popping up on the internet as hostile websites. They just load up with no source address and fill the screen until you open a new browser window that allows normal internet use with only a nominal decrease in page loading.

It's not good PR for the school and you are being listed as a terrorist."

Justin steadied in the second step and contingencies flashed through his mind, the fragments breaking apart and reforming in new combinations as he headed into the hallways and sought the game room. He was in a reactionary state when he passed by the busy telephone banks and the internet kiosks were packed, The Cadets busy with notepads while instructors lectured on the politics currently taking place all around them.

He just studied the lists of locations and his mind spun, the new data added to the old speculations and rumors fostered by conspiracy theories and mere guesswork. He acted then, one tall Cadet's use of the telephone overruled without thought and the connection reset. He pressed the receiver to his ear as the phone initiated the dialing of a number without prompting.

The woman on the other end answered with frustration and true dislike but even with her mood she was brisk and the words, however forced, revealed enough.

"General Chand's office. This line is not secure."

Justin spoke at once in his clipped, fast way. After all, logic was his weapon of choice and, as his father had done all the work, he had only to initiate the proper response this military situation required and likewise take the blame for doing so.

"This is Justin Brunheldigon. I didn't crack the egg on political finance and legislation secrecy. You did. You transmitted all of the relevant data to me thirty-seven times in metafiles that were extensive and detailed down to telephone numbers and personnel lists. Given the number of times you transmitted the data in completion from so many different locations, I was left with the assumption that you wished it given a financial review and a full audit."

He hung up the telephone and turned to the kiosks, the hostile web pages reacting at once as the telephone behind him rang. The web pages changed to news feeds from across the world, line item text and visual images of politicians dodging cameras and reporters as detected by satellite and those camera networks linked to internet access. A Cadet answered the telephone briskly.

“Maxey Military Academy, game room. This is a blue light call.”

Justin heard the arrogance and the power in that hard to catch voice but even heard so faintly amid the background chatter, he could hear the brisk tenor and sense the authority.

“Cadet Justin Brunheldigon, please.”

Justin turned at once and the telephone was snatched, yet one backward glance showed him another startling aspect of his family’s computer skills. He felt the detachment and saw through his brother’s eyes for a short, dizzying few minutes. He even knew what to say in his clipped, fast, seemingly excited way.

“This is Justin. Go ahead, General Chand. I trust that the public review you desired has met with your approval.”

The man so far removed was shaken.

“Public review? Son, you stole and then leaked classified data vital to national security to the enemy and put a lot of good men in the line of fire.”

Earnest’s approach was so strange but the answer was simple.

“Sir, you sent me the source data thirty-seven times from a number of peculiar locations which did cause me to think that I was working with a Whistleblower, which is not all that unusual. Additionally, sir, you did not specify that it was nominally classified or otherwise restricted, tied to national security or otherwise damaging with exposure to the public taxpayers to whom the financial data is most relevant and, upon inspection, the data is only harmful to the politicians and judges who were involved.

I, a child with some development issues and socialization problems, acted in innocence and good faith once the nature of the data revealed itself as rather peculiar financial information the public taxpayers were not aware of. Like any good accountant, I reported the problem to the affected parties so they could assess the finances properly and take the appropriate investment actions and honor the appropriate discretion at the polls.

I did not realize that taking the correct moral and legal actions in this situation would cause me to be a terrorist due to how stung the guilty parties are by being exposed in their complicit acts of collusion, financial conspiracy and so forth. Myself, I'm trying to be good so I can grow up and join the CIA.

That way, I can kidnap people when I feel like it as you are trying to do to me and not worry about what is legal or not when I do. It looks like lots of fun. I just can't let you take me yet because I don't know all the rules and I think that's one of the rules. I want to be like you, General Chand and I'm studying everything you show me while showing you wherever you are what I've learned from the lessons in applied proper military behavior.

I think I have defensive fortresses down pat but you are the expert and the one teaching me the lessons I am trying very hard to learn. Were the perimeter defenses adequate upon thorough inspection? I would have added defensive fire embankments but I'm not allowed anything more than paintballs."

The general hung up the telephone with force and Justin did the same to applause and nods. He just watched the websites and then heard the sudden audio file of his young voice playing, the whole conversation repeated as the mindset of his brother turned into utter weariness that drove him into a nearby chair. Perspiration soaked his clothes as he relaxed but no one mentioned his state of affairs.

His state of being was swiftly assessed and the remediation of coffee was soon in hand, the tepid brew sweetened and turned light brown by creamer. The websites blanked out and the terminals reset, new browser windows awakening as backup protocols engaged with alternate internet access successfully found. It was a testament to his father's foresight and ingenuity and as the hostile pages reloaded, he sipped the brew that helped immensely.

Headmaster Aflek came close in a clean, dry uniform no different than the one before it and another chair was brought for his use. Aflek settled down and more coffee arrived, the black cup of coffee held absently in a short silence. Aflek then spoke as relative silence fell, only the pinball machines making noises as he spoke quietly.

"Justin, where did you learn to manipulate people and situations like that?"

Justin found it hard to speak and when he did, his soprano voice so young held a thickness that slurred the words. Clearly there were hidden costs to thinking as others did.

"My brother Earnest, sir. It was hard to think the way he does. It even hurts and I'm just tired, but not physically. I don't understand what the outcome is supposed to be but that's what Earnest would have done and everything he's done so far is working. The words

were mostly mine but said the way he would have said them. Was it the right solution to the problem?"

The hundred inch television screen popped on and TNN appeared, the scenes of reporters milling around the gates among the teams of soldiers who were packing up gear flickering wildly from one perspective to another. Unmarked vehicles and military vehicles from tanks to trucks were loaded up and police were everywhere, the mobs of shouting people protesting the government forced back amid flying debris of all kinds.

It was ten minutes of chaos and then the channel blanked out again, this time with the announcement that the station itself was suffering technical difficulty. In that silence Aflek responded with slow care.

"Let's hope so."

Aflek then rose, the telephones tested and when a dial tone was heard, a number from memory was typed into the numeric pad. Justin could hear the odd buzzing of that other telephone and after six long rings someone answered, a prim woman full of bitterness.

"Hello?"

Aflek's voice changed radically as he spoke with a coldness born of past anger.

"Hello Linda. It's Carl."

"You didn't send me my check and I know you got a job."

Aflek mused with an eye to the computers which revealed nothing of the call and then a glance at Justin's stillness before responding coolly.

"Take a settlement. Let me go. You've eaten me alive for six years and I think that's enough."

Linda responded oh, so coldly.

"You didn't call me to settle out and don't think I won't know where you are. The trace is always on. I will find you."

Aflek chuckled almost pleasantly.

"That's what I'm counting on. In fact, I'm going to tell you where I am and all about my finances. I'm the new Headmaster for the Maxey Military Academy and my paycheck is

zero plus expenses since I volunteered as opposed to being hired for a salaried position. It's legal and since there's no actual income, there's no more money paid to sweet little you. By the way, you might be getting a call or two and maybe a visit from my old employer.

Do give them my regards. Enjoy life without my money. It might persuade you to remarry but it won't be to me."

Aflek hung up the phone and smiled in that cold way, his watch glanced at and thirty seconds passing before the telephone rang. Aflek responded smoothly and politely.

"Maxey Military Academy, game room, Headmaster Aflek speaking. You are on a blue light."

The moment of silence was one caused by shock and then a woman spoke tersely, the shock tamed into brisk tones. Better yet, the conversation appeared in text form on the hostile browser screen and that made Aflek grin with the coldest kind of satisfaction.

"So that is where the brilliant Carl Aflek wound up. Did you push the boy into this confrontation?"

Aflek responded with genuine cheer.

"Not at all. Cadet Brunheldigon is just trying to show the government that he can learn their rules of play and I walked into the middle of the game. Admittedly it is disturbing in the sense that he learns so fast and we were hoping to keep him from thinking in conflict assessment values and crisis response. You see, he doesn't actually have a well developed sense of right and wrong or any defined set of behavioral ethics.

For him, there is only acceptable and unacceptable and the definitions of both change with every interaction, however small that interaction might be. So, when the government tried kidnapping, he assumed that it was right to do so and also right to engage in documented retaliation. Fortunately, he has a learned limit with weapons due to extensive paintball games.

After the third attempt, we weren't sure if it would hold. To our relief, he was focused on fortress designs and live capture tactics instead of counter fire and so forth. The outcome of a sniper's shot, though, would have been really nasty. It's not out of hand yet. You can smooth things on your end and I can get the boy nudged back on spaceship designs. The terrorist label, though, has to go away.

For one, he was just doing what he thought was right and he didn't steal the metafiles as claimed by you and so many others in that element of the setup to define him as an enemy of the state. I did check the data logs myself and I can certify that they came in, not the other way around. More relevant to you, each and every one of them was sent to him without labels or tags.

I do suspect a whistleblower or two, maybe as many as thirty-seven, although I haven't ruled out the CIA, FBI or a few others I'm not going to mention by name. On his side, he's a damned good accountant and naturally thorough. Since they came from all over the country, he went through them like he does his own assets, which should be unfrozen and very politely returned intact with interest.

We use them as calming therapy as he most methodically goes through the data to count every penny. No goon squads, no strikes, no snipers, no FBI, CIA, CPS, police, etcetera. Tactically, pulling him from here would be the worst possible scenario I can think of other than a nuclear strike and even then it's still a coin toss. Besides, I've got the best security grid in the nation to keep him inside when needed and right now, Ma'am, it is needed.

Outside, he's up for grabs and wouldn't know good from bad or right from wrong down to when to change his socks. As to the spotters, he'll see them but being watched is nothing new. He's been in a glass ball his whole life due to lots of drugs for psychiatric remediation and we're working on the consequences of that kind of life now that the main cause is adequately fixed.

Some of the behaviors are permanent and some aren't. We're still figuring out which ones can be changed and we were making progress until the kidnapping attempts began. He got so excited about learning from live military tactics that all the hard work went right out the window in about thirty seconds or less. So, we have to start over from the ground up and see what sticks and what doesn't.

As to the telephone, internet and TNN problems, I'm working on them. He's not sure how he did it and that's the problem. He was too focused on making sure that General Chand and those military others saw that he was learning from live engagements. The key to success at this time is a hands off approach so keep the big boys in check or we'll have real problems.

He's contained for the moment and I'm calming him down so he can think harder on what he did to the integrated systems. He's young, innocent and didn't know any better. As to the program and hardware issues, I'll look at the source code and the wiring and see if I can disarm the system. There is no better solution."

Aflek hung up the telephone and smiled to himself before glancing at his watch while the student body watched the screens as Justin closed his eyes. The telephone rang softly in low beeps as opposed to a normal ring and Aflek picked it up, his words into the mouthpiece stated coolly.

“This is Carl. Red light on.”

Justin’s eyes opened to see the hostile web browsers and the political chaos from across the country but when his father’s voice sounded on the other end, no words appeared on the screens.

“We found that to be a most intriguing approach. Betty and I do feel that there was almost too much personal information on Justin’s problems in it, although we do trust Thant’s choices and therefore your directives and decisions until required to do otherwise. Will it work?”

Aflek responded flatly, almost forcefully.

“Why do they want him?”

Kyle responded resignedly and quietly.

“He has shown himself to be an extremely rare mind capable of unimaginable technological greatness and our esteemed government would prefer to ensure that no terrorist group or potential enemy gains possession of him. When should I discontinue the openness of the school to the world’s eyes?”

Aflek sighed with the same kind of weariness.

“Can you set it to engage automatically at need and shut down within a few days thereafter?”

Kyle exhaled forcefully but despite the sound of frustration, he was deeply intrigued by the notion itself.

“It would take a day or two for the reprogramming of the grid and perhaps another to rectify the telephone bypasses and the consequential internet connections but it is doable. However, I will not do so until his status as a terrorist is rescinded and I will not negate the automatic reconnect systems which are enabling this telephone exchange. I may be in hiding but I am not powerless or fully out of touch.

Do inform Doctor Munroe that all the arrangements for the other Capriacil clients are still in place and unaffected by the government's rather poor and inefficient attempts to steal Justin's assets. Additionally, your ex wife will soon receive an offer that might prove too tempting to refuse. I have a cousin who cannot live without abusive women in his life and he, in turn, prefers to marry them and divorce them within a one year window while keeping all of his personal assets quite safe from theft due to divorce settlements.

He is currently between wives and has developed a certain personal interest in Washington DC. I thoughtfully referred her telephone number to him and will sit back and wait to see if he and she do meet. You may also reassure the Cadets that they will not be summarily pulled from the school by their parents or guardians as all believe strongly that their children are safest there.

So, when things calm enough and some of the normalcy of society returns, you will find yourself with a large number of custodial guardianship forms that each Cadet will need to know of personally. And last, before the illegal roving taps discover us, Justin's modest corporation, named Spacesuits Limited, is about to buy out a small but profitable pharmaceutical company in a public merger.

While simply an assets leveraging maneuver, I have decided to make it a headline event to accent your claim that he is an accomplished accountant, although that is the only reason. In all truth, he is, although usually only under duress. The outcome will be a declaration to our esteemed government that Justin is landed, has assets that cannot be lightly seized and so forth.

It might shake the tree sufficiently to actually dislodge the bad apples. Good day, Colonel."

Aflek sighed and hung up the telephone to grin at the internet kiosk before speaking without volume into a small, rectangular pager of gray and red pulled from his pocket while tapping one of its small buttons. His voice was suddenly everywhere, audible throughout the school.

"Cadets, there will be an assembly in the dining hall at zero five thirty tomorrow morning. I don't care if you come in naked and dripping wet from the pool or the showers or whatever else but you are required to be there and preferably conscious. It concerns the school and your status as Cadets. That is all."

The palm sized pager was then pocketed again and Justin faced. New words were spoken gently.

"Justin, if you can walk, come with me so we can get you cleaned up."

Justin nodded, the coffee cup settled on the floor before he sighed and rose, the chair left with a damp imprint as he stood and walked slowly for the nearest showers. He thought of home and then of his father but when he did so, all he could do was to grin and savor the expressions of love so subtle.

And that was more precious than any sum of money. . .

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Justin was barely conscious and only half aware of being herded into the dining cafeteria at zero four hundred hours with only the barest modicum of decency while the red light from light emitting diodes gave the painted walls a surreal, unreal aspect. Indeed he thought he was still dreaming until the first swallow of fresh, delightfully warm coffee hit his stomach.

It was the defining moment that brought out a sigh and then the slow claim of a table for the short hour before Cadets in new uniforms arrived to fold the dining tables one by one, each stacked in long, wheeled carts made just for them. Yet in that hour the coffee had its customary effect. He finally saw past the coffee as Cadets began to gather, each checked off lists on clipboards in the hands of instructors.

Some arrived in colorful pajamas while others arrived in dress uniforms that Justin had not yet seen, the dark red shirts and matching pants with pale green buttons and trim bright enough to catch attention. The roll call was taken as the Cadets came in and when the long checklist of four hundred and seventy-two was complete, Headmaster Aflek appeared. He, too, was transformed, his former blue uniform traded for a Cadet's style of uniform that matched the new dress uniform closely but with red buttons of crimson and a cap sporting a crimson eagle while all his ribbons were neatly in place.

Aflek climbed up on a service counter and pulled that definitive pager from his hip pocket. One simple tap sent noise throughout the dining hall and without preamble he spoke briskly.

“There are changes coming to Maxey and these changes directly affect both you individually and Maxey's future as a private institution. As all of you know, the current political environment is a nightmare and as TNN resumed normal operations early this morning, I can also tell you that the country is under martial law, especially in Susanville. For those of you studying politics and military science, pay very close attention to the ways the people are reacting to the long decades of the political abuse of power and secrecy by our government.

The last time I saw anything like this, whole governments fell and stayed down for more than five years. Yet, the initial surge of chaos is almost over. The second wave is much worse and far more pervasive. There will be a radical upsurge in violent crimes and general lawlessness as people sort out their own ways of reacting to a corrupt government. The military and other governmental bodies, in turn, will do things that are demonstrably appalling while backpedaling and denying complicity.

It might take weeks or months but politicians will show their true colors as either for the people or for themselves, with all the attendant consequences in the currently unstable political arenas. Some services to the school will stop entirely, such as the postal service and food runs, although I doubt that such interruptions will last more than a week or two. Still, we must be prepared just in case and that is why we have greenhouses and the books in the library to guide us as we become food independent as opposed to flower vendors.

Last night I received a rather vital bundle of heritage Heirloom seeds for various crops and then reviewed our stocks of food to see if we would be in jeopardy between planting and initial harvest. As the result was not entirely comforting, all of us will resort to MRE rations once the perishable food stocks are depleted, which will happen in roughly three to five days.

As to the political chaos of our government, don't blame Justin. The gun was already loaded and the trigger half pulled, if not more so. He was just the one to knock it to the floor and cause it to discharge into a keg of gunpowder. In fact, given the metafiles he was sent, thirty-seven of them, and his background as an accountant, this was inevitable. I'm not politically astute enough to tell you which way the government will change or legally astute enough to tell you how the laws will transform.

I can only tell you that they will. I, personally, am earnestly hoping for a relatively smooth resettlement of the political hierarchy and a more open, transparent government that responds to the people as opposed to the corporate interests and lobbyist groups. So, after contacting your parents and assuring them that each of you was intact and unharmed, the discussions about your continuances at Maxey were made.

All of your parents are in agreement that you are safest here. Additionally, as it is necessary to meet the terms and conditions of the law despite the social unrest, all of you are now wards of the school as Justin is and the concurrence of your parents and guardians is that the terms protecting him are valid for you all. I have simply to receive the documentation for each of you.

As the documentation arrives and according to schedules which will be posted in the game room, each of you will be called into my office and the terms of that custodial arrangement explained to your satisfaction. Additionally, the school's security systems are going to be upgraded. All of you, once I have the documentation in hand and when you understand the terms of guardianship, will be given a physical examination on par with the ones Justin is used to so that your biometric information will be available to the new security system.

Otherwise, you might go into a classroom and find yourself locked inside. On the good side of the long and tedious exams we instructors are already undergoing, if there is

anything wrong with you, we will know it and, in most cases, we can fix it. As every student is vouched for with guardianship terms, I am planning to pose the suggestion to the board of directors for a one line addition to the school's new charter so that the same clause applies to any student entering Maxey in the future.

As this affects each of you, I would prefer that you discuss it among yourselves and give it due attention in Maxey fashion before the final answer comes back to me in written form. Of lesser importance, it was proposed to me that you are brilliant enough to build another building with the same architecture as the main building and then to clad it with the reactive panels so useful in our defense. The added classroom, if you choose to build it, would be a computer sciences laboratory where you, those interested, can learn to build computers from the basics.

Again, discuss it in Maxey fashion and present me with the final choice in writing. Necessarily, graduation will be low key and I am not sure if your families will seek to attend given the national climate and the relevant hazards of travel. Cadet Rupert Maeps, I already have your paperwork as your father was the one who provided me with the seeds for the greenhouses and the four select books on advanced hydroponics. I expect you to report to my office at the end of this meeting for our discussion and thereafter you report to medical for a full exam.

You, due to being first, will be the one the other Cadets turn to for the relevant information on what guardianship means and how boring the medical examination truly is. Last, there will be other changes, both to the class schedule and to group organizations. As these changes are made, they will be posted in the game room. If you feel that they are unfair or impractical, or if you have suggestions, please say so in writing, even if it's on a scrap of paper that gets slid under my door at three in the morning.

Do be fully aware of the fact that we are still in lockdown and as we are, the instructors and I will overlook midnight traffic and after hours use of the game room, library and so on. Medical is always open and all internal uniform standards are in a relaxed state except classes. Watches and patrols are temporarily discontinued, as are outside, aboveground excursions to the annex buildings. Do use the underground tunnels.

I do expect decency in most cases but as the swimming pool has no back-up filter and cotton tends to shed particulates that clog the remaining filter we have, wear either spandex swim gear or nothing at all. We do have an eclectic assortment of rather colorful Speedos in the supply rooms but I do not know if we have sizes for everyone or even a numeric tally for a one to one count match.

Like so many other supplies I am just learning of, the boxes were not labeled and there is not much of an inventory manifest or even size tags to determine fit by. Additionally, the

instructor's dorms are now open at all hours in case you just need to talk. Simply remember that there are four hundred and seventy--two of you and only eighty--seven of us and do try to respect one another's needs for private discussion.

But, in anticipation of the request, paintball must wait until all the involved players have been registered in the new security database. So, as that concludes the announcements, Cadet Maeps, come with me. The rest of you may return to your assigned chores and classes are as scheduled."

Aflek dropped down and worked his way through the students, one small boy no taller than Justin caught and herded out as the assembly began to break apart. Cadets fell into the routines they knew as Justin just sipped his coffee and when Justin settled at a table when prompted, Cadets gathered. The questions were careful and his slurred, slow replies listened to.

"What is being a ward like?"

"It's a safe feeling. I'm here where they can take care of me and make sure I'm okay."

"Can they tell you what to do?"

Justin nodded.

"They have to. I don't always know what to do and I don't always know when to do something, either. You see them being guardians all the time. They make sure I do everything when I need to. If I have problems, they help me fix the problems. I just can't go anywhere I want without permission and they do make sure I don't read too much. They tell me when to eat and when to get up. When I need a shower, they make sure I get one, even if I just took one a little while before.

It's like being in the hospitals, only not strapped in or tied up to protect the other patients. That happened a lot. If I need shots or blood draws, they make sure I get them, even if I'm asleep. If I need an examination, they make sure it's thorough so they aren't liable for neglect. They can tie me up if they feel like it and when they do, they take my clothes so I can be cleaned up when needed.

You all have seen when that was necessary."

The nods were quick and the final question came, one slightly nervous.

"Can they just tell you to undress just because?"

Justin sighed over his coffee and responded with the truth.

“Yes. I don’t always know when I need to. If I don’t, they can just undress me and fix whatever problem is going on. Father was specific on that one. He made sure that everything was legal, too. If I need something and I’m not behaving right, they can enforce the desired behavior with due necessary force until I learn it. That means they can beat me if needed but they haven’t, not that I know of. Besides, there are always the security logs and they are accountable to Father for their actions, so your parents would have the same access when desired.”

The Cadets split apart and Justin was left with just the instructor, the man speaking speculatively and quietly as the Cadets in question bolted for the hallway.

“That may have been too much said the wrong way, Justin.”

Justin drained his cooled coffee and spoke as the brew settled in his stomach.

“They asked for honesty and I gave it to them. I don’t know any other way to answer.”

Justin rose to get himself another cup of coffee and more Cadets returned, some settling at the table as others boldly assaulted the coffee pot. The instructor let Justin do for himself until the cup stopped and then he inserted himself, the cup taken and Justin herded to the table while Cadets studied the interaction. A new question sounded, one posed without fear and with a hint of daring.

“Justin, do you like being school property?”

Justin sighed as he weighed the question and finally he faced the tall Cadet who was a genuinely decent paintball player, his own reply returned.

“Your reference to property is unclear. Do you mean material property, legal property or custodial property? I think you are implying material property when I am a variant of legal property in the custodial property definition with no end terminus. That means they can keep me here for as long as needed to fix my problems. There is also a deliberately vague and open ended protection clause to make sure I am not left unprotected in case something happens to my family.

In such a case, the school remains custodial guardians and may oversee my money as long as they account for every transaction with a one line reason for expenses or trust additions, purchases and so on, to an outside accounting agency which is overseen by a court appointed agent. I can say if I want something and they can say no. I am also allowed an

expense account for leisure things and needful expenses. I think the account is at a million but I'm not sure."

The instructor spoke smoothly then, his insertion quiet but heard by the other Cadets.

"The fund for personal leisure is much higher since your father adjusted to a one percent return equity from your companies and investment portfolios. We are hoping you might find it fun to buy the school some rather critical supplies before things get out of hand in Susanville."

Justin exhaled and lifted the coffee cup, his grin personal.

"Get everything we need for a long haul. I take pleasure in studying the transactions due to the lessons in logistics that it provides. What are Speedos?"

One Cadet frowned thoughtfully before speaking up.

"The tight fitting underwear we wear in the pool."

Justin sighed and responded with his own perspective.

"As I have a choice, I would rather swim naked, like at home. It is more comfortable than underwear. The wrestling suits are comfortable enough, though. If they were allowed in the pool, I would wear one of them."

The Cadets broke apart and fled again, Justin left alone until Maeps reappeared, the young Cadet truly quiet and reserved as opposed to his usual eagerness to jump into conversations. The boy circled the cafeteria, picking out favorite bread rolls and orange juice before parking himself next to Justin without a word said. By then Justin was on his fourth obligatory cup of coffee and alert, he the one to speak in a much improved voice.

"You are very quiet."

The young boy responded with a trembling sigh as his nimble hands broke the rolls into bite sized pieces.

"My parents got threats from the CIA if I wasn't pulled from the school. They went into hiding. The Headmaster says your family took them in even though the news says the CIA was trying to protect them from kidnapping by an unknown militia group."

Justin sipped his coffee and responded as he thought of his parents and then his extended family, the whole collection of his relations contemplated as the cup was emptied and

nudged away. Facts he had known but had not understood were only just making sense. His mind caught fire as logical actions and reactions were computed. Tactics flickered through his mind to change a thousand times before he spoke quietly to his peer so young.

“My family, some of the distant cousins, went to talk your family into disappearing so they could not be used to get to me. While they were explaining why it was necessary, the government tried to steal your family out. My distant cousins protected your family. So, it seems that I am important. I must now figure out why.”

The instructor spoke up quietly as the coffee cup was lifted from the table.

“You have a rare kind of mind that can see the ways technology can advance and you have the ability to design the advances to maturity without need for construction or testing, which is a talent no one has ever seen in anyone to such an extreme. You, with scraps or a junkyard and tools to work with, could build weapons vastly superior to anything that currently exists. You are one of a kind, also an unknown element due to your sketchy past as defined by interactions with others and your utter lack of political views.

Besides, nobody wants you in the wrong set of hands and everybody is sure that their hands are best. By the way, you have a scheduled hour of news before we get you dressed for classes as part of your tactics studies.”

Justin nodded, and rose at once, his young friend left to eat alone as he made his way to the game room where Cadets were clustered around the internet kiosks and crowded onto the chairs or the floor itself before the huge television screen. He settled into a folding chair squeezed into place. He watched the buxom, black haired woman rattle on about politics and secrecy as the headline banners detailing the corruption of politicians scrolled beneath.

Some cited validations of audiovisual files that had appeared on TNN during the night and others validated financial transactions as well as litigation passed without notice for the benefit of an incredible list of private and publicly traded corporations. Yet at seven in the morning one new banner inserted itself almost seamlessly into the news, one that startled Justin’s peers into frowns and silence.

“Spacesuits Limited has just purchased Ricor Pharmaceuticals for six hundred, eighty million dollars.”

The next text announcement was just as declarative and almost too long for the banner line itself.

“Fifteen year old Nobel prize winner, Justin Brunheldigon, wrongly accused of terrorism, wholly owns Spacesuits Limited.”

The banner to follow that one was just as declarative.

“Spacesuits Limited has numerous international contracts worth more than eight hundred million.”

Then, as the last banner began and Cadets took real notice, he sat back and studied the reporter as she paused for a moment due to her ear piece.

“Spacesuits Limited holds thousands of advanced patents on space suit technology and other technologies.”

The banner headlines vanished entirely and the reporter resumed her report on incumbent recalls and special elections of congressmen as if nothing had happened but Justin had seen enough and his peers were now contemplating their own situations while studying him. He rose to his feet and quietly folded the chair, the brown steel chair soon at rest against the wall. He turned to slip away to his room to dress but as he did so, the reporter on the television screen spoke to him.

“Justin Brunheldigon, if you are watching or if your fellow Cadets are watching and will relay this message to you, TNN would like an interview.”

Justin faced the instructor who was nearby and posed the question with genuine innocence.

“May I call home, sir?”

The instructor was preempted by the low, telling buzz from one telephone, a low, annoying, buzzer like ringing the thoughtful man answered.

“Maxey, game room. Instructor Heshel speaking.”

Justin listened but discovered himself too far from the telephone to hear what was said by the caller. The instructor noted his concentration and spoke briskly.

“Cadet Brunheldigon, are you listening in?”

Justin’s peers were suddenly quiet and considerate of the thirty feet between Justin and the telephone in use as Justin responded shamelessly.

“I am trying, sir, but I’m too far away.”

One Cadet rose with a grin and pulled out ordinary blackboard chalk that dotted the floor at Justin's feet. Another Cadet pulled out a well used tape measure and the distance was measured down to the inch as the instructor spoke.

"Cadet Brunheldigon, your father will contact you on the interview arrangements after your classes."

Justin nodded and sighed, the issue less than preferred but better than the alternative.

"Yes, sir. May I go get ready for classes?"

The instructor hung up the telephone before replying.

"Certainly, Cadet. Look over your class schedule first."

Justin responded solemnly and politely as he turned smartly on his heels to walk away.

"Yes, sir."

He was in for a very pleasant surprise...

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

His new class schedule was nothing less than the grandest kind of pleasure. He now had his preferred forms of relaxation to enjoy for hours on end, beginning with lithography. The thirty year old antique used to imprint circuitry on circuit boards as well as t-shirts and paper was quite swiftly his favorite toy and when he had taken the two weeks needed to master the rudiments of employing it, his mind had already devised a thousand incremental improvements that took just another three weeks to enact.

From that beginning, with improvised circuit board substrate from the automotive shops and copper patch tape that adequately conducted electricity, etching chemicals and his own talent to invent, the old relic was duplicated and that duplicate unit improved. From that leap his rapid advancement to circuit boards equal to the best in the world were simply steps that came oh so naturally. Light emitting diodes were added in and when they proved to be inadequate, his now fervent mind turned to formerly tedious lessons in inorganic chemistry for solutions.

The chemistry labs were raided a dozen times and with methodical care he became the most passionate of novice chemists, each step to his dream one learned well. But it was the first step into the domain of becoming obsessed for as that new lithography machine transformed and grew more versatile with every addition, he focused that much harder on attaining the impossible.

It was merely another three weeks before his first microchips were created. With those, systems the world had never known took on their first incarnation. Templates became the governing thoughts in his always busy mind, more important than leisure games of Paintball or the physical exercises he had come to employ as morning rites as vital as his coffee and breakfast.

