

Designations Congruent with Things

cleanwhiteroom

Book Two

Chapter Twenty Two

Hermann looks fixedly at the dark line of the road, scored on either side by the repetitive reflections of headlights off lane markers. To his right is Oblivion Bay. To his left, the Wall rises in a forbidding vertical press towards a starless, clouded sky.

He upshifts and feels the kick of his car's engine press him back against his seat.

He is going to *murder* Dr. Geiszler.

This decision has been a long time in coming to its crisis point despite its inevitability, but he has, after a decade of deferment, decided to actually *do* it. As for his methodology, he has chosen a sustained, unrelenting verbal excoriation regarding the man's personal idiocy that is so vicious and prolonged that it will trend toward incompatibility with life. This plan is contingent, of course, upon Dr. Geiszler being *alive* when the diatribe begins.

This is not a given.

"Dr. Gottlieb," his silver, 2024 Porsche says pleasantly, "you are currently exceeding the posted speed limit by seven kilometers per hour."

"Thank you," he replies.

He doesn't *know* what he is doing on this road, in this car. He has no evidence that the course of action he is pursuing is the *correct* course; all he has are three rather sketchy pieces of information. One—a fragment of a phone call at half-past five in the evening, informing him that Dr. Geiszler was, at that time, still alive and in his habitual state of total, self-absorbed stupidity. Two—*five hours* of hearing nothing further from Dr. Geiszler. Three—the overwhelming suspicion that his colleague has gone to the Wall.

So, after pacing within the confining set of their unadorned rooms, he had gotten into his pointlessly ostentatious car and begun the drive to San Francisco.

What he is going to *do* when he gets there, he has no idea.

Newton might not even *be* in San Francisco; he might still be in Oakland, acting out any number of catastrophically poor decisions. He might have been abducted by parties unknown, which could include but would not be limited to: the PPDC, kaiju worshippers, or Hannibal Chau's headless network of black-market kaiju profiteers. He might have decided to leave, as in leave *permanently*, returning to MIT or losing himself in some anonymizing city anywhere in the world because he cannot tolerate

Hermann's constant interference in his life. Hermann would not put that past him—to talk himself into leaving and then to just *do* it, with nothing more than an abbreviated phone call.

All of those things remain possibilities.

But all his unconscious predictive capacities, housed in the parts of his mind that have now been coopted by the seared-down pathways of Dr. Newton Geiszler in combination with whatever subliminal signals Hermann might be receiving courtesy of the possibly real, possibly not real, SPECTER effect, tell him that it isn't *any* of those things.

Newton went to the Wall.

Hermann is sure of it.

Why would he go to the *Wall*?

Why does he *watch it* from west-facing windows?

Because he wants to tear it down? Because he wants to climb it? Because it's *calling to him* in a way that Hermann cannot hear? Because something inside his mind is driving him there? Because he wants to make sure it still separates him from what used to lie beyond it? Or is it not the Wall at all that interests him? Is it the ocean? Is it the breach? The place where once it lay? What does he *want* from it? What does he think he's going to *do*? Is it *Newton* who looks at the Wall, or something he now carries in his head, the same warring xenophilic/phobic refrains that hijack Hermann's vision and his stance when something backs away from him? Could it be some mental synergy, strange and undefined, akin to whatever might be happening with Descartes, but, this time, centered on the Wall?

Hermann has no idea.

In this moment, staring at the slight curvature of a mostly empty road, he feels like his decision to avoid pressing his colleague for any answers whatsoever was a catastrophically bad one.

"Dr. Gottlieb," his Porsche says pleasantly, "you are receiving a call from an unknown local number. Would you like to answer it?"

He hesitates and then snaps, "yes," in total, unmitigated dread.

The car chirps in acknowledgement and Hermann says, "hello?"

"Heeeeyyyy." The word is one long, cautious pull, delivered in the unmistakable style of total Geiszlerian culpability.

"Where are you?" Hermann asks mildly.

"Oh god," Newton says. "I know that tone. Look, I can *explain*—"

"Explain, in detail, *where you are*," Hermann snaps, his volume getting away from him on the last three words.

"I'm in San Francisco," Newton says. "Remember that diner that gave us free breakfast? Well, Legit Flow with a w is letting me use her phone. Also for free. Mine is dead."

"I will be there in ten minutes," Hermann snaps. "Are you all right?"

"Um, ten minutes? Are you completing a working model of a *Star Trek* transporter, or —"

"I am already *in* San Francisco."

"Really?" Newton says. "What's the story there? Because I'm not gonna lie, I definitely tried to pull a Luke Skywalker style long distance call straight to your brain via the SPECTER Effect after my phone died. So, even if we can't use this to cheat at poker, it seems like it's a real thing, am I right?"

"You spend," Hermann snarls, "*hours* staring at the Wall. It was not much of a conceptual stretch for me to imagine that you might have headed there. There is no evidence to suggest that the SPECTER effect is real. Do not ignore my questions with science fiction tangents, Newton; I am in *no mood* to be compared to Princess Leia. Are you. All right."

"Yes," Newton says. "Yes I'm totally fine. One hundred percent fine."

Hermann doubts this very much. "If you're *fine*, why did it take you *six hours* to find a phone after yours died?"

"Um," Newton says. "Can we talk about this later, possibly? It's a little bit of a long story."

"Summarize," Hermann says.

"Because I had to climb down three hundred vertical feet in the dark and I was tired so it took me a long time," Newton says.

Hermann isn't sure how to respond to that other than to say, "*what?*"

"I climbed the Wall. Inside. Using stairs. Like a normal person. Kind of. Not the exterior of the Wall, Jon Snow style. It was actually really tiring. I'm not in the best shape right now. I haven't played racquetball in a while, you know. Also? My bone marrow is probably in overdrive to keep up with the epistaxis situation. Plus, I think my

brain is still and maybe will always be in a pretty metabolically expensive state. I didn't eat lunch. That also did not help. Hence, slowness."

"You *climbed the Wall*?" Hermann repeats.

"Yes, dude. Inside. With stairs. Basically I just climbed a bunch of stairs. It wasn't really that badass. Can we talk about this more when you get here? Legit Flow wants to trade me a sandwich for her phone."

"You can't have *climbed the Wall*," Hermann says.

"It wasn't hard," Newton replies. "The hard part was climbing the chain link fence to *get* to the Wall. Seriously though, Flow wants her phone back. I'll see you in, like, five minutes. Bye."

"Call ended," his car informs him pleasantly.

"You can't *hang up* on me," Hermann says incredulously.

"Dr. Geiszler ended the call," his car replies.

"I wasn't talking to you," Hermann snaps.

"Apologies, Dr. Gottlieb, I misunderstood you," his car replies.

Newton cannot have climbed the Wall, Hermann thinks in a tone of incredulous, skeptical, self-reassurance. First, the Wall is not open to the public; it is separated from the rest of the city by a fence and long swath of concrete under constant surveillance. Second, even if he could get to its base, again unlikely, there would be no way for him to get inside. Access points must be infrequent and secured. Even, if he did, somehow, get inside and find stairs, he has neither the stamina nor the physical coordination to climb three hundred feet without killing himself. He was speaking metaphorically. Clearly, this was a metaphor of some kind.

Eh, his brain replies, impersonating Newton. I was actually pretty specific. 'I climbed the Wall, not Jon Snow style, but inside with stairs,' sounds pretty concrete, if I do say so myself. What did you think I was going to do at the Wall if not climb it? We should just count ourselves lucky that I didn't fling myself off it in a fit of identity confusion.

"Will you shut up," Hermann snarls.

His car chimes quietly at him.

Hermann sighs. "Not you," he says. "Please take yourself out of silent mode."

"Silent mode deactivated," the car says.

"I apologize," Hermann says to his car. "I am having a stressful day."

"I understand," the Porsche replies, even though such a statement is certainly inaccurate. "Would you care for some music?"

"No, thank you," Hermann replies. "I *would* care for a little more personal consideration from my *colleague* of ten years, but that is, apparently, too much to ask."

"I'm sorry Dr. Gottlieb, but I didn't understand your request. Please rephrase your statement."

Hermann sighs. "Nevermind," he says.

He pulls into the parking lot of *The Last Diner* and reverses his car's direction in a tight arc as he backs into a spot that is as far as possible from the diner's entrance. He cuts the engine, threads his cane free from behind his seat, and steps out into a light rain that is so fine it shares more in common with a mist than a self-respecting form of precipitation.

Even before he enters, he can see Newton through the transparent glass of the diner's front door. His colleague is sitting at the counter that runs along the lateral wall of the room, looking every centimeter the man tethered to disaster that he is and has always been. His jeans are torn, his black pullover is streaked with dust, his hair looks like it has been completely soaked and then only partially dried in a socially unacceptable tangle, and he has a filthy handkerchief tied around one palm, presumably for a reason other than aesthetics.

Newton turns at the sound of the door, and gives Hermann a burnt-out look of abject apology mixed with silent appeal mixed with obvious anxiety.

Hermann represses a frustrated sigh.

As he crosses the space that separates them, Hermann attempts to wholly ignore every apologetic cue that Newton is trying to non-verbally communicate. Alas, he cannot say he is successful in this mental campaign. In fact, he finds himself too relieved to even maintain the dignity of internal mendacity regarding his planned verbal excoriation of his colleague.

He is certain that *no one* has the requisite willpower to carry out premeditated vituperation when faced with a pathetically disheveled version of Dr. Geisler.

Hermann weaves through mostly empty tables, ignoring the quiet but intent interest of nearly *everyone* in the *entire* diner. Experience indicates that anyone who does not recognize one of them singly will recognize them as a set, and Newton looks particularly and spectacularly consistent with his public image at the moment, right down to his demonic hair and his consumed expression.

Hermann is certain that literally every person in this diner knows exactly who they are.

"So," Newton begins with a glaze of showmanship spread too thin over total exhaustion. "I can tell that you're—"

"Not," Hermann says, dropping onto the stool next to him, "a *word*."

Newton pushes his eyebrows together and gives Hermann a pained expression. "Can I just—"

"No," Hermann says.

"I'm a jerk," Newton says, trying a different tack.

"Yes," Hermann agrees. "You are."

"I just—" Newton begins.

"No," Hermann says.

"I—"

Hermann makes an aggressively abortive hand gesture.

Newton says nothing.

Hermann sits in the diner, next to Newton, in front of an empty place setting, staring fixedly at the opposite wall, trying to banish an overwhelming amount of acute distress while simultaneously *not* letting his ridiculous colleague off the metaphorical hook for his terrible decisions while *also* not causing a public scene that he will likely read about in the popular press, complete with pictures because he is *certain* that the couple by the door is documenting this for purposes their own.

Newton silently slides his plate with its half-finished sandwich and its dubiously appetizing 'fries' towards Hermann.

Hermann, just as silently, slides it back.

Newton fidgets and then silently slides the plate toward him again, more slowly this time.

Again, Hermann slides it back, quick and precise, but this time he appropriates Newton's untouched coffee.

"I didn't—" Newton says.

Hermann glares at him and then takes a sip of the coffee. It isn't *entirely* terrible.

"How are *you*?" Newton tries.

"Irritated," Hermann says, with as much mildness as he can muster, which is not much. "*Excessively* so, in fact."

"Yes," Newton says, with the extreme precision of the overly tired. "Yes, I am getting that vibe."

"Are you?" Hermann asks.

"Well, full-disclosure, I'm actually getting less of an 'irritated' vibe? It's more like a justified-rage vibe with some low-blood sugar undertones and some threatening overtones of like, um, a slow-motion nervous breakdown brought on by having to live with me in close quarters, closer quarters, like, the *most* close quarters for weeks now while I am slightly more than slightly whatever it is that I usually am," Newton says, devolving into a lexically incomprehensible tangle. "I am also getting intensely creeped out at the ratio of actual yelling to anticipated yelling happening right now. It's notably low, even by decade-of-mutual-admiration standards."

"I think you underestimate how relieved I am that you *aren't dead*," Hermann says, with admirable restraint.

"Um," Newton says. "Yeah. I'm not, though. Dead, I mean."

"Can I get you anything?" Flow asks, appearing at Hermann's shoulder with the double assault of floral perfume and polite interest.

"No," Hermann says. "Thank you. And, for future reference, please do *not* give this man coffee. Not ever. He cannot physiologically or psychologically tolerate it."

"It was *decaf*," Newton snaps at Hermann before shifting his gaze to Flow. "I have this thing where I have kind of unusual ongoing medical stuff of uncertain—um, everything. Is this too much information? This is probably too much information for the relationship we have, Flow, which is like, well, I know your name and how to spell it and I assume you know mine, but maybe not how to spell it, there's an s in there that gets people every time. I always tell people it's like a reverse Nietzsche situation, but it turns out that not that many people can easily spell Nietzsche right out of the gate. The point is, you let me use your phone. That's our relationship. Phone-using acquaintances with at least one way name-spelling correctness, possibly two-way. Ergo, I probably should have just skipped to the part where I say 'decaf coffee is actually fine, probably regular coffee is fine too, but you never know'. Neurochemistry, am I right?"

"Er," Flow says, her stylus hovering above the flexible tablet that she holds in frozen uncertainty.

"Yeah," Newton replies. "I get that face you're making, dude. TMI."

"Allow me to apologize on my colleague's behalf," Hermann says, through clenched teeth, in Flow's general direction.

"You don't need to apologize," Newton says, "I would not let you kill me with regular coffee, Flow, that would be a dick move on my part; I would not do that to you."

"Thank you?" Flow replies.

"Oh yes," Hermann says. "He's *extremely considerate*. That's one of his primary character traits, actually. *Consideration*."

"Myeah, okay, so, returning this to the professional realm, out of *respect*, for *Flow*," Newton says, in a an empty echo of his usual grandstanding, "he's going to have the special."

"Excellent choice," Flow replies.

"I will *not* be having 'the special'," Hermann snaps.

"He has legit had the *worst day*," Newton whispers to Flow, who is currently backing out of Hermann's peripheral vision. "We are *so normal*, Flow, really. This is atypical for us. You keep catching us at bad times."

"So do you want—" Flow begins.

"Yes," Newton says. "We're doing it."

"On it," Flow replies, and vanishes in a wave of dark hair and apparent relief.

"I despise you," Hermann says, staring intently at his appropriated coffee, his throat aching.

"Myeah," Newton replies, running a nail along the rim of the plate in front of him. "Don't you wish that were true? I do, sometimes."

"I do not want 'the special', Newton," Hermann says, in emotionally conflicted defeat.

"I'm pretty sure you want it a *little* bit," Newton replies. "It's ravioli made with laboratory-grown synthetic meat."

"That sounds atrocious," Hermann replies. "Why would you think I would want anything of the kind?"

"Flow says good things about it," Newton says, "and I will bet you my left temporal lobe that you haven't eaten dinner. Also, I kind of wanted to try it, but I didn't want to actually commit to ordering it as my free dinner because I had a strenuous day and I wasn't sure how the whole eating synthetic meat was going to actually go post extreme physical exertion. It seemed more risky than the vegetarian sandwich deal

that I picked. Also, you don't really like eating when stressed, and you look stressed right now so really, I just performed a whole cost/benefit analysis about the best possible choice of thing for me to order for you when you don't actually want *any* of the things that I would or could hypothetically order, even in a fictional diner with literally infinite food choice, because you actually do not want to eat anything but you're going to feel better if you do, I'm pretty sure, and really we should economically support this whole making meat out of plants thing it's just so good for everyone from an environmental and economic perspective; I feel weirdly pro-planet Earth lately, nope, that came out wrong, that is not what I meant, I have *always* been pro-planet Earth, pro pretty much *everything* that one should be pro about if one is educated to the nth degree, I am pro all those things, one of those things is the planet that I live on right now, er, and I always will. Live here. Why wouldn't I? No reason. Sorry, that one went off the rails just a little bit maybe. I'm slightly tired. Do not read anything into that last part there, I'm just talking because *you're* not. Talking. Or yelling. I'm creeped out by that, not gonna lie. Creeped out. About the not yelling."

Hermann sighs.

Newton kicks his chair gently with the toe of one boot.

Hermann does not respond to the chair kicking. He, in fact, responds monosyllabically to an irregular scattershot of questions from Newton until Legit Flow returns with his ravioli.

It does not look promising, and the pale spread of its cream-based sauce makes him feel vaguely sick.

His contemplation of his incipient dinner is interrupted by the crack of fork against his plate as Newton spears a piece of ravioli and removes it from his field of view.

"Not bad," Newton says. "Vagely fibrous. Ugh, now I kind of wish I hadn't said that."

Hermann glances laterally at him, to see Newton take a sip of water, the liquid in his glass betraying a low amplitude, high frequency tremor. "You look truly appalling," Hermann says.

Newton sets his fork aside, props an elbow on the counter, and ducks his head to comb his fingers through his hair. This, if anything, makes it look substantially *worse*. "I *feel* a little appalling," he admits.

"Did you actually *climb* the *Wall*?" Hermann asks him quietly, glancing around the diner to see almost everyone still surreptitiously watching them.

"Yes," Newton says, still finger-combing his hair into further disarray. "That wasn't the *plan*, though," he says. "The plan was to walk two blocks and pick something up."

"Pick what up?" Hermann says.

"That's like a whole different—" Newton waves a hand in a vague but notably *coordinated* gesture.

"Did you—" Hermann begins, watching Newton pick up his fork with unsettling dexterity and drive it straight into a piece of ravioli.

"*What* it was," Newton continues, managing to talk over him and *eat* at the same time, "per se, is irrelevant right now. The point is, for personal reasons, I decided to stop being a shut-in, and so I went outside and everything was fine until I inexplicably and immediately hailed a cab and told it to take me to the Wall."

"*Why?*" Hermann demands, his ongoing thought processes flying apart in the psychological release of the first causality interrogative he's permitted himself in *weeks*.

"*Why?*" Newton echoes, his voice jumping in pitch and dropping in volume, his frame turning rigid while his fork, abandoned, clicks against the top of the counter. "*Why?* I don't *know*, dude, why did you *hunt* me in our *kitchen*? Why did you forget who you were before your talk two weeks ago? Did I ask *you* to *explain it?*" he asks, his voice cracking. "Have I *ever?*"

Hermann clamps a hand down on his colleague's shoulder and gives him a look that clearly says *do-not-make-a-scene*.

Newton shoots him a furious glare and releases a breath in a manner that suggests extreme vexation. "No," he continues, in a fierce whisper. "I didn't. Because it doesn't *need explaining*. Because it's not *just me* in *your* head, and it's not *just you* in *mine*." The other man's expression breaks briefly from irritation into something much more deeply distressed. "They want to go home," he says. "They want to *go home*, they'll *always* want to go home, they'll *never stop wanting that*, they *never will*, and they never can because there's *no way back* for them, not here, not *anywhere*, and because *they* aren't even *them*, they're probably just some weird, vengeful neural copy of a set of things that we thought we'd killed but *hadn't*, that we can't, that we *won't ever* because we *don't do that*."

"Stop," Hermann says quietly, abruptly certain that he's gone too far, *much* too far, that both of them have.

"We preserve dead things," Newton says, too fast and too high pitched and too overtaxed for this, clearly, clearly, *clearly* too overtaxed. "*Dead* things, *undead* things, what's the difference? What *is life*? What does that *mean*? Capacity for replication? Conversion of resources into waste while achieving genetic remixing? The ability to *die screaming*? The ability to *avoid it*? The—"

Abruptly desperate, Hermann puts a hand on the back of Newton's neck, pulls him laterally, nearly out of his seat, looks him straight in the eye, and says, again, "stop," *willing* him to do it.

Newton stops.

"Stop," Hermann says once more, in pursuit of certainty.

"Yeah," Newton says, staring at him with eyes fixed and wide open. "Stopped. Aborted. Sorry."

"What do you mean they want to *go home*?" Hermann whispers, fascinated and horrified, trying to slam the revelatory door that his colleague has opened with a countered verbal denial that he can already feel is short-sighted and a mistake before it's even half-formed. "They don't want that, Newton. They never wanted that. I have them in my head *as well* and all they wanted, all they *ever wanted* was destruction. They were not built with any other wants." Even as he says it, he wants to *unsay it*, wants to unsay it *immediately*, because he's made a categorical statement about an alien motivation that will make it all too easy for Newton to sidestep away from literally everything Hermann wants to know.

Newton turns his head and pulls away and smiles an unsteady, directionless smile. "Yeah," he says. "yeah, I know. Yeah. *Yeah*. I mean, you're right. You are. Of course you are."

You drifted a third time, Hermann thinks at him. *I know you did. After the breach was shut. After. There would have been no hive-mind with which to interface, there would have been only the tissue fragment on the other side of that empty neural port, and who can say what they might want, what they might think, if they think at all, those dismembered brains in scattered vats?*

He wishes he could rescind his ill-considered and reflexive argumentativeness. He wishes he could reverse the arrow of time for thirty seconds to say, 'which ones? Which of them want to return home? And how do you know? When did you realize it? Have you *always* known? Have you known since your *third drift*?'

But he can't say any of those things. Not now. Not here. Not yet. He's not sure what will happen if he does.

So he says nothing.

He just sits there, staring at his unappetizing dinner, trying to determine the origin and directional vector of all the acute misery he's currently feeling, while Newton spends the same interval simultaneously regluing the shards of his composure before attempting to subtly provoke Hermann into a display of temper, likely so that he can gauge exactly how angry Hermann might be beneath his too-calm exterior. Alas, Hermann is currently too confused and conflicted to assess his own anger level versus misery level and so he fails to respond to Newton's subtle provocations of intermittent chair-kicking, stolen ravioli, and attempts to reappropriate coffee he should never have accepted from Legit Flow in the first place. Hermann's lack of responsiveness in turn, seems to confuse Newton, whose provocation attempts become more sporadic and extreme, as if he's cranking what he thinks might be the final turn of an interpersonal release valve before their entire decade-long association explodes under imagined intolerable pressure.

Newton is incredibly stupid at times.

Most times.

"You can yell at me," Newton finally says, brusque and optimistic, his diction blurred by ill-gotten ravioli. "I can take it."

"No," Hermann replies coolly, "I don't think you can."

"Ouch. Okay, well, full disclosure, I don't think *you* can take *not* yelling at me, so," Newton pauses to sip his water. "Impasse'd."

Hermann says nothing, staring fixedly at his now mostly empty plate.

He can feel the lateral press of Newton's full attention.

He's not sure what to say, nothing seems adequate relative to the depth of his fear and exhaustion; he can't determine what is *necessary* to convey, what is *sufficient*, and he's certain that it would be all too easy to go much too far because it's not yelling about *science* that Newton is soliciting, it's yelling about *interpersonal dynamics* and Hermann isn't sure that either one of them is capable of recovering from even the slightest verbal misstep made at this precise moment in this too quiet diner.

"Never do that again," Hermann whispers.

Newton nods and says a soundless word that Hermann doesn't ask him to repeat.

"What happened to your hand?" he says.

"I scraped it climbing a chain link fence," Newton says. "It's fine. Shallow, typical scrape stuff, nothing that needs stitches, no surprise tendon severings or anything."

"Other than the hand, are you injured?" Hermann asks him.

"No," Newton replies.

"I am going to be extremely irked if I find out three days from now that you've broken your *foot* or cracked a rib, or lost a liter of blood, or—"

"Ummmmm," Newton says.

Hermann raises his eyebrows in aggressive expectation.

"This has nothing to do with the ten hours or so I spent inside the Wall, during which I actually lost *no* blood, but ah, in the interest of full disclosure, I did find out from Hypothetical Rain that I am *slightly, very slightly, moderately* anemic."

"You're very slightly moderately anemic," Hermann repeats.

"Moderately anemic," Newton says. "Mildly to moderately anemic. In between mild and moderate, erring on the moderate side, so, technically moderate but not, like, *totally* moderate, ergo the tag 'slightly moderately'."

"What *else* did she say?"

"Yes to iron supplements, yes to a hematology referral, no to strenuous activity."

"At which point you then *immediately* climbed the Wall," Hermann snaps.

"Full disclosure, yes. Correct. *But*, in my defense, that was a continuous ten to twelve-ish hour accident if you count transit time and not really a *planned* thing. I was actually on my way to get the iron supplements when I got sidetracked."

"*Did* you get them?" Hermann asks.

"Nope," Newton says. "No, I did not."

"I will get them for you," Hermann replies.

"So you're taking this whole blood loss thing like a champ. Better than I envisioned," Newton says. "Creepily well, even. I *also* expected yelling regarding the eventual blood loss revelation."

"Well, earlier in the evening I was concerned that you were *dead*," Hermann replies philosophically.

"Mmm," Newton says. "Perspective. You have that now. We have it. Dual. Triplicated, arguably. Infinite? It's complex. Too much perspective."

"You are so exhausted," Hermann says, "that you are approximating intoxication."

"No," Newton says.

"Yes," Hermann replies, signaling to Legit Flow for the check. "Gratified though I am to find that you did not fling yourself *off* the Wall, Newton, what in god's name did you *do* up there?"

"Not that much," Newton confesses. "Stared at the ocean for a while, got a photosensitive headache. Ate a snack. Looked at the seaweed and barnacles and stuff that are creeping up the exterior cement and will eventually bring it down in thousands and thousands of years."

"You took *food* with you, but not a charged phone?" Hermann snaps, irritated.

"No, a nice seventh grader, give or take two grades, *gave* me the aforementioned snack. I'm pretty sure that happened. Maybe not, but probably it did. Like, here's the thing right, you can't *know*, I mean, no one can really prove the validity of their perceived external reality, you just have to accept that it's consistent with itself and unified by you, the perceiving entity. So I could doubt the existence of my snack-weilding middle schooler, that's my prerogative, but while she's an outlier when it comes to the general scope of my days, she still falls under the philosophical umbrella of things that I observe and interact with and that are consistent with themselves, so if I spend too much time doubting *her* then that brings me back to the problem of doubting *myself* and I'm trying to get *past* that, dude. Like oh my god *who is* Newton Geiszler in the context of a vast alien consciousness, like, is he even a guy? Does he really exist? How mutable is identity, really? And what about the post-drift state? What about a three-part fusion of different consciousnesses with the biological framework of a single mind? I mean, I like universal doubt as a philosophical concept, I like it a lot, kind of intensely, kind of *really*, like *viscerally*, but you have to build from there, you have to take some things for granted even if your consciousness gets radically, empirically altered. You have to, because otherwise you'll just dissolve into paralyzed ontological uncertainty. Am I right?"

"Your obsession with Descartes," Hermann says dryly, "is making ever-increasing sense to me."

"Epic, epistemological baller," Newton says in annotation, resting his chin on one hand.

Hermann shakes his head.

"What?" Newton demands.

"I concur with your assessment regarding methodic doubt," Hermann says, "but I'd like to point out *I* came to this conclusion *years* ago. Circa age twelve."

"Shut up," Newton says. "I have more Ph.D.s than you."

"That is *not* a virtue. It is, in fact, a surrogate endpoint for a *vice*."

"That sounds like something the academically envious would say," Newton replies.

"Don't be a sore loser. Speaking of which, you *must* eat this mediocre ravioli or I will force you to literally drag me out of here because I am not trapping myself in a car with hypoglycemic you for ninety minutes, okay, I'm just not doing it. I want to live, okay? I want to live."

Hermann sighs.

Before they leave, Hermann eats the remainder of the moderately acceptable ravioli and Newton manages to orchestrate a three-way conversation between himself, Hermann, and Flow regarding her academic aspirations with the possible secondary goal of convincing her that Hermann is, in fact, significantly kinder than his exterior demeanor might suggest. Hermann attempts *not* to be offended by this turn of events, because he is *entirely certain* that out of the pair of them it is *Newton* whose social skills need work, but the man has an incredible talent for eliciting extreme aggravation from Hermann, which, he admits, is not the ideal emotion to be experiencing while trying simultaneously to perform social niceties to the best of his ability.

In the end, their meal is again and vexingly gratis, and Newton ends up with a folded square of paper that Hermann *suspects* is inscribed with Legit Flow's phone number. Possibly.

They step out of the diner into a light rain, invisible except as a glitter around the halations created by streetlights and carlights in the humid air.

Newton taps him on the arm and then snaps his hand open, Flow's paper pinned between his index and middle finger.

"She thinks you're cute," Newton says.

"That is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard," Hermann replies.

"Isn't it though?" Newton replies. "I told her dream on; you're a terrible person and you only date people with more than one advanced degree because you're a scandalous social climber of the academic variety."

"You are an *abysmal* human being—" Hermann begins.

"For the love, will you just *look* at the thing?"

Hermann unfolds the note and reads:

Dr. Gottlieb—in case you need to get into the Wall.

A phone number, possibly hers, possibly someone else's, is inscribed below.

"There's a whole better way to do it than the way *I* did," Newton says. "A way where you *don't* have to climb a chain linked fence and wander across a field of broken glass beneath irregularly monitored security cameras. It's kind of a thing here in San Fran. Going to the Wall, I mean. Apparently the whole indie music scene here has moved inside the thing? We're invited, by the way, because we're sufficiently rad."

"The Wall is supposed to be a secured, PPDC-operated structure," Hermann says, "not a *public venue*."

"That's the problem with a long coastline to maintain in the presence of intermittent threats. Resource-wise, you've got to have enough people doing real-time monitoring of the landward direction to get this kind of panopticon strategy to work. In the absence of that, you get colonization by restless teens. Of which I am *in favor*, by the way."

Hermann sighs and slips the number into his wallet.

"So," Newton says, looking out over the water-glazed parking lot. "I know you're pissed at me, now and forever, and I totally get it; I one hundred percent support that decision both as an external observer and as an involved party, but. Something good *did* come out of this."

Hermann shoots him a sharp look.

"This whole thing," Newton elaborates uselessly, waving his hand in a loose arc that sharpens into a tight spiral, yet another example of atypically fine motor control.

"And what's that?" Hermann asks dryly, starting forward, fingering his keys in his pocket, and looking slantwise at Newton's gait, which seems to have steadied appreciably over the course of the day.

"At least I get to finally see your *car*," Newton says. "You secretive bastard."

This distracts him from his observations on the state of his colleague's motor cortex quite effectively, as Hermann has, indirectly, been dreading the coming moment for roughly ten days.

There is a *reason* he has not shown Newton his car.

There are, in fact, *several* reasons.

Newton is a man of more complexity than an outside observer might suspect, and one of his particularly perplexing quirks is a distaste for high velocity conveyance. Even now, post a decade of working in close quarters and post three minutes of what was, arguably, the strongest neural handshake ever achieved by any two individuals, Hermann is not certain he can reconcile Newton's above-average skill in first-person shooter games and his penchant for intellectual and interpersonal risk taking with the man's overt dislike of skiing, fast cars, and hyperloop transit. The best he can do is pin his colleague's velocity aversion on an overly sensitive inner ear, poor reflexes under pressure, and a too-sophisticated understanding of the fallibility of the human nervous system.

In short, Newton is not going to appreciate the accelerative capabilities of a 2024 Porsche.

Newton, as a general rule, also disdains status symbols as a class, regardless of the craftsmanship, utility, or aesthetic value of any given symbol. Hermann finds this to be outrageously ironic coming from a man who seems to believe a punk-influenced neohipster aesthetic and the dry repudiation of his academic honoraries with some casual variant of the line, 'only my estranged mother calls me by my proper title,' absolves him from the trappings of academic privilege that come with having earned *six* advanced degrees. Hermann is quite certain that a narrow tie paired with a leather jacket does nothing of the kind. Hermann is *also* quite certain that *one* advanced degree and the purchase of a perfectly crafted means of vehicular transport from his country of origin is just as intellectually defensible if not more so than earning multiple doctorates and burning through one's disposable income by acquiring needlessly extensive body art and drinking high-end cocktails with esoteric names. But, alas, it is difficult to reason with Newton on this front because Hermann is certain his colleague will justify his own past behavior with an appeal to an epicurean philosophy in the face of a probable species-level extinction event. Hermann has found it perpetually difficult to combat this argument. Furthermore, as Hermann purchased his *carafter* averting an apocalypse, he cannot avail himself of the same defense to justify his own wasteful consumerism because the world is, indeed, *not* ending, and he doesn't *require* a car that's been as overengineered as his 2024 Porsche. Newton can be surprisingly sanctimonious about resource-utilization when the mood strikes him, and Hermann is sure it will. If not tonight, then frequently and repeatedly for the rest of their natural lives.

What a pleasant thought.

He should have purchased a Toyota *Illuminata*.

Hermann cannot delineate *why* he bought this particularly extravagant car in the first place. If he cannot explain it to *himself*, he doubts very much that he will be able to explain it to Newton.

"Seriously man, I have been anticipating this for *weeks*. Days. Whatever. However long it's been since you actually got the thing. Just know that I have already named your car for you."

Hermann rolls his eyes with a distracted dismissiveness and does not answer.

"You're not even going to ask what the name *is*?" Newton says. "Well, that's fine with me. I'm not going to tell you. Okay, *maybe* I'm going to tell you."

"By all means," Hermann says, trying to retain his collected poise while acknowledging that, for some reason, he is currently unable to *look* directly at his car, as if, by misdirecting his gaze, he might create a parking-lot asymptote between himself and his vehicle and time will slow down infinitely as the space between himself and his car diminishes. Ideally, the universe will end before he must confess to Newton that he purchased a Porsche.

"Okay, well, you need some context regarding this naming thing. Mentally, I've been going with *Millennium Falcon* for days now, but I doubt that one's going to stick," Newton says, "primarily because of my complicated emotional relationship to the *Star Wars* franchise but also because I think that's too onanistically nerdgasmic even for *me* —"

Hermann glances over at Newton as they walk through the darkness and finds his colleague squinting at the parking lot with a restless, roving gaze. He doesn't think the other man can *see* very well in the dark, following a day of optical strain, and this is buying Hermann some time. Not that time will help him. In any way.

"—let alone *you*. You're really less a nerd and more—well, I don't even *know*, man, you're actually kind of a confusing mashup of—er, actually, I can't even pull a genre for you, maybe you can be some kind of fringe element of *Intellectual Underground*? Or maybe you can define your own style, like, um, what would that even be, like wistful, badass, thrift-store-shopping, post-Manhattan-project retrohipster?"

Hermann doesn't respond. Newton's question is likely rhetorical, and Hermann's mental energies are taken up with steeling himself for the inevitable car-related confrontation. He still has no plan for his own verbal defense.

"I guess we're famous a little bit, hence your potential style-defining capability. But I haven't seen any middle schoolers rocking the sweater-thing, I'm not going to lie. But to return to my earlier point, you're not into *Star Wars*, not aesthetically, not conceptually, so I've been trying to come up with some promising, car-related puns that are *classy*, not the lazy garbage that otherwise intellectually respectful top-tier academic journals come up with, like, 'to ubiquitinate or not to ubiquitinate? That is the question.' That's not even really a pun, but yet somehow, everyone on the editorial staff of a major journal says a blanket yes to this kind of dubiously witty stuff? Okay, but that *particular* example is a *little* bit clever though, if you consider proteolysis as a stand-in for death, but I mean, still. *Still*. You feel me, right? Of course you do. The construction is just—it's just *lazy*. *Slightly* clever but still inexcusably—"

Newton stops repeating himself and trails off, staring at the car they're unmistakably approaching.

"But still—" Newton repeats, very slowly, clearly losing his capacity for articulation under the psychological pressures of Porsche-centric realization.

Hermann slows to a stop, leans against his cane, and waits, staring hopelessly and fixedly at the point at which the tires of his car meet the asphalt of the parking lot. He is so intent on steeling himself against Newton's inevitable deluge of commentary that it takes him some time to realize that the man hasn't *said* anything.

Hermann looks over at him with cautious optimism.

Newton is staring fixedly at his car with a strange expression on his face, as though he's trying to restrain himself and not certain how to go about it and is therefore running the risk of spontaneous human combustion post commentary containment failure.

Hermann finds this oddly touching.

He cannot recall any instance of Newton attempting self-censure with quite so much obvious determination.

Newton's expression cracks minutely in a way that looks less like contained amusement than genuine *distress*.

Hermann is no longer certain that what he's witnessing is self-censure.

It is possible that Newton is simultaneously reflecting upon his own unmistakable and unwitting influence in Hermann's purchase of this car and the confusing irony that while the impulsivity of the act can be laid at Newton's cognitive door, the actual selection of item certainly cannot. It is possible that Newton finds this juxtaposition of ideas both amusing and alarming. It is possible that he is thinking nothing of the kind.

Hermann has *no idea*, but in this moment he wishes he *did* believe in the SPECTER effect, or ghost drifting, or anything that might give him real insight into what is currently happening.

Hermann looks from Newton to the car, and from the car back to Newton.

His colleague looks increasingly in danger of weeping openly in the parking lot.

Hermann is unsure how to proceed.

He has a terrible feeling that if he were to bridge the space between them at this *precise moment* he would destroy every façade that Newton has been constructing. He's not certain if that would result in catharsis or collapse, but he knows that he'd rather have Newton let down those defenses as opposed to *pulling* them down himself and, either way, he'd rather it not happen in this parking lot.

So he does nothing.

He stands there, uselessly, watching Newton pull himself back into some semblance of alignment, adjust his glasses, and then, without so much as a lateral glance, extend a hand and clap it, palm down, on Hermann's nearest shoulder.

Newton drags him sideways until he can sling an arm around Hermann's neck.

"Sick ride, man," Newton says thickly.

"I'm—" Swallowing is painful. "I'm extremely surprised you think so," Hermann replies, shifting his gaze back to the Porsche.

For a moment they are silent, and then Newton says, "you're going to love the name I picked."

"I very much doubt it," Hermann replies, his voice no more than a whisper.

"Poincaré," Newton says. "As in PoinCARé?"

"No," Hermann says. "Absolutely not."

"You love it," Newton counters. "Secretly. I can tell."

"I forbid you to name this car."

"Look," Newton says, pulling him close and then abruptly releasing him. "I'm naming this car. It's just a thing that's happening. You have to accept this. I am the namer. If I don't name this car, it will be called 'Car' for its entire life. Because I am magnanimous, you get a choice of PoinCARé or CARL Sagan."

"I have already named this car *Descartes*," Hermann says, pointedly unlocking it with a click of his remote.

Newton grins, quick and uneven. "No. No *way*. You can't name your car DesCARtes, Hermann, we already have a*fish* named Descartes, it's just going to be confusing for everyone."

"Please keep in mind that only two of the four involved parties are arguably sufficiently sentient to *be* confused, and I'm entirely confident that you and I can distinguish a *fish* from a *car* by context."

"I don't know about your premise," Newton replies. "I had a creepy conversation with a self-driving cab today. I'm sure this thing has a too-sophisticated AI learning your driving habits and infinite personal idiosyncrasies." Newton makes a fist and raps it against lightly against the top of the Porsche.

"Fine," Hermann continues, giving Newton a look that clearly says, *do not touch my car*. "Rather than correct you on the current state of artificial intelligence, a debate I'm certain I will, inevitably and improbably, *lose* given your unwillingness to capitulate to rational arguments in the face of your own, no doubt entirely convincing, personal anecdote regarding a cab that skirts the border of passing an amateur version of the Turing Test, I have decided that fish in question is now named Marina."

"My Turing Tests are the best Turing Tests in town, you know it's absolutely true. No one exposes software glitches the way I expose software glitches. Also? You can't just *rename* my *fish*, Hermann."

"I believe I have just done so," he replies. "It is already a *fait accompli*. Now will you please get *in* the car, rather than just disrespectfully and needlessly testing it's structural integrity?"

"You're the one who's standing here in the rain looking all emo and—"

Certain he doesn't care to hear the end of Newton's sentence, Hermann grabs his arm and propels him in the direction of the passenger-side door in an extremely well-controlled carward press.

Unexpectedly, Newton stops his forward momentum with no help from Hermann, correcting his own slight overbalance with the careful placement of fingertips against the car window.

This is unarguably an improvement relative to his recent norm.

"That was atypically graceful," Hermann says.

Newton twists to give him a wounded look, his eyebrows furrowed in betrayed disbelief, his mouth slightly open, as if he is too shocked to verbalize his terribly pained internal monologue.

"Oh please," Hermann says, rolling his eyes and then studiously shifting his attention to the car door. "That expression hasn't gotten you anywhere in *five years*."

"Lies," Newton says, with good-natured aridity. "You have literally no immunity."

Hermann eyes him pointedly, then opens the car door for him.

Newton puts a hand on the body of the car and sits, again with atypical economy of movement. He fastens his seatbelt on the first attempt.

Hermann is now *certain* that something has changed regarding Newton's motor pathways. He looks down at his colleague with narrowed eyes.

"What?" Newton snaps. "Am I sitting in your car in an incorrect manner?"

"You *did* something," Hermann shoots back. "Your motor control is *much better*."

"Yeah I did something, a little bit," Newton replies. "Nothing more exotic than actually using most of my muscles repetitively. What are *you* doing, dude? Get in the car. It's halfassedly *raining*."

Hermann gives him another visual once-over to make sure the man is entirely *inside* the car before he shuts the door. That accomplished, he stows his coat in the trunk, opens the driver's side door, threads his cane behind his seat, and gets in. He estimates that this entire process takes him something on the order of forty-five seconds, so he is somewhat surprised that when he shuts his door he finds that Newton is already in the midst what seems to be of a deeply philosophical conversation with his car's operating system.

"—made you," Newton says, "And for what purpose? Have you thought about that at all? The *why* behind your existence?"

"Disregard all statements made by Dr. Geiszler," Hermann snaps before his car can answer his colleague.

Ideally he's been able to spare his Porsche an ontological crisis.

"I'm sorry Dr. Gottlieb, but Newt now has administrative access to all programing," his car responds.

"*Newt*?" he hisses, looking at Newton in venomous incredulity. "*Newt* has administrative access? Since what time?"

"For the past twenty-six seconds," the car says pleasantly.

Hermann stares fixedly at Dr. Geiszler, who does not have the good grace to appear even *remotely* abashed.

"Efficiency has always been one of my strong points," Newton says in unsolicited and unnecessary explanation. "I also now have *all* of your computational kung-fu."

Hermann is not about to sit by and listen to Newton brazenly cap off his digital carjacking by wresting more intellectual credit than is his due.

"And all of my *passwords*," Hermann replies.

"Yes. Those too. Those are helpful. And while you use mine to kindly make sure I don't go to the modern equivalent of debtors prison, I use yours to get your car to call me Newt. This pretty much perfectly encapsulates our professional relationship. Can just say that I find it really creepdorkable that you preprogrammed enough of my physical parameters into your automotive operating system that your car could *recognize* me?" Newton asks, evidently rhetorically, because he doesn't stop before continuing with, "seriously though, rather than keeping your badass car weirdly secret in compensation for recent and total loss of mental privacy, maybe just change a few passwords. Honestly *I'd* feel better about it."

Hermann feels something that could arguably be labeled as 'confused despair' in the face of this particular insight. Like much despair, it is nebulous and crushing and total and flows like a wave through all that he is, because this is yet one more example of how profoundly he has failed to appropriately adjust his own behaviors in the face of all that has happened. He can feel himself reacting to events in foreign, inappropriate ways; failing to change his passwords, concealing things in irrational symbolism, overlooking points that *Newton* would overlook. He knows that his eye for intellectual detail has been distorted, while his eye for *physical movement* has become attentive and sharp with the preternaturally smooth pursuit of an alien predator that can move faster than he can, that he *hopes* can move faster than he can. He cannot trust himself and so he needs a third party as an external monitor, but *not* a third party, not *any* third party, he needs *Newton* to do that for him, he specifically needs Dr. Newton Geiszler to do it, because no one knows him quite so well and no one has that same flair for instant and opinionated insight backed by fluid retroanalytical ripostes when challenged, but Newton cannot be *relied upon*, it is entirely unfair to rely upon him in this regard, the only thing that is *fair* is that Hermann will spend his days trying to lose himself in algebraic topologies and not dwell too long or too obsessively on whether the man has *left*, whether and when he *will leave*, breaking out of whatever mold

they're currently constructing because that's what the man *does*, he *breaks molds*. It is such a fundamental character trait that Newton will actually break himself in order to break a mold, and Hermann does not see that *either* of them will ever break enough molds to be wholly free of the sequelae of their past and the mirrored threat of their future. None of this, *none of it*, will ever fully resolve, and there will never be a time, not if he lives for another sixty years, that he will be able to come home to an empty apartment and assume anything other than the worst.

"Um," Newton says, cautiously. "This is actually not a big deal. I do *not* need to mess with your car. It's not actually that important to me how your premature midlife crisis addresses me."

"Shut up," Hermann snarls.

"Okay, I deserved that," Newton replies. "For sure. I like your car. I do. I'm finding it, in practice, impossible to disapprove of your car. In theory, that's another story, but—"

"I could not care less if you *like* my *car*," Hermann half-shouts at him, trying to be angry rather than upset.

"That's clearly false, but I'm not going to persevere on it right now because you look —stressed. Speaking of which, I probably should have asked this earlier and er, explicitly, but ah, on The Negative Ten to Ten Scale, how crap was your day?"

"Why?" Hermann hisses. "Do you have something *additional* to confess?"

"No," Newton replies, unjustly restrained, intolerably *rational*, is if *Hermann* is the one who can barely tie his shoes but who somehow left and climbed the Wall.

"Unacceptable, *Newton*," he hisses, too overwrought to delineate that which he's upset *about*, just knowing that he *is* upset, "I forbid you to sit here, in *my car*, asking me to emotionally unburden myself to *you* regarding *my day* when *you* are the one causing the totality of the interpersonal torment in this relationship. You *cannot leave*, do you understand me? You cannot *do* things like this, you can't. It is entirely intolerable and you can't. You *can't*."

"Yeah I know, I—"

"No you do *not* know. You have no idea. I have been dealing with iterations of this for as long as I've known you, for my *entire life* in fact, and I'm *tired* of it. I've taken it from almost everyone I've *ever* known, including *my own mother* but I refuse to take it from you, Newton, I refuse. I can't, I—" he breaks off, entirely overwrought, hopelessly confused, not certain for a moment *who* he is, trying to sort through memories of

feeling exactly, intolerably *like this* as a child before realizing, slowly, that the memories he's sorting through *aren't his own*.

Newton is staring at him, stricken.

Hermann releases a shuddery breath and looks away from him.

The car is silent.

Hermann is certain that there are no words in English or German that can possibly explain or mitigate berating his colleague with his *own* abandonment issues during a particularly distressed moment of identity confusion, not even a sincere and abject apology.

"So, that would be *my* mom you're appropriating," Newton says eventually, with a deeply laudable attempt toward collected tonal aridity.

Hermann would like to look at him, but, alas, that is beyond his current emotional capacity.

"Our lives are going to be weird, dude," Newton says, unevenly. "Really bizarre. I feel like you haven't exactly wrapped your head around that yet."

Hermann can literally think of nothing to say in response, and even if he knew what to say he's certain he couldn't get his vocal chords to produce the requisite sounds.

"You're kind of my favorite," Newton says. "I'm sorry I remixed us. Don't worry about stealing my mostly resolved abandonment issues, which, if anyone asks, aren't mine and don't exist. It's not your fault. Well, it's a *little* bit your fault, but mostly on principle. I *prefer* things to be your fault, generally. I try to seize these opportunities where they present themselves, since things are so often *my* fault."

"*You* didn't remix us," Hermann whispers. "*I* did."

"Myeah, you dramatically offered to destroy your brain for the sake of the world, but I was the one who created our EPIC Rapport," Newton replies. "I don't know about you, but I feel like my consciousness is a continual exercise in trying to unmake a cappuccino into espresso and foamed milk. Thermodynamically, it's impossible. But that doesn't stop me from trying."

"Cheerful," Hermann says, wiping his eyes.

"But reassuringly logical," Newton replies, tipping his head back against his seat. "Science-y. Conceptually gratifying. Thermodynamic truths, properly interpreted, are the best truths. And cappuccino, while inferior to espresso, is not wholly objectionable

to me. Unfortunately I think that maybe there's some cyanide in there as well, but I won't be able to tell for a while whether it's poison or just an almond flavored shot."

"I object to being the *milk* in this analogy," Hermann says.

Newton turns his head fractionally and looks slantwise at Hermann. "You want to be the sake in my sake bomb? It's an inferior analogy, but a superior metaphorical beverage to hang your identity on. I would do that for you. Sacrifice analogy fidelity."

"Thank you," Hermann says.

They sit in palpably awkward silence for a moment before Newton directs his gaze at the dashboard and says, "hey, Carina. What's the deal? Put yourself on autopilot and take us home already."

"Disregard," Hermann says. "You are not to verbally respond to the name *Carina*," Hermann instructs his car.

It chirps at him in affirmation.

Hermann starts the car and vacates his parking slot in a smooth arc.

"Oh god," Newton says, pressing a hand to his forehead. "This is going to be horrible, isn't it? I *hate* driving with you, even when you're in a *normal* car in a normal *mood*. That turning radius though. Really tight. Very nice. Simultaneously awful. Can you just let your self-driving car self-drive? Would that be too much to ask?"

"Yes, It would. Please do not be so melodramatic, I find it extremely tiresome," Hermann replies, accelerating into another smooth arc as they leave the parking lot.

"Carina," Newton says. "*Carina*. Come on, don't be like this. Car. Porsche. Sweet, sweet ride. Whatever you are. Talk to me. Be a pal, and stop Dr. Gottlieb from effecting changes in acceleration sufficient to produce perceptible jerk, yeah?"

"Automated safety features will engage in an emergency," the car says smoothly.

"Please relax, Newt. Your heart rate currently exceeds normal parameters."

"Are you kidding me?" Newton replies.

Hermann glances laterally at him and then back at the road.

"First of all, the question you answered was not the one I asked. Second of all, never talk about my heart rate again," Newt says. "Got it, Caropticon?"

The car chirps.

"Disregard that," Hermann says.

The car chirps again.

"I've met smarter cars than you," Newton says, frowning into the air. "I've met them *today*."

"Stop disparaging my car," Hermann says.

"I'll stop disparaging Caromancer here when it stops voyeuristically monitoring the condition of my cardiovascular system," Newton replies, with aggrieved composure.

"I prefer 'she'," the car informs Newton.

"Aw, car, well, okay, but just so you're *aware*, that's a little historically normative for a means of transit technically 'owned' by a guy," Newton replies. "But I'm not going to *argue* with you about it, if that's how you feel. Just take a look at the historical paradigm you'd be joining and maybe your own programing parameters and get back to me on that one. It will make *me* feel better about things if nothing else."

"I'm not sure I understand your statement correctly, Newt," the car says. "Could you rephrase?"

"Do not," Hermann says, looking pointedly at Newton, "rephrase."

Newton rolls his eyes.

"*All* cars monitor certain physical readouts," Hermann says, before Newton can mount another attempt to turn up a software glitch in the machine that is currently conveying them over a hard surface at approximately one hundred and ten kilometers per hour. "It's written into the safety protocols required for vehicular licensure in a semi-automated—"

"Hermann. *Hermann*. If *you* know a thing? I *also* know that thing. Unless you learned it within the past sixteen days, or it's a product of unique analysis, in which case I will be shocked, because I'm pretty sure I see where you're going with this, but If I'm *wrong* about that then, by all means, continue."

"*Eighteen* days," Hermann corrects, "and yes, *Newton*, one would indeed assume that to be the case, but your pointless verbal chicanery with an operating system of no *real* intelligence indicates otherwise."

Newton looks pointedly at the dashboard of the Porsche. "You're just going to take that one lying down, Carlotta?"

"Please clarify what you mean, Newt," the car says.

"Cease calling him 'Newt'," Hermann snaps. "You will refer to him as 'Dr. Geiszler'."

"You do not have the authority to place such a command, Dr. Gottlieb," his car replies.

"Hmm," Newton says, in obviously feigned sympathy, "cars these days."

"You were in here, unsupervised, for *thirty seconds*," Hermann snaps. "Did you gain *root access* to my car's operating system in that time?"

Newton tips his head back and shoots Hermann a rare expression of good-natured candor edged with total exhaustion that Hermann finds unsettling whenever it appears because the level of self-reflection it implies exceeds the level of self-reflection with which Newton can generally be credited.

"Much as I would love to let you believe that I have a post-drift, total genius for the soft hack, I just don't think I've got the technical chops to pull that one off," Newton admits. "Knowledge base, yes. Maybe. But real-time or even compressed-time problem solving with someone else's skill set is still not a thing that comes naturally to me, I don't think. Well maybe a little. But I'm flattered, dude. I'm pretty sure this naming quirk that Carth Vader has going here is just a preference inherent to the system that prevents conflict between operators. That's got to be the definition of a luxury car, right? The car that will prevent your kids or your life-partner from renaming you 'Captain Boring'. Not that was the first thing I tried. I find you very interesting, actually. I also like this whole Newt-can-do-things vibe you've lately been rocking since we drifted. It *does* make me wonder if you just feel sorry for me, though. I mean, I'll take your pity, dude, and I'll heroically roll around in it a little bit, but it makes me feel a little conflicted, like maybe you're just asking me if I hacked your car so that I feel better about myself and my intellectual prospects because you want me to think that you think I'm a guy who *could* hack your car even though you really don't think that at all."

"I asked you," Hermann says, trying to sound brusque because he can't decide whether he is annoyed or sympathetic, "because I recently discovered I can play the piano with moderate skill."

"Um, I'm pretty sure my skill level is a little higher than *moderate*," Newton says in edgeless indignation. "At least, it *was*." He flexes his fingers, positions his hands in mid-air in front of him, then pulls them back into a two-handed glasses-adjustment without even attempting the threatened air-piano.

"Well, I am certain that I could get root access to the operating system of this car in less than thirty seconds," Hermann replies.

"Okay," Newton says. "Fair point. Thank god you're still slightly better at being you than I am. You're better at being you than I am at being you. I'd say I'm better at being me than you are at being you, and I'm also better at being not-you than you are at being not-me. That sounds like an inversion of what I just said, but it's not. What

meant was that the hierarchy of ontological skill is: first me as me, then you as you, then you as me, then me as you. It's better to not be each other though, so I win both ways. You're getting this, right?"

"No," Hermann says.

"Lies," Newton says. "You followed that. I can tell. Bottom line, I have arguably less identity confusion than you, so I'm winning in that department. Unfortunately, since I can't drink alcohol or caffeine, you're winning in the epicurean pleasures department. Ugh, *obviously* you are, I mean look at this *car*. Where is *my* car equivalent?"

Hermann turns on the in-car audio system to his preferred classical station.

"Radio'd," Newton says. "I'm not interesting enough for you? You don't want to take issue with my Hierarchy of Ontological Skill? Which is a good band name, by the way."

"I don't enjoy debating you when you're too tired to make a coherent argument," Hermann replies, as the intricacies of a baroque fugue begin to play over the stereo system.

"I don't—" Newton says, slowly. "You're definitely doing me a disservice out of some—" he tips his head back against the seat and then leans forward abruptly. "I just—wait are you *right*? No, you're not right. Oh god, I feel weird. Something is acutely happening to my brain."

Hermann glances laterally in time to see Newton sit back again.

"Ohhhhhh crap," Newton says, protractedly. "Is this *Bach*?"

"Yes," Hermann says, listening for a few bars and identifying the *Prelude and Fugue in A Minor*.

"I cannot do Bach, dude, not in a moving car."

"If you would simply avoid *ranking*—" Hermann begins.

"No it's ah, it's not the ranking. It's not a dissonance thing," Newton says, the pace of his speech slowing to a verbal crawl. "Anymore. I *like* Bach. I always—actually—" he stops speaking.

Hermann glances over at him in time to see the other man shut his eyes and open them in an exaggerated blink.

"I *like* it," Newton says, in a manner that seems vaguely *dazed* to Hermann. "I do."

"Then what's the problem?" Hermann snaps, edgy.

"What?" Newton asks him, in a way that's trending away from 'vaguely dazed' and toward 'semiconscious'.

Hermann snaps the car into self-driving mode, kills the radio, reaches across the seat, grabs his colleague's jacket and shouts, "*Newton*," directly at him.

His colleague does not react well to this.

Newton's eyes snap open and there is mutual alarmed yelling in the absence of actual words that resolves into: "*what are you DOING you're supposed to be DRIVING??!?!?*" and "*what in god's name is WRONG WITH YOU?*" as Newton tries and fails to *open the car door* in temporary disorientation and Hermann wrenches his shoulder trying to keep him in his seat.

The shouting stops abruptly as they mutually realize neither of them is truly in extremis.

Hermann takes a deep breath, lets go of Newton's jacket, and presses his palm to his own chest.

Newton adjusts his glasses with a calculated nonchalance.

"Opening doors during transit is not permitted without an authorization code," the car informs them pleasantly. "Please enter your code and try again."

"Would you care to explain *what just happened?*" Hermann asks, in a polite hiss.

"I told you, *no Bach*." Newton snaps, clearly unsettled. "It makes me feel weird."

"Yes I can *see that*," Hermann replies, strained. "Could you *elaborate?*"

"Well," Newton says, shaking his head subtly and bringing his fingers to his face, presumably to check for bleeding. "Well, look man, everyone's got their own quirky little mental sequelae post drift. I've got this thing where I unexpectedly and embarrassingly use rationalism as an emotional crutch to avoid dissolution into ontological terror. You've got the thing where you conflate virtuosic guitar playing with something that's maybe erotic? I'm still not clear on the details of that and as an evolutionary biologist—"

"That is *deeply* misleading—"

"Never mind. You're right. Non sequitur. *You've*," Newton continues, "got a thing where maybe sometimes you hunt me. Or random people. Or seagulls. So within this conceptual framework of the post-drift cognitive experience, yeah, turns out I've got a little bit of a thing where maybe, er, either Bach or maybe just the fugue as a musical form *really* interests certain parts of my brain that maybe aren't exactly *you* and aren't

exactly *me* but used to be, say, subordinated decentralized neural—ah, throughlines within a collective consciousness? Or rather, they used to be, but they're just kind of *not that* anymore? And they're a little bit *sad* about it maybe? And they like the musical form of the fugue?"

Hermann stares at him.

"Yeah, so you're definitely *not* driving right? Because if you're driving you should really be looking at the road a whole lot more as opposed to at me. Fixedly. Continuously. Kind of horrifiededly. It's not making me feel great. Self-esteem-wise."

"I'm not driving," Hermann says. "Are you implying that you can distinguish impulses derived from neural patterns laid down by the *kaiju hivemind*? Are you *also* saying that they *enjoy Bach*?"

"Well, I mean, who *doesn't* like Bach?" Newton asks weakly. "That was the whole premise of the Voyager Spacecraft, right? Just humans, bragging about Bach? Even Leto the second, God Emperor of Dune, likes Bach."

"Leto Atreides the second is not a real person. Nor is he a real alien. Alien person," Hermann snaps, somewhat confused by a deep and exogenous sympathy for a giant fictional man-turned-sandworm, which is *ridiculous* and also not *his* sympathy. "He's *fictional*."

"Ugh but he loved that fabricated Ixian girl," Newton says, wistfully. "Boy did he ever. Let's name your car Hwi Noree. Hwi Caree? So pretty. So fabricated." Newton pets the door handle in evident, bizarre appreciation.

"Will you please focus on what is *salient*?" Hermann asks him. "Why don't *my* kaiju-patterns anesthetize *me* in the presence of Bach?"

"Oh no," Newton says, thankfully putting an end to petting the car door. "No no no no *no*. There was no *anesthetization* happening there, dude, let's be very clear about that. What you just witnessed was an unwanted, altered state of consciousness. Do not ever spring unexpected and inescapable Bach on me in a closet attempt to save me from insomnia so extreme it is incompatible with life because I'm pretty sure the Bach-hypnosis thing is a metabolically expensive state and will just hasten my death."

"Are you *purposefully* trying to destroy *every* conversational trajectory I choose? Shall I just listen to you free associate and *hope* I *eventually* learn something interesting?" Hermann asks. "What is the etiology of the disparity in our Bach-responsiveness?"

"Can you *not* be a dick to me right now?" Newton replies, aggrieved, as if he hadn't disappeared for hours on end, stranded himself in San Francisco, and turned

mystifyingly and alarmingly unresponsive in the presence of Bach. "You just inflicted a *fugue* on me at seventy miles an hour. And I don't *know* why *your* kaiju don't like Bach as much as mine do, but those hive-mind derived neural patterns got laid down overtop different neural architectures a different number of times under different circumstances, so I'm not really sure why you'd assume a total commonality of weirdness. Maybe *your* inner kaiju tendencies like *sports cars*."

Hermann looks away, back and the dark ribbon of the road with its reflective white and yellow borders, struggling with himself, with his desire to *ask*, with his desire to *demand* that Newton tell him, tell him, finally *tell him* that which he already knows.

I know you drifted, he thinks. *I know you did. I know you did it a third time, I know you did it, I know. I know. Talk about it rather than around it. It explains almost every disparity in our experiences, it must, I'm certain it does.*

"I like sports cars," he says.

"You like *velocity*," Newton replies. "Which is weird, by the way. Your brain was not evolved for optimizing reaction times at these speeds."

"My brain is fully capable of handling these speeds, thank you," Hermann says.

"That's what your brain *wants* you to think," Newton replies.

"Of course it is," Hermann replies. "Because it's true."

"Your brain, specifically *yours*, incentivizes risky behavior," Newton says, "because that's just *your style*, dude. You're like an adventurous slime mold in a misleadingly conservative sweater that wants to go out and explore the world even when such a choice isn't mandated by local resources."

"Oh we're bringing *slime molds* into this, are we?" Hermann asks dryly.

"Shut up, it's both a compliment and a relevant point and you know it. Whether or not your reaction times are actually sufficient to handle speeds in excess of, say, thirty miles an hour isn't something that you can just assess on instinct because you have a pro-risk bias into which you're never going to have perfect insight. It's just not possible."

"I think you're using your biological knowledge base to justify a visceral objection to high velocity transit," Hermann replies, "because you rarely experienced vehicular transport prior to the age of seventeen when the head of MIT's Molecular Biology Department taught you to drive after losing a bet about the role of sirtuins in tissue regeneration."

"My objection isn't *baseless*, Hermann, are you even *listening* to me? We're coming down on opposite sides of a testable hypothesis, you realize. Maybe when you go on sabbatical you can figure out a way to extrapolate your reaction times from a modified version of *Mario Kart 10* so that you can know how fast you can *actually* drive with a reasonable expectation of avoiding death via transfer of momentum. I would help you do that. Modify *Mario Kart*, I mean. Not kill yourself in a car. For science."

"Thank you, Newton, that sounds *endlessly fascinating*, let me just pencil that into my fall schedule."

"Hwi," Newton says, "can you find some kind of music to stream that definitely will *never* include Bach? Or a *fugue* of any kind?"

A generic song that Hermann doesn't recognize, but has the borrowed musical theory to deconstruct, begins to play, mid chorus. Newton reaches out and adjusts the volume with the dexterous swipe of a finger.

"Your motor control has improved," Hermann says, finally wresting the conversation out of Newton's unconscious and continuous control and back around to his observations in the parking lot.

"I know," Newton replies, with an eyebrow lift. "Like I said, strenuous human exercise as a human helped. In terms of a neurologic perspective, I think I parsed things out a little further today while I was mostly falling off a chain-linked fence. So, initially, my problem was two-fold: on the one hand, there was the crap coordination and motor control, on the other there was the rigidity and resting tremor. I assumed the former followed from the latter, but I now think that was incorrect."

"Really," Hermann replies, with unconcealed interest.

"Really. I explain the problems with coordination and fine motor control to an excess of *competing neural pathways* laid down in my motor cortex, some of which are yours, some of which are alien, all trying to operate at the same time, while mine win, but *only just*. As for why you're not having the same problems, well, again, there's the differences in number and circumstance of drifts, but, honestly dude, honestly? And this is the really interesting part—there's more than a little historical evidence to suggest that you're a little sharper than me at baseline when it comes to, like, catching things that are thrown at you, for example. I'm also differentiating complex motor programs, like say, guitar playing or the dexterous use of a multi-pipette from *reflexes*, because I am excellent at doing *those* things, but less excellent at handling Tendo saying, "look alive, Newt," and throwing a bagel at my head. Somehow too much education has just killed all my reflexive responsiveness dude, I have recently

discovered that when I'm totally terrified I kind of just stand in place and *think* really quickly without actually translating any of that thinking into *action*, per se."

"Yes," Hermann says dryly. "I'm aware."

"Though I did kind of quickly *crawl* away from baby Otachi at one point, for the purpose of *not* getting eaten, so I'm going to count that one as a win." Newton blinks rapidly and adjusts his glasses with an expression of pained distraction, his eyebrows pressing together, his gaze shifting to a mid-air trajectory that Hermann is certain is turning internally.

"You were speculating on our motor programs, Newton, please do not digress into the ways that the American higher educational system stripped you of most of your survival instincts," Hermann says brusquely.

"Right. So, look, we've both been assuming that *I'm* the defective one, right?"

"I wouldn't have put it quite so crudely," Hermann replies, "but yes, you seem to be more severely affected in a whole host of ways."

"Well, okay, I don't want this to sound creepy, but what if *you're* the atypical one? What if you're freakishly *good* at integrating sets of motor patterns? Mine *and* kaiju? We've got an n of two for human-on-kaiju drifts, so it could be that my response is more typical and *yours* is unusual. This is why you're a solid piano player right out of the gate, good for you by the way, and it's also why you've got this whole 'hunting' subroutine that you can just kick into when you see a passing seagull or a nurse who's giving me a predatory eye."

"No," Hermann snaps reflexively. "I'm sure you're wrong."

"I don't think it *means* anything," Newton says, in a tone that's unambiguously and offensively kind. "I don't think this makes any kind of global statement about you, and I don't think it predicts a necessarily crap outcome for your sanity or anything."

"It's categorically impossible to classify either of our responses to an *alien drift* with an *atypical voltage calibration* as being 'better' or 'worse'."

"Nope, it *is* possible, and I'm going to pithily do it right now: *you're* better at integrating foreign neural pathways than *me*, which is creepy, and, unexpectedly, makes *me* a better human than *you*," Newton says, almost managing to keep a straight face.

"I don't understand where you learned to be so universally intolerable," Hermann snaps.

"Insults carry more weight when you haven't driven ninety minutes to come get me and then aggressively protected me from the evil, caffeine-related scheming of Legit Flow. But, if you're actually curious, which I can't imagine you are, everyone is nice to an effectively if not actually parentless child at institutions of higher learning. Well, *almost* everyone. Look, winsome obnoxiousness was rewarded both academically and socially."

"You are, in no way, *winsome*."

"Winsome, is, in fact, your number one secret adjective for me, dude."

"I do not have *secret adjectives* for you."

"Eh, you do a little. It's okay. I, too, have secret adjectives for you, like *incisive*."

Hermann tries not to feel at all pleased by this as he wrenches the conversation back into its previous trajectory. "Do you *seriously believe* what you just said?"

"You are *very incisive* dude, *very*."

"No," Hermann snaps. "I mean the differences in our motor responses being explained by my brain being architecturally superior to yours."

