

# Designations Congruent with Things

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Book One

# A Prologue in Two Parts

## A Prologue

He begins it already pried apart.

His perception of himself doubles as he backs away from the underlayered narcissism at the fusing core of all he is and straight into the protected perspective of completed analysis.

There is a threat to himself and that threat is him.

The front man Newt hasn't been for a decade steps out of the shadow of the day job he'd loved too much to quit and the night job he'd loved too much to sleep, lifting his latter day and bastardized guitar, remodeled into a remote detonator of his consciousness. He looks at up at the lights, hoping for photobleaching of the psyche on this stage of his own design, backed by a green column of formaldehyde. In that space before the echoed vibration of that first note all audiences anticipate, before he creates that wave of sound and pressure, he feels the floor, he feels his fingertips carefully apposed, and then he squares his shoulders because this is every show he's ever played, man, every time he's ever stared into those lights without counting the faces in the crowd, this is his show-stopper, if Hermann's right this is his heart-stopper, the Freddie Mercury moment that he keeps finding over and over again in increasingly intense variations. And now, with the cover art for the most salient album of his life jacketing his skin in green, here he stands, one terminal in a two terminal system, holding his button and looking at the lights.

Key change, people; brace yourselves.

*Whatever happens, he'll leave it all to chance.*

No he won't; but it makes a nice epitaph, if one's shopping around.

It seems he is.

He tenses his back, he raises his hand, the balls of his feet press against the floor in a subtle homage to the power chord that's about to blast out his brain, the last killer riff of his conscious existence. He can't even tell when he hits the button because he rides his conviction straight down into something dark and vast and violent and violet, many-eyed, many-consciousnessed, an infinite arachnine incarnation of death destroyer of worlds and the last aware and awful mental annotation that Newton Geiszler, of the

sextupled doctorates and the sloppily-rolled shirt sleeves, is able to make is: *oh god, a hive mind.*

Their childhood bursts like a thing dammed up by time and knowing better. They stand in childish shoes, they find a Dyson sphere is not enough, they are too small, they are grown too sprawling, too mired by their waste, there is the day that the bookcase they are climbing falls on top of them, dark and shedding books like backlit falling bodies; they discover that the truth of the universe is that planets that are fit to support life *do*, they *always* do; they weep amidst a radio in pieces irreparably destroyed through disassembly, so this is death—a garage, the dust-filled air, and a thing that had a function unmade by childish hands in blind pursuit of something better—the scale of the drift confuses them—it is too vast, it is too confined, and they're not certain this is death, after all, in pieces, like the radio.

Kaiju do not die.

Jaegers do not die.

Or do they die in pieces?

Shock yields to rage and to elation.

They struggle with themselves on foreign scales, seeking structure, seeking science. They *clone* their war machines, they *construct* their war machines, their resources are vast, their wars ongoing, their resources are limited to resurrected metal and a *Wall* that falls in hours. Limitations, *limitations*, they seek them, they *seek them*. They're constrained by the nature of the breach, the short statistics of its opening, they're constrained by the tranching of *money*, the terror of *failure*, the tiny fragility of their forms, the energy requirements of sending progressively larger kaiju, drowning comes as revelation, they are caged by their genetics and their genetics sets them free to share and build and decouple viciousness from consciousness, their kaiju do their killing, but *they are in* the Jaegers, they did not know, they *did not know*.

They will never stop coming.

They—

He.

"Newton," Hermann says.

## In Two Parts

He begins it like he begins all things worth beginning.

The unity of Hermann's purpose flows from his thoughts to his voice, initiates the anticipatory removal of his glasses and the offering of an open hand in a prefigurement of immediate neural necessity.

Newton looks at him, for once uncertain.

Hermann waits like a spring compressed beneath the pressure of his own assurance. He has made his contribution, not a calculated offering but an offering of calculation, and he stands now on the perimeter of all that he has plotted and prepares to step into a realm less quantified, prepares to reveal all of himself to the nightmare he has opposed for the past decade and to a man whose entire existence is one limitless, lambent stream of self-revelation. Hermann's civilization is out of time, running up hard and fast against the temporal asymptote of a triple-event unless his species can shatter their way through it with explosive power, precisely applied. He knows now what he needs and doesn't have, and that is data on the breach, on its origin and composition, and on what, *if any*, ways it has been *engineered*, where its foundations sit, in leas of space-time turbulence—so that he can orchestrate, or even guarantee, a quantum demolition. The meridian of their time passes across the unbridged space between the man who designed the required interface and the man who can best interpret the data it will offer.

He waits for apposition.

For the shattering of limits, the stuff of mathematical nightmare.

And he's going to attempt this thing with *Newton*?

Yes, it seems he is.

Their hands clap together, chiral and connected. They sit, they affix, and, in accord, they drift. The locking together of two human minds comes first and comes harder, because in the face of alien neural infinitudes their differences collapse like a wave function, superimposed eigenstates falling to one in the face of exponential decay into the veldted darkness of a foreign immensity, an infinite plane, an infinite volume, deep and wide and strange and the last insight he can ascribe to himself is a shift in his perception as Newton snaps, with regrettable permanence, from quixotic to clairvoyant.

They exist like light, a non-paradox that looks like one on paper; tormented and alone, the incandescent center of a set of older peers, a roiling mass of needs justified by their achievements. They sit with ordered pages and ink upon their hands, they stand in boots astage and under lights while silently, in water, they swim toward San Francisco, ready to destroy and to learn through this first essay in destruction. They watch it, they *perform it*, and their buildings cave like shell-walled castles made of sand, colonial and colonized, as catenaries snap and bridges fold and fall. They don't know fear, they feel their fear, they turn it into aspiration and write it on their skin; they're throwing up in bathrooms as they rend apart their Jaegers and they picture death by drowning. They cannot win, they always win, they win or stop existing. So this is fear—the bathroom stall, the heavy coat, the mouthwash and the needle. Their risks are so abstracted that they are caught in fascination because *here* they're absolute; they nearly killed the part of them that killed their radio, they find that unacceptable and they find that illuminating and they find that an entirely reasonable cost.

All things fear their ending.

If endings will permit their own perception.

They will not submit to the intrinsic finality of an alien teleology.

This time they are ready, so in they dig with claw and foot.

They know the scale on which they clash. They tear through with precision. They've sent out ships but space is vast; they send *no* ships—tormented into silence; their ships are metaphor but they will *literally* rock them, guys, come on. They built the drift, they built a door, a lock in one direction, forceable with ease if one has seen it, opaque if one has not, because who upon the other side will ever see, will ever *guess* the mechanism by which it might be forced, a key genetically incarnate. They're filled with rage, they're dying, they *own* this secret now, they are lying in the rain unable to get up, what happens if they drink this, all around them are the sounds of closing doors as people leave them. They try to optimize performance in a setting unpreferred. *They want into the breach*, they've lost surprise, they've lost their secret, how potent are the weapons that they have not yet used upon their planet's surface? They wrest, they yield, they *know* that outside the fragile architecture of the breach even fusion's not enough, but they know the code, they'll get inside, they're seeking names and numbers. They will not yield, and yet they *must*; there is a blur of obfuscation as they drag themselves into the roaring stream of memory and struggle for control of someone's hands and helmet in a rush of memories so thick so fast—the depress of

ivory keys, the alignment of two shoes, the sliding planes of chalk, the steadiness of hands, head down, head back, the lights are hot, the room is dark, the math is waiting, but so is Gipsy Danger with a core of glowing revolution.

When faced with threat, there is a coalescing; true at every scale, true at every time.

They move against disorganized assault from within and from without.

They detach their helmet.

But *Hermann* pulls it off.

## Chapter Two

The question of what one should do immediately post an averted apocalypse does not have an intuitive answer.

This perhaps explains why, when Newton decides to proceed back to their shared laboratory space, Hermann labels that a 'reasonable course of action' and follows him through knots of human exuberance and into the quiet lees of corridors less trafficked.

After weaving through the peripheral edges of the spontaneous chaos converging on the main hanger, it occurs to Hermann's esteemed colleague that Hermann is along for the prototypical 'ride', *again*, and so Newton begins, or more correctly *resumes*, his perpetual monologue.

Hermann lets the man go at it unopposed, expecting that despite his mixed verbal signals, Newton *does* have something specific in mind, if for no other reason than his pace through the metal corridors of the shatterdome suggests a definite goal.

Hermann supposes that after the events of the previous twenty-four hours, Newton possibly deserves the benefit of the doubt.

That, or a sitter.

For god's sake, what had the man *used* to construct a *personal*, unapproved, modifiable, transportable, *drift interface*? Or, more appropriately, what vital piece of equipment did he *dismantle* in order to put the thing together?

Hermann ought to look into that.

In fact, that should probably be the *first* thing he looks into.

He makes an attempt to find the answer in his own mind. The act of reaching back into Newton's memories is instinctive, but the man has sat amidst the mechanical wreckage of his own hands, surrounded by the things he's pulled apart and rebuilt in so many iterating memories that Hermann is surrounded by a blur of radios, circuitry of electric guitars, patch-clamp apparatuses, microscopes, *microphones*, internal combustion engines, computers, a *Volkswagen*—

Hermann shakes his head and gets a reminder of his headache in reward.

He will look into Newton's destruction of property in the *conventional* way, by examining the makeshift drift interface and determining from where its component parts have been stripped.

He has the option of simply *asking* the man, but Newton is currently hypothesizing on the neural-net nature of hive-minds in a vague stream of consciousness punctuated with a host of analogies to marine life, *Star Wars*, and variations on the theme of, 'and how would that even work, man?' sentence endings indicative of unfinished avenues of thought through which Hermann has no plans to be actively dragged.

Hermann has his *own* avenues of thought to wander, and most of those are converging on the idea that he and Newton have been irreparably altered and possibly physically damaged by the drift.

Perhaps it's time to stop following Newton and instead make an effort to get *Newton* to follow *him*.

To the medical bay.

When they arrive at the laboratory, he's sorted himself to the point that he feels sufficiently organized to make such a suggestion and rationally back it with logical arguments, but his intention collapses when Newton does *not* proceed to *his own* side of their shared space, but to *Hermann's*.

This is rarely a good sign.

It is also surprising.

It is also surprising that he *finds* it surprising.

Somehow, Newton has *ruined* his thought processes.

In blithe unawareness of Hermann's multilayered misgivings, the other man simply stops, crosses his arms, and looks intently at the expansive, regimented mathematics covering the relocatable blackboards with an unfamiliar and therefore uninterpretable expression.

The man is still talking—he's talking straight over and through whatever impulse has pulled him to Hermann's blackboard. At some point in the last few minutes, neural-net conjecturing has morphed into speculations on the evolutionary inevitability of the bilateral form, which Hermann has heard before and finds less interesting than Newton's newfound attentiveness to mathematics.

He blames the drift.

Correction.

He *credits* the drift.

"So we, at a fundamental level, saved the world, man," Newton says, shifting out of science and into vague, if merited, self-congratulation, his eyes on Hermann's chalk as



if he's simultaneously reading and talking, "I mean, at a minimum, we provided the theoretical underpinnings of a world-saving protocol, so I'm pretty sure that if there's going to be an after party, we're invited. But the question is, where is it, what are the mechanics by which it's being orchestrated, and how much consumable alcohol *is* there in the shatterdome? Because we've got, I don't know, a ridiculous amount of methanol, but I'm pretty certain that while methanol is great as a kaiju fixative, it *will* render humans blind if consumed. Well, if not blind, then maybe at least transiently visually impaired?"

"Yes," Hermann agrees, anything more he might have added scrambled and delayed by an extraneous memory that snaps to the fore at the mention of potentially consciousness altering organic compounds that should not be consumed. He spends a brief interval uncertain which one of them it was who had imbibed half a bottle of mouthwash in a strange, irrational attempt to gain some kind of mental relief after the first kaiju attack had indirectly dismantled his laboratory and his life at MIT.

Hermann has heard it said that, after the drift, talking is often rendered superfluous.

He now understands what the Jaeger pilots mean when they discuss this phenomenon. If he makes an effort he can pull forward memories that aren't his own, but, more concerning, if he makes *no* effort they come forward *anyway*, at unpredictable intervals, offering insights he's not sure he's grateful for and interpretations fraught with as yet unmappable bias. He feels he can and does communicate with Newton, without words, forming interrogatives and receiving answers. It is important to keep in mind, however, that he's not interrogating *Newton*. He's mentally interrogating his memory of Newton circa three hours previous, and that is quite a different, possibly misleading, epiphenomenon of uncertain duration.

Nevertheless, it does result in the subjective perception that verbal communication is unneeded.

For *most* individuals it does.

It is extremely apparent that Newton is experiencing no such phenomenon.

Or if he is, the man is hiding it well.

"So we're agreed. We will suggest the methanol to no one," Newton says, verbally reengaged but still staring at Hermann's wall of mathematics, still disheveled, his hair a mess, his clothing torn, one eye bloodshot. "We need that methanol anyway. For science. Obviously. I've already requested specimens of each of the downed kaiju, but

what we *really* need is some high quality, unfixed samples that we might be able to set to work on cloning, I mean, if it works for sheep, why not for giant alien sea monsters?"

*That* is enough to ensure the coupling and reengagement of Hermann's brain and mouth.

"What?" he snaps. "Newton. You *cannot* be *serious*. Did you put the word *cloning* and the word *kaiju* in the same sentence? You reckless, thoughtless, *heedless*—" Hermann trails off, unsettled by the uncharacteristic silence with which his list of irresponsible adjectives is being met.

Usually he doesn't get so far before being interrupted with a countered catalogue of diametrically opposed descriptors.

He isn't sure what to make of this.

Newton stands next to him, still staring, fixedly staring, at Hermann's wall of mathematics.

Hermann wonders what has caught his attention amidst the logical progression of thoughts in chalk.

It's possible the man is looking for some error, some unexplored application or implication that he's seen or intuited via the drift.

It's possible that Newton is seconds away from rewriting or reworking the entire thing without so much as a by-your-leave.

It's possible that Newton's understanding of mathematics is now more nuanced, and he's mapping the borders of his borrowed biases, much as Hermann is struggling against opinions both foreign and familiar, none of which he can call his own with certainty.

It's *also* possible Newton is staring at Hermann's mathematics because he's exquisitely distractible when exhausted.

Upon reflection, the latter possibility seems the most probable.

"You wish there was certainty there," Newton says, quietly arrogant, which is, admittedly, Hermann's favorite type of Geiszlerian arrogance, "but there's not. There's only probability and confidence intervals, especially when you're dealing with something as complex as colliding spatial dimensions. The nature of the universe is statistical."

Newton is correct, of course.

But Hermann plans on admitting no such thing.

"So you *did* pick up *something* from my mind," Hermann replies, a dry, verbal cover over his awareness that Newton has gathered more from the drift than Hermann has ever been able to effectively communicate to *anyone*. By intention or by necessity.

It is a slightly depressing thought.

"Everyone knows that," Newton says.

Hermann doubts this pronouncement, but he does not doubt that *Newton* believes it.

"It's quantum mechanically dictated, dude, you'd have to be living under a rock not to know. There's a nonzero probability that the breach reopens," Newton continues.

"There's a nonzero probability that it opens again, somewhere else."

"Vanishingly small," Hermann replies, with a stiff sweep of the hand.

"But not zero," Newton says, still looking at the wall of equations with an unnatural familiarity and considerably more interest than he'd ever displayed in the past. His fingers tap in a quick sweep over the leather of his jacket.

Hermann looks away from him and at the lines in chalk.

They stare at the mathematical spread, the one that *should* be *his*, the one that *feels* like *theirs*, and it occurs to Hermann that perhaps they are both caught in a psychological defense that had always been his alone—to consider mathematics in lieu of considering something else—so they look at it now because they do not want to look at the disembodied, partially dissected brain of a kaiju on the other side of the lab, because, in tracing the ordered ranks of chalk, they can look away from the split open halves of their own minds.

This is an impulse that should be *solely his own*, an impulse that Newton has, in point of fact, *disparaged*—this look from life to math. But it's now an impulse that's displayed *by* Newton; Hermann had been staring directly at it until he'd looked away from his own reflection in his conceptual opposite, a man who had likely buckled straight under an unidentified foreign influence, without even identifying it as such.

He does not like the implications of Newton's newfound appreciation for mathematics.

Hermann cannot *fault* him though, because he himself feels confused, briefly but entirely, not certain which one of them it was who had wanted to be a musician, which one of them had been tormented by his peers, which one of them is the reckless one, the careful one, which one of them—

"I like your brain," Newton says, a non sequitur that doesn't feel like one.

Hermann likes Newton's brain as well, creative, irregularly ordered, more rigorous than he's ever openly credited, cheerfully and distressingly reckless, as if nothing could hold it in a defined track except for the ending of the world.

But he doesn't say any of that.

"You are not to clone a kaiju," he says.

"Aw," Newton replies, but it is, unfortunately, clearly some kind of monosyllabic endearment rather than disappointed acquiescence.

## Chapter Three

He's still staring at Hermann's wall of math, and he's a little bit, but only a *little* bit, resentful of the fact that staring at it like this makes him appear to be having either some kind of arithmetic awakening or a mental epiphany regarding the importance of Hermann in his life, but he is *not* having any such revelation, not *either* of those revelations, actually, because, first, he'd understood Hermann's math, mostly, *before* the drift—really, if he hadn't, what had all those doctorate degrees been, other than something to repetitively do until he got old enough to apply for grant funding with a straight face, like the cross-dimensional intellectual baller that he, for sure, definitely was and is—second, he's pretty sure that he understood Hermann himself, sort of, from about the midway point of their joint-appointment-to-the-apocalypse, but, presuming both those statements he's made are givens, why is he staring at the man's spread of chalk *now*?

Because he'd come here for alcohol. He's pretty sure about that.

Newt supposes the appeal of those ranked and filed equations up there and down here and all over the wall is that they now *feel* more *personal* to him, as if string theory and parallel universes have suddenly and irrevocably come under the purview of his own body of work, as if *he* had written the things, as if *he* were the one who had known, had known *exactly*, when the world was going to end, had felt the press of future annihilation in a rigid temporal way and—wow, yeah, that had been hard to take, *extremely* hard to take, hard to *feel*, hard to bear alone because his immature savant of a lab partner—but wait. That hadn't been him after all, had it? That had been—

"I can't say I'm surprised," Hermann says dryly.

And he had been thinking what now?

Hermann seems to interrupt his train of thought at *the most* inconvenient times, cognitively speaking, and Newt is pretty sure, pretty outrageously positive actually, that the guy *knows* it and does it on *purpose* even though he can remember no such thing from the drift. He has evidence, empirical evidence; it's happening right now, in fact. Data does not lie, it *cannot*, it simply *exists*, waiting for the gloss of interpretation, but sometimes underlying mechanisms can be confounded by the story that stitches them together—

"If you consider your previous twenty-four hours, you will discover that you experimented on yourself, neurally entangled your consciousness with a hostile alien mind, traipsed about Hong Kong, nearly were ingested several times by, I believe, two *separate* kaiju, drifted with *me*, entangled yourself *again* with the hivemind of the kaiju anteverse, consulted on the best way to detonate a thermonuclear warhead so as to seal a dimensional rift, and then proceeded back to this lab for no rational reason I can determine."

That's probably the longest sentence that Hermann has said since they drifted, and Newt gets that, *yeah* he does, because the post-drift mental state, well, it's a designation congruent with the actuality of things, and he doesn't have *words* for it; how could he? It's a post-verbal phenomenon, meaning he just *knows* Hermann now like he knows himself; he can conjure up the cognitive image of *himself-as-Other*, without words, but honestly Hermann had never really, never *entirely*, been 'Other' to him in the philosophical sense. They had worked together too long for that.

"Yes," Hermann says. "I suppose we have."

Newt stares at him in abject astonishment.

"That was atypically poetic," Hermann says, "but didn't pertain to your earlier observation."

Newt stares at him in even more abject astonishment.

He's pretty sure he has no idea what is happening here.

*I think you just responded to my internal monologue, dude*, he thinks in Hermann's direction. *Either that, or my internal monologue went external without my permission.*

Hermann looks away from the chalkboard. He takes one look at Newt and he snaps, "*Newton*," in that way he has, that super-irritated way, that Newt now realizes also has an element of anxiety to it.

*What?* Newt thinks, mildly affronted.

"*Say something*," Hermann says, looking a little bit more *freaked* out than faux-British *put* out.

Okay, so maybe he was wrong about Hermann being able to read his mind. It's still a little ambiguous though—Hermann could be quietly imploding because he *can* hear Newt's thoughts and he thinks that's about eight kinds of terrifying, *or* he might be freaking out because Newt is staring at him like maybe a little bit of a creeper; he

thinks his eye probably looks pretty disturbing, it hurts like hell if hell was glaucoma—does he have unilateral cerebral edema?

*Can you read my thoughts?* he thinks at Hermann, staring at him in intent, purposeful silence. *If so, please respond in a complete, unambiguous sentence. For science.*

The sharp sting of Hermann's palm cracking against his cheek is *so surprising* he actually flinches and overbalances and then falls over.

Now he's on the floor?

Yeah.

And he still doesn't know the answer to his question.

He will admit, however, that a trend is starting to emerge.

"Ow," Newt says, the word coming out verbally rather than mentally and as kind of a bewildering mixture of annoyed and outraged and confused and betrayed and also, mostly, confused. "What the *hell*, Hermann?"

"*Newton*," Hermann says, looking ten percent aghast, fifty percent satisfyingly guilty because—well duh, the dude just *slapped* him and because of coordination problems the whole thing escalated—and also thirty percent confused. The final ten percent Newt is going to equally distribute into the categories of 'somewhat distressed' and 'very tired'. Hermann's eye looks as bad as Newt's feels.

"You stopped responding to me," Hermann says, very slowly, kind of *insultingly* slowly, leaning on his cane like his leg is *killing* him.

"So—you *can't* read my thoughts," Newt concludes, coming up on his elbows.

"What?" Hermann says.

"I thought maybe that was a thing you could do," Newt explains.

"So—you *weren't* briefly catatonic then," Hermann says, faster now, with the air of a man coming to his own conclusions.

"No man, I was hypothesis testing," Newt says.

Newt is pretty sure that Hermann was *also* hypothesis testing, which would explain the slap. They just had begun with different hypotheses. It turned out neither of them had been entirely correct in their initial suppositions, but they had ruled some stuff out at the end of the day.

*Science, man. Kickass.*

Demonstrable kickassishness of science aside though, he's still not totally sure what just happened there and whether his observations on the philosophical implications of the drift had made it out of his mouth, and, if they had, what he'd *actually said*. Apparently, *if* he had said something? It had been *poetic*.

In Newt's opinion, that argues against it being a verbal thing.

"Ah," Hermann says. "*Naturally*. Can you simply—"

The other man breaks off as Newt gets his feet under him and pushes himself up. The guy is slightly late to the Newt-acquiring-vertical-momentum proposal, but he reaches out to grab the front of Newt's jacket in a belated and kind of superfluous stabilizing maneuver.

Or nope, actually, not that superfluous after all, *good call there, Dr. Gottlieb*, because Newt's a little bit lightheaded as it turns out, but he has definitely had a rough day so that makes sense.

"Yeah dude," he says, hands on knees, trying to look at the floor but looking at grayness instead, "I can simply."

"No," Hermann says, in disapproving, crisp stereo or maybe surround sound? Newt's not sure, but his head is now the headspace of the audiophile he's always been or always meant to be, it's hard to do much with a laptop and the crap acoustics of a lab made of metal but he makes it work. "Incorrect. You've demonstrated repeatedly that that's*not* the case. You're barely standing, and, based on the last five minutes of conversation, I have material doubts about the coherency of your thought processes."

Hermann has a point.

Usually he does.

He *is* fine, but he can see how he might not look it.

Newt gives his cardiovascular system and his nervous system time to have a confab, the main topic of which will be, ideally, where his blood should be going i.e., not just his feet. Everybody crosstalks it out like champs—nice work, nervous system—and then he can see and hear normally, and he feels less like he's got one foot in the door of a room labeled 'unconsciousness'.

He straightens.

He's good.

He's awesome.

"Medical," Hermann snaps. "Now."



"Aw," Newt says again, touched for the second time in a ten minute span by all the super-secret concern that Hermann has been plastering over with outraged decorum for something like—well a lot of years.

"Stop saying that," Hermann says.

"Medical," Newt agrees, deciding that rational decision making cum subject change is the better part of valor. "We're going."

## Chapter Four

The corridors are nearly empty.

The majority of the base population is, Hermann supposes, in one of two places—either the main hangar, awaiting the eventual arrival of the choppers carrying Mr. Becket and Ms. Mori, or in search of alcohol.

Now that Hermann has had time to consider it, a search for alcohol was almost certainly the reason Newton had proceeded to the laboratory in the first place. Fortunately, before retrieving or *distilling* anything, the man had been distracted by the statistical nature of the universe, segued into vague speculations regarding philosophical implications of the post-drift state, nearly fainted, and then been amenable to redirection.

Thank god.

Hermann wonders how much drinkable alcohol Newton *has* in the lab.

Ideally—none.

Practically—more than 'none', of that much he is certain.

Whatever quantity of alcohol Dr. Geiszler might possess, or be able to acquire within the span of several hours, is immaterial.

Post drift *drinking* is simply out of the question.

For both of them.

But mostly for Newton.

The events of the past fifteen minutes interpreted through the lens of the past twenty-four hours lead Hermann to place the odds of Newton losing consciousness between the lab and the medical bay and ending the day in an indecorous sprawl across the corridor floor at somewhere around the fifty percent mark.

This is the reason why Hermann still has one hand clamped around Newton's disturbingly sticky jacket.

"So the drift, I'm pretty sure," Newton says, "is an empirical rejection of perspectivism. It's an epistemological absolute of the subjective experience, consisting of the Other and the Look in an infinite loop where information transfer approaches whatever its

maximum is while time approaches zero, so yeah, suck it, solipsism. Neuroscience validates intersubjectivity. That's a great title, man. We should write a paper."

This is excessively unfair, Hermann decides.

Wading through Newton's baffling insistence upon the obfuscation of his own intellectual merits in daily discourse and curbing the man's irritatingly brash and deeply flawed propensity to disdain the predictive power of computational and mathematical modeling in favor of ill-advised experimentation, occasionally on *himself*, have defined the past *decade* of Hermann's social and professional life.

And *now*, after ten years, the man decides he's going to convert his conversational style into something rational and creative and appealing and openly intellectual to the point that Herman no longer feels he's performing the discourse equivalent of excavating a buried city with a teaspoon?

Yes.

Naturally.

*Of course* Newton decides that.

Newfound eloquence aside, resistance remains the cornerstone of their conversation, so Hermann says, "science informs philosophy," with all the aridity he can muster. "How original. And you propose to *prove* the validity of your subjective experience of our briefly homogenized perspective in what way, exactly?"

"Ugh," Newton says, in gratifying exasperation. "Hermann. Come on man, you are *killing* me here. You *experienced* it. It's a *reproducible phenomenon*, it—"

"Is, and will always remain, firmly outside the realm of 'science'," Hermann says. "Feel free to write a speculative treatise regarding the implications of the drift on existentialism as a discipline. I will read it with interest."

"You are the *worst*," Newton declares. "Admit it though, you thought most of what we'd heard from the flyboys and flyladies about the drift was about as objectively valid as an interpretation of abstract art, which is to say *not objectively valid*. For example, take—who's that guy you like? Kandinsky? It's nice how I don't actually have to wait for you to answer questions because I already *know* what you're going to say; it streamlines things, have you noticed this? I'm sure you have. I'm totally with you, by the way, just chuck the whole post-van-Gogh-post-impressionism period right out the window, anything between 1890 and the founding of the Bauhaus is aesthetically *tedious* with the possible exception of—waaaait." Newton finishes his stream of consciousness in an apparently unwelcome revelation. He narrows his eyes at Hermann.

Hermann shoots Newton a pointed look, meant to convey that the realization that Newton is likely currently having regarding the suspect nature of his own opinion and at least a portion of the implications thereof is a realization that Hermann has already had.

Several minutes ago, thank you.

Newton, not in possession of adequate mental resources to simultaneously support walking and critical thought, trips on the perfectly planar floor and nearly falls over.

Again.

"Prioritize walking over thinking," Hermann snaps.

"Boring," Newton opines, before he says, "quick—Riot Grrrl or Skate Punk and why?"

"Riot Grrrl," Herman says, with an assurance so instinctive he finds the question nearly offensive, "because—" He stops speaking and glares at Newton.

"My life is complete," Newton announces to the empty corridor.

The problem with Newton is, and always has been, everything.

"Your life and mine are now a tangle of inextricable cognitive bias," Hermann says crisply, "for which you are *entirely* to blame."

"If you're going to saddle me with all the blame you're also going to have to allocate the credit in the same manner, man," Newton replies. "And then the headline becomes 'Geiszler saves world', not 'Geiszler and Gottlieb save world'."

"Most likely," Hermann says, "the headlines will read 'Becket and Mori save world'."

"Probably," Newton agrees, looking offended in an exhausted sort of way. "Maybe we'll get interviewed by *Nature Neuroscience*. I think *Neuron* has a podcast? Now *there's* a rockstar subgenre more our speed. Whatevs man, we are *legit*. Kaiju mindmelding like *pros*. Let's do an experiment though. Bach or Beethoven."

The cognitive dissonance induced by *that* particular binary choice is so nauseating that Hermann cannot *even respond*. He loses track of his feet and his cane in the intense effort not to vomit for the second time in one day and stumbles, a bolt of pain shooting up his leg, as he tries and fails to reconcile two diametrically opposed, *strong* preferences held in confusing simultaneity.

So it is, *somewhat*, justifiable that when Newton reaches over to steady him, out of an instinct for self-preservation, Hermann snaps, "Descartes or Nietzsche."

"Oh god," Newton says, staggering, one hand coming to his temple, the other braced against his knee.

Hermann is fairly certain that if either one of them goes down, *neither* one of them is going to make it to medical.

"Cognitive dissonance'd," Newton says faintly, "*why* would you—"

"*You*," Hermann snarls, but can't get anything else out past the Baroque vs. Romantic internecine musical *warfare* that is currently being waged in his head. He does his best to keep a grip on Newton's revolting jacket, not throw up, and stay standing in the face of a doubled but conflicting opinion.

"It's not resolving," Newton gasps. "I had no idea that you loved Descartes so much you *boring rationalist*. This *is not normal*."

Hermann grits his teeth and tries to focus on something that they have a *matching* preference for, but unfortunately all he is managing to do is compound his own sense of dissonance as he comes up with increasing numbers of divergent opinions that he simultaneously holds.

"You like what," Newton slurs, the words nonsensical and nearly unrecognizable, but a testament to the fact that the man can verbally navigate himself through *anything*.

"Turing," Hermann says, eyes shut tight with the effort of excavating a safe juxtaposition from the treacherous unfamiliarity of his own mind.

"Yeah, good, *always* Turing," Newton interrupts. "Hands down. Dude is a *baller*. Kandinsky or Cézanne?"

"Kandinsky," Hermann replies. "*Obviously*. Kierkegaard or Heidegger."

"Ugh. Gross. Kierkegaard." Newton says.

Yes, Hermann mentally agrees, *always Kierkegaard*.

He opens his eyes, feeling marginally *less* lost in the unfamiliar topographies of his own remodeled bias as he makes his way onto firmer cognitive footing.

"I despise you," he informs Newton, "you asinine, self-experimentation-obsessed, *cad*."

"It's mutual, man," Newton says weakly, hands on knees, head still down. "Oh is it *ever*. *Descartes*. Get out of my life with your dualism and your visions of symbolic logic and your methodological doubt, god I freaking *love* it except I think maybe I didn't? Don't? Whatever."

Hermann has no idea if Newton is addressing *him*, or some mental vision of René Descartes.

He's not sure it matters.

"Say *nothing*," Hermann says, "until you are lying down. Until we are *both* lying down."

"Yeah," Newton says, looking at him with glasses marginally and maddeningly askew. "Brilliance. In the abstract. That's an annotation. For you. And for your comment. Let's just do that right now, actually. Say nothing and lie down."

Hermann manages to drag Newton up by his jacket before the man can make good on his poorly articulated threat to collapse on the floor of the corridor. He pushes him back, steadying Newton against the wall and steadying himself against Newton.

"Aw," a passing technician calls over her shoulder. "I knew it. Live it up, guys."

"What?" Hermann hisses, distracted.

"Oh we *will*," Newton says, disorganized and emphatic, sloppily pointing two fingers in the woman's general direction. "K-science for *life*. Life *preservation*. For *humans*. And for *kaiju*. *Small ones*. *Cloned*. In *captivity*. *Forscience*."

The technician's expression morphs, quite appropriately, from approval to disapproval as she vanishes around a corner.

"Newton," Hermann snaps. "Please just—try and hold yourself together for *three minutes*."

"Hold myself *together*," Newton says, affronted. "My brain is like the cognitive equivalent of epoxy, dude. Freaking*tight*. Cross-linked all over the place. As you should *know*, since we *merged*. Do you think we're *actually* drift compatible or do you think we bypassed neural affinity requirements because of the nature of my setup and the nature of handshaking it up in a three-way with a kaiju hive mind? I could see there being some unusual side effects and/or after effects of drifting in the absence of true compatibility and maybe that's why I feel like I have to throw up when I try to compare —"

"Do *not*," Hermann says, "say it. Ideally, do not say *anything*. Can you walk?"

"Yeah, obviously *I* can walk. Can *you* walk? Because you look *horrible*, dude, and you probably haven't noticed this and I legit hate to break it to you, but you've kind of been using me as a budget secondary cane this *entire time*. Also, I think you almost passed out and/or threw up when I accidentally experimented with cognitive dissonance."

Hermann exhales in short, sharp irritation, rolls his eyes, and pulls Newton away from the wall and towards the medical bay.

## Chapter Five

"But how do you *feel*?" the medic asks Newt, after he and Hermann have explained separately and in tandem the events of the previous twenty-four hours, and their vital signs have been taken and evaluated to make sure that no one is acutely dying.

"Good," Newt says. "Totally fine. Weird, maybe? But *normal* weird. Mostly. Some cognitive dissonance, here and there, when I'm being experimental or when Hermann is being vindictive. So probably *that* will happen at least once a day for the foreseeable future. But this is expected, am I right? The bottom line is that considering," he waves a hand vaguely, "everything? I'm great. I think I'm fine. Did I say that already? Either way, it's true."

Hermann is glaring at him.

Newt shoots him the requisite *what's-your-problem-man* look in return because he doesn't think that Hermann deserves his best *fire-and-sulfur-née-brimstone* glare at this *exact* moment.

Not yet.

Hermann's heading in that direction though.

Boy is he *ever*.

The reason for this is that Hermann does not seem to be on board with Newt's extremely reasonable, and, he thinks, pretty *obvious* and *well defined goals*. The medic isn't on board either, but that's not so surprising; Newt does *not* have high expectations of the *medic*, but he *does* have high expectations of *Hermann*. Maybe unreasonably high, but the guy *shared his brain*, at least for a little while, so the man should be able to *get it together* and read between the lines.

"Um," the medic says, looking both confused and distressed, and also kind of like a drowning person, if that makes sense. Newt isn't sure it does.

Everyone is having an unusual day.

Now it's the medic's turn.

But back to Newt's *point*, the one that they're *just not getting* despite his basically having spelled it out for them, implicitly, about four times now. It's this: if he's going to be formally *evaluated* by someone, he would like to ensure both a high level of competence and a high degree of coolness on the part of the evaluator *going in*,



because he most definitely *does not want* any kind of persisting documentation that's irrevocably attached to him to be annotated with some poorly-chosen, hysteria-laden, kaiju-perjorative'd adjective or set of adjectives that will render his future professional life difficult or impossible because some glorified *med tech* thinks he's qualified to make a sweeping and definitive statement on what the *heck* has happened to Dr. Newton Geiszler in the past twenty-four hours, because even *Newt* doesn't know that. And if *Newt* doesn't know, then *no one* knows. Maybe the kaiju know. They are probably pretty pissed at him right about now.

He will think about that more later and decide if he finds it satisfying or terrifying.

At the present moment, he contents himself with stonewalling medical bureaucracy.

Newt has too many Ph.Ds. to put up with people's sloppy and uninformed theorizing.

He's sure that Hermann is going to agree with and support his course of action. Once the guy gets with the program, that is.

"Are you a *neurologist*," Newt begins, squinting at the medic through his increasingly difficult to ignore headache, "because, no offense man, but I think you're going to need to take this one up the medical ladder. So right now? We'll both just settle for some Advil, a glass of water and some a la carte brain imaging if you don't mind. I think—"

"Will you stop talking and *lie down*," Hermann snaps, undermining both Newt's delivery and his point, as the guy *isso very* wont to do, and also like the man has some kind, *any* kind, of material expertise in the *medical* field. Ha. Newt is about eight thousand percent more qualified regarding anything that takes place *in vivo*, thanks; Hermann works *in silico* not to mention *in chalk dustio*, which is always going to be a pale, weakass reflection of the complexity of *life*, man, like, through a glass darkly and murkily, *that's* for freaking sure. Neuroscience. Is it messy? Yeah, it *is*, but it's also probably the most topically relevant subdiscipline to both human and kaiju—

What the—

So.

Yeah.

That's the ceiling.

That he's looking at.

Is that *mold*?

He is now lying down.

Noted.

*Thank you, Dr. Gottlieb, thank you so much.*

Hermann has always been imperious, high-handed, and dictatorial. So much so that Newt has, over the years, devoted several mental asides to contemplating the roots of Hermann's ridiculous behavior because it wasn't something that made a whole lot of sense to him and it had also seemed *compensatory* in some way but in *whatway* hadn't been clear until hours ago. Now it's *quite* clear, kind of painfully clear, and Newt realizes that he is now and had always been, at least on the surface, the kind of guy who looks like a harbinger of hell to Hermann's nicely ordered mental and physical existence, but he hasn't turned out to be *that* bad, or maybe he's toughened Hermann up in a nice, older-brother, rigorous-and-taxing-love type of paradigm, if one discounts the fact that he isn't, strictly speaking, 'older', nor is he sure that 'tough-love' includes long diatribes regarding an inversion of the quantitative hierarchy and ridicule of chalk as a medium for communication. Besides, the Newt-is-not-the-jerk-he-might-appear argument and the Hermann-can-take-it argument don't sound mutually exclusive to him; he needs to stop using 'or' unless he really means it.

"Can you *not*?" Newt says to Hermann in a peripheral snapping, as he props himself on his elbows and then redirects his attention back to the medic standing between him, freedom, his future, the afterparty of the century, and also freedom and also his future. "Let's get this show on the road. Draw some blood, do some imaging—make sure we're not going to drop dead in the next forty-eight hours if that's even a thing you can do. But?" he raises his eyebrows at the medic. "*You do not* write anything *down*, dude. Not about *me*, and not about *him*." He points a finger at Hermann without looking at him to indicate to everyone that he means business. "We are going *out of network* and *out of military* for our neurological care, no offense, but barring any literal, life threatening emergencies, we consent to *nothing*."

Newt has already decided that he wants a laid-back neurologist from the West Coast who surfs on the weekends, has at least one tattoo, one piercing, and thinks that saving the word by mind-melding with a dead kaiju brain is 'rad.' Maybe his name will be Paul. Or Blake. Or maybe Damien. Or it could be a lady. In which case maybe Danielle, maybe Rain, possibly Esther. Hermann probably wants a more uptight neurologist from England named Phillip, though Newt thinks that Hermann is going to fare much better with Rain.

Both Hermann and the medic are looking at him in silent confusion.

Newt gets that look more than one might expect, even when *everything* he says is *perfectly* logical. Unless he said that stuff about Hypothetical Rain, the surfer neurologist, *out loud*.

It's probably best not to inquire.

"I'm—going to make a phone call," the medic says. "I think kaiju drifts on non-standard equipment are maybe a little out of my area of expertise."

Victory.

Sort of.

Maybe.

It remains to be seen.

The point is, he *will be* victorious. Eventually.

The medic leaves the room.

Newt looks at Hermann. The guy looks like he's only staying conscious because he can't decide whether to strangle Newt or not before he passes out.

"Hermann," he says, "will you *sit down* already, because seriously? You look like *death*."

Hermann, pale, one eye bloodshot, his clothing not so much '*unkempt*' as 'moderately kempt' but definitely a whole order of magnitude above Newt's current level of kemptness, sits down on the edge of the bed that Newt is now lying on and shoots Newt a venomous look that Newt in *no way* deserves.

Newt feels slightly wounded by this turn of events.

"I think you may have suffered *brain damage*," Hermann says.

Newt is now slightly *more* than slightly wounded by *this* turn of events. And also by the choice of pronoun, because Newt has been, this whole time actually, extremely courteously including Hermann within the screw-off-outside-this-line Venn diagram he is trying to trace around himself so that his brain and Hermann's brain are not appropriated for medical science or for military research.

"I think *you're* suffering from brain damage," he snaps back. "Nice eye."

"It needs to be *ruled out*," Hermann says in his irritatedly-didactic voice. "For both of us."

"And you have the gall to insinuate that you're somehow hypothetically immune from this conjectural-kaiju-anteverse-induced brain damage?" Newt says skeptically. "As if

you could even *identify* brain damage. Who is the biologist here? Because I'm pretty sure it's not you."

"I will happily cede you that title," Hermann says, dry and shoving him back down. "Try to lie there without talking."

Newt looks at the ceiling.

Yeah, that's *definitely* mold, a dark, creeping, Hong Kong varietal, looking cool, sending hyphae through the damp. Like a boss.

"It's just that I'm not sure how 'state of the art' these medical facilities are," Newt says.

Hermann follows his gaze, looks up at the mold with an expression of pure, prototypical Gottliebian distaste, and says, "agreed."

"I mean, computational modeling we can do," Newt says. "Programming? Get out of here. Predictive modeling of the quantum foam? You're killing it. Electrophysiology—I will patch clamp alien brains all freaking day. Molecular bio—eat your heart out and die, academic powerhouses of the eastern seaboard. Neuroscience? Seriously, even posit the existence of a person who can build a better drift interface that I can build and I will—"

"Are you *driving* towards something in particular?" Hermann asks.

"Yeah," Newt says. "While the scientific expertise of the PPDC may be unreasonably baller, the *medical* facilities? Great for orthopedics. Great for severed limbs. If a kaiju that I clone eats my hand in a horrible but somehow semi-humorous misunderstanding, this is where I will come, presuming I am based here, and not at some pleasantly maritime institute of higher learning. Also? Shatterdome medical? Great for 'my friend just hit me in the face with a bo staff while we were pretending that some kind of *je ne sais quoi* of physical combat has *any* chance of predicting drift compatibility', but still. You see my point. Medical is good for that. It's also good for when my long-term nemesis hits me with his cane. Or strangles me. Accidentally. As a hypothetical example. But given everything—"

"I take your point," Hermann says, both hands braced against the cheap-ass gurney Newt is lying on.

"Do you?" Newt asks, intensely relieved and trying not to show it, pushing himself back up onto his elbows. "Awesome. So let's get out of here, grab my limited alcohol, and drink until we're unconscious. I don't think it's going to take as much as usual. For either of us."

"No," Hermann says.

Newt sighs.

"You need to be evaluated," Hermann says, "because I don't believe you're capable of evaluating yourself."

Newt feels the power requirements for his own brain, inner monologue, and continued sentence spike *so high* that everything, for a moment, shuts down.

In this interval of mental and actual silence Hermann's expression changes from 'exhausted,' to 'acutely anxious'.

Yes.

Good.

"*What* did you just say to me?" Dr. Newton Geiszler hisses, pushing himself up entirely so that he is eye-level with his sanctimonious prick of a colleague, who is now trying to say something that *doesn't matter* because Dr. Geiszler has no plans on ceding Dr. Gottlieb *any* conversational space *any* time in the near future. "Did you just express *more doubt* regarding my *executive mental functioning* because yes, congratulations, you predicted the timing of the ending of the world with magnificent specificity, which was *useful*. *Kind of*. But you *actively impeded my* attempts to *communicate*, to achieve congruity or at least some kind of neural parity, with an *alien life form* which *worked* by the way, which *worked* like a fabulous, elegant, proof-of-principle that then paved the way for a *second attempt* that worked *even better*—"

"When I *found* you, you were *seizing*—" Hermann snarls.