In the end of his first round of creative genius, the lithography machines and template printers were rebuilt eleven times and were already well beyond the scope of the modern technology available to the rest of the world. Only then did the ulterior motive surge into play, other microcircuits created after clandestine visits to the chemistry labs and the pottery kilns.

Crystalline computer cores of his own design came next as the mental order of things to come ruled and the dream governed all. Mathematics played havoc with his intentions twice as he built the seemingly alien hubs and interconnected, definably solid circuits, the assembly finally hidden in his locker before the day came when he would have access to the machine shop.

Yet even in that obsessed madness with such narrow focus and intent the new military mindset was speaking and contingencies were laid in place with his work duplicated, the sum of his gains settled and secured with the second construct hidden in the old bomb shelter. Finally, three months after his beginning, the fated day came when he did have unfettered, private access to the machine shop and all that lay within its boundaries.

Without pause or delay he settled into the needs of the future by welding together a box of ordinary steel and to that steel box he added his assembly of microcircuits, the final addition a keyboard that was carefully interfaced wire by wire before the whole assembly was flashed with electricity. He expected the circuitry to burn out as he typed in the algorithms for a set frequency of resonance but when the unit did not immediately burn out, the second set was entered.

His peers watched with wary curiosity and real interest as he added a third set of variables only a dedicated theorist would appreciate and finally he added the fourth set, the keyboard detached and one of the extra N dimensional vacuum taps pulled from the circuit breakers. With deft skill he snapped it into place and held his breath as the whole unit began to thrum, the circuits of his own design shimmering with radiance as his programming caused definable changes.

The ceramic alloys changed chemically as the steel box began to glow a lurid red. The whole unit then fell silent, the vacuum tap itself sparking in the final death. Justin frowned as the steel box cooled and when it was merely warm to the touch, a welder cut the side panel off to expose the amazing gain of an opalescent white metal that had never before existed.

Cadets were quick with Geiger counters and radiation detectors but when the strange metal was examined, the gauges did the unthinkable. The needles hit the hitherto impossible mark of zero background. He studied their interest and considered that block of new metal sacrificial as he set to work with the need for more vacuum taps, the total sum needed assembled one by one and set aside on a workbench to cure as the block of heavy metal finally vanished to the chemistry labs for a full analysis.

He worked until he felt the rising tingle of his skin and with that natural alarm he closed the shop, the curing vacuum taps settled onto wire racks before heading for the school. He crossed the open ground as Cadets made their rounds and when he entered the school itself, instructors and Cadets alike clustered around him with one question foremost and the block of his alien metal displayed.

Aflek was the one to ask that question so important and he did so quietly, his wariness balanced with suspicion.

“What is this?”

Justin studied the block of synthetic metal before replying just as quietly, yet without emotion.

“I call it Brunite, sir. It should show as a noble metal on the elemental charts but with an exceptionally high atomic weight. Theoretically, it exists in nature but only in the remnants of supernovas and then only in extremely minute amounts. In theory, sir, it is reactive to concentrated plasma and possibly malleable when used as a conducting medium, although neutronium doped carbon would be better.

I just haven’t worked out the theoretical synthesis frequencies for neutronium.”

Aflek sighed with frustration but when he spoke again, the question was almost casual and the man was rather wary, cautious in a most peculiar way the other Cadets did take notice of while Justin missed the relevance entirely.

“Were you intending to build something special with this?”

Justin thought of his ambitions and then his intent but when he tried to see things from a military perspective, his answer changed radically. The half truth came so easily then.

“Sir, I am attempting to create a more durable N dimensional tap as the current materials tend to burn out during excessive moment loads. Additionally, sir, this first sample of Brunite is for experimental study and analysis at the research centers Father considers most reliable. I am already equipped to make more as needed, sir.”

Aflek frowned with a peculiar expression before posing a careful question with the same softness of tone.

“About how far ahead of the rest of the world is this?”

Justin frowned thoughtfully as he replayed the numerous steps that had resulted in Brunite and then time itself was factored in, most of the variables assumed and therefore unreliable. Still, it was his best guess and spoken hesitantly.

“Roughly two hundred and eighty years, sir. I do have some trouble extrapolating the normal inventive process but the basis of the approximation is the theoretical works currently available to my mathematical peers and the fact that they have to derive their own solutions to N dimensional taps. Since it took me three years to achieve a stable N dimensional tap after causing an electromagnetic pulse with a radius of roughly one

hundred miles, I have to assume that the three year gap equates to maybe fifty to eighty years.

Everything else is just as approximate, sir, although I did try my best to factor for normal technology advancements.”

Aflek hefted the one hundred and six pound block of Brunite and then held it out to Justin without much strain as he posed another question. But then the man did work out often and did so to inspire the students.

“Can you give me a logical outcome if military minds were exposed to this Brunite?”

Justin closed his eyes and focused, the mindset of military mentalities captured for a few body tensing moments. The chaos was bitter but short lived and then the fragments of reality merged, the outcome chilling. He felt the cost as his body relaxed in embarrassing ways but speaking was much more important than the mess he made of himself. His breathy, dazed voice then sounded quietly, every word thickened by his sluggish tongue while his eye lids fluttered madly.

“Sir, the military mindset would be to seize and control this valuable resource, regardless of quantity gained or the end outcome of practical use. Any and all possible manufacture systems would be taken and the zone or area where the manufacturing took place would be secured, classified and otherwise contained indefinitely.”

Aflek nodded knowingly as he set the block of Brunite on the floor, one foot soon at rest as this lesson continued.

“And how would someone counter the closure of the school by reason of a military seizure in the interests of national security?”

Justin tried again for the military mindset and found it within reach. The question held him for a while and then changed, the outcome a peculiar twist on all of Earnest’s political actions and his father’s numerous counterstrikes against the government. It was an answer spoken with less of a struggle to breathe and even sounded smug.

“The answer, sir, is to give full disclosure of the metal itself to the military with the documented story that the event in question was not repeatable and therefore warrants extended study by the appropriate minds in theoretical quantum research and also in the field of applied quantum physics. Additionally, my youth and mental complications should be cited subtly as reasons why I don’t exactly remember how I achieved Brunite’s manufacture due to being half asleep and further confused by a lack of timely skin remediation.

It is not beyond reach to build several fake units that burn out when surge energy is applied. Of course, sir, such a call would need to go through Father for best effect in the applied political sense as I am no politician.”

Aflek snickered as he spoke to the air in full confidence.

“Did you catch it all, Mister Brunheldigon?”

Kyle responded smoothly and with a hint of pride.

“Oh, yes. The tactic is quite sound and easily attended to by the student body. Additionally, one student should discreetly hide the real unit as other Cadets build fake ones with the circuit templates I am highlighting for their easy reference. In the meantime, with such a buzz of activity going on for the spotters to record, one Cadet should ever so innocently go outside the gates and ask the man inside.

I do trust the military more than any other aspect of the government but only to a defined point. Temptation is still temptation and Justin is a genuine prize. But, for the moment, they seem reasonable enough so the Brunite goes to the man outside and the chaos in the workshop is then witnessed with the given explanation which would be relayed to the proper authorities within the secret military hierarchy.

The expected outcome will be a bit of confusion and added interest but the hands off approach will be maintained and, possibly, more rigidly enforced after any chance clashes are faced in the appropriate fashion. Do expect genuine military spies in the guise of scientists and other supposed specialists in metallurgy and so forth to seek admission. Justin, you will have to relocate your metal research lab to the old bomb shelter or to the access tunnels leading to the ridge caves that don’t show on any of the campus maps.

It’s inconvenient but invisible to the military. You simply need to tell your fellow Cadets what needs to vanish from the machine shop before military eyes take a gander at what happens to be for show and tell.”

Justin nodded, the habits of the school expressed without thought while his mind caught fire with entirely new possibilities.

“Yes, sir. That would be the steel box I was using and the arc welder I built plus all my freshly made vacuum taps. The taps can slide into a hip pocket without being easily seen but the steel box will be the hardest as it is two cubic meters by volume and as heavy as the cubic meter of Brunite. I’ll also need the keyboard and more components for tap

manufacture, an oscilloscope, a Geiger counter, a wide range multimeter, some shielded twenty--six gauge wire, a spare monitor and a battery powered soldering iron.

I'll get the rest of the stuff I need after I'm cleaned up and the bomb shelter is refitted with work benches. I could also use a stand alone computer with ten spare gigabytes of memory for the pattern files but that can wait."

Kyle sighed with interest as Earnest's voice was heard.

"How big are these pattern files?"

Justin shrugged, the reply simple and his personal needs obvious.

"Not sure. They are the theoretical quantum signatures of the elements I am going to synthesize. Some are ordinary metals but a few will be Brunite in combination with other metals so that makes those files huge, maybe on the order of five to six gigabytes each when they self expand during use. I need them to build my full scale model of the skim fighter and that means I need the package from the barn."

Earnest snickered across the link as Justin aimed himself for his room and Aflek followed, the Headmaster listening to the ease of familiarity both Justin and Earnest used with the security grid. Cadets, though, were already settling into action, the block of Brunite hefted from the floor and carted away. Earnest's next question left Aflek surprised but Justin handled it easily.

"What simulation do you want me to start work on?"

Justin's reply was casual and smooth.

"A trip to Mars. I want the subject to feel like he's flying at full speed from here to there while fighting the rebel armada alone. I want the whole thing to feel realistic and seem actual. You could use your generic interactive combat flight simulator routines and expand them to fit the known profiles of the skim fighter."

Earnest exhaled with force at the challenge but then the detailed questions began, questions not impeded in the least by Justin's entry into his room or his eventual shower.

Aflek heard every one of them...

CHAPTER NINETEEN

To watch the influx of scientific minds was intriguing and to see the arrogance in those numerous men was amusing. To see them pour over the circuits he had designed to improve a lithograph machine's high spectrum outputs was cause for a grin that necessarily hid quickly when he was glared at as if he had committed the unpardonable sin. Then, too, he was followed relentlessly by those many specialists who pretended to know everything while knowing nothing at all about artificial metal synthesis.

So they studied they studied what his father made available while Earnest's numerous, pointed questions on components and sensors played havoc with his no longer boring lessons in applied inorganic chemistry and his new studies in ancient history. Indeed, those classes were examples of rote education at its finest and the only genuine excitement came when the instructors posed questions on alternate realities by way of tactical maps showing the ancient battlefields with whole armies clashing.

In those exercises of mind the past came alive, yet even then it was the surge of passion based on mathematics and logic rather than any deep love for war or the contest of one against another. He could see the clashing societies but in his mind's eyes, the clashes were for resources rather than the cited ideological beliefs that history claimed. Greed, he was learning, was a potent motivator and the more one person had that another did not, the more likely the former would be assassinated by the latter by any means needed to steal his accrued wealth.

Prehistory, though, changed often in his mental realm and as lessons in geology taught him plate tectonics and as the world realigned century by century with the addition of climatology, facts hit hard. The ancient contests of dominance and superiority shifted, some ancient battlefields far more complex than rendered by a simple modeling program as outlined in his already memorized history books. One such battle was the conquest of Nubia by the Egyptians and as his eyes closed in the middle of one such dissertation, his mouth opened and out came the facts.

He heard his voice but could not believe the outpouring of plate tectonics in combination with climate analysis but no one spoke as he cited the logic that finally ended with his claim that the Egyptians had won only by superior numbers and luck itself. And even when he fell silent the grand vista which existed only in his mind continued on, the alternate world of the long ago past dazzling him with its divergence from the real history he had been taught.

Beads of sweat formed on his forehead and soaked into his uniform but he barely noticed as he obeyed the buzzer that announced the end of class. He toppled chairs and thumped into the walls as he staggered like a drunken fool towards the sanctuary of his room and once inside, the desk was claimed and the terminal activated. The wild visions born of true understanding finally had their expressions as his hands careened across the keyboard at top speed.

Yet the madness was short lived and oddly brief for the Nubian history as he envisioned was swiftly absorbed back into normal history and that point was when the strange madness broke apart. Egypt was Egypt once more and the Nubian Empire fell back into obscurity, the lands of gold and ivory stripped far more than the real history declared. He ended his book with the final words of this is not real and saved the file, the deed of the moment achieved. He leaned back in his chair to rest as his roommates finally spoke up, at least the portly youth who held little back when he had endured enough.

“If you’re done, I need to do my homework.”

Justin’s eyes opened and truths previously unseen were then known. His roommates were all awake and staring at him. He was soaked with perspiration. An instructor was present. He itched fiercely. He rose from the chair with the oddest kind of weariness rising within and almost fell once he achieved his feet. The instructor said nothing as Justin peeled away the soaked uniform but as he began the ritual task of cleaning himself up, a message popped up on the terminal screen.

The portly Cadet who had claimed the damp seat spoke briskly.

“Cadet Brunheldigon, go to medical before you shower and take your wet uniform with you.”

Justin glanced at the medical directive Doctor Thant had sent and complied meekly, the soiled uniform pulled on down to the socks and boots. He grabbed a fresh uniform but the instructor spoke quietly, the man almost snickering with amusement.

“We are still in a relaxed state of affairs internally, Cadet.”

Justin responded seriously as his choice was made and the clean uniform folded neatly over his left arm while snatching his ditty bag and a second pair of dry boots stuffed with socks.

“I know, sir.”

He added his bright red Speedos to the collection as an afterthought and headed out with the instructor behind him, the long journey to the medical wing a time of reflection on the book he had written and all that it signified. He was silent the entire time and as he entered the medical wing to see Thant and two new doctors perched in chairs around the terminals, he just shook his head and deposited his spare things on the nearest bed. He spoke up as the instructor settled on another bed without a word but did so with respect.

“Doctor Thant, I’m here.”

Thant rose from the chair with a grin and Justin felt the urge to do nothing at all as the huge black man approached. Thant touched him and the sensation of being safe took over, leaving him truly docile and tame as his shirt was peeled off and deposited in a diffusion centrifuge not much different from a washing machine basket. He was summarily stripped and then wiped with a red, soft plastic cloth that was added to his soiled clothing while his boots were casually retired over separate drip trays before Thant herded him into the shower.

He had a final glimpse of the curious unit as one of the other new doctors added a small bucket of a green solution to the machine and then the unit awakened, it’s whine terrible to Justin’s ears. He could not shut out the scream of worn gears or the screech of dry bearings but mercifully the unit was alive for less than a minute and as he recovered to find himself cowering in the shower’s tight corner, Thant was found staring at him with a grim scowl of regret.

He rose to his feet and turned on the shower with shaking hands as Thant casually worked a new kind of pungent orange soap across Justin’s skin. The soap smelled delightful despite the heavy scent of musk and water rinsed it all away. He emerged a much calmer being and was soon dressed in his Speedo, the uniform gone with the instructor. Thant gestured him to sit before the terminal as the two new doctors retreated from the screen that showed his written work laid out in Chinese characters with a translation page beside it.

Seeing his own words on the screen was strange indeed and among the words in Chinese were characters in English, each notation highlighted in red and surrounded by parentheses. He was fascinated and puzzled by the minor additions that corrected his apparent mistakes in historical theory but when he saw Earnest’s trademark string of computer code, he grinned with a nod and studied his mistakes. Only then did he factor in the amount of time it would have taken his brother to make those changes and the grin faded to a frown as he spoke hesitantly indeed.

“How long was I in the shower?”

Thant responded quietly as a popsicle appeared, one shaded pink and flecked with bits of real strawberries.

“Almost an hour. I didn’t know the bearings were shot or that the gears were grinding until we turned the centrifuge on. I sent it out to the machine shop for a complete rebuild.”

Justin nodded as he claimed the delightful popsicle and after a few licks of pure glory, he returned a question that shared his pleasure in such a simple wonder of the modern age.

“Is there something in my sweat that you need?”

Thant responded casually.

“It’s a pheromone similar compound that doesn’t evaporate like other pheromones do and it has a curious property when processed into an injectable serum. It causes the target genome to purge the Herpes retrovirus from the genomic template as inert debris that is then purged in various ways by the body, although as a repeated regimen as opposed to a single treatment. We found out by accident and since you sweat the most, we are using you, with your father’s permission and the Headmaster’s approval, to quietly gene cleanse the other students.

Munroe thinks your urine has it and other compounds in concentration but since he’s between clients and we have a decent facility here, he wants to know if you are up to peeing in a bag for us while you sleep. If you agree to the study, we’ll go the distance with everything you expunge to see if anything else might be useful.”

Justin blew out his cheeks and nodded, the Speedo shed and the curtained end bed claimed. Thant was quick to settle him in place with one arm strapped to the rail with an intravenous tube inserted and then came the catheter, a moment of trauma Justin did not breathe through. Thant did more once Justin exhaled and with a casual grin he stabbed Justin’s thigh with a syringe filled with Benadryl.

Mere moments later the Albuterol inhaler was in play and after four puffs, Justin simply went limp, the blended combination sending him into that strange domain of empty dreams void of all but impressions. Yet into that emptiness came the stirrings of awareness and finally dreams were reborn, the abstract and theoretical combining with the known quantum states of metals.

Alignments and programming parameters he would never have thought of consciously were imagined and memorized in that time between slumber and awareness, a world full of expectations full of excitement. But growing aware came slowly as the quantum states

of mythical alloys were compared to the known. There was no caffeine to speed his body as the familiar voices gained names and then values as spoken words.

“How long?”

The guest, a supposed professor of physics named Carl Markershind, was not at all pleased with Doctor Munroe, who answered with staid calm that nothing seemed capable of ruffling.

“Any day, now, although his recital of quantum states is promising. Three to four is his usual limit when he’s had sedatives. You seem a bit tense, today, Professor. I assume it’s due to your button camera and microphone, although I could be wrong.”

The nervous professor gulped and lied well, even cheerfully.

“You must be mistaken. I’m not wired.”

Munroe’s soft snicker was a pleasant noise and the words that followed were smoothly stated like a joke full of inexpressible richness.

“The scanners say otherwise, down to the second button on your shirt and the curious flag pin on your collar. Besides, as they are wireless, the hall sensors picked up the transmissions and decoded them automatically. Oh, don’t worry. You aren’t seeing anything we consider classified or exceptionally private. Justin is just citing primes in quantum states and isn’t even aware of us yet. Is something wrong with his urine bag? It seems to have your undivided attention for some strange reason.”

The tense professor exhaled hard but when he spoke he was a calmer man.

“Um, his piss is green.”

Munroe chuckled softly as Thant spoke from nearby.

“We are extracting a complex organic excretion that is rare even among the Capriacil clients, somewhere in the two percent range. The compound, called Beta Seven Fourteen by the research specialists, has some very interesting properties when purified and injected into a Petri dish of cultured human cells which are contaminated most deliberately by a host of viruses we consider unloved and undesired.. For one, it cures Syphilis so thoroughly that no trace of the Syphilis genome remains in the targeted cell’s DNA structure and the cells seem to become immune to future Syphilis attacks.

His sweat is just as valuable, although the as yet unnamed compound we call Five Three One Beta only cures Herpes with a twenty shot, five week regimen. We think that other compounds in his urine might do the same for Hepatitis or possibly AIDS but we aren't sure since most of the compounds in question are energetic volatiles. By the way, he volunteered to give lab samples of the Beta Seven Fourteen.

The urine bag, one of six so far, could theoretically treat eight people and his pharmaceutical company is already very hard at work in synthesizing the compound for mass marketing and clinical trials. Imagine the outcome of that when added to his true dislike of corruption in politics. When the word does leak out, I'm sure the media will go into convulsions trying to get an interview.

Oh, Colonel, we do know your military affiliations. We do a full, very comprehensive background on everyone we let in and as you have been markedly discreet, so have we. By the way, we are using your illegal link to inform the military that a bag action would be tactically unsound due to collateral damage. I seriously doubt that they want all of their secret military bases and think tanks completely exposed to the public."

The colonel sighed deeply but the calm in his voice was more pronounced and his tenor was smooth.

"How many people here know where the bases are?"

Munroe responded with a chuckle.

"That is hardly important, colonel. What is important is that the military stands back and that the student body is not harassed in any fashion due to the brilliance in the ranks. Justin is not the only prize here. He is simply the most visible. You really should take a closer look at the kits the Cadets are building and ask a few questions here and there about talents and interests.

But, if you need examples of the security system, go ahead and touch the glass. We'll even accommodate by exposing those bases people already suspect and flock to just in case the conspiracy theories are actually true. Do be mindful that this rule applies everywhere, not just here on school grounds. And, if we suspect tampering of any kind by any outside agency, we will do a rather impressive expose` of one base or another, from funding to personnel.

We would naturally pick the target base at random since there are so many of them. Is that perfectly clear, Colonel?"

The professor sighed slowly before he posed one almost amused question, one that sounded with an unusual aspect of caution.

“What if we see a kidnapping take place? Are we to just stand back and watch?”

Munroe responded smoothly and pleasantly.

“By all means intervene to the needs of the law but in all things, Colonel, we are immediately notified and the student is returned to us as unharmed as possible with due expedience. After all, they are much more valuable to you here where they can use their creative talents with proper supervision and the appropriate oversights than elsewhere. Besides, most of them intend to enter the military as a lifetime career path, some as doctors, some as engineers, yet all as soldiers.

That, sir, should be deeply pondered as you begin the protection of this rather unique, undeclared national asset.”

Justin’s eyes opened to find the wide shouldered colonel frowning and as the colonel spoke in reply with closed eyes and his head tilted slightly to the left, the realization that the colonel was hearing something was made.

“Are there other terms involved, like persuasion with the locals in the event of petty crimes? We can handle that but nothing more serious.”

Munroe responded with contentment.

“We would rather have you intervene to dissuade the crime than to necessarily be used to mitigate the offense in court. Prevention is an ounce but the cure is a pound. Additionally, no covers would actually be blown by such an intervention as the students already know you are there somewhere and watching closely. The goal is to show them as needed that they are always under glass and then, as can be managed, to further their applied grasp of genuine military expertise, values and all the rest.

Also, as the intent of such lessons, we hope to foster a much higher standard of excellence which will eventually become the envy of the world. Maxey needs to shake its dubious reputation as the last legal home for the wayward youth and any useful assistance the military can provide in that area with discretion and while adhering to the official hands off policy is welcome.

Last on this issue is the preference for what is right as opposed to what is legal, especially in light of recent political turmoil. We are beginning the lessons on moral fortitude as postulated in part by the Boy Scouts and also as presented by the military heroes from

across history, most notably the Marine ethics and the recently abandoned code of gentlemanly conduct as once taught to all military officers.

We can do this as we are a decidedly private institution with no federal funding or involvement of any kind. This aspect, by the way, is one of the numerous reasons why we are so strict on the avoidance of hiring anyone with active military affiliations. It is a most difficult challenge, yet Maxey is able to achieve it, with or without your tacit and discreet assistance, although we prefer the assistance.

If you do agree to these terms, we will notify you when the student body is planning to visit Susanville or other locations. One such event we are considering is the Space Battles Modeling Convention in Amalito, California, this coming September. The students are most eager to build their competing, flight capable replica with the hopes of winning the top prize of a trophy and the sale of the model to the new Space Battles Museum outside San Francisco, which is hosting the event this year.

That is a new dynamic as all previous conventions of this kind were hosted by collective private ventures or were simply prearranged gatherings of Space Battle devotees in rented wheat fields post harvest and so forth. As I understand the rules, the vehicle design is picked from a selection of one hundred preapproved photographs. The Cadets try to build it as accurately as possible while making sure it can hover by means of fan blowers and small turbines to a minimum of four feet above the ground for the contest trials with further maneuvers in side to side motion considered as sort of bonus point material.

While this does interfere with normal classes and routines, it does provide an incentive for innovation. One thing your other eyes and ears should take notice of is the instrumentation panels in the kit planes the Cadets routinely market. They are the leading edge for digital systems as available to the civilian market and the Cadets build their own. I understand that several elements of the instrumentation are now being patented with a percentage of the royalties to the school and some of the residuals split among the Cadets.

While still a new venture, they are already far enough along to see the early gains in monthly checks which provide personal spending money on weekend excursions. I mention this only as it might be useful to show their determination to free themselves from the anonymous benefactor's financial influence. This compromise is workable for both sides, Colonel Markershind.

You see everything that goes on and if something catches your attention, you may inquire about it. We, in turn, gain protection for the students while they are outside Maxey which would otherwise be prohibitively expensive. But, Colonel, if you break the glass, the alarms just might go off."

The colonel scowled with irritation at Munroe but his compliance was sealed, set in stone without animosity.

“Might I inquire about the strange air frame that recently passed through the gates? It doesn’t fit any plane configuration that I know of and the Cadets have been pouring over it with ultrasound gear for the last ten or twelve hours.”

Munroe acquiesced smoothly.

“The frame happens to be the girding of an Adventurer Seven from the Space Battles theme and a long time project of Cadet Brunheldigon. One of his driving ambitions is to enter his Adventurer into the modeling contest but due to prior medical issues with crowds and so forth, the ambition had to be postponed. The Cadets are simply examining the welds for damage as the frame was transported by trailer down some rather poor roads from Eastern Kansas.

Additionally, the Cadets are rather curious as to where Justin intends to install the turbines for lift tests and the wager pool, while frowned upon and formally disapproved of, has many of the instructors just as discreetly making arrangements for a special, in week pass to Susanville for the winner.”

The colonel nodded with another sigh but spoke without passion, the issue resolved.

“Just keep us posted on his metals research. We can use his Brunite for nuclear waste containment.”

The colonel turned on his heels and departed as Aflek stepped in and Aflek studied the arrangement as Thant ever so casually gathered the tools for shaving away Justin’s head and body hair. Aflek watched Justin become wholly compliant to Thant’s every whim as Munroe continued to monitor the display screen which highlighted dozens of military specialists who traveled the hallways alone.

It was a strange display of trust and one as perplexing as it was disturbing, more so when the ritual of shaving away hair spread to the arms and legs. Justin became the most adept of living puppets as Thant chose every pose and finally Aflek could not hold back his curiosity.

“Is that a normal behavior?”

Munroe turned for a moment to survey the actions of his colleague as Thant remained silent. Munroe spoke quietly, his calm tone edged with resignation as well as just a hint of humor.

“Justin has a behavior issue with dark skinned people fitting Thant’s general physique. When he encounters them, he is utterly compliant in every way and will not do a single thing for himself as a consequence as long as Thant is around and indicating any need for that compliance. In other words, when he and a man of Thant’s description are in the same room, Justin will obey him in every fashion.

The result is that Justin will not do anything for himself, although the spotty evidence from his past does indicate that his current extreme will eventually lessen to a more reasonable level. The behavior stems from an early childhood trauma that we do not quite understand in detail. Therefore, Colonel, we are very careful of him around any male with dark skin, especially the other Cadets of African descent.

While we haven’t noticed any major peculiarities, we have noticed that he does seem more prone to honor their suggestions than he does with the other Cadets. In the simplest of explanations, he has a marked tendency to trust black males preferentially.”

Aflek scowled as the routine continued and without missing a beat, Thant removed the catheter and the shunt to the saline solution as Munroe rose from his chair to claim the prizes. Aflek came closer as the depilation progressed and with some hesitation his next question sounded.

“Is shaving him necessary?”

Munroe snickered as he carried the urine into the small laboratory where the entire bag was emptied into flasks which were soon capped with tube riddled stoppers. Thant, though, was the one to answer with the same amused edge.

“In Capriacil clients, body hair is the leading cause of poor hygiene. Even as young as he is, he has a lot of very fine body hair, due to the effect of Capriacil itself on the genes which govern fingernail and hair growth. It may not seem significant to you but hair is a sensory appendage, especially body hair. By shaving him thoroughly, we are eliminating a potentially debilitating sensory input which may very well have caused his failure to bathe properly.

We are also looking into known oral depilates and drugs with the known side effect of excessive hair loss as it is rather impractical to shave him every few days. The immediate gain should be the ability to wash himself without much assistance, although we aren’t quite sure of the reality until we try. As a favor, I do ask that you handle the shower as he behaves differently for you than for me.

The operative element is minimal assistance to determine how much of the essential task he can achieve for himself without stepping in. If I were to oversee, he would just stand still until I turned the water off or did the work for him.”

Aflek came closer yet as Thant scraped the razor down Justin’s seemingly bare chest and Justin glanced at the razor out of curiosity. He was no less amazed than Aflek was when he saw the unexpectedly dense clump of fine, down-like hair the razor had cut away from his skin and was, in that moment, left keen to the change of sensation in that place where the razor had been. He sighed softly and became more compliant yet to the process of denuding and Aflek spoke up with more caution than custom.

“Won’t shaving him make the hair problem worse?”

Thant responded with a sigh of his own but the answer was undeniably honest.

“To a point, yes. However, if we don’t do something, the hair will still grow and the cumulative effect will be his reluctance for any kind of touch and a definite hatred of attire as well as a markedly reduced benefit from the topical ointment. It’s a case of one evil over another with the lesser evil being the razor or some other depilate like a topical, however caustic it might be.

On that score, Colonel, we do know from other Capriacil clients that compounds like Nair and Aussie cause unbearable dermal irritation despite Lidocaine ointment and three of the hair loss causatives we have tried with others failed in voluntary experiments. Of the remaining nine drugs with the known side effect of hair loss in most people, one seems effective, which is why we are currently studying it with clients in mind.

The rest vary considerably by individual. So, as he is the most sensitive of the Capriacil clients, we opted for shaving until we found something that works without gastric irritation or the triggering of unwanted muscle spasms. We did consider chemotherapy but discarded it rather quickly due to the physical debilitation aspect. Waxing was also considered and discarded as other Capriacil clients could not stand the pain and shaving is inherently faster as well as relatively painless.”

In the small, makeshift laboratory, the whine of small centrifuges sounded amid the clink of glass vials as Munroe began the extraction of the vital compounds from the green urine. Justin winced at the unwelcome noise but Thant was still closest and therefore to be obeyed without protest. The ritual event progressed onward without relent and when it was finished from head to toe with nothing missed, Thant casually discarded the spent razors and put away the shaving cream.

In turn, Justin rose from the bed feeling vastly improved and without hesitation he aimed himself for the shower, his excitement plain as he sought for himself the changes to previous limitations which he so seldom contemplated.

It was to change his world, that new study of himself. . .