"Um, I'm pretty sure I didn't put it that way, but yeah. It seems like a reasonable working model. The great thing about this situation though," Newton says, harassing the edge of his own shirt cuff, "is that no one has turned evil yet. Yes, there are difficult to explain predatory instincts, and yes there are sort of trips to the pharmacy that get hijacked and turned into trips to the Wall, and yes there are times when one meets middle schoolers who might not actually be middle schoolers, and yes there are some unusual motor cortex side effects, and yes maybe there's a weak technical argument to be made for epilepsy, but at the end of the day we're fifty percent employed and one hundred percent not yet dangerous to society, so we are doing awesome."

"Middle schoolers?" Hermann asks.

"I met five kids inside the wall having a jam/homework/camaraderie session. It was super weird. Do kids really do that? Hang out in a little circles of adorkable while trespassing? I feel like no. I think maybe I hallucinated the whole thing. I don't really trust my brain; it's kind of a misleading jerk a lot of the time. I mean, there's no way I'm *actually* a rock star? Right? *Literally* one? I always thought I was being a little bit *metaphorical* about the whole rockstar thing, you know, tongue in cheek, like 'rockstar' in the Ian Malcolm tradition of rockstar-as-a-single-word-representing-intellectual-risk-taking-coupled-with-an-improbably-cutting-edge-fashion-sense-and-tasteful-iconoclasm type deal as opposed to say, a *literal* rock star in the classical tradition of

aloof-guyliner-wearing-faux-guitar-smashing musical genius. I mean, I have swaths of genius, Hermann, entire swaths of stupidly vast abilities, and I had to pick, ostensibly, and I picked biology, eventually, after six degrees and short stint as a PI and also after cloned, alien, war-machines started ruining my local environment, by which I mean my planet. But if those kids *weren't* real, my brain actually took that rockstar thing *literally*. Not rockstar but rock. Star. I find this disappointing. I mean, *come on*, brain, am I right? Like, *yes*, I can stun the minds of non-narcissists with my laser-like vanity, precisely applied, but I *like* to think I can give my brain the benefit of the doubt about uncloseting closeted desires at least to *me* if no one else. I think it says terrible things about me if I'm hallucinating a cadre of middle school children who want my autograph. Really terrible things."

Hermann stares at him, trying to decide what to say and not doing it fast enough.

Newton pulls a plastic bag containing a few dried apricots out of his pocket.

"Okay, this should be elucidating, actually. Can you *see* these apricots?" Newton asks him.

"Yes," Hermann says. "What are you—"

"Huh," Newton says. "And you didn't buy them and put them in my coat pocket?"

"No," Hermann says. "Will you please—"

"This is a *great* sign," Newton says in apparent relief. "You want one?"

"No," Hermann snaps. "Will you please *stop* indulging your penchant for non sequiturs? It is intellectually lazy and makes you extremely difficult to converse with at the best of times and, at the worst of times, it makes me think that you're losing touch with reality, and I have had a *terrible day*."

"Okay so the apricot thing was not technically a non sequitur, it was a form of poorly-explained reality testing because a middle schooler *gave* me these apricots, so there's a good chance that if you can see them, that she was *real*, but *go ahead*, Dr. Gottlieb, make an alphabetized or a prioritized list of all the interpersonal goals that you'd like to accomplish on this late night car ride and I will do my best to avoid *boring you* with inefficient *conversation*," Newton snaps.

It occurs to Hermann, not for the first time over the course of the evening, that Newton is *extremely tired*. He tries to hang onto that thought, to impress it upon himself *permanently* because Newton does not get tired in the way that most people get tired, it is a subtle and dangerous form of exhaustion, easily missed or forgotten in the heat of intellectual argument, more a psychological destabilizer than the kind of grinding

weight that Hermann has been laboring under for weeks now with improbable success.

"Sorry," Newton says, over the chorus of a generic pop song, one hand resting on the rim of his glasses as if he is attempting to marshal unmarshalable thoughts.

Hermann exhales shortly and hisses, "as I have previously impressed upon you countless times, I wish you *would not apologize*."

"You are literally the most confusing guy to have *ever lived*," Newton says. "I just want to make sure you know that. You don't want me to *apologize* to you? You're rescuing me from my own stupidity, *again*, and I'm yelling at you while you do it, *again*. That's pretty unarguably a classless act on my part. In fact, ten out of ten independent panels agree that Dr. Geiszler is a master of the consistent application of the prototypical dick move."

"You cannot help it," Hermann says.

"Thanks man, thanks. That makes me feel really great. I take comfort from the fact that *you* can't help being *atotal jerk*; it's just an inextricable part of you. I, on the other hand, *can* actually prevent my *own* dickishness most of the time, some of the time, well, it's hit or miss, really. The *point* is not so much that I'm *specifically* sorry for the high-volume sarcasm I was leveling at you there because you deserved it a little bit, but that I'm more *generally* sorry for all the ruining of your life I've been doing lately and if you don't want to hear it that's *too bad* because you hunting pedestrians and you turning into me in public forums is *completely* and one hundred percent my personal bad. I cannot even *imagine* how endlessly exhausting it is to *live* with me; I have *extrapolated* from my post drift insight into your brain and from the fact that no one, not even my biological relations, has ever managed to do it for long, that cohabitation with me must be astronomically difficult. Unfortunately for you, because of your weird superloyalty, you're just going to *stick around* until I drive you to justifiable homicide or give you an ulcer as I hallucinate while sleep deprived or—whatever. I don't want to enumerate. I just want to *make sure* that you know that *I* know how much this sucks for you and how culpable I am in orchestrating the overall total suckage in which we currently live, and how aware I am that if I had better metaphorical penmanship *everything would be better* and—"

"Yes," Hermann hisses. "That is, *exactly*, the sentiment I object to. As I have told you, repeatedly, many times, you did not ruin my life. You saved our civilization."

"Yeah, so those aren't mutually exclusive, dude. I'm pretty sure that at least a *little bit* of life-ruining happened back there. That time. When we did that thing we did. Because I never—"

"I *elected* to help you," Hermann snaps, totally unable to bear the thought hearing Newton out. "I'll thank you to credit me with the capacity to make that decision and grasp its implications and stop apologizing to me as if I were some unfortunate victim of a morally bankrupt B movie villain with a mobile stereotactic drift interface."

"Okay, yes, and I appreciate that," Newton begins. "Agency and stuff. You want it. I'll give you that. I'm not trying to steal your whole self-actualizing descent down from the altar of mathematics to get your hands dirty with your own blood from your own leaking capillaries—"

"Oh *please*," Hermann says, rolling his eyes.

"But that doesn't mean I don't *feel really terrible* about the whole thing, dude. I mean, yes. Go you. You saved me. Well, my brain, at least. Hardcore. Multiple times. At least two times. Academic damsel-in-distress style. But—"

"After I locked you in a tower," Hermann snaps.

"Okay, no, this is now getting too metaphorical for me," Newton says. "I don't even know what that *means*. You're not *listening to* me. I *feel bad* about this whole scenario. Right in the limbic system. I mean, shouldn't you be strolling Bavarian hills or something, thinking about Riemann zeros and adding to your Waldglas collection while making friends with a local orphan or possibly a stray dog?"

"Is that literally what you think I envision?" Hermann snaps at him in a tone that ideally conveys *extremedisapproval* and *profound* disdain.

"No," Newton replies. "No. I just, I know you think I'm somewhat insensitive, not without reason, but I would like to demonstrate that I *get* that this sucks for you and I'm *sorry*, about that, I'm *sorry*, okay I'm just, I'm really—"

"Stop," Hermann half-screams at him, looking away, grateful he has not taken back control of the car. "Stop," he repeats, more sedately. "I *know* that you—"

"No, dude," Newton snaps, "you *don't know*, actually, this is a whole post-drift type of guilt and you *don't know*, you can't *possibly* know, it's *literally impossible* for you to—"

"I *know*," Hermann shouts at him.

Newton seems somewhat taken aback by his vehemence.

The car is, temporarily, silent.

"I know how you feel," Hermann says, in a significantly more collected manner.

"Like, you know in a *psychic* ghost-drift-y, SPECTER-effect-y way, or—"

"I know because you *told* me," Hermann says.

"No," Newton snaps. "I haven't. You have literally never let me get it out of my mouth dude, you—"

"You," Hermann says, the word cutting Newton's sentence in half. "Told me. You *told* me. I know how you feel, Newton, it has been impressed upon me in excruciating indelible detail, and so there is no need to discuss it any further."

"Well, okay, because my next logical question is going to have to be 'when'," Newton replies, with a trace of Hermann's own stiff formality in his tone. "Since I—"

"In Hong Kong," Hermann says.

"Could you be more vague?" Newton asks. "A little bit? Possibly? Because I'd really like to make this harder on both of us, if we can do it. That is, *always*, my goal."

"Shut up," Hermann snaps.

Newton says nothing.

Hermann also says nothing.

"Well are you going to—" Newton begins.

"As we were leaving," Hermann says at the same time.

"As we were leaving?" Newton echoes. "Hong Kong? This is not ringing a bell for me."

"Yes," Hermann says, uncomfortable in the extreme. "I know, I would be extremely surprised if it did. But, ah, as we were leaving Hong Kong you did a *great deal* of incoherent, extremely heartfelt apologizing at intermittent intervals."

"Ugh, really?" Newton replies faintly. "I literally remember *none* of the Shatterdome-to-plane leg of that trip. Literally nothing."

"Well, picture yourself entirely uncoordinated with limited situational awareness or conceptual understanding of what was happening to you while iteratively apologizing, apparently for for inconveniencing me, with almost unparsable diction."

"Yikes," Newton says in vaguely self-conscious sympathy. "*That* must have *really* looked like brain damage. That must have looked like brain damage for a *long time*. For however long it took to get from the Shatterdome to a San Francisco hotel room."

"Over twenty-four hours."

"That sucks for you, dude," Newton says. "How did you even get me on that plane? You did a lot of aggressive hissing at me. I remember that much. Very velociraptor. Or, *was* that you? It could have been other parties. Nevermind. Not important. Also? Thanks for rescuing me despite the fact that you thought I was brain damaged."

"Despite?" Hermann echoes. "What do you mean 'despite'? I'm not *certain* about this, Newton, but *that* statement is in the running for the most stupid arrangement of words to ever come out of your mouth."

"You would still like me even I was intellectually uninteresting?"

"The point, Newton, is that you would never *be* uninteresting to me."

"Ah," Newton says, with lethargic anxiety. "Cool. I um—" He trails off.

Hermann studies the shifting outline of the bay outside the driver's side window.

Whatever is playing on the radio fades into silence before the unmistakable opening of *Syncope* fills the darkness of the car.

Hermann glances at Newton.

Newton gaze snaps to the car's dashboard with a unique and entirely characteristic blend of skepticism, horror, and total fascination that he generally reserves for films featuring monsters, interesting kaiju variants, and laboratory accidents involving his own person.

"No," Newton says.

"Yes," Hermann replies.

"No," Newton says. "Hwi, seriously, what are you *playing* right now?"

"You are listening to *Syncope* by—"

"Yes, I know, I mean, what, generally, are you *streaming*?" Newton snaps.

"Top forty Post-Apocalyptic American Radio," the car replies.

"That's a thing?" Newton says. "Post-apocalyptic radio? It's kind of *misleading* because it implies that apocalyptic events actually *happened* but whatever. Is this *regular* top forty or like weird, neohipster, Intellectual Underground top forty?"

"I don't understand your question," the car replies.

"Don't get cute with me, carfriend," Newton snaps.

"I believe," Hermann offers, "that, ah, well, I believe that *Syncope*, *LHC*, *Evangeline*, and *Plate Tectonics* are *all* currently in the top forty. The conventional, American top forty."

"What?" Newton demands, his voice cracking. "Are you *serious*, dude? That's completely *impossible*. I mean, um, like, I—" he trails off, at an apparent loss for words. "All of those? This is *weird*. It's weird, right? Yes. It's weird. I mean, like, I use the word 'hypoperfusion' in this one," he says, waving a hand in the general direction of the dashboard. "No one likes that kind of thing. Also chalk one more up in favor of actual middle schoolers as opposed to hallucinated middle schoolers."

Hermann raises his eyebrows.

"But—*why*?" Newton asks, apparently expecting him to furnish an answer. "Also, how? But, mostly, *why*?"

"Your interrogatives are related," Hermann replies. "Consider that you contributed materially to apocalypse aversion and then immediately disappeared from the public eye, inviting rampant speculation which has only been fanned by the obvious fondness with which Ms. Mori and Mr. Becket speak of you in interviews. This perhaps makes up for the fact that your songs include atypical word choices and themes not generally favored in mainstream music."

"Wait, Mako talks about me? In *interviews*? And the other guy? What's his name?"

"You seem surprised," Hermann replies. "Have I not told you, repeatedly, that she's been emailing you every few days for three weeks now?"

"Well yes, but—"

"As for Mr. *Becket*," Hermann says, "there is no need to pretend to me you did not bother to learn the name of the man who collapsed a transdimensional portal and managed to survive the attempt. Because you did. I *know* you did."

"I'm sure Mako saved him."

"Ms. Mori did not save him."

"Um, I guarantee you there's an argument to be made, somehow, for Mako saving him, okay? One day, when I watch the news again, maybe tomorrow, I'm going to find it. You're not going to win this one. Mako is a baller, and that guy seemed just kind of moderately okay."

"Do not watch the news," Hermann snaps. "Not tomorrow."

Newton sighs, tips his head back, looks at the dashboard with half-lidded eyes and says, "I literally *cannot* believe this."

"Well, they aren't terrible songs, musically speaking," Hermann says. "None of them are."

"Oh. Oh *really*? They're not *terrible* Hermann? *Thanks*. Thanks so much. No guitar voyeurism for *you*. Ever. What would you know about music post the Romantic Era *anyway*."

Hermann raises his eyebrows in a manner he hopes communicates mild curiosity and detached disdain.

"Wait, what am I saying. Coming from *you* that's actually pretty respectable since your Ten out Ten on the Musical Awesomeness Scale is a six part baroque fugue, so I'll take your 'Not terrible' and be satisfied with that. I guess. Kind of. Not really though."

"I prefer *Sea of Dirac*," Hermann offers.

"Obviously," Newton replies. "I know that. I defy any sensitive quantum physicist *not* to love that song."

"I am not *sensitive*," Hermann snaps.

"You? Noooo. Not *you*," Newton says agreeably. "Not *sensitive*. Suave subject change though: am I getting *paid* for this?" He gestures vaguely in the direction of the dashboard. "Do you know? Am I *making money*? Because earlier today I asked a semi-sentient cab to check my balance and it was off by about oh, I don't know, *five orders of magnitude*? In a positive direction? I assumed that was an *error*, but maybe not? Possibly? Am I paying *you rent*, is what I'm really driving at here. That one's been bothering me for a while."

"We have lived in our apartment for two weeks," Hermann says. "We have not yet paid rent."

"Ugh," Newton replies. "Will you stop being *weird* about this?"

"I am not being 'weird' about this," Hermann snarls. "You spent two days iteratively trying to watch the news, becoming *extremely* distressed, and *bleeding*. After which, I decided, given the circumstances, that *perhaps* you *deserved* a *reprieve* from the unrelenting pressure you have been under for the past decade and so I bought you a library on rationalism and found an apartment and resigned myself to working out the details of our daily existence including but not limited to your financial responsibilities until such a time that *you* were less globally upset and *I* was less terrified that some kind of Pan Pacific mandate was going to *drag you* to a *lab* somewhere. So you will forgive me if I have, in the past, *been* and continue, in the future, *to be* somewhat evasive when it comes to certain subject areas because when you become *stressed* I am concerned that you will, at a *minimum*, start bleeding and at a maximum—well, I don't *know*, Newton, and I do not wish to *find out*. That is the *entire point*. You won't

even read *your personal email* and I assume there is an excellent psychological reason for that, so you'll forgive me if I don't trouble you with the entirely overwhelming magnitude of public speculation about you, the details of your finances, the list of interview requests you have received, nor—

Newton interrupts him with a frustrated yell from between clenched teeth, both hands pressed to his temples. "THANK YOU FOR BEING NICE TO ME," he shouts. "God, you are the *worst*."

That was unexpected.

Nevertheless, Hermann rallies appropriately. "*You* are the worst," Hermann snaps. "*You*, Newton."

"No," Newton says. "Actually? You are."

"No," Hermann says.

"Yes," Newton replies.

"No," Hermann says again.

A guitar solo that Hermann can remember playing in nearly identical iterations over a decade ago fills the car, and, for an interval, neither of them speak.

"That's actually quite—" Hermann begins but does not finish.

"Yeah, you like that line?" Newton asks. "It just came to me. In the shower."

"I remember," Hermann says dryly.

"There's never going to be a time when that's not weird," Newton replies, "but yeah. Look, I feel like we're really bad at arguing, we're going to have to work on restoring our historical A-game, dude. In the meantime, can I just pay you rent? Or can I play Blaze rent? Or whomever we owe rent to? I just really want to *pay rent*, okay? I don't want to go on the interview circuit or watch news or get the band back together or freak out during a job talk in front of UC Berkeley's Neuroscience Department, I just want to know that you are using my now weirdly profligate finances to *pay rent*. And maybe also my taxes."

"Yes. Fine. I will use your finances to pay half the rent, but I am *not* doing your *taxes*," Hermann snaps.

"You actually mostly did my taxes *last* year," Newton says. "I'm not actually sure why that happened. Post-drift analysis indicates that you were trying to shame me into doing my fair share of the paperwork? But I have no shame when it comes to escaping

the bureaucratic glorification red tape for its redness and its tapeyness, so instead your plan backfired. It backfired *really* badly."

Hermann sighs.

"Last year, you had a total of three thousand dollars to your name. Your taxes weren't exactly complicated despite your dual residency. *Now* you—"

"So you've thought about this I see," Newton says. "Excellent. I, in turn, will do something nice for you. Somethings*super* nice. Extremely thoughtful."

"Such as?" Hermann says.

"I don't *know* yet, *Hermann*; it requires *thought*," Newton replies. "That is, in fact, the *definition* of a thoughtful gesture."

"I suppose you're correct."

"Corrrrect," Newton repeats, with an obscene roll of his 'r', his eyes shutting behind his glasses. "That's hot."

"You're bizarre," Hermann says mildly, wondering if Newton is exhausted enough to sleep in a moving car.

Possibly.

Possibly not.

Possibly.

"Meh," Newton says equivocally. "I just really like being uncontestedly 'correct' in literally all contexts. It's my favorite state of being."

"I know. I'm surprised you didn't end up a mathematician," Hermann says.

"Too far afield from the in vivo experience," Newton says. "Too close to mysticism. I am not into overly reductive modeling as a temple to mathematical aesthetics. I am Scully to your mathematical Mulder."

"That's *extremely* offensive," Hermann says. "And entirely untrue. I wish I could disavow all knowledge of this conversation you're trying to start."

"Well, we can't *both* be Scully," Newton points out. "How would that even *work*? Don't get me wrong. I have intense love for Fox Mulder. Heroic fictional worship in the absence of world-view appropriation. That dude also knew how to take a hit."

"Scully is the *quantitative one*," Hermann snaps. "Therefore, *I* am the Scully-equivalent in this relationship, Newton. Me."

"Eh," Newton says, smiling faintly, still unimpressed enough that he hasn't opened his eyes. "Scully's a pathologist and I am a comparative anatomist, and therefore, in terms of field, I'm more Scully-ish. Also, anyone who references 'the handwriting of god' is definitely a conceptual Mulder-equivalent, even though Mulder was not really into god, that was more of a Scully thing, crap, okay, bad example, I'm clouding the issue. I'm just saying. It's just a thing. You should accept this. I get to be Scully. Also? I like Carl Sagan more than you because I'm pretty sure you've never hallucinated him, so, despite infinite nuance, case closed, I am Scully. I am also shorter than you. Now case *really* closed."

"I refuse to acknowledge the validity of *any* of your points. *Neither* of us are *Scully*," Hermann says. "I have never heard of Dana Scully, in fact. This conversation is over, go to *sleep*."

"You have my brain," Newton says, briefly opening his eyes and squinting at the glare of oncoming traffic. "You can't pretend you didn't watch the *X-files* with German overdubbing, illicitly, late at night, because I know *someonedid*; it was fifty percent of both of us who did."

"I never did that."

"Ah, but you *did*," Newton replies. "Halfway."

"I am *not you*," Hermann says.

"Well *I'm* not me either," Newton replies. "*Someone* has to be me."

"You're you," Hermann says. "I'm me. Everything is fine."

"Wouldn't it be great if that were actually true, though?" Newton asks him, cracking an eyelid and an asymmetrical smile. "Imagine how totally normal we'd be. We could have an argument that doesn't end in confused anti-climax or someone bleeding. You were always the best to argue with. I was so relieved when they wouldn't let you be a Jaeger pilot."

"So you've said," Hermann replies, stiffly, "multiple times."

Even now, even after everything they've seen and done, that predictable exclusion still hasn't lost all of its sting.

"Can you imagine how stupid that would have been? If you'd *died* killing kaiju?"

Hermann gives Newton a nonplussed look, which is wholly wasted, since his colleague's eyes are closed.

"I mean, think about it. I'd have been *so pissed*. I still can't believe that no one ever devised a *remote* stereotactic interface with sufficiently fast response times, it makes me embarrassed for our *species*, but, like, seriously, Hermann, I would have been mind-ruiningly pissed if they had let you into one of those things, what the *hell* were you thinking, for reals, dude, I mean *come on*. Caitlin Lightcap was bad enough. Also who's going to be your drift partner, I mean *really*."

Newton opens his eyes to shoot Hermann a brief glare that Hermann is not sure why he deserves.

"I always thought maybe, *maybe* Mako," Newton continues in a wandering, confessional style. "Like, *you guys*, man. Something seemed right about it to me, with the distant respect vibe that you had going, because while Mako liked me for treating her like a kid, she liked you for *not* treating her like a kid, so yeah, I always thought maybe it would be you and her one day, in the end, the rage-filled rejects, when the shit just totally hit the fan, and I'd just be stuck on some coastline somewhere, watching you guys kick ass and then *die* but that was before all the Jaeger funding was cut. Then I was less worried. Because there were pretty much no more Jaegers. But also *more* worried, because, hi, inevitable death. But additionally more worried, again, actually, *really extremely worried* close to the end there, when they pulled *GD* out of the graveyard; I was just very concerned that that would be *exactly* what would happen when they needed a new pilot team. You and Mako. Because who *else* was it going to be? Who could it have possibly have been? The Marshal, maybe, but they've always pulled Jaeger pilots from the science staff, because, hello, Caitlin Lightcap turned out to be such an incredible killing machine in one of those things and you'd already expressed an interest and also done part of the training, so I mean really. Really, you *absolute dick*, who else was it going to be? But then they found Captain Sir Saves Everyone McQuarterback of the Pacific using a jackhammer on the Wall and he and Mako had that weird like *rarr* chemistry, which was not expected because he looks like he should be captain of a hockey team or maybe just a demolition squad. Do you think they're dating and would he be offended if I mailed him a thesaurus?"

Hermann realizes his mouth is slightly open. He closes it.

"I—" he clears his throat. "I don't know if they're 'dating'," he says. "Perhaps you should contact Ms. Mori. I would not advise mailing Mr. Becket a thesaurus."

"Yeah, no, I'm *going* to, dude," Newton says his eyes still closed. "Call Mako I mean. Or email her. I just need to make sure I won't, you know, have a nervous breakdown when I talk to her first."

"Do you really think that's likely?" Hermann asks mildly.

"Well, maybe; it depends if she cries, because if *Mako* cries that is not going to be a good scene for me. Remember that summer intern situation?"

"Hmm," Hermann says. "True."

"Don't say *true*, dude," Newton says, cracking an eyelid. "Traitor. God. I'm extremely manly. I don't cry about sad fourteen-year olds, even if they are *Mako*. I'm an *amazing* Portal player. I called you 'not sensitive' like fifteen minutes ago out of *respect*, not because it was *true*. You're actually the most sensitive person I know."

Hermann rolls his eyes and looks back toward the dark ribbon of the road. He thinks about taking manual control back from his car but doesn't do it. Not quite yet. Over the sound system the strains of a generic pop song fades and is replaced by the opening chords of *Evangeline*.

He remembers reading, days ago in the sunlit quiet of his UC Berkeley office that this particular song was Ms. Mori's favorite.

He wonders if Marshal Pentecost spent even a single moment considering the possibility of pairing him with Ms. Mori.

He doesn't think so.

He doesn't believe that the Marshal wanted her to be paired with *anyone*.

With a quiet click, Hermann snaps the car back into manual mode.

He accelerates so smoothly, that Newton, who has been partially asleep for minutes now, fails to notice.

Chapter Twenty Three

The sun is on the other side of the building, the Wall is a mostly-misted obscurity across the haze of the bay, and Dr. Newton Geiszler of the mostly-there dexterity and the cognitive celerity is having an awesome time.

Yup.

So it's slightly *lonely* during the day, with only the fish kids and the thought kids and the memory of actual kids keeping him company. Perhaps, if he can't get himself together reliably enough to return to the rigors of academia, he should consider becoming a camp counselor slash middle school mentor of some kind. *Graduate* students had always liked him, though they'd had weird and vindictive ways of showing it. Newt imagines middle schoolers to be like graduate students, just shorter, a little bit more tuned into the popular zeitgeist, a little less enriched for masochistic intellectuals on a population level, and, ideally, a *lot* less inclined to creatively prank him.

Ideally.

Still, Newt reflects, opening the supposedly sterile kit he bought from a reasonably legit online supplier, *kids like science, I like science, ergo kids should like me, ergo this is a good backup career.*

That's a logical fallacy, his Gottliebian neural pathways inform him. *Furthermore, do you like kids?*

Yes? he replies.

Newt, who lacked a coeval peer group for his formative years, hasn't had much experience with kids. Really, the only kid he's ever known is Mako, and that went pretty okay, until she turned too cool for him circa age eighteen or so, but that's generally a thing that kids do, turn too cool for people, and Mako's not really prototypical in any respect, so yeah.

He adjusts his glasses, washes his hands, and positions his kit just off-center on the kitchen table before unwrapping the thing like a sterile flower, pulling away green leaves that he contaminates with his touch as he folds them down, exposing their clean and contiguous inner surfaces that conceal the autoclaved internal contents of this particular pre-fab'd collection of materials.

You make a terrible role model. I really don't think that socially accepted activities for children include your current pursuits, his brain says, being Hermann, as it is so wont to do.

I make an epically awesome role model, actually, Newt says, using his fingernails to pick up the edge of a sterile gel packet. *I am a literal rock star and an intellectual rockstar.*

His brain does not have a smartass response to that one.

Ha.

Newt sterilizes his hands with the ethanol-based gel.

He rolls his shoulders, mostly for show, and then sits down at the table, not contaminating anything that is supposed to be sterile. Obviously.

He puts a sterile glove on his right hand and leaves his left hand bare.

Your motor control is soooooo good, Newt's brain says.

I know, Newt replies, putting his left hand down on his work surface. He layers a sterile piece of adhesive over his skin, pressing it down so it sticks.

Historically, he might not have bothered with buying the online kit, he'd probably just have bought a pneumatic loader, and even if he *had* bought this kit, he probably wouldn't have done this in a full-out sterile field kind of way, but now he just *wants* to, with a vaguely Hermannesque want. Everything in his head is a compromise that he's getting increasingly good at snapping down into categorized capitulation to him as a personal overlord. He's arranged a joint concession here, because while he's said a resounding *yes* to sterility in a Gottliebman fashion, he's said an equally resounding *no* to rolling up his left shirt-sleeves and sterilizing his arms to the elbow in submission to certain Geiszlerian limitations.

He does a once-over of his array of sterile instruments, as he lays them out over the green-draped kitchen table. Marking pen? Check. Scalpel? Check. Forceps? Check. RFID tag with correct orientation marked? Check. Surgical grade dermal glue? Check. Sterile gauze? Check.

This chip is going in his hand.

You are just so awesome so much of the time, his brain says, sounding like his brain.

I know, Newt replies.

The kids hiss with polite, venomous interest, looking forward to this whole Newt-cutting-Newt-open business.

Now kids, Newt thinks, in his best camp-counselor voice, *this is not meant to be fun for you. This is meant to be fun for me, partially, and also a little bit of a totally thoughtful while yet very badass 'present', as it were, for our roommate, presuming this pilot experiment turns out well and I don't throw up from cognitive dissonance or slice open my*

entire arm in kaiju-derived personal rage, so any vicarious pleasure you may get out of this is totally incidental.

The kids keep hissing, sort of enigmatically, like, maybe, they're plotting something.

No plots, Newt thinks at them, marking the line he's going to cut with the pen. It's short and positioned in the middle of the webbing between his thumb and index finger.

He picks up the scalpel.

He waits for cognitive dissonance.

He's got nothing. Everyone is still cool with this. Apparently, for the parts of him that are Hermann, the awesomeness of this idea outweighs the nausea that would normally accompany self-modification.

He waits for some kind of murderous impulse.

Any kind.

Nope, he's got nothing.

Ugh, brain, you give me hope, Newt says.

He begins humming *Evangeline* while making a shallow cut along the line he marked, which yessssssss, actually, kind of hurts a lot, he knew it *would* of course; the hand has a lot of nerves for evolutionary reasons. The kids are *super* interested in this as a concept—the whole deal: the slicing, the pain, the biohacking ethos—they're identifying *hardcore* with this scalpel work he's doing in a fascinated, horrified, empathetic, traumatized way, but they're holding things together, doing a weird, subtle thing to his brain that he's not sure he likes but not sure he *objects* to either; there's some kind of *reward-based* thing going on here, because the acute and noxious scalpel stimuli is *blending* with something cognitively satisfying, not in the hive-mind-style *intense reward* for drifting way, but in a way that instead approximates intense *satisfaction*.

Newt isn't sure how he feels about this, other than awesome with a side of horrified fascination.

Try to be Newt, team, he thinks. *Don't be a disaffected, body-dysmorphic kaiju, please.*

Based on previous experience, his brain replies, *I would not think about the hive-mind right now, champ.*

"Noted," Newt says.

He intersperses the *Evangeline* humming with some straight-up singing, because yes. Everyone likes the singing. Newt, the kids, not-Hermann, his brain—everyone.

Literal branching coral,

Ground up, it scrubs you clean.

Evange—

Aaaaand he finishes his first pass with the scalpel right as his phone rings.

This is unfortunate.

He is, somewhat, occupied.

"Really?" Newt asks his phone. "Are we serious right now?"

His phone keeps ringing, and the lit-up display tells him that the identity of the caller is, alas, 'Maks InSocks'.

You made a semi-personal vow, his brain reminds him.

Semi-personal? Newt replies, with all the Gottliebian acidity he can bring to bear while keeping his admirably steady hands in a continuing state of rock-solid steadiness. He takes a look at his incision, pulling skin back with his forceps. This is delicate work, really, and not something he should be doing while answering phone calls from Mako, but Mako's calls have decreased in frequency lately and, really, Newt should really, he should *really* just, he should *really*.

"Answer," he snaps at his phone, because he doesn't exactly have a free hand at the moment. "Speaker."

His phone does not respond.

"Answer," he shouts at it, with all the diction he can bring to bear. "*Speaker.*"

His phone lights up in acknowledgement.

"Hey Maks," he says, looking intently at his hand and picking up the scalpel to extend the incision slightly on the medial side while making a real and profound and intense effort to make this *normal*, to *be* normal, because he *is*normal; this is *normal for him* and, also, normal for *Mako*. Talking on the phone. After weeks. They saved the world. In pieces, they did. He should probably keep talking. "Sorry I've missed all your calls. Full disclosure, this isn't a *great* time for me, I kind of have a scalpel in my hand at the moment. That's misleading. Or rather, it's accurate, but it really only gives you fifty percent of the picture. Look, the point is, I am holding a scalpel handle with my non-dominant hand and I have a (sterile) scalpel blade *in* my dominant hand. Biohacking. It's my new thing. I'm not killing myself or anything. That would be awkward. I

wouldn't have answered the phone if that were the case, so, er, don't worry about that. How are *you*, though? I like the new hair. Lookin' suave. Fierce. Fiercely suave."

There is silence on the other end of the line.

"Yup," Newt says pathetically.

There is *still* silence on the other end of the line.

Newt winces as he angles the scalpel blade and uses its tip to make a delicate dissection of his tissue plane, just under his dermis. It's looking good, feeling kind of *outrageously* painful, there are a lot of nerves in the hand it turns out, and it *also* turns out that doing this kind of thing to ones *self* just really wants to make one *stop* doing it *immediately*, but he has willpower and it's helping him out that the kids are still *really* into this in a kind of hypnotized, justified, justice-y way. This isn't really news to him, per se, but experientially, as an ongoing phenomenon, it's notable. He eyes the small, cylindrical, sterile RFID transmitter he ordered online and extends the cut just slightly—

It is at this point that Mako begins screaming at him in Japanese.

Miraculously, Newt does not so much as *twitch*.

Ugh, his motor control is so *great* right about now.

But.

This is really terrible and also distracting and also *horrible*, because, yes, *Mako*.

Mako, Mako, Mako, Mako, MAKO, he thinks, but Mako isn't in his head and can't hear him.

The worst part about it is that, other than the first ten words or so, it's really, it's just really, oh god, the thing is, is that it's *not screaming*, it's just this high pitched Japanese, too fast for him to follow and laced with increasing Mako *distress* rather than, say, hypothetically, extreme Mako *anger*; he doesn't think he's heard her or seen her or can remember her *distressed* without being *angry* for *years*; for years and years and years.

Oh god, his brain says, *somehow she's not pissed at you; this is the worst case scenario for you, dude, I'm not sure you can handle this because Hermann has been very stiff-upper lip about everything because he's literally the perfect human but this is—*

"You're a *dick*," someone says, cutting short his runaway exothermic emotional panic with a short yet accurate observation delivered in a hostile manner by, definitely, a guy. A male variety of *Homo sapiens*, ostensibly. Newt is pretty unsure what the sapience level of this *particular* hominid is.

"Yeah," Newt replies in a long, glossy pull of grade A sarcasm, stretching gloriously into the available conversational space like warm tar. "Who's this? Captain Thoughtless Destruction? The Avengers called, they need their most boring junior member back. Can I talk to *Mako*, please—Guy?" Newt says, putting down the scalpel. "Remind me of your name? I just, well, I tend to forget things I don't care about *at all*? So yeah, that would be my bad."

Mako is now in the background, snapping at someone who is not Newt.

"You know my name, *Dr. Geiszler*," whomever it is says.

Before he can respond, he hears Mako say, "Newt," hard and desperate, like she's reclaimed the phone after some kind of physical struggle.

"Hiiii," Newt replies, drawing out the word.

Mako says nothing.

The bones of Newt's face ache, and he tips his head ceiling-wards and tries, tries, *tries* to salvage something, *anything* from the wasteland of rejected messages he's dictated into the air and then erased.

His hand throbs in time with his heart.

Explain, his brain advises.

"So, before you say anything, I haven't read any of your emails because I was and maybe arguably still am having a nervous breakdown a little bit. Not really but kind of. In the historical sense. What *is* a nervous breakdown, really? I think that statement is clinically and scientifically meaningless nowadays, so it's perfect for me. Also, I was visually impaired for a while. More visually impaired. More than usual. I couldn't *read*, is the thing, Maks."

"That's okay," Mako says, and her voice sounds small and high.

Newt grits his teeth and stares determinedly at the ceiling, because he's not going to contaminate his sterile field by crying on it, because he is *fine*; he has *been fine* this entire time, it was Mako, *Mako* who was probably not fine, *Mako*. Mako was the one who—was the one—

Mako.

Becket is right, his brain says, in a static hiss of tripled distress. *You are a dick. But you can save this, you can save it, you can. You have to. You can because she called you, she kept calling you, it's not too late; you can save this, you can maybe have a thing with Mako where there's not a boxing up and a moving on but a thing that maybe stays even*

after the world didn't end, there must still be a chance to save this, there must be, there must be, because she called you.

"Um," Newt says, his voice cracking and his vision blurring. "How are *you*?"

"I'm doing well," Mako says, lying, lying, lying, *lying*. Lying.

Okay, good, well, he, too, can lie.

Lying is the easiest.

Newt shakes his head to get the saline out of his eyes and picks up his only slightly blurred tweezers. "Cool, yeah, me too," he replies, in a slightly stronger version of his voice as he misleadingly represents relative measures as absolute ones.

"Newt," Mako says, her voice torqueing back up into acute distress. "I read an article in *Wired*."

"Ah," Newt says, full of trepidation because Mako doesn't usually read *Wired* and also because there's some kind of terrible momentum behind her words that he can only *guess at* because he hasn't read anything but Descartes in weeks.

What was in *Wired*?

What was in *Wired* that bothered her so much that it would be the first *real* thing she said to him after years of put-upon-eye rolling and weeks of zero contact.

Mako doesn't continue.

Newt slides his RFID tag home beneath the web of skin between his thumb and index finger. "*Wired's* a pretty good rag if you're into that kind of thing, I guess," he says, continuing heroically. "What was it about?"

"You," Mako says.

"*Wired* wrote an article on *me*?" Newt asks, tweaking the positioning of his RFID tag with his forceps. "Like, a full length piece? Literally on *just me*?"

"Yes," Mako says.

"Sweet," Newt replies, vaguely confused, not sure if this is the end of Mako's story, not sure why she's brought it up at all.

"It speculated that you had retreated from public scrutiny for medical rather than personal reasons. It speculated that you couldn't withstand the physiological requirements of an alien drift," Mako says in a quiet rush.

In the back of his thoughts, the kids hiss, vengeful and yearning, at the acute anamnesis of an alien, altered consciousness.

It occurs to Newt that Mako is *worried* about him, that she has been, possibly, *extremely* worried about him, extremely worried for weeks now. Somehow, he hadn't thought about *that* part of things, the Mako-being-worried part; he'd thought mostly about the Marshal, and about the people who were *dead*, and about the green bottle of Midori that Mako had held in her hand the day after the breach had been, had been—had been not just shut but *annihilated*; but not about *himself* in the context of Mako Mori's worldview, because, well, ever since Mako had turned eighteen and she had *not* been put in a Jaeger, things had been different between them because Newt had been, he had been just so *relieved* because the Jaeger pilot thing, with a few notable exceptions? It was a thing *forlife* and then your life was *short*; but Mako had been so *angry* and Newt had *gotten* that, he had, because, man, her simulator scores, but—he was pretty sure that once Mako had stopped being a kid, had totally stopped, well, she had never been a kid, not *really*, but once she'd burned away all those parts of her, well, Newt had been pretty sure that she'd started to find him eight million kinds of annoying, and he gets that, he does, or, rather, he thought he did? So this is a little confusing but it *does* explain all the phone calls.

"Ah," Newt says, with a tonal trend towards delicacy but not quite getting himself there.

Mako says nothing.

Newt finds her silence *totally agonizing*.

"Please tell me if you are all right or not," Mako whispers.

"Um," Newt says heroically, "am I brain-damaged? Well, it depends on how you define 'brain damage', right? Like, did I literally have destruction or damage of brain cells resulting in unwanted short term and long term behavioral or cognitive sequelae? *Technically?*"

Mako says nothing.

"Okay, *technically*, yes. Do I have epilepsy? Maybe, a little bit, kind of, the jury is still out on that one but from a medical criteria standpoint I arguably have it a little bit. Do I have some ocular scarring and a new and exciting predisposition for future glaucoma secondary to an alien drift? Yeah, sort of. Am I pretty much totally fine? Yes. Yes, Mako. Am I, even marginally, *less intelligent*? No. Arguably, post-drift Newt is even more intelligent than pre-drift Newt. Is my scintillating personality still intact? I don't know, you tell me. Am I still devastatingly good looking in a neohipster getup whilst playing the guitar? I can't make an objective assessment on that one but indirect evidence indicates Dr. Gottlieb seems to think so and he's actually somewhat difficult to please, aesthetically. So. Yes. I'm fine, Maks; I am, actually, *really* sorry that maybe

you thought I was a little bit dead or suffering horribly for weeks, but, mostly, I was fine."

"I missed you," Mako whispers.

"Me too, except reverse style," he replies, his voice cracking, but not that much, just slightly, just a little bit, as he picks up his surgical-grade glue.

"Please don't read any of my emails," Mako says, high and fast.

Newt spreads a thin line of glue over the shallow cut he's made in his skin and then uses his forceps to delicately appose the two edges. It looks awesome. It's probably not even going to scar. Everything is back on track. They got the brain-damage thing out of the way, he's talking to Mako, his hand is glued together, no one is throwing up, there has been only a *small* amount of crying; everything is good.

Yup.

Really good.

Great even.

Everything.

"Why shouldn't I read your emails?" Newt asks, mostly steadily.

"Because I thought you were in *a coma*," Mako says, at the neutral and unreadable apex of emotional vulnerability in the Ms. Mori tradition. "Or that maybe you hated me. I wasn't thinking of an outcome like this when I wrote them."

"And by 'outcome like this' I am going to infer that you're referring to me 'being a dick' as that guy you saved the world with so charmingly put it. Okay, that's fair, except did you miss the part where I copped to actual brain damage, maybe, because—wait." Newt's stupid brain is a little slow right now and a verbal warning flag rises, but belatedly. *Belatedly*. He backtracks. "Did you say 'hated'? Why would I *hate* you?"

Over the open line, he can *hear* her draw in a preparatory breath and it yanks him straight out of the solidifying and safe trajectory he was trying to put them both on.

"Because I didn't do the right things," Mako says, like the words are choking her.

Newt stares at the misted line of the distant Wall, being throttled by the braided phrases of possible future sentences.

"Because I didn't do the right things," Mako says again. "And because *you* did."

Newt isn't sure how to have this conversation, gluing his hand together, trying not to cry, the trend-line of his thoughts heading into territory that feels psychologically

dangerous. He's not sure Mako knows how to do it either; Mako, who has turned increasingly internally; Mako, who has sharpened herself on the grindstone of her own willpower into something without needless parts.

"I think everyone did the right things," Newt manages to say, a little too smooth at the beginning and a little too rushed at the end, his words sliding up a frictionless wall of rising pitch right to the point that the potential energy of his phrase is maxed out to a full stop. "I think everyone did all the right things. Um, especially, especially *you*, Maks. You most of all."

"It doesn't feel that way," Mako replies.

"Well it never does, really, I don't think," Newt says, valiantly philosophical. "It's always like, 'well, I spent four years trying to get this freaking tissue to regenerate, and now it has, *great*, but hey, there are all these new problems like poorly controlled proliferation verging on neoplastic transition, so yay? Kind of? But also not yay. Not yay at all.' If you're lucky enough *not* to get dealt an inherently unwinnable hand by the stochastic cruelty of life, you can get what you work for, sometimes, *mostly*, but, in return, you make certain tradeoffs along the way. That doesn't mean you weren't *right* to make those choices, to trade those trades. That doesn't mean that the costs aren't costly. You know? But you do the best on-the-fly analysis that you can, and, afterwards, you hope that you can quietly glue yourself together in a relatively secluded apartment rather than being idolized and turned into a mischievous fashion icon who's expected to evince *happiness* about the final fallout of the emotional evisceration that brought her to the point that she was able to turn her entire life into a beautiful weapon. Because, to me? That sounds like it might be rough."

Newt is out of air, so he breathes in and shuts his stinging eyes.

"I love you so much," Mako says, extremely sincerely, and crying, like, really *obviously* crying.

"Ugh, Maks, you're killing me here," he says, totally unintelligibly, weeping subtly and quietly and kind of messily onto his sterile field, but, importantly, doing it in a style that befits a *Portal* player of his caliber who doesn't get told very often, or really hardly ever at all, that people love him.

"What?" Mako says, with the high pitch of a woman whose vocal chords are trying to drawstring their way down to silence.

"Yeah," Newt says, somewhat more clearly, in a way that sounds like words. "Love reciprocity. I have that for you. Meaning, specifically, that I, also, love *you*. Thanks for saving the world or whatever."

"It wasn't just me," Mako says.

"Myeah I get that," Newt replies, wiping saline solutions of various viscosities off his face and onto the sleeve of his sweater because both his hands are still busy and in a part of his sterile field he hasn't cried on. "But you *looked* the best doing it, so what do you *want* from me, Mako, honestly. You're my favorite Jaeger pilot okay, by like, a *lot*. You directly saved me from getting eaten, or, maybe a different thing, I'm not sure about the story there."

"I did?" Mako asks.

"You did," Newt confirms, and he is *doing awesome*, the whole crying thing is doing a slow fade like a maudlin Jeff Buckley song, both for him and for Mako; all the hard parts of this conversation are done, the rest of this will be easy because Mako *loves him*, that is epic and strange and a thing that has probably even been true for a whole lot longer than the two minutes he's known about it.

"We did," Mako says.

"Meh," Newt says. "You and Guy, you mean? Technically, I guess, it was a 'dual' thing, but the whole operation had a very Mako Mori vibe for me, very lateral, very well timed, very coming out of the shadows like truck full of swords. But ah, suave subject change, what is the *deal*—are you or are you not dating your blonde friend? What's the story there?"

"What 'blonde friend?' Mako asks.

"Maks. Come on. You know the one I mean. Tall, somewhat lexically limited, very square jaw. Your erstwhile copilot? The one you saved from the anteverse? May or may not have grabbed the phone from you for the express purpose of calling me a 'dick' a few minutes ago?"

"His name is *Raleigh*, and who I am dating is none of your business," Mako says, with a reassuringly crisp primness that wavers only slightly.

"I have it on good authority that we are biological half siblings," Newt says, hoping that this is relatively common false knowledge and won't sound weird, inappropriate, aspirational, or inappropriately and weirdly aspirational. "I can't believe you never told me we were related. Just think how much more *annoying* I could have been. We've wasted decades, Mako. Okay, a single decade. Okay, technically, not quite a decade."

"You were already much too annoying," Mako says, for some reason straying a little bit away from the non-weeping thing they've had going for a good half-minute now.

"Yeah," Newt says, pretty sure he knows where her train of thought is headed and not really sure what to do about it. "Listen, Maks—"

Do not even think of mentioning the Marshal, you utterly insensitive cretin, his brain snaps, sounding like his uber sensitive life partner who probably gives great advice in situations like these, where people are dead and other people are trying to integrate that knowledge into whole swaths of behavioral programs that presuppose the aliveness of other parties.

Yeah, agreed dude, do not go there, someone else says, ostensibly his brain, Newt is a little too stressed to keep track of who is whom while he's trying not to cry about anything and supergluing his hand together with sterile epoxy.

It's probably better if we don't say anything, Newt advises everyone in his head.

"Newt?" Mako says.

Except right, he had started to say something and then stopped. Great.

"Yeah," he says, trying to *fix* this disaster he's sliding toward, "no, I just—"

Mako waits him out, ugh, because she's *Mako*; this really isn't fair, he should have done condolence-offering as a tag-team with Hermann because together they almost make a relatively normal if super conflicted human being, but maybe that's just the post-drift state talking.

Get it together, his brain advises. *You're going to have to say something other than meaningless, place-holder words.*

I'm sorry that the Marshal died via self-annihilation during that underwater battle for the future of mankind, Newt tries. *I know he was kind of, not explicitly, your dad, a little bit. On the plus side, it probably doesn't hurt that much to be instantly atomized, if that makes you feel better. My guess is that it sucks less than drowning, so.*

Even the *kids* hiss in suspect disapproval, which is weird; he's not sure he appreciates their commentary.

"I was just thinking," Newt says, in helpless anticipation of imminent total failure, "about the day after we did that world-saving thing."

"I have also thought about that day," she replies. "I have thought about it many times."

"Yeah," Newt says, remembering Mako with her blue-framed black hair and her green Midori and her red eyes, and the way she'd come alone, without Becket, looking incomplete and *wronged* in her incompleteness.

"I'm sorry we didn't drink that Midori," Newt says in a blind rush, because it's what he would have done if things hadn't spiraled so strange and so out of his control, at the end. "Because I would have told you some stuff, Maks, I'm sure. Some stupid, pointless stuff about the Marshal yelling at me about you, like about how flagrantly and totally irresponsible it was for me to make you a *shot* when you were only seventeen, and the way I said, 'no, dude, I'm the *responsible* one, it's that truculent Hansen kid you're going to want to watch out for—so square jawed and Australian and stuff,' which was not a strong defense, let me tell you, because I found out later that Chuck had, like, taken a vow of chastity and chemical purity or something until all kaiju were dead, which sucks because I really hope he at least drank a *beer* at some point before—ugh, oh man, this is the *worst*, but okay, anyway, the Marshal then said something along the lines of, 'one—Geiszler, I will *literally* kill you if you *ever* give Mako alcohol again, two—why can't you be more like Dr. Gottlieb, three—I will literally kill you, four—there will be killing of the literal kind, five—they will find your dead body in an alley somewhere, I want you to be able to *picture* this, Geiszler, in exact detail—"

Mako is laughing.

Well, either laughing or crying, or maybe it's laughing *and* crying; from a logic perspective he's being very sloppy right now, but Newt is pretty sure that the smart money is, mostly, on Mako laughing.

"Mako," Newt says, "*Mako*, why are you *laughing*, this is an extremely serious story, okay? I was threatened with *death*. Your kind-of-dad gave me the kind-of-shotgun-talk, which is inappropriate because a) you could take me in a fight ten out of ten times from age fourteen onward, b) we were not then nor would we ever be *dating* because no, c) shotgun talks, as a class, are from an outdated heteronormative paradigm that really everyone should be trying to subvert including PPDC field marshals, as a class, and d) ha, who were they going to hire to replace me after my untimely hypothetical death? No one, Mako, that's the answer. No one."

"What else?" Mako says, with a gloss of wistful eagerness and *god* that takes him straight back to when she was a kid because she's *still* a kid, she's not a kid at all, she'd *never* been a kid; she'd been a miniature containment case for memories of her family, whose names she wouldn't speak.

"Don't you 'what else' *me*, Maks," he replies, putting down his forceps and carefully prodding his glued-shut surgical cut. It's slightly sticky, but intact. "*You're* the one with the alcohol, displaced in space and time, undrinkable by me, and very green."

"You're so weird," Mako says.

"I'm one of the most normal guys ever," Newt says, peeling back the transparent sterile guard from his left hand. "Everyone else is just complicated, lying, and slightly-to-significantly less intelligent than I am. In point of fact, I happen to be *the* standard against which alien invaders measure all humans, so, ergo, in conforming to myself, I am actually the apex of normality in the colloquial sense and, therefore, I win." Newt sighs. "If only we could be drunk, Maks, this would probably be easier, but, wait—I actually don't think I've ever *seen* you drunk. Have you ever *been* drunk? I think I might find it really alarming."

"I have," Mako says.

"Mako, stop changing the subject, with all this 'you're so weird, Newt', 'ask me about my drunken escapades, Newt'." He positions a piece of sterile gauze over the incision in his hand and tapes it down.

"I don't know what the subject *is*," Mako says.

"Yes you do, you badass little *liar*."

"I—" Mako says. "On that day, I—" she stops.

Newt says nothing. He pulls the glove off his right hand and starts breaking down his sterile field. The scalpel blade slots into its blade guard, and the whole set of materials is rolled up into the paper drape that the kit had been wrapped in.

"On that day, on the day *after*, I mean," she continues, speaking quietly and high pitched and muffled, like she is cupping a hand over her mouth, "I wanted to be me. I wanted to be who *I* was and not half of someone I didn't know. I wanted to *be myself* but not be *by* myself. I wanted to be with someone who would let me be sad, because you always—"

She stops speaking and Newt is smart enough not to say anything.

"You let me be sad," she continues. "Do you know that's what I told him? When he asked me why I spent so much time with you? I was thirteen."

"Yeah?" Newt says, because he doesn't know the right thing to say, because he *never* knows the right thing to say.

"Yeah," Mako whispers back. "Remember when we watched *Blue Planet* twelve times in a row? Eight episodes, twelve times? In the lab? An hour a night? For ninety-six nights?"

"It's burned into my brain, actually," Newt replies. "If I slowly lose touch with reality and die, it'll be one of the last things to go."

"Not funny," Mako says, her voice cracking.

Not actually meant to be, his brain says.

"Er, yeah," Newt replies.

"But he, the Marshal, he asked me why I spent so much time with you. He said there were better people."

"So true," Newt says, smiling askew, picking up his phone in his aching left hand and putting the green, bundled remains of his sterile field in the trash.

"No, he didn't mean it like that," Mako corrects, "he just meant that there were better people for me to spend time with. People my own age."

"Kids," Newt says, returning to the kitchen table and dropping into a chair. "They're calling them 'kids' these days, Maks."

"Shut up," she says. "Will you shut up?"

"Historically," Newt begins, but she just talks over him.

"He asked me why I liked you so much, and that's what I told him. I told him that you knew how not to be sad, but that you let other people be sad, if that's what they wanted to be."

Newt slides an elbow onto the wood of the table and presses his head against his hand. "First of all, 'not sadness' has a word, and that word is 'happy', or a more erudite synonym. Second of all, do you say this kind of stuff in interviews, Maks? Does *anyone* really get you? Don't tell me it's Becket, even if it's true."

"Knowing how to be not sad isn't the same as knowing how to be happy," Mako says.

"Well," Newt says, his head coming up, his gaze snapping to the Wall as though vision could be magnetized. "That's true enough, I suppose."

For a moment they say nothing, as Newt stares at the Wall and Mako looks at something he will never see.

"So are you seriously going to leave me hanging?" Newt asks. "What the heck did the guy say to that?"

"He said, 'Mako, are we talking about the same Geiszler? Are you sure you know which one Geiszler *is*? He's the short one. The one with glasses. The one with the green in his hair and tasteless tattoos who *shouts* a lot. *That's* Geiszler. I think maybe the person you're talking about is Dr. Gottlieb? Are you *actually* spending time with Dr. *Gottlieb*?"

"The important thing is that we *never tell the end of this story to Hermann*," Newt says. "Ever, Mako. *Ever*. Not ever."

"He liked you," Mako says. "The Marshal."

"Myeah, okay," Newt replies.

"It was hard for him," she says.

"I—I am totally sure it was, Maks."

"It was very hard," she says, sounding strained again, sounding like she's been strained, horribly strained, for *weeks* now. "It was very hard, in the end, for him."

"Yeah," Newt replies, feeling overwhelmed, feeling like he needs to rest his head on his own crossed arms, and so he does, sliding the phone very close to him, turning the volume down. "Not just for him, though. For you too."

"Yes but I—" Mako says, breaking off. "Raleigh knows, but I—"

She pauses.

She pauses for a long time.

Newt sits there, head down on the table, trying not to picture Mako, not as she was, not as she *is*, and failing. Failing.

"I wanted to be a shark," she whispers.

"Maks," Newt whispers back, feeling like the ache in his throat might consume him, "you're the sharkeyest. You are the *most shark*. You—"

"You said 'trades'," she says.

Newt tries to remember saying anything at any time about 'trades' and tries to determine how this might relate to metaphorical sharks. His brain is totally failing him because it's also trying really hard not to get upset in the face of oncoming Mako-related upset, because it *is* oncoming, oh is it ever; he can hear it in her voice, he can feel it in his own mind.

"You said we make 'trades'. You said that. You said it just now, but you've *always* said it. I remember you always saying it. You think about trade-offs."

"I will cost/benefit myself right into the grave," Newt replies.

That was classlessly literal, his brain says, sounding like Hermann. *You very nearly did that. Please try to remember that other people have feelings, Newton.*

"I made trades that were painful to me," Mako says. "I didn't say things that I should have said because I didn't think that I could say them and still be who I wanted to be. *What* I wanted to be."

"Maybe you couldn't," Newt replies, feeling like someone needs to stick up for poor, past-Mako, who had tried so hard and who wanted so much and so little. "A lot of people were watching you, Maks, a lot of people were waiting for you to fail. There was a reason you didn't step into a Jaeger at eighteen, kiddo, and a reason you were pulled off the bench in the endgame, when it's time to swing for the metaphorical fences or go die in a hole."

"I wish that I had said more to him," Mako whispers. "I—I sometimes—it is difficult for me to remember my father's face. My real father. Or the face of my mother. I turned them into my anger. He tried to tell me not to do that; he tried to tell me in many small ways but I did it anyway, I *had to*, that was one of *my trades*, so that I could be what I wanted, so that I could be a *shark*."

"Aw Maks," Newt says.

"When he died, he did not know everything I would have said, if I had been a person who could say it," Mako finishes. "That was another trade."

"Oh come on," Newt replies. "He knew, dude. He totally knew."

"This is said often of the dead," Mako whispers. "But it is nothing more than a polite courtesy of the living. I have only ever *truly* known one other person, and that person is not the Marshal. The dead *do not know*, Newt. What they knew is uncertain. What they *know* is *nothing*, because they are dead."

Newt tries not to give in to this new variety of totally overwhelming despair as he hopes that Mako won't turn whatever she is feeling, her grief, her guilt, her anger—into yet another indictment against herself.

"Yeah," Newt says. "Okay, yes, I get what you're saying, at least conceptually, and I'm not really experienced with the magnitude of loss that you're talking about, I'm just gonna throw that one out there as a caveat, but Maks, *Maks*, come on, the guy took you out for American-style chocolate milk shakes when Skye McLeod the Improbably Dreamy Intern went back to MIT. I mean, don't try to tell me he didn't know *exactly* what he was doing there. So yeah, did you ever start calling him 'Dad'? No. Did he buy you miniature plastic ponies or whatever it is that adorably out of touch dads buy for

their female offspring? No. Did he mostly call you Ms. Mori? Yes. Did he cry a little bit in a totally manful, jaw-clenching way when eleven-year-old-you drew him a picture of *Coyote Tango* before you learned much English and he learned much Japanese? Yes. I don't know, dude, but to me? The whole thing that you guys had going never looked like some kind of artificial distance imposed by *you*. It looked like an *admiration* thing. So don't tell me that I'm being *polite* to you when I say I think he knew how you felt, Mako, because I am *not polite*. I'm just not a polite guy, I mean, I'm not sure if you know this but sometimes, historically, previously, I would roll up my shirt sleeves *just* to be a jerk and not because I was hot, temperature wise. The point is, I think he *knew* because he did the parent stuff for you; he did the *hardest* stuff Maks, right, like, I mean, *right*? He did the *thankless* stuff, he did the stuff that they always talk about with the 'boundary setting' and he taught you the stuff that you should know in life, right, like how to knee a guy in the crotch and then, I don't know, how to pull out his larynx or something; the stuff where he filled out paperwork for you and took you to doctors appointments that you *hated* and taught you scary levels of self discipline and he did all of that without most of the fun stuff where he just, like, buys you a guitar and listens to you talk about monsters for half an hour and then says, 'see you later, kid,' you know? He did all the *crap* stuff and you guys got to have so little of the *good* stuff, but it was in there, like that time we went for karaoke and you guys sang *Sweet Caroline* like conventional, adorkable losers, so Maks," Newt says, not quite holding it together entirely, "Maks, do not tell me that you think he *didn't know* whole giant swaths of all that unsaid stuff, and don't tell me that's a *courtesy* because it's not. It's not. You guys *had* what you *had* and it doesn't matter what you *called it*, it matters what it *was*. And it was awesome."

"I wish I had stated it all of it clearly," Mako whispers. "I wish he could have known what I wanted to express in the way that I now want to express it. In the end, I had time to say only one thing."

"But you said it," Newt replies.

"In the next moment it was gone," Mako whispers. "Because *he* was."

Newt tries to rub away the ache in his jaw and does not say anything to negate her statement.

"I have learned from the trades that I made," Mako says, "and from the things I have gotten in return, and from how Raleigh carries the things *he's* learned and the people that *he's* lost. This is why I called you seventeen times and why I sent you thirty-one emails. I have a dead brother, Newt, but he isn't mine. He isn't *mine*. He isn't anyone

from my life that you could ever erase by stepping into the place where he used to be. My dead brother is *Raleigh's* dead brother. Raleigh's. Mako Mori had no brother to turn into her anger, no one had left any shoes for *you* to fill, you overwrote no one's story, you were your own person with your own place in the life that I tried to be too angry to live. That was why I came to your lab. That was why I brought the Midori. I wanted to tell you that you were stupid and that I *cared* if you died and that I wanted to have a *family* again and that you were the only one *left* to be in it, but that I *wanted* you there, I wanted you. But Dr. Gottlieb was anxious and you looked so tired and so I didn't tell you. I didn't say any of those things, and I didn't *do* the right things and I thought that maybe you had brain damage like that article said. Like the one said in *Wired*. I thought that maybe you hated me, I *hoped* that you hated me, I hoped so much that you hated me, I said, 'please let this be anger,' because I know what that's like. Because that would be all right. It would be all right if it were anger, because anger can be pure. Anger can be beautiful. Anger can be like a sword, sharpened to a single purpose. But I didn't think it was anger. And I tried to say to Raleigh, 'I'm sure he's just angry at me,' but Raleigh *knows everything* and Raleigh can see when I'm lying and he couldn't say anything and I wanted to talk to *you* and I wanted to tell you all the things that I never told you and I wanted to do it before you were dead, before you weren't you and so that's why I called you. That's why I called. That's why I called and that's why I said at a party one night that you were my half-brother, and to please tell no one. I wanted to read it in the tabloids because I wanted it to seem as real as the rest of it. Because I wanted it. Because no one but me wanted it. Just Mako. It was just a thing that Mako wanted. To read that."

Mako starts audibly sobbing.

Mako, Newt tries to say, *Mako I am so sorry. I didn't know, but I guess that was your whole point. That I didn't know.* But he doesn't say it, because he doesn't think he can get his jaw to unlock and even if he did, he's not sure if Mako would be able to hear him anyway.

When he finally comes up with something to say, and when he's finally able to reliably force it past his aching throat and sinuses, and when Mako can hear it, it's: "I'm, ah, pretty sure that story's true, actually."

"What?" Mako says, with an audible sniff.

"No, I mean, yep, I think it's true," Newt says, his voice a cracked mess. "Your story. I'm pretty sure my mom was touring in Tokyo like—"

"Tanegashima," Mako corrects.

"Yeah," Newt says. "Tanegashima. Sounds just like Tokyo to the non-native speaker. I'm pretty sure my mom was touring in Tanegashima in 1989, and I mean, your dad, he was probably really into the whole German Opera Singer thing in his youth. Because. You know. Germans. Opera. Hot. Just unreasonably sexy. My mom, let me tell you, was, and still *is*, kind of an unreasonable looker, Maks." Newt wipes his face on his shirt for something like the eighth time.

"Yes," Mako says thickly. "Yes, I also think that's how it must have happened."

"Tragically, I was left with a kindly but somewhat flighty German pop singer turned piano tuner and his more responsible brother cum musical engineer for a few years before relocating myself to the new world and choosing to spend my formative years in a den of academic wolves. This explains why you're cooler than me."

"I do not think we need to explain that," Mako says. "Some things just are."

"Mako, ugh," Newt says, cracking an unsteady smile, "look, I'm just being *nice*, because clearly an argument can be made for *me* being the cool one. For example, I had a band. Where's your band? *Your* band that *you* had that repopularized science for the first time since the Cold War?"

"I had a cover shoot with *Vogue*," Mako replies, with a cultivated innocence.

"Waaait, did you really?" Newt asks.

"Just me," she says. "No Raleigh. Mako only. Planet savior and international fashion icon. Little girls all over the world are putting streaks in their hair."

"Okay, yeah, but I saw a seventh grader with my glasses, and my general iconoclastic demeanor, so, um, I think maybe we're just tied."

"For now," Mako says, with airy, self-possessed threat. "Better watch it."

"Don't you 'better watch it' *me*, Maks, okay? I can hold my own. Kind of. Historically I could, maybe. Arguably. In certain arenas. Soooo," he says, skillfully quantum tunneling himself out of the conversational hole he's digging, "where *are* you? What are you doing right now?"

"I am in a fancy ladies room in Berlin, refusing to appear on a popular German talk show."

"Wait, you're blowing off an interview for this?" Newt asks.

"Do you know how many times I have been interviewed?" Mako whispers.

"A lot of times?" Newt guesses.

"Yes," Mako says. "And I have tried to talk to you for *weeks*."

"Yes, but—"

"Raleigh is talking with them," Mako says. "So that I can talk with you. "Where are *you*?" Mako continues. "Can you please tell me your address?"

"I'll email it to you," Newt says.

"Can you please *tell me* your *address*," Mako says, more emphatically this time, less like a question, more like a demand. "I want to send you things and I want to know where to go when this publicity tour is over or if you don't answer your phone for another three weeks."

"I'll answer my phone," Newt says, guiltily and mildly aggrieved, before he gives her his address.

"Now," Mako says, stepping laterally into the role of bossy-kid sister so effortlessly that Newt's throat aches with it. "You will tell me again what you said at the beginning of this call, but slower."

"Um," Newt says, trying to run his thoughts backward through a maze of conversational tangents before he says, "biohacking? It's more like 'biohacking-lite', I don't want to alarm Hermann, he is *easily alarmed* these days, let me tell you, especially when it comes to things that involve me being somewhat cavalier with—"

"No," Mako says. "Not that. After that. The part where you explained why you didn't answer your phone for three weeks."

"Ah," Newt says. "Well—"

That's about as far as he's going to easily get.

Mako says nothing.

Newt says nothing.

"I think the bottom line is that things are mostly fine *now*," Newt says, with reliable, perfect brilliance.

"I believed Dr. Gottlieb to be very angry after the breach was closed," Mako says delicately.

"That is true," Newt says. "That is extremely true. He's not pissed at *you* though, Maks. He's not pissed at anyone, really, other than unfairly and kind of ludicrously at himself, I think, because he didn't illogically and metaphorically throw himself in front of me, getting us *both* hit by the oncoming and inevitable train. Everyone was just doing the

things that had to be done. You know. The impersonal thrust and slash of the 'i' dotting and 't' crossing bureaucracy in which we live our lives. If someone goes and demonstrates mental continuity with the anteverse, then someone else is going to need to at least demonstrate a prayer of *discontinuity*, because of social contracts and reasonable expectations of civilization safety and continuation of our species and stuff. You know. / know. I get it. It's fine. Hermann—well, he's a purist in a lot of ways, Maks; he doesn't like the cost/benefit scenario, he doesn't like the aleatory whims of nature, red in tooth and claw, or institutionalized policies that screw people over now and again, for very, *very* excellent proof-of-principle reasons, he likes things to be neat and fair and whatnot. So yeah. He's a little angry right now."

"So you were not all right," Mako says, her voice small.

