

# NUMBER NINE

(The magician's son)

Broughton looked at the others, seated at the long table before him. "So, what is our move? We must discuss what we are going to do."

The silence was deafening, the unease palpable. Everyone present had been summoned to Vauxhall Cross in the middle of the night, as soon as news of the incident was reported. Several news reporters were preparing pieces for print, and one had already gotten the story into publication.

Admiral Stewart, looking dismissively at the document before him – marked *MI-6 Classified* – said, "It looks to me like our project is over, that our young operative has died."

The admiral, being a Navy man, not an MI-6 regular, missed the point. It wasn't just some "young operative" who had died, it was a person of singular importance.

"He'll be replaced," said Broughton, from the head of the table. "I have ordered the story killed. Agents are managing the press people. The public mustn't know."

"Impossible," said Michael Pennington, with conviction. Seated halfway down the long table, he leaned in, so he could see past the row of MI-6 agents separating he and his boss. He looked dead on at Broughton, as if to drive his point home. "Number Six had unique talents and abilities that we've spent years developing. He was the perfect complement to Number One."

"Nonsense," said Broughton. "Number One's role in all of this is irrelevant, and we have a good man, our Number Nine, who will fill Number Six's role nicely."

"He can't have Six's sensibilities, or his talents," countered Pennington, who had skin in the game. The project had been his from the first. He was the one who first saw the opportunity and envisioned the initiative. A whole population could be captured, managed, manipulated. He vested himself with knowledge of the research that had been done regarding the minds of military men shattered by the horrors of war. He researched their psychiatric reconstruction, and then he wrote the program plan. He would demonstrate the capacity for capturing public attention and manipulating thought. That struck him as a monumental accomplishment, and he hadn't imagined his cohorts had additional objectives in mind for his project.

Pennington was far the youngest of his MI-6 peers, and he recognized changes in society unnoticed by his elders. He was the one who recognized a change in the music that young people were responding to. It wasn't old England, anymore, not the bombed-out spirit of a reminiscing culture, but rather a new wave, more global in nature. They liked America's popular music, it's Jazz, Country, and Rock'n Roll. The idea had hit him like a tsunami, magic made available, power blasted from Vox amplifiers, a voice of the people that could be used to modernize England, and perhaps help it hold on to its remaining world power.

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Patrick Spencer, seated closer to the head of the table, asked Broughton about his thinking. “Who is this Number Nine?” It had always seemed odd to him that this pop music project had used its own operative identification system. The Boys, as they were known internally, were not MI-6 regulars. They didn’t even know who it was they were working for.

Broughton weighed his thoughts for a moment, cautious with his answer. “Number Nine is much like Number Six,” he said, which brought a doubting wave of managed objection from Pennington, seated down in the pecking order.

Broughton shot Pennington a disapproving frown, then continued – “He has the same skills; in fact, a few more. He is known as ‘the man of a thousand voices’.”

“He is known?” asked another of the agents with concern.

“Oh, this is going to work,” groused Pennington sarcastically, loud enough for those seated close around him to hear, pouting a little at being over-ridden.

“Number Nine is a working professional,” said Broughton. “He is respected, rather well-known, but he has always worked in theatrical environments, always wearing masks and prosthetics, or wild makeup.”

William Rose snorted, commenting – “So, he’s a clown!”

This brought a chuckle from the table, but Broughton remained expressionless. “He is anything but a clown. He has a patronage that is old and already deeply ingrained in our organization.”

Pillington Bowles, seated next to Broughton, asked - “He’s one of ours?”

Broughton looked at him and said, flatly – “He is the magician’s son.”

This sent everyone in the room into a commotion, as they adjusted themselves in their chairs and shared startled glimpses with one another.

Bowles looked at Broughton like he was looking into the eyes of Satan himself. He had always been uncomfortable with The Project, which had made The Boys the most beloved and powerful quartet of young people the world had ever known. They were magic, gifted with a sort of healing power, and it was that which gave Bowles bad dreams. With The Project, MI-6 and their associates within the U.K. government had crossed a barrier, taken an agency that was in place to protect the interests of England and its empire, and turned it into an agency of social change, powered by supernatural forces that agents such as Bowles had spent decades, centuries even, trying to hide from public knowledge.

Pennington had become aware of a young boy – son of a fractured family, traumatized by the death of his mother – who was unusually receptive to the nature of the world around him. He was imaginative and naturally artistic, but most extraordinarily he was growing up in a house established on land that had once been a Druid ceremonial site. That site was situated along a ley line, associated with

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other religious ceremonial sites, and when the Druids mysteriously disappeared from history the energies associated with those locations remained.

There was a bridge near the home of the lad who would become known as “Number One”. Pennington would meet the young man on that bridge, speaking in ways that would convince him that he was a representative of something new, for something new was what he most wanted.

Number One had fallen hard for Pennington’s pitch, for his emotional desperation and desire to be famous was all consuming. He would sell his soul to anyone who could help him realize his own dream of himself.

It was Pennington who recognized that Number One needed a partner, a counter-balance to his Libran instability. He had found the perfect complement in Number Six.

