

JoinThink

By Rhett Holt

### **Birth minus 30 weeks**

Very early in her pregnancy, Janine Thorlow suspected she was in for a rough time as a mother. Her stomach had risen to the size of a beach ball within her first trimester. Storms had been raging continuously for weeks since falling pregnant, and unless she stayed in the basement, her organs felt like over-played shuttle pucks. Pan eyes of surprise filled the radiologists face when the foetus's began thrashing violently in response to the ultrasound. Instead of calm excitement, Janine got to drive home alone clutching her freshly tap-danced insides; less illuminated about her condition than before. Except for the assurance of a particularly grabby intern, who told her there was *definitely only one foetal heartbeat*.

Janine stumbled through her front door, her thoughts set upon the drab décor of her basement prison. She would never have imagined that the antiseptic concrete walls would one day be her only solace. Jarrod Thorlow, hearing the door, came out of the kitchen only to see the flash of a back retreating down the staircase.

“How did it go sweetie?” he asked delicately, staring in hope at the basement stairs.

“Awful. I think it grabbed my heart when the ultrasound started,” she panted.

“It? I thought we decided to find out?” Jarrod called curiously. Janine did not respond. Jarrod looked at the tea towel in his hand, thoroughly prepared, yet again, to put her mood down to hormones. Something within him cracked. His hand clutched upon the flowered tea-towel until his fingernails bit into his palm. Standing still for a moment, Jarrod soliloquised his choices; decisively he tossed the now crumpled rag aside and stalked into the basement. “What is it now?” he yelled.

“Not now!” Janine panted, more to the ceiling than to Jarrod.

“When then? Tomorrow? Next week? Maybe, the third Tuesday after the birth...”

“*Our little angel*, enjoys riding my spine like a mechanical bull. I barely made it home. Please. Not now!”

“You can’t keep this up! You live down here like a bat. You never come upstairs. You never go out. There *was* a time we were actually a couple.”

“Do you want to carry your handiwork?!” Janine roared. “This is the only place it doesn’t flap my guts out. I hate it down here! What do you want me to do?”

“I don’t know!” Jarrod yelled, amusement playing at his lips. “I... I just didn’t realise I was marrying batman.”

“*Batwoman!* I’m not a man you poofta!”

“Yeah, well you were once a lawyer too.”

“Better a lawyer than a neurosurgeon. I’d rather be a bottom sucker than Jesus wanabe. But, *batman*, maybe you would too.”

“Give me a man anyday. Bring on a cock over a moaning whore!”

“You still think you’re clever. Dream on Mary, how many lecturers did you sleep with again?”

“Better a lecturer than my boss.”

“You *were* my boss, Jarhead!”

Jarrood cringed.

Janine starred for a moment contemplating her response. She looked around the concrete walls and the boxes, “I’m not batman,” she pouted, “He at least had a snappy wardrobe in his cave.”

“Don’t you go thinking about rubber jumpsuits, that’s what got that thing into your guts in the first place,” Jarrod smiled.

“Ha ha!” Janine said, sarcasm swallowing the last tastes of argument. She allowed herself to look at her husband. Her eyes lingered a moment too long on his dish-water-wet clothes. His black hair was moist with sweat, and his dark blue eyes sparkled with amusement. The slight cling of the fabric

outlined the definition of his stomach and chest, she suddenly wished their bed had been moved into the basement.

“You only ever wanted me for my body,” Jarrod said, acknowledging her leer.

“So?” Janine paused briefly, “I want you to move the bedroom down here.”

“Kinky.”

“I can’t take much more of this. I need sleep,” Janine sighed.

“Neeny,” he whined. “My pager doesn’t work down here. Besides, it’s damp, dirty and cold, you shouldn’t be in this place, not while you’re pregnant.” Jarrod attempted a smile, still scrutinising the box in the corner.

“If you haven’t noticed, it’s the only place I *can* be,” Janine knew she had already won the argument, she now just had to smooth out some details. “What if we put in a land line down here, and, *I’ll* spend the morning cleaning it out. I’ll have wallpaper put in and even some carpet. You never know, it might only be for a few more weeks. Besides, it would expedite your porn retrieval.” Janine smirked, a savage leer directed at the box.

Jarrod looked at her; his sweetheart *was* still in there, hidden slightly beneath a beach ball, and sleepless dark eyes. This chance encounter with peace in the basement was a blessing. She was his very own enchantress glamour; neatly plucked from a Disney cartoon. Flowing locks of brown hair nestling a neat, pale face with a penetrating hazel stare conveying wisdom well beyond her years. Of greater importance still, maybe here he would have a chance at a romp. “I suppose,” he smiled, “A chance to play with an that inflated rack is worth *some* extra effort.”

Janine rolled her eyes in amusement. Admittedly, her breasts had skipped several letters in the alphabet this week.

**Birth minus 29 weeks**

Remodelling took a day, a decorating army of 63 was hired to complete the job. The walls were scrubbed, the floors and roof dusted. Wallpaper was up in hours. Plush rugs covered the floor. By the end of the day Janine had decided that the roof was still too plain. With a well-timed accident, she had unleashed the triple E's. The labourers were then more than willing to stay late to paper the ceiling (and move her bedroom suit down three flights).

"How did you convince them to do the ceiling?" Jarrod balked, staring at the catalogue room. It was well dressed in off-white wallpapers and plush cream carpet, studded poetically with aged wooden furniture; it created an amusing regal air.

In a royal accent, Janine elicited, "forgot to clip my brassiere." She feigned a giggle.

"Nice!" Jarrod smiled, "Do you think you could forget again on Thursday; get the gardener to trim the wisteria?"

"Won't work. I tried last month," Janine smiled, "But I think you might have better luck."

"Oh," Jarrod wondered. "A towel accident whilst getting the paper?" Smiling broadly he walked over to the dresser and pulled out two towels, "What colour suits my skin best?" he asked holding up one white and one crimson.

"The red one suits your tan better," Janine eyed him, "Five bucks on it?"

"I'll even get a newspaper subscription so I have an excuse to go outside." Jarrod replied.

Janine laughed.

"If you can do it I can. Easiest five bucks ever!"

### **Birth minus 1 hour**

Excessively unoccasional trips to the upstairs bathroom created a stomach reminiscent of an alien movie. As the bump grew it started to look more like jelly wrestling under a blanket. The cursed landline woke them just as frequently, inevitably at midnight. Each call was immediately followed by Jarrod's hasty exit. After a time Janine did not even mind. To his credit, Jarrod would always come

home with a curious smile: he never told her it was actually pride at his accomplishment of a perfectly groomed wisteria.

Two of the hospitals leading gynaecologists slumped into the basement in the early hours of a cold August morning. A stirrup bed sat prominently in the basement suite. Perched precariously on top, Janine muttered curses to the ceiling between gasps. On approach, black boxes on the doctor's belts panicked and vibrated in alarm. Both pagers managed to panic themselves to an early death. Startled, the doctors began to search for a the cause. Janine and Jarrod caught one and others eye, '*Evil spawn?*'

"Something about this room gives anything with a transmitter hell," Jarrod explained apologetically, "I should have warned you. I'll pay for new pagers; I really should have told you up stairs. I think there must be something magnetic in the bedrock."

"I'll crack your head you asshole! This dominatrix stirrup bed is exactly what I told you not to get."

"It's the only one that would fit down the stairs. Would you like to go upstairs?" Jarrod smirked.

"One more word, Jarhead, and I'll kill your kid!"

"I would not worry about that, a few hours and I can start beating you again!"

"You couldn't beat me with a cricket bat you little mincer."

"Who caused you to get pregnant? I take joy in your pain."

### **After Birth<sup>δ</sup>, Six hours.**

The three doctors stood staring at the heart monitors. If identical boys were not surprise enough; the twin's heartbeats refused to differentiate. Six hours had already passed and the beeps remained synchronised perfectly.

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<sup>δ</sup> Birth taking 37 hours. But a child does not care about that.

“I underssthand now vhy de radiologisht misshed sem... Sier hurtbeatsh er schtill schynchronished.”

“I can understand that while they were unborn, but how are they keeping time now?” Jarrod whispered, trying not to wake Janine.

“It’s probably just a coincidence. They’ll separate after a while.”

“Ok. Then explain why both of them startle when only one baby drop tested?” Jarrod was slightly spooked, his voice was elevated and castigatory.

“Jarrod, calm down. Be rational. If these weren’t *your* boys, you’d be the first to concede to chance. People have written about twin connections for centuries. They have spent months together. They’re fine. They *are* healthy.”

“For how long?” Jarrod pled. “Please just stay to help me finish testing them.”

Nine hours later, Jarrod had become quite dishevelled; his heart was searching the heavens for a solution.

“We have taken them upstairs fourteen times; they scream murder the second they leave the basement,” Jarrod begged.

“Yesh Jarvod, it may jusht ve a sensichtivity to lighcht.”

“Why do they both scream when one is taken upstairs?” Jarrod asked, belligerent.

“Jarrod! This is *normal* parental doubt. They’re fine! You’ve kept Janine down here for months, with them inside her; daylight might upset them. When one leaves they both cry: that’s obvious, they have spent nine months together; they don’t want to be separated. That is all! Stop getting so worked up. Give them some time to get used to the world,” Marcus had taken hold of Jarrod’s arms to emphasis his point.

“You’re right Marc.” Jarrod shook his head uncertainly, “I think having two of them just caught me off guard. Thanks.”

Mark Filius and Agneska Malcolm turned to leave the basement, Janine finally stirred, calling after them.

“Marcus and Malcolm,” Janine yelled, still exhausted. All three men turned around to her.

“Honey?” Jarrod asked sweetly.

“That’s what we’re calling the boy’s,” Janine smiled. “We’ll name them after their guardian angels.”

“I’m honoured,” said Mark sleepily.

“Shankyou,” added Agneska. “Ve Vill come Vack in a few daysh do meet sem proporely,” he smiled.

“Rest Janine.” Mark smiled as he turned back and walked up the stairs, Derek nodded and followed him.

“Goodnight guys,” Jarrod called after them. Waiting for the click of the front door, Jarrod finally turned to Janine. “That was a lovely thing to do?”

“Well,” Janine shrugged, “they’ve seen me naked; that’s the only way we’ll ever get them back here after that.”

Jarrod snorted loudly and shook his head at her.

### **After Birth, Six weeks.**

Their heartbeats were still linked. Their screaming was always a duet. They could not go upstairs. The basement became the nursery.

Jarrod was onto his seventeenth pager. Janine had been through four mobile phones. The boys were already speaking; babbling coherently. The phone company had been around twice to check the house; the only problem with the basement was that there was no network coverage. After first signal tester *maxed-out and* the second exploded, the technician did not seem to believe the explanation he gave them.

At twelve weeks the probabilities of *chance* had become infinite. Jarrod's ethics lost the battle with his curiosity. Drawing on an old experiment, Jarrod showed Marcus how to open a trick box containing his car keys. Without letting the twins near each other, Jarrod then gave the box to Malcolm. Gurgling around for a moment, Malcolm ignored the box for a particularly interesting piece of floating fluff. When the fluff was finally gone, Malcolm rolled over, scrutinised the box for a moment, then touched only the open button to obtain the keys. Terrified and excited, but mostly curious, Jarrod thought *what's the possibility of 'chance' now?* Being a good scientist, he tried to recreate his success; he took Malcolm into another room for an hour and taught him to blow a raspberry, then to scream, then to say *ba ba ba*. Each time Malcolm got the sequence correct, Jarrod gave him a sip of sweetened milk from a bottle. Finally, once Malcolm had the sequence perfect each time, Jarrod left him in the room and went out to Marcus. Instantly, after seeing the bottle, Marcus chortled the sequence: raspberry, scream, ba ba ba. Jarrod stared at Marcus shocked, forgetting to provide the reward of milk. Marcus looked outraged; he repeated the sequence. When Jarrod still gave him no milk, Marcus screamed like he had been mortally wounded.

The other doctors refused to listen, even the twins namesakes laughed at his apparent *father pride*. Jarrod had no method of proving himself; the boys still could not be taken outside the basement quietly. The crescendo of screaming as the boys were taken upstairs could wake the dead.

"The situation is completely unacceptable, all of it!" Jarrod screamed one night. "Perhaps I am just loosing it."

Janine glanced up from her magazine and smiled. "They are special boys Jarhead, we know that. Maybe it would be better to leave it alone," Janine said serenely, returning to her reading.

"I'm not a jarhead! I am Dr Thorlow, a *brilliant* neurologist. Now they think I'm a quack. I think I'm a quack," Jarrod whined.



Ruefully, Janine dropped the magazine. “They are very special. Even simple old me can see that,” Janine poked. “But you have to get it through that think jar you call a head, YOU are not infallible! *You* are completely biased and *your* “tests”, are as tainted as Boston tea!”

“Maybe, but they’re connected in some way that doesn’t make sense,” Jarrod defended.

“Look, tomorrow you can go to work and apply for leave. When you have it, you and I will try together. That is, of course, if you don’t mind the assistance of simple mortal,” Janine jibed.

### **After Birth, 16 weeks.**

Over the weeks leading his leave, Janine and Jarrod created a small series of tests to understand what was happening.

Separating the twins proved to be the most difficult. One morning Jarrod had Janine drive in an opposite direction to him away from the city. All was going well; the boys continued to scream as the cars speed down the road. Janine was ready to turn home after a kilometre.

At the turn off to the free way, two kilometres from their house, Janine prepared to merge into the traffic. As she did so, the radio system in the car started to spark and smoke. Within seconds the entire stereo had burnt out. Turning the car around, she sped back to the house. Malcolm screaming in his car seat.

Pulling into the driveway, Jarrod’s car was already waiting in the garage. Janine removed Malcolm from his seat and stormed back to the basement. Jarrod was already sitting in a chair with Marcus, trying to coax him to feed.

“What happened to five kilometres?” Janine boomed.

“My stereo exploded at the first set of traffic lights,” Jarrod shook his head, “We may have to try another day.”

Janine flopped into a chair, mouth agape.

“What is it sweetie?” Jarrod asked sweetly, placing Marcus and Malcolm in the cot.

“My stereo burnt out at the freeway merge,” Janine trailed off.

Jarrold sat in silent reflection for two hours following Janine’s revelation. Startling up, as if he had received a shock, Jarrold stood and picked up Marcus.

“What are you doing?” Janine shot.

“Only our radio’s were affected right,” Jarrold stated.

“Yes,” Janine replied.

“There is more in a car than a radio.”

“So?”

“It’s got to have something to do with the transmitter. It can’t be an emp or a magnetic field. The must be affecting transmitters, think about you’re phone.”

“I’m taking them outside the city,” Jarrold replied shortly.

“Why? Where too?” Janine begged.

“I don’t know. I just want to test something,”

“Test what?!” Janine demanded.

“I want to see what happens, when they aren’t in radio range,” Jarrold replied reluctantly. Even he thought it sounded stupid when he said it out loud.

“You really think they did that to our radio’s?” Janine mocked sarcastically. “It couldn’t be that the mechanic stuffed up when he tuned the engines on Friday?”

“It is just a drive,” Jarrold shot, “What harm can it do?”

Janine stared, scrutinising Jarrod carefully.

“None, I guess,” Janine sighed, “But maybe we should have the engines checked before you go.”

“I want to try now,” Jarrod picked up Malcolm, “I’ll take my mobile with me.”

“And if the boys choose to blow that up?” Janine mocked.

“Then you’ll stop looking at me like I’m a nut when I get home,” Jarrod smiled.

Jarrod drove the boys outside the city for an hour, finding their screaming would stop occasionally on country roads in the middle of nowhere. He could not figure out the connection. A small pocket radio he had brought with him had lost signal well before the boys had stopped crying. Taking his mobile out of his pocket, he switched it on to call Janine. The handset let out a negative bleep, announcing ‘No network coverage’. He looked at the boys, who were silent. Restarting the car, he drove for a while, periodically checking the phone for signal. He placed the phone on the seat next to him and continued the drive. Suddenly, the twins started babbling incessantly in the back.

Malcolm, the younger of the two, started first “Ba... ba, bab, mmm, k, kmm, hmm...hmm nwwww,” he babbled.

Marcus joined him soon after, “bab.e. kkkoo...mmmnnn. Ooomm NNwwww.”

The two boys continued in unison, “bab kkoommmm ooommm nnnnnwwww.”

The phone on the seat buzzed to life; a message from Janine chirped into the handset. Jarrod stopped the car to check the phone. Staring at the screen, it read: **'Babe, come home now.'** Jarrod looked up at the twins, their babbling sounded too similar to be just *chance* again.

'Is it possible?' Jarrod thought clutching at straws, 'do you hear digital transmission as well?'

Restarting the engine, Jarrod screamed the car on a u-turn and speed back out of signal range. When his phone beeped again to indicate no signal, Jarrod pulled over onto the side and stopped. Snatching it up he typed a quick message and hit send. The phone announced that it would attempt transmitting; a telegraph pole danced around on the screen giving the comical impression that the phone was trying its hardest. The boys reacted instantly, babbling at first, their young mouths trying furiously to pronounce anything more than basic letters. The phone chirped failure and requested advice on its next action. The boys stopped the instant Jarrod hit no.

Sitting in shock, Jarrod spoke to the boys as if expecting an answer, "It can't be possible? You two can hear what this sends?" Jarrod's shock progressed into excitement. His fingers danced rapidly around the keypad.

He typed in: **GGG NNN BBB NNN KKK GGG BBB KKK NNN GGG.** Then hit send.

The phone chirped: Attempting. The telegraph pole started its pirouette.

The boys began in perfect unison, “Ggggggg nnnnnnn. Bbbbb nnnnn kkkkk ggggg bbbbb kkkkk nnnnn ggggg. Gggggg nnnnnnn bbbbbb nnnnn kkkkk ggggg bbbb kkkk nnnnn ggggg. Gggggg nnnnnnn bbbbbb nnnnn kkkkk ggggg bbbb kkkkn nnnn ggggg.”

Jarrold sat in the drivers’ seat of the black SUV, his excited breath exiting his lungs rapidly. He turned the key and screeched back onto the road, speeding towards the city. Suspecting the boys would recommence screaming as soon as they re-entered cellular network range, Jarrod was surprised when they did not. Instead, as soon as the phone chirped signal acquisition the twins started babbling away together in the back seat. He imagined how strange this would seem to the people in the other cars as he passed them. He smiled thinking about outrageous *normal* explanations he could give if police pulled him over; *they’re possessed, speaking in tongues and unable to move, drug babies.*

Depositing the twins back in the basement, where they immediately went quiet again. He bounced up the staircase to his Janine. He recounted the story of his transmission-tower-twins and proceeded onto a demonstration of their abilities using his phone in the basement.

Janine was horrified, the colour in her beautiful face had disappeared and she starred at Jarrod, “You can never tell anyone else about this Jarrod!”

Jarrold starred taken aback, “What?”

“You tell anyone about this and we’ll lose the boys.” Janine was almost pleading, “Jarrod, if you show them off out there someone will take our boys and never give them back,” Tears had started to stream down her face. “We can keep them here. Take them out to the bush for play and sunlight. We’ll teach them ourselves,” she listed, gesturing wildly.

“Sweetie, who would take them. You’re being silly?” Jarrod took Janine in his arms, but she pushed him away.

“No. You said yourself; you don’t know how it is possible. People will want to know,” Janine was looking at the twins who were now wrestling around the floor.

Jarrod thought for a moment, then, without thinking replied, “It is an important scientific…”

“They are babies!” Janine cut him off, “Our boys! Our babies, Jarhead! We have to keep this too ourselves. Science be damned!”

Jarrod could feel his own curiosity burning into guilt, “You’re right.” Jarrod knew that if even *he* could forget that they were people, anyone else definitely would. “You’re not allowed to call me Jarhead though,” he whinged.

“Anything to get your head out of science mode. They aren’t transmission towers, we have to remember they’re our babies.” Janine nodded, “And we have to move!” She suddenly announced, starkly seguing the conversation.

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The twins had reached thirty-two weeks old, and after finally receiving a network signal tester off Ebay, Jarrod found a seven hundred acre valley only fifteen minutes from town for their new house. The surrounding mountains blocked every signal the device could scan for. The final test had been to

take the boys out there: the valley passed perfectly. They silenced immediately as the black SUV disappeared over the hump of the valley wall.

The boys were chattering wildly between themselves in the back seat. Their speaking skills had progressed rapidly over the past four months. Jarrod and Janine had found that if they each took one boy in lessons alone, both of them would learn both lessons by the next day.

Deciding it best to ask the boys whether they would like to come out here to live, Jarrod presented the options. Both boys looked around for a while as if considering their options in a place like this. After seeing a strange horned dog, which Janine announced was called a dear, they were extremely excited at the prospect and nodded with glee.

After several hours of four-wheeled-driving the forest tracks, Janine and Jarrod agreed on the perfect location to build their new house. The day getting late, Janine prepared the boys for the trip back into the city. Explaining for the hundredth time; what, why and how they could sense the phone signals, as if she actually understood it herself.

Waiting for the boys to break into senseless chatter as they crested the valley: the sound of their silence blasted like an air horn. Janine spun around to check them; deep concentration haunted Marcus' countenance.

“Boys!” Janine shrieked.

Moments later both twins opened their eyes and started looking around as if everything was normal.

Janine starred, “Jarrod!” She exclaimed, beating his arm, “Jarrod!”

Jarrod stopped the car and turned to check his phone. It showed full signal.

“Boys? What’s wrong?” Janine panicked.

Malcolm looked at her curiously, “What?”

“I have signal?” Jarrod ventured carefully, “Can’t you feel it?” The boys had explained many times that what they could do was different to seeing and hearing. But their dad, even though brilliant, could not understand. It was like trying to describe the feeling of the colour red on your eyes.

“Yes,” said Malcolm.

“No,” said Marcus in unison.

“Boys you have to explain? *What* is different?” Janine’s slow controlled tone was begging for good news.

“No different,” said Malcolm. Causing his mother to shrink with disappointment.

“Peek a boo,” added Marcus cryptically, trying to explain.

“You’re saying you can stop it?” Jarrod almost yelled, his excitement overflowing.



“No,” replied Marcus, “still there.”

“But you can hide from it?” Janine tried.

“Yes,” Marcus answered.

“Cus hides us,” Malcolm added.

“How?” Jarrod requested, staring at Malcolm, “Why can’t *you*?

“Us hungry,” Malcolm replied, ignoring the question.

“How long have you been able to do this?” Jarrod questioned.

“Now,” Marcus replied,

“You just got it?” Jarrod balked.

“Yesm,” Marcus said, “Mal ok.”

“How?” Janine was shocked.

“Don’t know,” Malcolm added.

## Chapter 3 – Brothers in arms.

Moving took eight months in total; both building time and the growing demand of the twins slowed progress. Jarrod was reluctant to sell the house, preferring to enter extreme debt than give up his family's home of nearly 80 years. His foot came down around ten minutes into the ninth fight with Janine; *we either keep it, or we don't move!* They were set to move the following day, Janine figured he would loosen up once they had settled; he never did, and never would.

Physically, the boys grew normally in size, but were reading their fathers medical books by the time they were six. Bureaucrats from the education department would sporadically bother them with visits. Trying constantly to force the boys into public schooling. Janine would continually develop new and better arguments to keep them home schooled, but she had to admit, eventually she would fail.

An intoxicating world of new and amazing gossip awaited the boys on each trip into the city. The boys would giggle at a girl breaking up with her boyfriend via text message, or at ridiculously rude SMS to someone called Bugzy; that they did not quite understand. Janine tried to limit their visits into 'signal range', acquiescing only on rare occasion at protests of extreme boredom.

At seven years old, *quiet valley* life did not suite them at all; their exuberant energy and insatiable curiosity went wanting among the trees. The boys were *forced* to entertain themselves. Eventually chess and cards were confiscated because of the fighting caused by stealing thoughts to cheat. They concluded that their mother would continue to be in the way of actual fun as long as they stayed indoors. From then on they set out each day for the forest and trouble; so began: *The cacophonous catastrophes of Captain Cus and Major Mal.*

What started as a simple sword fight, led to the greatest set of adventures the Gripsland Valley had ever seen. Perched in trees and marauding from burrows, Marcus and Malcolm were intent on causing as much damage to each other as possible. Fake bombs made from aluminium added to acid in old coke bottles blasted small holes in trees and frayed the nerves of birds. Pigs' blood bought from the butcher made their battles feel *more real*.

Never before had Janine been so angry as the day her boys stumbled up the clearing from the forest, covered in pigs' blood. They got a belting they would never forget; their bottoms were red for a week.

"How," smack, "Dare," smack, "You," smack, "Scare," smack. Janine put Marcus aside and grabbed Malcolm, both were still drenched in pigs' blood, "Me," smack, "Like," smack, "That," smack, smack. "Go to your room!" Janine screamed. The boys scurried away in tears.

Deciding to be more careful, the twins *tried* to tone down their adventures for a while. But after finding a hidden cave behind some bushes, the temptation for mischief was impossible for them to resist.

"You'll never take me alive you rotten scallywag!" Marcus hollered, dropping his backpack and rolling through one of the rock crevices leading into their cave.

"I am the greatest swordsman alive, you cannot run!" Malcolm yelled, sprinting in hot pursuit.

Within the cave their store of food, water, weapons and junk, made play options limitless. Marcus grabbed a string of firecrackers as he ran; *the perfect diversion*. Pulling a lighter from his pocket he lit the fuse and chucked the strand over his shoulder. Pelting towards the exit, he heard Malcolm's feet hit the cave floor behind him.

Malcolm looked towards Marcus just in time to see cracker fuse disappear. He dove back to the crevice and covered his head, just as the first cracker blew.

BANG.BANG.BANG BANG BANG. BANG. BANG BANG BANG.

“Mwa HAHHAHAHAHA!” Marcus roared, “You shall never defeat me Major! My skill is too great.” Malcolm stumbled out from behind the rocks covered in dirt.

“You bastard!” Malcolm swore, “I can’t believe I fell for that.”

“You’d fall for a snake in a can. Lets go swimming,” Marcus smiled.

After a freezing dip in the creek, Marcus and Malcolm made their way back to the cave, naked. The trip took longer than usual because they were falling around in fits of laughter as they created different animals and shapes out of their wieners. Continuing the game in the cave, the fun turned sour after an unfortunate accident with an old jewellery box.

Marcus thought it would be hilarious to place his penis in an open ‘snap lock’ jewellery case, “Would you buy this from a store?” Marcus looked up at Malcolm, as he did, the case, true to its name, snapped shut.

Marcus screamed, “My wang!!!!” as the jewellery box dangled between his legs.

In a way only a brother could, Malcolm, “*helping*”, walked over and ripped it off.

“What’s your problem?” Malcolm asked, staring stupidly.

Marcus’ face contorted with pain and he vomited all over Malcolm. Both fervently disgruntled, play was over for the day and they went home. The jewellery case however, received an honorary dais in the cave and was named the *sister maker* by Malcolm.

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Late one morning as they made there way home for lunch, Malcolm felt a signal in the valley. At first it seemed to be just scramble and garbage, so for weeks they tried to ignore it. But when Marcus accidentally made out a word with a picture, their interest peaked. Without intention, the cacophonous catastrophes ended that day.

Working for weeks, they tossed about ideas, even once standing back to back to attempt increasing their signal. It did not work. Months passed and the boys were not able to crack the mysterious sounds and pictures that seemed to be *on the tips of their tongues*. It was late in July, when Jarrod came home early with a box that they got their first real clue.

Inside the box was a small black devise with cables attached and a remote. He plugged it into the television and the boys watched in wonder. Jarrod took a small card out of his pocket and the moment he clicked it into the box the TV came to life. Jarrod flicked through hundreds of channels using the remote. The boys were captivated, they watched him and listened to how the digital box connected to a cable network and decoded the signal for the TV. To Jarrod’s surprise, the boys up and sprinted for the

manual; completely uninterested in the shows, just hoping to understand how it worked. Within minutes they understood what was wrong with the signals they had detected.

In an unusually agreeable mood, Janine consented to a trip to the library the next day. Had she known what they were actually up to she would have outright refused. But a trip to get math books seemed innocuous enough for her not to question them. At the library, they each checked out eight books (their hiring limits) relating to cryptology. Making sure to speed read as many others as they could while their mother was out in the shopping centre.

Three days later, Jarrod came into their bedroom to force them outside to play catch. The boys were spread eaged on the floor. Their eyes were rolling back into their heads and a dribble of spit was rolling down Malcolm's face. To any other parent this would have been cause for concern.

"Boys!" Jarrod yelled, assuming the boys were just 'sharing' as normal. Malcolm startled first, a mischievous grin on his face. Jarrod knew his boys well enough to realise they were up to no good.

"Are you going to tell me what you're doing or shall we start with time out?"

Jarrold discovered early on that traditional punishment would not work with his boys; he had to be creative. If, like normal parents, he locked them in separate rooms, the twins would happily comatose themselves and 'share' all day. So, when the house was built, he had on room in the basement lined with chicken wire and coat hangers. The boys never liked being mentally separate, and the room worked like a charm. So much so that he had only ever had to use it once. The boys lasted half an hour before they were pleading to be released, and professing that they would never be bad again.

Malcolm shuddered at the words ‘time out’, Marcus woke suddenly, “We didn’t do anything *wrong!*”  
Marcus protested.

“What *did* you do?” Jarrod returned. Marcus gestured at the book. Jarrod looked at the cover, it was titled: Advanced Cryptology and Applied Computational Linguistics. “What’s it for?”

“There was a signal we couldn’t quite understand,” Malcolm announced. Marcus glared at him.