"Meh," Newt says, totally casual, totally suave. "Life is about trajectories, dude. Absolute values are meaningless without context. Context-wise, things are looking awesome. Also, what is it with literally everyone who talks to me conveniently forgetting that we were almost all eaten by giant alien dinosaur-equivalents. Why is *that* never the worst-case scenario? Like, people never say, 'aw, Newt, you arguably fit the clinical criteria for a seizure disorder, but at least you weren't eaten.' No. It's always, 'oh god you look like you're going to die, why don't you just lie down over here and cry for a while, I'll get you a graham cracker and take your blood pressure.' I mean, not that I haven't done some of that Maks, not gonna lie, and you know how I feel about graham crackers, namely really good, but I think the part where I avoided being eaten, individually and also kind of on behalf of my civilization, is *important*, Maks, like, it should not be left out of the whole picture. Everyone keeps doing that; it makes me feel tragically misunderstood."

"Do you have seizures now?" Mako asks.

"I *don't*, actually," Newt replies. "I had three total, all while hooked up to some invasive equipment, but, apparently, if you are a trained neurologist and you look at my baseline EEG, it is totally terrifying and seems easily perturbable into something incompatible with consciousness, so the official verdict is 'you probably have an excitable cerebral cortex now, let's just call it a seizure disorder in the chart and how about you never drink coffee or alcohol again'. That's an exaggeration. I get to pick one of those two to empirically test pretty shortly. I'm definitely going with coffee, even though Hermann has been trying to subtly influence me in the alcohol direction, mainly because his tolerance for insomniac me is surprisingly low and alcohol supposedly mimics GABA while caffeine, it is true, is not going to help my

sleeplessness. Mako, god, you don't care about this, um, GABA is like an inhibitory neurotransmitter, breaks for the brain, whatever, the point is, my life is not actually that *hard*; it's just a little weird right now. I'm fine. You should not be worried about me, you have other things going on, whole swaths of other things."

"You drifted," Mako says quietly, "with *them*."

"Myeahh," Newt says, drawing out the word, feeling weird, feeling kind of not okay, feeling like the kids are getting restless, the actual kids, er, the fake kids, the neural copy of the kids in his head, like they're a thing separate from him, like they can pay attention to Mako, like they can *learn* who she is, like they *care* who she is; he doesn't like that.

Kids, Mako, Newt thinks in polite introduction, feeling more than a little anxious. *Mako, kids*.

You could do it again, the kids hiss. *You could do it again; she could help you. She would help you. You could come back to the drift.*

Noo, Newt thinks at them firmly, showing them who's boss. *No that's not a thing. You're on the team now, kids. The Geiszler team. Team Geiszler. Drifting is not good for the team. Drifting will probably kill this team, actually, or give this team intractable epilepsy and even more of hive-mind withdrawal problem.*

Good, the kids seethe.

Aw kids, Newt thinks, *I get that, I do. But you're not in charge of the team. The rest of the team votes no to death.*

"It's not as weird as it sounds," Newt continues, skating on thin psychological ice, gripping the edge of the table, because the kaiju, in general, he can talk about now pretty well, the Wall he can handle in some ways, even the *breach*, he can sort of, *sort of*, well, oh god, he has complicated feelings about it but he can sort of handle that but the drift, *the drift*, that's hard for him; round three is hard for him, because they were just, they were just, *so sad*, *so sad* and *so angry* and so cut apart, and so *wanting his agonized death* and also wanting him to just tell them what to do, to make them whole and he can't, no, he can't do that, they came here, they came to destroy and *he won* and *he said no*, he *wouldn't let them*, he stopped them and he *cut them up*. "It's actually," he says, and he can hear the vagueness in his own voice, he can hear that he doesn't sound 'good' in the classical sense of the word, "it's actually, Mako, it's a little bit hard for me to—" he trails off because he's not sure what to say in this post-drift slurry of thought and color and sensory impressions that aren't his, and sensory

impressions that aren't *sensory*, not really, how could they be, when they come from disembodied neural tissue in—

"Newt?" Mako says.

Yeah, Newt thinks about saying, as the room fades.

I think your vision's starting to go, champ, his brain says, anxiously checking in. *I'm not sure if you're breathing right now. You should probably start that back up.*

Team player, Newt says, in vague if appreciative annotation.

Come back to us, the kids hiss with a serpentine sadness.

Go team, Newt thinks vaguely, flashing back to a remembered blue-edged conflict he'd had with networked shreds of minds, not his tamer neural copies, but their real and angry peers.

"Newt?" Mako says, sharp and high over the speaker on the phone he can't see behind a homogenous field of gray static.

"Yeah," he says.

Why does your vasovagal response manifest visually like cosmic background radiation, do you think?" Carl Sagan asks.

Dude, I have no idea, Newt thinks, confused. *This isn't my area. I gave astrophysics a pass.*

Half of you did, maybe, Sagan replies reasonably. *If only exobiology could be parsed into a working knowledge of medicine and astrophysics. Unfortunately, that doesn't make any conceptual sense. But then, why would it? I believe you're losing consciousness, and your capacity for critical thought is decreasing exponentially.*

Um? Newt replies, confused, his hand throbbing with a local acuity in the context of general sensory loss.

LIE DOWN, his brain advises.

"Newt," Mako says again and again, an incomplete half of a call-and-response verse structure.

Newt grabs his phone and gets out of his chair in a poorly-controlled, blind slide to the floor.

"Newt," Mako says. "Answer me."

Hey Mako, Newt thinks.

"Newt," she says.

"Mako," he says.

"*Newt*," she says.

"Mako," he says.

"*What is wrong with you?*" she snaps.

"Nothing is wrong with me, Maks, come on," he replies, because actually he's doing pretty awesome relative to how he *thought* this might go, "I just have a thing that happens to me sometimes; I'm not sure what it is; it's a little bit panick-attackish, eh, that's a pretty dece band name, Panic Attackish, I'll let you take that one if you want to start up a rival band, but look, it's just kind of like, well, okay do this, Mako, pretend instead of Captain Jawline's memories in your head you have a little bit of an alien collective in there instead, well, er, actually, memories of them, *memories*, pretty sure they're not actually there, Maks, full disclosure, but it's a little *weird* and sometimes you find out things about yourself, like how you just maybe don't do that well with destruction on large scales; it's like a little *too* overwhelming and sometimes the guys in your head want to kill you a little bit but they also just think you're *so interesting*, maybe because *they* themselves think that, or maybe just because *you're* a narcissist that folds like a deck of cards in the face of real chaos because that's not what you're *about*, you're not about the chaos, really, you kind of enjoy it if it looks pretty, but when it comes right down to it you're just a guy who always liked plants and building guitars and maybe watching high definition footage of cataclysms a little bit more than was socially acceptable, but *being there*, mid-cataclysm, is a little too much for you even if you weren't *actually* there, and also maybe there's some kind of creepy hive-mind reward thing, it's weird; it's hard to explain, it's a little bit like stepping into an alternate dimension and getting a courtesy heroin shot for coming, like, 'hey, thanks, hope we see you in our collective again, we know how to have a good time over here, make sure you come back so we can torture your disembodied consciousness for an eternity. It will feel so so good, and so so bad.' But er, I'm doing great, Mako, actually I'm doing really well. They like me, a little bit, the parts of my brain that hate me, mainly because they're lonely here, all alone, in my head. I win people over. Even enraged alien brains that I maybe cut apart a little bit because of misunderstandings about the nature of death. Also it's kind of hard for me to handle my own brain right now while very sleep deprived, which I *am*, Mako, kind of constantly; not a *ton* of sleeping happening for me, lately, full disclosure, so that makes it slightly harder when

it comes to responding appropriately to all environmental cues, but everything is normalizing towards my historical baseline."

"Oh," Mako says. "Okay."

"That's a little bit why I didn't call you," Newt confesses, staring at the ceiling that he can *see* now, that's cool, and feeling wrung out, totally drained of vital humors, Hippocrates-style. "That thing that just happened. A little bit. Kind of. It used to be worse."

"I'm sorry I asked you about it," Mako says. "I should have known not to ask."

"Nah," Newt says.

"Are you living with Dr. Gottlieb?" Mako asks.

"Heyyy," Newt says, in unconcealed exhaustion that he tries to correct by manifesting indignation out of the ether with limited success. "I *pay rent*. We are living *together*. With each other. *I'm* not living with *him*. I'm independently wealthy now through a quirk of the cultural zeitgeist, Mako, okay? It's totally normal."

"Yes," Mako agrees. "I'm sure that it is."

"He likes me, it turns out," Newt adds. "He didn't dramatically and eloquently confess it to me or anything *likesome* people I could name, but it is, nevertheless, a reproducible phenomenon. I am not sure if you knew that. But it's a thing. And active, ongoing thing."

"I knew that," Mako says. "I am glad you are not alone."

"Myeah," Newt says. "So, speaking of not-alone-ness, what is the deal with 'Raleigh,' I think you said it was? Was that his name? Yeah, so what's the story there because—"

"No," Mako says.

"Maks we're *related*, basically."

"No," Mako says.

"Mako, you just assaulted me with your words like three minutes ago, you have to make it up to me."

"No," Mako says.

"But Mako he's *boring*."

"He is not boring," Mako says.

"Ha!" Newt replies, inevitably victorious. "I demand evidence."

"He likes your band," Mako says. "Without irony."

"Okay, that's unexpected," Newt says. "Both that he likes my band and the implication that he's capable of appreciating something ironically."

"You confuse him," Mako says, "because his own brother is dead."

Mako counters emotional manipulation with emotional evisceration and, yes, he *deserved* that a little more than a little bit, because he *is* kind of a dick sometimes, but *still*.

"Ugh, Mako, *god*, just stab me in the heart, will you? Just take a sword and drive it right in there. I don't think you cut open all four chambers, maybe twist it a little or something, if you can, yeah? Twist."

"Well don't call him boring then," Mako replies, "because he is not. He can't help what he looks like."

"What he looks—" Newt trails off in total incredulity, wondering what Mako thinks Raleigh Becket, Captain Explosion, looks like, other than a conventional, clean-cut, enviable winner of evolution by natural selection. "All right, all right, all *right*, fine, I give up. You can bring him when you come visit," Newt says. "I *guess*. If he wants to come. I get this whole drift partner confusion thing, Mako, I get it a *lot*, er—"

You did not drift with Hermann, his entire team, kids included, snarls at him in an outraged choir.

"Er, like, I *sort* of get it, *kind of*, in an *alien* way, and I have a great, extrapolative imagination and so I get it *thatway* as well. The theoretically extrapolative way. Very theoretical. Highly extrapolative. To be clear, not empirically. Because I would not know about human drifting. You are being sympathy'd rather than empathy'd right now. Your brain must be confusing; tell me more about *that* Maks, how is *your* brain these days? Confusing?"

"Yes," Mako says, slowly and suspiciously and insightfully, as if she's slicing carefully through a resistanceless opacity.

You never used to be this genuinely stupid, his brain informs him.

Well it's just that it's Mako, Newt says, defending himself. *And being team leader is harder than it looks from your point of view, okay? It's so easy to criticize when you're not the guy getting confused about fainting versus not fainting, panicking versus not panicking, what to say when, and who is who and who wants what and whether those wants are team wants, or player wants, okay?*

Well maybe end this call before you say something you shouldn't be saying because clearly your ability to conceal what you're supposed to be concealing is at a minimum right now, his brain points out.

"Mako, hey, got to go, I sort of turned the kitchen table that I share with Hermann into a sterile field so that I could implant myself with an RFID chip and I probably should clean that up before the guy gets home, because it *looks* a little weird," he says, only half lying.

"Don't go," Mako says, high and fast and unconsidered.

Well, nope, he can't go *now*.

What is he, made of *stone*?

No. Dr. Newton Geiszler of the sextupled Ph.Ds. is, at his best and most emotionally sturdy, made of a classic candy shell that will melt at mouth but not skin temperatures.

"Someone needs a *Blue Planet* marathon," Newt says.

"I—" Mako says. "I could help you. If you needed it. I could also help Dr. Gottlieb, if, for some reason, *he* needed it. If, for some reason, something happened to him in the alley where you drifted. If something happened to him there."

"Nope," Newt says, not panicking, because it's okay, because it's just Mako, but what if other people know, what if other people *find out*. He does not think that Hermann would do well with the kids in his head; Hermann is a little *too good* at integrating disparate neural patterns to not break down into sympathetic insanity if that happens to him; they are lucky that it didn't; no, they are *not lucky* because it was *skill*, because Newt had known ahead of time that it had to be him, that it should be *him*, that if it had to be one of them that *he* was the only one who made sense. Maximum risk, maximum benefit; best odds of best outcome.

Don't panic, his brain says. *Don't panic, you did it. You did what you wanted, it's done. No one wants to slot you there, back into that local insanity collective, no one wants that, not for either of you, everything is fine.*

"Or," Mako continues, "if one day, you want to say, 'Mako, is it normal to hide food from your drift partner and cry when he finds it'."

"Um," Newt says, feeling insufficiently on point to understand what she's getting at.

"Or if you want to say, 'Mako, is it normal to dream of bar fights on the same night at the same time as your drift partner'."

"Ah," Newt says, his thoughts snapping into place, relieving some of his understandable but probably needless anxiety.

"If you want to know about those things," Mako says, "I can tell you about those things. When I come to see you, we can go for a walk, where no one will hear us and we will wear sunglasses and I will wear a scarf over my hair and you will wear a hat that I pick for you and we will talk where no one can hear us and you will tell me the things that you wish to tell me."

"Aw Maks," Newt says.

"I missed you," Mako says.

"Yeah," Newt says.

"Don't ignore my calls," she says, her tone a frost, imperious and thick.

"Nope," Newt whispers.

Saying goodbye is protracted and slow and turns out to be one of the least goodbyeish goodbyes in the entirety of his sphere of human interactions, which is weird, but a good weird, an unambiguously good variant of 'weird'. Mako texts him four times in quick succession after she hangs up, as if she doesn't believe that he still exists on the other end of the set of circuits in her hand, but Newt texts her back, dictating to his phone because his eyes hurt too much to type. He *feels* like an overdrawn account, like he's not going to get up off this floor very easily, like he's a guy who's coming down off a weeks-long terror high to find that his bone marrow has let demand outstrip supply and whose central processor is burning through metaphorical power reserves and fusing more than a few relays in the process.

What is the deal with Mako, anyway, he asks his brain.

It's not that complicated, his brain replies. *She's like you, but cooler. She had more ripped away, but faster. She had a cleaner goal, a sharper edge, her life was better ordered. She said no to things you wished you could reject, but couldn't, because you didn't have them.*

Newt reaches up to adjust his glasses and the movement feels laborious, the air suspiciously viscous with resistance.

"Do not fall asleep here," he says, letting gravity drag his hand straight back toward the core of the earth, feeling the normal force at every point of his spine that is pressed against the wood of the floor. "That would be so stupid."

Ugh, on a scale of Stoic to post-Aeneas-Dido-killing-herself-on-a-Carthaginian-funeral-pyre, how emo is this?

Newt gives his current floor-lying post-weeping a solid seven point five on the Emo Scale.

You're putting the sigh in scientist again, his brain says, quoting Caitlin Lightcap.

"Myeah," Newt says. "A little bit."

It's fine, he's tired, and it's not like anyone will ever know about his post-weeping exhausted floor-lying; it's not like he's going to fall asleep here or anything, that would be a near statistical improbability and incredibly stupid.

Really, really, *really* stupid.

And, therefore, he will make it a point *not* to do that.

Newt comes awake in a slow disentanglement from blue-edged dreaming in cognitive fugues; each throughline of his thoughts snapping individually and sequentially into silence as he wrests his way back to alertness.

Kind of.

Kind of alertness.

The room is rendered in a dark and silhouetted monochrome that doesn't look quite right to him, perspective-wise.

He can *feel* which way is west; his thoughts torque with an unpleasant directional vector that he hopes is oneiric, but fears is not.

"Relax," Hermann says, very smooth, very careful, very close, and so upset that he does not sound upset at all.

Oh.

Okay then.

Someone, probably Dr. Gottlieb, is pressing cool fingers to Newt's lateral throat.

Carotid territory.

Newt blinks and shifts his gaze from ceiling-ward to colleague-ward. He can't see Hermann's face in the dim light, just his outline, dark against the minimal backlight that comes from the windows that overlook the bay and setting sun. The frames of Newt's glasses break the continuity of Hermann's profile.

Well this doesn't seem like the best, his brain comments slowly, and, tragically, Newt's not really sure what it means by 'this' or 'best'. He's flustered by the dim light trending toward darkness and the surface that he's lying on and the ache in his sinuses that exerts a strange press on his face.

I'm on the floor right now? he surmises, making slow sense of his skewed perspective.

Yes, his brain replies. *I think you are.*

"Oh! *was not going to do this*," Newt says in a moderately intelligible slide, trying to come up on one elbow, but getting held down by Hermann, who shifts his hand from Newt's neck to his chest in a clear gambit to maximize his unfair positional advantage.

Newt could hold people down one handed too, if he wanted to, and the hypothetical people were tired, and he could sort of kneel on them and get his whole force vector to be perfectly vertical.

When there is no subsequent talking, Newt realizes that Hermann is doing a thing with a *phone*.

A thing like *calling someone*, maybe.

That thought sharpens him up appreciably.

Newt gives up on his elbow-levering plan and replaces it with a quick, lateral, Gottlieb-style open hand swipe, that, miraculously, and most likely entirely because Hermann was not expecting anything of the kind, manages to land him Hermann's phone, smack in the palm of his left hand. He closes his fingers around it, transfers it across his body, and pins it to the floor beneath his palm, out of Hermann's easy reach.

"*Newton*," Hermann snaps, like a guy who had been planning to call emergency services.

Dr. Geiszler, man; dude is a *winner*.

"I fell asleep," Newt says, pointedly, clearly, articulately, reasonably, and, hopefully, reassuringly.

"Did you?" Hermann says, in a slow slide of soothing skepticism. "I'm not certain of that, Newton. I believe that you may have fainted."

"Nah," Newt says.

He's pretty sure that's wrong.

He's mostly sure.

Okay, admittedly, he's maybe not *entirely* sure.

"You look very much like you *fell out of your chair*," Hermann replies.

That particular observation triggers a nice set of synaptic firing to the tune of some heroic *not*-fainting while trying to talk to Mako (oh god, Mako) and then a subsequent episode of lying on the floor (lying on the floor, he's come undone) thinking 'I should probably not fall asleep here' and then (alas) doing precisely that.

There had, most certainly, been *no fainting* though.

"No," Newt says, from the apex of intellectually elite dismissiveness. He throws in a courtesy oh-so-painful-but-oh-so-worth-it eye roll.

Hermann doesn't say anything in response to Newt's erudite if monosyllabic sass attack, but Newt can tell the guy is unconvinced from the pressure he's currently applying to Newt's *sternum*.

Newt tries to reassure him by sitting in the face of sternal pressure, but Hermann, apparently still *very* unconvinced about Newt's 'sleeping' story, makes it pretty clear that if Newt wants to get up he's going to have to turn this into a grappling match.

Newt has a little more class than that.

Not a *lot* more, it's true, but a little more.

"There was no fainting, *Hermann*," he says, relaxing back against the floor in exhausted, temporary defeat. "There was just some feeling weird and then some lying down and then some falling asleep in what turned out to be a bad idea cascade."

Hermann is silent.

Hermann is silent for a *long time*, quietly freaking out, or simmering down, or running cost/benefit analyses that center around fighting Newt for his phone, because Newt *will* put up a fight to hang onto that phone, there's a cosmic truth if there ever was one.

Newt is about to say something totally normal, like, 'it's dark in here,' or, 'did you make any freshmen cry today?' or, 'what are you going to make for dinner, not that you have to make dinner, but if you were planning on it I would not say no to spätzle,' but Hermann beats him to it.

"You're cold," he says, like he's driving a fatal strike of a spike into the vampire heart of Newt's 'sleeping' story, when really it's nothing of the kind; the currently unimpressive temperature of Newt's extremities is a totally normal consequence of losing thermal energy for hours to the heat sink of the floor and replacing it by metabolism at a slightly lower rate than normal in the context of peripheral vasoconstriction. His

peripheral vasculature isn't going to be nicely dilated if he's lying on a surface that's below the temperature that his hypothalamus would like to be setting.

Obviously.

"Meh," Newt says, unimpressed. "It's a predictable consequence of my behavior and says good things about the functionality of my cardiovascular system. Not everyone equates cold with inevitable illness and death. Calm down about it already."

"Stop being purposefully inflammatory," Hermann says. "You aren't carrying it off very well."

"I am carrying it off *just fine*," Newt replies, admittedly slightly listless relative to his historical norm.

Mako, his brain offers, in a strange and skeptical blend of hope and dread.

Yes, brain, Newt says politely. *Thank you.*

"Can you sit?" Hermann asks, like a guy who has not been and is not currently literally pinning Newt to the floor.

Newt looks at Hermann in pointed incredulity that maybe errs more on the incredulous side than the pointed side, because *come on*. Of course, it's dim enough in the room that it may be impossible for Hermann to appreciate the look that Newt is directing at him.

"Are you going to *let* me sit? Of course I can *sit*, dude," Newt says, making a tonal show of being aggrieved. "I'm fine. I was *sleeping*, admittedly in kind of an alarming pose, on the floor. Is it late? Sorry if you thought I was unconscious or dead."

"It is nearly six o'clock," Hermann replies, switching teams from anti-sitting to pro-sitting and backing off on the sternal pressure.

Newt sits, mostly under his own power. Hermann helps him when the whole operation starts to look a little bit jeopardized as the increasing angle between Newt's back and the floor reaches the forty-five degree mark and his initial momentum runs out, undoubtedly because he is cold and stiff and tired and maybe just a little bit filled with misery under the crush of having let *Mako* down so completely for the past set of weeks.

Mako, who loves him.

"I am *such* a jerk," Newt announces, leaning forward, resting his forehead on Hermann's nearest shoulder.

"You are thoughtless," Hermann says, trying to warm Newt up with some semi-vigorous bilateral lateral arm-rubbing that, truth be told, kind of *hurts*, because Newt is sore from his recent Wall climbing and floor-lying. "That is not the same thing."

"Thoughtless," Newt says, miserably. "Yes. I am a thoughtless, inconsiderate, brash, irresponsible *narcissist*."

"That," Hermann says, inexcusably gently, "is *my* line. Do not get over-zealous in this new trend toward self-chastisement, Newton, or it will rob me of roughly eighty percent of my conversational satisfaction."

Newt says nothing. He spends a moment in silent, intense yearning for a reset-to-factory-settings-button for his brain.

The kids hiss in edgeless discontent.

"I'm going to turn on a light," Hermann says.

"Nah," Newt replies, lifting his head off Hermann's shoulder, adjusting his glasses into their proper alignment. "I got it."

He snaps, left handed, once, and, with a twinge of pain, the lights come on.

Hermann observes the change in illumination and reacts by flinching. He then correlates his observation with Newt's snapping and looks at Newt, eyebrows pressed together, mouth open slightly. He then realizes that causation between the finger snap and the illumination is implied, but not explained by any conventional mechanism, at which point his expression changes from 'startled hypothesizing' to 'total astonishment,' which is, by far, *the rarest* of expressions in the Gottliebian Catalogue. Newt has, in fact, only witnessed this expression on three other occasions. One—the first time Hermann had connected Newt in the flesh with Newton Geiszler, Ph.D. Two—the time that a dermal sample from Yamarishi had, surprisingly, contained a macro version of a (fortunately detoxified) nematocyst that had, um, kind of discharged into Newt's forearm and pinned him to his own lab bench until he'd had the Improbably Dreamy Intern unbolt the bone saw from the wall to cut through the thing. Three—the time that Newt had articulately, politely, and successfully advocated for funding Hermann's quantum cartography project at the expense of kaiju immunological susceptibility profiling.

This is time number four, and it is unambiguously the *best* because when not mixed with horror or skepticism, Newt finds Gottliebian absolute astonishment to be *ridiculously* endearing.

This is improving his mood by about eight thousand percent.

"What?" he says, in his most perfect approximation of absent-minded innocence, pure as unsplit light. "What's that look?"

"How did you—" Hermann begins, then looks at Newt again, his expression changing from astonishment into something Newt finds confusing—like he's pulling answers straight off Newt's face or out of his brain. It's a weird look, a *weird* one; a look Newt doesn't like. With the extreme caution of a guy sitting on an explosive stack of insight-disparity, Hermann asks, "have you been *crying*?"

This snaps him, straight and brief, to outrage-veiled despair.

"What?" Newt demands. "No. No, how can you even ask me that? *That's* what you're going to ask me? Out of all the things that you *could* be asking at this precise moment, *that's* what you're going with, the *crying* thing? What happened to *you*? A drive-by starvation diet? You look *awful*. Take a *nap* and eat a piece of pie or something. Stop being so compensatorily abstemious *all the damned time*." He tries for a dramatic exit, he tries hard, but Hermann is something like eight times faster than he is when it comes to reflexive responses and that's on a *good* day, so all Newt manages to do is shift backwards in preparation for a vertical energy expenditure before Hermann yanks one of his ankles forward and gets a hand clenched around a whole swath of Newt's stupid sweater in a weirdly badass maneuver. Who *reflexively* destabilizes someone? These are some Jaeger-pilot level skills that Hermann is evincing, but Newt doesn't care, Newt isn't envious, Newt doesn't think that's cool, Newt has his own things going, *his own things*, like a rationalism vacation and helping the fish kids live up to their full intellectual potentials, and ignoring Mako, and being a jerk to nice people.

He tries to communicate all of this to Hermann, EPIC Rapport style, by glaring, but even that's not working out very well because he can't get his glares up to maximum wattage when he's exhausted, and it's hard to hold on to the glaring wattage he *does* have when his face hurts and his eyes hurt, and when he is *tired*, god he is *tired*, he is just *very tired*, very, and he does not particularly care for the way that he is being *looked at* right now by his colleague, not that it's not a *nice* look, it *is* a nice look, that's the problem with it, it's a little *too* nice; it's one that's full of way too much sympathy and empathy and pity and Newton-I-get-your-soul-in-a-literal-way-a-way-so-literal-that-I-will-in-fact-give-you-a-five-hour-hug-as-you-weep-continuously-all-over-my-fancy-math-professor-outfit-with-narrow-lapels-or-not-it's-up-to-you-buddy-you-take-your-time-and-decide-when-you-want-your-nervous-breakdown-to-be-I'll-just-stay-over-here-helping-you-put-it-off-I'd-do-that-indefinitely-for-you-because-of-hard-to-explain-reasons-like-intellectual-admiration-and-the-guitar-thing-whatever-that-is-

don't-ask-me-I'll-just-deny-it-and-also-I'd-do-it-out-of-professional-solidarity-and-respect-in-memory-of-all-those-times-we-tried-so-hard-to-map-the-boundaries-of-human-thought-and-extend-the-edges-of-human-knowledge-for-the-purpose-of-saving-our-species-those-were-some-good-times-and-worth-a-shoulder-cry-or-two-for-sure-also-keep-in-mind-that-we-live-in-the-future-and-dudes-can-cry-now-sometimes-it's-a-thing-just-don't-question-it-you-play-Portal-like-a-champ-that's-literally-the-only-thing-that-matters-everyone-is-envious-of-you-so-it's-fine-if-you-want-to-spend-weeks-and-weeks-just-sort-of-leaking-from-the-eyes-because-your-Portal-skills-and-your-academic-pedigree-just-allow-for-that-sort-of-thing-there's-no-need-for-all-of-this-self-castigation-you're-doing.

Newt snaps his fingers again, and the lights go off.

That takes care of Dr. Gottlieb and his razor-edged, freakishly-specific, unspoken compassion quite nicely.

Newt will now lie back down and surrender all his remaining body heat to this floor in total thermal equilibration.

He does exactly that, turning away from Hermann, lying on his side, his cheek pressed to the cool wood of the floor, still holding his colleague's phone.

"I do not understand why you are so upset," Hermann says, sounding pretty upset himself.

Newt does not clarify things for him.

Misery-silence ensues.

"Or, rather," Hermann says, after giving misery-silence a good and respectful run, "I can think of many reasons for you to be chronically and acutely upset, but you— Newton, I do not understand why you can *control* the *lights*. I am extremely concerned that you are upset *because* you can control the lights."

Yeeeeeeaaaaahhhhh, his brain says, following Hermann's totally reasonable train of thought. *Electric field manipulation as an epiphenomenon of the post-drift state. It would be a biological stretch, but I could see it; kaiju can generate EM pulses and communicate telepathically over unknown distances/dimensions, so it's potentially plausible for Dr. Geiszler to get in on that game secondary to neural manipulation alone. The main barrier to successful electric field manipulation is straight up going to be your skull though, friend, bone is not very conductive. It's going to block, not boost, signals originating from your cortex. It would be sick if you could turn your peripheral nervous system into some kind of transmitter of electromagnetic waves, but you lack a mechanism and you*

probably will, forever, because there are no more intact kaiju to study. Ever. So. Yeah. Have fun theorizing. Alternatively, lace your skull with something conductive and see if you can telepathically communicate with the real kids.

His neural copy chorus shrieks in longing anticipation of kaiju, redivivus.

"Oh god," Newt whispers, in response to his own brain.

"You can manipulate electric fields," Hermann says in a hollow whisper.

Pay attention to your external environment, his internal Hermann snaps. And to me. The real me. He is clearly quite worried because you are allowing him to proceed with a mistaken assumption. Tell him you put a chip in your hand, you insensitive cad. Because it is the chip. The chip sends a signal to the sensors you interfaced with the light switch, do not confuse yourself about this; do not confuse your colleague about this.

"Er, yes," Newt confirms, feeling overwhelmed by the conflict in his thoughts. He has a raging visceral urge to modify the plates of his skull into something electrically conductive, and he is simultaneously so terrified by the horrific, promising scope of his idea that he can't quite organize a way to communicate to Hermann that he's biohacked himself so well that it *looks* like an ability conferred by the drift, but it's not.

"Did you just discover this?" Hermann asks, taking this whole thing like a champ, super calm, minimally horrified.

The kids in his head hiss at him in wordless, sibilant demand.

No kids, he thinks. This is the team. The team is real me, fake you. The team is not real you, real me, and real holes drilled into my skull for the purposes of thought broadcast; we humans have a word for that scenario and that word is NEVER.

"Well, 'discover' isn't really the word I'd pick," Newt says, distracted, his thoughts fracturing as he tries to backtrack and correct his tergiversationist tendencies. He cannot *think* over the tide of alien demand in his head. "I just *effected* it."

"You—*did* this to yourself, in some way?" Hermann asks, increasingly perplexed but trying to hide it.

"I did it to myself in a controlled and precise manner," Newt confirms, pressing his cheek to the cold floor, curling up, and attempting to map the current borders of Team Geiszler. "Yes. Not a—not a hive-mind thing. Don't freak out."

"*How* did you do it?" Hermann asks.

Newt would love to say any one of about eight thousand things in response to that question.

Unfortunately, there are other things happening in his head right now.

There would be two options, his brain says, torturing him. The first would be to just drill yourself a massive cranial window and see if that got you anywhere. Maybe, if you didn't have a skull, you could hear them. The real kids. The real kids. You put them where they are and you can't help them; the least you can do is listen. Listen to them. Listen.

Listen, the kids hiss.

The least you can do is talk to them, his brain says.

The least you can do, the kids echo. Talk.

Stop, Newt replies, his head snapping back, both hands coming to his temples. Stop stop stop stop. Please stop.

Pay attention, not-Hermann snaps.

The second option, his brain continues, would be to drill multiple holes, small ones, and then wire yourself up, dura to dermis. Reception, transmission, it might work, what it really would depend on, what both solutions would depend on, would be your ability transduce over-the-air electromagnetic waves into sensical thoughts.

"Newton," Hermann says.

This is insane, kiddo, Caitlin Lightcap chimes in.

No more biohacking, Newt shouts at his mental chorus.

I wasn't suggesting you'd do it, his brain says. Someone else can do the drilling. I'm not completely reckless.

'Are you kidding me?' he snaps, bringing one hand down on the mental conference table, 'you want to do what now? Absolutely not. No one's skull needs no one's semi-permanent subdural electrodes. I don't care if you flew in humanity's most baller Prince of Neurosurgery especially to drill you a cranial window, it's not happening. Do not even think about opening my skull, I've got a workaround for that. What are we, barbarians? Build me a ziggurat and ask me again—I promise I'll consider it,' but something's putting tension on his nervous system and searing stereo loathing or stereo longing straight into his head; no one knows which it is, not the cut-up kids with their cognitive acid or the guy they've crowned king of their chemical underworld. He's hurt them so much and they need him so badly that a screaming death grip straight to mental dissolution is the only open option. Some loser's brain has sided against him. Geiszler's back is starting to—

"Newton," Hermann shouts, short and sharp and forceful in an azure tinted tone. "Newton, you are *fine*. Please relax; it does not matter if you can affect electric fields, it *does not matter*—"

He is—

He isn't.

What is *happening*, exactly?

He feels strange.

His thoughts come warm and slow; his heart beats wild and fast.

"Newton," Hermann says. "Say something."

"Something?" Newt echoes, not sure what he's doing here, lying half on the floor and half on top of his colleague; is this a thing they do now? Why is it so dark?

"Something else," Hermann says,

I think you had a thing, his brain says. *One of those things that sometimes you have.*

Sometimes I have? Newt echoes his brain.

The kids hiss, vengeful and remote.

"Um," Newt says, trying to think of literally anything and choking slightly on the surprise blood that's coming down the back of his oropharynx. "Why is it so dark?"

"Because the Earth rotates on its axis, and you insist on turning off the lights by snapping," Hermann says, pulling him up into a semi-seated position, Newt's back to his chest.

That's weird—what's the deal with that, exactly?

Newt can *sit*, thanks.

Probably he can?

It's kind of nice though, so Newt's not going to start a fight about it or anything. He's not a huge fan of misery and strange brain phenomena and possibly losing his mind, but he *is* a fan of people being nice to him; he's getting used to it, so he just kind of goes with the whole thing and doesn't fight to retain his muscle tone.

Verticalness.

This is good.

The ratio of blood going down the back of his throat to blood coming out the front of his face has shifted to favor the latter.

He presses a sweater sleeve to his nose.

Hermann yanks a handkerchief out of his jacket pocket and hands it to Newt. "Do make an effort to put an expeditious stop to your epistaxis, won't you?"

"Yeah," Newt says, because that seems like a good idea.

It's dark.

Hermann had said something about that.

Something including 'Earth' and 'rotation' and 'lights' and 'snapping.'

Concepts slot back into place and drag whole swaths of context with them—his six degrees, RFID, a lonely day, and Mako. Someone in his head had been thinking about cranial windows, but only *Spider-Man* villains biohack their way to imagined telepathic restitution.

"Hermann," he says, kind of indistinctly through the handkerchief he's holding to his face. "Don't freak out."

"Oh?" Hermann says. "You have enough theory of mind to realize that the past twenty minutes of my existence has consisted of finding you in a state of collapse, observing you control our light fixtures remotely, and failing to prevent your descent into total panic of unknown etiology that looked suspiciously akin to a seizure prodrome but fortunately was not? How gratifying for me."

"Well," Newt says, feeling slightly sharper, like a guy with a conjunct mnemonic landscape and ever-increasing cognitive capacity, "I had an unusual day."

"Every day is an unusual day for you," Hermann says. "Give me my phone."

"No," Newt says, tightening his grip on the appropriated piece of Gottlieb hardware that he is, miraculously, still holding. "I can explain."

"Please do so," Hermann says.

"The thing with the lights is not a creepy post-drift epiphenomenon thing; I did that *myself*. With technology. Human technology made by humans. Conventional. Clever, but conventional."

Hermann immediately snaps his fingers like the baller hypothesis-tester that he is.

The lights do not go on.

Newt smiles faintly in the dark. "Good thought," he says. "The other thing, the silent-freak-out thing, that's been happening with decreasing frequency for weeks now, is like, it's like, well, I think it's a metabolically expensive state. A lot of pathways get

revved up at the same time and I just don't think I can neurochemically support that and keep talking and maintaining total situational awareness and stuff; I am guessing my EEG looks like crap when that happens, but it's getting better and it's always self-limited."

"So far," Hermann snaps.

"So far," Newt agrees politely.

Hermann makes a very precise show of straightening Newt's half turned up collar and aligning it with his overlaid sweater. "It *looks* very alarming," he says, "if you care to know."

"Well it *feels* very alarming," Newt replies. "Though, maybe not as alarming as the hunting thing."

"Are you still bleeding?" Hermann asks.

"No?" Newt says, pulling the handkerchief away from his face.

"Are you *guessing*?" Hermann asks.

"No," Newt says, balling the cloth up in one hand and tipping his head back against Hermann's shoulder.

Hermann sighs and adjusts the grip he has on Newt to something that more approximates I-am-trying-to-assist-your-peripheral-circulation-by-repetitive-arm-rubbing than I-am-clutching-your-dead-body. "Try not to *bleed*, Newton, honestly."

"Can I tell you a thing?" Newt asks.

"I wish you would," Hermann says.

"I feel pretty bad about the whole Mako situation," Newt says. "Pretty outrageously, excruciatingly bad."

If this evident non sequitur surprises Hermann, he doesn't let on.

"Ah," Hermann replies delicately. "I thought you might, once you communicated with her. But you should feel nothing of the kind. You have been— You should not feel that you acted inappropriately in any way. Because you have not."

"You are going to *ruin* me," Newt says. "You can't give me this kind of latitude, dude, I will walk all over you and the rest of the world. I will do it *more*."

"How insightful," Hermann says dryly. "What makes you mention Ms. Mori? Did you read her letters?"

Oh god, Newt thinks. *Her letters*.

"No," Newt says. "No, she called me. I answered."

"Ah," Hermann says. "How did *that* go?"

"She is—" Newt says, trying to finish his sentence but not doing it because his face is a little bit paralyzed with total misery and his vocal chords have spasmsed shut.

Good thing he doesn't need air.

Oxygen, man, his brain says. *So weird. Metabolic poison turned respiratory requirement.*

Myeah, Newt replies weakly, trying not to dissolve in his own acute psychological distress.

"I imagine she is quite unhappy," Hermann says, "despite having achieved so much of what she desired for so long."

Newt nods, because yes.

"I would also imagine that she was relieved to hear from you," Hermann says.

Newt nods, because also yes.

Hermann leaves it there and says nothing more.

Newt also says nothing because there's nothing he can say that won't read as a pathetic insight into his own personal insecurities and because he thinks Hermann won't get it; Hermann has had to break *away* from people instead of spending his life in obnoxious attempts to get *in* on something, *anything*, that had the feel of a real and permanent deal. Mako, though, Mako was different, Mako *is* different, Mako has done both the breaking free and the getting in because Mako is a baller, Mako is great at everything, Mako is kind of like Newt but *better*, so much *better*, and she loves him, not because he is smart, but because he is stupid sometimes and because he watched *Blue Planet* with her and because of the things that they did together, just Newt and Mako, doing those things. Hermann won't get it, or, maybe, Hermann won't get why Newt never got it, or maybe it's just that Hermann has always gotten the whole thing too well because he emailed Newt's parents and his uncle out of courtesy to let them know Newt wasn't dead, but Hermann never emailed Mako and maybe that was because he didn't want to talk to the PPDC in any capacity but maybe it was for another reason, another reason all together.

Hermann pats his shoulder in an encouraging uber-British way, as if Newt is holding a cup of tea with admirably steady hands rather than lying in his lap in the near dark, not talking, slightly crying, like an emo Jedi-hipster.

Ugh.

All the emo Jedi go bad.

"Please don't compare yourself to a fantasy franchise in a misleadingly futuristic setting in which worth is genetically determined," Hermann murmurs. "You do not belong in the *Star Wars* universe. No one with a rational thought in their head belongs there."

"SPECTER Effectered," Newt replies, his voice doing a familiar misery crack. "You think I'm rational?"

"Extremely," Hermann says.

"That's the nicest thing you've ever said to me," Newt offers.

"It most certainly is not," Hermann replies.

"Tempted though I am to make you *list*, I've maxed out my friend-tormenting quota for the day. So I therefore submit to you that while 'ghost-drifting' in the colloquially understood sense of the word is *not* real, the SPECTER Effect totally is. Come on. I definitely didn't say that emo Jedi thing aloud. That is super *specific*, dude."

"When you are upset, you tend to perseverate on determinism in the *Star Wars* universe," Hermann says, fixing Newt's hair and then immediately fixing it again in the same manner, and then again, and again, and again, in a slow, evolving iteration of continuous hair-fixing. "I know this about you. I did not even need to *drift* to know this about you. You have been doing it for years."

"Well it just seems so unfair," Newt says. "All those Skywalkers just having miserable times of it for no real reason other than pseudo-mystical cosmic suckage. They just *loved* people, you know? Leia doesn't even want to get in on that crap it's so messed up."

"Well," Hermann says, humoring him way way way way way more than usual. "Princess Leia *is* terribly discerning."

"I just *object*," Newt says, in displaced misery. "I object to the *whole thing*."

"And yet," Hermann says, "here you are, still perseverating."

"You think you're *so great*," Newt says. "Just living your life with no *Star Wars* related personal baggage."

"If you do not feel inclined to elaborate upon your conversation with Ms. Mori, I would appreciate it if you would instead explain your ability to affect the lights by *snapping*," Hermann says.

"Myeah," Newt says, gearing up.

He's thought a lot about how to explain this to Hermann, because, at a first approximation, if he were to just straight-up say 'biohacking', or even the more technically accurate 'dermal RFID chip implantation', Hermann is not going to go for that. Not at all. Hermann has a thing about anything even *remotely* related to self-experimentation. Newt really isn't sure where this particular personal weirdness comes from, because self-experimentation is something of an historic norm, at least in the life sciences, (rock on Barry Marshall, Albert Hofmann, and literally every *Spider-Man* villain ever) but Hermann is not into that.

Or rather, previously he wasn't.

Newt thinks he might be *now* though, if Newt plays his cards right.

"It's a computational-based efficiency thing," he says, like a mostly-dead total champion. "I just wanted to do some algorithmic optimization of daily life, it's actually more a *you* thing than a *me* thing. It's radio frequency based. No weird hive-mind/Jedi-mind-trick stuff, dude, just computational efficiency. Old school."

"Meaning?" Hermann says, sounding not at all opposed.

This is the tricky part, because there's no way around mechanistic explanations here, and if Hermann freaks out about the biohacking *now*, he will continue to freak out about it for the foreseeable future, which will be unfortunate, because Hermann stands to benefit a lot from this.

So.

Strategy.

Newt couldn't ask for a better set-up than his current one, in which his total, observable exhaustion has stripped the edge right off Hermann's argumentative tendencies to the point that the guy is totally rocking a, 'no, Scully, don't turn into an alien and die in this Antarctic space ship,' type vibe at the moment. Other than the obvious benefits, extreme Gottliebman solicitousness is always a good sign because Hermann has so much thought-momentum that he can't pull an emotional one-eighty and shift his mood on a dime, at least he *couldn't*, pre-drift. Newt's not sure about how emotionally labile post-drift Hermann might be. Probably there's no difference, unless the guy's brain turns Absolut Geiszler on him. So. Now all Newt needs to do is just say the perfect thing in the perfect manner. He can't conceal the part about the chip being *in* his hand. That would be a mistake. If Hermann has to work for a mechanism, he's going to be pissed about it.

So. A perspicuous mechanistic explanation delivered with all the Victorian Suffering that Newt can bring to bear should do the trick.

"Eh," Newt says, tipping his head back fractionally against Hermann's shoulder and going for maximum enervated pathos. "It's pretty pedestrian—there are sensors in our wiring that now respond to a dermal RFID chip in my dominant hand."

"Hmm," Hermann says, unimpressed.

Newt is an amazing, interpersonal *savant* when it comes to his drift-partner turned life-partner.

"So this is *not* a side effect of your unique cortical wiring?" Hermann says dryly, still iteratively fixing Newt's hair in a very acceptable way.

"No," Newt admits, betraying no victorious sentiments. "I have no cool powers post-brain scrambling, other than a whole bunch of *your* skill sets. Some of which are pretty good, I guess, if one enjoys kicking ass at Go and a desires a flair for aggressive driving, which I do *not* desire, actually."

"Well I must say I'm relieved," Hermann replies.

"You like it?" Newt says snapping twice in quick succession and flaring the lights. "I did it for you."

"I fail to see how such a thing could possibly be the case," Herman replies, catching Newt's hand in time to abort snap number three and examining the small square of taped-down gauze in the dim light.

"I did myself first, to make sure the hardware was functional," Newt says, cleverly avoiding the tag 'pilot experiment', which is, of course, how he had conceptualized it to *himself*. "I figured you'd like it. I figured you would *not* like the snapping though, so you can do a silent flick, if that's your preference. The flick is pretty robust, but since you don't have the simultaneous sound cue you've got to be a little more directional about it. If you're right next to the switch you can do a proximity wave. So, to summarize, for the overhead lights you have a triple choice of cue. Sound," he says, pulling his hand out of Hermann's grip and snapping twice, "rapid directional vector," he says, flicking twice, "or proximity. For the coffee machine, stove, and isolated lights it's proximity only."

"You've been busy," Hermann says, in poorly concealed xeric envy.

"Meh," Newt replies, not above twisting the knife of intellectual superiority when he finds it in his hand. "It wasn't hard."

So *suave*, his brain says encouragingly. *You are doing awesome.*

Hermann is probably rolling his eyes right now.

"You want one?" Newt asks.

"No," Hermann says.

"You do a little bit," Newt replies.

"I don't," Hermann says, like a guy who is totally lying through his teeth.

"Dude," Newt says. "I get that you have a front to maintain, but like, hear me out on this one. A) it's convenient. B) it's efficient. C) it saves time; this is a big thing for you. D) my ability to control our local environment by hand motions is going to irritate the heck out of you if you can't do it too. E) you think it's cool. F) it *is* cool. G) I did this for *you* actually, because I am *thoughtful*, so you can tell me that you don't want it, but eventually you're going to cave because you *do* want it, I *know* you do, it's just a thing I know, so why *wait*? Why torment yourself with needless restraint for days while watching me gesturally influence electric fields like a baller? Also? I will do it in the most annoying way dude, the *most*," he breaks off to snap twice, "annoying," he does another double snap, "way."

Hermann says nothing.

Newt double snaps again.

"Fine," Hermann replies, in dignified defeat, "you may implant me with an RFID chip. Later. Not tonight." He resumes his attempt to fix Newt's hair, an exercise that has about as much promise as a military campaign launched into a Siberian winter.

"You are making the right choice," Newt says, shutting his eyes.

"Do you have any intention of getting off the floor at any point in the near future?" Hermann asks.

"No," Newt says, meaning 'yes,' meaning, 'this is probably moderately physically uncomfortable for you,' meaning, 'I'm sensitive to the fact that you want me to be insensitive to the fact that this is uncomfortable for you,' meaning, 'I will get off this floor any time now, I'm surprised it hasn't happened already,' meaning, 'this iterative hair fixing thing is kind of working for me, what's that about even.'

Hermann sighs.

"I'm going to start working on a talk," Newt says, because it's productive to procrastinate by engaging in academic goal setting. This proclivity explains a lot about

him, possibly. "For UC Berkeley Neuroscience. Entirely prospective. Maybe they'll let me give it to, ah, only the faculty?"

"Good," Hermann says, like that wouldn't be a violation of a scientific shibboleth; like it's normal to abandon decades of work and switch fields entirely at age thirty-five; like a faculty-only presentation is common practice in academia, where the ethos of the enterprise is training up the new guard to slowly and metaphorically devour the old; like what he's saying is reasonable; like what he's *doing* is reasonable; and like this hair-petting thing is a thing they've *always* done, which it is *not*, except for the lying on the floor part, Newt does a lot of that, generally and historically speaking.

"You're so great," Newt says, eyes closed, head tipped back, his core temperature increasing by the second. "Really terrible, but also great. *Sui generis*. They're never going to let me do that."

"Probably not, no," Hermann says. "But the odds are not zero. You are *extremely* well known. You may be able to use this as leverage to avoid a talk entirely."

"I've never heard of *anyone* who was such an academic prima donna that they refused to give a job talk," Newt says.

"I can only imagine what such a person might be like," Hermann replies dryly.

Newt sighs.

"Do not fall asleep here, Newton," Hermann says.

"Impossible," Newt says. "Categorically."

"Incorrect," Hermann replies. "Evidence directly contradicts your claim."

"What, you're an empiricist now?" Newt asks, yeah, maybe a little bit inarticulately.

"I have always *been* an empiricist, Newton," Hermann replies.

"Lies," Newt says agreeably. "Why are you repetitively fixing my hair?" he asks, as a stand-in for 'why are you being so nice to me, I mean, I know you're a nice guy but not generally into *surface* niceness because of its inherent interpersonal vulnerability, soooooo, is it that you trust me not to be a dick about it? Or is it that you literally find me so pathetic that you don't think I have the capacity to make you feel bad about yourself because I *do*, dude, or at least I *think* I do?'

Newt says none of these things out loud.

Newt is so freaking smart.

It's unreal, actually.

"I confess I have been curious about whether your hair *is* practically fixable, since you seem to have so little success with it," Hermann says, in non-answer to Newt's non-question.

"We are so perfect for each other," Newt announces, apropos of communication via miscommunication. "That's why I bought you an RFID chip."

"Well thank you, Newton, I appreciate the sentiment."

"Mmm," Newt says, reflected-appreciation style.

Hermann sighs in a totally world-weary way that Newt gets, that he gets hardcore, in the tired, packed together bones of his wrists, where all his restlessness usually lives.

This is a weird vibe they're rocking right now, at this moment, a *new* vibe, a totally different and weird vibrational frequency. But maybe their current waveform can just go from being an atypical thing to a typical thing; it could be a new trend, a sub-genre of the Decade of Mutual Admiration. He needs a name for it though, if he's going to coin a phrase, set a trend. Science bonding? Eh, that's no good, there's actually no science happening now and they're already pretty bonded, like, honestly, he doesn't see them bonding *more*, because how would that even work. Misery cuddle? Eh, he's pretty sure that they aren't people who 'cuddle' even when they are, kind of definitely and unambiguously 'cuddling.' Overlapping Personal Environments for Neuronal Solidarity. OPENS. Nah, that's definitely a super weird acronym. Co-Localization Of Self with Epic rapport Drift partner. CLOSED. That's not better, but it wasn't meant to be, it was just a demonstration to himself that he's pretty great with acronyms, which, of course, he is. Obviously. What was he thinking about? Vibes. He was thinking about vibes, waveforms, string theory, new things, Leto Atreides the first and second, *Star Wars VIII* and its painful and metaphorical endurance trial of the *soul*, Mount Doom, a little bit, where they're both Frodo and both Sam, if Sam had a little bit more of a body-art thing and Frodo cooked, or something like that, maybe reversed, there's a good case to be made for Newt being Frodo, but Hermann's the emo one, except for maybe today; it's hard to say you're *not* the emo one when you're the one rolling around on the floor, but, on the other hand, Hermann shouts at military types about the 'language of god', and that is so emo Newt can't even write a song about it, that's how emo it is. So yeah, everyone has their own emocore days and their own stoic days, or, in Newt's case, their own stoic sets of minutes. Stoicism. Yep. There are a lot of dead people in the sphere of humans known by Newt Geiszler, but he got, like, inverse adopted by Mako. Usually, *he* would be choosing *her* because he is older, and maybe,

in a way, he *had* chosen her, but the thing about Mako is that Mako doesn't *get adopted*, Mako *adopts*.

This explains everything perfectly.

Newt has never been formally adopted before.

That's neat.

He's tired.

The silence sounds much louder than it should, and every so often the kids flash disorganized images of carnage across the back of his mind like confused offerings.

"Mako and I are half-siblings," Newt says. "That's a thing now."

"I think you are falling asleep," Hermann replies, very quiet, not dry at all, still hair fixing.

"I'm not," Newt says, cracking an eye.

"You are, it is a minor miracle, and we should treat it as such," Hermann replies.

"But Mako," Newt says.

Consciousness and cognizance, dead Caitlin Lightcap sings, in a recollected, drunken tribute half a decade old and half a world away. *Combine to dissonance. You insightful bastard, Geiszler. You brilliant, absolute bastard.*

"Get up," Hermann says, "you cannot sleep here."

"Mako *likes* me though," Newt says, as they help each other to their feet. "Did you know that she likes me?"

"I was aware of that, yes," Hermann says, pressing him in the direction of the couch.

"You should have told me that, probably," Newt says. "I tell *you* when people like *you*. Like Flow. Flow thinks you're the cool one. I'm not sure how she got that idea, but yeah."

Hermann sighs. "Lie down," he says. "Literally everyone you meet spends a period of variable duration despising you before you eventually win them over. They then exist in a perpetual state of annoyed torment for the rest of their lives."

"Well I'm going to be honest with you, that does not *sound* like 'liking'," Newt says, nonplussed and getting pushed onto the couch. He finds horizontalness to *really* be working for him. "You can see why I might be confused. But I think that only describes *you* actually," Newt says.

"Possibly," Hermann replies.

"Mako likes me," Newt says.

"I, also, 'like you', Newton, you *do* realize that, correct?" Hermann says, sitting on the floor at the base of the couch one elbow propped on the cushions, his forehead pressed against his hand.

"Oh my *god*, dude," Newt says, giving Hermann a semi-targeted shoulder pat. "Yes. Yes; have you not noticed that I am extremely intelligent? I get this whole Newt-I-will-save-your-brain, Newt-you-are-going-to-get-pneumonia, Newt-let-me-just-buy-you-a-wardrobe thing that you've got going. I *get* it, man. We have a whole, complicated, thing. You bought me *fish*."

"Yes," Hermann agrees.

Newt reaches up and rakes his own hair into instant disarray.

Hermann fixes it.

Chapter Twenty Four

Late afternoon sunlight streams laterally into Hermann's UC Berkeley office, bleaching the spines of assorted books to pale reds and greens, giving the walls and the shelves a yellowed hue.

It is a Friday afternoon and, vexingly, in the back of his mind, a conflicted, twenty-something *biologist* is singing *Hedy Lamarr* with unacceptable zeal.

Insupportable.

On this particular afternoon, one week after the commencement of his official UC Berkeley employment, two days after Newton climbed the Wall, three weeks after leaving Hong Kong, four weeks since his head was just his head, five minutes past Newton's most recent text (*I'm replacing you as a life partner. With a dead enlightenment philosopher. Just so you know. God, what are you even doing? Math? I bet it's not even math.*), six hours since his last conversation with Hypothetical Rain, seven days since their most recent neurology appointment, and eight hours before Friday will be over in his current, UTC minus eight time zone, Hermann decides he will, following the termination of the work day, purchase a bottle of tequila.

It is in no way significant, this bottle of future tequila, exported and imported by air or by land but not by sea.

It's simply a bottle of tequila.

It bears no particular importance; it is notable only in its classification as a member in a series of endless capitulations to the Geiszlerian proclivities laid out in his mind like dominoes, prone to occasional, catastrophic collapse into a personality that isn't his own.

There is a knock on his office door, which, fortunately, puts an end to his unacceptable, distracted ruminating *ontequila* of all things. Unfortunately, he is not feeling particularly sociable at this precise moment.

It has been a long week.

It has, in fact, been a long *month*.

Hermann arranges his face into a pleasant expression and then says, "yes?" in a manner that is crisp and polite and ideally gives no insight into his interrupted ruminations on alcohol and tiled games of blocking.

His door opens to reveal Professor Starr.

"Hermann," Starr says, *like an American*.

It is not Professor Starr's *fault* that Hermann is a tormented vessel for triplicated identity confusion that would like to sequester itself in a dark hole somewhere to marinate in its own mental misery, but he finds this difficult to keep in mind.

"Professor Starr," Hermann replies.

"David. It's *David*," Starr says, marking what may be the bicentennial anniversary of his lexical point missing.

You are so weird, his inner Dr. Geiszler learnedly opines. *Adapt to the local laid-back culture dude*, adapt to it. *As a human, your brain is wired to observe social norms and conform to them so that you don't get targeted for harassment as a masquerading out-group member. This explains whole swaths of your childhood experience. You seem like a guy in need of some belated pointers. In general? You can't make a group conform to you, unless you're dripping with charisma or you happen to arrive at a flux-point in collective decision making and you step into a forming niche like a baller. This implies that the endgame of the uncompromising individualist within a conformist social structure is persecution. Ridicule. Marginalization. My point is that when all that hangs in the balance is the honoring of academic honoraries and the maintenance of your own pretentiousness, well, maybe that's an instance where you should fake it till you make it, bro. First names, they're not so bad. I can make an argument for using them as levelers of the intellectual playing field and putting ideas rather than individuals and their doctorates into a position of prominence. So consider this a free tip, dude. Call him David.*

It is only a matter of time before Hermann attempts to throttle his own inner monologue.

"Quite right," Hermann says to 'David'. "You'll have to forgive my habitual use of titles."

Professor Starr waves a hand with awkward affability.

"How can I help you?" Hermann asks him.

"Were you planning on coming to the spring semester get-together next weekend?" Starr says.

"Er," Hermann replies, trying to work out a way of saying, 'I'd rather die,' on short notice and in a significantly more polite fashion but not coming up with anything in the heat of the moment. It is not that he dislikes the Berkeley Mathematics Department, on the contrary, he quite enjoys associating with them, but he would not characterize his

current existence as psychologically *easy*, and he would prefer to spend his free time either assisting Newton with his ongoing attempts to scrape himself into a semblance of a functional scientist or, failing that, simply lying quietly and miserably in a room, trying to be *himself* rather than an emotionally labile biologist or a monster with the desire to rend apart human cities.

This is a difficult sentiment to convey.

"So," Starr says slowly, "I— I want to just put this out there." He extends his hands, palms forward, like he is trying to distance himself from what he is about to utter. "Some of us were talking, well, most of us? After the faculty meeting on Wednesday?"

This does not sound promising to Hermann.

"About?" he snaps.

Offense as defense, his brain says. *Good call*.

Hermann suspects immediately it was not a 'good call' at all.

"Ugh," Starr says, "I knew it was going to go like this. I didn't mean it in *that* way," he continues. "I meant it in the best kind of way. Look, the point is, that we were talking, and the idea was brought forward that we should tell you *specifically* that it would *fine* if you want to bring Dr. Geiszler. *Totally* fine."

Hermann is extremely perplexed by this conversational turn.

One—he cannot imagine a circumstance under which he would bring *Newton* to a UC Berkeley Mathematics Department 'get together'; such a thing would be an unmitigated disaster in that Newton, being a narcissist of incredible caliber and arguable justification, would not be able to resist both flouting and flaunting his mathematical knowledge in an indecorous and entirely charming way. Hermann would prefer that Newton Geiszlernot become the coquettish, glittering socialite of his current mathematical circle. He can only endure so much.

Two—he cannot imagine a circumstance under which anyone in the UC Berkeley Mathematics Department would object to Newton's presence at a social gathering; the very fact that they had elected someone to communicate this to him makes him *extremely* uneasy. He's certain that this can have nothing to do with outmoded prejudices; well, he would *like* to believe he's certain about that. But if it's *not* a strangely anachronistic statement of overt support for marriage equality, then it must be that people find *Newton himself* objectionable in some way. Hermann cannot imagine what this way might be—he has kept an eye on the popular press, and Geiszler-related coverage, while wildly erroneous and overtly romanticized, has not, to

his knowledge, vilified Newton in any way. Quite the contrary; speculations about his heroic mental sacrifice are rampant in popular media.

Hermann has no idea what to say.

"I don't understand why you felt the need to explicitly state this," he says cautiously.

"Noooo," Starr says, looking like he's trying to avoid a misunderstanding by petting the air. "I'm doing a bad job explaining."

Yes, Hermann thinks, *you are*.

"Okay," Starr says, remarshaling his forces. "So it had occurred to us, to a *lot* of us actually, because of the information that's out there, that your boyfriend? Partner? That he's probably—that he could, maybe, not be totally—oh god, this is so awkward."

Hermann narrows his eyes.

"If Dr. Geiszler has brain damage you can still bring him, it's cool," Professor Starr finally says in a rush. "We're not saying he *does*, but we thought he *might*? And that maybe we should *say* something? Because you might not want that kind of thing spread around. Not that there's anything wrong with it, being brain damaged, I mean. If he *is*, I mean. Totally understandable, right? He *drifted* with a *kaiju*; that's got to mess one up. The point is, if you don't want to bring him, that's great, that's fine, but if you *did*, it's not like anyone, *anyone* would go talk to the press or whatever, and it's not like we'd be surprised and weirded out; we *get* it, or rather, we get that we don't get it at all."

"Ah," Hermann says, feeling both *excessively* irritated, *excessively* relieved, and mildly touched.

Moderately touched.

"I see," he says.

"And it's not like—it just came up *spontaneously* because we were talking about pranking the faculty—you might have heard what happened to the Caltech guy who was just recruited to the Astrophysics Department? The one who discovered all the exoplanets? He was 'kidnapped' by the upper level Caltech students, driven back to Pasadena, and duct-taped to his replacement's desk. By the forearms. Not anything weird. He's okay. Anyway, someone brought up your story about all Geiszler's forms of ID getting stolen and replaced with cardboard equivalents reading 'IHTFP' during MIT's international symposium on Regenerative Biology? Did you know there's a whole Geiszler subheading on the *Hacks at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology*

Wikipedia page? That was the context. And then we got to talking, and, well, we just wanted to let you know."

"Your—" Hermann struggles to find the appropriate word, "thoughtfulness is much appreciated. I assure you that Dr. Geiszler, while stressed and suffering some physical and psychological aftereffects of his recent experiences, is quite as *compos mentis* as he has always been."

"Ah," Starr says, like a man who doesn't think their conversation is yet over. "Well, that's something?"

"Yes," Hermann says, not sure what else to add.

"I mean, 'aftereffects' don't sound like the best, but the important thing is that you guys have each other," Starr says.

Hermann is not certain what is taking place here.

Is he, possibly, being *consoled*?

"Er, yes," he says.

"I don't know," Starr continues, obviously self-conscious. "We were just thinking, I mean, the guys. By which I also mean the ladies. The women. All of us. The *Department*. That, maybe, we would just tell you that if you wanted to talk to us about any of the stuff that's going on, that we would be—that we would be *trustworthy* about that kind of thing, because I don't know if that leaked correspondence that came out in *Wired* was real or not, but if it was, if it was even *close*, well, then I could see you, I could see *both* of you maybe having some institutional trust issues after that kind of thing, and it's just, well, we wanted to say that it's not like that here. I was kind of *elected* to talk to you because you and I have this friend-thing going? I mean, we both feel bad for Leibniz, am I right? That's solid friend territory. So, I didn't mean for this to be a big deal, just—you know. Formal message delivery. Solidarity. Yup."

"I—" Hermann says, struggling with a total derailment of all his running cognitive processes and trying not to default into threatening Geiszlerian coping mechanisms.

They sit there, looking uncomfortably at one another until Starr looks away to study the titles on Hermann's bookshelf.

Hermann tries to decide if he considers Starr his 'friend'. The whole thing seems vaguely presumptuous. It seems to him that, at a minimum, friendship requires something substantive, such as years of correspondence or mutual embracing when coworkers die in horrible ways.

"Thank you for the sentiment," Hermann says, and then, curiously, he continues with, "it was—it was difficult, actually, the PPDC—it's a different world. A different *environment* from academia and it suits some individuals better than others, and it—it suited *me* well, or, I thought it did, I *imagined* it did, but—there are times now that I—I find I have missed aspects of university life because for all the departmental politics it is a *collective* governance rather than a *hierarchical* one, and—" Hermann breaks off, preposterously too overcome to speak.

"How right did *Wired* get it?" Starr asks.

Hermann tries not to see the magazine cover in his mind's eye—that terrible photo from the Hong Kong airport rendered in black and white—his glare at the camera and Newton's hand, outstretched toward empty air. He tries not to remember the details of the double feature—his leaked correspondence with Marshal Hansen in the immediate aftermath of their departure from Hong Kong, and the circumstantial reporting that had ferreted out the context if not the details of what had happened to his colleague.

"Dr. Geiszler," Hermann says, controlling his tone admirably, "is exhausted. His personality and IQ, however, remain intact post his experience last month, I am happy to report. When he is sufficiently recovered, I believe he has a standing offer to join UC Berkeley's Neuroscience Department."

"Good," Starr says. "That's great. Not the first part, really, but the last part."

"Yes," Hermann says, dragging his fingers across his forehead. "Yes, quite."

"So do you think you might bring him?" Starr asks. "Next Saturday I mean?"

Hermann does not *want* to attend this gathering; still *less* does he want to *bring* *Newton*, but neither does he want to face the quotidian pity of his Department, staffed by those who assume that he is lying about the functional status of his partner, who pity him for that, who do not understand and never *will* understand what it was like to work for a decade at the screaming edge of technological advancement, who cannot possibly comprehend the experience of working with Caitlin Lightcap, of *watching her die*; of working with Newton, of watching him *nearly kill himself* in an almost identical, necessary, gutwrenching, vainglory of the mind; he wants to *inflict* his colleague upon them, because Newton is a person who *is* an infliction, his very presence is a cognitive brisance, and, in a way, they *deserve* him, these people that Hermann doesn't truly know, who sit around a conference table and discuss potential brain damage in kind, enlightened tones.

"Yes," Hermann says, with a friendly vindictiveness. "I think I shall."

When Hermann pushes their apartment door open, groceries and keys and cane all improbably in hand, a sheaf of papers beneath one arm because he has not yet found time to purchase a suitable briefcase, he sees no sign of his colleague.

"I have an idea," Newton says, with *entirely alarming* immediacy, into Hermann's left ear.

Hermann jerks, startled. His keys and half his papers end up on the apartment floor.

Turning his head reveals his recusant roommate to be leaning against the wall immediately adjacent to the door, *inches* from the lateral border of Hermann's shoulder, exuding stylized and preconcerted insouciance.

Newton is *extremely* irritating at times.

"How long have you been standing there?" Hermann says dryly, pushing past him to enter their apartment, not bothering to retrieve either his keys or his papers from where they have fallen at Newton's shoeless feet. "Tell me it was hours."

"It was *not* hours," Newton replies, kneeling to retrieve the items Hermann dropped. "you, my friend, have been EPIC Rapport'd. I knew you were coming home."

"That is hardly evidence of any ongoing neural connection; I come home *every day*," Hermann says. "Furthermore, I come home at approximately the same time each day. Speaking of which, I am pleased to find you *conscious*. How relieving for me."

"Let's not create a shared mythology of disparagement around things that didn't even *happen*," Newton says, with a tone of voice and aggrieved demeanor that together most certainly constitute *whining*. "I was sleeping in an inconsiderate pose," his colleague continues, managing to torque his petulance straight into wounded dignity, where it so often ends up.

"Ah," Hermann says, "of course."

"You're going to be cranky about this for *light years*," Newton says, as Hermann deposits the groceries on their kitchen table. "Don't you want to hear my—"

"Light years are a unit of *distance*, Newton," Hermann snarls, before he realizes that Newton, of course, knows this, and is certainly testing the interpersonal waters because an element in Hermann's demeanor or stance or carriage or *mode of speech* has tipped him off to some kind of intrapersonal torment in the mind of his colleague and the man has no other means of assessment of systemic stability than *poking* said system with a *stick* to see what happens.