"Yes and that was a *cost*," Newt says, plowing over him, "but look at the *benefits* column you prosaic bastard, in which you will note the items 'world not destroyed', 'humans not eaten by kaiju', 'breach closed', and—"

"You are missing my *point*," Hermann shouts, probably because Newt, also, apparently started shouting sometime in the past several seconds. "As *usual*, you—"

"No," Newt shouts, "*I* do not *miss points*. *You miss points*. Speaking of which, you've been missing my most recent, super salient, but not spelled out, point for the last *fifteen minutes* so let me perform some apparently necessary epexegetis. *We do not want to give the Pan Pacific Defense Corps unlimited access to our brains*. I *know* you've spent a *lifetime* in support of authority figures *everywhere*, because, in the past, *authority* has supported *you* right back, which must be nice. I have enough *theory of mind* to grasp that this is not an intuitive conclusion for you to come to on your own,

but sometimes? When you are in possession of a valuable resource? You have to demarcate *exactly* where you would like everyone else to just *step off* because once they *step in*, it's *too late* to prevent all sorts of unfortunate outcomes and so you *withhold consent* as a *default* so that they have to *ask you foreverything*. I am sure as *hell* making this happen for myself and I'm willing to do the same for you if you *don't screw it up* for both of us by undermining my capacity for rational thought to other people while tacitly agreeing to an entire battery of unnecessary tests for both of us, like the dyslogistic *jerk* that you *are*."

Fortunately, Hermann looks like he's now getting the picture.

Unfortunately, the medic is standing in the doorway, looking nervous and concerned and slightly more than slightly offended.

Newt stops talking. Stops shouting. Whatever. He realizes belatedly that he is *shaking*, and he tries to *stop that*, stop that *immediately*; it's not his fault, it's not anything *serious*, it's just the effect of epinephrine on overtaxed muscles, for sure, he legitimately has no doubts on that point, but it's not helping his case, his case that he *reallyshould not* be *losing*, that would be inconceivable, he is *not losing* the *sanity* argument, he just freaking used the word 'epexegetis' in a complete sentence that made sense even if it was a little bit run on and he will *demand* a—

"We require a moment," Hermann says, eyeing the medic in that way he has.

The medic leaves.

Things are looking up.

Newt tries not to breathe so fast but the effort leaves him feeling vaguely seasick so he stops.

Trying.

Not breathing.

Obviously.

"Fine," Hermann says, both straight forward and straight off the bat; he probably learned that from the drift, probably picked up that particular and totally normal preference of Newt's from somewhere in his brain and is now using it to get what he wants and that's fine because Newt's doing the same thing, except his new technique is diametrically opposed because Hermann loves the vocab, so typical and so *not* normal, but Newt can and will tweak his idiolect to make it a little more appealingly recondite to his colleague. No problem. Done and done.

"What do you suggest?" Hermann says.

Newt doesn't even have to think about it because he's been thinking about it off and on for the past day. He actually started thinking about it even *before* he put his budget helmet on for the first time, because it's always nice to do thought exercises where you assume your own death maybe *isn't* a given, so he says, "bloodwork, a complete ophthalmology exam, a CT scan, and MRI. Of the brain. An EKG. All results released to us, digital and hard copy. They can keep their own copies. I'd rather they didn't but they will anyway, regardless of our preferences, because, you know, the fate of the world is at stake. Possibly. Someone will rationalize it that way as they commit an infringement of civil liberties."

Newt hasn't said '*EEG*', the magical three letters of neural destiny. He wonders if Hermann will pick that up, or maybe he's *already* picked it up and isn't mentioning it because he gets it and agrees that if no one, *no one*, mentions it, that would be best. The man's not a biologist but he has the *memories* of one in his head. Newt wonders if the PPDC medical people will pick his omission up. They probably will. Anyone moderately informed in the cognitive sciences would. Because he *wants* an EEG. He *needs* an EEG. He does. They *both* do. He just doesn't want one *here*. Because he's pretty sure an EEG is going to be abnormal and, if it is, he could see some perspicacious jackass saying something like 'abnormal brain waves—rule out mental continuity with kaiju anteverse,' which would be *impossible* and then they'd both be labeled security risks, studied, and, in short, screwed for the rest of their miserable lives.

*Please* he thinks, *please do not be connected to the kaiju anteverse, brain. Please do not. How about no. I have an idea. Let's just not. No, please.*

"Based on the mess of poorly understood and conflicting opinions I haven't had time to reconcile, I'm having a difficult time determining whether your concern regarding future agency is *rationally* justified, Newton," Hermann says.

"Oh god." Newt transfers his hands to his face and manages to shove his fingers beneath his glasses to press down on his good eye and sort of gingerly touch the bad one, because *ow*.

"But," Hermann continues, "I'm willing to grant that you may be correct."

"Really?" Newt asks, his voice cracking as he half pulls his glasses off in dragging his hands away from his face.

"Furthermore," Hermann says, "I want to clarify that I have no doubts about your 'executive mental functioning' as you put it. I was simply—"

"Nah dude." Newt holds up a hand. "Just stop right there. I feel you."

Hermann sighs, reaches over, and straightens Newt's glasses like the stickler for decorum that he is. "You're a terrible influence," Hermann says. "On everyone. Now will you *please lie down?* So that *I* can lie down?"

"Yeah," Newt says, lying down, because he's actually epically tired, his eye feels like he walked into an icepick at some point in a Hong Kong alleyway and didn't notice while it quietly slipped into his brain to hotwire this headache that's been creeping up on him; he was not kidding about cerebral edema, he could see that one happening, but they'll identify it on imaging if it's in progress. And even if it is, he's not concerned about it, well that's a lie, he *is*, he'd *like* to believe that there aren't going to be *any* neurological consequences of his decision tree, but he can't because there already *are some* like the fact that he just *loves Descartes so freaking much right now oh god*, but even while he *is* concerned about the electrophysiological state of his brain, 'closing the breach' and 'no more kaiju,' are things so monumental that neurological sequelae for himself and also for Hermann seem no more than expenditure line items detailing one more cost in a too-costly war.

A war that is over.

And this, *all of this*, makes *sense*, because it is *cogent* and *accurate*.

It's so accurate you could *plot it*.

On a *coordinate plane*.

Not really but *kind* of.

Intersecting number lines. Who *thinks* of that stuff? Who sits down one day and says 'I could really use a coordinate system right about now'? René De-epic-intellectual-badass-cartes, that's who.

"Newton," Hermann says sounding horrified and incredulous in confusing simultaneity.

"Are you *crying?*"

"No, man," Newton says, wiping his eyes. "I just love Descartes *so much* right now."

Hermann gives him a weird look.



## Chapter Six

Hermann spends most of his ninety minute MRI trying *not* to focus on the incessant banging resulting from undesired vibrations in the magnetic coils that surround him.

Since he is required to be here, doing nothing, absolutely motionless, his eyes shut and still, he tries to occupy his mind in a useful manner.

His thoughts are extremely disorganized at present, but perhaps he can use this time to sort himself out.

He is highly tempted to return to the paralyzing question of impossible choice that Newton had posed earlier in a thoughtless, curious, typical fit of insight, but he does not want to vomit in an enclosed space.

As long as he does not try to make an evaluation of *superiority* or an attempt at *ranking*, he finds that he is indeed capable of holding two separate preferences in his mind at one time. He wonders if the electrophysiological *reality* of the situation is something more analogous to multitasking or to true parallel processing.

He will be interested to hear Newton's thoughts on this.

Later.

Not today.

For the remainder of the afternoon and evening he is going to make a sincere and sustained effort to keep his colleague as mentally solvent as possible, which means that most items of intellectual interest will have to wait until the point that Newton has recovered enough to refrain from weeping over formal logic.

He understands that impulse, as he finds himself surprised by a fierce and passionate affinity for the Nietzschean trappings that Newton has strangely and singularly woven in and through his conceptual, rather than mathematical, understanding of the disorderly complexity of life.

Biologists.

He has the impulse to shake his head, but he doesn't, because that would disrupt the slowly assembling image of his brain.

Biologists rarely bother to understand things quantitatively when it's not overtly required, and so, in the absence of mathematical absolutes, Hermann supposes they must cling to something.

There's no reason it shouldn't be Nietzsche.

Hermann has no inclination to *weep* over it though.

He does feel extremely, just *extremely*, affectionate towards Kierkegaard, he will admit. That's clearly a synergistic phenomenon; a function of '*only the difficult inspires the noble-hearted,*' meeting, '*once you label me you negate me,*' meeting finally, '*one understands only in proportion to becoming himself that which he understands,*' in an elegant coup de grâce of adjusted self-hood.

But he's not going to weep about that *either*, no matter how aesthetically lovely and aching satisfying he finds it.

Though—he may stencil '*once you label me you negate me*' onto Newton's laptop.

Except—no.

He most certainly will *not* be doing that, because *that* particular impulse is the confused product of Newton's predilection for semiotics and for invading Hermann's personal space, combined with Hermann's preference for understated irony, combined with that bizarrely strong affection for Kierkegaard he simply *cannot* shake.

This is why he needs to sort himself out.

The maddening thing about all of this is that he's certain that Newton is not going to *bother* trying to work through it, he's simply going to take his new and inappropriate passion for Descartes, his improved quantitative reasoning, and an almost infinite number of other mental biases large and small, as givens. The man is going to effortlessly proceed with his new reality in blithe unconcern. He will, certainly, subject Hermann to poorly organized soliloquies on the fractal nature of the musical compositions of J.S. Bach, or the intricacies of set theory, and he will probably inappropriately blend these things in novel ways with his own expertise in a manner fascinating and infinitely frustrating.

But that is *not* what Newton *should* do.

And it is *not* what *Hermann* is *going* to do.

*How* he's going to work himself out of his current identity confusion is not yet clear to him, and he's not inclined to problem-solve his way free from conflicting biases while inside a three-Tesla magnet. As for the *why* behind his resolve, well.

It's complex.

Hermann likes his identity as it is—or, as it *was*, thank you very much. He also, though he would be unlikely to admit it in so many words, likes Newton's identity as it was as

well, and would prefer for his colleague to remain relatively unscathed by the events of the past day.

Unfortunately, he cannot convince himself that such an outcome is likely.

Fortunately, it is *more* likely than it would be had Newton performed the second drift alone, as was his original, *asinine* intention.

Hermann *still* cannot believe the man was able to *drift* with *dead alien tissue*, for god's sake. The entire concept, when Newton proposed it, had struck Hermann as offensively, revoltingly counter-intuitive and flagrantly irresponsible, given that the almost certain outcome of his experiment as outlined was a reduction in the PPDC science staff by fifty percent.

But.

It had worked.

Experientially, the drift had been terrifying, monumental, overwhelming—a simultaneous revelation between himself and two other parties—trying to ignore the fascinating stream of Newton's memories and identity mingling with his own while chasing down alien relevancies through horrific landscapes of psychic vastness.

He still, even now, has no idea how Newton had managed it alone the first time.

Drifting with the kaiju hivemind had been a double violation of identity. The first had been the one he'd already articulated—the merging of his selfhood with the selfhood of two other parties. The second violation was a violation of Hermann's autocategorization of *himself* as *victim*. Objectively, the truth of this was unambiguous. Kaiju were invading his planet, destroying his culture, and trying to consume his species with the ultimate goal of harvesting the resources of the earth; there was no ambiguity as to who was the injured party.

Except.

*Except.*

To *become* the kaiju hive-mind was to *become* the aggressor. Hermann had not *looked* for their rationale, but their *need* for a brief time had become *his* need, even as he'd tried to shut that out, even as he and Newton, in flawless mental accord, had sought out the objective details of the breach that might make it amenable to closure.

And this, most fundamentally, is the *why* of his resolution to recover *himself*.

Not because he fears *Newton*, whose most terrifying characteristic is his own capacity for thoughtless self-immolation.

No.

It is because he fears mental contamination from the *kaiju*.

He *wants* the ability to recognize such contamination in himself.

He *dreads* the possibility of recognizing it in Newton.

Because Newton's mind, after all, was *and is* a unique thing, impatient and quick and well-intentioned and sloppy, brashly arrogant to the point of blindness, inventive and adaptable, creating the clash of intellectual discord wherever it is directed—in short, not the sort of mind that one comes across every day, and not the kind of mind that one would necessarily choose to expose to the kaiju anteverse, if one had a choice in the matter.

They'd had a choice, Hermann realizes—he and Marshal Pentecost, but they hadn't recognized it as such.

He does not fault his own reasoning.

But that does not mean that he does not regret it.

When Hermann's MRI is completed, the medical technician tells him that his results will be available shortly, pending review by their offsite teleradiology service, informs him he can substitute his scrubs for his clothes, and asks him to fetch Dr. Geiszler.

Hermann dons his slacks and sweater and straightens his hair to the best of his ability in absence of comb or mirror, and then, resolutely ignoring his headache, eye ache, and leg pain, proceeds into the main floorspace of the med bay.

Newton is sitting at a computer meant for medical staff, which he has somehow coaxed into playing an obnoxious and relatively obscure example of 'alternative hip hop' from the mid nineteen nineties that Hermann *very much* wishes he could not identify.

Alas, he can.

This is now a skill set he possesses.

He hopes that nothing was overwritten in his brain to make room for all this irrelevant knowledge. But he supposes he'll never know.

He finds this both maddening and comforting.

Newton is currently listening to one *Dr. Octagon*, also known as 'Kool Keith', *properly* known as Keith Thornton, performing a piece of work entitled *Biology 101*, from his debut solo album.

Hermann spends a moment in mental preparation so that what's about to come out of his mouth sounds appropriately vexed.

Because he *is* vexed.

He likes *Bach*, he does *not* like *this*.

"Someone in Medical has magnificent musical taste," Newton says, not looking up from the computer and entirely ruining Hermann's impending waspish propriety before he can bring it fully to bear. "Do you think it's the med tech back there? If so, *that's* unfortunate, seeing that I'm pretty sure he hates me after all the obliquely insulting comments I made regarding PPDC Medical, for which I *entirely* blame *you*, man, I was *trying* to be *tactful* about the whole thing. I didn't know the guy was going to be cool, if this is even his music. Whoever did this is a closet rule bender though, because I am pretty sure that they do *not* like you putting music on government issue hardware. I've looked into this."

"Will you shut off that *deplorable racket*?" Hermann asks politely, if at high volume.

Newton looks over at him, in obvious, provocative amusement but the man's appearance is *so atrocious* relative to his typical state, which Hermann would generally describe as 'disheveled' or possibly 'intellectually debauched,' that the effect on Hermann turns out to be a mixture between vexation, horror, and sympathy.

This, perhaps, explains what happens next.

"You're looking singularly *soigné* post neural imaging, Dr. Gottlieb, if you'll permit me to say so. Now answer me this: Hendrix or Clapton? Go."

"Hendrix," Hermann replies, and then exhales in short aggravation, rapping his cane against the base of Newton's chair. "Will you *stop that*?"

"There will *never* be a time that this will not be fun for me," Newton says.

Mercifully, the man decides to shut off his 'music.'

"That computer is for use by *medical* personnel," Hermann says.

"Do you *see* any medical personnel?" Newton asks. "Because *I* don't, other than our traumatized junior partner holding down the fort back there. Everyone's either deployed cityside or scooping up Raleigh and Mako. This is fortunate for us. I'd get out of here before anyone realizes they might have the authority or cause to keep you, file an abbreviated report that you flag to Pentecost, and then try to bury yourself in the post-apocalypse shenanigans that will be starting shortly. That's the essence of *my* plan."

"Pentecost is dead," Hermann says.

Newton flinches. "I know," he says.

They look at one another.

"I *know* that," Newton continues, "but even so. Do it anyway." He brings the tips of his fingers, briefly, to his bloodshot eye and runs them over his eyelid.

"Trying to obfuscate the enormity of what has happened to you is not going to solve *any* problems," Hermann says, "and will *certainly* create new ones."

"Do *not* let them label you, man," Newton replies. "That is a *huge* mistake. I forwarded you my crappy report as a template, so that you can avoid making *yours* into an unmitigated disaster for *both* of us."

"Thank you, Newton," Hermann snaps, "for the inspiring amount of *trust* that you have invested in me, your colleague for the past decade."

"Do not even start with me, dude, I let you into my *brain*."

"You *also* let the hive mind of a hostile alien race into your brain, so you will excuse me if I do not feel flattered," Hermann replies.

"Aw," Newton says. "You're a unique, fractalline, infinite snowflake, man. Now listen, I mean this in the *nicest* possible way, but you're also a perfectionist, law-abiding nerd, who's going to write something really horrendously accurate in your report that causes us worlds of trouble so consider sending it *to me* before you file it."

"Did you just use 'law-abiding' as a pejorative and then offer *yourself* as an editor of *my* report?"

"A little bit, maybe," Newton says, loosening his already too-loose tie.

They look at one another for the span of several seconds, and Hermann does his best to keep the to their familiar, confrontational pattern, but Newton seems too tired for any such effort, and it takes two to have a satisfying mutual glare.

"I'll consider it," Hermann says, still unwilling to admit defeat. "You are supposed to be *lying down*."

"You are *exceptionally worried* about me," Newton says, leaning back in his chair in unmistakable, self-perceived, victorious superiority. "You're not even *bothering* to couch most of this scolding as closet disapproval about my life, my science, or life science as a discipline, which is the best, by the way. For sure. Anyway, the point is that I win. And since I am magnanimous in my interpersonal victories, I will tell you, so that you can just *stop asking*, that in regards to this 'lying down' that you keep pushing

like cheap cocaine, I would *like* to, man, believe me I would, because I am *tired*, but it's just not working for me right now. Cognitively. And I need to get my brain imaged anyway, just in case this banner headache is the headache of massive neuronal excitotoxic cell death, which, *before you yell at me*, is probably not happening, I think I'd be comatose or a lot weirder if it were, I probably should not have even mentioned it, based on the face you're making right now, but, as you know, self-censorship is not one of my best qualities unless it comes to obfuscating facts so that they can't lead to crappy hypothesis generation by old guys with stars on their epaulettes, in which case I am awesome and offer you my services. Still. And always. For free. Standing offer. In return for saving my brain, at least partially, so that I can live to clone some kaiju, because who is going to do that other than me and off-their-rocker-billionaire-think-tanks a la *Jurassic Park*? I ask you. Do you know when I read that book I promised myself, *promised myself*, that I would never leave academia so that I wouldn't accidentally annihilate mankind? And now look at me." Newton raises his eyebrows, exhausted and faintly amused, and far, *far*, more wanderingly insightful than Hermann was prepared to give him credit for, even now, after all that has happened.

Even so.

Hermann is not going to touch *any part* of what has just come out of Newton's mouth and mind because he can think of only one thing to say in response, and he is *not* going to say it.

He is *especially* not going to say it because Newton is *waiting for it*.

Hermann can see it in his eyes, in the tilt of the other man's head. He can *feel* the idea resonate between them, either because they still share a shadowed connection or because it comes straight out of some kind of simpatico subsequent to shared consciousness.

"It's cliché," Newton continues, but slower, because of course *he* will say it, of course, out of the two of them, Newton is going to articulate the thing that is slowly, quietly, terrifying them *both*, "to the point that it's become a cultural axiom. You know how it goes, Hermann."

"Newton."

"When you gaze long—"

"*Newton*," Hermann snaps, succeeding this time in cutting him off. "You have made a life out of escaping clichés. So do so."

Newton raises his eyebrows.

"May I also suggest confining yourself to Kierkegaard."

"Noted, dude."

"Finally, you will clone a kaiju over my dead body. Literally."

"Yeah," Newton says, looking relieved, looking exhaustedly *grateful* for this stream of censorship applied from outside his own mind.

They regard one another for a long moment, until Hermann says, "they're ready for you." He inclines his head, brief and lateral and painful, in the direction of the room he just came from.

"Great," Newton says, looking across the floorspace toward the room with the three-Tesla magnet but not moving. "I will get right on that."

"Do you want me to stay?" Hermann asks.

"No dude," Newton says, looking for a moment as though he means 'yes,' but then snapping his face and his tone into a paradigm that Hermann finds both familiar and reassuring. "Am I five? Go sleep or something. I will meet you at the kickass party that's a few hours away from self-organizing out of the confused, elated humans who aren't sure what they're doing and have subsequently decided to seek out alcohol and other humans. Based on my extensive experience with self-organizing systems, I'd say it'll be something like three hours before a critical mass is reached. You had better be there. I will be *pissed* if I have to come find you and drag you out of your hermetically sealed room, even though I am *positive* that there is a one hundred percent chance of that exact outcome."

Hermann rolls his eyes.

Newton gets to his feet with an atypical precision of movement that suggests he's unconvinced of his own stability.

Hermann has the impulse to take his arm but doesn't do it, because that impulse comes only from a post drift proprietary familiarity that he has resolved to identify and isolate.

Newton has no such resolution, obviously, because one of his hands lands on Hermann's shoulder as he staggers past, working up the forward momentum that, mostly, stabilizes his trajectory.

Hermann watches him for a moment, to ensure that the man actually makes it to the back room without falling over.

He does.



Hermann stands, undecided, considering the door and the computer that Newton just vacated.

He should return to his quarters and begin his report there, on a computer *not* reserved for *medical* personnel.

That is certainly the decision he would have made forty-eight hours ago.

Isn't it?

Is he hesitating because improper use of a medical terminal now seems less inappropriate than it previously did, due to Newton's influence on his thoughts?

Is he hesitating because he's concerned about Newton's ability to lie motionless in a confined space for ninety minutes while his brain is imaged?

Is he hesitating because he doesn't believe he should leave this infirmary without permission from the chief medical officer, who isn't here?

Is he hesitating because he doesn't want Newton to be here, alone, when the medical personnel *do* return?

He has no idea.

This is miserable.

And certainly Newton's fault.

He sits down at the computer.

## Chapter Seven

Yeah, so this is probably his worst nightmare right about now.

Actually.

Nope.

That is false.

So so false.

Demonstrably false.

That may be the falsest thing he's ever said to himself. One of the most false things. It's right up there. On the list of false things. That he has said. He can't think of any other things on that list *right now*, but that is *fine*, because he's *stressed* and he's *tired* and he's feeling kind of inappropriately *weepy* about *Descartes*. It's also fine because he's not in a habit of making false statements, at least not ones that can be immediately identified as such, as a general rule.

"You want me to do *what* now?" Newt asks the med tech, who is eyeing his tattoos in a hypnotized manner that makes Newt dubious about the guy's prospective coolness and competence. "How do you feel about Dr. Octagon?"

"Who?" the med tech says, confirming the entire array of Newt's suspicions in the span of one syllable.

"Nevermind," Newt says.

"Dr. Geiszler," the med tech says. "If you don't *want* this MRI, or if you'd prefer to do it under sedation then—"

"I want it," Newt says, already standing there, next to the always-on magnet, divested of all his metal, in a state of cold dishabille what with the thin scrubs and the no shoes and the being mostly-blind sans his glasses. "I want it now."

He needs it now.

He needs it *now* and not *later* when everyone is *back* and filling out reports and thinking, as critically as their brains and education allow, about the kaiju anteverse. He's doing it for himself, but also for his stupid colleague, because the man is going to be n-sub-one out of an n=2 experimental group that will rot at the basement of

statistical significance so far from the light of a cutoff p value that they will never reach anything other than the status of a puzzling and probably dangerous anecdote. Newt is absolutely determined to pull the *pair* of them out of that particular oubliette of rationality and from beneath the microscope of the military-industrial complex and *keep* them unscrutinized for the rest of his natural life or until his self-restraint snaps and he clones a baby kaiju, finds out he can talk to it, and then somehow accidentally ends the world.

He is *not* going to clone a kaiju.

Except for how he *really wants to* and he *always has*, so that's fine, but has he always wanted to *this* badly? Is this *him*? Is it some creeper kaiju-plan left in his brain, a subterranean sleeper subroutine subluxed beneath his subjective experience of the world? Waiting for—

"Dr. Geiszler?" the med tech says uncertainly.

He has *got* to stop freaking this kid out.

That's step one.

Newt claps the med tech on the shoulder, says, "yeah, thanks man, you are doing science a solid," and then lies down and lets the med tech strap his head into immobility.

This does not freak him out *at all*.

Why would it?

No reason.

There's some mechanical repositioning of component parts and one might think that the PPDC would have something a little more high-res, man, than a *three-Tesla MRI*, god, what is this, the turn of the century? How embarrassing for everyone associated with this travesty of tech. But whatever, it will get the job done, really the only thing he wants to know is how his ventricles are doing and whether or not he's got any radiographic features of ischemia or intracranial hemorrhage and whether he's going to slip into a coma and die in the next half day or so, because that would be unfortunate seeing as he *really* wants to go to this party that he's certain is going to be starting to coalesce right about the time that he finishes with this scan and right about the time that Mako and Raleigh show up all suavely black clad and wet and photogenic; they are *pretty*, Newt will give them that. If anyone is going to make the cover of *Rolling Stone*, Newt votes for himself because he once had a moderately successful but a little bit embarrassingly 'nerd rock' band called *The Superconducting Supercolliders*, which

did pretty okay on the Boston scene, but presuming *Rolling Stone* doesn't choose *him*, he votes for *Mako* because that blue hair thing she's got going is totally—

"Dr. Geiszler?" the med tech says, over the in-magnet speakers.

Newt jerks, hard and startled, and he is just *so wired* right now, an understandable thing, because, hi, yeah, almost eaten by Otachi and then, *again, twice*, by baby-Otachi, honestly, he *hopes* that the kaiju were trying to eat him because if they were trying to do something *else* he does *not* want to know about it, not *ever*, and he hopes if they had some other plan it's not already planted in his head because, if it is, it's going to come out at some point, everything usually does.

"Yeah," he says, breathlessly trying to *relax* in this blurry, plastic-lined magnet.

"Close your eyes," the med tech says, voice distorted by crap circuitry and budget, *budget*, like lowest budget *ever*, speakers, one might as well use a paper plate and a wire. "And try not to move. At all."

"Sure," Newt says.

No problem.

Totally easy.

Probably one of the easiest things for humans.

Lie in a magnet, Dr. Geiszler, just *lie there*.

Get your brain scanned.

He tries to decide where his next tattoo is going to go, because *that's* a good idea—take the things that try to kill you and memorialize them forever in art on your body that you will have to look at every day for the rest of your life. That's called building character, that's called panache, that's called gutsy and unafraid, that's called badassery, that's called *anything* except 'a really terrible idea', because it *isn't*. Unless it is. Hermann had articulated *that* counter-argument pretty well, years ago, right off the bat, when he'd said something along the lines of 'Dr. Geiszler, consider that if this war ends badly and you spend *years* in terrified hiding, far inland, waiting to die, your 'decorative art' will serve only to remind you of the scope of your own arrogance and failure.'

Hermann can be kind of a downer sometimes.

The guy had also been missing the point because—

The magnet vibrates with its first loud and not unforeseen but kind of in-the-moment-unexpected banging and Newt jerks *so violently* in response that one knee hits the

upper bound of the *tube* he is lying in and can't they *get any decent tech here this is unforgivable he will build them an open MRI for the love of all that is good and holy he will do it immediately*. Tomorrow. Tonight. While he is drunk. He's sure it can't be *that* complicated. Someone find him a five-Tesla magnet and—

"Dr. Geiszler," the tech says over the speaker that is probably a hand-me-down from Thomas Edison's kid's phonograph, version 2.0. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah dude," Newt says; it's more like gasping though, unfortunately. "Let's do this. I'm good."

"Try not to move," the tech says.

Yes, Newt thinks, waiting for it this time, waiting for the banging to start, because once it *starts* he can *habituate* to it; he's got enough higher brain function left for *that*, he's pretty sure. *Try not to move*.

This time he manages it.

*Come at me, bro*, he thinks vaguely in the direction of the med tech, the three-Tesla magnet, a host of dead kaiju, Hermann, the director of Medical, Hypothetical-Rain-the-surfer-neurologist's jerk of a hypothetical-receptionist, the military industrial complex, and his own brain.

So.

His list of things to do is shaping up something like this. One—get an MRI, already in progress, so he's going to call this one a 'check.' Two—take a shower, find a fire, and use it to burn his clothing, ideally *after* he removes his wallet and his phone from his pants, and not *before*. Three—find Hermann and figure out a way to read the report he's writing, and make *sure* the guy is *actually* going to flag that thing to Pentecost and not to Hansen. Hermann is very 'i' dotting and 't' crossing, obviously, one would have to be, as a mathematician, eh, that's probably not even true, but if one isn't a stickler for detail it likely causes so much heartache and repeated fits of worthlessness and angst over unbalanced equations that mathematicians probably train their brains right out of any non-perfectionist tendencies. Biology is better. Three—no wait, he's on four. Four—presuming the party still isn't happening yet, he is going to spend some time on the internet in search of his surfer neurologist, Hypothetical Rain, because if he already *has* a doctor it's going to be harder for the military to *give* him one when they decide that's a thing they'd like to do. Five—he's going to finally, *finally* get drunk. Six—he's going to build the PPDC a *new MRI that is not a terrifying piece of garbage*. Like this one.

Just lie there.

Just lie there, Newt.

Yup. One minute down, probably.

Eighty-nine to go.

He should have asked for a countdown.

He should have asked for music.

He should have asked Hermann to stay and read him the latest issue of the *American Journal of Physics* starting with the copyright information and omitting nothing, including figure captions, the table of contents, and the editor's opinion on the feasibility of making detailed measurements *of* and/or *in* the quote unquote 'space,' between dimensions, which would be stupid, probably, and would piss Hermann off whether it was *actually* 'asinine' or not because Hermann is super intense about measuring things. Newt has done some physics, who *hasn't* in the sciences, god, but 'experimental error', to him, is an obstacle rather than a source of infinite challenge and delight. That was why, when all was said and done, he'd picked biology. Neuroscience, man. Probably the best and most terrifying of the sciences, because who really wants to know how their own mind works?

He does, apparently.

What's he going to do now—study synapses? Study the mechanism of long term potentiation like everyone else in the world? Jerk off to the multisubunit elegance of an NMDA receptor as half his field was wont to do?

Nope, probably not.

Anyway, Hermann would have read him the physics. Newt is, in fact, *sure* that Hermann would have done that for him, had he asked. Newt is *also* pretty sure it would have been *weird*, kind of like that time Hermann had to extract Newt from a county lock-up when they'd been based on the coast of Washington State. The whole thing had not been Newt's fault, strictly speaking; it was an unfortunate instance of his personality clashing inappropriately and drunkenly with some people holding *excessively* strong but opposing musical preferences, as befit Seattle natives—what was left of them after people with means moved inland to Kansas and the people without means stayed behind with their guitars and whatever possessions people who lived normal lives not in labs and hermetically sealed bunkers kept with them when they stayed to face down sea monsters that would certainly eat them, no matter their folksy stubbornness. Newt had tried to get an apartment like a *normal person* when it had seemed like Hong Kong was going to be a long term thing, but Pentecost had said

no. It was possible he'd said no *because* of the Seattle incident, but Newt still thinks that's unfair because no charges were *actually* pressed, and Newt had emerged pretty much unscathed. Hermann *had* been singularly teed off about having to come retrieve him. But he'd done it. And this was one of the reasons Newt was pretty sure the guy would have read him the *American Journal of Physics* if he'd asked, but he hadn't asked, because he was a *grown-ass adult*.

He still is.

Lying here.

Very still.

He saved the world, partially. He was like one hundred percent of 'Step Two' and fifty percent of 'Step Four' in the seven-step 'So You've Decided to Avert the Ending of Your Civilization' plan.

Anything would be a travesty on these speakers, anyway, even physics.

*Especially* physics, because of the implicit irony of sources of error punching one in the face with static.

How many minutes have passed?

This is going to take forever.

Well, if he's going to lose touch with reality and/or turn evil as a result of everything that's happened, he might as well kick-start the process now. He's pretty sure all that, 'Newton, think of Kierkegaard,' ugh Kierkegaard *rockst*though, and, 'Newton, I will die before I let you clone a kaiju,' and, 'Newton, be a special flower,' stuff that Hermann was spouting back there was pretty much an attempt to say, 'Newton, do not start down a dangerous philosophical road and unmake humanity in the process,' which is probably sound advice, but he's been on a dangerous philosophical road for a while now, and he knows it, and it also goes to show that even if you share someone's brain you can still be blindly hopeful about their capacity for change, even while simultaneously realizing that that change is never going to happen.

*Kaiju anteverse*, he thinks, *are you there?*

Nothing answers him back.

That's a good sign.

It would be *really appalling* if something had answered a summons that weakass and nerdy.

This whole contact with the kaiju anteverse just smacks one in the face with archetypal parallels of corruption via knowledge.

So he's Eve. (Great.)

He's Prometheus. (Light up the world with your tech, young man.)

He's Gary Mitchell from *Star Trek: The Original Series*. (Classic. Does this make Hermann *Kirk*, though? Because that seems wrong.)

He's the Dorian Gray of science. (Thanks, but no thanks.)

He's made a Faustian bargain. (No surprise there.)

He's Saruman from *The Lord of the Rings*. (So Hermann is Gandalf? Man, if Newt is anyone from LOTR it's got to be a hobbit. Probably Frodo. Come to think of it though, Frodo has the same problem as Saruman in the end, even though it comes from a different psychological place. Crap.)

He's every blind visionary turned unwitting villain in Michael Crichton's entire body of work but especially Dr. Henry Wu. (This makes Hermann Dr. Ian Malcolm and that works better than Kirk for sure.)

And he's one cloned kaiju away from being a modern-day, *actual*, Dr. Victor Frankenstein.

One has to be pretty uninformed or pretty uninterested in the human condition not to know what archetype one trends toward, and Newt has been aware of his own destructive paradigm for a long time. A *long* time.

He'd found the entire thing somewhat concerning.

He finds it *more* concerning *now*.

Dr. Victor Frankenstein, his literary friend and fictional warning buoy, ended up alone in a state of nervous collapse on Arctic ice, trying to kill the work of his own hands after it destroyed everything he loved. Unfortunately, the guy failed and died of pneumonia before he could get the job done.

Yeah, that sounds pretty plausible to Newt, unfortunately.

So he won't clone a kaiju.

Done. No kaiju clone, no failure and death via crawling about without a jacket in a frozen waste.

Is he seriously *not* going to clone a kaiju?

Is he seriously considering *doing* it?



There are pros and cons.

The cons column is pretty obvious. It includes the Jurassic Park scenario, the breach reopening scenario, the Newt-develops-psychosis scenario, the ostracism-from-the-world scenario, and finally, the more complex possibility that the kaiju he clones turns out to be extremely intelligent and either influences Newt back, or takes over his brain and spends years terrifying the crap out of Hermann before people finally get it together and take down Newt and his pet kaiju with a harpoon gun or whatever it was that Ahab used on that dick of a whale.

The pros column is also pretty obvious. It includes knowledge for knowledge's sake, which, despite what popular mythology would have one believe, is actually pretty awesome and brings humanity things like electric guitars, efficient transportation, giant robots, and crappy, disturbingly loud, *slow* MRI machines. It also includes increased tactical anti-kaiju knowledge just in case the breach does spontaneously reopen or the kaiju reopen it from the other side on purpose because they're pissed. It also includes —well, the nebulous advances that come from any new thing. Maybe kaiju blue will turn out to cure cancer.

Newt knows what Nietzsche would say if he were here.

He'd say, "watch it, Dr. Geiszler, you've been looking long into that abyss."

*It looked back, man*, Newt says in return. *It already looked back.*

That is, probably, why he thinks it's too late.

There had been moments, *extended intervals*, of unarguable look-back time from the kaiju anteverse.

Hermann *also* thinks it's too late.

Newt *knows* it, he just isn't quite sure if *Hermann* knows that Newt knows that Hermann knows it, but it's *obvious* Hermann thinks that there's *something wrong with him* because Hermann isn't really one to be hyperbolic about anything other than Newt's supposed stupidity, but the guy had most certainly said, 'you will clone a kaiju over my dead body,' which Newt finds a horrible, soul-freezing statement on about nine different levels, but the worst two are that it indicates how far Hermann thinks Newt will go and how far he in turn will go to stop him.

Can he please get out of this tube?

No he cannot.

Not right now.

Either way though, whether he clones a kaiju or not, he thinks he's probably in for a *world* of unrest because if pop culture has taught him that he doesn't want to be Frankenstein it has *also* taught him that it's a bad idea to be a strong personality living through one's own slow obsolescence. He's going to have a hard time with that, he's pretty sure, harder than Hermann, most likely, who is probably going to go back to the Riemann Hypothesis or something elegant and mathematical as soon as he's sure he doesn't have to be saving the world anymore.

Newt is going to see Hypothetical Rain, his surfer neurologist, once per week and try not to have a breakdown or brain-damage-induced epilepsy while he chokes to death on his own repressed impulses and freaks people out with the skinny-tie, thick glasses, creepy tattoo combo. That doesn't really sound like a *good* plan, but it sounds better than the pneumonia-in-a-frozen-waste-as-a-failed-kaiju-hunter-hacking-up-a-lung-as-he-screams-what-have-I-done plan. It sounds marginally better.

It is so *loud*.

He feels dust fall onto his face from a cracking ceiling and he *jerks*, muscles snapping into maximum contraction, hitting the sides of the *stupid freaking scanner god* can they not have a five-Tesla open model is that too much to ask there must be Jaeger pilots who are claustrophobic after near death in close quarters *for the love of—*

"Dr. Geiszler?" the tech says.

"Yeah," he says, realizing what had just happened, which is one hundred percent within normal limits and totally explainable; everyone has flashbacks after they almost die; it's part of the human condition. "Sorry."

"I'm—going to have to restart this," the tech says.

Of course he is.

"Yeah, okay dude," Newt replies. "I got it. How long has it been?"

"Three minutes," the tech says. "Try not to move."

Three minutes.

Magnificence.

*Yes, Dr. Geiszler, try not to move.*

"Yup," Newt says. "I know. Done."

*Okay brain, he thinks, please do not do this to me right now. Do it later. If we can just get through this, no one can stop us in our quest for alcohol and dance-floor abandon and then you will wake up, magically reset, to find me sprawled over a planar surface*

*somewhere, possibly confused, possibly missing my shirt and shoes, and all will be right with the world for a blessed handful of minutes. You can have that. We can have that. Maybe. We are a team. A team that's going to hold still. For ninety minutes. Starting now.*

He tightens every muscle that he can think of below his neck in an attempt to keep his face, his eyes, relaxed. He tries not to freak out about the possibility of ruining this scan at the forty-five minute mark. Multiple times.

On the plus side, if this MRI takes *five hours* because he *cannot stay still*, his esteemed colleague will probably mount some form of mandatory rescue because that's a thing that Hermann tends to do. Rescue Newt from his own stupidity.

He's not sure what would have happened if Hermann hadn't pulled him out of the drift apparatus the first time.

Probably, he would be dead.

Or.

Nope.

And/or.

Maybe, his brain would be *forever trapped* with the kaiju hivemind.

Actually, since he'd been successful in establishing a drift, he's *certain* that's *exactly* what would have happened.

Great.

He's so happy he's had this thought, right here, right now.

The risks had been worth it. For sure. To the max. He'd do it again. Except maybe next time he'd try to convince everyone of his plan with a neatly typed piece of paper or a well-ordered power point presentation with key ideas in large, sans serif font, instead of just gesticulating a lot and speaking at high volume. It shouldn't *matter*, the ideas were and are the ideas, but there is, indeed, a *reason* that kids with terrible handwriting receive worse grades than kids with perfect handwriting for work of identical quality, and if Newt is a potential real-world Victor-Frankenstein-equivalent well, then he is also, certainly, the poster child for the social, professional, psychological, and neural costs of metaphorical poor penmanship.

The hivemind. The *hivemind*. Is it still in there? In here? With him, where he is? Colocalized and integrated? A set of scrambled circuits? It doesn't respond to its name when he calls it like a dork summoning a demon, it doesn't answer to the name

that he's *given* it, the name that his brain *tacked straight onto it* as the merging was happening. He is pretty sure his last conscious thought had been something like 'oh crap, a *hive* mind?' before he'd lost track of everything he was in the sprawl of foreign science and foreign thoughts and *aggressive, entitled, anger* at the constraint, the *perpetual constraint*, that limited resources put on a species such as his, such as *theirs*, such as *their species*, *Newt*, *not* yours. Never *yours*. It had been almost impossible to retain any sense of purpose in that violent, violet, infinite mental *abyss*; the only thing he'd been able to hang onto was the idea of *science*, and so he'd gotten *something*, but *they'd* gotten things straight back from *him*. He'd been surprising to them, apparently hitching a cognitive ride on a dead fragment of tissue was not all that common in the anteverse these days, or ever, and they had been *interested* in the tiny human and the *pressure* of their interest would have torn his mind apart, it *had been happening* until it hadn't and he'd been vaguely aware of Hermann yelling at him close and far away, fixing his head in place because Newt couldn't do it himself, unfortunately, couldn't do much of anything for the span of about fifteen seconds, and *that* had been concerning, but then everything snapped into an unscrambled state and he'd opened his eyes and realized his mouth was full of blood because his nose was bleeding and his head was being tipped the wrong way, so he'd coughed and some of the blood that had been in his mouth had ended up on his shirt and *that* had freaked the *crap* out of Hermann in a manner that Newt had found sort of vaguely satisfying, which is really the only way that you can find something satisfying while simultaneously trying to determine if you're actively dying, but he'd found it satisfying because, afterall, *he had been right*. That had been his first *real* thought after the requisite 'why am I bleeding,' 'did someone stab my eye with a sharp laboratory implement?' 'ow,' and the fast becoming typical, 'I'm on the floor right now?' He finds Hermann's extremely obvious horror *less* satisfying, now, in retrospect, since he knows that freaking the guy out so badly had led directly to Hermann getting in on the kaiju-hivemind-spy-squad thing they had going, but he isn't going to complain *that* much about the outcome because he is pretty sure that if he'd drifted again, alone, he would have died, turned evil, or snapped immediately into insanity in the embarrassingly stereotypical way that fictional scientists behave in Spider Man movies, the absolute basement of scientific literacy if one doesn't consider the *real* weird ones, despite Peter Parker's ostensible interest in quantum mechanics.

Yeah right.

Like Peter Parker would realistically give a crap about quantum mechanics.

Get out of here.

Just because you say you like quantum mechanics doesn't mean you get to be absolved if you vilify the search for knowledge in the narrative themes of your fictional universe.

Ugh, Newt's not one to talk there, except for how he's not fictional.

This is confusing.

Hey, Dr. Octavius, let's have lunch some time.

Why are ze crazy ones so often being *German*?

It doesn't say good things about Newt's odds.

Speaking of Germans, and ones other than him, he hopes *Hermann* hasn't been infected by the kaiju anteverse or screwed up too much by Newt's own brain. Much as he enjoys the prospect of springing musical subgenre rankings on Hermann, literally every day, for as long as they both shall live, he would be more than a little bit sad if Hermann swapped his sherry for tequila and started acquiring tattoos.

He doesn't think that's going to happen though.

Ugh the tattoos.

Ugh Otachi.

Baby otachi.

He's got to put them on there, it's hypocritical if he doesn't. And by 'on there' he means 'on his skin'; *that* was a weird verbal substitution and is kind of an indicator of either how messed up he is at the moment, or the extremely mixed feelings he has regarding his own tattoo hobby. He wishes he could memorialize the Otachi family in that 'we honor your sacrifice' type of way, or even in that way that pilots used to paint bars on the side of their planes, except in Newt's case he never *killed* any kaiju, he just avoided being eaten by them.

*Here are all the things that didn't eat me, emblazoned on my skin, he thinks. I salute your efforts, predators, but I live to crawl away screaming another day, so suck it, giant, alien, cloned war machines.*

Whatever, man, he's pretty sure that everyone who meets a kaiju outside the confines of a Jaeger does some amount of screaming.

*It's dark but even so, he can see the cracking of the ceiling, feel the dust on his face and he needs to—*

Nope.

No, please.

No flashbacks right now.