“Do I need to talk to you two *separately?*” Jarrod questioned the ceiling.

Malcolm and Marcus went pale, “No!” They shouted.

“Well?” Jarrod shrugged.

“It’s the military intranet,” Marcus slurred.

“We got the next generation internet first, but the military encryption felt nicer to use,” Malcolm added.

“We got the idea from your TV decoder,” Marcus added.

“You’ve hacked into the military network?” Jarrod balked.

“Yeah!” Malcolm announced very please with himself.

“My six year old boys have hacked the military network,” Jarrod rubbed his eyes. “So now you’ll *unhack* it!”

“Well... It’s there now,” Malcolm said.

“It’s not like we were trying too. We just wanted to figure out the cryptology language, and it sort of took over; like riding a bike,” Marcus chortled.

“And it feels nice,” Malcom added.

“Feels Nice!?” Jarrod scoffed.

“Yeah,” Marcus agreed.

“*Boys*,” Jarrod started in his best lecture tone, “you have to understand something...”

Boredom settled in around the twins five seconds into the speech. Malcolm and Marcus sat looking attentive, but also playing a game of battle chess online. Ten minutes later, Jarrod finally broke off and gave in to his own curiosity.

“So what did you find?” He asked trying to sound angry.

Marcus snapped too attention, “nothing *too* interesting, a lot of procedure manuals.”

“Something about a military build up off shore, and a lot of funding transfers,” Malcolm added.



“And what makes you think these people can’t track you?” Jarrod suddenly realised.

“We jammed the transponder signal. We set the firewall against a random spam agent, and rewrote the tracer software to track itself,” Malcolm shrugged.

Jarrod tried to remain unimpressed but his surprise and pride escaped.

“How did you learn to do that?” Jarrod squeaked.

“It’s the same as any language, once you learn it, it is just another conversation,” Marcus trilled.

“Are you sure they can’t track you?” Jarrod asked.

“We reset everything before we leave, all of the data transmission and system logs are empty. But we aren’t anything like computers, we don’t use frequencies like the normal systems do,” Marcus replied.

“What do you mean?” Jarrod asked.

“Normal systems run software and waste time hand shaking and pinging; we can be inside a system without even thinking about it,” Malcolm explained, “we don’t need registration, like how old computer modems needed to log on and sign in.”

“We can feel what a computer is waiting for and just adapt to it. Once we break an encryption formulae, we can use it without trying, it just happens,” Marcus added.

“It isn’t possible to just break through a firewall,” Jarrod said.

“Not for a computer, they are fixed how they are, but we aren’t like that,” Marcus replied, walking over to the desk to grab Jarrod’s mobile phone, “See this?” Marcus pulled out the sim card, “We don’t need one. This thing tells anything it’s connected too who it is. We can be anything we want, we can make systems think we are their own software. Firewalls can’t block everything, otherwise there would be no point in being online. We feel technology like you see and hear: block out most and you still see or hear something. You can hear only one note of a piano right. See?”

Jarrod thought about how hard this must be for a child to explain. He remembered a lecture in one of his classes about perception: *our perceptual systems are impossible to define, imagine trying to describe the felling of a colour, or the experience when you hear A sharp on a piano.*

“I won’t ever understand completely boys. You are trying to describe something that is beyond me,” Jarrod shook his head, “I suppose it must just come naturally to you, like a baby learns to use its arms.”

The twins looked at each other and decided that it was time to ask.

“Dad, we want to know *how* we can do this,” Malcolm asked, almost pleading. Jarrod stared out of the window for a few seconds and turned back sadly.

“I know boys. I know. But I’ve told you before, we can’t just go out to have you checked at a hospital *or computer shop*. If I even wanted too, we have no idea what scanning equipment will do to you,” Jarrod sighed.

“We want to try. There is nothing on the internet anywhere about humans communicating with anything except by speech,” Marcus added.

“Except on stupid sixth sense sites. And they have nothing real, just a bunch of worthless talk about hocus pocus. And, their html code is usually badly written,” Malcolm announced.

“Boys we can’t risk the scans,” Jarrod sighed.

“Dad, we need too. What if something starts to go wrong?” Marcus tried.

“You could take us to your hospital when it’s quiet,” Malcolm ventured.

“It isn’t safe boys, the signal on an MRI might hurt you,” Jarrod explained.

“No it won’t. We can use a helmet!” Malcolm was suddenly excited.

“What?” Jarrod spat.

“We found a paper in a medical system about lining bike helmets with a graphite alloy to allow MRI’s on people with cochlear implants,” Marcus beamed. Intrigued crossed Jarrod’s face, his curiosity was tweaked; the boys had him.

“How did they do it?” Jarrod quizzed.

“They coated a plastic mixing bowl with graphite paint. Then held it on using a standard bike helmet,” Malcolm answered.

“What sort of paint?” Jarrod asked.

“Just some high weather resistant stuff with added graphite,” Malcolm replied.

“What were the results?”

“It added a sort of cushioning for the magnetic field, allowing a higher resolution scan,” Marcus explained. Jarrod recognised their need to understand *why* they were different.

“Ok boys, fine. I will go to the hardware store to have a look. But I am not promising anything, and I’ll be testing it on myself first.” Jarrod announced.

The boys had never lied to their dad before. He had always taught them to respect the truth. But they had not *really lied*; the paper had been on what they said it was on. It had simply proven completely useless.

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The hospital staff watched the two boys curiously as they sat outside the radiology room wearing mixing bowls painted egg yoke yellow. Passing nurses smiled at them, assuming the bowls were part of a game. Inside, Jarrod had already completed five MRI’s: one with the bucket alone, one

with the bucket and the helmet, one with the bucket on a himself, one with a bucket on a himself with the boys standing 10 feet away, one with a bucket on a dummy with the boys standing 3 feet away. All scans went without incident and *his brain* looked completely normal.

Now it was time to attempt with the boys. Jarrod hesitated a moment then steeled himself to proceed.

“I want you both to *close off* as much as you can. You have to yell out at the first sign of pain. I want you both shut down, even to each other. If this is successful we can try it more later,” Jarrod lectured.

“Me first,” Marcus applied, feeling bad that this all had been his idea.

“Ok Marcus, hop up,” Jarrod sighed.

The scan was completed without major incident. Marcus felt slightly overwhelmed by it, as if a light in his mind had been on too bright, or a sound too loud, but he was not physically damaged.

As the pictures loaded, all three Thorlows held their breath. The pictures building before them were not unlike their fathers. As the final rendering passed across the screen, the room seemed to deflate. At first there did not seem to be any difference. After twenty minutes of manipulating the picture into different angles and zooms, still they found nothing. They eventually started a search using the systems maximum magnification; Jarrod finally noticed an odd formation of cell clustering within Marcus’s forebrain. It sat on protrusions at the front of the basil ganglia. It was unlike anything he had ever seen before. The closest he could think was that they looked similar to the rods and cones within the eye.

“These are certainly very interesting boys. Can either of you tell me what they look like?” Jarrod asked.

“They are the same shape as light receptor cells in the iris,” replied Marcus.

“They do at that, very good. But see the metal traces,” he clicked the screen onto a different mode, “they are *well* beyond normal, much much higher... And there seem to be a significant increase in allotropes,” Jarrod was starting to lose himself.

“Light cells are receptive to light wave frequencies, aren’t they? Could these be receptive to transmission frequencies?” Malcolm asked.

“There is really only one way to find out,” said Jarrod pushing up the brim of his yoke yellow hat. “We need to try an fMRI. Marcus, feel up to another run through the scanner?” Dr Thorlow had now been roused from his hibernation of ignorance.

“I think so, but what will I have to do?” Marcus questioned.

“Just something easy.... I want you to send a string of basic letters to my mobile. It may get difficult during the scan, but just keep sending them until it’s stopped.” Jarrod explained, eager to continue the investigation.

Both boys were shocked at the change in their dad. They had never seen him so provoked before. They enjoyed him being like this.

The fMRI was slightly harder for Marcus to handle. With his mind open; what had felt like a bright light before, now felt like staring at the sun. He was not keen to repeat it.

The pictures appeared again on the screen. This time certain sections of the picture were highlighted with a rainbow colours, especially in the area of the cells they had found in the earlier scan.

“Boys look. If you look at this picture, it shows where oxygen is being used in the brain. And what that means is, because oxygen is like brain fuel, we know what parts were being used,” explained Jarrod.

“Take a look where most oxygen is being used when you send a message...”

“But only half of them are highlighted?” Malcolm asked, noticing that Marcus was too shaky to pay attention.

“I have a feeling the other half will show up when you receive something. Similar to the way the brain uses different systems for talking and listening,” Jarrod smiled.

They repeated an fMRI on Malcolm, but had him focus on trying to receive a message. The scan was almost the mirror image of the earlier one on Marcus. As he hopped down, Malcolm realised why Marcus seemed off balance. He did not want to go back into the scanner again either.

Three hours passed and the boys were lying on the floor, *completely bored*.

“As far as I can tell boys, these cells are laced with metal deposits like those found in the sinuses. Half look similar to frequency receptors in the eyes, but the other half look like nothing I’ve ever seen before... Perhaps some sonar cells in bats, even similar to the receptive cells in a platypus’s bill. They seem to be more heavily clustered in the output section. If I had to guess, I’d say that they are transmission cells and the others are receptor cells... If an eye can see so many frequencies with only

four types of cells; there are at least 200 I've catalogued in the past six hours. You must be able to handle billions of different frequency combinations," Jarrod was thinking aloud, he had forgotten the boys were with him.

Marcus looked up at Jarrod, realising that they had put themselves in danger.

"Dad, we need to delete all of this now," Marcus stood, helping Malcolm up.

"What?" Jarrod looked mutinous.

"Dad, delete it. What if someone else comes in and finds them?" Malcolm asked.

Jarrod looked like he had when Janine had called him Jarhead. He was once again weighing his options. He looked at his boys carefully, "You two have a lot of your mum in you," he smiled, "you're right."

After one last fleeting skip through the files. Jarrod deleted all of the data on the computer, emptied the buffers and ran the MRI one last time to scramble the circuits. A father again, he took the boys out through an old staircase without surveillance and left behind his last desire to prove himself as a great doctor.



## Chapter 4 – Graduation

An army of bureaucrats finally won out over Janine's brilliant lies. At nine years old, her beautiful boys would surely win every heart, but still had to appear normal. School was to commence on the next Monday, but lessons on behaviour had been in progress with Janine for the past month. She had insisted they develop stories for every possible question. Marcus and Malcolm were now looking forward to school. In class they were to appear average, even though both boys now had several correspondence degrees under several different names: Malcolm in science and engineering, Marcus in medicine and mathematics. Languages seemed to come naturally to them both: they now spoke most eastern and western dialects of over 53 different languages.

School posed an interesting dilemma for the Thorlows. Neither twin had spoken to more than three different people outside their family before. They had been using instant messaging software and chat rooms since they were six, but they were novices when it came to face-to-face.

The schoolyard was fascinated to meet identical twins that had skipped the first five grades. For a week the Thorlows were overwhelmed with attention, acquiescing to multiple different nicknames: M&M being the most popular. Janine's clever stories of the past four years held perfectly, no-one suspected the boys were different. In class they were content to be quiet and feign mediocrity, though they mostly chose to pay absolutely no attention. Playtime was difficult at first; in one basketball game, one time too many Marcus threw a ball to Malcolm without looking at him. A rumour grew in the playground that the twins were telepathic, and so came another nickname, the ET Twins.

To the teachers they were average, to the children they were cunning and quick. Never separated long, bullies could not corner them alone. Occasionally, when they did, they found themselves viciously

outmatched. Their natural ability to coordinate and their innate fitness from a lifestyle in the wilderness kept them safe.

One lunch break late in their first year, Victor Bruik, a small boy with broken glasses came to Marcus on the errand of a teacher. Victor was the child always without lunch money, even though his parents were seen handing it to him every morning. Although curious, his story was plausible; Marcus was to check the northern turning marker for the cross-country run, taking place the next day. Malcolm set off with him. Another student, an older prefect, *by chance*, asked him to ring the ten minute warning bell for the resumption of classes: a privilege usually reserved for seniors. Malcolm jumped at the opportunity and sped off towards the main office block. Marcus continued on with his own task alone.

Half way to the northern marker, stepping out from behind the last building, appeared an overfed lump of a boy. Marcus recognised him immediately as Joel Crevely, one of their more difficult 'attempted assailants'. Six other boys were with him. Marcus stared around, knowing that he had fallen for a well-devised ploy to separate him from his brother. This time there was nowhere to run. The small army of six surrounded Marcus, leaving Joel free to strike.

"Let's see how you go without Malcolm to watch your back, Thorlow!" Joel slurred.

Just as the smirk appeared on his face, an announcement alarm rang out and a male voice with a strange foreign accent spoke out.

"Joel Crevely. Repeat Joel Crevely, your messenger has arrived to collect you. Please report to the administration building," the announcer bellowed.

“Shit!” Joel cursed, glaring at one of his cronies.

Marcus made good use of Malcolm’s distraction. He turned swiftly and punched the boy blocking his escape. A nose broken flat to the lip made him keel over and clear a path, sidestepping the stunned boy beside, Marcus pelted off down the walkway. The small gang stood silently bewildered.

Later when Joel arrived at the office to find that there was no-one waiting, he realised his mistake. Dejected, he stalked around the school for the rest of the week causing greater havoc than usual.

In a sumptuous twist of fate, a mistimed violent outburst got Joel a week worth of detention. Lashing out after overhearing the Thorlow twins nattering in the same voice as the announcement, Joel upended his tidy tray and was caught by the teacher. The thoroughly harassed woman came down especially hard on Joel. A day of prank phone calls from private numbers, and endless questions from her resident twins, had her anger already threadbare.

Joel sat solemnly staring out the window of the detention room on his next lunch break. There, perfectly positioned stood Marcus and Malcolm, posed with fingers up, laughing hysterically. Joel’s repeat attempts never succeeded in isolating either of the Thorlow twins again.

A combination of luck and circumstance gave the boys another opportunity for a crack at Joel. In the seventh grade the Federal government interfered with the education department and instigated standardised testing for primary schools. Malcolm and Marcus thought this was very funny, considering the education department computer was the easiest for them to enter. During their third *standardised* test, Malcolm’s recently discovered enjoyment of adult websites had him connected to one of the cell towers. Around five minutes into the test period, he noticed a sequence

of SMS messages coming through the same tower: **1.b.** then **2.b.** then **3.a.** By checking the phone registry, Malcolm found the name Crevely on a billing statement. Malcolm quickly messaged Marcus: *Joel is cheating.*

In unison Marcus and Malcolm smiled broadly; the same plan had occurred to each of them. Marcus started an intense discussion with the phone towers firewall system to keep it occupied, while Malcolm took over communication with Joel's telephone. **4.b. 5.d. 6.d...** Malcolm made sure each answer was the most incorrect and frivolous possible. Both of them secretly surveyed Joel as he scribbled each response onto its circle without even reading the questions.

On the day of test score posting, Joel's ludicrous language score of 3 out of 200 got him an immediate trip to the Principal's office and a serious lecture on the *crucial importance of learning*. Joel was furious when he was forced to complete the test a second time under the principal's supervision. But it turned out for the best, as he managed to score one of the highest grades in the class.

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The years of high school passed without major incident. The twins still received mediocre grades and were constantly bothered by academic counsellors about squandering their abilities. Meanwhile, they now had hundreds of academic papers published between them in different names and different countries all around the world. Marcus' most recent correspondence addition to a mathematical journal was a nomination for a field medal. Sadly, his alias could not be found, as he did not actually exist, and the nomination was forfeit.

By the end year nine, Marcus had mastered the use of Malcolm's eyes and ears as he wished; Malcolm got it by year ten. By year eleven, they had mastered ambidexterity and were able to work writing their own work, while correcting each other's. One evening, Marcus sat writing his cryptology paper, while Malcolm's left hand followed, correcting slight computational errors: Malcolm sat opposite writing a meta-review on CPU voltage tolerance, while Marcus' left hand followed correcting his spelling. Janine and Jarrod walked into the room and found them sitting on opposite sides of a desk, working on each other's work. It was as if they were watching a ballet of intellects, writing in long hand; they watched for half an hour before leaving.

Girlfriends seemed to pile up between them like academic reviews. Their mothers' superior brown hair and summer blue eyes added to their fathers' athletic body made them the focus of many daydream diary scribbling's (Jessica Hillary Thorlow, J.H.T; Kim Kate Thorlow, K.K.T; Eliza Jane Thorlow, E.J.T; Blake James Thorlow, B.J.T).

The basketball and football teams were particularly successful in the Thorlow years. Yet the occasional scripted intra-sibling assault (Janine Thorlow directed) kept them cautiously outside the award realm; *'if you must play you can, but tomorrow I want you both sent off for something; take some pigs blood with you'*. As tales of their feats grew, many of the spectators came along only to see the wondrous synergistic spectacles performed by the Thorlow boys.

Graduation was a mixed affair, although they had both managed to scrape entry to the state university (by 0.003%). Their diploma acceptance was marred (almost revoked) when the twins simultaneously shed gowns and ran away naked across the oval. Encouraged by the twins, the rest of the basketball and football teams, with names earlier than T, joined them. Most were slowed by the need to shuck clothes from beneath their gowns; a problem the twins did not encounter. And, having foreseen the need to

dress again, Marcus and Malcolm had planted clothes on the opposite side of the field. Their followers were less than impressed when they had to walk back to their clothing in shame.

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University was an equally uninteresting time for the twins. Many of their classes were no longer together and Malcolm's tendency towards practical arts kept him constantly occupied. Over the years they had discovered new and more efficient ways to connect with each other. Some frequencies were significantly faster and did not seem prone to blocking. Three grounded days of separation in the eighth grade had helped them to overcome their dad's wall linings. Since then, nothing could interrupt their connection.

At 23 and in their fifth year of classes, completely by accident Marcus handed in his mathematics homework, containing a hidden 'unsolvable proof' that the lecturer had put in for fun. Marcus had solved it easily, thinking it was just standard homework. That afternoon Marcus was whisked away by the mathematics department into a series of interviews on how he had solved the problem. He tried to explain it as an unplanned accident; that he had just done while occupied by the television. Nevertheless, the department was intent on sending him to an international mathematics symposium immediately.

Janine was livid when she found out. In an attempt to nib it in the bud, she insisted Marcus confess to cheating and accept expulsion. The university however, refused to accept his confession, demanding he produce evidence on where he had obtained the mathematical proof. He was still symposium bound when he arrived home; it seemed he had been caught up in a government initiative to prove the availability of world-class education from state universities.

“I don’t care what they said. You have to be smarter than that! Start thinking on your feet,” Janine paced around the kitchen in lecture mode. “If they ask you for proof, you use that mutant brain of yours and you make it up! Plant it in their computer if you have too.”

“I didn’t think of that,” Marcus sighed.

“Do it now then!” Janine yelled.

“I can’t, they checked the journal intranet while I was there. No-one has come close to solving this proof, they’ve already registered it under my name,” Marcus explained.

“This is ludicrous Marcus! We’ve spent nineteen years keeping you off the radar and you throw yourself onto it with stupidity,” Janine screamed, “Use your head!”

“What do we do now?” Marcus mumbled.

“I don’t know. There isn’t much we can do besides change your name and send you both away,” Janine shook her head. As outrageous as she sounded, Marcus knew she was serious.

“I’ll have to go, they gave me the tickets before I left,” Marcus shrugged, pulling the plane ticket out of his bag. “The plane leaves on Friday.”

“I don’t like this at all Marcus, it puts all of us in danger, especially you,” Janine sat down at the table.

“It’s going to look more strange if I don’t go... I could disprove it while I’m there,” Marcus tried, “I’ll write problems into the files here. I’ll fix as many as I can while I am over there.”

“That’s good, Marcus,” Janine replied, “Disprove your own proof.”

“I didn’t mean to put everyone in danger mumma,” Marcus looked up at her weakly, clearly distressed.

“I know. It’s probably just my imagination; I’ve been protecting you for too long. How much attention could a mathematics paper really get?” Janine felt guilty for making Marcus so upset. “I’m just worried what will happen when you two boys are separated.”

The prospect *was* unappealing. No immense distance had ever before separated Marcus and Malcolm. The whole planet was about to be placed between them, and he was not looking forward to it. Knowing the satellite network might not accommodate the bandwidth of their connection, they spent days trying to get Malcolm a ticket; none were available. Anxious and scared, Marcus could not help pacing their room constantly as his departure neared.

The night before Marcus left, he and Malcolm could not sleep. They had planned for almost a week on staying in contact while they were separate; the conversation was well worn.

“Start with frequency phasing if we drop out. If we both work through the same combinations, we’ll eventually get something,” Marcus rambled.

“I know,” Malcolm rolled his eyes. “We spent all night working on the timing. I know!”



“Well you aren’t the one who’ll be stuck in some stupid foreign country for two weeks,” Marcus shot.

“Just don’t go!” Malcolm replied. “Tell them you’re sick.”

“The vice-counsellor would make me go in a coffin if he had to; just to prove I once existed,” Marcus guessed.

“Well at least this will teach us never to do homework,” Malcolm smiled.

“I don’t know what I am going to do. This is all a giant wank!” Marcus shook his head.

“Just go, we don’t know what will happen yet. You may be worried about nothing,” Malcolm nodded.

Marcus pulled him up and hugged him.

“Bye brother,” Marcus sighed.

They were both severely anxious as the plane disappeared over the horizon. So much so that they kept sharing visual images to be sure they could still connect. As the plane landed, Marcus was shocked to find that there had been no change. What Malcolm could see was still as clear to him as it had been all along. Even the new sounds of a bustling city came through loud and clear, although, their connection took more effort to maintain than ever before.

Over the first week, the twins learnt new and easier ways to maintain their link. They toyed with more elaborate ways to encrypt their thoughts and even played games to test each other. Marcus was quicker,

managing to beat Malcolm several times. But each time he lost, Malcolm managed to get his own back; inducing an excruciating ache or overwhelming pleasure when it would be the most embarrassing for Marcus; causing him once to laugh hysterically in the middle of an opening address.

Marcus was impressed. On the eighth day of his trip Malcolm sent a message that took him over three hours to decrypt. When he finally broke through he was shattered. In a panic, he tried every protocol, encryption and frequency he knew. Malcolm did not respond. He sat still in his room studying every layer of the encryption he could remember. It was extremely sophisticated; Malcolm must have spent weeks working out the attenuation and phases. It said: **I need to spend some time alone for a while, I don't want you in my head.**

The detail of the encryption was almost like a parting gift to Marcus, but a feeling of dread settled on him. It felt like Joel Crevely had managed to separate them again. Malcolm hated being apart more than he did. Nothing made sense. He could not understand why Malcolm would wait until he was so far away to do this.

Over a lifetime of complete connection Marcus had never sensed any desire to part, nothing they had ever shared said anything about separation. Marcus spent hours considering the message. Trying to keep it fresh in his mind, he replayed it over again. Then again. The message was extremely mercurial, but bland... There was simply no emotion in it. Marcus thought hard, trying to remember them ever doing anything like this before. He could not; neither of them had ever managed a signal that was emotion free. It was more like a computer signal, but with Marcus sending it. Something was wrong. Something was very wrong.

**Part Two**

## Chapter 5 – A dead trail

By the time Marcus thought to check his hometown cell towers, the trail was gone. He manoeuvred through town systems, checking for traces of his family. The backup logs in all each cell tower he checked had been replaced with minutia from the current day. None of the other arts students had heard from Malcolm in a while either; via phone at least. Paranoia, a side effect of his mother, settled in. He went as far undercover as he could; creating new fake records for himself before he went near the airport.

Stealing enough money to pay for a ticket home, Marcus created a paper trail of fake information to back up his lie to get back into the country. As an extra precaution, he scuttled as many government computer systems as were necessary to inspire the worst immigration system crash in history. Effectively, he single-handedly hurtled the airports back into the computer stone age; reliance on paper work. Conveniently, creating a four-day lag in intra department processing; just in case someone was looking for him by picture. By the time Marcus had successfully re-entered the country, nerves were so significantly frayed that no one acknowledged the subsequent surveillance system failures.

Not relishing the risk of being overheard on a phone, Marcus took a train home from the airport to tell his parents the news in person. Instead of leaving a litany of annihilated systems behind him, Marcus learned new skills as he went. He soon started sending false images to the various security systems he encountered: removing himself from the footage. He supposed, there *was* a chance, he had gone slightly screwy from jet lag; but it was better to be safe than sorry. He figured felling sorry for the airport staff was better than feeling sorry for himself.

Still concerned, Marcus surveyed his house from the forest; both cars were in the garage. Since he could remember, his mother had never allowed her bedroom to be window completely closed. It may have been some form of claustrophobia, but she maintained that Peter Pan might still pay her a visit someday. The window had been shut; there was no doubt in his mind, the lights were on, but Janine and Jarrod were gone.

Running back to the valley edge, Marcus staged an emergency call to the police, pretending to be foreign hikers lost in the forest. Why anyone would want to hike in this brush scrub was beyond him, but the police bought it.

Sitting in a tree, Marcus listened in on the communications between the police; it was a strange sensation to perceive the clumsy analogue of a UHF radio, but it kept him one step ahead them. He watched closely as they arrived at the front door of his house. A lanky grey haired man appeared at the front door and shook his head in confusion as the officers spoke.

The radio message as the police walked away confirmed the worst of his fears.

“Dr Thorlow claims not to have seen anyone.” An officer reported.

The grey haired man had claimed to be his dad. His fear was confirmed: the family was gone, and someone was waiting for him to come home.

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For three days Marcus sat watching the house. Occasionally, he would walk down to he and Mal's cave for some water or a can of rusted baked beans. He could not be sure what he was waiting to see, but knew these people could lead him too his family.

An odd stabbing sensation woke Marcus late one night, as he looked out, he felt that something behind his eyes was burning. He worked hard to block out the feeling, and noticed that beneath the burning, there was a pattern. He focused on the signal alone, closing his eyes to concentrate. He occasionally made out words beneath the pattern, but just as quickly as he had found them, they would change. For three minutes he tried, only managing to hear last words of sentences. At last he managed to hold enough of the signal to make out a sentence.

“Remain at dwelling until further notice.” Said a garbled voice, before the signal shut off.

It was signal scrambling. Marcus and Malcolm had used this technique before they had learned cryptology. It was tiring for them to change keys so rapidly, so they had avoided it, but now he knew what it was, he could easily adapt. The satellite connection used a great deal of bandwidth, most likely, Marcus figured, to occupy an entire channel of data to avoid eavesdropping. Under the alias Jeffery Jenkins, Marcus had written a paper on this encryption style in the tenth grade. Obviously these people had been trying to track them for a long time. Marcus' careless homework solution must had led them straight to his family.

Marcus spent three days practicing new mathematical formulae, which used fractal patterns to generate encryption. He knew computers could not understand or trace fractal intersection mathematics; due to continuous random changes. Marcus was then quickly able to adapt it, like he could with any another formulae he had learnt. He decided then and there, that to stay safe, fractal encryption was all he could

rely on from this point on. Neither he nor Malcolm had ever written about them as anyone, so he hoped it would keep with an advantage.

The next transmission came at the same time only the third morning. Marcus broke it easily.

“... ode txtbz-54981: All thirteen documents forged. Construction appears seamless. Show subject one in three locations across one time frame. Examination of subject two has not revealed any communications ability in comatose state. Sedation will continue until acquisition of subject one. Genetic recreations from parent and cloned cells have commenced, results as yet inconclusive. Extended gestation required. Stem cell and gamete cell harvest complete, subject parents terminated. Remain at dwelling until further notice,” the computerised voice ended abruptly.

He repeated the transmission twelve times before he could believe it. He stumbled back from the tree overlooking his house to sit in what once was his fort shocked. Tears fell from his expressionless face. Subject parents terminated rang within his mind, a cold computerised recording speaking about his family as lab rodents. The cold casual mention of their death at the end of a sentence drove in to him him continually. He could not sleep, he would not eat. Light turned to dark turned to light turned to dark. He sat.

After a moment, or a week, searing pain found his brain once again. He was hearing another communication begin.

“Report code txtbz-55076: No further sightings. Assume subject one alert and hidden. Report required.

Key in...” The computerised voice stopped.

Marcus chuckled silently as the pathetic touchtone code was entered.

“4981762” Marcus shook his head.

The satellite signal reversed itself. A similar voice channelled through the system.

“Report code fxtbz-55077: No change to report. Police Sergeant questioning six days prior...” Marcus zoned out to the conversation. The satellite they were using was now accepting input. Spending several moments arguing with a firewall, after which other security systems fell like dominoes, Marcus planted himself in the programming core with total clearance. He waited for the report to end normally before he took to the satellite itself. He spent two minutes switching his connection onto a back up transmitter in order to allow other traffic to pass normally. Then, reprogramming the system to report his transmitter as inactive meant he could work undetected for hours, or even days.

The satellite was at least two years old and it’s buffers were filled with garbage traces, most of which Marcus and Malcolm had generated. It became evident that this satellite had been launched to specifically trace unauthorised network access. System logs recorded that it had only been activated in the past two weeks, after they had obtained a copy of Marcus’ mathematics paper. All remaining hope within him faded; he was responsible for loosing his brother, he had gotten his parents killed.

Marcus gritted his teeth and his stomach rumbled for food, guilt would have to wait. He needed to find Malcolm, he had to save his brother.

Setting out towards the city, Marcus walked for three hours before he found an open store. He tapped into the banking network while he was standing at an ATM, he made the machine issue all of its cash within one thirteen second transaction. Walking away with \$23000 in fifties and twenties.

