

SPACE CAMPERS

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Synopsis: Something strange is going on at Camp Graystone. Weird uniforms, weird food, weird staff, weird everything. Could aliens be responsible? Will Matt figure it out or will he end up as a slave on the planet Xentron?

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Matt Smith looked out the window of the bus and frowned. Evergreens and firs. Water and shore. Winding two-lane highway. If these weren't the boonies, he'd never seen them.

God, he wanted to go home. He was bracing for a summer in Hell brought about by none other than the minions of the Devil himself. At a football camp, of all places, on the Olympic Peninsula.

It wasn't so much that Matt was a nerd. Far from it, in fact. It was more that Matt just wasn't sport-inclined. He was a little overweight, and he wasn't a jock. School spirit was an alien concept. But he wasn't a loner. Matt was a little awkward, true, but it took a while for people to actually notice; few ever did. Otherwise, he was a perfectly average high school teenager.

And he thought half the football team was probably gay. After all, the sport had positions like "Tight End" and "Wide Receiver." The players all tried to look butch by grunting and acting cool, but it had to just be a cover, right?

Matt fiddled with the camp brochure he'd brought alone. Luckily, he'd managed to get a seat all to himself on the bus. The camp was, as the glossy cover attested, Camp Graystone. WE BUILD THE BEST, the pamphlet claimed in big red letters.

Camp Graystone, Matt gathered, was supposed to be able to turn even the worst football players into Greek gods and the most withdrawn bookworm nerds into football players. They had the best sports medicine, the best equipment, the best coaches, the best everything. It was every meathead, good-old-boy dad's dream come

true.

Including his own, which was how the whole sordid affair had gotten started. Early May, Matt's dad had managed to come up with the Graystone pamphlet and was positively starry-eyed with hopes of his lazy son being the star quarterback at the state varsity championship. Mom just thought it'd be a fun thing to do. So that morning in mid-July Jordan had been packed onto the bus whether he liked it or not and three hours and one ferry ride later was almost at camp.

Matt looked around and the other guys on the bus. They were either jocks who got all the credit but did none of the work or fat grunts who did all of the work but got none of the credit. Some were wearing jerseys from school and community teams: Knights, Eagles, Warriors, and so on. It seemed as if Matt was the only one who wasn't on a team of his own.

The bus turned off the road, bumped off the side of the pavement and passed a sign saying CAMP GRAYSTONE. Guys started cheering, yelling, and giving each other high-fives, bumping the back of Matt's seat as they did so. As soon as the bus pulled up to the main building, they all eagerly grabbed their bags and stampeded as they tried to get off the bus as quickly as they could.

Matt was the last off. He found himself almost at the end of the crowd-slash-line going into the building, a rustic-looking A-frame. A sign above the entrance repeated the mantra WE BUILD THE BEST in even bigger and bolder letters. Matt immediately thought of the Marine Corps. Butterflies in his stomach fluttered a little.

He was not looking forward to what must surely go on in every football locker room in every high school across the country. Or was he? If anything, Matt was more terrified by the question mark hanging in his mind over the scenario than anything else.

As soon as he was inside, Matt was pulled out of line by a counselor and sent to a sign in table set up in the cafeteria. All the counselors looked to be beef-freaks no older than college. Must be a summer job, Matt thought, but then weren't they supposed to have the best here?

"Name?" the guy behind the table asked tersely.

"Matt Smith."

The quickly flipped through a card file and found Matt's registration. "You're number 41," he said as he handed the card over. "Drop your bag and get going," he instructed as he pointed to a growing zig-

gurat of duffel bags and backpacks in the middle of the room.

Matt shrugged and reluctantly followed the other guys outside, leaving his bag behind. There was a much larger and more modern building behind the cafeteria: SPORTS MEDICINE, TRAINING, AND DEVELOPMENT the sign went. Beside it was a meticulously-kept green-grass football field that Norman Rockwell couldn't have done better.

