

A JACK CHRISTIE ADVENTURE



DAY OF  
**DELIVERANCE**

JOHNNY O'BRIEN

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## Praise for *Day of Deliverance*

“Sword fights, acting, guns, and time travel all make for an intriguing and interesting read. This fast-paced story with the unusual concept of travelling through time to purposely change the course of history will appeal to readers.” Library Media Connection

“A challenging and exciting read for those who appreciate a blend of history and science fiction.”  
School Library Journal

“*Day of Deliverance* is a suspenseful and entertaining journey back to an important time in the history of England and of the world. Jack Christie is a very relatable hero – a regular schoolboy caught in, and coping with, circumstances beyond his control... His latest adventure delivers on all counts!”  
Teenreads.com

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For Sally, Tom, Peter and Anna – J. O'B.

A JACK CHRISTIE ADVENTURE



# DAY OF DELIVERANCE



JOHNNY O'BRIEN



templar publishing

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# Day of Deliverance

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## CAST OF MAIN CHARACTERS

Jack Christie – Our hero  
Angus Jud – Jack's loyal friend  
Carole Christie – Jack's mother  
Professor Tom Christie – Jack's father  
Dr Pendelshape – The slightly unhinged history teacher  
Counsellor Inchquin – Leader of VIGIL  
The Rector – Headmaster of Soonhope High and VIGIL second-in-command

## Secondary Characters

Edward Alleyn – An actor  
Miss Beattie – English and Drama teacher and nuclear physicist  
Belstaff – Games teacher and VIGIL security  
Elizabeth I – Queen of England  
The Fanshawe Players – Harry Fanshawe's failed group of travelling actors  
Harry Fanshawe – An actor  
Philip Henslowe – A businessman & theatrical impresario  
The Henslowe Players – Philip Henslowe's professional acting troupe  
Theo Joplin – VIGIL historian  
Thomas Kyd – A playwright  
Mary, Queen of Scots – Queen of Scotland  
Christopher Marlowe – A playwright  
Monk – An actor  
Jim de Raillar – Bike shop owner and VIGIL analyst  
William Shakespeare – A playwright  
Tony and Gordon – School janitors and VIGIL minders  
Trinculo – An actor  
Professor Gino Turinelli – Italian bistro owner and Professor  
Sir Francis Walsingham – Principal Secretary of State and Privy Councillor  
Whitsun and Gift – Revisionist agents

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# Jack's Adventures So Far . . .

It has been six months since Jack and Angus made the mind-boggling discovery that their school, Soonhope High, is a front for a team of scientists who control the most powerful technology ever conceived by man: the technology of time travel. At the heart of this technology is a machine called the Taurus, and Jack's dad, Professor Christie, was part of the team that originally designed it. Jack hasn't seen his father since he was six, when the scientists who formed the Taurus had a serious disagreement and Christie was forced into exile, leaving Jack and his wife, Carole, behind.

Christie's plan was to use the technology to make changes to the past – stopping major wars, for example – that would make today's world a better place. He attracted some passionate and brilliant supporters, including Dr Pendelshape who, until last year, was Jack's History teacher. Pendelshape and Christie, together with their small band of followers, who call themselves the 'Revisionists', developed sophisticated computer simulations to model interventions in the past that could benefit mankind. Their former colleagues, on the other hand, continue to believe that changing events in the past, however well meant, would be dangerous and have unforeseen consequences. Once Professor Christie was out of the way, they formed a group called 'VIGIL' to ensure that the Taurus was kept secret – but in working order should it ever be needed.

Jack and Angus had become embroiled when, unknown to VIGIL, Christie created a *second* Taurus and proceeded to try to stop the event that triggered the First World War – the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand, in Sarajevo, June, 1914. Pendelshape acted as Christie's partner, continuing to teach at Soonhope High and leading VIGIL to believe that he was loyal to them. Meanwhile, Jack and Angus were used as pawns in a battle between the two camps. Jack's loyalties had been torn. In the end, having witnessed first hand the dangers of time travel and intervening in the past, Jack decided that the right course of action was to side with VIGIL.

Since then, there has been a stalemate, with neither side able to make a move against the other. Not knowing the whereabouts of Christie's base, VIGIL can do nothing about the second Taurus. Christie, on the other hand, will not use his Taurus while Jack is under the guard of VIGIL. The members of VIGIL know that Christie will do nothing while there might be a threat to his son, in retribution for any action the Revisionists take. But Christie does not know that Jack's loyalties are now with VIGIL and Carole Christie is also firmly inside the VIGIL camp. The atmosphere at VIGIL is tense. Although their security is highly sophisticated, they wonder what the Revisionists' next move will be...

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# A Poisoned Sword

Jack thrust the rapier forward. Angus jumped back, but this time he was not quick enough. The blade pierced his flesh and an ominous red patch appeared on his white shirt. Angus glanced down at the wound and looked back at his opponent with an expression of rage on his face. A frisson of excitement rippled through the crowd. The contest was proving far better than they had imagined. Jack was exhilarated – one final blow and it would all be over.

His confidence was short-lived. The strike had found its mark but he'd also momentarily lost his balance and Angus came back with a violent counter-thrust. His blade flashed through the air and caught Jack in the ribs. There was a gasp from the crowd. The foil was so sharp that Jack scarcely felt it. But in only a few seconds his own blade grew heavy in his hand and his breathing quickened. Sensing his chance, Angus darted forward once more, his sword aimed at Jack's chest again. This time Jack spotted the move and swayed to one side. Angus's forward momentum presented Jack with an opportunity. He grabbed his opponent by the arm and heaved him onwards, while simultaneously thrusting out his leg. Angus tripped and spun through the air landing with a crunching thud, his sword spinning from his hand. Jack pounced onto him and they became locked in a deadly struggle. But Jack should have known better than to take on Angus in a wrestling match. Angus was much too strong and soon he had Jack pinned on his back beneath him. He grasped Jack's sword hand and banged it hard on the ground until Jack relinquished his grip. Angus lowered his face towards Jack's and sneered.