From the comfort of a small motel room, Marcus spent time obtaining destinations for each transmission. Somehow, each time he tried, trails end break off abruptly half way through each search. Eventually, a quick trip to one of the relay station where his searches ended revealed the addition of protected landline breakers, designed to prevent tracing. Curiously, it was the only perfect method of securing a system against him.

Whoever the architect of this system was, knew specific methods of blocking Marcus's mind. Welcome relief came from the realisation that Marcus could not have been responsible for someone else having this information; it had been built more than two years before he filed his homework. A more disturbing question ensued when Marcus realised that someone else knew so much about them over two years ago: *who could have possibly told them?*

The satellite was useless now; it could not give Marcus access any system connected to it. The only information it could provide was the logs of the information that it had passed. Marcus checked through everything one final time, and blew up it. He had the computer record that the system had suffered an impact with an asteroid, even preparing a fake 'last image', showing the damage. His final command activated the self-destruct system, anyone looking at the southern sky that night might have noticed the briefest flash of light from the small moving dot near the horizon.

He chuckled to himself that the people in his house might be waiting for days in hope of response. Despising the random man that was still violating his family home. A home that was not empty.



Realisation finally dawned on him, as if emerging from frozen water: he had now lost everything he had to lose. From now on he could do anything he wanted to get something back.

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A new passport in hand, Marcus left his home and headed for the city closest to the last communications about his brother. He had noticed over the last few weeks that military telecommunications were being rerouted through older satellites, but were using extremely sophisticated encryption. All of which Malcolm had designed before he turned eight.

Marcus could not help to think that using Mal's encryptions was rather stupid, but it did give him some hope. Obviously, if Malcolm *were* being forced to provide complete information, they would have understood knowledge their connection gave him of his brother. The coding changes gave Marcus some hope that Malcolm was using their own codes as a message to him that he was still alive. And as long as the codes changed every day, Marcus had hope of rescuing Malcolm.

Spurred on by images of Malcolm defying torture and the knowledge that government had not cracked their codes, Marcus became cocky. He took fifty cents from every bank account in the world under the guise of a service fee. Walking away with forty accounts massing over ten billion dollars. Using logistic companies, international slave labour and private couriers, he moved the money around like pieces on a chess board, until finally there was no possible way to trace the origin of his monumental wealth.

Hiring private investigation agencies and security groups he sent the government on wild goose chases around the world until finally it happened. Marcus's face arrived on the seven o'clock news worldwide;

armed and dangerous, even he was impressed with himself. The picture they had obtained was a forgery he had planted within his passport file over eight months ago. It looked *like* him, but no-one would ever even stop him in the street to check. Amongst the chaos, Marcus' real intentions were to mass his own stockpile of technology and information.

Spending every moment in search of his brother was tiring, even with his natural abilities, the words 'subject two' were in too great an abundance to filter out anything useful. There was nothing more Marcus could do. He had to wait. But wait silently he would not!

Using his billions, and more as he needed, he created a small army under the direction of a fictional organization. He placed enough evidence inside government systems to cover himself, and clouded any suspicion with the word Classified. A perfect circle of ignorance protected him, the catch twenty-two of government secrecy (the best kept secret is one nobody knows). With both his unbreakable encryptions and his most wanted status, people were only too ready to follow him. To his staff, and his *superiors*, he was an identified spy, forced into a desk job. People feared him and started rumours about his past; Marcus fed them with an occasional leaked *video*.

The amassed collection of ex-dishonourably discharged soldiers and officers, enticed to serve with excessive salaries: all seemed somehow delighted to serve under a *wanted criminal*. Marcus however, realised his age and inexperience would be a dead giveaway if he assumed a position of too great an importance. Filling a request with the command retiree board for an *experienced commander* (hopefully senile) presented him with several options for leaders. The man he chose was a slender grey Colonel, skilled in resource provision and operation establishment; perfect for building a new outfit. Marcus did not really care about who he chose, as long as they did what he wanted; but Colonel Cedric Bates made him feel slightly less alone.

After their first meeting, Marcus decided that what he had felt in their phone conversations had been more commandery than affection. If misery loved company, two morose loners were destined to become family. Marcus found Cedric carried weight as he did, silent pain was hidden beneath his eyes, to the point that made him close off to others completely and focus solely on his work; a kindred spirit.

On the night of Cedric's first address to the staff, Marcus set up a demonstration of his own; an alpha male establishing his prowess. Colonel Bates was addressing the podium and was forced to stop at the sight of Marcus. A flicker of a grin touched his lips when he saw Marcus walk into the assembly hall covered in blood. The entire corps tracked him as he approached the microphone, completely unaware that it was merely pigs blood.

"Major Simpson, may I help you?" asked Colonel Bates. Marcus openly whispered in his ear.

Stepping aside, Colonel Bates relinquished the podium, "as of nineteen hundred hours no staff will be permitted off base without orders," Marcus announced it in nonchalance. He could not help laughing at the ridiculous situation in which he had placed himself. The corps watched him, horrified. Still chuckling and shaking his head, Marcus walked out of the hall and up to his office. Every eye, including both of Colonel Bates', tracked the giggling oversized blood-soaked officer, until he was gone.

It took almost a minute for the Colonel to remember his interrupted train of thought. After the meeting was dismissed the Colonel sort out Marcus for a chat. Marcus was washing in his 'quarters' when the Colonel knocked on the door. The room looked more like a seven star hotel suite than an officers quarters.

“Colonel,” Marcus saluted, letting his towel drop.

“Cedric, please, leave rank for working hours,” Cedric nodded. Marcus relaxed and retrieved his towel.

Now twenty-five, Marcus was larger than his father had ever been. Since birth he had been quite an athlete and since Malcolm’s capture he had trained obsessively. The view of a starkly bared Herculean officer had the female staff outside openly gawking as the door closed. He sighed, his female following had not reduced over the years, but his obsession with his brother had kept him as cloistered as a catholic priest.

“How did it go?” Cedric ventured.

“Not well,” Marcus replied, gesturing towards a couch. Marcus left the room, re-entering in shorts. Grabbing a remote, he clicked on the flat panel screen in the corner. A news reader appeared.

“Government officials still refuse to comment on the impossible appearance of Marcus Thorlow at seven alternate locations at the same time. Captured on no less than fifty-three independent camera’s,” an array of different footage checkered around the screen, “each shows Thorlow at one of the seven different office blocks minutes before each of the recent murders. Experts suggest the creation of such unfaultable footage is only possible for a select group of government agencies; perhaps an attempt to raise support for the continuing multimillion-dollar manhunt. Obviously, someone out there has underestimated the scrutiny of the press once again. Bill...” Marcus clicked off the sound.

“I take it you can’t explain?” Cedric guessed.

“No. This time I can,” Marcus smiled.

“I made thirty-seven of the video’s and planted them into the surveillance systems,” Marcus grinned, “the other sixteen were planted to keep the public looking for him. I thought the pig’s blood added a theatrical quality.”

“It was pigs blood...” Cedric laughed, “the corps think you’re insane.”

“Wait until they pair it with the news,” Marcus smiled.

“You seem very happy about this? Who is this Marcus Thorlow?”

“A name used to hide murders,” Marcus frowned. “Hopefully it’ll stop now.”

“By who?” Cedric was intrigued.

“Us,” Marcus sighed, “Vodka?”

“Brandy thanks.”

Marcus walked across to a bar and poured two full glasses.

Cedric looked at his *bucket* of brandy, “setting me up for a long hall?”

“Giving you stamina for some hard truth.”

“I take it this will be off the record?” Cedric sipped his brandy.

“Not at all,” Marcus placed his drink on the table, “you can tell as many people as you want. But after that much brandy, who knows what was really said.”

“Cheers to that,” Cedric smiled and raised his glass for another gulp.

“The best I can figure is, lies keep better secrets,” Marcus started, “Shaw, the writer, said there are no better secrets than the secrets that keep themselves. You started as an infantry lieutenant right?”

“Some may think I was born in command, but I started as an infantry private,” Cedric grinned.

“Well, I was born a Major,” Marcus starred seriously, “This was my first and only rank, as far as history is concerned. Check if you like.” Cedric smiled at him, ignoring the offer. “Marcus Thorlow was a boy with a brother that we now use, or did use, to keep secrets. For two years; they could have just called him the whipping boy. According to the public, he has spent the last two years wiping out every trace of his own family. A very clever lie that keeps *our* secret: we wiped out his family.”

“You mean, the military did?” Cedric replied.

“Same thing. The poor kid. If he is alive somewhere, imagine how much could be left of him. His brother is who *we* are looking for.”

“Why?” Cedric balked, “He’s just a boy, what’s the point?”

“That I can’t tell you, because I don’t know,” Marcus sighed, “Two years and I am no closer today than I was when I started.”

“You are young, when you get *old*, you learn: life gives us missions, but when the mission asks the impossible, success is accepting failure.”

“His brothers name is Malcolm. I’ll fail when I am dead, not before.”

“He’s a lucky kid then,” Cedric was gulping his drink now, “missions pick the men. I like you Jared, I knew it the second I arrived,” Marcus searched Cedric’s eyes, “When you walked into my office you said: *Colonel, I wont lie. You’re on my feet by being here. You have been put here for paperwork only: this is my outfit. Your purpose is to keep me in the field.* You looked so surprise when I agreed. Do you know what I saw then?”

“No,” Marcus mumbled.

“A little boy dressed up in a stolen uniform,” Cedric watched Marcus for signs of fear, he found nothing.

“What changed?”

“Nothing,” Cedric emptied his cup, “*my* mission is to support you Jared, but I hope for it you will give back trust. As that is still a long way off, I want you to know: since you told me you wouldn’t, you lied to me constantly, and I haven’t left. I suppose you realise, I have nothing else, I married this uniform,

and working for a liar is going to be the only noble chapter in my life. I'll help you find your brother until my end.”

Marcus refused to be shocked, Cedric stood and walked to the door.

“Colonel. Trust? I should kill you for what you just said.”

“I should have killed me for doing a lot of things, Marcus,” Cedric spoke without turning away from the door, he then left without looking back.

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After years of nothing, a wave of exhilarating pleasure echoed within his mind. He could feel him again. Malcolm was connecting to him. The connection was slow and simple, but it was there, and then it was gone.

Flying out of his room in just his shorts, Marcus ran towards the medical wing. He darted into the room, locking the door: Malcolm's thoughts held tight in his mind. He sealed the door shut with a desk and ran over to the MRI consol. After so much time to plan, it took only seconds to activate the software Marcus had written to Track signals. Slamming the button on the MRI, he almost dove onto the bed and waited for the scan to finish.

Over two years spent studying his own fMRI's, Marcus had discovered that by tracing the direction of cell activation, he could determine the direction of the signal he was receiving. He lay still in the



circular pod and listened closely to the familiar thumping of the spinning magnets. Again he felt the connection; Malcolm was drowsy and weak, but alive!

Three hours later Marcus lay over a giant map in his office. A thin line was drawn from his location northwest, all the way to the western ocean. For hours he worked, cross-referencing recordings and information he had collected over the last few months. He finally found it, only sixty kilometres from his own compound. It was a small top-secret research station on the desert outskirts. Practically flying to his computer he activated the assembly alarm and went to work.

The entire military division was specifically composed of troops that had been either tactical forces, seals, or court-martialled incursion agents; but now they could earn four times their old salaries in success bonus's alone. Marcus hoped this would make them loyal. It did. They were mostly under the impression they had been recruited to a top-secret agency working directly for the president. Since his arrival Colonel Bates had helped to maintain this *lie*. Any remaining doubt would be gone by tonight.

In the assembly room the entire staff, including Marcus, stood before a massive projection screen. The screen flickered to life. Nobody except Cedric seemed to notice that Marcus was standing among them, eyes rolling back in his head; almost in a coma. Cedric watched Marcus with fascination.

“Mission priority one.” The computerised female voice announced. “Security code TX. 4107619 Tango.” Everyone in the crowd seemed to just accept this, even though Marcus knew none of them had a clue what it meant. The computerised voice was somehow enchanting; Marcus could picture her being beautiful. A satellite picture of a building appeared, flanked by blueprints. “Inside this structure intelligence has confirmed army officers conducting human experimentation. This process is outlawed under international agreements and must be terminated. Staff discretion is approved for maximum

force, however, due to civilian prisoners, stun weapons and tasers are preferred. Target Alpha..." A picture of Malcolm appeared on the screen, Cedric's stared in surprise, "is know as Malcolm Thorlow, he is believed alive, kept under sedation. Medical team Gamma assisted by tactical group Alpha is instructed to obtain this individual at all costs. Six evacuation helicopters will remain under evac-five conditions. Following destruction of video surveillance systems, Medic team Gamma will prepare five decoys in body bags along with Target Alpha and escort to numbered units. Team Alpha and Beta is then instructed to secure the facility under condition green. Secondary priorities: Team Beta will be provided with burst decoders," Malcolm's picture shrunk to the corner and a picture of what looked like a small telephone with a connection cable appeared. "Each device is to be installed in all computer equipment before extraction. All prisoners will be taken and evacuated on carrier eight and nine. Any staff capture will not be tolerated; all troops are to be returned to designated evacuation zones: dead or alive." Marcus's face contorted with deep concentration and pain, the president appeared on the screen, Cedrics eye's widened, "This is what you have been trained for. Combat salary and conditions are approved. Good luck and god speed." The screen went blank, the staff were all shocked to have seen the president. Marcus was panting, he focused as hard as he could, the computer voice rang out again. "Team Omega will remain on base and are instructed to secure the facility against counter strike. Base personal are instructed to maintain condition white and for casualties. Mission briefing complete." The room exploded into action. Cedric stared at Marcus in awe.

Marcus took a moment to recover and ordered a lieutenant to get him chocolate and caffeine. He ran back to his office, ignoring Cedric as he left. Already at work on his computer, the lieutenant came in quickly with four shots of coffee and a large chocolate bar. Marcus thanked and dismissed him.

Sealing the door after he left Marcus skulled the searing coffee and lay down on the floor. He could hear helicopters of in the distance preparing to leave; he had no time to loose. Breaking into the

military network, which was only protected by codes Malcolm had generated before his eighth birthday, took seconds. It took longer than he assumed to find and disable the radar network around the city; he was forced in haste to send eight satellites off chasing birds, and several computer systems into clean-up mode. The telecommunications computers was the most argumentative, challenging him for clearance every few seconds; *private companies were much more cautious with security than the government*. He eventually managed to gain control of each communication hub within the facility, transferring all calls to his own phone. His only job now was to occupy the staff of the facility long enough for his teams to arrive, suddenly his door burst open and Cedric rushed inside.

Cedric was carrying a rainbow of folders, all filled with numbers, frequencies and codes. The folders were all marked 'Top Secret'.

"You might need these," Cedric dropped all of the folders onto Marcus' desk.

"I don't," Marcus said flicking through one, "everything is done. All of the landlines have been diverted here. We just have to keep them occupied until it's too late."

"Do you know where he is?" Cedric was staring in fascination.

"No," Marcus shook his head, "I've been trying to get in all night, the surveillance system is close circuit." Cedric looked at Marcus' computer, which was switched off. He bit back a question that was dying to come out.

Marcus saw it, "I'm like a telepath for technology."

“And so is Malcolm? That’s why they took him…” Cedric reasoned.

The phone on Marcus’ desk rang, surprising them both. Marcus shut his eyes and checked the interchange.

“It’s the base commander’s line!” Marcus jumped.

“Calm down. What’s his name?” Cedric asked. Marcus Closed his eye’s again.

“Trimm… General Joseph Trimm,” Marcus replied.

Cedric grabbed the phone, “Trimm?” He bellowed, speaking as little as possible.

“Sir, we have two confirmed sightings of infantry helicopters landing on base,” an intimidated voice stammered.

“Brilliant eagle-eye!” The phone distorted badly at Cedric’s volume, “get out here to meet me!”

Cedric used the disconnect button on the phone to give the impression of a cellular call.

“Did he buy it?”

“Search me, I don’t think it matters. He wouldn’t be making a phone call if he had a garrison of troops to command,” Cedric nodded.

Reports swarmed Marcus' mind from the mission, apparently the base commander had walked right out of the front entrance just as they had surrounded the building. He listened to as much communications traffic as he could, after mere minutes Marcus felt the first burst decoder sign onto the network. Soon several others joined. Marcus screened as much of the information as he could handle while it was downloading. He saw schematics for human implants, some connecting to the same part of the brain as were highlighted in his MRI. He found medical records of the birth of five new siblings and nephews; all without his abilities, and each in turn destroyed. Hundred of cell cultures and dissections reports about his parents. There was a mountain of information about Malcolm; surgical reports, interrogation files and even an ability catalogue.

Eventually one of the transmitters connected onto the camera systems. As the information started to download onto his own hardware, he observed with horror, graphic recordings of his parents death, as well as various surgical violations of his brother. Finally a system came onto the network with detailed information about Malcolm's current condition. The database was massive; Marcus had to access it exclusively to make any sense of it. The networked hard drives would have to record the rest to examine later.

Marcus found recordings on the computer from Malcolm's perspective. The software was designed to force him to provide memories, but it showed signs of repeated tampering from Malcolm. Small memories filled massive segments of hard drives. Malcolm had obviously spent six months only giving them memories of his original forages into adult entertainment. Marcus could not help laughing.

Schematics appeared on the screen of various devices, accompanied with lists of effects and information provided. Only under torture had Malcolm ever given them even the most simple of their encryptions. Marcus found information about an electrified prison cell to prevent external

communications. For the first time Marcus feared who the person would be when he finally had his brother back.

All files finished uploading in three hours. Marcus could not stop himself from laughing when he checked the file ratios. He had taken twelve million gigabytes of information; 98 percent was Malcolm's porn memories. Remembering a speech when he at school where a lady preached about the negative influences of pornography on juvenile minds. 'She may be right', he thought, 'but whatever its floors porn has, it may have saved Malcolm's life.'

Marcus attempted to load some of the files onto his computer screen; his mind was tired. It went berserk: the screen started to scramble and the speakers buzzed. It was not until the computer had restarted that he realised the problem. He had been watching human memory files, *real memory files*, and while he had spent his whole life learning to understand and interpret them, there was no computer software in the world that could even come close.

"The bastards stole my family for a computer full of porn and have no idea," Marcus yelled. The news was musical. He had not been this happy in months.

"What?" Cedric asked.

Marcus had forgotten Cedric was in the room, "Malcolm never broke. He just gave them memories of porn!" Marcus beamed.

Then the evacuation helicopters sounded overhead.

“Cedric, I have to go!” Marcus jumped up, “I can’t keep him here. If they somehow track the helicopters, they’ll have both of us.”

“Where can you go?” Cedric protested.

“I have everything ready. When Malcolm arrives I’ll take him and go. The tracking systems will be down for a few days, but the sooner the better,” Marcus stopped to think, “I need two doctors to check Malcolm as we leave. There are reports that the base commander surrendered, and then got away into the bush land. I need you to track him down. I’ll send word as Malcolm recovers.”

“I’ll send two doctors down to the tarmac,” Cedric nodded, “be careful. Malcolm has been a prisoner for two years, he may not be what you expect.”

“I’ve never had to expect anything with Malcolm, we’re part of each other,” Marcus lied.

Cedric nodded and hurried out of the office.

## Chapter 6 – Tell and show

Disconnecting the hard drive tower, Marcus shoved it into a bag and ran outside. He reached the tarmac where a single helicopter was waiting surrounded by ground staff. Ordering two officers to move aside, there before him, bundled in a thermal blanket, was Malcolm. His shaven-scarred head was pale as a sheet, but Marcus could feel his mind blinking back to life.

True to his word, Cedric had sent down two surgeons that were already beside his brother checking what they could.

“Check him in transit, we have to get him moving,” Marcus said, everyone complied without word; blood splattered speeches still fresh in their minds. “Get out!” He yelled at the remaining marines on the helicopter. The two officers jumped out and Marcus instructed the pilot to fly towards the northern freeway. “Check him!” Marcus ordered the doctors as the helicopter lifted off.

Malcolm appeared fine. The doctors suggested that the drugs should wear off over the next few days, but it would be best to take him to a hospital for observation. Marcus declined and told the doctors to return to the base after dropping them on the freeway.

The helicopter landed in a field behind a petrol station, just off the main freeway. One of the doctors and the pilot helped Marcus carry Malcolm to a utility van parked outside the station.

Marcus stood outside the van once the doors were closed, “You’re orders are to return to base. The remaining crews should return within the hour. They will need your expertise. My mission is now



classified, forget coming here. Fly twenty minutes due south, then back to base, radio blackout. Dismissed," Marcus stated.

The female doctor made to protest, but a flash of the bloody speech came to her and she thought better of it. They turned silently and jogged towards the helicopter. Marcus flew into the drivers seat and flung the van onto the freeway before the helicopter's props had started spinning. He still had a long way to go to before he could feel safe.

Driving through the night had been difficult, Marcus was exhausted and had to pull the van over to send final 'Presidential' orders to the base. He would not be going back there any time soon, but destroying it if he did not need to would not be a mistake he would make twice. Blowing up the communications satellite had been irrational and stupid.

He drove the van into a crowded shopping centre car park and left it there. After pulling a suitcase and his backpack out of the back, he unfolded a wheel chair and stumbled his brother into it, wheeling him away. Marcus found the nearest car lot and spent six hours buying another new car.

Explaining to the dealer that his brother was paraplegic and that he needed something bigger to transport him. The whole lie would have been much easier if Malcolm would have stopped moving. Ignoring the dealers continual fee complaints, Marcus paid him with a credit card owned by Felix Worchester (another fake alias). After pushing the dealer out of the car half way through his practiced features spiel, they were back on the road. Driving non-stop until they reached the next city. Marcus was onto his fifteenth caffeine tablet by the time they finally reached the airport. Malcolm was still unconscious.

The morning was cold and the snowy ground made pushing the wheelchair difficult. His usual charm forgotten, Marcus demanded two first class tickets under the names of Jeffery Murray and Nolan Smithe. They were to board an international flight within three hours of arriving at the airport. Marcus spent their waiting time waiting filling hundreds of security systems across the country with video footage of him and his brother boarding ships, planes, trains and busses. By the time they left, every security camera in the country, connected to anything external, had footage of him and his brother leaving for somewhere different. He replaced the only real images with two elderly men heading on a war service tour: just to ensure the ticket purchase receipts were not checked. He had already prepared a story and images to leave behind in cameras and computers once they arrived.

It was a real treat to sit in a first class chair and be pampered with masses of chocolate and coffee. Marcus was finally able to relax during the flight. The sweet young stewardess addressed him as Mr Murray so tenderly that he nearly forgot he was a fugitive. Only intending to rest momentarily, Marcus woke with a start as the stewardess poked him to fasten his seatbelt.

Malcolm sat upright staring him in the face. Marcus's mind flooded with the familiarity of his brother. Their separation had lasted almost two years, more than once he had feared he would never feel him again. Forgotten parts of his mind came back to life; enjoying a luxurious mental stretching after an unwanted rest. Cedric's words flowed through him; *he may not be what you expect*. Malcolm had not changed a bit.

"That dream about that stewardess was disgusting!" Malcolm said sternly, "where did you learn such filth?"

"You," Marcus returned groggily.

“You need to wake up, the plane is landing, you missed the entire flight,” Malcolm smiled. His bald head tugged at Marcus’s heart, “don’t worry about that now. Let’s just get to wherever it is you’re taking me.”

Malcolm could not walk properly. His legs and body were thin and waisted. Marcus had the steward bring a chair for Malcolm to be wheeled out of the airport.

Tossing Mr Baxter and Smithe into a furnace port, Marcus had a new car waiting at the airport under the name of Frans Victor. Collecting the keys from a snooty young woman, he pushed Malcolm outside for his fist look at sunlight in two years. Blinking and hiding his eyes, Malcolm sighed, unable to believe his enduring dreams of freedom were coming true.

The drive from the airport lasted an hour, and Marcus did not have much to say on the trip. Arriving at a large property overlooking the ocean. Malcolm looked back at Marcus with a grin.

“Did you rob a bank while I was away?” Malcolm trilled.

“No. How dare you suggest such a petty thing,” Marcus replied, “I robbed all of them.”

“Ha!” Malcolm feigned, “I knew you were the evil twin.”

“Confucius say; when people look for you in caves, hide on mountain tops,” Marcus looked exhausted.

“You look terrible. You still need sleep,” Malcolm smiled weakly.

An entrance loomed of polished marble and iron gates. As the car approached, the gates swung open and a short tanned man came to the car.

“Good day Mr Victor, the house remains as you left it. Please find your way inside,” he bowed.

Marcus trudged up the front steps. Three lanky butlers in dinner suits followed carrying his brother in the wheel chair. A forth man in his early forties, also wearing a dinner suit, had their bags.

Walking through the first door he found, Marcus collapsed onto the bed and slept for three days.

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Generally forward stumbles propelled Marcus towards the sunroom when he decided to surface. It was as if two years of worry and turmoil had been left within the sheets. Malcolm was in the sunroom with two of the staff, already relearning how to use his legs. Having made little progress over Marcus’s nap, his severe frustration was heavy on the room. His legs, at least were moving now.

No sooner than sitting down; eggs, toast and juice started to fill the table from a ballet of black coats. Marcus ate little, trying to focus his attention on where to head now.

“We’re saying here for a few weeks,” Malcolm announced.

“We have to keep moving,” Marcus replied, forgetting the honesty he had long missed with his brother.

“Not until I am at least useful,” Malcolm stated after being caught by one off the staff.

“We can’t rely on luck Mal. If we made one mistake we’ll both end up on at the end of a scalpel.”

Marcus returned.

“I know. Believe me, *I* know,” Malcolm said, “But I am not going outside again, especially while you look like a cover boy and I look like Fester Adams.”

“What do you care? I was always prettier,” Marcus posed.

“But, nevertheless, a nerd,” Malcolm focused on a rotating movement in his ankle, “I had bohemian mystique: made me hotter.”

“But now you look like you’ve been playing *operation: the home game*.”

“Yeah, about that. Do you have any ideas what they were doing yet?” Malcolm asked earnestly.

“All of the records are on a portable drive in my back pack. I haven’t looked at much of it yet.”

“Where did you stow mum and dad?” Marcus had felt the question before it had sounded. He tried to stop the images filling his mind. It was too late Malcolm had seen them. “Marcus, when?” Malcolm was calm and collected.

“Just on two years last Friday,” Marcus sobbed.

There were times that their connection was a liability, times that it was the most hated thing imaginable, but today it made up for itself: two years of grief found its way into Malcolm within an a few moments. Marcus shared his journey and his pain with his brother and felt all the worse for having to dig it up again. Malcolm saw his pain, the longing and the fear. He moved through Marcus's journey and jumped beyond it into resolution. Marcus, however, broke down crying.

"We'll then, it's time to let them go," Malcolm frowned, having himself moved to rub Marcus' back. "There is no blame for you in this, accidents happen."

"I know, but it's also completely my fault," Marcus cried.

"They would be proud of you," Malcolm looked over at him. Marcus could see himself through this brothers eyes, he looked small and isolated, but Malcolm's awe fill his thoughts. "I'm proud of you."

"Really?" Marcus looked up and smiled weakly.

"I think, you've had a worse time of it than I have," Malcolm sighed, "I don't remember much at all, they've kept me pretty doped up most of the time."

"That sounds like a ball," Marcus mocked.

"We are staying here for a while," Malcolm stated. "You need a month off."

"Ok," Marcus shrugged. Even after three days sleep he was still drained.

“Eat more. You look terrible,” Malcolm nodded to the two men next to him and returned to him to his rehab.

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His mind was content, the piece of Malcolm it had been missing for so long had returned. Studying the stolen database took up most of Marcus’s time. Malcolm’s memory of everything was limited to cloudy moments when he was being interrogated. The computer data was much more revealing.

Malcolm filled in a few gaps, guessing mostly. The best he could reckon; at the end he had been gotten a spoiled batch of medication, and over the week he had been able to contact Marcus.

“They assumed I was out of it, so they left me outside the cell for too long. It was just a coincidence, when I first tried, a stupid security alarm went off. It scared the crap out of me, so I stopped, but they had no idea I was awake,” Malcolm explained.

Video’s of each interview showed that Malcolm had tried to stretch the truth as far as possible. Any question that had been left open to interpretation had been used to his advantage

“Technically they asked questions that were really vague. See,” Malcolm speed through the recording. “So when I did answer, I told the truth only for a specific interpretation. That’s really the last thing I remember.”

“After that, they had a few test samples made, some from mum and dad, some from you. Mum and Dad’s came out of test tubes but they couldn’t do anything. None of the babies from you lasted very long either. There is a report filed by one of the doctors arguing that they needed to find me before any real progress was possible; it looks as if that is when they started leaving you alone more,” Marcus explained

Marcus went into one of the earliest recordings in the files, the footage showed his mum screaming on the floor while his dad was being questioned. She continued to scream at Jarrod to say nothing. Throughout the scene various men came through and would, beat, rape and shock her, but she never broke. The final footage of his parents showed a shadowed man with a gun to Janine’s face. He fired. Janine sat normally for a few moments too long and then crumpled onto the floor. Malcolm was lying naked on a table between them, still unconscious. The shadowed figure held the gun to Malcolm’s temple. Jarrod finally spoke.

“He’s your prise, you’re not going to hurt him.” Jarrod muttered.

“How can smart people be so stupid?” The dark figure shrugged. He raised his gun above Malcolm and shot Jarrod. Talking into his sleeve, he muttered, “Have our orphan taken back to the cell block.” Jarrod seemed to ignore the bullet for a long time, until he too crumbled onto the concrete floor. The video stopped.