Along with a bunch of others, Matt was shunted into a large room where jerseys, T-shirts and other parts of a uniform were handed out. Matt as quickly grabbed roughly and damn near attacked by two counsellors wielding tape measures. In no more than half a minute, Matt had been sized up and a pile of clothes thrown into his surprised arms. Then he was practically kicked out of the area and sent along into the changing room.

The place was crowded with naked and semi-naked testosterone-filled young males taking off their 'civvies,' showering, then putting on camp uniforms as eagle-eyed counsellors yelled at them to move it along faster. Matt gulped, found an unoccupied spot of bench and started taking off his clothes.

It didn't take long for a counsellor to notice Matt. "You will wear your jockstrap and other prescribed clothes at all times, is that understood?" the guy screamed in Matt's ear as he leaned in close for effect.

"Okay, okay," Matt replied defensively, trying to go as fast as he possibly could. What the heck was going on? He knew football could be a bit militaristic at times, but this was ridiculous!

There were cameras in the big shower area. Matt stopped dead when he saw them, ominous black boxes just above each shower-head standing out against the white tiles. All of them were pointed down to get a good look at who was showering. Not really knowing what else to do, Matt simply rushed in, ducked under the water for a second, then ducked out again.

It was over-the-top freaky-weird, but Matt was stuck now. When Matt put on his uniform, he immediately noticed that the jockstrap he'd been given give him a huge crotch-bulge. So did everyone else's. It was nauseating. Football really *was* gay! At least there weren't any pads – yet.

Once Matt was dressed in his blue 41 jersey, his clothes were taken away – where, he didn't know – and he was thrust outside onto the

field. Everyone was running laps. Footballs were being tossed. Matt took one step into the gridiron and was immediately hit in the side of the head by a ball.

Matt stood still holding his head, not sure what to do. A guy came up to him. His jersey number was 26. He patted Matt on the back, then told him to start running. "They're hardasses here," he added, as if Matt didn't already know.

"I'm Matt," Matt began as he started jogging with the other guy right beside him, not really knowing what else to say.

"Eric. I just play for fun, but my dad made me come. Wants me to go pro or something."

"Same here, except mine wants to make me start playing," Matt explained.

"Know how that feels."

Matt quickly changed to brass tacks: "Did you see the cameras in the shower?"

"That's just wrong. I mean, why would anyone do that besides being a pervert?" Eric said as he brushed a tuft a blonde hair out of the way.

Someone at the side of the field yelled at Matt and Eric. He looked like a counsellor except his shirt had COACH on it. "Hey you two! Go long!" he shouted as he tossed a football over Matt's head. He and Eric looked at him, surprised.

"Go get the fucking ball!" the coach shouted. "Or does your head still hurt? Want me to throw another one right at you, pansy?"

"That was you the first time?" Matt asked, somewhat incredulous.

"Darn tootin'."

Why would a coach attack his own campers, or for that matter, swear? Before Matt could come up with possible answers to his own question, the coach yelled again. "Fatso 41 – get going and don't fucking stop running till I tell you to. Poser 26 – go down to the end and start tackling! Neither of you cadets wants to know what to do for punishment around here. Substandard performance is not acceptable!"

Matt did what he was told. He certainly didn't want to get blasted by a pigskin again. Something was definitely and very out of alignment at Camp Graystone – that was clear.

Several hours later, Matt dropped down into a seat at the cafeteria. He was sweating all over – smelling a little rank while doing so – his

dirty-blonde hair was messy and his heart was pounding. His sun-reddened cheeks puffed as he breathed deeply to catch his breath. He looked, and felt completely beat. This was much, much was than he'd thought it'd be.

"What are we eating?" Matt asked the guy across from him. Black hair, thin, lanky. Sizing the guy up, Matt decided he was a nerd back wherever he called home. Whatever. Any port in a storm, and he looked just as messed up as Matt was.