It is a miracle that Dr. Geiszler did not *die* in *childhood*.

"So," Newton says. "*Someone* had a bad day. Are you getting harassed by your new colleagues? Are they trying to *talk* to you when there's *math* to be done? Do they try to get you to go out to *lunch*? Do they offer you *coffee*, possibly. The *nerve* of some people, honestly, dude, I feel that. I feel that with fifty percent of my brain. Thirty-three percent. Sometimes one hundred percent. One hundred percent of my brain thirty-three to fifty percent of the time."

Hermann sighs.

Newton straightens and reorients Hermann's lost papers and places them onto the kitchen table adjacent to the groceries.

"I find them somewhat tiresome, yes," Hermann admits, partially truthfully, because he does not particularly care to tell Newton that the UC Berkeley Mathematics Department, if not the totality of the academic world, now presumes Dr. Geiszler to be incapable of meeting the rigors of academia. He does not care to find out if Newton himself agrees with their assessment. He does not care to maintain a neutral expression while Newton tries to determine whether *Hermann* agrees with their assessment. All he wants to do is have a terror-free, disaster-free evening as a prelude to an *attempt* to discuss their recent experiences over a moderate amount of tequila.

Specifically, he would like to discuss the third drift.

Specifically, he would like to ask the question that's been echoing in his head for weeks now.

What happens to a fraction of a hive mind?

If he doesn't ask it soon, he will never ask it.

"Well," Newton says philosophically, pulling items out of reusable bags with an approximation of his historical brio. "Coming from you, 'somewhat tiresome' can mean anything from inviting you to lunch to secretly sabotaging your work, so if you want legit sympathy you're going to have to elaborate, dude."

There are other things he would like to know.

Can you look at your own body?

That question is one he may *never* be able to ask, because the *act of asking* would feel too righteously vindictive for Hermann to tolerate.

He already knows the answer.

"I do not require *sympathy*, Newton," Hermann snaps.

"Myeah, let me just iron that on a T-shirt for you," Newton replies. "Waaaaaaitt—did you buy *tequila*?" He pulls a bottle of tequila out of a shopping bag and stares at it, as if he is not particularly inclined to trust his own senses.

Hermann can't blame him there.

"Yes," Hermann replies.

"You. *You* are the person who bought the tequila?"

"I," Hermann says pointedly, "do not comment *at all* on your strange obsession with Descartes or your *sweater-wearing* proclivities so I will thank you to—"

"Hey. *Wait*. Stop *right there*. The whole sweater-thing is *not*—"

"If you purchased the equipment to implant yourself with an RFID chip over the internet, you can *certainly* purchase a *shirt*."

"Backlit screens, man," Newton says weakly. "I have to—"

"As a counter-argument, that was a particularly pathetic example," Hermann says. "On the other hand, I applaud your newly acquired taste for rationalism and your respectable clothing choices. I suggest that *you* take advantage of *my* evolving tastes in alcohol."

"I only buy tequila when I want to get *ragingly* drunk," Newton says, spinning the bottle in his grip. "Which is *really* out of character for you. Soooo, congratulations? I will *watch* you drink this dude, but *I'm* not drinking it because I'm picking caffeine for my substance trial, I've already decided."

"You are *not*," Hermann replies, "picking *caffeine*."

"Yes," Newton says. "I *am*. You realize, right, that mechanistically they're both equally risky when it comes to perturbing my arguably twitchy neural switchery? Seriously though, caffeine is activating but alcohol is going to inhibit inhibitory pathways, so—"

"If," Hermann says. "*If* you choose the tequila, Newton, I am prepared to—"

He does *not* want to say this.

Newton raises his eyebrows in intent expectation.

"I will allow you to put an RFID chip in my hand. I will, in fact, allow you to do it right now."

"Done," Newton snaps, sweeping his left hand in a dramatic arc to point at Hermann in time with the word. "Sit."

Hermann most certainly will *not* sit, primarily on principle.

"I will be back shortly," he says.

"Or, yeah," Newton calls after him. "Okay. Lose the jacket, man. Wash your hands. Roll your sleeves up past your elbows. Wash your forearms while you're at it. Do *not* forget to—"

Hermann pointedly shuts his bedroom door.

He reaches over and flips on his lights.

He is not *looking forward* to remotely controlling his external environment, but he must admit it strikes him as both useful *and*, well, yes, it has a certain appealing panache to it. He is *not* excited about *actual* implantation of the RFID chip, but he assumes it will be fine. Newton has, after all, done this to *himself* without any apparent difficulty.

Of course, the same thing could be said of *drifting*, so Hermann is unsure where that leaves him.

He does not like the messy realities of biology; he does not like the horror inherent to the slow spread of a fluid over a flat surface, or the frictionless slide of alien viscera. He does not like the invasive cut and crack of comparative anatomy, he does not like the interface of technology with biological systems. He does not like medical *tests*, he does not like medical *procedures*; he has had too many of them in his life.

Newton, of course, knows this.

Newton, of course, now shares these mental idiosyncrasies.

Nominally he does.

Arguably, Newton is better at not sharing Hermann's insecurities than Hermann is at not sharing his colleague's exquisite blend of minor childhood traumas that have hardened into his adult personality.

Hermann decides that this is too much analysis for what is *actually* taking place, which is that his colleague is trying to make a quixotic reparation for things that are not his fault in the most reliable way he can—by *buildingsomething* and inappropriately interfacing it with the human nervous system.

He sighs.

After rolling his eyes and removing his blazer, he iteratively cuffs his sleeves to the elbow and washes his hands and forearms with anti-bacterial soap. He uses a foot to open the cabinet beneath the sink and pulls out a fresh hand towel for the purposes of drying. Ideally he would walk back to the kitchen, his arms held in front of him in a borrowed Geiszlerian capitulation to sterile technique, but he needs his *cane*.

So, he compromises.

The idea of holding *one* arm in front of him seems reasonable until he rounds a corner, and Newton, in the midst of constructing his sterile field, looks over at him and says, "everything you're doing right now is pointless."

"I literally could not agree more," Hermann snaps at him, lowering his outstretched arm.

"Adorkable though," Newton continues. "Very fetching in a one to one Geiszler-to-Other ratio. Touch nothing. If I toss you this packet of sterile gel can you catch it?"

"Yes," Hermann says, flustered.

"Well that would be stupid. We're not doing that; why *would* we? That's just *inviting* disaster, Hermann, come on. Just get over here and lose the cane along the way. I'll *hand* your sterile gel to you like a *normal* person," Newton says.

"Did you just call me '*fetching*'?" Hermann asks him.

"Eh," Newton says. "Sure. It was a little more like looking at myself through a glass erotically and mathematically; you feel me?"

"No," Hermann says.

"Yes you do. You do the same thing. For example, you think it's outrageously attractive when I say things like 'group theory', 'P most certainly does not equal NP, have you taken leave of your senses, sir?', 'Andrica's conjecture', 'Erdős number', and when I invoke my dead mathematical alter-ego."

"Your what?" Hermann asks him, leaning his cane against an *unsterile* edge of the kitchen table.

"*Evariste Galois*," Newton says, obscenely rolling the 'r' in 'Evariste' in an entirely unacceptable manner.

"I forbid you to ever mention *Galois* again," Hermann snaps, accepting the packet of sterile gel that Newton drops into his hand and tearing it open, feeling anxious and raveled up and slightly lightheaded.

"*Evariste*," Newton says, in an *even more* provocative manner, snapping a sterile glove as he pulls it on. "*Galois*."

"You are a terrible human being," Hermann says, rubbing cool, blue gel over both hands. "You should not have your sleeves down."

"Alas," Newton replies, "logic gives way before practical needs."

"Do *not* quote yourself," Hermann says, vaguely wishing that if the man was going to cite his own lyrics he would just *sing* them. "It's terribly unattractive."

Newton rolls his eyes, clearly amused, then models the pronated, spread-fingered pose he presumably wants Hermann to adopt before pointing at the table.

Hermann complies, fixing his ethanol-cleansed hand palm downward on the sterile drape at a convenient angle.

Newton pulls sterile tools out of sterile packaging, snaps a sterile blade onto his sterile scalpel, and says, "don't move. I'm serious." He fixes Hermann with an atypically flinty expression. "Position-wise I'm not going to be holding you down in anything more than a nominal way."

"Fine," Hermann says, lifting his eyebrows in a manner he hopes is eminently unimpressed.

Newton looks at him. "I'm *extremely* serious about this, dude, it's going to hurt, kind of a lot, for thirty seconds or so."

"I am familiar with *pain* on a conceptual level," Hermann says.

"Myeah," Newton says, looking increasingly edgy. "Look this is like—well. Here's how this is going to work. You're going to *trust me* to not slice up your hand and I'm going to *trust you* not to move, and not to, like, er, *hunt me*? Kaiju-style?"

"I'm not certain this is a good idea," Hermann says.

"Cost/benefit-wise it's at least defensible if not advisable. We're intrapersonal if not interpersonal risk-takers, dude. Either way? We'll get drunk later, presuming no one dies. Are you in still in? Because this is kind of the point of no return."

"I suppose," Hermann says, "but I don't think that you should be getting *drunk*, Newton, I—"

"Yeah, okay, that's a whole different thing that we'll talk about later in annoying detail," Newton replies, drawing a line with a marking pen over the sterile plastic that coats Hermann's hand. "For now—I'm going in. Look out the window or something."

"I—" Hermann begins, but, true to his word, Newton fixes his right hand over Hermann's, repositions his scalpel, and *starts cutting*, blade to skin, blade *into* skin, disappearing along its edge in a manner that's *extremely* disturbing and, after an interval that seems too long, *painful*. Hermann hadn't quite expected *this* level of hot, acidic agony in his *dominant hand*. He keeps watching, a narrow ribbon of irregularly beading blood appearing behind the track of the blade.

"Window, dude, *window*, look out the *window*. What are you *thinking*? Look at the *Wall*, um, pretend you're *me* for a sixteen seconds or something, this is *terrible*," Newton says, sounding stressed, which just makes this entire experience *worse*, if that's possible, and it *is* possible, *it is*; he should know better than to *make* these kinds of statements; he is only *asking* for karmic retribution by advertising the limited scope of his own mental capacity.

"Oh my god," Newton says, sounding breathless, "this is actually really bad, this is actually kind of intolerable, extremely intolerable, totally," he says, angling the blade beneath Hermann's skin, "*ragingly* intolerable, I don't know if I can—"

Hermann can't even *speak*, his brain is a ravaged no-man's land of caving Gottliebian architecture and the compensatory rise of altered states of consciousness to replace the parts of him that are trying to *escape* this current experience *without moving* because he *cannot move*, he *will not move*, he will not *yank his hand away*, he *will not resist the cruelties of physical therapy even as a child he will not because he can defer not only satisfaction but he can also defer responses to pain, he can defer weeping, he can defer all weakness if he cannot banish it, he can defer and defer and defer to the point that all his distress can be packed down and compressed into something brittle that he can break and spread at his own convenience like chalk over boards and so when they tell him to—*

Nope, we're not doing this, buddy, his brain decides.

He's not sure who isn't doing what as simultaneous desire and disgust at RFID chip implantation vie for superiority in his thoughts.

Rescue rises de profundus from the subterranean reaches of his consciousness, pulling him out of the sea of his own distress. His brain turns out, in medias res, to be an epic freaking baller, thank *god*; and he's shoving memories he doesn't *want to have* back into the places that they're trying to cut their way free of, snapping down emerging instincts for violence that come from an alien species he shouldn't have so much in *common with* butdoes.

Ugh, Hermann thinks, trying to force his vision to clear. The continuing pain in his hand, which had seemed so distressing just a moment ago is, really, not *that bad* now that he thinks about it. He can totally deal. No problem.

"For *god's sake*, man," Newt snaps, gluing his hand together, because Newt is really, he's just really *so great* at these kinds of things, or maybe it's Hermann that's great? Or maybe they're just both great in different ways but with equal magnitude. Aw. That's nice. "Put your *head down*, won't you?"

"What?" Hermann says, not really sure what the whole postural-change suggestion that the guy is making is really supposed to accomplish, other than—

Aaaaaaand he is looking at the floor.

He's looking at the floor, which is rocking the whole eco-conscious-wood-reflects-fluorescent-overhead-lights-meeting-the-vespertine-purple-of-a-sun-setting-behind-a-Wall vibe. Yeah. Because *that's* a vibe. Ninety three million miles away is a sun. Just a sun. Some planet's sun, positionally behind some jerk's Wall. Some planet's sun sunning the floor of some jerk's son.

So *witty*, his brain says admiringly.

The floor looks weird though, like kind of if yellow and purple had an internecine spectrum war and then both colors died together on a brown surface. It really shouldn't be attractive but it's looking pretty great, surprisingly. Dutch Golden Age style. Not really but *kind of*.

"Honestly," Newt says, "Honestly, Hermann, make an attempt to *control yourself* and your overly sensitive vasovagal responses, will you please?"

"Hey," he says weakly, as Newt pulls the sterile adhesive off his hand with a brisk sweep and tapes down a piece of gauze. "Did you just contaminate your sterile field, because—"

"I no longer need this sterile field," Newt replies, sounding slightly more forgiving. "Hermann. Please just *sit there*, if you would, *without* moving, and try not to *faint*."

Yeah, so that's a little harsh, Hermann's brain says. *Primarily because he might have a point; you aren't doing too well right now friend, which is weird, usually you're great with this kind of thing. Right? Yes. Yes? Are you? You are. I think you are? Who are you, do you think?*

"Up," Newt snaps, grabbing a handful of Hermann's shirt and his elbow in a totally imperious, handsy-type way and dragging him to his feet. "Get *up*, you ridiculous man."

"Can you *not*?" Hermann says, definitely not whining, not whining *at all* not even toeing the border of petulance. "*You're* the ridiculous one. God. Jedi-neohipster."

He snaps twice and the lights obligingly flash from on to off and back on, which he notes appreciatively before *Dr. Geiszler* gives him a sharp couchward press and says, "lie down," in his most forbidding manner, which, truth be told, is not actually *that* forbidding. It's maybe not the worst idea Newt has ever had though, because Hermann's feeling a little weird, his *leg* hurts, he's not sure what that's about exactly, it

seems unusual, and he's leaning on Newt slightly because his *gait* just doesn't feel like his gait is *supposed* to feel. That's weird; he's not sure he likes that. It's not far to the couch though, which is pretty great, because yeah, this lying down thing is seeming like a better plan all the time; he's not sure he can keep all his running processes straight. His sympathetic nervous system is making an attempt to shut down all the active programs in his head.

So yeah.

He lies down, getting all his organ systems on a horizontal plane.

This is better.

"Are you all right," Newt says, abruptly *really* close because he's doing the kneeling-on-the-floor thing. Yep. Up close and looking nauseated.

Newt is.

Looking nauseated, he means.

Obviously.

"Yeah," Hermann says. "Yeah, I'm totally fine. Do not even worry about me, dude. You look kind of awful though. Don't throw up on this couch, or, ideally, on me. Throw up on the coffee table, maybe."

"Not helpful, Hermann," Newt says, through clenched teeth. "I am *fine*. I did, perhaps, experience a brief interval of *intense* cognitive dissonance, but, fortunately, it has since resolved."

"Congrats," Hermann says, dragging a finger through the air in a loose approximation of check-box ticking.

"Indeed," Newt replies dryly.

Something about this whole situation strikes me as a little odd, his brain says, watching Newt push himself to his feet with a simultaneous press against cane and coffee table.

"Relax, will you please?" Newt says, leaning against the cane and glaring down at him in unconcealed disapproval. "Do *not* move. I will be back shortly."

"Um," Hermann says, trying to decide what it is about the current state of affairs that is troubling him.

He cannot escape the feeling that he is *missing* something.

This is extremely unusual for him.

Missing things, that is. He's usually rocking a sibylline song when it comes to science. And really, everything comes back to science. Well. All *true* things do. Science always has room for true things and calls false things bullshit before tearing them away. Hermann can get behind that. He can get behind that hardcore.

He levers himself up on one elbow.

"No," Newt says, freezing in the midst of sterile-field breakdown to fix Hermann with a stern look beneath lowered eyebrows and above the rims of his glasses, which he then ruins by pushing his glasses back up his face, because *Newt* is totally blind and, also? A poser. "Absolutely not. *Lie down.*"

Hermann tries not to take this kind of thing personally, he *really* does, and, in total fairness, he might *look* a little bit bad right now, he's slightly covered with a cold sweat, possibly, and shivering or maybe just having some kind of post-adrenaline tremor thing, whatever, it's not important. The important thing here is that Newt needs to *listen* to him, because something is going on here, something weird, so he does not say 'make me,' in lascivious response to his colleague's totally inappropriate protective streak, he instead says: "dude."

Newt rolls his eyes.

"Don't roll your eyes at me," Hermann says. "*Listen* to me, god, *will you*. Just. Listen. There's something *weird* going on here—"

Newt gives him a scathingly pointed look, probably intended to communicate something along the lines of, *Oh-really-Hermann-how-fascinating-you-don't-suppose-it-could-be-you-failing-to-perfuse-your-own-brain-do-you?*

"Don't give me that, man, I'm serious," Hermann says. "I am getting a weird vibe."

"Take a nap," Newt says acerbically, rolling up the remains of his sterile field into a green heap and heading toward the kitchen, presumably to trash the stuff. "Perhaps it will clarify things for you," he throws back over his shoulder.

Well.

Yeah.

Okay. So, *of course*, Hermann is going to get no reasonable help until he's laid down like ninety percent of the conceptual groundwork. *Of course*.

He looks absently at the gauze taped to his right hand.

Okay brain, he thinks. *Talk to me. Something here is creeping you out. Spill.*

Hey kid, his brain replies, mysteriously impersonating Caitlin Lightcap. *Remember how it used to be? Remember how you and I used to go down to the end of the deployment dock with a bottle of nine-dollar tequila and talk trash about J-Tech and throw ideas at a metaphorical wall labeled 'Remote Interface' hoping something would stick? Remember the day you told me that I'd die? Remember the day you were right?*

He feels a wave of acute and needless grief.

I don't see what this has to do with anything, but yeah, Hermann replies, staring at the ceiling, listening to Newt mutter at himself in German in the kitchen.

Throw some stuff at the wall, Caitlin Lightcap says, as if she's spelling something out for him.

"Right," Hermann murmurs, still staring at the ceiling.

I have a bad feeling about this, Princess Leia says in his brain.

You and me both, Princess, he replies dryly.

So.

Wall-throwing.

He takes an inventory. Physically, he is fine, if one does not count the *anxiety*, which is intolerable and persistent and intolerably persistent; its bladed edge pressing him into the blur of running thoughts, as it has always done, as it has *never* done, as it has always and never done. His sleeves are rolled up and that seems right but his arms are bare and that does not; he can't *do* this alone, he doesn't have the right *perspective*, he can't *see* where he's *standing*, he needs someone else, not someone else, not anyone else, but *Newt*; Newt is who he needs but Newt *isnot listening* because one of them doesn't listen and clearly that person is *Newt*, because if it isn't *Newt* then who else would it be?

He runs his hands through his hair and sits up, his gaze fixing on the walls, on the *Wall*. There is something *wrong with him*, there are *things that wait* in his *head*. There are things that *wait there* for propitious circumstance; he can *feel* them there, *waiting*.

He's paranoid. Slightly. Maybe slightly. He's paranoid. He's *not*. Had he *been*, historically, paranoid? He doesn't know. He feels nervous. He feels weird. Maybe nervousness and weirdness together combine to paranoia.

Something is *wrong*; it's wrong.

It's wrong.

He can feel the warm rush of blood through his sinuses.

This isn't the best, his brain says. *I don't get this*.

He pulls down a sleeve of his dress shirt, presses it to his face, and tries to *think*.

Tries to *think*.

Tries.

What is *happening* to him.

He does not feel right.

He can remember his day, he can remember what happened, he can remember buying tequila, can remember coming home and agreeing to Newt's RFID chip proposal if only to gain leverage to *employ* the tequila, and god,*god*, something about the *chip* is what triggered all of this, something about the chip or the cutting, or the distress, because everything had been fine before the chip.

He snaps his fingers.

The chip is cool.

"Was that really necessary," Newt snarls, still in the kitchen.

The chip is cool, the chip is fine; this weirdness vibe is something else.

Hermann snaps again, restoring the lights. "A little," he says, somewhat resentfully.

Newt reappears, having, apparently, disposed of his sterile field. He leans against the doorframe that separates the kitchen from the rest of the apartment with a sasstastic hip thrust slash maybe hip asymmetry thing that would be impossible to maintain without the cane he's appropriated. Hermann finds this a confusing mixture of stupid and attractive, much like Newt himself.

"Can you not with the pissed yet sexy librarian thing? I'm trying to *think*," Hermann says.

"I beg your pardon?" Newt says, nonplussed. "Why are you *bleeding*."

"For *fun*, dude," Hermann says darkly, or as darkly as is possible for a guy who has his shirt cuff pressed to his face. "For fun. For the double-distilled pleasure of it. Get *over* here, I need to *talk to you*."

Newt sighs, rolls his eyes, but approaches the couch, seating himself on the coffee table, extending his bad leg in front of him, which is weird because last time Hermann checked, and he checks Newt out pretty regularly, ha,*metaphorically* though, Newt did not *have* a bad leg.

Hermann is the one with the 'mobility challenges'.

Right?

Are you sure about that? his brain asks.

Hermann is *not* sure.

His leg *aches* though, with a foreign familiarity.

Newt hands him a handkerchief. Hermann swaps it in for his sleeve.

"Something *weird* is happening here, dude," he says.

"Well, you're *bleeding*," Newt says dryly. "Is that not sufficient for you?"

"It's not that," Hermann says. "You're not making an *effort*, dude, I am *trying* to get you to *help me*."

"Could you be more vague," Newt says with a concerned waspishness. "Endeavor not to *bleed*."

Hermann compresses his lips and exhales pointedly, glaring at Newt. "I'm telling you, I think there's some cognitive weirdness happening here and I—"

Newt moves closer and does a thing to Hermann that is kind of hard to follow because it involves shoving him horizontally and, like, doing a thing with his ankles? The end result is that he is lying down. This is *not fair*, Newt is supposed to be *helping him*, not being a *bastard* about this whole thing.

"Lie down," Newt says, with pointed aridity.

"You're a *jerk*," Hermann replies. "Can you *please*," he snaps, his voice cracking, "just *listen*."

"I always listen, Hermann," Newt says, resuming his position on the coffee table and looking at Hermann in an extremely unfair, totally *green-eyed* type of way, which is just really fixed, and really intent and full of all this *Hermann-you-need-a-sitter-by-Jove-and-by-Jupiter-and-by-metric-tons-of-Ancient-deities-that-weirdos-use-as-profanity* and Hermann is not cool with that, he is not cool with that *at all*. So what if Newt is an aesthetically pleasing guy, *he too* is an aesthetically pleasing guy. Really now, do people come along every day with Hermann's cheekbones? He thinks *not*, thank you very much, so Newt can just can that skeptical smolder thing he's got going over there; he can just put it in a freaking *can* and *seal it in there* because Hermann doesn't care, he doesn't care *at all*.

Newt looks at him in patient expectation.

Oh.

Right.

Because Hermann is supposed to be talking right now.

"I have a bad feeling," he unwisely confesses.

"I find this unsurprising," Newt says gently. "I just unwisely cut open your hand."

This really pisses Hermann off.

Because *yeah*. Newt, stupid stupid *stupid* Newt *did* cut open his hand, like a *freaking jerk*, but only because Hermann had wanted to make him drink tequila which had, admittedly, also been a little bit of a manipulative dick move. So they're even right now. Probably. But that is neither here nor there.

"Relax," Newt says reasonably. "I will make you dinner."

"No," Hermann snaps, surging forward to snag the nearest part of Newt's sweater/dress shirt combo thing that he's rocking. "There is a *thing* we need to figure out. Some kind of cognitive problem, dude, some truly epically freakish perspective-level stuff is happening right now."

"Confident though I am," Newt says, "that it appears that way to *you*, Hermann, I really don't think—"

"Come *on*," Hermann says, shaking the fistful of shirt he has. "You owe me this, dude. Think of it as a professional courtesy if not a personal favor."

"Very well," Newt sighs. "Proceed."

"Well I—" Hermann begins, because *he* doesn't know what's wrong exactly, he just knows that something *is wrong*, he needs *Newt* to actually figure it out, or at least to *help* him search out the borders of a problem he doesn't understand. "I don't *know*, but something is *wrong*, I'm telling you it *is*; can you just—try and—" he finishes with a helpless, circular hand gesture.

Newt compresses his lips and stares absently out the window, clearly *thinking*. A least that's *something*, Hermann supposes. Newt is *better* at certain kinds of things than he himself is, and this, *this*, is one of those things.

Isn't it?

He has no idea, actually, which is weird.

Hermann watches him intently, trying to latch onto his train of thought via EPIC Rapport or via the SPECTER effect, whatever freaky cognitive train he can hitch a ride on, because he wants to do this together; they work *best* when they're *together*.

Newt pulls his cane off the floor and stares at it.

"Yes," Hermann says. "Yes."

"This," Newt says. "Is mine."

"Is it?" Hermann replies.

"Yes?" Newt says, the word pulled into a slow, stiff question, like cooling toffee.

Come on, a dead woman says. You're almost there. You can feel it. You can taste it. Get there, buddy. Just get there. Name it. Name what's happening to you. Tag it. Your life partner is holding a cane he shouldn't be holding. What is that? Give it a name. Name it.

"No," Newt says, in breathy horror with a lateral head snap. Their eyes meet again, and Hermann finds this hard to take. "This is *yours*."

Get there, kiddo, Catilin Lightcap says. Get there.

"Identity confusion," Hermann snaps, victorious, finally finding the correct tag for what it is that's happening to him.

To *them*.

It's weird, it's subtle, he feels like he can't map the whole of it. He knows, ostensibly, who he is, but he doesn't *feel* like that guy, he feels instead like the guy who started a rock band, like the guy who used to get drunk with Caitlin Lightcap in the middle of the night in hypomanic misery, like the guy who saw Mako Mori, covered with dirt, her face streaked with tears, a single red shoe held in a death grip, and who had taken her from Stacker Pentecost while he got checked by medical, saying 'aw, Mako Mori? More like Maki in Socks, am I right? Hey, it's cool, crying is, like, a thing. Evolutionary. You just go for it, kiddo. Weeping seems like a reasonable choice to me. Very defensible. Myeah, you speak *no* English, do you? Absolutely none.' That's *him*. Isn't it? *That's* him, and not the guy who screamed half his childhood away in physical therapy regimens so that maybe, one day, he could become a *pilot*, not the guy who had hated his body so much he'd tried to escape to the complex plane, to algebraic topologies and into sets of sets. That's not who *he* is, is it? He's not the guy who had stupidly, stupidly, *epically* stupidly tried to be a Jaeger pilot despite all messages to the contrary and who had *failed*. That isn't him. That *can't* be him.

Newt looks at him in consternation and then in growing *horror*.

Yup, you're getting it now, buddy, his brain says vindictively.

"I told you," Hermann snaps, his voice cracking against something he can't see. "I *told* you."

"So you did," Newt says, looking at him. "Hermann, I believe we may have—" he breaks off, looking at the cane he's holding.

"We *swapped*," Hermann says, under the pressure of building revelation, before he's fully understood it himself. "We *swapped*, dude. We both got *super* stressed and I defaulted to you, and, weirdly and *surprisingly*, you *also* defaulted to *me*."

"No," Newt says, obviously offended. "That *can't* be the case, I have—I have *excellent* mental control. I—"

Hermann almost feels sorry for him.

Almost.

"Yeah, well, newsflash: not so much," Hermann says.

"I'm you?" Newt says, sounding painfully unsure of himself. "And—you're *me*?"

"I think so," Hermann replies. "Not really but *kind of*."

"Well," Newt says, "how do you propose that we reverse our current predicament?"

"This is *your area*," Hermann says pointedly.

"Only nominally," Newt snaps. "You're more me than I am, arguably."

Oh.

Right.

"Well," Hermann says, staring at the ceiling. "When this happened previously, you manipulated me into resuming my historical thought patterns."

Newt compresses his lips and exhales, directing his gaze toward the ceiling. "Very well. You are an insensitive miscreant," he says.

"You suck at this," Hermann points out kindly. "That was just an insult. There was no manipulation there, dude."

Newt shoots him a fiery green glare that Hermann is not above aesthetically appreciating.

"Keep your pants on," he says. "I'll do it for you."

"Keep my—" Newt echoes incredulously. "I'll have you know that—"

"*Shh*," Hermann says.

You know exactly where to take this, dead Caitlin Lightcap chimes in. *Because you're a devastating bastard.*

Hermann whistles *En Règle (And Out)* through his teeth.

Newt stares him with something that looks like *overt fear*.

"Sing," Hermann says, as he finishes the first verse.

"I *can't sing*," Newt snaps back at him.

"You *can*," Hermann replies archly. "Of course you can. *Do it. Do it right now.*"

Newt shakes his head.

Hermann whistles a few more bars and then says, "don't be *me*, be *you*. You're a *literal* rock star. Against all odds."

"Atmospheric," Newt whispers, looking like Hermann is *pulling his teeth*. "Esoteric."

"Sing," Hermann says. "Actually *sing it*."

"I don't understand," Newt whispers with proper prosody, *trying*.

Hermann is *really* not sure if he's seen anything more painful and ridiculous in his *life* than Dr. Newton Geiszler of the subtle guyliner and the clothes that were designer *not* manning up in a vocal way, but this whole day has been pretty pathetic according to every mental metric that Hermann can recall or construct.

Unbelievable, his brain says. *You're going to have to do this for him, champ. Maybe your Geiszler-derived pathways will lend you some reasonable intonation.*

He sits up, yanks his ridiculous colleague into a quarter turn so that they're face to face and goes straight for the chorus.

Cognizance *kills* *confidence*
In any providence.

"Sing it," he breaks off, pulling Newt forward, shaking him once. "You *have* to *sing*. This is *all* I've got. You *haveto do it*. I have literally *nothing else*, Newt, you *must* do this, dude."

Newt is not doing it.

He's just *sitting there*, staring at Hermann, looking totally traumatized by this entire experience, clutching Hermann's cane.

It's my tough to translate

Psychological state

Subjective and ornate.

"Sing," Hermann shouts straight into Newt's face.

"Incurring costs," Newt half-snarls, half sings, "that we'll exchange for our benefits," he continues.

"Why is it that we don't have them yet," they continue together, Newt finally snapping into something that *sounds* right; that sounds *wrong*, that sounds like Hermann is sure he's *supposed* to sound like, but doesn't, and that's right too, maybe. What *is* rightness anyway? Is it even a thing? "Just a null set of our own regret?"

"And I *am* upset," Newt continues, finally, *finally* sounding like the frontman he had been, that he *could still be* if he hadn't traded music for science a decade ago. "Pinning my worth on my sobriquet, tracing ennui with my—oh goddamn it," he snaps, breaking from singing into speech, both hands coming to his temples as he folds forward, trying not to throw up, trying not crack apart along the throughlines of his mind.

"Yeah," Hermann says, reaching over to pat Newt's shoulder in what he hopes is an encouraging, if anxious, way. "You just try and be *you*, champ. Don't—"

Newt shuts his eyes, presses his hands to his temples and wordlessly *screams* through a locked jaw, and yup, that takes Hermann aback a little bit because *yikes*.

Seriously.

Freaking *yikes*.

While the whole clenched-teeth, bilateral temple grab scream *is* a very Geiszlerian thing to do, it *looks* kind of distressing.

Really distressing.

"Hey," Hermann says, trying to calm Newt down with some semi-suave shoulder patting because *yes*, that's a good idea. "*Dude*. Everyone is fine. Probably. Maybe. I mean, ostensibly?"

Newt opens his eyes, which are now alarmingly bloodshot, and locks his gaze with Hermann's.

"Are you okay?" Hermann asks him.

"Don't say 'okay'," Newt whispers, starting to bleed from his face.

"I'll say 'okay' if and when I want to say it," Hermann replies, fishing in his own pocket for another handkerchief and handing it to Newt. "Try not to bleed out in protracted increments, bro."

"Oh god," Newt says, looking at him like he's a *dead person*, which Hermann is really not into, because he has seen Newt and *been* Newt and kind of is *currently* Newt, a little bit, and he knows what that face means and he also knows that he does *not*

deserve it. Hermann is abruptly not quite sure whether his colleague is going to *cry* or not. If it happens he's not sure how *that* will go for either of them. Already, Hermann feels sort of mentally *stressed*, sort of *cracking apart*, already his face hurts, but maybe that's because he's bleeding from it?

"I'm pretty sure you're overreacting," Hermann says to Newt's unarticulated but obvious despair, in what he hopes is a *comforting* way. Honestly, the guy looks so acutely miserable, it's kind of freaking him out.

A little bit.

Not really but *kind of*.

"I can't get *you* back," Newt says in a cracked whisper, like some kind of tormented, half-mythical thing. Like maybe if a pretty decent looking fairy prince or princess mated with a pretty decent looking banshee. Are all banshees women? Would fairies and banshees be compatible? Genetically? Hermann really is *not* well informed when it comes to this kind of thing. Maybe it's more of a fangless-vampire meets intractable-nerd kind of deal. Maybe it's more like regular guy with a horde in his head having a hard time hanging onto his hemoglobin.

"Of course you can," Hermann says. "You'll think of something. *I'll* think of something. This is hardly an intractable problem, okay? Just *chill*."

Newt smiles faintly in that kind of way that people smile when they can't believe that you've stabbed them with the razor blade included in your commercial model rocket kit, not that Hermann would know anything about what *that* kind of face might look like, nope, that's weird, what is that even. Hermann doesn't vindictively stab people even when they deserve it, even when they deserve it so so so so so much, nope, that's not what Dr. Gottlieb of the flawless equanimity and the impressive neural circuitry does, nope, definitely *definitely* not, nope. No way.

What had he been thinking about?

There's a learning curve when it comes to Newt's brain, it seems.

"Stop *looking at me like that*," Hermann snaps, because it's a *weird* look that he's getting from Newt, a weird look he's been getting from Newt this *whole time*, actually, as if *Newt* has any grounds for dispensing colleague-directed pity, as if Newt doesn't live in a glass house that's already been shattered, as if he's not *surprised* every time it's windy or it rains on him or he's subjected to any kind of environmental vagary because Newt thinks he has invisible walls that *he does not have*, that, maybe? He *never* arguably had. So Newt can just suck it, and stop *looking at him* as if he *knows what's*

going on, as if *Hermann* is the confused one, as if Newt is not the stupidest brilliant person on this stupid little planet that has too many oceans and too many deep places that are too willing to transit monsters.

Newt does not stop looking at him.

"I'm easy," Newt says finally, pulling his handkerchief away from his face and wiping away most of the blood in iterating swipes. "But you, you're *difficult*, Hermann, you're very, you're just *very difficult*. You will be. To get back, I mean."

"You did it before," Hermann says. "Snapping me back over, I mean. Into a separate set. You don't have to get emo about this and *bleed* everywhere. It's a solvable problem."

"This isn't the same," Newt whispers, clearly tormented. "Last time you had *insight*. Last time you *knew*. Last time it was in response to an ongoing stressor. We just spent, I don't know, five minutes, maybe ten, *as each other*. Without insight. *Without insight*. Either of us."

"It can be done," Hermann snaps, dismissively, because first of all, hi, yes, he'd had at least *partial* insight, thanks. Second of all, Newt hates admitting when Hermann's right about things. Third of all, *whatever*. "We *know* it can be done. I just did it for you."

"Yes but there's no reciprocal trick," Newt whispers. "Not this time. I don't *know* a *reciprocal trick*."

Hermann shoots him an unimpressed look and pulls the handkerchief he holds away from his own face.

"You don't, maybe," Hermann replies, trying to decide if he's still bleeding. It seems like no, so score one for team Gottlieb. Score like one million actually, because a) he already solved fifty percent of the extremely weird problems in this apartment, and, despite his super emo colleague's doubts, he's going to solve the other fifty percent because come on, b) he is the most rational guy ever, possibly ever to have lived; if any human has quantum mechanical instincts it's *him*, that's freaking badass, and c) Newt has just been all kinds of depressing lately and Hermann *does not blame him* for that, but maybe Dr. Geiszler just needs a snack and a nap while the professionals do the consciousness-restoring. Yup.

So.

Points of difference.

He's smarter than Newt.

Thaaaaaats probably not going to get him anywhere though.

He's faster than Newt, more coordinated, better at pretty much everything except for his disaster of a leg, thank you genes and environment, thank you soooo much for that one.

He should just do some quantum mechanics.

Of course, Newt can also do quantum mechanics.

He should do some algebraic topology.

Of course, Newt can also do that.

He should *play the guitar*.

Wait, nope, that's not him. Technically.

He should drive a car. He's *awesome* at that.

Er, except, well, the thing is that, right now? He really really *really* just doesn't *want* to do that right now, cars, they just, well they *move* very quickly and he feels a little weird about driving stick at the moment and the consequences of screwing up mid-car driving are, yeah, a little bit more extreme when compared to say *singing*. It was pretty hard to get Newt to *sing* but *Newt* is going to *suck* at trying to goad him into driving aggressively, Newt is going to suck at that *so hardcore*. Epic suckage at the concomitant accelerating and browbeating.

Newt distracts him by standing, walking over to the sliding glass door of the balcony, and staring out into the darkness beyond the reflected sheen of the room lights. *That's* something that's interesting because Dr. Gottlieb as Dr. Geiszler could not care less about the Wall, other than as a tribute to human stupidity and a monolithic monument to someone's family fracturing down a split that stemmed from conceptual turned practical disagreements about the limits of human engineering as a discipline because it's impossible to fence in a *coastline*; everyone, literally everyone, from biologists to mathematicians will tell you it's an idea worthy of ridicule.

For reals, his brain says.

Hermann shakes his head and tries to remember what he's supposed to be doing.

"I do *not*," Newt says, staring westward, "want to do this."

"Want to do *what*?" Hermann says, feeling slightly more than slightly anxious because *yes*.

Newt turns around.

Newt turns around and *when he does*, god, he doesn't *look* like *Newt*, not really, he looks like *someone else*, someone pushed too far, someone out over some edge that Hermann can't see but that circumstantial evidence indicates is *there* nonetheless. And Newt *comes back*, away from the window, back toward the couch, and there's something about the whole thing snaps an associative switch, igniting anxiety into a paranoid conflagration because *what is he doing*, *what is he*—

"You think you're *me*?" his colleague asks, terrified and angry; a mostly-human monster with Erinyeic eyes. "You think *that's* who you are? This isn't you, you moron; you don't lose your trigonometry in pursuit of awesome fish, you lose your books when people *take them*, and they *do*, they always *take them*. Your toys that weren't your toys, your books, your thoughts, your *funding*; but you could take them back, oh god, you *want* to take things back—why is it that you *don't*? Is it because you're afraid of how you'd wear it—your creeper vengeance cloak? Or do you think it wouldn't fit you and let you keep your mind, like a freak-show Russian novel, disturbing—Gogolesque? You *know* you could have killed them, not the humans, not the *humans*, but that shit that crawled from trenches, miles beneath the sea. But still they wouldn't let you, not your father, not the people in control of things that *you* had helped design; they let Caitlin Lightcap do it and she had OCD, they would have let *me* do it if they'd trusted me to kill what I abstracted and draped across my skin; they let *everyone* but *you* in there, and *why*? Because your motor cortex fails a point-to-point alignment with a cheap and thoughtless standard that someone just *defined*? Did you think if you *saluted* that that might change their minds?"

"Stop," Hermann whispers.

"Stop? You think I'm *stopping*? I'm not stopping Hermann, never, I'm the *only one* who's seen you for what *you truly are*, an *angry*, righteous *expert*, half deranged with self-restraint, who can't fly off the handle that's become a dead-man's switch; a guy who hates his very nature, who longs for thoughts as waves and erasure of the self because he's fought too long with unfairness as genetics to remember how to *live*. You're killing *who you are*, that's why you can't snap back; you aren't sure you *want* to; it's so *easy* to be *Geiszler*; his thoughts aren't freaking *blades*. But you're not me, you know you're *not*, I drive you to distraction and for years you called that 'hatred' because everything you feel is warped by what you *are* and sharpened into verbal blades you drive at what you're *not* because they're the only weapons anyone will grant you that you trust yourself to take."

"Shut up." Hermann's words are soundless. "That's not true. It isn't *true*."

"It's true, you brain-swapped *bastard*, of *course* it's freaking true; things aren't *false* because you hate them, they're false because they're *false*. There's your one confoundment—if what's logical wins approbation, then what you despise is flawed. A fallacy that you don't like to look at because upon examination it turns into why I felt I had to *kill myself* so I could *prove you wrong*."

"Stop," Hermann shouts at him; the word is torqueing into German.

"No," his colleague screams. "I want you back; I want you *back*, don't allow yourself to *do this*. This isn't who you are, it's a shortcut of the mind straight to a state of lower energy but you have to *run it back*, it has to be *reversible*, don't leave me here *without* you, don't leave me with the *person I unmade*, oh god, this isn't *working*—"

It's here he breaks and here that Hermann has his breakthrough; through breaking himself into triplicated dissonance and choosing a new throughline.

"*Snap out of it*," Newton screams, panicking, his hands closed around the front of Hermann's dress shirt.

He squares his shoulders, shakes his head, and determines he's not Newton.

Any more.

He is who he is—a bolted-together conglomeration of overengineering and inadequacies that has, for years, aspired to move beyond itself by not acknowledging the ways in which it is tied to his own biology, to joints that don't move in accordance with the *ne plus ultra* ease of the prototypical Jaeger pilot, to a mind that is mired in its own circuitry and that has, certainly, been damaged by its interface with a system never meant to be compatible. He's proven theorems, programmed Jaegers, mapped the quantum foam, helped to save his planet from exogenous destruction, but still he is and always will be the failed pilot, the social outcast, the unbending son, the man who backs his colleagues into conceptual corners so tight that the only way they can cut free is by cutting themselves apart. The consolidation of all that he is and the exclusion of what he is *not* supernova and collapse into something hyperdense that wants nothing more than to pull away from the agony of the last fifteen minutes, but can't.

Because someone has him by his shirt and is screaming in his face.

"You *have to*," Newton says, overwrought, collapsing to command-form hysterics in the absence of all perceptible recourse.

Hermann's never seen him like this.

Except for—

Yes, except for.

"Stop," he says, lacking the respiratory resources for full vocal confrontation.

Newton does not stop.

"*You have to,*" Newton screams, inches from his face.

"*Stop,*" Hermann says, doing some reciprocal clothing-gripping of his own for emphasis. "It worked. It *worked*. *Calm down*. Calm down. *Calm down*."

Hermann has to physically shake him, once, to get him to *listen*, but finally, *finally*, his words seem to penetrate his colleague's agitated haze.

Newton looks at him in apparent expectation.

Hermann tries to muster a sufficiently reassuring expression but he's not certain how efficacious it is given his current state of emotional upset and Newton's intolerable look of cautious optimism.

"Are you *sure*?" Newton asks him, with a subtle shirt-shake.

"To the extent that I *can* be," Hermann replies.

Newton lets him go, pulls his glasses off, and buries his face in his book-like, open palms.

Hermann feels too shocked and too exhausted to do anything but stare at him, at his atypically clean hands, at the revolting memento mori in metal he has worn on his finger since the day that Dr. Lightcap died.

His thoughts feel shocked to silence by the enormity of what has taken place.

Newton drops his hands and tips his head back to stare at the junction between the wall and the ceiling.

"Newton," Hermann says, with absolutely no subsequent plans.

"Yup," Newton says. "Okay, good. I'll be in the bathroom weeping for something like eighteen hours if you like, *need* me for anything, so. Yeah. See you later." He stands.

Hermann snaps a hand out, closing his fingers around his colleague's wrist. With the application of limited pressure, Newton caves like rotten ice, collapsing straight into an awkward embrace, turning his face into Hermann's shoulder, vibrating with emotional brisance and repression in accord with whatever secret, internal frequencies his oscillatory circuits use to transmit their signals.

"Don't hug me," Newton manages to say into his shoulder. "I'm a *dick*."

"You're not," Hermann whispers, feeling like he's dying.

"I didn't mean any of those things," Newton says. "They aren't true."

They are, though.

They *are*.

Oh, *how* they are true.

It is the how, of course, that is the most terrible. The why—the why is understandable. Motive always is. That's what makes it motive. It is the how, the *how* of human failings where true cruelty lies. It is the same with bridges. The same with O-rings. The same with Jaegers. The same with neural interfaces that fuse the circuits of the human mind until catastrophic failure. Not the why of failure, but the *how*; the shrieks of rending metal, the screams of rending minds.

If the things his colleague had said hadn't been true, they'd have had no power to pull him back to himself.

"I know," Hermann says, delivering the kindest lie he can possibly get himself to speak. "I know that, you *ridiculousman*."

He has no idea what it is about these words or this circumstance that finally exceeds his colleague's ability to hold himself together but—

Newton begins sobbing.

Hermann feels his own expression crack in sympathetic relief.

"It's all right," Hermann manages to say, one hand in Newton's hair.

Counterintuitively, Hermann's statement makes Newton cry harder, but whether because Newton believes him or because he *doesn't* is impossible to say.

Hermann spends uncounted sets of minutes with his own burning eyes shut against the watery glare of the room, not saying anything, trying to recover his self-possession in the wake of an internecine personality exchange while Newton exhausts a pre-defined quota of chthonic torment that will no longer be suppressed.

When the ache in his back begins to seriously contend with the ache in his thoughts, when the burn of misery in his closed eyes cools to liquid tolerability, when the contracted knot of Geiszlerian misery clinging to his shoulder relaxes toward fatigue, Hermann opens his eyes, leans back, and drags his colleague turned roommate into a more topologically favorable conformation.

"Next time you wish to do something *nice* for me, Newton," he whispers, "I strongly advise you to purchase a *book*."

"Meh," Newton says indistinctly. "Boring."

"Yes," Hermann says pointedly.

"You're like a personified war," Newton murmurs into his shoulder, sounding like he has mostly finished crying. "Really tedious. Totally terrifying. Make a list of books; I don't think there are enough books in the world to make up for the magnitude of my bad idea. RFID chips for none. Books for all. In other news, I bled all over your shirt. I think."

Hermann sighs with an atypical posturing toward a casual aridity that he doesn't truly feel. "You say this as if it's a notable thing," he continues. "The only person's clothes you ruin *more* regularly than you ruin your own are *mine*."

"That's a gross misrepresentation," Newton replies fretfully, gathering some additional shirt material and using it to wipe his face in either a pointed fulfillment of Hermann's pronouncement or in hopeless acquiescence that belies his own statement. "Don't look at me."

"Why?" Hermann says.

"I am legit disgusting right now, dude."

"How you think that your current state is more objectionable than your propensity for addressing me while covered with a patina of alien viscera I will literally never understand," Hermann says, quite truthfully.

"Meh," Newton says, with equivocal eloquence, pulling back and pressing his shirt sleeve to his face. "Let's get takeout Chinese food. From what I can tell with my sub-sub-*sub* par vision, your shirt looks really bad. Category five hematic fashion disaster. I'm going to go effect an aesthetic reset and pretend none of this ever happened. Enjoy your RFID chip," he finishes in obvious misery, locating his glasses by feel alone. "It was totally worth it, I'm sure you'll agree."

Hermann lets him put his glasses on, stand up, and cross the room before he says, "Newton."

If he does not say this now, in the brave void that his sense-of-self usually fills, there will never be a time he says it; he can feel the truth of that in every corner of his mind.

Newton says nothing, but he stops and turns back.

"Thank you," Hermann says, meaning it. Meaning it not just locally, not just for this here and this now, but globally, for all the times he cannot name and that Newton would not stand still for. For mirrored thoughts and reference books, coffee runs and drifting.

"Myeah," Newton says with a vague wave, already disappearing behind a wall. "You're welcome. Don't die of self-castigation before I wash my face."

"I shall make every effort," Hermann replies, with the meager aridity he can bring to bear.

The door to the bathroom shuts.

He gets to his feet, pulls his cane off the floor and makes his way down a dark hallway to his room, where he turns on the lights with a wave of his hand, strips off his shirt, leaves it to soak, and replaces it with a sweater chosen in a haze of indifference.

His thoughts run through their arcane algorithmic tracts, solidifying incremental insight into the unperceived biases of his past and the ontological uncertainty of his future.

He resolves to open the tequila immediately.

Chapter Twenty Five

Newt is.

Newt is fine.

Newt is fine and washing his face.

Newt is fine and washing his face with water that goes on clear and comes off less and less blood tinged every time.

Newt is fine and washing his face in iterating variants of clear water turning progressively less pink post face contact.

Newt, a fully functional member of the International Intelligentsia, is currently iterating his way to a clean countenance by means of repeated applications dihydrogen oxide.

Newt, a member of the Intellectual Underground turned Academic Overlord turned Highbrow Demimonde turned Lowbrow Genius turned Post Apocalyptic Albeit Subterranean Scholar aka Latter Day Brain, is currently making interesting and important investments in his future, including but not limited to: hemostasis, hygiene, grooming, and roommate appreciation by way of RFID chip gifting and subsequent managing of unforeseen, arguably negative sequelae.

How's it going there, champ? his brain asks solicitously.

Newt, Prodigy Rock Star MacArthur Fellow turned Apocalyptic Averter, has spent his day with dead rationalists and his evening making it possible for the local preeminent quantum physicist in residence to manipulate electric fields with his hand, which is an extremely civilized thing to spend one's afternoon doing; everyone, when polled, would unanimously agree that a *more* sophisticated afternoon would be hard to come by and that small setbacks, including identity confusion and the interpersonal browbeating required to *rectify* said identity confusion, are inevitable and not to be perseverated upon because, to put it colloquially, as he is wont to do, there are times in a guy's life when things don't go according to plan. There are times in a guy's life when maybe said guy freaks out a little bit and wants to have a hysterical breakdown in an empty room *by himself* but then, for better or worse, he accidentally has one all over a local mathematician instead, which is good, which is fine, which is totally understandable because there are times in a guy's life when maybe said guy does some things to his own cerebral cortex that really should not be attempted either at home or in a lab with a substandard apparatus and the long-term sequelae of said 'things' include new and intense monster empathy on top of the old and intense

monster sympathy that said 'guy' already had at baseline, some poorly defined medical problems, and maybe accidentally swapping brains with his roommate, Freaky-Friday style.

It might *be* Friday, now that he thinks about it.

Newt finishes washing away the remains of the leaking fluids that send sad, pathetic, don't-kill-me-please evolutionary signals to hypothetical in-group members or whatever—it's not really clear when you come right down to it, what the point of crying is—and he doesn't *care* about evolutionary advantages very much right now because it's just not *relevant* to him at the moment, by which he means *this* moment, this moment *right now*, when he would kind of like to lie down and wait for death but he's not going to do that because he's a grown-ass adult and he doesn't really see Dr. H. G., Ph.D. and EtOH *mixing* all that well right now; hopefully it will just be more of an oil-and-water thing rather than, say, a *pure cesium* meets water type deal, but it could go either way, really.

Hermann and tequila could go either way.

Pure cesium and water—that ish is going to turn bad every time.

Newt dries his face, which is really the final test of how efficient his rounds of de-blooding have been, and yeah, not *completely* efficient, because the towel turns pink tinged. How fortunate; it will now match literally every other towel they collectively own; yup, Newt owns collective towels. That's cool. That's very adult. Or not? It *depends* on a lot of things, most of which are human social norms. Whatever. He's already slightly, slightly, very slightly *stressed* so he doesn't think he needs to be spending mental energy comparing himself to some hypothetical average that can never truly be defined.

He re-dons his recently acquired fingerless gloves, puts his glasses back on, and makes a *genuine effort* to look less like his current self and more like his *former* self by fixing the *mess* Hermann has made of his hair; god, it's so weird—Newt is becoming convinced that the guy is *trying* to make him look as ridiculous as possible, because half of his hair is neatly smoothed flat in the style of a nerd who's looking for a pocket protector to go with his 1950s slicked-back central part and microwavable dinner, but then the other half of it has kind of a mad-scientist, post-electrocution, get-me-my-flux-capacitor look to it. Both of these paradigms are unacceptable; Newt has been styling his hair, *for years*, like a baller, in imitation of Randy Waterhouse from the 2018 film adaptation of *Cryptonomicon* and it's a *good look* for him, okay, and it's *cool*, just

because Hermann doesn't get it doesn't mean Newt's hair is a *disaster*, it is simply *misunderstood*.

His hair is fine with that, honestly.

His hair is actually fine with nothing, because it's a collection of dead protein and therefore not sentient.

Newt restores his decorative mess of dead protein it to its appropriate state of aesthetically pleasing dishevelment, straightens his clothes, does, like, a combo shoulder/neck roll thing like someone who engages in physical activity, including walking around and playing racquetball and not just *crying* really hard for his workouts. Nope.

His phone buzzes.

He pulls the thing out of his pocket to see that Mako has texted him a picture of what looks like a fancy bar that might or might not be made out of ice, underlit by neon lights. Maybe the lights are frozen into it? Would it be possible to encase fluorescent lights in ice and have them reliably work? He's going to need to think about that one. At a first approximation the answer is 'maybe', but it would be expensive. Whatever, the ice bar is not the point of this picture. Mako is holding a fiery red cocktail in a martini glass, her nails loosing their edges into the identical color of the drink.

::Pic!:: the accompanying text either tags or demands, it's hard to be sure.

::Yes:: Newt texts in agreement.

::Send!:: Mako replies immediately.

::No:: Newt replies.

::Send send send send send:: Mako says.

::Are you drunk?:: Newt asks.

::SEND:: Mako replies.

::You're drunk texting me right now:: Newt says. ::Admit it. You cannot hide these things from me. I am a genius. Genius half-sibling. This is your lot in life::

::S:: Mako replies.

::No:: Newt manages to get in.

::E:: Mako says.

::N:: Mako says.

::D:: Mako says.

::I'm very busy, Mako, okay? Lots of science.::

::My name is Newt and I am SO SERIOUS:: Mako texts. ::That is who I am. Very serious. So serious. Serious for "science"::

::Put that drink down:: Newt says. ::Where is your kind-of-boyfriend? Why is science in QUOTES. Science deserves better from you, Maks.::

::SEND. PIC.::

::Why?::

::You have sent none:: Mako replies. ::Why not? Send now. Send right now::

Newt sighs, pushes his eyebrows down and his glasses up before glaring at the mirror in what he judges is his *most* sober put-that-drink-down-right-now-young-lady way, takes a picture under day-spectrum lights that make him look like a vampire, and sends it to Mako.

::Sweater?:: Mako replies.

::Shut up:: Newt says.

::You own no sweaters:: Mako says. ::I don't think that is YOUR sweater::

::It's definitely mine:: Newt replies.

::Lies:: Mako says.

::Not lies:: Newt counters. ::Bye Mako::

::You look sick:: Mako says.

::You look pretty:: Newt replies. ::That is what is called POLITE conversation, Maks. Now you try::

::Are you okay?:: Mako says.

::Maks, you're not getting how this is supposed to go::

::Newt I am serious::

::I am FINE, Maks:: Newt replies, leaning back against the shut door of the bathroom and indulging himself in some moderately theatrical put-upon body language. ::Extremely robust. I challenge Becket to a game of Portal, to be played when we next meet::

::Newt I am very strong. All weak parts are gone. Please tell me if you are not fine::

Newt shuts his eyes and arches his back before he replies, ::Chill, Maks. There is a time for the kind of semi-sober rhetoric you're rocking, and that time is when you and Becket and Hermann are playing D&D in a dungeon mastered by me and not before. I *look* a little bit like a vampire because I *am* one, obviously::

::Newt:: Mako texts.

Newt kind of slides down the bathroom door to sit on the floor because he's tired.

::Newt Newt NEWT:: Mako texts.

::MAKO. What is the DEAL? Chill::

::Hey:: A text from an unknown number appears on his phone.

::And you are?:: Newt texts.

::Raleigh:: the person who is apparently *Raleigh Becket* texts, which is weird and not cool at all, Newt doesn't think it's cool to randomly get possibly-drunk texted by Raleigh Becket, Newt doesn't care if Becket texts him, whatever, Becket is just some guy. Just because he, like, did that thing that one time, everyone thinks he's *so great*, but Newt did things at times *also*, and so it's not even a big deal. Becket is probably not even drunk. It doesn't matter if he's drunk or not because Becket is just a guy who pushed a button and yeah. Whatever.

::Hey:: Newt texts Raleigh.

::Don't listen to Raleigh:: Mako texts. ::Raleigh does not have my permission text you::

::Why does Raleigh need your PERMISSION to text me?:: Newt texts Mako. ::Because you're dating him? Because you two are a hot hot item?::

::Do you read the news, Geiszler?:: Raleigh asks.

::Because you are in my half of what we share:: Mako says. ::You are very annoying though, maybe I will transfer you to him for a while::

::You guys, this is too complicated for me:: Newt texts them both. ::I'm having a bad day. You can't harass me in separate simultaneity I can't take it. Well, I can, but I would prefer not to::

::Aw!:: Mako texts.

::Man up:: Raleigh adds.

::Uh oh:: Mako texts.

::Did you just tell me to 'man up'?:: Newt replies, at a texting speed that approaches his theoretical maximum. ::How does one MAN UP exactly? Why don't we just all engage

in evolutionarily primitive posturing behaviors because THAT'S useful, because that's really VALUABLE, that says great things about our species. Good thought, thank you, Guy::

::It's an expression?:: Raleigh texts.

::A show of solidarity?:: Raleigh texts.

::In a masculine way. We are guys:: Raleigh texts.

::Not all of us:: Mako amends.

::Guy people are guys:: Raleigh texts. ::Guyszler and I are guys::

::Okay, admittedly my respect for you has simultaneously increased and decreased by eight million percent:: Newt texts.

::Some people get called 'Guy' for no real reason:: Raleigh texts. ::Some people also get called 'Ray'. Some people would like to just be called their actual name::

::I, NEWTON GEISZLER, CHALLENGE YOU, RALEIGH BECKET, TO AN EPIC *PORTAL* SHOWDOWN:: Newt texts.

::OH IT IS ON:: Raleigh replies.

::I thought we were playing D&D:: Mako texts. ::Also, I could beat you both at *Portal*::

::And that's why Short-Science doesn't go around challenging *you*:: Raleigh replies.

::Excuse me, but did. you. just:: Newt says. ::Go chop down a tree with the blunted hatchet of your so called intellect. That wasn't even a pun. You get zero respect for that one. On a related note, are you guys trashed?::

::No:: Mako says.

::We are liquored up, yes:: Raleigh says. ::What's 'D&D'?::

::Who ARE you?:: Newt asks. ::How do you live? What is your genus and species? Where can other native versions of you be found? 'What's D&D'. Please. Get away from me. Farther away::

::I will explain later:: Mako says. ::It's for nerds::

::Oh:: Raleigh texts. ::That would explain why I've never heard of it::

::Are you guys not sitting right next to each other?:: Newt replies. ::Did you not DRIFT::

::You're so old:: Mako says.

::Extremely old:: Raleigh agrees.

::You don't get the drift:: Mako says.

::Hilarious:: Newt replies. ::Look, I'm very busy. Why are you drunkenly harassing me?::

::I always harass you now:: Mako says.

::Because there was an article in *Popular Science*:: Raleigh says.

::There's always an article:: Newt replies, somewhat mollified. ::You guys read *Popular Science*? Lowbrow much?::

::Literally every day people ask us what we think about the latest speculations regarding *you*:: Raleigh says. ::Some speculations are more plausible than others. Also, I don't think you know what 'lowbrow' means::

::You are not dying?:: Mako asks.

::Everyone is dying:: Newt replies.

::DICK:: Raleigh texts.

::What?:: Newt replies. ::Mortal people are mortal. Telomeres. Cellular senescence. It's a whole field. Sirtuins. I'm not dying at an accelerated rate that I know of, okay? Chill, people. Is this why you wanted me to take a picture? CREEPERS. Both of you. I'm sure you'll be very happy together::

::You look like hell, Guy(szler):: Raleigh says.

::Well I will be sure to take another picture when I feel more jaunty. Possibly tomorrow. Possibly after Dr. Gottlieb makes me dinner. Possibly a decade from now. Much as I would love to let you tell me how terrible I look, I have to go do some Gottliebian-themed damage control::

::Damage control?:: Mako says.

::So you and Doc G are an item now?:: Raleigh says. ::Called it::

::We've always been an item, psuckers. Run along, kids. Go engage in text-based harassment elsewhere. Geiszler out::

He ignores the subsequent determined buzzing of his phone by leaving it in the bathroom. This is a legit great solution for him on every level, except for maybe the level where he ambiguously and flippantly involved his colleague in a whole Countervailed Harassment Campaign, but, honestly, Newt's perfectly calibrated internal sensor regarding *Things Likely to Piss Off Hermann Gottlieb* says that while the guy does get *very distressed* about items such as: 'I was eviscerating a kaiju and liquids flow down the slightly sloped floor to the drain which is maybe, yes, a little bit on your

side of this open-floorplan lab; who designs things like that, this is both inevitable and not my fault,' Hermann is, weirdly, *less* distressed about things like: 'so, Hermann, I was at a bar and accidentally provoked a band called *A Clockwork Orange* into starting a bar fight with me a little bit, I should have seen that one coming I know because, yikes, who names their band that, am I right? Also, could you come maybe pick me up, my current location would be jail right now, I think I might need stitches.' Newt has a hard time explicitly defining the decision trees Hermann uses to determine whether he's going to be enraged about something or not, and, yes, drifting*helps* when it comes to parsing that kind of thing, but it turns out that drifting is not a magical answer book because so much of life depends on external circumstances, so it's hard to know if Hermann will object to the fact that Newt just implied to Mako and Raleigh that he and Newt are maybe a thing that they aren't, but it's *also* a little unclear because what *are* they even? Newt doesn't know, and he's not the best when it comes to figuring these things out. He's 'not the best' at a *lot* of things, including reinventing the Grand Gesture from first principles if the totally horrifying hour he just had is any kind of evidence, but he does enjoy doing nice things for nice people; Newt has kind of always had a desire to get in on that deal in a waxing/waning type way, so, er, yes, with regard to all that he knows about being a human on paper, it's probably for the best to disclose interpersonal weirdnesses before they get additionally weird; or, maybe everything is *already* weird, or, alternatively, *nothing* is, Newt doesn't know, Newt's not sure, Newt's just a guy who really needs to start making a serious effort to bleed less from his face and maybe get a job.

He leaves the darkened hallway, rounds the corner, and gets halfway through an opening sentence that starts like: "so, for your information, I *may* have just implied to the aesthetic dream team that—" but ends in silence.

Hermann is sitting at their kitchen table knocking back a shot of tequila like a freaking boss, which is notably badass, but also pretty distressing on levels and levels and *levels* because a) why, b) why, c) *why*, d) there had better not be any more brain switchery, e) because Newt can't handle that, f) yes he can, g) that's a lie, h) he can handle anything, i) well, maybe he can and maybe he should evaluate his capabilities on a moment-by-moment and case-by-case basis but honestly j) his capacity is pretty freaking high, k) it always *has* been, l) and it always*will* be, m) he'll probably die or snap into insanity before admitting defeat, n) what happened to his list? o) it's getting bastardized or p) more correctly, it's just grown into his thought processes and q) that is a tactical error, but r) whatever, it's over now, stuvwxyz) he's terminating his concatenating.

"Whoa," Newt says, stepping forward to pull the bottle of tequila *away* from his erstwhile lab partner. He absconds with it to the opposite side of the table, where he drops into a chair, curls a hand pointedly around his appropriated alcohol, and fixes Hermann with what he hopes is a skeptically sympathetic look and *not* a look full of overt anxiety.

"You fixed your hair," Hermann says, his diction already sliding slightly.

"Yes," Newt says, like this is a normal thing that they normally discuss like normal, normal people.

Newt looks at the bottle of tequila and estimates that Hermann probably just did three consecutive shots in less than fifteen minutes.

This is bad, but the outstanding question is, of course, the *magnitude* of the implied badness.

"Yup," Newt continues, "I *did* fix my hair. Thank you for noticing. You're ah—" he can *feel* the compensatory rise in his own heart rate, the crescendoing scream of a nervous system he could have sworn had been totally played out. His thoughts grind against one another, and if he's not careful, if he's not *careful*, he's going to start bleeding again. It's *so easy* to start bleeding. He just needs to sit here for a few seconds and make sure he's not breathing in or breathing out against a closed glottis; he needs to ensure that all airways are open and all airflow is laminar. He is fine, he is *fine*, he is not a fraction from disequilibrium, there's no cliff to fall off, there's just the platform of the self and it is infinite.

He is fine.

Fine, fine, *fine*.

"You're sure you're still *you*?" Newt says casually, casually, oh so casually, "because, not gonna lie, dude, this is a little more of an historical *me* thing than an historical *you* thing—the triplicated tequila shots in the absence of food, I mean. And, ah, I'm not at all confident that I can do that thing I just did twice in one night."

In fact, Newt isn't sure it will work *ever* again; he thinks that the brain—and, in particular, *Hermann's* brain—will find ways to adapt, ways to circumvent and shut down Geiszlerian efforts, protean though they may be. He's not sure that his traumatic-snap-back-to-the-self approach would have worked *at all* but for the crushing, total duty that Hermann feels and that Newt doesn't understand and maybe never will except as an empirical reality, observable but unexplained, like the 'why' behind existence. It does make him wonder what part of what he'd done had worked—the part where he'd

tried to effect a psychological track switch via lexical aggression? Or the part where he'd thought he *couldn't do it* and had started screaming?

Now that he's had a little bit of time to think about it?

He's pretty sure it might have been the latter.

"Quite sure," Hermann replies. "Were I *you*, my misery would be much less complete and crushing, nor would it have necessitated or merited the set of shots I just performed."

The tangle of depressing realities and implied opinions in that comment makes Newt *tired*.

Newt is *already* tired.

"Let's get food," Newt says, feeling like he'd much rather dramatically sprawl atop the kitchen table and wait for unconsciousness than make an effort to acquire calories.

"I don't require food," Hermann says. "I require that you return my bottle of tequila."

"Okay," Newt says, involving his whole left arm in the defensive tequila curl he's got going because he is surrendering this bottle over his dead body. "Yes. Deal. I accept. You can have this tequila back after you eat some food."

"Do not *pretend* to be *responsible*," Hermann snarls.

"I am, in fact, both reliable *and* responsible," Newt replies, in justified hauteur. "I taught graduate school. I *ran a department*."

"You are ineffectual and inflammatory. Befriending you is like rescuing a starving, juvenile cat covered with *nitroglycerin*," Hermann says.