CHAPTER TWENTY

Having that one unit he blithely named a synthesizer changed everything. With that one unit functioning, however inefficiently or with so many flaws, his mind did gain the means to express itself with both speed and reasonable accuracy once he had conceived of the proper resonant frequencies for the metals he needed. From that beginning the potent excitement built, the need to create inexorably dominating him as if he were nothing but the means for its expression.

Indeed, he was a demonic, fixated being as the slow surrender to the sacred quest continued on. Notebooks were filled with theoretical resonant frequencies for a host of ordinary metals and then, days into his desperation to accomplish the unbelievable, the notebooks were simply abandoned while his mind focused and his hands grew busy. It was not long at all before that first synthesizer was remade, the flaws he could eliminate vanquished and new, seemingly immortal N dimensional taps fashioned.

With endless power to work with and his computer ready, there were no limits and time meant all. Components of all kinds were first programmed into the connected computer as data files comprised of energy patterns, frequency outputs and logical coordinates and then he settled into the task of building a better replication unit, one made of alloyed panels of Brunite and silica that were found best for the task of containing such phenomenal amounts of energy.

Tools then followed, tools first conceived in his mind as discrete elements which were assembled one part at a time into the final creations that were finally powered by wholly redesigned extradimensional taps which were as white as Brunite and sure to last far longer than any of the ones he had made before them. The new, third incarnation was astoundingly capable and the new extradimensional taps, unlike their predecessors, did not suffer from rogue surges.

Indeed, they kept on producing the stable, smooth energy he desired as part after part was summoned from raw energy from another dimension like thoughts reshaped by inexplicable magic into reality itself. Yet even with that newfound advantage he tried for perfection with a desperation only his brother could understand and his reach expanded as a consequence while technology advanced far beyond the two hundred year mark he had stated to others.

His dream of building the Split V Wing Adventurer Seven was no longer merely a dream as the requisite, small body panels and specialized fusing strips were called into being and stacked to the side. Shimmering, seemingly frail crystals which were in actuality wholly

contained computers with unthinkable data storage capacity suddenly existed, yet only when imagination gave rise to the template designs and the synthesizer was then engaged.

Interfaces were made for those incredible computers and sensors which had never been a reality became wholly real, each a unique concept his mind tried to expand upon without success as the challenge of his personal mission continued onward without relent, pause or quarter. Indeed, the private zeal to achieve the dream had become the ultimate obsession and without thought he neglected to slip out of the bomb shelter which was now full of components and parts to eat and later, to shower or even sleep.

The madness of his awakened skin was set to the side as his needs so personal took charge. Even half crazed by sensory madness, the work continued until exhaustion alone bested him and yet even then he slept for less than three hours to awaken in a daze to resume the work he had dreamed of for most of his life. Even then each part was intimately known and mentally marked for a specific location in his future craft.

Element by element he prepared everything in advance, his pauses to rest brief and the water meant for the future survival in the event of catastrophe consumed just as sparingly. It was in that state of mind that time lost meaning for this was the holy, sacred quest for which he existed. Indeed, his only limit was the replication unit itself and his impatience with it grew with each delay of a part which took seconds to fabricate but minutes to cool.

Cadets came down to find him committed to his dream and as they watched him work without any outward sign of distress, he ignored them out of hand. After all, they were wholly unimportant to the moment or the mission. So, as they watched him progress from one replication pattern to the next with no pause for rest beyond a short respite that became something less than real sleep and as he ate rations meant for the future, he pressed on to find his upper limits of self and person.

Eventually he began building the keys to success as the heart of a Graviton lifter was built, the solitary discs which defied all but the most complex of quantum equations ready for the grand, incredible surges of controlled power which would give them the power to lift tons into space without effort. And within that complex madness of commingled sensation and imagination, the interfaces of ordinary copper wire transformed into tangled networks of wholly new synthetics which had never before existed.

By then two entire weeks of time had passed him by but time was a trivial matter when this work was so vital to the quest. Cadets came and went as he finally achieved the replication of the last preordained part and only then did he yield to the long overdue necessities of a shower, new clothes and Lidocaine. Yet even then he was careful of his achievements and thorough with the deletion of his data files.

Without hesitation he erased each file and then wrote one of the few programs he understood, one that was in actuality a program to render the target hard drive useless until the hard drive itself was fully reformatted and therefore cleansed of all previous data. From that moment onward he was again the relatively docile Cadet named Justin Brunheldigon.

That lasted only for the length of time needed for his being to be redeemed by a shower, a shaving and then a hot meal before falling asleep in his long unused bed, all while Aflek reprimanded him for personal neglect. His dreams were feverish and vivid as that long time of fourteen hours passed by, a time in which he mentally assembled every part in the framework built long ago in the barn where the dream itself had first taken form.

In that dream so taut with expectations and dreads, every possible flaw was faced and yet the goal so close to completion did not fail, not at least in that oft repeated dream. Yet even then he saw more than the future reality that was now within reach. Fragments of the future were found within the vivid explorations of every contingency which could yet take place.

In some of those fragments the military rushed in to steal his most prized possession just as he was about to climb into the cockpit for that eventful launch into the heights of space. In others, politicians with troops of policemen sought him with passionate zeal amid the lies and innuendo that he was shamelessly the most dangerous being on the whole planet. In others, jealous assassins without faces fired their long range rifles with the intent to murder and in those horrific dreams so almost real, his body flinched and jerked with the imagined pain of being struck with a bullet that felt like a paintball with ten times the force of impact.

In a few that truly unsettled him and brought out whimpering as he shifted and tossed on the narrow twin bed, he was the captive of nameless, faceless agents seeking his family for reasons unknown. And finally the revelations of the ancient past rose up to further color the previous nightmares, the elements of painful torture explored in light of his extremely sensitive skin and the madness it caused without effort.

All of those dreams tormented and yet they were not as horrible as the simple dream that came twice, the one where Aflek ever so calmly and firmly denied him the right to participate in that all important contest where his vital ship needed to be for the world to see the inspired event that was such a critical quest and all consuming goal. He jolted awake at the end of that second expression of this one true nightmare to find his body slick with sweat and his bed soiled.

Still, despite the faint, mildly unpleasant odor that most noses would miss, the unpleasant sensations that did sting his heightened, awakened skin, he lay there for a few minutes in

the difficult task of settling his mind before actually rising to face the chore of redeeming his bed and person. He rose with almost no noise made to find Aflek perched on the chair at the desk with strings of computer code on the display, codes written by Earnest and command strings that were now being truncated and modified, each change saved to a new file while the next change was considered intently.

Justin studied the example of transformation for a few enlightening minutes while wiping himself mostly dry with the edges of the sheet for he was able to grasp what Aflek was doing to already impressive, if excessive programming variables. Indeed, as he grasped the pattern of Aflek's changes, he was almost captured by the mystery that had always eluded, the art and science of a programmer's mind.

Still, he grasped the secret that Aflek had clearly mastered and now employed for the Colonel was ever so carefully refining Earnest's programming with small deletions and sometimes with additions that expanded functions or linked one program element to others that had been kept firmly disconnected. He contemplated the programming variables as one change led to another in a curious pattern that did not waver and when he made too much noise by accident while peeling the sheets from the bed itself, Aflek quickly saved his work and closed the windows before turning to study him intently.

Aflek then studied the other empty beds before tapping in a command to bring the room's overhead lights into play. In that increased illumination which exposed Justin's nighttime sins, the able Headmaster sighed with a scowl but still he said nothing as Justin resumed the chore so familiar. It was the most awkward of silences that Aflek broke apart quietly as Justin balled up the saturated sheets with the intention of depositing them in a laundry bin.

"Those go to the medical wing after you shower and dress, at which time you will fully submit to a complete medical evaluation of your mind and body which is likely to take two or three days. After that, Cadet Brunheldigon, we are going to have a discussion about your plainly self destructive obsession with an Adventurer Seven model. The examination and your subsequent stay in the medical wing will give you ample time in which to review all the various ways in which we can remedy the obsession and reduce it to its proper status as a deep interest and strong passion.

Do keep in mind the simple fact that if you allow any dream or desire to possess you in this fashion, the end result is most often self inflicted failure. Additionally, Space Battles is fiction and you are letting this fictitious reality rule your behavior and conduct to the point of compromising your academic standing and your already impaired and therefore woefully deficient social development.

In the real world, your games of paintball were far more valuable than this obsession with a full scale replica of a fantasy. At least with the paintball games, you were interacting to some degree with your peers and therefore gaining prized, if small, valuable lessons in socialization and teamwork.”

Justin heard the tone and lowered his head meekly until the meanings of the words flickered through his mind to summon the realities of paintball. A moment of anger pulsed but it vanished as his head lifted, yet long after the anger had died away, simple defiance remained to prompt him to speak with polite respect while countering this key authority figure’s words on a fundamental point.

The words he desired sounded and yet even as he spoke them, the ways to win a victory against the Headmaster were being defined, a path treacherous and convoluted, yet one attainable if his tone was carefully governed and his words were picked with care.

“With all due respect sir, the paintball games are mostly me against all of them. I’m not usually picked as a team player.”

Aflek was momentarily startled but he was quick to mask the event with a deeper scowl and then a sigh which clearly evidenced his dislike for that admission.

“Why do they go against you in that fashion?”

Justin shrugged, the reason a mere assessment of his known abilities as compared to theirs.

“I have demonstrated the ability to win despite superior numbers, sir. Additionally, sir, we were in the process of analyzing the extent of my limits when we were denied further exterior paintball contests by reason of the military attempts to acquire my person. The other Cadets are rather curious as to the number of combatants required to take me out in a wild environ.

As things currently stand, I am capable of holding my own against two ten member teams with a relative success of ninety-eight percent elimination within the four hour duration of the game itself and I have managed to achieve complete elimination of the opposing teams four times within two hours, although that was when the rules were changed to ground me.”

Aflek was surprised indeed and without a word he turned to the keyboard, instructions and override codes entered to summon the recorded paintball game scores. They appeared almost instantly to validate Justin’s claims and after studying the data for several seconds of tortuous silence, he sighed and spoke with less irritation.

“Have you been defined in a team setting?”

Justin replied dutifully and honestly.

“Not as yet, sir. The initial evaluation of the new entrant is always one against all until the kill event occurs four times in succession as a repeatable event, thereby determining the contestant’s abilities and proficiencies with team play in mind. The causative reason for this practice is the likelihood that the majority of the team players will be eliminated during the course of the four hour game event.

Therefore, the most adept member of the team is most likely to be the end survivor who determines the team’s success or failure in the local paintball competitions and possibly in the regional championships, if the team in question manages to survive the local elimination rounds held in Gracey Park in Susanville. I’m told that Maxey has never achieved survival through the local elimination rounds.

While it is a relevant issue for the Cadets as a whole, the contests are ordinarily less important than the modeling conventions which showcase the new gauge and engine technology developed for both the kit cars and the kit airplanes. This, as you know, is due primarily to the income derived from the sales of the kits and, as a historical annotation, the Cadets have most often enabled the school’s survival by that same income or through similar arrangements.

Additionally, sir, the kits have become recognized as a symbolic element of Maxey Military Academy and many of our customers are repeats. This, sir, necessitates the elevation of the kits above the more personally prestigious paintball competitions due to that symbolic and traditional element of exceptional quality work sold for a reasonable price. While I have not fully reviewed the annual sale records, I am aware that the clientele has apparently doubled in the last three years.

Additionally, sir, they will not let me assist much in the kit manufacture due to physical size, although they do acknowledge my expertise in a consultant position or more often as a quality control inspector in the relevant issues of carbon fiber composition, resin saturation and so on. Therefore, sir, where it matters, I am already a team player with a clearly defined value, although in the construction of their half scale shuttle, I am dead weight.

First, the model is being built of plywood with fiberglass matting and small lift turbines of known outputs utilized in a standard format as opposed to a novel design with unknown elements. I’m relatively useless as they know the application standards and techniques of fiberglass matting as well as I do. Also, sir, they employ the same lift turbines year after year in the same relative configuration as opposed to new designs or placements which

would require quick rethinking of the model's overall dimensions, weight ratios and so on, which further reduces my relative value in that situation.

The rules of engagement in construction require that I tactfully accede to the governing protocols due only to my physical stature. After all, sir, they cannot afford to make an exception as it would establish a precedent which could eventually get another Cadet similar to my physiology killed or severely injured in the future. My remaining option, as a consequence, is to build and enter my own model without the assistance of the other Cadets and as a separate, private entry as opposed to a second entry as a student of Maxey Military Academy.

As I am working alone in every aspect to comply with the Cadet protocols and the contest guidelines, I must necessarily press my limits at certain times in order to meet the mission deadline. Add in my preexisting handicaps and the necessary delays such handicaps cause with medical examinations, routine shaves and two daily showers and my available time for ship construction is reduced by almost thirty percent.

My apparent obsession and equally apparent self abuse by determinant neglect was simply the only way to achieve the core parts manufacture within the timeframe of the contest deadline. At this point, with that initial sacrifice made, I have all the key components on hand for a relatively leisurely assembly of the parts into the frame as well as the necessary tools to fuse or cut the synthetic alloys themselves.

I do intend to accomplish the objective with time to spare, sir, and I do hope you would be one of the first test subjects for the simulation of actual flight. I may need your assistance in tweaking the simulation program Earnest promised me for maximum effect in the applied sense and you do seem quite capable of such revisionary adjustments, although that is clearly a matter of life experience and prior training.

Privately, sir, I'm mostly thumbs with programming of any kind. I am, however, reasonably adept at rote copying for those simple programs which are proven useful and therefore committed to memory as assets and able to edit and merge code from different programs to approximate the end programming goal. So, sir, any assistance you could give me with the simulation program's revision would be most welcome.

As to my behavior issues, I will pay more attention to what I am doing so that I make fewer mistakes."

Justin saw the slight widening of Aflek's eyes as the man was momentarily motionless but the man swiftly managed a thin, forced grin before those startled eyes blinked and the moment of revelation came to an end. Yet in the next few seconds of silence that came to

be, Aflek studied Justin intently from head to toe before breaking that silence with carefully chosen words delivered in a pointedly neutral tone.

“Then I will not restrict you to the interior of the school itself unless you repeat this untenable behavior. If you do so, I will lock you inside and summarily deny you further chances to indulge in that self destructive behavior. Now, get yourself cleaned up and report to the medical wing. Additionally, as a reminder of the consequences of such behavior, I expect you to wear pads when sleeping from now on.

Don’t forget that your bedding and attire, when you change it, from diapers to the outer shirts, all go to the medical ward for compound extraction. I am also considering the requirement that you report there when you have to pee but given the situation and the distance between the medical wing and the machine shop, I will find some other solution. Regardless of what it happens to be, you will comply with the arrangements.

I trust that you are already aware of why such arrangements are deemed necessary.”

Justin sensed the fact that Aflek was nervous without knowing why but in this moment and situation, the odd nervousness of his governing authority figure was set aside for a polite, proper response spoken with calm dignity that made Aflek pause in that moment of stillness which preceded another measuring study of Justin’s person. In that second repetition of tension so subtle, Justin had one moment of grand inspiration which left him adding more to his simple summary of what he knew about himself.

“Of course, sir. The compounds in my urine and sweat are of exceptional medical value as disease purgatives which function on the genetic level to thoroughly eradicate the diseases in question from the host being. Given the obvious value of these extracted compounds, my compliance will be unstinting and complete, almost to the same degree as your expertise with programming variables.”

Aflek swallowed in the moment of tension which again faded so quickly and when Aflek spoke again, the words were impersonal and brisk.

“Then you are dismissed.”

Justin provided the ritual salute and fell into compliance, the issues of self begun as Aflek turned back to the terminal to access the instructor databases. Justin assembled his necessary gear as the second instructor arrived and when the lean, wiry man assumed the chore of being his shadow, Justin simply carried on with his affairs with the sense of being safe.

Yet even in the rituals that governed his normal existence, he was beginning to see issues that marked him as different from others. The complex problem proved to be a useful distraction until the shower itself began and when the warm, pressurized spray of water hit his untamed skin, the shock of sensation left him almost paralyzed and gasping for air. Yet even in his clear distress the watching instructor did not intercede and the other filthy Cadets slicked in mud just sidled into place while he ever so slowly worked through the bitter consequence of self neglect.

Indeed, the only thing the instructor did to assist was to press the shower tap when the timed spray of warm water ceased and then so quickly that Justin could not recover from the experience itself. It was an event bordering on mental torture but as Justin worked through the vastly slowed motions of scrubbing himself clean with soap that bore the imprints of his fingers, he saw the reasons and finally justified them logically.

Even he could see the reason for this treatment as he finally finished the horribly long shower, the last of the lather purged from his toes and his body again redeemed. It was a defining lesson in what he had to gain for himself and by that defined weakness caused by Capriacil, he was again changed and given a challenge which would clearly take a lifetime to master.

In that understanding of himself he turned to face the instructor who had assisted in the self determined lesson that no words could adequately explain and when he faced the man, he presented himself for an inspection the instructor was unprepared to give. He spoke with the grim assessment of his personal determinations and did so quietly as more Cadets arrived, their paintball guns hastily disassembled and cleaned before they bothered to attend to their filthy states.

“Did I miss anywhere, sir? If I did, I will try again to improve the regimen.”

The instructor scowled at this expression of unexpected intimacy and when the tense man did nothing, one Cadet abandoned his paintball gun and simply stepped in to review Justin’s person with unexpected skill and proper attention to detail. It was just one more subtle transfer of claim from the instructors to the Cadets but in that seemingly minor event lay the transformation of Justin’s life among the Cadets he had in majority avoided.

No longer was he unreachable or to be excluded from the small cliques and private groups that existed even among the student body. By that necessary expression of weakness and inadequacy, the other Cadets came to see him as more than a being who preferred isolation to contact. In that transformative event so personal and revealing, they saw through the many veils he had established. They gained the vital insight into his well hidden need for dignity in the face of personal adversity.

They caught sight of the underlying reasons why he was so reluctant to merge into their affairs beyond limited contact sports or through mechanical expressions which were truly his strongest suits. Yet before they fully assimilated that new gain, Justin settled into the older routines and new requirements that took him from the bathroom and conveyed him and his soiled laundry to the medical wing where the rite of extraction began in a new unit built specifically for the task, a unit that seemed little different from an ordinary washing machine.

He was curious about its design and shameless in his study of it as Thant gave him a warm grin, the hidden tubes and fluid traps within the centrifugal unit exposed by the removal of a panel that Thant casually set to the side while the still silent unit was loaded. Thant said nothing as Justin's clean uniform was pulled at and in the strange, blind trust that existed, Justin complied, his clean uniform soon added to the centrifuge.

Thant added the solvent and turned the surprisingly quiet unit on as Justin remained fascinated by the dynamics of the mechanics while the vital compounds from his being were extracted into ordinary flasks as particulates. He was so absorbed in the ways the machine worked that the prick of a needle was missed and only when the shot of Benadryl revealed itself by its effects did he realize the truth.

Thant caught him before he fell and within seconds the known quantity of an Albuterol inhaler's aerosols were added to the event taking place, an event that left him lost to oblivion and wholly at Thant's mercy.

But even then he felt utterly safe. . .

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

He awakened oh, so slowly to discover truly taut, almost terrified Cadets pared down to their underclothes arranged in a long line that extended out of the medical wing and well down the stairs, a line that inched forward in a set, timed fashion timed to the delivery of two injections administered by Thant and one other doctor Justin had never seen before. He shifted in the bed while wondering why he had not been restrained but even with that advantage of such freedom, he lay still to watch the ways others reacted to Thant's huge bulk and natural aura of simple menace which was vastly different from the reality of the man.

He knew personally that Thant was amazingly gentle and a truly wonderful person. His eyes focused as he became more alert and finally he saw the end destination of each Cadet as they stepped through a tunnel--like, strange construct made of white rods and flat panels after hesitantly shedding the last vestiges of attire. One instructor was the keeper of their underclothes as they passed through the curious device and while each seemed shaken upon emergence, they did not seem overly disturbed.

He shifted as other doctors were seen perusing the temporary terminals that had been assembled, the views on the display screens full of incredible details for each of the Cadets who navigated the inner heart of that unknown unit. Their physical beings unfolded in every detail from a dozen perspectives and when one terminal Justin could see flashed with a red smiley face, that doctor spoke softly.

"Cadet Markirson stays. Bed four."

Aflek's voice sounded softly in turn, a calm, self possessed question that was merely curious. Aflek, though, was nowhere to be seen and his voice had sounded from nowhere in particular.

"Is it serious?"

The doctor responded with a moment's study of the long line yet to be processed as that young Cadet emerged to discover his underclothing in transfer to another doctor who herded him to a bed that he claimed with obvious fear.

"A treatable genetic complication that ordinarily results in extreme asthma and occasionally causes respiratory failure during sleep. It may take a week or two to permanently rectify the issue but we have everything we need for the gene therapy itself.

I'm assigning Doctor Krump to handle the procedure as he is rather talented with rebreathers and venous shunts."

Aflek responded with a sigh and by that sigh Justin traced the sound to the terminal's speakers, a proof that told him most plainly that Aflek was elsewhere.

"Will that give him any unexpected advantages?"

The doctor snickered as he responded.

"It will eliminate the wheezing he most likely exhibits while sleeping and restore him to a normal level of physical function, which is as much of an advantage as he needs. Untreated, he will become a severe asthmatic in a year or two and as this is genetic, most doctors would assume the underlying cause is untreatable. Instructor Ormend, pull Cadet Freckson, bed five."

Aflek posed the same question without pause, yet without more interest than mild curiosity and no intention of interfering.

"What's his situation?"

The doctor responded with a sigh of irritation but the response still came without delay as that lean Cadet obeyed the rules and took possession of bed five.

"He has a parasitic infestation I've never seen before and since this is a full scale remediation event, I'm taking no chances. I can't do anything about his hemoglobin deficiency but I'm hoping it's directly caused by the parasites."

Justin frowned thoughtfully as the line kept moving, the medical truth that most of the Cadets were in respectable good health learned when the last passed through the unknown scanning system with only a handful restricted to the medical ward for treatment. Yet even with that handful the ward was almost full and while the majority of these Cadets had minor issues, they seemed truly terrified of treatment.

It was a puzzling response to self improvement and so Justin watched and studied as the doctors began the treatments that would rectify each issue. He saw in each professional the smooth intimacy that Thant and Munroe exhibited and in that one quality he realized that these were all doctors that Thant and Munroe had worked with more than once. The Cadets were sometimes startled or shocked by that unconscious expression of casual expectation but slowly they adapted and when Justin was discovered to be awake, the other Cadets learned why that unusual degree of casual intimacy existed.

They witnessed the ways he complied to the handling of these unknown men as they soothed his awakening skin with ointment and examined him thoroughly for indications of rash before purging away body hair. Through it all Justin was unstintingly compliant and wholly docile, these events the regimens so vital to his continuance as a sane, rational being with the allowance to continue his quest to build the V Wing Skim-fighter.

Yet in the end he was herded into the same unit that all the other Cadets had used and when he entered, the strange humming hit his bones and the odd vibrations of electrons stung his numbed skin to the point of personal distress. He emerged as a plainly tortured being and as the doctors reviewed his unique responses to that experience, he forced his distracted mind to focus on the displays of his physical being rendered down to such comprehensive perspectives.

The doctors allowed him to review the results and as he spotted the dozens of red smiley faces that popped up on the display, the duty doctor chuckled softly.

“That’s normal for a Capriacil client. In fact, if we don’t get at least fifty flags, we’d be very alarmed. Just watch and wait. The program will hit the fifty count and your actual summary will appear once the program recognizes you as a Capriacil client. From there, we’ll see if you match the tabulated results of the other clients or if you are one of the divergent two percent.

Doctor Munroe thinks you are a divergent and that means you need specialized training to cope with unexpected sensory overload and the attendant increase of physical strength you are then capable of achieving. In that case, we would require you to undertake a more comprehensive exercise regimen to maximize your muscle development, reflex speeds and overall dexterity.”

Justin nodded without comment as the program blanked the screen now full of smiley faces and seconds later the humble percentage chart appeared, one that defined him as a percentage of zero point zero one. The tabulated display of that singular number then vanished to reveal his being in every fashion, yet when the visuals of his body in so many perspectives returned, the image of his brain was foremost.

The doctor took the time to study the bright regions in yellow that tried for green and the linear line of soft blue that split the image neatly in half as Justin simply memorized the display itself and when Justin sighed, the doctor spoke quietly in explanation.

“The closer to blue the displays happen to be, the more intense the brain functions actually are. Your hippocampus, the blue line, is remarkably active and that’s rather strange as the hippocampus of most Capriacil clients is almost red. Also, the yellow regions show that

your brain has interconnections that most brains don't have. You don't seem to have locally, activity defined regional centers for individual skills like languages or emotions.

According to this scan, your whole brain works all the time to accommodate data absorption and the following data processing, which usually results in those mental seizures which come from the brain taking over biological resources to maximize the data processing events like technology extrapolation. When the brain is faced with the need to process such huge amounts of data and then is required to extrapolate the unknown of technology that doesn't yet exist, your brain does so at the expense of the rest of your body.

The autonomic aspect of the central nervous system then takes over cardiac function and respiration while the body itself enters a state of shock. In doing so, the body provides the brain with more resources to further speed the processing of data. Blood flow reaches dangerous levels and in such events your blood pressure is quite elevated. That's why you respire at high rates of speed and perspire so profusely.

Then, when the data event ends, your body has to go through another shock as all the resources the brain had demanded are suddenly available for other functions. Your organs are slammed with glucose and other chemicals that force them into another round of excitation and that is the reason why we prefer to knock you out while you prefer to write out everything in notebooks during the settling out period as the body finds its balance and calms down to normal levels of activity.

The trick to cope best would be to not write things down immediately but rather remember the details and write them out later when the body and mind are once more synchronized."

Justin said nothing and the visual was closed, the next of the many presented for Justin's review. The doctor then explained the oddity of his cardiovascular system with the aspect of his hyperactive mind mentioned often for it was the organ that ruled the body. Justin simply studied and listened as the explanations grew complex. Interestingly, the doctor did not attempt to mediate his word choices in any fashion and as one false color outlay became another, Justin learned more about biology than he realized.

Indeed, when the chart detailing his lymphatic system appeared as the last rendition of his biological self, he discovered that he did indeed understand why his glands produced the peculiar compounds that were so valuable to others. He spoke up as the doctor paused for breath, his own words simpler than the doctor's own choices but valid nonetheless.

"So my pheromones, which are actually produced at the cellular levels, are concentrated in the lymph glands and excreted as waste byproducts due to the secondary chemical processing of Adenase Triphosphate in conjunction with the compound you defined as

Miphrosin, which is unique to Capriacil clients and therefore a biological tag. And, as my pheromones are radically different from ordinary human pheromones, according to the prevalent theory, I lack the same degree of attractiveness that ordinary males of any age possess when encountering the opposite sex.

Additionally, by the same logic, I don't react to ordinary pheromonal compounds for the same reason. They are too different for me to react to in the normal encounter with the opposite sex. To the female persuasion, I am virtually invisible as a sexual being in the biological response sense and will always remain so due to this difference in my physiology.

Therefore, if I do begin to mature with the eventual resumption of cyclic growth, the female being will never regard me as a potentially viable mate. As a consequence, I will then be forced to find other means and methods of enticing women if and when I find myself mature enough to pursue the adventure of biological reproduction. Of course, we reference the metabolic diagramming six windows previously which show the relative immobility of defined cellular expansion.

By doing so, we again revisit the fact that my developmental physical growth is either stopped entirely or progressing at rates that are almost undetectable without extensive, specific tests which may or may not yet exist. This, of course, is due mostly to the severe experimental drugs to which I was exposed as the last resort prior to full incarceration without any remediating drugs of any kind due to biological intolerance or outright adaptation to them.

So, in the summary, I may not grow at all for the rest of my life and if I do begin to grow, the advancement of that growth will occur at a rate that is well below the redefined norms for the other Capriacil clients. I, therefore, must determine if the goal of reproduction applies to my person as a need with psychological value or if that aspect of reproduction is a relatively unimportant event.

Logically, given the slowed growth cycle of Capriacil genetics, breeding has its unknown complications and attendant consequences, which I would have to fully understand if and when I do find myself able to reproduce. Naturally, with these unknowns, such a determination must be carefully weighed and considered before any sexual encounter takes place."

The doctor was impressed but the man pursed his lips and tapped the keys, a new rendition called up to reveal Justin's reproductive organs. The text on either side of that rendition was extensive but the doctor spoke the brief summation with a casual air that was actually a smug declaration Justin was not at all prepared for.

“Actually, you are already capable, if we employ radical techniques. The spermatozoa is already viable. We would have to reverse the vasectomy someone conducted on you in early childhood and due to the nature of the incisions performed at that time and the intervening years, the actual chance of success is roughly fifty percent. More relevant, though, is your complete lack of sexual interest, either with yourself or with others.

According all the data we have on your prior history before Capriacil, you failed to exhibit any indications of sensory desire after the Daylan situation. From that defining event to the present, you have shown a set dislike for personal touch. When administered Capriacil, this already well established preference was further enhanced to the current extreme by soak behaviors with Lidocaine in a self treatment attempt, of which only one event took place.

Since, you have been remarkably consistent in the denial of self touch in most aspects and situations. As a consequence, the majority of your shower events have been nothing more than rinsing events during which you literally mimed the motions of self cleansing. In fact, we have a program designed to count the actual number of times you do touch yourself during hygiene related events and so far it is still in the single digits.

As to the shower you took four days ago, the shower itself took more than three hours to conclude, although you did manage to cleanse yourself without outside assistance and then with the whole bathing event definably one single touch as opposed to the normal multiple, intermittent touches most people would have employed. Given our experiences with soak behaviors and your peculiar personal issues which predate the Capriacil, we don't think that you will ever manage a shower event in a timely fashion, which is arbitrarily set at ten minutes.

So, with the outcomes of your psychology known and well defined, the odds of you actually wanting to breed in more than the logical sense is extremely low. That does set you apart from the other Capriacil clients in ways that you are unlikely to ever fully grasp as most of them are rather adventuresome with tactile stimulation. We do want to extract a seminal sample but as the procedure is painful for the ordinary man and considerably more so for someone with your heightened skin sensitivities, we have not done so.