“You will die.”

Jack was nailed to the ground. He was wounded and he had no weapon. Angus's massive bulk was pressing down on him. But it wasn't over yet. He gritted his teeth, and with a super-human effort jerked his knee upwards into Angus's crotch. Angus wailed in pain and Jack seized the moment to wriggle free. Snatching up a sword, he wheeled round. The sword felt different – heavier and unbalanced – but it didn't matter now. Angus jumped back to his feet and grabbed the other sword and the two of them circled round and round, panting at each other like wounded animals. The crowd jeered. Jack's remaining energy was melting away – he knew he only had seconds left. There was blood all over the floor and Angus slipped. He was only distracted for a split second but it was enough. Jack leaped forward to land a second, fatal blow. Angus screamed as blood from a second wound spurting from his chest. He dropped to one knee, and looked up at Jack. It was an unexpected expression – almost apologetic,

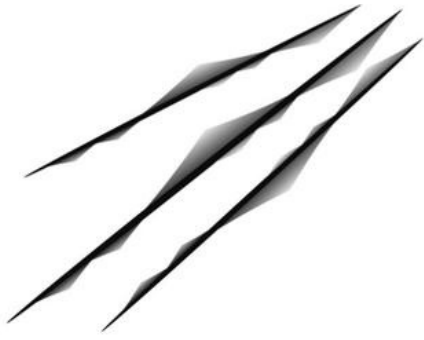
“The poison... I am killed with my own treachery...” He stammered.

Jack glanced down at the sword that dangled loosely from his hand – and suddenly he understood. He had snatched up his opponent's sword, which Angus must have dipped in poison before the contest. Jack had already been injured with the same sword, which meant that, in less than a minute, both of them would be dead.



But there was still time to see to unfinished business. Jack knew what he had to do.

~~Clutching his chest to stem the bleeding, he staggered across to where his uncle sat cowering~~  
behind the long banqueting table. The food and drink was laid out – still untouched. Jack mounted the  
table and fixed his eyes menacingly on his uncle who sank back into his chair, shaking. There was  
be no mercy and Jack did not hesitate. He thrust the sword into his uncle's heart.



## Words, Words, Words

Miss Beattie scurried onto the stage, “Well done, everyone! Lights!”

There was a spontaneous round of applause from the cast and crew. Nothing was being left to chance. The week before, Miss Beattie had even arranged for a special fight choreographer to come and help them with the sword fight between Hamlet and Laertes in the last scene. It was all perfectly safe, of course, and the flashing swords reassuringly blunt, but there was always tension in the air during the famous scene and everyone stopped what they were doing to watch. And today, with Angus a reluctant and unrehearsed stand-in for the real Laertes who was off sick, anything might have happened.

“That’s all coming together quite well.” Miss Beattie said, pleased with their progress. “Only two weeks to go now...”

Jack looked down at Tommy McGough from his position high up on the table. Tommy was playing Claudius, Hamlet’s uncle, and he nervously opened one eye.

“Did I survive?”

“Looks like it,” Jack said. “Don’t know how you get away with it. Every rehearsal I somehow manage to miss.”

“Dangerous business this Shakespeare stuff...”

Angus bounded over from centre stage, flushed with excitement after the sword fight.

“That was awesome...”

“Told you...”

Angus’s shirt was almost completely red as Miss Beattie removed the pouch of stage blood from underneath it.

“What a mess,” the English teacher fussed.

Angus grinned, “I thought I would go for Hamlet meets Terminator... Everyone likes a bit of blood, don’t they, Miss?”

Without looking up, she replied, “Actually, you’re right. When they performed these plays in the old days they wouldn’t have skimped on the blood... they’d have used real goat’s blood probably. The audiences loved gore. There’s even a story of actors using a real musket. In one production it went off and someone in the audience had his head blown off by mistake.”

Miss Beattie was always coming out with stuff like this. It was one reason why Drama was so popular at school – and successful. The whole town of Soonhope would probably turn up for the end-of-term performance of *Hamlet*.

“Is that true, Miss?”

“Apparently. They just dragged the body out. Next day they were on again. I doubt they used the musket again, though health and safety wasn't top priority in the sixteenth century...”

“I could get into that,” Angus said.

Jack elbowed him. “See – told you it was worth coming.”

“Well – the fighting was good fun, but I couldn't stand Shakespeare for too long – you know, all those... words.”

Miss Beattie looked up at Angus with a steely eye, her good humour evaporating. At nearly six foot, Angus towered over her, but somehow, the expression on her face made him shrink.

“You've done it now...” Jack murmured, casting a sidelong glance at Tommy, who grimaced in return.

“Words!” Miss Beattie rolled the ‘R’ in her strong East Scots brogue. “WORRRDS!” She repeated it – louder – and it came from her lips like a dart from a blowpipe. “Is that all you have to say on the matter – WORRRDS?”

Everyone around the stage stopped what they were doing and turned to look at Miss Beattie. For all her boundless enthusiasm, she was also prone to dramatic changes in mood. As a result, Angus was about to receive what was popularly termed by the pupils of Soonhope High School as ‘a Beattie Beating’. It was never pleasant.

“But, Miss...” Angus bravely tried to stand his ground, but it was too late. It was as if he had inadvertently triggered a small thermo-nuclear device.

