

# —BOUND

*by Alan Smale*

Day after day they threw him into the sky, arms strapped to his sides, legs straight and lashed together with tight cord. The rough cloth of the bindings abraded his neck and wrists where his jumpsuit did not protect his pale skin. Layer upon layer of bandages prevented him from bending his legs or curling up into a ball. Bundled as tightly as any Chinese child, he was immobilized and helpless.

The schoolyard was paved with black asphalt and marked in fading yellow paint with the rectangular grid pattern of a game he couldn't identify. Not soccer. Not tennis or field hockey. The schoolyard was enclosed on three sides by a tall wall of brick, crested with slate and concrete. A soot-blackened church with a high steeple defined the fourth side of the square.

Bound and rigid, they threw him. He turned end over end, or spun like a top, or drifted stably to the peak of his narrow arc with a clear view of the sky, wall, or pavement. It all depended on the angle of his previous bounce, the spin imparted by the blanket they used to toss him, and the skill of the thirteen people who held the blanket, but they never cast him high enough to see over the wall.

When he flew up—terror. When he dropped back toward earth—frantic terror. Especially if he could not see the ground beneath, and did not know how far and fast he was falling, or whether the blanket remained stretched below him. He could neither help nor hinder, steer nor protect himself.

He was at their mercy.

His memory of his life before the schoolyard was hazy. He thought his surname might be Jackson, but perhaps this was a pun created by his subconscious: Jumping Jackson, muttered a sarcastic voice in his head. Jumping Jackson.

They'd toss him into space again and again, until he was close to vomiting. Somehow they could tell when his equilibrium was failing and stop the punishment. That was a shame. Puking over them would have been a kind of revenge; petty and gross, perhaps, but there was little else he could do to discomfit his tormenters. Also, he was curious to know what they were feeding him.

They wore overalls and hoods of plain black, and ski-masks to obscure their features. Always thirteen of them, but not always the same ones. Of any given group, between six and ten seemed familiar in build or body language. He'd hear whispers from his memory—this one perhaps a parent, that one a brother, here a lover, there a child, maybe a friend from college. Of course, he couldn't recall their names any more than he could be sure of his own, nor could he picture their faces. Yet he was firmly

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convinced that he was not being tortured by strangers.

As he arced upwards once more, Jumping Jackson thought perhaps today was the seventh since he had arrived here. A week of being hurled into the sky within these schoolyard walls.

"Is... this the seventh day?" His feet hit the blanket first, and then the rest of his body. It took the whole of the next bounce for him to draw enough breath to finish his question. "Six days... oomph... before today?"

None answered, yet as he spun he saw one of them flick her head towards him so familiarly that he wanted to kiss her, or slap her. Distracted, she did not pull her weight on the next flip, and he spun crazily across the sky, his view a blur. The blanket crew had to skip back several feet to be in place to catch him and whiz him upward again, this time so high that he almost came level with the wall's parapet--but not quite, not quite.

His nausea rose, and his throat spasmed. Seven days, then. Seven. He should try to remember that.

When they folded the blanket around him and carried him through the arched doorway into the church, he fell asleep, apparently of his own accord.

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He regained consciousness as they threw him into the sky, bundled in his cocoon, arms strapped to his sides, legs straight and bound together. Instantly he panicked--he couldn't move! The rough cloth of the bindings abraded his neck and wrists. He screamed as he fell, to be silenced abruptly as his impact into the blanket knocked the wind from him. He sailed through space and tried to suck air into his lungs, bounced again, saw the squad below clutching the blanket's edges just before he hit one more time. They were in the swing of it now, and fresh, and for the next few times he flew up horizontally, not spinning, and he could count them. Thirteen in all and... surely two of them were family. A brother? A sister?

I am Jumping Jackson, he thought. They do this day after day.

I never see over the wall.

That church is the same church, its walls blackened by urban pollution, its spire pointing heavenward. Showing them the direction they must throw me.

And it's the eighth day of this torment.

The eighth day! Clutching at the knowledge, Jumping Jackson felt his panic recede. Whomp! He hit the blanket again, askew, and spun dizzily up into space, hung for an eternity, then the sickening fall back downward. He saw a flash of yellow--surely the markings for a game of some sort, yet not one he recognized. For a moment his consciousness flickered, then he flowed back to himself again as the crazy rhythm echoed in his bones.

He tried not to let his body adjust. If he accustomed himself to this insanity, if it became acceptable, it might last forever. But if he stayed off kilter and dizzy, it would stop. He remembered that if he was close to throwing up, they'd cease and take him inside for another interval of timeless sleep.

Jackson thrashed within his bonds. He moved only a fraction of an inch, yet in his victory it felt like he twisted and turned. Almost as if he was dancing. Almost as