Also, while you might think we could extract a viable sample during an induced knockout, the assumption is quite invalid. We aren't sure why as of yet but the combination of Benadryl and Albuterol effectively neutralizes the viability of spermatozoa in all the male Capriacil clients who are susceptible to that recombinant knockout approach. As a fascinating opposite, the Capriacil females who respond to the recombinant knockout in the same manner as you do become exceptionally receptive to male interests, although the released eggs are actually sterile for reasons unknown.

But, as we have come to learn, the residuals of Capriacil in the revised genomic tables does trigger accelerated development in the gametes. This takes place in every case, although not with the attendant physical development of the penile organ or the body itself. Indeed, if you could handle looking down to self examine your personal organs, you would see that your testes are rather large for a child of your age, on the order of ten percent.

This is not a surprise, by the way. Every Capriacil male has undergone the same relative increase in testes dimension and of the thirty-seven who were known to be completely impotent due to chemical exposure or physiological damage are now quite able to sire offspring if we could rectify the sterility issue. In some of these cases, the missing gonads actually grew back in spite of the fact that they had been excised years before due to various reasons from surgical necessity to combat events.

In the regrowth cases, we have had to intervene with supplemental surgery to restore pathways or to provide a male member with functional capability to some degree but in these extreme cases, the body itself has taken over to correct for our inadequacies as molecular surgeons. It is this aspect of regeneration in the Capriacil client that supports our premise that we have a fifty percent chance of success if we were to perform the corrective surgery on you.

Admittedly the scarring is severe and the vas deferens has whole millimeters missing in five areas but the body does know itself and with this in mind, we also know that the body regenerates with almost no scarring during the healing process. What does disturb us in your case is the fact that the vasectomy was conducted in early childhood and performed to prevent reconstruction.

Additionally, your parents were wholly unaware of that surgical event until we asked them why it had been permitted. As we have detailed records that encompass the majority of your life to work with, we are therefore able to determine that the surgical event took place at or about your fourth year. With that determination to work with, we logically assume that the vasectomy was conducted at Dylan during your incarceration there.

Being the thorough people that we are and while the trail is very cold, we will eventually learn the name of the doctor who performed the surgery and then the name of the person who authorized the surgical event itself. In the meantime, you are the one who has to determine if reconstruction is worth the effort and the attendant pain. You might find it rather surprising that your parents, while profoundly incensed by the revelation of that transgression against your person, have chosen to leave the final decision of whether or not to seek restorative surgery wholly to you.

While it would be painful, the surgical procedure itself is not all that difficult or complex. This clinic is fully equipped for surgical needs far in excess of the procedure and all of us are competent enough as surgeons to perform the remediation itself. The relevant aspect we are trying to imprint at this time is that someone took it upon themselves to ruin your genetic future.

That, Justin, is a criminal action, more so as it took place without parental consent and likewise took place when you were utterly helpless and wholly unaware of the ramifications. It is doubly heinous as this event took place when you were a very small child and fully at the mercy of the adults who had snatched you from your parents in the guise of protecting you from further abuses.

So, Justin, if you were not the victim of a vasectomy or unwilling to be touched with intentional intimacy, you could already be a father. We do want to study this more thoroughly but we respect both your person in this instance and your personal issues with pain. Additionally, even if Aflek demanded that we perform the restorative surgery, we would still wait for your determination and then we would honor your wishes.”

Justin scowled solemnly as his mind absorbed every word and as he let the issue soak into the depths of his mind, his eyes turned again to the terminal. He began reading the text which framed the image of his male organs and when the words were grasped through the insight of known lessons in human anatomy and biology, his eyes narrowed in surprise. He was startled by the discovery that this doctor had learned long before and his question sounded, one most careful and cautious.

“Is this tabulation of hormonal derivatives and apparent functions accurate?”

The doctor glanced at the screen before speaking honestly.

“It’s accurate for Capriacil clients because we are in a Capriacil client file. Normal medical profiles chart with normal biological data relevant to the file in review. In fact, the only transfer between the different databases is the comparative analysis during anomalous finds. In your file, for example, we have more than seventy anomalous events which are still being studied.

So, in this case, when we have accurate information, the data is charted in completion to further the exposure of the remaining anomalous events. As to the hormonal derivative tabulations and functions specific to you and the other Capriacil males, we are accurate to ninety percent in percentage and relative function.”

Justin still stared at the relevant information and posed his next question timidly.

“So the fact that I’m not producing actual testosterone is not a problem?”

The doctor exhaled slowly as he turned to study the screen, the derivatives themselves called up and the testosterone values sought. Soon he was caught up in the study that came to an end in a new chart of values, a graph that revealed a formerly missed fact about all Capriacil men. To the doctor it was a shock and without hesitation he pulled a cell phone from his shirt pocket, one that was soon active with the opposite phone far away ringing.

Munroe’s voice was the tenor that responded but in the greeting the doctor made out of habit, Justin heard another voice just as familiar in the background.

“Munroe. Go ahead.”

The doctor spoke to his superior with the surprise of his discovery but even while excited, the doctor calmed and became a more formal person while Justin listened to the chatter of his brother’s voice which was not easy to glean from the mask of a television program’s dialogue.

“Justin just pointed out a testosterone issue that none of the charting programs caught. None of the Capriacil males have testosterone as such, although the derivatives from normal testosterone metabolism are present at standard levels. His, by the way, are thirty percent below the averaged norms for the other men in the study and he has two additional anomalous hormones which don’t have a defined function.

I’m still running the database search to see if the same derivatives show up for other males and I’m inclined to think that it’s going to be a match with fifteen percent, specifically the same fifteen percent who can make the genetic cleansing compounds to some degree. I have likewise informed him of the vasectomy issue and he is rather unmoved by the meanings implied.

Additionally, he has responded to the entire situation in a majority logical manner which I find privately unsettling. In fact, the most emotion he has shown has been related to the hormone disparity that I am now citing and that was more shock than surprise.”

Munroe chuckled as Earnest’s voice made mention of something concerning a peanut butter sandwich and then Munroe’s voice drowned out the background noise entirely.

“He’s not an emotional person, Jack. How long did the self directed shower actually take?”

The doctor named Jack responded with the added element of sudden calm.

“Four hours, twenty-two minutes, from start to finish. He also asked for an inspection afterwards, which was provided by one of the Cadets as opposed to the instructor in attendance. I’ve run the psychological values four times since and the outcome seems to be that he will never achieve a ten minute shower on his own. The closest projected score was two hours and eleven minutes, based on his known reaction tables and adaptation parameters.

Additionally, the visuals showed him as extremely tense, enough so to leave the well defined imprint of his hand in the soap. It was not at all easy for him to attend to his own hygiene, although I do have to factor in the two week gap and the resulting shock to his system when normal routines resumed. I’ll keep it in mind when he takes another shower.”

Justin heard his brother’s mention of whipped cream and spoke in the brief silence before Munroe could respond.

“Tell Earnest to write my simulation program as I need it in about a month.”

Munroe heard his rushed demand and was startled by it, although the able doctor was quick to capitulate without revealing more than a trace of his passion.

“I will make the mention. Jack, when he’s around and you are having a discussion with me, do be mindful that he can hear a cell phone ear speaker at roughly ten to twenty feet without difficulty and try to remember that I do like my auditory privacy when I am off duty and between assignments. So, if there is nothing pressing or dire, do terminate the call with the full knowledge that I will be reviewing the medical profiles later this evening.

If I find something worth a call, I will do so at that time.”

Jack sighed hard as he terminated the call and as the cell phone returned to his pocket, those wide brown eyes studied Justin’s face. Moments later the doctor posed a question that seemed casual, one edged with intrigue.

“Why did you ask him to pass a message to your brother for a program when you could post the message through the network yourself?”

Justin scowled most thoughtfully as he weighed the issue in light of Munroe’s preference for privacy and finally he responded as vaguely as possible out of nothing more than respect for the able doctor’s desire to be left alone with some aspect of personal space.

“I know he will deliver the message in a timely fashion, probably in person. Doctor Munroe is a very reliable person in such matters. Earnest may have e-mail but he sometimes waits a week to go through it all.”

Jack’s narrowed eyes widened as the man’s curiosity was assuaged and as the issue was forgotten, Justin posed a question of his own with careful hesitation.

“Can I get dressed? I want to start on the assembly of my ship for the modeling convention.”

Jack scowled and spoke with a brisk, firm note.

“After you take a self directed shower. I need the audiovisual record to recompute the behavior variables and revise the projected outcomes as well as see if the issue with excessive clenching is due to terror or due to some other cause.”

Justin sighed tiredly as he heard the directive and without resistance he complied.

But all the while he was thinking of Earnest. . .

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The resumption of reasonably stable routines left Justin torn between breaking the rules established by Aflek and the need to comply for his own greater good. It was an issue he faced each and every day as the regimens meant to foster his physical and mental development ensued, all the while taking away vital time needed to assemble his Adventurer. Yet even in that conflict of interest he became aware of the change among the Cadets, especially the older boys who now made sure he was part of their normally private plans and games.

They were simply the first to admit him into their personal spaces and by their examples the other groups did the same. Then, too, the other Cadets had no hesitation in assisting him in his personal issues of hygiene and self remediation. More often than not he was given a survey after the long and difficult showers that taxed his endurance and tortured his mind, the determinations thereby made sometimes causing a repetition of the challenge which still remained at three hours and a handful of minutes.

But in such events no one assisted, although the issue of time was often cited and given a curious degree of emphasis with the instructors who had openly terminated his normal classwork just to accommodate that necessity. Better yet, the new games of paintball took place and as the teams pitted themselves against him, the outcome proved beyond question that he was gaining more than mere agility and grace from the physical regimens.

In those events, his mind surged with that strange, inexplicable and truly glorious excitement and his body obeyed the insights born of the challenge of besting his peers. Indeed, the instructors who supervised those games were left amazed by the outcomes when a mere two hours passed before the Cadets appeared with paint splattered shirts while he was markedly clean.

In those games, the change of opposing numbers kept rising, the twenty turning into thirty-five before one of the other Cadets managed that lucky shot which stung fiercely for an entire day after the event itself. It was a strange feeling to know the definition of his limits as the routines settled into a more defined rigidity and all the while his free time was spent on the Adventurer.

The ship itself took on the future glory that the movies had declared and as the many components were installed one by one and interfaced with humble, ordinary wires of copper, the other Cadets took the time to study the visual appeal the ship had gained. Indeed, while their shuttle was merely wood and fiberglass, his attention to the visual elements of their mock components did gain an expression.

Their gauges and displays transformed to better reflect the illusion of the imagined future and when he was asked to examine the visual appeal, the effect was contemplated with all due seriousness before the answer was given in nothing more than a nod of approval. In his eyes, the shuttle appeared able to transit space and while he knew beyond doubt that it actually could not, he had acceded to the request to the smallest detail.

Soon, though, their work as a collective was complete and his own was far from achieved. They did observe his methodical approaches to the construction of the sacred and by that study they learned more about him than he realized. Still, in the unspoken domain of equality and fairness, not one Cadet ever attempted to assist. Their comments on visual appeal were listened to and considered intently, although the value of those many comments which were spoken to him at a distance of whole paces were often masked by his own expectations of what had to be.

The work itself took on a rhythm that merged with his new exercise routines and the three remaining classes which taught life sciences. His days were thereby filled to capacity with every minute a precious commodity but never had he felt more complete and whole. It was indeed the challenge of a lifetime to keep pace with their expectations and his own. So the month passed by and May became June.

In June the classes he was trapped within came to an end with the familiar verbal tests that exposed his marginally acceptable grasp of the coursework and after reviewing the results of those exams which truly exposed his lack of emotional understanding, Aflek finally acceded to the reality that Justin was at his educational limits. Yet languages were presented for his study and then electives in art and painting, which he handily mastered to their satisfaction and more besides.

Career counselors and social workers then arrived to review his academic profile with the intent to help him attain the means to enter a college of one kind or another but when they interviewed him during his class times and studied his interactions with others, the outcome was the same in every case. Each determined that he was actually unfit for a standard education and that he had attained as much as he had already was, in their changed perceptions, a miracle worthy of remembrance.

With each determination which was made without the counselors knowing of the other times Justin was evaluated, Aflek grew more frustrated and temperamental. The Headmaster actually growled at the other Cadets in the hallways and when offenses were determined and punishments meted, the darker side of the man was seen in the kinds of punishments meted out.

Those unlucky Cadets found themselves handling the most unpleasant chores within the school in doubled rotations or then discovered themselves hard at work polishing brass and copper with packets of unsweetened citrus beverage mixes and toothbrushes. The new mood within the hallowed halls of the school was now one of wary tension and open nervousness as other instructors crossed that ill defined line with Aflek.

Cadets saw the outcomes of two such events as the Headmaster and the guilty instructors clashed with sudden violence. Justin was aware of it all and as he measured the tensions he did not quite understand, his logical mind finally conceived a path of action that finally led him to Aflek's door in the early hours of the morning when most people were sound asleep.

He simply pressed his hand to the scanner and as the panel flashed in the reading of his handprint, the door itself slid open to expose the private domain Aflek called home. The room itself was markedly spartan with the spacious room's emptiness celebrated by one declarative, if small table upon which a standard computer terminal rested. The occupied bed against the far wall beside the window which showed the thicketed glade where paintball wars took place was identical to those the Cadets used and the night stand beside the bed bore only one small traveling alarm clock and the equally small portrait of a child not much older than Justin looked.

Aflek was sound asleep with the thin blanket standard to the school half draped over his lean form, although his gray and brown pajamas were exposed to Justin's eyes. Justin considered a discreet departure before settling down on the floor near the door itself. He made himself as comfortable as possible as Aflek shifted, the man stirring for other reasons than the unexpected intruder. Indeed, when Aflek rose and aimed himself for the adjoining, very private bathroom, Justin's presence went unnoticed.

Aflek soon busied himself with the same routines that each Cadet honored almost blindly and when the man emerged without a stitch, Aflek froze in the doorway simply because he had finally seen Justin sitting by the door. The moody man finally spoke as he covered himself in the essential location with his hands and those words came out in a terse fashion far removed from civility or friendliness.

"How did you get in?"

Justin rose to his feet and responded with extra politeness.

"You said we could come to see you at any time, sir."

Aflek muttered an irritated curse before ducking back into the bathroom. He emerged in just moments wearing a towel and grimly assaulted the walls that hid concealed lockers

where most of his few possessions rested. Yet in that moment of necessity the man seemed to calm and after another glare at Justin, the man finally settled into the need for dignified discretion.

Justin watched the man dress in the clean uniform that now defined the Maxey instructors and in that pale red attire, the man seemed to find an uneasy truce with his internal conflicts. Aflek finished the ritual with the donning of the cap and when he was ready to face Justin again, his tone of voice was calmer.

“Now, why are you here?”

Justin rose to his feet in the moment of definitive choice and as there was no other logical means to resolve the unknown, his question was posed as a statement.

“I came to see if I could help you with your problems, sir. I am a good listener and I know that most people need to talk things out to find the solutions for themselves.”

Aflek managed a small grin as he turned his attention to the pillow free bed that was swiftly stripped down to the vinyl mattress and recloaked with practiced speed in clean sheets and a fresh blanket. Aflek was silent through that personal ritual which heralded his contemplation of the day to come but when the bedding on the floor was collected, the man spoke with a greater degree of calm than in the weeks prior to this confrontation.

“Listening and talking through the details won’t solve the problem, Cadet Brunheldigon. The problem itself is beyond a workable solution. The problem, in fact, is you, or more specifically, your inability to learn beyond the limits of the tenth grade level. Additionally, the counselors I called in further determined that you are, in fact, a miracle and something of an impossibility which has them amazed and astounded.

They cannot understand how you managed to achieve so much when you have such a plainly impaired grasp of emotive structure. Therefore, Cadet, you cannot adequately understand the coursework which fills the final two academic years of a normal education and most certainly dominates college coursework in most areas. Oh, I could have simply directed you to memorize the textbooks and then provided the standardized tests for you to pass with perfect scores but had I done so, I would have violated my own ethical standards and then left you and the world with the erroneous belief that you had somehow bypassed the core problem borne of trauma in early childhood.

You don’t process emotions in any fashion that comes close to the norms of the ordinary member of society. In fact, that emotional lack has, on more than one occasion, caused marked distress and confusion among the doctors and the Cadets, even among the instructors. You see things as either good or bad with nothing in between. You don’t

always see what is proper in a situation and therefore you do things which are socially improper without ever realizing that you have offended or shocked those around you.

This, naturally, has caused me considerable frustration as I cannot teach you every situation within the whole of society and then define for you what is correct in one situation but incorrect in another much like it. No one can. Society itself is a dynamic, living entity fueled by the individual passions of each and every person tied to that society. Society is sustained by the interactions of those emotive values which you miss in majority without ever grasping the fact that you missed them.

Yes, society has the codified bodies of law which form the structure of stability which then provides continuity in the agency of conservatist tradition as well as in providing a means for controlled societal change. You can memorize the laws without issue and you could even tie yourself in behavioral knots in the futile attempt to obey all of them blindly. But, Cadet Brunheldigon, that would be a mistake.

It would be nothing more than a vain, wasted effort as laws change and there are also a number of laws which are encoded and validated but never actually enforced because they are in majority obsolete in relation to the social expectations and needs of the society itself. In time, when the legislators decide that the matter is worth consideration, the laws are reviewed and amended.

That, though, is a political process with many unspoken rules of its own, not the least of which is the deep intent of the governmental body to hold legal dominion over the general populace affected by those encoded markers of proper and acceptable behavior. Cadet, many laws with no practical value in modern society remain legal and valid in the eyes of the courts.

These, in the military sense, are weapons which can and are often used to catch and contain those undesirable members of the social order who are otherwise able to escape containment by the enforcement bodies who want to remove them from social interaction for reasons ranging from mere suspicion that some other crime has been committed to the tactical, preemptive elimination of a political opponent prior to an election.

If you could truly grasp the emotive elements involved, the historical cases of law and political science are full of exciting and deeply passionate battles which define the war between church and state as well as clashing ideologies. That war of ideologies and defining political motivations still rages on in the background of society itself and both sides, at one time or another, have had the upper hand for brief periods without many members of society as a whole being more than marginally aware of the fact.

You, however, missed the majority of that conflict so relevant to the formation and continuance of today's political and societal design. The best you could do in the verbal testing was to cite the events in question without giving them dimension beyond historical reference. Yet, you are extremely versed in tactics and truly adept in the application of the principles of combat, which is truly confounding.

Such an innate ability requires an equally intimate grasp of the motivations and desires of others ranging from yourself and your teammates to the motivations of the combatants against you. So, as I know this to be true and as you evidence such genius which defines the abilities in question, I cannot understand why you cannot grasp simple emotive values inherent to the ordinary social order.

To this conundrum I add in the fact that the doctors, however distressed they are when you fail to grasp a situation, are wholly content to accept the situation as immutable. More telling and personal, your parents are beside themselves with joy due to the reach of education that you have already attained. The issues I have had with the other instructors in your situation have been in possible approaches, some of which were demonstrably illegal outside these walls due to the terms of guardianship that your father defined or void of ethics entirely.

The clashes of violence between myself and the other instructors were not intended for Cadets such as yourself to see or even be aware of. They were postulating an intensely aggressive approach and as they postulated with the clear intention of following through, I most generously expressed the fact that if they did so, they would be first to feel the nature of such tactics so that the application would have balance and some element of a definitive limit.

Otherwise, Cadet, such aggressive tactics turn into wanton torture which can kill the victim quite easily before anything useful is learned. Additionally, there is the element of trauma which those instructors did not clearly understand and as they lacked that clarity of understanding, it was my duty to make sure they did understand. Now that those instructors have the vital understanding of that trauma induced by the tactics they proposed to employ on your person, do take note that they have since withdrawn the proposals in entirety.

In the events that were unintentionally witnessed by Cadets such as yourself, I have been most busy in protecting you. In protecting you from such abuses to your person, I further protect the rest of your peers from similar events at the same time. However, Cadet, I am incapable of being everywhere at once and the view that you need to be beaten senseless to further your education is not isolated to a handful of the Maxey instructors.

Most have come to the rather strong belief that physical abuses of one form or another might foster the insight into an emotive understanding sufficient to the comprehension of historical events as real elements with dimension and meaning as opposed to mere facts memorized and recited blindly in context. Again, Cadet Brunheldigon, I am in an impossible situation which has no definable resolution.

Interestingly, your father and mother have taken opposing sides on this issue, although neither party has evidenced the same degree of intensity that the instructors have. Surprisingly, your mother is the one siding with the instructors while your father is opposed. Your twin, wisely, has distanced himself from the issue as much as possible and has, when faced with the question as a determinant choice which would have broken the deadlock between your parents, stated simply that the issue was outside his reach of authority and likewise exists outside his areas of expertise.

In that definition of decided neutrality, your parents found themselves quite mired in logical debates that eventually bored me to sleep. The last I remember of the exchanges was that neither side had yielded a single justification in their arguments. I did gain the insight that both are adept with legal nuances in ways that frighten me personally. So, with your parents divided and unwilling to give an inch and your brother remaining neutral, I have chosen the proper social course of denying such abuses to your person on ethical and moral grounds.

Personally, I do not feel that whipping you or beating you senseless would instill any useful degree of emotive understanding of history past the cruelty of the Crusades or possibly the Inquisition. I am, however, curious as to your personal views and feelings in this most difficult of issues. The answer might give me some sudden clarity or it might further compound the issue in ways I cannot cope with in any sense or fashion.

The ball, Justin, is in your hands and it is now time to either drop the ball or to toss it to another player.”

Justin frowned in his usual way as he stared out the window to see the moonlight spawned silhouettes of the trees beyond. In his mind the dynamics of this situation settled into stillness before breaking apart, each instructor’s assumed stance for or against abusive actions assigned in an almost random manner. His parents were added and so too Earnest’s neutrality.

The problem was still incomplete and so he added in the Cadets, each a more easily defined value than the fairly anonymous instructors who revealed little about themselves while teaching classes or governing recreation. His small body grew still as the many elements of the issue finally began to stir and as those aspects gained a mathematical definition, his eyes closed fast.

He barely heard his own slow sigh as the elements started to realign themselves in every possible way, the innumerable incompatibilities set aside while the compatible arrangements remained behind. Yet it was only when his own person was added to the complex challenge that the new alignment took place, one that repeated time after time until he accepted the seemingly improper outcome and slowly relaxed from the long ordeal.

His eyes opened to see the morning's first light dappling the distant leaves of green and Aflek was found casually sprawled on the bed moments later, the man remarkably patient and content to rest. Justin cleared his throat and Aflek sat up expectantly, although the Headmaster clearly had no real belief that Justin could solve this impossible issue.

"Sir, the problem is a little more complex than you indicated in your parity definition. The instructors aren't entirely convinced that abuse can be utilized to guide instruction. The intention in this case with myself is actually more personal due to the way I accidentally injured several of them in an extrapolative event. In other words, sir, they are more interested in revenge or in collective appeasement than in the useful, if questionable, application of corporeal force as an educational aid.

Additionally, sir, the problem is more aligned along defined aspects than you intimated. The other instructors are aware of the guardianship terms and in the current situation there is an increasing interest in seeing if the broad limits defined on paper and approved by the courts is actually tenable in application. This curiosity stems, apparently, from the recent processing of the Cadets in entirety through the experimental medical scanners while providing them with the derivatives of my person to cleanse their DNA, another experimental event with a high degree of controversy attached as a social value.

In fact, the whole problem remained unsolvable until I factored in the entire student body as rogue elements with undefined mathematical values. That, of course, made the problem harder to work due to the inherent instability and dual aspects of quantum states which change when the particles in question are observed. In summation, sir, the instructors want personal gratification in the form of revenge against my person through abusive hostilities and when they gain that, they will then turn on the other Cadets simply because they can do so with impunity so long as they do not cause death or permanent injury.

In both cases, the guardianship terms do protect the offending instructors from legal culpability as long as there are no lasting physical complications or life termination events due to those abusive actions. In fact, sir, the guardianship clauses are careful of the difference between the definition and defined limits of the physical impairment while the mental condition is a blanket issue. In other words, the legal outcome of mental abuse would be the judge tossing the case out.

This is because the prior permissives granted by the parental agents openly permits and allows the mental abuses to occur if they are deemed necessary in either a long term application or in a single situational event. In such a case, sir, the end result, good or bad, is the determinant justification for the means used. The solution I derived as a counter to the very difficult problem posed as impossible to resolve is personally disturbing because I don't quite understand the implications.

The solution, sir, is to engage us in close combat situations with the instructors, sometimes Cadet against Cadet and in others, Cadet against instructor. My mental image was along the lines of a boxing match or something similar but it fell apart since I could not fully agree with the answer itself. In my own mind, it is ordinarily wrong to turn aggressive with an authority figure as that authority figure is most likely the only person who has the medication you may need in order to continue to cope with the world in any useful fashion.

In fact, even when I was in majority beyond rational self control, my actions were not intentionally hostile. I was simply desperate to record the critical summations I had derived while resting by the pool and they did not have a valid working appreciation of the peculiar nuances of my less obvious mental behavior norms. In the final summation of that event, they are the ones who actually caused their own injuries by seeking to contain me at the wrong time.

But, if it would serve to calm the current tensions, I would look into some sort of overture which would serve as an apology or at least as a token of peace. I'm just not sure what would be appropriate in this instance as we aren't two definably different ideologies in an irresolvable territorial clash with limited natural resources in contention. Additionally, sir, if such an offer or gesture was ineffective, I would simply yield to the abuse in a demonstrably passive manner when necessary.

Historically, this tactic of behavior has shown itself as the most effective psychological means for limiting or eliminating the abuses of others as the victim denies the grant of a response to the pain event. It is not effective in all situations as people are people and some people enjoy the act of abusing others simply because it satisfies some lack or deficiency within themselves.

But, sir, this situation is not governed by any kind of ideological clash or a deeply seated need to injure others. If that were true in any sense, this situation would have arisen almost immediately after the guardianship forms were signed and delivered. To date, as far as I know, not one instructor has, in any aggressive fashion, attempted to abuse any Cadet simply for the pleasure.

They have had numerous opportunities and I certainly am at their mercy if they were to choose to act, with or without your tacit permission. So, from the logical assessment of the threat, the risk to myself is actually rather low and if the risk should suddenly become self evident, the postulated passive action would do more to neutralize the severity of the abuse in question.

Yet, sir, if I were to react when such abuse were to be conducted on my person, the dynamics of the event would change. In giving a reaction that sates or appeases the aggressor in some essential way, I would actually be inciting that aggressor to repeat the offense, either at the moment or at a later time. As I do not like pain, I am well aware that total passivity, at least to my best, is essential.

The historical references I am basing this action on exist in several places within the documentation of the Inquisition and in the survivor stories of war prisoners such as those of Vietnam. Additionally, if the psychology textbooks Cadet Luder has graciously allowed me to study can be relied upon, further references to the dynamics of passive aggressive behavior indicate that the aggressive element is eager to gain or elicit a terror response from the passive element.

Sir, I have no real fear of the instructors and I am capable of governing myself mentally and physically to a degree which should be sufficient in keeping an expression of pain or suffering from being made evident. You see, sir, I do remember some of that reactive event which did cause these instructors physical harm and loss of esteem. I know that the use of my body does follow a mathematical formula and that if my body follows a mathematical formula, hand to hand conflict also does due to the sameness of my body in dimension and scale to that of an adult.

Additionally, sir, I am much faster, more nimble and just as strong physically, if not slightly more so despite my small stature. If I were to retaliate with the same violence they would use against my person in the event you postulate as a growing possibility, it would be extremely easy to accidentally kill one or two of them. As that potential outcome is not an event I am comfortable with in the least, the passivity angle is more necessary yet.

You see, sir, I am willing to endure the abuse if it actually takes place, yet not because I am a victim mentality or psychologically dependent. I would be passive simply because I have no desire or need to kill anyone else and I could easily do so by accident in the defense of my person. This awareness of myself is why I am personally reluctant to engage the other Cadets in mock wrestling events or to join into other close contact sports.

But, sir, I am not locked into this perspective. If pressed by a situation which is determined to be life threatening, I will immediately work for my own survival by any means. In fact, sir, while I find it personally unpleasant and unsettling, the boxing ring

might be the best place to preemptively nip this budding issue dead. I admit that I have only watched a few rounds of the sport itself but if you were to train me in the techniques and the rules, I think I would learn with sufficient speed to hold my own in short order.

In the meantime, sir, you could set the precedent of Cadet and instructor competitions and then arrange a charting of defined skills in such competitions for the public record. In the process, the instructors are reminded by the event that the Cadets are still people despite the guardianship terms and conditions.”

Aflek sighed to himself in that comprehensive reply and in the habit so useful in his career, the man responded smoothly.

“Thank you, Cadet. I will consider the solution and my determination will be public, one way or another. Do report to the clinic for a blood test and a neurological functions profile. As the examination has no determinant completion time, the remainder of the day is free time. You are dismissed.”

Justin saluted with dignity and quietly departed, Aflek left alone in that frighteningly empty room to think through a student’s postulation on a difficult problem’s one known solution. Justin exited Aflek’s quarters to find Cadets in motion but as they studied him for whole seconds with speculations of their own, he just aimed himself for the medical wing without a word.

But even in his silence he was seeing the world differently because of the problem Aflek had defined and he had resolved. In his thoughts the issues of necessary future clashes with those he trusted was now a real consideration which needed definition and rules and those contingencies became numerous as he yielded to the doctors who were so companionable and respectful of his dignity in ways that were more relevant to him than to others.

It was the first damaging blow to his otherwise enduring personal innocence. . .

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Outside, among the trees, Justin was often distracted by the momentary flash of sunlight off distant lenses. The flashes came at the most inopportune times as he tried to remain hidden in the wonderful and exciting game of Paintball and more often than not his reactions, usually a jerking of his head ever so slight or his freezing into motionlessness for a second too long, caused paintballs to fly in his general direction, forcing him to react with every mite of speed to avoid being tagged out.

It was a most annoying situation but he learned to cope by simple adaptation, each discovery of his person by his many enemies cause for him to bolt away in the complex maneuvers that just barely kept him from being slicked from head to toe in paint of many dull hues and shades of red and blue while his own paintballs of equally dull yellow popped in retaliation to sometimes catch the goggles of his peers who, like him, had been obvious for just that one instant too long.