*Relax, brain, he thinks. Remember that deal we made? The deal about not freaking out because you are maybe a little bit occasionally understandably slightly confused about the false equivalencies of being trapped in a magnet that's imaging you versus trapped in a bunker by a kaiju trying to eat you. It's okay brain, it's not your fault, you are just doing your thing, your thing you have been evolved to do, which is to teach me a lesson about my own stupidity by reminding me forcefully and with a lot of integrated, strong reproductions of sensory input that my behavior over the past day makes me less likely to stay alive and reproduce. I get it. I respect that. We are on the same page. The survival page. The survival outside a medical facility page. You wouldn't like that, brain, you would not like that at all, and if you flip out and start screaming at any point that anyone can hear you, that's going to be what happens to you. Because that med tech isn't cool and doesn't get it. So use some of your other skill sets, consider future outcomes using that suave prefrontal cortex you've got on you, and do not do this to me.*

He can lie here and will himself straight into immobility for ninety minutes, not moving his eyes, not flinching at all; this is not even hard for him.

Hermann is probably back in his hermetically sealed box of a room typing a terrible report, but there's some small chance that maybe he's thinking he should harass the med tech into letting him read a very important article to his colleague while the guy has an MRI because science waits for no man. Or no lady. And everyone will agree that this is very true, now and for the rest of time.

But Newt *does* have important problems to consider, the foremost of which is this: *if* he were to be influenced, subtly or not subtly, by the kaiju hivemind, how might such an influence manifest? In order to predict this, one should look at the goals of the kaiju, and hi, those aren't exactly understated. Destroy dominant species, harvest resources, and build a stronger civilization upon the burnt out husks of the weak. He wishes that social Darwinism would just *get out of his life* but it keeps showing up. Anyway, so if he were the kaiju, and he had access to a lethally stupid little genius, either one time, or sort of surreptitiously all the time across dimensions, how would he use his influence to get the guy to re-open the breach?

Maybe you get the guy to clone a kaiju, a thing that he *already* wanted to do. Maybe that triggers their ability to reconnect. Maybe that deepens whatever influence they had or still have.

So, he really needs to *not* do that.

No kaiju cloning, Hermann is right.

For reals, yo.

*It's dark but even so, he can see the cracking of the ceiling, feel the dust on his face and he needs to find his glasses—*

No.

He needs to stop that. Stop it.

*Terrible job, brain, he thinks, you are doing probably the worst job ever. Did we not discuss this?*

He can kind of feel a building panic because he would *really* like to *get out* of this tube but he *can't* and it's *so loud* and also *so quiet* at the same time, and he can feel this urge to just breathe in and then to sort of *start screaming* but he's not going to do that, that would be poorly advised and that would also *ruin everything*. Literally all he has to do is nothing. How hard is that? It's not that hard. He's doing nothing like a champ.

He takes a breath without moving his head or his eyes and then he lets it out and he does not scream.

And then he does it again.

And then he does it another time without screaming.

*You are killing it, brain. Good job. You could turn pro with that level of self-control.*

He's not even sure what that means.

Apart from getting him to clone a kaiju, or just setting up shop in a secret corner of his brain that's now cross-dimensional, he doesn't see what his anteverse frenemies are going to actually or theoretically do to him. He should probably be more concerned about the PPDC if he's thinking about sucky yet statistically significant sequelae, but it's hard to compare hypothetical bureaucratic cruelties to aliens red in tooth and claw that literally tried to eat him yesterday. Maybe today? What *time* is it, anyway? Whatever. He's not sure that cross-dimensional cognitive influence is remotely plausible. He should consult Hermann on that one, but, eh, immunologists would have told you that transplantation between genetically non-identical individuals would never work, back in the day, but some jackass said, 'suck it, rational types,' and did a transplant anyway like a baller iconoclast and it worked, kind of, after a while, after a fashion, with some tweaking. The point is: can he *rule out* some alien influence on his thoughts? Sadly, epically tragically, alas, *no he can't*. Herman can't either. Not with models. Not with chalk. And so Newt just needs to do his best to stay a good person and make sure no

one else comes to the same conclusion *he* has come to and locks him up and attaches him to a perpetual EEG for the rest of his natural life and/or tries to replicate his experimental technique *using him*. Because then he could definitely see himself going evil and he probably, after stewing long enough in his own concentrated, incarcerated rage, wouldn't even feel that badly about it.

He really hopes that Hermann is not going to go the Frankenstein route *either*. This seems less likely than Newt going down that road, but alas, it, also, cannot be ruled out. If, in ten years, he and Hermann are on a boat, re-opening a dimensional rift in the Pacific Ocean because they've been slowly corrupted by alien knowledge, that is going to be *so frustrating* from a karmic sense, and also just so sad.

That's not going to happen though.

Right?

Right.

*Go back to Geneva, Victor, you were so happy there. Nice doctors don't spend all their time in graveyards.*

Hermann is too on top of his game for destruction of his civilization. Newt is on top of his game, but in a different way, in the kind of way where he reflects about his life and his choices at intervals so wide he finds himself saying things like, 'six Ph.D.s seems a bit much,' or, 'hey I can regenerate tissue in a petri dish now,' or 'how did I start working for the military,' or, 'my choices have led to my imminent death.' That kind of thing. Hermann's a lot more of the analyze-as-you-go kind of guy, the ask-yourself-why-you-think-electrocution-is-a-good-choice-for-you kind of guy, the if-this-doesn't-work-the-consequences-are-unacceptable kind of guy. In short the kind of guy who probably *won't* accidentally annihilate the world.

Maybe they should stick together.

It's going to make the neurologist preferences hard to work out, since Hypothetical Phillip and Hypothetical Rain do not live in geographically contiguous regions, but honestly that's the least of Newt's problems, because Hermann has always been pretty up front about Newt annoying the crap out of him most of the time, so Newt's not really sure how this life-partners proposal is going to go.

Maybe it will go like: 'Hey, so could you do me a favor and make sure I don't destroy the world? Not that I'm worried.'

Maybe it will be: 'Let's go the academic route and apply for grant funding together.'



Or possibly he will say: 'I need a roommate, man, because—yeah, I got nothing.'

Alternatively he could try: 'It's your professional duty to make sure I'm not in neural continuity with the kaiju anteverse, just as it's mine to make sure *you're* not.'

Worst-case scenario, there's a good chance that: 'Please don't leave me,' would do the trick.

Oh boy.

Whatever he ends up saying is going to be really awkward if his list of options is anything to go by.

*It's dark but even so, he can see the cracking of the ceiling, feel the dust on his face and the dirt beneath his hands, he needs to find his glasses this is so cliché he will be so annoyed if he dies without at least seeing what's seating him; after all the work he's done that seems the least that he deserves. He finds them and the ceiling cracks apart—*

Newt manages to catch and abort the screaming that's threatening to start, manages to keep aborting it, iteratively, over and over again, keeping his face still, keeping his eyes shut, pressing his fingers into fists and his fists into his lateral thighs.

*Brain*, he thinks. *Please stop. Please.*

And it does.

He's fine.

This is totally understandable and this is fine.

Probably it's only something like seventy minutes now until he's done.

He can do seventy minutes.

No problem.

No problem at all.

It's just a magnet.

He's in a magnet, that's all, a crappy, closed, three-Tesla magnet, and he can get out any time he wants.

But he does not *want* to get out *now*, he wants to get this *over with* so that everything will *work out*.

So that when he falls asleep tonight he can spend *one day*, one *single* day, believing he can just be *done* and stew in thwarted narcissism on the beach and nothing bad will happen and *They* will leave his brain *alone*.

It's *his* brain.

And he *likes* it.

As it *is*.

Or was.

He and his brain can do this.

They are a team.

His brain possibly feels a little angry at him right now, considering how terrified it's been for something like twenty-four hours straight, but that's fine. Newt gets it. He does. He will let it have *whole days* of terror. Starting tomorrow. Whole days of punishing him before he distracts it with something super interesting, or a new goal, or a mind altering substance, or long term cognitive behavioral therapy, or whatever Hypothetical Rain suggests, maybe some kind of intense yoga routine on the beach. Tomorrow he will say, 'fine brain, do your worst. Integrate the crap out of the mess that's in there. Integrate it through flashbacks, through dreams, through panic attacks, through discussion sober and drunken with other people who have done or suffered similar things, integrate it through listening to music, integrate it in good ways and bad ways, in a mash-up of every coping mechanism known to man.'

That is what he will say tomorrow.

Nope, actually, that's what he's going to start saying in seventy minutes, because tomorrow is probably too far away.

*Just please, he thinks, please, please, for the love of all that is good and science-y, start in seventy minutes. Start with burning your clothes and taking a disturbingly long shower and getting drunk. Start with an ungodly streak of making Hermann miserable as you drag him to a dangerously out of control party populated by military personnel and random, elated civilians and then tell him he has to help you build an open MRI immediately. Start any time and with any thing you want, brain.*

*Except now.*

*Do not start now.*

*Do not start now, with a screaming fit in a confined space.*

*Not now.*

No problem.

No problem at all.

He's got this.

Seventy minutes to go.

## Chapter Eight

Hermann sits in surreal solitude, using a computer he should never have appropriated, typing a report that he is planning to directly consign to bureaucratic obscurity, and cross referencing it with the atrocious, vague, and minimally coherent mess that Newton assembled during Hermann's ninety minute neural imaging session.

*Using a biological interface, Dr. Gottlieb and I were able to extract information from the brain of an immature kaiju clone. We then determined the specific requirements for the passage of matter through a kaiju-designed trans-dimensional conduit. We relayed the specifics of what we had discovered with maximum speed to the command hierarchy at the Hong Kong Shatterdome. This resulted in—*

Hermann looks away, with a brief exhalation. He removes his glasses, pressing gingerly against his throbbing eye.

If Newton thinks that no one will question *that* particular pile of excremental inexactitude, the man is sorely mistaken. A 'biological interface'? Could anyone read such a ludicrous black box of a term and not wonder, not *guess*, what he means by it? Could the man *be* more provocatively cryptic?

That's a terrible question.

Yes. He certainly could.

Hermann can see *no way* to achieve what Newton wants—a decoupling of themselves from what they've done—but he can *feel* the desire, strong and contrapuntal and very nearly his own.

But not quite.

He checks his email, and an unread message from Stacker Pentecost traps him in a doubled, synchronized memory five years old, of Newton twisting in his chair, exhausting and exhausted, the second axle of a shrinking, double-cored science team to say, *letters from the dead—the crap slap in the face that civilians take in wartime. The intervals between letter writing and letter receiving are shorter now than they used to be, but that's about all you can say. Someone should build us a widow's walk.* Hermann can't remember what he said in reply, but Newton does, and so his doubled perspective narrows into one that's not his own as he watches himself snap, *consider*

*constructing one atop the Wall.* Newton looks away, back at his screen, scrubbing his eyes. *You wish,* he replies, *I'm staying.*

The only thing that Hermann is certain of is that he will never be certain again.

He opens the email from Marshal Pentecost. It is short, the time stamp indicating that it was sent only a few hours before the Jaeger teams were deployed.

*Dr. Gottlieb,*

*I tried to locate you before deployment, but heard you were still assisting Geiszler. Hopefully he's still alive. The pair of you are on a priority PPDC transport list, so if breach closure is unsuccessful, get the hell out of Hong Kong. I'd suggest Moscow if you can make it there—they made a proposal three years ago to weaponize drift technology and given what Geiszler just did, I'd say that's probably the best bet we'll have left.*

*If we are successful in closing the breach, keep an eye on Geiszler, if you can stand it. Once the breach is shut, he's going to be the only source left for intel on what's beyond it.*

*Good*

*luck,*

*SP*

Hermann feels a brief and confusing urge to stand, slide his fingers under the desk at which he's sitting, and upend the thing—an impulse that *certainly* comes from some unfortunately Geiszlerian residue in his thoughts.

He contents himself with sitting motionless, rather than engaging in pointless property destruction.

It is less satisfying.

But he needs this computer to *function*, and that will be difficult for it if it's in pieces on the floor.

Disgusted, he eyes his cane, leaning with irritating innocuousness against the desk. He gives it a sharp shove, and it clatters to the floor.

That *Pentecost* had subtly articulated the same essential idea that *Newton* had poorly explained less than two hours previous casts the issue in a somewhat different light.

Newton has made a moderately successful career out of bucking authority in all its forms, but that particular proclivity of his does not mean that he is not correct to try and minimize the depth of his connection to the kaiju anteverse.

*Their connection.*

Hermann is still not certain he believes that there is any real threat to their autonomy, agency, career prospects, or persons, not from the PPDC, an organization they materially aided, not from any major world power—

Not from *any*?

Not from kaiju worshippers?

Not from parties like the late Hannibal Chau, who have made a business of peddling materials from the anteverse?

Fine.

He's convinced there *may* be *some* element of material threat.

Being convinced, he's certain that it's not sufficient to leave out key details and replace the word "drift" with "biological interface." What they write in their reports matters very little, because no amount of precise vagueness in word choice will shield either of them from what might await. In order to improve their position, they're going to have to leave governmental employ. As soon as possible. They're going to have to affiliate, as rapidly as it can be managed, with a private organization with the monetary and legal resources to provide at least a modicum of protection.

As far as he's concerned, that leaves them only two material options. Academia or industry.

And *he* is *not* going to *industry*.

Unless he has no other choice.

He's unwilling to leave Newton entirely to his own devices, for several reasons, not the least of which is that the man is possibly susceptible to alien influence and likely to make *at least* one serious attempt at cloning a kaiju if he's not directly opposed, every day, multiple times, by a rational colleague. Furthermore, Newton is thoughtless enough to accept a proposal from outside parties regarding self-experimentation, presuming such a proposal was framed correctly.

Again, Hannibal Chau comes to mind. Dead though he may be, the man had not existed in isolation.

Such a thing would be a *disaster*, because, despite Newton's irritating perspicacity, there are certain areas in which he will, doubtless, leave himself *wide open* to external threats.

Presuming those threats exist.

Hermann sighs.

He's not certain how gracefully Newton is going to take his insistence that they continue their working relationship, now that the world is not in immediate danger of ending. In the past, the man has been quite articulate regarding Hermann's role as the chief bane of his professional existence.

Hermann's *also* not certain that *either* of them is in any kind of shape to sit through job interviews or discuss the state of their decade's-worth of mostly practical rather than conceptual scientific advancements, given *his* inclination to tip over tables and *Newton's* perplexing propensity for *weeping over rationalism*.

He returns to his report and manages to write a non-explicit but accurate account of the wretched desperation that characterized his previous twenty-four hours with enough detail to satisfy a moderately informed reader.

Drifting with dead kaiju.

*Honestly.*

He does not mention the word 'drift' in his report, not because he thinks it will deceive anyone, but solely because it will make Newton significantly more reasonable.

Once he is finished, he looks at the clock and realizes that Newton has been in the scanner for nearly two hours.

He gives the clock a disapproving look.

After retrieving his cane from the floor, he proceeds in the direction of the back room. The medical technician is watching an assembling image of his colleague's brain. It appears to be nearly complete.

"What is taking so long?" he asks.

The technician jerks, startled, then spins to face him. "We had a few re-starts," he says. "Dr. Geiszler was having some difficulty holding still?"

Hermann feels an acute spike of sympathy, and finds himself literally unable to picture Newton tolerating more than three minutes of forced immobility.

"How much more time is required?" Hermann asks.

"Five minutes?" the technician says, as though uncertain.

How aggravating.

"You don't have an exact number?" Hermann asks.

"Four minutes and twenty-three seconds," the technician replies.

"Thank you," Hermann says.

"Your scans came back clear, Dr. Gottlieb," the technician adds.

"Naturally," Hermann says, and leaves the room.

He stands next to the drapeable and locker-lined recess in the wall, where Newton's clothes have been discarded in a slovenly heap crowned by his glasses. Considering the state of his outfit, this is perhaps no more than it deserves.

Hermann hopes that Newton is not tolerating this MRI because he's *comatose* and the medical technician hasn't bothered to *check*.

The odds of such an eventuality are not zero.

He drums his fingers over the handle of his cane.

He will wait five minutes. If, at the end of that interval, Newton has not emerged, he will put a stop to this.

Hermann spends the next five minutes in increasing mental agitation until, *finally*, the door to the room opens and Newton emerges, looking—if possible—even *worse* than before. He is drenched in sweat, and shaking.

"Hey man," Newton says, leaning against the door, his voice ragged. "I thought maybe you'd read my mind and then come read me physics."

"What?" Hermann says, certain Newton's sentence had made *no sense*, and alarmed enough that he steps forward to take the other man's elbow.

"But that would have been weird," Newton says, as though finishing a coherent thought. "Let's get out of here."

Hermann has no plans to allow Newton to leave the medical bay in the absence of clearance from an offsite radiologist. For all he knows, the man is *bleeding into his brain*.

"Absolutely not," he begins.

"Hermann," Newton says through clenched teeth, his eyes alarmingly wide, appallingly mismatched in white and red, both hands landing on Hermann's shoulders and digging into his sweater. "You *must* get me *out* of here, dude, because I *cannot take this*."

This is atypically succinct for Newton.

Furthermore, he's somewhat taken aback by the intensity with which the request is delivered.

So, perhaps, he's willing to compromise.

"Why don't you get dressed," Hermann suggests.



"Nope," Newton says, "I'm incinerating my clothes. Stop hedging."

This seems extreme. On two fronts.

"Commendable," Hermann replies. "Even so, you're still in need of your glasses, wallet, phone, whatever ridiculous items you keep in your pockets, and your shoes. I'm certain I have no idea what you mean by 'hedging,' I never 'hedge'. Mathematicians do not hedge."

"Okay," Newton says. "Good point. I *was* not and *am* not going to incinerate my phone. I planned that, believe or not. Or rather, I planned to *not* do it. And, liar, you hedge all the time. This *is* hedging; you're doing it now. Hedging is I say I want to do A, and *you* say, not unless B and C. And I say no. Just A. A is happening. And you say, 'but Newton you have no shoes,' and I say look man, thing A is the *most important thing*, and so we're just going to *do it*, and not dick around trying to, like, map the quantum foam or *find shoes*, okay? I'm *freaking out* and *I just want some tequila*, you would *too*, you probably *already do*, except for all the thought-hedging you've been using to obscure your heterochthonous tequila urges. I *deserve* some tequila, I'm pretty sure. Frankly? I *also feel* insultingly *underappreciated* despite the fact that you ruined your perfect brain to save my life, maybe, hopefully not, and I'd really just like you to say, 'Newton, you were *so right*, about everything the *entire time*, and *lapologize* for being a *prick* and saying, and I *quote*, 'only an idiot would try patch clamping his way to the anteverse'—"

"Fine," Hermann shouts directly in his face, if only to prevent whatever is coming at the end of Newton's increasingly overwrought monologue.

He succeeds in startling Newton into temporary silence.

"Fine," he says more sedately. "*I will retrieve your shoes, since you clearly have some kind of confusing, poorly articulated objection to retrieving them yourself.*"

Newton makes a sound like Hermann is strangling him.

Hermann inverts his cane, uses the handle to snag Newton's glasses, and passes them over to the other man, who snaps them out of his hand in temporarily silent rage.

Nothing about this current state of affairs bodes well for Hermann's plans to convince Newton to join him in academia.

"Newton," he says, as the other man steps around him, apparently trying to make or obviate a point by retrieving his *own* shoes. "You were right," he continues, with all the stiffly formal apology he can muster without choking.

Newton stops mid-shoe retrieval and stares at him, frozen.

Hermann stares back at him impassively.

"Oh god," Newton says, slowly collapsing against a blue-lockered wall, one hand over his chest. "That—is so. *Deeply. Viscerally. Satisfying.* I can't even tell you, and you'll never know because I'll probably never need to say it back to you. I can die now. I think I *am* going to die now. I have no regrets. Zero." He shuts his eyes.

Hermann looks at him for a moment, unimpressed, and then swats the other man's leg gently with his cane.

Newton cracks his good eye and looks up at Hermann skeptically.

"Furthermore," Hermann says dryly, "while I stand by my statement that 'only an idiot would try patch clamping his way to the anteverse,' I am glad that you are just such an idiot."

"So, yeah, that's *less* satisfying," Newton says, reclosing his eye.

"Will you *get up*?" Hermann snaps.

"I don't think I can," Newton says.

"Put on your shoes," Hermann replies, "while I inform the medical technician that we are leaving."

"You're literally the best, man," Newton says. "In return, I will make an effort to *not* drop dead on you in the next several hours. Out of *courtesy. And respect.*"

"I would settle for finding you shod when I return," Hermann says.

"Shod?" Newton echoes. "*Shod?* Seriously? You want to find me *shod?*"

"Heterochthonous?" Hermann counters, lifting an eyebrow, despite the pain in his head.

"That was for *you*, man."

"And I appreciate the sentiment," Hermann replies crisply, before turning to find the medical technician.

It takes him very little time and minimal glaring to convince the young man that there are *many* other individuals *inmuch* greater need of medical attention than two civilian scientists, and they are quite content to wait, responsibly resting in their quarters for the complete and annotated results of the medical testing they just initiated out of nothing other than a sense of professional responsibility.

He returns to find Newton leaning against the wall of blue lockers, standing, wearing his shoes and his glasses, with the rest of his belongings crumpled beneath one arm.

Hermann inclines his head.

"We need to find a fire," Newton says.

"I'm sure that there is an entire array of burning buildings in the greater Hong Kong area," Hermann replies, jerking his head in the direction of the door. "However, that will have to wait."

"I have a whole *schedule*," Newton says, as they leave the medical bay. "A to-do list. Number one is find a fire."

"To incinerate your clothes," Hermann says. "Yes I know."

"Look, can we please make an effort *not* to do the thing?" Newton says, weaving slightly as he walks.

Hermann reaches over to steady him. "Newton, do you think I have *any* idea to what you might be referring? Because I do not."

"This thing. I will demonstrate. The single most important feature arguing against a spontaneous reopening of the breach is—"

"Subatomic space-time turbulence," Hermann says.

"Yes," Newton says, in overt exasperation. "*That* is the thing. The thing you just did. Interrupting *my* totally normal sentence that I was just about to end, *by myself*, with your weird, evil-twin, thought parity."

"*You* aren't a *mathematician* with a mid-career interest in theoretical and applied quantum mechanics."

"So?" Newton says. "That was *my* sentence, that *I* was going to end."

"You interrupt me *all the time*," Hermann replies.

"Yeah, with *opposing* opinions," Newton says. "Ideally. I just don't think I can handle being science twins with you, man. I can handle the Bach, I can handle the Descartes, oh my *god*, can I *ever*."

"Please don't cry," Hermann says dryly. "Again."

"*If* I ever cried over Descartes, and I'm not saying I *did*, it would, for sure, be *your* fault, and if it reflects weirdly on anyone it reflects weirdly on *you* so maybe we just want to forget about what happened regarding my mental introduction to Herr Cogito Ergo Sum, am I right? I'm legit on board with the practical doubling of my fields of expertise, though I kind of wish that *one of us* knew Kung Fu, because come on. I can live with the weird thing you've got going for group theory *and* for Évariste Galois, even though it's borderline inappropriate and kind of confusingly conflated with *me* for reasons that

I'm not even going to explore because I know that you're not going to mention or ideally ever think about that thing that happened when I was eighteen in Prague—

"I suggest you redirect your current conversational tangent," Hermann snaps. "But for the sake of accuracy, I *do not* equate *you* with *Galois*."

"Yeah, okay. Sure you don't, man. Just like I don't weep over rationalists sometimes when I'm really tired. Anyway, I feel kind of weirdly unsettled about comparative infinities right now, and I could have done without that particularly needless source of unruhe in my life. Also, have you noticed that *you're* invariably—"

"The thought *completer*," Hermann says, with an entirely justified streak of pique.

"I'm going to steal your cane," Newton snaps, one hand coming to his temple. "*Purely* out of *spite*. Did you know that's thing number fourteen on my to-do list? Why are *you* the thought completer?"

"Because *you* do more than your fair share of thought *initiating* and *I* am in favor of *efficiency*," Hermann replies. "Furthermore, I do not advise incorporating *my* preferences into *your* personality."

"I'm not," Newton says. "I'm just *enjoying* your preferences *as if* they were mine. There's a difference."

"Is there?" Hermann asks.

"There's a whole ocean of metaphysics between enjoyment and incorporation. You like that I like Descartes," Newton says. "You don't like that I also might enjoy the idea of invading planets and leaving them burned out shells of fully utilized resources."

"Do you?" Hermann asks, without looking at him. "Enjoy the idea of merciless colonialism?"

"No. A little bit? No."

Hermann says nothing.

"You're already starting the paperwork to write me off as evil," Newton says.

"Entirely inaccurate," Hermann snaps, punctuating the words with a poorly considered hard shake of Newton's elbow that his colleague barely manages to weather without falling over.

"You are *grabby* today, god," Newton says, aggravated, recovering his footing with poor grace and Hermann's assistance. "Can you *not*? Just because you vacationed in my brain does not mean you get to *manhandle* me when you think I'm being stupid. Keep it up. Find out what happens. I was *not kidding* about stealing your cane."

"First," Hermann continues, ignoring Newton's entirely empty threats, "there are no rational grounds to write you off as 'evil,' without writing off *myself* as well. Second, you are far, *far* more likely go mad than to turn slowly malevolent."

"Wait, is that supposed to be *comforting*, because—"

"Third," Hermann continues, "I doubt 'evil,' could ever be defined in a meaningful manner."

"You know it when you see it," Newton says. "Much like pornography."

"Useless," Hermann replies. "And in poor taste."

"Me, my observation, or pornography?" Newton asks.

"Fourth," Hermann says, resolutely avoiding the pornography tangent, "while I am certain that we will, unfortunately, be forced to grapple with the cognitive repercussions of our neurological experimentation for the rest of our potentially shortened natural lives, I am convinced that with constant, vigilant, rational monitoring of our thoughts and actions we should be able to avoid doing something untoward."

"Yeah," Newton says, unmistakably hopeless. "Rational thought monitoring. Descartes-style. Sounds easy and fun."

Hermann stops in front of the door to his quarters, keys in his code, and swings the blastedly heavy thing open.

"This is not a fire," Newton points out, quite correctly.

"I never promised you a fire. Would you like to come in?" Hermann asks.

"Um," Newton says, "last time you invited me into your room was the Firecracker Sake Incident, during which I said some things I came to deeply regret about Erwin Schrödinger, you threw up in your sink, and we tried to discover, from first principles, a biological equivalent of uncertainty relations, and then gave up and drunkenly critiqued *A New Kind of Science*."

"Yes," Hermann says dryly. "I remember. In fact, I now remember in disconcerting duplication."

"Seriously though," Newton says, listing alarmingly until he steadies himself on Hermann's doorframe, "what kind of guy makes up a thought experiment about a *cat* like that?"

"It is a *thought experiment*, Newton. Not. Real."

"I know but when I do thought experiments I try to make them *nice*."

"That is blatantly untrue," Hermann says. "That is, in fact, extremely false."

"Why can't, like, there be *cat food* involved instead of a flask of *poison*. Like instead of alive or dead it's hungry or fed?"

"Newton," Hermann says, "I believe we have already, on another occasion, taken this particular perseveration of yours as far as it is capable of being taken. Now are you coming in, or not?"

"Just so long as you're *sure* you want to pre-game for the Apocalypse Cancellation Party with drunken science," Newton says, already leaning against Hermann's doorframe. "Because if not? I *will* find a fire. And then a neurologist."

"Quite sure," Hermann says, and pulls him inside.

## Chapter Nine

Newt is lying on Hermann's bed.

This is not really what he'd *had in mind* at any point before it had come to pass, but considering his day, he's okay with it, mostly because tensing himself into the tetanic stillness required for detailed neuroimaging used up what little remained of any intramuscular glycogen reserves he might have and so, nope, he's not going to be able to get up, and, if he *does*, by some miracle or statistical improbability, claw his way over *that* particular activation energy barrier, he wants to have a definite, achievable *goal* in mind, like locating a five-Tesla magnet, hypothetically, or perhaps going to an awesome party, or obtaining an analgesic of some kind for his eye and head and probably pretty shortly for his whole body because today has been a six-sigma day when it comes to exertion. It's hard to make time for Racquetball when cloned, alien, war machines are laying waste to your civilization so while it's true that he's probably been in better shape in his life, evolution is about trade offs, man, so sure, he's no Raleigh Becket, but he doesn't see Captain Jawline saving the day through science—more like saving the day through fortitude and fighting skills, fine, Becket's cool, whatever—but the *point* he was making was that Newt considers Dr. Newton Geiszler, of the sick tats in green and the six advanced degrees, to have struck a pretty tight, awesome, and frankly commendable balance between being intelligent enough to biohack his way into an alternate dimension and physically fit enough to avoid a giant killing machine specifically targeting him for *death*, though it was possible it had wanted to do *something else*; he was still *not clear* on what that blue-tentacled business had been, was that like—a sommelier-styled assessment of an interesting human varietal before consumption or did, *maybe*, Otachi have something else in mind, like a drift part deux in which Newt climbed on its back—or maybe *her* back, though the whole oh-look-a-baby-kaiju phenomenon was parthenogenetic for sure, there was no indication that kaiju reproduced sexually, he had looked into this, but gender issues aside—maybe Newt would have climbed on its back and then sort of presided over an informed and efficient single-kaiju-mediated-destruction-of-his-own-civilization, which, while *bad* on a lot of levels, would have been visually striking, because there is no doubt in his mind that in a Geiszler-kaiju combo versus even *multiple* Jaegers, he's pretty sure who's going to win, just, like, hypothetically as a *thought experiment*, not a real thing because yikes, *he doesn't want that*, and he doesn't even just not want it on paper he legit does not want it in his *soul*. Hermann is right about his thought

experiments though, god, he just had one where he destroyed his planet, and that is worse than a cat with a flask, so maybe he should cut Schrödinger some slack.

"Newton," Hermann snaps, standing over him, as academically disheveled as the man ever gets.

Newt twitches.

God, how does a guy in a poorly-fitting sweater make himself so freaking alarming?

"Are you *listening* to me? At *all*?" Hermann asks, frowning, eyebrows pushed together.

"Yeah," Newt says. "Of *course* I'm listening to you. If anyone is being inattentive, it is, for sure, *you*. As I keep telling you, I'm *not brain damaged*. You seem to be not grasping that. Are *you* brain damaged? Go search for some Riemann zeros, just to make sure you're still fully functional, man."

There is, probably, in Newt's entire life, going to be *no more consistent source of intellectual pleasure* than the ability he now has to tell Hermann to screw off in abstruse arithmetical argot. He wishes he could bottle this feeling it and save it for later when he's losing an argument about the value of abstraction or when Hermann tells him he's going back to mathematics, have a nice life, don't clone a kaiju.

Hermann glares at Newt, pulls the chair away from his desk, positions it a few feet from the bed, sits down in it, crosses his legs, rests his cane against the adjacent desk, and commences *staring at Newt*.

"No," Newt says. "*No*. What is *this*? Bedside-vigil pregaming? Because that's *not* an accepted form of pregaming. You *definitely* promised me drunk science, or, if not *promised* me, you let me tacitly understand it was going to happen and then shoved me onto your bed under false pretenses. I object to every aspect of what's happening here."

"Then get up and leave," Hermann replies, in prototypical xeric victory.

"I *will*," Newt says pointedly. "In a *while*. When I *feel* like it. When I judge, using my life experience and my knowledge of complexity theory, that the awesomeness of the party out there has reached its logarithmic growth stage. Furthermore, you have committed a tactical error in your campaign to achieve perpetual, steady-state boringness."

"And what might that be?" Hermann asks.

"Just a little item called Newt-has-your-memories-and-is-entitled-to-the-benefits-thereof," he says, as he twists, with significant effort and some unfortunate shaking, to



reach beneath Hermann's bed to pull out a half-empty bottle of sherry. "It is *so weird* that you *hide* this stuff. Who is going to *judge* you for *sherry*, dude? I mean, a) it's classy, and goes with the whole sweater-a-loved-one-with-questionable-taste-purchased-for-me-a-decade-ago look you've got going, b) it's not like either the Jaeger teams or the K-science division, back when it *was* a division before the funding cuts, were ever known for their dour alcoholic abstinence; in fact, it might be said that —*hey*."

Newt has been relieved of Hermann's sherry.

He *really* should have seen that one coming and/or processed what was happening *as* it was happening and taken steps to prevent this sherryless outcome.

"I find it *extremely irritating*," Hermann says, *opening* the bottle with an atypical flourish and a typical glare. Newt finds this turn of events *so staggering* that he almost misses the end of Hermann's sentence.

Or—nope, not 'almost'.

He actually *did* miss it, as it turns out.

That's okay, Hermann finds a *lot* of things irritating, and Newt can extrapolate from past experience.

"So we *are* drinking the sherry?" Newt asks.

"No," Hermann informs him. "*I* am drinking the sherry. You are *already* drunk on your own exhaustion and hubris. Furthermore, you have had a *seizure*, while I have *not*. Therefore, until you are *evaluated* by an *actual* physician, you will *not* be drinking *at all*, because if you have a second one there is no force on this planet that will prevent me from having you *immediately* assessed by someone in the medical division with an *actual* medical *degree*, at which point it will be too late to claim that you're not experiencing any aftereffects from the 'biologic interface' you constructed, and the likelihood of spending the rest of your career as an experimental subject increases substantially." Hermann punctuates his pronouncement by electing to drink sherry directly from the bottle.

Okay then.

Newt adjusts his glasses, as if that's going to help him sort anything out.

Nope, even with glasses correctly positioned, he's still looking at Hermann, in a state of alarming moderate-kemptness, looking back at him with one bloodshot eye, one normal eye, both sporting an expression that Newt is going to tag as 'vengeful anxiety.'

There had been a whole lot going on in the guy's monologue, including some identity confusion, a chunk of concern, a swath of disparagement regarding Newt's recapitulation skills, a dash of ideological dismissal of the idea of self-experimentation as a valid choice under extenuating circumstances, and a pile of ratiocination about comparative sherry rights.

Newt is a little too overwhelmed by the multiple conversational avenues to take *any* of them.

"Are you okay?" he asks, with maximum polite tact and minimal exhausted slurring.

"No, *Newton*," Hermann snaps. "I am fifty percent *you*, which is *intolerable*. Furthermore, *you* are fifty percent *mewith* no discernable problems and enough flawless integration of two sets of discordant memories to be able to locate my *sherry*, but evidently not enough to know that it's there because it should be stored in a in a cool, dark place to prevent *oxidation*. You *peasant*. Are you not a *chemist*, amongst other things? You realize it's *sembarrassing* to have so many degrees, don't you? It makes you look intellectually indecisive and dubiously employable."

Newt would sit up for emphasis, except, unfortunately, he doesn't have the resources for moving unless something is trying to eat him.

"First of all, I *am* a little bit indecisive, except for when I'm so so so right about things, which is most of the time. Second of all, tell me, Doctor Gottlieb, how easy do you think it is to get a post-doc position and apply for governmental funding at the age of fourteen? No one is giving the fourteen-year old whose *uncle* drives him to his research in progress job-talk the sweet two point three million dollar startup package, okay? Are you *jealous* of how awesomely I am adapting to being, mnemonically speaking, fifty percent *you*? Because you're not usually one for critiquing educational excesses," Newton says.

"No," Hermann replies, in a stiff way that translates to 'absolutely.' "I am in *no way* jealous. I *disapprove*, but that is *not* the same thing."

"Aw," Newt replies, trying to relax, trying to get this post-adrenaline reactive shaking to stop and *stay stopped* for the love of god. "Look, here's the thing. First of all, while it's true I'm not weirdly and needlessly insulted by a whole new set of enthusiasms that weren't previously mine—like cherries, undeciphered manuscripts, the historically suspect incident in which Euler supposedly smacked down Diderot with a brutal application of induced math-anxiety, Stuttgart and its sports cars, Bach's kickass, six-part *Ricercar* in *Das Musikalische Opfer*, that guy could *crush* a counterpoint—it's *also* true that there's maybe the minor possibility that in the future I'll be taking the *Crazy*

*Train* to the anteverse, while the *Toccata and Fugue in D minor* plays in my head or maybe over loudspeakers, and I'll think *that's* equally awesome, and the thing is, it will *not* be awesome, it will not be awesome*at all*, and that's the kind of thing that makes me better at this in the short term, but *you* much better in the long term, *infuriatingly better*, and so that's why I need for you to be my life partner."

Hermann doesn't bother answering that; he just takes another drink of sherry.

From the bottle.

Newt wishes *he* could do that right about now.

But he can regroup.

"What I *mean* is, could you do me a favor and make sure I don't destroy the world? Not that I'm worried. Like, I think we should probably just go the academic route and apply for grant funding together. Also I need a roommate, because—well, I mean, I *will* probably, housing is expensive, or not, depending on where one lives, possibly I can just—whatever. The point is, that I just think, given the events of the past twenty-four hours it's your professional duty to make sure I'm not in neural continuity with the kaiju anteverse, just as it's mine to make sure *you're* not."

Ugh.

This is the *worst*.

He should have waited until *tomorrow* to make his life partners proposal when he was not so *tired*, that was the plan—why is this even *happening* to him *now*? Whose idea was this? Because it wasn't *his*. His idea was to do it later, with *one* argument that he then supported with *examples* rather than all of them right in a row, one of which didn't even have *any* rationale; now he just looks weird and desperate, and his head feels odd and he is *anxious*. Why does he *do* this to himself?

*Brain, if you're going to crap out and die young, just—do it now. Right now would be extremely convenient for me.*

"Yes I know," Hermann says, looking confusingly relieved and also like he knows *more* than *just* where his professional responsibility lies, and of course, he *does*, he knows *all* of it and that makes Newt feel even weirder about the whole thing, because they don't *like* each other, nope, they are nemesises who have pitched verbal battles about things like *Kraftwerk*, the merits of reductionist approaches to the analysis of complex phenomena, determinism, the strenghts of theory versus empiricism, and which is better—chemically synthesized cheese spread or chemically synthesized imitation crab.

Nemesises.

Nemeses.

Mutual ones.

"Cool," he says weakly, sliding shaking hands beneath his glasses like the paragon of suavity he is.

"We'll need to leave Hong Kong," Hermann says, with the air of a guy who's thought about this a lot more completely than Newt, "and withdraw ourselves from the employ of the PPDC, as soon as you're able to travel."

"Able to travel?" Newt repeats, his hands still over his eyes, "what are you *talking* about? I'm able to travel right now."

"You most certainly are not," Hermann says. "No rational person would let you board a plane. Words cannot do justice to how *truly appalling* you look."

"Thanks man. But why are we *quitting*?" Newt says into his hands.

"We are not quitting," Hermann replies. "We have, in fact, *triumphed*, and it is now time to leave the PPDC and return to academic life, where we will not be contractually obligated to make ourselves available for attempts to gather intelligence regarding the kaiju anteverse."

Newt drags his hands away from his face, takes his glasses with them, tries to organize his hands and frames to get everything back in order and ends up somehow driving a knuckle into his bad eye, which, great, *closes*, so, reflexes intact, but, not-so-great, hurts with an excruciating, eye-watering intensity; can he just fall asleep and wake up three days from now? That would work out well for him. He looks over at Hermann to see the guy is halfway through his half bottle of sherry. There's pregaming and then there's just straight up gaming, which is the direction Hermann seems to be heading in. Newt is not going to judge though. He's going to lie here, neither pregaming nor gaming, and be unjudgmentally envious.

"Yeah," Newt says. "Okay. Boston it is."

"Boston? I don't think so," Hermann replies.

"Cambridge is, like, the academic capital of the world," Newt says, feeling brutal levels of cognitive dissonance as Hermann's preferences engage and his overtaxed brain starts trying to fight it out between Cambridge, *Massachusetts* and Cambridge, *freaking England*.

"If only I didn't know what you meant by 'Cambridge'," Hermann says, his teeth clenched.

The room moves and fails to move in nauseating duality, leaving him unfortunately unable to rule out the possibility of falling off Hermann's stationary bed.

This is not going to end well.

"Don't throw up," Newt says, "because if *you* do it, *I'm* going to do it. How does this not happen to *other people*? You don't see Captain Jawline throwing up in the cafeteria because Mako likes eating fermented soybeans. Or something. God. I don't think we're drift compatible."

"Is it too much to ask that you *stop talking*?" Hermann asks, through impressively clenched teeth.

"Think of Kierkegaard," Newt says. "Think of *many* excellent academic centers. Berlin, Paris, Tokyo, Vladivostok is up and coming in terms of biomedical engineering post all the kaiju samples that landed in their lap, crap, Dublin, San Francisco, think about cost versus benefit as a gestalt rather than trying to literally *rank*, dude, it's the ranking that's killer. Let's get a map and some darts. Bonn is nice." He trails off and manages to roll over so that if he throws up it's going to be on the *floor*, he's pretty sure he's talked himself mostly out of his cognitive dissonance but if Hermann throws up he's going to *also*, for sure, no matter his dissonance level, because it's like some kind of evolutionary thing—see evidence of a poisoned peer, commence vomiting. Certainly in terms of life-prolongation it's a good idea to take protective measures, except this time it's, like, fake, *psychological* poison, but try to tell that to his area postrema, just *try*.

"This is pretty much the worst," Newton says, opening his eyes, to *oh hey*, watch *blood* drip onto the floor.

Why does he *articulate* these kinds of karmic invitations? He needs to stop doing this.

*Duly noted, brain*, he thinks, *this is not the worst. It's literally never the worst until you're in the ninth circle of hell, being perpetually consumed by Lucifer, or, alternatively, stuck in a disembodied hive mind for eternity because you accidentally killed your physical body. Thank you, brain, for reminding me that this is called 'perspective' and it's now a thing that you have and that I have. We both have it. Why? Because we are a team. Don't sabotage your team, brain. It's not worth it.*

But more to the point and less to the Dantean hyperbole, apparently nearly throwing up is enough of a trauma to his friable capillary beds that his nose is bleeding again. He's not *sure*, but it seems like this could potentially be a long-term thing. And by

'thing' he means 'problem.' He wonders if he has a vasculature abnormality that predisposes him to this, or if he just really screwed himself with that first drift. He pulls out one of the handkerchiefs he carries for the guy who is definitely his nemesis, and not his friend with a dislike and maybe-real, maybe-not-real, 'allergy' to latex gloves and a pathological horror of touching totally innocuous things like atypically suspect door handles or the outside of specimen containers that Newt occasionally needs him to hold because hi, no lab techs, no lab techs *at all*, none for like three years, and he only has two hands, and the outside of those containers are *clean*, but whatever, he carries handkerchiefs and he's positive there's nothing weird about that; it's a mark of civilization. Like hashi. Like piano. Like the complex plane. Like a brutalist architectural phase. Like a single perfect flower in a single perfect vase. Whatever.

Ugh bleeding.

Ugh *moderate* bleeding.

No one is *yelling* though, that seems weird.

Newt looks over to see that Hermann is managing not to throw up by shutting his eyes and thinking. Probably he's contemplating something *super Zen*, like maybe Gabriel's Horn with the infinite surface area and the finite volume, that's cool, that's Zen, but unfortunately that means that when Hermann is *done* being Zen, or maybe once he's achieved an *approximation* of Zenness, Newt is going to ruin it for him by being actively bleeding when he opens his eyes.

There's not much he can do about that.

Hermann opens his eyes.

"There's no way this is serious," is all Newt manages to get out before the other man interrupts him by snapping his name like a pencil. Hermann is, at the apex of vexation, a pencil-snapper. Newt is a table-upender, but he has only given into that impulse twice in his life, both times it was awesome, but only one time was it for science. He just gets emotional when uninformed mathematicians-turned-theoretical-physicists talk crap about the fidelity of DNA polymerases *as if they know anything about mutation rates*, those things molecularly *proofread* okay; they are probably *the best* enzymes *ever*, so complicated, so willing to play well with others—

"*Newton*," Hermann says, again, a little more a word, a little less a fracturing of a wooden emblem of the civilized mind. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah," Newt says, managing to finish wiping all the blood off his face, probably, mostly, and then pinch his nose shut. "Look, there is literally no way that this is serious.

You don't bleed from your brain into your nose; that's physiologically not going to happen unless you've got one heck of a skull fracture, which I do *not* have, please see the eight hundred thousand examples of astronomically high mental functioning I have been providing you with *forhours* now. I just have some very irritated capillary beds and trying not to throw up is enough of a pressure trigger to knock those guys over into bleeding a little bit, probably. I don't know; I'm not a neurologist. Maybe neurologists wouldn't even know, because turns out that the nose is not the brain. Maybe let's go somewhere with a good neurology department that's a little bit counter-culture, what do you think?"

"Agreed," Hermann says, watching him like a hawk. A creeper hawk.

"Ugh," Newton says, pulling his handkerchief away from his face to see if he's still bleeding. It seems like maybe yes, so he puts it back. "So you want to do what? Math or theoretical physics?"