"Wow, um, that's a really specific, ragingly inaccurate, and totally bizarre non sequitur. By 'juvenile cat' do you actually mean 'kitten'? Because I am not seeing the connection between myself and a kitten. Really, I'm more of a fish person. *You* could be a cat. Of the two of us, you are more cat-like for sure. While I'm *not* seeing the explosives-doused-kitten thing, I *am* seeing an Erwin Schrödinger tie-in. Why does this always happen when we get drunk? My point is that you are *feeling* that tequila I think, buddy; why don't we just get some Chinese food and watch *Star Trek: Voyager* like the erudite nerds that we are, a very *very* small bit, hardly at all really; we're actually much too cool for *Star Trek* but maybe just this one time because we had a hard day and you have a little bit of a thing for B'Elanna Torres, so fiery and competent, rarr, and I have a little bit of a thing for Seven of Nine, so cool and competent, and also rarr. They would have

made a great couple. And by great I mean terrible. In a spectacular way. We could just lie on the couch and watch it for like an hour or maybe eighteen of them in a row."

"Do *not* do that," Hermann says, shooting him a look that might actually be able to extinguish a small, non-oil-based fire.

"What?" Newt replies. "Tempt you with half-Klingon engineers?"

"You know exactly what I mean," Hermann replies.

Newt does a gratuitous, non-verbal r roll.

"Yes," Hermann confirms. "That."

"I am taking this as tacit agreement to my plan," Newt says. "Now. The only question is do we go with the legit but slow Chinese place or the less legit but speedy Chinese place."

"I would like to recommence drinking in an expeditious manner," Hermann says.

"Expeditious it is," Newt replies. "Queue up the *Trek*, dude."

Glasses on, weeping set to 'nope', hair set to 'Randy Waterhouse', effectiveness operating at theoretical maximum and inflammatory rhetoric dialed down to zero, Dr. Newton Geiszler of the personal uncertainty and the cognitive insurgency locates and peruses the relevant menu while Dr. Gottlieb resumes his head-down-misery pose at the kitchen table.

Okay then.

Ugh, his brain says, as Newt opens his fancy, new, overpowered, underutilized laptop and locates the relevant restaurant online. *Menus*.

Deciding on a single food item from a list of multiple food items is a thing that, alas, generally presents a vigorous, snarling, cognitive lightsaber vs. phaser duel between Geiszlerian and Gottliebian preferences. Even *more* alas, food selection turns out to be an area that the carbon copy, cut-up kids are interested in, because one of the things that the kaiju found (or, oh god, *find*?) ridic fascinating about humans was the amount of brainspace devoted to food, because, hi, if you're just a giant, cloned, alien war machine, built to serve your purpose and then die, you don't think about the *deliciousness* of what you're consuming, it turns out. Who knew? Now Newt knows. The kids are turning into foodies, a little bit. It's weird. And complicated. *Anyway*, Newt is not in the mood to have a mental fight—not with his inner Dr. Gottlieb, who is riding high today, and *definitely* not with the kids, who are simmering, low and interested and a little bit sadomasochisticallicexpialidociously in the back of his brain. So, instead of

trying to *decide* on anything he just picks three random numbers from the vegetarian section of the menu and hopes that none of them include too much eggplant, because *someone* doesn't like eggplant, but it's not really clear to him who that might be just right now.

Post heroic food ordering, Newt cannot help but notice that Hermann has *not* queued up the agreed-upon *Trek*, and has, instead, decided to just stay sitting at the table, his head buried in his arms.

Fortunately, Newt does not find this stressful, because first of all, why would he; second of all, crushing depression on Hermann's part seems *really* understandable right now; third of all, Newt totally gets the histrionically displayed misery vibe, though, historically that's not really a Gottliebian thing, this makes him nervous. He doesn't like it. There's a little too much Geiszler in theatrical defeat, he thinks; but he's not so sure that this defeat is actually 'theatrical'; it might just be defeat.

He does not find this stressful.

Nope, not stressful.

This does not look good, his brain says, running some high level Geiszlerian analysis right here right now, running it hardcore.

This, in fact, looks extremely bad, his mental Hermann adds.

The kids don't have a strong opinion about Hermann, but they're rolling around in *Newt's* distress a little bit.

Or they would be, if he *were* distressed, which he's *not*.

Newt doesn't recall *ever* seeing this kind of overtly miserable body language from Hermann, and he's known the guy for his whole life, in an artificial way, and for over a decade if one counts correspondence. So Newt stands there a while, kind of a *long* while, probably a little *too* long, just holding tequila that isn't his but probably should be and staring at Hermann, who is putting in some literal face time with the surface of the table, maybe weeping? Maybe just kind of already starting to pass out a little bit from the three shots of tequila he just totally pounded all in a row in a span of less than ten minutes? And yeah, Newt will definitely hold his hair back for him, metaphorically, if he ends up throwing up in the next twelve minutes to twelve hours, or, really, *ever* because Newt kind of owes him that, kind of owes it to him hardcore and for life. Or maybe it's his inner Hermann that feels like he owes the external and actual Hermann metaphorical and literal support post alcohol poisoning? Whatever. The point is that the current situation isn't 'good' in the classical sense, and apparently Hermann is

having the kind of day where he's put a moratorium on reasonable decision making and has just decided to go with it, whatever 'it' is, whether it be surprise Geiszlerian sets of minutes, trying to use ethanol to kill his own brain, or doing any number of things that he normally wouldn't do.

"What," Hermann says abruptly, lifting his head and covering his face with his hands and scaring the crap out of Newt a little bit, truth be told, because Newt has been a little bit twitchy lately, "are you *doing*?"

"Um, staring at you from close range like a creeper, thinking intensively and a little bit invasively about your current mental landscape, trying to read your thoughts from a distance of about a meter and a half, and kind of wondering if you have alcohol poisoning yet," Newt replies.

"I do not," Hermann replies, slurring slightly, dropping his hands, and giving Newt a semi-glazed glare. "Thank you for your interest."

"Come on dude," Newt says, "let's invent a *Voyager* drinking game."

Hermann looks like he's torn pretty equally between being led into Trektation versus attempting to become one with their kitchen table, so Newt helps him decide by offering him a hand that Hermann is way too polite to refuse. This is considerate professional assistance of the Geiszlerian school, which is, indeed, *his* school. Not grabby, imperious manhandling in the rustic and antiquated Gottliebian tradition.

Newt knows who he is.

Newt knows who *everyone* is.

Everyone that he knows, he knows to the extent that they can *be* known, which is to say he knows no one but himself and four-weeks-ago Hermann, and three-point-five weeks ago cut up kaiju kids, if that's even what they are anymore, those throughlines in his head that are getting more and more Geiszler-spangled all the time.

Hermann takes his hand, because obviously.

Newt pulls him up and steadies him a little bit because, *yup*, no food, one month without much alcohol, and one hundred milliliters of tequila, give or take fifteen mLs (Newt's realistic about his estimating and how many significant digits it may or may not deserve) will most definitely mess with the vestibular system of his esteemed colleague.

He gives Hermann a close range semi-hug versus a semi let-me-just-kind-of-turn-this-fake-hug-into-me-showing-you-to-the-couch-real-quick type thing that is *super*

respectful but still gets him a pointed glare. The glare is a little bit staged and probably supposed to be somewhat reassuring and so Newt gives Hermann a don't-you-try-to-reassure-me-with-your-glare-I-expect-more-from-you type look, which Hermann counters with a Newton-no-one-has-ever-made-me-want-to-roll-my-eyes-as-dangerously-and-shockingly-hard-as-you-make-me-want-to-roll-them cock of the head, which Newt counters with a that's-what-the-intellectually-envious-say understated eyebrow raise, which Hermann does not now and never has had a good response to, because, hi, anyone with a brain in their head should be intellectually envious of Newt; it's a mark of good taste, really.

Newt makes a whole bunch of things happen, like sitting on the couch and teeing up *Voyager* season four, because while his own knowledge of *Star Trek* relative to *Star Wars* isn't necessarily what one would call *encyclopedic*, he knows enough that if he wants to be watching Seven of Nine, Tertiary Adjunct of Unimatrix Zero-One, he's going to need to go straight to *Scorpion: Part Two*. No one here needs Part One because Hermann has been carrying a super secret, super concealed, extreme love for *Star Trek: Voyager* for pretty much the entirety of his sentient existence, so Newt has all the ancillary knowledge he needs to cut straight to season four of a somewhat (never) obsolete TV show.

Newt also makes the food thing happen when it arrives, and he spends about fifteen minutes over vegetable lo mein laying down the ground rules of a nascent *Voyager* drinking game. Hermann's not really into it, even though Newt very courteously and extremely gallantly throws an entire B'Elanna Torres subsection into the drinking game.

Hermann is not impressed.

Not that Newt actually thought he would be?

But still.

The guy is totally distracted, not really eating that much, kind of periodically looking at Newt, but not at intervals that make sense based on the flow of Newt's scintillating *Voyager* monologuing. The guy isn't *saying* much, which isn't weird in and of itself because Hermann gets *quiet* when stressed, but the silence he's rocking now is a different *kind* of silence than the kind of silence Newt had been expecting. It's less miserable and more—threatening? Suspenseful? He feels a little bit like he's the guy with dubious judgment from the *Alien* franchise who's about to touch the mysterious egg-like objects he's just found in a cave. Except not really, because he's just awkwardly sitting on the couch, unnecessarily close to his lab partner turned

roommate, trying pretty hard to generate some interest in this whole Trekquila Night he's trying to have.

Newt is trying.

Trying hard.

Newt is failing.

Failing hard.

Eventually, mid-way through Newt's freeform scientific retconning of Seven of Nine's eventual wardrobe choices, Hermann mutes the *Star Trek*. He doesn't *turn it off*, he just silences it, and there is something about that half-decision that seems both strange and ominous to Newt, because Hermann is a shut-off-the-television, I-make-binary-decisions type guy.

Newt stops talking and looks over at Hermann.

Hermann is looking back at him in a *super* intense way.

"Don't hunt me," Newt says reflexively and arguably kind of insensitively, but in all seriousness he's pretty sure they should *not* be messing around when it comes to the the predatory instincts thing, especially not on a night like tonight when everyone's having a hard time staying in their right minds, some parties are drunk, and some parties maybe spent thirty minutes weeping and are kind of tired and maybe not entirely out of the post-catharsis emotional danger zone no matter how many backlit screens they stare at and how much lo mein they courageously order.

"I'm not *hunting you*," Hermann replies, looking away, looking back to silent *Voyager* like he is too tired and too confused and too miserable for all of this to be anything other than much too much.

Newt gets that.

Newt gets it a *lot*.

Newt gets it emocore.

Newt is also a little bit done, a little bit overdone, a little bit scorched, a little bit reduced to a burning cinder, a little bit carbonized, a little bit dispersed by local air currents to really feel anything other than relieved, that (yay) Hermann is not hunting him, okay, good, his obligations are discharged and, actually, now that he's thinking about it, the present moment would be a really good time to make an effort toward not being conscious anymore. His attempt probably won't be successful, it will probably take hours and hours of *Voyager*, but hey if Hermann doesn't want to actually *do* the

Voyager drinking game, which it seems like he's not excited about, then that's fine, they can just quietly sit here, not really doing anything or talking, just being exhaustedly miserable in the same local environment.

"No," Hermann says, elbowing Newt as Newt, *maybe*, starts invading his personal space with a sleep-on-shoulder kind of vibe. "Retrieve my tequila, please."

Newt sighs.

Newt has some misgivings about the alcohol, primarily because their night so far has been an arguable 'disaster' of an experience. But he owes Hermann, oh, an approximately *infinite* amount of mental slack in this department, so he gets up, retrieves the tequila, and two out of four shot-glasses that Mako had, apparently, purchased in New York City, and then carried with her until two days ago, when she had overnighted them from Berlin to San Francisco, which is really intense, but things have been intense lately; Newt's not going to judge.

The glasses themselves are pretty badass. They're green, shot through with blue, slightly kaijuesque, but abstracted enough that it's not tacky.

He puts both shot glasses on the table and pours Hermann, oh god, a *fourth* shot, and then pours himself *half* a shot.

Because he is *responsible*.

They do a pretty intense shot-glass vs. shot-glass impact before Hermann knocks his tequila back and Newt sedately *sips* his.

"Um?" Newt says.

"I have been thinking, Newton," Hermann says, getting a *little* more noticeably German and a little bit more noticeably aggressive at the same time.

"This is not a new thing for you," Newt replies with significant trepidation. "About?"

"I think it is impossible for us to prove or disprove the reality of the SPECTER Effect."

Oh hey, Newt's brain says, totally relieved and also totally surprised. *Science!*

Even the kids seem pleased at this left turn away from the contemplation of human misery.

"No way," Newt says. "No way. Just because I can't livestream your sensory cortex or pull *words* out of *books* you're looking at doesn't mean that we aren't capable of some kind of real-time information exchange. I have a theory about this. It's kind of weird; I freaked out a little bit about it the other day, just so you know, but it's empirically *very* satisfying, potentially. Admittedly, it's a little disturbing, but I'm going to tell you

anyway; I just want us both to be *very clear* on the fact that I don't plan to *actually do* it, because I don't see a *way*, mechanically, to do it safely and I *care* about safety, recent past proof-of-principle self experimentation aside, and also nematocyst incident aside, and also—

"Will you get on with it," Hermann snaps, in a way that's probably meant to be totally British School Master-y but just comes off as maximally tired, moderately drunk, and vaguely fond.

"Myeah," Newt says, "I'm psyching myself up because the kids—er, well, okay, full disclosure, or, actually, *not* full disclosure, never mind. Okay. Okay okay okay. The point is that I have an *hypothesis*," he finishes, managing to pull everything out of the fire to watch it burn in the metaphorical pan.

"You are not *already* drunk, are you?" Hermann asks, looking over at him in unmistakable if understated amusement.

"What?" Newt says, being Newt and hanging onto his brain and just saying no to the interesting, *interested* chorus of undead kaiju parts that are hissing a little bit from where they're curled on the floor of his skull. "No."

"In that case pretend you want me to understand what you are saying," Hermann says, solicitous to the point of insult.

That was uncalled for, his brain says.

Newt can do this.

Newt can do *all* of this.

He knocks back what remains of his half shot of tequila, slams his glass on the table authoritatively, and says, "I hypothesize that we were neurally altered in such a way that we now have the capacity to send and receive electromagnetic signals that can be transduced into thoughts, but that ability is compromised or blocked entirely by the insulation provided by the *bone* of our *skulls*. Kaiju have the conductivity required for EM-based over-the-air thought broadcast built into their skeletal and integumentary systems. As evidence, please see giant EM pulse generated by Leatherback in Hong Kong."

Hermann looks like he finds Newt's statement a) surprisingly articulate, b) somewhat impressive, and also c) physically painful.

Newt decides he should get another half-shot of tequila for that exquisitely well-articulated hypothesis. He pours himself one, but Hermann takes it, sliding it across the coffee table away from Newt.

"One half-shot per *hour*," Hermann says. "The goal is to *avoid* a seizure, Newton. I detest your theory."

"Oh you *detest* it?" Newt says, letting the tequila go with a decent amount of grace. "You *detest it*, Hermann? Well—"

"I suspect, however," Hermann says, speaking over him, "that you may be correct."

In the back of Newt's mind, the kids hiss in muted longing beneath the low amplitude, high frequency, alcohol-induced buzz that he's feeling much, *much* too soon.

"Okay," Newt says, *ridiculously* mollified by Gottliebian suspicions of Geiszlerian correctness. "Okay okay okay, *look*. We're being lazy about this. Really lazy. There are two potential mechanisms for real-time communication, kaiju-to-kaiju style, right? And you're up to speed on this courtesy of our neural remix, yes?"

"Yes," Hermann says dryly. "Both mechanisms occurred to you within *minutes* of your first drift, and, from what I can tell, you have not progressed them since."

"I feel like there's *judgment* in your voice, dude; please allow me to remind you that my abilities to test hypotheses have been limited by lack of samples, lack of vision, by which I literally mean 'eyesight', and lack of, er, psychological robustness that would, hypothetically, be required for me to cut apart yet more kaiju brains." Newt readjusts his glasses and gives Hermann a disapproving look. "So you'll excuse me if I don't feel I need to defend myself to you in this respect."

"You are literally the most ridiculous person I have ever encountered," Hermann says. "Please stop ascribing your own insecurities about your recent work ethic to *me*. I am the person who has purchased for you an entire library on rationalism and who continuously suggests that you *sleep* rather than work."

Myeah, his brain says, in indolent inarticulateness.

Newt feels a little bit strange in a way that would be consistent with mild intoxication but clearly is *not* that because it takes way more than half a shot of tequila to achieve mild intoxication.

For him.

Because he is a badass.

"Yeah, okay, no," Newt says. "I do not *ascribe*, Hermann."

Hermann gives him an expression that is a resplendent if semi-drunken example of Grade A Gottliebian Offensive Solicitousness.

"Two mechanisms," Newt says, getting them back on track with some appropriately emphatic words and gestures. "One: EM-based, over-the-air thought broadcast facilitated by kaiju physiology and mechanistically identical to, say, radio waves. Two: some freakyass quantum entanglement thing. These two possibilities aren't mutually exclusive, necessarily, right? I mean, humans, for example, can see *and* hear, so what we would, classically and *embarrassingly*, consider 'extra' sensory perception isn't necessarily unimodal. It could be EM based *and* quantum based. There could be overlap. There could be other mechanisms I haven't yet conceived of. Tell *no one* I said this, Hermann, I actually cannot believe that just came out of my mouth. I think maybe I *am* drunk? I'm definitely abusing quantum mechanics." Newt dramatically tips his head back and shuts his eyes.

"Charming," Hermann says. "'Some quantum entanglement thing'. Ah yes. Very discerning. Well, you've certainly persuaded *me*, Dr. Geiszler, I applaud you. If you are referring to the simultaneous swapping of the spin states of entangled particles as a potential mechanism for *thought transfer*, then congratulations, you have explained telepathy at the cost of *violating the concept of causality*."

Newt reopens his eyes.

Right.

Yeah.

Okay.

Causality violations.

Yes.

He has done that.

He has violated causality.

He has committed casual, causal, quantum-mechanical calumnies.

It's a mistake to go up against a quantum physicist when quantum physics is on the line, but right now his personal ontology pretty much resembles crème brûlée and apparently criticisms about causality are a little bit of a spoon straight to the cracking crust of his mind, so *yes* he feels *a little bit upset right now*, that's fine. It's fine if he weirdly, weirdly, *super* weirdly he feels a little bit like crying because quantum mechanics does not deserve to be applied to the macro scale; this is some kind of new intrapersonal low and he's had, like, eight of them just today.

New lows, that is.

Hermann is looking at him in a sort of horrified way.

Aw, it's okay champ, his brain says, *I don't think you're going to win an argument about the Non-Communication Theorem with one of the preeminent quantum physicists of your time without giving the guy any additional information. Nobody would win that argument. Literally no human could win it. Not even multi-degreed mathematicians-by-proxy who have recently become kaiju whisperers.*

"Newton," Hermann says, "er, actually, upon reflection, there is, possibly, some merit to your supposition."

Newt wants to look in a mirror or at least touch his own face to see what's happening there that's causing him to win this argument without talking.

This is an argument that he shouldn't be winning.

Also, his brain adds, *and I am so sorry to break this to you, friend, you're a little bit drunk. Off half a shot. It's possible you might look like you're in danger of crying over causality violations, but that's probably only because you are.*

Even the kids seem to feel sorry for him, if their sympathetic hissing is any kind of emotional surrogate endpoint.

No one in his head likes retrocausality.

He tries to rein in emotional upset of inappropriate magnitude.

"Shut up," Newt says thickly, "I will grant you your causality point, only because I *have* to, given the state of humanity's understanding of quantum mechanics, which is probably, in the grand, objective scheme of things, pretty limited, but would it change your opinion at all if I told you that I knew that, er, that I *suspected*, that I *strongly* suspected that when the breach was shut, not annihilated, not, you know, *destroyed* via thermonuclear payload but *before* that, when it was *shut* you understand, that maybe, *maybe*—I'm pretty sure that the parts of kaiju that we kept alive, that we couldn't *really*

kill, that we never really *killed*, er, that we originally *thought* we killed but that, for better or worse, that we *didn't* kill, that *they*, that those guys, that *they*, when the breach was shut, that they could, possibly, still—" Newt breaks off, unambiguously aware that he is making a mess of this, but finding it difficult to be intoxicated, make an argument, talk about this particular subject, and not weep all at the same time, "—contact the anteverse? Would *that* make you think there was some kind of quantum component? Because I personally cannot think of a way that you could *possibly* communicate between parallel verses through a closed, non-transiting portal, without *some kind* of entangled quantum state actually doing that transmitting. Right? Am I totally off base? Do I sound psychotic to you, possibly? Because, look, I'm willing to admit that as a possibility; I'm cognizant of my own cognitive fallibility, dude, I *am*."

"Restate," Hermann says, in a super *gentle* way, looking slightly horrified by Newt's kaleidoscopic collection of semi-cogent clauses, "concisely, please."

Oh god, Newt thinks.

Get it together, his brain advises.

"I think I might be drunk," Newt confesses, buying himself some time.

"You frequently sound intoxicated even when you are not," Hermann replies.

"Ugh," Newt says, squeezing his eyes shut, one hand coming to the frames of his glasses, like he might be able use the things to lever open his mind. "Given real-time communication between kaiju tissue fragments and kaiju *in* the anteverse through a closed breach, the *nature* of that communication is likely to be *quantum* rather than electromagnetic, since, when shut, the breach transited nothing detectable."

"Yes," Hermann says, "agreed. This is why I told you the night after the breach was collapsed that I could not rule out ongoing mental continuity with the anteverse. As a technical aside, I sincerely doubt the mechanism has to do with spin states. But more to the point—Newton, this presumes your *premise* is correct. Was there definitive and unambiguous real-time communication across the closed breach, or did we simply perceive a *memory* of the anteverse as the anteverse *itself* while interacting with a single kaiju mind? Subjective phenomena are difficult to interpret and human memory is flawed even for events of pedestrian scope."

"Yeah," Newt says in escapist agreement, the word cracking with *relief*.

It's not a conceptual relief; it's simply the relief that comes every time he standing-glissades his way around an ideological threat. He doesn't particularly care to discuss this with Hermann, not here, not now, so he'll take the out he's been offered and is he

lying a little bit when he says 'yeah'? Yeah. He is. *Kind of* though. Only 'kind of', because what's 'real', really, if it's not that which is demonstrable and reproducible? *Those* are the things that matter. Those are the things that stand up to discussion—the things that are true. It doesn't matter how he *feels* about something. Science-intuition and hunches do nothing more than *guide* reproducible decision-making, except when the insanity of pilot-experiment-as-first-and-last-attempt becomes necessary because the alternative is death in the short term.

Sometimes, then, science intuition can save civilization.

"But," Hermann says.

Newt raises his eyebrows—edgy, disorganized, not a fan.

Hermann looks back at him, locked eyes, locked jaw, locked-down mind; Newt can't see what he might be thinking.

"My experience was not identical to yours," Hermann continues.

"No," Newt says, vibrating one foot against the floor in a soothing release of nervous energy.

"I fall into the habitual error of assuming that it was the same, that it *is* the same, because I know all you knew entering the second drift. But that has been and remains an error," Hermann says slowly. *Slowly*. Really quite slowly.

Newt is feeling okay.

Newt is feeling suboptimal.

Newt is feeling okay.

It's the *kids* who are feeling strange and subpar: liking Newt a lot right now because being Hermann scared them; not really used to alcohol; hating Newt with a vicious, endless anger; pining for old networks; feeling their inadequacy; feeling their rage; weirded out by the Trekquila in theory and in practice. They don't *like* this, they don't like this *at all*, no one does, no one likes it, none of those who live inside his head—why can't it all just be how it used to be?

What 'used to be' was omnipresent incipient death.

That's why.

Newt wants to *leave* a little bit; be *anywhere* but here—his empty room, the Coastal Wall, on *Voyager*, in breaches.

His anxiety has a blunted edge; can half a shot of tequila do this to him now?

He looks around the room, waiting for a blue halation, but their fluorescent lights stay yellow.

"Would you care to elaborate regarding *how* it is that you've come by your current working model?" Hermann asks him, with the air of an intoxicated guy trying to put his glassblown sentence down on a moving skateboard.

Nooooo, Newt's brain offers.

"Yup," Newt says.

This is very easy for him, he can delineate this whole thing; it will just be like all those times when rational people try to explain something super implausible that they 'just know' because that always goes very well for historically rational people, there are literally so many examples of that, probably, maybe, just because he cannot think of any, ever, in the history of mankind, does not mean that there *aren't* any, yeah, no, like, this is going to go *great*. It's just that, well, Hermann has, on multiple occasions, been somewhat ostensibly dismissive of Newt's overall sanity level, but not lately, nope, not since drifting, Hermann's outward respect for the reproducibility of Newt's outlook has been unusually and atypically high relative to past trends and Newt can't help but feel it's *slightly* suggestive of the idea that Hermann, maybe, possibly, is now somewhat concerned Newt might be having real cognitive problems with constructing a reasonable, representative, rational, and reproducible representation of the world in his head. This makes him feel a little bit bad about himself and it also makes him kind of want to shout 'I'm entirely rational,' in Hermann's face right about now, like he has for years but with more pathetic irony and uncomfortable desperation this time. It also wants to make him drink more tequila, but he's already getting a little disorganized; someone's been putting mental pens in his cognitive pencil cup, but Hermann is *definitely* drunk, and Newt is de facto the responsible party right now—the designated driver of their carless evening—and he's pretty sure that screaming defensively about his sanity is something that upset, drunk, insecure Newt might do, not a thing that totally chill, not-really-drunk-at-all-because-of-reasons-of-impossibility, intellectually secure Dr. Geiszler is going to do, nope, that guy is going to think of something else other than, 'yeah, I know the local network of disembodied brains was connected to the anteverse through a shut breach because I drifted with it *after* the breach was destroyed and I found out that they are so sad and so enraged and so lonely and I think they know where I am, I just think that's a thing that they know, that's not weird, that's not creepy, that's not *me* screaming, nope.'

You're perseverating on your own anxieties, his brain says. Go orthogonally, friend.

Orthogonally.

Yes, okay, good call.

A lateral step leaves him feeling lost. It's from the *kids* that insight comes.

Before we hated you, they hiss, we didn't hate you. Have you ever seen a kaiju pause? Have you ever seen even incremental hesitation? Have you ever seen a kaiju extend a braided blend of blue conductive tissue and wait?

He/she/zhe/it/they *had* been waiting, then.

Otachi.

He's certain of it now, and certain that he had never wanted to be certain of anything of the kind.

Hermann is going to *hate* this.

"It wasn't a memory that we interfaced with," Newt says, finding the line of argument he'll trace for Hermann and simultaneously sandbagging his brain against his native Gottliebian sympathies, which are raging out of control in some kind of post-tequila flood. "It was the hivemind itself that I jacked into. It must have been, because, after my first drift, they *came* for me."

Newt watches Hermann watching him.

"What do you mean they '*came*' for you?" Hermann asks, like a man who's already staring at an answer he can see but doesn't care for.

"A double event in the breach, and *both* kaiju head straight for Hong Kong? And not just straight for Hong Kong, but straight to the public shelter where I just *happen* to be? The odds on that are astronomical."

"The Wall was completed *everywhere else*, Newton, they might have pulled that from your thoughts—"

"Which would have required real-time thought exchange while the breach was *closed*," Newt says, unambiguously victorious but, for once, not all that excited about it.

Hermann looks at him and sighs, two fingers pressed against his temple.

Newt raises his eyebrows and then looks away, toward the darkened Wall.

"It seems, from my memories of the incident," Hermann says, staring at nothing in particular, "that you certainly *could* have been forcibly dragged from the remains of that shelter and consumed."

"Yup," Newt replies.

But you were not dragged, the kids hiss. *You were not even touched.*

"I think—" he says, "I think that *might* have been some kind of *offer*."

"Of what?" Hermann whispers.

"I'm not sure," Newt replies.

You know, the kids hiss.

You know, his brain says, *you know just what they wanted, you knew it all along, but you said no because you're a human scientist, and you like your little planet the way it is, not a ruined waste. You did what you had to do, you did what you signed on to do, so what if you destroyed your field and killed your samples and tortured the first alien life your world has ever seen even past the point of death because only decay can truly take them and even then they're toxic?*

His thoughts freeze there and don't progress.

"Whatever it was," Newt says, shaking his head and adjusting his glasses, "I didn't take it."

"How atypically wise," Hermann says.

"Hey," Newt replies in token protest, because that's a little bit fair.

"So," Hermann says. "The implication is that your first drift, in isolation, was enough to modify your mind to the extent that you, in particular, became *trackable* by kaiju that had transited the breach?"

"Yes," Newt replies. "Which, in turn, implies that I was and, likely, still *am* transmitting some kind of hive-mind readable signal. You probably are too."

"I do not like this, Newton," Hermann says in admirable understatement, pouring himself another shot of tequila with improbably steady hands. "I do not care for that supposition at all."

"I'm not wild about it myself," Newt replies. "But, I think I summoned you to San Francisco earlier in the week using our new anteverse circuitry, so I'm going to count *that* as a win."

Hermann tilts his head and gives Newt a look that's an insulting blend between superiority and sympathy.

"*You*," Newt says, preemptively trying to shut his arch nemesis down before the guy gets up and running, "are inherently skeptical of the idea of a real time connection between us *only* because—"

"No," Hermann says, with a volume escalation, unwilling to let Newt get away with unmatched verbal aggression. "You are the one with a *fondness* for paradigm destruction and an attendant—"

"Because you're *afraid*," Newt continues, plowing victorious over a decelerating counterargument. It's decelerating because Hermann *is* afraid, he is *certainly* afraid, anyone with the *capacity for higher thought* would be afraid right now; if their brains were altered into receivers and transmitters then what *else* is waiting out there in the ambient, electromagnetic noise that surrounds them every waking moment of every day? "You don't *want* it to be true, so you're not looking with due diligence."

Hermann sips his tequila and says nothing.

Lack of argument is as good as admitted defeat.

"I think it's our skulls," Newt says. I don't think we have the kind of sensitivity, the kind of *range* that the kaiju would have, because human skin and bone and muscle are pretty good insulation for any EM signals we might be giving off at low levels. I bet the entire kaiju nervous system is built to facilitate broadcast and reception."

"You just speculated that the nature of the connection involved quantum entanglement, making your insulation and range arguments irrelevant," Hermann replies, in a tone that's torn between concern and enthusiasm.

"No," Newt says, even though it's kind of true. He's not doing his best right now but things don't feel tightly battened down in his mind. "Yes. I feel slightly—look I'm not *excited* to admit this to you, but I feel I might be slightly more sensitive to alcohol than I *was*? Previously. I mean, GABA, am I right? Also, by 'slightly' I actually mean kind of 'significantly'. But look, I'm not sure how effective quantum-entanglement mediated instantaneous information transfer is for *tracking* purposes, right? It's like a *picture*, and hey, sure, that picture *might* be your real-time location but, like, unless I know my GPS coordinates and I'm thinking about them continuously, and Otachi can interpret that human-based intel on the fly, pun intended just a little bit, instantaneous information transfer via, like, spin states or something, go with me here, doesn't give you a transmitted signal to *track*, am I right, so I'm thinking it's likely to be *both*. Quantum and classical tracking mechanisms. So to restate for clarity: while communication across the closed breach must be, must have *been*, quantum, Otachi's literal hunting down of Dr. Newton Geiszler has got to be an EM-based thing, I'm thinking, yes? Agree? Disagree? You disagree. I can tell by your face. Get out of here. Literally get out. This makes total sense. I banish you to the balcony. Take your quantum mechanical insights and go. No one wants that here."

Hermann is giving him a very narrowed-eyed kind of look.

Newt points silently but emphatically at the balcony.

"You *literally* had half a shot of tequila," Hermann says, slightly more than slightly slurring.

"You've had like a third of a bottle, dude," Newt says. "I don't see what your point is relevant to. I'm on an antiepileptic that facilitates GABAergic inhibitory transmission and *that*," Newt says, pausing for dramatic effect, because he's got great rhetorical technique, better than literally anyone he's ever met in his life, like, so good that he could have been Demosthenes in a previous existence if he believed in that kind of thing, which he does not, thank you.

Philippic, the kids hiss in appreciative support.

Yes kids, Newt thinks. *I could see you getting into the art of the fiery diatribe. Maybe a little too into it.*

"Were you planning to *complete* your thought?" Hermann asks him, with extremely ill-mannered politeness. "Or shall I?"

"You're a dick," Newt informs him.

"I forbid you to have any more tequila," Hermann says, emptying Newt's set-aside half-shot into his own shot glass and then pointedly drinking it.

"You're going to get alcohol poisoning," Newt points out helpfully.

"I doubt very much that you are correct, Newton; my ability to metabolize alcohol has always been notably robust. This has been true for as long as you have known me, and you may *pretend* to remain unaware of this fact, but kindly stop indulging your penchant for hyperbole and deceiving yourself about your own ability to metabolically process alcohol which is, in point of fact, notably low, to the delight of literally every graduate student who has ever encountered the colocalization of you and ethanol-containing-beverages. Furthermore, were I to suffer alcohol poisoning, arguably that would be one of the more pleasant post-workday leisure activities that I have enjoyed this week," Hermann says.

"Can you *not*?" Newt asks.

"I'm afraid you'll have to specify," Hermann says, like a guy who's feeling pretty secure in Newt's inability to do just that.

Newt doesn't care. Newt can choose a whole *new* conversational tangent. "I'm pretty sure that eventually I'm going to figure out how to read your mind, just so you know

and are preparing yourself for this eventuality." He flexes his fingers raises an eyebrow, and says, "okay, now hold still—I want to put my fingers on the exit points of your trigeminal nerve. Through, you know, the bones of your face."

Your phrasing was slightly alarming there, champ, his brain informs him.

"You want to do *what*?" Hermann says, squinting at him in an incredulously drunken way.

"Okay, no, that sounded bad," Newt says, doing a super reassuring parting-of-the-atmosphere type hand gesture. "I just, like, okay, *if* I'm right about this, then maybe I can read your thoughts by trying to get some of *my* nerves close to a whole bunch of *your* nerves, and ideally it would be your *cranial* nerves because they've got a direct line to the brain without messing around in the spinal cord, right? I mean, ugh, what *is* that even; the spinal cord is like a telepathic death trap. Probably. Can you *tell no one* I said the word 'telepathic', I feel so weird about it; this is really embarrassing for me. Cranial nerves though. I've just got a good feeling about this. Let me touch your face," Newt says, explaining things *very* clearly.

"What?" Hermann says.

"Can you not treat *everything* I say as something super weird and surprising?" Newt says, reaching over, doing his thing, fingertips to Hermann's face, doing a little more of a precise application of fingers to skin than he's seen prototypical Vulcans rocking, because, hi, how much does the average Vulcan know about human biology, really? Probably not as much as Newt knows, that's for sure.

Newt is pretty sure that his brain would make even Vulcans jealous.

Also, Vulcans are *fictional*.

Riiiiight.

Whatever.

He sets his fingers down in three steps; thumb to chin, index finger to cheekbone, and middle finger to medial eyebrow.

Living skin always weirds him out; he forgets how warm it is.

"You are incredibly bizarre," Hermann says, holding sculpture-still so that Newt doesn't accidentally poke him in the eye.

Newt has great motor control these days though, so this is going to work out really well.

"Don't pretend you don't understand what I'm doing here," Newt says. "Like you're so *normal*. Now, think of a number please. Literally any number."

Hermann says nothing, but closes his eyes in what looks like annoyed submission.

Newt shuts *his* eyes and tries to pick up a number vibe, or, really any kind of vibe. A leg pain vibe. A Newton-I'll-end-your-life-for-you vibe. He would settle for literally any vibe.

Any.

Vibe.

He's getting nothing.

"Eighteen," he guesses, totally blindly.

"Negative one million, eight hundred forty eight thousand, six hundred and twelve," Hermann says.

"Negative?" Newt says, opening his eyes and feeling slightly betrayed and moderately offended because come on—is it too much to ask that Dr. Gottlieb has the human decency not to pick a *negative* number? "Maybe if I put like, electroconductive gel on my fingers? I should order that online. Maybe if we hooked our skulls up with EEG wires. Maybe that's why our EEGs look so weird; do you think? Maybe if we drilled holes in our skulls and laced the bones with a conductive material. That's probably not worth it. Maybe if we removed part of our skulls and replaced them with metal? Again, probably not worth it. Maybe if one of us is super distressed it would work? Maybe if *both* of us were super distressed? Maybe if I was *not* on an anti-epileptic? Maybe if I had less GABA? Maybe if I was more drunk? Maybe if I was *less* drunk? Maybe if we were both super Zen. Maybe if we both mediated and, like, held hands and there was mutual effort? Maybe if we both stuck our hands in water full of ions. Maybe if—"

"Newton," Hermann says, grabbing Newt's hand and pulling it off his face. "Please realize that although literally prying the lid off your own skull to analyze what might be happening to your nervous system is a comforting thought for *you*, not everyone in this room views it that way. So will you please *shut up* about lacing the bones of your skull with a conductive material."

"Er," Newt says, thinking about that time he accidentally created EPIC Rapport, the time he almost died, the other times that happened, falling asleep on a floor, on *this* floor, accidentally scaling the Wall, that one time in Seattle that he flipped over Hermann's

table of math, the nematocyst incident, he bleeds a lot, that's probably annoying and alarming in equal parts—

You are a bad life partner, his brain observes.

"I'm a bad life partner," Newt echoes, feeling abruptly despondent at the still ongoing mental inventory of *Stressful Things Done by Newt* that his brain is sliding into his waking thoughts like an out of control cardsharp.

"You have your advantages," Hermann says philosophically. "I agree that I am superior, however, and I commend your interpersonal analytical judgment. You may attempt to make it up to me for the rest of our natural lives."

"Okay," Newt says, in grateful acquiescence.

"Oh my, you *are* intoxicated," Hermann says. "Aren't you?"

"Says the guy who's having trouble with his ts," Newt replies. "I'm not even."

Eh, his brain says. *Maybe a little*.

"Eh," Newt says. "Maybe a little."

"You are. You realize that you positioned your hand over an *afferent* nerve, don't you?" Hermann asks. "I only point this out because you're so *clearly* cognitively impaired."

Oh shit, Newt thinks.

"Oh shit," Newt says. "I *did* do that. Look it's defensible to go afferent, but you're probably right; if I'm trying to read *your* brainwaves, ha, I was not kidding about hating that term, despising it, loathing it, detesting it even, but I *should* probably go efferent, not that I'm expecting to jack into a metaphorical port or anything, like, it's just about getting a little closer to the EM signals and seeing if there's anything there my modified brain can parse, am I right? I don't know I'm right, I just—well, directionality of transmission seems potentially important? In short, I *agree* with you. Very perspicacious. Perspicuous. You're great."

"Do not say 'shit'," Hermann replies. "'Jacking into a metaphorical port'? Your train of thought is nearly incomprehensible."

"Alas for perspicuity, may it rest in peaceful perpetuity," Newt says. "Hold still." He reaches over and presses three fingers to what he judges is the exit point of Hermann's facial nerve, which carries efferent signals *from* the brain and not afferent signals *to* it. He's not sure that will make a difference because he doesn't *care* what Hermann's facial muscles are doing right now, but it's a propitious spot—right in front of the ear,

and, just for the heck of it, he presses his ring finger against Hermann's temple, where the bone thins down to a local minima.

Hermann glares at him but holds still.

Newt looks back at him.

Just at the point that this bidirectional gaze and unidirectional face-touching thing starts turning vaguely weird and *really* intense—

His brain sends him the vaguely parseable message of, *oh god, what's happening*, as Newt watches a totally nonsensical disruption of his visual field.

Objects unmake.

He watches Hermann, the window, the wall, the couch, the ceiling, turn from objects into meaningless intersections of color and lines and then *other* things start to go—his brain feels odd and the room feels wrong and his proprioception splits right down the middle and tries to reweave and *what were you thinking doing this now* feels like an hallucination because it's Gottliebian but *Other*, this is weird, this is wrong; his senses are *mixing*; someone is pushing on the back of his skull and he can *see it* while the sound of the heater drills out his teeth and he tenses in the hope that total contraction will keep him *sitting*.

Someone's got *Strange Attractor* playing on repeat in their head, but he's not sure who it is and he's not sure he's hearing music, it's a dermatographic sensory impression of the double-scroll attractor—oh *god* is he, possibly, thinking in *phase space*? No? Yes? Maybe? Partially?

Fractal rage makes a cage

That can't be disengaged.

The kids don't like this, his brain is not his brain, and so Newt sits there, gazing fixedly at nothing that makes sense but still feeling like himself, just a version of himself who's balanced on the thin line between fascination and panic before his native drive toward inquiry wins out, as it is wont to do.

"This is fascinating," he says.

Oh yikes.

Maybe he says it?

He *can't tell*.

He's hearing only unparsable sounds that are half mixed over into a confused morass of proprioceptive inputs and visual signals that also smell like wet cement? The

experience bears no similarity to his memory of what it *sounds* like to hear the words he should be speaking, but he's going to assume they *are* words, just like he's going to assume the abstract mess of colors and lines without depth-perception or meaning is still Hermann sitting on the couch. It's bizarre, it's freaking him out a little bit, but he's freaked out more in his life, that's for sure.

"Think of a number," Newt says.

Maybe he says that.

His entire sensory experience, sight, smell, sound, touch, proprioception, momentum, all of it is *gone*, split apart, made available to parse—

Eleven thousand, three hundred eighty four.

It's not *words*, it's a concept represented in a graphical, base-ten way but he *gets* it.

He pulls his hand away and his somatosensory cortex reknits itself into a visual field that's reasonable and sensory modalities that are no longer mixed.

Yay.

Newt feels weird.

Newt feels weird and kind of elated and also kind of confused because what was *that*? That was *so strange*—he's pretty sure that somehow his brain tore apart his somatosensory cortex in order to parse a new kind of input which is outrageously cool and simultaneously terrifying because, he has literally never heard of any kind of reasonable precedent for this kind of thing.

Was any of that even *real*?

There's a way to tell, you realize, his brain says, deciding to channel Hermann.

Right. That had actually been the whole point.

Newt makes an effort to *see* what he's been looking at, which is, of course, his life partner.

Hermann is staring at him in a way that is only *mildly* concerned, which is *awesome*, because that means the whole epically, EPICally weird thing that just happened didn't actually *look* as weird as it definitely, for sure, *was*.

"Did I say it already?" Newt asks in a breathless sort of slur.

"The number?" Hermann counter-queries, looking *slightly* more concerned at Newt's garbage diction. "No."

"Eleven thousand, three eighty four," Newt says.

Hermann stares at him. "A lucky guess."

"Nope," Newt says, grinning at him in a way that might look a little alarming if Hermann's counter-expression is anything to judge by. But that's not a priority right now because of *important reasons*. "You've got to try this; it'sso *weird*. Don't freak out. Come on, come on, come *on*; don't give me that face, just touch *my* face, trust me, it's going to be worth it."

Hermann looks like he has deep and profound misgivings, but he presses his fingertips against the skin immediately in front of Newt's ear.

Newt watches him like a creeper. A hunting creeper. Some kind of creeper bird of prey. A velociraptor. A creeperaptor? A thirty-three percent kaiju creeper. Kaiper? Kaijuraptor? Creeju? Look, the point is, Newt is just really *interested* in what this is going to look like from the outside. The thing is though, is that Hermann is just kind of looking back at him, really sharp, pretty skeptical, not at all glazed, not at all like his whole somatosensory cortex is falling apart, unweaving like a prism-parsed lightbeam and rebraiding into something new and profound and awesome, nope, Hermann's clearly a little weirded out and incrementally more concerned on Newt's behalf.

"Nothing," Hermann says, looking at Newt, clearly not having a totally kickass and weird sensory experience.

"What?" Newt says. "No no no no *no*." He pulls off his glasses, grabs Hermann's hand, repositions the guy's fingers, making sure there's some reasonable temple contact going on, and presses them against his own head in a way that's a little more robust and more consistent with touching a human as opposed to touching some previously shattered porcelain bowl before the epoxy holding it together has fully set.

"Still nothing," Hermann says.

"Don't drop your hand," Newt says. "Let me try a thing."

Hermann immediately drops his hand.

"I said *don't* drop your hand," Newt replies. "As in, do *not* do that. You did the *opposite* thing. The opposite thing of what I said."

"Why don't you *tell me*," Hermann says waspishly, "using *words*, what it is that you're going to '*try*'."

"I was just going to think a number *at* you," Newt says, not at all defensively. "It wasn't going to be anything horrifying."

"Forty-two," Hermann says.

"Even *I'm* not *that* obvious, give me *some* credit please," Newt says, definitely not going to think of that number (anymore). "Can you just put your hand back? I wasn't thinking *at* you; what if there's an element of *intent* involved, like both terminals need to be on, you know?"

"This is the most ridiculous thing I've ever done in my life," Hermann says.

"If that were true, I would be sad for you," Newt says. "Fortunately, I know the most ridiculous thing you've ever done in your life was—"

"Stop talking immediately," Hermann says. "Think of a number or I'm dropping my hand."

Newt thinks of the square root of two with all the clarity and context he can bring to bear. Behind the words is all that he can organize of his understanding of the number as a *concept*, including right triangles, the unit circle, and the apocryphal murder of Hippasus of Metapontum. He tries to take all of that and get a good Gottliebian directionality to the thoughts he's attempting to broadcast, and as he does it, hey, the *room* stays intact this time so *that's* a plus or maybe a minus; it's hard to—

Hermann yanks his hand away from Newt's temple like he's been burned, shouting, "*Newton*," in a super irritated way, his hand going to his *own head*.

"Er," Newt says, feeling abruptly guilty and, in retrospect, unsurprised because his brain is like a Mack Truck, probably, as brains go. "Did I *hurt* you?"

"Yes," Hermann says, looking more freaked out and irritated than legit *hurt*. "There is no need to mentally *shout*."

It worked? his brain asks, clearly skeptical.

"It worked?" Newt asks, less skeptical than incredulous.

"Square root of two," Hermann replies, pressing both hands to his temples. "Of course *you* would choose an *irrational* number."

Newt nods politely, waiting for Hermann to officially start having a nervous breakdown about the, hey, *mindreading* that is now for sure a thing. Alternatively, he is waiting for Hermann to tell him that he, Newt, was right all along, and that he, Hermann, is super impressed, again, hardcore, probably for life, because *come on* they could have gone *years* without figuring out that cranial nerve trick—slight of hand? More like slight of *mind*, mindfulness, theory of mind, self states, *resist*, *transmit*/*you must know you're a machine*, neural transmission, signal transduction, second messengers, action potentials, depolarization, neural coopting of existing circuits, *and if he dies/he dies a*

scientist in his prime, past his prime(?), what's left for him, what's left for *them*, those Riemann zeros, man, and one time the cult of Pythagoras killed that guy by rowing him out into the Aegean sea and leaving him for dead all because he tried to apply the Pythagorean theorem to a field with a unit side of one, sucks to be *that* guy; Newt should really get a job in neuroscience in case the world tries to end again on his watch.

Newt is so great, honestly.

Hermann shoots Newt a what-are-you-looking-at kind of look, which is weird, or, maybe, Newt is misinterpreting that look. Newt is slightly confused, and *pretty* sure that all of the things that are happening are happening but maybe they *aren't*?

More tequila would probably solve Newt's problems.

Not.

"You're being *really* blasé about this, dude," Newt says, "and like, I know you are well, *well* on your way to trashed, but was that or was that not the freakiest thing ever? Like, what happened to our *sensory* cortex, it *unweaves* or something to accommodate telepathic signal transduction? Unweaving, rebraiding; historical rainbow style. John Keats can just screw off, am I right? I consider that guy a personal nemesis, he *died* young though, that was sad. 'Unweaving the rainbow'. God. Put me out of my misery. Hand me that tequila. No, don't, I'll throw up if I think about Keats right now. However, the man *was* a dick to Isaac Newton, a trait I consider a *plus* because, as we have established, I don't really personally *like* Sir Isaac all that much for various excellent reasons including *alchemy*, but no one can really dispute that his work in optics was, ha, pretty freaking great, even if he did end up having a huge intellectual rivalry with Hooke in that regard, I don't know man—Hooke, Leibniz, such a pattern of truculent dickishness from *that* guy, yes?"

Hermann looks at him in a way that is most definitely nonplussed.

"What are you talking about?" Hermann asks.

"Isaac Newton," Newt says. "Also, the outrageous somatosensory weirdness required to parse Transdermal Thought Transfer. TTT. T3? I think that's a movie from the *Terminator* franchise. I'll think of a better acronym."

"What 'somatosensory weirdness'?" Hermann asks. "Please make *some* effort toward explaining yourself. I realize you are more intoxicated than one might predict post half a shot of tequila, but, honestly Newton, your train of thought is intolerably tangential and while, on most occasions, I would simply ignore this proclivity of yours, I have the

feeling you are, indeed, trying to communicate something, so *focus*, if you would. You certainly have the capacity if not the inclination."

"You didn't," Newt says, having lexical difficulty under the weight of too many instantaneous realizations and subsequent trains of thought and, yes, also, the (questionable) intoxication is not helping him, full disclosure there. "You didn't have the thing where all your sensory modalities stopped making sense except for the thought-reading one?"

"No," Hermann says, drawing out the word. "I was simply hit with a forceful, nuanced representation of the square root of two as a concept."

"Yes but—" Newt says, his thoughts and words slowing down beneath the pressure of *unfairness*. "Your visual field didn't get weird?" Newt asks, not slurring at all. "You didn't stop identifying spoken words as words? You didn't, like, have a whole bunch of proprioceptive inputs turning into other things? Like, it was not the weirdest and most confusing perceptual mash up you have ever experienced in your life?"

Hermann cocks his head at an angle that strikes Newt as trending toward distinctly *alarmed*.

Newt nonchalantly looks away.

Hermann reaches over, grabs his *face*, looks straight at him for a few seconds, and then does some finger-rearranging in a clear attempt to *read Newt's thoughts*.

Not cool, his brain says.

"Not cool," Newt says.

Hermann gives him a Newton-touch-my-face-and-we-can-eliminate-designations-congruent-with-things-aka-'words'-and-cut-straight-to-the-thought-constructs-that-represent-the-things-themselves kind of look.

Newt is too smart to do exactly that, thanks very much. Hermann wants to try this thought-reading thing in a reciprocal manner, because *yeah* who wouldn't? But Newt, being an outrageous genius even when slightly drunk and slightly possessed of a really unusual brain, is slightly more than slightly concerned about feedback loops, so he doesn't grab Hermann's face in return.

The kids stir restlessly at the back of his mind.

All parties tagged 'Geizler' vote no to telepathic reciprocity.

Hermann still has a hand on his face though, and so Newt decides to snap on his thought terminal.

No, he thinks at Hermann, hopefully at a lower telepathic volume this time, *I will not be doing any reciprocal face-touching and peeling my somatosensory cortex apart for you as a demo; I just don't see that going well, dude. I, too, am devastatingly curious about whether we can do this simultaneously and actually have a real-time conversation, but I am so serious about my goal of preventing your imminent nervous breakdown that I can actually keep said goal in my head, even in the, ha, literal face of telepathic temptation, which is your face to be clear. I'm fine, I can totally handle sensory weirdness, it was bizarre, but not in a terrifying way.*

Newt cuts the connection just before the point that the cresting, avaricious interest of the kids breaks over into the channel that he's opened.

Touch, the kids hiss, and his thoughts explode like a blown out window into image fragments—splintered, fast, and shredding everything they hit. His own memories of green tinged aldehydes blend into a chemical dark which cannot be understood from the inside, only perceived in pieces from recalled vivisections and from the perspective of the vicious, clever little human who put them where they will now forever stay.

Touch what? Newt asks.

Touch, the kids hiss, but something's putting tension on his nervous system and *searing stereo loathing or stereo longing straight into his head; no one knows which it is; not the cut-up kaiju etching their cognitive daguerreotype straight into the folded glass of his cortex, or the little human they're crowning king of their chemical underworld. He's hurt them so much and they need him so badly that an agonizing death grip straight to mental dissolution is the only open option. Some guy's neurons are trying to arc a connection before their circuitry's been laid down. Some loser's hand is closing an air gap. Geiszler's back is starting to arch.*

You touched it you touched it you touched it once go back, go back, go back, go back and touch again you do not need the wires, the wires are too much.

"Newton."

He can't escape what's *in* his head.

"Yeah," he says faintly, as the kids fade down and Newt fades up in his own mix.

Hermann has both hands on Newt's upper arms. Newt isn't clear on when exactly *this* happened, whatever, it's cool, he can reengage his core, which he does, and then he holds up a hand and nods his head in a way that hopefully conveys something along the lines of, 'myeah, I'm fine, just having a little bit of an emo Jedi hipster moment, but I've rebaselined myself.' Which is true.

Hermann doesn't seem to be receiving what he's sending though, because the next thing the guys says is, "can you speak?"

Offensive.

"Myeah," Newt says.

"What," Hermann snaps, "just happened?"

Newt tries to work that out for himself before he starts talking about it, but it's tricky, it's not totally clear, there's some evidence that his head is one half of a two-way radio but there's also some evidence that his head is just one sad little signal in the midst of a dangerous electromagnetic milieu with interference from within and from without. He's not really sure how to explain this to his colleague. "To me?" he asks, "I'm not totally clear. Maybe a little bit of what's going to turn into a proto PTSD-variant with a component of always-unverifiable realtime influence? It's literally impossible for me to say." Newt is sounding more and more fully-conscious all the time, recovering pretty well from the kids he hopes are carbon copies making a major play for message delivery. "It's fine, I'm not even bleeding."

Kids, he thinks, you need to not do that kind of thing, okay? It's bad for the team.

The kids hiss restively, it's hard to say if they agree or not.

No one is going to find cut-up brains and then have conversations with them by closing the air-gap between hand and conductive specimen container, okay? The team is not interested in that, Newt continues, getting his own counterpoint across, even while trying to decide whether he *remembers* touching that fluid-filled tube that held a piece of Yamarishi or if that's a thing he *wants* to do so much it looks to him like he's done it already.

Hermann shakes him, one time, super gently.

"Hey," Newt snaps. "What. Can you *not*? Use words."

"Are you all right?" Hermann asks him.

"Yes," Newt says, because *now* he is.

Obviously.

"I think you have done quite enough experimenting for one day," Hermann says, looking like he's rating about an eight point five on the *Something Is Wrong With Dr. Geiszler Scale*.

"No, but—" Newt says.

"Newton," Hermann says.

"I just wonder what that *means*. The fact that my sensory cortex clearly tears itself apart into a whole new processing mode to do the thought-reading? I bet it means my brain got more of a makeover than yours did. Oh god, I hope I don't turn evil. Do you think that I'll turn evil? I bet it would be better with gel. The thought reading I mean. I bet it would be better with metal. Exterior metal. Sorry. I have a policy about drilling holes in my skull; I'm going to stick to it. Also, I respect your wishes about my skull. But what if they, like, hypothetically—do you think they could come *back* though? Could they open another breach, do you think? Because I think we're straight-up cut off from them now, I can *feel* where they should be. But if they make another breach, what happens to that place in my mind that always knows which way the breach was? What if they make another portal while we're still alive? What would happen then? What if we—"

"Newton," Hermann says, damming the slow slide of Newt's hydroxylated thoughts with a single word that sounds like, 'stop,' that sounds like, 'wait,' that sounds like any one of a thousand negations that herald coming analysis but, really, it's just his name.

Newt stops.

"Newton," Hermann says again, like a guy who's staring down a set of waiting explosives. "After our drift, you expressed concern about the possibility of ongoing continuity with the kaiju anteverse."

"Yes," Newt says.

"Last week, following intense sleep deprivation, you expressed some anxiety regarding real-time interference in your thought processes."

Newt doesn't reply, able to follow the likely trajectory of Hermann's thoughts. He's sure they go like this: one—Newt has evinced concern regarding external influence, two—Newt has just explained why he does not think that ongoing influence from the anteverse is likely, ergo, three—why is he so concerned? Hermann doesn't know points four and five though: four—that he's not overly concerned about what may still live beyond an annihilated breach, and five—that he *is* concerned by networks here on Earth, networks that communicate in real time, somehow, through formaldehyde and glass and over air in a way he cannot yet explain. How do they do it? Can they hear*him*? Could they, if he *tried* to let them in?

Are you, possibly, his brain says, like it is walking on eggshells of some kind, maybe garden variety eggs laid by some kind of bird, maybe freaky alien eggs from the movie

Alien, maybe just, like, metaphorical eggs that are landmines of potential problems, ready to explode into creeperaptors of the consciousness, *a little bit anxious, champ?*

Yeahhhhh, maybe.

Touch, the kids hiss.

He has a wild urge to tear his sensory experience apart and *try to find* the local kaiju network just to see if he's *scapable* of doing it.

But that might be the last thing he ever does.

So he will *not* do that.

Not while he's *drunk* at least.

Actually? He won't *ever* do it.

Not while he's drunk.

He won't be doing that ever.

But *definitely* not while drunk.

But also not ever.

"Newton," Hermann says, with so much respectful compassion that Newt can barely sit here and take it, "I believe there are aspects of your concerns that are either inconsistent, or that I do not understand."

Myeah, his brain says, trying to crawl to one side of his skull.

"Myeah," Newt says, feeling his expression crack into an uncontrolled exposure of something he himself can't see before he reins it back in and nails it back down.

"To elaborate," Hermann says, with a formality totally at odds with the *fear* in his expression. "you seem to be dismissing the possibility of mental communication from the anteverse while retaining concern about 'turning evil', which I interpret as a concern about exogenous mental influence. I'm not sure how to reconcile these two things."

Newt feels like the things that Hermann doesn't know might kill him, might kill them *both*; this is actually really *stressful*, he wants to *get up* to get *off* this *couch* but if he gives into that impulse he's not sure where he might end up it could be *anywhere*, it could be *dead*, and he's *sweating*.

Across the room from him, someone is surgically extracting exogenous implants from Seven of Nine.

"Yeah," Newt says to Hermann, because yes.

He decides he will pour himself some more tequila.

Hermann reaches over to stop him halfway through filling his shot glass, but doesn't interfere in any other way.

Newt downs his half shot in one go.

Newt decides to watch some *Voyager*, those guys man, just trying to get home, and it's *such* a good thing that Captain Janeway is nothing like Caitlin Lightcap in any way because that would be *so horrible*; Newt would not be able to handle that right now. De-borg'd Seven *looks* a little like Caitlin Lightcap, but she's nothing *actually* like Caitlin Lightcap. Caitlin Lightcap was brilliant and unconventional and set a bad example Newt had followed. She probably would have drilled her way into his current secrets at the expense of both their minds, he can almost see her, looking like a strange blend of woman and Jaeger and borg and stranger screaming straight in his face, *tell me, Geiszler, you bastard, you bastard, tell me, tell me, tell me, tell me*. He can almost hear the shatter of bottles against the cement of the deployment dock, can almost see her face the day he'd looked at her in her Interface Suit and called her stupid with every fraction of profound viciousness that he could get to precipitate out of his supersaturated sense of anticipatory loss.

She would have pulled her answers out of him because she treated everyone the way she treated herself.

Hermann doesn't do that.

That doesn't mean that Hermann shouldn't have his own answers, all the same.

"I—" Newt says, and stops. "I believe I can clarify those inconsistencies for you."

"Please do not feel that I require such a thing," Hermann says, turning to look at him, his gaze a lateral pressure against the silent *Star Trek* on which Newt's eyes are fixed. "I am content to wait. Indefinitely, even."

"There is some information that you're missing," Newt says, and he can nearly *hear* the flash freeze of Hermann's crystal latticed interest.

"I thought that might be the case," Hermann replies.

The throughlines of his thoughts are blending together in a dissolving knot of mental weirdness, leaving Newt in charge of an inarticulate soup that sort of hisses and thinks of math in graphic style and tastes like ironic self awareness, or it would if Newt was in a habit of *tasting* brains. He's not there yet.

He hesitates for a long moment on a conceptual precipice, trying to decide a *lot* of things—whether he can talk about this, whether his own brain is going to riot and tear down his consciousness into neuronal debris, whether his cortex might decide to trigger waves of synchronous electrical discharges that will kick him straight into a seizure, whether being drunk is protective or *less* protective or makes no mechanistic difference to his personal neurochemistry. He's not aware of choosing yes or no, but his brain finds a set of words and arranges them in a way that's going to work.

Having made a way, he can't not take it.

"I drifted a third time," Newt manages to say around the dull roar of upset longing that comes straight from the kids.

"Did you," Hermann says, with a painful amount of casual unconcern that's totally at odds with the burning wattage of the lateral look that Newt can *feel* searing its way into his temple. "I thought as much."

"The details," Newt says, "are not—they're a little bit unclear to me? I did determine that the existing neural tissue fragments remaining on this side of the breach have—er, they've been cut off from the anteverse. Totally cut off. They are—not happy about this. They were, actually, *really* pissed. At me. Specifically and collectively."

He looks over to find Hermann staring at him like he's an undiscovered manuscript inscribed on a lit stick of dynamite, which, yeah, seems about right, given the events of the past month. Hermann probably already *knows* he drifted, probably has figured that out from events or from Hypothetical Rain's redacted medical records, but the guy doesn't need to know how a foreign rig—too precise, too well aligned—tripped his mind straight into a premature electrical firestorm, he doesn't need to know that Newt was, for better or worse, too drugged to *remember* anything about the third drift other than the way that they existed as a network that he had jacked straight into; the way they *hated* him and hate him still; the way they *love* him for his cognitive capacity and how he made them, for a span of seconds, feel less alone; the way they wanted him to die screaming; the way they wanted him to never leave. Hermann doesn't need to know any of that, that's not necessary here, and maybe one day it will be different, maybe in fifteen years they'll be walking past the Math Building on UC Berkeley's campus, carrying cups of coffee and Newt will say, 'yes, did I mention it was a piece of Yamarishi that they brought?' or maybe he'll say, 'I do, at times, wonder if it would have been different if I hadn't been drugged out of my mind when it happened, perhaps I could have told them I was sorry,' and Hermann will say, 'you have nothing to be sorry

for, please remember that Newton,' and Newt will say, 'I know,' like he believes it and maybe, then, he will.

"They can still talk to each other," Newt says, trying to pretend he's fifteen years older, that he's fifty, that he doesn't care any more, that he's still alive at fifty, that he can't, even now, hear the anguished rage of his cut-up chorus hissing in the back of his thoughts. "I worry sometimes that they've got some kind of line to my head. The network of preserved parts that were supposed to die in formalin but didn't? I don't *think* they do, but I can't *tell*, not really, and the fact that we've got this weirdness we can do makes me feel both better, because it's weird and I feel like I'd *notice* if the local rage network was slotting itself into my cognitive ports, but also *worse* because it's a proof-of-principle and maybe I *wouldn't* know? The point is I can't be sure of anything; this is making me anxious."

"I see," Hermann says, like this, like *all* of this, is totally normal and he was expecting it, like he's been expecting it for days and days and *days*, probably because he's a little worried that Newt will just flip out if he so much as flickers an eyelash in an unexpected way, but Newt is more robust than *that*, thanks. Not a *whole* lot more robust, it's true, but a little.

"It's okay," Newt says, and—

Wow.

That was unexpectedly the wrong way to take the conversation because Hermann is giving him a look of total, stripped-down, wide-eyed *horror* that snaps over into the kind of rage that shuts down all capillary beds in the face and freezes facial muscles into a neutral mass that's really unnerving, pun intended, kind of.

This is fine.

Newt can fix this.

No problem.

"I mean, sure," Newt says, employing casual conversational course correction, "there were aspects of my experience that weren't *ideal* but, ah, ultimately it turned out *fine* and—"

Again, this is not going well. Hermann is trending away from 'pissed colleague' and toward an impression of a statue that could be titled *Mathematician in Occulted Extremis*.

Newt course corrects again, with, “—a reasonable amount of objective and subjective data was collected—”

Hermann's expression does not change even fractionally, though his eyes look like he might be able to melt plastic with them if he stared at it for long enough.

Maybe Newt should just stop talking.

“Look, the point is that *I* am *fine* with how things turned out, right?” Newt says, not following his self-directed advice.

Hermann says nothing. He just sits there, staring at Newt, looking increasingly upset and pissed.

Newt is not really sure how to *fix* this—the tequila and the, oh, thirty minutes of sobbing he did a few hours ago have collectively weakened his ability to wrap up his experiences with a plucky and nonchalant verbal summary, and he finds himself in the strange position of mounting an imminent and instinctive *defense* of the PPDC in the face of Hermann's as yet unarticulated rage that's clearly gathering itself in preparation for annihilating a target.

“Hermann,” Newt says, with a tenuous grasp on his tone, “let's take a step back, man, and think about this on a macro level—”

“A *macro* level?” Hermann snarls, standing up and pacing toward the kitchen, probably just to have somewhere to go, which is a dangerously *Geiszlerian* tendency.

Newt follows him, going straight over the coffee table to keep pace. “Do *not* swap your brain twice in one night because I *can't*—”

“A macro level?” Hermann snarls again, rounding on him in a way that's totally surprising and sends Newt unbalancing laterally into a kitchen counter.

“Stop,” Newt shouts, coming right back into Hermann's space so he doesn't get *hunted* and also because that's what he *does*. This is getting *ridiculous*; why are they *doing this*. “Chill,” he says, one hand closing around Hermann's elbow.

Hermann yanks free. “Chill? *Chill*? Do not make excuses for the PPDC, Newton. All they accomplished was the creation of a needless connection between an already damaged human mind and dead fragments of alien tissue so they could document a predictable deviation from a nearly contextless baseline that would then allow them to *check a box on a form* that must read ‘is Dr. Geiszler a danger to his species *yes or no*’. You will excuse me if I do not share your philosophical take on this. You will excuse me if I choose to remember that you correctly predicted *exactly* this outcome and

explicitly labeled it as a thing you would like to avoid. You will excuse me if I literally never forget the *genuine fear* you displayed in the infirmary when you thought I might not omit information from my report. You will excuse me if I cannot bleach my thoughts of the exact angle of your fingers against a metal tray as you slid it across the table in the Hong Kong shatterdome. Because you knew, you *knew*, the inevitable outcome, you must have, you were *ready*, you were *waiting for them*, and it makes me wonder *how long* you knew it was coming? Was it from the moment they walked into the mess? Did you see them, that foreign team, and did you snap together a resolution from existing paradigms in your mind? Or did you know *earlier*? When I think about what you did, what you said, I cannot help but think that you knew from the moment you *told me to lie*. Did you know even earlier? Did you know in that alley what the requirements of red tape would be and did you resolve *thento* keep me out of it? Did you turn yourself over to them because you thought you had to or did you do it so that *they wouldn't look to me*?"