Then, too, the flashes of binoculars and telephoto lenses in the distance did add a useful dynamic to the game itself, a stirring up of the usual interminable waiting game which sometimes lasted a whole hour or more before that first essential volley caused someone to be struck in a definably final manner. He tried to ignore them but could not, although he finally saw the proof that his equals among the most adept Cadets on the forty acre field were more annoyed than he himself.

In that discovery he was successful in being still just so as one more distant observer's lenses caused a moment's flash into that seventeen year old's goggle protected eyes and because the lanky, adept teen could stand no more, his air rifle turned from Justin's assumed location with decisive haste while truly hard to see fingers deftly and swiftly recalibrated the range of the toy rifle by a nudge to the pressure setting and then the sight bars.

It was an action so out of character for Zeke Tanner that Justin did not take advantage of that exposure and in half a second more, the toy rifle popped off six speedy shots with truly impressive accuracy which did test the weapon's unintended outer limits. Justin was so amazed that he turned to watch as many other Cadets did, the dull red balls so fast whizzing out into the distance towards the far away target which had clearly annoyed them all to the point of declarative action.

But they watched the distant targets as he watched the paintballs themselves, his eyes and mind alone just barely able to keep pace. The strangest thing happened as the moment stretched and space contorted, his mind adapting as his eyes readjusted. He saw the full

second pass by as the paintballs traversed the distance and then, as the six observers caused the annoying flashes yet again, dull red paint impacted each to ruin the lenses.

Like the children they were, all then waited for the waist pagers to beep with the game's end but, to their eventual surprise, that declarative signal did not come. Justin was the one to sigh thoughtfully in the riddle and promptly twelve volleys of paintballs impacted him from head to toe. He was rueful and quite willing to snicker at his own mistake as he tapped his pager's second button to declare himself dead and when he did so, the response was audible across the gaming field.

Every pager beeped with the five half second pulses so declarative and as the game was over, all the remaining contestants filed out of the glade to the clearing where instructors were monitoring laptops which were showing the moment Zeke had fired into the distance. Justin was not at all surprised by the many layered renderings of false color on the displays.

His peers were just as used to the fact that the sensors tucked in truly odd places all through the glade could see them in so many ways with accuracy and details worthy of a doctor's attention. They, after all, were used to such things and Justin's different halos of odd yellows and declarative blues was familiar to each. So, as they so often did, they clustered around the laptops as the instructors kept silent, the keys manipulated and the time index replayed to show Zeke's amazing feat in every possible rendition.

Sometimes the views were confined to the infrared that defined him all too well or then the ultraviolet which was detailed enough to expose otherwise invisible acne and his recent applications of deodorants in rather embarrassing places to hide his scent from people like Justin and Sven Eersill. Yet it was only when the hues of the paint were called up in a wholly different range of false colors that they saw the unexpected and did investigate it with customary thoroughness.

In those renditions in other bands of the electromagnetic spectrum, grown men were exposed, men perched high up in the trees they were not allowed to use. The four instructors did take notice of that revelation but their scowls and silence were simply catalysts to the actions of twelve Cadets that Zeke led back into the glade. Justin, though, did not join in that vengeful retaliation to being spied on by the military which was supposed to be well outside the school walls, although not for the obvious reason of being declaratively splattered with red or blue splashes in one hue or another from head to waist.

While that did make him stand out beyond question in the undergrowth, his expertise was needed in other applications. No, his mindset was far different from that of his peers and he was likewise far better at the complex direction of the twelve into the glade towards the elevated targets in the trees. So, with his calm voice sounding into his waist pager's

microphone with the voice mode active, his twelve peers were directed with brutal efficiency into the best ground positions for upward shots from air pistols and air rifles.

Yes, he was calm indeed, calm enough to guide dozens of paintballs to truly unexpected head shots that left most of the military interlopers with spatters of paint right between the eyes and the rest with the same marking on their foreheads in line with the nose, all while imagining fantastic goggles with impressive functions that were indeed advanced well beyond the ordinary means of modern technology to duplicate.

His mind did find the dual opposites confounding but the balance was achieved due to the computer's presence and the speed of his hands as the keys were employed, the renditions of the glade replaced by design files and complex circuit templates which soon exposed the goggles as something well beyond casual reproduction.

He did not stop directing the twelve other Cadets for so much as a second and while not one trained soldier ever revealed himself to the students who now fired declarative paintballs that certainly stung painfully and likely inspired vicious headaches, he knew the psychology of warfare. He did not notice that he had just amazed the instructors and never heard their carefully hushed calls on their own waist pagers as Aflek and the doctors were informed of his peculiar ability to multitask even while trembling in the usual fashion and perspiring profusely.

They quietly and carefully drew closer so they could study his work while his recitals of position and exactly when to fire upward were seen on the other laptops down to the shots and the outcomes. Yet it took them whole minutes to grasp the nature of his directives as the Cadets had to transverse surprising distances between the observers. The first forehead shot itself was thought pure chance and the second equally so but in the third they finally saw the pattern.

Then, when twelve different Cadets were aligned in twelve different places and each was given the same precise direction for shots of the exact same type, they did grasp Justin's real mood and then found his calm, if quivering voice quite alien to such deep seated hostility as evidenced before them. Justin was so far beyond or away from awareness of the instructors by then, too far removed to notice their private alarm or any of their real, now justified fears.

On the screen of the laptop he had simply commandeered, the designs kept growing more complex and in the paintball lot the twelve Cadets moved on, the last of the thirty-eight military observers pegged with accuracy before Justin so simply called them back because the mission was over. Justin was then fully focused on the designs, the multitasking event now a single task that consumed in the usual fashion as one leap in technology led to another at speeds the laptop could barely cope with.

Yet in the end when the goggles had their digital reality, Justin did more, the goggles remade in the final step of total technological maturity. Those final, truly massive files were nothing like his previous data but were instead the replication patterns used by his synthesizing unit. By then the usual consequences were in full play and by then the twelve Cadets were gathering around the other laptops, they the ones to see what Justin no longer could, although the words did filter into the complex madness so profound.

Soldier by soldier the men descended with surprising stealth to gather at one point on the far edge of the vast glade where they tried in vain to wipe away the paint that marked them so plainly as dead, paint that the Cadets had reformulated so that mere water could not purge it as they themselves had so many times used such a technique to cheat. Zeke typed in well known commands so useful in the school's hallways and their voices were heard as they saw the plain truth for themselves on each other.

"These kids are assholes. Got any Aspirin?"

"Should we report this or just sneak out one by one? The stuff is soap dissolved and I got Wets in the vans."

"We're missing the point. They found us and that's the mission kill. We pull out, lumps and all. We'll let the Snakes deal with them from here. Believe me, they'll jump on this one."

Justin heard Zeke's voice sound as the final outside influence before the huge files were complete and Zeke's still breaking tenor was passionate, a vital, almost desperate noise. Zeke's voice was both close at hand and then heard from the forested glade itself as each sensor unit concealed across the forty acre lot was now a speaker as well as eyes and ears.

"Yeah, we can be real assholes and bastards, too. In fact, we can even get downright nasty, if you push it. These Paintball guns can shoot other things besides paintballs, like, say, ball bearings or welding rod slag, maybe even nails. But, sirs, we've been told we can't take hostages and we've been told we can't kill you, either. Hell, we've even been told we aren't supposed to involve ourselves with you or otherwise admit that you are breaking the rules by having a presence on school grounds.

We, most of us, anyway, were reasonable about that and mostly we can ignore you just fine until Justin picks you out and goes strange in the head. We may have pulled the triggers that dotted your foreheads but he's the one who guided us in down to the millimeter and the angle of fire. Oh, we got the whole thing on record and I'm sure the Headmaster will release some of the file if you need it for task analysis or mission reviews and don't believe for a minute that we won't tell Justin's psychologist about this one.

He was way too calm and way too casual about it, especially since he's pretty involved with something else we can't even make guesses on and has been the whole time. We think it might be something nasty, maybe even worse, but we aren't like him and don't even try to be 'cause it doesn't work. We do know that when he gets around live military like you, he gets mean in a funny way.

He doesn't react with anger or frustration or anything like that, not that we can tell, anyway. He just gets tactical and plots out how to eliminate opposition in a decisive manner from the top of the heap down to the last straw, usually while coming up with something we don't understand in the least so he can make it happen a whole lot faster. That's a big problem for us and all of us, doctors and instructors too, have worked damned hard to keep him decent and to avoid casualties past occasional fights which just happen when his mind goes really strange and mostly because of exposure to active military like you.

Paintball is a concession, especially for him since we use it to keep him from making anything more dangerous. If you doubt that, go buy a Bruno-Blaster paintball kit and run range tests while you play with the pressure settings and the sight guides. It doesn't matter whether it's the pistol kit or the rifle kit. Both have a mean final range of half a mile with fair precision with the rifle better by a margin of twelve percent, enough for me to tap six really annoying telephoto lenses on the walls dot on.

But, in spite of that, we're more comfortable about the paintball than Laser Tag since he's already matured the paintball gear and we don't want him playing with lasers. You, by getting out here on our game grounds where you most definitely shouldn't be, just made that a lot harder, so we thought we'd show you exactly what his mind is like when you guys are around, especially since you idiots don't listen to anything else but hard knocks proof.

So, we thought a headache might do the trick, especially since all of us know exactly how he gets in a paintball run and we've all been pegged between the eyes more than once since that's his strike style. He doesn't go for maiming tags anymore. He goes for quick elimination and has ever since he read Sun Szu but you don't seem to understand the real problem. He doesn't have a real concept of death or killing and when he gets around active military of any kind, he goes strange, with everything done to Sun Szu's rules of engagement because that's how he thinks the military mind is supposed to work.

So, you can call us whatever you like and think whatever you want. You can make your reports and paint him and us evil any way you like, too. Just don't do it around here on school grounds where he can and will find you sooner or later because we don't like

having to undo the damage you people cause by just being around and one of these days, we won't be able to.

We don't care how you got past the walls or the gate. We don't even care about how long you've been on school grounds and we won't hassle you in any way on your way out, no matter how you choose to leave. Hell, we'll gladly escort you to the gate and let you out ourselves because we do have questions of our own we want to ask but we do need you gone with a no return status and we need you gone pretty quick.

He's gone funny right now and that gives us a day or two with his brother to figure out something of what he's come up with this time. If it's bad, we'll lock the file and pass it on to you folks once we've figured out his formatting and completed the patent paperwork. If it's not bad but it is something he shouldn't have just because, we'll do the same thing because that's the smart thing to do.

Either way, you'll see the outcome of what you caused him to create this time by just being where he can just pick up on your vibes. I can't explain that, but I've seen it too many times to ignore the reality. We all have. Your call."

The files he created were saved and in that final action he saw the file itself flicker as its entirety was transferred to wherever his brother stored such things. He did feel the hands of instructors as he lost track of himself and in the madness of seeing new components in his mind, he knew too late that something else was now trying to be born, something based on the final advancements he had already achieved. But here in this moment he found the fatal flaw, a limit of his mind, a barrier he could not pass.

However much his mind tried, those distant technological futures beyond the definitions of his Adventurer's components were far too much to cope with. The basic elements alone were far too complex by themselves and in trying to work out the replication files for such impossible unknowns made from recombining those immensely complex components left him tasting the full richness of pure insanity. In the end the prick of a syringe needle filled with Benadryl into his thigh and the taste of Albuterol on his tongue immediately after were the gifts of Heaven.

Drug induced oblivion was the most peaceful event and while oblivion itself stole all sense of time's passage, it healed and mended while leaving behind the memory of the consequences of seeking too much and reaching too far. And while he awakened feeling worse than ever before in his life in the physical sense, the peace of knowing that defining limit was reassuring, proof that the universe itself was truly impossible to conceive in all its glory and indeed impossible to capture in its smallest aspect.

By knowing that now firm truth, he knew that all his adventures still awaited. Even upon finding himself thoroughly tied down with needles in his arms and tubes in their known, appointed places, he managed to grin to himself and then to open his eyes, the ceiling above familiar and the face of Doctor Munroe reassuring. Munroe spoke softly in that kind and gentle way, those bright eyes gleaming while the man deftly checked Justin for any sign of rash or other banes to such tender, sensitive skin.

“You had us worried. I even called your parents and admitted that I didn’t know what to do beyond the wait and see approach. It’s been almost three weeks since the paintball game and all the Cadets are rather eager for some report, whether good or bad. I’m rather pleased that I can tell them you pulled through, especially since I take no pleasure at all in locking any of my clients away in special care facilities.”

Munroe’s warmth intensified as he pulled back long enough to extract a thin, seemingly mundane band of translucent plastic from his smock pocket, a band matching the width of Justin’s eyes which was fitted with Velcro tabs for adjustability. Munroe spoke with true appreciation as he displayed the creation of Justin’s amazing mind.

“This is absolutely brilliant and after consulting with your father at length on them, he concluded that they should be sold specifically to the military, law enforcement and medical professionals due to their function and their provision of such remarkable detail across twelve different electromagnetic bands, although only after learning how to mentally induce the field reception shifts.

Aflek, however, feels that they should not gain any kind of widespread use due to the detail they enable and then how effective they are in exposing the human body regardless of normal attire. Do note that all the Cadets have one or two of these tucked away somewhere and while the Headmaster and the other instructors do conduct random inspections to collect them, the Cadets simply make more.

I further understand that they are quite the rage on weekend trips to Susanville and thoroughly enjoyed in the paintball games, as no one can simply stay hidden from sight. Consequently, paintball has become a rather intense affair and the games themselves rarely last more than an hour, although the thought of you out there with one of these on does make everyone rather eager.

It seems that you have the best knack of matching the conditions of your environment when in camouflage and therefore you are the least easy to shoot unless you make some species of mistake that they are alert enough to notice. Prior to that revelation, I simply assumed that you were compensating by using your enhanced reflexes and greater agility to avoid being shot.”

Munroe acted as he spoke, the band which would reveal so much of the world carefully settled into place across Justin's eyes and secured in place by means of the Velcro tabs. Justin's eyes focused through the translucent plastic which was quite unlike any other but initially the only change his eyes and mind could perceive was the ordinary filtration of light which was no different than what a typical pair of cheap sunglasses achieved.

Yet, as he let his mind drift, the mental lessons on nuance and control were learned and the reactive plastic changed, the world around him transformed in astounding ways beyond his description. He was amazed as the realms of electromagnetic fields were opened to his mind and Munroe chuckled pleasantly as Aflek came in. Justin turned his head to see Aflek revealed in such detail down to the contents of his now highly transparent pockets and Aflek sighed with cold irritation at the doctor.

"Did you have to give him one of those?"

Munroe issued his reply with smooth amusement.

"He needs something for a distraction while I start his therapy and he did design them. Technology is no good if it's not used and it does even the social playing field on a number of levels, especially for him. In that aspect alone, the band is quite valuable as he thereby learns equality in a personal way which he can relate to, which might just well be the reason he made them. Besides, you do allow them for paintball games and in the machine shops due to the very frequency field exposures that you protest and object to anywhere else.

Do note that if they see you in one place while wearing those, they still see you in totality. Besides, if they are allowed for the games and work areas, then they are not confiscatable in the legal sense. Additionally, all the Cadets are quite used to reviewing the sensor logs and already aware of the effects of various electromagnetic field views. The only differences with the band are that the fields are select as opposed to overlapped and likewise real time as opposed to digital and delayed."

Justin watched the fields his eyes could now see through the plastic shift and exhaled in awed shock at the gain. He saw far more than he had ever expected to and bluntly spoke, his curiosity hot and his voice a croak of sound which annoyed him no end.

"Sir, why the tattoo of a dove on your-?"

Aflek cut him short with a forceful, passionately hostile reply.

"None of your business."

Aflek turned and stalked out but in doing so, Justin saw other things he had not noticed. He sighed as Aflek vanished down the stairs and Munroe, who was in the same degree of exposure to the band, chuckled pleasantly. Unlike Aflek, he was not embarrassed by his body and for him, attire was dignity enough despite the capabilities of the band covering Justin's eyes. Munroe gave Justin a knowing grin as the first of the Cadets arrived, Justin's change in status known at once the moment the band was noticed.

Munroe then spoke deftly and smoothly, his professional chore now the laying down of rules with ulterior motives.

"Cadet Heins, do pass the word that if Justin is seen without his band on at all times other than while asleep or in the shower other than very brief periods no longer than fifteen to thirty minutes which are to be spaced widely apart, he is to be reported to Aflek and then to myself for neglect of his person and also for medical disobedience. Additionally, I do expect to see you and the other Cadets wearing them just as frequently due to the hidden benefits to your minds, particularly in the Gamma states and the Theta ranges as well as in the overall neural interplay with the hippocampus that does foster rapid memory development.

It might take me a week or more, but Aflek will eventually sit down with me long enough to view my medical data and then his personal conflicts will quite suddenly melt away. Do notice that Cadets are now authorized to wear them during paintball where we can detect the frequency fields which indicate the initial benefits of the bands and in the machine shops where we can study the hand to eye coordination increase thereby derived.

From now on, when possible, your medical examinations will gain a normal forty-five minutes of idle time where you are required to wear the bands in a fully conscious state while studying a wide variety of visual triggers. We, while facing considerable opposition of a purely political nature, are still doing our job in making certain the health benefits of the bands are gained by all.

In fact, a failure to wear them as now directed might easily result in certain liberties and freedoms, pleasures and the like, to be revoked so that we can cage you in here so that we can encourage you and the other Cadets to wear the bands for the proper minimum lengths of time while in a conscious, reactive state. We will do so even if this means curbing other liberties or pleasures such as weekend excursions and so forth.

I trust that my directive will be passed on with reasonable speed."

Justin was amazed again by the band which now revealed halos that showed wild changes in Munroe's being and stranger shifts in Heins as the suddenly nervous Cadet saluted and almost bolted from the medical wing. Munroe chuckled to himself and ever so casually

settled down on a chair by the desk laden with computers and medical gear. Justin finally frowned as he studied Munroe's twelve different electromagnetic bandwidths and spoke in his croak as inspiration finally dawned.

"Are you using reverse psychology?"

Munroe lied with adept skill but the band Justin wore revealed the sin presented by the competent man, although Justin did not yet know just how capable the band actually was in such a revelation.

"Not at all. I can easily support every claim in a dozen different ways. Do focus on your environment as much as the restraints allow with visual attention given to everything as presented and redefined by the band. I want you to be at least as adept as the others with its use and much more comfortable with how it does trigger a vicious few seconds of vertigo and occasionally a severe headache when removed, due in part to your unique needs as a person with complications.

After the visual fields are tolerated with reasonable skill, we will then think about your release from the restraints and then focus on physical remediation, again while you wear the band as much as possible. So, for the time being, study the walls and everything else."

Justin blew out his cheeks and settled in to obey, his head slowly turning in all allowed directions so that his band covered eyes could see the mystery of so many things. His lips were tightly pressed together all the same despite the amazing changes hidden in the walls and in every electrically powered object for the band was now another thing to endure for his own greater good regardless of personal choice.

But he was still unaware of Munroe's satisfaction at his demonstration of the preferred psychological response to the band itself and less aware of that same mindset spreading like wildfire through the ranks of his peers, a situation which made the bands truly undesirable in extremely short order despite their remarkable virtues and applied uses.

That reaction was exactly why Munroe was so pleased. . .

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

In the real sense, it took almost a month for Justin to regain that definable and critical degree of self control so crucial to games of paintball and other sports with the same degree of necessary disciplines. In the mental sense, the work was still ongoing for the aftermath of his attempt to pass beyond that mental barrier was the natural avoidance of interacting with most things technical, even the computers and the sensor pads that opened doors.

But it was the old lure of real success with the Adventurer Seven that finally drew him out of that easily noticed desire to avoid technology as much as possible. Indeed, by the end of August, he was going so far as to step into the hangar where the nearly complete craft waited with patience for his devotion, love and skill. By the first days of September, with the deadline of the modeling convention looming, he was again hard at work on the ship in his spare time, although not by any means as compelled to finish it as he once had been.

It was still the majority thought in his mind and in his dreams but due entirely to that period so intense when technology had stung him so deeply, he was more cautious. Then, too, his almost constant employment of the frequency band due to medical orders and Aflek's most sudden and firm capitulation in that regard had likewise shown him a host of elements that had been mere theories and suppositions defined exclusively in the mathematical domain.

With each component settled into place and given power by which to integrate itself with the rest, he saw more of the electromagnetic chaos which was so disturbing to his sense of technological purity and cleanliness. Indeed, seeing into the electromagnetic bandwidths normally well outside human senses had shown him just how messy his precious ship truly was and then how messy the world itself happened to be.

And while he reacted to that offensive aspect in sometimes peculiar ways, the other Cadets who were routinely forced to wear the band themselves did gain the valued insight into his odd affliction and otherwise inexplicable shying away from various components. But he did not see the greater aspect that the Cadets did notice and report to Munroe and Aflek with pleasure and excitement.

The band itself had provided a psychological barrier which did curb the development of technology which would reach four hundred years ahead of the rest of Mankind and those new things that did still come to be during chaotic fits ending in the medical ward were impressive and almost electromagnetically invisible even to the band itself. By the end of

that first week of September, the internal elements were all in place and by the tenth day itself, so was most of the remaining exterior.

Indeed, as he settled the last plates in place and welded them securely, Aflek appeared in the hangar doorway by himself and, after so many months of time in which to redefine his sense of self, he was not at all upset when Justin turned to study him with the full means to see all there was to see down to the health of the body, bones and all. Aflek casually inspected the outer hull which appeared to him to be perfectly smooth and without flaws, even the guides for the supposedly mock plasma turrets tapped and fingered.

He was a thorough man well outside his element but soon it was plain that he had done the unthinkable by researching the topic he had no real passion for.

“The Adventurer Seven is the standard, all purpose fighting craft for the Imperial Forces and can, when given maximum thrust, attain speeds charted as faster than light itself for brief periods lasting up to seventy-one seconds while maintaining full capability in a combat scenario. The plasma cannons, of the series four delta one type, are specifically designed to fire when the craft is at an angled approach so as to avoid accidental impact.

This necessary firing technique does cause a weakness in the counterstrike options which the Rebel Forces employ to maximum effect, namely the direct impact shooting solution with solid projectiles at subluminal velocities and deliberate spread. This, consequently, creates a field of high velocity, point targeted debris which the Adventurer Seven cannot always successfully negate with its deflection shields or counter fire.

In this famed and suicidal Rebel tactic, the kill rates for Adventurer Seven ships is now listed at one in seven, due to the skill of the Rebel pilots in managing a last instant non planar evacuation from the combat theater and the surviving pilots are regarded highly for their competence by both the Imperial Command, the Imperial pilots and among the Rebels themselves.

Interestingly, the majority of the Empire’s trillions do not view the Rebels with the same degree of respect. Many suppositions and arguments have been posed to define this peculiarity and yet the issue is still hotly contested in almost every debate that does dare to touch upon it. I was wondering why and as there is no definitive thesis or guide available on line or in the bookstores, I thought to ask an expert.”

Justin again noticed the flaming dove tattoo which was in that most sanctified of unmentioned places but it was now a familiar thing and while an unknown, the small metal and plastic key case which slid out of Aflek’s sleeve for Justin to see was defined as the more crucial item by far. Justin therefore weighed his options and spoke quietly, the issue of the Empire’s trillions so easily resolved.

“The Rebel forces are seen by the majority as a counterproductive influence to varying degrees, although the degree of that disruption is determined by the approximate closeness to the Imperial centers or the resultant distance away from it. Additionally, the majority of the Rebels do exhibit a marked tendency to be fanatical or extremely passionate about the dissolution of the Empire without providing an equally stable political and social order to replace the Empire.

This is the core dynamic of both the Empire and the Rebels as the Empire does draw on the element of stability for its fighting forces and the Rebel forces draw on the disaffected in the fringe systems at the Empire’s outer edges which have seen the least overall benefit in terms of legal stability or trade due to their extreme distance from the Imperial core. As to the Adventurer Seven’s fighting style, the shooting solution for a direct fire scenario is to weave across the planar grid.

At the same time, the attacker has to drop out of the line of fire with a burst of superluminal speed while inverting the flight itself and then firing instantly on the control thrusters of the Rebel ship, normally a Ketta Three One Zero, causing it to spin at high revolutions. This counter is extremely difficult to perform in an actual combat scenario due to the timing involved and the four second opportunity provided by the Ketta’s opening shots.

The Ketta is then forced to seek an automatic restabilization of its internal systems as checked by its factory set attitude and planar tables, which makes it extremely vulnerable to the killing shot which must come within the four second reset window of the Ketta. In actual practice, the Ketta Three One Zero is an extremely versatile ship which is a near match for the Adventurer Seven, although lacking superluminal capability while in a firing situation.

This enables the Ketta Three One Zero to utilize superluminal speeds for much longer periods of time and thereby escape the combat event if the killing shot does not take place. Both ships do define the Empire, as one is against the other and each are symbolic of the duality of the Rebels and the Empire in conflict while maintaining a balance which does seem to keep the dominant territories of each moderately pacified. Without the Rebels, the Empire would expand to the point of internal collapse and without the Empire, the Rebel forces have no holy purpose.

They are, therefore, in a very stable conflict which has ritualized itself in many respects, having a code of ethics and a standardized formula by which any combat event is engaged when one pilot or the other feels that the clash between them will result in death, including standardized prayers, which each side offers for the other in their form as opposed to the form of the pilot speaking them. Once the prayers are spoken, the combat event begins.”

Justin sighed with the ending of that dissertation and Aflek nodded appreciatively despite his real disinterest however versed he had become in the grasp of the dynamics of a purely fictional realm. Aflek then emphasized the key case with twinkling eyes and a knowing smile just before making the exchange while speaking smoothly.

“Your program, as written by your brother. It came in this morning but I missed it as I was reviewing the security logs and the permission grants for tomorrow’s scheduled trip to Susanville, which you are now permitted to join if you so choose. The arcades are not the top of the line and the Laser Tag arena is most definitely off limits for you in particular but they do have a movie theater, a dance hall and other venues which are age appropriate and Instructor reviewed.

Additionally, as a rare treat, I have gone so far as to rent rooms in the Highbar Motel for the entire weekend as opposed to insertion tactics, which makes this your first real open interaction trip to Susanville. The motel is within a few blocks of the local museum and mostly local to the usual pleasures the Cadet body prefers in majority. Last, which might appeal to you more than anything else, Munroe said that if you were to go along, you could pocket the band while in public and would only have to wear it inside the motel.

He will run you through a number of tests on your return and he will not let you get away with not wearing it entirely but he has conceded to the majority conclusion that it has done most of its overall good and wearing it after this point is simply to maintain its mental impact as a quantified stabilizing influence in your mental domain. Apparently your brain chemistry is more reactive to visual cues and therefore the band does have a more direct impact on the resultant neural functions.

So, you can go with us and cut back on wearing the band so much or you can stay behind where Doctor Munroe might quickly rethink his position. I am not demanding an instant answer but I do need to know by dinnertime in case I need to rent more rooms and reassign additional instructors as you would be attended by one at all times. In the meantime, install the program and see where I might possibly need to tinker with it for best effect, if at all.

Your brother is an incredible programmer and while I have adjusted the security systems here and there, I have not actually violated the program’s intent. The outcome of my minor revisions was the proper integration of the entire grid as one cohesive whole as opposed to the interaction of separate elements of the grid interacting in a limited fashion. You might want to consider that aspect of your brother’s mind as you study the program he wrote just for you as it does tell me that he has quite a few secrets.”

Aflek quietly departed and Justin finally climbed up into the cockpit of his Adventurer, the padded seat which had once been nothing more than a peeled back van seat settled into before he tapped the interfaces instead of using the proper keys and pressure switches to awaken his glorious vessel. He took the time to savor the thrumming so subtle and for a brief little while he relaxed into the seat, his mind set free to imagine flight.

He sighed and returned to the reality as the ship lost power because it had no governing programs to regulate power feeds throughout its complex networks. He faced the fatal flaw as he uncapped the case, its metal tip finally slid home into the one interface port which had been the only concession to the real world and all of its limits. He then tapped the key interfaces to reawaken the vessel.

The telling, unique click sounded as the ship sought anything useful from every empty data storage cell and finally it found the flash data the case held within. He had no real understanding of how his brother had actually devised his self extracting programs or even a clear sense of how such programs could expand almost exponentially but he trusted and relaxed as that programming complied with the applied tactics his brother knew so much better than he.

The unfolding program was slow to expand but even in its beginnings, that program had instant effect. Critical systems remained active long past the subtle clack of crystalline shifts due to thermal changes and soon the cockpit illumination awakened on its own. Gauges and displays which were entirely digital pulsed, their indications adjusting automatically once the communications array spoke its first noise to the world beyond and had then received its first answer.

The thrumming of the ship changed ever so slightly as other systems awakened, went through their own diagnostics and then waited for use. More amazing yet was the discovery that the electromagnetic haze so abhorrent to his eyes and mind was swiftly reduced, curbed almost entirely by the programming which now guided and directed phenomenal sums of energy and then checked the excess by dispersing it as a single, steady pulse well outside the normal means of any ordinary radio system to detect.

The outcome was his ship turned from a mere collection of parts into something which was a united whole, a real vessel capable of almost anything. He savored that truth with a small, joyous smile until the ship's holographic displays engaged and thereby revealed the actual truth of his brother's program. The prompt was a standard game element with the protocols appearing for finger interfaces and as he watched, the enticements so common to electronic games of all kinds began to play on their own with the ship rocking and making all the proper sounds a simulation like his required.

It was precisely measured and implemented for the psychological element of utter fascination needed to inspire the mind of the one to play the game and then to let that person walk away sated. His smile faded as he realized exactly what his brother had done and then, while thinking of all the new, definably vulgar names he had learned since entering the school by which his brother could be called and thereby offended in his person, he finally had to blame himself.

After all, his brother had listened to him and had done so with his customary precision down to the nuances of the stated desire. His brother Earnest had indeed written out the finest program possible and it was clearly impressive, one of a kind in every respect. It was the ultimate simulation program for an Adventurer Seven, just as he had requested while providing all the real variables of the craft itself.