“I'll tell you this – laddie – not any old words... nearly one million words in forty plays and more than one hundred and fifty four sonnets and poems... and not just any old plays and sonnets, but the most sublime writing the world has ever read – even after four hundred years. Words? Shakespeare invented them. Lots of them... like: *critical, frugal, dwindle, extract, zany, leapfrog, vast, hereditary, excellent, eventful, lonely...* and phrases... new phrases like: *vanish into thin air, brave new world, fool's paradise, sea change, sorry sight, in a pickle, budge an inch, cold comfort, flesh and blood, foul play, baited breath, cruel to be kind, fair play, green-eyed monster...*” She paused only to take a deep breath. Then she was off again. “These are WORDS and phrases that have been used so much they have become clichés... they are words and phrases that I use – God help us – even *you* use them, my lad – Shakespeare was the world's greatest writer. He helped define the world's richest language – the English language – *your* language. He gave us the very tools to think and feel. He gave us the *essence of humanity...* do you get it? Do you understand? So please don't talk to me about WORRRDS!”

There was stunned silence around the stage as everyone wondered if there might be more – whether this was to be a tactical nuclear strike – or the full-blown strategic version that would take out the whole of Soonhope. Thankfully, the colour in Miss Beattie's cheeks normalised from a deep purple to its more usual pink. Nevertheless, Angus continued to stare at a spot on the end of one of his shoes for a full ten seconds before finally mumbling, “Yes, Miss. Sorry, Miss.”

Miss Beattie gave a final sigh of indignation and said, “That's all right, Mr Jud.” She looked around and clapped her hands.

“Now everyone – let's get this lot cleared up. It's nearly four o'clock.”

But something that Miss Beattie had said stuck in Jack's mind and as he and Tommy put away their props, his curiosity overcame his fear of re-lighting the blue touch paper.

“Sorry, Miss – did you say a *million* words? I mean written by one man – Shakespeare?”

“Yes, Jack, I think that's about right.”

“But that sounds like an awful lot for one man to write...”

“It is. ~~There are lots of theories – most of them rubbish – that he did not actually write his material~~ but that others did. Shakespeare lived during the ‘English Renaissance’ – it was a boom time for play and playwrights and art and artists generally. More than fifty candidates have been suggested as the ‘real’ Shakespeare – people like Christopher Marlowe.”

“Who?”

Miss Beattie was overseeing the flow of props back into the store cupboard, giving orders as she worked. “No, Tommy, put the swords into the sword trolley *properly*, or they’ll get damaged.” She looked back at Jack. “Sorry, Jack – what was that?”

“Marlowe – was he like Shakespeare, then?”

“He influenced Shakespeare, but he died in 1593 before Shakespeare’s career had really got going. He was only twenty-nine... it was murder. He was a spy.”

“A writer and a spy?”

“Yes, maybe even a double agent. I know it sounds odd, but there were quite a few writers who were at the time – not Shakespeare, though. They often studied at Oxford or Cambridge; the universities were hotbeds of radicalism.”

“What do you mean by radicalism?”

She sighed. “You’re insatiable, Jack.” She turned to lock the store cupboard and then looked at him sympathetically. “Look – we don’t really have time to go into the whole of sixteenth-century politics right now... but next lesson maybe we’ll do it in more detail.” She thought to herself for a minute. “Tell you what, come over here...” She scurried over to a pile of bags at the side of the stage and pulled out a large book.

“There you go, that should get you started.” She handed the tome over to Jack. It was entitled simply, *Elizabeth I*. On the front cover was the famous *Armada Portrait* of the auburn-headed queen in an elaborately decorated dress covered in jewels with one hand draped over a globe and pointing to Virginia in the Americas, England’s first colony in the New World. Behind the queen, the Spanish Armada could be seen, sailing to its doom.

“Knowing you, Jack, you should be able to finish that off in a couple of hours. It’s all there. And it’s not just about Shakespeare and Marlowe you know. This was a period of deep religious conflict between Catholics and Protestants – a struggle for the very soul of man. And this religious conflict was intertwined with the political struggles between states. Spain was the global superpower and England was a backwater by comparison. But when England defeated the Spanish Armada, that all started to change. Otherwise, we might be living in a Catholic country today and speaking Spanish and so might most of the world. We would probably be having tapas for school dinners.” Miss Beattie stopped. “There I go again... prattling away...” She tapped the book. “Anyway, I’ll leave it with you.”

Jack leafed through the first few pages.

“Who’s that?” He pointed to a picture of a confident young man in what he took to be flash Elizabethan clothes.

“That’s him – Marlowe,” said Miss Beattie, “Only portrait ever made of him – he was just twenty-one and dressed up to the nines.”

“What does that mean?” Jack pointed to some Latin words beneath the picture.

Miss Beattie laughed. “‘What feeds me destroys me.’ Just about sums Marlowe up. How shall I put it – he liked to live life on the edge.”



*The auburn-headed Queen Elizabeth I in 'the Armada Portrait'*

Jack didn't really understand what she meant but he was already leafing through the rest of the book. There were pictures of ships: great Spanish galleons stuffed with treasure from the New World; terrifying fire ships let loose by the English on the anchored Spanish fleet off Calais; *The Revenge* demasted in the Azores, where, in a fit of macho bravado, Sir Richard Grenville took on twelve great Spanish galleons single-handed, only to die. There were extraordinarily beautiful new buildings, soaring edifices of glass and stone – a far cry from the brutal castles of the Middle Ages. Then there were the people: kings and queens, princes, players and poets... One chapter was called 'The English Renaissance' – and it seemed to live up to its billing. As Jack leafed through the volume, he noticed a small frame at the bottom of one of the pages. The caption read, 'Elizabethan Troupe'. It was a color plate of a group of actors in various costumes. There was one dressed as a court jester and next to him, in stark contrast, another dressed as a priest or, more likely, a monk. There was a third who looked slightly more important – a country gentleman with a fine cloak and a neat, pointed beard.