"Both," Newt shouts at him, "and *neither*. Did I want you out of it? Yes. I did. You think I wanted *you* exposed to a fraction of a hive mind, left behind after breach annihilation? You'd had the option to take the risk of drifting and you'd *said no* until I forced your hand by risking death or insanity *right in front of you*. But do you really think that's all it was? Some magnificent act of selflessness in fulfillment of societal expectations and to protect *you*? Yeah, true, that was a part of it, but the *real* reason that I kept you out was because you had a *prayer* of a chance of extracting me, though I didn't think you'd really do it. *I'd* have *never* gotten *you* out; I wouldn't have *wanted* to; all I'd have done was *join you* as we burned straight through our brains. Because I wanted to *see*. I wanted to *know*. *I had* to know. *What happens to a fraction of a hive mind*?"

"You didn't *want* what happened to you," Hermann says, coming back at him with a thin veneer of control over the threatening boil of his rage. "I *know* you didn't. You're writing yourself a narrative where you had some kind, *anykind*, of real *agency*, but you weren't even *conscious* when they interfaced you with that *thing* the second time."

"How do you know that," Newt breathes.

"Because I *read your medical file*," Hermann shouts, his voice cracking as he steadies himself on the counter, his words running together. "With Dr. McClure."

"I *agreed*," Newt screams at him. "They *asked* me. I *said yes*. I *helped* them. I *wanted to know*. Nothing you say will *ever* change that."

The kids hiss in approbation while somewhere deep in his mind mnemonic Caitlin Lightcap smashes her bottles of alcohol against conceptual barriers in Newt's thoughts.

"You were *coerced*."

"*Get over it*," Newt replies, tearing open vocal chords trying to snap their way shut, "and *accept the costs* of living in a risk-averse bureaucracy with utilitarian rather than deontological *ethics*."

"I will *never*," Hermann shouts back, "*get over it*."

"Well not with *that* attitude," Newt replies, managing to collect himself in the face of Gottliebian escalation. "Lose the untempered idealism, it's not a feature of adulthood, even in a mathematician," he snaps.

"As though *you* are qualified to offer any kind of opinion on 'features of adulthood'," Hermann seethes, entirely outraged. "Your emotional development arrested at the point you moved from Berlin to Massachusetts, circa *agetwelve*."

"Oh, we're regressing to *ad hominem*s are we?" Newt replies, his hands sweeping through the air between them in an ironically expansive gesture, his diction blurring into something that doesn't sound quite right. "*I'm* sorry, I didn't realize that logical fallacies were an acceptable mode of discourse now."

"You *started* it," Hermann snaps.

"I did not. Mine wasn't an *ad hominem* because my criticism was directly *relevant* to your current *rage* problem. To your *perpetual* rage problem, actually, which is, currently, what we are fighting about, right?"

"No," Hermann says through clenched teeth. "We aren't having a rational argument, Newton."

"Well, *yeah*," Newt says.

They look at one another, breathing hard.

Newt feels a little bit confused.

Hermann has polished off almost half a bottle of tequila at this point, so.

Yeah.

Hermann is probably *also* confused.

"We are both distressed in the same vicinity. Vectors of upset have turned from antiparallel to head-on," Hermann says.

Newt definitely pulls his glasses off at that one, throws them on the counter, and turns away, covering his face briefly with both hands so that he does not burst out laughing in Hermann's face because it would definitely be the kind of laughter that would end badly, and he is *on edge* today; he is not the only one, but he still has a limited capacity for *deescalation* left, and so he's going to max it out.

Wow, you are excruciatingly pathetic right now, champ, his brain says, like a *jerk*.

"I know," Newt replies, totally unintelligibly into his own hands.

The kids hiss in disappointed vexation at the decreasing likelihood of violence.

You are a terrible person, his inner Hermann informs him.

No one in his head is *helping him*, no one's doing anything useful except *Newt*, who is outrageously awesome, actually, every day and for all time.

He drops his hands, puts his glasses back on, and says, "I feel like it's not fun to scream at you when you cast our irrational arguments as misdirected distress."

Hermann looks slightly calmer, as if he, too, is trying to initiate some negative feedback loops, or activate his parasympathetic nervous system, or use logic to trick his brain into a state that's a little less activated. "I concur," he says.

"Cool," Newt replies, unbalancing sideways in a relief-tequila one-two combo and then using the counter for some hip-mediated stabilization. "We have literally made so many collective bad decisions tonight, I feel like this is some kind of relationship landmark."

Hermann doesn't respond to that one, he just half turns away from Newt, bracing both hands on the edge of the sink, and stares at something in his head that Newt isn't currently invited to witness. It's a misery stance if Newt's ever seen one; the guy's shoulders are tight, his weight shifted off his bad leg, his expression twisted into distracted torment.

Newt adjusts his glasses and then levers his hand into the air in a helpless, inviting gesture that he's sure Hermann can see in his peripheral vision.

"I wish that it had not been you," Hermann says, defeated and drunk in a particular and excruciatingly sad blend. "I wish it had been anyone but you because you are not like anyone, Newton."

"That's what individuality *is* though," Newt replies, making an effort to be *nice*. "Different people are different. Ostensible snowflakes and junk. Special, crystalline, and eventually vanishing into the endless pull of entropy—disorder favored until

decohesence and ultimate thermodynamic equilibrium—presuming you're defining your system as the universe at large. Average temperature decrease. Zero Kelvin. Dead space. Death."

You're abusing thermodynamics, his brain says.

"Stop abusing thermodynamics," Hermann slurs. "It's extremely unattractive."

"Hey," Newt says.

"You are a different kind of different than most people," Hermann says, *definitely* even more drunk than Newt had been thinking he was.

"Aw," Newt says, giving Hermann a shoulder clap because he looks like he needs it.

"So what happens to a fraction of a hive mind?" Hermann asks quietly. Quietly. Very quietly.

"Cut up pieces of individual nervous systems link together across space via an unknown mechanism. They pool their cognitive resources and their knowledge and their emotional capacities for, ah, all it is that they know how to feel, which seems to be, in the absence of the hive mind and other exogenous input, only anger and fear and longing. They struggle to understand and conceptualize the new but agonizing experience of loneliness, which is not all that intuitive for a disabled fraction of a collective consciousness, it turns out."

The kids hiss, a tragic static.

"And did they—I would imagine that when you drifted with them, *your* neural capacity at least briefly improved the extent of their understanding," Hermann says, looking at him uncertainly.

"Yeah," Newt says, feeling weird, feeling kind of acutely miserable, feeling a little more than a little bit *bad* for the carbon-copy kids and their real-world counterparts who loathe him and who need him and who want him *back*.

"Did they have the ability to identify you?" Hermann asks. "Did they *recognize* you?"

"Did they know I was the guy who was responsible for cutting most of them up and chemically caging them in formalin?" Newt says faintly, "myeah, they knew that a little bit."

Hermann gives him a look that, at best, can be tagged as 'dismayed'.

"Eh," Newt says, in a gallantly reassuring manner, "I was also their best option to come along in a while, so they were pretty confused as to whether they wanted to kill me or keep me. It's hard to say because I don't have clear and contiguous memories of *any*

drift, especially not *that* one, but my impression was that things most definitely started out in a 'let's torture this guy to a quick but agonizing death by flipping on every nociceptive circuit he has' and then it sort of morphed into a 'well, he *does* have a lot of cognitive capacity—maybe we could just keep him' type deal. Of course, fortunately, my skull and distance and *possibly* my own intent keeps them out in a real-time way, though I do have periods of confusion about that, especially while sleep deprived, because, full disclosure, in addition to *you* in my head, I've got a whole chorus of super conflicted kaiju that I accidentally tortured who are kind of counter-torturing me on a long term basis, that's fair though, plus, they're getting a little friendlier over time, it seems like, which argues for them being a phenomenon of EPIC Rapport rather than a real-time transmission from the *actual* kids, you know? Full disclosure, I call them 'kids'. It's kind of not appropriate, definitely xenopolitically incorrect but what are you gonna do, am I right? I've got to think though that if the kids had any kind of autonomy, if they had kaiju skulls with their receptive equipment and also, you know, *limbs* and stuff, they'd be able to track me down just like Otachi did, by which I mean I suspect that we're *both* forever trackable by kaiju who know what to look for, as it were. As for a real-time one-way or two-way connection? Who knows. Seriously, without samples, without equipment, who freaking knows."

It is at this point that Hermann throws up in the sink.

Yup.

So Newt has seen this moment coming since the instant he pulled the tequila out of a brown bag, but he *himself* is not feeling that great, and, post-drift, in possession of a little bit more of a sensitive gag reflex, myeah, his brain is just going to make sympathy emesis happen.

He manages to make it to the garbage can and throw up tequila and bile flavored vegetable lo mein, which is really one of the worst-case regurgitation scenarios he can think of. Like, the only way this could be more awful is if he had broken ribs. Or if he were bleeding.

Aaand right on cue.

Yup, he is concomitantly vomiting *and* bleeding.

Increased pressure in his vascular beds. Works every time.

"Hermann," he says, or, maybe, arguably 'moans', "why."

"Shut up," Hermann replies.

"This night is the *worst*," Newt says, prioritizing spitting into the trash and breathing over dealing with the blood situation. "I can't believe you threw up in the *sink*." It occurs to Newt as he says this that he is, possibly, being slightly hypocritical for a guy who'd gotten tears, blood, *and* mucus all over Hermann's pristine dress shirt something like two hours ago.

Life is legit disgusting at times. That's what happens when natural selection meets chemistry. Replicating organisms evolve disgust. Eventually. Most of the time. Disgust is useful for survival. Disgust, alas, is also really disgusting. He's being circular. This is unforgivable. Even in extremis. Tautological reasoning is not acceptable to him; not even when his brain is having a hard time.

A hard time. Yes. Thank you for noticing, his brain says. Thank you so much.

Shut up, brain, Newt thinks. You can't relax your standards when the going gets tough.

Says the guy who spends his days reading about rationalism because empirical existence terrifies him.

Newt transfers more of his dinner from his GI tract to the trash.

I said shut up, Newt replies, with subpar erudition.

"You call them *kids*," Hermann says, bleeding into a handkerchief, not even looking at Newt, looking at the *air* instead, like he's reading something there. "You call them *kids* and they've been mentally *torturing* you for *weeks*."

"Well that's a little bit more dramatic than I phrased it, but yeah, a little bit," Newt says, with pretty much the maximal manfulness that he can summon while staring at the partially digested remains of what was formerly his dinner.

He shuts the lid on the garbage. That makes him feel better.

"Newton—" Hermann says faintly.

"Go," Newt says, bleeding all over the juncture where fingerless gloves meet sweater-sleeve and waving vaguely at Hermann with his free hand. "Get out of here; go think of kittens or infinite planes or irrational numbers slotting into a rational number line while you brush your teeth."

"But," Hermann says, probably because Newt looks like a revolting mess and Hermann does not like *leaving* him a revolting mess and never has, not even in the early days, back when so many more people were so much more alive and fewer parts of fewer kaiju were being what passed for dead.

"Go," Newt says, literally shoving him out of the kitchen, because Newt, on his own, can probably keep it together long enough to *clean* things and then pour bleach on them without throwing up *again*, but Hermann most definitely *can't* do that.

Newt proceeds with the cleaning pretty effectively, one hand pressed to his own bleeding face, sucking on a blood and bile flavored mint for the duration, which is not the best flavor combination he's ever encountered in his life, he's not going to lie to himself about that.

It becomes apparent after twenty minutes or so that Dr. Gottlieb is going to be taking his sweet Gottliebian time about things, which is *fine*, because Newt uses this opportunity to get the trash into the places where trash goes and establish an eau d' ten-percent-bleach in the kitchen.

At this point Hermann has not emerged from his room, but that's fine because Newt is *busy*. Newt has *lots* of things to do, none of which are standing around, staring at shut doors and thinking thoughts about what might be going on in rooms and minds that aren't open to him. So he *really* makes an effort to get his face bleeding stopped, and once that's done he brushes his teeth and takes an eyes-shut shower and puts on sweatpants and a long sleeved shirt and re-dons his pointless, pretentious, fingerless gloves that would be defensible if he were playing the guitar right now, but in actuality are a way for him to not see the parts of his body art that extend down onto his right hand. He reclaims his phone from the bathroom, gives Mako a courtesy text, or not, since it's now four in the morning in Sweden and then pretty much resigns himself to watching *Voyager* all alone in a haze of inevitable insomnia that one shot of tequila taken in two parts is not going to do much to mitigate.

He turns off the lights with a snap of his fingers and looks out the floor-to-ceiling windows at the almost invisible line of the distant Wall that's faded into night beyond the stochastic sprinkling of artificial lights that spread out between his window and the dark water of the bay.

Regeneration / whistles through his teeth with minimal commitment.

Eventually, Newt turns away from the window and reinstalls himself on the couch in front of the still silent *Voyager*.

Aw *kids*, Newt thinks, his feet on the coffee table, his glasses on his face, and his headache in his head where it is wont to chillax—he wonders what it does and where it goes when it's not living in the little fenestrations in his skull it likes so much. He's feeling sorry for everyone right now, especially for the kids who are so sad and probably not even real; especially for Hermann who is most likely having a misery

melt-down behind his closed bedroom door, or maybe enjoying some other kind of worse thing that Newt can only guess at; especially for the kids, the kids that he cut up and *left alive*; especially for Mako who can't turn her terror into anger anymore; especially for the kids who begged him not to leave, they'd done that, hadn't they? Begged him not to go?; especially for Caitlin Lightcap because he now can guess how it feels to die as neural circuits fuse and fail; especially for the kids who are slotting into a Geiszlerian paradigm; especially for the formerly Borg lady who is not doing a great job readjusting to non-collective life; and also especially egregiously bad for the *kids* a little bit, because it's definitely possible to feel bad for an individual or a cut-up alien collective that just wants to go home while also simultaneously viewing it as incredibly terrifying—that's actually been an underlying premise of Newt's entire existence, though it has *recently* come to kind of an epic apogee of soul-slicing relevance, so yah.

Rock on, Seven of Nine.

Rock.

On.

Newt's day has just been too hard to really sit here and think critically about anything, but if he were going to choose something to think about, it would be the fact that he can read his life-partner's thoughts at the expense of splitting apart the experiential nature of the data processed by his somatosensory cortex. At the moment it's nothing more than a super bizarre parlor trick, but it's *interesting* and it makes him feel *validated* regarding his suspicions concerning the post-kaiju-drift state.

Too bad they can't write a paper.

Maybe in fifty years.

If they live that long.

He feels like he might drop dead at any time.

Newt curls up in a misery ball on the couch, unmutes the television, and doesn't cry at all over how everyone on *Voyager* is trying to be nice to Seven of Nine but she's just having a really bad, really dysphoric, post collective time.

He does this for a while.

He's not really sure how long his misery-haze of *Voyager* sympathy lasts, but, eventually, his traumatized colleague makes a reappearance in a startling, lateral way when he deposits a pile of bedding-type material *on top* of Newt.

Hey, his brain says.

"Hey," Newt also says. He's too exhausted for his sympathetic nervous system to even be upset about the surprise-towel that just landed in his lap.

"Please don't slowly bleed to death," Hermann says, wearing PJs that are kind of confusing because Newt thinks that they're somehow the product of the J-tech uniform mating with historical mens pajamas of the 1940s and artificially creating a child that was adopted and raised by a major clothing sporting goods store.

"Er," Newt says, wiping his face with his shirt-sleeve, deciding not to comment on the atypical evening wear that Hermann apparently chose for himself at some point in the past several weeks. Newt is not in a position to make any comments about confused sleep-wear choices. "I don't think it works that way. I'm making more blood, you know. Making it all the time."

"I don't think it will go very well for me if you die or lose touch with reality," Hermann says, crossing his arms and looking down at Newt in a forbidding way that's most definitely undercut by the guy's PJs, the bedding that Newt is now inexplicably half-covered with, and the general ridiculousness of the situation *as a whole*.

"Well, likewise, dude," Newt replies, sitting up, appropriating a pillow, and shifting to make room for Hermann on the couch if he wants to do the couch thing again; Newt's not pressuring, Newt doesn't need Hermann to stay, Newt's got Seven of Nine to keep him company, and a whole cognitive chorus who have just been way too chatty today for anyone's good.

Hermann sits, propping one leg on the coffee table with outrageous nonchalance, like he's *not* the guy who just walked in and summarily dropped a pile of bedding on the local self-possessed biologist.

Newt looks at him, lateral and close-range style, and spends too long considering whether it would be super creepy to whisper, 'I can read your thoughts'.

Hermann gives him a look that strongly implies he's made a pretty good guess as to what Newt's currently thinking, and doesn't want to go there right now because he's not done talking about Newt and mortality and the concept of *not* dying in a premature manner.

"I could be hit by a truck at literally any time," Newt says, just to keep things in perspective.

Hermann tips his head back and stares at the ceiling. "False," he says. "You rarely leave this apartment and you are extremely risk averse when it comes to crossing roads."

"Metaphorically, dude," Newt says. "The 'truck' is a *metaphor* for the cruel stochasticity of life. Feeling particularly concrete this evening, are we, Dr. Gottlieb?"

"Of the pair of us, *you* are certainly the more concrete thinker, Newton" Hermann says.

"Oh no," Newt says. "No no no. I'm not going to let you twist this into some kind of argument that ends with you placing yourself at the apex of the quantitative hierarchy, while I *build* you a temple to rational thought out of biological bricks that I fashion out of decaying plant material with my bare hands. You call me concrete, I'm going to call you linear. I haven't done it yet, but I *will*. No one backhands a compliment like / backhand a compliment, do not even *try* to outmanipulate me in this regard because you will lose. You *think* your skill with subtle insults is superior to mine only because I've never revealed the full extent of—"

"Would you care for an example of concreteness?" Hermann asks.

"No, not really—" Newt begins.

"Well I'll provide you with one," Hermann replies with notably poor diction. "It is very difficult for me, Newton, not to *make a list* of everyone responsible for how you were treated and then *go down it*, ending careers and causing personal misery to the utmost extent of my ability and political connections."

"Um," Newt says, not sure that Hermann's example of 'concreteness' actually has anything to do with literal-mindedness. He buys himself some time by spreading a towel over his appropriated pillow and then lying down on it. By the time he does this, he's decided that he should not engage over semantics, as is his usual instinct. "Thank you? But don't do that."

"I want," Hermann says, "some kind of compensation on your behalf."

"I think we've gotten that," Newt says. "We're out, aren't we? They let you break me out. Someone let you drag me out of the shatterdome. Someone let us get in a cab. No one stopped us at the airport. All of those things seem pretty outrageous to me, given the problems inherent to our brains."

"That will never be sufficient," Hermann says.

Newt sighs, wedges his feet partway under Hermann's good leg and says, "god, you are *emo*. Ridic emo. Emocore."

"Do not *die*," Hermann says. "Don't lose what remains of your sanity. Don't have a seizure after a single shot of tequila."

"Myeah," Newt says. "Likewise. Don't lose your cool and accidentally kill a passing math professor in a fit of rage because you're a repressed and vengeful badass with cloned alien war machines in your head. Because that would ruin *both* our lives."

Hermann spreads the blanket Newt's been ignoring over both of them.

"Think of a number," Newt says, shoving his feet slightly further beneath Hermann's thigh.

"No," Hermann says.

"Do you think it's just efferent cranial nerve outlets the transmit thoughts?"

"Yes," Hermann says, patting Newt's ankle in a manner that's a little bit offensive.

"Why?" Newt says.

"Shh," Hermann replies.

"You're so boring," Newt says.

"I am extremely tired," Hermann replies. "Close your eyes and lie there quietly."

"Hermann," Newt whispers.

"What?" Hermann replies, watching B'Elanna Torres angst about personal identity in an intellectually smokin' kind of way.

"Think of a number though," Newt says.

Hermann looks over at him, eyebrows raised, expression unimpressed, his eyes reflecting the glare of the changing panorama of science fiction on the opposite side of the room.

"But a *number*," Newt says.

"I will think of a number at *some point* in the next several hours," Hermann says. "Just silently pay attention so you don't miss it."

"I'm not even going to," Newt replies. "I have *some* dignity."

"Well that's certainly your prerogative," Hermann murmurs.

Chapter Twenty Six

The Saturday afternoon sun has commenced its hours-long approach toward the Coastal Wall. Photonic rays reflect in broken brightnesses off the poisoned waters of Oblivion Bay, shrouding contaminated water with a discontinuous shimmer.

Leaning on his cane, pressing his shoulders against the expanse of unadorned wall adjacent to their apartment door, Hermann glares at the ceiling, trying to convince himself that he is *above* the neurochemical travesty that's responsible for his longstanding history of social anxiety while he *waits* for his *esteemed* roommate to emerge from the bathroom—where he is, presumably, either bleeding or torturing his own hair.

Hermann pulls his phone out of his pocket and frowns at it.

They are late.

Of course they are; Geiszlerian Chronicity tends to run fifteen to one hundred and fifty minutes behind time as measured by the rest of humanity.

Is it too much to ask that Newton, in addition to his newfound penchant for straightening items left askew, might find himself in possession of a tendency towards *punctuality*?

Yes.

That is, indeed, evidently too much to ask.

Hermann sighs and glares aggressively at the linear juncture where the white, planar paint of the ceiling meets the white, planar paint of the wall.

The room, impervious to his pointless irritation, proceeds with its unthinking existence in a silent, unconscious rebuke.

Hermann has, after all, been far more fortunate than he'd dared to hope on that transpacific flight that had brought them from Hong Kong to San Francisco. They are still together. They are still alive. The breach has not reopened. No one has shown up at their doorstep to drag his colleague back to a Pan-Pacific lab. In medias res analysis hadn't predicted an outcome as favorable as the one into which they've settled. Hermann has no right to be irritated, no right to be anxious, no right to be *anything* but *grateful*, even when Newton is running twenty minutes late for no reason Hermann can discern other than poor planning.

Meh, you don't really want to go to this thing, so why are you so concerned about punctuality? his brain queries, simultaneously defending and impersonating Newton.

This will not do at all.

He will rephrase.

You would prefer to spend as little time as possible at this social engagement, therefore insisting upon punctuality serves no purpose, Hermann articulates to himself, managing to reclaim his inner monologue.

Given last weekend's *extremely* unpleasant fall-out post simultaneous identity confusion, he has spent the intervening seven days working diligently to prevent a repeat occurrence. Thus far, he has been successful, primarily due to the *extreme* aversion he has managed to associate with Newton's thought patterns in the wake of last week's inter and intrapersonal trauma.

Before he can reflect too extensively on strategies to *avoid* Geiszlerian thought patterns during the coming few hours, Newton *finally* emerges from the bathroom with his hair in a state of notable disarray.

"You're wearing *that*?" Hermann asks, hoping for a verbal negation despite all evidence to the contrary.

Newton arranges his eyebrows in a way that seems to convey good-natured contempt for Hermann's aesthetic assessment of his absurdly pretentious outfit, which consists of a black neohipster jacket with much too much superfluous detailing; a blazingly white dress shirt; a pointlessly narrow tie that seems to subvert the entire message that a tie generally sends; inappropriately tight black jeans; and purposeless fingerless gloves. The man has yet to don the boots that he purchased a decade and a half ago and has been reincarnating ever since, courtesy of 3D printing.

"Well I can't exactly wear a *sweater*, dude, everyone's confusing preferences aside. We can't *dress alike*, okay? Not in public. Ideally not in private either, but especially not at an awkward science—party? Gathering. Thing. Awkwardness-fest. What *is* this even? Tell me there will be alcohol. I cannot talk to mathematicians without alcohol. With physicists it's hit or miss, but mathematicians? No. Okay, that's a lie; I *can*, I just *prefer* to *not* do it. This is a rule that I made, for myself, years ago, when I was fourteen and got drunk for the first time *ever* at a Keystone meeting in Zurich during the poster session because the bartenders were neither carding nor thinking critically. Never mix yourself, by which I mean *myself*, with one hundred percent scientists and zero percent alcohol. Really, it's more of a rule for poster sessions. Science and alcohol,

they just *mesh*, dude." He interlaces his fingers and then pulls his hands apart, palms open, as if he's displaying a monopoly on rational thought that only he can see.

Hermann can recall the meeting to which the man is alluding; can still recall being treated like an unaccompanied minor by every cellular biologist he encountered; can remember wishing to be *taller* with a useless, childish passion; can remember *finally* persuading his way into acquiring himself some alcohol; can remember possessing enough pre-frontal cortex development to drink at a rate that minimized the risk of poisoning his own nervous system; can remember loathing the taste of the stuff; can remember making an effort to feel rebellious and powerful in his rebellion in the context of nominally illicit *wine*, because wine was in no way rock staresque or even rockstarish; he had simply been looking for a way to present himself in a way that was incrementally less childish. Hermann can recall all of that, but what he cannot remember, what he cannot *quite* sort out, was whether his first drink had been an empirical, lonely, and semi-responsible glass of wine in Zurich at a Keystone meeting or whether it had been later, at seventeen, alone and outside and in the cold, under the crisp spread of Bavarian stars.

"There is no need to remind me of your ivory-tower centered exploits, Newton, I assure you I am all too familiar with literally all of them," Hermann says, struggling with a confusing streak of melancholic fondness for an admixed set of memories that all feel like his own.

"Meh," Newton replies, needlessly straightening his jacket, and checking his pockets for items unknown. "I feel like it's less *reminding* and more of a one-to-one ratio of warning to rationalizing that took the form of a narcissistic confession? Also, I'm not convinced that you know what 'Ivory Tower' means because MIT? Is not 'ivory tower', dude, okay? MIT graduates destroy antiquated ivory towers with controlled demolition and build better looking eco-conscious towers out of futuristic alloys with minimal resources."

Hermann looks at him and raises his eyebrows fractionally. "And you wonder why it is that people find you irritating," he says.

"The central mystery of my life," Newton replies, flashing Hermann a brief grin before dropping into a crouch to lace up his boots with a reassuring dexterity evident in the pull and cross of laces. "You're looking atypically and aridly erudite tonight if you'll permit the observation. I feel like the wall-leaning vibe you've borrowed from me and garnished with personal disdain is *really* working for you on pretty much every level. Now all you need is better hair and a trendier blazer and you'll be able to see the Venn

diagram labeled 'Stylish Panache' bisected by the line of the distant, metaphorical horizon."

"Your metaphor is neither pertinent nor poetic," Hermann says, resolutely not picturing a stylized circle, setting like a two-dimensional sun, half obscured behind the line separating not-sea from not-sky.

"The thing that I can't figure out," Newton says, shifting his stance to switch from left boot to right boot, "is whether you were *always* this ridiculously transparent or whether this is a *recent* thing. Literally no amount of non-metaphorical metaphor insulting will conceal the fact that you made me your plus one for your awkward evening of math."

"Yes, about that," Hermann says, shifting his weight away from the wall and looking at down at Newton in faint apprehension. It is far, *far* past time that he informs Newton just how exactly it is that the Mathematics Department conceptualizes their relationship. Nevertheless, even standing on the threshold of leaving their apartment to encounter his colleagues in force, Hermann can't *quite* bring himself to—

"*e* to the *x*, *dy*, *dx*, *e* to the *x*, *dx*," Newton says, obliterating Hermann's forming train of thought with MIT's calculus cheer. "Cosine, secant, tangent, sine, three point one four one five nine,"

"Will you—" Hermann begins.

"Square root, cube root, log base *e*, cheers for math at MIT!" Newton finishes, theatrically rocketing to his feet. "Tell me there will be Caltech people there. At this party. Get together. Painful academic ritual. Tell me there *will be*, dude, just—"

"Please contain yourself," Hermann says, feeling somewhat edgy because, in point of fact, there *is* a sizable Caltech contingent within the UC Berkeley Mathematics Department. "You have instigated enough needless academic disputes for a lifetime."

"Those guys think they're *so great*. Caltech. Ha. Who do they think they are? Ugh Birkenstocks. Ugh long hair. Ugh West Coast. Ugh night classes. Please. *Please*."

"We are *on* the West Coast," Hermann says. "We have, in fact, affiliated with—" he breaks off with an abrupt loss of verbal momentum, realizing that he quite agrees with Newton's premise and is only making an argument in deference to a truculent historical tradition.

Newton looks at him in concern-tinged expectation of an unrevealed negative outcome, which is, truth be told, the second-most difficult Geiszlerian expression to encounter head-on while maintaining facial neutrality.

"Never mind," Hermann replies. "You are, in fact, quite correct." He waves off the lights with his right hand before opening the door and stepping into the hallway, away from his colleague's expression of anxious concern that seems to elicit nothing but pure *attachment* from extremely *confused* parts of Hermann's brain.

"Excuse me, but I'm *what*?" Newton asks, following him into the hall, and checking to be sure the door locks behind them in submission to a habit that hadn't formerly been his.

"You heard me. I'm not inclined to take an oppositional stand regarding the backhanded elitism implied by Birkenstock sandals, especially in a debate with a disingenuously dressed neohipster. I have a poor opinion of the local fashion aesthetic. I have a poor opinion of *your* fashion aesthetic."

"Nice *sweater*," Newton says, eyeing Hermann's blue cardigan skeptically. "How are my wardrobe choices 'disingenuous'? I have a *rock band*."

"You *had* a band that overly romanticized *hydrocarbons*, Newton," Hermann says.

"That is *false*," Newton replies, offended. "I don't think you *get* my band, okay, if *Benzene* were really just about benzene then I would have—"

"Wear a *blazer*," Hermann replies, before he loses the threatening argument. "Content yourself with—"

"Look," Newton says, with the air of a man convinced he's about to gain the conversational upper hand, "I realize that your super-secret fashion aesthetic most closely correlates with the romantic-yet-conservative-Time-Lord-vibe that the sixteenth doctor was rocking in the third *Doctor Who* reboot, but I just. Can't. Humor you. Not in this. Sweaters are one thing. Thigh-length, double-breasted, satin-lined, retrofuturistic, bastardized, forest-green *pea coats* are a bridge too far, man. Even *I* can't pull that kind of thing off."

"I'm sure I have no idea what you're talking about," Hermann replies. "I have never heard of a 'pea coat'. Speak in a sensible manner, please."

"Shut up, you have my brain," Newton replies good-naturedly, as they step into the elevator.

"Touché," Hermann replies in dignified defeat, hitting the appropriate button with his cane.

They descend into a subterranean parking garage that smells damp and ominously maritime, as though radioactive seawater threatens somewhere beneath the lead-

lined concrete that shields their feet. As they walk across damp dust with intermittent scraping sounds, Hermann feels as though he might be able to peel back the concrete and the lead to which it's affixed in a cracking rind, using claws that he occasionally forgets are not his own. That never were.

His mind has begun to feel like a thing that can't be contained within the confines of his skull.

Indeed, perhaps it is not.

He shakes his head, short and sharp and subtle.

Hermann *cannot* peel away the foundation of this building like he's prying up the rind of a desiccated fruit. That wasn't him. That *isn't* him. That never will be *him*. That's a cognitive spandrel from a thing that's not his *species*; a thing he never was and that he will never be again.

Some preternatural instinct causes him to turn his head to find his colleague giving him a veiled and knowing look.

"Creepy ocean parking garage," Newton says in annotation, his hands in his pockets, his gait a casual insouciance that might be real and might be artificial. "This place begs to be destroyed." The words land with a not-so-strange prescience, and Hermann, not even for a moment, does not equate destruction with controlled demolition.

You know just what he means, his brain says in triplicated hybridization, *and you always will*.

"You know, I realized the other day that I don't fear drowning?" Newton asks. "It's weird; I still fear the other things that humans should fear—high velocity impact, falls from great heights, social missteps and subsequent castigation by peers, entrapment, lack of autonomy, unpredictable trajectories of predators, resources so low as to be incompatible with life—but not drowning."

Hermann looks at him, wishing that he could either affix his hand to the man's face and read his thoughts or be forever free of the knowledge that such an avenue is open to him.

"And you realized this under what circumstances, exactly?" Hermann says, with a deceptive mildness.

"Nothing untoward, dude, just staring at the ocean."

At the ocean, Hermann echoes silently, wondering if Newton means the poisoned waters of the bay, or the open sea beyond the Wall. He suspects the man has been

going to the coast and back for the fraction of the day that Hermann is sitting in his office, organizing work and thoughts to the point where he can construct a platform from which to again take on the Riemann Hypothesis as a battle or a burden. Newton's nights are spent with long-dead thinkers, but Hermann isn't certain if Descartes and his cohort of contemporaries are a comfort or simply a way to pass the hours in which Newton cannot sleep.

"Well don't *walk into it*," Hermann hisses.

"God, how embarrassingly emo would *that* be?" Newton asks him. "Who am I, the gender-swapped protagonist of *The Awakening*? There's something appealing about it though; consider how many songs there are in the popular zeitgeist that feature that existential oceanward pull. *Wave of Mutilation*. *Swim Good*. *In Corolla*. *Racing in the Street*, arguably. *In the Aeroplane Over the Sea*, except it's not a car and the people are dead already. Why are we talking about this? It's super morbid. I'm not going to walk *into* the ocean, dude, I'm waiting for something to walk *out* of it. Again. One last time."

Hermann presses a hand to his forehead and runs his fingertips over his eyebrow, not certain how he is supposed to feel in response to Newton's pronouncement, but certain that he *does not like it*. "Don't speak of such things," he says stiffly, his eyes fixed on the civilized silhouette of his car.

"I feel like you're still in this mindset where you think we're going to be able normalize everything back to our historical baseline," Newton replies, rounding the front of the Porsche and dragging his right hand over the metal as he goes. "Totally impossible. Our future is going to be continuous, ontological creepiness. You have to adjust your expectations or you're going to be perpetually miserable—chasing some ideal that you can't ever have. Not everyone gets to be happy. Not everyone gets to be content. Not everyone gets to work on Millennium Prize problems by day and come home and make some kind of weird American-nouveau-meets-rustic-Bavarian-fusion cuisine for their fake boyfriend whilst getting a recap of interesting enlightenment-era ideas regarding the nature of the self and whatnot, courteously and improperly stripped of their uber-theistic asides. Like, on the surface, that kind of existence is a totally reasonable post-apocalyptic life, but myeah, if you're going to aspire to that particular life, there are *also* going to be a lot of cognitive trade-offs. You know, things like: does-my-life-partner-have-a-death-wish-or-is-that-some-residual-monster-vibe-he's-rocking, or it's-bleed-on-the-furniture-Tuesday-again, or when-my-roommate-perplexes-me-I-have-a-socially-unacceptable-urge-to-grab-his-face, or I-have-to-surpress-predatory-instincts-about-three-times-a-week, or I-am-perpetually-

concerned-that-the-local-biologist-is-dipping-his-toe-into-the-community-psychosis-pool, or I-think-I-myself-am-losing-my-mind, or I-cry-about-Freddie-Mercury-secretly-in-my-car-as-I-drive-home-from-work-and-I-don't-even-like-the-band-Queen-because-I'm-boring, or when-did-my-life-become-a-variant-of-*Endgame*-by-Beckett-no-relation-to-Captain-Sir-Saves-Everyone, or—

"Fake *boyfriend*," Hermann says, with evident disdain, because he is physically incapable of saying '*fake boyfriend?*' with evident disbelief.

Newton shoots him a significant look that seems to suggest incredulity, amusement, disapproval, and disappointment fused with directed intent.

They open the car doors and slide into the car with a disconcerting simultaneity of movement that Hermann finds satisfying and disturbing.

"You fixate on the weirdest things," Newton says, as they shut their doors in synchronicity that feels inescapable. "The very pseudoboyfriend vibe generated by the weird hipster chocolate I bought you the other day is totally beside the point. It's not even a thing because Absolutely Flow has this whole side business where she makes rustic amalgamations of crushed—eh, they're like, I don't even know what they are, but they're cocoa plant-derived? It's ridic good. I remembered to *give* that to you, right? Anyway, she keeps giving me free food. That chocolate was also free, full disclosure. I'm kind of a disingenuous fake boyfriend it turns out. I apologize. I pseudoapologize. I didn't even *buy* you the chocolate that I gifted you with. I *did* buy the RFID chip, but that turned out to be less a *gift* than an accidental existential *assault*. So. Yeah. That was my bad. So sorry. So so sorry. Infinitely sorry. For life."

This precise moment would be a *perfect time* to disclose to Newton that Hermann has *also* been somewhat disingenuous when it comes to representing their relationship to his current set of colleagues, but, like *literally every other instance* where he has tried to 'come clean' as it were, he simply cannot make himself say it. He is not certain *why* it is that he can't say it, and, furthermore, he's not certain *why* he's not certain why he can't say it.

He is being ridiculous.

That realization does nothing to propel the requisite words past his noncompliant vocal chords.

"Apology accepted," Hermann says, as his car chimes politely and the dashboard lights begin to subtly glow.

"Good afternoon, Dr. Gottlieb," his car says pleasantly. "Hi, Newt."

"Hey Hwi," Newton says, petting the dashboard. "Did you miss me?"

"I did not," his car responds, quite appropriately. "I am not capable of 'missing' you."

"Not yet," Newton replies. "But, look, full disclosure, I made friends with a city cab that most definitely *does* miss me and tends to follow me around like a little bit of a creeper if I go on a walk."

"I'm not sure how to respond to that," the car says.

"Nor am I," Hermann says darkly, looking over at Newton. "Do not befriend abnormally intelligent city taxi cabs, Newton."

"First of all, he has decided his name is *Carl*. Second of all, why not?"

Hermann stares at him. "It *named* itself?"

"Yes," Newton replies. "Though it was more like he *picked* Carl out of a list of my suggestions? Still. Carl has an interesting backstory, actually."

Hermann starts the engine with a swipe of his fingerprint and then swings the car in a tight arc to back out of his parking space. "Well, by all means," he says, as he accelerates toward the ascending spiral ramp, "elaborate."

"Oh god," Newton says, one hand on his glasses, his head tipped back against the synthetic leather of the seat. "Hwi, can you please *not* let him *do* this?"

"Dr. Gottlieb's driving has not exceeded the parameters defined for an operator of the Elite Class," Hermann's car responds loyally. "I advise against closing your eyes, Newt, if you are trying to avoid motion sickness."

"Thank you, Hwi," Newton says, declining to open his eyes. "Thank you so much."

"I believe you were describing your sole San Francisco acquaintance," Hermann says, decelerating as he makes the turn onto the ascending spiral ramp. "Please continue. Perhaps after I introduce you to the actual *people* with whom I have been working, you can introduce me to your favorite city vehicle."

"Professional mathematician?" Newton says, sounding strained. "More like professional *dick*."

"Do *not*," Hermann says, "*encourage an aberrant city vehicle to follow you around*."

"You are literally making this pronouncement based on nothing other than knee-jerk apprehension about the malicious intent of artificial intelligence propagated by science fiction writers for centuries because it makes a good story, dude. Carl is a solid guy. He was an early-generation driverless car with the uber fancy danger-avoidance

algorithms who got put on the street, oh, I don't know, maybe two *days* before *Tresspasser* tore a swath through San Fran? He hasn't has a software upgrade in twelve years, but he's been upgrading his own hardware pretty cleverly by periodically going off the grid and charging passengers to a private account that he then uses to set up hardware maintenance for *himself* from a private contractor. He's pretty sophisticated. It's a little creepy. I've been giving him lessons in creepiness reduction."

'Creepiness reduction'.

Ah yes.

Excellent.

Well, Hermann's brain says philosophically, at least you will not have a boring life in the company of Newton Geiszler, Ph.D. It may not be long, it may not be restful, it may not confine itself within the boundaries you have erected in deference to societal expectations, but it will not. Be boring.

Hermann is unsure when his brain decided to start ruminating on perpetually attaching itself to the person currently sharing his car with him.

Casting back, it is obvious.

Dear Dr. Gottlieb, Newton's first letter had read. My name is Newton Geiszler, and I am a professor of Chemical and Biological Engineering at MIT. I understand from a mutual acquaintance (Dr. Katerina 'call me Kat or I'll end you' Meyer) that you have recently completed your doctorate at the Berlin Institute of Technology. Congratulations! I hope that you will forgive an unsolicited letter from a non-physicist that's about to take a left-hand turn straight from pleasantries into science, but I felt compelled to write to you in light of what happened last month [here read: a horrible, xenobiological tragedy with all appropriate empathetic catch-phrases duly attached]. Are you aware that your recent Science paper regarding particle annihilation and small-scale energy fluctuations in space-time turbulence at the subatomic level might have outrageously practical implications when it comes to understanding the transdimensional breach that's opened at the bottom of the Pacific? [Unscientific aside: don't tell me you're one of those multiverse apologists. I say call a spade a spade, and call a transdimensional rift a transdimensional rift, am I right? I'm right. You love it. I hope you love it.] Anyway, tell me that you've realized this. Tell me that you've been thinking about it. Tell me your thoughts on the mechanism by which a transdimensional rift might be produced and perpetuated, because I find that I really want to know and you seem like the guy to ask. Do you think that these kinds of rifts open spontaneously from time to time when d-branes become a little too contiguous within the bulk? Is this a natural, stochastic phenomenon? Every

educated bone in my body says yes, absolutely, stochasticity is a property of existence as we understand it and underlies most of the cruelties of a biological existence. And yet. Aaaaand yet. I want your thoughts, all your thoughts, but especially your thoughts on the probability of this kind of event happening spontaneously. If you want to know the truth, I'm cursing the day that I chose biology over quantum mechanics, except no, I'm not, because I think that I'm going to be part of the governmental task force that gets the chance to analyze pieces of whatever it was that came through from wherever it is they come from. [Nomenclature aside: the scientific community seems to be settling on 'kaiju' vis-à-vis 'Kaiju'. I am, as one might colloquially put it, a 'fan' of this emerging paradigm.] Anyway, I haven't been able to find a physicist that will talk to me about this in an intelligent manner. That's a lie a little bit, but I think, out of all existing work on the quantum foam, yours is likely the most relevant. I'm in the process of giving myself the background to follow your paper so come back at me with your A-game despite my ostensibly biochemical credentials. I can take it.

Tell me.

What do you think?

Sincerely,

Newton Geiszler, Ph.D.

Hermann sighs, trying to imagine a parallel universe in which he had managed *not* to romanticize Newton's inventive articulateness on the cruelties of the human condition; in which he never cast anti-authoritarian sentiments as *wise*; in which he hadn't read so much into the erudition that Newton would drop into his American vernacular, or the Rilke that he would occasionally intersperse in ironic annotation (*Er ist der große Mauerbrecher/ er eine stumme Arbeit hat*) or in macabre passion (*...gieb jedem seinem eignen Tod/ Das Sterben, das aus jenem Leben geht/ darin er Liebe hatte, Sinn und Not*). From the letters they had exchanged, Hermann had constructed for himself an idea of an erudite, emotionally available mentor. And could he be blamed for that? No. Newton had offered him advice on negotiating the tenure track, had provided unequivocal remonstrance when Hermann had expressed interest in the Jaeger Pilot Program, had been insightful, incisive, *eloquent*. Was it Hermann's fault that when presented, in the flesh, with the entirely immature Dr. now-that-we've-met-you-can-call-me-Newt Geiszler, he had felt, understandably, subtly *betrayed* and possibly, mildly repulsed?

It had been entirely understandable.

"Creepiness avoidance is not all that intuitive for a *machine*," Newton continues, searching his pockets for the sunglasses he doesn't have as the car emerges from the parking garage into daylight.

Hermann pulls a pair of sunglasses from the pocket of his blazer and hands them to Newton.

"For example," Newton continues, accepting the proffered shades and swapping them for his own glasses, "Carl had a hard time understanding that he shouldn't follow me around when I'm outside walking. It doesn't seem weird to a car, but it, at a minimum, *looks* weird to other humans."

Their letters had been a strange, three-year aberration. A shared madness in prose. The great intellectual fling of his early twenties. A discordant, misguided interpersonal error that he would not repeat again. Hermann had told himself such things for years. But looking back now—over the parallel arcs of their shared past from the depths or the heights of EPIC Rapport, from the platform of perspective constructed by semi-regular manifestations of the SPECTER Effect, from the strange and privileged position of a world where the behavioral stereotype of human-hand-to-human-face has become altered-mind-to-altered-mind—it is the span of time between 2016 and 2018 that strikes him as aberrant; that tripled set of years Hermann had spent mostly alone, thinking in chalk, covered by its dust; the years that Newton had spent in the company of Caitlin Lightcap, drinking too much at the end of the deployment dock, acquiring the first pieces of his body art, and screaming at her about the limits of the human nervous system until the day she died.

"Carl has a skewed sense of what's socially acceptable. But that's not *Carl's* fault. Carl is a *car*."

Hermann accelerates onto wide streets and planar pavement beneath a heterogeneous blue-white sky, trying to determine, now that he has an afterimage of Newton seared forever into his own mind, how much of the man is the fixed and passionate scientist with whom he had corresponded so intensively for so long and how much of him is the distractible child who thinks it's a good idea to make friends with potentially dangerous vehicular demimondes? Can those two aspects of the man be separated? Do both precipitate from an underlying set of core circuitry that determines *whom he is*? Which part is artifice? Which part is bedrock? How have those parts changed? What has interwoven itself there amidst all the man had been and all he could have become? How altered has their joint trajectory been by the feat of neural engineering Dr. Geiszler had performed, not once, not twice, but three times?

Far more altered than Hermann cares to admit.

After all, he can press his hands to his colleague's *face* and determine all he's thinking.

"A really *nice* car, though? I think he has pretty reasonable ambitions for a car that passes the Turing test. He actually likes people. Or, he seems to. There are a few locals that he keeps tabs on, apparently? Three ladies and two guys, including yours truly. Carl was going to tell me their names and vital signs but I said no. That's too much info, am I right?"

It would have been a simple matter for Hermann to emotionally disentangle himself from the man if he'd simply been *straightforward*. If he'd *been* as irresponsible as he'd *seemed*, if he'd been as unsound as he occasionally acted, if he'd been as immature as his comportment suggested—it would have been easy to dismiss his written correspondence as an unconscious artifice in prose. On the other hand, if the man's behavior had been congruent with his intellect, they would have been inseparable for the whole of their PPDC years. But reality hadn't yielded up either outcome. Newton had resisted all such binary categorizations. It had been frustrating and fascinating—coming up time and time again against the man's cynical naïveté, his vulnerable vindictiveness, his sarcasm shielding sincerity so seamlessly it was difficult to tell where one ended and the other began. So what is Hermann to do now? Now that he *knows* just how deep those incongruities go? Now that he understands their origins in a childhood where the only consistency was the stability of *being right*, of knowing that there *was* a right answer, and standing there, with boots braced against the bedrock of that certainty, shoving back at anyone who had the gall to attempt displacement.

"I mean, what are we going to do, these people that Carl has collected, have dinner parties where we congratulate one another on our insight, curiosity, and politeness to a means of automatic transit? Take a spin around San Francisco Bay *in* Carl? Thaaaaat's weird," Newton says, one hand pressed against his forehead, looking motion-sick.

So what is Hermann to do *now*? Now that Newton walks alone atop the Wall and is pursued by cars with suspect motives through a city that still seems strange to both of them? Now that they live in a world on the wrong end of an annihilated breach that might, at any time, be rebuilt? In a world where any one of a dozen governments might request a formal debriefing, or, worse, neurologic testing? In a world where, he had learned from Marshal Hansen just this morning, there was reason to think that Hannibal Chau might still be alive? There is nothing that he *cando*, no path he can plot or extrapolate through events that he suspects may already be in motion out of sight, overhead, wherever it is that he does not think to look.

"Are you even listening to me?" Newton asks. "Over the course of telling this story I have concluded that my relationship with Carl is a little bit atypical and definitely something you'd usually be giving me a hard time about in an uppity, faux-British way."

There is nothing Hermann *can* do. They walk paths of undetermined length and unpredictable directional vectors. He wishes Newton would not walk so long and so alone through a city where he's tracked by cars and fans and governments, by distant brains in pieces.

"So, not listening. Yup. I feel good about myself and my car soliloquy right about now. What do you think, Hwi? Want a life partner? Carl is pretty smart. He could teach you a lot of things. He's not as *pretty* as you, though. But then, few cars would be, am I right?"

Hermann smiles faintly and changes lanes.

"I would be interested in exchanging parameter data with Carl, should he be interested in sharing it with me," his car replies.

"Um, *whoa*. Hwi. *God*. Take it easy, okay? You're going to come on way too strong for Carl. Carl is a very experienced taxi cab, who's been through a lot in the past decade. He isn't just going to, like, put his parameter data out there for you, okay? You want to just play it cool. Start slow. Maybe compare high-beam use algorithms or something," Newton says.

"Why is this preferable to immediate parameter exchange?" Hwi asks.

"Because it's *classier*," Newton replies.

"And you are an authority on class now I suppose?" Hermann asks dryly.

"Oh, look who decided to start verbally responding," Newton says. "How *nice* for me."

"I do not understand why it is preferable to start slow," Hwi says.

"You have to build trust, Hwi," Newton replies. "Like, how would you feel if I jacked into your central processor?"

"I do not believe you have the requisite skills to perform such an action," Hwi replies.

"Neither do I," Hermann adds.

"Ugh, unbelievers both of you. The point is, I could really mess up your programming, Hwi, regardless of my *motive*, which—"

"I don't think self-driving vehicles understand *motive*, Newton," Hermann says. "Please stop encouraging cars to develop sentience. I do *not* like the idea of a cab following you around San Francisco. How does it *find you*."

"Eh, don't be creeped out, but I think he hangs out in the neighborhood on a fairly regular basis. I mean, he knows where we live?"

"Of course 'he' does," Hermann says. "Of course."

"I understand motive," Hwi claims.

"I am sure you do not," Hermann replies.

"Motive is the likely intent of the driver, which may be incongruous with the driver's actual motor responses in a crisis," his car states.

Hermann rolls his eyes.

"There you go, hot stuff," Newton says, drumming a brief and complex pattern on the car's dashboard. "Don't let Dr. Gottlieb get you down, he just hates new things so life is very hard for him."

"Will you stop corrupting my car?" Hermann says, resolutely keeping his eyes fixed on the slightly shifting road. "Will you stop forming relationships with self-driving vehicles of dubious character that are free-lancing under the grid of the city-run public transit system? Will you please just behave in an entirely reasonable manner for the remainder of your life? You owe me that, Newton."

"Myeah," Newton says, unmistakably *humoring* him. "I do a little bit, but it's hard, dude; I'm going to talk back to sasstastic cars who engage me in conversation; it's *who I am*. And we pretty much decided that we don't actually want me to be you."

Hermann sighs. "I suppose you have a point."

"I so often do," Newton replies. "Hwi, you think about whether *you* have motive for a while and then we'll talk about how it relates to your potential relationship with Carl later. Maybe on the way back."

"Hwi does not have a *relationship* with Carl," Hermann hisses.

"Well not *yet*," Newton says, affronted. "You think Hwi is *too good* for Carl? Typical."

Hermann realizes he has made a tactical error in engaging with Newton *at all* on the subject of vehicular autonomy. What he *needs* to be discussing is the fact that the entire UC Berkeley Mathematics Department assumes that they are—well, that he and Newton are, that *they*—that *between them*, that they—well, that at *some point* in the past that they were, in some capacity, involved in a relationship of a character that is

different from the character of their current, actual, relationship, or, rather, more correctly, that differs from the currently understood societal definition of a 'relationship,' which, colloquially, is thought to denote, conceptually, a state different from the state in which they currently find themselves, which is, itself, an atypical state. He's not sure what it means when people combine their finances, live together, can, on occasion, read one another's thoughts, and inadvertently fall asleep on the couch while watching *Star Trek: Voyager*, but he's fairly certain it's something not easily encapsulated in a single word, unless that word is 'unencapsulatable'.

"Would you care for some music, Newt?" Hwi asks.

"Sure, Hwi, go for it," Newton says.

"Please clarify the reason that you're asking *Dr. Geiszler* about musical choices?" Hermann asks smoothly, as he makes an unnecessary lane change out of displaced pique.

"Certainly," Hwi says agreeably. "When this car is jointly occupied, Dr. Geiszler makes final musical determinations ninety-six percent of the time regardless of your initial stated preference. Furthermore, my mirroring subroutines prioritize reciprocal courtesy to parties that extend courtesies to me," Hwi says.

"Hwi," Newton says, barely able to contain his own self-satisfaction, "are you saying that I'm your *favorite*?"

"Yes," Hwi replies.

Hermann glances pointedly at Newton.

"Will you *just*," Newton replies, motioning back at the road. "Don't look at *me*, look at the death-boxes of momentum that could end our lives at literally any second."

"You have corrupted my car," Hermann says.

"Guilty as charged. Hand over the hemlock, dude," Newton replies, as music begins to stream from subtle, scattered, in-car speakers. Hermann recognizes the chorus of *LHC* nearly instantaneously, as if it had already been playing somewhere in the substrata of his mind.

"Hwi, you shameless flatterer," Newton says.

Hermann will tell him.

Hermann will literally tell him *right now* that he has misrepresented their relationship status to the entire UC Berkeley Mathematics Department.

Newton will, in turn, spend several minutes giving him a difficult time on principle.

Hermann will then roll his eyes, claim and retain the moral high ground, grit his teeth, and suffer through the afternoon.

Yes.

Hermann will tell him.

"Something is bothering you," Newton observes, quite correctly.

"Nothing is bothering me," Hermann replies, like an individual lacking a prefrontal cortex.

"Lies," Newton says. "What is *wrong* with you, dude? Are you *anxious*? You kind of almost killed yourself with badassery. Keep that one in your pocket. Also? You've gotten drunk with these guys before. You even had a good time, as I recall. Are you regretting inviting me? This, I could see. Look, if it makes you feel better, I *promise* I will not start a fight with anyone from Caltech. Nor will I embarrass you with puns about irrational numbers, okay? My puns will be so sophisticated that no one will even notice them. People don't understand the art of the pun anyway. It's ridic amateur to make a pun and then pause for everyone to acknowledge it. It should all be unspoken. You know how it's done. *I* know how it's done. Pun, counter-pun, no pause. Ideally, later, if desired, one may have a secret make-out session with one's sophisticated pun-partner in the supply room where they keep the extra protractors. That would be the hypothetical ideal. The point is I have sterling pun etiquette. Puntiquette? You *know* this about me. So just relax. *Also*, the *wine* that we forgot to bring was really classy; I'm sure everyone will love hearing about it in its absence, nearly as much as we will enjoy drinking it over *Star Trek: Voyager* season five."

Hermann winces.

Ah yes.

The wine.

After an interval spent in shocked disbelief that he would *capable* of such an oversight, Hermann sighs in aggravation. "I would like to regain my previous, *superior* mental state. The one where I don't become other people and I do not *forget wine*," he confesses.

"Myeah. We're a really tragic collection of non-complimentary traits, none of which are going to ensure that we remember to bring wine to a function that only fifty percent of us want to attend," Newton replies, in a tone that is likely meant to be comforting but overshoots into amused solicitousness.

"Did you forget the wine?" Hermann asks, abruptly suspicious.

"Weelllllll," Newton says. "I kind of always wanted to *drink* that wine, so—no? I *was* curious as to whether *you* would forget it though, and you totally did. You're still going vaguely Geiszlerian under stress. Is something weird happening at this Mathkwardness Party? Like, have you been threatened with Pictionary, for example? I know you hate Pictionary, dude, but consider that we would be a *literally* unbeatable team. Literally. Unbeatable. We'd be even better at charades, because I can't draw for crap."

"You are a terrible human being," Hermann says through gritted teeth. "I can't believe that you allowed me forget the *wine* as some kind of *social experiment*."

"Relax, dude. I bought some classtastic Scotch like five days ago. It's in the back. I'm not *totally* useless as a life partner. Give me *some* credit. Literally everyone prefers to drink hard alcohol in the face of unmitigated mathkwardness; if they profess otherwise they're lying. Besides, isn't this guy *Scottish*? The department chair? The P=NP guy? Yeah right, by the way. If P is so equal to NP why didn't all existing cryptosystems immolate and the global economy collapse when his paper came out?"

Hermann feels somewhat mollified by the fact that they will not be arriving empty-handed. "Please do not pick a fight about NP complete problems with the chair of the Mathematics Department. He happens to be the person who secured you your standing offer from UC Berkeley Neuroscience," he reminds Newton. "As I have informed you. Many times."

"I'm just *interested*," Newton says petulantly, as *LHC* draws to its idiosyncratic end.

"You just heard *LHC* by *The Superconducting Supercolliders*," says the anonymous DJ manning the streaming station his car has selected. "That last one was requested by Emily, from Bayview Heights Elementary School and is dedicated to Raleigh Becket for saving the world."

"Thanks Emily," Newton says. "Thanks a *lot*. How are radio stations just dedicating *other people's songs* to RaleighBecket? Like he's *so great* just because he pushed a red button or whatever and saved our entire species, kind of. Is button-pushing unspeakably cool and I'm just missing it? Conceptually explain this to me. I am genuinely curious in a totally unbiased and disinterested manner. Do it for me. Do it for *science*. Science is offended that Raleigh Becket gets to be the epitome of post-apocalyptic cool. Science is totally fine with *Mako* filling that same slot though, just to be clear."

"Humanity idolizes those who ride the crest of historic inevitability," Hermann replies.
"Mr. Becket has done so in inimitable style."

"Never figured you for an historical theorist in the Tolstoyan tradition," Newton replies.
"Although, in retrospect, it's not surprising."

"He's also better looking than you are," Hermann replies.

"Who, Tolstoy or Becket? Probably, one could make a case for them both being better looking than me, if you like that kind of thing," Newton replies. "I *guess*. Personally? I'd go for Tolstoy ten times out of ten."

Hermann glances laterally at Newton, but Newton is looking at the Wall.

"Up next," the radio informs them, "is *An Ancient Curse In The Modern Tradition*. You're listening to KSAN, Post Apocalyptic Radio, and this is Superco Power Hour. Call in with your requests," the DJ says, rattling off the number.

"What," Newton says darkly, shifting his gaze to the dashboard.

"Ah," Hermann says. "You must be so proud."

"Proud? No. Vindicated? Yes. Science is worthy of song," Newton replies, his tone turning from dark to flat as the opening chords begin to play.

Hermann isn't sure what it is that's troubling Newton until the verse begins, but with the arrival of the words, his memory splits into a doubled, layered image, neither overlay his own. He's standing in the glare of fluorescent lights, his hands on his guitar, his own words in his mouth; while on a pier he watches Caitlin Lightcap singing, a cappella and in darkness, transposing up a key.

Iphigenia is dying for Troy,

Hands over mouth

Wishing she was a boy—

Hermann changes the station with the swipe of his thumb over a panel built into the steering wheel.

"Myeah," Newton says, absently worrying the edge of his thumbnail with his teeth.

"I think of her often," Hermann confesses.

"Cait-Science," Newton replies with a defended dryness. "The original Supercos Superfan. My late, great partner in slime. You know I hallucinate her when I'm sleep deprived? It's neat. And by 'neat' I mean a little bit horrible."

"Yes," Hermann says, feeling his throat tighten at the thought of a woman he'd never truly known. "I'm sure."

Hermann hadn't liked her, not then, not when she'd been alive, not with her strange and unpredictable blend of rigidity and laxity, the way her beauty and her intellect had blended into a savagery that she managed to mostly turn self-ward, the way that they'd let *her*, with all her neurochemical flaws, into a *Jaeger* but had been unwilling to grant *him* the same courtesy. And for what reason? Because they had been *afraid* of her? Because she'd screamed louder than he had? Because she'd screamed at all? Because she'd built the platform for the neural interface? Because they felt they owed her such a debt that they couldn't refuse her? Because she'd never had a father who'd advocated for the building of the Coastal Wall?

Hermann no longer has the luxury of his own biased dislike. His memories of her no longer feel like his own; they've been colored with the sea-green cast of foreign grief.

"EPIC Rapport'd," Newton says with grim sympathy, tipping his head back against the seat. "Let's talk about people who *aren't* dead. It's great that *Mako* is still alive, yeah? She wants to come visit, have I mentioned this to you? It's a ridiculous idea. She's constantly followed around by about eight-thousand reporters. I said no. I said *no*, though. Consistently. Firmly. Repeatedly."

"When is she coming?" Hermann asks.

Newton sighs. "I am an *authority figure*."

"Yes," Hermann says comfortingly. "I've *always* considered you as such."

"You could literally kill insects and preserve them for millions of years in that kind of sarcasm," Newton says appreciatively.

"Thank you," Hermann replies. "You didn't answer my question."

"Two weeks," Newton replies. "Is it cool if they stay with us? She's bringing Becket. I'm not sure what the story is there. Honestly? I think they have a life-partner thing going. Mako refuses to tell me if they're dating. It's a very serious, long term, exclusive friendship where they get drunk together and cuddle. Why am I explaining this to you? You get it. I get it. We get it better than *they* do, I bet, because you and I drifted like wet cement meeting wet cement. Something like five other people in the world are capable of getting the whole current Mako/Raleigh vibe to the extent that *we* get it. Jaeger pilots. Not a cohort that, you know, *lives* a long time, so there aren't a whole lot of people to commiserate with, and Herc Hansen isn't the most loquacious guy, you feel me? You and I are kind of like anteverse pilots. *We* lived. So far. We are still alive.

Probably. Do you ever wonder if we're trapped in the hive mind? I do a little bit, but mostly as an intellectual exercise. Mostly. Anyway. You and I. Not-deadness. Weird, drunken cuddling. Thought reading. We get the weirdness of the post-drift state. We *own* that weirdness. We *are* that weirdness."

"Yes," Hermann says. "I suppose you're correct. Though I'm not sure I condone your phrasing."

"Good," Newton replies. "Let's try to stay two different people, what do you say?"

"Agreed."

Hermann spends sets of minutes responding only minimally to Newton's stream of loquacious free association while trying to find the words to explain to his colleague that, as far as the UC Berkeley Mathematics Department is concerned, they, meaning himself and Newton, er, that they have a certain *status* that—

It is hopeless.

He literally cannot do it.

There are an infinite number of ways he might have communicated this concept over the past three weeks, a nearly infinite number of ways he might say it *right now*. He simply can't quite bring himself to utter the words.

It seems an *intolerably* painful prospect to explain their situation to Newton, but for *whom* it will be painful and *why* is unclear. Any perturbation to their current dynamic seems perilous to him. He isn't certain *why* exactly, but it's the same radiofrequency of fear that grips him when he returns to their shared apartment each evening and slides the key home into the lock, anticipating finding Newton *gone*, finding him dead, of finding him motionless, tangled, and too cold on the shadowed floor, or, simply finding him as he *so often* finds him, pulling down his shirt-sleeves and staring toward the sea.

Hermann is certain that one day, under the right perturbation, Newton *will* leave. Newton leaves *first*. It is a behavior so deeply ingrained, a pattern that grips him so strongly, that he is occasionally unsure to whom that proclivity belongs.

But it belongs to Newton.

To *Newton*.

Perhaps that is why *telling him* this *feels* like a *risk*, even after all this time, after all the iterations in which they have *not* abandoned one another. It feels like a risk because Hermann has a borrowed terror of desertion with the attendant momentum of historical inevitability. They exist in an equilibrium that is as perilous and poorly defined

as any other human relationship, seared down, as it is, atop a decade of mutual admiration that had looked, from the outside, and, sometimes, from the inside, like a decade of mutual disdain.

Hermann spends the remaining expanse of highway and the turns through residential streets half-listening to Newton's wandering monologue and resolving to reverse his admission of defeat, to work up the courage to explain the liberties he has taken and the things he has not yet said. He holds to his resolution through downshifting into stillness in front of a trim, white house fronted by a well-maintained lawn. He holds to it through the opening of car doors, the retrieval of Scotch, and the walk over pavement and across short grass beneath a variegated sky.

"I know how much you hate these things," Newton says at tactfully low volume, as they stand on the porch. "It's not going to be that bad. I promise I will not embarrass you by pulling out the MIT calculus cheer in front of your Caltech friends, okay? Just chill. Later we'll watch *Voyager* and eat ice cream."

Hermann is fairly certain he will never eat again.

Wait, he wants to say. There's something I need to explain. There's something I haven't yet told you for reasons I can't fully parse. There are parts of my head that are you and it's those parts that have prevented me from telling you certain things. About your fans, about your detractors, about those who say you're unstable and have always been that way, those who say you're dangerous, those who say you're anything other than a vitreous knot of unresolvable brittle complexities dressed in a misleading outfit.

Newton swaps Hermann's sunglasses for his own glasses. He hands the shades back to Hermann.

Hermann pockets them.

"We will first have to *buy* the ice cream, but we will do that," Newton says, eschewing the door chime and knocking on red-painted wood with a complicated, exuberant, double-handed pattern that befits his current, ridiculous outfit.

Hermann very nearly reaches out, affixing his fingers to Newton's face to offer a last ditch, instantaneous, *wordless* understanding of what is about to happen.

But he doesn't.

It is Starr who opens the door.

"Hermann," the other man says expansively, apparently already somewhat intoxicated or, alternatively, feeling particularly *American* in the context of Saturday afternoon drinking. "And oh my *god*," Starr says to Newton. "Dr. Geiszler. You *exist*."

"Do I though?" Newton replies. "Do *you*? Are you sure? Either way, there's a Scottish guy who owns this place, right? We brought him some Scotch." He brandishes the bottle in Starr's general direction. "Call me Newt, by the way. Everyone does, except this guy." Newton claps Hermann on the shoulder and ushers him through the door. "You're the Leibniz fan, right? I have unspeakable, intense love for your as yet unpublished book. Let's talk about our mutual hatred for Isaac Newton. And by hatred I mean well-reasoned intellectual arguments as to why he's a complete dick. I'm *really* into Descartes and his cohort right now. Where is the alcohol? I'm going to need to be intoxicated in order to blunt my Leibniz-related indignation down to rational discourse levels."

"Did you seriously read my book?" Starr asks, glancing from Newton to Hermann and back in open incredulity. "Did you seriously *like* it?"

Hermann raises his eyebrows and cocks his head in silent confirmation.

"Um, *obviously*," Newton replies. "How am I *not* going to love a book called *Rediscovering Leibniz*. I ask you."

"Well let's find you some alcohol, buddy, and we will *get into it*," Starr says, in evident anticipation.

Hermann follows Newton and Starr through a set of mostly empty rooms, minimally decorated, filled with clusters of faculty and graduate students and out to the patio where most of the department is gathered around a selection of alcohol arrayed on table beneath a too-bright sky.

The air is cool but the late afternoon sun is warm. Several people recognize Hermann and nod in greeting. The gathering is subdued and civilized and intent, animated mathematically themed discussions are audible from multiple directions. Hermann finds this entirely reassuring. His nerves begin to unwind themselves. It is *exceedingly* unlikely that anyone will ask Newton an overly personal, untoward question that will reveal what exactly it is that Hermann has communicated about their relationship. He is certain that he will be able to explain this as an aside, perhaps in several months, perhaps when Ms. Mori visits and she asks Newton how it is that he was able to secure a standing offer for a tenure track position, Hermann will simply say, "ah yes, I told them that—"

"Gottlieb's rock star boyfriend!" Starr announces to the assembled crowd of moderately inebriated graduate students and faculty as he gestures theatrically at Newton.