"I saw it when I passed the kitchen. It's eggs covered with some disgusting blue sauce. Bright blue. Smells as bad as it looks. Anyway, I'm Darren."

"Matt. Now, did you come here on their own or did they make you?"

"Um, well, I guess a little of both," Darren replied. "My dad's a meathead. So is probably everyone's here. Am I right?"

"You got it. Right on the frigging money."

Plates of food were passed out to each table. Darren was right. Blue eggs and no ham or anything else. Matt stuck a fork into the thick, goopy sauce and held it up, watching it slowly stretch like mozzarella back down to the plate. He was not impressed, no sir.

As if this place wasn't messed up enough. Matt looked around. He could see he wasn't the only one who'd just lost his appetite.

A counsellor stood up at the front of the room. He waited until everyone noticed him and quieted down. "Attention everyone!" he began. "Here at Camp Graystone, we like to make sure that our campers get only the best food. You need to bulk up. You need vitamins. Our special topping does all that and more. Much more. Try it. It doesn't taste as bad as it looks. Really - I promise."

Darren took a bite of sauce-covered sunny-side-up slowly and cautiously. His face contorted like he'd just taken a big suck on a lemon when he quickly swallowed it down. He offered his appraisal to Matt: "It tastes like ketchup."

"Ketchup? Blue ketchup? You've gotta be kidding me."

"But it's sticky, like syrup."

Matt looked down at his plate. The food was starting to blend together into a watery mess as it cooled. He picked at the eggs a little with his fork. "I think I'll pass," he decided, satisfied this was one bit of strangeness he could avoid.

"Suit yourself."

“So,” Matt asked. “What did they make you do?”

“Tackling, catching, passing. No throwing – don't know why, though.”

“Heh. They just made me run laps. Over and over – lost count. Practically wouldn't let me rest until I was on the ground screaming totally cramped up.”

“Really?”

“Not quite, but close. Too close.”

Cabin assignments were finally given after dinner was finished. It was amazingly simple. Matt's bunkmates for the summer were the guys who happened to eat at his table. Table 12 corresponded to cabin 12.

The cabins were on a path that went down to the water. Cabin 12, in fact, was right on the water, built on stilts like a dock. Although the view out over the Strait of Juan de Fuca to Vancouver Island was incredible and majestic, it wasn't really Matt's concern. He was more worried about how he was going to survive this twisted nightmare camp, especially if things got even worse than they already were.

There were three bunks in the cabin for a total of six people and a small bathroom. Matt could hear the water pounding against the pilings right under the floor. He hoped it wouldn't keep him up.

Evening passed and eventually turned into night. Three guys were rough-housing loudly like the morons they were. One was off somewhere. Matt was on the top bunk bored out of his mind, and Darren was below him reading a book.

Matt rolled and bent over the side of the bed and looked down at Darren. Since he'd finished with the brochure and tossed it out a while ago, he had nothing else left to do. The guy had buried himself in a well-thumbed paperback with several pieces of paper stuck between the pages. “What'cha reading?” Matt asked.

“Did you know that there have been more UFO sightings in this area than anywhere else in the United States?” Darren replied. “There's something wrong with this camp. I don't know why, but it's been a common denominator in most if not all of the reports. In fact, the sightings only started after this place opened in 1990.”

Yes, definitely a nerd, Matt thought as his stomach growled. “Right. But the book?”

“It's called *Project Evergreen: Alien Conspiracy on the Olympic Peninsula*. Fascinating stuff.”

Matt was tempted to roll his eyes, but didn't. "It must be," he said before pulling away and pulling himself back up.

"There's something going on here, even if it's not aliens," Darren said, talking up to Matt.

"You're telling me! I mean, didn't you notice the cameras in the showers."

"Uh, yeah, I did," Darren admitted. "Great, huh? Reminds me of a John Saul book - wish I could remember the title. Only freakier," Darren said with more than hint of sarcasm.

To be continued?

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