"Don't change the subject," Hermann says.

"I don't even know what the subject *was* if you don't think it's where we're going to go and tell them that they need to hire the most badass whatever-we-are in the history of interdisciplinary world saving."

"Are you still bleeding?"

"Um, I don't know, probably? It's been ten seconds; I doubt it's over yet. I think you should do quantum mechanics, mainly because it's more awesome, and also because I'm not sure that all your math friends have been following your career now that you're not directly working on zeta functions. I mean, life goes on, even when giant alien monsters are eating coastal cities. Those Fields Medals aren't going to win themselves. But you can get back into the whole thing slantwise because of the connection between the quantum energy levels of chaotic systems and Riemann zeros, dude, it's so perfect it suggests itself. To me. A biologist. Who could not find a Riemann zero if his life depended on it. Before yesterday. Because now I'd crush those zeros. But I'm not as *interested* as you are. Tell me I will not make an awesome life partner and/or roommate. Have you considered that if we don't turn evil we could do a lot of good things? Like, you know, for *science*?"

"First," Hermann says, "that was *already* my plan, so I will thank you *not* to describe it as 'slantwise,' and I will thank you *not* to take *credit* for proposing I avail myself of the connection between the Riemann hypothesis and quantum mechanics to further my professional career. I, in fact, conceived that plan more than five years ago, and I'm *certain* you pulled it directly out of my head, akin to the way you managed to

unerringly locate this sherry, much good though it did you." Hermann shakes the bottle in his direction.

"Keep drinking," Newt advises him.

"Second," Hermann says, glaring at him, "yes, it has occurred to me that the post drift consequences could have extremely advantageous cognitive implications, presuming equally disadvantageous consequences do not precipitate catastrophic psychological consequences."

"You're always so negative," Newt replies, eyeing his moderately blood-soaked handkerchief and trying not to be negative himself.

"You're always an idiot. Are you still bleeding?"

"You're using the word 'idiot' at high frequency," Newt says, trying to decide if he can feel blood coming from wherever it comes from. "I'm pretty sure that's to compensate for the fact that I now *know* you think I'm a blazing paragon of intellectual insight and a validated wunderkind, so I'll let it slide. Just to be clear though, I *always* thought *your* brain was pretty great, if a little rigid, so, that's another thing I was right about, by the way." He decides he's not bleeding anymore, and tosses his handkerchief in the direction of his pile of clothes to be incinerated, but misses so badly he can't even claim to have really been aiming at all.

Hermann shoots him in unimpressed look.

"And not bleeding," he finishes, hoping it's true, still tasting blood.

"I will be extremely annoyed if you *die*," Hermann says, managing to take a pretty nice sentiment and set it on fire with pique.

"I think I would have died *already* if it was going to happen," Newt says. "I *definitely* would have if you hadn't pulled me out of that first drift when you did. So thanks, dude. I owe you one. Maybe I owe you two. Definitely at least one though."

"How would you describe it?" Hermann asks, still drinking his sherry out of the bottle; Newt still cannot get over how *uncharacteristic* that is.

"The first drift?" Newt asks. "Kind of like the second one, but less fun. They were initially pretty shocked, I think. There was—" he makes looping, poorly coordinated hand gesture. "A getting-to-know-you period where they were like, 'wow, baby humans are stupid and tiny', and I was like, 'nice *Dyson sphere*, jackasses, why do I think that's not going to cut it for you?' and then they were like, 'huh, this guy *did* manage to *get* here, that's *not* so stupid, and hey, turns out we're enraged,' and I was like, 'oh so



you guys are basically sending the most destructive packages the breach will allow over given time intervals,' and they were like, 'oh no you *did not* just figure that out,' and I was like, 'yup, pretty sure I did, suck it, jerks,' and then they were like, 'you guys are actually *in* those metal kaijus? How shortsighted is that, why not control them remotely?' and then I was like, 'you *cloned* that business?' and they were like, 'we are going to get *you* and your *Wall*, and your little *civilization* too,' and that pretty much brings us the point where I was about to die. Fortunately, you pulled me out. Do you, maybe, want *aglass* for that sherry you're knocking back?"

"No," Hermann replies. "I do not."

"*Why*," Newt says. "Can you just use a glass? It's disturbing."

"Too Newtonesque?" Hermann asks dryly.

"First of all, oh my god, *no*," Newt says. "If you're going to adjectivize my name, the correct way, the *only* way, the established way, is '*Newtonian*,' okay? It's already a thing. A thing you're purposefully avoiding. Second of all, *yes*, way too 'me,' except weird, because I wouldn't drink sherry, and if I did, I'd *use a glass*, dude, because you drink tequila out of a bottle, you drink vodka out of a bottle, you drink, *maybe*, a blended scotch out of a bottle, you drink Irish whiskey out of a bottle, but you do not drink sherry, red wine, or sake out of a bottle, you've clearly got some wires crossed somewhere between the you-circuitry, the me-circuitry, the authority-circuitry, the tequila-circuitry, and the et cetera-circuitry. Now go get a glass. Do it right now. I know you have them. Go."

"I very nearly *upended a table* today, Newton," Hermann says, standing in indirect acquiescence, shaking the bottle in Newt's general direction. "*This* is the least of my problems."

"I know; the table thing is tempting, right?" Newt asks. "Once you do it, you never look back. Hey, if you're getting a glass, *I* could use some sherry. Or if not sherry, at least *water*."

"You may have *water*," Hermann replies, making his way to the sink none too steadily.

"This is the worst pregaming ever," Newt says. He considers sitting up, does a pilot experiment that indicates sitting up is going to be *way* too hard, and then settles for propping himself up on one unlucky and protesting elbow. "And *when* were you going to upend a *table*? We haven't really *seen* many tables since we had our mental three-way, and I do not recall pissing you off to table-upending levels any time in the past however many hours that it has been since we did that thing we did."

"It was, actually, a desk," Hermann says with endearing primness, filling one glass of water at his sink and then emptying the remainder of the sherry into a second glass.

*Ah yes, Newt thinks, a desk, by Jove. How tempting and unpropitious.*

"Desks don't flip as nicely," Newt says with commendable gallantry, "depending on their construction and what's on top of them."

"I'm aware of that," Hermann replies.

"May I ask what triggered that particular appropriated proclivity?"

"No," Hermann replies, handing him his water.

Newt takes it, and, of course, Jurassic Park-style, it just accentuates how much he is still shaking so he downs the entire thing immediately. It's room temperature and blood-flavored.

"Are you all right?" Hermann asks him for the eighty-thousandth time.

Newt sighs, deposits the empty glass on Hermann's nightstand, and lies back down.

"Why do I get the feeling that we *aren't* drift compatible?"

"I cannot imagine," Hermann says dryly as he drops back into his chair.

"I've heard of people acquiring new preferences," Newt says, "but I haven't heard of anyone nearly throwing up over—"

"Whatever you are about to say, *don't*," Hermann snaps.

"Cognitive dissonance," Newt finishes, shooting Hermann his best who's-the-jerk-now look.

"Likely because they don't *have* significant cognitive dissonance," Hermann says.

"Because they're *compatible*."

"Is that even *really* a thing?" Newt asks. "A discrete thing? Discrete in a *mathematical* sense? Digital rather than analog? You know what I'm saying, maybe? I'm still not sure."

"You just posited our own fundamental *incompatibility*," Hermann says, "in such a way that implies *you* view it discretely."

"Yeah, I think there's probably a minimal threshold that you need to hit so that you don't throw up over Nietzsche or weep over Freddie Mercury, which will, someday, happen to you, if it hasn't happened *yet*, presuming there is justice in the world, which there might not be. Once you hit that threshold though, it's an analogue thing, like, more compatible or less compatible—better at sword-mediated kaiju evisceration, or

you know, tragically *less* good, as the case may be. The thing is, though, is that we actually turned out to be pretty awesome at extracting information, better than I was on my own, mainly because *I*, prior to six hours ago, was *less* solid on the quantum mechanical underpinnings of dimensional transit—I also, for your information, found it less staggeringly *hilarious* than I do now that after all those string-theory-doesn't-belong-in-science-because-it-can't-be-directly-tested protestations that the whole shebang gets proven to have empirical validity by *monsters*—"oh god, he is going to lose it, this is not *funny*, this is not even remotely amusing. "By *monsters*. *Literally eating cities*—" he can barely string a sentence together with the effort of suppressing laughter that is, for sure, one hundred percent, guaranteed to end up squarely in sobbing.

Hermann is doing a really terrible job helping him out because he's clearly trying not to laugh and doing it about as badly as Newt would expect.

His brain really needs to step up and get this situation under control because Newt refuses to laugh uncontrollably about *string theory*. In the absence of consciousness-altering substances, that's a line in the sand he isn't going to cross.

"Oh god," Newt says, trying to breathe, "I think I'm going to die. String theory wins forever. Infinite win. Monsters. You really have a better sense of humor than I ever thought possible. Or maybe now I have a terrible one. What was I even *talking about*?"

"The drift," Hermann says, "which you are, if I'm correctly interpreting your meandering train of thought, rather creatively equating to synaptic transmission, in which a certain threshold must be reached to trigger the depolarization required for electrical propagation along a neuron."

"You realize what you're doing right now is de-jargoning neuroscience *for a neuroscientist*?" Newt asks, "which is *adorable*."

"It is most certainly not 'adorable'. It is a *professional courtesy* which I have extended to you for a *decade* without the faintest hope of reciprocation," Hermann says primly, before returning to his original point. "Given a neural signal *is* transmitted, further improvement can then be effected, via repetitive stimulation, in a manner conceptually akin to the neuronal phenomenon of long term potentiation."

"Not bad for a glorified accountant," Newt says. "Biology. It is awesome. Try not to be jealous. I suppose neuroscience as a field is big enough for both of us, and I would be willing to share it with you, but only if you beg."

"How charitable," Hermann replies. "There are several problems with your model."

"Let's call this one *your* model," Newt replies. "I never formally committed to anything like what you're describing. This is just a thing that you've put together in a very *Newtonian* manner using our longstanding and extremely reasonable mutual skepticism of *floor matches* as a means of assessing drift compatibility, your new knowledge of neuroscience, and your long history of following my extremely logical if not always perfectly explained trains of thought."

"This is not *my* model, Newton," Hermann says, still amused, still making progress on his sherry.

"Well it's not *mine*, dude, you can't just make up *models* and then *ascribe* them to me and force me to defend them. I have *some* standards."

"I am certain that the only reason you are *claiming* not to conceptualize the drift in the way I just described, is because *your* model—" Hermann trails off in unmistakable sudden realization. He gives Newt an incisive, interested, and edgy look.

Newt tries to appear innocent, or, failing that, at least extremely sick, entirely exhausted, *possibly dying*. "Your model, Hermann. *Yours*."

"It *was* yours," Hermann says, eyes narrowed, "I'm *certain* it was, now that I can retroactively interpret what I previously labeled 'intellectual windmill tilting.' But given that *was* your model, you would have predicted that you wouldn't be able to drift with a *kaiju*."

"Um," Newt says.

"What did you do?" Hermann demands, in a manner that can, *at best*, be classified as 'suspicious'.

"Well," Newt says, adjusting his glasses with one shaking hand, wondering if he can subtly valsalva his way to a propitious episode of epistaxis.

"*Newton*," Hermann snaps. "You *lowered the threshold*."

"A little bit, maybe, yeah. I mean, this might be news to you dude, but sick body art aside, I did not expect to actually be drift-compatible with a *kaiju*. I mean, you've *seen* those things right? Not a lot of common ground there. Plus, I was using an ostensibly 'dead' one. As you pointed out. Many times. So, um, yeah, I built a custom helmet to manipulate my own membrane potentials into a little bit more of an excitable state, in an attempt to override the monster-human threshold problem."

Hermann drinks more sherry and looks at the ceiling, sliding along thought catenaries or something.

"And yours," Newt says, queuing up an anticipatory wince. "Also. Just for full disclosure. Helmet number two, same deal. I also screwed around with *your* membrane potential."

"That's quite clever," Hermann decides.

"What?"

"That's quite clever," Hermann repeats, and *god*, Newt should get him drunk more often, this is *awesome*. "And I'm going to assume it's only because you're exhausted to the point of disability that you haven't put this all together to form a cogent explanation for what is currently happening to *us*."

This is less awesome.

"*What?*" Newt says, looking over at Hermann who is staring back at him in evident satisfaction.

"Do you need it *explained* to you?" Hermann asks, with Herculean levels of ironic solicitousness.

"No," Newt snaps.

"Very well," Hermann says, and makes a show of inspecting his sherry.

"We're incompatible, and I overrode our incompatibility with my drift-hack," Newt says. "I broke our brains, a little bit, maybe, and now we can't make decisions without throwing up, which is probably temporary. Maybe. Hopefully."

"No," Hermann says, so self-satisfied that Newt can barely *stand it*. "No, I do *not* think that's what you did."

"I," he says, twisting to grab Hermann's cane from where it's leaning against the nightstand, dragging it onto the bed, depositing it next to him, and wrapping one hand around it, "am *taking this*."

"Much good may it do you," Hermann says. "You appear to need it more than I do, at the moment. I doubt you can even *sit*. How you're still managing to speak in complete sentences is a mystery to me."

"*You*," Newt says.

"And you were doing so well," Hermann says, with entirely false sympathy.

"Just tell me," Newt says.

"Tempted though I am to make you *beg*, as you so chivalrously threatened *me* with not three minutes ago, I will resist this impulse, because you have had a difficult day."

"I am crushing this day," Newt says, and he *is*, he's pulverizing this day into a liquid sluice of pure victory, upon which he is getting drunk because his extremely cranky life-partner won't let him pregame with *sherry*.

"I think this day nearly crushed *you*," Hermann replies.

"You're enjoying this way too much," Newt says. "Tell me. I am *literally begging you* to tell me your so cogent and so sound working model of what is happening to our brains, and, so help me, if there is so much as *one* unexplained—"

"We *are* compatible," Hermann says, apparently not in the mood for Newt's science posturing, but looking like he enjoyed the begging a little more than is strictly appropriate. "We are, in fact, *quite* compatible. Even *atypically* compatible. But in the presence of your unusual setup, designed to boost drift compatibility in the face of extreme neural disparity, what we are experiencing is—"

"Oh god," Newt says, getting it, getting it *hardcore*. "Extreme Post-drift Induced Cognitive Rapport. That makes a good acronym. EPIC Rapport. Let's write a paper." Ugh, he is *slurring* and he is not even *tired* or *drunk*.

That's a lie.

He's tired.

And drunk on hubris, apparently.

"You just completed my sentence," Hermann replies, eyeing him skeptically.

"No I didn't. I started my *own* sentence," Newt says. "A new and different one. You want to write a paper?"

"That was, unmistakably, sentence *completion*, Newton." Hermann raises his eyebrows and continues to sip his sherry, "as it had no subject, and instead, borrowed an understood subject from *my* sentence. And, while I would not, theoretically, object to writing a paper with you, I don't think this is something that we should document in a formal way, given that it will only draw attention to the fact that we drifted with the anteverse."

"You would be the *worst* to write a paper with, anyway," Newt says, with definitive manfulness that is not at all petulant. "I definitely don't want to. You couldn't *pay* me to write a paper with you."

"That's demonstrably untrue," Hermann says. "You have, in fact, suggested it twice in the past several hours, to no avail."

"Whatever man," Newt says. "I've also failed to find a fire, failed to find a neurologist, failed to find a five-Tesla magnet, failed to get drunk, failed to convince you that we should go to Boston, failed to grasp the implications of my own drift-hack, failed to get drunk, failed to incinerate my outfit, failed to irritate you to the point of irrationality, failed to build an MRI, failed to find my own alcohol, failed to start screaming uncontrollably while trapped in the most crap scanner known to man but that was a *win*, failed to get drunk, failed to plan ahead so that when I couldn't move any more I'd be in the middle of the most awesome party of the century rather than watching a mathematician drink sherry, but I *did* steal your cane. So. There's that. What is even *happening here*, I don't*have* to build an *MRI*."

"No," Hermann says, his eyebrows coming together, probably because he didn't miss the reference to 'screaming uncontrollably' that Newt unfortunately made. 'Committed', perhaps, is a better term than 'made'.

"I *do* know what's happening," Newt clarifies, "just to be clear, that was a rhetorical device I was employing. I also think there is a possibility you might be correct about the Extreme Post-Drift Induced Cognitive Rapport."

"A possibility," Hermann echoes, in presupposed victory.

Newt spends a moment considering the ceiling—low, metallic, corrugated—before his confused theory of mind kicks in and he looks back at Hermann. "You," he says, propping himself up on one elbow, "make it a point *not* to listen to me."

Hermann shrugs in self-satisfied admission.

"And so you wouldn't have been thinking about my thresholding theory."

"No, I generally leave that sort of thing in your dubiously capable hands," Hermann replies, sipping his sherry, avoiding eye contact.

"Given that you had *no idea* I'd screwed around with operator neuronal excitability, you must have *assumed* our fundamental drift compatibility."

"I assumed nothing," Hermann said. "Will you lie down? You look extremely alarming."

"Lies," Newt replies, falling off his elbow. "You *did*."

"The only thing I assumed," Hermann says dryly, "is that, in the absence of *some* mitigating factor, a second drift would likely be too much for you to withstand, given that the first one nearly killed you, and so I was willing to *bethat* mitigating factor."

"I can't believe you thought we would be drift compatible," Newt replies.

"You are probably the most infuriating person I have ever known," Hermann says. "That is *not* what I said."

"Myeah," Newt replies, smiling faintly. He closes his eyes, trying to picture some kind of ridiculous sparring match between himself and Hermann a la the Mako-versus-Raleigh exhibition that he'd heard so much about, but the entire thing takes a lot of mental effort to envision, and he really can't seem to progress it beyond both of them standing without shoes on a mat, yelling at one another. It occurs to him then that they've been sparring every day of their acquaintance, for hours, to a dead heat. Intellectually. So yeah. They're drift compatible. They have EPIC Rapport. The whole sparring thing is still garbage though. Or if not garbage, then a really, *really* approximate surrogate endpoint.

"I'm curious," Hermann says, deciding on a change of subject. "How in god's name were you able to tolerate that MRI?"

Newt could live without this as a topic of conversation.

"Eh," he says, eyes still shut, one hand blindly sweeping the air.

"Are you becoming monosyllabic?" Hermann asks.

"Nah," Newt replies.

Hermann jabs Newt with his cane, or some other object that produces an identical effect.

Newt tries to flinch, but only about half his muscles are feeling like it's still their job to do what his nervous system says. This makes the effect interesting from a perceptive standpoint, but pretty understated as flinching goes. His eyes *do* come open though, so that's a win, possibly, or not, he's not sure how much winning there is left for him to do in the world, he'll probably spend most of his mental energy on not cloning a kaiju and he'll spend what remains on trying not to have PTSD or epilepsy or generalized anxiety disorder or a mental connection to the anteverse or whatever his problems are going to shape themselves into once they've started to congeal from the mass of disorganized goo that's sitting in his cerebral cortex.

"I stole that cane," he says, looking at Hermann, who is holding his sherry and his reappropriated cane.

"Not only did you steal it," Hermann says, "you, in fact, turned it into a metaphor for your entire professional life by committing a glorious proof-of principle, and then failing to follow through on making any effort to *keep* it."



"Was it too much to hope that you'd be—surprise—a *kind* drunk? Or, at minimum, an irresponsible one?" Newt asks. "I'd even settle for some demonstrable cognitive impairment. *Any* demonstrable impairment. Is that *evensherry*? I *have* follow-through, by the way. Follow-through, as a character trait, is a prerequisite if you're planning to *construct* your own drift interface and then reproducibly use it. Which I *did*."

"You have seen me intoxicated," Hermann replies, "so it should come as no surprise to you that given the amount of available alcohol, no cognitive deficits are likely to be forthcoming."

"You have had a hard day," Newt says, half explanation, half aspiration, and nope, that was not his best enunciation job ever.

"Yes, Newton, I have. Thank you for belatedly noticing. But I was not finished."

"Oh," Newt says. "*Well*. Please proceed."

"I am extremely *kind* at *baseline*. If you bothered to accurately conceptualize your current situation, you would find that you are currently lying in *my bed*, while I *watch you*, to ensure you don't '*drop dead*,' as you so charmingly put it, from some unforeseen consequence of your actions over the past twenty-four hours. *Why* am I doing this? Is it because I think it is a good idea? No, Newton, it is *not*. I am doing it solely for *you*, because you have an atypical amount of distrust in authority, which has somehow infested *my* personality structure, leaving me totally unable to perform even the most basic risk assessment regarding *your* current situation and leaving me with no other option than to sit here and *watch you*."

"*Our* situation," Newt says, shutting his bad eye and running his fingers over his eyelid and under his glasses. "Not mine. *Ours*."

"*Yours*, Newton," Hermann says, "because I am certain the medical risk to you is orders of magnitude greater than it is for me."

"Hopefully," Newt says, pulling his glasses mostly off his face as he pulls his hand away and gives Hermann's sherry a pointed look. "You know, it never occurred to me to try a three-way drift. Human on human on kaiju."

"Never refer to it in that manner again," Hermann says dryly.

"Human on human?" Newt replies, styling his eyebrows in what he hopes is a tastelessly suggestive manner. "Or human on kaiju."

"You know," Hermann says, considering his sherry, "I had the idea that you purposefully played up your non sequiturs *solely* for the purpose of annoying me."

"And now you know it to be true," Newt replies.

"Yes," Hermann says, "but not *quite* to the extent I had imagined. Even when you're *not* being deliberately inflammatory, you're extremely difficult to converse with if one has a definite *goal* in mind."

"It sounds like you're confused about whether you're trying to insult me or compliment me," Newt says solicitously. "You need some help with that? Because I'm pretty sure that while normally it would be the former, today you're going to want to choose the latter."

"I'm attempting to choose *neither*," Hermann replies. "What I want to know is how you tolerated that MRI."

"I just laid there, man," Newt says. "Kind of like now, except with more muscle tension and less talking out loud. It was, for sure, the *least* interesting thing I've done all day. It figures that *that's* what you're going to fixate on as the thing you want to know about. Of course. 'Newton, tell me how in god's name you laid zere vithout talking for ninety minutes, I find it frankly beyond belief.' Thanks a *lot*. You know I can do this whole external monologue thing *internally*? That *is* a skillset I possess."

"But not one you frequently *display*," Hermann counters. "Your experience of lying motionless in an MRI is *far* from the only thing about which I am curious. It *is* the only thing I *currently* care to ask you about because I have *no desire* to precipitate some kind of poorly organized strong inclination on your part to undertake some kind of project."

"I was going to build an open MRI," Newt says, faintly regretful at his total inability to be vertical at the present moment.

"Why?"

"Because the PPDC's setup is not only a pathetic three-Teslas, but it's *closed*, and that is just *cruel*."

"Post-scan, you looked as though you found it quite stressful."

"What makes you say that?" Newt asks.

"Possibly it was the pallor, possibly it was the shaking, or possibly it was you, digging your hands into my shoulders and saying, 'you *must* get me *out* of here because I *cannot take this*'."

"I don't remember that," Newt says, slightly untruthfully, but in his defense, the whole experience seems to have been memorialized by his hippocampus in an untrustworthy admixture of confined space, layered with remembered terror, topped by an

increasingly ridiculous Geiszlerian monologue—a memory laid down as a fancy, three-tiered shot of colored cognitive alcohol with a witty name, like *Kaiju Codicil*, that one might find in a devastatingly trendy Hong Kong bar. Alas, this is not a drink that he is currently drinking. He is drinking *nodrinks*, and the likelihood of drink acquisition is tragically low any time in the near future. Furthermore, his odds of attending the party of the century, if not the millennium, are abysmal and sinking by the microsecond and yeah, this seems typical—he's going to spend his night of victory more or less out of biological juice, trying not to drop dead while Hermann gets drunk by himself on his own sherry. Newt finds this equal parts vexing and comforting. Once a demimonde, always a demimonde, it seems, no matter how many shows you play, tattoos you get, or Millennium Prize Problems you've almost basically already solved.

Ugh.

No.

Identity confusion alert.

*Brain*, he thinks, *please try to remember it's not you who loves the Riemann Hypothesis with a deep and abiding love because a) it's going to drive you to despair if you really try to engage with those zeta function zeros, you know you're not the most reliable place to house the kind of rigorous, abstract thought needed to construct a temple to quantitation and then live within it, that's just not going to turn out well for you, b) you're not a mathematician, all that stuff is borrowed from someone who isn't actually you, and c) there's no surer way straight to interpersonal hell than to piss Hermann off by poaching on his side of the mutual intellectual garden that you now share custody of in the loosest and yet also most rigid of ways.*

"Newton," Hermann snaps, "please try to be as accurate as possible, as I am constantly assessing your mental state."

"Yes," Newt says, "fine, I *may* have said that. I *may* have encountered some difficulty with immersive neural recapitulation of recent sensory experiences while in an enclosed environment, but I'm pretty sure that's normal and unrelated to any hypothetical brain damage I may or may not have."

Hermann says nothing in response, but then, Newt doesn't really blame him, after all, what is the guy supposed to say that's not going to sound uncharacteristically sensitive? What else is there really left to communicate beyond what he's already demonstrated by simply *inquiring* about Newt's subjective experience in the first place; so yeah, *of course* Hermann says nothing. Until he says, "I imagine such an experience was not at all easy for you."

Empathy'd.

"Yeah," Newt says, "I'm sure you *do* imagine that. And as long as you're imagining things, I encourage you to imagine how little I want to talk about this with all the sparkling clarity that I'm sure you can now muster. You falsely advertised drunk *science*, not drunk *awkwardness*, but since we're talking about feelings I don't want to talk about, I *did* devote some serious thought to whether or not I'm in mental continuity with the anteverse."

"Did you," Hermann says, in arid unsurprise. "Did this self-inquiry include anything other than some kind of free verse mental *summoning*?"

"I don't like that you know me *this* well," Newt replies, narrowing his eyes in exhausted suspicion.

"Neither do I," Hermann replies.

"What do you think the chances are that, a decade from now, you and I will be in a boat on the Pacific reopening the breach?" Newt inquires with one hundred percent casual unconcern.

"Zero," Hermann replies.

"Now you're just *asking* for it," Newt says, with no more than ten percent overt despair infecting his tone. Twenty percent. Thirty percent tops.

"There is a vanishingly small but material chance that you or I or both remain in some kind of mental continuity with the kaiju anteverse. There is a small but material chance that you or I or both are able to be influenced via an unknown, transdimensional mechanism."

"Oh god," Newt says, "so you think it's possible."

"I cannot formally exclude it," Hermann replies, "though, as I said, I consider it unlikely. What is it you *want*, Newton, bland anti-Frankensteinian platitudes, or statistics that include informative insight into their own imprecisions?"

"And you wonder why I work *in vivo*."

"Your work, *at best*, can be classified as *ex vivo*," Hermann says.

Newt gives him a pharaonic, supinated sweep of the hand.

"To continue," Hermann says, like a guy who has a point he's driving towards and can keep in his sights like a laser-wielding badass, "there is also a small but non-zero possibility that you, I, or both of us will fail to realize our horrendous hypothetical lapse

in judgment and take steps to correct the problem. All of those unlikely events will be required to occur to bring about the outcome that you are anticipating."

"'Dreading', I think, would be the word I would choose," Newt says.

"Nevertheless, the final outcome depends on probabilities of several independent, unlikely events."

Newt stares at Hermann in open incredulity.

"Independent?" Newt echoes, when his brain organizes itself back into talking. "Like anyone could *unambiguously* classify your three events as 'independent.' There is *clearly* an argument to be made for interdependence. There's literally *no way* you can actually believe any of what you just said, and so I conclude that this is *you*, trying to reassure *me* with math."

Hermann looks away from him, toward the, apparently, *super* fascinating blank wall.

"It *is*, isn't it?" Newt continues, a little too smacked in the face with a two-by-four of revelation to be operating with his maximum manful tact. "I feel like this is the nicest thing you've *ever done*. At least—that involves me or was witnessed by me, I'll give you that as a caveat."

"How generous." Hermann gets them back on track with some resolute disdain.

Newt can work with that.

"Alas, a day ago this strategy might have worked, and wow, you really don't give me a lot of credit for statistical insight, do you? I'm too tired to be offended about it right now, but watch it, dude, biologists do math, okay? They might not *invent it*, but they *do* it. More to the point, I *don't* feel excessively reassured, given my borrowed numerical instincts and my *own* certainty that improbable scenarios cave all the time in the face of unadulterated willpower. But I do take *some* comfort in the empirical evidence that at least *one* of my colleagues not only cares if I live or die, but is willing to go so far as to actively *prevent* my death by risking his *own* life, then willing to forego a party so awesome it might be dangerous in order to stare at me to make sure I don't have a seizure, while simultaneously reassuring me about my future prospects via some kind of statistical bedtime story about independent probabilities that aren't really all that independent after all."

Hermann sips his sherry, unperturbed, and says, "quite."

Newt figures that if Hermann is going to go so far as to misrepresent statistics to him and then cop to it, then *hemight* as well lay all *his* cards on the table. He adjusts his glasses, and tries to decide ahead of time on phrasing.

It's not working out for him.

"Is there a reason you're staring at me?" Hermann asks, straightening a sweater seam.

"I *can't* actively read your mind, Newton, I'm relatively confident of that much."

"I really just need for us to be in a relationship where you never leave me and you also perpetually ensure I'm not ending the world," Newt says, in a drunkenly hubristic or hubristically drunken torrent of words.

Hermann pulls out his most sophisticated, stratospheric single-eyebrow raise.

This was a terrible idea.

If things turn weird, Newt is pretty sure he's not going to be able to get up and leave without falling over at least one time.

"Newton," Hermann replies, "we already *have* such a relationship. We have, in fact, had such a relationship for approximately nine years."

"Oh," Newt says.

Hermann sips his sherry and lets his eyebrow go back home.

Newt is going to need to spend some time thinking about whether Hermann was *always* this nice to him or whether this is a new thing, brought on by Newt's recent multiple brushes with death.

In the meantime, he will settle for a valorous subject change.

"Any philosophical objections to continued residency on the Ring of Fire? Because, given that Boston is off the table, I vote California."

"I am not *entirely* opposed to such a course of action," Hermann replies. "The University of California at Berkeley is quite well known in mathematical circles."

"I can work with that," Newt replies, already picturing the ceaseless pound of the tide against the Wall enclosing the Pacific Rim.

# An Interlude In Two Parts

## An Interlude

Later, when Hermann stands alone in undisturbed reflection on a windswept foreign balcony in reddish evening light, he will become, slowly, so *terrified* that to contemplate a vista will be a hardship for the remainder of his life. This consequence of cognizance comes as capitulation to a penchant that is not his own. It is a thing that comes from *Newton*—who professes a disdain for anecdotal thinking but who must combat this personal proclivity every waking hour of his life.

They make it out of Hong Kong.

But only barely.

Only after a breathtaking example of institutional and interpersonal maneuvering that Newton—that arrogant, magnificent, manipulative, *terrifying* man—initiates a mere *two days* post their drift when he stops eating, terminates a half-formed thought mid-word, and says, “who’s got the better black book of influential contacts—you or me?” in a tone that is light years away from a good-faith interrogative.

Hermann’s too enmeshed in arguments of quantum decoherence to tolerate this verbal whiplash with his typical aplomb. But when he looks at Newton’s face he sees disquiet there—in eyebrows pulled together, in the setting of his jaw. The man is looking at a thing across the mess and out of Hermann’s line of sight, until he veils and redirects his focus. Hermann starts to speak but Newton lifts his eyebrows, cocks his head, and slides his tray across the table, saying, “we both know it’s not me. I’ve upended one too many tables in my academic life. Do your best to mount a rescue that’s within the bounds of reason, don’t always be so honest; bus my tray and take my carrots. I don’t want them.”

Hermann’s hand snaps shut, pinning Newton’s wrist so he’s incapable of rising.

There they sit, locked in wordless conflict in the busy, crowded mess.

Then Newton says, “let go,” and Hermann does.

They make it out of Hong Kong.

But only barely.

Only after Hermann buses both their trays and leaves the hall while Newton makes a scene, upends a table, and allows Ms. Mori to step in, preventing violent escalation of a clash he's manufactured before giving up his freedom to a formalized 'request'.

Hermann spends three days obscuring his involvement in Newton's second drift, cashing in the favors he recalls or manufactures, and feeling lost in wretched mental conflict; trying to divine a moral course of action that does not involve a lie and does not involve *abandonment* of Newton to a *Pan Pacific lab*.

His conflict resolves in a four day evolution of evening visits to the med bay that proceed in this direction: "I am *not*enthused, man, no one understands the *science*," to "co-authorship's alluring—but where'd they get their funding?" to "what would happen in a drift, given breach annihilation?" to—

Nothing at all.

Because his colleague is 'unfit for visitation'.

It is at this point the stakes become clear to Hermann.

They become so clear, they become *so immediate*, that in a terrifyingly uncharacteristic move that comes from an area in his mind he can no longer call his own, he books flights out of Hong Kong, packs all the technology he can fit in a single bag, orders a taxi for two in the morning, returns to the medical bay, presents a forged letter of resignation to on-duty personnel, then—

*Abducts* his colleague from the Hong Kong shatterdome.

His plan is a disaster from the point of its conception. It succeeds for just three reasons—Newton's free cooperation, which leaves his room unguarded; Hermann's history of submission to decisions from above; and the lack of firm directives to the staff that work the nights, who might otherwise resist the force of Hermann's glare and his litigious ultimatums.

In a miracle of willpower, both heartbreaking and striking, Newton pulls himself together to the point he can withdraw consent and requests his own release.

They make it out of Hong Kong.

But only barely.

Only after Hermann helps his listless, *silent* colleague into clothes he's brought for him and then spends several hours dragging Newton through a nightmare, berating him so he's alert while hauled through public spaces; an experience that climaxes when Hermann keeps him conscious in the bathroom of the airport with a vicious, long



cadenza of creative verbal threats—this string of words is all that keeps his plan from certain failure as Newton struggles not to faint and Hermann tries to help him. *Please*, he thinks, one hand on Newton's blazer, *be too exhausted; be too drugged, or maybe too postictal to be forming memories of this. Please let there be an explanation, please let this not be lasting, please tell me that this isn't you, you moron; if your mind's been ruined I will destroy so much in compensation that even you'd be shocked.*

Hermann doesn't *ask* what happened in that four day evolution, doesn't *inquire*, doesn't *demand* it of the medical staff or attempt a distillation from Newton's mixed and broken words, but that does not mean he will fail to *find out*.

He spends fourteen hours of a fifteen-hour flight in a blitzkrieg of medical terminology and wi-fi granted planning while Newton sleeps or is unconscious on his shoulder. Forty minutes before they start descending, Newton stirs, sits up, and slurs, "we're on a plane? Good show, old sport," in increasing British accent, then inquires after breakfast and the location of his glasses with a set of ordered sentences and slowly crisping diction.

Hermann can't decide if he's enraged or he's relived; whatever he is feeling is unparsably extreme, so he just stares at Newton, who is pale and still too still, and because he cannot shout, '*never do that again you reckless halfwit*', in the face of a man who was willing to walk straight into the very thing he most feared on the unstated faith that *Hermann* would pull him out, instead he says, "go back to sleep."

"Meh," Newton says, noncommittal but compliant.

They make it out of Hong Kong.

But only barely.

Only after being stopped at Customs because in the fifteen hours that they've spent upon their plane, there's been an order to detain them—placed and then rescinded—as favors counter favors in interfering waves. Newton spends a quarter hour in loquacious fantasies before he takes his anti-epileptic, a prophylactic courtesy. He talks himself to sleep atop the table in their holding room while Hermann waits in locked-down panic, his back to where a camera's perched, unblinking, on the wall.

When all wave functions in the void collapse into their outcomes, they stagger free of Customs and they travel to a campus—green-lit, under trees. The doctor who they meet there has ears that have been pierced in quadrupled iteration and an eyebrow ring that's shell-like in a tribute to the sea. Her name is "Coral," and when she extends a hand, beneath the edge of her cuffed sleeve, the margin of a blue tattoo appears.

Despite her skills on paper and the branching web of contacts that have fostered this connection, Hermann doesn't like her.

But Newton does.

"I hear you saved the world by tweaking your membrane potentials," Coral says, unhurried and at ease, "and in exchange, became a little epileptic?"

"Myeah," he says. "Or maybe not? No. Possibly? We'll see."

"Well either way, that's pretty rad. So thanks, man. Have a seat."

This perplexes Newton—to the extent a man who's half-aware can *be* perplexed—but for what reason, Hermann can't precisely say. Possibly it is because he doesn't understand he's being *thanked* for averting an apocalyptic end to human culture. Possibly it is because his mental function is a *shadow* of its former self. Possibly he's flummoxed by his female doppelgänger.

"Yeah," Newton says, slow motion revelation. "It *is* rad."

Hermann warms to 'Coral' a small amount. He despises her still less after careful neural testing is performed on each of them once Coral has cleared her schedule for the day. He decides he finds her 'adequate' during Newton's EEG when he discovers she remained in San Francisco despite the constant kaiju threat because she was unwilling to leave a city, half-destroyed, with even one less physician. He decides that he quite likes her when she tells them both their EEGs are, "ragingly abnormal, guys, so that's not great. But it isn't unexpected either, so I vote for careful observation to see what trends emerge. You boys cool with cognitive kinetics?" He reclassifies her as 'exemplary' when she says, "Dr. Geiszler—please lie down. Dude, y'got *worked* by ethically conflicted military types who were packing XR-benzos, and I'm finding this more than a little painful to watch."

"For all *you* know, Hypothetical Rain, *I'm* ethically conflicted." It's a knee-jerk opposition—disorganized, in torment.

Hermann stands to help him up.

Coral gets him on the table.

"Were you addressing me as 'Rain?'" she asks.

"Myeah," the man admits, tracing frames of borrowed glasses like he wants to get his fingers underneath them.

"What kind of name's 'Hypothetical Rain?'"

"It sounds better aural than 'Actual Coral'," Newton counters.

"You're a little bit cute, *Newt*," Coral says.

"You're certain he's *drugged*," Hermann snaps, not in a rhyming mood.

"His blood work confirms he's postictal and heavily medicated. Based on what's coming out of his mouth given that double caveat, I'd say he's likely not to show any significant cognitive deficits.

"I like this one." Newton looks at Hermann behind darkened, borrowed glasses. "Let's keep her."

They keep her.

It is only late in the day, when Newton is still sleeping off whatever he was given, this time in tangled hotel sheets, only after Hermann has showered and donned a robe because the only change of clothes he'd thought to pack hadn't been his own, only when he is standing on borrowed balcony—bare feet, damp hair—that he allows himself to dwell on how narrow their escape from Hong Kong had truly been and how tenuous it still remains.

They've made it out of Hong Kong.

For now, it is the best that he can do.

He hopes that *They*—this nebulous, precarious concept of the authoritarian, occulted Other, that he's received from Newton and cannot shake—got all that they needed in those four days. Hermann still doesn't know exactly what it was they did. Coral has offered to make an inquiry on their behalf, and Hermann is content to allow her to petition *Them* for all materials related to the four days that Newton spent in 'volunteered' collaboration.

He has no plans to try and wring any details out of *Newton*, unless the man should *offer* them to him.

Hermann stands on cool cement and grips the railing, tormented by a terror he can't shake.

The sun sinks in a red haze behind the gray and monochromatic Wall that has obscured the whole horizon.

He has so much to do.

And all of it seems impossible.

"Wall'd Sunset," Newton says, from the open door behind him. "Good band name."

Hermann jerks and grips the rail, then looks back at Newton.

He leans against a glass edged wall—Eurydicean, spectral, and by no means out of hell. Hermann doesn't say 'what happened' and he doesn't ask, 'who did this?' he avoids both Coral and Keppra, to choose gentle disputation.

"I'm sure I don't agree," he says, "but when compared to '*Superconducting Supercolliders*', *anything's* preferred."

"The name reflects the ethos of the band." Newton sighs—philosophic, windblown—abridged by his exhaustion.

"Ethos, is it?" Hermann asks. "Then try tasteful misdirection. You're certainly practiced enough."

"It's an art form," Newton says, his steps unsteady, fingers closing on the rail. "I think I might throw up. I think I might be starving. My brain is overtaxed. My proteins won't go down a pathway labeled 'catabolic', or if they are, they're taking their sweet time."

It occurs to Hermann then that he has not eaten for what must be twenty hours. He has *no idea* how long it's been since Newton ate. "We should order food," he says.

"Yeah, dude," his colleague says, "but let's just wait a beat to make sure there won't be gross dry-heaving over twilit metal rails."

"Delightful," Hermann offers.

"Well yeah, what can I say?" Newton rests his forearms on the rail and twists to look at Hermann. "Delightful is my skillset. Winsome even. Fab. You have made a splendid life choice, Dr. Gottlieb, sticking with me. Commendable. Praiseworthy. Laudable. Meritorious. Just think of all the escapades we'll have together as I demonstrate my own stupidity in pursuit of larger goals and you rescue me from resulting permutations of triggered consequence."

"I regret nothing," Hermann says.

"I do." Newton coughs. "A little bit. I should have tried that second drift alone."

"You said it would have killed you."

"Now, I'm not so sure."

His head tips back, his eyes fall shut, and Hermann looks away so that he does not scream at him in mangled German/English, 'do you *know* because you *tried* it?' He cannot speak past locking jaw, and wonders if he'll always be this angry. He is *sure* the answer's yes until he turns his head and Newton looks at him with windswept hair and rumpled shirt, a principle of entropy who's been cursed with human form.

Newton's nose begins to bleed and he searches vainly for a handkerchief before settling on his cuff.

"I find you wretchedly infuriating," Hermann whispers in the dimness. His throat is tight, his eyes are hot, and he can no longer look at Newton. "Borderline intolerable."

"I know," the man replies, choked with words or blood. "Thanks for rescuing me anyway."

"You are quite welcome."

"This is less yelling than I'd have predicted, were I in a predicting mood," Newton says, his wrist pressed to his face.

"I prefer to yell at you only when I'm certain you won't *faint* if I trigger an episode of intense self-righteousness or cognitive dissonance."

"Are you implying that I would *lose consciousness* in the face of my own perceived superiority?"

"No," Hermann says. "I implied no such thing. I stated it directly."

"Whatevs, man, I'm going to go bleed in the *sink*, rather than raining blood on benighted—where are we?"

"San Francisco," Hermann replies, his eyes narrowing. "How much do you remember of the past twenty-four hours?"

"Planes," Newton says. "Rain. Head pain. That's pretty much it."

"There was no rain," Hermann replies.

"And by 'Rain,' I meant Coral."

"Of course you did," Hermann says, then watches him in silence, fighting with the questions he's too terrified to ask: '*are you all right; what happened; how could you let them do this?*' while Newton stands there twitching, clearly trying not to cry.

"How much do you remember?" Hermann asks, in compromise.

Newton shakes his head and swallows.

Hermann guides him back inside.

Time passes.

Hermann tries to track the things that change, because someone ought to, and Newton's not inclined.

Their hotel gives way to an apartment. Hermann's realms of bravery expand. Newton straightens items left askew. The number of communal handkerchiefs increases at a rate suggesting unseen reproduction. Hermann now reads *Neuron*, sometimes even to himself. Newton walks a widow's walk in front of west-faced windows. Hermann brokers UC Berkeley tenure for them both. Newton undermines him by refusing an invited talk and spending weeks on rederiving calculus for purposes his own. Hermann asks no questions and enjoys his proxied Leibniz. Newton spends six weeks exclusively in clothes that hide his skin. Communal nightmares rise. Hermann waits three weeks before he buys tequila. Newton waits for half a bottle to elapse before admitting to the final drift that Hermann's long suspected. They speculate on consciousness in pieces: *what happens to a fraction of a hive mind?* Hermann throws up in the sink, Newton throws up in the trash, then everyone is bleeding. Hermann takes a daily aspirin. Newton takes twice daily Keppra.

When something runs away from them they stop and watch it, frozen by an instinct of predation.

But there's the day that Newton drives to Berkeley, talks to his department, then spends a week in frenzied inspiration that Hermann thought he'd lost. There's the time that Hermann puts on *Queen* in absentminded preference and Newton tackles him to stop a musical correction. There are the nights when no one dreams, or dreams are small and life-sized—espresso grounds and science books, the tenure track, or people.