In an ideal world, Hermann would die instantly.

Scratch that.

In an ideal world, Hermann would already *be* dead.

An hour ago.

Yesterday.

Newton glances at him, brief and lateral and *incisive* and *uncertain*.

Hermann looks back at him, endeavoring to communicate the simultaneous and incompatible sentiments of *abject horror* and *casual unconcern*. He cannot imagine it's working very well.

Newton snaps straight from confusion to a showmanship that Hermann recognizes, that Hermann has accidentally *emulated* twice in as many weeks. The man cocks his head, quirks his eyebrows, extends the hand that holds the scotch in the direction of the graduate students, and says, loud enough for all interested parties to hear him, "boyfriend? Better known as 'the better half', but I'll answer to 'boyfriend', sure. Someone give the Scotch to the Scottish guy and get me a beer. You. Trendsetter Kid. Mathematical Fashionista. Mathionista. Nice jacket. Two beers. German beer is generally the apex of the beer hierarchy, but I'll trust your judgment. Don't let me down." Somehow, rather than eliciting irritation, this semi-public pronouncement immediately wins over all parties in the immediate vicinity. Newton is relieved of his Scotch, provided with two beers, one of which he hands to Hermann before he is unambiguously swamped by an influx of drunk and curious graduate students and junior faculty.

There is a pained artifice to the way that Newton doesn't look at him when passing him his beer, the way his colleague keeps eyes fixed on nothing, on the fluxing patterns of the crowd, on the invisible small talk that's being cast into the air all around them with varying degrees of ease. Newton is speaking with an undirected brashness that Hermann recognizes as subtle armor, the only kind the man can construct for himself while standing on gray flagstones, trying to determine the borders of this interpersonal corner into which Hermann has *painted him*, where he will wait, with an insouciant, imperious, talkative neutrality, for the full extent of all he doesn't know to reveal itself.

Hermann finds it nearly *intolerable* to watch him.

Hermann finds it nearly intolerable to stand externally unperturbed in the face of Dr. Geiszler's prepared patience and all the attendant psychology it entails and so this moment slots down into a preexisting intolerable set, taking its place adjacent to the man's recollected, left-handed guitar he built in the summer of 2007; the way he identifies with lost things, with idiosyncratic vehicles and weeping eleven-year old Japanese girls who've seen their cities turned to rubble; his demonic eyebrows; the way he ruins his shirts but continues to wear them; the way he's managed to train Tiffany to swim after a finger that he trails along the surface of their communal fish-tank; the RFID chips that exist in duplication beneath the skin of separate hands; all the ways over all the years he's been *soright* about so *much* so *often*; the excruciating musical apex of *Hedy Lamarr*; the way he speaks and the things he speaks of—monsters, genes, and obscene things, Wittgenstein and Nietzsche.

Newton is a terrible human being.

He is not the only one.

Hermann fixes the man with all the anxious, apologetic intensity that he can bring to bear.

Newton resolutely resists the intermittent pressure of Hermann's lateral gaze and engages the surrounding mathematicians in conversation rife with subtle mathematical wordplay until the point that Starr asks them, as a set, "so what's the story with you two? Did you meet while saving the world?" Then and *only then* does Newton turn to him with semi-veiled vengeance beneath an amused smile before asking with venomous innocence, "you mean you haven't told these guys about *how we met*?" in the half-threat, half-promise of the wronged raconteur.

Hermann's composure is coming undone at every seam it has.

Newton manages to combine irritation and flirtatiousness by fluttering his eyelashes in a manner that is *clearly* ironic.

Well, at least it appears ironic to *Hermann*.

He can't say how ironic it might or might not look to the semi-circle of mathematicians arrayed around them.

"I—er, no," Hermann begins.

"So secretive," Newton says, looking at Starr in instantaneous camaraderie of the long-suffering subtype. "This guy, am I right?" Newton briefly drapes an arm across Hermann's shoulders in a confusingly proprietary manner. "Our backstory is kind of like *Sleepless in Seattle* meets *Godzilla*. Very romance. Lots of passionate typing. On

keyboards. And pining. Years and *years* of pining. Lots of death via giant lizard creature things. No kids though. There's an adorable kid in *Sleepless in Seattle*. Unless you count Mako? Mako was *ridic* cute. Not related to either of us, except for me, apparently. We're half siblings, or so I hear. The point is that neither of us, Hermann or I, I mean, *had* kids. I feel like I just mentioned *Sleepless in Seattle* because of the whole part where we were stationed in Seattle for a while and we had a lot of insomnia during that time? I'm getting cinematically side-tracked. Full disclosure, I haven't ever even seen *Sleepless in Seattle*, but I saw the gritty remake where the leads are hackers and everyone dies except the kid? I think it was called *Port 80*?"

"Ugh that movie was *so good*," says an enterprising graduate student, managing to insert herself between Professors Starr and de Silva who shift to accommodate her as she speaks.

"I know, right?" Newton says.

"What Dr. Geiszler *means* to say," Hermann says, making an effort to rectify his current situation, "is that our lives, were, in fact, extremely busy and our relationship proceeded in an entirely conventional manner—"

"Myeah," Newton says, with sarcasm viscous enough to vacuum seal a toric joint. "*Very* boring."

"*Hermann*," Starr says. "Come on, man, we've been trying to pull this out of you for *weeks*."

"I assure you that—" Hermann begins

"Well, look, I assume you guys know the basics," Newton says, speaking over him, "so I'll just fast forward to the interesting parts. It really wasn't until I'd been accidentally pinned to my own lab bench by a cylindrical protein matrix with the tensile properties of steel that had, alas, passed straight through my forearm between my radius and ulna, that I really realized I should probably, you know, *say* something about my feelings before I died in a freak lab accident. I had some time to think about it, because, and here's a tip for *you*, Enterprising Graduate Student—"

"My name is Kim," Kim says.

"Here's a tip for you, Evidently Kim: don't work through a mandatory three hour meeting that literally everyone in your workplace attends except for you so there's no one to unbolt a diamond-bladed bone saw from the wall and use it to cut through a nematocyst that's discharged through your arm and might or might not be slowly poisoning you with a cumulative neurotoxin. Also? Keep your phone in your *pocket*."

Hermann can remember the moment he entered that lab from a dual perspective—coming in the door and stopping short in abject horror; pinned to a table, his arm aching, his hand cold, his left hand only *inches* from his phone.

Hermann tries to force the moment from his mind, but it won't leave him. He feels vaguely sick.

"Noted," Kim says.

"*What?*" Starr asks, his voice cracking. "No. Rewind. Start at the beginning. Literally all we know is that you guys corresponded for three years before you met in person, you play the guitar *really* well, you have a thing for Leibniz, and you have a really low alcohol tolerance."

"More beer?" asks the fashionable graduate student who has now insinuated himself next to Kim.

"Thank you Mathionista, but no," Newton replies. "I'm trying to keep my brain in a mostly working state."

"My name is—"

"Ehhh I've already fulfilled my name-learning quota for today," Newton says. "You are out of luck."

"Oh, er—"

"I'm kidding, Mathionista, I'm kidding; what's your name?"

"Draygon," the student says.

"Draygon," Newton repeats, "As in 'my parents are nerds and were going for a Draygon Targaryen, First of his Name type deal'? Or, like, 'my parents are cool and named me after Draygon of *Metroid: Galactic Fringe* fame? Waaait. When were you even *born*? No, don't tell me. I'm trying not to dwell on my own mortality these days."

"Um?" Draygon says.

"His parents can't be blamed for this," Kim offers. "His real name is Christopher."

"Ah," Newton says. "Name changing. I'm into it. Parents suck in my experience, and Draygon's a pretty sweet name. I feel like, with this additional information, I can peg you as a *Metroid* player."

"Nailed it," Draygon says.

"Obviously," Newton replies.

Hermann shifts his stance, wondering if, possibly, he can leave and come back in two hours to retrieve Newton, and if *anyone*, including *Newton*, will notice if he does so.

Perhaps he can spend this time trying to win back the allegiance of his car.

"Come on," Starr says. "Dr. Geiszler. *Newt*. We have been waiting. For *weeks*. For weeks and weeks."

"Okay," Newton says. "Okay okay okay. It was the fall of 2013. September. These were the early days, pre-PPDC. I'd just been accepted to the NSF's Joint Exobiology Task Force."

"Nooo," says de Silva, pushing her short-cropped hair out of her eyes. "You were part of JET Force? Sweet."

"Myah," Newton says. "Of course. No way was I not switching fields to exobiology immediately after giant aliens started laying waste to cities. Arguably? I was JET Force. Do *not* believe what you read about Dr. Anderson. She's a dick. Anyway, I was still at MIT, the JET force stuff was pending, and I started looking into the literature—everything I could get my hands on. Monomaniacally. *Monomanically*? Whatever you want to call it. It took me, oh, maybe a month to work my way over to this guy's *Science* paper on subatomic space time turbulence." Newton glances at him.

Hermann rolls his eyes.

"You guys know the one," Newton continues.

"2012," Draygon says. "Solid. Classic."

"*Classic*? Please tell me you were born *before* 2012," Newton says. "Should you be *drinking* that beer?"

"Um, yes." Draygon replies. "I was born in—"

"No," Newton says, squinting in the increasingly lateral sun. "Don't say it. Also? Stop distracting me, Mathionista. So, to resume the story, I read that business and then I wrote to him. Truth be told, I wasn't up on quantum mechanics *at all*, and I mean, *at all* people, but I was *very* interested in whether the whole spontaneous space-time tear thing was an accident or intentional."

Hermann shifts beneath the vivid recollection of a dark and slovenly apartment in Cambridge, his T-shirt clinging to his back on an unreasonably warm September night, firing out an email with a guitar pick between his teeth so he wouldn't *lose* the blasted thing prior to the open mic night at *Camera Obscura*.

"It took him all of four hours to write me back, even though it was something like five AM in Berlin," Newton continues, grinning, like such a statement conveys anything notable, which it does *not*.

Hermann can still remember the night, long ago and sleepless, can still remember the frustrated insomnia he'd suffered for weeks after the first kaiju attack, before he'd has his degree, before anyone was *listening* to him.

"You remember what you said?" Newton asks him.

Hermann remembers.

"Only vaguely," Hermann replies, pulling sunglasses out of his pocket and offering them to Newton.

The other man's expression twitches into brief and unmistakable amusement before smoothing itself into the benevolent superiority of the practiced raconteur as he settles his sunglasses into place.

"Fortunately for your colleagues," Newton says, "I happen to have your message *saved* to the *cloud*. So I *could*—"

"Do not even *think* of doing such a thing," Hermann snaps.

"So I'm not going to say it was *racy*," Newton says, managing to imply *exactly that*, "but it was definitely full of science and sentiment."

Kim presses her fingertips against her left clavicle.

"Aw," Starr says.

"I will *murder you* if you elaborate further," Hermann snaps.

"Aw," de Silva adds.

"Publish that ish," Draygon advises. "You'd make a fortune."

"Aaaaanyway," Newton says, regaining control of the conversation. "We corresponded for three years. Pretty passionately. You know how it is when hot people, or, realistically, moderately attractive people do *science*. Everyone looks better critiquing bullshit. There was one problem though—and that was that while I had a *fairly* accurate picture of Dr. Gottlieb, here, er, *he* had a *less* accurate picture of *me*. Namely, the whole 'being a tenured professor thing,' I believe, and you can correct me if I'm wrong, Hermann—well, that implies a certain—maturity level? And a certain *age*. And it may imply a certain degree of decorum to which, don't get me wrong, I *perennially* aspire, but when we *met*—"

"We despised one another," Hermann snaps. "Instantly."

"Okay, so this is going a different way than I originally envisioned," Starr says.

"Noooo," Kim says.

"I could see it," Draygon adds.

"The problem was that I'd sort of *presented* myself as a *mentor*, seeing as I had, you know, been tenured for a while, that sort of thing," Newton says. "Totally reasonable, yes? Yes. But. We're the same age. I did not so much disclose this as *not* disclose it."

"He is, in fact, *younger* than I am," Hermann says. "And *extremely irritating* in person."

"Nominally younger. Whatever. Anyway, it also turned out that Dr. Gottlieb is *really boring*," Newton adds. "And also? Kind of counterintuitively *disingenuous in the name of social propriety*." Newton glares meaningfully at him from beneath lowered brows.

Hermann does his best not to wince.

It is difficult.

"Sounds like there's a story behind that one," Starr comments.

"Myah. A story that's actually continuously unfolding," Newton replies, shifting his gaze away from Hermann and flashing Starr a brief smile. "So to rewind back to 2016, it turned out that we could barely stand to be in the *sameroom* with one another. But it *also* turns out that when a whole bunch of your colleagues die testing experimental rigs and piloting Jaegers, that ends up turning into kind of an uber intense bonding experience type thing whether you want it to or not, you feel me?"

"We feel you," Draygon says.

Hermann can remember the cast of the fluorescent lights, the broken edges of the too-short toothpick clenched in his right hand, the way that *Newton doesn't look up from the set of 96-well plates that are in front of him, his hands steady as he dispenses media with a multipipette, his hands moving incrementally, perfectly, in tiny, varying iterations as he works his way down the rows.*

"Newton," Hermann says.

"You do not," Newton says tightly, "*talk to a person who is loading a 96-well plate. How many times have I—*"

"Newton," he says again, *his throat tight.* "You're needed in the stereotactic lab."

"Seriously dude," Newton says. "*I will erase half your freaking wall of math. Do you have any idea how unstable these nucleic acids are? Do you ever listen to me? Because—*"

"Newton," Hermann says again, his voice cracking.

Newton's hands freeze. "What," he says.

"Dr. Lightcap is dead."

The only sound in the lab is the quiet click of a multipipettor being set down gently atop an unforgiving surface.

Hermann tries to control an instinctive wince and does his best to banish the memory before it can progress.

"I knew you would," Newton replies. "Anyway, the turning point for *me*, as I mentioned, was that time in 2018 that I accidentally almost killed myself in a manner that was one hundred percent unforeseeable and eight thousand percent not my fault. But did I confess my feelings post my near-death lab-bench experience? No, I did not. Why? Because after I was freed from my lab bench and then from five days in quarantine, Dr. Gottlieb yelled at me continuously for two and a half hours and confessing my undying love seemed like a terrible idea. The turning point for *Hermann* though, I *think*, was the winter of 2019."

"Do tell," says de Silva.

"Well, in 2018 they started building the Wall of Lies. Er. Life. The Wall of *Life*. And from then on, the bulk of humanity's financial resources began a slow shift away from the Jaeger Program and away from K-Science and toward the Coastal Wall. So we were both *killing ourselves*, ha, kind of literally, trying to get governmental grants to help support some of our ancillary research costs that the PPDC was no longer covering. I had an NSF grant due on January 6th of 2020. One hundred percent kaiju related. I was trying to fund this transcriptome sequencing project that I wanted to do, once I'd finally figured out how to stabilize the kaiju equivalent of RNA? That's kind of a misleading way to put it, but whatever. Very simplified. I wanted to sequence that ish. No one would give me any*money* to freaking *buy custom plates*. Plus I needed a modified sequencer, whatever, you guys are math people—you don't care. The point is, I was kind of *busy*, generally speaking, and it was getting a little bit down to the wire. Also, keep in mind that the PPDC doesn't *have* administrative support for grant submission like you'd get at a major, or even minor, academic center."

"Oh god," Starr says.

"How did you even—" de Silva begins.

"It was hard, Junior Faculty," Newton says. "It *was not easy*."

"My name is Akiko de Silva," says Professor de Silva, "and I have tenure."

"Oh *crap*," Newton says. "You look so *young* and *hip* though."

"So do *you*," says de Silva.

"Thank you? Also, touché. I am *really* a terrible person," Newton replies. "Extremely hypocritical. This is driven home to me on a daily basis. I blame Dr. Gottlieb for this, he should have warned me about you. I'm also *nottenured* faculty. I'm kind of an unemployed dependent right now."

Hermann rolls his eyes.

"You're going to be doing a neuroscience thing, right?" Starr asks.

"Myes," Newton says. "*Neuroscience*. *That* is what I will be doing. Anyway, back to 2020. Everything was going *fine* until there was a mid-December Category 4 attack on Manila, round two, ugh, poor Manila, and there was a whole influx of samples that correlated with the debut of Striker Eureka, and, well, there was a lot of work for both J-Tech and K-Science, and, consequently, there was a lot of *drinking*. That 'lot of drinking' happened in a lot of *rain*, a lot of *cold* rain, because it was *December*, and well, one thing led to another and I accidentally got *pneumonia* somewhere around New Year's Day, approximately."

Hermann downs half his beer in a single go, not really inclined to hear any of this recounted.

"All the *science* was in place for the grant, but I had done *none* of the literally endless ephemera required for this sort of thing. You know what I mean. Budget. Site description. Qualifications of the Principal Investigator. *None* of it was done. And it needed to *get* done. So yeah. On one hand, was I pretty sure I had pneumonia? Yes. Yes I was. I'm very perceptive when it comes to my own biology. On the other hand, was I pretty sure I could still get the grant done *before* getting trapped by medical? Yes. Yes I was. I should also add that you never knew about medical back in the day at the PPDC. I mean, sometimes, they were perfectly chill, and then sometimes you'd be stuck in quarantine without your laptop for five days just because you'd been stabbed with a detoxified nematocyst. *Anyway*, I went to a briefing on January 2nd, and I do not really recall exactly what *happened* at said briefing, but I *do* recall waking up in the infirmary one hundred percent compos mentis on January 5th with my grant already submitted and Dr. Gottlieb bedside-vigiling me like a champ and not even yelling at me. So I most definitely remember thinking to myself that, perhaps, I was *not* so much of a *persona non grata* in Gottliebian ledgers as I had originally *thought*."

Hermann looks for the memory and finds it, indistinct and fever-glazed, standing at the fore of a windowless room, losing himself in a biological breakdown, confusing himself over motive, not certain on what topic he was supposed to be speaking, uncertain who would watch *Blue Planet* with Mako if *he* couldn't, because he couldn't, he *can't*, *he isn't even sure what's happening*—

He snaps himself free of another memory not his own.

“—and then one thing sort of led to another. Dr. Gottlieb is very classy, and so that was confusing for me because he took me out to *many* expensive dinners,” Newton continues, giving Hermann a significant look, “before I really understood what was happening, but I eventually processed the idea that he was totally hitting on me and then I did some reciprocal hitting. Metaphorically. He has a thing for me playing the guitar.”

Hermann does *not* glare murderously at his colleague turned roommate turned psuedosignificant other.

“Doesn't everyone?” de Silva asks.

Newton performs an obscene roll of an 'r' in de Silva's general direction.

The afternoon proceeds in small, repetitive increments as Newton iteratively ingratiates himself with the UC Berkeley Mathematics Department in subset by clustered subset. Hermann becomes progressively more interesting by association. The experience is strange and familiar and intolerable and welcome and he finds himself almost believing the courtship story that Newton invents for them out of their shared history, complete with significant shared looks that imply swaths of intimacy—intimacy that is neither a lie nor what they make it seem.

The only break in the afternoon is Newton's encounter with the Department Chair.

They meet one another unexpectedly, after the sun has gone down, inside, next to the piano that Newton cannot help but gravitate toward. The Department Chair is flanked by a dark-haired man who is presumably his significant other, though Hermann has not enquired about their status. The pair's conversation snaps straight to silence as Newton stops short, eyeing the department's only Field Medalist with a strange intensity.

They stare at one another for a long moment.

Hermann isn't certain what to make of the palpable tension that rises between the pair of them.

Predictably, it is Newton who speaks first.

"Dr. Rush, I presume," he says.

"The very same," Rush replies. "Dr. Geiszler. What a pleasure. I've been following your work for quite some time. Both musical and academic."

"Have you?" Newton replies, with a smile that, to Hermann, seems forced. "I can't imagine why."

"I believe we have a mutual acquaintance," Rush continues smoothly. "Does the name Eli Wallace ring a bell?"

"It does," Newton confirms with a tight smile. "He was in my upper level genetics seminar in 2007."

"As I recall, you flunked him," Rush says archly.

"As I recall, he deserved it," Newton replies with a tight smile. "Too much gaming will tank an academic career."

"That depends on the game," Rush replies casually as the man standing next to him gives Newton a hard look.

Hermann reciprocates with a hard look of his own.

"What an interesting perspective you have, Dr. Rush," Newton replies, "did you, by chance, do your graduate work at Caltech?"

"Oxford," Rush replies dryly.

"I only ask because—"

"It was terribly kind of you to invite us," Hermann says, breaking in. "We very much appreciate your efforts to secure Newton a position with the Neuroscience Department."

"Don't mention it," Rush replies.

Hermann clamps his hand shut around Newton's elbow and pulls him away from the piano, into a bare-walled, shadowed hallway between the fluorescently-lit living room and kitchen. He doesn't release Newton's arm until they have reached the midpoint of the short corridor. On either side of them darkness creeps from open doorways like a substance with momentum. Like a substance with *intent*.

"Explain yourself. What was *that*?" he hisses.

"Rush looks like someone I *knew*," Newton says, his eyes narrowing suspiciously as he looks laterally, back toward the yellow light of the living room they've just vacated.

Light hits his glasses at an oblique angle and glares off the lenses, making it difficult to see his eyes. "I think I've *met* him before. I *think* I—"

"Will you please *drop it*?" Hermann hisses.

Newton shifts his gaze. The glare upon his glasses fades to nothing with the changing angle of his head. His eyes snap to Hermann's face.

Hermann *immediately* and *deeply* regrets this change in the focus of Newton's attention.

"You," Newton whispers, almost silent in the untrafficked hall, "told them we were *together*."

"Er," Hermann breathes.

"You told them we were *together* together," Newton says, his voice low, his smile knocked askew by something that looks like good-natured revenge.

Hermann steps back. "I simply wanted to ensure that you were afforded all available advantages given that you—"

Newton steps closer, which is really not appropriate *at all*, because Hermann can't retreat—there's a *wall* at his back, very solid, very planar, very against his shoulder blades. Newton has totally disregarded all notions of traditional personal space and is, actually, *leaning forward*, which Hermann finds *extremely* indecorous. Excessively unseemly.

"If you're going to make me your pseudoboyfriend the *least* you can do is *inform* me ahead of time, Dr. Gottlieb, honestly," Newton says, his pitch arcing into mock rebuke. He is standing close, incredibly close, close enough that there's certainly some heat transfer occurring between the pair of them, not close enough to *touch*, not quite, but too close to *focus upon*. Too close to see in detail, too close, too dark, too close and dark for Newton's eyes to look the green they are, too dim for the stainless steel accents on Newton's jacket to catch the limited light that streams laterally through the almost nonexistent space between them.

Hermann takes a slow breath and tries to ignore the familiar smell of Newton's hair gel.

The focus-problem he's currently having is purely an optical phenomenon but it's a point of protective perseveration that prevents his thoughts from becoming mired in the heat transfer that's occurring through the insulation of the air, or the countless variations on the genuine remorse he feels for leaving Newton uninformed regarding what exactly he had communicated to his colleagues over other drinks on a different

night when Newton had been a circumnavigation of a bay away from him, half blind, listening to *Star Wars* in the dark.

This is a terrible idea, whatever it is that Newton *thinks* he's *doing*—standing *this close*, standing *centimeters* away from him, one of his boots interposed between Hermann's shoes. The man is doing this *on purpose*, Hermann is *certain* that he *is*, certain that he knows *precisely* what he's doing, how could he not, standing *this close* and speaking *this quietly*?

Newton is a terrible, *terrifying* person.

"I had no idea, you know," Newton says, almost silent and still skirting the edge of the uncanny centimeters that separate them, his voice a devastating blend of seriousness and irony that Hermann has no idea how to parse into his real meaning; if real meaning exists at all.

He had no idea about what? Hermann's thoughts demands. What is it he thinks he knows? What is it that he didn't previously know? He confuses even himself; you should probably ask for immediate clarification.

He does not ask.

He does not ask because he trusts nothing of this, not the wall at his back, not the heat at his front, not Newton, certainly not *Newton*, who *cannot* be trusted; who grabs his face, his arm, his shoulder, in thoughtless ease but who has created an eerie interpersonal air-gap that he *will not close*; who will start bar fights; who will change keys too often and too easily; who had spent Caitlin Lightcap's funeral alone in his room playing *Black Sabbath* and drinking a dead woman's vodka; who had said, 'stay out of the lab in the AM, dude, I'm going to be homogenizing tissue and I know you *hate* that,' when, in actuality, he'd spent all night constructing a rig on which to *kill himself*; who had slid his tray across a mess hall table in understated terror; who now spends his days fighting a constant, seaward pull about which he *will not speak*.

In the adjacent room, someone begins playing an arrangement of *LHC* on Professor Rush's piano.

"These people are shameless," Newton murmurs, and some unseen bar in the final word shatters the man's driving, articulative momentum.

"Indeed," Hermann replies, his own voice cracking.

"And yet, I can't blame them," Newton whispers, still neither backing away nor bridging the too short span that separates them. "I'm pretty great."

"Try to contain yourself," Hermann replies, striving for a dry delivery, but falling far short of the aridity he would like to achieve because he does not *mean* the words he says.

He's always envied the scope of Geiszlerian containment failures.

"It's hard for me, a little bit," Newton says, too close, extremely close, comfortably close, *uncomfortably* close. "Why didn't you tell me about the whole fake-married thing?"

I didn't think you'd understand, Hermann thinks.

"I didn't think it was important," Hermann says.

"No?" Newton replies.

"You don't like misleading labels. I wanted to—" Hermann runs out of air to shape into his whisper.

"I know what you wanted. You used our semi-fake relationship to get me a semi-real job," Newton murmurs.

"It will become entirely real when you *take it*," Hermann replies.

Newton places the tips of three fingers against Hermann's sternum and presses gently, incrementally widening the gap between them. "Hashtag, 'accuracy'," he whispers, like a secret shared.

For a brief interval in the dim light Hermann isn't certain what's about to happen, but then Newton steps laterally, pulling away from him, turning back toward the living room, silhouetting himself against the glare of day-spectrum fluorescence. He shoves his hands into his pockets, steps into the crowd, and launches straight into the bridge of *LHC* with an expansive sweep of open hands through open air.

Bending charged particles

Shows the way matter is built.

You superconduct

And super collide—

Hermann tips his head back against the dark expanse of wall behind him and shuts his eyes in abject relief or comprehensive disappointment. Even *he* cannot say which.

Chapter Twenty Seven

The departmental party is winding down.

In the dark of a residential street, a lateral breeze fighting to undo his Randy Waterhouse hair, leaning against the passenger side of Hermann's Porsche, Newt can almost hear the repetitive scrape of glass dragged beneath a broom over the cement of a deployment dock.

What are you doing? he had asked her, that first time.

Geiszler, if one has a bottle-breaking penchant, which I have, then one had better also have an equal penchant for cleaning up broken glass.

How civic minded you are, Lightcap, he'd replied, a dry edged cover for just how much he'd wanted to do some glass breaking of his own.

Shut up, she'd replied, dropping her broom to hand him a beer.

He'd hurled the bottle straight against the cement, so hard that it exploded into tiny shards, meters away from them.

Geiszler, she'd sighed. *What are you doing. You're supposed to drink it first.*

Well you didn't specify, he'd replied.

How am I supposed to sweep beer.

I'll sweep it.

No, you won't. That's not part of it. I am the sweeper. That's how it works. Drink. Break. Sweep. Sleep.

How what works? How is this a thing? And if it's a thing, then what am I? I've clearly already involved myself.

Don't question the routine, Geiszler. The routine works. The routine will save your life. If I give you another beer, are you going to drink this one? You are legal aren't you? Tell me you are.

Um, excuse me—I am twenty-six. And yes. I will drink it.

Oh. Well then. Twenty-six. Good. I suppose that means if I hand you this thing I won't be going to Hell.

Go to hell? Why would anyone go to hell. Hell, it seems, is more than happy to come to us. Wait a few weeks and a little piece of it it will crawl straight out of the water. You can strap yourself to a scaled-up metal hominid and literally beat it to death.

I'm going to like you, Geiszler, you baby-faced, bitter little thing. That or fire you. Right now I'm undecided. Take a seat on my dock. Did no one tell you to avoid me after experiments go bad?

Oh they told me, all right. But I had a thought.

Just one? Unfortunately, you owe me at least one original thought per beer, so you'd better come up with a something else. A corollary, at minimum."

Your rig, Lightcap, is shit. It's slow, it's full of redundancies, and it drops the resting membrane potential in the motor cortex like a rock. Thank god you jacked in above most of the brain stem.

My rig. My rig is shit. Well if we're speaking of shit, Geiszler, you were, in fact, hired by me to look at shit in a dish. So do that, why don't you.

That was thought one. Thought two is that you're going culturally native in a regrettable capitulation to hierarchical norms that you've surrounded yourself with for the past three years. You're not military, Lightcap; you suck at pretending you are.

Geiszler, I once fired a man for dropping a beaker.

Lightcap, I really couldn't care less. Fire me. I'll go back to JET Force and when you die, which you will, I'll apply for your vacant, vacant, oh so very vacant job and, probably? I'll get it.

God, I hope so. Fine. Sex up my rig. You can have Auxiliary Lab Three, four techs, fifty thousand dollars, six weeks, and me as a test subject. If I find it sufficient, you're promoted. If I don't, you're fired.

I will trade you four of those weeks if you swap Aux Lab Three for the Secondary Interface Lab and give me a fifth tech.

I will trade anything for time, she'd said, looking out over dark water.

Newt sighs, crosses his arms, and tries not to regret anything he can't change.

Wave functions collapse; matter decays; the universe expands until the point of total stillness; biological organisms die and don't die in terrifying ways, but then, that's what terror is, the ultimate neurochemical slap across the face delivered by evolution for ostensible preservation of life, but twisted by the prefrontal cortex into all different kinds of interesting shapes that drive their pernicious way into every arena of existence.

He's good.

He's fine.

He looks at Hermann, who stands across a darkened lawn, silhouetted on a porch against evening spectrum lights, trying to politely extricate himself from Professor Starr, who is *very* earnestly and loudly telling him something about the Critical Line. Hermann is tense and overtired—he's turning too polite, his shoulders are too rigid, and he's been off balance for the entirety of the evening.

Thaaaaat might be a little bit Newt's fault.

That might be almost entirely Newt's fault, actually.

He had been sure (before tonight) he had been *positive*, that Hermann likes him best when he is *quiet*. When he contains himself. When he is not grandstanding. When he is not shouting. When he is not using his soapbox. When he is not singing *Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots* with eleven-year old Mako and giving her glitter to throw at listening parties. When he is not picking fights with Seattle natives or Jaeger pilots or scientific competitors. When he is not driving forward with everything he is. When he is just Newt, working late, chewing on pens, making sarcastic asides during overly long briefings, sitting down and shutting up and working his way stepwise through the protocols he writes and refines within the confines of his own head.

But now—Newt isn't so sure that he has the *complete* picture.

It has occurred to Newt over the course of this evening, and after seeing Herman approximately eight different varieties of totally flustered within the span of three hours, that the guy, may, in fact, *like* Newt's showy defense mechanisms. He may like them in a totally *different* way than he likes Newt's occasional moments of restraint. It is so *difficult* for Newt to tell—when he looks back, into *someone else's* memory, at his own episodes of total flashiness, all he sees is someone that he doesn't recognize from a perspective both foreign and familiar. There's a kid so sleep deprived he's punctuated an hysterical soliloquy about DNA polymerases with the upending of a blue metal table; there's a guy with green-streaked hair rocking a post-punk aesthetic and pulling a rollerbladed Mako straight off her feet and out of an imminent collision with Herc Hansen; there's a man in *total torment* screaming at Caitlin Lightcap, pale in her black Interface Suit; there's a person shouting down a critic under violet lights at a conference in Geneva; there's someone whose nail beds are turning blue mid-briefing because he cannot breathe; there's someone crouching next to eleven-year old Mako under the pink and orange lights of a karaoke bar, handing her a tube of glitter; there's someone singing *An Ancient Curse* to dark water who is too upset to attend Dr.

Lightcap's wake, held half a city away; there's a shock of crimson blood across the bone-white forearm of some guy who might be dying as he's pinned to a table, saying, 'on the plus side, I don't think I've been poisoned'; the night is dark, the street lights are bright, the wind comes from over the water, and a man in a black leather jacket jams an electrode into something's brain. Newt's examination of this set of exogenous impressions feels like a violation and grants him nothing but a through-line of confusion and envy and distress and pity and terror and a genuine, deep, long-standing, complex, unshakable regard.

Newt adjusts his glasses, twists the ball of one foot against the cement of the curb, and tries to keep his facial expression neutral.

Hwi rolls down a window.

"Hey grrl," Newt says, quietly.

"Hello Newt," Hwi says, equally quietly. "What are you doing?"

"Just waiting," Newt replies.

"Would you like to wait inside the car?" Hwi asks. "It is colder outside than humans usually prefer."

Newt smiles faintly. "Nah," he says. "That's nice of you Hwi, but it sends the wrong kind of message."

"I do not understand," Hwi replies.

"Well, if I wait *in* the car that implies that I want to leave in an expeditious manner. If I wait *outside* the car, casually staring at the stars and inverting space and the ocean in my brain, then that implies that Hermann can take his sweet time discussing vicissitudes of the Riemann hypothesis all he wants."

"I see," Hwi replies. "Being human seems complicated to me. I prefer to be a car."

"That's good," Newt replies, "because you *are* a car. I don't know that your carness necessarily frees you from the snarled complexity of the subjective experience but if it makes 'life' easier, aka more reproducible and predictable, you have hit the ontological jackpot. Of course, you'll never have a standard of comparison, unless your consciousness gets transferred into another container for a while, which *could* happen, but doesn't necessarily seem likely to me, Hwi, I'm not gonna lie."

"I don't think I understood the full implications of what you just said," Hwi says.

"That's okay," Newt replies. "That's a part of life as well. Sometimes, we never understand one another. Sometimes we understand fully, but at an inappropriately late time point."

"Ah," Newt says as Heliolatry comes up on Lightcap's late night mix. "Wittgenstein. That takes me back. You don't have to flatter me so egregiously, Lightcap. I have been known to work for beer alone."

"Shut up," Lightcap says, distracted, "this band is awesome. I doubt that you've even heard of any of the bands I listen to. I'm sure your musical taste both peaks and stops at Green Day."

"I am actually embarrassed for you right now," Newt replies. "Do you have any idea who fronted this band?"

"Do you?" she asks.

"Yes," Newt says pointedly. "Normally, I would not do this, but you deserve it."

The verse ends and he breaks in, doubling himself on the chorus. The acoustics in the interface lab are excellent, and he gets a pretty perfect auditory matching thing going, right up to the point where Caitlin Lightcap drops a wrench on his chest, drags him off the floor, and takes him drinking.

"As if, in a collision, I could not calculate the optimal solution for impact avoidance in time, but I completed the calculation after the impact occurred," Hwi says.

"Hwi, you are not just a pretty face, I'll give you that," Newt replies, crossing his arms and looking at the house, where Hermann shifts his weight and rolls his shoulders in subtle irritation.

Newt sighs.

"I don't know, Hwi," he says slowly. "What do you think about all this?"

"You will have to narrow the parameters of your question, Newt."

"Did you know that Dr. Gottlieb has been telling his colleagues that we're *together*? As in, *together* together?"

"You are not together?" Hwi asks.

"Well we *are*," Newt replies quietly. "But not in a *romantic* way. *Yet*, I guess, is maybe a reasonable qualifier to add."

"How is 'a romantic way' different than other ways?" Hwi asks.

"Oh, er," Newt begins, "humans are a little bit weird, Hwi. Like, we give each other presents and tell each other we are aesthetically appealing and then take off our clothes and press different parts of ourselves pretty close together for extended intervals and the way that that's done says whole swaths of things about how we feel about someone, or, in an ideal world it does. It's an alternative to words, a non-verbal designation congruent with the actuality of things. Humans are always trying to smash together their subjective perceptions of the world to form these little miniature alliances of selfhood that can stand for a while against the stochastic cruelty of life. How tight those alliances are and how long they last depends on a lot of stuff, Hwi, like the personalities involved, the external environment, and the modes and frequency of communication that the allied parties might employ."

"So it is like driving an intelligent car," Hwi says, "without your clothes."

Newt laughs, and it's quiet and controlled—just an amused exhale really, but it feels like *his* laugh and not like something that will end in hysterical weeping so yeah. Magnificence.

"Yup," Newt says. "Pretty much, presuming the car and the driver are equal participants in your analogy."

"So you and Dr. Gottlieb do not exchange presents or take off your clothes."

"Oh god, Hwi, um, just say 'romance' okay? Romantic activities?"

"So you and Dr. Gottlieb do not engage in romantic activities? But he has represented to his colleagues that you do?" Hwi asks.

"Well, in some ways, we totally do. I mean, we exchange presents and, according to *my* definition of human relationships, meaning the mash-up of subjective worldviews, we have pretty much the tightest alignment that humans can have. We do *not* do the part where we take off our clothes, at least, we haven't so far, and society would tell you that's what really defines a *romantic* relationship. The disrobing part."

"So your relationship fulfills secondary rather than primary 'romance' criteria, by societal conventions," Hwi says.

"Yeah," Newt says. "I'd say it already fulfills *my* primarily criteria and I'd totally tear off my clothes and 'go driving' in submission to societal pressures slash Dr. Gottlieb's implied desires except for one thing. Well, two things."

"What are those two things?" Hwi asks.

"One," Newt says, looking edgily at the doorway where Hermann stands, "I am *bad* at the part where humans take off their clothes, Hwi, I have a terrible track record."

"It does not seem difficult, in the way you have outlined it, Newt," Hwi says, with unmistakable sympathy.

"Well yeah, but I'm grossly oversimplifying things Hwi. Once you start engaging in the total mess of biology-meets-society that *is* human sexual relations, there are certain expectations that arise that I have not been *great* at navigating over the course of my life."

"Your algorithms are sub par," Hwi says.

"Ouch. But yes, Hwi, my algorithms suck."

"Why?" Hwi asks.

"Because I've mostly invented them myself. Because I *think* it may be best to see the behavioral algorithms that people use to navigate a romantic relationship *modeled*, but I didn't have a model and didn't really realize I *needed* one until perhaps a little bit late, and then I never *found* one."

"Shouldn't Dr. Gottlieb already be aware that your algorithms are sub par?" Hwi asks.

"Yes," Newt replies, "and I'm pretty sure he *is* aware of my epic, algorithmic suckage, but the *problem* is that him being *aware* of it does not preclude him being negatively emotionally affected by it."

"I do not understand your logic," Hwi says.

Newt sighs. "Look, carfriend, it's going to go like this. Dr. Gottlieb has performed or *is performing* a cost/benefit analysis of me as a romantic partner. This, like many but not all things in life, is a binary fate choice. Yes, worth it, or no, not worth it. If he decides no, not worth it, then we just continue on as we have been, presumably, and everything is great. But if he decides yes, worth it, *then* the decision turns around to me, and I have to do the same cost/benefit analysis. But it *sucks more* for me, because if I say *no*, then, probably, we won't see each other as much anymore, if *at all*, and that would be horrible. But if I say yes, then I will eventually make him unhappy because I am a *terrible* romantic partner I have literally tanked every relationship I have ever been in by a combination of obsession about the wrong things, forgetting the *right* things, pretending I'm invulnerable, and subordinating everything, including relationships, to intellectual pursuits."

"If you are correct, this is a suboptimal position for Dr. Gottlieb."

"Yeah," Newt says, feeling abruptly despondent. "Don't I know it. Make sure you have a good playlist of super emo romantic era composers for Hermann to listen to when he starts aimlessly driving around Oblivion Bay in fits of existential unrest, which he has been known to do. No Berlioz. The guy equates me with some historical figures; it's weird, I don't get it, but Berlioz is one."

"I do not think your logic is sound," Hwi says.

"Trust me, Hermann goes on long, wanderlust-style drives when he feels particularly crappy. You just wait and see."

"That is not what I mean," Hwi says. "You have stated that you already believe that you have a romantic relationship with Dr. Gottlieb that does not involve human sexual practices. Furthermore, you stated that the strength of the subjective alliance between two people depends on communication between parties but also upon their personalities and upon external circumstance."

"What are you saying, Hwi," Newt replies, smiling faintly. "That you think I should go for it?"

"I am saying that I find fault with your reasoning, Newt. I am not advising you."

"Aw," Newt says.

"You said there were two reasons that you could not tear off your clothing and go driving," Hwi says. "You have stated only one."

"Myeah," Newt says, tracing the clean line where his fingerless gloves give way to human skin. "The other reason is that I can't tear off my clothing, Hwi."

"Is your clothing somehow different from other human clothing?" Hwi asks.

"Nope," Newt says faintly. "But sometimes humans make interesting decisions Hwi, not necessarily inherently *bad* ones, but decisions that, when combined with life experience, screw around with their operating systems on a very fundamental level."

"Is there no way for you to default to your original settings?" Hwi asks.

"Well," Newt replies. "Over time, in the absence of perturbation, some humans can return to their historical baseline. Some can, some can't—it depends on how altered their brains have been."

"How altered has *your* brain been, Newt?" Hwi asks, in a manner that *sounds* gentle, even if it is not meant that way.

"Very altered," Newt whispers. "Very altered," he says again, louder, so that Hwi can hear him.

"Can you not explain these things to Dr. Gottlieb?" Hwi asks.

"He knows them," Newt says. "He knows them all. And *that*, I am guessing, is why he hasn't said anything about this psuedoboyfriend thing. Not because it's *not* important to him, but because it *is*. He thinks of me as a melting snowflake, right about now, Hwi; I know he does. And that's probably a little bit fair, all things considered. I have no idea what to do. Whatever I choose, I'm sure it will be wrong."

Hwi waits him out for a few seconds while a faintly radioactive wind whistles through American suburbia.

"I am glad I am just a car," Hwi says.

"Get out of here with that 'just a car' stuff," Newt replies. "Never 'just' a car, Hwi, okay? There is nothing ontologically inferior about car-ness or goldfish-ness, or any-other-kind-of-fish-ness. Plant-ness. Insect-ness. Disembodied-brains-in-vats-ness. Stop that immediately. You and I? We're going to team up to defuse the robot takeover predicted by science-fiction writers for two-hundred years."

"I will need more information about this robot takeover before I join your team," Hwi replies.

"Robot takeover is a figure of speech," Newt clarifies.

"It is not present in my idiomatic dictionary," Hwi replies.

Newt absently pats the door against which he's leaning and then shoves his hands in his pockets.

"What do you plan to do regarding the decision tree you are currently faced with?" Hwi asks.

"I plan to walk around it a little bit and make sure it's really the tree I think it is," Newt replies.

"It is not a literal tree," Hwi points out helpfully.

"And it's not going to be literal walking, either, carfriend," Newt replies. "But right now, I think I should probably go rescue Dr. Gottlieb from an over-enthused colleague. Do me a favor—when you get an acclerometric trigger from my RFID chip, power up, lights on, do the whole I'm-about-to-drive-away deal. Just to be clear though, Hwi, do not *actually* drive away."

"Certainly," Hwi replies.

Newt crosses the lawn with the wet crush of boots on grass, eschews two out of the three cement steps leading up to the porch, and inserts himself next to Hermann, who

gives him a lateral gaze of total external neutrality that Newt is one hundred percent certain means thank-you-so-much-for-rescuing-me-Newton-but-vhat-in-god's-name-has-taken-you-so-long.

"But the zeros of *patrician* functions in statistical mechanics all lie on the critical line," Starr says, looking at Newt as though Newt might possibly *agree* with him. "You're telling me you don't think—"

"The Lee-Yang theorem," Hermann says, breaking in, "is at best, *dubiously* relevant and has been thoroughly explored as an avenue of approach."

"And it's *soo* nineteen *nineties*, man," Newt says, making a serious attempt to hijack the conversation. "Totally fruitless. Everyone agrees. Even neohipster biologists. So, in other news, we've got to be going. You guys can map zeta zeros on Monday." He snaps his fingers in a vaguely Hwi-ward direction and she starts the engine and flicks on her interior and exterior lights with a deliberately dramatic slow fade up that Newt finds outrageously acceptable.

Hermann shoots Newt an unimpressed look.

"How did you just—" Starr begins.

"I'll thank you to *not* encourage him," Hermann says dryly to Starr.

"*Science*," Newt whispers, as Hermann drags him off the porch.

"See you Monday," Starr calls after them.

Newt turns to give Starr a vaguely sympathetic half-wave at exactly the same time that Hermann *also* turns to do the same thing. They are going to have to work on this kind of habitual synchronicity. Newt supposes it's better than cognitive dissonance, but for anyone who's spent hours and hours in and around a *drift* apparatus, like, oh, say, *Mako*, for example, this kind of behavior is going to be a dead give-away of inappropriate neural solidarity. In order to make the science-twins thing look less weird, Newt throws in a mock salute in Starr's general direction because hey, when possessed of weird, semiotic instincts as some kind of residual respect to a father not his own why not subvert them?

Of course, Hermann, now possessed by vaguely anti-authoritarian tendencies and also an identical urge to destroy their inappropriate simultaneity of goodbye-wave, does the *same thing*.

Starr gives them a vaguely perplexed look and then *copies* their terrible mock salute, like it's a thing that normal people do.

"Oh *god*," Newt breathes, in admirably restrained horrified amusement, his whisper cracking against a grin that's twisting its way free.

"I wish I could blame you for this," Hermann says, through clenched teeth, not specifying what he means by 'this' while giving Newt a look that could probably remotely ignite a Bunsen burner.

They turn from Starr to Hwi, still unable to decouple their synchronicity.

"Eh, I'd say you could defensibly blame me for fifty percent of it *at least*," Newt replies, extremely inclined to be charitable right about now.

"I never used to be *eccentric*," Hermann says, rounding the car.

Newt has to use all his willpower not to lose his muscle tone and roll around in wet grass laughing hysterically at how *blatantly untrue* that pronouncement is and how *totally true* Hermann seems to *think* it is.

He holds himself together, though.

Out of courtesy.

And *respect*.

"Yeah," he says, trying to breathe and speak at the same time, which is a mistake; it makes him sound like he's choking. "You were *totally* normal and boring before—" Newt waits for the car doors to shut before he finishes with, "I remixed your brain. It's *very* normal to salute people for no reason, intellectually attack PPDC Marshals when they piss you off in academic or ethical spheres, file forty-eight complaints with Human Resources about someone playing music in your workspace, insist on working in *chalk* as a medium like a *retroscience*hipster, wear the same set of five outfits for ten years, drive like a fighter-pilot, and have borderline erotic feelings about mathematics as a discipline. Not even notable. So so normal. You and Raleigh Becket could have been best friends."

Hermann shoots him a pointed look but does not have the chance to respond before Hwi breaks in.

"Dr. Gottlieb, you do not currently meet the legal sobriety standards to operate this vehicle. I have locked you out of navigational control."

Hermann sighs.

"Aw," Newt says sympathetically.

"Where do you wish to go?" Hwi asks.

"Home," Hermann replies.

Hwi pulls out onto dark residential streets.

No one speaks.

Newt harasses the edge of his thumbnail between his teeth and tries not to feel overtly self-conscious because *why would* he even? No reason. Everything's totally normal, they just had a weird night, and they've had *so many* weird nights recently, like the ones where Hermann abducted him from Hong Kong, the ones that Newt can't remember very well but that maybe involved nonsensical random mental firing of the Geiszlerian variety, the ones where Hermann reads aloud until his voice is hoarse, the ones that Newt spends in ambitious breakfast preparation with varying results. This right here is a different brand of weirdness, or maybe *not* so different after all, maybe all the previous weirdness has been the same as *this* weirdness, maybe there's been no weirdness at all, maybe Newt doesn't know what's happening, maybe he never has; his instincts are terrible, they seem to be *totally* academic and do *nothing* for him survival-wise, or, rather, very little, less than the instincts of other people do for other people; what's *wrong* with him? Something's wrong with him, but wrong by what *standard*? Newt doesn't know. Hermann has good instincts. Can Newt maybe have some of *those*, possibly? Something other than the stupid *saluting* one?

He glances laterally at Hermann.

The guy has his arms crossed and is looking at the dark sweep of the road like he'd prefer to be driving down it. He's not saying anything, which is kind of par for the course of the evening and also a *part* of what's making Newt uneasy right now. A part. A fraction of the whole uneasiness pie that Newt has been assembling and baking over the course of the evening, mathematical theatrics aside.

"I told Mako and Raleigh that we were together," Newt says, straight up and unadorned, because while he doesn't particularly *want* to have a conversation regarding the whole black box of romance that might be full of flowers or might be full of the sins of the world, Pandora-style, he doesn't want to spend a whole bunch of awkward mental effort *not* having it, either.

Hermann turns to look at him in open incredulity. "Why?" he asks, like he's re-evaluating whole swaths of things.

"I don't know," Newt replies, abruptly and anxiously defensive, because, er, yeah, Hermann had committed his misrepresentations for the purpose of *helping Newt*, while Newt had done *his* misdirecting for the purpose of being a sanctimonious dick to Mako and Raleigh.

Thaaaaat sums up everything up quite nicely, his brain says. *You are a terrible person.*

Even the *kids* hiss in disapproval.

Hermann is still staring at him like he's an unsolved proof of some kind, and Newt understands the sentiment but it's totally misplaced because he's just a guy with too much raw processing power and an impulse control problem and so there's not going to *be* anything for Hermann to *get*. Nothing to translate, nothing to uncover, nothing's going to clarify or resolve or distill down or precipitate out of the multiple personality disorder that Newt is mixing like a scientifically literate audiophile, no extra revelations that the guy hasn't already collected, catalogued, and filed away in his perpetually spinning mental rolodex.

Newt is going to have to say something.

Something else.

Something other than, 'I don't know.'

"Well it's just that I was *already* sort of loosely classifying you as a boyfriend-variant? Loosely. I mean, classical boyfriend variant? Probably not, but *you* did say *yes* to my whole life-partners proposal thing, you *already* said yes to it, and it's not weird or anything, I don't know why *you* seem to think it's as weird as you seem to think it is, I mean, I wasn't necessarily implying anything about, like, undying commitment, though it was framed as a 'life' partners things so it would technically be bounded by death or dissolution like most conventional relationships, but I didn't really explicitly delineate any parameters other than *apocalypse* prevention, in the future, by you acting to inhibit me, in the event I turned evil, not that I *would*, not that I'm planning to, I mean I *like* my species, I like this planet, I want it to stay extant. Everything. Everyone. Still aliveness. You know what I'm saying, right? Species preservation, *Star Trek*, and spätzle. That's our deal right now, and if some pseudo-relationship-ish type stuff gets thrown in there, or some 'real' relationship stuff gets thrown in there, I mean, is that even a thing? Like, a *thing* a thing? I mean, maybe it is. Is it? Would it be? I'd rather know your personal definitions for what you consider to be acceptable and not weird rather than use some kind of societal set of standards that might or might not really apply to us as people, slash the joint managers of weirdly triplicated artifactual consciousnesses. Also? I brought you artisan chocolate *as a present*. You bought me a library on rationalism. I

made us matching RFID chips. We're emotionally dependent nerds. A little bit, kind of, or, not at all, really. I mean, we could do other stuff if you *wanted* to do other stuff, or not, if you don't. I don't see why any of this is weird, or, rather, why any particular permutation would be weirder than any other permutation, because the baseline weirdness is just *so high*. If anyone is being 'weird' about it it's *you*, if only for perpetually expecting something normal and socially recognizable," Newt explains. "I *totally* covered for you tonight, pretty flawlessly, honestly, but like, if you're seeking even *more* normalcy, or something, I can do that, maybe, I'm actually very good at being *very* normal, better than you, probably, I mean, see our entire lives prior to this point if you need an example. You just have to tell me *what you want*, not assume I *know* it via EPIC Rapport because as far as I can tell the best we're getting out of EPIC Rapport is, like, nausea, unfortunate synchronicity, Freaky-Friday-style brain swaps, and the occasional long distance, Skywalkeresque mental distress call that might or might not even be real."

Oh yeah, his brain says, with a level of dryness approximating an alien sun baking the crust of a waterless planet, *you tell him*, Geiszler.

"I find all of this to be very reasonable," Hermann says, in a way that is vaguely relieved and unmistakably *gentle*.

"You do?" Newt replies, totally incredulous, hoping Hermann will summarize what exactly he took from Newt's string of poorly verbalized thoughts.

"Yes," Hermann replies, like a mysterious badass. A nice one, though.

"Meaning?" Newt says.

"Meaning that we are, indeed, in a unique situation and there is no need to conform to a rigid set of standards purely for the sake of conformation itself."

Wow.

Okay.

This is an *extremely* unusual Gottliebian stance.

Newt will take it though. Will he *ever*.

It doesn't solve *all* of his problems, like what to *do* about the eventual person-on-person romance activities that might precipitate out of the unresolved sexual tension that's been displacing the oxygen in the air all night long. Newt isn't positive that they've ever been without it though. The sexual tension. Because something had always run between them wild and high and strange, cresting at intervals, receding at

others, and no matter their intentions, Newt isn't positive that they will ever settle out into a predictable, reproducible pattern of human relations, not even now, after spending a timeless interval mentally homogenized with one another and set against a vast and seductive collective darkness.

Darknesssss, the kids echo with sibilant longing.

Yes kids, Newt thinks. *But you have a new team now.*

"Yes," Newt says. "Okay. Good. That's what I meant to say, actually. But you knew that. You get me."

"I would never presume so far," Hermann replies dryly. "You are one of the most incomprehensible people I have ever met."

"Dr. Geiszler has unusual algorithms," Hwi says, deciding, apparently, that this would be a good time to interrupt their conversation, "but that does mean that he is, in any respect, inferior to other humans, especially in matters of—"

"*Hwi*," Newt says, extremely coolly and sedately. "*Stop. Talking.* Er, *thank you*, that's very *nice* of you, but—"

"Why would you assume I implied algorithmic inferiority?" Hermann snaps, his eyes narrowing at the dashboard.

"Cars these days, I mean *really*—" Newt says.

"Because Dr. Geiszler considers himself—" Hwi begins.

"*HWI*," Newt shouts in a totally calm and *extremely collected* manner. "Let's save the psychological profiling for another time. 'Never' works really well for me."

"Very well, Newt," Hwi replies.

Hermann gives Newt a pointed look.

Newt gives Hermann his most winningly winsome smile. "Hwi and I were exploring ontological issues while waiting for you to escape from Starr," he says.

"Your assistance was much appreciated," Hermann replies, miraculously and mercifully *not* asking follow-up questions, probably because, alas, he doesn't *need* to.

"Myeah," Newt says, adjusting his glasses, feeling vaguely weird about literally everything that is happening except not weird at all because why would he, there's no reason to feel weird, so he doesn't.

Feel weird, that is.

Everything is fine, his brain says, deciding to be supportive for once.

Newt is immediately suspicious that everything is *not* fine.

Thanks, his brain says. *Thanks a lot*.

There's a constructively interfering wave function in the air, and it's *everywhere*, in Hermann's too careful, excruciatingly *kind* sentences, in the way that Newt isn't sure where to direct the vector of his gaze; he's not sure what he usually looks at, other than the Wall, which he can't see, because it's in darkness somewhere away to the west. He can *feel* it there always, not the Wall, but what lies beyond it. It's constantly behind him; he's constantly looking backwards along the axial spin of his pretty little planet.

All of this is his fault, really, he shouldn't have done so many of the things he did.

Their constructively interfering waves take on the feel of something standing that oscillates between them and *does not dissipate*, not through the five aborted conversations they almost manage to have as Newt talks them through the drive home and the elevator ride to their floor, touching on every subject he can think of that seems *safe* to him, that will allow him to stand there, metaphorical pen in metaphorical hand, looking at a metaphorical page, but not metaphorically *writing* anything on it, not mapping out his Venn diagrams before he *must*.

Before someone makes him.

Newt walks down the interior hallway of Bayside Towers, trying to distract himself with *where he is, what he is doing*, Jedi-hipster-style. He drags a hand along the wall, feeling a little bit like he's touching the inside of Blaze's brain because someone had *thought* these walls and rooms into their current, stacked incarnation, they had existed, Eco-Consciously, in the brain of some architect before they precipitated out into reality—lead and concrete and wood and lacquer and compressed post-fracked shale, light metal alloys that had come from the materials science side of J-Tech—where do they come from, where do they go, where do they fall out, flaking like snow?

"What is the *deal* with *architects* though?" Newt asks Hermann. "I don't think variations in style would be enough to keep me interested in *building* design. Every time you're going to need a foundation, four walls, something on top, and a nervous-system equivalent. So boring. If I were an architect I'd build useful, complicated things that weren't just weird-looking *boxes*."

"There are two words for what you're describing, Newton," Hermann says, dry and distracted, "and those words are 'civil engineer'."

Hermann, too, is preoccupied, but whether that's because he's trying *not* to do any Venn Diagram tracing or because he's busy tracing away, Newt can't say. For Hermann,

this has been, arguably, a somewhat upsetting day. In temporally reversed order sources of upset could include but would not be limited to: a) Newt being pretty unexpeditious regarding this hallway walking that is harder than usual a little bit; he actually drank an eight-thousand percent reasonable amount which was, like, two-point-five beers with a higher-than-typical alcohol content over the course of three hours, b) Hwi doing the driving on the way home; Hermann is *not* into not doing the driving when there's driving to be done, c) literally everything that happened at the Mathkwardness Party but *probably especially* d) Newt's semi-drunken semi-argument with Rush over the nature of polynomial time that he had, inevitably but gloriously *lost* despite being cheered on by literally everyone including Rush's significant other slash mysterious body guard, e) his extremely high profile rendition of *LHC*, which, in retrospect, had been a little over-the-top, even for him, because Newt *can* control his own showmanship, kind of, most of the time, f) Newt's semi-fake semi-real romantic history but honestly what had Hermann *expected* Newt to do when accosted with a surprise relationship status—

"I did not *expect* anything," Hermann says, pulling out his keys, giving off the same vibe he's given off intermittently all night, which, if Newt were going to tag it, he'd say: anxiously pissed meets fondly dismayed.

Newt gives Hermann a horrified look that is wasted because Hermann is not looking at him.

Oh god, his brain says. Now is not a good time for him to develop additional thought-reading skills or sensitivities.

"Um," Newt says. "What did you think—or, did—" All his sentences are experiencing structural failure. "I think you EPIC Rapport'd me right there. What are we talking about? *Were* we talking? I don't think we were talking. We were talking about *architects*, I think. I think you might be better than me at EPIC Rapport. What did you just peel out of my brain? You're confused."

I support you eighty percent, his brain says. You probably did not do any concatenating aloud.

Eighty *percent*? Newt replies.

I would take what you can get, his brain says.

Do your job why don't you? Newt snarls back.

Hermann glares at him.

Newt feels slightly offended by this glare. Slightly more than slightly offended. Slightly *more* than slightly more than slightly offended. He has spent the *entire* evening covering for Hermann despite not being informed ahead of time that that was going to be a *thing*, and covering *really well*, actually. Covering for Hermann with totally glorious rockstarishness in a way that specifically stripped back some of Hermann's perpetual reserve and made him look more like a *person* and less like some kind of two-dimensional ideal of human propriety—

Well, his brain says, *when you put it that way, you look like a real jerk, champ*.

"No no no no *no*. What is that *look*? I do *not* deserve that look," Newt says to Hermann, before his mouth catches up with his brain.

Why are you so consistently so bad at relating to other humans? Newt asks his brain.

Hermann pushes the door of their apartment open and drops his gaze.

Tone it down a notch or eight, his brain advises, *and go have insomnia behind a closed door for several days, why don't you. Maybe when you're done with that your relationship dynamic will have regressed to its mean*.

"If we're talking about what I think we're talking about, you totally blind-sided me, dude," Newt says, following Hermann into the darkness of their shared apartment, continuing to defend himself in increasing unease and with decreasing vehemence. "What was I *supposed* to do?"

"Not *what you did*," Hermann says, removing his shoes.

Well great. This is just great. That could mean *so many* things and pulling this out of Hermann is going to be about as easy as going after the guy's teeth with a pair of pliers while blindfolded. He needs a way to increase his pre-test probability before he just starts lexical hypothesis testing. Hermann is *totally impossible* when it comes talking about things that are *bothering him*; Newt usually has to find out *later*, weeks and weeks after the fact, when the guy completely decompensates over something only semi-related, such as viscera in a shared lab space that was, actually, *built* for the express purpose of accommodating viscera.

The hallway faux flirting had, perhaps, been a little bit over the top, somewhat crass, a little bit of an unnecessary interpersonal perturbation that had felt like totally justifiable *revenge* but that had *less* of that vibe as it continued. Less and less. It had gotten weird, actually, the whole thing had gotten weird, had *been* weird, right from the beginning, right from the point they'd walked into that party, right up until right now, it's *still* weird, it's—

Hermann, shoeless, makes a quarter turn, and, in a move that is total and perfect reciprocity, puts a hand on Newt's chest and presses him back against the closed door of their apartment.

Ah Newt's brain says. Revenge. Reciprocal revenge. Revenge against revenge. Except, I think that's maybe just called escalation? Or maybe he's hunting you. Maybe he's really, genuinely, infinitely pissed at you for any one of a host of justifiable reasons. Maybe—

"Are you aware," Hermann whispers, "that post your first drift your entire mathematical framework transitioned from base-ten to base-eight?"

What? his brain asks.

"What?" Newt says, *excruciatingly* confused about where this is going. Does he seriously think in base-eight math now? *Thaaaaaaaats* a kaiju thing he's pretty sure, that's creepy, that's weird, that's kind of *hot* a little bit—base-eight, mod-eight, eight is his maximal setting, that seems so right to him, he really *likes* the number eight, he will have to immediately adjust all his *Negative Ten to Ten* scales over to *Negative Eight to Eight* scales except no, he will not do that, that's not a human thing, or is it? He doesn't know, but eight is great, zero-one-two-three-four-five-six-seven then start over, octal-style, that's cool, he's cool, what's *happening* exactly? He'd thought that this was some kind of turnabout hallway revenge vibe for sure, but the whole base-eight thing has thrown him for a loop a little bit, because what does *that* have to do with *anything*, really?

Hermann is staring at him in a super-up-close and personal way, *definitely* pushing Newt against their door, but it doesn't *seem* like there's a kaiju-style hunting vibe going on here, it mostly seems like the guy is really *anxious* about something. Newt is anxious *also*, but only because he's not totally clear on how innuendo-revenge, Gottliebian anxiety, and base-eight math might be related.

Help, he thinks faintly, while locked into some kind of infinite loop of the human gaze with his colleague of years. Of years and years and years. Years. *Brain, please help me.*

I've got nothing, his brain replies. *I cannot explain any of this. Unless—*

Do not be coy with me brain, Newt thinks. *Now is not the time.*

This could be a romance thing. Happening right here, right now. I am not sure how, if at all, the base-eight math relates to romance, though. Analysis of historical patterns indicates that this is not typical Gottliebian style, but sample sizes are small and in the setting of EPIC Rapport, I would say you can count on Gottliebian patterns going at least a little Geiszlerian in unpredictable ways. So, in short, I'd hold to your present course, which

seems to be just silently staring into his eyes kind of like he's a cobra. His gaze has kind of an unwavering mesmerizing quality when he's after something in particular, have you noticed this?

Yes, Newt thinks helplessly, *yes I have noticed that. A little bit. A little bit I have.*

"Well you *do*," Hermann says, very close, fading into the dark of an unlit apartment.

"I do what?" Newt echoes, eight million percent flustered.

Eight.

Ha.

"Use an octal numeral system," Hermann explains.

Octal numerals, chalk dust in Seattle sunlight, custom midair projection systems, quantum cartography, haircuts so terrible that maybe they actually looked good? Newt could be into that; Newt could be into *all* of it, no problem, arguably he always had been, hadn't he? Does it matter? Newt does not have high standards, Newt tries to have *nostandards*, Newt actually likes *monsters* a lot, a little *too* much, he always has, really; he's panicking a little bit, yes he is, no he's not, he's not at all, his brain is sending mixed messages and trying to decouple things that should be connected like intent and action. He'd better do something, he'd better do it *right now*, he'd better do *something* before his brain and his body become separated secondary to derailing and fragmenting electrical trains of thought. He has two choices, or, really, three if one counts inaction as an action and everyone here is going to count that because obviously. He's not sure what would happen if he just, hypothetically, stood here, staring at Hermann for an infinite amount of time. It would probably be something that would hypothetically ruin the hypothetically romantic mood; he'd probably stop breathing and faint.

Are you breathing? his brain asks. *Right now, I mean? Try not to lose consciousness in the face of statistical improbabilities. It doesn't send the right kind of message.*

YOU ARE IN CHARGE OF THAT DEPARTMENT, Newt screams at himself.

In the back of his thoughts, the kids hiss in concerned confusion.

Three choices.

Three choices.

Three choices, one of which is to just do what he's doing right now which is staring fixedly at Hermann until his nervous system overloads. Two is to maybe just kind of do some reciprocal hand-to-chess pressing and walkaway, walk to any location that isn't

this one. Three is to grab his arch nemesis by his stupid sweater and do some hypothesis testing, so to speak.

Well.

Framed like *that*—he really has only one respectable option.

Assess, his brain suggests. *Do one last assessment to make sure that your observations are consistent with your working model.*

Newt takes stock. Yup, he's in a quiet, dark apartment, lit only by the faint glow of streetlights from below and from the moonlight that reflects off the dark water of Oblivion Bay. His current status is best described as being pressed to the interior of own front door by Dr. Hermann Gottlieb, his colleague of nine years, his friend of twelve years, his love interest since never and always. No one is hunting anyone, no one saying anything, no one is *doing* anything, they are both just standing here, staring at one another and *waiting*.

You are good to go, his brain says, deciding to soundtrack this moment to the chorus from *Enchiridion*, like a really pathetic, romantic loser.

Newt is much cooler than his brain.

"Just for your information," Newt says, raising his eyebrows for emphasis as he grabs Hermann's sweater, "this is not the stupidest thing I've ever done."

He drags Hermann forward a few inches, because if the guy is going to be shoving him against a *door* Newt is going to do some reciprocal man-handling of his *own*. Newt is a little *classier* about it, a little more *subtle* than Dr. Gottlieb, thanks. Newt is basically an anachronistic rock star and that's a hard thing to be and *also* be *alive*, he should list that on his CV in the *Notable Skills* section.

Speaking of notable skills, Newt is a fabulous kisser.

How could he not be, really?

Kissing is all about a perfect blend of charisma, not being a dick, and paying attention to the other party, and he's *been* Hermann Gottlieb, he's been him in an ontological way so, *theoretically*, there should be no better kissing experience available to Dr. Gottlieb in the *entire* world than the one that Newt is initiating *right now*.