It was exactly what he had asked for and far more besides, especially since the program was still awakening hitherto untouched circuits to test every possible data path. He did hear the priming of his weapons systems as the ship did lift itself off the floor unprompted, these the final parts of the ship's many data paths which were now defined as whole, intact and vital.

The simulation program completed itself and then rewrote its own code into an utterly new file as the ship displays changed to render the data cores and all the unseen aspects normal to a programmer to Justin's eyes. The key case flash data card popped out of the port socket to fall to the floor where it slid beneath a foot pedal with no functional purpose but visual appeal.

The ship itself then settled gently on the ground, the first systems test ended and the ship itself powering down with the program menu plain and merely one defined file available for selection. He thought of Aflek's technique of dual files and was thereby inspired into actions with confidence, the holographic fields touched deftly as if they had always been his first choice and the file so precious and unique duplicated with the merest leading character changes to make ready for all the subtle adjustments which were to come.

But Earnest's programming had its darker side and the ship had the most advanced communications grid in the world with data storage capacities never before imagined by anyone but Justin. That communications grid awakened to life in that wholly unexpected way, every frequency band scanned until it found the school's private networks and oh, so much more.

As Justin stared in amazement while hearing chatter rendered into binary and conversations which became a mind torturing hum, the files from the school and other places the school's systems could access wrote themselves into his phenomenal databases.

In the deed, Earnest's ulterior and secret agenda to capture the total sum of all that the Human race knew was exposed.

His already damaged innocence which had been so enduring despite the hardships of his life received a truly cruel strike and as he grasped the outer elements of his brother's innermost desire to know it all, he retrieved the key case and extracted himself from the cockpit while his brother's best, most amazing program sought to achieve the various purposes for which it had been created.

His final actions before that crucial, necessary departure were the simplest deeds of all and wholly selfish, the security programs of the school which were now already in his ship's databases called up and his personal biometric metafiles given full priority as the solitary keys to access the ship. When done with that simple protocol's creation and implementation, Justin climbed out, he the one to watch in thoughtful silence as the ship obeyed.

The transparent hatch slid closed and the ship settled back down upon the solid cement slab which was the floor, the illusion of innocence itself again the only reality that others would see while in truth the ship was still caught up in the duty of obeying Earnest's program to the final character. He studied the craft that he had made for a long and timeless while before he most solemnly walked out and pressed his palm on the door's sensor pad.

The door so wide slid closed to lock securely in a way that not even Aflek could bypass as he aimed himself for the main buildings of the school, the truth of his brother pondered while making the surprisingly difficult choice Aflek had given with such careful grace and political skill merely hours before. His band enhanced eyes swept across the open ground and as one frequency field translated into another, he saw so clearly the truly anonymous, darkly clad stranger in the distance who dropped expertly from a simple rope which had been strung unnoticed across the charged, polarized walls by means of grappling hooks lodged in trees barely tall enough and strong enough for the chosen task.

That stranger was followed with amazing speed by three others and all four kept themselves low to the ground where ordinary eyes without such a band as Justin's would never have seen them. His mind did instantly shift into that other way of thought based wholly on Sun Szu's philosophy and then so fully that he never noticed the transformation of himself as he made a casual retreat to the second hangar where the paintball gear of others lay on the tables and benches.

He snatched up young Cadet Leerdon's favorite rifle which happened to be the last model of the Bruno-blaster series. He calmly, swiftly filled the ammunition slots to capacity with his own declarative yellow paint balls. The compressed air cartridges were then snapped

into place to give the capable toy weapon he had matured to its design limits its hint of lethality while eyeing the many elements of machine design and all the fragments of metal which were given due consideration as projectiles.

In the end he turned away from the benches and the bins but not because of any choice to avoid maiming or injury of the military people who had once again broken the rules of engagement. His determination was made for another reason entirely as he had thought of the consequences to the air rifle's performance when metal bits were fired and thereby allowed to gouge out new tracks within the almost perfectly machined barrel.

So, in that new mindset and with paintballs and himself, he slipped back out into the late afternoon so pleasant while grinning coldly at the game of paintball which had begun without announcement while the band he had designed revealed far more than those military minds would have ever believed without the proof learned for themselves man to man through bands of their own.

His amazing mind shifted more yet into the patterns of combat as the ancient scholar and philosopher Sun Szu had defined and time had validated as military gospel as he began the stalking of the quarry which discovered his presence as little more than a child's persistence detected at the fringes or sometimes as nothing more than a presence they could not see in any sense of the word but could indeed sense.

Eventually he fired just four times when the perfect shooting solutions were gained for less than half a second. He heard the distant curses as each of his victims was dotted between the eyes and thereby given nasty headaches as well as incidental bruises that would not wash away with soap and water. He saw as well their momentary confusions and as they began to recover, he shot them again in the same exact fashion simply because he could while tapping his waist pager without a thought in the rules of the game.

His pager set off the alarms which called out students and instructors in force, they the witnesses to his third volley so perfect and precise which struck the four intruders down and had inflicted real, if minor, injury by nothing more than repetition with precision. Aflek exhaled dread as he acted swiftly, Justin's borrowed rifle taken as the other instructors rushed across the open ground to capture and cage the four people Justin had targeted so easily and effectively while the Cadets themselves saw at last that any toy was dangerous in the wrong hands.

Justin himself changed mentally without notice, the warrior within instantly buried because the instructors were now declaring the impromptu, decidedly warped game itself ended. He, as always, simply waited for the final score to be announced as the instructors helped the intruders to their feet and then coaxed their dazed captives into sluggish motions aimed at the medical ward.

Justin did not know that his precious, oft wounded innocence was almost dead. . .

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

In spite of his actions in capturing the four intruders the day before or, perhaps, due to capturing them, Justin found himself ensconced in one of the packed seats on the long, lime green bus that Cadets themselves had rebuilt countless times out of simple necessity weighted heavily by self interest. His keen ears which could not shut out any sound were filled with the chatter of excitement, the plans and intentions of his peers a drone his mind tried often to set aside but could not.

Beside him, as promised, the instructor named Carlin Griss was attentive to his stillness and the faint expression of personal torment caused by the chatter of so many plans laid and changed due to the plans and suggestions of the others. And, as the band which rendered hidden domains of electromagnetic fields visible to human eyes was still on Justin's face, Griss casually pried it off and casually tucked it into his shirt pocket while Justin felt the whole impact of twelve seconds of vertigo which did indeed precede the most vicious kind of short lived headache worthy of an actual moan and then repeated gasps for air in the self defined and determined battle to cope with some semblance of personal dignity.

Griss then casually inspected Justin's ordinary T shirt for any trace of coffee stains or possible remnants from breakfast as breakfast had been undeniably rushed and Justin permitted merely two of the four cups of coffee he normally consumed. The plain blue shirt was clean and while trying to show sympathy for the well known consequence of losing the transparent band, Griss also knew that the attempt itself could so easily backfire.

So, after the momentary fussing over Justin's state of person, the man resigned himself to enduring the sounds of pain which could not be remediated with pills or drugs, not even Albuterol or Benadryl in combination had the time existed for their long enduring effects. That headache came directly from the loss of the band itself for it did link directly to the neural fields of the wearer's mind and with such constant use, the mind learned to consider it as an extension of itself.

And that was the fatal, secret flaw of the band Justin had devised, one Munroe had defined and grasped in mere minutes of seeing the changes in the mental activities of Cadet brains after they had come in number to gain remediations for the mental hell gained by such a divorce of extended sense. But Justin's headache and the preceding vertigo was definably more intense than anything the other Cadets had dealt with personally and in hearing his pain, the excitement of his peers quieted considerably.

The bus still headed out the gates which closed fast behind them and without hurry or delay the bus itself had merged onto moderately busy roads where the knowing eyes of Cadets and instructors did spot the tell-tale, subtle signs of long term surveillance. Certain well suited and naturally positioned trees bore the hash marks of climber's spikes and many noticed instantly the hard to spot, tough steel cables which supported discreet hammocks when the military spotters needed to sleep.

Justin, though, had already closed his eyes to mediate the pain and while the hissing through clenched teeth would not stop for many minutes to come, that one action did give some relief. So, as usual, he missed the proofs of military presence which brought about the change of topics from premeditated plans to curious interest in Justin's methodical assault on four military scouts who had turned to stone when questioned and had no identification of any kind, even to the standardized records of fingerprints or retinal files.

And, with practiced deftness which was actually habit, they tactfully avoided the mention of the outcome Justin had been kept ignorant of, namely the ways his repeated forehead shots by a paintball rifle of his own design had indeed caused definable, if merely temporary harm to the brains of all four due to the resultant wave effect which had initiated highly localized frontal lobe swelling by those rapid surges of compression and decompression.

His motives were brought up and then his logical, honestly believed defense, although his known penchant for switching from one mindset to another without warning or notice was spoken of as a joke which carried serious implications due wholly to this first adventure by Justin into the real world where such minds would undoubtedly be noticed and thereby reacted to.

They, his friends and companions, were simply assessing the situation in their own remarkably efficient fashion. Indeed, the instructors listening to the conversations that took place with ear bending speeds while Justin was patently unfit to follow them were left with the clear realization that the Cadets, more than themselves, would mitigate most, if not all, of the possible conflicts which could arise without warning.

The bus kept moving on its intended course as the chatter changed again, if only due to Justin's slow recovery as the migraine ebbed and then ceased altogether. He was eventually caught up with questions about his interests and thereby studied in new ways by his peers, all of which had a vested interest in his protection and thorough distraction by whatever social venues he did find appealing.

Justin's itinerary was thereby defined ever so smoothly and with his consent, the final plan finalized as the bus turned into Susanville proper to navigate the denser traffic and all the stoplights which mysteriously but consistently shifted to green in a timely fashion for their

arrival at the motel while police vehicles proved numerous but equally unobtrusive until reporters showed themselves and the less loved paparazzi tried for close contact.

By then the Cadets were disembarking to the sounds of chirp-like sirens and the outrage of professionals who made their money photographing reclusive international celebrities like Justin Lucas Brunheldigon while the extremely competent police dispossessed them of cameras and camcorders. The police were so effective in their duty that only one lean, fast woman in a smart green and gold business suit managed to reach the line of Cadets.

Justin was suddenly faced with a live dictation tape recorder and that patently excited woman's swiftly uttered question so taut with passions that did leave him pointedly startled as well as more than a little confounded.

"How does it feel to be a Nobel Laureate, amazingly rich and in an all male school surrounded by the military due to all the political change you inspired?"

Griss smoothly swept into the moment with one hand closing on the dictation recorder as he spoke briskly but firmly with a practiced, efficient smile as police officers responded with the airs of men and women truly at the edges of their professional approaches.

"Cadet Brunheldigon does not give unscheduled interviews to anyone and never has, although he does plan such an interview in September. The exact date and location will be posted on the appropriate school websites via the internet and we hope to see you there with far less desperation and much more personal discipline."

Griss was then remarkably graceful in sweeping Justin away towards the motel doors as the police were left with the chore of caging that one escapee who was now scowling in real frustration because she, like so many others of her profession, had just been expertly thwarted with real, praiseworthy finesse. Justin was soon indoors and aware of the many bags and bundles with the Cadet logo imprinted on the sides, all of which were being meticulously searched by total strangers in three piece suits who were likewise peculiar to his perceptions, men and women who had a definable lethality not far removed from the mindset of the military.

He was transfixed in much the same way a bird often was by the presence of a determined snake and Griss shook his head in private dismay as he necessarily forced Justin into motion towards the elevators which led up to the third floor Aflek had rented in entirety just for this particular outing due to Justin's notoriety and his known status as a recluse in the extreme.

Other Cadets followed and one adventurous lad of sixteen deftly donned an electromagnetic band with a smug, knowing grin as Griss sighed again with a deeper

scowl than the one which had just terminated in resignation. Eldred Wright, though, proved most logical in that deed which had its consequences for in just the elevator itself that band revealed two neatly concealed cameras and a micro transmitter. And so began the technology war which was most definitely lopsided in the school's favor, one where the Cadets themselves had undeniable pleasure in harassing the unknown, unseen people who were spying on them without consent simply to snare images of Justin while Justin tried to cope with this full reversal of right and proper, accepted and unacceptable.

His behaviors shifted and the old wariness which had almost ceased returned, it the restoration of the vulnerable child who was most definitely far outside the domain he understood. It was an event that neither the Cadets nor the instructors had foreseen and one that even Munroe had thought Justin past due entirely to his successful adaptations. After all, he had learned to cope with the school's routines, classes and then there was his survival and further adaptation to the almost self destructive grant of nearly absolute freedom to build the Adventurer and then the independently directed, impressive, if disturbing, strikes against the military added in for good measure.

But here he now was in that first step out of the elevator on the third floor behind the other Cadets who were adding themselves to the search for illicit surveillance gear with the use of bands of their own, a pale, nervous boy who looked every bit the part the eight year old who had no idea of who to trust or what to do. His eyes had even widened to their fullest and his respiration was picking up speed while losing valuable depth. Griss scowled in the final choices he could make as Justin stepped into the hallway.

In the moment his decision was declarative as he pulled Justin's band from his pocket and held it in place across his eyes for the fifty seconds the band required to match his brain's neural field. He saw the world in that whole new, extraordinary way which he personally did not like and spoke firmly to Justin as he did so.

"Lead us to room three zero two. It's an end of the hall room but I'm not sure which end."

The order had amazing effect. In being the recipient of that simple directive, Justin managed that steadying, deep exhalation and then the forward step which left him focused on the doors in a decisive manner. In just one survey to the left and right to read the numerals within range, he had his bearings and therefore the simple ease of confidence to lead the way to the left with Griss behind him.

Griss was soon at the door to the room he and Justin, as well as four other Cadets, were to share under less than ideal conditions so much like a camping trip and with that same grimness of self, the man endured the brief moment of vertigo caused by the sudden cessation of the band's use while unlocking the door. He then tapped it with his booted

foot, letting it swing into the room before resuming the task of counter surveillance with the band.

Justin studied his actions intently in that terrifying, wide eyed alertness so unsettling to the soul and as Griss moved into the room, Justin followed, the points of where the discovered cameras and other surveillance gear lay hidden contemplated by a mind that was suddenly working as opposed to being locked in that peculiar state of helplessness. But he was not seeing with an electromagnetic band as the instructor was. His mind was simply vectoring views and auditory fields, the room analyzed acoustically and then for field of view before he turned to face the logical points Griss had not yet examined.

The more ordinary boldness again showed itself as his delicate, skilled fingers deftly pried out the first of many hidden and extremely small pinhole cameras. The first was in an unlikely place indeed, it so neatly tucked into place as a decoration on the filter trap of the small one cup coffee maker which would certainly see almost constant use. And, as he did want a cup of coffee, he ever so casually disposed of the camera by dropping it down the sink while filling the pot.

From there he readied the small unit with a packet of coffee the motel had provided, the chore so simple one he knew to be watched by cameras like the first that Griss, for whatever reason, had not detected even with the electromagnetic band's assistance. He then accepted what he could of this peculiar change to all the norms in his life, the finds of modern technology laid out on the night stand.

As Griss endured the vertigo a second time, he amazed the man by simply pointing to other locations he could not reach, each a place which Griss studied with a frown that grew deeper until the surprise of insight arrived. In the end, Griss managed a chuckle as he pulled his waist pager from his hip pocket and turned the unit on. Justin's beeped softly and then spoke the faint words that all the other Cadets and instructors would hear in like fashion.

"They are also hiding the surveillance gear around electrical sources with greater electromagnetic outputs. You might have to look for them with attention on the composition or perhaps the feedback effect, although that might accidentally start fires. So, the best way is to isolate the surveillance gear and that is most easily done by eliminating the greater electromagnetic fields. Instructor Adelin, call the main desk and ask them to kill the mains for this floor for some sixty minutes.

It won't turn off the smoke detectors like they say it will or damage the emergency lighting like they might suggest or imply but we can inspect these sites manually once we have the majority of the bugs found and disposed of. Do expect the motel telephones to be both

tapped and traced as well as the conversations themselves recorded. Switch over to the pagers if you want a reasonable amount of privacy when you call your parents.

Oh, someone needs to go down and take a gander at the FBI's approach to the inspection of our gear and take notice that Justin did not react well to them. He's still out of sorts and I'm not going to ask him any questions until I have assured myself that the illegal bugs are all gone."

Justin sighed as that one vital word of illegal changed everything in his mind. He was startled by what it meant and further confounded by the derived implications, which made him shake his head as if truly confused. Indeed, he was, yet more by the dynamics of legality as learned from his parents. The world he did know of as more of an abstract made of jurisdictions and overlapping governmental authorities changed yet again, every location redefined in a most peculiar way with each void of legal definition.

Indeed, hospitals took time to resurface with all the known issues and parameters he had learned directly and then came the awakening of right and proper for the school, all of its extensive and leading edge technology isolated as legitimate by supportive legal permissives and justified necessity. Slowly the change spoke in his body as a trembling the instructor found alarming and when the beads of attire soaking perspiration were added to the rise of shallow respiration, the man exhaled with frustration and did the most logical thing he could think of.

Justin was only half aware of being herded gently to the desk and then ensconced in the adult sized chair while one ordinary notebook was pulled out of hiding from beneath the instructor's shirt. A pen was soon laid out but Justin did not need these tools as the mental world of comprehending legality took more of his mental resources at the expense of his physical self.

Griss waited for the magic of inspiration to begin but when it did not and Justin's evidenced distress grew more obvious, he finally capitulated to the logic of calling someone else far more able than himself. The waist pager was again in use but Justin was almost oblivious to it.

"Griss to Munroe."

Munroe responded pleasantly.

"Speaking."

"Justin is in an inventive state but he's not inventing. He's shaking bad and his clothes are already damp to the touch but my thought on a shower and a nap was put off due to the

bugs in the room and the fact that our gear is still being picked through rather meticulously by the FBI. Incidentally, he saw them and just froze perfectly still for quite a while and I had to force him into the elevator.

He's been acting strange ever since, similar to his charted response to admission into the school. He did have one encounter with a reporter and he was quite surprised by her but I handled it and he was fine by all the evidence until he saw the FBI agents. I'm reasonably sure that seeing them was the causative and in past events like that, removal usually solves the problem.

He even found a few bugs I didn't find myself and we're working to resolve the problem accordingly. He made himself coffee after that and then he started this. I just don't have a contingency plan for this situation and I don't know what to do. My other option is to pull him and return to the school."

Munroe sighed forcefully as Justin found the crux of his problem. The gains of legality shattered as a consequence and became trillions of elements, his mind again caught up in the amazing, timeless event which was so much like extrapolating technology but was now seeking to do something far different, something with far too many elements of politics, emotive values and social dynamics he could not define.

He was nominally aware of the waist pager's slow passage across his body from head to toe before it again circled his head with even less speed. The following silence seemed eternal and yet it was indeed brief and Munroe's intrigue was plain when he broke that definitive silence.

"I can tell you right now that he's not cycling technology. He is making leaps of some kind but it's not technologically based. The neural field scans aren't even close to a technology extrapolation event and the only comparative I have on him that comes close to a match is his language comprehension event and this indicates that someone somewhere said something which initiated a linguistic analysis.

Does the waist pager have a replay mode? I need to know everything he heard before he went into shock and this might be a matter of nuance as much as word choice or grammatical structure. That means anything which was said or seen within thirty feet of him."

Griss grunted softly with surprise and then Justin was vaguely aware of his jeans being invaded, the Velcro seam crackling as his waist pager was taken. In his mind the fragments so numerous were beginning their realignments, the first clash certain to fail and therefore the first recombined pattern to be set aside. He heard the replay of Gris'

instructions to the others and Munroe sighed hard, the puzzle faced as he spoke to someone else.

“Any clues or insights?”

Earnest’s much transformed voice was heard and the maturing teen was clearly intrigued.

“Well, it’s not due to a new language or any he never mastered, although there are about sixteen of those waiting somewhere in his head for just the right connection. It’s not due to the FBI, although the trance state does indicate that he was definitely studying whatever he picks up from people who kill for a living or at least have the training and the active state of mind needed to use it.

So, that’s not the trigger, either, although it likely came very close to a military reactive state and removal was not only sensible but timely. His behavior after, though, indicates that he has no idea of what is expected of him in any context. This setting is not a hospital or the school or a home environment, the three areas which he does have a mental format for. Additionally, I noticed the behavior as beginning when the Cadets apparently found a camera of some sort in the elevator, specifically in a change to his blinking pattern as recorded by Cadet Chriss’ waist pager.

He may not have any means of coping without being under glass, especially since he always has been. We may have initiated a catastrophic mental crash by putting him in a normal social setting which he just can’t handle. For him, especially, rules are pretty much everything even if he seems to ignore them at leisure. In his case, he is not actually ignoring any of the rules but rather has developed an intricate hierarchy of which rules have what priority in every setting.

As an example, games normally follow several guidelines. First, most of his preferred sports are minimal or no contact, which is why paintball is his favorite. Second, paintball is combat oriented and he has studied Sun Tzu as well as grasped its principles in a logical form I can’t come close to understanding, which is the underlying reason why he can and does switch to a military mindset so damned quick when in contact with like minds.

He can, in fact, relate to them and does so because it is easier than constantly coping with everything else. Paintball is also a favorite as it does push his physical limits, this due to his understanding that he does need exercise and so he uses the game to see how far he can go before he does get tagged out. So, in this structure, the rules of engagement are extremely ordered and layered by effective priority down to how the game ends.

That is a glimpse of his mind in a stable, workable setting to which he has effectively adapted and we are now seeing that same mind in a situation where there are no defined or

understood governing rules, protocols or regulations by which to define the social elements that govern acceptable interaction, either by approval or disapproval. In summation, we turned his world upside down and inside out without providing him the necessary base by which to handle the sudden transition from one realm of behavior norms into another which is quite opposite in most respects.

Do you have anything, Mom?"

Betty's calm voice was direct and thoughtful.

"I noticed the dynamics of the grammar and linguistic values of the dissertation to the rest of the Cadets and instructors at the motel and it seems that Justin was coping better than he should have until the issue of legality was brought into play. From the records at hand, it is clear that he was helping to locate the surveillance items by defining logical locations and this by auditory and visual parameters.

From that evidence, my suspicion is that his current mental leaps are his attempts to validate and structure normal society into a workable form. This is simultaneously taking place in both the legal sense and the social sense, if not also in the political and emotive senses, which might prove futile due to his inability to effectively grasp or work with emotive elements due to the lack of logic inherent in an emotional event.

He does have the educational background to achieve the work but he does not have the psychological basis in the comprehension of emotions in a definitive and consistently workable form by which to make effective use of that data. In other words, normal society is too loosely regulated and unstructured to deal with for more than limited times under the best of circumstances and he has found out that these are not ideal circumstances.

He, in this instance, is trying to use his current situation as the basic template for his desperately needed internal social parameters as Earnest stipulated. Admittedly, this does complicate our advance planning for his future in ways I don't like. First, he has attained his limits of comprehension in majority, regardless of how much more he does learn in text form.

At this point, however unconscionable to me as his mother, I would push the rote recitals of mere data and standard tests to get him his graduating diploma, which should be quite simple due to his rage of memorized coursework. Whatever else he does do in the future, the diploma is a necessity due to the way society works and what they expect. Aflek can review everything and with the tests at hand, Justin could be technically graduated sufficient to society's needs in two weeks, if not sooner.

Kyle and I will then come to visit with Aflek and work out something else with all of Justin's issues in mind. The situation has come closer to a head and while I cannot tell Justin the dynamics of quickly shifting legality in society, I can always love him nonetheless."

It was her final words that transformed Justin's mental domain and in that moment those words had filtered into his mind, connections formed. It was not the familiar, all at once clash but was instead the much slower union of first one element and then another while his body went rigid and the world beyond him was wholly ignored. The domains of society awakened one by one as those same unknown voids where there were no definitions but here, in Susanville, rules did emerge, ones which were tenuous and uncertain, sure to change and then without warning.

It was nothing less than self preservation. . .

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

However terrified he seemed to be and despite the way he tended to freeze into stillness without warning and although he was the epitome of the vulnerable child of eight, Justin Lucas Brunheldigon was actually enjoying this truly frightening, strange foray into a world where the rules did and already had changed innumerable times in subtle ways that his fellow Cadets or the instructor Griss could never appreciate.

But he was aware as well of the elements that were stable and fairly consistent, like the ways the vehicles traversed the roads to the governance of stoplights and stop signs. He was equally aware of the distorted, stress inducing routines of police and plainly dressed others with those peculiar mindsets so similar to the military who were plainly outside their normal behavior norms because he was among them.

So he traversed the sidewalks and studied the social order he would never fully grasp effectively and even managed something like a grin when he noticed the candy store that the party of eleven he was just one of seemed wholly willing to ignore. He simply broke from the pack so quickly that Griss never noticed and with the speed granted by Capriacil and further bolstered by dedication in paintball contests, he was already at the glass doors where colorful posters and balloons truly enticed before his absence was noticed.

Dark skinned children and adults entered and left as he studied the posters offering all kinds of tangible sweets he had never sampled and when his waist pager beeped, he answered so casually with a tap to the response button while stepping inside. After all, he just had to study the shelves and bins laden with the marvelous new that were common and well known to everyone else.

His nose was blasted with the plethora of odors so tempting as the automatic tracking function of his pager initiated. His blue eyes were wide and full as the excitement surged, this the chance to sample the amazing that had come to his ears more than once when Cadets had discussed sugar laden preferences in casual conversations, all while being aware of the shocked stares that came his way because he was markedly bald from head to toe.

Even as young as he was, his pale arms were far too smooth and while they had no real idea in the conscious sense that his whole being was routinely shaved, they did react unconsciously to that fact and to the tiny tremors just beneath his skin that simply were, ones he no longer noticed. So he perused the wonders of the shop with meticulous care and finally advanced on the service counter where the wary, dark skinned clerk studied him with open suspicion.

He sensed that indefinable element of another language and without thought he spoke in Hindi, his inflections precise and his vocabulary as expansive as the texts that had taught him the language. He spoke in that markedly formal way as Griss entered, the instructor instantly aware of Justin's language and then of the origins of the clerk who was now amazed and well beyond the fringe of his own comfort zone.

"Do you take debit cards? I do intend to make a very large purchase and lack insufficient cash for it."

Justin did hear the faint words that came to Griss' ears through a tiny ear transmitter and Earnest's voice was truly amused.

"He's asking if the clerk can process debit cards as he intends to buy a lot of candy. Knowing him, he'll probably try to clear the man out and probably only because he's never had candy beyond peppermints. We don't have an issue with the purchase but we don't want him recognized in the financial transaction, either."

The clerk caught sight of Griss as he swallowed hard and then the man managed the ritual smile which did restore him to composure as he responded with a shake of the head and the fair use of English.

"I do not speak Hindi well, Little One."

Griss chuckled to himself and smoothly glided to the counter with a grin that said much before speaking smoothly, all the while giving the clerk a knowing stare that said he knew the truth. The clerk was again nervous but as Griss then used English, he calmed immediately.

"He was asking if you can process a debit card so that he could make a rather large purchase. Due to his life situations, he has never had this opportunity and he might even feel that he will never get it again."

Other customers heard those smooth words and the study of Justin changed, he now someone to sympathize and then to give a certain discretionary space for reasons as varied as the chance of contagion to the offer of dignity. Justin did notice this shift of the rules in so many ways as the lesson of the clerk's reluctance to speak his own native tongue was added to the many dynamics which did indeed challenge the very limits of his already strained means of coping with society.

But the answer did sound with the false smile given, although in English poorly rendered in Justin's estimation.

“We are able, sir. What does the Little One wish to buy?”

Earnest’s suggestion was quick and unheard by all but Griss and Justin.

“Use the expense card with the school tag for anonymity purposes. Oh, someone has been following him specifically for several blocks and his quick disappearance into the candy store caught the man wholly by surprise due to the way Justin seemed to just vanish. We only noticed the unknown observer due to the way he rather quickly backtracked to you.”

Griss sighed with frustration but he was a man used to swift decisions and that frustration was soon aimed tactfully at Justin.

“What do you want to buy?”

Justin sighed and spoke, although now in Hindi because he was in conflict with English and quite busy in the study of being trailed by unknown people Earnest was suspicious of. His list began and the clerk blew out his cheeks as Griss gave him that knowing stare once more. But, contrary to Earnest’s supposition that he intended to buy out the store itself, his list was well defined to the preferences of his peers and then refined to quantities the shelves and already memorized cases defined as standard.

Earnest dutifully translated and Griss then spoke the translations as if there was no personal issue with this clerk’s deceptions. Yet the effects of Hindi in use was evident in short order as other people of Indian descent appeared with pleasant smiles and clear curiosity while cases of candy were hauled out of the storage room and stacked neatly to one side.

And last Justin caught sight of a delicacy that was as strange as all the rest, even if it was not a known element by name. He added it to the list without hesitation while struggling to use English while facing so many people who knew Hindi well. His English came out slurred and hesitant, as if English was not the native tongue by any definition.

“I also want to buy fifty cases of the Marpazzi and I am hopeful that you can deliver everything to the Maxey Military Academy sometime tomorrow. I am willing to pay for the service.”

The Indians were startled and Griss himself given pause but Earnest’s words in Griss’ ear left the instructor quick to grin as if apologizing for Justin’s flawed use of English.

“He’s just fighting his own instinct to speak their preferred language and you aren’t enough to effectively balance him out. It’s a numbers thing. The Marpazzi is questionable

as I don't know the formulation and it might have nut derivatives. You might want to ask the clerk discreetly."

The resistance to speak the Mother tongue finally fell apart as the plump, graceful matron with such gorgeously styled hair of midnight black glided close to the counter. Her Hindi was all that Justin expected and her smile was that of a mother who knew well the hardships of a second language.

"To whom do I send the candy, Little Dove?"

Justin frowned for only an instant as Earnest translated for Griss.

"Doctor Alvin Munroe or Headmaster Aflek."

Griss sighed as he acted, his voice still light and the smile on his lips amused.

"There is one consideration. Does the Marpazzi, which I personally am unfamiliar with, have any nuts or nut derived oils in it? That includes flavorings and encompasses coconuts as well as all the rest."

The matron inhaled nervously and Justin gave her a pleasant grin before speaking the same approximate message in Hindi while seeing the peculiar element of omission as somehow vital in the exchange.