"Head in a book again?" Angus leaned over Jack's shoulder.

It looked like nearly everyone else had gone. "Do you want to get something at Gino's?"

Jack snapped the book shut.

"Why not?" He stuffed it in his bag.

"Well, stop reading that rubbish and let's go."

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# Gino's

Jack sat pillion on Angus's motorbike. He was nervous. Usually trips on the back of Angus's bike did not go well. Angus was seventeen now and had passed his bike test. His old 125cc Husqvarna two-stroke had been left in one of the sheep sheds at his place up at Rachan and he had taken to riding one of the farm's more powerful four-stroke Yamaha 250Fs. When he could afford the petrol, he took the bike to school – avoiding the one-hour journey on the bus that picked its way painfully round the hamlets of the upper Soonhope valley.

Angus turned back the throttle and the engine wailed; he dropped the clutch and they set off. Thankfully, Angus omitted the wheelie he usually performed just to frighten Jack. Soon they reached the bridge over the river, which was quite low from a dry spring. The big Presbyterian church at the head of the High Street loomed ahead of them and Jack remembered what Miss Beattie had been saying about the 'struggle for the soul of man'. Even in Soonhope, with fewer than two thousand inhabitants, he knew of at least five churches, all of different denominations. It occurred to Jack that he hadn't actually been inside any of them, and he wasn't sure how many of the local population had either.

The High Street was busy but Angus managed to squeeze the bike right in front of Gino's and, as they went in, the welcoming smell of warm coffee and ice cream wafted over them. Gino was manning the espresso machine while Francesca, his daughter, polished glasses grumpily. Gino was as jolly as ever.

"What can I get you, lads?"

"Hi, Gino." Angus looked up at the endless menu of drinks and snacks pinned to a board above the counter. But he already knew what he wanted. "I'll have the double Gino-chino, extra shot, full fat with caramel and extra cream... and don't forget the cherry." He looked over at Francesca and winked provocatively, adding in a deep voice, "Shaken, not stirred."

Francesca rolled her eyes and tutted loudly. Gino glanced up. "You have no chance there, the Turinelli family's outta your league."

Angus shrugged. "Oh well – I'll have four chip butties as well, please, Gino."

"Cutting back?" Jack asked.

"Not exactly. We're playing Melrose the day after tomorrow – last game of the season. If we win we're champions. Need to bulk up."

"And Jack, my friend, what are you having?"

"Thanks, Gino. I'll go for a Gino-chino as well – but without the bells and whistles and make it just one chip butty."

"Coming right up. Take a seat, boys."

Gino had recently tried to convert his popular Italian bistro into an American diner – he had even

got himself a juke box (which didn't work). It had been a brave attempt, but somehow it all looked bit out of place in the traditional High Street of Soonhope. Jack and Angus settled into one of the booths and soon, in hushed tones, they were discussing their favourite subject.

"Do you think we did the right thing?"

It was Angus's first question. Jack thought for a moment and came up with his usual answer.

"Yes – we did the right thing. I'm sure of it. Dad and Pendelshape created brilliant computer simulations to test out the changes they wanted to make in history, but you could never be certain that by going back in time you might not do something that would have unforeseen consequences for the future. That's the risk. That's the whole reason VIGIL was set up. And that's why we had to side with them."

"Suppose. Pity though."

"Why?"

"Well... I know going back to 1914... Well, it was dangerous and stuff, and a lot of bad things happened..."

"Yes, Angus," Jack said slowly, making sure the point sank in, "that's why nobody wants to be doing it again. Time travel and especially using the Taurus to make changes to history... it's a bad idea. Remember your great grandfather Ludwig in the trenches? If that bayonet had been a few inches to the right, he might have died and, you wouldn't be here."

"I know, but..." Angus grinned. "You've got to admit, it was pretty cool."

Jack shook his head. "Sometimes I wonder about you. We can say that, sitting here now. But it didn't feel cool to me at the time. We were lucky to get away with our lives. Meddling in time is definitely to be avoided. VIGIL – and their leaders – the Rector, Councillor Inchquin – all of them, they're trying to do the right thing. Dad and Pendelshape, the Revisionists, for all their brains and good intentions, are just plain wrong. We're on the side of VIGIL now."

Angus shrugged.

Gino ambled over to their booth. "Two Gino-chinos, one chip butty for you and... four for you."

"Great Gino. Thanks a lot."

Jack looked at Angus's plate, "You're not seriously going to eat all that are you?"

"I don't really want to... I'm doing it more out of a sense of duty to the team," Angus replied regretfully, as if he were making some terrible sacrifice. He opened one of the butties and poured sauce, vinegar and ketchup onto the chips inside before quickly re-sealing them within the bread. Then he took a large bite and the contents leaked out from each side.

"Gross."

"Actually, very tasty," Angus replied, his mouth full. It didn't stop him from continuing the conversation.

"But what about your dad? Don't you feel bad about him? If VIGIL ever gets hold of him, they'll do him for sure."

Angus was never one for subtlety and Jack grimaced. "Thanks for reminding me." There was an awkward silence and then Jack shrugged. "I try not to think about it." He swallowed. "And, I don't know, maybe one day there will be a way... a way that VIGIL and Dad can be reconciled." He looked down at his plate. "Maybe then Mum and Dad could even get back together."

Angus swallowed and took a swig of his Gino-chino. "Sorry Jackster – didn't mean to..." He shrugged. "Well – you know."

"It's all right. Anyway – we're fully signed-up members of VIGIL now. Don't forget what that means."

Angus wiped his mouth and his eyes lit up. “How could I forget?”