There are the dawns when Hermann wakes, and does not find his colleague fully clothed and staring toward the sea.

Of those, there are not many.

But there are some.

## In Two Parts

Later, when Newt weaves across a semi-dark hotel room, lit to rust at sunset, and sees Hermann, barefoot on the balcony, clutching its rail as though he thinks he'll fall, he will come to feel, slowly, *so guilty* he'll have difficulty ever asking Hermann for *anything again*, tacit or overt; a consequence of his own narcissism subluxed beneath a borrowed weight of crushing, total *duty* to some nebulous concept he's never able to fully define and that must haunt Hermann every waking hour of his life.

His third drift is clean.

In a way.

It is clean in the way that that all terrible decisions made from pure motivations are clean; it is clean like a circuit, clean like fiberoptics, clean like a prism, clean like a paring away, clean like an informed sacrifice in good faith is clean because he doesn't do it from *desire*, he does in the *place* of someone else, he does it because he's already been more damaged than Hermann has, he thinks. He does it because they will not stop asking him, he does it because they will start asking Hermann, and Hermann might do it, Hermann *has* done it, Hermann *would* do it, Hermann *will* do it; it is a certainty, it is factual, so Hermann must not be asked, there must be no *Race to The Prize* la *The Flaming Lips*, it must be only Dr. Newton Geiszler of the neuronal debris and the epidermal verdigris who discharges this lien on his cognition in full. That was what he signed on for, his poor, perspicacious past-self, and Newt owes it to past-Newt, to Hermann, and to *everyone* to control what happens in the aftermath of this apocalypse, averted.

So when they say, 'if you're not *interested* in helping out, perhaps your colleague would be more amenable,' Newt lifts a hand and eyebrow and comes back with, 'history favors the jerk first published—so, sure. I'll help you. No need to call the physicist, he hasn't got a clue, wasn't even *really* involved, not in a *material* way, 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."

*This is your brain*, his brain says. *This is your brain on blood. Always say no to trephination even if it is in the ostensible name of scientific progress. Or, in this case, apocalyptic prophylaxis.*

*Good advice, brain*, Newt replies. *You are rockin' it this week. I'll miss you if we're cut apart because of questionable choices that I've made.*

*Speak for yourself*, his brain replies, sounding just like Hermann. It watches waveforms change as he attempts to realign a foreign rig to match the one he built.

His third drift is clean.

In a way.

It's clean in that even though he commits some sins of omission in order to break the news of what's going on to Hermann in a sort of slow motion bowling-ball-meets-bowling-pins-and-sedately-knocks-a-few-over kind of way rather than mallet-meets-a-giant-single-paned-window kind of way, his *intentions* going in are good. It's also clean in that the last clear memory he has is engagement of electrodes and membrane voltage fluxing, which, in and of itself, should not be a problem—

Except for how it is.

The rest of it?

Confusing.

Spatial distortion, derealization, whose hand is that that's shaking? Simple partial, that's not good—*oh look*, he has an aura. Some guy's neurons are depolarizing before they've read all the directions. Some guy's visual field is turning blue. We should have loaded him ahead of time, Dr. Geiszler can you hear me Dr. Geiszler can you talk. *That would be a negative*, thinks the man whose simple partial seizure's trying to rickroll to a complex class; a transmitted bait and switch in waveform current before this trial has even started, but what in god's name is *expected* when one queries ns of ones? So *sorry to have inconvenienced you, someone should have seen this coming; in retrospect it's clear*. Not clean, not *in* the drift, not *even clean*, 'what a mess,' is spoken words. That guy losing consciousness concurs, *clean in nothing but intent*. Some loser's brain has sided against him. Geiszler's back is starting to arch.

His third drift is clean.

In a way.

It's clean because he can't recall it, knows it happened, someplace blue and buried beneath the plate tectonics of a molten sense of self, there's *so little* he recalls and most of it is shouting. Newton get up, Newton get dressed, Newton when they get back in here communicate your *vanting out*, Newton if you faint inside this men's room I will flay you alive with the sharp edge of your long-lost trigonometry textbook do not test me do not breathe so fast you will be fine you will be *fine*. Blue light, confused thoughts, a consciousness in search of missing aperture.



He nearly falls but someone rights him, he needs to sleep but someone fights him.

His eyes are burning, he cannot feel his hands he cannot *exist this way* it is too hard; he cannot shut the doors that don't have hinges; he has no place to stand, let alone a way to leverage any order in his thoughts.

*Relax.*

The word is close and urgent, smooth and distant. Hands are pushing him back, hands are pulling off his glasses, an upward press of thumb opens one eye, then the other. Something holds his head in place. What is *happening* exactly? He thinks he's sitting up and this is Hermann; he thinks he's lost his hivemind—this is hell. The only thing collective consciousness cannot conceive is the terror of *aloneness*, and now the breach is closed; all dead parts are lost. Who knew that they were screaming, disembodied, silent, cross-linked? Active even in their prisons made of liquid aldehydes? He tries to scream, he cannot scream, he screams in all directions.

Something runs into his eyes and leaks across his face before it's wiped away.

His glasses are returned, but they are dark and they are not his glasses.

His third drift is clean.

In a way.

It's clean in that it cleans him out—his mind feels reinvented. Is this a plane? Are these *his* shades? Who dressed him in a *blazer*? The answer to that question stops typing and turns to look at him in tense anticipation. "Good show old sport," is all Newt says until he also says, "when's breakfast?" and, "whose glasses do you think these are? I'm sure that they aren't mine. I think they might be non-prescription shades."

Newt doesn't know what's happening, but nobody is screaming.

Hermann stares at him in long and neutral silence.

Newt considers anterograde amnesia while Hermann says, "go back to sleep."

'You're not the boss of me,' turns into, 'I don't care for your tone,' turns into, 'no, thank you,' turns into, 'no,' turns into, "meh," which is what he *actually says*, while reappropriating shoulder real estate.

Hermann adjusts his posture in a facilitating manner and confusingly pats Newt's *hand* in quiet reassurance, with a whispered, "idiot."

Even Descartes, prince of coordinates, might find this confusing, so Newt doesn't judge himself too harshly. He tries to remember if he's done anything stupid but comes up with echoed nonsense. The last thing he can remember is Seattle—

Is this the real life?  
Is this just fantasy?

Caught in a landslide,  
No escape from reality.  
Open your eyes—

Ow. What a terrible idea, Freddie Mercury, can you *not*? Unplug your mic and go home.

Hypothetical Rain's name is Actual Coral, and she does nothing to diminish Newt's sense of unreality by thanking him for his world-saving, calling him 'rad' and using the word 'sick' as a stand-in for 'awesome' while gradually winning Hermann over in a sustained display of total improbability and then telling Newt to take a nap on her exam table while the people with baller executive function talk it out in complex strings of words with more idea density than some losers can currently handle, and he just *does it* because he feels like maybe if he goes to sleep he can eventually wake up and see with eyes that aren't aflame. Maybe he'll Descartes his way to happy endings

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But how? His coordinate planes are rusted, filled with glue and dirt.

"There's so much *walking*," he says to Hermann, out of breath, half blind—he thinks his eyes are melting? He is stumbling across the planar tile of a deserted echo chamber hung with chandeliers.

"I know," Hermann replies, one hand on Newt, one hand on his cane, as theoretically exhausted as theoretically he gets.

"What if we just stop here?" he gasps in desperation.

"We cannot stop here," Hermann says. "We are *literally* in the hotel. Do *not* lose consciousness."

"Do you think that's a possibility?" Newt watches as his vision grays along its edges.

"No," Hermann says. "It is not. Keep *going*."

His inertia's bent on leaving him; he tries to fall in iterations—in doors, the elevator, and halfway down a hall—he's never quite successful until he's collapsing, uncontrolled, face first, and straight into a bed, so this *is* a hotel after all. He thinks he drifted, he thinks that screwed him up, he thinks he remembers why he did it and that was because *They'd* left him here, alone.

There's something that he's missing.

The horde in his head isn't there anymore.

Sodium carbonate is grinding in his skull. Someone, maybe Hermann, has pitched him off a hypnagogic cliff.

His third drift is clean, or so he tells himself. It must be, because his hypochlorite mind is oxidizing every thought he has.

When he wakes, the world feels real.

His hair's a mess, his muscles sore, his tongue is stuck against his palate, his eyes are burning, his head is pounding, he's tasting days-old blood, he's not sure where he is, he's much too hot, and someone has his shoes.

The room's a blur.

He isn't wearing all his clothes?

He lacks the mental resources for 'concern,' and so he tries to find his glasses.

Obligingly they find his fingers when his fingers find the nightstand. He puts them on, and an impersonal room sharpens into red relief.

It is evening.

There are hard drives on a desk.

There are folded clothes atop a shoulder bag.

There are two pairs of shoes on the floor.

There is a scrambled set of lines behind a frame that's reminiscent of a piece by Kupka, but is not.

This room seems less stationary than rooms he can remember.

But.

He's in a rented room, and rented rooms have bathrooms.

Getting up is trickier in practice than in theory and his nervous system sends him anxious autonomic signals while the thing's in progress but eventually he's standing with one hand on the wall.

After five more minutes he's contemplating an alarming version of himself who might have bled into his sclera and who could use a razor if he's got one, and who, like Newt, is gripping sink and wall.

"Well," he says to his reflection, "it seems you bought a week of stupid that you're slowly paying down."

*Brain*, he queries, *are you there?*

No, his brain informs him. *Try back later.*

*Thanks a lot*, he thinks, and fills a plastic cup. He chokes on rusted water and spits some mystery blood into the sink. The blood becomes less mystifying when his mouth reclaims its own pain variant from agony more generalized and head-shaped. Newt discovers that, at some point, he'd bitten the inside of his left cheek.

"Oh, you did not have a good day," he says, trying not to see his body art. "Did you."

His reflection gives him a pale and bloody step-off stare.

*Someone's been drawing Venn diagrams again*, his brain opines.

"Did you do *acid*?" Newt inquires, polite and nonjudgmental. He helps himself to the damp toothbrush he *really* hopes is Hermann's—because if not? Well, he's extremely screwed. He finishes his brushing and spits more minted blood into the sink. "Because if so? *Why*."

He splashes water on his face, runs hands through hair that's stiff with flaking glue. He finds a sticker on his temple and remembers someone mentioned EEGs. Could he still be in Hong Kong? He remembers walking in a grayish haze through different buildings and lying on a two tables. Sitting on a plane. Wearing Hermann's sunglasses, that's weird; it makes him nervous.

Two eyes, both red, snap back to the mirror.

The memory of drifting hits him like a slap unformed—blue, amorphous, so full of *longing* that he staggers, trips on nothing, and ends up on his knees, dry heaving on the floor beneath the burden of a nauseous desire.

"*Why* would you—" he gasps. His body tries to rid itself of things it doesn't have in blind pursuit of what it shouldn't want.

He lies down, his nose is bleeding, so he breathes in through his mouth, tips his head back, thinks of kittens, and does his best to prevent death in a foreign hotel bathroom because that would be tragically unfair.

To Hermann.

To Hermann, who he hopes is here. Somewhere. Around.

If Newt hasn't died already, he doesn't think he will.

*Drift number three?* he asks his brain. *You thought you could withstand it?*

His brain is MIA right now and not inclined to answer, a mental divahood that's going to make his life less good; *we already talked betrayal and how it's good for no one, brain.*

He pulls himself up, he washes his face, he wonders where his shirt is. He traces back along the wall to clothes that have been folded. He shakes them out and puts them on, foregoing socks and buttons. His shoes he leaves right where they are, tangled with their playmates.

Intent expands his field of view.

Hermann's backlit on the balcony. His hands are on the rail, his shoulders square and bathrobed, while in front of him the sun goes down behind a darkened Wall.

*'Sun sets disgusting'*, Dr. Geiszler tags this vista.

He has to hold the wall to cross the room.

It's the thing Bosch would have painted had he ever seen the Wall—the falling sun, a hellish red, a wall, a man in bathrobe. But who's that creep who stands in open doorways with a disregard for buttons and those eerie bleeding eyes?

*Hermann*, Newt begins, leaning edgewise on paned glass, *I'm sorry that I did this.*

The door is hard, his head is hot, his eyes are silicized if what was silicized could suffer.

*I'm sorry that I left you, that I dumped this at your feet—but you're for sure the better man. In a reversal of position I could not have pulled you out, all I'd have done was join you in some final, ending blaze. Did you think we might escape drift three? What kind of story is this? There'd be a third, I knew it, I knew it in that alley. We cannot leave a thing alone when hypotheses are proven. Even you cannot quite do it—why else would you be looking at the sea, the turning tide, the deepest trench, the bridges that might form there?*

Around him he can feel the ghostly glide as metric tons of displaced water stream across the scales he doesn't have.

*Too late, my time has come,*

*Sends shivers down my spine,*

*Body's aching all the time.*

*Goodbye everybody, I've got to go,*

*Got to leave you all behind and face the truth.*

Shut up, Freddie Mercury, *shut up.*

Newt pulls shirtsleeves down as far as they will come, gripping cuffs with fingers, feeling fabric tense across his back. He is too wrung out to be upset; he wipes his eyes on cotton shirt cuffs and tries to think of what he'll say that won't end with him a sobbing mess on Hermann's shoulder. Descartes is out, and so is 'thanks,' so is, 'sorry that I did this'. 'Hieronymus Bosch'd' might get him punched, coming out of nowhere,

but that's the avenue he'll take when he's pulled himself together, he'll comment on the vista. That should be safe—no one will cry, freak out, or lose it, in a perfect world, that is.

"Wall'd Sunset," Newton says, when he thinks his voice is steady. "Good band name."

Hermann turns to look at him.

Time passes.

Newt cannot help but track the things that change; he doesn't want to, and keeps them to himself.

San Francisco yields to Oakland. Hermann buys them both new clothes. Newt returns the clothes, or *would*, if he were leaving their apartment, which he's not and so he wears them. Hermann arranges him a job talk, Newt arranges, 'how about no'. Hermann wrests a standing offer out of UC Berkeley Neuroscience, and leaves it on a table made of pointed metaphor. Newt gets a little monomaniac and takes up with Descartes who leads him into Leibniz. No one *ever* mentions Nietzsche, *ever*, not now, not anymore. Hermann drags him out to dinner and they live with epistaxis. On the day Newt leaves their building, he walks a massive circuit through abandoned, ruined streets and completes it on the Wall, where he *knew* he would. He looks out at the sea—the running tide, the creep of life upon the outer concrete leaflet—but he just stands there, nothing happens, *nothing really matters, anyone can see*, so he walks back in the dark. Hermann studies eigenvalues and picks through zeta zeros at the times he's not distracted by the way that Newt will stand at windows, and bleed there, unprovoked.

When they argue, *really argue*, they stand distant and immobile, shouting, but unmoving, because they do not know if hands are clawed or not, and someone might get shoved through a window, someone's skull might get staved in with a cane.

But there are the times that Hermann pulls out shades and reads him *Neuron* while Newt lies in sunglassed darkness, attentive, listening; and the times he reads him Goethe when Newt's pulling down his shirtsleeves and staring towards the sea. There is the afternoon that Hermann spends in Newton's lab at Berkeley, setting up a rig, unasked, in waspish, quiet glee. There are the nights when no one dreams, or dreams are small and life-sized—broken strings and shipwrecked boats, dishabille, or seagulls.

There are the nights when Newt can sleep, the dawns he doesn't see.

Of those, there are not many.

But there are some.

## Chapter Eleven

*Geiszler victorious*, Newt tags this moment.

Oh sure, it might not *feel* quite like victory in the classical sense, what with this headache that seems to be the climax of a migraine that started with a crescendo he slept through; all the nociceptive receptors he has seem to be screaming a coordinated magnum opus in A-delta and C. It might not *look* quite right, either, it might not *look* all that victorious to an outside observer or even to a semi-inside observer who might or might not be wearing a bathrobe right about now, yup, nope, it probably doesn't *look* like what it *is*, but that doesn't change the *truth* of it, the verifiable subjective *yesness* of his sweeping win.

*Take a seat in my drift interface*, Newt thinks, *pull up a cognitive chair, and measure my subjective superposition if you think you can get away with it, I guarantee you that when you do it's going to collapse into something awesome*, he thinks, not certain who it is he's addressing. The hypothetical straw man in his head who's not into empirical validations of subjectivity? Whomever it is, it's not *his* brain—*his* brain is on vacation somewhere, hopefully somewhere nice. It's taking a leave of absence. That's fine. He supports his brain, even when it doesn't support him back, because *Newt*, unlike his *brain*, is *loyal*. Newt is, Newt is just—right now, he is just—he is, he is just—he is just *killing* this, he is *killing this*, he is *winning*; he has everything he wanted, he can look his past self in the face and he can say, *dude, you crushed it. You crushed it. Way to trade resources to get what you want, past-self, you are a lot more plucky than even I gave you credit for. Nice work.*

"You should try to eat," Hermann says.

"Yeah dude," Newt replies, shivering or shaking or tremoring subtly atop a hotel room bed. "Good idea. I will get right on that."

He doesn't *move* though, which is fine, there are a lot reasons for that, one—his eyes hurt and he prefers to keep them closed, two—his *head* hurts and that is related to all different kinds of things, the eye thing, the neck pain, the jaw pain, the mouth pain, and probably some kind of distressed vasculature thing that's going on anywhere there are openings in his skull, three—he's pretty cold and food doesn't seem worth it just right now, four—he's thrown up once already since waking up in this hotel room, five—he took a look at this incipient room-service dinner and it's *soup* which seems like a



disaster, though, to be fair, no more of a disaster than anything else is going to be, six—he's pacing himself, seven—the soup doesn't look *that* great, he's seen more appetizing soup in his life, that's for sure, eight—whatever, he's had a long day, probably, even if he did sleep through most of it for reasons that still aren't perfectly clear to him, nine—he's going to move in a little while, ten—nope, eleven—nothing's leaking out of him right now, he's not bleeding, he's not throwing up, he's got a little problem with the streaming eye thing he has going, he's not about to tag that 'crying' because it's not; obviously when the capillary beds in one's sclera blow out, the eye just tries to fix that misery right up, like a champ, like a thing evolved by natural selection to be a progressively more awesome swiss army-knife of sensory transduction with its sexy sexy rhodopsin; how many layers does the retina even *have*, it's a *lot*—maybe eight, maybe ten, he thinks it's ten—it's like a layer cake, no it's not, it's way more like a nested set of wet, multicolored, translucent tissue paper that gets signal transduction done like a boss even though it sometimes just falls off the back of the eye in a folding slide of biological wetness, yuck. That's less of a good job for evolution. The kaiju eye is better, a little more substantial, a little more engineered, well yeah, duh, it would be, put the photoreceptors on the surface if you're building things from scratch, *obviously*, and man, if one's really thinking about *literal* retinal layer cakes, just in terms of size the kaiju eye is really the kind of thing that yields up a satisfying visual on a macro scale when sliced into, and—

Nope, his brain thinks, making a belated reappearance that seems kind of ominous in its alarmed intensity before—

A *wall* of disorganized shrieking blue rises up from his memory; Otachi and dismembered neural tissue, some of which he *himself* cut apart—*how could you do that, how could you, you who knew, you who guessed, you who*—mortared together into something that might or might not be *real*, he can't tell, there's no way to know; there are *parts* of them still here, still on this planet; *parts* of them in formaldehyde; *parts of them* still *thinking*, like small animals everywhere are thinking; parts of them just *waiting* for him to come back to the drift; parts of them that maybe *don't have to wait*, that maybe *won't* have to wait, that maybe are right here, *right now*. He is terrified but *not alone*, his mind isn't a lockbox anymore it's wide open. He's sure people were *meant* to be this way.

Something snaps back into place, his thoughts turn less blue in a room that's mostly dark and slightly red and he sits up gasping, but his airway is clear, and he can breathe and he can move and it's *just him*, holding onto his shirt sleeves, his hands over his chest, and it's definitely just him, *only* him, in this bed, in his head, and that's great, that's

a *win*. *Okay, sure*, he thinks, trying to make friends with the screaming tenants of his subconscious mind. *Everyone just relax. You're not turning psychotic right here, right now, nope you are not*. Whatever had just happened was probably a flashback to something he doesn't fully remember, which is an interesting phenomenon in and of itself and a fun new thing that apparently his brain can do, traitorous, vacationing, talented bastard that it is; it's always been a little too good at everything to be any good to anybody at all.

*I can't work under these conditions*, his brain shrieks at him, deciding not to take responsibility for its own actions.

*I am so sorry, dude*, he apologizes, while trying to breathe, trying to decide if he's traumatized or coming down off a short hit of a brief and creepy high. *You are totally right about that. Please try to remember that we're a team though. A team*.

"Newton," Hermann says, with medium sharpness, medium concern, and maximum freaking out, like maybe it's not the first time he's said it. And oh, hey, speaking of inexplicably bathrobe clad German ex-pats, Hermann has decided to sit on the edge of the bed. Newt frankly finds this pretty baffling; this is for sure the weirdest thing they have ever done together—Newt, fully dressed and having periodic *Synapse-tastrophies in Blue*, Hermann with his still-damp hair and his improbable bathrobe. *Dr. Gottlieb*, Newt thinks, *I was not aware that your hair was capable of being wet, any more than I was aware that my eyes could hurt this much and still be functional. Welcome to this crappy hotel bed that I will now probably bleed alarmingly all over if the past twenty minutes have been any indicator of how the rest of the night is going to go*.

"Myeah," Newt says, confirming his identity and his ability to speak, which is about all he's game for at the moment.

Hermann rolls his eyes. It's not the whole shebang, it's not his maximum oh-please-Newton-what-preposterous-nonsense-is-coming-out-of-your-mouth-now, it's not even mid-range of-course-you-decided-not-to-make-more-coffee, it's a low-grade, everyday-exasperation kind of eye roll. "You are fine, and your night will only improve," he says, clipped and totally normal except for the looking away part and the part where he's got a good grip on Newt, a really solid grip right over Newt's right shoulder, which is less normal, Newt usually just sits on his own, and he is so cold.

"I think you can read my thoughts," Newt says.

"No," Hermann replies, doing some complicated stacking thing with pillows out of Newt's line of sight. "I cannot."

"I'm pretty sure you're wrong about that," Newt says, and while he'd like to expound on that topic, this is about the best he can really do while trying to make sure he can breathe at the same time. "I'm pretty sure you've *always* been wrong about that."

"I am not wrong," Hermann says, rolling his r just a little and shoving Newt in the general direction of the temple of pillows he has constructed against the headboard, and Newt just goes with it, because his muscles don't seem to be good for much these days other than locking up and giving out in that order.

"Who *are* you even," Newt says, though he knows, he knows down to the roots of his teeth, who Hermann is, knows it so completely that he can't fully separate knowledge of Hermann from knowledge of himself anymore. "Did you *steal* me from the PPDC?"

"No," Hermann says.

"Good," Newt replies.

"Possibly, there might have been a point at which the word 'abduction' was used by a member of the upper military echelons, but the situation has since been clarified."

Newt brings a shaking hand to his face. He rests it on his temple before gingerly sliding two fingers beneath his glasses. He's been in a high velocity skid straight toward a brick wall from the moment that the PPDC decided they needed one more data set on the anteverse following breach closure and all he remembers is the feeling of his own momentum in the face of blue-tinged brick and so, yeah, it's pretty understandable that he's confused to find that Hermann has managed to arrange for quantum tunneling on a macro scale, or whatever it is that he's done, because while it had been nice to fantasize about rescue from bureaucracy, he really hadn't *expected* any such thing, and can't imagine how Hermann might have pulled him through that metaphorical wall without some huge and actual personal cost.

"Don't touch your eyes," Hermann says, dragging Newt's fingers from beneath his glasses in a slow, controlled slide. "Your intraocular pressure is elevated."

"You're really annoying," Newt whispers, trying to pretend that Hermann actually *is* being annoying, irritating, an overeducated nag in an undereducated bathrobe, trying to pretend that he's really being anything at all other than outrageously *nice*, because he's pretty sure that if anyone, *especially* Hermann, is even *remotely* nice to him right now he's going to start crying hysterically and possibly not stop for hours because his brain is not around running the show like it's supposed to. "Has anyone ever told you that? How much trouble are we in right now?"

"Please do not worry about that at the present moment," Hermann says unevenly. "Please just try to relax, and trust that I am capable of handling this."

Hermann's definitely having the same problem that Newt is having when it comes to the runaway trajectory of thought and tone. Where have everyone's superegos gone? Who is driving these thought chariots? Why does he not understand the minutiae of what's happening here? Why is Hermann not wearing his clothes? Why is it so cold? How difficult must it have been for Hermann to get him from Hong Kong to San Francisco if Newt doesn't remember anything about it? Did he *actually* meet Hypothetical Rain, surfer neurologist, earlier or was that just a dream? Why does he feel so *bad*? How is it that *both* his eyes were affected by the really terrible decisions he made over the past three days? Will this headache ever go away? What would Descartes do right now? Who sent that team that fried his brain? Will they send another one? Should he change his name and disappear off the face of the planet, dragging Hermann with him? Should he make a paper chain and count down the days until he can drift again and he won't have to be alone in his own mind? Which does he prefer, the confused and unenlightened rage of dead and slowly fixing tissue, or the raging void that his thoughts can't quite fill? Is that a trick question? Who is going to water his plants that have spent months growing a little too well on the ledge of a now abandoned Hong Kong lab? What happened to his drift interface and can it now be used on *other* people? Will it? If he cloned a kaiju would that fix the screaming vacuum that makes up more than half his mind? How long has it been since he drifted? How many hours? How many times did he do it? How many times did they do it to him? How many seizures has he had? Will the PPDC pay his medical bills? Is he brain damaged? Is he capable of complex analytical tasks? Is this flurry of thoughts made scattershot his new, permanent deal? Why doesn't he have any clear memories of the span between seizure number two and twenty minutes ago? Is he going to retain memories of this? How long does he have to live? Out of all of the appalling things that have happened to him and to the planet how many of them are going to happen again and how soon? Why does he—

"Stop," Hermann says.

Yeah, like that's going to work. It would be nice if that worked, it would be *nice* if Newt could say, *stop it, brain, you realize you're cloistered coils of semi-solid goo, isolated by tight junctions and atypically thick basement membranes, there's really not anything special about you so just shut up already, god, no one wants to listen to the things you find interesting or the inappropriate questions you're forming just now, least of all me. Are*

*you not supposed to be on vacation? If you're not interested in cleaning up your messes then just stay away, and let me eat my soup and then throw up in relative peace.*

"What exactly am I supposed to be stopping?" Newt asks.

Surprisingly, Hermann looks like he doesn't know how to answer that one. This makes sense to Newt, sort of. It should, he supposes, because he *asked* like he wanted an answer, meaning that he *himself* doesn't know. It's hard to put a *label* on anything that's happening, but that's all to the good, he supposes, and maybe one of the few things that's preventing him from entirely freaking out, because he's pretty sure that whatever label gets affixed to whatever is happening right now, he's not going to like it, he's not going to like it *at all*. No one is doing any labeling at the moment, it's just bathrobes and cold soup and a room where no one is turning on the light even though the sun is well on its way to totally, entirely set.

Newt looks at Hermann, *really* looks at him, and the more Newt looks, the more awful things seem. Hermann is giving him an exhausted, hopeful look, like maybe some kind of miracle will happen and Newt will start making sense or stop doing whatever it is that he's doing that Hermann wishes he wouldn't. Like maybe Newt will magically think of a way to eat soup without throwing up or needing fine motor control. Like maybe Newt will start fixing whatever it is that's been dissassembled, because *Newt* is generally the one who constructs things—interfaces, arguments, layered shots with witty names, sick guitar riffs, prototypes and proposals, stylized representations of kaiju to transfer to his skin, patch clamp apparatuses, mobile stereotactic drift interfaces, relocatable blackboards, agendas, playlists, routes through foreign cities. Hermann is, at heart, a critical thinker, better at saying no than saying yes, and right now he's got the look of a guy who's surrounded by a nest of disassembly and isn't really sure how things should be coming together, because that's not his job, not this logistical stuff, he *predicts* things and he *models* them, he picks out patterns where no patterns are, he's a redirector of effort, misapplied. He builds things out of code and draws up plans for Jaegers, but he's less at home with chemistry and colleagues bleeding from their eyes.

"Why are you wearing a bathrobe?" Newt asks.

"Because the laundry service is washing our clothes," Hermann replies.

Surprise that actually surprises no one—this answer ups his anxiety. Newt is pretty sure he's *wearing* his clothes; that's what it *looks like*, this button-down white shirt and these black jeans are most definitely *his*. Is he wrong about this? Is he *not* wearing clothes? If he *thinks* he's wearing clothes and he's *not*, his problems are more profound than he is really prepared to handle at the present moment. Alternatively,

could he be wearing clothes that aren't actually his? If so, they fit really well. If *both* their clothes are being washed, which makes sense because Hermann distinctly said "our," then why does *he* have clothes? Why is there a clothing disparity between them? If there *were* to be a clothing disparity it should certainly go the other way, since Newt cannot conceive that he had been in any state to pack anything *at all* prior to their departure. What had he been wearing when Hermann had pulled him out of Medical? Had he even been wearing clothes? He has *no idea*.

"Newton," Hermann says carefully.

"Yup," Newt replies, trying to believe that he's having no problems with getting sufficient air to support all the anxious catabolism that his cells are kicking into gear all over his vital organs. "I um—" he breaks off, expression neutral, eyes fixed on the dim patterns that the geometric designs on the bedspread make in the deepening darkness, about to lay down a hand of cards that he'd just as soon keep close to his chest, because he's certain that he doesn't understand everything about what has happened over the past several days and he's certain he doesn't understand everything about what's happening now in this hotel room, and he's certain that his own mind will remain a horrible, closed-off wasteland of continuous, circuitous torture for the foreseeable future, and he really has no desire to reveal to *anyone*, least of all *Hermann*, how profoundly *crap* his current hand of cards is.

"Everything will be fine," Hermann says, not looking at him, because Hermann is arguably the worst liar on the planet and they both know it.

"Yeah," Newt says, his fingers wrapped around the shirt cuffs that had better be *real*, and had better be *his*, and had better be *shirt cuffs*. "I know, dude, I just, ah, I was just trying to rationalize our counterintuitive clothing disparity."

Hermann looks at him, a sharp little changing of lines in the dimness. "I packed an extra outfit for you. There's nothing counterintuitive about your slovenly track record."

"Well not when you put it that way," Newt replies, temporarily relieved. Hermann has a point, in that he's already managed to bleed on this shirt. Some of his anxiety yields its headspace straight back to his headache and he has the urge to touch his eyes, to sort of press on them and then to maybe sort of claw them out of his head. "Do you think you could tell me," he breaks off the sentence prematurely, needing to gear himself up for its informative, ending half, needing this moment when it could still turn into something totally reasonable like, 'what the diameter of the open transdimensional portal is and how it varies with mass of the transported organism,' or, 'when you first encountered Descartes did you realize what a magnificent bastard he was going to

turn out to be,' or really *anything at all* other than what he's actually going to say, which is, "what happened?"

Hermann is quiet and looking away and breathing unevenly and Newt immediately regrets the request.

"At a first approximation," Hermann says finally, "you ceded to a formalized request from the PPDC and spent three days 'collaborating' with them regarding drift technology. At some point during those three days you suffered at least one seizure and were subsequently medicated. I forged a letter of resignation and removed you from the medical bay. We boarded a direct flight from Hong Kong to San Francisco while I used what minimal institutional goodwill I possess to prevent the pair of us being detained and taken into military custody. After a three-hour delay, we were released by Customs. I was—concerned that you required hospitalization, and so I arranged for you to be immediately evaluated by a UCSF neurologist. Her opinion on this was equivocal and so I brought us here. You have been sleeping with mixed success for approximately eight hours."

"Oh," Newt replies, not really sure what 'mixed success' might mean, and hoping it doesn't mean anything like 'periodic screaming,' or 'choking on blood,' or 'occasional talking about horrifying subjects'. He estimates he remembers something like twenty to thirty percent of what Hermann has just described. "You *forged* a letter of resignation?" Newt asks, deciding he would prefer to hear about his colleague's adventures in disingenuousness than his own adventures with synchronized waves of neuronal activity. He has no interest in speculating on the probability of a future or current seizure disorder at this point in time.

"Yes," Hermann says, with a crisp primness. "Rest assured, it was atypically professional."

"You should have written 'suck it' on a napkin. That's what I would have done."

"I considered it," Hermann replies, "but non-standard paper sizes and textures are difficult to force through the high volume scanners upon which modern bureaucracy is built. I wanted this expedited."

"You're a little bit of a magnificent badass when the mood strikes you," Newt says, "I've told you this, right?"

"I am nothing of the kind," Hermann replies, and there's a waspish edge to his voice that Newt can't pin an etiology on in this kind of anonymizing darkness.

If Hermann wants to be waspish, that is *fine* by Newt. That is absolutely okay and eight hundred percent reasonable. Newt has dragged the guy into and through a whole tangled mess of legal and logistical and logical barbed wire of the metaphorical variety, and he is *sorry* about that; maybe if Hermann hadn't come after him and Hannibal Chau hadn't been *eaten*, and had been more of a nice guy, *Chau* would have been the guy who decided that drifting with dead kaiju was cool, was for *winners*, and then maybe—maybe what? Yeah, okay, no, this is a terrible fantasy backup memory Newt's constructing, because for one—he is pretty sure he wasn't then and isn't now interested in seeing the inside of Hannibal Chau's head, and for two—he had *won*. He needs no fantasy backup memories because he had *been right*, and he had *done* all the right things within his purview, and yeah, sometimes a whole branching tree of the most flawless decision making still dumped one in a pit of total despair, but that was the stochastic sucker punch delivered by the game of life, man, and sometimes you could get around it and shut transdimensional breaches like a baller and sometimes your own neurochemistry would punish you for the rest of your miserable, transient existence, and that's just the way it was, and is, and would be, and he had signed up for this. He'd read the fine print and he'd scrawled his name in craptacular penmanship on the form and then he'd designed and donned the metaphorical t-shirt; he'd donned it multiple times. Unfortunately, he had let Hermann sign himself up as well, and that was kind of a poor choice on Newt's part, understandable, arguably a defensible idea at the time it had happened, but still a poor choice. So now, given that Hermann is justifiably upset about a whole set of things that Newt has pretty crap insight into at the present moment, he's not really sure what to do. Ideally, he would say something that would mitigate any aspect of what's happening here, but he absolutely does not trust himself to do any such thing. Given the current status of *everything*, he'll probably lead with something totally innocuous like 'I'm sorry?' or 'okay,' and then things will be awkward and he'll keep talking and his discourse will end up devolving to the point that something unfortunate happens, because there's a whole lot brewing in his subconscious mind that he doesn't particularly care to inventory right now, and he's not sure he can keep all of it *shut up* wherever it is that he's managed to shut it up and he's *also* not sure what's going to happen if it makes an appearance in force, but he thinks that would probably not be the best.

Hermann pats Newt's knee, either because he feels like he needs to apologize for his thin veneer of waspishness, which says terrible things about his impression of Newt's mental state, or because he's picking up on Newt's train of thought, or because Newt is really having a problem keeping his internal monologue internal. This is a problem



that's been going on for *days*—his inability to tell whether he's talking and Hermann is responding to stuff he says verbally, or whether he's *not* and Hermann has some kind of intermittent window into Newt's head when neither one of them is paying attention. Either way, he doesn't view this as a positive thing. He's also pretty sure it's option number two, because he feels like he would have noticed this monologue problem previously had it been going on for a long time. Maybe it's a post-drift phenomenon, *maybe*, but he's pretty sure he knows when he's talking and when he's not. Perseverating on this verbally isn't going to do him any favors at the present moment, since Hermann seems to be worried that he's not quite mentally intact and has already made his thoughts on the thought-reading pretty clear. So he won't think about that right now.

"How do you feel?" Hermann asks.

He feels awful. Unmitigatedly awful. He feels like the guy who's going to find out whether it's possible to die of head pain. He feels like he might go blind, probably because it's dark and his eyes are trying to implode under their own elevated intraocular pressure. He thinks he might throw up again, literally any time, but especially if he has to swallow any more blood. His muscles are sore and overtaxed and not doing a very good job with *anything* he asks of them. He's trying to *stay calm*, because he's not sure if he can *physiologically handle* the amount of freaking out that his unsupervised brain is trying to jump-start about every thirty seconds or so.

"Pretty good," Newt says.

It's getting so dark in the room that Newt really can't tell whether or not Hermann buys this at all. Probably not, considering the guy dragged him halfway across the planet, flew with him in a plane over the Pacific—they must have passed over or near the place where—

His thoughts turn bright, the room lights up in a haze of blue-violet, all his muscles decide to contract in response to a simultaneous double spike of utter revulsion and raging desire; if the breach still existed *there would be no force on this planet that would prevent him from*—but it *doesn't*, it *doesn't exist* anymore he can *feel* that it *doesn't* in some kind of weird and horrible phantom limb phenomenon. His brain chooses this moment to make a vengeful reappearance, riding him down on its warpath of vindictive triumph over whatever part of him feels *wronged* by that which he has done. *I did this*, his brain shrieks at him, *I was the one who cut them off, the one who destroyed them, the one who sliced into their dead emissaries, the one who submerged still active neural tissue in formalin, and I'd do it again, I'd do it again*—

Newt is dry heaving into a trashcan when his thoughts lose their azure edge.

He manages to *stop doing that* and then to mostly relax.

"Pretty good," Hermann repeats dryly, still holding the trashcan.

"That was a lie," Newt whispers.

"Oh really," Hermann replies.

"Believe it or not," Newt rasps, feeling the warm pressure of an imminent episode of epistaxis.

"I'm going to turn on the light."

It is only *after* the bedside lamp comes on with a click that Newt realizes that was a cue to *shut his stupid eyes*. He gets it done, but not before being stabbed right in the retinas by too many photons. He pulls his glasses off and claps a hand over both eyes right around the time his nose starts bleeding again. He tries to angle his head so that he's not going to end up swallowing most of it, and manages to get the sleeve he's dedicated to blood-control under his face, but that's about all he's good for.

He's done.

His organ systems have all made a good effort, but there's not going to be any more sitting or thinking or worrying about blood on bed sheets. There's just going to be lying here, curled on his side, freezing to death in an overly air-conditioned room in a temperate, maritime region of the world, one hand over his eyes, one sleeve kind of under his face.

Hermann does some muttering in German, and the parts of it that Newt is getting seem to mainly deal with how much of an unmitigated mess Newt is, bad decisions of all kinds, and stupidity in the abstract.

Privately, Newt agrees with the gestalt of Hermann's private monologue. Publically, he decides to disclose, "I threw up earlier and then used your toothbrush." He's not really sure why. It seems like the thing to do. Honesty. Yup.

Hermann makes an aggrieved, disgusted sound and starts deconstructing the pillow ziggurat he built earlier for purposes unclear to Newt.

"Sorry," Newt slurs. "It seemed really necessary to me at the time."

"I'm sure," Hermann replies, doing some blanket yanking and arranging, mostly underneath Newt, who is really not capable of getting out of his way right now.

"Differential toothbrush benefit to me versus you was, like, really high, dude," Newt says, trying not to cough.

"So you felt entitled." Hermann drags him up into a seated position, with a slow, deliberate effort that Newt manages to help out with a little bit, while still keeping one hand over his eyes. A tissue gets shoved into his other hand, and Newt uses it to pinch his nose shut.

"I don't know if 'entitled' is the word I would choose," Newt replies, feeling lightheaded, his eyes streaming behind the shuttered darkness of his hand. "It was more like—given that I've ruined your life, what's a toothbrush, really, in the grand scheme of things?"

"You have not ruined my life," Hermann says, too unsteadily and way way way way way too nicely for Newt to really sit here and take, "so I will thank you to leave my future toothbrushes *alone* and not subject them to ill-founded fits of nihilism that you use to justify your unthinking gratification of your immediate material needs. I will, however, cede you this *particular* toothbrush, if only because you have already contaminated it."

"Thanks man," Newt says, cracking his fingers for a brief, painful visual so that when he folds like a bad hand he manages to do it in the direction of Hermann's bathrobed shoulder because it's either that or fall out of this sitting position that his core isn't really up to maintaining for a prolonged period.

Hermann helps him out with an academic-bro type of manly solidarity that includes being the thing that Newt is leaning against and also some awkward shoulder patting that turns a little less awkward over time when Newt neither pulls away nor says anything about it. Technically, this might even be considered a *hug*, but Newt has no plans to tag it that way. Not that Newt has anything *against* embraces in the abstract, in fact, he engages in them frequently. This is not a hug though. Mostly, this is just an expeditious way to keep Newt's currently bleeding capillary beds above the level of his heart. Mostly.

His brain is finally starting to feel like a matched set for his body, slowing down, struggling through thought-sludge, powering up and down in a slow strobe of intermittent and inappropriate clarity and he wonders where Mako is right now, what she's doing, half a world away, her professional cohort mostly dead and her family all dead, again. He flashes back to the public shelter in a venomless, colorless memory of a cracking sound and twitches faintly. Wonders if he's falling asleep or dying, knows it's the former when his hearing kicks into something hyperacute and hyperimmediate. Wonders what it *is*, wonders what does it *mean* when his thoughts turn blue; he can

remember it happening before, can remember his own back arching like it had been someone else's, which had been weird, he's not sure he likes that.

Newt pulls the tissue away from his nose and tries to decide if he's still bleeding.

It seems like no, so he drops his hand, too tired to keep it attached to his face if it doesn't really *need* to be there. Like the hand he's got over his eyes. That one is staying for the duration.

Hermann does some readjustment and Newt is lying down, mostly flat, and now, topologically under blankets. He's not sure how *that* happened; there had been some kind of fancy surface manipulation that had arranged this, but what does one expect when one hangs out with a mathematician? Lying down makes Newt feel substantially sharper, probably because it helps his autonomic nervous system make better decisions about bloodflow.

"Newton?" Hermann says.

"Yeah dude," Newt slurs, "I'm only *mostly* dead."

"Good," Hermann replies. "I will be back shortly."

He's pretty sure he's blown some fuses in his brain, or, maybe he's still in the process of blowing them. When events occur only within the confines of one's own cranium it's hard to be objective about what's truly taking place. It's not *impossible* to be objective, not anymore, because someone could drift with him and say, yep, Geiszler's slowly or maybe rapidly going nuts, it's an observable phenomenon, based firmly in the electrochemistry of the guy's prefrontal cortex, which, let me tell you, friend, is not looking so good at the moment. This observable reality would be corroborated by the fact that literally everyone who's ever met him could have told him that this was where things were trending, and many of them did, over and over again, and it's not that he doesn't *listen*, it's just that he set about to create choices for himself, but those choices turned out to be moral imperatives that he then did a bad job framing as such to his peers and superiors. Having poor metaphorical penmanship doesn't absolve one from the duty to act, though, so he had. Acted. Like a winner.

*Please do not be connected to the kajju anteverse, brain*, he thinks in a running glaze of words that seem to only partially form. *Please also do not be connected to scattered and formalin-fixed, dead, cloned, alien, war machines who understandably don't like you that much right now. Please do not be connected to Hermann. Please be an island. Please be part of no main.*

*You have a lot of nerve to be making requests at this point, don't you think?* His brain asks, deciding to make an appearance.

*I see what you did there,* Newt replies. *It's nice to know that pun-making will be a skill I retain to the end. Because that's important.*

*You are truly insufferable,* his brain replies.

*Who replaced you with Hermann?* Newt asks vaguely.

*You did,* his brain snaps. *Several days ago. When you drifted.*

"What?" Newt says, startled, opening his eyes in a painful haze to see Hermann, blurred and sitting on the bed. "Oh god. I think I'm hallucinating?"

"Well it wouldn't be the first time," Hermann replies, putting one hand on Newt's forehead and managing to get eyedrops into Newt's right eye before Newt figures out that was his plan. "In fact, it would not even be the first time *today*."

"A little *warning* would be nice," Newt snarls, pulling away, blinking something that stings out of already stinging eyes, "what *is* that?"

"Do *not* move," Hermann snaps, managing to do the other eye with Newt's half-hearted cooperation. "These are eyedrops."

"I *know* they're eyedrops, dude," Newt snaps. "What is *in them*? Anything? Or are you just watering my fried capillary beds?"