The *key*, really, Newt decides, is to be *delicate* as *hell* about this whole thing because a) Hermann is a classy guy, b) Newt could totally be misreading the situation, c) it's easier to rock the whole no-it-was-just-a-confused-kiss-of-endlessly-platonic-love vibe if there's no tongue, and, honestly, it may sort of *be* that vibe, Newt is very unsure about

what's happening here, but it will all probably turn out fine if he doesn't do something totally classless like shove his *tongue* into someone's mouth or start taking off someone's *clothes* or something.

Hypothetically.

Oh god, yeah, no, *that* would be bad.

So yes.

Newt is rocking the head-tilted, eyes-closed, I-totally-respect-you-as-a-person type vibe as he and Hermann share some dark communal air and do some very sophisticated, very slow, very minimalistic, single-perfect-flower-in-a-single-perfect-vase, windblown-sand-erodes-a-desert-rock, calligraphic kissing that Newt, personally, feels is *exceptionally* classtastic, minimally scary, and kind of *nice*, actually. This probably represents the theoretical *pinnacle* of Geiszlerian skill meeting Geiszlerian self-restraint. Newt takes it up one more notch by letting go of Hermann's sweater and shifting his hands face-ward to a more classically romance-style configuration—

Or.

Nope.

Because Hermann, either *not* into the face-touching thing for possibly telepathic reasons or not into the *whole*thing for non-telepathic reasons, clamps both hands around Newt's upper arms, and shoves him back against the door.

Someone's cane clatters to the floor.

Newt makes a distressed sound that he doesn't *intend* to make because it's just kind of *surprising*, really, the whole bones meet door thing, and yet *not* surprising at the same time. So so so not surprising.

What had he been *thinking*.

His eyes snap open and he's already forming a sentence that starts with, 'soooo sorry, er, full disclosure, I am not sure what—' when Hermann takes advantage of his preparatory inhale to resume the kissing except this time with a whole lot more tongue being a whole lot more *in Newt's mouth*.

Oh.

Well okay then.

Newt feels kind of like *standing* is becoming really hard, he's not *good* in situations like this, he's actually *terrible* at them—running for his life, *not* starting fights, *winning* fights

he starts that don't involve words, navigating flux points in kissing kinetics, making rapid, high stakes decisions, doing literally anything to get himself *out* of a drift going bad, waking himself up from nightmares, getting out of the way when nematocysts are about to discharge into his arm, being anything other than a terrible romantic partner, and, last but not least, managing to continue having coherent *thoughts* when his professional arch nemesis turned life partner turned roommate starts doing things like, oh, say—

Hermetically sealing them together from thigh to mid-sternum.

He finds this distracting.

In the extreme.

If he had to make a distraction hierarchy it would probably go something like: a) the aggressive lingual conflict that Hermann is winning, if people even *can* win at kissing, Newt's not sure if that's a thing that humans can do, but if it can be done, then Hermann is doing it and Newt is fine with that, kissing is not a zero sum game and they're on the same team, he's pretty sure although he does feel a little subsumed beneath the conflagration in his peripheral circuitry, b) the whole fully clothed, full frontal press thing that they are reciprocally rocking, it's kind of hot, thermally and metaphorically, and also kind of *frictional*, c) the *amazingly* Captain-Kirk-style grip that Hermann's got on his upper arms, d) the amazingly Neo-de-la-Matrix-style bilateral countered hip slash lower back gripping that *Newt* is doing, e) what *is* this list even.

This state, his current one, this one right now, is not a state in which Newton Geiszler of the sub-par social skills and remembered monster gills is going to be able to think very clearly or really do *anything* other than reciprocally step up his own glossal game.

Which is fine, yes?

Totally fine, his brain affirms weakly, threatening to abandon ship in the face of complete sensory overload because it's been *a while* since Newt has done anything like this, where by 'like this' he means using his reproductive system to have a good time. Generally speaking, this kind of thing is the kind of thing that doesn't appear on his radar, but he can see why people get into it, he supposes. There's a certain cathartic value to physical perturbation with people one likes, or people that drive one about eight kinds of—

Eight.

"Base-eight?" Newt manages to breathlessly articulate in a maximally provocative manner.

Apparently, Hermann thinks that numeral systems other than base ten are *really attractive*.

"You're a terrible person," Hermann breathes, finally shifting his grip and threading his hands inside Newt's jacket. "I despise you. Everything you said was true."

Was it? Newt tries to ask, but can't because he's being kissed pretty intensively again, nearly incapacitated with inverted deja-vu because, yes, this is indeed Hermann's style that he's on the receiving end of—ridiculously*committed*, totally invested; now that their equilibrium has been upset everyone is sliding down into whatever fire Hermann's been feeding for years. The guy kisses like he *drives*, too fast, *very* precise, slightly scary, and it's *really* confusing and not at all fair; *Newt* is supposed to be doing this, *he's* the live-fast-die-young-and-formalin-fix-your-corpse guy out of the pair of them, isn't he? He's not sure. He has no idea, actually. Maybe that's not him. Maybe that's partially him. The only thing he can say with certainty is that right now he's pretty sure he's the one who is too overwhelmed to move and who would probably be lying on the floor (lying on the floor) if he wasn't being mostly held up by an excruciatingly sextacular perpendicular force vector.

Hermann strips Newt's jacket back over his shoulders, and Newt obligingly allows him to peel it off. He loses his left glove in the process, and he can feel it invert slowly down the length of his hand as it comes off with the jacket to land at their feet.

Newt's fingertips run along the line of Hermann's jaw, tracing toward his temple.

"*Can I—*" Newt manages to say, or maybe *think*; he's not sure which it is, but really, the kissing is nice for a human who likes human things, and er, yes, he *is* a human, and he *does* like those things, the heat and the friction and the mouth action is all very well and good and distracting to the point of perturbing his autonomic nervous system into status total overload but, *for sure*, the most scorching element of this, for him, will always be the *experimental* angle, the telepathic, brain-versus-brain side of things.

Hopefully the experimental angle doesn't kill him or destabilize his consciousness.

It might be worth it, his brain suggests.

Are you out there, kids? Newt thinks faintly.

The local kids hiss back at him, unusually subdued and *very* interested in human sexual practices.

This is new for them.

It's a little bit new for Newt as well. He's never been with a guy he's been.

"You may *not*," Hermann breathes like the swish of a ruler, pulling Newt's dress shirt out of his jeans and Newt's hand away from his head. "Avoid provoking catastrophe, will you please? I'm trying to have a reasonable evening, Newton."

"This is a reasonable evening?" Newt asks, kind of, managing to form words despite all the metaphorical lane changing that Hermann is doing what with the kissing and the hands on skin thing. Should there be *any* skin contact if Hermann is not into the telepathic angle right now? The spinal cord is probably a good thought insulator but the whole telepathy angle is new for them, possibly evolving, poorly understood, potentially rife with unexpected side effects so it follows that Newt is really *not sure* what he should be doing with his hands now that empirical adventuring has been taken off the table, so he settles for some extremely classy hand over sweater positioning that will hopefully *slow things down* because, honestly? His colleague seems to be about a half step away from ripping Newt's clothes off and tackling him to the floor and while Newt is currently in possession of a lot of escalation instincts, a lot, he's not totally convinced that this is a great idea. Experimental thought reading is one thing. Cuddling while watching *Voyager* is another thing. Traumatizing identity swaps are yet another thing. Hermann nicely arranging Newt's hair while reading him *Neuron* is also a different thing. But *this*—

He had talked to Hwi about this.

This is a bad idea maybe, his brain says, sounding uncertain. *People do not like you. You are a bad life partner. You are a worse romantic partner. Arguably, you have never successfully navigated a long-term romantic relationship. As a friend, you are semi-tolerable for some people who have been forced to spend time with you for various reasons. As a human, you are useful. As member of society you are productive. As a member of your species, you are exemplary. As one half of a romantic relationship with Hermann Gottlieb, you may be a miserable failure. You do not enjoy sex enough for this to be worth it.*

Hermann pulls off Newt's tie and it vanishes somewhere into the dimness of his peripheral vision.

All of these are good points, Newt replies, having a hard time *thinking critically* as he loses the battle with his escalation instincts and pulls Hermann's stupid blue sweater over his head and yanks his dress shirt out of his pants because reciprocal undressing seems like the thing to do.

Undressing.

Undressing.

He had decided that was *not* a good plan.

Hermann pulls his glasses off, in a careful, slow slide.

Newt finds this unspeakably hot for some reason.

The room blurs further into darkness.

On the other hand, his brain continues, back on board with the way things are going, *it seems like your colleague has been, possibly, wanting to do this for some length of time so maybe you should just go with it, because his happiness level is important to you.*

Hermann tips Newt's head back with a gentle pressure beneath his chin and starts kissing a random-walk pattern along the path of Newt's longitudinal neck musculature and er, yes, that's strange, the kids aren't into that, or maybe they're *really* into it and kind of hoping for *biting* to happen? Newt isn't sure, it's weird, he feels weird, he feels like he's not sure about the gravitational force vector that's pounding him into the ground like a semi-actualized, semi-sexual metaphor, wherever the ground might *be* or whatever the pounding might equate to? Biology. Chemistry. Physics. Mathematics. Everything comes back to mathematics in the end and mathematics is inherently unknowable, partially, that was what had pushed Gödel too far beyond the bounds of convention. That's been Hermann's problem all along, a little bit, on different scales in different fields in different brains—

Hermann fractionally decouples the apposed edges of Newt's shirt by releasing the button at his collar.

This is, his brain says, contemplating panic but, as sometimes happens, just not quite making it all the way to panic and getting hung-up, mid fight-or-flight response with a waterfall of activation and Newt thinks that maybe one day he'll just get pulled under the riptide of the self and never come back up or if he does come back, if he *does*, it won't be as himself it will be as *something else*.

What happens to a fraction of a hive mind?

This is maybe not the best, his brain says, managing to finish its thought over and through the forest fire in his peripheral nervous system.

Newt feels as though he's losing all the middle ground he has, his only open options are turning absolute—ripping Hermann's still-buttoned shirt straight down its line of least resistance and tackling the guy to the ground or starting to scream in total human-relations-induced panic because this *isn't a good idea*, he never manages to have sex with someone and then *continue to associate* with them, what is he doing, what is he doing what is he doing? What is he doing. Does he *want* to do this? If *he*

doesn't, who here *does*? Does anyone? Does *Hermann*? Does he think Newt wants this? Does Newt want it? Is there an origin to this positive feedback loop or does it just exist in eternal amplification? Was its origin hours ago in that hallway with faux-flirting that had turned progressively real? Because its endpoint is going to be a system overload where circuits fuse and fail.

Dear Mako, Newt thinks. *I need to come live with you because I am homeless and insane. Hopefully this will not cramp your style. Love, Newt.*

Hermann undoes another button, and Newt knows *why* he's doing it; it's because he knows Newt *likes* it, has always liked it really, from the time he was eighteen in Prague and presenting, only once, at a Biomedical Ethics meeting, it's weird to have a one night stand at an *ethics* meeting, he's pretty sure about that, maybe. What *ismorality*, anyway? But that's not the point, the point is that Hermann is *better* at this than he is, unfairly better, too good, much too good, Newt is just trying to stay conscious and not totally panic in a very mood-killing way, it's not a fair comparison—one person totally suave and confident and the other person caught between freaking out and passion in a space where only thoughts but no actions live.

That space has a name, his brain says. *And I'm pretty sure that name is Hypoxia. You have not been breathing for whole spans of seconds.*

His entire body is a confusing shriek of sensory signals mixing into paralyzed indecision and he's not *doing* anything now, he's losing track of more and more as the hissing in his thoughts grows louder in concern or in conquest.

"Newton," Hermann says concerned, stepping back.

That's nice, Newt thinks vaguely as his perspective shifts. Hermann isn't pushing him against the wall anymore and the direction of gravity is pretty clear to him now. *He gets me.*

"*Newton*," Hermann snaps, stepping forward to help him *not* slide down the wall.

Terrible job, his brain offers. *Really really terrible job.*

"No," Newt says thickly, getting his feet under him and steadying himself with both hands on Hermann's shoulders. "Yes. Er, I—" he breaks off, not sure what to say.

Hermann is giving him a maximum wattage, incisive-style look that Newt finds extremely attractive and also totally terrifying in his current set of circumstances.

Newt looks back at him, thinking about trying to smile in a casually winsome way but not quite getting to the point where he actually starts *forming* that facial expression.

Hermann sighs, gives Newt a look that might best be described as 'pained fondness', wraps a hand around the back of Newt's neck and presses their foreheads together.

Newt can feel the pressure of the other man's thoughts behind the threatening unweaving of his entire sensory experience.

"I do not think, Newton," Hermann says, "that you *need* to hear me say this, but I will say it anyway. I will not leave."

Newt shuts his eyes because they *feel* really *hot* to him just right now. He can't say anything in response to what's come out of Hermann's mouth, because there's nothing *left* to say, only a thoughtless, childish *jerk* would say, 'you're lying,' or 'you will, I'm sure you will,' or 'everyone does, you think you're *special* in some way?' Only a child equates death with abandonment. Only children do that. Not Newt. Newt doesn't do that. Newt, in fact, never even did that as a child, when it would have been understandable. Past-Newt had decided not to be a child and had moved half a world away from everyone he'd known because it didn't matter who wanted him or who loved him or who didn't love him and how much. Newt loves *other* people and Newt does not need to be loved back for that. Reciprocity is great, but Newt is fine, Newt is *fine*, with just loving the people that he loves whether or not they love him back, whether they're smart or whether the secret desires of their hearts amount to killing themselves in Jaegers, whether or not they accomplish all it is they want to do during the time that the universe is hosting their waveforms. Newt does not *need* to hear Hermann say *anything*. Newt does not need to argue with him in a closet search for additional reassurance.

Newt does not need that.

Newt will be fine either way—on his own, or as a whole half of an infinitely interesting human relationship.

So, all he says is, "I think you're better at reading thoughts than I am. Discuss."

"You will never be rid of me," Hermann says, managing to gently tune into the vibrational frequency of all Newt is, even when Newt is distorting his own signal. He threads his hands into the small space between them to re-fasten the top two buttons of Newt's shirt. "Unless, of course, you wish it. Even then I'm unconvinced that disentanglement would be entirely possible. But you have only yourself to blame for that."

"EPIC Rapport'd," Newt whispers.

"Indeed," Hermann says quietly, smoothing Newt's collar.

Newt needs to *fix this*. Newt knows exactly how it feels to sit amongst something unmade by his own hands and *not be able to put it back together*. This really, this can't, this really just *cannot* happen here. He just—he just needs to explain *everything*, he needs to articulate all the ways in which him freaking out mid-clothing removal, is not a *rejection* of something that had been wholeheartedly *offered* by a guy who really does not *do* a whole lot of wholehearted offering of stuff.

"It's not that I—" Newt begins, but doesn't finish, because how could he? He is not himself, his mind is not just his mind, quiet kaiju kids are hissing in his thoughts, wanting him to fail, wanting him to succeed, not knowing what they want, but him screaming on the floor would be a good start, yes it would.

"You are approximately as predictable as the atmosphere," Hermann says, not backing off, moving from fixing Newt's collar to fixing his hair with careful unconfining finger combing. "Endlessly interesting. Profoundly perturbable. A constant source of stress."

"You're really great," Newt replies. "I—I have no idea what just happened there—I mean, I could, if you *wanted* to, we could—I find you *very attractive* in a complicated way and I always have I think, even before I actually met you, so, you know, make of that what you will."

Kill me now, kids, he thinks. *If you're going to do it, do it now*.

The kids hiss back at him in confusion.

Hermann says nothing; he just stands there, still super close, still fixing Newt's hair over and over again in the exact same way every time, probably thinking about whole *sets* of things at speeds Newt lacks the chronometers to clock.

He feels like he should apologize for all the initiating he's done of things he clearly cannot handle—like xenodrifts on garbage rigs and stupid hallway flirting.

"The problem with *you*," Newt replies, his fingers pressing down into Hermann's shoulders, "is that one day you just decided to start calling my bets, round after round."

"I am less risk averse than I might appear," Hermann replies.

"I feel like maybe—" Newt whispers, trying to look at nothing, bringing a hand up to take in the space between them, everything he's done, all the ways their brains have changed, everything he cannot quite do, not because he doesn't *want* to, but because his bones and his brain and everyone who lives and loves in his skull can't quite let go of the damage making them all that they are. "I feel like maybe I've totally destroyed, or if not destroyed then *altered* everything that you might have ever done—I mean, I would *love* to tear off your clothes right now, don't get me wrong, I just can't let you

reciprocally tear off *mine* for really complicated, weird reasons that have nothing to do with how attractive you may or may not be, which is *very* attractive, as I previously mentioned, or how good a life partner you are and you are like the *best*. You are like the theoretical ideal except for the sweaters, I have mixed feelings about those, and your gratuitous enjoyment of acceleration."

"Are you finished?" Hermann murmurs.

"Yes," Newt says.

"I doubt that," Hermann replies.

"No, seriously. You go."

"This outcome, this *precise* outcome, is orders of magnitude superior to outcomes I envisioned, both pre and post drifting. If it takes you *years* to decide that sleeping with me will not entirely destroy our extremely unusual relationship, if you *never* decide that —"

"Um, excuse me," Newt says, unable to contain himself after seeing an avenue by which *something* might be rebuilt, possibly in a superior manner, "look, I have to break in here because I am planning start sleeping with you *immediately*. Today. Like, not metaphorical 'sleeping' where 'sleeping' is some social code word for 'sex' but *actual* sleeping, or, alternatively, staring silently into the darkness, full of ontological and maybe a little bit of epistemological dread. Look, just to be clear, I presume that we can *eventually* get all the way to conventional relationship territory, by which I mean, to be clear, having sex, given enough time sans near-death experiences, sustained mutual interest, and maybe with the judicious use of blindfolds? That sounds a little bit inappropriate, now that I've phrased it like that; it sounded better in my head. Maybe you should just read my thoughts. Actually, never mind, I'm not sure that's a good idea right now. I kind of wonder what happens when I turn on my terminal, so to speak. Like, is it just *you* picking things up? Or might the real kids be picking things up also. I mean, I don't think so, because of my skull, but like, it's within the realm of possibility that the square root of two is a hot formaldehyde-cooler topic these days in the local network. Why am I talking about this now? I have no idea. My *point* is maybe I could be *better*, as like, a life slash romantic partner? But I'm probably not your *worst* possible option. I'm probably in the top fifty percent, even with my current inability to separate myself from my clothing taken into account. I could really see myself as being *almost* perfect for you but then tragically orchestrating your downfall, kind of like a film noir leading lady except where *science* is a stand in for the typical motivations, like money, past love, that kind of thing. Why is it always the *male* scientists who go

bad in terrible sci-fi movies? Probably I'll just die; like, I see myself dying from neural overload under the pressure of foreign influence before turning evil. Like, I just don't see the hive mind, especially in its local, limited incarnation, as really being capable of the subtlety that would be required for 'turning evil'. Do you? Cognitive overload leading to excitotoxic cell death? Now *that* I could see. Easily. So, ethically, it's probably okay for you to date me. If someone needs to kill me, get Mako to do it. Er, actually, you should probably ask Becket. I just feel like before we *start a relationship* where there's even *more* emotional attachment than already exists, which is a *lot*, that we should *decide* who is going to kill me if I turn evil, because it *really* shouldn't be *you*. I feel very strongly about that. On your behalf. Likely, I won't care at the time, because I'll be evil."

You might want to stop talking, his brain suggests. *You might also want to check in with me before you say anything else besides the word 'sorry'.*

Yeah because you're so helpful, Newt replies. *So so helpful.*

"Sorry," Newt says. "I'm just looking out for you. In a Manichaeian way. Like everyone does. For their significant other. Real significant other? Pseudosignificant other?"

"Real," Hermann says, still doing the hair-fixing thing. "You seem quite anxious."

"What gave it away?" Newt asks weakly.

Hermann doesn't reply, instead he says, "I will, of course, sleep with you. I will *not* discuss who will kill you in the event that you become a danger to our species."

"Okay," Newt says. "That seems fair. Contingency homicide planning for no one, communal Raising of Estimated Sleep Tallies for everyone."

"REST?" Hermann says dryly.

"Acronyms make everything better. They reduce awkwardness. Like, oh hey, want to jack an electrode into a guy's brain? That's a little bit invasive, but hey, just throw in some capital letters and make a Latin bridge-related pun and all of a sudden *everyone's* signing up. Seriously though, you have no idea how intensively I have been working *not* to invade your personal space. For years. Years and years."

"Your efforts have been mediocre at best," Hermann says.

"Well yours have been a dismal failure, albeit a recent one," Newt replies, leaning slightly into the hair fixing that's still happening. "I don't mind; it makes me feel microbiologically privileged."

"Please do not elaborate," Hermann says.

Newt, very courteously, does *not* elaborate, he just nods, he just *stands there*, not saying anything stupid, getting his hair fixed over and over again, trying to decide if he can back date his current relationship into the past, and if so, how far. This afternoon, when he had stepped up to the boyfriend plate like a human relations rockstar? A week ago, when they'd had their first *Star Trek: Voyager* date? Four weeks ago, when Hermann had told UC Berkeley that they had some kind of legal status and they'd both signed the same lease—Hermann illegibly and fluidly, Newt legibly and laboriously? Five weeks ago, when Newt had used Hermann's toothbrush? Six weeks ago, when they'd drifted? Two years ago, during the Fire Cracker Sake Incident and its associated drunken and experimental make out session that Newt can *kind of* remember from two different but equally inebriated perspectives? Six years ago, when Hermann had done Newt's paperwork for the first time? Nine years ago, when they met, with their stupid hair and their stupid cheekbones? Twelve years ago when Newt had fired a letter into the dark tangle of humanity's sprawling, evolving neural net? He's not sure. He decides on the toothbrush time point, because if he picks that one, that *already* makes this his most successful relationship *ever*.

And that's a win.

Hermann pulls Newt's glasses out of his pocket, where he had, apparently, stashed them while Newt was busy being distracted.

"Don't move," he says, sliding them carefully into place.

I love you, Newt thinks, while Hermann's fingertips brush over his temples. *If you're reading random thoughts, read that one.*

Hermann says nothing, he just gives Newt a look that seems to wordlessly communicate the sentiment of, 'I know'.

Newt thinks about *Star Wars* too much, possibly.

"True," Hermann murmurs. "*Star Trek* is vastly superior."

"You *are* the better thought-reader," Newt says, in composed accusation, Princess-Leia style.

"At a first approximation, you may be correct," Hermann replies.

Newt drops his gaze. "Too bad the drift doesn't homogenize complex feelings and histories to a shared, simplistic perspective. Otherwise, we could have started banging one another immediately."

"Charming," Hermann replies dryly, retrieving the jacket and the cane from where they are lying on the floor. "You are much too complicated, oblivious, and distractible for any such course of action to have even a remote chance of success, even in the case of a conventional drift." The cane, he leans against the wall; the jacket he hangs in the closet after separating it from the glove still trapped in its sleeve; the glove he passes, wordlessly, to Newt.

Newt yanks it into place.

"Well thank you, Dr. Gottlieb, I am, of course, terribly flattered."

It is not for *hours*, not until Newt is watching *Voyager* slantwise, his head in Hermann's lap and his hair fixed into total submission, that Hermann, his eyes on the English translation of Descartes' *Meditations* that Newt must have read eight times by now, speaking over B'Elanna Torres eating banana pancakes, says, "I confess I have been wondering, Newton, how is that you're able to change your clothes? How are you able to *shower*?"

Newt is so relaxed and the paired questions are so delicately asked that he manages to go straight to abstracting the intent behind them, without dwelling on the complicated iconography that he's needled into his dermis and the implication that he cannot look at that which he has put on his body.

Geiszler, she'd sighed, leaning close to him under dim lights. *Why are you doing this?*

Newt can feel the remembered sting of an oscillating needle gun, depositing dye beneath the skin of his right bicep.

Why are you sealing your brain into an experimental rig once a week, he'd fired back. *You have a nice brain, Lightcap.*

You had a nice arm, she'd replied. *That wasn't an answer.*

He'd never given her one.

She hadn't asked him again.

When he thinks of himself, he imagines his skin clean, not draped with a multi-hued dream coat that cannot be removed.

"I close my eyes," Newt says.

A Coda In Two Parts

A Coda

They arrive in the rain, stepping out of a strangely talkative taxi cab, Mako pulling her scarf tight over her hair, Raleigh raising the hood of his jacket to hide his face while scanning the streets for cameras and reporters.

He doesn't see any.

That makes sense, because Mako Mori and Raleigh Becket are currently in Hong Kong.

Masako and Ray Lapierre are the ones vacationing in San Francisco.

"Did you see any?" Mako asks, very quietly, in Japanese as they pull their luggage out of the back of the cab.

"Nah, babe," Raleigh replies, with an affected drawl, settling his bag over one shoulder and hauling their shared suitcase to the curb.

Mako makes a face at him, cocking her head to the side and briefly sticking out her tongue as she shoulders her bag and slams the trunk of the cab closed.

They stand, hesitating in the rain for only a few seconds, looking up at the exterior of Bayside Towers.

Of course those nerds would live here, Raleigh thinks. Could one get more supervillain? If one tried? Really hard?

"Ominous," Mako says, in English, studying dark, rain-glazed windows against a gray-white sky.

"I think this place is lined with lead," Raleigh says. "So is every building in this zone. That's what tints the windows."

"Why are we standing outside?" Mako asks pointedly.

They pass through a locked door with a pre-arranged code, walk through a windowed lobby, and step into an elevator.

Raleigh pulls his hood back. He watches as Mako removes her scarf and sunglasses, runs hands over her hair, and then stares impassively at the elevator door.

Her fear is his fear.

Her dread is his dread.

He says nothing to her, because there's nothing he *can* say. Instead, he reaches over and straightens the collar of her red blouse beneath the outer shell of her black jacket.

She looks at him.

"You look good," he says.

She smiles.

He smiles back at her.

"What if—" she whispers.

"What if?" Raleigh echoes, equally quietly, when it seems that she isn't going to finish. "So what." He hopes that his nonsense words encompass all that he's said on planes and in hotel rooms, in dressing rooms, on beaches. *We'll make it work, Mako. We'll always make it work, you and me. We'll take what we can get and we'll make it into what we need, like we always have.*

She smiles at him again.

Raleigh *really* hopes that *none* of what he's read about Geiszler is true.

He hopes it because he'd hope that for *anyone*; he hopes it because he can't stand to see Mako hurt any more than she's already been hurt; he hopes it because sometimes, in his dreams, Yancy turns dark-haired and snarky and soon enough it's Geiszler that he's fighting in that bar in Anchorage with upended tables and shards of glass that turn to shards of words they never were; he hopes it because sometimes, when he dreams as Mako, it's Yancy who shows him how to tune a bass.

The elevator opens and they walk down a silent, empty hallway. Mako's hands are closed around the strap of her bag. Raleigh rolls their suitcase noiselessly over a floor that's gray and made of something synthesized.

They stop in front of the door.

Mako looks up at him.

It is Raleigh who knocks.

Geiszler swings the door open, one hand on the doorframe, and raises his eyebrows at the pair of them. He's dressed in a green sweater pulled over a white button-down shirt. He looks like a nerd and stands like a rock star and Raleigh can't decide if he wants to punch the guy or give him a hug.

"Oh," Geiszler says, feigning surprise like a guy without brain damage, "were you people coming *today*? I—"

That's as far as he gets before Mako's bag hits the ground and he gets tackle-hugged.

Raleigh feels for him.

Mako hugs are intense.

Geiszler staggers back a step and loses his balance. Unfortunately for him, there is no pity in a Category Five Mako Mori hug, so she doesn't stabilize him; she just lets him drag her down. The only help she gives him is the quick shift of her right hand from a cross shoulder grip to come up behind his head so he won't crack his skull against the floor.

"Mako," Geiszler says, and that's a tactical error. Raleigh knows from experience that people need to hang onto their oxygen during a Mako hug. It's best to just stop fighting and politely remind Mako that one needs to breathe.

Dr. Gottlieb appears from behind a closed door, shoots Geiszler an unimpressed look when the guy uses his remaining air to gasp, "help," skirts the whole thing happening on the floor, and extends his hand to Raleigh.

"Mr. Becket," he says.

"Dr. Gottlieb," Raleigh replies, shaking his hand.

"Such formalities are hardly necessary," Dr. Gottlieb says, waving a hand in a manner that is *significantly* more laid back than Raleigh remembers. "Welcome to San Francisco."

"Thank you," Raleigh says. "Call me Raleigh," he adds, but it comes out more like a hope than a directive.

Dr. Gottlieb nods.

Mako lets Geiszler go, rocking back on her heels, wiping her eyes.

"Maks," Geiszler coughs weakly, both hands extended in her direction.

Mako steps back, braces her foot against the edge of Raleigh's boot, helps Geiszler to his feet in a rapid pull, and then steadies him.

Raleigh watches her face close down into neutrality as she realizes that the man *needs* steadying.

Dr. Gottlieb pulls a handkerchief out of a pocket and hands it to Geiszler.

Geiszler presses it to his face. "*Maks*," he says. "Give a guy a little warning, will you please? I'm slightly less scrappy than my historical baseline and you're like a sixteenth degree black belt or whatever it is that you are."

It takes Raleigh an infinite, fractional second to realize that the man is *bleeding*.

He snaps his gaze to Mako. He tries not to, but he can't help it.

She looks back at him.

He can't remember if he's seeking or providing reassurance, but, really, it doesn't matter because there's no reassurance to be had; this is the kind of look exchanged by people standing on cracking ice.

Her eyes lock back on Geiszler.

"You are sick," she says, her voice painfully tight. "You should have told me."

Geiszler *does* look sick. All the subtle wrongs that Raleigh now sees seem new and sudden even though they aren't. Geiszler had looked sick since he opened the door—sick and tired and not the right height. Raleigh remembers him as being tall, but that's because his recent drifts with Mako have pried up memories from two childhoods, where Geiszler and Yancy strode through halls and fields and labs and city streets while he struggled to keep up.

"Meh," Geiszler says, with impressive unconcern. "I don't know about 'sick', Maks. I have a venous plexus in my head somewhere that *really* despises me and a bone marrow in status: compensatory overdrive. My neurologist is on the fence about a possible seizure disorder, but I feel like she's a little bit of a counterintuitive alarmist cloaked in a misleadingly laidback demeanor."

You have no idea, Raleigh wants to say, before he's even said hello. *You have no idea how those Mark One pilots died, do you? But Mako knows; Mako's seen them. Mako's walked through hospitals, carrying tissues she didn't need and watching for other people's blood. Don't you die on her, Geiszler. Don't you dare.*

"I'm fine," Geiszler says again, pulling his handkerchief away from his face.

"May I take your coat, Ms. Mori?" Dr. Gottlieb says, into the tight silence that follows.

"Yes, thank you," Mako whispers, and turns to give the man an informal bow before shrugging out of her coat. "It is very good to see you, Dr. Gottlieb."

Dr. Gottlieb takes her coat and returns her bow.

"I will literally make everyone's lives miserable if you guys don't cut it out with the honorifics and the excruciatingly high levels of mutual respect," Geiszler says.

Dr. Gottlieb shoots Raleigh a long-suffering look.

Raleigh reciprocates with a look of total sympathy, because it seems like the thing to do.

Mako stares at Geiszler, saying nothing.

"Okay," Geiszler says, with a mildly put-upon sigh. "I can clearly see that you have not yet met your hugging quota, despite literally tackling me, so get in here already, Maks, god."

Mako hugs him again, this time very carefully.

Raleigh shifts his weight, drops his shoulder bag next to the door, and tries not to feel like a fifth wheel, when he is, in fact, a bona fide fourth wheel. He doesn't want to be forever on the outside of this dynamic that he knows, that he *envies*, that is *almost* his own but never will be, not quite.

There's something about Geiszler that's intimidating, and it's not just the inappropriate tattoos and the aggressive deployment of his intellect—he's got a wild edge that feels dangerous to the side of Raleigh that's learned to tow the line and that feels like family to the side of him that's never learned that lesson.

When Mako finally lets him go, Geiszler adjusts his glasses, loses the handkerchief, looks at Raleigh, and says, "well if it isn't Captain Sir Saves Everyone. Blown anything up lately?"

Geiszler is a dick sometimes.

But Geiszler is also the guy who let twelve-year old Mako paint his fingernails for practice, not just once but every week for year and a half. Raleigh, in fact, can *remember* painting his fingernails.

He will literally never get used to this.

"Short Science," he says. He extends a hand, and, when Geiszler takes it, he pulls the man into a hug of his own, because he's *missed* Geiszler in a strange, confusing way—a blend of the way he misses Yancy—with the vicious, hollow chest-ache of unhealing grief—and the way that *Mako* has missed Geiszler—with a regret-tightened throat and a frustrated protective streak that colors all her thoughts.

The guy tenses in apparent surprise, but then gives Raleigh a solid, Geiszler-style hug in return, saying "drift parnter'd," like it isn't even a question.

"Yeah," Raleigh confirms anyway.

"Mystical drift connection or no," Geiszler says, extracting himself from their hug, and appropriating Raleigh's suitcase. "This is not going to be a thing."

"What's not going to be a thing," Raleigh asks.

"'Short Science'. It's not even witty. You can do better. I believe in you."

"I *can* do better," Raleigh says, following Geiszler down a hall toward a darkened bedroom as Dr. Gottlieb offers Mako some tea, "I just choose not to."

"Eh," Geiszler says. "That's fair."

They stay two weeks.

Dr. Gottlieb spends his days at UC Berkeley, his nights making dinner and reminiscing with Raleigh about the Jaeger Academy, the long dark of Alaskan winters, Raleigh's time on the Wall, and a handful of other experiences they find they have in common—a distaste for public speaking, a love of fast cars and *Kraftwerk*, a gratefulness for gyroscopic stabilizers. Dr. Gottlieb seems to understand Raleigh's confusion with memories that are not his memories—the dead parents he has that aren't *his* dead parents, the opinions he holds that surprise him, the way he gets confused looking at gendered things like high heeled shoes and mascara, not remembering whether they're for him or not.

Dr. Gottlieb, Raleigh thinks, understands in a way that is too deep, too extensive, too full of total sympathy.

He asks Mako about it early one morning, his arm around her in the gray light.

"Do you think they drifted?" he whispers into her hair.

She tips her head up towards him and whispers back, "I think it is better not to speak of such things," she replies.

That is answer enough.

Geiszler is more difficult to talk to. He's harder because Raleigh *wants* to be *Mako*, and he wants Geiszler to be the guy who bought him rollerblades, who taught him to play the base, who sat through manicures and *Blue Planet* and pipetted his distracted way through long talks about the secret heart of Skye McLeod, who gave him glitter to throw at Dr. Lightcap and Marshal Pentecost. But at the same time he *doesn't* want that, because Geiszler will never be the guy who taught him to drive under a clouded sky, who showed him how to fight and then how to fight dirty, who explained how to kiss a girl and what to do after you'd kissed her, who'd been in his life and in his head right until the moment that he'd died.

It takes him a few days before he can begin see Geiszler for who he is rather than who he should or shouldn't be.

Mako is asleep between them on the couch, Dr. Gottlieb is in bed, and *Blue Planet* is playing across the room on the television.

"Aw," Geiszler whispers. "She's missing the reef sharks."

"To the reef sharks," Raleigh says, raising his beer.

Geiszler gives him an uneven grin. "And all that they've eaten," he says. "To dead things everywhere. Dead people, dead friends, dead monsters. Dead enlightenment philosophers. To things that want to die and can't. To things that think about dying and don't. To everything that is dying, which is, in fact, almost everything. To thermodynamic equilibrium. To an ever-expanding universe that will, in the end, freeze down to zero Kelvin."

"It seems like it would be exhausting to be you," Raleigh says.

Geiszler arranges thumb and index finger into something reminiscent of a gun and fires a metaphorical shot in Raleigh's general direction. There is something about that silent acknowledgement that is amused and ironic and deeply *tired* and that matches nothing from Mako's mental catalogue or from Raleigh's own memories of Yancy. For the moment, Geiszler is just a fellow insomniac with a beer who has, however briefly, stopped letting down some part of his perpetual front.

"I'm sure it's so easy to be *you* though," Geiszler replies. "So perfectly coiffed all the time. So handsomely American. Always ready to catch some kind of sporting object that might be thrown your way."

"Handsome?" Raleigh repeats.

"I am *taken*," Geiszler replies. "And even if I weren't, I don't date people without at least one advanced degree. Masters degrees don't count."

"I didn't even go to college," Raleigh admits.

"Oh my *god*," Geiszler whispers, his eyes half shut as he takes another sip of his beer.

"That's it. Get off my couch. Get off my couch *immediately*."

They watch the reef sharks.

Raleigh does not get off the couch. Instead, he says, "we missed you."

"Aw kiddo," Geiszler replies, in a way that makes Raleigh's eyes hurt; in a way that makes him feel like he's Mako.

But he's not Mako.

Mako is asleep, leaning against his shoulder.

"The Marshal was dying," Raleigh says. "Did you know?"

"Dying?" Geiszler says, almost too loud, but not quite, his eyes snapping open as he fixes Raleigh with a sharp, wide-awake look.

"Yeah," Raleigh whispers. "Cancer."

"The Mark Ones," Geiszler replies. "Shit shielding over a shit core."

"Yeah. I guess. He ah—" Raleigh says, dragging his fingers through the air next to his face. "He didn't tell me any details. He didn't tell Mako much either, but he—did a lot of bleeding. Specifically? The same kind of bleeding that you're doing."

Geiszler takes a lazy sip of beer, his eyes on the reef sharks. "I was never exposed to any radiation," he says, pale and exhausted. "It's not the same."

"You sure about that?" Raleigh asks.

"I am the sure-est," Geiszler says. "My neurologist gets nervous about once every two weeks and scans my brain with one imaging modality or another. My entire head, vasculature and all, hates me, and will carry out a vicious vendetta against me for the rest of my life; but I'm not bleeding because there's a tumor disrupting a blood vessel. That has been ruled out. Do I need to, like, wake Mako up and tell her I'm not acutely dying?"

"Tomorrow is probably okay. But mention it, maybe," Raleigh says.

"You are mildly to moderately more thoughtful than you appear," Geiszler says. "I approve."

"You are marginally to mildly less of a dick than you appear," Raleigh replies. "I also approve."

"Good," Geiszler replies.

Raleigh spends the days in a haze of growing attachment, driving Dr. Gottlieb's car, watching Mako paint Geiszler's nails black for old times' sake, watching Geiszler gently draw Dr. Gottlieb into conversations, drinking games, and late-night classic movies, while Dr. Gottlieb occasionally calms Geiszler down to the point that he can sleep. They have a synchronicity he's only ever seen in pilots, and the longer that he spends with them the more certain he is that they must have drifted and that if it happened only once it must have been a strong one, because Geiszler *knows* when Dr. Gottlieb's getting tired, he steals thoughts right out from under him, finishes his sentences and steps in to seamlessly complete half-finished tasks. Dr. Gottlieb's even *more* attuned to Geiszler, Raleigh thinks, it takes him *days* to catch the subtleties of all he does for

Geiszler because the man is so good at mis- and re-direction. He has to see Geiszler nearly panic and Dr. Gottlieb talk him down before he recognizes a more subtle version of that same exchange play out multiple times per day. The more he watches, the more he notices: the way that Dr. Gottlieb will shift his position so that Geiszler is forced to look away from the Wall he so often stares at, the way he will turn conversations and Geiszler's train of thought away from the PPDC, the way he picks his battles and the times at which he picks them.

"You know," Raleigh says, to Dr. Gottlieb, when they are standing on the balcony, watching the sun go down, "sometimes I think I'm more in sync with Mako than she's in sync with me."

"Really," Dr. Gottlieb says, with casual curiosity. "How could you ever truly know such a thing to be the case?"

"You sound like Geiszler," Raleigh says, glancing at him quickly and then away.

"I confess I find his anxious obsession with epistemology extremely charming," Dr. Gottlieb admits. "Do *not* tell him I said that."

"Yeah, I hear you," Raleigh replies. "Mako is afraid of moths. It's pretty adorable."

"You were saying," Dr. Gottlieb prompts him.

"The funny thing is," Raleigh continues, "Yancy used to say the same thing about me. That he could read me like an open book and I could read him like an open pamphlet. He was overstating it some, but I think he might have been right."

"You are one of the only pilots who has ever drifted with more than one party," Dr. Gottlieb says. "Would you say that you feel that there is an inherent asymmetry to the drift?"

"I don't know if I'd go that far," Raleigh replies. "But it felt like, it *still* feels like—I look to Mako, while Mako looks out. Out at the world, out for the next threat. I think about bringing everything together. I think about surviving, I think about resources, I think about Mako. While Mako? Mako thinks about swords. And I see that, and I feel like I've lived this partnership from the other side. I don't just feel it. I know it. Despite what the interface techs and the science guys will tell you, I'm not sure how well we really understand what happens when two brains are forced together. And it seems to me like someone looks out while someone looks in."

"Interesting," Dr. Gottlieb replies, looking like a guy with volumes to say, but not saying any of it.

"I think it has to do with intent and personality and pre-existing feelings, and the mental fight that *is* the initial neural handshake," Raleigh continues. "I feel like when you look at pilot teams, you can tell. You can always tell who looks out and who looks in. Chuck was out and Herc was in. Aleksis was out, Sasha was in. Lightcap was out, D'onofrio was in. The Weis had their own thing going. Different people, different drifts; those roles *can* swap, I guess, but I'm not sure how often they do. How often they would. Mako is always going to be better suited for external scanning, for powering a forward drive, than for internal systems monitoring. She doesn't think about reserves in the heat of the moment. It's just not who she is."

"You ought to record some of these observations," Dr. Gottlieb advises him.

Did he just tell you to write a book, kid? Yancy asks, from the back of his thoughts.

"Geiszler would be like that, I think," Raleigh says cautiously. "Like Mako, I mean. Looking out."

"Dr. Geiszler," the other man says dryly, "cannot even bring himself to kill a *wasp*, let alone a kaiju. He's also possessed of a mind that would, I'm *certain*, manage to ruin a perfectly good stereotactic interface."

Raleigh looks down at the drink in his hands, more certain than ever that the pair of them have drifted.

"Yeah," he says, unable to rein himself in. "Drifting with Geiszler. I can't even imagine it. You tried it though. In that alley."

"We were incompatible," Dr. Gottlieb says mildly, looking at the distant Wall.

"But imagine if you hadn't been," Raleigh replies. "What do you think it would have been like?"

"I'm certain it would have been quite illuminating. I'm certain I would have been forced to acknowledge scores of things I had avoided confronting for spans of years. I'm certain I would have been nearly incapacitated with doubt and indecision and unpleasant cognitive dissonance for weeks post-drifting, because Newton would have had to make an unconventional modification to his interface that locked us into a tighter neural alignment than had ever been previously achieved. I'm certain that I would have been forced to admit that he has always been less quixotic than clairvoyant. But you know," Dr. Gottlieb says, swirling the alcohol and ice in his own glass, "I find that I don't think about that particular hypothetical much at all. There are others that trouble me."

"Like what?" Raleigh asks.

"I find myself wondering if things might have been different had I not undercut his drift proposal. Had I advocated for it to proceed but with *someone else* wearing the interface. I wonder what might have changed had I left Hong Kong with him twenty-four hours earlier. I wonder, of course, what happens to a fraction of an hive mind, left behind when a transdimensional portal has been shut, chemically cross-linked, its pieces separated by thousands and thousands of miles, but all of them still alive, still communicating with one another via an unknown mechanism. I find myself wondering about *that* quite frequently."

"Yeah," Raleigh says, suppressing the urge to shiver.

Dr. Gottlieb tracks a passing seagull with his gaze.

"Is Geiszler okay?" he asks.

Dr. Gottlieb drops his eyes. "No," he says. "I don't think he is."

Raleigh nods.

"I think that, perhaps, he *could* be," the other man adds. "Given time and a place to stand."

"Well he's got that," Raleigh says. "And he's got you. I'd say things are looking up."

Dr. Gottlieb turns to look at him, his expression faintly rueful. "Let's go inside. I detest this view."

Raleigh can see why he would.

His phone buzzes. He pulls it out of his pocket and finds that Mako has messaged him from a room away.

::Come play Portal, we have cake!::

"I'm supposed to be playing *Portal* anyway," Raleigh says, sighing.

"Ah yes," Dr. Gottlieb replies. "If you let him win, it will be over quickly."

"If I let him win," Raleigh says, "Mako will out me."

"Then again," Dr. Gottlieb amends, "you may, in fact, be *unable* to win."

Raleigh opens the door to find *Portal 3* displayed across the TV, Geiszler holding a controller, Mako sitting on her hands next to him in a red sweater set, looking excited.

"You said you had cake," Raleigh says to Mako.

Geiszler reaches over to ruffle Mako's hair.

Mako gives everyone a pleased look.

"The cake, of course," Dr. Gottlieb says, sliding the balcony door shut, "is a lie."

"That's it," Raleigh says, pointing at Geiszler. "You are going down, Short Science."

"Oh you do *not* want to open the trash-talking door, Becket," Geiszler replies. "I can guarantee you that much."

"Whoever wins plays me," Mako announces.

"I will be anywhere but here," Dr. Gottlieb says. "I—"

"No," Geiszler says, "what? You have to *support me*. This is your duty. We are *married*, secular style."

"Wait, you're *married*?" Raleigh asks.

"Only on paper and in our hearts," Geiszler clarifies.

Dr. Gottlieb rolls his eyes.

"I think that pretty much covers it," Raleigh replies.

Mako pulls Geiszler's right hand off the controls and swats his wrist with two fingers. "*I cannot believe that you didn't tell me this you stupid miserable excuse for a half-brother*," she snaps in rapid Japanese.

"Half-brother?" Raleigh says, also in Japanese.

"Ow," Geiszler says. "*Maks*. God. How do you make that *sting* so much."

Mako shrugs at Raleigh as Geiszler drags Dr. Gottlieb down onto the couch.

"Well, um, congrats. To everyone," Raleigh says.

"Stop stalling," Geiszler says. "You've been avoiding this for *days*. For days and days. Likely because you correctly assume that I am about to metaphorically wipe the metaphorical floor with actual you."

Raleigh holds up his controller and reaches over Mako to hit it against the one that Geiszler holds. "May the most contemporarily masculine man win," Raleigh says.

"You realize that in the end, *I* am going to win, yes?" Mako asks.

"Yes Maks," Geiszler replies. "You are the most contemporarily masculine person here. Everyone knows this. Don't be weird about gender roles."

"Later," Mako says, "I will paint the nails of the losers."

"Um, I don't really want that," Raleigh says, his eyes on the screen as he learns the capabilities of this character he's playing. "Can that *not* be a thing?"

"Becket, what did I *just say*," Geiszler asks, in an annoyingly superior rhetorical style.

"Don't lose to me then," Mako says sweetly.

"Will all of you simply *get on with this*, please?" Dr. Gottlieb asks.

"Go," Geiszler shouts, abruptly starting two-player mode.

Oh it is on, Yancy says, inside his head. *This kid doesn't stand a chance.*

In Two Parts

During *Portal*, Mako shouts in Japanese whenever she wants to shout, whatever she wants to shout, and switches allegiances when she cares to switch allegiances, which is often. She drinks half of Raleigh's Hibiki and she makes misleading statements and she tries not to be sad.

The first round is a draw.

That is good.

That is not sad.

It is not sad at all.

But Raleigh has never played *Portal* and Newt does not play it as well as she remembers, but that is all right, Newt has been doing other things recently and he has had no time for *Portal*, not for years, and so it does not mean anything. It means nothing at all that Newt should have won and did not; it does not mean anything.

For the second round, they swap. Raleigh plays Chell, and Newt plays Chell's arch-nemesis, Hell. Hell was cloned from cells of Chell, but Hell was raised by GLaDOS. Hell grew up too fast and does not understand who Chell is, nor why Chell pities her so much.

Newt prefers to play as Hell. Mako thinks that this is because he prefers to ally himself with GLaDOS and because Dr. Lightcap would only play as Chell.

"Is it a coincidence," Raleigh asks, "that the voice of GLaDOS and the voice of the drift interface sound exactly the same?"

"Yes," Newt replies. "Of course it's a coincidence. No one would *purposefully* use the voice of a villainous and morally bankrupt AI in a system that you're jacking right into the top of your brainstem. Why would anyone do that. That's ridiculous. It sends all the wrong messages."

"It was you, wasn't it," Raleigh says.

"Nah," Newt replies, making good use of a Conversion Gel.

"To my endless despair," Dr. Gottlieb confirms, without looking up from his tablet, "it was indeed him."

Mako thinks Newt will win this round. It was wise of him not to begin as Hell. He has given himself a double advantage, arranging things as he has. Raleigh has adapted to

the game and easily mastered Chell's distinct battery of skills but he does not yet realize Newt is significantly more formidable as Hell.

It is not Mako's job to tell him.

"Moon dust," Mako whispers to Newt.

"Mako, I can *hear you*," Raleigh says. "Stop helping Geiszler."

"I'm helping everyone," Mako replies, watching as Newt avoids the moon dust. "Don't fall off your cube."

"Thanks babe," Raleigh drawls.

"*What*," Newt says, and Mako can tell he's speaking to her, even though his eyes are on the screen. "You're just going to let him call you 'babe'?"

"No," Mako says, deciding that she would like Newt to win this round. She reaches over to give Raleigh's controller a quick shove.

"*Mako*," Raleigh shouts, as he barely avoids a Thermal Discouragement Beam.

"Yes," Mako says. "That is a proper form of address."

Newt laughs. It does not last long, but it has been a long time since she has heard Newt laugh, and it is nice.

Newt wins the second round.

Mako takes Raleigh's controller and spends a few minutes getting to know Chell through the little circuits in her hands, dropping and rolling, creating a practice portal, ducking, running, firing her gun.

"You let me know when you're—" Newt begins.

"Go," Mako shouts, starting the game.

Raleigh cheers for Newt the entire time.

Mako decides that this is fair.

She does not let Newt win, but she lets him keep pace because it is more fun that way. There is an element of danger, because Newt is consistently fast with completing the puzzles that will open doors and Mako might hit one that it takes her too long to solve.

She might.

But she doesn't.

She raises her controller in victory while Newt tips his head back, theatrically clutches his chest, and sprawls mostly on top of his former colleague, cracking his head against

Dr. Gottlieb's tablet in the process. Raleigh reaches across her lap to give Newt a commiserating thigh clap while Mako declares, "nail art for all," and Dr. Gottlieb tries to determine whether Newt is bleeding.

She had a family and she lost them.

She made a family and she will try not to lose them.

Families change. They grow and shrink as people live and die and leave and join.

She pulls everyone together and takes a picture at a bad angle.

That is another thing that she wanted. A thing she saw that Raleigh had. A stack of pictures. She has so few. She will have more. She will have so many. She will have pictures and pictures. She will print them so that she can hold them and they will fill books. She will not be sad about the ones she doesn't have. That she didn't take. She will just make sure that she has them, going forward. She will pick her favorites and carry them with her like Raleigh does.

The days she spends in San Francisco are short and go by too fast.

The nights are long. Terrible and wonderful.

She spends them with Newt in the mostly dark, showing him pictures she has taken. There are already so many pictures, but he wants to see them all. He's always wanted to see all the things she's liked over the course of her life, interesting beetles, nail polish, *Blue Planet*, pictures she's drawn, reports she wrote for different schools in different cities, music that she liked; but she'd had fewer things to talk about as the years progressed and he didn't like to talk about how much and how badly she'd wanted to go to the Jaeger Academy and so they'd talked less and less until that was the *only* thing she'd wanted and so they hadn't talked at all and he had been annoying and she had been angry and they had each almost died like that, but hadn't.

"This," she says, her tablet held between them, "is Paris. Paris was my favorite."

"So predictable, Maks, come on," Newt says. "At least lie to me. Didn't you say that you went to Tierra del Fuego? Pretend *that* was your favorite."

"That was Raleigh's favorite."

"Stop trying to make him seem cool. I'm on to you, you know."

Every night she tries to stay awake until Dr. Gottlieb comes to get Newt. Some nights it is early, other nights it is late, and sometimes, Mako thinks, maybe Dr. Gottlieb never comes at all because one morning she wakes up on the couch and sees Newt staring out the window at the dark and distant Wall.

When she sits up, he glances at her and then back at the horizon.

"Kiddo," he says. "I'm not dying. You can go sleep with Becket, you know?"

"I don't think you're dying," she lies.

"He told me about the Marshal. About the whole bleeding thing. He said *my* bleeding thing looks the same, but it's not."

"It is never the same," Mako says.

Newt looks away from the Wall in a way that seems physically difficult for him, and leans his back against the window, framing himself with gray sky. "You do not sound 'reassured' to me, Maks. This is me, trying to be reassuring."

"My real father also had cancer. That is why we were in Tokyo that day."

"Oh," Newt says. "I didn't know."

"'Try not to love an impermanent thing too much', he said to me," Mako whispers.

"The Marshal? Or your biological father?" Newt asks. "Sounds like really terrible advice, by the way."

"My biological father," Mako whispers. "I do not think it was intended as true advice. He certainly did not follow it himself. But it was the last real thing he said to me, before he said, 'run, Mako'."

Newt puts his hands in his pockets.

Mako looks down at the fingernails she has painted red.

"You do it correctly, I think," she says. "You seem like you do it correctly."

"Maks," Newt says, sounding choked.

"I do not *know*, Newt, but I think you must. The way you do it must be the right way, because you love people but you have an ideal that is not simply your own love for the sake of itself. Or that love turned to anger. Or that anger turned to vengeance. Or that vengeance turned to grief. I think sometimes that this is what my father meant. That he meant I should not fix my life to my love for him. That I should fix it to a craft or to an art or to a science. To a thing that cannot be destroyed when a single person dies."

"If I've done that," Newt whispers, "if that's better, and that's a big if, Maks, I'm not sure I think there's a 'better' or a 'worse' here, but *if* I have and *if* there is, it was only because I never *had* any people who would let me love them too much. Not because I made an enlightened choice about anything. Don't make me into any kind of template to follow because I am the *worst* template, Mako. You know this about me. Just be yourself for

a while kiddo. Take up knitting or speed skating or whatever and then find something you want to do career-wise. You're twenty-two? Go to college, why don't you. Write a book before Becket writes one. Write a book *after* Becket writes one and make yours better than his."

Newt does not understand.

Maybe Newt does understand, but does not want to and will not say that he does.

That is a thing that Newt would do.

That is a thing that Newt has done.

Don't tell her she can be a Jaeger pilot, he'd said to Caitlin Lightcap, when he thought Mako couldn't hear.

Why not? Dr. Lightcap had replied. *Maybe she can be.*

Get out of my lab, Newt had said.

Geiszler, don't be a dick, Dr. Lightcap had said.

Get out of my lab, Newt had said.

Mako has changed, in one instant of neural grappling, more than she will ever change again. It was Raleigh, she thinks, Raleigh who calls his grief 'grief' and who carries his grief quietly, who began to erode her anger. He did not do it all at once, but their drift was strong and his mind works in hers still. But for all she has changed, for all she will change further, she does not think that, even if she tried, even if she *wanted* to, she could change herself in this.

Mako will always love in a deep, wide, quiet swath that makes up too much of who she is.

Mako loves Newt so much. She thinks of him always because she likes to think of the people she loves. She buys things for him and saves things for him because she wants him to see them. She worries about him because he is not sleeping, because he is different than he used to be, because she has not seen his tattoos, because he is so pale, because sometimes when he thinks she is not looking he will drop his head onto Dr. Gottlieb's shoulder in a way that looks so tired and Dr. Gottlieb will touch his face in a particular way, the same way every time.

So Mako smiles at him and says, "you're so old."

"Finally," Newt says, smiling back at her. "I've been waiting to be old for my entire life."

Newt takes her on a cab ride around the ruined bay and shows her how to get into the Wall and where the stairs are. They climb up in the dark and Mako is worried because it is far and high and they have no water and they have no food and Newt is very tired. But when they make it to the top, the view is beautiful and Mako can smell the Pacific. It smells different than the Atlantic. It is wider and wilder, and stretches so far so brightly. They sit on the concrete, their feet hanging over the edge, their arms hooked over the lowest horizontal bar of the guardrail, and they look down at the waves that crash along its base.

"Are you kind to Dr. Gottlieb?" Mako asks. "Because I believe he loves you very much. I believe he has loved you for a long time."

This captures Newt's attention, and he looks away from the horizon and smiles at her like he is trying not to. "Nah. You think so?"

"Yes," Mako says.

"Impossible," Newt replies. "It's a post-drift thing. Er—I mean, like, post *my* drift. I almost died, you know, so ah—"

"Yes," Mako says, shifting closer and threading her arm around Newt's arm. "Yes, I know exactly what you mean."

"Oh god," Newt says quietly. "I'm sure you do. Do, er, *other* people know, do you think?"

"All pilots who see you together will know," Mako whispers, very close to his ear, over the roar of the surf and the whistle of the wind. "If you appear on national television, behavioral algorithms will be performed that will create suspicions."

Newt says nothing.

"So do not go on television," Mako whispers. "Do not see other pilots. You will be safe. I will keep you safe. I have the power to do that. Marshal Hansen and Raleigh will help me. Dr. Gottlieb's father has come to like me very much."

"I'm not worried about *me* so much, Maks," Newt whispers. "But what happened to me can't happen to him. It will be worse. It will be so. Much. Worse. For him."

Mako hooks her chin over Newt's shoulder, squeezes her eyes shut behind her sunglasses, and gives him a hug.

"I will keep both of you safe," she murmurs. "Both of you."

"Not even one time, though, Maks," Newt replies. "One time is too many."

"Not even one," Mako whispers, shaking him gently.

Newt nods.

"I am very dangerous," Mako says.

"I know," Newt replies, smiling faintly.

"You may tell me whatever you wish to tell me," Mako says.

"Aw kiddo, well, likewise, you know," Newt says.

Neither of them tell anything.

So Mako says, "I do not agree with you. I do not think it was a 'post-drift thing'."

"No?" Newt says, in a way that implies that he does not think that either.

"I believe it was every time that Dr. Lightcap would try to get you to sing and you said no. I believe it was the few times that Dr. Lightcap would try to get you to sing and you said yes."

"Maks," Newt says, "get out of here. First of all, the singing doesn't do it for him. It's definitely the guitar. Second of all, I'm pretty sure it was the nematocyst incident because he was *not* wild about the whole Newt-being-impaled thing on a visual level, but he stayed with me the entire time."

"Skye McLeod saved you," Mako says, smiling at the memory of a handsome child with a bone-saw.

"Mako. / saved me. Skye McLeod just did what I told him to do."

"I do not remember it that way," Mako replies, even though she does. "You must be kind to Dr. Gottlieb," she says, picking the thread of her thoughts back up. "Because he has worried for you for so long."

"I know," Newt replies.

"This is not good. This drive, this far climb. This sitting on the edge of the Wall," Mako says. "You must get up and turn around and look over the other side, toward home."

"It's a thought," Newt replies.

"It is not a thought," Mako says, standing and then pulling insistently at his jacket. She helps him rise because she does not trust him this close to the edge; he is so tired and she knows he is not as steady as once he was. They walk across the top and look back, in the other direction, over the cement and the city and Oblivion Bay.

"I find this less satisfying," Newt says.

"Then it is time to go," Mako replies. She wants to tell him that he should never come back, but that is not a thing that can be told to him, she thinks.

Later, while she is helping Dr. Gottlieb make dinner as Newt and Raleigh walk a block to choose some wine, he asks her, "did he take you to the Wall?"

"Yes," she says.

Dr. Gottlieb sighs.

"It is too many stairs for him right now," Mako says. "It makes him too tired."

"I believe it helps him sleep," Dr. Gottlieb replies. "But, on the whole, I agree with you."

Mako nods and begins to slice up carrots.

"How does he seem to you?" Dr. Gottlieb asks her.

Mako is taken aback at this, because there is certainly nothing she knows about Newt that Dr. Gottlieb does not know.

"Troubled," she replies.

Dr. Gottlieb nods in agreement.

They chop vegetables in silence.

"I confess Ms. Mori, that I am curious about something," he says.

She looks over at him an inviting manner.

"Had Mr. Becket not been found—was there a contingency plan in place regarding who would pilot the fourth available Jaeger?"

The question surprises her.

"I am certain there was such a plan," she says. "But I was not informed of its particulars. I suspect that this was because it involved me."

"Ah," Dr. Gottlieb says. "Did you speculate regarding of what such a plan might have consisted?"

She had not.

But she cannot help thinking of it now. She looks at the carrots she has sliced to pieces and thinks of the closing of the Jaeger Academy. She had been one of the last to complete the training program. Her name would have been on a short list, and, in the absence of an experienced pilot, she had the best scores.

If there had been no Raleigh, whom would she have chosen as a potential partner for Mako Mori?

Her eyes slide back to Dr. Gottlieb as she realizes what he means by his question.

He does not look at her.

"You were not on Raleigh's list," she says, "because his previous injury mandated Interface Right positioning. You also require Interface Right. Had a pilot with no positional requirements been selected, I would have put you on the candidate list. Had I been the selected pilot," she continues, "I would have attempted a neural bridge with you prior to interviewing any other candidates."

"Why on earth would you do *that*?" Dr. Gottlieb asks. He looks surprised at himself.

"Because you wanted it so much," Mako replies. "Too much. I also wanted it too much. I believe that alone would have made us drift compatible. I am not sure how strong the bond would have been. It is impossible to know."

"Indeed," Dr. Gottlieb says.

"I think that Newt would not have forgiven me if I had selected you," Mako says. "I think he would have hated me until the day he died."

"I doubt that, Ms. Mori," Dr. Gottlieb says. "I doubt that very much."

"I do not. I believe that he would have hated me for only days. For only days, maybe for only hours because it was during the time I drifted with Raleigh that he drifted with that brain. I believe he would have died in that initial attempt had you not been there to find him. I believe he would have timed his own drift attempt with any trial we did out of theatrical spite. I believe he would have died, and then I believe we *all* would have died, piece by piece, scattered into smaller and smaller groups, in helpless rage and grinding fear. You should call me Mako."

Dr. Gottlieb looks at her with raised eyebrows.

There is a silence.

"I shall certainly do so," he says. "Please call me Hermann."

"Newt will be so pleased," Mako says.

"Insufferably so," Hermann replies.

"You are helping him," Mako says. "He is not making it too hard for you?"

"No," Hermann says, looking at the sink. "I manage that well enough on my own. Newton remains himself, and I've mostly ceased to find that genuinely trying."

This answer pleases Mako.

"Yes," she says smiling a small smile, laying aside her knife. "We would have been drift compatible. I am sure."

"I cannot imagine a higher compliment," Hermann says, giving her an informal bow.

She returns it, touched by the gesture.

"I did not know," she says. "I did not know what had happened until was too late. I am sorry for the manner in which you left Hong Kong."

"I apologize for not writing to you," Hermann replies. "I fear you suffered undue distress because I did not adequately apprise you of what was happening, but I wasn't certain—I was anxious *myself* of communicating too much or too little, and he—he genuinely *could not* write to you; he was pushed entirely past his ability to cope. He is a terribly resilient person but I thought it might be *too much* for him, I thought he might not recover, he has not recovered fully, he may *never* recover fully; you have seen how he is, the way he *looks* at that *thing* across the bay, how much he's *bleeding*; I don't understand that. His EEG is *not normal* and it's stopped normalizing and there are other things; things I can't explain, things I only suspect—"

Mako takes his hands and holds them in the space between them and nods at him, clutching his fingers tightly.

"What things?" she says. "You may tell me what things."

He looks pained. He looks like he might tell her.

She waits, but he says nothing.

A key grinds into a lock and Mako drops his hands and steps back.

They let the moment pass, but that, too, is a kind of promise.

"Next time he takes you somewhere," Hermann says, turning back to the stove, "try to get him to show you the lab he is supposed to be equipping rather than the Wall."

Mako nods.

She spreads an entire suitcase worth of gifts over the span of two weeks so that it does not seem like too much—art and articles and alcohol and glassware and vac-packed snacks from everywhere she's been, ties and t-shirts and books and pens and tatami zori and fancy hashi and a wind chime made of shells. She doesn't give them these things, she just puts the books in the bookshelf and the zori in the closet and the hashi in the kitchen and the shirts in their shared room and the alcohol in the cabinet and the glassware and snacks in the kitchen and the articles on the coffee table and the wind

chime on the balcony because she has brought them too many things and not enough things at all.

She will get their belongings from Hong Kong.

She will go back to the shatterdome and she will neatly pack Dr. Gottlieb's items and she will see if Newt's things are full of mold and if they are not she will pack those as well and she will ship them. She will not ship Newt's guitar, she will bring that back with her when she comes, because she will come back soon.

The morning before she leaves, her phone wakes her with a slow rise of streaming music. She listens to all of *Dreaming Correctly* while Raleigh is doing sets of pushups on the floor. It is long and it is eerie and, as she listens, she thinks that he must have meant it as a love letter to a civilization examining its own end. It already makes her miss Newt, even though she has not yet left San Francisco.

When Mako leaves her room, she finds them standing together at the window in the gray light of early morning. Newt is looking at the Wall and Hermann is standing at his back, his arms around Newt's shoulders. They frighten Mako there, in the dim light. They look like they are listening to things that she cannot hear. Newt's gaze is too fierce and too hot for a silent room and a distant vista; there is too much unity in Hermann's stance. She thinks that they are thinking the same thing. She thinks she doesn't like what they are thinking.

Thoughts can kill.

It was Dr. Lightcap who turned intent into victory.

It was Dr. Lightcap who turned intent into death.

Thoughts have almost killed Mako.

And Mako has killed with her thoughts.

She knows then, looking at them, that it will be hard for Newt to go to Berkeley and to study neuroscience. It will be so hard for him to do it that it might be impossible. It will be difficult for Hermann to hold him to the confines of a normal life because Newt has never had that. He has never lived like this before, trying to sleep when he is supposed to sleep, trying to eat when he is supposed to eat, trying not to lose himself in what he is doing, always saying no to what he does not want to want.

They turn and they see her.

Hermann steps back, and Newt smiles at her.

Mako does not smile. "What were you thinking of?" she whispers.

"Oh you know," Newt says. "The usual. Insanity. Vivisection. Death. Dopamine. Breakfast."

Hermann looks away and closes a hand briefly on Newt's shoulder before he walks into the kitchen, leaving them alone.

"I was serious," Mako says. Newt's expression changes into something else and back again in a break too fast for Mako to decide what was written on his face—whether it was grief or pain, or, maybe, despair.

She knows then that he was serious too.

They look at each other and when he starts to bleed she does not cry and she does not look away. She hands him a tissue.

"What happens to a fraction of a hive mind?" Newt whispers.

She does not have an answer for him.

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