Jack remembered the VIGIL inauguration ceremony that he and Angus had taken part in after the return from Sarajevo. As things settled down, they learned that VIGIL’s aim was not only to be ready to counteract any Revisionist attempts to meddle in history, but also to identify and train promising students and enrol them into VIGIL. This recruitment was one reason for secreting the Taurin complex and VIGIL headquarters in an ordinary school: it was easy to identify potential candidates. In this way, VIGIL would ensure the continuation of its cause from one generation to the next and ensure the future safety of mankind as well. This was critical, particularly while the Revisionist threat was still alive. Jack and Angus’s experiences in 1914 had made them instant VIGIL veterans and obvious candidates for enrolment.

\*

Jack’s mobile went off and he pulled it from his pocket. “Text from Mum probably, wondering where I am...”

Angus returned to his chip butty.

Jack peered at the screen. “Don’t recognise that number...” He opened the message. “Funny...” Jack’s brow furrowed. “What do you reckon to this?”

“To what?”

Jack read out the text. “Jack – meet at old lookout. Very urgent. Come now.”

“What can that mean?”

“You’ve got an admirer – finally.”

“Hilarious.”

“The old lookout – that’s the fire tower, isn’t it? You know, top of Glentress... we used to go up there on the bike.”

“Yeah – but who’s this from? There’s no name.”

Angus grinned mischievously. “Only one way to find out.”

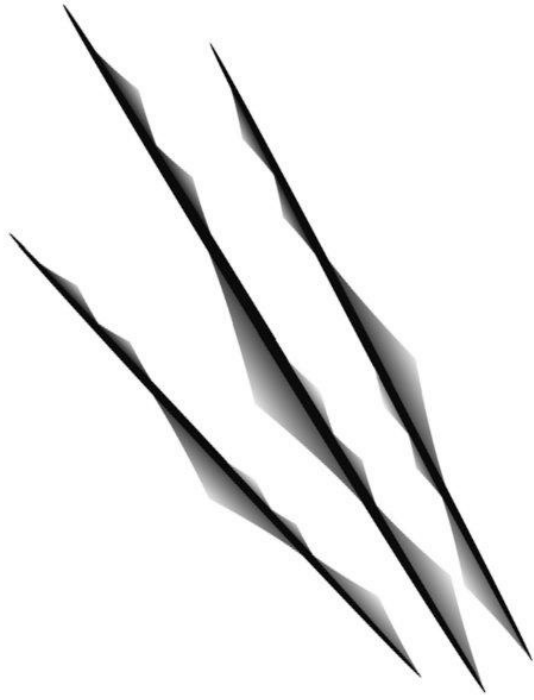
“But I can’t do that without alerting VIGIL... I’ve got this stupid tracker on my ankle, remember?” Jack pulled up one leg of his trousers a little to show Angus the discrete wireless tracker that ensured VIGIL always knew his whereabouts. Jack was a valuable asset to VIGIL, and the tracker was just one of the ways they made sure he was properly protected. Most of the time he forgot about it, but sometimes it made him frustrated and even angry about the responsibility that rested on his shoulders.

“Oh yeah.” Angus thought for a moment and then a twinkle came to his eye. “On the other hand, it might be a laugh to see how quickly they send in air support when they know you’ve gone AWOL. It’s good to keep them on their toes.”

Jack was not sure. “I don’t know, Angus.”

“Come on, Jack, who dares wins and all that.” He nodded at Jack’s butty and stood up. “Scoff that and let’s go and find out who your mystery girlfriend is.”





# The Tower

In a moment they were back on Angus's bike heading out of town and towards the forest. The Forestry Commission owned large tracts of land above Soonhope, and had populated it with pine and spruce plantations that spread for many kilometres across the hills. Soon they were powering up one of the forest tracks, a plume of dust rising from the back tyre. At intervals there were fire warning signs with a picture of a red flame and lists of 'DON'TS' beneath – 'DON'T' do this and 'DON'T' do that. It was as if they'd been put there by VIGIL themselves. But you would need more than that to deter Angus. He worked his way up and down the gears as they ascended steadily. At one point the forest track swept round to the right and a steep path rose through the thick woodlands at an angle from the bend.

Angus pulled up and shouted through his helmet. "Hold on – I'm going to take a short cut."

Before Jack had time to object, Angus had re-selected first gear and the bike shot up the narrow path. All Jack could do was hang on. After a while, the steep path levelled off and they picked up speed, the densely packed conifers whizzing past on each side of the narrow track.

Suddenly, a shape appeared in front of them, right in the middle of the path. It was a man, just standing there, looking at the oncoming bike as if caught in a trance. Angus hit the front brake and then the rear a split second later. He twisted the handlebars to avoid the man and, as he did so, both tyres lost their grip on the loose track surface. In an instant, the bike, Jack and Angus were horizontal and sliding along the ground. The man leaped free, moments before impact, and the boys slid to a halt in the tall grass on the verge. Jack's heart was pounding. His leg hurt from where the bike had pressed down on it as they scraped along the track. Thankfully nothing seemed to be broken. Angus was first to his feet.

"What the...?"

Jack groaned and pulled himself into a sitting position. He looked up and immediately wished he

hadn't. He felt nauseous.

The man looked at them from the side of the track. They had slid past him by a good twenty metres. He was, maybe, mid forties, slim and fit-looking and wore jeans, hiking boots and a grey fleece jacket. He had not shaved for a few days and his yellow hair was ruffled.

“What the hell are you doing – trying to get us all killed?” Angus bellowed.

The man did not reply. It was as if he were weighing up something in his mind. Then, still saying nothing, he turned and melted back into the thick, dark woodland.

Angus was apoplectic. “What? He's just run off!”