"For someone who is ostensibly hallucinating," Hermann says, opening a pair of sunglasses and putting them on Newt, "allow me to compliment you on your coherency."

"Noted, dude," Newt says, identifying the sunglasses thing as a thing that had happened before, and wondering if Hermann had also explained the eyedrop thing to him previously, and if so, how many times. "But—"

"Their purpose is to reduce intraocular pressure," Hermann says. "You may recall I mentioned that yours was elevated due to inflammatory obstruction of outflow tracts within the eye."

This seems extremely reasonable to Newt, unfortunately. It does not necessarily bode well for his already sub-par vision.

"Both the medical team at the PPDC and Dr. McClure have expressed reasonable confidence that your vision will make a full recovery."

Ah. Good. But—

"Dr. McClure?" Newt asks.

"Coral," Hermann says.

"Hypothetical Rain?" Newt asks.

"Her name is *Coral*," Hermann replies.

"That was *real*?" Newt asks.

"Yes," Hermann replies.

"Does she have an *eyebrow ring*?" Newt asks.

"Yes," Hermann replies.

"Does she *look* a little bit like me?" Newt asks, still skeptical.

"Yes," Hermann replies.

"Have I asked you all these things? Previously, I mean?" Newt clarifies, because Hermann, from what he can see of the other man's dim and extremely blurred outline, seems more amused than traumatized.

"No," Hermann replies. "You are unmistakably vastly improved."

"Ugh," Newt says, not in the mood to contemplate the kinds of things that have likely been coming out of his mouth over the course of the past day. "You can see why I might think that I hallucinated Actual Coral, though."

"Yes," Hermann says, twisting the top off a bottle of something that Newt wishes his lenses and retinas were capable of resolving but seems like it might be a bottle of prescription medication. "Entirely reasonable."

*That's probably an anti-epileptic*, his brain says, startling him with abrupt and useful conjecturing.

"And this would be the advertised anti-epileptic?" Newt asks, "which I do not *need*, by the way, probably. I'm pretty sure that I only have seizures when I give them to myself by putting my brain into an overly excitable state, voltage-wise."

"Yes," Hermann says, putting the pill in Newt's hand, "and though I hope you're correct, let's not test the *veracity* of your claim."

Newt manages to get himself up on one elbow for the span of time required to drink blood-flavored water and swallow some kind of GABAesque agonist or whatever the kids are taking to avoid seizures these days.

"Try to keep that down," Hermann advises, totally unhelpfully.

"Yeah okay," Newt says, with as much eye rolling as he can pack into his uncooperative vocal cords. "Sure. Good idea, man."

"Shut up," Hermann replies, with flagrantly outrageous fondness that he's not even bothering to hide and that's freaking Newt out a little bit. "Do you think you can—"

"Do not even say it," Newt says, doing his absolute best *not* to think about lukewarm soup, attempting to eat it, or the experience of his gastrointestinal tract rejecting it and violently sending it back from whence it had come. "The answer is no. Do not negotiate, do not hedge, do not persist, do not refer even obliquely to that stuff on the table over there."

Hermann sighs and drags his bad leg onto the bed, elevating it kind of like maybe he's been walking on it for hours and hours as he drags Newt through walls and over the surfaces of planets, rescuing him from foreign cities and nefarious bureaucracies. Maybe just the one planet. Maybe no wall dragging happened, except for the metaphorical kind.

"You are literally the best, man," Newt says. "And kind of also the worst."

Hermann exhales, short and sharp.

Probably, if Newt could actually see his expression, it would be a glare.

"Wait let me qualify," he says, his tongue not fully cooperating with the signals his brain is sending. "You are probably literally the worst person to be sharing a brain with, if that's what you're doing, what *we're* doing, what you're doing to me sometimes, because, look, I know that you don't believe me but I'm pretty sure that there's some kind of weirdness going on with you and my inner monologue, and I'm not sure what this periodic blue-edged thing that happens to my brain here and there is, but I don't think it's *good* and I don't want it spreading, not to you, not like some kind of horrible neural net thing and this *really* creeps me out, okay, right? Listen to this. Kaiju, like terrestrial cephalopods, have some element of neural decentralization, it's part of why the drifting with fixed tissue even works at all, it's also what makes them so fast, can you imagine if all those motor programs were centralized? That would be ridiculous. But my *point* is that whole networks operate with relative independence and so, crap, what if they have this whole thing going, those guys in the jars, and me, sometimes, or not, I don't know, I don't *get* it, but what if they, what if they can, what if—"

Hermann decides to lie down next to him, and this makes Newt stop talking, shift laterally in a poor show of coordination, and then say, "are you okay?" in that order.

"Yes," Hermann says, most definitely meaning 'no', because, hi, the guy is wearing a bathrobe and pretty much just collapsed into total defeat next to Newt on a hotel room bed. This night just keeps getting weirder and more alarming and it occurs to Newt that now is maybe not the best or most tactful time to think aloud about the various ways that he may be losing himself to a disembodied hive mind and/or infecting Hermann with his own problems.

Hermann has had *hours* to think about these things already and is probably light years ahead of Newt when it comes to a) insight into problems possessed by himself, Newt, or both, and b) the implications thereof.

"I'm pretty sure I've still got my genius-level IQ," Newt whispers, "and most of my charming personality—"

He breaks off again as Hermann brings his hands to his face.

"And so do you," Newt continues, with all the valiance his borrowed shades and blurring diction and exhausted brain will allow, "so we've got a good chance of making things turn the way we'd like them to turn."

"Go to sleep," Hermann says, sounding like he underestimated the amount of air he was going to need to complete his sentence, "you atrocious man."

"*You're* the atrocious one," Newt replies. "You're not even *wearing any clothes*, by Jove. How uncouth. How offensively irregular. Is that *blood* on your bathrobe, sir? How dare you. Remove yourself from my personal space, if you would be so good, I simply *cannot* countenance such—"

"I will smother you with this pillow," Hermann breaks in, conjuring one of the things up from somewhere, maybe from the graveyard of Newt's dismantled bedroom ziggurat.

"I am not even worried," Newt says, shifting laterally again with the poor coordination of a musculoskeletal system on furlough. "I bet, post-drift, meaning now, meaning today, meaning any time, we could have a British-off, and I would *win*."

"You would not win. There is also nothing more antithetical to the concept of Britishness than a 'British-off'."

"Myeah," Newt says slowly. "Either you're correct about that, or you're *so* correct that you've flipped your correctness pendulum right over the bar and into the territory of very much wrong."

"That makes no sense," Hermann replies.



"Yes it does," Newt says. "Think French Revolution man, you know, Thermidorian Reaction post Reign of Terror, except for where the Reign of Terror is your statement about British-offs, and—okay, fine, not my best work analogy-wise but you expected *what*, dude?" Newt lets his eyes fall closed behind borrowed shades. "*Last* week someone drugged me into *this* week, which I'm thankful for, I *guess*, depending on their motivations, which I'll probably never discover, and the metaphor still works, man, I don't even *get* the Anglophile thing you've got going, I mean you're from the *Continent*; culturally you're supposed to look askance at the guys across the channel."

"I look askance at no one," Hermann says.

"More like *everyone*," Newt replies, nearly able to hear the sound of Hermann rolling his eyes, watching his own inner landscape begin to fire randomly, trying like a champ to integrate whole swaths of memory and experience that aren't its own in terrifying and glorious detail. He can hear the slide of chalk over an accommodating surface, the sound of wings beating against thinning atmospheric pressure, and stranger things, the twang of snapping catenaries the rhythm of his voice from a perspective not his own—is that really what he sounds like? Behind his closed eyelids he sees the sea in triplicate perspective, different piers and different ports, over water and beneath it—a random, synaptic, kaliedoscopic, ocean-colored collage of a decade spent attacking and defending the Pacific Ring of Fire.

It's going to be a rough night.

This and all the rest.

"I am going to apologize," Newt says. "In advance and, also, retrospectively."

"Please do not apologize," Hermann whispers, not turning out the light, not saying anything else.

## Chapter Twelve

Hermann is no stranger to sleepless nights.

In point of fact, he cannot currently recall a period in his life predating this perpetual exhaustion that seems to have infected his entire sense of self. He traces back along linear stretches in the webbed interrelationships that define his own past experience, his eyes fixed on the off-white ceiling of a hotel room, lit to dusky yellow by the warm spread of the LED lamp on the bedside table. He searches for some episode from his childhood that contains anything of the energy, anything of the true *enthusiasm* that he knows he once felt for entire swaths of his intellectual life, before the time that solution sets, or the lack thereof, had been linked with death on apocalyptic scales, but every time, every *single* time he makes the attempt, he ends up in foreign territory. The memories that present themselves are not his own; they're too full of recklessness and anxiety and, worst of all, *trial and error*, a problem-solving method he prefers *not* to utilize if he has *any* other choice. There is something uncomfortably vicarious about this mental exercise, in the accidental hedonistic slide of *someone else's* hands over the custom circuitry of a remembered electric guitar that *he* never wired, one that he has never *touched* at all, never *will* touch—

Next to him, Newton jerks into a half-seated position, his hands coming up, fingers brushing the edges of the sunglasses he still wears, even in sleep.

Hermann flinches, startled. His pulse pounds a fast and painful rhythm through his still sensitive right eye.

Newton falls back in a rapid and entire loss of tension that would be much more alarming if Hermann hadn't been watching variations of this play out for *hours* without any *obvious* ill effects.

Hermann pulls in a measured breath and tries to decide whether the man has actually awoken or not, but Newton neither moves nor speaks and so Hermann says nothing.

His *own* dreams have been difficult to bear in the aftermath of drifting—immersive, exhausting, unbearably intense, and permitting no insight into their own nature. He wakes unsure of whom he is, unsure, at the worst of times, of *what* he is. Historically, he had been an intermittently lucid dreamer, usually retaining or coming to a sense of awareness, of *ownership* over the random unconscious firings of his own well-ordered thoughts. Not so now. Now, his dreams plunge him back into the drift, back into a tripled perspective laid down simultaneously but apparently amenable to mental

parsing. His dreaming mind seems to be prying apart three sets of memories as he sleeps and bricking them down into their own separate neural tracts.

He's certain that this is progress.

He's certain that this is a good thing.

That it's necessary.

He's certain that even though he has *no desire* to dream of amphibious assault on cities where he's *lived*, where he's *worked*, where he's *known people*, no desire to feel the destruction he had opposed so long and so tirelessly as if it is the work of his *own hands*—he's *certain* that these unwanted memories will, eventually, be worked over and processed and laid to rest somewhere at the foundations of his mind, where they will not haunt him anymore, where they will buckle beneath the pressure of all he is and all he was—all he had *always been* and will *continue to be*.

He's certain that, eventually, the nights he dreams *as Newton Geiszler*, of the ever-present urgency and the blazing neural circuitry, will lose their ontological uncertainty, he's positive that they'll lose their painful edge, their unusual auditory quality, their exhausting, multicolored spread of forced voyeurism into a history not his own. Hermann has spent a lifetime dreaming without sound, and he finds the greatest hits of *The Superconducting Supercollider* to be a bit much to take at times when he would like to be *resting*.

It has been approximately one hundred and forty four hours since he drifted in a Hong Kong alley. Of that gross of hours, Hermann estimates he has spent only thirty of them sleeping, which is certainly insufficient. Sleep deprivation will do him no favors when it comes to memory processing. Nevertheless, despite this realization, despite his own profound exhaustion, he is incapable of falling asleep.

This is entirely and unambiguously Newton's fault.

The other man twitches again, faintly this time, in a direct, if unconscious, validation of his own culpability in Hermann's raging insomnia.

Hermann glares at him, trying to will the man into a sleep state even *slightly* less agonized.

Hermann now has a borrowed knowledge of human sleep cycles because it's a topic Newton had taken an interest in at some point. This exogenous information has a foreign and qualitative feel to it for something that's based in a concept as quantitatively solid as voltage fluctuation. It isn't nearly sufficient nor complete enough for Hermann to determine, even in an approximate way, what might be going on in his

colleague's head. He's formulated two competing theories. Either Newton is having nightmares that are briefly waking him when he drops into REM sleep and resetting his sleep cycle, or the man isn't even *making* it into REM, and what Hermann is witnessing has been a long progression of hypnic jerks as Newton's mind panics its way out of falling into anything but the most shallow of sleep states.

Either way, it isn't ideal.

Newton has, for as long as Hermann has known him, existed in a state of perpetual sleep deprivation courtesy of unrelenting insomnia coupled with intent interest in his work. Newton is hardly singular in either of these respects; the pressure of global annihilation tends to unsettle even the most imperturbable individuals over time. Hermann can personally attest to that. The man *is* singular in that his capacity to intellectually function in the face of catastrophic insomnia is preserved well past the point he loses other crucial skills, such as impulse control, manual dexterity, and good judgment. This had become apparent to Hermann only a few months after their initial acquaintance, when the man had volunteered for six consecutive shifts of back-to-back cleanup and tissue retrieval following the Seattle kaiju attack, then returned to their shared lab, instigated a confrontation, the underpinnings of which Hermann still, *to this day*, even post-drifting, does not understand, but that had centered around some perceived slight to polymerases *as a class of enzymes*. It had been their first *real* altercation, meaning that Hermann had temporarily dropped his perpetual professional courtesy, and Newton had engaged in limited property destruction which had culminated in an entirely unnecessary table-upending, for which Newton apologized to him later by showing up unexpectedly at his door with one arm bandaged post-body art acquisition, holding vodka, licorice, and the compiled video footage of six recent kaiju attacks in *the* most bizarre attempt at intrapersonal conciliation that Hermann had *ever* witnessed in his *life*. For one thing, vodka and licorice failed to compliment one another, in his opinion. For another, watching footage of urban destruction was not exactly Hermann's preferred leisure activity, but he had invited Newton into his room anyway. It had taken the man all of twenty-five minutes and half a shot of vodka to fall asleep on Hermann's floor in irresponsibly total exhaustion. Hermann had found this an inconvenient, if extremely informative, half-week.

Hermann knows, with depressing certitude born from a decade of experience, that Newton will likely to spend the foreseeable future with raging, uncontrollable insomnia, to the point that he will become almost entirely insufferable. The only reason this incipient misery hasn't *already* begun is because the man has been pushed to the edge of complete collapse and is potentially still under the influence of

whatever it was that was given to him at the PPDC. *Something* is overriding whatever cognitive circuitry is trying to wake the man up every five to ten minutes.

He regrets not asking Dr. McClure about the half-life of the benzodiazepines that had turned up in Newton's bloodwork. He should have the opportunity to do so shortly, however, as she had scheduled the pair of them for follow-up EEGs after forty-eight hours. Perhaps, at that time Hermann will be able to pay *more* attention to the state of their brain waves, and *less* attention to a terrifyingly semi-coherent colleague who—

Newton twitches, his head snapping back, his spine arching, and Hermann sits, because he doesn't care at all for the look of *this* particular twitch-variant, and he wants to ensure the man isn't about to *start seizing*. But Newton just relaxes; he doesn't begin seizing, doesn't come awake, doesn't move again, doesn't make a sound, locked back solidly into whatever it is that his mind is torturing him with. It feels cruel not to wake him, not when Hermann is *certain* that his unconscious mind is creating an experience both immersive and intolerable, if his own nightmares can be used as any kind of metric.

*Did you drift again?* he thinks, not daring to ask it aloud even now, already suspecting that Newton *must* have done it, they *must* have asked it of him, and he *must* have given in, not knowing, not having *any idea*, what it would be like to drift when the breach was not just closed but *annihilated*.

He sighs.

He wonders if Newton would be *capable* of telling him what had happened, should Hermann choose to ask.

He will put off finding out until he can't stand it any longer.

He doesn't *want* to know.

He *needs* to know.

He needs to know how correct Newton had been about PPDC-sanctioned violations of agency, needs to know how much the man knew *going in*, how much he *actually agreed to* and *why*, needs to know what caused his second seizure, needs to know, needs to be *told* that it wasn't the *drift* that did it, because he *wouldn't* have *drifted again*, not with dead and confused fragments of tissue, cut off from the hivemind of the anteverse, or, *worse*, with some kind of still navigable mental connection, made possible by quantum entanglement on a macro scale or some other phenomenon that Hermann hopes he'll *never* need to understand.

He spends another twenty minutes trying fruitlessly to sleep with the bedside light burning its way into his still painful eye, while Newton twitches beside him at irregular intervals with variant intensity.

After that twenty minutes, he gives up.

It is four AM, and he can loosely justify his preference for considering this 'morning'.

He stands, feeling as though he might buckle under atmospheric pressure or his own exhaustion, walks to the bathroom, and flips on the shower, uncertain about how he's going to explain the blood on the bathrobe and bed sheets to room service, uncertain whether he *needs* to do any such thing. He hopes that if Newton can manage to have an uneventful week and avoid any elevations of intracranial pressure or capillary irritation, perhaps this troubling trend of ruining his clothes by bleeding on them will just fade away.

He showers as briefly as possible, and then exchanges his bathrobe for his now laundered slacks and sweater. He contemplates his toothbrush with narrowed eyes, but doesn't use it.

When he reenters the room proper, he is relieved to see that Newton looks fine—to the extent that a man sleeping restlessly in sunglasses and a bloody shirt with hair plastered into unfortunate and impressive disarray by a combination of dry glue and electroconductive gel is capable of looking 'fine'—meaning that he *is* breathing and he is neither actively bleeding nor actively seizing. Dr. McClure had been impressively forthright and singularly unhelpful regarding her ability to predict what exactly Newton's future risk of a seizure disorder might be. When he'd asked her about projected odds, she'd replied, "somewhere from zero to one hundred percent. His particular situation, even relative to yours, has a whole bunch of weirdness-cred, don't get me wrong, but given that he's had at least two seizures and you've had none—he's going to need to spend a good chunk of time during which his negative feedback loops are getting a pharmacological assist."

Unfortunately, this means that *Hermann* is going to spend that selfsame 'chunk of time' *watching* the man *constantly*.

Even *more* constantly than had been his original plan.

Alas, this will likely drive the pair of them to distraction.

*You are entirely insufferable*, Hermann thinks in Newton's direction, while retrieving his laptop from the bag against the wall. *And you're only going to become more insufferable now that you are no longer directly required for planetary preservation.*

He rights himself too quickly and can feel the prickling sensation of an imminent nosebleed, can smell the tang of incipient blood. He tips his head and pinches his nose in an expeditious manner, and manages to avoid getting blood on his recently laundered clothing. He deposits his laptop on the desk and finds a tissue, then moves to stand over the bathroom sink until he's satisfied he's stopped his own bleeding.

He glances at himself in the mirror and finds that he looks—

He has looked better.

He's certain his appearance would improve if he could manage to fall asleep and stay that way for a reasonable length of time, but this seems unlikely to him, not while things remain so uncertain; not while he *feels* like he has both betrayed and been betrayed by the organization that so recently possessed his wholehearted affiliation; not while he and Newton are *unemployed*, staying in an American hotel in a city where they have only minimal contacts; not while his colleague has had *one* lucid hour out of the previous seventy-two.

Their current situation feels extremely *unstable* to Hermann, in virtually every respect.

He retrieves his computer, returns to the bed, and sits, bracing his back against the headboard.

Unfortunately, this seems directly responsible for Newton jerking into a half-seated position. Instead of falling back, he pushes himself up until he is sitting, one hand braced behind him, the other coming to his face and running into the shades he is still wearing.

He looks *awake*, and this is not ideal.

Hermann manages to prevent him from removing his eyewear by closing his fingers over the grip Newton has on his borrowed frames.

"Newton," he says quietly.

The man doesn't immediately respond, he simply sits for a moment in the dim light, breathing short and fast, one hand still closed around the lateral hinge of the sunglasses, his fingers icy beneath Hermann's hand.

"Newton," Hermann says again, relatively certain that his colleague *is* actually awake this time.

"Crap," Newton says, loosening his grip on the glasses and then dropping his hand entirely.

"Yes," Hermann agrees. "Keep these *on*." He gives the frames of the glasses a gentle tug for emphasis and then lets go.

"But if I keep them on, how am I going to claw out my own eyes?"

Hermann hopes he is being facetious rather than asking a question in good faith.

"I would not advise such a course of action," he replies.

"You're so boring," Newton slurs, collapsing back into a horizontal position. "Where's your bathrobe? I liked it. Freaking stylish. Compellingly—fluffy? You don't seem like a guy who just wears a bathrobe at the drop of a hat or maybe *ever*. That *happened*, right? I feel like it did. I hope it did. I'm not sure what it says about me or our working relationship if I'm hallucinating you in a bathrobe and then hoping I didn't because you were *actually wearing one*. It says something extremely complicated. Nuanced. Also, this is *my* bed, why are you *here* with your computer, when there's a perfectly acceptable *alternate* bed like three feet away? What *time* is it even, why are you not *sleeping*? It's either dark outside or these sunglasses are *really* effective. We saved the world, dude, you can take a nap, did you know that? You don't have to wake up before dawn to do cartographic surveys of the quantum foam anymore, you know? You can do it after breakfast."

"I'm extremely sorry I woke you," Hermann says.

"Are you sorry for *your* sake or for *mine*? That can read a few different ways, *Hermann*," Newton replies, with an exhausted testiness that Hermann finds extremely reassuring.

"And hence it's elegant utility," Hermann says.

"Oh *I'm* sorry," Newton replies, even less intelligibly, "are you finding it *annoying* that the guy whose *bed* you've invaded has decided to *talk* to you?"

Hermann rolls his eyes.

"Don't roll your eyes at me," Newton says.

"I am doing nothing of the kind," Hermann replies.

"You are."

"I know for a fact you are incapable of determining any such thing, given our relative positions, your lack of prescription eyewear, and the eighty-five percent probability that your eyes are currently closed."

"I know, Hermann, okay? I *know*. You and me? For better or for worse? We have creepily EPIC Rapport. I will *always* know. I will *literally* always know when you are rolling your eyes. I will literally always disapprove."



"Go back to sleep," Hermann says.

"Tyrannical theorist," Newton says.

"Eccentric empiricist," Hermann replies.

"Derivative despot,"

"Neurotic neuroscientist."

"Freaking faux physicist."

"Overeducated underling."

"You wish. I am *not* your *underling*. I take issue with that. I demand insult accuracy. I mean, who are we even, if we're not *accurate*. We're *no one*, dude."

"My division was larger," Hermann replies.

"Yeah, like five years ago, when there was money. My division consistently kicked more ass."

"Debatable. *Will* you go to *sleep*? I am extremely busy."

"Lies," Newton says. "There is literally nothing to do right now. It's a pre-sunrise Wednesday—"

"Saturday," Hermann says.

"—*Saturday*, and you don't even have a *job* anymore, you don't have to do *anything*. Go get your bathrobe, man, and start reading *Gödel, Escher, Bach* for, like, the eighth time, you *know* you want to."

"Shh," Hermann says. "Stop talking."

"I would even let you to read it to me," Newton declares, doing a passable job concealing any hopefulness in his tone, "since I will probably never read again, and I like your academic preferences, if only because I assaulted my own brain with them and now have no choice in the matter. My brain is being held hostage by rationalism, Baroque-era music, and Incompleteness Theorems. And Group Theory. The Langlands program, a little bit."

"Your eyes will be fine," Hermann says, in what he hopes is a soothing, sleep-promoting tone. "Be quiet."

"That time those guys showed Tetris was an NP-complete problem."

"Quiet," Hermann says. "Tetris is a waste of time."

"An NP-complete waste of time," Newton replies.

"Be. Quiet. Attempt to *sleep*."

"Why aren't *you* sleeping?"

"I am not engaging you in conversation right now," Hermann replies, resolutely opening his laptop.

"I bet it's because sleeping is *literally the worst*," Newton says.

"Quiet," Hermann replies, with a sharp spike of empathy he wishes was sympathy.

"Or," Newton says, theorizing in slow motion, "I'm being bedside-vigil'd. For the second time in a week."

*The second time?* Hermann thinks in irritation, *try continuously. For three days.*

"Or maybe continuously," Newton continues, approximately an order of magnitude slower than usual, but getting there all the same.

"I assure you that is *not* the case," Hermann says. "I am extremely busy."

"Lies," Newton says.

"Not lies. I am entering negotiations for a tenured position at UC Berkeley the day after tomorrow, and I am preparing my talk."

"Well 'not-lies' it is then," Newton replies agreeably. "You do *not* waste time, dude."

"I will need to borrow several of your slides," Hermann says. "Specifically those pertaining to the mechanics of the drift interface."

"Sure, presuming you stole my laptop as well as me from the PPDC."

"Your laptop is government property, and I did not steal it."

"You are *kidding me*," Newton snarls, abruptly snapping into complete alertness, that Hermann finds more than slightly alarming. He sits, twisting to give Hermann a glare that is invisible behind sunglasses. He brings one hand to the side of his head, as if he's cognitively bracing himself for that which he's perparing to unleash. "*You seriously—*you prosaic, tedious, *literal*, perfunctory, *accountant*. What the *hell*, Hermann?"

Hermann is tempted to allow him to keep going, if only because he finds this display of unjustified rage infinitely reassuring, but he also wants to avoid triggering another episode of epistaxis.

"Will you *contain yourself*," Hermann snaps, pushing Newton back down against significant resistance. "I have all of your *data*, so please try to *contain yourself*. I did not remove any PPDC issued property from Hong Kong. I was certain that this would pose significant logistical difficulties, about which I was *correct*, given the trouble we had

passing through Customs. *This* laptop is *mine*. I left my primary machine in Hong Kong after transferring my data. I also copied the entirety of your allotted server space to multiple hard drives, which were *not* government issue, and which are currently *on the desk* not four meters from your current position, so I'll thank you to *calm down*."

Newton is quiet for a moment, and then he says, "cool. Thanks man."

"You are quite welcome. Now *go back to sleep*."

"I'm sorry I called you an accountant. A little bit."

"You should be." Hermann turns back to his screen.

"You can have my drift slides."

"Thank you," Hermann says.

"You want me to find them for you now?"

"I do not," Hermann replies. "I want you to *go back to sleep*."

"Why are you mentioning the *drift* in a talk that should really be mostly about Riemann zeros and the quantum foam?"

"Because I wish to contextualize my role in averting an apocalyptic end to human culture."

"Rockstar," Newton says, in ambiguous annotation.

"Indeed," Hermann replies, equally ambiguously.

"Seriously, though, how *smart* are we right now?"

"Extremely," Hermann says. "Stop talking."

"No, I mean, think about it. My knowledge base has doubled. I think about quantum mechanics so much these days. And by these days I mean like the one hour I was awake earlier. Half my mental metaphors have to do with quantum phenomenology—entanglement, tunneling, spin transfer of quantum information—I haven't felt this brilliant since Ph.D. numero uno."

"How nice for you," Hermann says, determined not to discuss *anything* interesting.

"I think my brain likes *your* metaphors better than *mine*," Newton says, sounding both comtempletive and offended.

"How surprisingly discerning of it."

"Are you literally giving a legit *science* talk on—"

"Monday," Hermann says, finishing Newton's slowing sentence. "Yes. To the combined Mathematics and Physics departments."

"You—realize that this could get—a little *out of control*, right?" Newton sounds like he *might* fall asleep if Hermann can avoid aggravating him in any way.

"How so?" he replies, opening the graphical image files from his most recent presentation and inspecting them.

"Dude, um, *five days ago* humanity collapsed the—" Newton breaks off abruptly and snaps into a sitting position, leaning forward, both hands coming to his chest, his breathing fast and shallow and audible.

Hermann, fighting down a sympathetic spike of adrenaline, says, "Newton."

The other man says nothing.

"Newton," Hermann says again, one hand on the other man's shoulder.

"Yup," Newton replies. "Five days since—"

"It was six," Hermann says carefully. "Six days. But continue."

"Yeah, anyway, my point," Newton says, somehow managing to run out of air despite the rapidity of his breathing, "is that you were a key player in that thing we did, and you're now going to give a *public talk*? Only eight days later? There are going to be a *lot* of people who show up."

"I'm certain it's closed-door."

"Are you?" Newton prompts, still sitting, one hand moving from his chest to his face. "Did you *specifically* request that it be *only* the Math and Physics departments in attendance?"

No.

He had not.

"I'm certain it will be manageable," Hermann says, not certain of *anything* of the kind.

"Uh huh," Newton replies, breathlessly and unmistakably skeptical.

Hermann exerts a backward pressure on Newton's shoulder but meets significant resistance, and wonders if the man is bleeding. *Again*. He persists and gets his hand smacked for his trouble.

"Can you *not*?" Newton snaps. "I *get* you've been dragging me around like deadweight for three days, but, seriously man, *back off*."

"I do not think that is a good idea," Hermann replies. "In fact, I think it's a *terrible* idea."

"Backing off? Ugh. *You're* a terrible idea. Why do I hang out with you?" Newton pulls his hand away from his face.

"Are you *bleeding*?" Hermann asks.

"No. A little bit? Not really. No."

Hermann hands him a tissue.

Newton waves it off. "Legit not bleeding," he decides, after cocking his head and considering his hand at several different distances from his face.

"Will you *please*," Hermann says, "lie *down*."

"Nope," Newton says, struggling free of the bedding and getting to his feet on his second attempt. "That ship has sailed, caught on fire, and sank. Is there coffee?"

"No," Hermann says, lying through his teeth, and knowing that Newton's vision is bad enough that he will likely not be able to resolve the poor-quality coffee machine located on the desk against the opposite wall.

"Let's go out to breakfast," Newton says.

"No," Hermann replies.

"I'm sure there are places open right now," Newton replies, undeterred and crossing the room. "This is a legit city. It must have legit, twenty-four hour food. It's not like we're in *Boston*, or somewhere full of *Puritans*. Let's find a crappy diner. I could go for pancakes right now. But for this? I need my other shirt. The one *without* blood on it."

"It's hanging in the closet," Hermann informs him, not without reservations. "Consider taking a shower before you put it on." He eyes Newton's hair, which is in a state of singular disarray, stiffened into unfortunate angles by dried and flaking electroconductive gel.

"Considered, dude," Newton replies, visibly shivering as he searches out the handle of the closet door, "and rejected. I can't see for crap."

"I'm aware of that," Hermann replies, extremely unwilling to entertain the thought of taking Newton anywhere, but equally unwilling to leave him unsupervised while attempting to locate food and other necessary items. Such as a toothbrush. For himself. "I'm certain this will be temporary, and it does not impede your ability to *shower*."

Newton tears open the thin sheath of plastic protecting his laundered clothing, and begins struggling with unbuttoning first the shirt on the hanger, then the one he is wearing.

"Do you need assistance?" Hermann asks him.

Newton shrugs out of his shirt and then raises his hands, *slowly*, as if he can't see *at all*, toward the shirt on the hanger. "Nope," the man says, standing there in his undershirt as he searches out the borders of the hanger and peels the shirt free by what is *certainly* touch alone.

"Are you *losing* what vision you *have*?" Hermann snaps, shoving his laptop aside and getting to his feet.

"Dude, *chill*. Right now? My eyes are *shut* behind these shades. I'm not going suddenly blind and being heroically nonchalant about it. *If* I go unexpectedly blind, *you* will be the first to know. I will have an unmitigated freakout that I courteously direct *right at you*, to the best of my hypothetically sightless ability, okay?"

Hermann crosses the short space between them and helps Newton pull his shirt on over decorated skin, which earns him a startle response and a, "for the love, can you *not*?" in return.

"Can *you* not?" Hermann snaps, stepping laterally and straightening seams before starting on the buttons.

"Um, no," Newton admits, leaning against the closet and deciding to cede the buttoning work to Hermann. "I cannot not. And you can't either. Maybe *previously* you *could* have notted, but we have EPIC Rapport now, game over, now we *both* can't not. Neither of us is able to not? It's a bad situation."

"Stop fruitlessly requesting it then," Hermann suggests.

"Noted," Newton replies. "Later, I'm going to start shoving *you* into strange beds, just for your information."

"You can try," Hermann replies dryly, completing the buttoning job. "Do you *genuinely* feel like eating?"

"Yes," Newton says.

"Because I would rather you not vomit and then bleed all over the floor of a twenty-four hour diner, presuming we can find one. I would rather you do that *here*."

"Why does this outcome get granted the status of a foregone conclusion?" Newton asks. "I am one hundred percent improved relative to last night."

"Arguably, it is *still* last night."

"Is it?" Newton asks.

"It is a quarter past four."

"That is *solid* 'morning' territory. There are probably fishermen and medical people and construction workers who are eating breakfast right about now. We can chalk this four AM breakfast up to jetlag-induced circadian chaos and therefore tag it as 'totally normal'. At least where *you're* concerned. I think *I'm* just straight up lagged. I cannot blame jet-mediated time zone changes for all my current problems. But things are better. Definitely better. I *amnot* going to throw up, I'm pretty sure. Let's go be normal."

Hermann sighs in unmistakable acquiescence.

Newton claps him on the shoulder.

## Chapter Thirteen

Aww yeah.

Delicious pancakes are delicious.

Newt still *feels* like *crap*, like he's on a tragically disorienting, weirdly uneven trajectory from something he can't really remember toward something he's unable to predict, which is not the *best*, per se, which is a *troubling state of affairs*—this failure to be certain about where his current curve might fall on a magnificently metaphorical *coordinate plane*. The Cartesian obsession he's rocking might be the strangest out of an already strange set of post-drift cognitive phenomena.

*The strangest?* his brain asks, pointedly. *I really don't think so, friend.*

*Are we friends?* Newt counters, equally pointedly. *I'm not convinced.*

The Cartesian love he's got going on is some weird, residual, conceptual *crush* from Hermann's adolescence or childhood, it *must* be, because, honestly, if *Newt* were going to pick a mathematical concept to have a crush on, *ohgod*, what would he pick? Insanity, *insanity* even to *try*. People have, he's certain, lost their minds over more trivial things. But man, he might pick Cantor's 'grave disease' infecting mathematics with the awesomeness of set theory that would eventually and circuitously lead to Bertrand Russell accidentally bitch-slapping Aristotle in the face with predicates not predicable of themselves and then being horrified about it, until Gödel came along and demonstrated what true mathematical terror really was. Could those linked events count as one conceptual victory regarding the unprovability of certain questions at the heart of mathematics? Yes. Yes they could. Other candidates might be the relationship between irrationality and universal constants—*that* one will be interesting to contemplate if anyone ever lets him within eight thousand kilometers of a mind altering substance *ever again*. Topologically, he'd go for compasses pointing forever north as they navigate loxodromic pathways. Then there's the whole laundry list of stereotypical mathematical sex symbols to consider, which are still pretty baller, even if popular culture dresses them in revealing outfits and puts them on nerd posters alongside Princess Leia in her metal bikini—pi, e, phi, imaginary numbers, fractals, platonic solids, the Pythaorean Theorem—they're cheap arithmetical erotica for the mathematical masses, but he won't hold that against them, *much*. Newt makes an effort to hate the game, rather than the player. Hermann hates the player rather than



the game, so he disapproves of the way that fractals are dressing these days. Kind of. Anyway. Newt's point is that in the face of this Gabriel's Horn of Mathematical Plenty, it's a little bit embarrassing to be obsessed with the coordinate plane. Boring. Predictable. Which is why this Descartes obsession he's rocking *must* be Hermann's fault.

On the other hand, Hermann is buying him this breakfast, so, there's that to consider.

Breakfast, freedom, and still-alive-ness.

There's got to be another word for that.

Oh right. That word would be 'life'.

Breakfast, freedom, and life.

All are ongoing processes, but the breakfast *is* pretty great, so it's at the top of his priority queue right about now.

This might be the high-point of his week, if one does not count *literally* witnessing Mako the Magnificent save the world and survive the attempt, dragging Becket after her, with what Newt assumes was nothing other than screaming stubbornness.

"You rock, dude," Newt says, enjoying his pancakes, vowing to, at some point, have a breathtakingly awkward conversation in which Hermann gets thanked by Newt for his material role in preserving all of Newt's currently running protocols.

"Thank you," Hermann says, sounding suspicious.

Whether or not he *looks* suspicious is something Newt, tragically, cannot determine. Because *someone* had decided that *bringing his glasses* on this particular breakfast expedition would be 'too tempting' for Newt to handle, and so he has only *sunglasses*, which he is still wearing, inside, like the hung-over rockstar narcissist he may actually be.

"Let's replace our historical tradition of insults with *compliments*," Newt says. "The decade of mutual admiration. What do you think?"

"I cannot even conceptualize what such a thing would be like," Hermann says cautiously. "Though I am not *categorically* opposed."

"I could see it getting weird," Newt replies. "I like your *handwriting*."

"I don't particularly care for yours," Hermann says.

"I feel like you're not getting this as a concept, dude," Newt replies. "Try again."

"I like the way you touch your guitar," Hermann offers.

Newt, in the middle of sedately sipping his orange juice, inhales it, chokes, starts coughing, and then manages to hang onto his hysterical laughter by the skin of his teeth, put his glass down, and gasp, "oh my god, *no*. Or yeah, okay, good try, I guess? I was *not* expecting that one, I will give you that, and guitars are sexy, sure, everyone knows that—"

"Will you *shut up*?" Hermann snaps. "You miserable excuse for a biologist. Do you even *have* a prefrontal cortex?"

"Or, we could just have another insult decade," Newt says, still amused, pressing his fingers against his right temple and shoveling another forkful of pancakes into his mouth. "That might be safer, though I advise you, in the spirit of pure sportsmanship, to stay away from neuroscience-based insults because *you* do not want to go up against *me* in that particular subgenre of verbal warfare. But, um, getting back to the guitar thing, would you describe yourself as having inappropriate thoughts about guitars that I've owned over the years? Because I'm pretty sure those aren't my fault. Your hypothetical inappropriate thoughts, I mean. I have a *normal* relationship with my guitar *du jour*, in that it's a little bit of a love/hate thing. Wait. On second thought, I don't know, *do* I have an inappropriately sensual regard for my guitar? Maybe I do? I'm willing to entertain the possibility. I don't *think* so though. No, seriously though, listen to this. I think there's something *really unnatural* going on with Descartes in my brain, and I'm not sure if it's *literally* your fault, or some kind of mental synergy, but maybe it's the same for you; are you obsessed with *guitars*, do you think? Inappropriately so? Do you think about them a lot? Do they crop up in your inner monologue from time to time with this horrible bittersweet feeling of absolute *longing* for a more rational world?"

"Guitars?" Hermann snaps. "No. On a related note, I never wish to speak of this again."

"Dude, I *get* it."

"You do not 'get it', Newton, of that I am *certain*," Hermann snaps.

"Yeah dude, pretty sure I do," Newt replies.

Hermann doesn't reply, and nope, there's nothing awkward about admitting to accidental *pinning* for *Descartes*, that's totally normal. Whatever. Newt casts his terrible, nearly useless vision around the blurred perfection of this diner of almost infinite freaking virtues. One—it's *open*, two—it's mostly empty except for scattered clusters of people he can't really see at all, three—it's very *diner-y* for the impassionedly hip war zone that San Fran has become in a decade of half-hearted rebuilding by indigent secular humanists, immigrant kaiju-worshipers, and the people who had just *lived here*, man, and who hadn't moved away, like Hypothetical Rain and her ilk, four—the

pancakes that this place produces are unreasonably delicious—chocolate-chip, three of them, probably neatly stacked, he can't tell visually and he's not going to *touch* them, gross, who *touches food*? That is just *bizarre*. Isn't it? Maybe not. Ugh, he can't remember if he had a thing about touching food before he drifted with Hermann. He thinks maybe he didn't? Should he be eating pancakes with his hands? No, probably not, conventionally the correct answer is a 'no', but *would* he have, hypothetically, previously, rolled one of these things up, maybe put something inside like butter or fruit and eaten it like a taco or a crepe or an enchilada? That seems like a thing Dr. Newton Geiszler of the high-gross out index and the gloves made of fauxtex might have done or *still* might do, it's confusingly appealing and disgusting to him at the same time and he feels a little bit sick and confused and like he's one wrong thought away from a blazing episode of cognitive dissonance.

He stops eating, puts his fork down, and takes a deep breath.

There is a choice here, true, or, more correctly, there *was* a choice here, but he *already made it*, and, because of that, no *real* quandary exists as long as he doesn't *manufacture it* by second-guessing his flatware preferences.

"Newton," Hermann says, like the slide of a razor, sharp and slow.

The guy does not miss a thing.

Newt drinks some orange juice. "Hermann," he says, fifty percent touched, fifty percent creeped out, and not really needing any additional stimuli that are going to tip him over into some utensil-related trouble.

Hermann doesn't say anything else, probably because the guy is stressed and tired and about eight thousand percent done with Newt and his mobile, old-school card-catalogue of active ongoing issues. Newt does not blame the guy for that. Not at all.

Newt eyes his fork to the extent he can; it's sort of a poorly defined silver blur right now, abandoned on the white haze of his plate.

Okay. He's going to make an executive decision about not questioning his initial fork-instinct here and just *leave it alone* for right now, before he becomes too confused about his own mental preferences to actually *eat* the rest of his breakfast. Because these pancakes do not deserve that. They are exemplary in their consistency and ridiculously high caloric content and, most importantly, he is something on the order of eighty percent sure that this meal is not going to make a reappearance. Nope, these straight-up carbs are going directly into his straight-up recently neglected anabolic pathways, repairing structures that need to be repaired, dragging his blood glucose

level out of the basement; he already feels warmer, he already feels less irritatingly shaky, he already feels sharper than he's felt in days, probably, though he can't be *entirely* positive about that, he might be even *more* of a genius when he's post-drift and post-benzos and postictal, he has no idea, but it's possible, he'll have to ask Hermann when Hermann is less traumatized about the whole Newt-as-bureaucratic-victim thing. Newt *himself* isn't that traumatized by it, at least not on a *moral* scale, it sounds about right to him—large organizations that put collective good above individual good are often not to be trusted when it comes to personal welfare or autonomy. On a literal scale, um, yes, alas, unfortunately one could make a case for about eight different kinds of psychological trauma of the really unusual variety, but that's fine, he's adaptable and able to turn off his own self-reflection like a light switch. Sometimes. Like now. Yup, doing that.

"You okay, man?" Newt asks, not really timing his question and his pancake consumption perfectly, in terms of etiquette or diction. "I mean, really?"

He's wanted to ask this one for a while, but it's hard to expect a decent answer to something like this from the questionee when the questioner is doing something alarming like bleeding or throwing up or *appearing* to cry *whilenot actually crying*; he wants the record to be *very* clear on that last point there. But nothing alarming has happened for a good thirty minutes now, and Newt is feeling awesome, and like maybe he can start participating in *real* discourse, which would be good for him, but even better for Hermann. The man looks like he's rating about a negative eight on the Negative Ten To Ten Scale. He's only making a halfhearted effort in the consumption of the perfectly appetizing spinach omelette that's sitting in front of him. He looks exhausted and miserable and depressed, or Newt is sure that's how he *would* look if Newt was capable of seeing the world in anything but the most dim and blurry of ways. He can *tell* though, even without remotely adequate vision, he *knows*, courtesy of a decade of shared experience and maybe a little bit courtesy of EPIC Rapport. He's getting a powerful misery vibe from a guy who participated materially in world-saving and is about to become the most famous mathematician at UC Berkeley. Newt gets that, *yeah* he does, there's a giant vacuum in Hermann's personal and professional life, now that he's not allegorically whispering in Computational Esperanto to decaying Jaegers and doing research that essentially amounts to beating back death with progressively better metaphorical sticks constructed out of dwindling resources.

"I am fine," Hermann says. "How are *you* feeling?"

Newt is feeling like invisible but not necessarily non-existent parties are trying to open his head from the inside with sharp implements. Their preferred point of egress seems to be through his eyes, considering the raging varieties of bilateral orbital and intraocular pain he's got going. Maybe they can buy some kind of painkiller, or maybe he can just scrape the agonized goo formerly known as sensory organs out of his eye sockets when Hermann isn't watching. The sunglasses thing is helping him out, taking the screaming edge off his raging photosensitivity. Fortunately for Newt, he's a pretty good visual guesser in predictable environments; this is partially courtesy of inherent skill and partially courtesy of practice, given that he has a habit of taking his glasses off as much as is evolutionarily permissible.