Marcus and Malcolm sat together in silence until the night rose around them. A staff member eventually walked in to announce dinner. Together they stuttered and blinked back into motion. A solemn finality had gripped them as the cold reality of their parents demise settled. They *were* orphans; no family left, except each other.



At the dinner table it was Malcolm who finally spoke, “How could so many people think we could be worth so much?”

“I know what we’re worth,” said Marcus. “An army of Thorlow’s wreaking havoc on a battlefield, just think of what we could do on a single football field.”

“Two heads,” Malcolm muttered.

“What?” Marcus was confused.

“You know, two heads are better than one. Imagine a dozen or more,” Malcolm explained.

“All governments think about is keeping themselves where they are,” Marcus slumped.

Malcolm brightened up, “And we’re a two headed freak of nature. The bureaucratic appeal is staggering.”

“Imagine the paper work tho,” Marcus smiled, “How would you figure out who to decorate?”

“How do you know it was a government thing?”

“They’re the ones changing their communication frequencies to things they got from you,” said Marcus.

“Oh,” Malcolm went silent.

“I figure the best we can do is stay out of sight,” Marcus shrugged. “It might even be a good idea for us to split up.”

“No!” Malcolm announced sternly, “we’re staying together.”

“It would be safer...” Marcus trailed off.

“Safety doesn’t matter any more, *and* I have no interest being normal either. I’ve watched four kids that could have been mine dissected for parts today. Whatever is left of me, all I want to do is stop these monsters doing anything else.”

“What do you think we can do?” Marcus asked doubtfully.

“There are blueprints in that thing to copy us. They have enough to make a start. We should too. They’re going to do something with what they took, we should be ready when they do,” Malcolm exclaimed.

“Why?”

“We can do it faster. We can back build from ourselves. You even have all of their research staff at that base, don’t you? We shouldn’t just keep them there to let them rot.” Malcolm was getting excited, “If we can figure out what they were doing, we can head them off.”

“What for?”

“There is nothing else to do!” Malcolm stated. “We can’t have a normal life: get married, have kids, grow old. I’ve had five test tube kids already. But we can stop them from using people like us ever again.”

“I suppose there *isn't* much else to do,” Marcus shrugged.

“That’s the spirit,” Malcolm smiled.

“But what difference will it make, we don’t know anything more than them.”

“They didn’t have you,” Malcolm grinned.

“That’s touching brother,” Marcus rolled his eyes, “but...”

“We aren’t identical!” Malcolm interrupted, “They tested your DNA from the baby teeth mum kept. We just look the same. Whatever we are, *you* taught me, protected me. I probably would have died without you.”

“Are you vindicating a proposition for action?”

“Yes I am!” Malcolm beamed

“You really think I’d be an advantage?” Marcus questioned.

“Advantage or not, revenge is boring. We can steal their thunder instead,” Malcolm answered

“Let’s contact Cedric then.”

Chapter 7 – More un-chewable than biting thought.

Six months had passed since the twins had arrived at the house. Malcolm was walking normally, and had regained most his former weight. His brown hair grew slightly ruffled because of the scar tissue: Marcus announced continuously that he looked like Harry Potter.

“We aren’t getting anywhere with the burst transmission, the computer can handle the input. New software would have to be written for every thought. They aren’t coded in anything *like* digital sequences,” Marcus whined.

“I don’t care about writing software, how did the transfer go?” Malcolm replied.

“Same as usual, half of the information is lost but the general insanity is there,” Marcus answered.

“What sort of information?” Malcolm suddenly tweaked.

“What sort of information what?” Marcus was getting annoyed.

“What sort of information is lost?” Malcolm barked.

“No emotion comes through when I send it back, periphery detail is lost too,” Marcus explained.

“What about daydream memories?”

“Nothing, it comes back scrambled.”

“So, what your s..” Malcolm began.

“Shhhh,” Marcus interrupted, his eye’s flickered, “Turn on channel 7!”

Malcolm grabbed the remote and the TV responded with a twang, followed by a slight sizzling sound. The picture of a news announcer appeared.

“Announcements from the telecommunications giant have confirmed that the first ‘*brain to brain*’ telephone call was conducted early last week. Several religious and environmentalist groups have already condemned the technology as inhumane and have demanded the company cease production. A spokesperson from the research division has revealed that the device is completely non invasive and has been designed for installation in under twenty minutes. I have been told that more detailed information is available online our website,” the announcers practiced voice trailed off.

Malcolm turned the TV off and turned to Marcus. Eyes closed, Marcus was concentrating intensely.

“Shit!” Marcus finally exclaimed, his eyes still shut. “They reverse programmed from the video footage I put in the airport recordings. It’s basic but it’s an interface.”

“Can we stop it?” Malcolm gasped.

“No. They have orders for over 35million already. The unit *is* the size of a grain of rice and it injects through your nose.” Marcus scoffed. “Hardly non invasive.”

“What powers it?”

“What powers us... We have to work faster.”

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Over the next six months the Twins successfully integrated several computers to function similarly to themselves. They had sent four different designs for personal blocking devices to Cedric to manufacture, but were not equipped to develop anything human based. Marcus had ordered the first of these units to be placed on base, and just to be careful, outlawed the use of the new implants among their staff.

The rest of their resources had been dedicated to building devices to stun others made like them using technology, or to rapidly kill themselves to prevent capture.

Frustrated with the limits of the house Malcolm finally snapped.

“We need staff, we’re obviously behind. We have to go back to your base!” Malcolm yelled.

“Will you stop with that,” Marcus replied.

“No! I’ve had it, I’m going back,” Malcolm announced.

“No you’re not,” Marcus stood up.

“You’re not the boss of me!” Malcolm spat, “I can do everything you can, they can just assume I am you.”

“We have no idea what they know about us by now,” Marcus shot, “the whole base could be a death trap.”

“It’s a military base. You send them new orders once a week. Is it so hard to believe that your cover worked?”

“Look we can’t just stroll down the street. You’ve seen what they’ve managed in only twelve months, they might have new software to find us,” Marcus cautioned.

“We’re head deep in their systems everyday. We knew this was going to happen; it’s just a fancy burst transmitter with some clever software. If we’re lucky it’ll make us harder to track.”

“That’s a good point. But...”

“But nothing!” Malcolm interrupted, “Now the whole world has access to this thing it will explode. Every small time genius will add his two cents and soon enough we’ll be too far behind to catch up. We have to go now!”

Marcus was speechless, Malcolm was right. If these things evolved at the rate computers and mobile phones had, within a few years people might be doing even more than the twins could.



Within weeks, Marcus and Malcolm had started to notice petty thoughts flitting through the SMS systems. At first it was mostly the prattle of wealthy sycophants scoring elitist class points, but soon the annoying diatribe of teenaged angst flowed freely. Sound and emotional hardware had been announced as ‘coming soon’ by the company.

There was no other choice. They were losing the fight where they were.

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Marcus had sent several messages to Cedric over the weeks since they decided to return. Cedric had convinced them to allow an ex-seal team to ‘extract’ them, and bring them back to base. Marcus preferred the new plan, considering his own video creations had already proven so useful to his competitors.

Forgetting to blackout their communications system was the first mistake the seals made. Having already express posted their belongings to a loading dock, the twins decided to walk down to the seals to save time. The whole group was huddling around a map in a small cave on the beachfront, one man spoke and pointed to things. Marcus and Malcolm caught them all off guard

“Can we please leave now?” Marcus yelled. The twins instantly were looking down the barrels of sixteen assault rifles.

“Wouldn’t it have been smart to keep someone out front as guard?” Malcolm ignored the armaments.

“Sir’s,” the previous map pointer lowered his gun, “h.. how did.. How did you get here?”

“Scrambled UHF is about as difficult as third grade fractions,” Malcolm shook his head.

“We walked! Now lets walk more,” Marcus stated impatiently.

“First, turn off the radio’s and leave them here,” Malcolm suggested.

The seal team clumsily unwired themselves and threw their equipment down. “We were instructed to air lift you from...”

“Shh!” Marcus spat, “I know for a fact you were told to be on blackout conditions.”

“Yes sir!” Humbled the seal, “we have nine supersonics inbound.”

“Good, where are they?” Malcolm was excited.

“Nine fallocks, Sir. We’re set to hump you both in,” a lieutenant nodded.

“We’ll keep up,” said Marcus, Malcolm huffed in feigned annoyance.

“What’s a fallock?” Malcolm added

“It’s a distance code,” Marcus replied, “gives distance and bearing. They have to memorise fifty in sequence for all eight rose bearings. Each time they use one they go to the next. Then, even if someone is listening they can’t understand.”

“Clever,” Malcolm nodded.

“Thanks,” Marcus grinned.

“It was your idea?” Malcolm balked.

“Yep,” Marcus shrugged, “it was the simplest way I could come up with to fool you. If the researches made you help them, you wouldn’t have been able to tell them anything.”

“You actually thought they’d turn me?” Malcolm was hurt.

“The truth is I didn’t know. They could have had your brain in a glass jar by the time we found you,” Marcus admitted, “I was being careful.”

“Ew! That’s gross!” Malcolm screwed up his face and shook, “you actually thought I was a brain in a jar. Ew!”

A man with Captain’s stripes interrupted them, “we have to move.”

Suffocating darkness surrounded them as they ran along the beachfront; the stars were clouded and the night held a new moon. The group moved an incredibly quick pace. Almost sprinting, they flew along the small solid sand strip between the waves and the beach. Marcus was enjoying himself; the cool wind and dark expanse felt never-ending. Malcolm was having trouble keeping up; after six months his body had still not completely recovered.

“Stop,” Malcolm gasped, bending over to catch his breath.

As they did, three seals surrounded Malcolm and had him inside a triangular hammock within seconds.

“Move out!” The Captain hissed.

Malcolm was hoisted up between the three seals and they resumed running. Marcus was shocked; the pace was even faster than it had been before. A sudden veer right had the group moving through a small brush forest, Marcus had been though it sometimes on jogs. Still no speed was lost. The group manoeuvred a perfect path through lightless scrub without disturbing any foliage.

“Stop stop!” The Captain hissed.

The group stopped dead, Marcus bumped into the seal in front of him. In the light from the Captain’s GPS, he glimpsed all of the seals wearing what looked like sunglasses. Marcus guessed this is what helped them to see so well in the darkness.

“One Blanok left. Move out!” The Captain whispered.

The group altered direction again and within moments found themselves in a clearing. The ground seemed to nurse several giant black moths. Marcus looked above him and another was hovering in perfect silence overhead. The jet, he assumed, was one of the supersonics the Captain had mentioned. Flickering lights inside the cockpits revealed a single pilot flanked by two empty seats.

“Sir, Lieutenant Foreman will accompany you on AT3 directly to your left.” The Captain told him, Marcus recognised the man he had silenced earlier step forward.

“No!” Marcus hissed back, “Malcolm and I are going together.”

“Sir, that wouldn’t be wise. Colonel Bates recommended...”

“No!” Marcus repeated, “We go together!”

“Our order’s sir...” the Captain tried.

“*This* is an order, Captain! We are both going together on AT9.” Marcus spoke out clearly, pointing at the plane marked AT9.

“Yes sir, sorry sir,” humbled the Captain, “I will file the change as your decision.”

Marcus ignored him and headed towards one of the furthest moths. Malcolm removed himself from the hammock and walked passed the Captain.

“You do that. It will be sent to him anyway,” Malcolm mocked, “thanks for the lift boys,” he waved too the three men with the hammock.

In less than three hours the jet had speed through the Troposphere and made it back to the base. Cedric was waiting to meet them on the Tarmac, he looked rather annoyed when they stepped out of the same plane.

“I figured you would change the orders at some point, but I never thought you would be stupid enough to get on the same plane,” Cedric yelled.

“Stupid is as stupid does. They want us alive, together one of us would have time to kill the other if we got caught or poisoned,” Marcus returned, “And for future; we don’t intend to be separated by more than 50 metres ever again.”

“Captain Jeffries has already filed a complaint,” Cedric smiled.

“Give him a promotion, he stood up for you, he’s loyal,” Marcus replied, “Cedric, meet Malcolm.” Malcolm walked over from the plane and offered a hand.

“Welcome back,” Cedric nodded.

“Nice rides, when did we get them?” Malcolm smiled.

“I ordered them about ten minutes after Marcus left with you. I expected they would come in handy,” Cedric said.

“What did they cost me?” Marcus announced.

“Nine billion, they’re SCRAM jets, they max out at MACH 24 and run on a double-hydrogen, oxygen mix,” Cedric beamed.

“Water?!?” Marcus gaped.

“They have a molecular cracking pod in the main fuselage,” Cedric explained.

“Where did you find this one?” Malcolm grinned gesturing to Cedric.

“The mission choose him,” Marcus smiled.

“What?” Malcolm requested.

“Don’t worry,” Marcus shook his head, “we should get inside. How did you go?” He looked at Cedric and headed towards the tower building.

“I got everyone you asked for, except for a research supervisor,” Cedric admitted.

The base had grown rapidly over his year of absence, the base was now a small town in itself; owing to the lucrative hiring policy. The ranks were well swollen with soldiers, professional and scientists; everyone needed to complete their work. Marcus’ orders that no staff were allowed communication implants, under penalty of discharge, were well accepted. Unwittingly, his policy seemed to be gaining attention from other departments and even other countries. Still running on purely pilfered profits, Marcus was worried how long his bank scheme would last undetected.

Cedric had outdone himself: the base and the staff were perfect for their needs. Also, without orders, Cedric had debriefed the corps in Marcus’ absence, regarding the non-official nature of the outfit: no one had chosen to leave. Inside the briefing room Marcus started at him the second the door had closed.

“Are you joking?” Marcus demanded.

“Marcus, listen. Everything that could be done as a military operation, was! As a private company we have freedom to act. The command structure is still in place, and neither of you are implicated. We successfully lobbied to buy out the town, including all power and infrastructure facilities. This place is now completely self sufficient, food, water, everything! We have a small army out there, and literally thousands of applications to live in a town that bans communication implants.” Cedric spoke firmly with absolute certainty.

“What’s next independence?” Marcus shot.

“That isn’t as big of a joke as you would think. What you haven’t realised is there is a lot more going on than you and your brother,” Cedric paused for effect, “As many people as are happy about these devices are scared. Your ban has led to entire countries banning these devices from their shores. I have received orders for over one million of the jamming units. People are terrified. Trust an old mans intuition; it feels like we are on a long road to another war. The two of you may be the only ones prepared if it happens. We are positioned to defend this town. The underground mine network is being reinforced as a fall out shelter and a city centre is forming on what was a dirt track. People want to be here!”

“What can we do?” Malcolm interjected.

“You’re doing it, every one of your orders has increased the flood of people coming here. When news got out of the expert list we hired, requests to move here tripled,” Cedric exaggerated.



“This is a nightmare,” Marcus announced to the ceiling, “What do you expect they’ll do to us when they find us? How many spies do you think are buzzing around this office as we speak?”

“Marcus shut up!” Malcolm spat, “It’s done. Now we work with it.”

“Boys, I think you should consider announcing the truth,” Cedric suggested.

As a last resort, the twins had made a film of the footage they stole from the hard drives. It was a ‘tell all’ video to release if both twins were killed.

“No!” Marcus shook his head, “It would start a mass panic and would bring them down on us like a lead brick.”

“Before you make that decision; I think the time has come for you to come face to face with a few people,” Cedric sighed cryptically.

Cedric stood and walked over to the door. Marcus and Malcolm followed him. While walking Cedric handed Marcus one of the new implants he had requisitioned for the twins to test. He walked them around several buildings and finally into one signed ‘Detention Block’.

“Malcolm, this might be hard on you. You might want to say outside?” Malcolm shook his head furiously, Cedric frowned, “Ok, I want you too show them that chip Marcus. See what happens.”

Inside the prison wing, Malcolm came face to face with several of his previous captors. Most of whom

were entranced by the appearance of his twin brother. Marcus ignored their faces and did as he was told.

“I assume each of you is aware of the new burst transmitters released?” Marcus announced coldly, holding up a piece of metal that looked like a grain of rice.

“Baxter! That’s our chip...” A squat bald man squeaked before being hushed.

“You built this?” Marcus was stunned, “that isn’t possible, you have been here for over a year.” The man cowered behind a towering military type sharing his cell.

“I want to talk to him.” Marcus pointed at the bald man. Three guards flowed into the cell and dragged him out.

“Talk!” Marcus growled.

“We were just research staff, please. We had no idea our data source was from human subjects,” The bald man mumbled.

“Where is, *Baxter*?” Malcolm demanded.

“In the other cell,” the bald man whispered.

The guards proceeded to escort out a beautiful young woman. She stood before them: the embodiment of poise. Long brown hair, tall, slender, wearing the slightest wispy glasses that magnified brilliant green eyes.

“Bring them up to the briefing room,” Malcolm held Marcus’ arm and walked out. Cedric followed.

Ahead of them, the two prisoners were escorted into the briefing room. Malcolm stopped Cedric outside.

“How long did you know?” Malcolm stared at him.

“Two weeks, since Marcus sent the list of experts you needed,” Cedric shot.

“You might have warned us, you have no idea how angry Marcus is,” Malcolm warned, “have the guards stay in the room.”

Marcus grabbed a bag off of the floor and rummaged around it for a thumb drive.

“Where is the presentation equipment?” Marcus demanded.

“There is a port panel at the table head,” Cedric answered.

Marcus shoved the drive into the consol; the lights dimmed and the projector fizzed to life.

“You two! Come and see, *exactly*, what your data source was,” Marcus grunted.

The video played, the bald scientist closed his eyes often, the shackles stopped him from covering his ears. The woman watched reluctantly, more often looking away at the carpet in shame. The video finished with a written report on the disposal of several, *unremarkable* infants.

“Who are you?” Marcus finally demanded.

The smaller bald one mumbled first, “Cleveland Grimois, interface design programming.”

“Helen Baxter, hardware integration,” sighed Baxter.

“I am not asking for remorse from you. I don’t care about you enough about either of you to become a murderer. The best thing I can think of is to keep you here as research staff,” Marcus admitted, “we need help to stop *your chip* from doing any more damage.”

“Marcus, are you serious. They know who you are?” Cedric squeaked.

“I agree,” Malcolm shrugged, “we can’t do anything useful without knowing what we’re up against. And keeping them in a cellar because they did their jobs, isn’t right either. What else can we do?”

An invisible candle lit within Grimois as he listened to the men who had *paid* for his work. He could never make up for this sin he had committed, but now he could at least spend his life trying to make up for it. The cries of the woman still shrieked in his memory; seeing many of his colleagues abuse her, sickened him. Watching his boss shoot her had been the worst experience imaginable. Nothing he could say would be trusted, but he did not want to wait to begin his retribution.

“I can build each of the five chip designs I created from memory, and Baxter knows the hardware schematics for all of the prototype equipment we used,” Grimois burst, “interfacing software was all pretty basic; we made it as robust as we could.”

Malcolm and Marcus turned to him.

“What?” They asked in unison.

“If I had access to a system that Marcus was connected with, and on occasion access to both of you: I could develop a jamming system for every known frequency there is,” Grimois jabbered, “At the very least it would be a good firewall for your systems here.”

“I can give you the schematics for the next five upgrades I projected for each of the units, they may not be accurate, but they will give us direction,” Baxter added.

Baxter and Grimois had both come to the same conclusion; they had a debt to be repaid and, as luck would have it, the skills they had made for perfect currency.

“What systems?” Marcus nearly gasped.

“Emotional messaging and real time transfers were the biggest ones,” Baxter sounded like a fish returning to water.

“We never came close to emotional content,” Marcus shook his head.

“It took us eighteen months to correct for the coding differences, emotions don’t handle a digital environment, we had to use gas storage drives,” Grimois explained.

Marcus, Malcolm, Grimois and Baxter nattered away for over an hour until Cedric spoke up and offered to show them to the laboratory wing. Grimois was fascinated to find out how Marcus had rendered the video footage in his head, but before he could answer Malcolm stopped them.

“We need sleep first Colonel,” Malcolm replied.

“Cedric, please. I have divorced my uniform quite recently and prefer to keep her out of my mind,” Cedric smiled.

“We can meet you there in the morning,” Malcolm smiled.

A guard came across to Grimois to replace his shackles, Marcus waved him off.

“I don’t want them taken back to that prison,” Marcus said, “find them an empty room.”

“Thank-you Marcus, but...” Grimois began.

“It will be guarded, and neither of you will be allowed near any communication equipment alone,” Marcus interrupted.

Malcolm frowned, “but try to think of them as body guards.”

“We’d be fine in the detention block,” Baxter replied.

“But I wouldn’t,” Marcus frowned.

“Sorry?” Baxter asked.

“How would you feel about living with those men after seeing who they are?” Marcus replied.

“I...I...” Baxter stuttered, “I didn’t think about it.”

“How many others down there were like you two?” Malcolm asked.

“There were no other civilian staff,” Grimois replied.

“What would you do with them?” Marcus requested.

“I wouldn’t want to have to decide,” Grimois finally replied.

“Neither do we,” Marcus added, “Do you want to go back there?”

“No,” Grimois frowned.

“Then take the offer, or not” Malcolm took over, “it’s up too you.”

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As predicted, new implants capable of greater bandwidth and emotional messaging arrived on the market within six months. Thanks to Baxter and her stout little companion Grimois, they had accurate details about the next three products that were planned before they were announced.

Research progressed rapidly with Grimois and Baxter at their sides, and the Twins had grown to rely on the new allies. Assisted by the reference, recognisance and testing ability of the Thorlow's, the base became a fortress of new anti-implant technology. Entire states and countries kept them constantly in production of every device they could design; Cedric jokingly named them the Thorlow alliance.

For a while, times were good, the Thorlow's were safe, and their 'Alliance' kept them in perpetual profit. Marcus considered axing his bank scheme, but as pressure from Baxter built to get satellites into orbit, he thought better of it.

Months of progress had given them all a sense of achievement. They had managed to limit the spread of implants in the population dramatically. It was a clear Thursday morning when Marcus walked into the lab early to begin cataloguing the most recent advancements. Marcus logged into a patent mainframe to seek out early registrations; to give them better warning periods for implant launches. As Baxter and Gromois walked in they found him spread eagled on the floor, next to Malcolm. Panicked, they ran to the Twins sides to check their vital signs. They both stirred at the touches.

"The nature of greed has just thrown down the gauntlet; a rival cooperation had spent billions to develop a better technology," Marcus explained.



Clicking on the television in the corner, a single commercial announced the beginning of the new world war.

**“JoinThink! Work together with your mates to be smarter,”** the cosy statement followed by a catchy jingle showed the newest technology that was now available.

Malcolm had the specifics of the JoinThink technology loaded onto their servers.

“It’s an extreme bandwidth multidirectional transmitter, three metre range. I’ve already ordered a dozen couriered to the dock warehouse.” Malcolm announced.

“Good, we can have testing started within hours,” Marcus frowned.

“Boys, I know it isn’t my place to say, but none of this technology comes close to either of you. There *is* an obvious card to play?” Grimois asked tenderly.

“I have a feeling that we may be too late. If it’s possible to send messages into peoples minds, to think with a joined brain, how hard do you think it would be to send in commands?” Marcus proposed. “With this system, it isn’t going to be very hard to win an election when you can forced people to vote for you.”

“They already can,” Malcolm chocked.

“What are you talking about?” Baxter scoffed.

“Marcus, it wasn’t a bad batch of drugs,” Malcolm realised, “they took me off the medication because they thought they were in control,” he starred away horrified.

“What do you mean?” Marcus gaped.

“They didn’t finally manage to extract thoughts, they made me give them up. I remember. I felt like a jackhammer was on my skull, then if felt a burning sensation behind my eyes and it felt like they were giving me another MRI. Then all I remember thinking about was the porn site, I remember needing to tell them about things I had done that I shouldn’t have. But they didn’t realise that the only thing I remember as *doing wrong* was looking at porn before I turned eighteen. They just couldn’t decode them,” Malcolm started to cry.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Marcus was glaring at Grimois and Baxter.

“We swear we didn’t know! Those sort of commands work in the brains executive systems, we only worked on the auditory and visual cortex’s... and the basal ganglia for the emotional construct,” Grimois stammered.

“How could they do it? Neither of us can make the other do anything,” Malcolm tried, “I don’t understand”.

“It doesn’t matter,” Marcus sighed. “If they can it’s too late. There are over a billion people with at least one implant.”

“Release the tape then. Put our research out there,” Malcolm announced. “Show people where the technology came from, show them what they are trying to do.”

“Mal. JoinThink has only just been launched. But, they’ve probably been testing it for months. Imagine what a group of just ten scientists could come up with grouped together like a think tank. We have to see it first, then we can decide what to do,” Marcus finished, his voice commanding the others to remain quiet. The room disbanded silently, the new announcement and Malcolm’s recollection had plunged everything into disarray.

An innocuous white parcel arrived within three hours. Four hours later they had no choice; the tape had to be shown to the public.

Marcus and Malcolm went to work accessing every private broadcasting network they could. They filled every satellite, transmission tower and internet site with the same broadcast. Setting firewalls and control systems upon themselves, they removed the world’s ability to prevent listening. Millions of sever administrators, hackers and nerds alike marvelled at what looked like a virus taking control.

Every screen, every channel, every website played the movie the Thorlows had written. The world had no choice but to watch. A harmonious feminine voice melodiously described the horrors committed against the Thorlows and their family. Scenes played of their mother’s abuse and their father’s death. Reports were read about testing on Malcolm and the terminated children. Finally, recreations were shown about possible command abilities hidden within implants.

As the report finished and regular television resumed; newscasters instantly cast doubt on the validity of the footage. The Thorlow’s were branded bank robbers and terrorists. Families of government staff

appeared on the screen claiming fathers and mothers had never returned from work due to a private army massed by the Thorlows. Obviously, whoever had planned JoinThink had been preparing for this day as much as they had.

Most people did not know what to believe. When it was realised that people with implants had no memory of the Thorlow broadcast; mass panic rapidly spread around the globe. Splits formed in families while trying to explain the problem to implanted children; but for some reason the name Thorlow and anything alluding to it was beyond their grasp.

Millions flocked to the Thorlow's base; tent and camper van cities sprung up around the outskirts of town. All sort protection for their independence.

Meanwhile, the Thorlow's spent their days in conferences with heads of state and their own research comities. Some countries abandoned the alliance to embrace JoinThink, others expelled the new and old technology, seeking redemption for their ignorance.

After five days of negotiation, Malcolm finally broke the deadlock that had kept them in the briefing room for days.

"Stop! I'm sick of arguing," Malcolm screamed, "There are millions of people camped outside this town. We can't possibly feed them or keep them *here*. We have enough equipment and personal to annex the state. We have no choice. The battle has to start now! Fall in, or fuck off!"

In unison, Malcolm and Marcus stood, followed by Cedric, Baxter and Grimois. They all left the room.

“I wish I had thought of that days ago,” Marcus sighed once they were outside.

“How do you propose we annex an entire state?” Cedric jibbed.

“Blackmail,” Malcolm smiled, “we may be running a lost race in technology. But you said it yourself, our first line of defence is us.”

“We have a plan; I want to show you the earliest MRI we have of Malcolm,” Grimois trilled, trotting off towards the laboratory.

Grimois’ body was twitching and squealing with excitement.

“Do you see the penetration scars extending into his forebrain?” The group nodded. “Based on tests conducted on the JoinThink processor, we have concluded that Malcolm was exposed to its much larger and far less sophisticated predecessor. We know how it works!”

Grimois went into a detailed explanation of his reasoning and showed Cedric all how the entire system worked.

“Due to the nature of the mutations in the twins Basal Ganglia, commands into the executive functioning systems via wireless methods are impossible,” Grimois beamed. “We are certain that unless they are forced to host an implant they will be safe. But it is definitely possible for them to learn how to impose commands on others hosting a JoinThink processor.”

“So what does that mean?” Cedric was confused.

“We get our state, or every implant user will want to jump of a bridge,” Malcolm grinned.

“But you two can’t send commands yet,” Cedric replied.

“There are only five people on the planet that know that for sure,” Marcus added, “and we’re all in this room.”

“You’re going to bluff?” Cedric doubted.

“We’ll send an ultimatum, only to the president,” Marcus reasoned, “he can call it a strategic quarantine if he wants to.”

“What if he calls the bluff?” Cedric cautioned.

“Two billion people have at least one implant,” Malcolm shrugged, “Would you?”

Within an hour of their message reaching the president, all residents were ordered to evacuate the area surrounding the Thorlow base and move to a distance 300 kilometres away. Moments after the Twins had been notified, Cedric walked into their lab with a bottle of Champaign.

“An officer I used to work with just called me to shed some light on the Presidents discission. It turns out, JoinThink has been installed in more than forty percent of the greater military. The advisors are terrified you two have access to their own troops,” Cedric smiled, pouring glasses for everyone.

“So they’re pulling out?” Marcus asked.

“They have sent word that this territory is quarantined permanently,” Cedric nodded.

“We have our own state?” Malcolm beamed.

“For the time being,” Cedric nodded.

## Chapter 8 – The conquered

Fortifying their new territory progressed slowly, JoinThink spread like a plague. Within weeks an advanced long-range upgrade was available to the public. Ministries spawned divisions of think tanks that took over bureaucratic functioning. Available to the public progressed to publicly required and implants were openly forced on any person within range. Countless millions had no option but to accept a joint mind. Others, seeking wisdom or acceptance, left protected territories and volunteers to join the new global network.