Jack pulled himself to his feet and dusted himself down. He could see the grazing on his legs through rips in his jeans.

“You okay?” Angus said. “Can't believe that guy!”

“We probably shouldn't be on this track anyway.” Jack looked down at the bike, still lying on its side. “Will it start?”

Angus hauled the machine up, inspecting the scrapes to the petrol tank and chrome.

“What a mess. If I ever see that bloke again...”

He straddled the bike and tried the engine. It fired immediately.

“Thank God for that.”

“What now?”

“Well we might as well finish what we came up here to do.” Angus looked at Jack's pale face. “You're still up for it.”

“I'll survive.” Jack mounted the passenger seat gingerly and Angus set off, this time at a moderate pace.

\*

After a while, they left the cover of the dark green canopy and were released onto the open heath and moorland above the treeline, where they re-joined the main track. Apart from the mystery hill walk they had nearly hit on the way up, there was no one around and the fire tower loomed into view as they crested a final ridge.

Angus cut the engine and the air became still. They took off their helmets and walked towards the tower. Jack moved with a slight limp but Angus seemed to show no ill effects from coming off the bike. Sometimes it seemed like he was indestructible.

“Can't see anyone here at all. No sign of your mystery admirer.”

Jack shrugged. “Weird. Shall we go up?”

They clambered up the wooden ladder to the lookout cabin.

Angus knocked on the rough wooden door. “Hello! Anyone at home?”

There was silence, except for a light spring breeze which teased the top of the trees in the distance.

“Nothing. Come on, let's check it out.”

The door opened into a crude wooden room with panoramic views of the surrounding forest and hills. It was like being in a small boat in a big green ocean. Far below you could see the river meandering its way down the valley, shining like a silver ribbon in the late afternoon sun. In the middle of the cabin was a rough, three-dimensional model, a sort of topographical map of the surrounding area. It showed the hills, the main plantations, tracks, streams, the river, each peak, each village and the positions of the other fire towers. The whole world was suddenly defined in detail across a square metre of plastic and modelling paint. From this lofty position you could see how the

fire wardens would have a sense of control... of watchful power.

“Nothing here. Certainly no clue as to your mystery texter.”

Jack peered into the one adjoining room. It was a bedroom – but it was more the size of a large cupboard.

“Hey – looks like there’s been someone sleeping here.”

In the room, there was a sleeping bag, a gas burner and a couple of books.

“One of the wardens?”

“Bit early in the year.”

“And I’m not sure they’d be reading these.”

Jack picked up a couple of books that had been left behind. One was entitled *Principles of Quantum Mechanics*. It looked old, and was by someone called Paul Dirac. The other book was a complete works of William Shakespeare. It was open at one page and the reader had circled an extract in pencil. Jack peered down at the book.

“That’s funny – this guy’s been reading *Hamlet*.”

“Please no, I’ve had enough of *Hamlet* for one day.” Angus looked around furtively. “Beattie probably got this place wired, just to check I don’t say anything dodgy.”

Jack read the circled extract from the book:

*“Let us go in together;  
And still your fingers on your lips, I pray.  
The time is out of joint; O cursed spite,  
That ever I was born to set it right!”*

“Sorry, Jackster that sounds like complete gobbledegook... as per usual.”

Jack smiled. “It’s actually one of my speeches from *Hamlet*.”

“I suppose you’re going to tell me what it means and make me feel stupid?”

“Of course. From what Beattie says, Hamlet’s basically saying that things in Denmark, which he calls ‘the time’, are all messed up because of what his uncle, King Claudius, has done – killing Hamlet’s father and marrying his mother. Hamlet’s thinking about what he has to do to put it right. and he’s kind of worried and also resentful that he’s the one who’s got to sort it out. Do you understand?”

“No.”

Jack rolled his eyes.

“All I can say is it’s a bit weird that this guy’s up here and maybe we shouldn’t hang around too long. He might come back. I don’t want to bump into some hobo living here all on his own who reads Shakespeare and Maths books for fun...”

“So who sent the text – do you think it was the guy who’s been hanging out here?”

“It’s all too creepy. I think we should go.”

They turned to leave. As they did so, they noticed an envelope pinned to the inside of the wooden cabin door. Jack’s heart leaped when he saw what was written on it. It was in an italic scrawl and read simply: ‘*Jack Christie*’.

Jack pulled the envelope down and ripped it open. Inside was a letter:

Jack,  
I had hoped to be able to meet you in person and have time for a proper talk. However, I fear that VIGIL may soon learn of my location and therefore I have had to leave in haste. This is a sad time for me. You already know about my exile from my former colleagues in VIGIL. It grieves me that, because of this, I have not been able to see you

or your mother over the past nine years. But now, I also find myself in disagreement with my friend Pendelshape and the Revisionist team. We were once so unanimous in our opposition to VIGIL. But now..

~~Some months ago we started work on a new timeline simulation – one that aims to bring about great good for humanity.~~ However, I could not accept further development of this simulation before I knew that you could be safely isolated from VIGIL and brought over to our side. Pendelshape and my Revisionist colleagues have become frustrated by my attitude, to say the least. We have argued and now, fearing their retribution, I have left them. Furthermore, with your safety in mind, I have, as of today, taken the unprecedented step of warning VIGIL of what I know of Pendelshape's plans. I now find myself alone in the world – a fugitive.

I never wanted to put you in this position or to expose you to all you have experienced. However, I live in hope that we can one day meet and that you will join me in my mission.

Dad

Jack stared at the letter in stunned silence. It all came together in his head – the strange books the tower... the man on the track...

“Your dad... he's been *here*?” Angus said, incredulously.

“Yeah. And I think that was the guy we nearly ran down. I thought I sort of vaguely recognised him. He was running away...”