"Good," Newt says. "On a relative scale. Really awful on an absolute scale. Even my *hair* seems to be contributing to my simultaneous headache variants." He shoves another forkful of triplicate pancake wedges in his mouth and raises his eyebrows at Hermann. "That was an informative answer I just gave you. Not only was it informative, it was *accurate*. Maybe you could think about doing some kind of reciprocal information exchange here, where you tell me *anything* or engage with me in *actual, meaningful* conversation rather than just misrepresenting your 'fineness', and my *eventual* fineness, and your theory that sleeping will solve all of my problems, because it *won't*, dude, sleeping is a problem *creator*, and I—"

His vocal chords decide to crap out on him.

*Careful*, his brain says, like a team player. *Careful*.

Newt breaks it off right there, because, because, he's just, he doesn't, he *can't* really, he's not going to—look, the point is that he's built for this. He is *literally* built for *exactly* this. He is built for finding food and eating it, he's built for resource conversion, signal transduction, environmental analysis, and adaptation in the pursuit of survival. He is great at it. He is, in fact, *so great* that not only can he do it for himself, he has, on one occasion so far, done it for his entire *species*, so yeah. Suck it, anteverse.

He swallows, takes a deep breath, and says, "whatever, man, sleeping is giving in."

"You are a *nightmare*," Hermann says, like an emotionally conflicted, confused, depressed *wasp*.

"Nah man, just *your* nightmare," Newt replies, the counter-waspishness he was aiming for turning into weird innuendo, which is really the only kind of innuendo he's ever fully mastered or managed to display, mostly when he doesn't *want* to be displaying anything of the kind. Whatever. He just goes with it, following that statement up with a

suggestive rearrangement of his eyebrows and, "come into my dungeon, man, bring your twelve-sided die," in his most inappropriately lascivious whisper.

Hermann kicks his ankle beneath the table.

Newt manages to keep a straight face and take another bite of pancakes before favoring Hermann with an unimpressed eyebrow lift/head shake combo that comes straight out of the Gottliebian Catalogue of Facial Expressions he now has stored in his cerebellum.

Hermann sighs in a way that indicates he's not sure whether he should be impressed, upset, or amused.

"Let's have it, dude," Newt says, gesturing with his fork, impatient with Hermann, with himself, with his stupid throat and stupid eyes and stupid brain, and deciding that he is, in this instant, *done* with Hermann's interpersonal attempt at generating some kind of protective, unnecessary, *Leidenfrost effect of the mind*. "All the stuff. Let's go. You've been wanting to yell at me for *days*, I'm sure."

"Very true," Hermann admits, in clipped restraint, "but I have no plans to start now."

Newt finds this *nearly impossible to take* because it makes him *feel* like he's on the ledge he *knows* he's on. Half out of his head, half dead, one foot in the door of an annihilated portal, forever in need of something that no longer exists on his planet because *he* orchestrated its destruction—

*You idiot*, his brain snarls.

*Oh crap*, he thinks, not certain where he is, *oh god*, he thinks, *we're networked, we're networked, we're networked, we're net worked*. He's got the most capacity, *he's* slotting right into his role of cyan cynosure, his sense of self begins to shred beneath the weight of linking, desperate *anger* and before it pulls him under Newt wrenches the trajectory of his thoughts out of the oncoming, self-organizing mess, Newt does that, *Newt* does it, he *does* it lacking any other option in total abject terror of the alignments forming in his mind; rends himself straight out of reliving (or, oh god, *recreating?*) *what* was *done* to him, because he wouldn't have—whatever that was—*he* wouldn't have—not *him*, *he* wouldn't have done it, not if he hadn't *had* to; he tries to remember what it was that they had wanted to know, the team that had fried his brain, they had wanted to *rule something out*, they must have done it, they must have been successful because, in the end, they had *let him go*.

His hands snap shut—around the table, around his fork—and he is breathing *very hard*.

"You," Hermann says, quietly, distinctly, "are fine."

Yup, Newt agrees.

Nope, his brain chimes in.

Newt is a little too locked down to talk just yet, to do really anything other than *sit here* on top of the powder keg that is his brain and the lit match that is his own adrenaline and try to keep those two things from coming together in a catastrophic cognitive conflagration.

"We are in San Francisco," Hermann says, still quiet, sounding *way* calmer than the guy probably *feels*, or, maybe not. Maybe relative to Newt's current state of *raging panic* anyone would sound calm, and Hermann is freaking out right about now, "eating breakfast."

This is a terrible riff that Hermann is laying down, terrible because Newt *appreciates* it, appreciates *knowing*, *forsure*, where he is to the extent that it's possible, to the extent that he can differentiate *actual* sensory input from sensory input recalled and reproduced, terrible because he thinks he remembers Hermann telling him things like this before in places he can only half remember.

*You are not doing very well*, his brain observes. *I think some epic weirdness might have gone down before you left the PPDC. Don't start screaming.*

*Thanks*, Newt replies.

"Following breakfast," Hermann says, "I propose that we procure some necessary personal items, presuming you feel up to such an activity."

Newt cannot relax his jaw, he cannot unclench his hands that he has wrapped around the edge of the table and his fork, cannot release the total body tetany that is holding him mostly still but for the nearly imperceptible tremors of exhausted muscles restraining themselves with maximum effort in the face of an onslaught of catecholamines.

"Then again, perhaps you don't," Hermann says, in a matter-of-fact way that Newt could just *worship* him for right about now. "Perhaps later would be better."

Hermann knows what's going on, Hermann *gets* it—gets the scope of the minor disaster that is Newt locking himself into total control post mystery memory and the scope of the major disaster that is his mind locking into ports where it doesn't easily slot. Hermann's been plotting the borders of this mess, Cartesian-style and carefully, for *days* now. Newt is *way* behind on this curve, so far behind that he hasn't realized until this precise moment that Hermann hasn't asked him anything about what *happened* to him, *not one thing*, other than, 'how much do you remember,' *one time* on

their *balcony*, and it hasn't, until *right now*, occurred to Newt that Hermann knows *less than he does* and yet *has not asked him*, and frankly, yup, Newt has to give it to him that *that* decision was and is a pretty genius call because even *oblique* references to that time when that thing that happened happened are plunging him into something *really* unfortunate, and *great*, does this mean that his entire past decade of work is just *off the table* as a topic of actual and mental discourse? That would be bad, that would be extremely, just *extremely*, bad.

"I think," Newt says, and stops, not doing the *best* job with simultaneous breathing and talking. "That if you w—" His jaw snaps shut in some kind of weird compensatory response to his left hand loosening up on his fork, but then he tries again, and things smooth down. "If you want me to come with you, we should go now. Post-pancakes, I mean."

He manages to peel his right hand away from the edge of the table, and then the rest of his musculoskeletal system seems to fall in line behind hands and jaw and he can move again. He's fine.

Not really, but kind of.

At a first approximation he is.

First approximations *suck* though, as a general rule. Nuance fail. Accuracy fail. At a first approximation the world looks flat, so, yeah, case in point, *quod erat demonstrandum*, drop the chalk, flip over the table, he is *done* here. Newt has just discovered that this place where he is now might nominally be San Francisco but it is also, experientially, First Approximation Hell (FAH). His brain has put him here. Hermann's good judgment has put him here. And *man* but this is this going to drive the *pair* of them straight into the realm of aggressively irrational and overly emotive discourse because FAH is no place that scientists can hang around very long and keep their conversational and cognitive cool. It's a little bit antithetical to the whole nature of scientific inquiry to avoid the pursuit of objective truth. At least *Hermann* has had the sense to realize that they *are* where they are and keep dragging Newt back inside the approximate bounds of his current mental and emotional capacity but Newt does not like that, does not *like it at all*; he determines his *own* course, thanks, and if Newt wants to claw his way from first approximations to second ones he *will*, when he *wants*, maybe *later*, because even Dr. Newton Geiszler of the sub-par brain and the bilateral migraine is smart enough to put that off until he isn't in public.

"How do you feel?" Hermann asks, for the eight hundred thousandth time, probably because he wants a real answer almost as much as Newt does when he asks the same



question, reversed. Probably he *deserves* one, given all the restraint he's been displaying and good decisions he's been making, but Newt isn't totally sure how to go about answering in a meaningful way, not now, not yet, not over pancakes, yeah, that would probably be a bad idea.

"Um," Newt says, pushing the bounds of first-approximating into something like three-halves-approximating, "I think that my brain might be trying to freak out about something it only partially remembers."

"Yes," Hermann says, meeting him at the three halves mark. "I'm certain you're correct about that."

"Not really sure how this is going to go," Newt confesses, in what turns out to be a passably conversational tone, finally.

"Yes," Hermann says, in an equally passable conversational tone. "That is life, I suppose. But I would advise against equating your current system state with a future one."

"I would never," Newt whispers. *You wouldn't let me*, is what he doesn't say, *please don't let me*.

"Good," Hermann says, resolutely taking another bite of his omelette.

"What are you *doing* dude?" Newt asks, not knowing himself what he means, exactly, by posing the question, knowing it's something profound, knowing it's something so weighed down it's broken loose from everything he'd like to burden it with because he'd tied a rock to a jet plane with the verbal equivalent of an old and brittle rubber band, and yeah, the link between question and intent snaps under next to no tension, and he is *useless sometimes*, god, but, even so, he manages to relax his shoulders, shift his position, and pick his fork up because he is *eating* these pancakes, *for sure*—they are *delicious* and eating is *necessary*.

"I'm sure I don't know," Hermann replies. "My thought processes are not entirely my own at the present moment."

"Geiszler'd," Newt says, with deep and profound sympathy.

"Indeed," Hermann replies.

"This is the worst for you, dude," Newt says.

"I prefer it to *death*," Hermann replies pointedly.

"Meh," Newt says, noncommittal, not sure whether Hermann means his *own* death via consumption by kaiju or Newt's hypothetical death post drift number two, which, had it

happened, likely would have also included Hermann's kaiju-mediated death at a later date. "That doesn't mean it doesn't suck," he says, with all the chivalrous empathy he can scrape together pre-dawn and post-panic.

"There are compensations," Hermann says, "as you pointed out earlier."

Yup.

Earlier.

By 'earlier' Hermann evidently means when Newt had woken up out of an amorphous nightmare he doesn't remember to find that Hermann had decided that bed sharing was now a thing that was happening? Newt likes to think that the rationale for that particular decision has more to do with Hermann's insomniac loneliness meeting the general interpersonal camaraderie of communal sleeping and less because Hermann had decided that *Newt* needed it for some reason. No matter the specific rationale, it's going to be a little hard for Hermann to justify beneath the painful glare of twenty-four hour fluorescence. He owes the guy a ridiculous amount of slack and so he won't inquire about the bed-thing just now.

"You," Newt says, with a passably coordinated fork-flourish in Hermann's general direction, "are enjoying my biological knowledge. Don't even lie to me about that."

"I am finding it useful," Hermann says, "if only in interpreting *you* in retrospect. I'm not sure what your post-drift experience has been, but personally—" Hermann stops.

Like a *jerk*.

"Oh no," Newt says. "No no no. You are finishing that sentence, dude."

"We should discuss this later," Hermann replies.

"Here's a thing you may not know," Newt says, shoving more pancakes into his mouth, even though he's less excited about the eating thing than he had been about twenty minutes ago, "though I'm not sure *why* you *wouldn't*, because you've known me for a *decade*, and last week you shared my *brain*, but this thing that you are doing? It *is* killing me. I get *why* you're doing it. I get that I'm a neurological disaster in a black box right now, but honestly, dude, *honestly*, if you keep shutting me down—"

"Shutting you—" Hermann half shouts the words and then shuts *himself* down and reboots in whisper mode. "Shutting you down?" he hisses, sounding a little more upset than Newt can easily explain. "Shutting you *down*?"

"Or," Newt begins, layering extreme reasonableness overtop alarmed tonal contingency within the span of a single syllable.

"You have *no idea* how *difficult* it was to rescue you *from your own stupidity*, let alone whatever might have previously been or whatever might *currently be* happening in *your mind*—"

"Okay," Newt says, "I get it, I—"

"—you horrifying, *miserable* excuse for a scientist—"

"Horrifying? Seriously, dude? *Horrifying?*"

"—is it too much to ask that you spend twenty-four hours in quiet, *limited*, self-reflection and enjoy the fact that you managed to contribute significantly to averting a catastrophe on a global scale, rather than pushing yourself past the point of your own ability to cope because you're *bored*, because you have no self-restraint, because when you're unoccupied you take apart the most interesting thing in your immediate vicinity and right now that is, unfortunately, *your own cognitive architecture* and possibly mine as well?"

"Okay, I guess that's fair as far as it goes but—"

"I am *not finished*, Newton," Hermann hisses. "You are irresponsible. Flagrantly so. You make rash decisions without fully considering their implications. Everything you do in *every sphere* of your life is aimed at rocking whatever dominant paradigms you decide have suspect foundational bases and are able to be *pushed* straight to *crisis* for no other reason than you enjoy *dismantling* things of *flawed design*."

"I never pictured you as a Thomas Kuhn 'groupie'," Newt snaps, rolling his final 'r' egregiously. He's not liking where this is going, and he's starting a derailment campaign.

"I'm *not*," Hermann snarls, "that's *you*."

"You're welcome," Newt replies through clenched teeth, "you *logical positivist*."

"I'm *not grateful*," Hermann says, talking over him. "Incommensurability, as a concept, is worthy of ridicule. Shutup for two minutes if you're capable of doing so, which I very much *doubt*. You—"

"You *should* be grateful," Newt says, managing to brute-force intercalate his own words into Hermann's accelerating philippic. "I'll stake the entirety of my personal assets that your problem with Kuhn stems from your *own* onanistic, objectivist, *fantasies* about absolute truth—"

"I *do not wish to discuss The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*," Hermann continues, leaning forward, managing to overpower Newt by freakishly intent hissing. "I want to

know if your perception of the past week approximates anything remotely akin to what *actually* happened to you. I want to know if you have *any* objective idea of what you're capable of doing to yourself if you turn the full force of your intellect on your own mind. I want to know if you have any *awareness at all* of how astronomically ironic it is to accuse *me* of 'shutting you down,' when really I have been doing absolutely *everything* in my power to *prevent exactly that*."

Okay, so Newt is going to need to adjust his assessment of what's happening here, because, nope, it hadn't been obvious to him until about thirty seconds ago, but Hermann is having his *own* breakfast freak out session, immediately post and possibly related to *Newt's* breakfast freak-out session. That's what's happening.

"Hermann," he says, lifting a hand, trying to cool things down in an uncomfortable inversion of *every instinct he has*.

Newt isn't sure he's *ever* defused anything before in his *life*, literally or metaphorically.

But he's trying now, apparently.

"I would like *nothing better* than to listen to your unique mix of specious and insightful conjecture on any number of topics that currently materially affect us, but that is a *terrible idea*, Newton, *terrible*. I'm not sure whether you've realized this yet or not but you—"

"Hermann," Newt says, making an impressively accurate grab for Hermann's nearest wrist. "Chill."

"Do not *tell me to 'chill'*," Hermann snaps, somehow even *more* furious, temporarily loosing his ability to speak and yanking his wrist from beneath Newt's tenuous grip.

*First effort at conflict mediation ranks you a D minus*, his brain says. *If he flips over this table, you've totally failed, and also ruined his brain. Definitively.*

"Okay," Newt says. "Good call, I could see that being annoying, coming from me, but I *get* it, man, I do. I get more than you're giving me credit for, actually. Look. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I—"

"Newton, if you apologize to me *even one more time* I will *drown you in the Pacific*."

"Um—" Newt says, entirely at a loss.

*Yeah, I've got nothing*, his brain admits. *We're failing abysmally at this.*

Hermann stews in aggrieved silence.

Newt *also* stews in silence, except his is more grimly contemplative than aggrieved, trying to figure out what exactly it is that Hermann is freaking out about in the abstract

and also in detail, and turning up the usual array of suspects—death, bureaucratic violence, Newt being inconsiderate, disorganization both in his world and in his brain—and, finally, just silently wishing for his glasses, because visual cues wouldn't hurt, wouldn't go amiss in this current scenario, no they would not.

He tries not to fidget.

He tries hard.

He fails.

Really, Newt is only capable of waiting so long.

"Specious," Newt says, dialing his indignation down as far as it will go, which is not as far down as one might assume. "Really, dude?"

"On occasion," Hermann replies with stiff dignity.

They spend a beat looking at one another, which is unfair, since Newt can't see.

"Uh huh," Newt says, doing some squinting, which doesn't really help him out. It *hurts* a lot, that's about all he can say for it.

He is doing a *crap* job assessing how upset Hermann might or might not be.

"Stop that," Hermann says, twenty seconds into the tragically useless squinting.

"I'm literally sitting here in silence," Newt snaps.

"Stop *trying to see*," Hermann replies, sounding like he's ramping down his freak-out curve.

"*You* stop trying to see," Newt replies, deciding to test the downtrend of Hermann's freak-out by perturbing the system a little bit.

It's not his best work, but after a few seconds of approximating, he manages to grab Hermann's coffee cup in one quick motion and not knock anything over in the process.

"Do *not*—"

Newt takes a measured sip of stolen coffee. It's bitter, clean, unadulterated, rating about a six point five on the Negative Ten to Ten Coffee Quality Scale, perfectly complementing his chocolate chip pancakes, redolent of innocent addiction and headache reduction. He can feel his blood vessels constricting everywhere in anticipation of relief that they're not going to get.

Hermann yanks the cup out of his hand, and Newt lets him do it.

"Do not do that again," Hermann says.

"I am literally going to do that once per day until such a point that you either stop drinking coffee in front of me like an insensitive bastard, or Hypothetical Rain clears me for significant caffeine consumption. Besides, you *deserved it*. 'Specious'. I don't think so. I am also vetting you as a potential roommate right now, just so you know. If you won't let me drink your coffee, I foresee about eight thousand other problems."

"You have been drinking my coffee for approximately nine years," Hermann replies dryly, "in clustered, irregular intervals. I will *never* cease demanding that you desist, no matter our housing situation. It is *not sanitary*."

Newt infers from Hermann's return to baseline arid disdain that he is one hundred percent forgiven for unfairly implying that Hermann is somehow a subpar life partner.

This may or may not be true.

The forgiveness part.

Not the subpar part.

Everyone is on par here.

"So," Newt says, "it seems you have a quarter-cup of contaminated coffee of mediocre quality. I could take that off your hands for a negligible neural cost to myself, I'm sure."

Hermann picks up the ceramic mug in blurred deliberation and *drinks the rest of his coffee*.

Newt stares at him, mouth slightly open, wishing fruitlessly for his glasses so that he could be *sure* that what he was seeing was really what he was seeing, because he's pretty sure there's got to be some mistake. "Did you just—" he breaks off, too incredulous to find a way to end his sentence. "I don't think I like this," he says, giving up and starting afresh. "I think I feel about this the way you would feel if I showed up at work wearing a thrift-store sweater, or shelving my books by descending height from left to right, or not even *that*, more like—"

"Quiet," Hermann says, in a way that's suddenly tense, suddenly understated, suddenly carrying an unmistakable eau de *us-versus-Them*.

Newt stops talking.

Briefly.

"What?" he whispers.

"Nothing," Hermann says, in a way that doesn't mean *nothing* at all.

"What *kind* of nothing," Newt demands.

"We appear to be a part of the morning news cycle," Hermann says.

"There's a *television* in here?" Newt asks, making a well-founded assumption.

"Behind you," Hermann confirms.

Newt twists, and, sure enough, there's maybe a widescreen TV that he can barely see and had previously labeled as 'people' or, 'a window' or 'people *in* a window'. So sue him, he's not actually *that* interested in what he *can't really see*, at least when it comes to inventorying the interior detail of a perpetually open diner. But apparently it's a television, and apparently currently featuring *him*. That's cool.

"No," Hermann murmurs, "it is in no way 'cool'."

Seriously, what. The *hell*.

He *definitely* hadn't said that aloud.

Right?

*I'm not sure*, his brain says, weighing in. *For all your commendable surface sass, I'm not sure how together you actually are, champ.*

He will spend time considering how empirically supportable this Hermann-reading-minds conjecture is at a later point. Right now, he is slightly more interested in his apparent fame. He doesn't *hear* anything that sounds like the continuous journalistic masturbation of the twenty-four hour news cycle, so presumably the TV is muted. He finds this *vexing*. He stares at it for a moment longer, wishes again for his sinful, tempting glasses, and then turns around, because really, this is worse than useless.

"Well what are they *saying* about us?" Newt asks.

"Based on the text and visuals," Hermann replies, "I would say that they appear to be curious about why we immediately departed Hong Kong and have failed to make ourselves available for interviews and other—" Hermann breaks off.

"What?" Newt hisses.

"That's—unfortunate," Hermann says.

"Hermann, you are *literally* killing me, here. I'm losing brain cells and cardiac tissue in frustrated anticipation. Let's go. Use your words. Start talking."

"It's nothing," Hermann says, sounding like he's being strangled. "This particular news outlet appears to have obtained some footage from the Hong Kong international airport, and you look, we look—we look quite—*memorable*. Based on the text accompanying the image they've chosen to display, well they appear to be

speculating on the etiology behind our sudden departure from the PPDC and your appearance on the footage."

"I haven't heard you describe something *that poorly* and euphemistically since—"

"Is that *you* guys?"

It's their waitress, but she's close and standing outside Newt's limited visual field, so Newt twitches *so violently* that dishware clinks and the waitress immediately says, "Sorry!" either in response to Newt nearly sending breakable objects to the floor or to Hermann leveling a steely glare in her direction, which is what he *assumes* is happening, though he can't say that's the case with absolute certainty, because he *can't see*.

"No," Hermann says, maximally steely, but also probably suffering eye-contact fail because he needs work in the deception department and always will. "I assure you that *we* are *not those people*." The guy is *way* overdoing it in terms of vehemence, getting himself into a the-lady-doth-protest-too-much situation.

"Nope," Newt says, with what would have been calculated nonchalance if he'd managed to deliver it a little more off the cuff and a little less like someone recently resuscitated post drowning. "Totes not us."

"Okay," the waitress replies, long and slow.

"Check please," Hermann says, clipped and fast.

"No charge," the waitress says, just enough of a screw-you twist in her voice to call the pair of them on their bullshit. Newt likes her immediately. San Fran is full of cool people. Okay, well, he's two-for-two, Hypothetical Rain and Soprano Waitress.

"Unacceptable," Hermann says, sounding flustered.

"Thanks, bro," Newt says, managing to sound less flustered and crack an asymmetric smile while looking at the indistinct outline of the woman holding what is probably a coffee pot.

"It's Flow, actually," the waitress says.

"Get out of here," Newt says. "Your name is *not* Flo."

"Maybe, maybe not. Either way, it's 'Flow' with a 'w'," Possibly Flow says. "More coffee?"

"I'm afraid we must be going," Hermann says, standing. "Thank you."

"Thank *you*," the waitress replies.



"For what, even?" Newt asks, displaying maximal casual charm coupled with minimal suave motor control as Hermann takes his elbow and helps him to his feet because Newt can't really see, can't really *easily* unclamp on the things he's clamped down on, can't really say for sure which of the blurred boxes in his vision might be the door, but if he had to guess, he's pretty sure he'd guess right.

Usually he does.

## Chapter Fourteen

The rear wall of the hotel elevator is a mirror, bisected horizontally by a narrow silver handrail. Across its base, etched in frosted glass, is a stylized representation of the sea.

Hermann doesn't care for it.

Not at all.

He is, however, *so exhausted*, post-breakfast and post-shopping, that he leans against the dark paneling of the orthogonal wall, wedging himself into a corner, his bad leg braced against the cool surface of the mirror. The lateral border of his shoe presses against frosted waves.

His shoe.

The sea.

It's a juxtaposition inappropriately absorbing, and he feels an echo in his mind of something *not his own*, something not derived from Newton, something *else*, something from a half-remembered dream, from the fading neural echo of a drift that should have never come to pass.

*What happens to a fraction of a hive mind?*

He hears the question in Newton's most unnerving turn of offhand revelation, but when he glances over at the other man, Newton's eyes are on the unlit panel near the sliding door, and Hermann's almost certain that there's been nothing said aloud.

He is tired.

He is, in fact, *so exhausted* he can barely interpret the anxious hiss of thoughts forming and dying beneath the too-sharp edges of his current sensory experience.

"Little help here?" Newton asks. He sounds strained. Impatient. Perhaps frustrated. In short, he currently sounds *nothing* like his semi-permanent avatar who has begun to make a habit of posing interesting questions in Hermann's mind.

The elevator door slides shut.

"Sometime *this* century?" Newton says.

Belatedly, it occurs to Hermann that his colleague cannot read the wall display at which he is currently staring. Hermann gives the other man a gentle swat with his cane

to encourage his relocation in a propitious direction before he hits the correct floor with a well-placed jab.

Newton folds against the wall in a manner that is vaguely petulant and shoots Hermann an uninspired glare, the full, burning wattage of which is substantially filtered by Hermann's own sunglasses. Newton must realize the fruitless nature of glowering behind tinted glass, because after only a few seconds he gives up and tips his head back, his hair audibly crunching against the wall as he says, "do you think they wanted to *eat* me?"

"*What?*" Hermann snaps at him, startled, shoving *down*, shoving *back*, the memory of darkness, of cracking stone above a crowded room, of an empty space around him that *feels* dangerous, if only because it has been created by collective terror.

Newton looks at him, startled.

Hermann feels confused and guilty, his mind a haze of disordered feedback loops. He's not sure where the moral high ground lies here—is it with him, a victim of elicited mnemonic hell, or is it with Newton, whose memories these are?

"As in, *for food*," Newton explains, short, stressed, and dismissive. He pushes away from the wall, shifts his weight to one leg and then starts what *appears* to be a purposeful tremor in the contralateral foot.

"The kaiju?" Hermann asks, ninety-eight percent certain that this a subject to be avoided at all costs, given that the man has accidentally talked himself into four episodes of silent, disoriented panic, and seems to be in the process of commencing attempt number five. Hermann's not certain what in god's name he thinks he's accomplishing. Could he be mapping the borders of his mental degrees of freedom, like a child with a toothache, or a subpar undergraduate calculating a chi-squared test statistic? Is he failing to learn from past experience? Is he purposefully *ignoring* past experience in some attempt at intrapersonal control by staging pitched battles between his prefrontal cortex and his sympathetic nervous system?

Hermann has no idea.

"What *other* things do you know of that might, realistically, have tried to eat me recently?" Newton snaps, adjusting Hermann's sunglasses, still fidgeting.

"Yesterday, you asked me if your *eyes* were made of *sand*," Hermann replies in frustrated, elliptical caution, trying to steer their conversation *away* from the *kaiju*. "So you will excuse me if I ask for clarification."

"Did I really?" Newton asks, swinging the bag of miscellaneous items he holds against the wall of the elevator for no reason at all that Hermann can discern, aside from his baseline instinct for demolition. "Ugh. Was I, by any chance, *super* insightful while drugged? Because I could see things shaking out that way when my brain declutches. You know. Gear shift of the self?"

Hermann raises an eyebrow at that turn of phrase, but it is wasted because Newton is not looking at him.

"You were not," Hermann says, quite truthfully. "I had a great deal of difficulty conversing with you, as you displayed only intermittent and partial insight into what was occurring around you, let alone the capacity for abstract thought."

Hermann does not add that those brief moments of unconventionally expressed insight had been singularly difficult to hear, difficult to respond to, stripped as they were of any of their typical fractious disputation. He does not add that he likes Newton best with every layer of his defenses intact and aligned because then Hermann can have his *own* defenses in place as well. His defenses are better than Newton's, if only because he needs his more.

Given Newton's currently fluctuating psychological fortifications, Hermann is primarily equalizing their intellectual footing by omission. He is having mixed success with this strategy, primarily because Newton has now *noticed it* and is, of course, finding it irritating.

But, in the vernacular, Newton can 'deal'.

The elevator slides open, revealing a fluorescently-lit hall.

Hermann pushes himself away from the sea-scored mirror as Newton waves him forward, one boot pressed against the recessed doors.

"*That's* disappointing," Newton says philosophically, one hand trailing along the wall as they proceed down the hallway. "I expect better of my brain, even under duress."

Hermann is, frankly, astounded that Newton is *alive*, let alone arguably *compos mentis*.

"I do not," he replies dryly.

"Well you're the irrationally pessimistic one," Newton says. "*I'm* the visionary. Everyone knows that."

"The one with *visions*, perhaps," Hermann replies, unlocking their hotel room door with the wave of an RFID card. "But that is *not* the same thing."

"It's nice to know that no matter what horrible psychological problems I end up with post-drifting, at least I can count on you to be an acerbic ass about them," Newton says, cocking his head at the planar surface of the desk before sweeping a pile of hard-drives aside with the careful imprecision of the glassesless. He deposits his bag of miscellaneous items on the desk. "That's comforting, Hermann, thank you. Thank you so much."

"I am the first to admit, I am extremely ill-qualified for every aspect of what is happening here," Hermann replies, hooking his cane over the back of the desk chair. "Especially reassuring *you* regarding your current array of—challenges."

"I don't need reassurance, man," Newton says. "My life is pretty awesome right now."

Hermann half-collapses into a sitting position on the nearest bed.

Newton follows suit in a fashion that is slightly more overstated, if only because his motor control is unfortunately underpowered. He belatedly checks his own momentum with a hand on Hermann's shoulder before he ends up horizontal. "Magnificence," he says, in ambiguous annotation.

Hermann sighs.

"That's a tag. For you," Newton continues. "For your *job*. Your job that you're feeling crap about. Like the aggravating perfectionist you are. You *rescued* me, dude. You *rescued* me. From a Kafka novel, basically."

"That is absolutely false," Hermann snaps. "I disingenuously removed you from a voluntary collaboration to which you should *never* have consented. I then prevented its transition to something compulsory."

"Hermann. You are *literally* repeating what I just said, using different, less exciting words. I have *never* gone up against bureaucracy and won. They screw you every time, man. I haven't gotten a raise since 2017."

"Really?" he asks, abruptly distracted. As soon as Newton points it out, Hermann can *remember* it, but the idea still seems odd to him, given that *he* has received a raise every year while in PPDC employ. He'd never been terribly *enthusiastic* about his salary keeping pace with inflation, since the world was likely going to end, making the accrual of resources pointless, but—

God he must be *exhausted*.

"That is hardly germane," he snaps, trying not to blame Newton for the tangential behavior of his own brain.

"You asked. My point is—this is a better outcome than I *ever* thought I'd get. So um. You know. Thanks."

Hermann stares at the ceiling, wishing that Newton would *stop thanking him*.

"You should have *told* me what you were going to do. What you *were doing*," he says, clipped and stiff, trying not to let Newton's inappropriate, intolerable *gratitude* be the catalyst that transforms days of anxiety into a solid wall of misdirected rage.

"There was nothing to tell," Newton says, his hand tightening on Hermann's shoulder.

Hermann is certain he has never hated anyone as much as he hates Dr. Newton Geiszler in this precise moment.

"What were you going to do?" Newton continues, atypically quiet, atypically considerate, and in *exceptionally* typical *unawareness* of his position at the vertex of intersecting trajectories of Hermann's deeply personal miseries. "Advertise your complicity in the whole thing? Document your hivemind exposure in excruciating detail so that, *maybe*, they'd let you stand in for me? More than you *already had*?"

"We could have *discussed* it," Hermann begins, his throat closing. "We might have—"

"I know," Newton says, now unmistakably conciliatory. "But I didn't think you were going to let me get my own way, so I took advantage of my recently upped intellectual street cred and made a unilateral decision, which, again, turned out to be a good one."

"Is that what you'd call this," Hermann hisses, but still, even *now*, not angry enough to ask him what happened. "A 'good' outcome?"

"No," Newton says. "I would call it an epic, sweeping win on behalf of our species."

Hermann looks away.

Perhaps Newton is right. What is the peace of mind, the sanity, the life expectancy of a single, meddlesome biologist when considered in the context of a decade of death and terror and desperation, the spending of lives and resources, the building of Walls, and the blending of minds?

Nothing of consequence.

But.

Hermann cannot quite make himself see it that way.

He had wanted to 'win' without resorting to Newton's clairvoyant closing gambit.

He had wanted to win by using the Jaegers, by mapping the breach, even by building a Wall of infinite potential energy. He had wanted to win with *anything* but Newton's

ridiculous plan to make himself the fulcrum of an attempt to leverage a wartime advantage across dimensions.

"Yes," Hermann manages. "Yes, you're quite right."

"Oh *god*," Newton rasps, one hand coming to press against his chest. "Hermann. *Please*. Give a guy some *warning*."

"I beg your pardon?" Hermann says, twisting to look at him, mystified and slightly alarmed.

"You can't just call me *right*; you can't just pull this surprise validation out of thin air and expect me to—oh my god, is it *hot* in here? Like, do you feel hot, possibly? I'm going to lie down." Newton gives up on whatever battle he is fighting with his core muscles and collapses back onto the bed. "I feel light-headed, slightly. I feel strangely turned on and also *really awful* at the same time. I think I—"

"Shut *up*," Hermann snaps, without any fondness at all, whatsoever, in any way, shape, or form.

"That would be unfair to the *world*, though," Newton says, struggling to sit. "This was a bad decision. Why did I lie down? I'm pretty sure my muscles have been replaced with lactic acid. I literally can *barely use them*."

Hermann rolls his eyes and pulls the other man up by his blazer.

"I can't believe you chose this *blazer* over my leather jacket, by the way. I *like* that jacket. I look like a shameless pretentious hipster, rather than a cool, edgy hipster. The demographic of this blazer and denim combo is not my demographic. It's not yours either. You just—*assigned me* to a new demographic and I don't like it. I don't want—I don't want to *be here* I—"

Newton snaps the end off his increasingly brittle monologue.

"You burned that jacket," Hermann says gently. "The day after."

"I know," Newton says, not looking at him. "I remember."

Hermann nods.

"It was *not* a lucky jacket," Newton says.

"On the contrary, it was an extremely 'lucky' jacket," Hermann replies dryly. "It was however, also a *ruined* jacket, and I do nothing but commend your instinct to incinerate your contaminated clothing."

"Yeah," Newton says, "though that might have been your influence. It's hard to tell. It wasn't really a typical day."

"I suggest you avoid excessive analysis at the present time," Hermann says.

"Noted, dude," Newton says. "Already in practice. Like, for example, I am not questioning the *why* of my loss of fine motor control, or my crappy smooth pursuit when it comes to visual tracking. I'm assuming that there will be a time that my musculoskeletal system starts taking orders from my brain again. Kind of makes you wonder what exactly—" he breaks off, both hands coming up, his skin blanching, his breathing a sudden, shallow struggle.

"You are fine," Hermann says for the fourth time that morning, his hand closing around Newton's elbow, right above the joint.

More than *anything* he wants to know what it is that Newton is experiencing in these moments. Is he panicking? Is he having an immersive mnemonic experience? Is it something *else*?

"You are fine," Hermann says, lying to him, *lying to him*. Possibly. Possibly lying to him. He doesn't know.

He wonders if it's possible, neurologically, for Newton to get lost in his own mind, to become mired in some pathologic circuit that *should not be there*, that does not belong, that should *never* have been laid down.

"You are *fine*," Hermann says, shaking him gently. "We are in San Francisco. In a hotel room. We had a disconcertingly gratis breakfast."

He has *no idea* if Newton is processing any of this.

"We then went shopping. You made a memorable impression on literally every single human being we crossed paths with, despite my advice to the contrary."

"Yeah," Newton manages after several more seconds. "No, I know. I'm—I get it."

"Do you know—" Hermann realizes mid-question that what he is about to ask is a terrible idea. He breaks his phrase in half and restarts his sentence. "Do you find it helpful if I orient you?" he asks, leaving the context implied, hoping Newton will say 'no', hoping that they'll both believe it.

"Yeah," Newton says, looking resolutely at the opposite wall. "Maybe a little."

Hermann nods, trying recast this as progress of some kind. Of any kind.

The more that comes to light, the less he's going to like it. Of that much, he is quite sure.



From the moment he'd predicted the timing of the triple event, he'd known that his life would be abjectly, acutely miserable for the foreseeable future, and, while he is now grateful that he's not in danger of being *consumed* by *akaiju*, he had hit that particular forecast straight on the proverbial head.

Breakfast had been awful.

Subsequent shopping had been *worse*.

He'd known it would be, of course, but he'd also known that he was not capable of leaving Newton *alone* in a San Francisco hotel room for even a minimal amount of time while he purchased a toothbrush and analgesics. Not today. Not right now. Absolutely not. Entirely out of the question. Insupportable. One hundred percent unthinkable in theory and in practice.

"What is wrong with you?" Newton asks, in faintly puzzled irritation. "Something is wrong with you."

Hermann tries to bury the urge to vent his frustration in one of many innumerable and equally unfortunate ways, but it is difficult.

Newton is unforgivably stupid at times. Hermann could contend with that, could accept it as a given and work around it, if only it were *always true*. Alas, it is not, and so he can't.

"And you know I mean that in the *nicest way*," Newton continues.

Newton is, in part, correct.

There are *many* things 'wrong with him' at the present time.

Hermann has no urge to start concatenating.

The entirety of his unrest reduces down to that which has always troubled him in one form or another—the shuttering of insight in the face of poorly defined bias. Ironically, it bothers him now in *Newton*, who, in the span of a week, has escaped Hermann's admittedly flawed estimation of him (as a tangle of compensatory blindnesses) only to be revealed, intra-drift, as the eidetic empiricist with prodigious predictive capacity and a tendency to swing at conceptual fences *he had always been*, before being caught in a web of probable neural damage that Hermann doesn't think he's fully capable of perceiving.

*You think something is wrong with me?* Hermann nearly shouts at him. *Something is wrong with you. Do you understand that?*

"Nicely," Newton says, with a strange mixture of condescension and anxiety. "I meant it *nicely*. Also *respectfully*. Did I mention respectfully?"

Hermann despises bias.

He despises incomplete insight.

He sees *both* of these in Newton now—in his appropriation of Descartes and Riemann zeros, in the way he offers to pull Hermann out of a sinking boat and straight into the water with the absolute sincerity of a man who doesn't understand he's drowning.

Hermann can only guess at the edges of his *own* insight.

Perhaps this is what Newton means when he says that something's wrong.

"I literally cannot tell if you are trying not to freak out or trying not to yell at me," Newton says. "Can you *saysomething* maybe? Like—which way are you leaning? Panic or pique, dude, come on, you're making me nervous. Pick one."

The unparsable distress he's feeling breaks against the wall of his own exhaustion.

Nothing will ever clarify for him again.

Not like it once had.

Numbers, equations, the semiotics of the civilized mind—these can be misinterpreted, there are places they cannot go, there are unsolvable problems, there are limits to confidence intervals, there are boundaries on predictive power imposed by sensitive dependence of initial conditions. Even so, mathematics is consistent with itself. It is the solid interior revealed at the hearts of physical laws that have had their phenomenological skin opened and peeled back.

Mathematics, understood perfectly, would allow for a shucking of all deceptions the human mind perpetrates against itself.

One can only be betrayed by one's flawed understanding. One can be betrayed by it, driven mad by it, tortured by it endlessly. *How* he would like to divorce himself from his biology—from this inadequate chunk of tissue through which he's forced to interface with the world. It's his *only* interface. And it is flawed. *Flawed* by the vagaries of natural selection. Flawed by its physical limitations. Flawed by its solipsism and its base links to primitive responses, to the terror that turns on like a spigot as it tries to teach him that which he *already knows*, to the concept of shame, which is *built in* simply to improve odds of survival by conformity to social norms. He doesn't like it. He's *never* liked it. And now he likes it *less*. It's full of glitches and incompatibilities.

"*Hermann*," Newton shouts, directly in his ear.

Hermann flinches, fixes Newton with his most overtly wroth-filled glare and snarls, "yes," with as much energy as total exhaustion and abject misery will grant him. "Very astute. There's *always been* something wrong with me."

"Oh for the *love*," Newton replies, looking at the ceiling in vexatious relief.

Hermann has no idea what that incomplete phrase might imply. His improved insight into Newton's disorganized consciousness extends only so far.

"What the hell *was* that?" Newton says, clearly referring to Hermann's brief period of acute existential agony.

"I've always suspected that my brain, as an interface with reality, was deeply flawed. Now it is, unquestionably, post your influence, more flawed than ever."

"Thanks," Newton says dryly. "But you realize you're doing *my* thing right now, right? It's like, the anti-hedge. It's the paralipsis defense. Run awaaaay from the hedging down a paraliptical rhetorical path. I wonder if I can do *your*thing? The hedge you into a hedge garden thing? Do people even *have* gardens of hedges? Would that just be a maze?"

"You know," Hermann says, "it would improve my mood *a great deal* if you would make an effort to enunciate and direct your train of thought to the extent you're capable of doing so because I spent the better part of a day concerned that you had lost touch with reality and *might never regain it*."

"So hedging it is," Newton says.

"I do not *hedge*," Hermann replies. "As we discussed last week, that is not a rhetorical device that I *ever* employ."

"So you want what?" Newton asks. "You have to *want* something for me to hedge for you, that's how it *works*, Hermann, do you seriously not *get* hedging, as a concept, or are you just *pretending* not to get it in some display of misdirected virtue?"

"Allow me to clarify things for you. I do not want you to *hedge* anything, Newton."

"You want a perfect brain," Newton says. "Understandable. I totally get that, maybe a little too well right now. But you can only have a perfect, unbiased view of the nature of reality if you can abstract yourself from it, which is impossible. You'll always be limited by your hardware. By the traversable surfaces of your interior eurhythmic architecture. By your resources."

"I know that," Hermann replies. "I have, in fact, always known it."

"No kidding. You put your money down on the purely theoretical horse before you'd seen the real thing," Newton continues.

Hermann rolls his eyes.

"Do not roll your eyes at me, you prosaic bastard; you committed fully to the quantitative and the abstract at about age eight, man, and that's because no one ever cast physiology for you as anything more than an *enemy*—a barrier to be overcome."

This is becoming slightly too personal for Hermann's taste, a sentiment he views with the self-aware irony that it deserves, given that he's in possession of Newton's entire mnemonic landscape circa one week previous.

"Isn't it?" Hermann asks dryly. "I thought *you*, of all people, would have particular insight into *that*."

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," Newton says, with a strange trace of familiar and foreign stiffness in the tilt of his head, the line of his jaw. "My brain and I are a *team*, thank you. Stop taking a chainsaw to my hedging job. I'm not doing this for *me*, dude. I'm not doing this for *my* amusement."

"What *are* you doing?" Hermann asks. "Because I'm sure I don't know."

"Demonstrating academic solidarity?" Newton replies. "Role reversal? Being *nice* to you, because it has not escaped my notice that you have been *extremely* nice to *me*?"

"Only because I *pointed it out to you*," Hermann snaps.

"No one's perfect, okay? Look, I will explain in a less implicit way. You're upset because your brain is a mess, and that's my fault in at least three ways. You say, 'Newton, I've decided to drop my Victorian-era demeanor and sensibilities and confess to you that I want Thing A, where Thing A is my brain returning to its former status as a fine-ass example of well organized, well ordered, intrapersonal control'. Context wise, Thing A is tied up in your long history of wishing you could exchange your brain for hardware that's a little less inherently limited and your acute history of tragically scrambling said brain with two other parties. You know that you're not getting Thing A, not *really*, but you *want* it so much that you're not going to qualify thing A for yourself, you're just going to let it piss you off endlessly. I, impersonating baseline-you—are you following this, dude? It's confusing and you look tired. Okay, based on the look I am getting, I assume your answer is yes. Continuing. So, I *hedge* for you by presenting Idea B, which is that divorcing yourself from the architecture of your own consciousness is not only impossible but also meaningless, because you *are* your neural architecture, your entire experience derives from it, *you have to drag it around*

and *make it* do what you *want*. I also hedge for you by presenting Idea C, which is that even though your perception of the world is flawed, we live in a universe of reproducible phenomena which permits the idea of absolute truth, at least in certain arenas. Yeah, you'll never claw your way to a privileged frame of reference—so what, man? There's something *nice*, something *comforting*, about the equality of observers. So you suck at having adequate self-insight right now. Big deal. Because, guess what, dude, you *always sucked at it*. You just didn't *know* how much you sucked. Now you know. Now you can *really* tell. Because you know what I know. About your brain. And how it's a little bit of a traitorous bastard most of the time."

"And that's what you think this is?" Hermann asks. "Some kind of quixotic quest to find a superior mental reference frame? I hardly think we're in an inertial state."

"You are the *worst*," Newton says. "That might have been one of my sweetest metaphors *ever*, and you're going to criticize it based on *inertia*?"