Since the announcement, governments and civilians flocked to the Thorlows in search of security and protection. The influx of support made their work faster, but stretched resources to breaking point. They continued to release devices that could better detect and block JoinThink, but they were constantly running to catch up.

Unwittingly, by developing the newest long-range implant, JoinThink had given the Thorlows free reign to enter their minds; a small oversight that resulted in a decisive advantage, both in progress and strategy. With practice, the twins developed the ability to force commands onto small groups and individuals, but with less effect as the volume of minds exploded. The knowledge base they now had access to was phenomenal: every fact, thought and feeling was freely available in the newest internet of brainwares. It was like someone had handed them the ultimate knowledge encyclopedia.

Flying down the halls one afternoon searching for the twins Grimois looked like a plump mango with legs, he finally found them in briefing room. It took him a few minutes to catch his breath before he spoke.



“I did it,” Grimois panted, “I cracked the basic chip encryptions.”

“Which one?” Malcolm was chuckling at his excitement.

“All of them!” Gromois beamed.

“How?” Marcus quizzed.

“Using fractal programs, I guessed they might have come up with the same things you had and there you go,” Grimois said still gasping.

“And?” Malcolm coaxed.

“Underneath every program are hardwired commands. They’re subliminal; it restricts the sharing of certain information, it just scrambles it,” Grimois explained, “the *very first* completely blocks everything about you two. They may know your entire life history, but no-one connected can discuss it or reference it. I think it started as an attempt to block your commands. But there is no way to identify a command source that comes from you two, neither of you has a registration code. So all it does is help to keep you us off the target list.”

“But surely they would realise we don’t need to log on like a machine would,” Marcus guessed. “How could they? They never actually saw how you really work, all they had were connection logs from computers that you contacted,” Grimois beamed, “That’s all we used.”

“So how did you break the encryption?” Malcolm requested.

“I didn’t have too. The only fractal encryption I knew of were the ones you two have written down. I searched the database you took from where they kept you and found one formulae set in an academic transcript. It decoded the chip instantly,” Grimois shrugged.

“But they would have developed others?” Marcus figured.

“They can’t,” Grimois blinked, “fractals are completely unstable in software, the error correction needed is beyond a computers capacity to quantify. Organic systems can handle that, like you two, the brain handles errors all of the time, but a computer freezes if it is stuck in an infinite loop.”

“So how can they use it?” Marcus shot.

“Each fractal set has a regression set to stabilise it, but the mathematics to stabilise a fractal intersection is impossible,” Grimois frowned, “or was thought at least thought impossible until you handed in your homework four years ago.”

“Are you saying they coded the chips with my homework accident?” Marcus was gutted.

“*And* that’s why they wanted you in the first place,” Grimois sighed.

Marcus was unable to recover. Malcolm took over in time to congratulate Grimois.

“You’ve outdone yourself Grim, I don’t know how to thank you enough,” Malcolm smiled, “If you wouldn’t mind giving us a minute, we’ll be done to the lab soon.”

Grimois beamed around the room as he walked away, he spent the rest of the day particularly proud of himself. He went about his work whistling and floating around the labs, patting people on the back while offering titbits of advice.

Marcus took the news like a dagger, their mother had always said that one mistake could cost them everything. She also would have been the first to consol him when one was made; as cruelty had it, this one mistake had cost him her aswell. There was no time for self-pity, their private office was more of a warfare strategy room than a research laboratory nowadays. The room was filled with reconnaissance reports and the walls were now plastered with maps of the world: countries shaded either red or blue. Very few were blue.

Blue shading signified a secured country with direct alliance with the Thorlows. In each case, the twins had personally worked up a new set of communication codes based on multiple fractal regressions as a welcome gift to the alliance. Neither twin could offer opinions as to how long encryption would hold, but made sure to install the measures personally; so no other staff knew how their codes worked. It seemed just a matter of time; JoinThink had the combined processing power of billions of minds. But Grimois doubted if even by force any level of processing power could chance upon the solution to a constantly changing pattern. The five of them (Cedric, Grimois, Baxter, Marcus and Malcolm) all showed up at the twins quarters one night after the final alliance member had been secured, it turned into an impromptu party.

“It isn’t a matter of intelligence, it is a matter of infinite chance. They would have to know the formulae, and the frequency it happened to be at five different times in under a minute. Or the

formulae, the starting time to the millisecond, *and* the starting frequency,” Grimois boasted, “What are the chances of that if the two of you are the only ones who know?”

“And if that isn’t enough, they’d need the error correction software that we designed from scratch,” Baxter added confidently.

“Enough,” Cedric sighed, “no more shop talk. A toast,” Cedric raised his brandy bucket and saluted. “Two years to the day since you came back boys.” Cedric gulped a mouthful of brandy and raised his hand again, “ and six months of independence!”

Everyone cheered except Marcus. He still had not recovered from Grimois’ news.

“You need to get over it brother,” Malcolm whispered in his ear, “it just as easily could have happened another way, and then you might have been caught too.”

Marcus looked into Malcolm’s eyes, wanting to believe him.

“Believe me. After all, that satellite was two years old by the time you had written your paper,” Malcolm patted his back, he registered a sudden wave of relief after that point.

Marcus raised his glass, “In two years, JoinThink has built from two billion people to six billion. But we started at just 2 and are now over 500 million. Now that’s something to drink too!”

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Reports were flowing from red countries that all governments were now forcing residents to host implants. Intercultural bickering and familial disparities had disappeared under JoinThink; lifestyle was achieving utopian. Marcus thought about the word as he heard it, Utopia, from an ancient language meaning nowhere, *life was achieving nowhere thanks to JoinThink*. Perhaps *life* was vanishing there, but without it they were making technological advancements by the hour instead of the month.

The twins worked to collect as much information as they could for the research staff. But the amount of information started to exhaust them both, keeping up technologically was becoming a full time task.

Early one morning as the twins slept, Grimois came to their door in a particularly agitated state. He knocked relentlessly until Malcolm rose to greet him.

“Malcolm! Get Marcus up and get to the conference room. The *president* has come to speak with you,” Grimois was clearly excited.

“Which one?” Malcolm yawned.

“The President!” Grimois stated incredulously.

“Oh.” Malcolm scratched his head, “Ok give us a minute.”

Hurrying along the corridor, Grimois tried to explain as best he could.

“He came on a Helicopter that seems to me a little worse for wear, but don’t tell him I said that. He only has four staff members and none of them are security. It looks like someone took a few pot-shots at them if you ask me, but don’t tell him I said that,” Grimois rambled excitedly.

“But, what did they say?” Marcus finally interjected.

“Nothing of substance, just that they needed to see you both urgently. We had them checked; they have no signs of implants. But I had the security staff stay with them in the conference room anyway. But don’t tell them I did that,” Grimois seemed to be suffocating slightly.

“Grimois! Calm down,” Malcolm held Grimois by the shoulders. “We won’t tell him you did anything.”

The motley group arrived to find Baxter waiting at the entrance.

“Boys, we hesitated to tell them anything without your permission. But one asked to go to the bathroom and I was slightly suspicious so I went with him.” Baxter was as agitated as Grimois.

“Baxter, you’ve done well. Both of you are welcome to sit in,” Marcus replied.

As the boys went to open the door, Grimois stopped them, “There’s something else.”

Marcus felt a little ill from Grimois’ tone, “What?” He tried, but a small burp was all that sounded.

“What,” Malcolm assisted.

“One of the aid’s...” Baxter trailed off.

“Was our boss at the facility that held you,” Grimois completed.

Marcus and Malcolm paled for a moment and the hands on the door trembled.

“Pull yourself together Mal,” Marcus joked.

“You first Cus,” Malcolm smiled.

Marcus and Malcolm entered the conference room to the sound of the soldier uniform straightening in salutation. The twins were strengthened by the presence of their own guards.

“At ease, it is far to early to be so alert,” Malcolm waved them off.

“Gentlemen, it’s a pleasure to finally meet you...” The President started.

“Can it! What’s wrong?” Marcus cut him off. Grimois let out an exhilarated snort, but quickly excused himself.

“We aren’t in control any more,” The President replied, unruffled by Marcus’ rudeness. The gravity of his frankness and the ramifications of the statement took a moment to settle in.

“So it *was* you all along?” Malcolm shot.

“This is not the time for an argument. We came here to warn you,” The President’s aid gave him an authority that seemed to humble Malcolm and Marcus.

“Go on then,” Marcus allowed.

“They have stopped responding to *our* commands. They have overrun the senate and my residence. The four of us are the only political leaders left free thinking,” the President admitted, “Forty percent of the army *are* networked but we kept several divisions tech free as a safety precaution: they have nowhere to go. We have an offer for you,”

“So you want to bring them here?” Malcolm reasoned.

“Under whom?” Marcus added.

“As the are my army, they will remain under my control. But I will be under yours,” The President finished.

“How do you mean stopped responding?” Malcolm asked.

“Not only do they now ignore external commands, they have started to break through internal repressions from old commands,” the aid explained.

“Like the one you used to make them ignore us?” Marcus quipped.



“I am impressed. But *that* particular command is quite old. They may not become aware of you for some time yet, if at all,” the aid added.

“Thanks to the encryption you stole from my term paper,” Marcus replied.

“You are much better informed than I would have thought,” the aid commented.

*“How can smart people be so stupid?”* rang through Marcus’s and Malcolm’s mind.

Marcus reacted first, “Would I be correct in assuming all of you will be wanting to remain here?”

“That would have to be part of our agreement,” the President replied.

“Excellent. Have the president’s aid escorted back to a helicopter,” Marcus ordered.

“Excuse me?” The aid balked.

“Our condition on starting any negotiations is that *your* aid be return to *your* residence,” Marcus explained.

“That is absolutely out of the question. He would be forcibly implanted on arrival,” The President was trying to intimidate the Twins again, this time he failed.

“It isn’t open to negotiation,” Marcus stated, “We know everything you think you are bringing to us already, perhaps more.”

“The mastermind of JoinThink, should really be part of his masterpiece if *we* are going to remain impartial,” Malcolm added.

“Oh, you two think you’re very clever don’t you?” The aid was surprised by their intelligence on JoinThink, he was not concealing it well.

“Not at all. But as you say; smart people can be very stupid,” Marcus smirked.

“But we aren’t *dumb enough* to harbour the only person being sort by JoinThink by name,” Malcolm added.

“And you think it’s me?” The aid enquired.

“You *are* Joseph Trimm, are you not?,” Marcus replied, “You *did* pioneer the command interface and tested it on Malcolm *did you not?*”

“Drilled it into my head sounds more like it,” Malcolm finished.

“They think that once that have you, they will be free to do what they want,” Marcus added, “That’s completely wrong isn’t it? You designed those chips so no-one connected could ever break free?”

“So who are we to keep you from them,” Malcolm shrugged.

“This is out of the question!” The President shrieked.

“It *is* you’re choice; he goes or...” Marcus began

“Or you all do,” Malcolm interrupted. Marcus smiled at the sabre-rattling.

The face of the President dropped, “You can’t be serious, Joseph Trimm is my top advisor?”

“Whatever his title is, it was extremely stupid to bring the man that executed *our* parent while asking for *our* help,” Malcolm replied.

“Major, shackle the president’s aid and have him sent back to the Presidential residence in an automated unit. Make sure he takes at least ten hours to arrive, and send a wideband broadcast that we have rejected his admittance,” Marcus announced.

The officers surrounding them advanced upon the aid. He started screaming abuse at both the President and the Twins, the President stood impotently.

“Lieutenant, I have a slight head ache.” Malcolm added.

A small electric spark plug was pressed against the aids neck; he immediately went limp and silent. The President watch as his aid was dragged out of the corridor without another word.

“You just won your amnesty Mr President,” Malcolm leered.

“Have your forces regroup within our boarders. Instruct them to submit to implant screening and to prepare for re-outfitting in allied colours,” Marcus detailed. “And make sure they surrender any foreign communications equipment before entering our territory.”

“Why?” The President finally spoke.

“Our target drones are designed to hone in on all non affiliated communication,” Malcolm explained, “If you haven’t realised. *We* are at war.”

“Baxter and Grimois will see to your needs,” Marcus yawned. “We’ll meet you in the briefing room at eight o’clock.”

Marcus and Malcolm walked away, returning to their beds. Malcolm called from a slight way down the corridor.

“Baxter, Grimois! Both of you outrank him. Make sure he doesn’t forget!” Malcolm announced.

Baxter and Grimois turned back to the President in giddy abandon.

“Follow us Mr President!” Grimois said, almost singing. “What *is* you’re real name anyway?”

“David Drummond,” Baxter replied.

## Chapter 9 – The dreaming giant

Sweet euphoria spread throughout JoinThink at the advent of Sharing technology. Experience and sensation empowered members to enter memories and experiences from other people. It was addictive. It was blissful. Travel was no longer needed and advanced skills became common. Anyone could be anywhere anyone else was, at the blink of an eye. Pleasure ran as if on tap, progress soared. Every *Joinling* was a plumber, a statistician, an electrician, a neurosurgeon and a hairdresser when they needed to be. School became pointless; childhood became pointless. Banks shut down, clocks were stopped, money died.

Medical advancement was top priority. No longer caring about people outside JoinThink, the Thorlows, still unspeakable, were left to their isolation. Implantation conquest had ceased with the final capture and implantation of Joseph Trimm. JoinThink had haemorrhaged to over six billion heads. Isolated countries were left alone for the most part; as long as they did not attack or possess something desirable.

Simple brains, stupid people and childish thought were targeted first for eradication. Most underwent extreme restructuring; the formation of a forced *preferred style building* division went ahead without protest. Radical brilliance was revered and elevated for a short time, until an underlying group jealously overwhelmed the command systems; genius became research and was dissected for the advancement of the majority.

Food production became mundane and solely nutrition based. Only one *tastes division* remained to provide a small number of JoinThinkers with an array of culinary interests for use in satisfaction of all.

Music, painting, writing, and all artistic expression stopped instantly; trillions of gigabytes of music was already available through the internet, which now seemed redundant compared to JoinThink.

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An original command to ignore all data concerning the twins remained hardwired into the basic programming of every unit created from JoinThinker technology. The oversight, similar to the one that got implants forced on all politicians, did not function as it was originally intended. Instead of enforcing support of government ideals, it resulted in the Thorlows and anything directly associated with them being invisible to the JoinThink society. Nothing less than a complete overhaul of their most basic technology would allow them to locate any information about their ‘founding fathers’.

Requiring constant advancement to keep up, the twins spent their time exclusively stealing new innovations and technology blueprints. Falling even one day behind would be dangerous with the current rates of technological advancement; without it the alliance would have been easy picking for JoinThink conquest. Finally, Malcolm designed an ingenious unit to download new information through himself and Marcus while they slept, leaving their waking hours free for more productive tasks.

Increasingly unlikely that the communications network of the entire planet was vulnerable to attack. They discovered that many of the JoinThinker’s were now completely reliant on the network: one child they managed to disconnect at seven months old had almost died due to asphyxiation. Later they realised that he had never learned how to breath without network support. It was Grimois who finally made a discovery that would give them a chance to survive. JoinThink had dedicated extreme bandwidth to keep their population breathing in real time; the developers had unintentionally made

themselves dependant on concentrations diamond deposits in the planet crust. Realising the limitations of being reliant on the planet; the alliance had a possible escape.

“Where will we find enough oar to start a space program Grimois?” Marcus balked.

“I don’t know. But if the only safe place we have to go is up, we have to try,” Grimois explained.

“Grim, leave it with us, we will try,” Malcolm smiled.

Pursuant to his discovery it became clear, that with resources limited as they were, a space program of the magnitude to move their entire population would be impossible. At least it would for the alliance. A recent vulnerability in JoinThink to large-scale group emotion gave Malcolm ideas. He went to work on a plan to have their own escape route built by the very people they would be trying to escape. When he finally let Marcus know, much of the work had already been prepared.

The twins had noticed from the beginning that shared fear within JoinThink was increasingly prominent. One feeling every member seemed to share and add too, even if they did not know it, was that each person held a fear of death. Imagined shadows and threats were surreptitiously growing as motivation for Joinlings to work harder, longer and smarter. None of them realised that they were becoming slaves to fear. Malcolm did.

Taking advantage of their isolation, Malcolm decided to start placing minor disturbances throughout the JoinThink divisions. Each was entered independently as an isolated possibility; the intension was for all disturbances would eventually join together to create mass group panic. Once Marcus was brought to the table, he suggested adding more fuel to the fire and spend several weeks tainting output

devises from sensor systems. He redesigned system software to overestimate dangerous probabilities in the space surrounding the planet; collisions, solar flairs, global warming. By the time the boys were complete, JoinThink had been moulted into a giant hypochondriac with a multitude of Armageddon complex's.

It was not long before the twins were recorded several proposals from every JoinThink division to assist survive. Owing to another *small* push from Marcus and Malcolm, the only proposal actioned was to establish a massive off planet colony; the moon was suggested. The decision unanimous; every mind and body on the network dropped everything and started to design and build emergency evacuation vessels.

“So all you did was scare them into doing what you want?” Grimois scoffed, “You’re just a couple of mutant bullies then.”

“Well when you put it that way...” Marcus started.

“The simplest methods are usually the best,” Malcolm finished.

“The second they move outside the gravity well of the planet they’ll lose the Network,” replied Grimois.

“And then what? We have no idea what they will do without the implants,” Drummond bellowed.

“We have some idea, and it isn’t going to matter anyway. None of them will be on any of them,” Malcolm answered, “They are only building them for an emergency.”



“What good does that do us?” Drummond demanded.

“David, you are not a president any more, you’re a council member. Be quiet and let Malcolm speak,” Grimois shook his head like a kindergarten teacher.

“We’ve *engineered* it so two of the super-carriers they have planned will be built on our western boarder. The best we can figure; if an all out war goes sour, we take the ships and provoke them to follow us. Once they leave the gravity well, they will die,” Marcus explained. “This gives us two options. We stay on board and keep going. Or, we use their dead ships to collide with the rest of their surviving cities. Take out as many of them as possible and try to turn a war back to our favour.”

“And how do we get on-board?” Drummond mocked.

“If you at least read your briefing, you’d see the blueprints and control codes are already in there,” Baxter shot.

“What about the allied nations?” Cedric asked.

“We have tried to divert as many of the building sights as close to allied borders as possible, but I don’t think it will help them very much,” Malcolm sighed, “the ships are designed to only accept JoinThink commands. They can’t pilot them.”

“This plan doesn’t sound too appealing boys,” Cedric said.

“No, but this is only a precaution,” Marcus shook his head, “if a war effort collapsed.”

“It is a 1 in 2000 escape option; a fallout shelter,” Cedric sighed.

“In every projection of a war, we are overrun in 63 days. The allied nations in 17,” Malcolm announced, Marcus glared at him, “and I wasn’t meant to tell you that.”

“63 days!?” Baxter scoffed.

“That’s assuming they implant everyone as they go,” Marcus seared, “I doubt they will. But if we lead by faking first strike, they will send twenty percent of their troops away on these ships. The second they leave the gravity well, they *will* die, Malcolm and I can then redirect the ships back at the surface to collide with their cities,” Marcus explained, “and at least some civilians will be out at a safe distance during the fight. But I will offer the allies an option to send people here to be on board.”

“What chance does it give us?” Cedric asked.

“Thirty percent,” Malcolm whispered.

“Thirty percent!” Drummond Demanded.

“Every one of their people is anything they need them to be! We’re out classed and out numbered,” Malcolm growled, “We have 400 strategists working in our entire alliance, every JoinThinker is a master strategist. We have 50000 advanced combat troops, every JoinThinker is the collection of every combat style any one of them knows.”

“How do we know they haven’t overcome the need of the planet?” Baxter asked.

“Luck,” Grimois answered, “I only found out because one of our jammers was overloaded when we tested it near them.”

“They don’t know,” Malcolm added, “they don’t use jamming technology, they think their buffers are better than they actually are. There are no mineral deposits included in the blue prints.”

“So thirty percent?” Cedric smiled.

“For now,” Marcus grinned, “but once we leave the surface, neural shock transmitters can use the deposits to knock out a lot of them too.”

“But because they have so many, they will be able to buffer against them, until, they block them completely,” Malcolm frowned, “But if we time it right, that number might get as high as fifty percent.”

“That sound’s better already,” Grimois grinned.

**Part Three**

## Chapter 10 – The hammer falls.

Summers of rain passed three times before JoinThink set upon them. It was any other clear-sky autumn day, a small blonde boy raised his hand to the sky to point out a soaring bird. As his mother and father raised their heads the projectile burst into light above them; filling the sky with smoke. The mirky fog sat ominously still for a moment, then from it's midst belched a swarm of rainbow lines, diving in every direction, detonating around the city.

Disarray clenched the base; the Thorlows flew from their beds at the sound of the first explosion. They watched from a window. Most buildings were fine, but their equipment hangers were taking an immense beating. Tanks, planes and ammunition stores were gone in an instant. Personal clamoured to shelters and basements. They could clearly see Cedric down in the chaos directing people to safety. The twins starred frozen.

As quickly as it began, it was over. Startled to life by the lull, the twins sprinted to the operations room. Arriving still in their boxers, they dove into the turmoil and commanded calm.

“Quiet!” Malcolm screamed, “What are we looking at?”

“Radar stations are quiet,” one Captain checked in.

“No response from ground equipment,” Baxter yelled from her seat surrounded by computer consols.

“Which division?” Marcus balked.

“All divisions, transponders and GPS,” Baxter answered.

“Ridiculous! There are over 17000, the station must be faulty,” Marcus announced.

“Three echo stations have confirmed,” Baxter replied.

“Satellite imaging in,” Captain Felier announced. Marcus, Malcolm and Baxter ran over to the station.

“Put it on the wall projector!” Cedric yelled as he entered the room. The twins watched, as their grim faced Colonel sailed into authority. The projector flickered on and the downloaded footage filled the wall, “You two should be in the control bunker!”

“There’s no point,” Malcolm replied.

Silence broke as the picture filled the wall. The satellite image of their territory was alight. Bases, supply stores and machine hangers were all smoky and burning.

“Freeze feed and reverse to ten seconds before the first detonation,” Cedric ordered, “What are you two getting?” he starred at the Twins.

“Nothing but rubbish. Every frequency is streaming music,” Marcus blinked.

“What about the JoinThink frequencies?” Grimois squeaked.

“Music... All music,” Marcus’ eye’s were shut, “All the same music.”

“What music,” Cedric’s eyes had widened, “what’s the beat?”

“4/3 time,” Malcolm replied.

“It’s encryption!” Marcus yelled, “They’re overloading the bandwidth to prevent external access.”

Another satellite picture appeared on the wall, ten second before the bombing, the western sky was filled with tiny dots of white light. The control room starred in silence.

“Count them, I need an exact count?” Cedric yelled.

“17628,” Marcus still had his eye’s closed, “I’m in.” Malcolm looked up in surprise.

“The consol was right, one for every ground unit, plus twelve armed with decoy chaff.”

“What channel are you using?” Malcolm eyeballed him.

“I’m piggybacking the command frequency,” Marcus shot, “They’re ignoring the other states, they used every launcher they had at once to disable us. The attack was timed to launch using cascade mathematics, each launcher fired to cause impact at the same time,” Marcus’ face opened in surprise, “I’m getting, no... wait... They’re sending us a message.”

“The music’s stopped,” Malcolm added.

“Confirmed, channels indicate a directed audio broadcast,” the Captain announced.

“Put it on speakers,” Cedric stated.

A controlled dry female voice monotone through the room, “Prepare for my arrival, I shall wish to speak with the Thorlow twin; Marcus.” The message cut off. It took the Captain a moment to notice the sudden appearance of a dot on his live feed. Cedric went noticeably pale on hearing the announcement

“Sir,” the Captain shouted, “incoming enemy carrier, fast!”

“It’s her,” Marcus blinked.

“She knows you?” Cedric asked, his voice shaking.

“How can they be aware of us?” Malcolm begged. Marcus’s eyes were shut, he did not notice that all attention in the room was on him, upon opening his eyes he jumped slightly.

“What?” Marcus asked sheepishly.

“They know about us!” Malcolm repeated.

“I know,” Marcus replied plainly, “I heard her too.”

“And?” Malcolm demanded.

“Well obviously they have cracked the encryption. It was only a matter of time,” Marcus stated.

“How?” Malcolm demanded.

“I don’t know,” Marcus shouted, “a spider virus is making it’s way through the system, it must be debugging the chips.”

“So, what do we do?” Malcolm requested.

“We meet her,” Marcus shrugged, “what else can we do?”

“Boys, this is a mistake. We should not let her onto the base,” Cedric warned.

“No, let her come,” Marcus replied. “We need time. They won’t attack again until they either get or don’t get what they want.”

“Which is?” Cedric asked.

“Me, I’d assume,” Marcus shrugged, “or at least a sample of me.”

“That’d be right,” Baxter gasped, “they’d have nothing on Marcus, except a few observations from Timms.”

“We can buy them off with DNA for now,” Marcus smiled, “It should buy us at least 24 hours.”



“We can’t, they can’t get your DNA!” Cedric shouted.

“I never said mine,” Marcus grinned, Malcolm joined him, “their medical technology is extremely advanced, but it will still take them a few days, maybe even weeks to realise they don’t have my sample.”

“Whose do we give them?” Cedric asked.

“Malcolm’s,” Marcus shrugged. “They already have it. Can’t hurt to give them a little more.”

“And what do we do with 24 hours?” Cedric demanded.

“We attack back...” Malcolm grinned.

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An aged lady stepped down from the carrier jet onto the tarmac. She wore a plain grey dress cut off at the knee, no makeup, her hair was neatly trimmed and held off her face with a small band. Her posture was perfect and her carriage was strong: too strong for someone whose face looked at least 80. Seeming almost mechanical, her head surveyed the base slowly before she proceeded to the welcome party.

As she met the guards she took time to appraise each individual and their armaments before even acknowledging the officer. She looked at him expectantly and waited.

“Follow me,” the Lieutenant turned.

Marcus and Malcolm were waiting in the briefing room alone. Cedric had elected to remain in the command centre with Baxter and Grimois to deal with the attack damage. The twins appeared to be waiting quietly. Seated at the head of the table they had both changed to wear matching backwards baseball caps, long sleeve shirts, pants, and gloves. All defining markings were covered by the clothes, especially Malcolm’s surgical scars.

The woman walked purposefully towards the room and let herself through the doors.

“Marcus Thorlow?” she questioned looking rapidly between them.

“Yes?” Malcolm answered.

“You are to accompany me back immediately,” she announced to Malcolm.

“Haven’t had much use for social nuance lately?” Marcus asked mockingly.

“No,” she answered.

“Well then, first lesson, it is polite to introduce yourself before demanding a hostage,” Marcus mocked.

“I am well aware of sarcasm. You are trying to waste time. Talk is not necessary, you know my intention,” she announced.

“What is your name,” Malcolm demanded. The woman stared at him for a moment, as if preparing defiance.

“Anne Lavers,” Anne replied.

“Sit down Anne,” Malcolm stated. “We still rely on speech.”

Anne seemed extremely amiable to orders, her will to defy would show for a moment, but quickly she would become docile and accept. With a defiant glance, then a polite trance, she sat.

“What are you’re terms?” Malcolm demanded.

“You will join me now, you have no means of negotiation. You will join me now or we will continue our attack,” Anne announced.

“That is a lie,” Marcus replied, “You’re missile attack platforms are exhausted and it will take at least six hours to reload enough to break through our counter measures again.”

Anne was surprised briefly, “Joseph Timms warns me not to underestimate you,” Anne smiled, “You have broken into our systems. This is not unexpected, our encryption sequences have now changed, you no longer have access.”

“Wrong!” Malcolm chortled, “this morning we were caught off guard. Even without heavy ground forces we can hold you off. Our missile platforms are completely intact.”

“Our projections show you will be able to withstand our forces for three weeks at maximum. Your only option is surrender. In exchange for Marcus Thorlow, we will spare this community and your allies,” Anne informed.

“For how long?” Marcus smiled. “If we give you Marcus how long will it take for you to overrun us?”

“You have no choice, you are clearly the inferior force. Battle will only cost needless lives. We have spared your personnel as much as possible, we clearly mean to avoid death,” Anne explained.

“Inferior?” Malcolm balked, “How aware are you of my talents? Surely you realise it is us who have spared you?”

Anne sat defiantly, “You are one mind, we are in excess of six billion, you can not attempt to intimidate me. I may look like you, but I have the thoughts and minds of JoinThink at my disposal, you cannot hope to prevail.”

Marcus focused his thoughts and prepared to block off Anne’s mind from JoinThink.

“Now you do,” Marcus opened his eyes and Malcolm feigned concentration, “Now you don’t!”

Anne gasped sharply, as if someone had removed her clothes and left her in a frozen breeze. She clutched and groped at the table, unable to breath or focus, she looked almost like she was having a seizure. As she stared at them in horror, Marcus released his hold and she gasped in air.

“You’re intension was perfectly clear when you arrived,” Malcolm announced to Anne as she neatened herself into composure. “You told us that you wanted me, we even found out that you know nearly nothing about my abilities. Your thoughts are open to us Anne!”

“We knew your abilities had protected your brother since birth, your brain is different to his. You have not done anything unexpected,” Anne had still not recovered her breath.

“Please stop lying, we broke your new encryption before you had put it in place,” Marcus droned, “JoinThink is terrified, we know, you all are afraid of disconnection.”

“Fine, I admit surprise, you exceed the projections. But it is of no consequence, you still must return,” Anne stated.

“No,” Malcolm replied, “We shall compromise. I will give you a sample of my DNA, you will give us ten of your super carriers.”