"Instructor Griss is highly concerned that I might be trying to become sick as he does not know Marpazzi and worries much that it might have the essence of nuts within it. As I do not remember myself, we hope for disclosure. But, between us, it was the odor of heaven that called me in."

Her eyes filled with relief and her smile returned but she spoke in Hindi instead of English and thereby forced Earnest to translate.

"It has no essence of nuts but he may wish to warn anyone other than you that it will be hot to the tongue as it is a curry flavored treat."

Griss chuckled with personal ambitions as he changed directives.

"Send one case of the Marpazzi to the Highbar Motel, care of Instructor Jeffries, third floor. I think I know exactly what he is up to and I like the prank. I just need to know the final sum so that I can pay you."

The original clerk nodded with the same twinkle in his brown eyes and after a moment, the matron herself grasped the joke about to be played, cause for her to snicker and wag her finger as if Justin had just come close to a horrible sin. The cost was soon summed and when Griss presented the debit card without Justin's name, the transaction took on a peculiar dimension.

Of course, spending almost ten thousand dollars on select kinds of candy was part of the issue, but more so the tactful anonymity that school account provided. Justin found himself under truly intense scrutiny for several unpleasant seconds and then the matronly woman deftly slipped away, her return in moments with a white rod burdened with a rainbow of cotton candy truly unexpected.

Justin found himself the recipient of that unknown fare and as he took the gift from that woman, a note was deftly slid into his fingers without anyone noticing. He felt the slip of paper and as he turned for the door, Griss heard the clerk's grunt of puzzlement.

"Is something wrong?"

Earnest's addition was the sound of frustration.

"Someone has frozen the school's public access accounts at the state level and I'm not seeing which agency. Looks like you have to use the fallback card but let me clear access first. Oh, if that gets blocked, which shouldn't happen, loiter for about five or ten minutes as Justin explains this situation to them. Father is local and he's definitely got enough cash to handle something this petty."

Griss swiftly switched cards with a bland smile as Justin dared to examine the slip of paper, its tiny Sanskrit characters read as words that flowed from one shape and design so beautiful into another that was not at all real but grasped by his mind as the meaning of the message.

"There is a high price on you and many desire it."

He scowled and surveyed the people in the shop, each sensed in terms of languages before he exhaled hard and struggled to speak the language he liked best. His Arabic was rough but the words were defined quite easily by his brother and relayed at once to Griss in English values.

"Griss, we have a problem. Justin just got some sort of message that there is a kidnapping attempt in the works and that there is a reward for his live capture. Father's shifting security teams and Mother is already in position with her teams just in case things get

messy out front. We'd prefer that this was kept low profile due to his notoriety and how valuable he would be to anyone that gets their hands on him.

The last thing we need is a full scale media circus. Justin, ask the matron if she might possibly be willing to shelter you in the event of an emergency."

Griss was understandably startled by Earnest's smooth inclusion of Justin into that supposedly private recital and more yet when Justin posed the question in perfect Hindi to the matronly woman who paled visibly while her fellow Indians tensed for the same reasons.

"If things become unpleasant, would I be welcomed and sheltered from the storms of the world?"

She finally responded with a shake of her head and truly sympathetic words.

"No. You are too different. The storms would find you."

Justin responded with a polite smile while feeling that sensation of being wholly outside his element.

"Thank you for this. I hope to enjoy it."

Griss tried the second card in the silence that followed but again the transaction froze, the authorization process interminable with no ending and no indication that the transaction would likewise be denied. Earnest spoke in Griss' ear, his tone perplexed.

"Someone with lots of clout is trying to freeze the account on the exchange level of normal bank transactions and I can't trace to a specific agency. It's a normal use Homeland Security protocol but it's not being flagged in the proper ways and Father thinks it might be international in origin, possibly Interpol or maybe Swiss Intelligence. If it blocks the card, we go to cash and take the hit in the wallet.

Mother indicates that she has enough cash to cover and she's already outside. Don't worry about the exchange. She is better with Hindi than Justin or myself and she also indicates that if she is to come inside, Justin has to look surprised or at least confused. She's not sure he can manage the trick."

Justin frowned as he faced Griss and once again he struggled for Arabic that came out unpolished and garish.

“I need to know the mechanics of the transaction. Can you redirect the signal and the exchange to another account, like switching a power feed in tandem so one system is polarized while the other is depolarized? I occasionally need to do that to rectify charges in secondary systems which are dual and counter to each other in normal operations.”

Earnest responded with sudden pleasure in Arabic of his own, causing Griss to wince with distaste.

“Sure. Never thought of that. Let me redirect signals. I am attempting to redirect, billing Mother’s account while doubling back with the same permissives to the rightful card. The protocols have just frozen her public funds to block the transaction, although I have managed to unfreeze the school accounts and all three of your emergency cards in total. I’m bypassing the usual channels and I’m waiting for the accounts to transfer properly to the candy store’s bank.

The funds are now transferred and final, although I did have to force the transaction since there is a rogue element I’ve never seen in play.”

The Arabic switched at once to English as Earnest continued his discourse so smoothly.

“Don’t use any of the school debit cards until I figure out how they are being traced and blocked. Mother’s outside and she’s got some cash. It’s only a few thousand but it’s enough for the weekend if you budget. If you think you need more, Father is almost there with his pocket cash. Justin, Mother says to come out of the store with the cotton candy right in front of your face, although she’s not saying why and is speaking very softly in Taglog.

The grid shows her team in motion but I’m not clear on intentions. How are you doing mentally? Your pager indicates that you are shaking some and since it’s in your pocket, I can’t get a neural.”

Justin made the admission but did so in Hindi to the surprise of the Indians present.

“I’m really out of sorts. It’s hard enough to deal with society’s dynamics when they change all the time and adding in all the rest is really pushing the limits. I’m doing but I’m not doing very well. I need to take a shower to settle out and then a nap to process. After that, I should do better in the next round.”

His father’s composed voice in Griss’ earpiece was wholly unexpected and while Kyle was calm, he was also resigned, the choice he had derived and now spoke gently in English one logically deduced and weighed in all the familiar ways.

“There won’t be a next round for quite a while, son, not until the modeling convention. Instructor Griss is going to take you back to the school for a lot of reasons but mostly because you aren’t doing as well as you think you are. From the visuals provided by Griss’ pager, you are very close to collapse, much as you were when we took you to the Caring Heart Treatment Center just before the Demisterin remediation you actually liked.

I do admit you are much more rational about things now than you were then but you are not at all fit to continue on, even with a settling out or a nap. We’ll just take you home to the school and figure things out enough so you can go to the modeling convention in September. Earnest has already flagged the contingency vehicle and it is almost to your location.

That gives you just enough time to come outside with a few minutes to spare so that we can arrest a few more paparazzi while your mother and I make extremely detached greetings of our affection. In so doing, we are then enabled to visit you at the school with due discretion and no real following sometime later this week as the many eyes upon us at the moment will turn elsewhere to find us due to that lack of parental exuberance, worry and so forth.

So, present the cotton candy as a facial shield and do what you can to seem afraid of cameras, interviews and so on. I doubt that it will be hard as there are a number of overeager reporters chomping at the bit, most attempting to remain inconspicuous while readying some remarkable cameras. My only regret is that you have no way to hide your eyes effectively so as to make the photos rather useless to the various media outlets they would be sold to.”

Justin frowned with sudden inspiration as Griss exhaled his irritation at being a conduit for a conversation between father and son. Justin then moved with almost desperate speed to startle all the eyes on him and deftly and skillfully he swiped the translucent band from Griss’ shirt pocket. In less than a second his real abilities of hand and eye were displayed in a way Justin did not really think about in the least.

The cotton candy was ever so casually tossed into the air and the band settled into place over his eyes, the cotton candy then caught a second later on its descent. He then plunged headlong for the door with Griss forced to rush after him, all to the applause of Indians and other customers who were amazed by that most modest performance. In fifty seconds he was outside and the band began its work, the world around Justin exposed in ways he was used to in majority.

Cameras did flash and security teams did react as his shocked expression was seen by so many in the revelations that Griss and Aflek had hoped he would never have. But while they thought in terms of human bodies wholly exposed to such a mind as his, he was not at

all shocked by that in any way. His shock came entirely from all the many neatly concealed weapons that existed in that crowd and then in all the dazzling implications that followed as a consequence when the plain, truly ordinary black Primus rolled to a stop with Aflek in the passenger seat.

The rear door opened and he climbed in, the wonder of reality far too much for his mind to cope with until he actually tasted the cotton candy for the first time in his life. Griss sighed with relief and as Justin settled into the rear seat to enjoy the amazing glory of this new marvel, the seatbelt buckled and his parents grinned at while so much of the world was seen from perspectives so few could understand.

He did see the dozen arrests as the paparazzi tried to close in on the vehicle itself but by then his deft, capable parents had already given him those knowing smiles and had closed in on Griss. Justin had the final glimpse of an alien world where halos of electromagnetic energy bared all, even the discreet packet of hard currency which looked like an ordinary birthday gift complete with ribbons and wrapping paper.

From there the joy of candy was all he focused on for it was far better than the alternate choice of coping with a reality that constantly shifted in so many subtle, maddening ways of wrong turning right while proper and improper traded values without warning or notice. Candy gained a special place in his mind as he finally realized how useful it was to him as a distraction, a pleasure and a source of deep contentment.

It was the final flowering of innocence...

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

It was the strangest game of paintball ever, both in the minds of the Cadets and the instructors who had studied the mere thirty-one minutes of digital footage four times just to see what, if anything, had gone so counter to the known routines of Justin taking out at least fifteen of his peers before being tagged out himself, electromagnetic revelation bands or not.

In that thirty-one minute replay which was now being studied with meticulous care by all, the replay itself was now crawling along at quarter second intervals that did show Justin's unique halo as markedly different from normal and his behaviors far less militaristic in every way, as if he had somehow forgotten the rules of engagement that had been such an integral part of his life for so long.

To all eyes, Justin's included, Justin seemed to be a novice without more than a passing familiarity with his pistol and no sense at all about camouflage or stealth. Justin, as perplexed as everyone else, finally shook his head and ever so casually pulled off the paint splattered blouse, the Velcro seam a noise in parting that was so familiar that no one turned to tell him it was not actually proper to do so out in the open.

He then fingered the tender, still stinging bruise which was already purpled and beginning to spread, the round dot marking his heart the very point where the paintball had impacted him not all that long ago. The blouse was casually dropped onto the torn ground as he then faced another terminal, a rogue, half formed notion driving him to turn the views to the treetops.

Nothing was found and so he sighed, the red hues of paint on his blouse examined before the blouse was retrieved and the issue simply accepted while other Cadets made the connection he almost had.

"The soldiers are missing."

The words made every instructor turn to the fifth laptop's declarative rendition of the treetops and they, as much as the Cadets, saw the same reality as Justin just headed for the school with his pale chest bared to the sun so seductively warm. Behind him the laptops were soon urged to replay every other recorded contest with the whole field for paintball examined.

Sure enough, in the replays, military men were found in some truly odd places, often in motion from one spot to another because the Cadets themselves were moving with deft

skills through the forested forty acre zone. He had heard the declarative and while he was simply in a mild depression of his own for having been shot so easily, the real issue was darker yet.

He knew intimately that his mind simply had not been on the dynamics of the game, not since his return from Susanville the day before. So, because he needed to think about the day before and because he was overly warm, he picked a secluded spot out in the open by the orderly orchard which no one cared about and where the sun's warmth would thoroughly seduce.

He ever so casually shed and did so with a sigh of relief most personal. The uniform became padding against the grass so disturbing to his skin and without hesitation his eyes closed, the pleasure in sunlight rich, timeless and blessed until Aflek arrived to block the sun as he spoke in a tone full of irritated speculation.

"Is there a reason you are choosing to sleep naked where telephoto lenses of unknown agents such as reporters can see you and then take photos?"

Justin sighed with frustration and simply rolled over, his warm chest given the cooling touch of his uniform parts as his backside was then given the sun's warmth, at least what Aflek's shadow did not block. Aflek sighed again and stepped away with the approximate distance of twenty feet marked while thinking it was thirty, his pager pulled from his hip and Thant called as Thant's arrival in the night had allowed Munroe to depart with haste.

"Thant, Justin is doing things that don't make any sense and are plainly out of character. For one, he lost a game of paintball in thirty odd minutes and now he's by the old orchard and stark naked on his uniform. I asked him why but he just rolled over and didn't answer, again an oddity in itself."

Thant's drawl was equally hard for Justin to hear but oddly the reply to Aflek was unimportant.

"I can't explain the paintball defeat as anything but a lack of external influences granted by military mindsets as perceived and not seen, due to the fact that he does have the ability and skill as well as the disciplines, although not the causative internalized trigger or personal motive inside a building. Do notice how his paintball scores are actually more consistent with this event when inside and wholly in view.

It is really not all that anomalous when examined closely unless you factor in the military and exclude indoor events from the review. In fact, it's only then that you can see the real impact on Justin when exposed to the mental effects of active military mindsets and only

by this glaring lack of those active military minds. So, the first problem is now resolved and defined and the interpersonal behavior issue detailed with causes and outcomes.

Second issue. His choice to sunbathe is a fairly consistent action among Capriacil clients but I am charting it as an anomalous behavior because this is his first time at the practice and the first indication that he is so inclined. I can see the logic you posed about the reporters and paparazzi but the subtle play of sunlight on skin as sensitive as his is not to be lightly ignored, even when that skin is numbed with a topical.

Do notice that he is not actually enjoying anything that impacts his skin with any real pressure, self touch, clothing and showers included. He showers and is normally attired, yet he does so because it is necessary and in this instance, he may have simply had enough of being compliant to necessity. We all have our limits and needs for a vacation of one kind or another, whether that vacation is a removal from a sensory stimuli or a break from a situation, location or political event.

I will put in the design specs for a sunlamp which will be better than public exposure but since we don't have one on hand just yet, he's probably picked the best spot. His unwillingness to explain himself might just be due to being moody, pissed at you and the world or maybe he just doesn't care because his input was so bluntly ignored and argued into meaningless noise.

Don't miss the fact that he can't rebel like other people due to his necessary dependence on those around him so his rebellion events are going to be necessarily subtle and therefore easily missed. As a justification, he was pulled from Susanville more or less against his will and that is a pretty hard blow to morale and esteem when his logic was pretty sound. He did settle out with a nap and a shower and while he was here when he did so, he did settle out.

More to the point, he would have done the exact same thing in the motel due to the environmental setting which approximated school to a sufficient degree and the people, all of them being Cadets and instructors who do know his issues quite well. Yes, I know about the paparazzi problems, kidnapping potentials and the political hash and all the other crap but he's not all that aware of them as real elements and that was part of what he was trying to study so he could understand them to some degree.

So, sir, he was ready for round two but nobody let him make the attempt and I'm sure that the denial really hurts. He is trying to be normal and he is trying to learn how to fit in with everyone else and just when he gets close to gaining that education in a useful form, everyone pulls him back so he can't. His family is highly private to the point of paranoia and security minded to beat all hell, which does complicate his life in ways you probably can't grasp adequately.

Have you ever actually listened to his parents when they discuss or compare Earnest to Justin? You might want to and listen extremely close because the nuances and the moments of silence mean as much as everything else they say. But, since that's a tough job even for me and Alvin, I'll cut to the chase. Earnest gets a lot more praise than Justin ever will because Earnest does know how to hide all of his assets, life history and personal involvements, even with a public school record track and an extensive set of college verified credentials which are quite impressive.

Do try to access them and you will find that you can verify them with remarkable ease. But, if you try to dig for any personal details beyond the educational statistics, you'll hit some damned impressive walls. Oppositely, Justin doesn't have a clue on how to hide his notebooks, much less how to hide the whole entirety of his life. Additionally, trying to do so would have bad consequences for Justin due to his personal needs but his parents have tried and so has Earnest.

They did so only because that is what they view as both normal and proper and they have tried very hard. On top of that, Justin is a Nobel Laureate with a published biography and a photograph that's all over the world and a historical footnote besides. That goes so hard against the family grain that it does cause a lot of family friction, not to mention quiet alienation and rather cruel kinds of simple avoidance.

Earnest, by the way, has never had a public photo, not even for the school yearbook of the preschool he attended or any of the alumni associations he is connected to. Add in Justin's world notoriety for crashing the US political scene with an additional two public access, face visible interviews by way of the computers here in less than a year and the family's sense of panic gets pretty intense.

On top, like frosting, he had a media circus in Susanville due to a leak nobody can find and more security around him than the President. That made his public visit to Susanville so far from normal that most of the other Cadets just holed up in the motel after he was extracted from the candy shop so they wouldn't be mobbed by the reporters. The adventurous ones, though, were rather clever in using the exposure to advertise the kit planes and cars as ad lib insertions and off the side comments the reporter couldn't completely edit out.

The comments, due to Justin's notoriety, did get national exposure and orders are still coming in. So, we have the cake, the frosting and now the cherry. Everyone was so damned worried about the short term event of him crashing due to known issues with structure and interpersonal dynamics that only he thought of the long term needs he is facing. He really wants something of an independent life, which isn't actually going to be all that independent when compared to anyone else.

Don't forget that his peers can dress, shower and wake up quickly without assistance and he sees that all the time. He's also playing catch-up to everyone else on a lot of other levels and that's damned hard for a fifteen year old with his issues and background. He has accomplished miracles but he knows quite plainly that he is still way behind and he isn't catching up as quickly as he'd like to.

So, professionally, I really do think more harm was done overall than good by his extraction yesterday and if he gets a little moody about that, it's perfectly normal. In fact, if he didn't show some irritation or rebellion, I would get worried. He may not be very emotional but he does have emotions, however limited they are in expression. I do think you are seeing the upper limits of his rebellious side and my advice is to just have a chat with him if he'll talk or send him to me.

He's probably got a lot on his mind and with a mind like his, behavior norms don't settle out like they do for others. By the way, how far are you from him?"

Aflek scowled as he replied, the distance measured visually for the second time.

"About thirty feet."

Thant's drawl so deep became a speculative noise.

"Check your proximity indicator and you'll find that it's closer to twenty. Justin, if you've had enough sun, I'd like you to come up to see me, for all the stated reasons and a popsicle, your choice. Alvin added a wider variety since the Headmaster hasn't received the candy from Susanville yet and you seemed to really enjoy the cotton candy."

Justin considered the offer and the reasons but he only rose from the ground for the offer of the popsicle and then walked away from his uniform with the coldest of glares at the Headmaster. He knew that it was wrong to do so and yet he did not care in the least, not when a declarative of some sort was plainly necessary to him. It was a five year old's rebellion to authority and Aflek was not at all a pleased man as he collected Justin's attire in silence, this situation one he had to face without delay whatever Thant wanted, suggested or advised.

So, with lengthened strides, he quickly overtook Justin's most deliberately casual steps and spoke firmly, flatly and decisively.

"Either get dressed or I'll dress you, with force if necessary."

Justin appraised the situation and silently claimed his uniform, the chore of dressing hardest when he donned his socks and boots. Even with all of his practice, modified boots and ankle socks that were not like shin socks which were so much harder to work with, the disorientation was still a problem and it took almost a minute to settle out and stand up. But, once dressed, he gave Aflek the same cold glare and walked away, the Headmaster left to sigh with frustration while he headed into the main building and sought the medical wing.

Thant was seen in the back of the long room where the modern marvels of medical technology waited for use and the huge black man turned as he entered, that wide face so frightening to others breaking into a warm smile.

“Let’s think about who you are rebelling against and why.”

Justin studied this man as the urge to trust completely rose and since it was such a potent urge, he did not resist. His mind started sifting through the facts and the word just came out, just one quiet sound Thant listened to with care.

“Everyone. Even you.”

Thant accepted those words as they were given and when Justin said nothing more, he grabbed a plain brown box from one of the lower shelves, it the offering which was presented as a gift.

“This is a puzzle that is three dimensional and intentionally unlabeled so you can’t advance the outcome mentally by knowing what the pieces are supposed to fit together into. We’re supposed to use it to see how fast your mind can assimilate dimensional variables like the edges of the puzzle pieces while measuring hand to eye speeds in a real time setting but we can pull all of that from the audiovisual files from the security system.

I’m actually offering it as a break from everything you’ve been through, sort of like a hobby. I don’t care if you are dressed or not and you don’t actually have to work the puzzle if you don’t want to. If you don’t want to do the puzzle, I’ll just let you pick out a popsicle and let you enjoy it.”

Justin felt odd indeed as his personal desires clashed with his utter trust of Thant. He did want to turn around and walk out but Thant wanted him to work that puzzle and then there was his real desire to simply shower and curl up alone in his bed and the opposite interest in the popsicle of an unknown flavor. His mind quickly froze due to all of those opposites so equal in strength and Thant studied the way Justin stiffened so subtly while those blue eyes ceased to blink.

Justin became the wholly vulnerable child in mere seconds but Thant did nothing to interfere and as the first few seconds turned into twenty minutes, Thant just waited with seemingly infinite patience for Justin to find his own resolution to the conflicts within. It was a necessary duty vital to Justin's future and as twenty minutes turned into forty and then forty turned into ninety, Aflek appeared to speak and therefore change Thant's gentle remediation of a mental crisis which could only be handled in that one fashion.

"Is he all right? He hasn't moved in over an hour."

Justin blinked and shivered as Thant's conflicting parameters were nudged ever so slightly out of alignment by Aflek's mere presence. And, as he had personal issues with Aflek and his parents, Justin just turned on his heels and walked out as Thant became a much different person. He heard that deep voice begin the expletives and then the fury that Thant had never before exposed as he descended the stairs.

He had no interest in lingering to hear the details of a psychological remediation event with conflict resolutions or anything else like it. So, problems and all, he changed directions and headed to his hangar where the biometrics panel was flashing the tell-tale red that was, to his eyes and mind, bright blue. He tapped the key code personal to him to access the logs which would reveal the persons who had tried to enter and the panel itself flickered to life in another function to show him a small video made of momentary clips, some mature faces wholly unknown and obviously soldiers while others were Cadets and then Aflek himself.

Each attempted breach had a time index and code variables which were intriguing to his mind and while he memorized them all with no expression, the ways to utilize them were considered. Finally the buffers cleared. He typed in the delete code and the buffer's memory was dumped into oblivion. He then pressed his palm onto the panel and the hangar door slid open, his grand, exciting ship at rest and seen plainly as the lights above engaged. He advanced but only by a single step, the chore of privacy followed as he turned and tapped the lockout code into the interior keypad.

The hangar door closed with its customary speed and only then did he sigh with private relief, the ship of his dreams finally touched with a smile he normally reserved only for his mother and father. The ship responded to that physical caress, its complex security systems disengaging and the hatch sliding back with the barest whisper of noise. He climbed up and settled into the padded seat to savor the dream as the ship itself awakened, the holographic displays pulsing to expose millions of files arranged in categories which had been sifted and cross indexed for search parameters of all kinds.

He simply sat and watched as more files yet were added to the sum and then he called up the copy of the simulator program. Its code appeared instantly and it was an immense

program, one well beyond his ability to follow or comprehend. He still tried, achieving only one relevant fact for all of his trouble and the two hours that chore took. Like the security program that Aflek had adjusted, it had that same peculiar extra set of encoding and the same exact patterns of that encoding.

He closed the file and set himself to work as he searched for and found a simple program creation program with a search led by a single word. That program opened and soon he was typing, the use of the holographic interface a clumsy approach at first but one gradually mastered. In another hour he had written a simple program and when it was saved, it, too, was added to the sum of Earnest's ambition to know all things.

He then called it into service and gave it the name of the one program he wished to change as the alarms within the hanger beeped to tell him that someone was trying to enter. His response was to tap the console keys to trigger the hatch, which closed in a second while his tiny, crude program did its job of selective purgation to another program which was truly incredible and amazing, the purged data ever so neatly saved to a file of its own which, unexpectedly, activated without permission.

It was a poor video with an audio track that cut out intermittently but that video was truly shocking, one he did not comprehend as being anything more than something most intimate and personal which Earnest wished to express but had never dared to admit. He watched it with a peculiar expression of total surprise and then true disbelief when he recognized the other participants.

The video finally ceased and ever so carefully Justin called up that numerically named file, its existence ended as the hangar door slid open to reveal Carl Aflek in a very sour mood as the evening sun illuminated him from behind. Justin sighed in what he now knew about his brother as he studied the Headmaster's entry and choices were made, each logical. He quickly called up the program he had made to make just a few minor changes before deleting the original.

He then wrote a brief message to Earnest and added his small file, the message itself one from the heart.

"Earnest, use this after you finish writing all your Survivor games and security codes due to the video I saw when I rectified the code strings and compiled the parsed data. I don't understand it but since you hid it like this, I assume it's bad politically and if it's bad, it's best to just get rid of it. Tell Munroe that he'll have to explain what he was doing with you to me so I can understand what I'm supposed to do or not or if I'm ever supposed to say anything about it.

You should also know that Aflek has been parsing your security routines for the school but he doesn't know that the extra programming strings which isolated parts of the security grid are elements of your hidden video. The program I wrote, which is the best I can do, will clean it out and delete automatically as a dedicated function. By the way, the simulation program is absolutely wonderful now that the program has full integration to all systems. Love, Justin."

He transmitted the file as Aflek approached the ship and then, because it was logical, he shut the ship down and opened the hatch as Aflek climbed up. Aflek was silent as he studied the consoles which were now seemingly lifeless and Justin, as Aflek was standing on the wing with the foot and hand holds, therefore sat still and waited with patience for whatever the man would say.

Aflek finally did speak and, to Justin's surprise, the man was rather composed, if cold in tone.

"You are late for your shower and ointment, so climb out and we will take care of business."

Justin responded quietly, the issue of his brother's personal affairs set aside and then buried as he faced his own situation with calm.

"I would, sir, but you are in my way. Adults might be able to climb up or drop down from the other side but since I am not an adult, I do not have that extra grant of freedom. I need the hand holds that were not part of the original design."

Aflek climbed down and Justin followed, the ship abandoned. Its security systems engaged almost instantly when Justin was three feet from it and those systems were so quiet in operation that Aflek did not notice. They stepped out into the illuminating radiance of the setting sun and, like the ship, the hangar closed without a prompt, although loudly enough to gain Aflek's attention.

Aflek finally lost the cold manner and was more open about himself as a consequence.

"It took me quite a while to bypass your access code to see if you were okay."

Justin headed for the main building as he replied, Aflek in step beside him.

"I needed some time to myself, sir. There are times when I just want to be alone without cameras or speakers, microphones and everything else, even people. Even aquarium fish hide under rocks once in a while and nobody complains about them when they do."

Aflek actually grinned and responded as his hand lightly touched Justin's shoulder in a gesture of friendship and protection. Justin flinched in the contact but only due to the shock of how much it felt like a slap.

"You've never met my mother."

Behind them the sun settled below the horizon and Justin faced the routines that were vital to his sane existence, yet even in doing so his mind was hard at work, the final details of his dream determined and new courses of action decided, all elements aimed at the end of September when the modeling convention would become a grandstand for the most glorious of adventures where he would leap for the stars to join the Imperial Forces against the Rebels.

And that brought a very private smile to his lips. . .

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The time indexed, verifiably day old message from Earnest was blunt, somewhat cryptic and yet, in its own way, an expression of affection, if one written in a complex blend of eight languages which took time to sort out and properly align for comprehension.

“Don’t ask, don’t tell and forget all about it. Glad you liked the simulator program and I’ll see you in Amalito. Loved the supplemental program and fixed some of the syntax, rectified a few operations parameters and put it into full use as a dynamic interface patch for a full systems upgrade in all applications, although at a nominal price. It’s now selling like Bavarian waffles at a pancake convention, although I did have to claim full propriety and authorship to make the sales move as fast as necessary.

Take good care of the ship so I can add it to my collection when you finally do get tired of it and walk away without a second thought. Oh, I’m shipping you a special sunlamp array due to Thant’s recent purchase specifications to the pharmaceutical company and it should be there sometime tonight or tomorrow. It’s fairly large but once it’s assembled and operational, you should find it extremely enjoyable.

Incidentally, it is actually the latest in an ultraviolet therapy unit which they use in various medical centers around the world for treating jaundice and vitamin deficiencies. Have fun and love, Earnest.”

Justin silently deleted that message as his shared dorm’s door slid open to admit Aflek, the man curious and speaking openly.

“Was it a real message or just gibberish?”

Justin sat back in the chair as he chose to honor his brother’s desire, the matter of that strange video thereby fully settled for all time.

“It was a genuine message. He encoded it to hide his itinerary from outside scrutiny due to competition, espionage issues and so on. I did notice that it came in yesterday morning at roughly seven thirty and the twenty-four hour lag from arrival to delivery does concern me as messages from my family are supposed to be delivered without issue or delays.”

Aflek mused, his reply casual but the words truly a revelation.

“I wasn’t sure if it was a real message due to the encoding and as you do get a lot of unpleasant mail, I had to be reasonably sure it was a message and not a virus of some sort

or a video bomb or something else just as nasty, which is just one of my many duties for all the Cadets as well as yourself. As a matter of fact, the only reason you even saw it was because when I returned it to the very anonymous and therefore highly suspicious sender, it refused to send.

Thereafter, it extracted itself out of my administrator inbox and transferred itself to your terminal using the authorization protocols of the school security grid. So, since it was sent suspiciously and then did suspect things, I traced it and came to see what it was.”

Justin scowled but the only question in his mind was if he had thereby missed other letters from his family.

“Do you read my mail or do you just wait to see if it acts funny?”

Aflek considered his reply carefully but when his words came out, they were calm.

“I do read everything unless it’s obviously a video bomb, porn or something similar, although some of the porn was actually intriguing. I do pass on the letters which happen to be in Chinese or other language formats but I do try to translate them first to validate family connection and I don’t normally block mail from Doctor Kleinlinger. Elim’s mail, on the other hand, has often caused my eyebrows to lift and I’m not sure if he’s detailing actual events or if he’s just using English in an odd format due to his tendency to twist letter values into a numerical expression.

As I am not sure, I side to caution and withhold the mail, although I have saved each letter.”

Justin nodded with the full knowledge that he was censored but in knowing the truth he was not at all surprised by it. He simply made his choices and spoke his preferences.

“Elim is most likely inverting vowel parameters as numerical constants in a verbal expression of a mathematical construct and therefore the letters are most likely harmless. I would like to read them.”