Six, like Number One, was a wounded spirit, a boy who had lost his mother. Also, like Number One, Six had a father who was disconnected from his son’s life, not so much emotionally – both Number One’s and Number Six’s fathers were energetic figures, powerful in their sons’ lives – but practically. Number One’s father had left the family years before, checking in only occasionally, but never really being there. Number Six’s father was physically present, but his mind was somewhere else, a kind of nowhere man. He had his head in the clouds, expressed through his own semi-professional music career.

Six’s father had only just been notified of his son’s death. MI-6 agents had arrived at his house in the dead of morning with the news, and with a set of orders. He was never to acknowledge his son’s death. To the public, everything would proceed as normal. It was the culmination of a deal that had been done years earlier, when Six’s father was first presented with the details of what was then a “proposed project”. His family would receive life-time financial security, and would be honored to be in service to the queen. That would come with certain responsibilities, requirements. Never explain, never complain. That was the deal.

Pennington arranged for Number One and Number Six to meet, which they did at a church, near the Druidic site. Both were sons of Freemasons, which Pennington suggested they use in the name of their band. Several bandmates were tested, as Pennington listened for how each configuration resonated with the universe and the music of the spheres.

The Project had been on the edge of failing, when Number Six suggested the addition of a younger kid who would become Number Seven. Like One, Number Seven was an empath, a spiritual conduit, receptive to the strong Druidic powers that were energizing the lives and futures of The Boys, even as it went unrecognized by them.

Years later, Number One would be confronted by a wise old outsider, a guru to the science and psychology wings of the intelligentsia; that is, the western wing of the global think tank. “You’ve been used,” he told Number One, who only later realized that he was right. The old man was a master of sacred geometries, and he knew how The Boys had been built, including those deals made on that bridge in north England, all those years earlier.

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“Sir – Lord Broughton,” said the agitated Pennington, “Number Six is one of the most well-known people on the planet. How can you possibly think he could just be replaced without anyone noticing?”

Broughton brushed him off. “It’s not an issue at all. Number Nine has been working as a double for Number Six for some time. He has actually performed with The Boys, as have other doubles from time-to-time. I assure you, Mr. Pennington, the pimple public won’t notice the change. Besides, there are prosthetics, cosmetic surgeries. Anybody can become anybody.”

Broughton looked at a far corner of the room, where there sat a distinguished-looking man, rather upper class. “Would you like to speak to that, Mr. Martin?”

Pennington watched as The Boys’ producer stood, so he could be seen in the shadows of the large conference room. “Yes, the individual that you refer to as Number Nine has worked in the organization for some time. He does bare some resemblance to the young man you call Number Six. Hair and makeup help the resemblance. I know The Boys did at least one show in which he performed in place of Number Six, who was ill, and he did quite an amazing job, mimicking the vocal characteristics of Six, and even playing the bass guitar in his opposite hand.”

“In his opposite hand?” asked an agent.

“Yes,” answered Martin. “He has unusual talents, quite malleable. He sings higher than Six, and doesn’t sound the same harmonizing with the other two, but he sings well. He isn’t the songwriter Number Six has been, but we can help him with that.”

Another agent spoke up. “I’d heard Adorno was working with them on that, anyway.”

Martin, speaking from the far corner, said – “He offers his ideas but he’s not needed.”

Pennington looked back at him in amazement, and then at the other’s around him. “Does this sound plausible to any of you? This idea that a person can simply be replaced, like a part in a machine?”

Boris Wheatly, seated near the head of the table, near Broughton, looked down his nose at Pennington, who he never liked, and said – “Get over it Pennington. This had to happen for your precious program to even continue.”

Pennington grew red in the face. “The Project is over! There is no Project without Number Six. One and Seven are nothing without Six!”

“Relax, Pennington,” sneered Wheatly. “Everything hasn’t been accomplished yet.”

Pennington frowned. “What do you mean?”

Broughton spoke up. “Six was getting to be a problem, Pennington. Nine will put us back on course.”

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“On course?” asked Pennington. “We’ve been on fucking course! The Boys are the biggest cultural influence in the world. They are bringing change to this world, making people happy! Making the crown money!”

“Stage one,” said Broughton. “The project has successfully reached that first, critical milestone, and you are to be congratulated for the role you have played in that. The Project will now be handed off to Mr. Wheatly, who is better positioned to take it from here.”

Pennington looked shocked. “You mean I’m out?”

“You aren’t out, Mr. Pennington,” said Broughton. “No one who has ever been associated with MI-6 is out. You are simply being redesignated. Your role on the project has changed. You have become emeritus, and congratulations for work well done.”

Pennington was stunned. “What are you saying? What is going to happen to The Project?”

“It is going to be repurposed,” said Wheatly. “It is going to be given a direction it hasn’t had up to this point. It is going to be re-messaged, something greater than ‘Yeah, Yeah, Yeah’, though that has been a useful mantra.”

“Who is going to be crafting this message?” asked Pennington bitterly. “The magician’s son?”

Wheatly looked over at Broughton, who acknowledged his glance, and then back at Pennington. “Yes, the magician’s son.”