“I am not here to compromise, when our systems are reloaded, if you have not returned with me, we will destroy you.” Anne announced proudly, still shocked by his knowledge of the super carriers.

“Another lie!” Marcus shook his head, “here is our counter; you accept this offer now, or, we show you just how advanced Marcus is.”

“Of course you are welcome to remain here to observe the attack,” Malcolm smiled.

Anne shut her eyes for a moment, she was furious. Terror threatened to overcome her as she connected completely, Marcus could see her fighting it.

“Your offer is acceptable,” Anne said suddenly.

“Good,” Marcus smiled. He shut his eyes and sent a copy of the ships they wanted to her, she again stared in surprise, “Have them evacuated and 90km clear of troops within two hours.”

“Understood,” Anne nodded curtly.

Malcolm grabbed a bag from next to his chair and withdrew a sample kit. He swabbed his mouth with a small stick and placed it in a bag, then plucked several hairs and put them in a jar. Anne watched greedily, and then looked to Marcus expectantly.

“You next,” Anne announced.

Acting as rapidly as possible, Marcus shut her connection down and jumped across Malcolm to swap chairs. Malcolm followed.

“Was that necessary,” Anne gasped.

Marcus pretended to recover from a sneeze, “Sorry about that, must be your proximity. I am not around JoinThinker’s often,” Marcus smiled.

The blinding shock caused by disconnection, worked, she did not suspect subderfuge.

Malcolm repeated the swabbing and hair procedure, finally pushing the full bag across the table. Anne snatched them up quickly; Marcus felt an odd anticipation emanate from her connection.

“Good day!” Anne snapped, and stood to leave, smashing the chair into the wall behind her.

“Until next time,” Marcus grinned waiving.

Anne turned on her heels and walked out.

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Back in the command centre the news was grave. Having realised their own transponders had betrayed them; Cedric was still at a loss for how to retaliate. Marcus and Malcolm walked in, shedding layers of clothes as they moved.

“That was awful,” Marcus sighed.

“They are going to realise they are both from Malcolm within hours,” Cedric shook his head.

“Only because they took both samples,” Malcolm defended.

“An hour is all we need anyway,” Marcus announced.

“For what?” Cedric balked.

“For us to finally have a chance,” Marcus smiled. “Baxter, I want you to take Malcolm and work on finding the top hundred locations for strikes. But use the JoinThink family tree archive; I want each locations where the largest number of families will loose at least one member.”

“What?” Baxter and Cedric spat.

“They’re civilians,” Cedric balked.

“Weren’t you watching, no-one is a civilian, every one of them is capable of anything,” Marcus returned. “When we disconnected her, JoinThink panicked, the grief started almost instantly. I checked the system, there has not been an unexpected death on the network in six years,” Malcolm finally clued into the plan.

“You want to traumatise the entire network?” Malcolm smiled.

“How?” Cedric scoffed.

“Imagine the loss to a family with just one dead son; Mother distraught, father distraught, friends, lovers. And that is here where we separated by our bodies. One person there is an intricate part of hundreds of minds that are closest to him. What do you think will happen when all of that intimacy is lost, then times it by 100000!” Marcus explained.

“That is fine, but *how* do we get through?” Cedric stressed.



“Countermeasures!” Marcus shot. “Grimois!” Marcus called. “The missiles in our defence grid are identical to the ones in our attack grid right?”

“Well no,” Grimois shook his head, “The software is compl.....” Grimois trailed off, realising the plan.

“I need you to set up a software update within the hour,” Marcus explained. “Every loaded system needs to be have attack software before that DNA is recognised.”

“Marcus, we’ll be defenceless,” Cedric boomed.

“For three hours,” Marcus said sarcastically. “The defence platforms have reloading supplies on site. You heard her, they wont be back up for six hours.”

“And when they are?” Cedric asked.

“I doubt they will be any time soon,” Marcus shrugged, “Damned if we do, damned if we don’t. Two hours isn’t enough time to get to those ships. Let alone install a physical interface. This will buy us months! Maybe even give us the advantage...”

Cedric considered the prospect for a moment, longing crossed is face; Marcus had him convinced.

“Contact everyone, let them know they will need to be ready for a possible ground assault. Tell them to rip out all GPS units and tracking transponders from all of their ground vehicles... and air,” Cedric ordered.

The room was busy at work when Grimois came in carrying a small computer.

“Done!” Grimois beamed, “It’s dirty, but it will make them swarm together before they attack anything. You need to send it though Marcus.”

“Why?” Marcus starred.

“We’re the only one with the frequencies to the allied systems,” Malcolm cut in.

“Oh yeah,” Marcus realised.

Marcus starred at the computer for a second, the networking lights on its screen blinked rapidly. Marcus then closed his eyes and stood comatose on the spot for over ten minutes; he looked like a statue holding a computer.

Coming around, Marcus looked around the room.

“What are the odds?” Marcus thought to Malcolm.

“Baxter projected that only five percent of the missiles will make it through,” Malcolm thought back.

“What if we were completely online during the strike?” Marcus thought to him.

“Doing what exactly?” Malcolm thought.

“Behaving like a bull in a china shop,” Marcus smirked.

“It would get their attention,” Malcolm raised his eyebrows.

Cedric looked at them both curiously.

“We’re as ready as we’ll ever be. What are you two planning?” Cedric had come over to them, followed by Grimois.

“We’re going to go openly online; share directly with JoinThink. We think it may overload a few of their safety systems,” Malcolm shrugged.

“What’s the danger to you?” Cedric asked.

“No idea,” Marcus said plainly, “They won’t be able to give us commands, but they may steal a few memories.”

“How many is a few?” Cedric returned.

“Depends how long we stay connected,” Marcus answered, expecting rebuke.

“Fine, but not until I say,” Cedric whispered. “And be extremely careful!”

“What about the command codes?” Gromois warned.

“Scramble them,” Malcolm replied, “Get everything switched to one of the emergency back-ups before we fire.”

“You wrote the emergency back ups,” Grimois added.

“If you activate them, we wont know what you’ve used grim,” Marcus explained.

Grimois nodded and trotted away to his consol. Tension in the room grow as the clocks ticked closer to the attack. By the time each station was prepared, reporting voices were shaking ass they spoke.

“All stations report ready Colonel,” Captain Felier trembled.

“Fire,” Cedric commanded.

Miles away hundreds of hidden instalments cranked to life, releasing their arsenal; the missiles at first leaving slowly allowing time for their later companions to catch up before arriving at the target. The wall screen in the base lit up, every section seemed covered with dots; a deadly flocks of seagulls. They watched as enemy dots light up in response; too few to stop them.

Marcus and Malcolm listened as JoinThink calculated their odds; the result was fear. Panic was enough to unestablished joint thought direction; projections of trajectory were lost in the turmoil as minds thought towards shelter and safety.

“Now boys!” said Cedric as the first red dots came close to the blue.

The room watched as the twins lay flat on the ground. For a moment they looked to be sleeping, but soon were twitching, eyelids drawn to blank expressions. The red dots shuddered, and many simply flew through the white.

“Marcus! Malcolm!” Cedric yelled, shaking the boys back to consciousness.

Marcus woke suddenly. He startled out of the stupor and sat up straight.

“Scramble all alliance codes to third back up!” Marcus shouted.

“Malcolm,” Cedric yelled, grasping Malcolm’s shoulders. “Malcolm!” He yelled again giving him a shake.

“Malcolm,” Marcus realised, launching over to his brother’s side, immense focus in his face.

“Malcolm!” Marcus screamed.

Marcus sat at Malcolm’s side, holding both hands.

Malcolm startled, choking for breath. Marcus’ eyes widened.

“Get a medic!” Marcus screamed.

Malcolm convulsed on the floor for a moment and then stopped; like a caught fish.

Cedric checked his pulse and looked to Marcus.

“Nothing,” Cedric panicked.

Marcus did not hesitate, he started CPR: Pumping furiously at Malcolm’s chest and breathing into his mouth.

Thirty pumps two breaths. Thirty pumps two breaths. Thirty pumps two breaths. Thirty pumps two breaths. Thirty pumps two breaths. Thirty pumps two breaths. Thirty pumps two breaths. Thirty pumps two breaths. Thirty pumps two breaths. Thirty pumps two breaths. Thirty pumps two breaths. Thirty pumps two breaths. Thirty pumps two breaths. Thirty pumps two breaths. Thirty pumps two breaths.

The medical staff still had not arrived.

Marcus felt a hand on his side, as Cedric pushed him aside. Cedric took over; Thirty pumps two breaths.

Marcus looked over at Malcolm, he saw a trail of wet dots on his shirt: from a cluster of wetness over his left nipple and dots leading away to the neckline. He checked his cheeks, he was crying.

Four medical staff burst into the room, they had brought a bed and trolleys of equipment. They seized Malcolm off the ground and placed him on the bed, connecting various pieces of equipment to him. Within a minute he was connected and the machine had taken over. Marcus followed as they rushed him to the infirmary.

After trying to force him to wait outside, one of the doctors now was nursing a broken nose. Marcus stood in the surgical theatre, clumsily dressed in a green smock. All of the surgeons had no ideas; they stood around the table staring at Malcolm. Marcus pushed one of them out of the way.

“Just get him conscious!” Marcus demanded.

“We don’t even know what is wrong yet,” A nurse announced.

“He got stuck in a connection with JoinThink, they’ve done something to him,” Marcus boomed, “Wake him up and I’ll find out!”

“How do you propose we do that?” a coctor demanded.

“Not being a doctor, my guess would be a stimulant!” Marcus replied.

The coctor said something about Adrenalin. Marcus watched as a nurse found an enormous needle. After filling it with a golden syrup, she inserted it through Malcolm’s chest and into his heart.

Malcolm’s mind blinked slightly, Marcus felt it mind switch on. Malcolm didn’t move, but Marcus could hear him.

“Malcolm, what’s happened, what’s wrong?” Marcus thought.

“I can’t move, I can’t feel anything,” Malcolm thought

“Why?” Marcus replied.

“They took it away, when you left, I couldn’t stop them,” Malcolm was weak, his thoughts were faltering.

“Wait here, you have to stay alert! Focus! I’ll be right back.” Marcus thought opening his eyes.

Two doctors were standing next to him holding his arms, “What happened?” one asked.

“They’ve *taken* his motor functions, or something,” Marcus stuttered, shaking his head.

“How?” Cedric had entered the room.

“I don’t know, I think they’ve affected his Cerebellum. He is completely cut off from his body,” Marcus said, starting to cry again. Cedric looked over at Malcolm contemplating his options. Gritting his teeth he turned to Marcus.

“Marcus,” Cedric said seriously, “do you trust me?”

“Yes of course, what does that matter?” Marcus asked surprised.

“Promise me, when Malcolm is better you will give me a chance to explain,” Cedric requested, staring into Marcus’s eyes.

“What? Of course, I promise. Explain what?” Marcus quizzed.



Cedric walked over to stand above Malcolm's head. He pulled the plug out of the medical equipment and held up a hand to stop the doctors. Lowering his forehead until it was almost touching Malcolm's, he closed his eyes and focused. Within a moment, Malcolm gasped and flinched back into his body. Opening his eyes, Cedric stood slowly, reluctantly looking over at Marcus.

Marcus stared, "Who are you?"

## Chapter 11 – Stand off

Viscous intensity filled the room as the two wills met; Cedric had exposed himself, and Marcus was at a loss. Malcolm was breathing normally, but was still lying unconscious.

“Tell me,” Marcus said. “Now!”

“Marcus, let me explain,” Cedric was holding his hands up; pleading.

“That isn’t an answer,” Marcus shot.

“Think Marcus, have I ever done anything to hurt you?” Cedric tried.

“Why are you stalling, just tell me!” Marcus yelled.

“You promised you would let me explain. Malcolm is fine, now please give me a chance,” Cedric begged.

“You have five minutes!” Marcus allowed.

Grimois suddenly burst into the room; his eyes were ablaze.

“Marcus! Where is Marcus?” Grimois shouted. Locating Marcus at the back of the room glaring at Cedric, “Marcus! We need you upstairs now the Anne woman is back.”

Marcus looked at the ceiling in frustration, he sighed, “Never a break!” Marcus shook his head, “Take her to the briefing room. I’ll be up in a minute.” Grimois nodded, slightly taken aback by Marcus’s tone, he turned to leave, “Grim!” Marcus called, “How did we do?”

Grimois turned with a beaming smile, “All successful impacts. 93 percent of JoinThink families have suffered an immediate loss, 98percent secondary. That Anne woman looks awful!”

Marcus tried to smile, “Well done Grimois. Whatever we did to deserve you must have been good.”

Grimois twitched slightly with excitement; if he had a tail it would have been wagging wildly. His smile broadening, he left the surgical theatre with illustrious vigour.

Marcus turned back on Cedric, “You’re coming with me,” he ordered.

“Marcus, I don’t think that would be the best idea,” Cedric calmed.

“I really don’t care what you think right now,” Marcus balked. “I have just spent the last, however long, keeping Malcolm alive. We are at open war with the people that have been hunting for me for years; now one of them is here to threaten me for the second time today... Her upstairs, you down here, them out there; it sounds to me like I’m surrounded.”

“Marcus listen!” Cedric demanded.

“No!” Marcus shot, “You are not leaving my side until you explain your little... Episode... Back there.” Marcus was gesturing wildly, “I don’t know why! But I have a sneaking suspicion that *you* are the key too all of this.”

“Marcus, you have to understand...”

Marcus was irate, “Tell me who you are!”

“Just wait until Malcolm recovers,” Cedric pleaded.

“Fine,” Marcus shot, he shut his eyes and thought for a moment. Guards flew into the room to report to Marcus. “Bring him to the briefing room with me,” Marcus ordered the Captain, “the Colonel is temporarily relieved of duty.”

Cedric looked hurt, “Marcus, this isn’t necessary.”

“Maybe not, but I can’t deal with anything else right now,” Marcus blustered. “For all I know she is up there to take me back for dissecting, and I doubt hair will buy her off this time,” He turned to the Captain, “Bring him.”

Marcus ran one hand over Malcolm’s quiet body and headed out, the guards motioned Cedric and followed surrounding him.

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Anne paced around the briefing room like a caged beast. A loud glass crack startled her to acknowledge Marcus's arrival. She flew at him.

The guards, reacting swiftly, were upon her before she was three feet away. Easily deflecting them, the old woman launched again towards Marcus, dropping at his feet. Her eyes wet with sadness, she looked up at him.

"Please," she moaned. "Please, I can't take it. Disconnect me," she pled. "Too much pain. Please. Take it away."

Marcus stared at her, his mind was swimming with emotion. In all of his planning, he had never considered the pain he was about to cause these people. *Were their families within JoinThink now worse off the Anne Lavers?*

As if sensing the question she spoke, "we cannot cause self harm, we cannot stop the feelings. You win, please stop it."

Marcus felt his guilt overwhelm him and taking pity on the old woman he decided to help her. Marcus used his knowledge of the JoinThink connection to temporarily dampen the emotional connection frequencies of Anne's link.

As he did, a memory came out of the old grey haired man from his house on the day he lost his parents. Marcus could not understand why the thought of that day had surfaced now, after so long. He assumed that the grief he sensed was similar to how he felt that day.

Marcus looked down; Anne was not there. She had regained composure once Marcus had dampened her connection. He could not figure out how long his eyes had been shut. She was on her feet and over a metre away from him; her wide eyes stared in shock.

“You!” Anne growled. At first Marcus thought it meant him, but she seemed to be looking past him.

Marcus turn to find that Cedric had entered the room.

“Hello Anne,” Cedric nodded.

“You are dead!” Anne growled, “How could you have survived?”

Marcus realised that he must have extracted the image from Anne’s mind in the moment he had connected too her. He turned on one heal and faced Cedric.

“I recognise you too!” Marcus hissed, “You were in the house after they took Malcolm! You told the police you were Dr Thorlow. I heard you report back to them.” Marcus looked at Cedric, “That’s who you are!”

“You’ve been hiding all of this time Benjamin,” Anne announced from behind him.

“You were there?” Cedric asked Marcus, surprised.

“I sent the police, I needed to make sure the house was empty,” Marcus explained, “Secure them both!” He ordered the guards.

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Marcus sat at the head of the briefing table with a glass full of spirits. He kept wishing Malcolm were with him. His next hour would be the most trying time imaginable: sitting opposite him were the two people responsible for everything that had happened. What was worse, he would now have to decide what to do with them. Up until now, he had considered Cedric a close friend, but even that seemed to be a lie. Needing at least some support, Marcus had called upstairs for Baxter and Grimois to join them, but for all he knew they may not be who they seemed either.

Sipping from his glass as he waited, Baxter and Grimois finally approached the briefing room from the stairs. Baxter walked in and seated herself left of Marcus, Grimois took up the other side. Marcus looked slowly at each person around the table; he took another sip of his drink and started to speak.

“I am tired. I am very very tired,” Marcus sighed, “So I am only going to ask questions once, then I’m through,” Marcus turned to Cedric, “Cedric, first, I promised you a chance to explain, you’ll have it. But, at this moment, when we leave this room, I intend you to be implanted. I think you both know that I can take what I want from you if you are connected,” Marcus trailed off into a whisper, looking to Anne. “Then, you are going to tell me exactly how you know Cedric, or Benjamin. If you don’t, I am going to make you tell me.”

Cedric and Anne nodded together.

“Cedric,” Marcus sighed, “Who are you?”

Cedric sighed, “I am your Grandfather Marcus. I am Dr Benjamin Thorlow.”

Marcus sat calmly, silent, waiting for Cedric, or Benjamin, to explain.

“I was waiting in the house to find you. But if you don’t mind I’d like to start from the beginning,” Benjamin stated.

Marcus shrugged and nodded silently.

“Not many people know this, but I was born a twin, in the year with the largest number of electrical storms on record. An identical twin in fact, just like you Marcus. And just like you, my brother and I had a rather unique connection. We were inseparable, we learned things quickly, we worked together perfectly, and we could both hear radio’s without using a wireless. Funny thing about it was that I could turn it off when I wanted too and Blake couldn’t, so I had to help him a lot.

“When I was nine, Blake caught a disease called diphtheria and without penicillin he died. I lost the my soul mate at nine, so I spent the rest of my time searching for connection again in other people. When I couldn’t, I turned to the army. I did extremely well in the infantry, breaking channels and codes was easy for me and I was quickly promoted into intelligence. After several years, the war over, I fell in love with a scientist and told her my secrets. That woman is now sitting to my left. Together we started an isolated research group to study ways to extend my abilities. Being in a time before modern computing, we didn’t make much progress, but together we advanced communication technology unbelievably fast. But, my love never being returned, I became isolated again.



“Later, I met Jean Lewis and wanted children with her, but I knew our kids might be like me. So I kept our marriage quiet. None of my boys turned out to possess my abilities anyway, so it seemed needless and I moved them back to our family home. I stayed working with the government for years, but as digital technology came out, I found myself at a loss. I could hear the frequencies, but never learned to understand them. Learning a language, like you have Marcus, only really happens when you are young. So I couldn’t catch up. As my uses around the Base lessened, I tried to be more helpful. I soon realised that my only use left to my department was as an experiment, and they were edging closer and closer to gaining approval. So I had to protect myself.

“One morning I arrived at the base and found a young officer named Joseph Trimm. I recognised immediately that he was hired to follow me. So a long story short: I faked my own death, and started a new life as Cedric Bates. Thirty years later, now a colonel, a newspaper wrote about a young identical Twin named Marcus Thorlow solving an impossible problem. I knew, my old department would have been after you immediately. So I attempted to find you first. I went to the house, finding only a small task group, I used my authority to gain entry and left them tied together inside the basement. Where they may well sit to this day. Your parents and brother were already gone. I waited for you for two weeks; using codes I forced out of my captives to keep reporting in.

“I figured I had been too late. I tried for months to find you, to find evidence of my old department. But they were all long gone, and I was well out of date. Then one morning, months later, mission orders were offered for an external deployment. I couldn’t tell you what convinced me to volunteer, maybe the promise of classified information monitoring gave me some hope, but this man *choose* this mission, Marcus. And that brought me to you. Possibly one of the happiest moments of my life was meeting you in that office up-stairs. I knew it was you on the first glance, it was what I imagined Blake would look like at your age. I couldn’t bring myself to admit my stupidity, that it was me who brought this down

on you, and Malcolm. I hoped to never have to tell any you of this, but now I have. May I finally say, no man could be prouder of his grandchild, if it means anything? You do your father proud with every breath you take Marcus.”

Hope kindled within Marcus for the briefest moment; he liked what he was hearing. Not only might he have another living relative, but some of his own guilt at their predicament could be waylaid. ‘No,’ he thought, ‘it is too easy, there are too many questions.’ With the utmost effort he suppressed his feelings, reminding himself that a war was happening outside.

“How did you fix Malcolm?” Marcus said flatly.

“I shared with him,” Benjamin replied.

“No,” Marcus said, “you went beyond sharing, deep thought was never something we managed?”

“You perhaps didn’t,” Benjamin replied. “As I said, we didn’t have the distractions that you did. Our only connection was ourselves. We were always learning new and better ways to torture each other; it started with sharing visions and sound, then progressed to making legs go numb and giving each other the hiccups. We didn’t realise, at the time that we had done anything amazing; it was just one-upping. I could eventually make Blake sweat streams at the dinner table, and once in a running race he stopped my heart for a beat to beat me. Ironically.” Benjamin sighed, his face looked like a devastated nine year old.

Marcus could not afford to open his sympathy yet, he still had an unknown element to deal with. He choked down his growing affection and switched blankly to Anne.

“You,” Marcus shot, “do I have any reason to doubt his story?” Marcus wanted to trust Benjamin, but there was still every chance he had been placed here by this woman.

“No,” Anne replied, “much of his story accurately fits my recollections. I cannot gauge whether his childhood tales are factual, but his responses do not fit any known schema for human lying. I project 98 percent likelihood that he is recalling accurately, or accurately as he has been made to recall.”

“Did you calculate that level of accuracy about the DNA we gave you earlier?” Marcus jibed.

“There are no known schema for humans linked as you are,” Anne explained. “Any hesitations were suppositional and specious; my feelings were ignored.”

“And what were your feelings?” Marcus leaned forward.

“Shock. My central nervous system was still recovering from disconnection, subsequent analysis however, revealed an 87 percent chance of truth. Your lying skill is either well practiced, or, your genetic structure resolves to different autonomic responses; as yet uncatalogued,” Anne answered.

“Were you responsible for the capture of my parents?” Marcus interrogated.

“No,” Anne replied, “I requested them to be monitored until your capture, I was overruled.”

“By whom?” Marcus added.

“Me,” Grimois sighed.

“What?” Marcus spun around surprised.

“I placed a request for support documents on the language acquisition displayed by subject two. I needed it to start software coding. We were never told subjects were being tortured. I pressed a favour with the section chief, to help me finish first. He owed me for writing his daughters PHD program,” dejectedly, Grimois looked away.

Marcus frowned, “How did you send me a message from Malcolm?” He asked Anne, “When you took him?” He added.

“No message was ever sent to you,” Anne replied.

Cedric sheepishly raised his hand, “Would the message be; **I need to spend some time alone for a while, I don’t want you in my head?**”

“That’s it!” Marcus remembered those words as if they were tattooed on his eyelids.

“That was me,” Benjamin grimaced sheepishly. “After I read the paper, I tried to contact you both. But you were hidden too well and Malcolm was already gone. I sent out a message that would have gotten my attention if Blake had sent it. I used an encryption that I knew you could break, and I sent it with everything I had. I never knew either of you got it.”

“I did, it is what started me covering my tracks,” Marcus stuttered.

“It also explains why you were not in the hotel when our team arrived,” Anne added.

“So that leaves only one thing,” Marcus glared at Anne, “Why did you come back here?”

“For you,” Anne replied, “JoinThink is at an impasse: emotion or survival. The only answer *was* you. I came to offer your brothers survival for your own. Owing to your grandfather this is no longer an option. Fortunately, we have another.”

Without displaying any physical exertion, Anne snapped her handcuffs apart and in one exquisite movement; pulled an earring off and sunk a hidden point into Benjamin’s arm. She had reassumed her former position before any of the guards had a chance to respond.

Guns finally raised, the commanding guard stalked towards Anne, “Drop the earring and place the other on the floor!” he ordered.

“There is no point,” She announced, “It is done, he is infected and must return with me.”

The guards did not stand down. Anne took the earring off her other ear and threw it too the floor with the one in her hand.

“I have nothing else,” she announced in Marcus’s direction.

“What did you just do?” Marcus asked, “What was that?”

“An enhanced strain of bacterial meningococcal, if you would like to check, JoinThink file reference code 176Alpha984ak,” Anne replied, “it will progress to an air contagion within 27 minutes, and is fatal within 2 hours. As you will find in our files, the cure requires six weeks incubation; we carry a supply on base 217, flight time: one hour six minutes north.”

Marcus stared at Benjamin. His suspicion was gone, replaced with the devastation incited by the shocking attack. Marcus felt sick. Benjamin looked worse. Their reality was settling rapidly.

Anne stood, “Follow me to the carrier,” she announced.

“Wait! What makes you think he is going anywhere with you?” Marcus balked.

“You have no choice, if he remains, you will all be infected before nightfall,” Anne stared.

“Cedric, what do we do?” Marcus pleaded.

“We have no choice, Marcus,” Benjamin sighed. “Give us a moment alone...”

“Take the cuffs of him please,” Marcus requested.

Anne rose and sailed out of the room, surrounded by guards. Grimois and Baxter rose slowly and left. One guard remained to unlock Benjamin, taking the cuffs he followed the others. Benjamin and Marcus remained seated.

“I’m sorry boy,” Benjamin’s eyes started to water, “I was a lousy trust teacher, and I’ve cost you another family member.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Marcus grimaced, “you’ve been here through everything, and you gave me back Malcolm, twice.”

“Marcus,” Benjamin frowned, “Would you consent to sharing with me?”

“Sure,” Marcus chuckled, his eyes wet.

They both closed their eyes. Their bodies went limp in the chairs.

Marcus’ mind swam with feelings and thoughts for a second: he found himself standing opposite Benjamin. Their link grew exponentially, it was overwhelming; Marcus had never felt disembodiment like this before and Benjamin similarly euphoric. They had managed a connection with a totality neither had ever expected. Their minds joined completely; experience, memory, feeling and attention became a single entity. Marcus finally understood the term twin; his mind had found its equal.

“You’ve been alone for so long,” Marcus felt the need for words and found his voice was not merely his own.

“Yes, but that is just time,” Benjamin’s echoic voice surrounded them,

“Once they’ve inoculated you, use this frequency to contact us,” Marcus replied, but the need for thoughts left. Benjamin’s mind was part of his now.

Marcus felt memories of his grandfathers childhood flood his mind. Marcus tried to share back as much as he could, but Benjamin seemed intent on leading the flow. Several thoughts of Blake filled the space, and the years working with Anne flashed past. Marcus understood things speech would never have conveyed.

Benjamin started to close off, “share it with him.” It was the last thought before they woke in the briefing room.

Benjamin wiped his eyes clear and stood, “Take care boy!”

“You too,” Marcus stayed seated at the table.

Marcus could not raise his head to watch Benjamin leave. He heard the chair slide and soft, rhythmical padding on the carpet. As the door opened he heard the resumed sounds of Anne’s wailing now that she had reconnected with JoinThink. He ignored it.

“Do you remember that first drink we had Marcus?” Benjamin stood holding the door.

“I can’t think of anything else,” Marcus admitted to the table.

“Trust yourself Marcus. You did all of this,” Benjamin looked around at the building, “You’re a born leader Marcus, think extravagantly.”

“Goodbye Ben,” Marcus choked.



“Goodbye Cus,” Benjamin grimaced.

As Benjamin walking out off the room, Marcus heard Baxter start to sob.

“I have to leave. It’s been a privilege working with you.”

“Thanks Ced,” Grimois nodded, “For everything,” He added before he left. Baxter simply nodded curtly and left; tears falling around her cheeks.

Marcus could not look up, or move, he stayed in his chair. He soon heard the carrier jet lift of and blast away. He listened to the music Benjamin played on the flight. He watched as the jet collided with the command building at the JoinThink base.

Chapter 12 – Two trip home.

Malcolm waking was all of the impetus Marcus needed to make him finally leave the briefing table. Sudden and decisive he stood bolt upright, his chair flying into the wall behind him. Looking at his watch as he stalked the hall towards the command centre, he found that he had been in that chair all night. Morning's first shine trickled through skylights as he descended the steps into the bustle.

Officers scurried around the room checking readouts and making notes. Grimois was standing over Baxter at the control consol, he looked worried.

“Grimois, worry ages. I can't have a station commander old before his time,” Marcus announced.

“Sir?” Grimois questioned.

“Benjamin's job must be filled and you will be filling it. I need you to liase with the department heads and have a complete capacity briefing to me in an hour,” Marcus explained.

“Marcus, we finished the briefing three hours ago. There have been no changes,” Grimois replied, confused.

“Good, where is it?” Marcus asked, surprised.

Grimois handed him a small hand held box, it looked like a calculator.

“I assumed you wouldn't need paper, but I can print it out if you want,” Grimois humbled.

Marcus smiled, closing his eyes to read the reports.

“Excellent, keep the attack software if it works better, but I want all platforms with triple supply allocations by Friday. And I need suggestions on removing Malcolm and my access from our systems,” Marcus announced. “Confiscate as many civilian vehicles as we need to fill the supply quota’s, four wheeled drives, vans, trailers, whatever we need.”

“People aren’t going to be happy about loosing their car’s Marcus,” Baxter replied.