“From what?”

“From just about everyone, I think.”

Suddenly, in the distance they heard a faint mechanical whirring. Jack and Angus peered out from the front of the fire tower in the direction of the noise.

“And probably from that thing...”

The whirring rapidly crescendoed into a pounding *whup, whup, whup* as, below them, a large helicopter skimmed the tops of the trees and headed up towards the fire tower. In seconds, the helicopter was hovering right above them. The noise was deafening and it shook the wooden structure of the tower to its foundations. The pilot circled once before descending, the thrashing rotor blades throwing up a maelstrom of dust and debris. Finally, it touched down on a flat patch of ground near the tower and the pilot cut the engine. Jack and Angus opened the door of the cabin. Speeding along the forest track they could see three Land Rovers driving in convoy. As the noise from the helicopter engine subsided and the Land Rovers pulled up near the tower, Jack could hear loud barking from the back of the vehicles. Dogs.

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# Pendelshape Panic

Two figures stepped down from the helicopter. They crouched low to avoid the rotor blades that were still spinning at a dizzying speed. One was a tall man in his forties with fine features. He had an air of distinction and authority about him. It was Councillor Inchquin. The Councillor was Chairman of VIGIL and oversaw all its operations. Next to him was another tall figure – slimmer than Inchquin – with a bald head fringed with thinning wisps of grey hair. By day he was Soonhope High’s headmaster – the Rector – and he was still wearing his trademark black gown. The Rector was VIGIL’s second in command.

Mr Belstaff and Mr Johnstone, the school games teachers, who also formed part of VIGIL’s security and response team, stepped from the leading Land Rover. All members of VIGIL had day jobs that belied their second life as key members of the VIGIL network. The four men converged on Jack and Angus who stood nervously at the bottom of the fire tower.

“Is he in there?” the Rector said, aggression in his voice.

“He’s gone.” Jack replied.

“Damn.” Inchquin hissed. “No sign at all?”

“He left this letter.” Jack handed the letter they had found inside to the Rector who scanned it quickly.

“Well – it confirms the message we received earlier,” the Rector said. “You saw nothing else?”

Jack was torn. The dogs cooped up in the Land Rovers were in a frenzy. Was Jack really going to admit that he and Angus had nearly run down someone they thought to be his father, only for VIGIL to release a pack of hounds on him in some brutal manhunt?

The thought had not even crossed Angus’s mind. “We think we might have seen him.” He nodded down the hill. “But I don’t think you’ll find him now.”

Inchquin looked at Jack sympathetically. “Sorry, Jack – we have to try. He’s too important just to let go.” He turned towards Belstaff and Johnstone. “Take the other men and the dogs – see if you can track him down. He might not have got far. Hurry.”

“What’s going on, Sir, how did you know he would be here?” Jack said, “... and... what does the letter from Dad *mean*?”

“We intercepted your mobile message. And then the tracker alarm indicated you were exiting the Soonhope safe zone. Sorry, Jack – you know we can’t take any chances.” The Rector waved the letter.

in the air. “And this letter basically means trouble. We will explain back at HQ.” He nodded at the helicopter. “You need to come with us. We have very little time.”

“Hey – what about my bike?” Angus said.

“The men will take care of it. I can assure you we have much more important business to attend to. Now, let’s go.”

\*

The sun was in the west and hanging low in the sky. Angus and Jack peered from the helicopter as it swooped in above Soonhope High’s extensive playing fields. Jack was pretty sure no one had arrived at school in quite such style before. Pity there was nobody there to see it. They had a bird’s-eye view of the austere Victorian school building which sat in secluded grounds some way out of the town. Until ten years ago it had been empty. It was then redeveloped by an endowment from a charitable trust, which they now knew, of course, had been a front for VIGIL. Since its purchase, the building had spawned a number of modern appendages around its Victorian core: the Science block and the gym and also the theatre, of course, where Jack would be appearing in *Hamlet* in two weeks’ time. It all seemed very normal. Just like all the other schools in the Borders, against which Angus regularly played rugby. There was one difference. Soonhope High housed the most advanced technology known to man: a working Taurus. A time machine. As a result, the site had tighter security than a US nuclear missile base. But it was completely unobtrusive. And that was the idea. Only a select few knew of the astonishing secret within the school walls.

The helicopter touched down and Jack, Angus, the Rector and Inchquin climbed out.

“Keep your heads down,” warned the Rector.

In the distance, two familiar figures stood waiting to welcome them – their old friends, Tony Smith and Gordon MacFarlane. They waited at one of the school’s side entrances. Tony took up almost the entire doorway. Gordon stood beside him. He was shorter but still built like a tank. Officially, they were the school janitors. But Jack and Angus had learned their true identity six months before. Along with Belstaff and Johnstone, they were part of VIGIL’s elite security squad.

“Gentlemen, please escort these two through Entrance B to the Situation Room. We will join you shortly.”

“An escort? Good.” Angus replied. “You two should have blue flashing lights on your heads.”

“That’s funny, Mr Jud. Look,” Gordon clutched his stomach with both hands, “I’m in stitches.”

The Rector scowled. “Gentlemen, I would advise less levity. We have an extremely serious situation here. Do I make myself clear?”

Gordon looked at his toes, sheepishly. “Yes, Sir. Sorry, Sir.”

Jack and Angus followed Tony and Gordon into the old Victorian part of the school.

“Right, here we are,” Tony announced.

They had reached a store cupboard halfway along one of the main corridors and Tony proceeded to take a large set of keys from his belt, jangling them loudly as he searched for the right one.

“Isn’t that a bit low tech for VIGIL?”

“Now, son,” Tony replied in a hushed voice, “you know better than to mention that name in an open corridor, even if no one else is here. Anyway, it’s all part of our image. You’re not supposed to see all the high-tech stuff.”