Aflek came close to the desk and deftly tapped in his codes, the new display of an electronic archive with student names called up and Justin’s database opened. Justin saw the five previously accessed letters from Elim and then the staggering number of other letters, all unread, untagged and unverified. Aflek mused knowingly and commented after that soft noise was merely a memory.

“You get roughly six to ten thousand e-mails a day from all across the world and most are junk. Half, by approximation, are viruses, electronic letter bombs and other truly

unpleasant things that the security protocols handle automatically. So, that's fifty percent, on average. Of the remaining fifty percent, most is porn intended for an adult audience, advertisements for everything from soup to hygiene elements and cars of all kinds.

In actuality, less than one percent of your mail is actually mail. Of that minority, a total of five letters are from Elim, eleven from Kleinlinger and eight from your family, including the one Earnest sent in such a disturbing manner. The others are mostly requests for interviews which were referred to your parents after I noted my disapproval for the interviews.

When asked for an interview, the standard response is denial."

Justin nodded in faith and opened Elim's oldest letter, the letter itself peculiar to say the least. But it was self evident to him that however unsettling the English was to Aflek, it was not intentionally so and most definitely a mathematical extrapolation. In fact, the letter's English meanings were simply ignored in whole for the elements of a new theory that Elim had wished to pass by him in a very normal, pride inducing peer review.

He grinned to himself as Aflek frowned with deep suspicion and no small amount of alarm.

"Was he making an actual sexual offer of some sort or was his descriptive on his own hygiene accidentally vivid?"

Justin focused for a moment on the actual English and as he read it, he had to frown with confusion.

"There's nothing suggestive here in the English values. He's just citing how the doctors take care of him since Munroe found the melanoma and the spastic bowel issue. The other details on hygiene are basically him saying that he's learning to be fairly independent and while detailed, it's nothing like what I go through when I try to shower by myself. But he's doing two things at once and the theorem is rather intriguing, a dynamic polarization of an accelerated particle stream which could be useful in military applications.

He's basically wondering if the atmospheric density would interfere with range tables he included in ways that he's not seeing."

Justin opened the second letter from Elim and grinned instantly for in the English values was the tale of many small successes so vital to real independence that Justin knew he would never attain himself while the underlying values in mathematical terms was the same theory refined in several aspects. He continued on until all five letters were memorized then closed out Aflek's administration account, his own then accessed and a

letter begun in Hebrew after switching the linguistic tables in his letter editor while Aflek silently observed the whole affair.

“Elim, I am truly sorry that I did not respond to your letters as the security system that protects my electronic mail was not sure if they were dangerous to me or not. Your theorem is sound but the energy needs are prohibitive unless you use an N dimensional tap, the construction details of which I am not allowed to share. There are many reasons why but the most important is that, if I were to give you the details, you would not learn the valuable steps, however small to the mind, which provide crucial insights into why they work as they do.

In this, Elim, I show you that I do value you enough not to get in the way of a learning event even though I already do have the answer. Doing otherwise would only hurt you in the long term as giving you the information steals from the gains and limits the ability to grasp the deeper meanings which lead on to greater things than even I can imagine. It would please me if you and Abraham could come to America, specifically to Amalito, California, on September Twenty-fifth at zero seven thirty with plans to remain for the whole day.

I am entering my full scale Split V Wing Adventurer Seven into the contest and your presence would honor me deeply. I will have to give some sort of public speech and answer reporters from time to time but it will be impressive even if you are not interested in models and vendors of Space Battle items. If hotel space is limited or unavailable and if Israeli Security allows, contact Headmaster Aflek by sending a normal e-mail to me but written to him instead.

Ask him politely if he could possibly board you and Abraham with us. The security additions would be welcome if they were male and able to speak English since we are male only and majority English speaking. I am likewise deeply pleased that you are attaining a degree of independence I will never have for myself. Do be good to Abraham and pay attention to your security teams as they seem to like you a lot.

Don’t fight the doctors and good luck with your theory. Your friend always, Justin.”

He finished the letter and sent it, the draft itself then translated with a simple program designed specifically for the task. Aflek scowled in private suspicion at the way Justin had done so without a word but as he read the letter for himself, he sighed softly and spoke more like a friend.

“I’ll have to contact Kleinlinger fast if we want to work something out, especially since the whole area is already booked solid for the weekend.”

Justin nodded, the chair abandoned and gestured to with half a smile.

“I need to go up to medical to see if my sunbathing system arrived as scheduled.”

Aflek frowned with a moment of guilt that vanished almost instantly.

“It did but we’re having an issue with where to set it up. It’s too big for the medical wing and we can’t put it in the pool room due to the humidity. It won’t fit in the greenhouses due to the growing trays and I’m not putting it in your hangar until you cough up the priority code you set up by means unknown.”

Justin felt the oddest of sensations as anger percolated upward from his soul, if only a mere flash so brief. It was enough to harden his eyes and to shift concepts into a decisive expression, words that were cool and as hard as iron while having in them a dose of real amusement.

“Then, sir, I guess I just sunbathe in the orchard regardless of the paparazzi and the military spotters. I’m sure I can think of some way to really give them a show.”

Justin then exited the room with Aflek left behind, the man actually stunned and slack jawed. But Justin did not aim himself for the medical wing. His direction of choice had already shifted with Aflek’s spoken assertions and he did have his other needful things to consider, each a personal detail aimed at space. He headed for the main doors and then exited without hesitation, this despite the brief lockout that was so easy to rectify with Aflek’s own emergency bypass codes while the quiet alarms began to sound.

He, though, ignored the alarms and stepped out into the sunlight, the warm air soothing and his lips curved upward in the smallest of smiles. From there he headed to his hangar and entered without issue, the door closed behind him and the codes altered to give him privacy until he chose to abandon it. He then faced his benches of equipment and the new replication unit with its stable, durable N dimensional taps, the future sealed in his mind and needing only implementation.

He did hear the faint thuds as people banged on the tough hangar door and then heard the silence as they discovered that he had changed the lockout bypass codes with Aflek’s original permissives. He even had an idea of what would come next as he began typing in the programs that would bring that special replicator to life in order to make his dream a reality.

It awakened without protest as the most likely scenario was proven and when Earnest’s nervous, worried voice came across the transceiver based and very isolated intercom, he even knew what to say.

“Justin, you have to open the door. You have to let them inside. You need them to help you. This isn’t proper behavior. This isn’t a good thing.”

Justin opened the replication unit and extracted the first components for new N dimensional taps, the components then assembled with efficient speed into the tiny buttons which were gray-gold and ready for priming. He spoke so calmly then, the future he sought one far different from the present his brother possessed.

“I just need space. I need time to myself and no one is letting me have it. I’ll come out when I’m ready.”

Earnest sighed tensely but when he spoke again, he was somewhat calmer.

“They need to know how you got Aflek’s bypass override codes.”

Justin’s grin widened.

“It’s simple. Like eleven military agents and twenty-three of the Cadets, four instructors and some lady in a pink jumpsuit, he tried to get into the hangar. It’s rather interesting that they all tried to use my privacy codes for mail and normal door access to get in except Aflek. I suppose it’s a good thing I had already switched over to a full biometric table with a wide range electromagnetic validation sweep.

Oh, the replay logs, which I did delete, were an excellent addition to the normal routines and that is where I got Aflek’s overrides. I do admit to using them for my own personal agenda but you are no stranger to things like that. You might have different needs than I do but I do have needs and one of them is the occasional need for some real privacy which has plainly been lacking my whole life.

As I could not get it any other way even with compromises offered, I used the Headmaster’s codes to lock myself in and while I do feel a bit upset about not having the use of that sun lamp system you sent while I do have real privacy, I’ll get by. Pass a word on to Munroe that I do need a chat and one that isn’t recorded somewhere. I’m reasonably sure you can guess some of the questions with a bit of thought and due consideration.”

And then, with the most casual of motions, he simply tapped the intercom button to silence it. He resumed his self appointed tasks as his waist pager beeped. He merely relocated it to the bench before continuing the entry of more program vectors for the replication unit, the beeping pointedly ignored. One replication event followed another with all the assembly steps between honored with due process and somewhere among the many things he fitted together, the pager vibrated as its functions were remotely reset.

Aflek's voice sounded moments later, although it was clear that the man was not sure about success and was speaking to someone else.

"Not sure. I've never needed to use the function. I'm just trusting that you write excellent backup protocols."

Earnest's voice followed and in that reply was arrogance.

"It works. It might take a minute or two for the reset but the protocol is viable. Patch to the field scan mode and let's see what he's doing."

Justin smiled to himself as he settled one of his recent creations over the pager. From that moment on he heard the muffled curses and then the pleas for him to open the hangar but he simply ignored them as he built his Imperial helmet and tested it on himself to be sure it worked to design specifications. He breathed in that perfect blend of synthetic air from its small synthesizers as its force fields engaged to protect his face, a test that made him smile because he was that much closer to being fully equipped to join the Imperial Fleet as a pilot.

The space suit was soon created and then his magnetic boots, yet when it came to the required plasma pistol, he discovered that he simply could not replicate the components because he did not know what the components were made of. His adjustment was ever so simple and soon a pistol that did look the part existed, one which was equally unique and truly unsettling to the knowing mind. Its output was mere sound with a visible component and while it would not kill, it would and could paralyze or stun as desired.

Last came the holster and when all of his gear had been tried on to test the fit and then pulled off again, the collection was soon transferred to his ship's storage compartment. He contemplated the outcome of his preparations then checked the mental list the final time before wiping the files in his replicator's database and settling his tools back into perfect order.

He pulled his uniform on as the final action before uncovering his pager, Munroe's amused voice heard and the man himself talking to someone else.

"And this is the entirety of the problem? There's nothing else going on, like a world cataclysm?"

Aflek was not a happy man.

“I can’t protect him when I can’t get to him. My job is to make sure he doesn’t hurt himself and he’s in his hangar alone with a wide assortment of power tools and God knows what else.”

Munroe snickered pleasantly but the pleasant snicker was replaced by truly cool, almost tranquil words in a most innocent question and yet, for reasons Justin could not define, the question was utterly fascinating and therefore hypnotic.

“Aren’t you forgetting something, Headmaster?”

Aflek was transformed, made wary, suspicious, as if he, too, had sensed this man’s attempt to compel him with a mystery.

“What am I forgetting?”

Munroe chuckled in his warm manner but now it held a menacing edge and that menace was still evident when his otherwise calm and very ordinary words sounded.

“I seem to recall several required behavior changes in Susanville and since which are radical and problematic, although they are seemingly insignificant and may therefore have been missed altogether. But, let’s set them aside for the moment and look at the larger picture, shall we?”

Aflek was less comfortable than only moments before and now almost timid.

“I’m not on the same level.”

Thant spoke up as well, although with deep curiosity as opposed to any hint of alarm or nervousness.

“I’m not there, either, Al.”

Justin had the moment’s imagination of Munroe’s face in the expression of cold disapproval and then heard the man’s voice turning brisk and professional in the manner of one about to give a lecture.

“Friday’s excursion into Susanville, in many respects, was a first time affair despite the number of times Justin has actually been inside the city limits. In each and every prior time in Susanville, he was always taken directly to the door of the facility he was to go to and that was the only allowed venue until his pickup that evening in the same fashion by the same vehicle and instructor. So, in all real parameters and by the actual defining elements of societal exposure, Friday was his first time in Susanville.

It was certainly not normal by any measure due to a leak in security concerning his itinerary and agenda but the leak was accounted for by innumerable FBI agents, called in police from other areas including the state and a large contingent of private security personnel from the Brunheldigons themselves. After all, Justin is a very helpless, innocent and unknowing boy that reporters alone would flay to the bone given half a chance when he couldn't escape direct questions.

In fact, the security was so comprehensive that I understand the stop lights were reassigned in situ by spotters to enable the school's bus to arrive in the motel parking lot without a single potentially detrimental delay. For someone like Justin, such an action may well have given him the worst possible, most warped example of a normal society in action and thereby set the stage for the eventual conflict in the candy store and then, regardless of his desires, an extraction that did fit with previous norms in most respects.

No lights yet? No realizations coming forth? Then let me continue. He got off the bus and was able to see all those policemen very busy containing the paparazzi and normal reporters so they would not possibly ask him a single potentially harmful question, all but one woman who was just fast enough to get past the human wall. Her question was a complex question and instructor Griss did two things that were counterproductive to Justin's education in all things ordinary.

First, he did not ask Justin if he wanted to talk to the reporter and second, he denied Justin any chance to pose an answer of his own in any case. Justin was thereby informed at the beginning of the day that his personal choices had very little real value. So now we enter the motel lobby where the FBI was most definitely hunting for trinkets and collectibles to keep for themselves.

Do note that Justin's satchel had very little of the prearranged items inside when it was finally brought up to his room. Fortunately, nothing he valued was taken as nothing he valued was previously packed. His soap was gone, as were most of his attire items, a booklet on the museums and other pamphlets which were my suggestions for his day of adventure, yet as he had not seen them, they were not at all missed.

Yes, gentlemen, his belongings were pared down to the clothes on his back and a pair of boxers, two pairs of socks and his brand new toothbrush by our illustrious FBI in the name of his protection. Do notice that all of the taken items were so new that Justin did not even know they existed, even his small, extremely expensive and highly compact sleeping bag. Mister Brunheldigon did have the foresight to set things up in the lobby and the guilty agents are now facing some rather unpleasant investigations.

Kyle Brunheldigon is indeed a vengeful man when crossed in person or family, so those agents will most likely lose far more than simply their employment. But, as things went, Justin was blithely unaware of the situation. So, he entered the elevator where his whole concept of right and wrong as well as proper and improper was turned inside out, upside down and then torn to pieces besides when the Cadets and instructor Griss reacted as they did to the discovery of cameras and microphones.

Let's not forget that Justin has always, to a greater degree than you might think, been under constant observation in every hospital since Dylan, always under scrutiny at home and then especially so here at school. His brother, when asked select questions, was quite literally able to show me files on Justin that do indeed go back to his early childhood with remarkable detail.

But, in the elevator, this discovery was such a shock to Justin that he went into the known reactive responses such shock causes. After all, it was a truly traumatic event to both learn and actually come to understand that your whole life under glass is not at all normal in any sense, not even remotely. But, what everyone missed was his recovery from that situation, a recovery sufficient for him to reenter an entirely unknown societal dynamic of immense complexity with only minor personal issues which he was correcting for as they were discovered.

That, gentlemen, is utterly remarkable and well beyond the ability of most marginal savants or true geniuses with societal issues much less severe than Justin's. Don't lose sight of that fact as it is extremely crucial to what happens next. So, in this state of constant self rectification with social dynamics he does not understand at all, he then self determines to enter a candy shop to buy his friends select treats.

A person in his state of mind should have been a quivering, naked soul trapped in the fetal position long before, yet he was still coping with remarkable agility and rational enough to select all the favorites of his peer group, tabulate quantities and then interact quite smoothly with the clerks and the store owner, even when presented with financial complications and the threat of kidnapping.

Earnest admits that Justin's direct question at a crucial time was the key to discerning international involvement and the store owner's note was enough to arrange for a very wide net to be spread to catch not one kidnapping team but six, all from other nations. Yet, even at this point when Justin's personal issues were becoming evident to others visually, he was still quite rational.

When asked how he was doing, he was able to self determine his own status and then give a practical solution which was very literal and developed for his current situation with the intent to foster a second attempt once he had processed the gains as he had the morning's

earlier crisis to himself. For him, a shower and a nap are quite restorative, as the shower breaks the mental chaos with brute overstimulation to the dermis and the nap afterwards lets him reprocess all the unworked data in ways quite different from the same technique as applied in a conscious state.

Whatever else he has learned at Maxey, he has learned to measure himself very closely so that he can push the envelope without tearing that critical and protective envelope apart. I did notice that his sleep as recorded by the pagers was unusually disturbed and fraught with sensory data that actually impeded proper rest. Contrary to normal people, Justin is a violent tosser and this is why we four point him as a normal rule when he is in the medical wing overnight.

In the nap event after the rather rushed shower which should have been left on until he turned it off, he slept in a nearly immobile fashion, which is alien for him however normal it is for others. The cause was the use of boxers and the sheet, as well as the rather heavy blanket which was added not long after he was evidencing REM sleep patterns. That much bedding is detrimental to any Capriacil client.

He should have not been forced into the boxers, either, although the sheet was acceptable and more than adequate to thwart the cameras that might have remained in operation. So, for all the good intentions and ethical issues, morality and decency elements, Griss, with your approval, initiated something akin to a torture event. Since his return, the issue with boxers has continued and so has the extra bedding.

Also, his shower time has been cut for reasons unknown and therefore he has been in clothing for a much longer period with no relief. Do tell me one thing before I continue. What is your normal reaction to being burned? Do you keep your hand in the heat or do you pull your hand back immediately?"

Aflek responded briskly and warily.

"I pull back. If I don't, I usually wind up with severe burns."

Munroe mused with the sounds of deep interest.

"And in such a situation, do you voluntarily put your hand back into that heat source later?"

Suspicious, Aflek responded with reluctance.

"No."

Munroe sighed softly with contentment.

“You have your answer to all of his recent behavior issues right there. He is not rebelling against authority. He is avoiding the very painful heat which has already burned him severely. Like you and a hot stove burner or perhaps a lit cigarette to the palm, he has no interest in a repetition. So, while Thant gives you an in depth lecture on dermal sensitivity as it applies to Capriacil clients in the school, I will attend to Justin and see if we can work out a suitable compromise that will not be altered for the sake of convenience.

He is generally amenable to such negotiations as long as the outcome is a workable set of behavior adjustments which do solve his problems to some useful extent. He does have a very well developed sense of compromise, unlike most people.”

Thant’s voice was soon heard in the very beginnings of just such a lecture and as Thant’s voice grew distant from the pager that was clearly in Munroe’s hands, Munroe spoke with personal dread.

“All right, Justin. He’s fairly malleable and there’s only myself and Earnest outside the hangar.”

Justin reacted, the hangar door opened and his brother studied as both he and Munroe entered. He then closed and locked the door and took Munroe’s pager, it and his own turned off with the batteries removed and the cases expertly disassembled before all the components were casually dumped into the replicator and the replicator door closed. He smiled to himself as one experiment was tried and as the replicator began to hum in a new, strange tone, Earnest grew curious indeed, enough so to study the laptop where a file was being propagated in reverse form from the replicator’s complex, truly advanced circuitry.

Justin noted his brother’s utter amazement but since the experiment was almost complete and could not be undone or damaged, he turned to Munroe with due seriousness.

“I need you to explain the video of you and Earnest so I understand it. This is off the record and just between us and that’s why I destroyed the pagers. Even without batteries and torn down to parts, they do have a carbon cell microphone and the necessary photomultipliers which are powered by the microphone that enables them to passively pick up audio from the surrounding area.

Anyone with a similar unit can then tap into the flash data and thereby listen in, which none of us want.”

Earnest turned with a grim, unexpected scowl but Munroe, surprisingly, studied Justin in a new appraisal before managing to grin with real appreciation. Munroe then began

speaking, the tale as convoluted as any he had ever recited, the facts which gave the lesson to come detailed with meticulous care in contexts Justin did not always understand.

It was a most startling lecture. . .

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

September Twenty-fifth was a surprisingly pleasant day and while the sun had yet to rise above the Eastern horizon in the normal course, Justin was not at all concerned that it might fail for reasons unknown. He simply studied his special craft in the predawn light with all the other models of other ships ignored. He finally touched the hull which was now matte black due to an overcoat of carbon fiber and the transparent canopy opened, granting him full access to the vital attire he had made with every intention of leaving Earth for the Empire somewhere far beyond.

Yet even in the survey of his consoles and the select, if small modifications he had made during the last few days of worry and reflection, he was already beginning to feel that peculiar calm. The hour of his departure was coming ever closer and in that final hour all of his nudges to his copy of Earnest's simulator program would be tested in a maiden voyage like no other.

Oppositely, the world would only see the simulator program and then merely taste the adventure he would gain in full measure. Then, too, the doctors from other races were most definitely advanced well beyond the understanding of mere human beings and that clearly offered him options which were definably personal. He was utterly certain that they would fix his skin issues and make him normal, so convinced that the flight into space was a temptation even as he pulled out his unique uniform and climbed down.

But he did climb down and he did know that every great event had its special time for expression. He sighed to himself as he caught the sounds of people arriving much as he had, each team of people settling around their own creations while still glancing at his because his was by far superior even if it was black instead of the proper opalescent white. He finally made his choice and shed his clothing with as much speed as possible while hidden in majority by the afterburners, his snug space suit pulled on to the peculiar sounds of whistles and several other snide comments he did understand to some degree.

His uniform parts minus the pager itself were then returned to the storage compartment along with the few trinkets and other items he had felt useful while the pager was tucked so neatly into his utility belt. He then climbed down, his transformation into something other than a mere boy in a military styled uniform cause for new contemplations on vastly reduced chances of winning the lauded modeling trophy.

His inner confidence emerged then, his body language altered unknowingly so that he radiated poise and authority. He finally dropped his mock plasma blaster into his holster and adjusted the utility belt which was fully functional, the last of his preparations the

mere distancing of himself from the ship so that the ship secured itself, although now with the Graviton emitters working hard to prevent the chance of someone simply coming in with a lift to hoist it from the ground.

If they tried, he knew that they would discover that his small ship could not be moved. In such an event, the more force they applied without his presence, the heavier the ship would get. So, due to that one feature and so many others equally subtle, he smiled to himself and took a brief walk down the long rows of models which did in fact cover the gamut of the fleets revealed in all the movies related to the Space Battles theme.

Most were mere plywood and wire substrate but some were truly excellent visual works, like the two different versions of a Dalini fighter which was, in the movies, a single glimpse as it had been shattered by a Rebel pilot's projectile cannons. He took his time until the pager beeped and as he had promised Aflek, he answered it, the buttons somewhat of a challenge due to the suit itself.

Other contestants were mesmerized by his appearance as he answered the pager which did in fact fit with the uniform rather nicely.

"Yes, sir?"

Aflek spoke with irritation but also evident was his resignation, if only due to the concessions that had been fought for on so many fronts.

"Exactly where are you?"

Justin's calm confidence showed itself in his reply and it was the final element that did leave every listener caught in the spell that every Imperial pilot created with his or her presence wherever they went.

"Five hundred meters from the ship, sir, westerly, first row. I was examining the rest of the fleet."

Aflek growled and there were a few hard to decipher expletives but overall Aflek was fairly calm and while taut, his voice was not as caught up in sounding as strangled as it had been just a days ago due to Justin's most deliberate act of blackmail and coercion after learning exactly what the definitely personal tattoo had meant and where it had come from. Of course, Aflek's ex wife had been so eager to tell him all the details and then had given him several other interesting facts Carl Aflek had no desire to expose to light.

Not after having spent eight years burying them as deeply as possible after such intense chaos with the military and then his subsequent forced retirement. But then she had no

idea that the man she had spoken to was in actuality a child of fifteen in an eight year old body using a voice modulation routine from inside an untraceable space ship's communication array while impersonating an investigations specialist.

But then, the documentary on espionage that Earnest had forced him to watch had been very informative about such things and he had learned well from the experience.

“Do return to the ship. Abraham and guest are there and looking for you.”

He turned on his heels as he had been taught and again the illusion was flawless, his physical size almost missed because he had the aura of command and the presence of self, the confidence and then that unspoken arrogance which made him seem invincible. The pager slid back into the small utility slot and off he went, the first tourists and spectators who wished to be first to see the wonders just as captivated by him as the contestants themselves.

Indeed, his following grew simply because he did look and act the part and as he returned to the ship that made all eyes widen in amazement, he found Elim to be the only one to frown at him in a vastly different way, the young teen making connections no one else had. Elim finally nodded as those dark brown eyes closed. Elim then glanced up at the sky so blue as he smiled in the strangest way, his body settling out in a whole new fashion so radically different from normal tensions.

That was when those transformed eyes of brown again met Justin's to reveal the sacred, holy glow of one given the ultimate glimpse of the universe itself. Aflek's different glare at Justin's uniform gave rise to words meant to chastise and Justin listened to them dutifully while grinning because soon he would be free of all his problems.

“Where did you get that and where did you change into it?”

Justin responded pleasantly.

“I made it and behind the thruster assembly.”

Aflek paled visibly but after a brief few exhalations, the man was fairly composed.

“Where is your uniform?”

Justin shrugged, the grin on his lips one of peace and ever so disturbing to Aflek and the others who knew his intimate issues.

“In the storage compartment.”

He then turned so smoothly to Elim as Abraham studied the dynamics of Justin's mood and then the reactions of Cadets and instructors who were now alarmed and most definitely uneasy. Justin used Hebrew with a delicate finesse and Abraham's eyes widened slightly in the grant now given.

"Elim, would you like to be the first other than myself to try the simulation routine?"

Elim was suddenly grinning from ear to ear and yet he shook his head in denial, those brown eyes so full of new faith and understanding locked only for a moment with Justin's as he replied in English that had almost no accent.

"I am not the man. I will only watch from a distance so that I gain the vision and am not changed by the glimpse of too much that would lessen the vision. I think that is best for me. Perhaps Abraham would be the better choice."

Justin watched Abraham stiffen with shock and the old man turned to Elim, the youth studied intently and most suspiciously before he almost timidly advanced on the Adventurer Seven. Justin discreetly touched the hull and the ship opened as if Abraham had caused that swift, remarkable event. Abraham then deftly climbed up into the ship, the console awakening to expose so many wonders that left his experienced mind dazzled, not the least of which was the holographic display which now offered only the simulation routine as a menu selection.

Everything else was now out of reach to all but Justin, locked away by an alphanumeric string eighty characters long and only viable with him seated in the ship itself. But Abraham's mind was seeing many of the same things that Elim had already deduced and while he did activate the simulation and did feel all the excitement of that mock ride to Mars with enemy fighters firing on him from all directions, his mind was caught up by the awareness that this ship was so much more than it seemed.

So, in the simulator's perspective, Abraham died swiftly and the ship descended to the applause of the crowd, yet with only one of them aware of how remarkable the craft had been as it lifted to the contest rules of four feet from the ground and then without the use of conventional turbines or fans to dip and sway, convulse grandly and then make all of its amazing sounds.

But then Elim was simply standing apart with two rather anonymous men on either side, all four of the security team alert as Abraham climbed down as a changed man full of that quiet, inspired awe. Justin nodded to the old mathematician and as their eyes met, Abraham nodded much as Elim had before speaking in Hebrew that held the passion of one transfigured by contact with the divine.

“Should we remain or should we go?”

It was an odd question but Justin responded with his own desire, one stated like the plea it was in Hebrew which was accented not by another language but by mathematics itself.

“I was hoping you could stay.”

Aflek was truly taut as Abraham gave Justin a wan, old smile and then responded in Hebrew yet again, if only a single word spoken joyously.

“Done.”

The old man turned to join Elim at the fringe of the still increasing crowds who were now producing cameras and video capable cell phones and camcorders of all kinds. Justin spoke again, his Hebrew cautious but the question necessary, one changed much by Munroe’s exceptionally long lecture of so many revelations.

“Do you love Elim?”

Abraham turned to appraise Justin much as Munroe had and then the reply came, one spoken gently with so many implications bypassed.

“One always loves a son, especially if the son is adopted. His name is Kleinlinger now.”

Abraham made his stately retreat and was inundated by questions of excitement and euphoria, everyone eager to hear his personal assessments on the simulator and then its marvels. Justin studied the old man’s deft grace and the ways his vague replies enticed and added to the moment’s flavor but most relevant of all was the marvelous act of becoming anonymous again with a final grin.

And throughout, Elim was caught up in the foretaste of what would come, he the one no one looked at so much as once while Abraham deflected the public eye as only a master of political nuances could. Justin learned much from the old Israeli scientist and the lessons were soon tried in other ways, his need for this final act of utter showmanship cause for him to offer the simulation experience to others.

But he did feel the change that came as men and women with those keen, taut minds of active military persuasion sifted into the crowd. He even spotted a dozen of them as they spread out, none daring to get too close but all, when his eyes roamed, meeting his stares so brief with moments of shock so quick to fade. The change within himself was noticed

by Cadets and instructors to the last and they too scanned the crowds which were now dense and filled with cameras and camcorders beyond easy counting.

Justin changed his tactics and soon children not many years younger than he were savoring the brief rush of something that dazzled and amazed. Earnest then made his graceful insertion, his self defined aura of commanding influence so subtle that people just yielded without noticing that they had. Earnest met Justin's eyes for a moment and Justin yielded, the moment of faith in himself tested as Earnest did climb into the ship.

Like so many other runs, Earnest plied the game and climbed down appeased, his eyes alight not because he grasped Justin's vision. Earnest was transformed because his program was indeed the finest and while his brother Justin was the inspiration, it was his work that had defined the reality of the experience. Earnest did stagger into the crowds with all the airs of a drunken fool but Justin was not blind to the two people who were simply there to catch him and then to whisk him away.

His parents met his eyes just once before they vanished out of sight like ghosts but they never knew how precious that moment was for Justin. In simply appearing as they had when such a crowd was gathered and cameras ruled, they had spoken a word of recognition and then had validated him. It was as they vanished that he made his choice and while a frazzled team of judges tried to battle their way close to judge his ship, he simply climbed up into the cockpit and settled in for the first great leap into space itself.

He felt the purest kind of utter calm as the moment of choice was met, the long access code entered and the sea of data accessed so swiftly. His personal program engaged and the ship responded without issue, the vessel rising higher than the four feet the contest required before it circled like a dove to the shock of all. The Adventurer made no sound as it was urged into the final salute to a planet and a race, the dipping of his wings an elegant act meant entirely to stun and amaze.

He tapped in the destination he desired and the ship surged, the carbon fiber coating turning to fine dust as the ship's shields engaged. In that one action the ship turned from matte black to opalescent white and then it shot into the sky, Earth abandoned for the eternal black abyss between the stars where all his dreams were true and all his hopes realities.

The grandest adventure had just begun. . .

THE END

Author's Comments

Justin's Spaceship begins the adventure of Justin Brunheldigon and, I hope, you liked it enough to pester BAEN PRESS into promulgating a midlist type of contractual arrangement with me for the rest of the series, ostensibly eight to ten books in total.

Sincerely, Clarence Shellito, the author of this work.