“After spending the morning under fire, I am sure we can find a way to convince them,” Marcus retorted.

“S..Sir, I d.don’t think it would be possible to remove your access from our systems,” Grimois stuttered.

“Just do it,” Marcus cut off, “We need cover.”

“For what?” Grimois begged.

“I need to see Malcolm now,” Marcus turned away and left the room.

Malcolm was sitting up in his bed eating oats when Marcus arrived. His face fell as when he noticed the look on his brother’s face.

“What now?” Malcolm queried.

“It isn’t good,” Marcus replied.

Pulling up a chair, Marcus set himself next to Malcolm for a long haul. After almost an hour, they had shared everything Benjamin gave him. Malcolm saw the memories of his grandfathers childhood, and watched the mirror images of themselves playing together in the early twenties.

“This isn’t your fault,” Malcolm finally said, “I would have done the same thing, he should have told us.”

“I’m not worried about blame Mal,” Marcus sighed, “If I really paid attention to guilt I would have lost my mind already.”

“What is it then?” Malcolm asked.

“It’s just sad we missed so much time,” Marcus answered solemnly.

“I wouldn’t think about it that way,” Malcolm placed his hand on Marcus’ shoulder. “We spent years together. If he had told us we might not have made it this far. You never know.”

“There’s something else,” Marcus looked away, “Take another look at the house he lived in.”

Malcolm closed his eyes for a moment. The surprise from what he saw knocked his eyes open to find Marcus.

“He was born where we were?” Malcolm quizzed.

“Yeah. What do you think about that?”

“I don’t know what to think,” Malcolm shook his head.

“I think this could be the reason none of your kids had any abilities...” Marcus trailed off.

“But wasn’t dad born there too?”

“No. Ced... Benjamine kept the family hidden until they after they were born, he only moved them when the didn’t have his abilities.”

“What are you saying?”

“I think we should go back there,” Marcus proposed.

“It’s a long shot, *and* close to the borders,” Malcolm warned.

“There is a chance JoinThink have enough information to figure this out now too,”

“How?” Malcolm gasped.

“They have access to all of the property records we do,” Marcus replied, “Anne was there when he told me.”

“But they must have know that for years?”

“They thought he was dead, and never knew he had a twin brother,”

“Surely they wouldn’t care about property records from eighty years ago?”

“Maybe not, but we should,” Marcus announced.

“What if it is just because of twins,” Malcolm tried.

“They might be testing that right now,”

“So what do we do?”

“We check out the house and then blow it to hell,” Marcus explained.

“Blow it to hell?” Malcolm squeaked.

“Sooner or later they’ll be interested in it. There would be no way to protect against a full scale assault on an isolated section of the outer border,” Marcus explained.

“No. That’s exactly why we shouldn’t. If we know they’ll go for it eventually, we can set a trap,” Malcolm announced.

“I doubt they could be that stupid,” Marcus smiled.

“Depends how well we play our parts,” Marcus smiled.

Within a week the convoy to their old house was ready to leave. A small team of forensic scientists, two substance experts, a radiologist, a geologist, three Doctors and one nuclear physicist were to accompany them. Baxter, deciding to join them at the last minute, she helped Malcolm carry his things from the building as his ribs were still bruised from the CPR. Grimois was staying behind.

“Will you two be alright flanking the others?” asked Captain Felier, their driver.

“We’ll be fine. What does the travel time look to be?” Marcus asked.

“Shouldn’t be more than six hours. There might still be damage from the attack last week,” Captain Felier replied.

The trip took nine hours in total, making the convoy of SUVs arrive at nightfall. Entering the dusty basement brought back memories the twins had not expected. Having left the house just after they had turned one, they did not think they would remember anything. But as they walked into the basement, the silence in their minds and the dusty regal décor made experiences flood them both.

“I remember learning to read in this room,” Marcus smiled.

“I remember drawing on this wall,” Malcolm grinned.

“I can’t believe this, we can’t’ve been more than one when we left,” Marcus gasped.

Malcolm’s thought came through in perfect clarity now; their link seemed stronger than ever.

“Do you feel that?” Malcolm whispered.

“All I can sense is you, it’s amazing...” Marcus trailed off.

“There has to be something here doing this,” Malcolm grinned. “How long will it take to test the soil?”

“Only two days to drill for core samples,” Marcus answered.

“Then what?”

“We take them back to study them,” Baxter replied, walking down the stairs. “Marcus, I think you and Malcolm should come to hear this.” Baxter gestured up-stairs and walked back up to the garden.

The geologist was standing in the overgrown wisteria bed, holding a rock the size of a golf ball.

“Guys, I want to introduce Dr Sarah Thike, ex-Yale professor of geology. She works in the university just off base,” Baxter explained. “Doctor, these two are Marcus and Malcolm Thorlow,” She gestured to them both in turn.

Marcus and Malcolm nodded, noticing that Dr Thike was quite elegant compared to what they expected for a geologist.



“What is it Doctor?” Malcolm asked.

“This rock, I have never seen any thing like it before. Here, take it,” Dr Thike offered.

Malcolm took the rock, the moment he did his mouth gaped. Marcus glanced over, Malcolm’s mind suddenly was gone. The doctor smiled.

“It seems warm, doesn’t it?” Dr Thike added, “It means it is somehow radioactive.”

“No, it isn’t that. I can’t sense anything,” Malcolm looked down at the rock.

“I can’t feel Malcolm at all,” Marcus added.

“These rocks are scattered everywhere on this property. More then likely there is a large deposit within the bed rock,” Dr Thike supposed.

“Is it dangerous?” Malcolm dropped the rock, Marcus mind appeared again instantly.

“I doubt it, especially if your family lived here for so long,” Dr Thike replied.

“It is quite heavy, which suggests high atomic mass doesn’t it?” Malcolm queried.

“Very good! Do you know much about Geology?” Dr Thike asked.

“No, just a scattered reading from textbooks,” Malcolm answered.

“Well I can’t be sure until we have taken some samples...” Dr Thike started.

Marcus cut her off, “Baxter, I want you to call in an excavation crew. We need them here now!”

“Marcus?” Malcolm asked.

“JoinThink noticed the signal disturbance, they’ve redirected twelve satellites to sweep for us,” Marcus turned to run for the house, “Baxter, get everyone inside. And call Grimois, tell him to expedite the demolitions crew. They have to be here by tomorrow,” Marcus was yelling over his shoulder as he entered the house.

“How did they detect us?” Malcolm demanded, as he caught up in the basement.

“They didn’t. When you touched that rock there it surged their system, I felt it too. You lit up on their network like a Christmas tree,” Marcus huffed, “They don’t know what it was, but it got their attention.”

“So what do we do?” Malcolm gasped.

“Follow the plan, I have a feeling that you just accidentally gave them the bait,” Marcus smiled.

The rest of the crew came filing into the basement carrying boxes. Baxter was the last to enter, staring at her phone as she walked down the stairs.

“My phone just cut out,” Baxter said confused.

“Nothing works down here,” Malcolm grinned, “Not even us.”

“Can you still hear each other?” Dr Thike asked.

“Yep, perfectly clear,” Marcus trilled. “Better than usual actually.”

“So that substance is in here... Or around here,” Dr Thike reasoned. “It can not only be radioactive, it also occludes energy.”

“Like lead?” Baxter asked.

“Considerably greater than lead,” Dr Thike replied.

“Who are the doctors?” Marcus asked Baxter. Baxter pointed over to a small group standing in the corner. Marcus gestured for them to come closer.

“Theoretically, what would happen to a foetus if it were exposed to radiation like this?” Marcus questioned.

“Without testing it is impossible to be certain. But if you two were born here, and so were similarly skilled progenitors. It is a possibility that prolonged exposure could cause your condition. As the neural plate develops in the first few weeks it utilises hundreds of different chemical combinations. At rapid growth stages, a small change to a sympathetic chemical could cause massive changes in resultant

development. Alcohol alone has been shown to cause massive effects if ingested at the wrong stages of gestation, especially if the intake is prolonged,” The doctor explained.

Marcus thought for a moment and turned back to Dr Thike.

“Why wouldn’t you have seen this before?” Marcus asked.

“Many reasons. Most probable is that it is an isolated source,” Dr Thike nodded.

“How is that possible?” Malcolm asked.

“Hundreds of ways,” Dr Thike shrugged. “Ever heard the expression; *there is nothing new under the sun?*”

Marcus and Malcolm nodded.

“Well, the planet is an isolated system; the only new things come off comets and meteorites. One possibility is that this was the site of a meteorite impact. Another is that it may be a natural vein that forms from specific elements below the surface and has taken centuries to surface. It also may be an unnatural phenomenon, forgotten or abandoned after an experiment. There is no way to be sure without proper testing,” Dr Thike shook her head.

“We’ll we should hope for option one. We need to take as much as we can then destroy the rest, any suggestions?” Marcus announced to the room.

“Destroying it may not be possible,” the nuclear physicist announced, “There is no way to be certain what the element will do under reactive conditions.”

“Then it is your job to find out,” Marcus ordered, “You have two days. At maximum. We will either destroy it, contaminate it, or booby-trap it; whatever the cost, JoinThink has to be kept away from it.”

“Yes sir, I’ll set up with what I have.”

A massive ground quake woke the Twins from their sleep at four o’clock the next morning. Ground crews had levelled the house within hours, and twelve industrial excavators laboured night and day over the ground. But the current noise was from none of their equipment. Baxter flew in through the zipper of the tent, panic-stricken. Captain Felier followed her calmly.

“They’re attacking the boarder outposts!” Baxter screamed.

Marcus and Malcolm responded to her by closing their eyes.

Malcolm’s eyes flew open and he stood, “Get everyone into their units, we’re leaving!” He ordered.

Captain Felier nodded and sped from the tent.

“Grimois has defence platforms tracking in, but the attack is concentrated on just this section of the border. We have no defence against an isolated attack, our ground units are still being rebuilt,” Baxter yelled.

Marcus stood, heading out of the tent “They’ve consolidated their stable personnel into a single assault group. The .001 percent of heads unaffected by our last attack have been isolated from the main think tank and sent to take the house.”

“How many?” Baxter asked, following at a trot.

“Over a million,” Marcus exclaimed.

“They must know we can still handle that,” Baxter stopped.

“The whole state could, but not a small abandoned town less than two kilometres from the border,” Malcolm explained.

“How long do we have?” Baxter begged through panicked eyes.

“Their forces are ten kilometres from the border. They’re holding. Waiting for the missile platforms to exhaust,” Malcolm explained, “27 minutes at the current exchange.”

“Isn’t this a little risky, if they’ve sent their only functioning heads against us? To mass that many they must have spent the last 24 hours grouping troops from every country in the world?” Baxter suggested.

“Exactly!” Marcus nodded.

“They know what we’re doing,” Malcolm added.

“Not everything,” Marcus reminded him.

“How far away is the catalytic agent?” Malcolm asked Baxter.

“It’s finished, but we’ve only had enough time to synthesise sixteen litres,” Baxter answered.

“What ratio will that yield?” Marcus asked.

“Only twelve percent of the substance will be destroyed,” Baxter replied, “But we have only managed to collect four tonnes for ourselves.”

“What are we calling it?” Malcolm asked.

“Dr Thike insisted on Thorlonium,” Baxter smiled.

“Fine. Have them place the agent in the centre of the mine area and arm the explosives for 40 minutes,”

“40?” Baxter and Malcolm exclaimed.

“We should be over ten kilometres away by then,” Marcus replied.

“16 litres can react with 7 tonnes, which equals... a 4000 degree exothermic reaction for six minutes. That might catch us too,” Malcolm figured.

“I doubt it,” Marcus scoffed, “The flash area might extend a kilometre or two at best.”

“How do you know?” Malcolm balked.

*“An introduction to Thermal dynamics, page 7: heat propagates in radial proportion to its instigation mass and temperature change,”* Marcus professed.

“And if it reacts exponentially?” Malcolm posed.

“A nuclear bomb doesn’t even go that far Malcolm,” Marcus jibed.

“What sort of damage do *you* expect?” Baxter requested.

“Hopefully most of their air and ground forces are in range by that point. The old free way is 200 meters north, even if they stop there to have the site checked, we’ll most likely get a good portion. That road is eight lanes wide; even at 60kph, 10km will only take them 10 minutes,” Marcus explained.

“What if they reach the site before the explosives go?” Malcolm asked.

“Captain Felier has been working with the demolition team since yesterday. The ‘booby-traps’ should look rushed and feeble, but will keep them far enough from the catalyst to let it detonate,” detailed Marcus.

“How do you know they’ll send them straight away?” Malcolm added.



“Use that mutant head of yours!” Marcus boomed, a flash of his mother crossed his mind. “They are JoinThink’s only active army! Do you *really* think they’ll leave them mobile any longer than they have too, what would you do?”

Malcolm looked hurt, the reminder of his mothers scalding tone made him grin slightly. Baxter stared at Marcus, she had never seen him loose his temper with Malcolm before.

“I’d move in as fast as possible to set up a perimeter, and deploy defence units,” Malcolm supposed.

“That’s what I figured too,” Marcus replied, “They would have checked satellite imaging for anything capable of large scale detonation.”

“And Thorlonium doesn’t register...” Baxter added; a mixture of realisation and awe.

“Bingo!” Marcus stopped next to their SUV, “We appear to be evacuating. They get burnt to cinders. We can always send another load of the catalyst back to destroy the rest later.”

“What if they follow us?” Malcolm asked.

“Then we *are* in trouble,” Marcus replied. “Our first short range SAM platforms are 100 kilometres away. In thirty minutes we wont even make 50 kilometres. Their planes can catch us in two minutes if they give chase”

“But they might not, they think you can disconnect them,” Malcolm announced.

“One problem at a time,” Marcus shook his head. “Why does bad news always interrupt sleep?”

Marcus climbed into the car with Malcolm and Baxter, waiting for Captain Felier to arrive. Within minutes Captain Felier and Dr Thike came running Towards the car.

“Dr Thike has requested permission to join this car Sirs,” Captain Felier boomed.

“That’s fine,” Malcolm waved him off.

Dr Thike jumped into the SUV, talking rapidly as she fastened her seat belt. Captain Felier started the engine, and radioed for the convoy to move out.

“Dr Nicoladies, the physicist, believes Thorlonium’s radioactive properties are conductive. Perhaps even generative. We tested it using a brief exposure to an electric current; the effect was exponential. The radiation spread in a radius 15 times its circumference with only 12 volts; every mobile phone in two meters went dead.”

“Stop!” Marcus ordered.

“What is it?” Malcolm asked.

“Radio demolition and have them disarm the detonators, ” Marcus ordered. “Let me out!”

Captain Felies mumbled into his radio, everyone else stared questioningly at Marcus. Marcus did not wait to explain. Flying out of the car, Marcus ran toward the evacuating excavation crews.

“Explain for me,” Marcus thought back to Malcolm.

Malcolm closed his eyes and a sly smirk grew across his lips. Turning back to the everyone, Malcolm open his eyes and shook his head.

“Drive,” Malcolm ordered.

“What is he doing?” Baxter requested.

“Running an experiment. How many generators did we leave?” Malcolm asked

“Six why?” Baxter answered.

“We are being given a chance to escape,” Malcolm explained, “Marcus thinks he has figured out why have mutated. He wants to test it.”

“What about Marcus?” Baxter gasped.

“If he is wrong, he will set the mine off himself,” Malcolm said calmly.

“What, that is crazy?” Baxter exclaimed.

“He knows what he’s doing,” Marcus announced.

Marcus sat on the lawn in a lounge chair waiting for the first JoinThink Troops to arrive. As thirteen carrier jets made a vertical landing on the road in front of the house, he felt his pulse quicken. Assembling precisely on the lawn several dozen JoinThink soldiers formed ranks before approaching the house. Marcus watched as two infantry approached the front of the pack carrying small silver guns with large needle protrusions stemming from their barrels.

Finally, the group approached Marcus.

“Stop!” Marcus called, holding up a small remote. “I am bait, as long as you leave my brother and the convoy alone, I will not detonate the mine I am sitting on.”

The group stopped instantly.

“You would kill yourself?” The left soldier carrying the silver gun asked.

“For my brother? In a second,” Marcus drawled.

“What will stop you from detonating the mine once he is safe?” the soldier asked.

“You’re just going to have to trust me,” Marcus shrugged.

“No. We will destroy your convoy now, our fighters will be in range in two minutes,” the soldier announced, “You will submit to implantation and your brother will be spared.”

“I know four Jet’s have been sent to destroy the convoy... Whoops, sorry three, one just crashed. Care to make it two?” Marcus smiled. The soldiers all glared at Marcus with identical stares. Marcus felt the command for the planes to retreat.

“We agree to allow your brother to escape capture and destruction, however, intimidation will not stop us taking this site,” the Soldier informed.

“No, but the Thorlonium might,” Marcus grinned.

“I have studied you deceptive techniques, and you are lying; there is nothing in existence called *Thorlonium*,” the Soldier announced.

“You are work exactly as I hoped; completely stuck behind known fact,” Marcus trilled.

“The extrapolated probabilities of ability to disconnect large groups are considered false. We have projected your capacity for signal at physical voltage limitations; you are capable of disconnecting three minds at one time at maximum,” the Soldier informed.

“Have you included an exponential carryover effect?” Marcus posed.

“Again, there is no such thing, you are wasting time,” said the Soldier.

Mornings first light broke over the horizon and lit their surroundings with a golden hue.

“We have time, Malcolm won’t reach the SAM zone for twelve minutes yet,” Marcus announced.

“Perhaps I should tell you a story...” he trailed off.

“Very well,” the Soldier accepted.

Marcus crossed one leg over the other and made himself more comfortable, “You see that large boulder sitting on the rubber insulation, connected to the two generators,” Marcus pointed at a rather rickety contraption. All of the JoinThink soldiers turned in unison, and then turned back.

“That’s what you have come for; it’s the same reason we were here too, by the way,” Marcus announced, “We decided to call it Thorlonium; mindlessly hedonistic I know, but we do have so little fun these days.

“Anyway, the story. My grandfather and us, had more in common than you or I realised. You see, things didn’t add up, we could only get any reaction from the Thorlonium without touching it, and I knew my mother wouldn’t have spent prolonged moments holding rocks whilst she was pregnant. Then I remembered something interesting my mother told me years ago, and put it together with something my grandfather mentioned just days ago. Storms have lightning.

“When my grandfather was born it was one of the stormiest seasons ever recorded, and low and behold, the first three months of my mothers pregnancy it was also storming. Do you know when most of the critical periods for brain development are?” Marcus asked.

“Between conception and eight weeks pregnant,” the Soldier answered.

“Excellent, gold star for you. The next part of the story happened just half an hour ago, when...”

Marcus trailed off as the soldiers started to approach him.

“Stop,” Marcus called.

“Our agreement is satisfied, your brother can no longer be reached before he reaches your SAM territory,”

“But my story?” Marcus requested.

“Your *story* will be extracted following implantation,” the Soldier continued to advance.

“Aren’t you going to shoot me first?” Marcus asked.

“You must be conscious for implantation to work effectively,” the soldier explained.

“Oh ok, but the end of my story says that this remote activates that generator, not the mine,” Marcus smiled, depressing the button. “Goodbye.”

Like dominoes the group of soldiers toppled sideways as the generators grumbled to life. Marcus’s mind went blissfully blank as every transmission frequency for miles collapsed. 90 Kilometres away Malcolm’s mind suddenly went blank aswell.

### Chapter 13 - The return of Mal and Cus.

A homecoming parade was thrown in honour of the Thorlow's return. News of a new technology to block JoinThink was everywhere. People had nicknamed it *AirNet* as a joke, but popular usage coined it into vogue. The original success of the field had knocked out communications across a 108 kilometre radius, disconnecting JoinThink's entire invasion army.

Dr Nicoladies, the Physicist, had warned them that such a high intensity field could be dangerous if it remains in use for too long. But suggestions had already been made for the creation of small-scale generators to be mounted on cell towers permanently, without risk to the population.

The Thorlows supported the idea, but were extremely quiet when people questioned them about what had happened inside JoinThink after the defeat. They were reluctant to reveal that their action had inspired a large amount of rage within the group mind, and that opinions to annihilate the alliance were becoming prominent.

"When enough of their population is cut off from their emotions, they are going to just wipe us out," Malcolm said when they were finally alone.

"They already have medical teams developing viral weapons to kill everyone," Marcus added.

"So we have only have until they manage to inoculate the JoinThink population," Malcolm finished. "If we don't do something to slow them down, or finish them for good, we're dead. Can't we try the same thing?"



“We’d loose, their production capacity is much greater than ours,” Marcus replied. “They could have their entire population inoculated within three years. Our only edge now is the Thorlonium.”

“What if we could get some in behind their lines?” Malcolm suggested. “Take out their production site?”

“I doubt we could get troops within 100 kilometres of New York,” Marcus sighed.

“I wasn’t talking about troops, I’m talking about us,” Malcolm proposed.

“You and me?” Marcus chuckled.

“No, Seriously. We could get in undetected, if we took a few small Thorlonium units and rigged them right, we could completely knock out the city. They’d have to start their viruses from scratch. It would at least give us an edge, we could steal as much of the inoculant as possible and bring it back.”

“I take it you’ve gone completely insane?” Marcus smiled.

“Completely,” Malcolm smiled.

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Grimois sat staring at them for five minutes after the had finished explaining their plan. Baxter stared at them both as if they were speaking in tongues.

“You can’t be serious,” Grimois finally spoke, “If Ced... Benjamin was here he would tell you it isn’t possible.”

“We have two weeks to make it possible. Malcolm and I are leaving for New York Sunday week and it has to be ready by then,” Marcus shrugged.

“Marcus,” Grimois shrieked, “New York is JoinThink controlled, there are over fifteen million heads there.”

“Yes, We know,” Marcus replied.

“No,” Grimois replied, “Surrendering yourselves for us is not an option!”

“We aren’t surrendering ourselves Grim,” Marcus smiled, “Malcolm and I are talking the fight off our door step and putting it back on theirs. We have to keep them off balance for as long as possible.”

“Then send troops,” Baxter shot, “You two are too valuable.”

“Troops will be vulnerable,” Malcolm replied, “Marcus and I can avoid being seen.”

“What about their attacks, you are both needed for reconnaissance here?” Grimois demanded.

“With the AirNet up there will be no use for us here,” Marcus replied.

“How do you expect them not to see you?” Baxter demanded.

“If they can stop my heart, we can fool their eyes,” Malcolm answered.

“What about the base? We’d have to Revert to hard lines; complete wireless silence. AirNet takes out everything, radar included,” Baxter challenged.

“Switch to LIDAR,” Malcolm shrugged.

“The reason we don’t use LIDAR is because RADAR works around corners,” Baxter was becoming belligerent.

“It’s a compromise, but we’re making it, get the AirNet up!” Marcus ordered.

“And how do we maintain communications with our allies?” Baxter shot.

Marcus sighed, “Set up window agreements,” he replied, “Give them rotating times that we turn the system off; keep it simple and random.”

“So why now, what’s happened that we have to do all of this crap now?” Baxter demanded.

“The Thorlonium is an advantage!” Marcus glared at her, “JoinThink is moving to wipe out emotions, when that happens we’re dead, their last weakness is gone. We’re going on the attack, we can draw them away from you.”

“Bullshit, you’re hiding something. The two of you going in there is about something else,” Baxter yelled.

“If it is, it is probably better that you don’t know, we can slow them down,” Malcolm calmed, “Marcus is the only bait they’ll chase. If he isn’t here, they might leave you alone.”

“They might take the opportunity to wipe us all out,” Baxter retorted.

“After loosing a million troops I seriously doubt it. Besides, the engineering corps has an entire battlefield full of JoinThink equipment to salvage through. Aren’t 103 armed scram Jets sitting in the AirNet field being rewired by our engineers?” Marcus mocked.

“Yes, our equipment stores have been replenished. But going into their territory alone is still suicide,” Baxter shot back.

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Marcus and Malcolm had debated their method of getting to New York for days. In the end Baxter came to the rescue with the most ridiculous option possible, but out of all choices hers was the safest. Baxter suggested using the train network; it had been neglected for years; ignored for faster and easier systems. To their surprise, she had already built a small rail bound pod years earlier as a possible bomb delivery system.

“It seemed too basic to work, so I gave up on it. The cabin is only 500 mill high, and the roof is painted to look like tracks; so satellite imaging can’t pick it up,” Baxter detailed, “I don’t know how far you’ll

get, they may have sealed the city tunnels. It only weighs 86 Kilograms, so you should be able to lift it around any blockages. It uses a battery powered engine; we can't detect it, I don't know how they could" she shrugged. As reluctant as she was towards the mission, she was still intent to make sure it succeeded.

"How fast are we talking?" Marcus requested.

"It should manage 50 kph, but it would be smarter to stay below 40," Baxter answered.

"That should take about 6 days to reach the city," Malcolm nodded.

"The engine is rigged for around 350kilos, and unless you feel like walking, don't push it," Baxter warned, "It might be an idea for you to take one each," She added.

"We could leave one outside the city," Marcus looked over at Malcolm, "as a back up?"

"Sounds good to me," Malcolm nodded, "Fill it with food and leave it in a tunnel?"

"It's no cacophonous cave but it will do," Marcus smiled.

"Ah yes, we meet again Cus, it has been too long," Malcolm sniped in a snooty English accent.

"I do hope your skills have improved, dear Major," Marcus parroted Malcolm's accent.

Baxter stared at them confused. Marcus kicked one of the tires, the whole contraction made a rattling noise.

“What is it made out of?” Marcus screwed up his face.

“Plastic,” Baxter shrugged. “Light, cheap, doesn’t rust,” she listed.

“It’s like a Tonka truck,” Malcolm smiled, “We are seven again!”

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Their Jubilance did not last long, with the AirNet online, both of them were completely separated for the longest period of time in years. Although, the rest was not completely unwelcome. Neither twin could remember a time in their lives when they had been completely at peace; this was the closest they had ever come.

JoinThink troops had completely retreated from Thorlow boarders. The new technology added to their already precarious emotional states made them quite jittery.

Marcus and Malcolm had been on their Tonka trains for only an hour before the cramped recumbent positioning had them annoyed. The countryside drifted past them, moving in ridiculous ponderosity. The boys were lying next to each other on the first *carriage*.

“I could get out and run faster than this,” Marcus balked.

“This reminds me of those egg yoke yellow bowls we wore for that MRI,” Malcolm finally announced.

Marcus laughed imagining them all in the yellow hats.

“We seem to have some interesting times brother,” Malcolm added.

“We do at that,” Marcus nodded, still giggling.

“Maybe we should instate mixing bowl hats as uniform when we get back,” Malcolm joked.

“Ok,” Marcus smiled, “Baxter will blow a fuse tho.”

“She reminds me of mum sometimes,” Malcolm smiled, “I thought she’d actually smack us when we told her we were going.”

“I wouldn’t put it past her either,” Marcus grinned.

“I wish mum and dad were alive right now,” Malcolm sighed.

“If wishes were horses,” Marcus sighed.

Six days felt six seconds by the time they saw the outline of light in the dark sky. The plastic carriages may have provided stealth, but comfort and speed was completely absent. The twins were thankful for the brief interlude from duties; days off were non-existent on base. Leaving the shelter of AirNet after

the first day, provided some distraction, but they would have been content without it. Regardless of their destination, this time together was priceless.

“We should ditch the things we don’t need in the next tunnel,” Marcus announced, “The city can’t be ten k’s off now.”

“What’s our plan again?” Malcolm requested.

“Depends where our train ride ends,” Marcus replied. “Further into the city centre we can get the better. Between us we have three AirNet generators, fourteen frequency grenades and two thousand stun rounds. If we play this right we could completely disconnect Manhattan Island.” Marcus searched through his backpack; checking items off as he spoke.

\*\*\*

From Philadelphia to New York they saw nothing; people or animals. Arriving at Penn Station, the boys found it completely abandoned. Carrying their little pod up to the subway line they expected there would at least be some small resistance; but even the surveillance systems were not powered. Desolate chambers welcomed them to the subway tunnels of New York. Three line changes later, carrying their pod between tracks, they were on the number 6 subway line.

The plan was to sneak into three buildings and establish an AirNet field. One generator was capable of covering a two-kilometre radius. In order to cover Manhattan they would need to place all three generators in three high towers down the centre of the island. Each generator required extreme voltage to create an effective field and the only power sources capable of handling them were used to power air



conditioners in major buildings. Necessity dictated their three targets to be: The Rockefeller Center, New York University Silver Towers Building on West Houston Street, and the Mount Sinai Medical Centre Central Tower. The medical centre doubled as home to JoinThink's viral program.

Assuming they would encounter resistance, the twins decided to hit each location in sequence; Rockefeller Center first through the 51<sup>st</sup> Street station, then the University through Blecker Street station, then finally back north to 96<sup>th</sup> Street station for the Medical Center.

Disturbed by the complete lack of people, Marcus and Malcolm neared 51<sup>st</sup> street station on edge. Leaving their pod in the darkened tunnel before the platform, Marcus shouldered the first generator and they headed to the street above.

"I don't like this at all," Malcolm whispered.

"It can't be this easy," Marcus checked over his shoulder, "I don't feel right."

The station was completely deserted and looked like it had not been use in years. Every step they made in the dust coated floor left an embossed print of their path. As they entered the stairwell the glow of morning sunshine illuminated their trail.

"Stop," Malcolm whispered. "We can't keep going like this. Anything could track us," He hissed, pointing down at the floor.

"What can we do?" Marcus shrugged.

Eye's brightening, Malcolm looked over at a wall.

"Give me the hammer," Malcolm whispered.