Tony located the key, inserted it into the lock and opened the door. The cupboard smelled odd, well... school. That stale, dusty smell of textbooks, old bits of computer equipment and stationery.

Tony reached inside his pocket and pulled out a thin piece of plastic, a bit like a pocket calculator. He gently pressed a button on the device and the cupboard door closed automatically.

“That looks more like it,” Angus said, knowingly.

“I think this procedure will be familiar to you all. Step to the back, please,” Tony said, pressing the device in his hand a second time. Without warning, an aperture formed in the floor. Soon the entrance had opened completely and a steep spiral staircase appeared, leading downwards. It was lit by a ghostly blue glow, just bright enough to make out the position of the steps.

“Okay – all clear – on you go.”

One by one, they stepped onto the spiral staircase. The steps began to descend automatically. As they dropped beneath floor level, the aperture above them closed silently and after a couple of minutes they came to a gentle halt. Ahead of them was a door. Tony pressed the device again and it opened onto a short metal-clad corridor illuminated by the same dim blue light. At the end of the corridor was a circular door like the entrance to a bank vault. It had five letters etched on it: ‘V I G I L’.

The door opened without a sound, revealing a tubular passageway that curved off symmetrically both to the left and to the right. Jack noticed that there were no markings on the passage walls – no rivets, no seams – it was perfectly smooth.

“Round to your left, please,” Tony said. They followed obediently and as they walked, the passageway bent away from the entrance, which resealed itself silently behind them. They had only taken twenty or thirty paces when Jack noticed a strange marking on the wall at about head height. It appeared like the outline of a figure – a stylised hominid figure of some sort. There was something other-worldly about it. Jack stopped and turned to Tony.

“What does that symbol mean, Mr Smith?”

Tony approached the figure on the wall. He turned to Gordon. “Have you seen this, MacFarlane?” he said apprehensively.

Gordon moved closer and inspected the strange marking, running his fingers tentatively over it. “Mmmm – the latest experiments must be more advanced than we thought.”

Tony turned back to Jack and Angus. “VIGIL have been using their wormhole technology to experiment on new applications...”

The boys’ eyes widened.

“Yes – the figure on the door is indeed a symbol...”

“The alien symbol,” Gordon added reverentially.

“Signifying a portal to a whole new universe.”

Angus’s eyes were on sticks, “You mean... space travel?”

Tony put them out of their misery, “No, you plonker, that’s the Gents toilet – and the Ladies opposite – look. Do either of you need to go?”

Gordon laughed raucously and the boys shuffled on their feet self-consciously.

“We’re fine, thanks.”

The party moved on, Tony and Gordon buoyed by their joke at the boys’ expense.

Finally Tony announced, “Right, here we are.”

The passageway had continued to curve round and they had reached a point where the grooving on the wall indicated another doorway. Jack reckoned that if they continued on they would eventually arrive back at the point where they had originally entered the underground complex. Essentially, they were in a giant subterranean doughnut from which all the various VIGIL control rooms and annexes could be accessed.

Jack read the lettering on the door:

‘Situation Room’.

He felt his heartbeat tick up a notch. This was it.

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Tony pressed the device in his hand and the door slid open.

\*

On each wall of the large underground room there were screens – some showed maps, some complex looking historical timelines and others just row upon row of computer programming language that Jack could not even begin to understand. Some of the VIGIL team were already seated around a large central board table. They looked like a war council. Others manned computer terminals, or scientific equipment, at pods in separate areas of the room.

Jack spotted a number of familiar faces: Miss Beattie, their English teacher, was involved in an animated conversation with, of all people, Gino Turinelli, from the café in the High Street. Jim De Raillar, who ran the mountain bike shop two doors down from Gino’s, was also there and, finally, Jack’s mother, Carole, was sitting at one of the computer terminals. In fact, as Jack looked around, he recognised everyone. They all either worked at the school or in the local village of Soonhope. Since their inauguration into VIGIL, Jack had learned that VIGIL’s network was quite pervasive. It made sense. Clearly, you would need a lot of different skills to create and maintain a working time machine – especially if you ever happened to need to use it. Each member of VIGIL had their everyday persona: teacher, shopkeeper, janitor and so on. Then they had their other, secret, role in the VIGIL organisation – scientist, analyst, technician or security guard. For example, Jack had learned that Miss Beattie was not only an expert on Shakespeare, but also had a first class degree from Cambridge and had done stints at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the European Organisation for Nuclear Research – CERN. Gino – actually *Professor* Turinelli – was a computer expert, and Jim De Raillar and Jack’s mother were analysts.

\*

Just then, the Rector and Inchquin came into the room through a separate entrance. Soon a ten-minute discussion was under way, facilitated by Inchquin who sat gravely at the head of the table.

“Jim, can you give us an update on the analysis of the message Tom Christie sent to us a couple of hours ago, please?”

“Certainly. To recap, the message confirms that Christie and Dr Pendelshape have fallen out. It also explains that following their failure to stop the First World War they started to work on a new timeline simulation some months ago...”

“What period does the simulation focus on?”

“Late Elizabethan.”

“Interesting...” Theo Joplin, the historical analyst, interjected, and the Rector flashed him an angry glance for interrupting.

Jim De Raillar ignored the comment and continued. “Anyway, it appears that the Revisionist team have refined the computer simulation software so they can make much more precise recreations of the interventions they plan to make in history, and the potential consequences of the action. Christie’s message referred to it as ‘surgical’ historical modelling. It seems that the Revisionist team were very excited about these advances... but then Christie got nervous when Pendelshape started to talk in terms of progressing the simulation to the implementation phase – an actual intervention in history.”



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