Marcus reached over his shoulder and hoisted out a hammer, handing it to Malcolm. Malcolm walked over to a wall and slammed the hammer down on a fire hose reel handle. The hose vomited to life, spewing murky water all over the floor.

"Fixed," Malcolm smiled walking back over to Marcus.

"Clever," Marcus replied, "let's go."

Stalking up the stairs hunched over, Marcus peaked over the sill of the stairs. The street was deserted, there were no cars, no people, no lights, nothing. The still morning calm sat eerily in the air. Marcus ducked back into the stairwell.

"There's no-one there?" Marcus whispered.

"Where are they?" Malcolm asked, "I can feel them, they're in the city?"

"I don't know," Marcus shook his head, "Let's change into greys, I don't want us to be easy to find on any satellite."

Shucking their bags onto the ground, the twins pulled out two grey coverall jumpsuits. Pulling them over their clothes, they zipped up the suits and strung the hoods over their heads. Marcus had to laugh when he saw Malcolm.

“You look like a grey sperm,” Marcus whispered, chuckling.

“So do you,” Malcolm shot back.

“Lets get this happening,” Marcus whispered. “We better speak mentally from not on.”

Sneaking up the stairs in file, Marcus led Malcolm over to hug the building side.

“How many satellites are overhead?” Malcolm asked in Marcus’s mind.

“Six,” Marcus replied, “Real time refresh cycles.”

“They didn’t see us come up,” Malcolm said.

“The suit’s work, but they wont on the bitumen,” Marcus returned.

“What do we do?”

“I’ll take out the sat cameras while you run. What about city surveillance system? Why wouldn’t they have it on?”

“I don’t know, count me down.”

“Go on three, two, one,” Marcus counted, closing his eyes to concentrate.

Malcolm flew across the street and launched towards the building wall on the other side.

“Your turn, count me down,” Marcus requested as he looked over at Malcolm.

“Go on three, two, one,” Malcolm projected, closing his eyes to concentrate.

As Malcolm opened his eyes he found Marcus was standing next to him.

“I’m glad we only have one more of them,” Marcus thought to Malcolm.

“Let’s keep moving, this is creepy,” Malcolm replied.

After only six minutes and still no human contact, the twins arrived at the base of the Rockefeller Center. The building was the same silent monster as all of the others around it. The twins looked across the courtyard leading to the building, it too was deserted, but the ground bore the unmistakable signs of recent traffic.

Surging forward, one behind the other, they ran towards the entrance and over the threshold. The main door was spinning silently and behind it was the magnificent entrance hall they remembered from movies. Not hesitating they continued forward to the elevators and clamoured inside. As it rose towards the 37<sup>th</sup> floor, Marcus stood eyes closed in the corner.

“What is it?” Malcolm thought.

“I am blocking the elevator registry from reporting the lift as active,” Marcus replied.

“We should have taken the stairs,”

“No matter, it’s fixed now,” Marcus nodded, opening his eyes.

The doors chimed open on the 37<sup>th</sup> floor. Like everywhere else, these rooms were deserted. *Air-conditioning plant room* was engraved on the door immediately opposite the elevator: it was unlocked.

“It feels like they know we are coming and why we’re here,” Marcus thought.

“I know,” Malcolm replied as he pulled the generator from his backpack.

The unit was small and had the appearance of a miniature metal silo except for four thick cables protruding from the back, and a formidable switch-lever next to them. Malcolm placed it on the top of one of the air-conditioning compressors and fished around behind it for the wiring.

“Will they know if I kill the power to one of these?” Malcolm thought.

“No, they aren’t on the control server, must be independently maintained,” Marcus replied.

Malcolm cut off the servo and severed the wires. It took him another ten minutes to attach the generator. As he taped the final wire the elevator door chimed behind them.

Standing dead still, as if deer in truck lights, Marcus and Malcolm watched the doors open. A woman wearing a grey dress appeared holding a handgun, she pointed it directly at Malcolm's face.

"Please, don't do that," She asked. Her tone was sweet and melodious, Malcolm was indulged by it; if it were a food it would be fattening.

Neither of the twins could do anything; her mind was completely closed off to them. It was like standing opposite a free thinker.

"Why not?" Marcus asked.

"Because I am holding a gun," She replied, still sweet.

"You aren't a Joinling?" Malcolm gasped.

"No," She replied, shaking her head and making her golden hair bounce.

"Then why wouldn't you want this?" Marcus demanded.

"It is complicated," She replied, "Can you turn it on without activating it?"

"Yes," Malcolm nodded fervently, "It is thought activated."

“Fine, switch it on, then follow me quickly. Shut the door as you leave,” She retreated into the elevator and held the doors open, still pointing the pistol at them.

Malcolm clunked the lever and the unit hummed.

“Done,” Malcolm thought.

“How do we get the gun?” Marcus thought.

“I say don’t,” Malcolm replied.

“I know exactly why *you* say don’t,” Marcus’s eye flicked down at Malcolm’s crotch to emphasise his understanding.

“Hurry,” the woman yelled.

Malcolm grabbed up his backpack and stuffed his tools inside. After a quick status check on the generator, the twins ran over into the elevator and the woman closed the doors.

“We only have nine minutes until waking hour,” she announced.

“How did you get here?” Malcolm asked.

“I was born here,” she replied, “We have to get back to that plastic train thing before waking hour. Eight minutes forty seconds.”

The doors chimed and opened on the foyer. The woman holstered her gun and sprinted towards the exit, Marcus and Malcolm followed her. They all ran across the courtyard and around the edges of the buildings. Once they got to the road, the woman stopped.

“Do your thing,” She announced.

“I’ll count down from three. After one, you bolt to the opposite wall,” Malcolm explained, still whispering. “Three, Two, One!” She sprinted to the opposite wall and waited.

“What are we doing?” Marcus thought to Malcolm.

“Just go, Three, Two, One!” Malcolm replied. Marcus bolted over to stand next to the woman.

“Three, Two, One!” Marcus thought.

Malcolm sprinted across the road and stood on the opposite side of the woman.

“Six minutes ten seconds,” She announced as she ran off around the corner.

Arriving at 51<sup>st</sup> Street, a single vehicle sat on the street next to the access stairs.

“That isn’t right,” Marcus said, “is that your truck?”



“No!” The woman hissed, “That’s a maintenance truck, they must have been alerted to the water pipe. Maintenance crew have top priority visual status, they’ll see us. We have two minutes thirty seconds. We have to get to the other side of the street.”

“Go now then, they’re all underground, Three, Two, One,” Marcus told her.

She sprinted across the street and hunched next to a wall. Marcus and Malcolm quickly followed.

“One minute,” she whispered.

“One minute to what exactly,” Marcus hissed.

“Until Joinling’s flood these streets to start work,” she hissed back.

Marcus and Malcolm glanced at each other.

“There is a second entrance around the other side of the block,” Malcolm whispered.

“Thirty seconds. Lead then!” She demanded.

Malcolm barrelled around the corner and flew off towards the stairs. As he approached the second corner, the sound of ringing lift chimes came from behind closed building doors. Rounding the corner, he saw the stairs before them; they were clear. Flying down them he stopped at the first landing to wait for the others. Panting and holding the rails, Marcus and the woman suddenly appeared.

“Two seconds. Get out of site,” The woman whispered.

Half-way through descending the second flight, Marcus heard tools and equipment working in the chamber below. Sneaking his head around the corner, he saw two men dressed in plaid overalls. They were welding the handle on the fire hose closed. These men were definitely Joinling’s; Marcus and Malcolm could feel their grief-stricken minds clearly. The woman looked up at the bustle on the street and shook her head.

“We should wait here until they leave,” She whispered.

“What if someone comes down here?” Marcus hissed.

“They wont,” She answered, “It weakens their connection, they don’t like it.”

“I am Malcolm,” Malcolm whispered, offering his hand.

“I know who you are Malcolm,” She replied.

“Who are you?” Marcus shot.

“Brie Thompson,” Brie answered. “I’m one of the New York forgotten’s.”

The two men finished welding and walked up the stairs.

“We should move,” Brie whispered.

Leading the way, Brie splashed through the water as she headed to the subway tracks. Stopping together at the Plastic pod, Marcus finally snapped.

“You need to tell us what is going on now!” Marcus demanded, “Every second that generator is there, we risk it being found. What the hell is going on?”

“There is no need to worry, they won't find it; back up compressors haven't been used in years. Once we're away from this station we'll have time to talk, but knowing maintenance, they'll be down here checking before long. I suggest we head to the next stop,” Brie replied.

Marcus sighed; knowing Malcolm would not back him up, he climbed onto the plastic contraption and hit in the activation code. The engine hummed to life as Malcolm and Brie clambered for a position.

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Trickling to a complete stop in the darkness of the subway tunnels, Bleecker Street station sat one hundred meters ahead. Minute slithers of light marked the otherwise dark platform. The ground shook overhead, as if an army was marching in time.

“They all walk six K's every morning before going to work,” Brie said, “Then they all walk home at 8pm, eat, mate and clean their clothes for the next morning. Always the same; asleep by ten.”

“What's the point?” Malcolm snorted.

“Routine,” Brie answered. “Half of the *jobs* they do just maintain old systems that are never used. They don’t have breaks, holidays, nothing. The burst fire hose may be the most exciting thing this city has seen in years.”

“Where do you come into it?” Marcus said, his voice thick with annoyance. Malcolm gave his a dirty look, but it was lost in the darkness.

“I was here when forced implantation started,” Brie replied, “The rumour is that when their numbers hit so many billion, individual ideas couldn’t be processed any more. I *know* that is when visual status came in; that’s when they had to reduce the number of people’s eyes that the group mind payed attention too. 1 in 20 was the last change up. They shut down all of the surveillance systems then too.”

“How did you escape?” Malcolm requested.

“I didn’t, they just never came for me,” Brie shrugged, “I never had a family to miss me, so JoinThink never became aware of me. As long as we don’t get in their way, they leave us be.”

Marcus’s interest had been sparked.

“Can you move around up there?” Marcus asked.

“When others are there, but it *is* dangerous; if a visual priority Joinling sees you, *and* attempts contact, you get implanted. Better to stay in the caves,” Brie explained.

“Caves?” Marcus requested, his tone was becoming more tender the higher his want for information went.

“The old mines and tunnels that the city blocked off years ago. Underground basements as well,” Brie explained.

“Have they ever checked them?” Malcolm asked.

“No,” Brie shook her head in the dark, “They die by the time they reach thirty meters down.”

“Are you saying they can’t maintain connections below ground?” Marcus asked, the implications of what she was telling them were profound.

“Can you?” Brie jibbed.

“We’ve never really tried, we can maintain a link on opposite sides of the planet though,” Malcolm bragged.

“Through satellites, not through rock,” Brie contested.

“I am not sure,” Marcus replied.

“So how do you get food?” Malcolm asked, keen for more information about Brie.

“Hydroponics,” Brie replied, “There are kilometres of dead tunnels around this city. We’ve sealed some of them and put in hydroponic gardens.”

“What if they’re found?” Marcus asked.

“What if they are?” Brie said, “We can’t just starve.”

Marcus smirked; this woman knew how to cut to the point.

“Where do you live?” Malcolm asked.

“About a K south, in the tunnels under the Hudson,” Brie replied.

“How did you find us?” Marcus tried to steer the conversation to useful information.

“They might not use surveillance anymore, but we do. We saw you coming from Penn Station,” Brie answered, enjoying the contrast of the two brothers.

“Who is we?” Malcolm ventured.

“The group of the forgotten,” Brie chortled, “You would be welcome come and meet them.”

“No!” Marcus replied, “We have to finish and leave as quickly as possible.”

“You can’t do that,” Brie started.

“Why not?” Marcus shot.

“If you set them off, they might think it’s us. We aren’t well armed or capable of defending ourselves. They’d wipe us out,” Brie explained.

“If we don’t it’ll happen anyway,” Marcus frowned, “We aren’t here to just hit and run. They are using the hospital on central park to grow viruses. We have to steal as much as possible.”

“But what if they search for how you got in,” Brie seemed desperate, “They might not be suspicious about that fire reel now, but after you kill twenty million of them they will be.”

“You don’t understand, with the grid up, they’ll never be able to step on this island again, you’ll be safe,” Marcus explained.

“Safe!” Brie boomed, “I am *SAFE* now! If your little plan even works, which I doubt, they’ll more than likely blow this city into the Stone Age.”

“Why wouldn’t it work?” Marcus demanded.

“Do you really they’d be dumb enough not to switch off the power the second your little machine flicks on?” Brie shot.

“It won’t matter, the generators field will last for over five minutes once it is established, they’ll be dead by the time they figure out it’s using their power,” Marcus spat.

“And once again, what happens to us?” Brie questioned, “We need their power to survive.”

“There are 506 million people counting on us to keep *them* safe. This will make JoinThink keep their distance for years; you are all welcome to come back with us,” Marcus replied, Malcolm’s mind brightened at this idea.

“What if we don’t want to leave?” Brie demanded.

“Stay here then,” Marcus said, “The generators are only rigged to last twelve hours before they detonate, I’m sure power will come back on before too long. And then once they finish inoculating their population, you can all die with the lights on!”

Brie stepped away from the twins because of Marcus’ callous comment; she took a moment to recover. Malcolm glared at Marcus.

“When do you intend to turn them on?” Brie asked quietly.

“Six PM, tomorrow night,” Malcolm answered, “They will all come online at the same time, after we have left the city.

“I have to go then,” Brie announced, “It will take at least twelve hours to get this information around to everyone.” She stepped away from the pod and after a fleeting look at Malcolm, she ran away down the chamber.



“Brie,” Marcus shouted, “How can we trust you?”

“I’m the one with the gun remember,” Brie called back.

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The university was easier than they expected. The grounds and buildings were deserted. Only eight Joinlings were out when they made the trip through the street, but as Brie had said; only one in twenty people could actually see them. So they only needed to *brainwash* one.

The trip back through the subway was quick; 96<sup>th</sup> street station was just as quiet as the others. It was getting late and the Twins figured it would be safer to wait until after the Joinlings made their mass exitus home before venturing out.

As the roar of footsteps silenced, Marcus and Malcolm snuck up to the empty streets. They repeated the count down road crossings as they made their way towards central park and the skirting St Sinai tower. Within minutes their final target rose before them, monstrously overshadowing the towers around it.

“Three, Two, One,” Marcus thought, allowing Malcolm to join him at the building side.

“Done,” Malcolm thought, “I can’t wait to be back on that Tonka train home.”

“What about your harlot?”

“She can keep this place, tunnel life would be dismal.”

Marcus snorted as he stepped away from the building and headed towards the entrance.

The inside was not as empty as they had hoped; several Joinling were walking around the courtyard, and the windows of the building were alive with activity.

“This is what we get for choosing a medical centre,” Malcolm thought. “I’ll bet you every one of them has *visual priority* and can see us.”

“Stop being stupid; you’re just used to it being easier than we thought. If you remember, this is what we expected every time,” Marcus thought. “I’ll go online in a second, just remember, stay exactly 3 feet behind me and walk like them.”

“I know,” Malcolm thought back.

Connecting with the network was simple. Imposing fake images on their own was significantly harder. Marcus was forced to disconnect from his own senses and guide himself using Malcolm’s; watching himself from behind was a disturbing sensation.

Through the courtyard, into the foyer, into the elevator; it all went well. Marcus convinced JoinThink, they were two of its own, but his mind was tiring rapidly. The trip from the elevator to the plant room was his greatest test. His mind could feel millions of voices within his mind, trying to allure him with their power. Keeping the voices from his memory took all of his strength. While trying to maintain focus as they approached the final Joinling, the effort became overwhelming and his connection fluctuated. The shock made him lose his balance and fall forward. Disconnecting from the network,

Marcus gasped for breath as he returned focus to his quiet mind. As the Joinling turned to face them, Malcolm, reacting on instinct, locked onto its mind and issued a command to ignore them both.

Marcus sat against the corridor wall and panted rapidly. The Joinling went back to its work and continued to ignore them

“That was quick thinking,” Marcus thought, his mind weak.

“We need to get into the service room, can you stand up?” Malcolm hastened.

“Help me, it’s the next door,” Marcus whispered.

Malcolm placed an arm under Marcus and hoisted him up. Together they stumbled around the corner and into the plant room. The giant fans of the compressors buzzed loudly consuming the silence. Malcolm placed Marcus on the ground near the door and fished in his bag for a block of chocolate. Pulling out a substantially sized block, he handed it to Marcus and shucked his own bag containing the generator.

“Finish it,” Malcolm yelled over the noise. “I’ll get this done.”

Malcolm headed over to an offline compressor and went to work. Progressing quickly with the practice from the first two. The final generator connected, he headed back to sit with Marcus.

“There is no reason we can’t stay here for a while,” Malcolm yelled, “How are you going?”

“Better. I could use a good nights sleep though,” Marcus thought back.

“You feel much better,” Malcolm thought.

“Chocolate: is there anything it cant do...” Marcus smiled.

“I could think of a few things,” Malcolm shook his head.

Suddenly the door snuck open and a head ducked in. It was Brie.

“How did you get in here?” Marcus gasped, sighing with relief.

“I came up through the sewer, the building was deserted,” Brie said, closing the door behind her.

“It wasn’t when we got here?” Malcolm quizzed.

“Look it doesn’t matter, you’ve got to go!” Brie replied, ducking down to the twins. “Julian has everyone in an uproar, they’re debating whether to rat you out. I got the feeling Julian will do it without their permission. You have to hurry.”

“Who is Jul...” Marcus was cut off abruptly as the compressors died and the lights went out.

“The powers’ been cut!” Malcolm announced.

“Thanks eagle-eye!” Marcus replied, sarcastically.

“We have to move!” Brie stood, searching the room for alternate exits.

“Give me your backpack,” Malcolm demanded, snatching Marcus’s backpack and throwing it over his shoulders.

Marcus stood shakily and moved over to the door. Sneaking it open he looked out into the dark corridor.

“It’s dark,” Marcus whispered.

“I can’t feel anyone outside,” Malcolm whispered, his eyes closed.

All together they ran out of the plant room and towards the stairwell, their heads birding around rapidly checking for Joinling’s. The hospital was deserted. Arriving at the emergency exit, they entered quietly to find a pitch-black stairwell looming beneath them. The hospital was still completely silent. Thirty flights took them several minutes with Marcus needing to rest often. The bottom room was slightly warmer then the rest as they descended the final flight.

“I’ll check outside, wait here,” Malcolm whispered.

“No,” Marcus warned, “they’re...”

A forest of hands grew from the darkness grabbing every inch of their flesh. Fighting was useless; the hands griped them like vices. Bursting open, light flooded in through the door reflecting on the faces of

over twenty Joinling's. They were completely surrounded. Forced their movement the hands hoisted them though the exit into the courtyard.

Overflowing with eyes, all darkness had been banished from the courtyard with artificial light. As they entered, the brightness made Brie and the Twin's squint. From the courtyard to central park, no empty ground could be seen.

Marcus was carried to lead the pack, which seemed to be heading towards the front of the medical building. As they rounded the corner, coming towards them was a small group dressed in white, all carrying surgical implements. Marcus felt himself panic, the instruments were the same he had faced less a month ago. He closed his eyes and focused intently on the people around him. Three stumbled and let go; choking for air and blood. Still eight were around him, carrying him towards the white coats. The crowd came to life, moving towards Marcus; replacing fallen support.

As the two groups met; carriers and white, Marcus was lowered to hip height. Four more Joinling's surrounded his head and clamped their hands around his face. He could not move at all.

"Marcus!" Malcolm's mind screamed, "Marcus, attack the white coats!"

Marcus's energy was failing, but he saw several white-coated Joinlings carrying the silver pistols with long, thick needles projecting from the spout. He focus what he could against them; this time only one fell. The rest surrounded him.

Malcolm watched the white coat circle surround his brother. One on the left raised his arm; he was about to implant Marcus. Malcolm's mind searched fruitlessly for connections that could help.

Marcus felt the needle enter his nose and watched as the trigger was depressed. The sensation was sickening; Malcolm felt it too. As the needle withdrew, Marcus waited for his mind to be overwhelmed. As he became disoriented something drew the attention of the Joinling's back towards the Medical Tower. Through a gap, Marcus could see lights coming from the building. He felt himself falling. His mind gave in.

Chapter 14 – The fallen.

Grimois paced quietly in the briefing room, looking up at the clock frequently. After receiving a notification of interest from JoinThink personal, he consented to disable the AirNet for one hour to allow a visitor. He had never met anyone in a leadership capacity before. He did not want to start now.

A cloaked figure walked up the corridor, surrounded by a small army of guards; Grimois was not taking the chance at being given a virus. As the tall figure walked through the door, there seemed to be something familiar about his walk. Grimois gasped when the familiar face emerged from the hood.

“Grimois,” Said Joseph Timms, “Command does not suit you.”

“I wont let you taunt me Joseph,” Grimois held up a small remote, “One click and you’ll be dead on the floor.”

“Understood,” Joseph nodded curtly, “We have captured Marcus and Malcolm attempting to attack Manhattan; they were found in Mt Sinai Medical Centre attempting to install one of your generators. A young forgotten woman was found with them: leading to the capture of the remaining New York forgotten’s. We have apprehended 94 in total, unfortunately 12 were killed in the struggle.”

Grimois sat silently as the news settled upon him.

“On that note, we wish to expedite affairs in taking this territory; to minimise casualties and losses. I have brought equipment for you to begin implantation immediately and request you to advise your confederates to do the same.”



“No!” Grimois looked up at him in surprise, “We will fight you to the death if it comes down to it.”

“Without your Twins, it will not be a long fight,” Joseph said confidently.

“Better then loosing my head to you,” Grimois stood.

“We are of course willing to simply exterminate you,” Joseph explained, “as I am sure you are aware, JoinThink is now immune to several new strains of anthrax, should you refuse, our next course of action will be your annihilation.”

Grimois fell into his chair.

Baxter flew into the room, running over to Grimois.

“Message from Malcolm; they’ve re-entered our territory, Marcus is wounded. They’ve Requested the immediate activation of AirNet. Their signal code are confirmed. They claim to have a free thinking New Yorker with them,” Baxter trilled.

Joseph stood furious.

“Surrender Now! We have implanted Marcus, he is useless to you, we will no longer tolerate your existence,” Joseph screamed.

Grimois starred back at him calmly, twirling the remote in his hand.

“More lies Joseph. Always lies. It’s funny how circumstances change tho, isn’t it,” Grimois smiled, depressing the button in his hand.

Joseph twitched slightly; all his confidence fell away. He dropped to the floor and quietly went limp.

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The only modified SCRAM Jet was sent to collect the Twins and their companion as quickly as possible. Marcus was still unconscious when they returned. Flying into the briefing room, Malcolm’s elated Joy energised everyone. Brie followed behind him quietly.

“Do *you* want to hear a tale of wonder?” Malcolm shouted.

“Calm down Malcolm,” Brie grabbed his arm. “Just explain.”

Grimois and Baxter listened intently to Malcolm’s story as he explained the empty streets and Brie. All of the details up too their capture. Revealing the circumstances of the viral weapons and elated by his success in stealing all of the inoculants.

“I watched as the white coat raised his hand above Marcus, the feeling was horrible when he inserted the needle. I turned to see Brie behind me, we both could only watch, it was terrifying. For some reason I remembered her story of the pointless maintenance of old systems. It was like dad and mum came back to help me. I remembered dad telling us when we were little that Emergency generators at a

hospital are linked to the alarm system. In case the hospital is attacked the alarm systems were all battery powered for safety. All I had to do was set it off,” Malcolm shrugged.

“Every face in the crowd stared when the building lit back up, and in another second they were all twitching on the ground. They must have dropped Marcus, because he was knocked out cold, but he was breathing fine. He still has the chip in his brain, so we had to keep him unconscious the whole trip home, but with AirNet on he should be fine and we can remove it now anyway.

“I went back inside to get the inoculants, we carried him back to the pod and carried the pod *and him* and the medicine back onto the Train line. I managed to turn the other generators on before we left, so they should be destroyed by now. But here we are, and *this* is Brie,” Malcolm gestured grandly.

“Hello,” Brie said, embarrassed.

After some awkward greetings, Grimois went through the details of his meeting with Joseph, reciting word for word what had happened.

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” Malcolm finally announced, “It sounds like another bluff, and if it isn’t, we have the cure right here,” he grinned holding up the bag.

“What about Marcus?” Baxter asked.

“When he wakes up, I’ll tell him what’s happening,” Malcolm nodded, “Let’s just leave it until then. I really need some sleep. Could you see too finding Brie a room please?”

Grimois nodded as Malcolm stood up. The trip had been more intense than he had let on. There were scars and scrapes on his face and neck from their capture, and his eyes were sunken and hollow. But thankfully, they were alive, unlike Brie's companions.

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It took three days for Marcus to finally wake. Malcolm was afraid of who would might be inside his head when he did. When Marcus finally spoke, Malcolm half expected him to sound like a robot.

"How the hell did we get here?" Marcus's first words rang through the hospital wing.

"Somebody down here likes you," Malcolm joked.

"Malcolm," Marcus gasped, "You were just behind me, tell me this is not some JoinThink trick."

"It's a long story bro." Malcolm smiled.

"It sounds like the tables have turned then. Your turn to catch me up hey?" Marcus smiled.

Malcolm went into a grandiose retelling of Major Mal's New York adventure. It took some convincing, and several retellings of the story, but Marcus eventually believed that he was not being tricked. Malcolm held off telling him that the implant was still inside his head until he had returned to normal.

When Malcolm finally consented to the doctors, to everyone's surprise, he already knew. It was the outright refusal to allow it to be removed that provoked some suspicion. Malcolm was forced to have his brother permanently monitored.

The next night, Malcolm woke with a fright to find Marcus sitting at the edge of his bed. The contemplative look on his face told Malcolm there was plan brewing.

"Those guards need to be trained better," Marcus smiled.

"Sorry Cus, you wanting to keep that thing in your head has us worried," Malcolm replied.

"I need you to do something for me Mal," Marcus said.

"Why do I get the feeling I wont like it," Malcolm replied.

"New York got me thinking, and now this thing in my head we have been given another opportunity. I don't think we can pass it up," Marcus explained.

"What's that?"

"They know we are thinking about running with their ships," Marcus shrugged, "What if we just made them think left?"

Malcolm's eyes opened wide, he starred at Marcus for a moment and finally sat up.

“How would we get them to think that?” Malcolm asked.

“It would have to be a pretty good show; they’d have to catch me,” Marcus said seriously.

“I take it you’ve gone completely insane?” Malcolm stared.

“Completely,” Marcus smiled, “How much damage do you think my brain can take?”

“How do you expect this little plan to work?”

“We have some time now, at least a few months before they manage to build a new virus. Maybe a year before they have inoculated themselves. How much of my memory do you think you could take out?”

“What would it take to talk you out of this?” Malcolm asked.

Marcus sat silently staring at him, Malcolm sighed.

Epilogue – Lineage.

Marcus stood in the breeze on a small hill behind the base; his hair flapping wildly, he soaked in the wonder of his surroundings. Enjoying the freedom of freezing air.

Malcolm walked towards him; the scars the last year had not healed properly.

“What are you thinking brother?” Malcolm asked.

“Don’t you know?” Marcus replied.

“Wouldn’t have a clue,” Malcolm grinned.

“AirNet must still be working then,” Marcus shrugged.

“How long do you think it can hold?” Malcolm asked.

“I’m hoping, until everything is loaded,” Marcus sighed.

“Do you think the reports are true?”

“I should think so, the thought of ten million JoinThink heads surrounding us sounds just terrifying enough to be true.”

“You’d think they’d just be happy to leave us alone.”

“I wouldn’t think that. People have never been good at sharing, and large groups with narrow thinking have been responsible for the biggest atrocities of all time.”

“So where now?” Malcolm grinned.

“Somewhere warm,” Marcus shrugged.

“What if they decide to follow?”

“I don’t know, I’m hoping they won’t have any reason to now.”

“I still don’t t...”

Marcus cut him off, “Don’t say it. Go!”

“I wish we could share one last time,” Malcolm’s eyes were wet.

“We’ve shared a whole life brother, share with Brie, those twins will be enough of a handful for you when she finally pops.”

“They’ll miss their uncle,” Malcolm smiled.

“I’ve spent enough time in their heads already.”



“I love you Brother,” Malcolm said, launching his arms around Marcus.

“I love you too,” Marcus replied, enjoying the hug.

“I was never good at goodbye’s,” Malcolm grimaced.

“Goodbye,” Marcus smiled.

“Don’t give up too easily,” Malcolm finally let Marcus go. “Look after yourself.”

Marcus watched as Malcolm ran down the hill towards the carrier. As the wind swept up around his body Marcus could hear the carried sounds of explosions off in the distance.

The plain vibrated with the energy of the craft lifting off the ground. It hovered for a moment, then slowly lifted higher and higher. Great white lights coated its underbelly as it lifted the last free thinking people off of the planet. Flying away to meet the hundred’s just like it on their search for a new home.

A final explosion hit a massive tower behind the base. The silence disappeared. Dower harmonies of emotionless thought flooded the airwaves. Shucking his backpack, Marcus walked towards the fields behind the launch platform.

Sweet gratitude occupied his thoughts for a moment before he realised its source. He could feel Malcolm and his two unborn babies reaching out to him in thanks. The brilliant seven month olds had

already created encryption styles Marcus could not break. Enjoying the final moments of connection; Marcus closed himself off for the last time.

From a distance he could already feel the vibrations caused by millions of feet marching in unison. They were coming for him, but they were not going to take him without a fight.

The End.