"I'm attempting to refine it," Hermann replies, rolling his eyes.

"Myeah, maybe non-inertial," Newton says agreeably. "This *is* weird, even for us. Sharing brains; you rescuing me like eight times from my own stupidity, me reassuring you with concepts borrowed from relativistic physics and improperly generalized to cognition; you avoiding your problems paralytically, me doing some crap hedging for you in response; you wearing that bathrobe, me being ninety-five percent blind rather than eighty-five percent blind; you sticking it to the man, me complying with the man and getting neurologically worked over for my trouble; you verbalizing inappropriate guitar thoughts, me being obsessed with the most straightforward coordinate plane out there; you not sleeping, like, at all, me sleeping a *lot*; us becoming rockstars but in kind of a suspect way that we want to minimize; not having to save the world anymore; it's weird, dude, we're changing our velocity in *some* way, that's for sure, but I'm not sure if it's an acceleration thing, or a deceleration thing, or just a really tight cornering to avoid an oncoming brick wall."

"Several points," Hermann says. "A) I do not *hedge*. B) I was not engaging in paralipsis. C) I do not have inappropriate thoughts about *any* musical instruments, least of all your guitar from 2009. D) I have been sleeping adequately, thank you. E) I am sure drug-induced semi-consciousness does not count as sleep. F) Your entire premise, that I am upset because my brain is, quote, 'a mess,' is flawed. My primary concern at the present time is, in actuality, *your* brain, Newton."

"Oh," Newton says. "Really?"

"Yes," Hermann replies, not sure what exactly it will take to firmly communicate this knowledge to his colleague of the past decade if he has not managed to successfully impart it already.

"Yeah, there are some blown or blowing fuses in there, I'll give you that. But I think I'm at least eighty percent. Don't you think? I could see myself misjudging that, so I'll believe you if you say I'm not, but like, come on. Non-inertial reference frames? I'm receiving what you're transmitting. Not literally. Probably. I feel like eighty percent of my theoretical maximum plus weird thought-parity should put me in a pretty reasonable cognitive sphere from a usefulness and discourse oriented perspective."

Hermann feels vaguely sick.

This is partially attributable to an elevated coffee-to-omelette ratio hard on the heels of a sleepless night.

This is partially attributable to the content of Newton's statement.

This is partially attributable to what he must say next.

He sees no way out, not ethically, not morally, not paralitically. This demands to be confronted head on.

*Do you not understand that I do not care about your discourse level at the present moment?* Hermann would like to ask him. *Do you think I don't know that your moral imperatives are more commonly cast as moral ideals? Do you think I am incapable of parsing out your rationale for nearly everything you have or will ever encounter? Do you think I will ever forget the slide of the tray that ended our last shared meal in Hong Kong?*

"Newton," he says. "I hope you realize that—"

He isn't certain he'll continue; his mind is saying no to every thought he has.

"I hope you realize that I didn't pull you out of that lab for any discursive or analytic abilities you might possess," Hermann manages finally.

"Um," Newton says, one hand coming to his head. "I know that. *Obviously*. You pulled me out because you have a pathologic sense of loyalty and devotion, which is sometimes hilarious, sometimes tragic, and has already gotten you into way too much trouble. I'm just—pointing out the side benefits that you can enjoy as a result of continually bending the knee to the rigid ethics of your superego. Hopefully the benefits will end up outweighing the costs."

"I would have done it at *any* cost," Hermann whispers, looking at the far wall.

"Terrible plan," Newton says, staring at the floor. "Evolutionary fail."

"I will always make decisions that transcend biological imperatives," Hermann says.

"Show off," Newton replies.

For a moment, they are silent, sitting too closely together on the edge of a non-descript bed in an anonymous room. Hermann looks out the floor-to-ceiling windows, past the dark metal rail of the balcony, and toward the distant Wall, pale gray under the light of a rising sun.

"You're seriously giving a talk on Monday?" Newton asks. "I can't even—yeah, I would *not* be able to do that, man. Are you sure *you* can? Maybe reschedule. Are you *even* sleeping? Have you slept anytime recently. Are you *even* a guy? Or are you, like, some kind of other thing? Are you infecting me with your thought parity? Can you *not*, maybe? Do you have a plan for how you're going to structure the thing? Can you tell it to me? Kind of vaguely? Remember that time in Geneva, with the weirdly purple ambient lighting? That was a great talk you gave. I was sitting next to the editor of *Nature Kaiju Science*, only I didn't know it at the time. Who he was, I mean. Did I ever tell you about this? He basically started jerking off once you got to your first data slide. Metaphorically. It was very uncomfortable for me."

"Charming," Hermann replies, remembering that meeting, remembering the undercurrent of terror that had edged every question, sharpened every conflict, heightened every intellectual rivalry. Newton had gotten into a shouting match at the end of his own talk, his sleeves rolled up, the green of his progressively building body art black under the dim, violet lights. "I don't think you did," he says slowly. "In fact, I'm certain you told me you *skipped* my talk."

"Um" Newton says. "I think I *did* tell you that."

"But you didn't," Hermann says. "You didn't skip it." His eyebrows pull together, as he remembers himself from outside his body and inside Newton's, wedged into a seat at the back of the room, ragingly hung over, his thumb hooked under his jaw, two fingers pressing against his temple, the knuckles of his ring finger digging into the corner of his mouth.

"Um," Newton says. "Don't think of that—don't think of that day, actually."

"Too late," Hermann replies, flashing back to an image of himself that comes not from his mind but from Newton's, from the corner seat in the last row of a dimly lit auditorium. He watches light reflect off the surface of his hair as he begins the final talk of the first plenary session. As he clicks through his slide deck, moving from his background on Quantum Field Theory to his first, and most important data slide, he

feels Newton's thoughts closing down like calipers in tense, anticipatory simpatico, a mental aligning, his fingers pressing against his temple, against the arm of his chair, the muscles of his left leg contracting and releasing in a controlled tremor, until, finally, the transition comes in a moment of climax so intense that the entire audience shifts as one, a collective breath is released, and the man next to him says, "oh god," as the topology of the breach appears on the screen in irregular, pastel relief. He can relax then, something lets go in his mind, and he whispers, "was it good for you too?" to his traumatized seatmate.

Hermann shakes his head, fighting a flood of disorientation. "You are *bizarre*," he says.

"You too," Newton replies.

He doesn't understand the memory, can't be sure if Newton's tension was real, was *actually* how the man had felt in that moment, or whether the fidelity of Newton's remembered experience is now infected with Hermann's own memory of the same event—behind the podium, a wireless microphone clipped to his collar, uncomfortable at the idea of public speaking, as he *always* was, but, for once, feeling his own fears subsumed beneath the importance of the material he needed to communicate.

"Were you *anxious*?" Hermann asks. "Were you anxious *on my behalf*?"

"No," Newt says. "Yes. No. You get very anxious, man, it's catching. A little bit. But not really. Look, it was *memorable*, that's all." He tries to run a hand through his hair and makes no headway through gel-petrified disarray. "Ugh, what did they put in my hair? *Glue*?"

"Yes," Hermann says dryly. "I believe that's exactly what they used. Water-soluble glue. Consider a shower."

"Myeah," Newton says slowly.

"Do you have some objection to *showering*?" Hermann asks, his eyes narrowing slightly.

"No," Newton replies. "No. That would be weird, why would you even ask me that? Showering is great. Hygiene is important. Glue is less good. Glue is not preferred. Did we buy a razor? I'm going to shower right now, actually. Do you think the PPDC is going to send us our stuff? Do you think we should ask for it, or is that just opening lines of communication that would better be left shut? Not that I don't enjoy the lifestyle of an itinerant intellectual rover, but I could use more than two outfits, and I *liked* guitar number four, dude, and last time I saw it, it was leaning against the south wall of the lab. Do you think anyone will water my plants? Where are my glasses?"

"You do not need your glasses to take a shower," Hermann says.



"Well I need them to find the hydrogen peroxide we bought and do an oxidative blood lift on all the things I've gotten blood on, which I can neither find nor identify without *vision*," Newton says, sounding like he's approaching vexation, if not quite there yet.

"I will do that," Hermann says.

"You're going to throw up," Newton says.

"I will not," Hermann replies.

"You will. I guarantee it. I will bet you eight hundred dollars that the *second* you see catalase generated *pink*-tinged *foam* you're—"

"*Fine*," Hermann snarls, pulling Newton's glasses out of the front pocket of his own blazer and extending them in the other man's direction.

"Wait," Newton says. "You *had these*? The *whole time*? In the *diner*? You *jackass*. We were *on TV*."

"I will collect and curate an *entire library* of literally *all* references to you in the cultural lexicon and *organize it for you*," Hermann says, "at a later date. As of right now, I did not think it wise to expose you to television coverage of recent events in an uncontrolled environment."

"What is *that* supposed to mean?" Newton says, wincing as he swaps Hermann's shades for his actual glasses.

"Use your ostensibly intact cognitive capacity to *figure it out*," Hermann says, all the bite he meant to give the words entirely undercut by his reaction to Newton's bloodshot eyes and pained expression.

"Yeah," Newton snaps, cocking his head to favor his right eye as he digs through plastic shopping bags and emerges with the hydrogen peroxide. "I *already did*. That was *not* a good-faith interrogative, dude. Do you even *know* me?"

*That* was not a good-faith interrogative either. Hermann is quite clear on that point.

"Yes," Hermann, says, standing, unwilling to watch Newton attempt to *read the label* on the hydrogen peroxide. "What in god's name could you possibly be trying to ascertain?" he asks, snapping the bottle out of Newton's grip.

"For one, whether I have enough visual resolution to *read*," Newton replies. "For two, what percent—"

"Three," Hermann snaps, glancing at the label and handing the bottle back to him. "It's antiseptic grade, three percent hydrogen peroxide. Simply *pour it on your shirt* and be done with it."

"Sit," Newton says, pushing Hermann backwards a step, in the direction of the bed. "That's step one. Then? *Lie down*. You are ridiculously *cranky* right now, do you realize that? Leave the redox reactions to the guy who can consistently tell the difference between oxidation and reduction and go dream about four-dimensional cubes, or something appropriately trippy. I promise not to die in the shower."

Hermann resists him, but Newton increases his own insistence with direct, linear proportionality and eventually just *shoves* him into the bed, saying, "just *lie there*, dude. Just lie there and *sleep*. Easy. The easiest thing ever."

"I *strongly* object to being *shoved* onto a *bed*."

"Noted," Newton says, already halfway across the room and half out of his blazer. "Noted, considered, and deemed wholly irrelevant on the following grounds. A) I gave you fair warning about this exact outcome. B) you have been dragging me all over the place for I don't even know how long. C) You deserved it, and D) you *deserved* it."

Newton struggles all the way out of his blazer and pitches it straight at Hermann, effectively preventing Hermann's incipient retort.

"Will you *stop*?" Hermann snaps, pulling Newton's blazer out of his face.

"Stop what?" Newton replies, squinting from behind his glasses as he pulls his bloodstained shirt and a bloodstained bathrobe from the closet. "I like that you hung these up."

Hermann doesn't dignify that with a response.

He waits for Newton to vanish around the corner, waits for the sound of a closing door, waits for the rush of the shower heard dimly through the wall before he pulls out the remote and turns on the television. He mutes it out of pure precaution, not because he thinks it's necessary, not because he thinks that Newton, *somehow*, might hear it behind a wall and with the ambient sound of running water, but because it makes Hermann himself feel safer. As though he's making rationally supportable decisions.

Which he is not.

He will endeavor to improve his performance in that regard.

Right now, he has an extreme bias against exposing Newton to any materials, images, or concepts too closely linked with the *kaiju* anteverse. He has only the vaguest of ideas regarding what is currently going on in his colleague's head, and he prefers to err on the side of caution. Hopefully, Newton's current difficulties consist of nothing more

than a few understandable, biologically justifiable episodes of unremitting sympathetic activation.

Unfortunately, he doesn't think that's what's happening.

Not exactly.

Not precisely.

But he is building a theory.

A theory he doesn't particularly care for.

As he flips through channels with a quick, repetitive flicking of the accelerometer in the remote he holds, Hermann lays it out for himself.

His *own* post-drift experience has been—atypical, relative to case reports compiled from Jaeger pilots. Hermann is now in possession of a repository of biological knowledge he did not work to acquire, of muscle memories that aren't truly his own but nevertheless *belong* to him, of a set of preferences built on a life he hasn't lived. These things exist in simultaneous parallel to his own sets of knowledge and banks of skills, and, if he is not mistaken, aspects of these exogenous memories and skills and preferences are becoming insidiously *incorporated* into his current mental function.

He narrows his eyes at his left hand and transfers the remote he's holding to his *right* hand. Where it *belongs*. He continues flipping through channels.

EPIC Rapport is not a concept he cannot yet conceptualize. He understands its underpinnings imperfectly. He would like more detail on the way the memories were laid down, *why* they were cemented so firmly when the drift usually resulted in transient synchronization that, post-drift, faded with a velocity inversely proportional to the number of successful synchronizations achieved by the drifting pair. He may not be able to biochemically parse the mechanism by which EPIC Rapport has been initiated or is being maintained, but he's certain that he can lay elements of his subjective experience at its door, such as his inability to create ranked lists in the face of diametrically opposed preferences, his talent for isolating kaiju RNA without reference to a protocol, his facility with Nietzsche, his ability to pick up a guitar and play the central riff of *Syncope*, arguably the greatest hit of *The Superconducting Supercolliders*.

Newton, however, is not the *only* party with whom he shared his brain in a vulnerable, hyperexcitable state.

Alas.

He also shared his consciousness with a *hive mind*.

An alien one.

Is there any other kind?

His borrowed biological knowledge fails to provide him with an example, other than those derived from science fiction, a field in which Newton possesses an encyclopedic knowledge of readily available, useless, inspiring ephemera.

Hermann rolls his eyes at a man who is not even in the room and then returns to his train of thought.

If *Newton's* neural patterns had been burned into his cortex in an expensive metabolic blaze of long term potentiation, Hermann isn't certain what has been left behind by the anteverse. Certainly, *something* has been, certainly some things are now altered, because otherwise he doesn't think he'd dream of destruction on scales that make him sick in waking hours. He had, of course, worried about the integrity of his thoughts, right from the beginning, right from the moment he'd regurgitated bile in that dimly lit Hong Kong street, nauseated by the violence, by the savage intent, that had, so recently, been a part of him.

This then, is a first approximation of his mental experience, post-drift: EPIC Rapport with Newton coupled with the subjectively limited influence of the kaiju anteverse that is manifesting, primarily, as dreams. At a second approximation, hyperexcitability of his neural pathways had facilitated a near duplication of Newton's experiences in his own cerebral cortex and had effected changes unknown but more subtle and therefore, likely, more circumscribed in response to synchronization with a kaiju hive-mind. He doesn't have enough data to get to a third approximation. Not at this point.

This brings him to his working model of Newton's current subjective experience.

One: Newton is experiencing EPIC Rapport with Hermann, as evidenced by his appreciation for rationalism, a newfound talent for engaging in mathematics-based wordplay, and the ability to locate Hermann's sherry, amongst other examples.

Two: Newton is currently operating under several acute psychological stressors. These consist of a) a level of sleep-deprivation at which Hermann can only guess, and b) several notably horrid experiences in the past week, some of which Hermann *can remember* and some of which he is forced to imagine. These things, taken together, *may* explain Newton's episodes of what *appears* to be brief but consuming panic. He does not feel comfortable assuming either panic or causality.

Three: Newton *may* be experiencing aspects of EPIC Rapport with the kaiju anteverse. Hermann does not believe there is a *real-time* connection between Newton and the anteverse, doesn't see how there possibly *could* be, given that the breach is not just shut but *destroyed*, but, as evidenced by his own experience with EPIC Rapport, the subjective sensation of another party existing in confusing simultaneity within the framework of one's own mental experience is extremely disruptive and confusing. He imagines that it would be worse, *infinitely*, unimaginably worse, if that other party was a mnemonically persevered representation of the kaiju hivemind.

Four: Hermann finds considering Newton's subjective experience extremely upsetting.

Five: So does Newton, he would imagine.

Six: He will determine what, *exactly*, happened to Newton during the time he was "collaborating" with the PPDC, and, if warranted, he will grind careers into bureaucratic dust.

Seven: *I think someone hijacked your working model*, his mind offers, sounding distressingly like Newton. *Because you transitioned straight from modeling to vengeful to-do lists.*

Hermann shuts his eyes, and threads his fingers through his hair at his temple.

When he opens his eyes again, he's looking at Ms. Mori, in sharp, two dimensional relief on the screen built into the wall. She is silent but speaking, wearing a red shirt, with red streaks in her hair, responding to a question asked of her with an earnest expression and measured, intermittent hand gestures. Mr. Becket sits next to her. Their poses are nearly identical, from the subtle twist of their shoulders toward their interviewer, to their polite, reserved expressions.

Hermann feels, for a moment, blindly and acutely *envious*.

Of what, exactly, he can't say.

He requires a moment to collect himself before reading the scrolling captions on the screen.

*Let me say on behalf of all our viewers and our production team that we're deeply sorry for the personal losses that you both sustained in the past week*, the interviewer says, leaning forward, interlacing her fingers atop the surface of the desk where she sits.

*Thank you*, Ms. Mori says.

*Can you tell us a little bit about how you're coping with knowledge that your coworkers, people you worked closely with, didn't come back from your last mission?*

For a long interval, neither of them speak, and Hermann watches the white words in the black caption box disappear.

*No one has gone untouched by all that has happened*, Ms. Mori says finally.

*There's common ground in that, I think*, Mr. Becket finishes for her.

Hermann flicks his wrist.

Capacitors discharge.

The channel changes.

## Chapter Fifteen

Newt shuts the bathroom door with a marginally cooperative foot and deposits all his materials in a disorganized slide across the limited counter space immediately adjacent to the sink.

He eyes himself dubiously in the painful glare of the mirror. He looks—maybe not his best? Not just right now, not with blood in his sclera and glue in his hair; *no one* looks their best like that, obviously, but that's *fine*; he's about to remedy this aberration of attractiveness, about to orchestrate a regression to his aesthetic mean, and yeah, he'll run it like a protocol, or, if he's going to be perfectly honest, a little bit like a pilot experiment which he will entitle: 'Toward an effort to calm the heck *down*, attempt number 86,752.'

Yes, that's an estimate.

With a misleading number of significant digits.

But.

Pilot experiments.

They are key.

Key like the keys that displace tumblers in locks and key like the keystones of arches, and just key, right? Right. Flagrantly, flamingly key. He is a big fan of piloting things, and sometimes those things are patch clamping his way to the anteverse, sometimes those things are isolating kaiju RNA for gene expression profiling, sometimes, apparently, those things are just doing normal-person activities like the slightly cooler than average but yet totally regular guy that he is except for when he doesn't *want* to be, and also excepting those areas in which he could be classified as just, well, there's no point in being modest right? Not *here*, not with the baller in the mirror who looks like he needs a pep talk right about now, so just yes, just ragingly awesome, a little bit of a badass, totally suave. One hundred percent normal things are happening here; he's just going to do some stuff that he *typically* does, he's just going to do it *slightly differently*, not because he *has* to, right? Because, seriously, he doesn't *have* to do anything differently, he could just, *really* he could just, seal the sink drain, slap some hydrogen peroxide on things that are bloody, get in the shower, and then go slide-tackle his day, *carpe* freaking *diem* style, he's just—the thing is, he's just going to run this *slightly differently*, he's going to run it with a little more formality, it's not going to

*bethat* much different, but he just—he needs a protocol for this because he just *does*, today, right now, honestly, honestly, honestly, perfectly *perfectly* honestly this is *for* his stupid brain; he really kind of owes it. That's a Hermann-thing right there, that *owing*-thing, because Newt is not really into *owing* as a concept, or at least he *hadn't been*, historically. Protocolling though, that's a Newt thing. *This* style of protocolling is—it isn't even *difficult*, the goal is *defined*, the problem is *clear*, and an appropriate sequence of steps has just snapped down into place. Perfect. Aligned. Extremely Newtonian. Eminently Geiszlerian.

His eyes.

*Really* hurt.

So does his head.

He actually thinks he might not have unlimited time before he's going to have to reswap his glasses for shades. He leans forward, looking at his eyes in a little bit more of a clinical way, which makes them hurt more, probably because of the up-close focusing. His accommodation is pretty sluggish, he's got some bilateral iritis but that's not new, and his pupils look a little wide to him for how freaking *bright* this room is. No wonder his vision is garbage right about now. Has he seen an ophthalmologist at any point? Because the PPDC is not exactly known for their ophthalmological expertise. Hypothetical Rain is probably a better assessor than he is when it comes to the human eye, but he's actually not one hundred percent positive about that because the eye is not the brain and Newt is a physiologist amongst other things. Someone had given him eyedrops, so someone had assessed his vision at some point. Really, this is incredibly annoying—not being sure what had happened over the past three days; it's a new experience for him and he's not a fan. Newt wishes he could literally remember *anything* that *any* doctor had—

*Nope*, his brain says.

Newt freezes, already halfway committed to what he's not going to call a 'flinch'.

Nothing happens.

*Oh hey*, Newt says, backing away from the mirror and running a hand through glued-together hair without much success. *Nice save, brain*.

*You've got things to do*, his brain says. *Go oxidize, young man*.

"Oxidizing," Newt murmurs, squinting at the collection of materials next to and also sort of *in* the sink.



He has all materials required, doesn't he?

Moderately bloody shirt?

Check.

Marginally bloody bathrobe?

Check.

Outfit that will remain dry?

He's wearing it.

Phone?

Not check. Hmm. Okay, well, he can live without a playlist. Also, where *is* his phone?

He'll worry about that one later.

Hydrogen peroxide?

Check.

Glasses?

They're on his face.

Various human cleaning products?

Check.

Towels?

Check.

Stolen toothbrush?

Check.

Disposable razor?

All things check.

He depresses the sink drain, throws his shirt in, and dumps hydrogen peroxide over the bloodstain. He performs a more limited application of the chemical to the shoulder of the hotel's bathrobe and watches effervescence in pink. He turns on the shower, kicks off his shoes with less than perfect coordination, peels off his socks without falling over, then extracts himself from his pants with increasing coordination trouble. Overuse is a concept that his musculoskeletal system is trying to teach him using some kind of primitive punitive-based learning system, or—

Or.

He grabs the edge of the sink, his brain balanced on the edge of throwing in *with* him or *against* him, because there *is* an 'or' here, a pretty profound 'or', no, it's an 'and/or', actually, god, how irritating. How irritating. How *irritating*, not *terrifying*, because no, there's nothing terrifying here, all the terrifying things are *over* and in his *past* not in his present, not in his future. Probably.

*No guarantees there*, his brain says, in an extreme example of pure unhelpfulness.

He skids to a cognitive stop immediately before articulation of impending revelation.

*Shh*, he says to his brain.

*Have you considered the possibility that you're not tired?* his brain asks, driving forward, respecting only *one* of the barriers that Newt manages to throw up in its way, submitting only to the drag of articulation; that's all Newt can do—delay, delay, *delay*—influence the manner of coming revelation because no matter what he does, his stupid brain can shove its stupid thoughts straight under the burning lights of his too-crowded, glam-rock consciousness, like this is a *show*, like a thing that *must go on*, in the style of certain singers he won't name. Not just now. *Have you considered the possibility that you aren't coordinated because someone's done some rewiring of your basal ganglia?* *It's not quite classic, but it's not quite not, either.* *You have a resting tremor and you've had one to varying degrees since your first drift. Someone's dopaminergic pathways have been fried. Blown out, like a bad hit of a triple reuptake inhibitor.*

*Someone drugged me*, Newt says. *I'm extremely tired. I'm sure that you're wrong about everything.*

*Oh yeah*, his brain replies. *I'm usually wrong, dude. Wrong. That's a thing that I am.*

He *is* coordinated, he *is*. He's *fine*, actually. And even if he's not, all costs are acceptable. Later he will talk about neural remodeling. With Hermann. *Later*. God, it would be *just his luck* if he got mentally remixed with a giant monster but, instead of living in the Marvel Universe where he'd be manifesting freakyass, awesome powers right about now, he just has a hard time with buttons, has panic attacks about destroying cities, gets headaches, and maybe has the odd epileptic episode here and there.

That's it.

He's *never* liked Peter Parker.

Now he *hates* him.

Out of *envy*.

"You really could not be a better spider-man villain if you *tried*," he mutters at himself as he pulls off his boxers. "Conceptually. Motivationally. Practically though? You suck. You probably couldn't even manage to kill a *regular* spider right now. Forget about some quantum mechanics teenage prodigy dreamboat who wastes his time in dead-end jobs."

Ugh what is he *doing*? He's not going to kill *Peter Parker*. He's not even going to kill a *real* spider. This is just a thought experiment about his capacity for the motor skills required for *killing*. "Oh my god, *stop*," his reflection advises him. "Just *stop*."

Also?

Peter Parker is *fictional*.

Newt gives up on his acute Marvel Universe envy and, out of complete spite for the miserable state that is his current dexterity, manages to shave, courtesy of some cross-hand stabilization. He's able to turn shaving into a more complex and absorbing task than it needs to be by considering surface area and minimal path-length for complete coverage, because *that's* both interesting and useful. Yup. In fact, he gets all the way through the shaving and the teeth brushing in this manner. It's not until he's faced with unbuttoning his shirt that he returns to the relatively pressing issue of trying to decide if his crap balance and his minor intention tremor have a normal or a creepy etiology and whether this tension he cannot shake is actually, possibly, *rigidity*, which is manifesting in the presence of too little dopamine.

Oh hey.

Relative dopamine depletion.

Because, well, if he's right about this, it *could* be very interesting, actually—is he compensating for too much activation by turning on inhibitory pathways? Is drifting a dopamine-expensive process? Is he *biochemically withdrawing* from the effects of the drift? He could see that happening. Maybe. Already he can feel the pressure of likely mechanistic explanations for his subjective and objective experiences bearing down on him in a wave of revelation that's going to be hard for him to deal with, given that he's standing on the beach of his mind holding a sieve and trying to stop a riptide from knocking him over and pulling him under.

*Crap*, his brain whispers.

*It's fine, actually*, Newt replies, but his reflection is wincing, his brain isn't talking to him anymore, and it's the idea of reward mechanisms that hits him first because, like any

behavior-based physiological process, individual reward for individual operators might, *might*, be a property of the hive-mind, the way that the *Others* induced and rewarded linkage, but that was assuming that linking into the hivemind, jacking into that collective port, was a thing that could be controlled on the level of a single mind, and he's not sure whether it might be true for discrete kaiju, or any individual portion of the collective, but he *knows* one little jackass for whom it was true, boy does he ever. Could they have manipulated his reward pathways on purpose? Made him want to *come back* to the drift? Because he *does*, *god* he does. He *doesn't* though, he *doesn't*, he won't, he can't, he—it's not the same, it wasn't the *same*, not the third time, the *third* time—

He's not sure where he is, *oh god*, he thinks, *we're networked, we're networked, we're networked, the net effect of this is that we're worked*. He's got the most capacity, he's slotting right into his role of central processor, glowing blue and glued to a board somewhere, his sense of self begins to shred beneath the weight of linking, desperate *anger* and 'what do you think that means,' 'I think it means *he's seizing*'. A ceiling is falling on him, he's blending with Hermann, cut up homesick mutilated brains are shrieking a stereo chorus in his thoughts, a crescendo with a rising action that flings him into nothing.

At all.

And—

He's.

He is now slightly confused?

Slightly.

Very slightly.

His thoughts feel warm and compressed.

This *bathroom* just doesn't look all that *familiar* to him, and also he thinks that maybe he's about to drop dead in it? Breathing seems really difficult, tragically, he's not sure what's happening with that just right now and also he's holding hydrogen peroxide and de-blooding a bathrobe?

This is really not a good time to be confused—it's actually *never* good to be confused while holding bloody articles of clothing. This is a universal truth of the human condition, he is one hundred percent positive of this.

He's cleaning blood off a *bathrobe*, though.

Statistically, that's a few standard deviations from your average blood-lift as portrayed in crime procedurals that, as a human, he's watched over the years. Crime procedurals. A fundamental aspect of human entertainment since Scheherazade's *Three Apples*.

Speaking of weird though, this is—

*Hermann's bathrobe?*

Grasping for context he finds it—Hieronymous Bosch and Hermann backlit by a sunset artificially abridged by a wall—yes, okay, he remembers now, this is Hermann's bathrobe which is technically the hotel's bathrobe, and which is also a thing that Newt had previously bled on, earlier, while not getting a hug. That had been memorable.

So.

Newt is cleaning his *own* blood out of a bathrobe that Hermann borrowed.

Okay that's fine.

This cleaning job he's doing is a little bit *confusing* though, it's somewhat nightmarish, and doesn't seem to be obeying the laws of physics because for all the hydrogen peroxide he's dumped on the thing, the blood doesn't seem to be *going away*. In fact, if anything, it looks new. That doesn't seem quite right to him; it makes him uneasy.

Things slot back into place slow and stepwise. This is a hotel; he had breakfast recently; Hermann is on the other side of the wall; Newt is Newt and holding hydrogen peroxide; he thinks he knows what year it is but he's not sure so he's not going to say; the breach is closed—he can feel it's shut because he can feel the place it would be open in his mind if it were open and could take them home.

Um, what?

No.

*Wires crossed, Geiszler, his brain says. You were the one who told your species exactly where their scalpel should be inserted and just how it should twist.*

*And I'd do it again,* he replies reflexively, not even entirely sure what he means. *I'd do it again.*

He'd had a protocol. Yes, right, a protocol. He's fine, actually, he's fine, he's not sure what just happened there, but now that he thinks about it, it seems like he'd sort of freaked out but his brain seems to be done with that for right now; everyone seems to agree that discussing things with *Hermann* is the best course of action, not thinking about said things *right now*, so much.

Ideally he would just take a shower, but he'd wanted to clean this robe first, but there's something wrong with it because it's *not cleaning* and it's making him doubt the sequential order of cause and effect and that's *freaking him out* a little bit; *he's not going to lie about that*. He needs *causality*—life without it is very *distressing* because *what is going on with this robe*, he doesn't understand, something entropically backwards is happening here; oxidative reactions are going the wrong way, possibly. Someone broke the second law of thermodynamics and didn't tell him, the arrow of time has been screwed around with, retrocausation is generally believed not to be a thing that should happen in bathrooms and on the macro-scale so *what is happening here?* He tries to think about it and figure it out. He's staring at this bathrobe and he's watching blood appear and he's pouring hydrogen peroxide on that blood to oxidize it into foamed release but more blood just *appears*. That *makes no sense*, entropically.

Entropically it *doesn't*.

He's also *tasting blood*.

He brings a hand to his face on some instinct and that hand comes away covered in the stuff and *what is this*—a remake of *Carrie* courtesy of his *brain*? Who put him in a Stephen King novel? *Why is there blood everywhere?*

He's panicking, he's *panicking*, he's panicking. He is just—this *should not*—

*Dude—I think you're bleeding*, his brain suggests.

Oh.

Right.

Yes.

Of course he is.

Newt decides that maybe he will take a break from cleaning this bathrobe and possibly sit down? Except no, because, miraculously, he has not yet bled on his shirt and he really needs one shirt to wear because he can't not wear a shirt right now, that would be a protocol deviation.

He leans forward, over the sink, and pinches his nose shut and breathes through his mouth.

This is bad.

This is *bad*.

This is terrible.

This is actually not that bad.

This is fine.

He's concerned.

He's *mildly* concerned.

Newt is mildly concerned by how confusing he's found the last thirty seconds or so. And by 'mildly' he means 'extremely'. He's *also* concerned he might be heading down a vasovagal road into synoptic sunset because he is *distressed*, man, physiologically, psychologically, just extremely *distressed* right now. By his headache, by his eye pain, by his tendency to bleed with minimal provocation, by his brief incomprehension of causality, by his imminent failure at showering.

He tries to think of kittens and not about dopamine; it was thinking about dopamine that had caused this problem in the first place. He will think about the dopamine thing *later*. When he is not by himself.

Is he still bleeding?

Yes.

It's getting hot in this bathroom, the air is humid and feels hard to breathe and he can't see the guy in the mirror anymore, he's blurred beneath a film of condensation. That's good. That's preferred. He's probably better off under there anyway.

Good.

Okay.

Yes.

Condensation, Riemann zeroes, Peter Parker, tissue regeneration, Victor Frankenstein, panic, dopamine, kaiju, hotels, breakfasts, breaking news, Hypothetical Rain, reward circuitry, Hermann, cortical remapping, oxidation, hydrogen peroxide, epinephrine, *Fear and Trembling*, quantum foam, proofreading polymerases, error correction (quantum style), dermal tapestry stitched with an oscillating needle-gun, phenotypic plasticity, neural plasticity, plastic plasticity, neural architecture, phantom tears in space time, a screaming background chorus of disembodied tissue cross-linked into prisons of virescent aldehydes.

All of it slots back into place, he is fine, he is *fine*, he doesn't need Hermann to tell him that he's standing in a hotel bathroom, cleaning up his clothes, he can figure it out for *himself*, it turns out, to no one's surprise, no one's *at all*, definitely not his; *he* is not surprised.

Is he still bleeding?

No.

Awesome.

Newt pulls the de-blooded and partially re-blooded bathrobe out of the sink and drapes it over the counter for future use. He turns his back to the mirror, shuts his eyes, and starts unbuttoning his shirt. He's not great at it, actually, this unbuttoning thing, he's less good than he would have predicted, but that's fine. It's not like there are any time constraints except for the one where Hermann decides Newt's dropped dead and breaks down the door with a shoulder-cane, one-two combination. He's not sure when that particular time point would hypothetically go down, but he's pretty sure it wouldn't be before the forty-five minute mark. And he's going to make this as fast as possible.

These buttons are really screwing with him.

Hold shirt, torque shirt, apply pressure to edge of button, slide through buttonhole, repeat.

Something is screwing with his motor cortex or his cerebellum or his basal ganglia or his spinal cord or his muscles and whether that element of screw is pharmacological, biological, drift-derived, kaiju-mediated, or just the first sign of imminent spider-man villainy, he really can't say at this point.

If Peter Parker really exists he is going to be so angry he's not sure he'll recover. Ever.

Kinesthetic feedback indicates that he's done with his unbuttoning.

Eyes still shut, he pulls off his shirt, sends it in the direction of the doorway with as much coordination as his cerebellum is capable of implementing at the moment, and then reaches behind him for the hydrogen peroxide covered bathrobe.

*I like your style there, champ*, his brain says, as if it's *not* a deceitful bastard apt to plunge him into pure panic at the slightest provocation.

*I wish I could say it was mutual*, Newt replies, tying the robe shut and opening his eyes. *I really wish I could. Unfortunately, your track record at the moment leaves a lot to be desired. A lot.*

He pulls off his glasses, sets them on the counter with a quiet click, and steps into the shower.

He sweeps the shower curtain shut.

Nope.



He immediately sweeps it open again.

There have been more efficient showers in the history of mankind, Newt will not dispute that.

The bathrobe becomes pretty heavy pretty immediately, given that it's so absorbent. He'd thought about just showering in the clothes he'd worn to breakfast, but that had seemed, somehow, weirder than showering in a hydrogen peroxide soaked bathrobe. He can justify this to himself, because, really, the bathrobe could do with some cleaning; he'd managed to cumulatively get a decent amount of blood on the thing between round one and two. Hopefully round two will be the last bleeding round. He doubts that a little bit, but it's good to have goals.

Newt still maintains that the epistaxis thing is not serious.

There is literally no way it could be.

Physiologically.

Okay, that's a lie, it *could* be serious, but a little *too* serious for his current level of serious, if that makes any sense. Newt isn't sure it does.

Waterlogged bathrobes are *heavy*, it turns out, and Dr. Geiszler is, improbably and suddenly, *very tired*.

Temperature-wise, this is nice though. He's been cold for days, he thinks.

Newt pushes at his hair and tips his head back, trying to work the glue out of it. It's not really happening—disappointingly his hair is now just a wet, stiff mess instead of a dry, stiff mess. Newt is not going to surrender to this though, at least not before he tries his hand at initiating some surfaction action, courtesy of complimentary shampoo. Following the application of some lavender-scented, violescent gel, he finally creates some weak points in the stubborn mat affixed to his scalp and makes some headway in working his hair into a state of freedom. Between the bathrobe and the being exhausted, he can't release his hair entirely before taking a break and dropping his hands.

He leans against the lateral wall of the shower, a hard surface that looks like stone but isn't, shuts his eyes, presses his forehead against disorienting coolness, and says, "this is great."

After a long interval, even though his eyes are shut, he feels the burn of shampoo.

This does not surprise him.

It does *hurt* quite a bit though.

He goes back to being an active participant in his own showering and manages to get the shampoo out of his eyes and out of his hair and into the back of the bathrobe he's wearing, where presumably, given enough time under enough water, it's going to work its way out of the material and into the drain. Newt pretty sure that there's enough water exchange going on through this terrycloth matrix he's wrapped himself in that he's getting mostly clean.

First approximation clean.

This is now his territory—first approximations, buffered showers, different colored filter cubes taking multichannel images of his thoughts: Geiszler's in green, Gottlieb's in gold, and his residual Grottesquerie's a catastrophe in kaiju blue.

He's going to have to try really hard to *not* become either the bitter washed up narcissist *or* the paragon of bad decision-making a la Victor Frankenstein that all his data sets are trending toward. He's going to have to figure out a third option, if only so he won't slowly suck the life out of Hermann like an interpersonal vampire, because Hermann would let him do it, Hermann's *already* letting him do it. Hermann is like—

It's hard to say what Hermann is like exactly.

Hermann's not really a guy who slots nicely into a paradigm. Not like Dr. Newton Geiszler of the Mary Shelley pedigree and the constant need for apogee. Hermann's a little too complicated to be a straight up ascetic in the tradition of Sinclair Lewis, even if Hermann does share a surname with the most prototypical embodiment of scientific virtue in the entirety of western literary canon. Gottlieb. Scientist as secular saint. Oh sure, it's true as far as it goes, but it's only a different kind of armor than the kind Newt himself has cultivated. Everyone grows (and decorates?) a skin to deal with the too-sharp world, and that is Hermann's—science virtue. Replicability, reproducibility, precision, accuracy, statistical power, Hermann weaves them together so seamlessly that one can almost forget that half the time the guy's hardheadedness doesn't come from quantitative exactitude but from some weird fusion at his core of total acceptance of externally imposed duty meeting some emotional state that's way more emo than the guy's wardrobe would lead one to believe. Newt is not the *most* emotionally intelligent guy on the planet, he knows that about himself, but even *he* can tell there's something unusual in Hermann's tendency to fire off needless salutes in the direction of nebulous authority figures with unreasonably full commitment.

Pre-drift, this had seemed confusing and alarming to Newt, and had provoked an initial, horrified response that was somewhat similar to what Newt thought he might feel like if he watched Hermann jump into a shark tank covered with blood.

*God*, he had said the first time he'd seen Hermann whip out that little piece of superfluous semiotics, *can you not? They don't have any power over you in a formal sense and nothing good can come of making them feel like they do. Did no one teach you how to navigate departmental politics? Flip over a table, maybe, I think it'll serve you better in the long run.*

Post-drift, he finds it even more painful.

Painful because he'd been right. He'd nailed it. He'd fired a nail out of a nail gun from a room away and *nailed* it right to the wall. Hermann signs on for things and then does not sign off. Not until he's dead. Even though Newt had accurately assessed Hermann's vulnerability when it came to the concept of duty, Newt hadn't, at the time, been aware that he himself was one of those things that Hermann had signed on for. It's occurring to him now, slow-motion style, as he's watching the wave of the past decade he's been surfing crest and break as it hits whatever it is he's done to himself. Hermann gave up a decade of work, a set of authority figures he'd supplied with ten years of virtuous compliance, and half his own brain-space to *Newt*. To Newton Geiszler of the too frenetic work ethic and the constant quest to be a skeptic.

Newt's a little bit oblivious, sometimes, interpersonally and maybe even also intrapersonally, but he's got enough raw capacity and a good enough feel for social norms that when he pays attention he can do a decent job at not being a total jerk. And he is now. Paying attention, that is. Not being a jerk.

If his life were a romantic comedy, Newt would finish his shower and walk right out of this hotel room in a fit of misguided pure, interpersonal *regard*, spend an undetermined amount of time in a misery-montage, growing a beard, probably, before Hermann sees him one day while buying something picturesque, like a physical book or flowers in kaiju blue, or another piece of romantic varia, and then confesses to him the total misery of the Geiszler-deprived state, at which point they go out to breakfast, in a satisfying circle of returning to their beginnings and knowing the place for the first time. He might have accidentally remixed romantic comedies with erudite, inaccessible poetry right there. Whatever. He doesn't have a stellar knowledge of the rom-com genre. If his life were a drama, again he'd walk out of this hotel room, but this time it would be from a sense of gritty realism regarding how completely his life is about to embody the phenomenon of controlled demolition, and then Hermann would maybe read his obituary later over some tragically symbolic coffee into which creamer is entropically dispersed in a manner suggestive of death. If his life were an action movie, he'd *still* walk out of this hotel room except something would interrupt his misery

montage, such as being kidnapped by Hannibal Chau's vengeance-obsessed-right-hand-man, or a group of kaiju worshippers, and Hermann would be forced to rescue him, using his secret sniper skills that *he* develops in an accuracy montage. In the *Spiderman 12* variant of this action movie template, he'd turn evil and Peter Parker would probably send him to his death with a thin veneer of surface sympathy for the scientist he'd once been, and then he'd make out with one of his peer group for thirty seconds before the closing credits. *Parker* would make out. Not Newt. Because Newt would be dead. Hermann doesn't even get to be in *Spiderman 12: The Wrath of the Kaiju*, except maybe as a bit part, shaking his head or something as he advises Peter Parker and maybe is introduced to his girlfriend. If this were a gritty indie film, Newt would walk out of this hotel room, lose touch with reality, and never realize that Hermann was continually making an attempt to drag him back from his fiery alternate landscape. If this were a tear-jerker, Newt *wouldn't* leave this hotel room, he'd just die in a selfless, picturesque manner, while Hermann soldiered on without him—wait no, he's got that backwards, because *he* is the protagonist here, *god, Geiszler, get with it, will you please?*—correction, Newt wouldn't leave, but then *Hermann* would tragically die, leaving Newt to soldier on with much less personal style than Hermann would manage, he's certain. If this were a Wes Anderson film, Newt would probably leave this hotel room with a neutral facial expression and Hermann would go on an intrapersonal and interpersonal quest to get him back and they'd talk less and be unintentionally both pathetic and extremely funny, and maybe at the end they'd take a nap in the same sleeping bag. If this were a fantasy movie, Newt would leave, but then someone would present him with a quest and he'd have to come back and collect Hermann with apologies and compliments before they could set out to do that thing that they've been charged to do. If this were a horror movie, Newt wouldn't leave and he'd start *literally* turning into a kaiju any time now. If this movie were primarily classified as 'suspense,' he wouldn't leave either but he'd start displaying homicidal tendencies and the audience would be extremely nervous for Hermann as their sympathy for the increasingly alienated Newt diminished until the point where everyone would cheer when Becket saves the day by shooting him with something. God, he hopes that doesn't happen. Becket? *Really?* He has mixed feelings about that guy. On one hand? Yes, cool, because hi, world-saving. On the other hand? Less cool, because the dude is a *total* bro. Although, he's not *positive* about that label, because Becket drifted with *Mako* and he doesn't see Mako being drift compatible with a total bro, so somewhere in this train of judgmental thinking he's made an error. Whatever. He tries to stay away from labeling people because he likes to lead by example. The point is? He hopes Mako finds the grit to do him in with a sword. That

would be better. He'd rather be killed by Mako than by anyone. Maybe he should email her and request this, just so she knows? That's probably not the email that she really wants to get right about now though. Later. Later he'll email her. He's not *completely* crass.

*Dear Mako, his brain suggests, I hope you're doing okay. Again, nice job with the world saving, now you finally have time to improve your bass-playing skills, because, as you know, The Supercos are in need of you if we ever get our acts together for a nerd-rock West Coast tour. I know this is important to you. Also, I was thinking that if anyone ever needs to kill me, I'd prefer it to be you, ideally with a sword. Don't let Becket commence with the 'blowing to pieces'. Gosh, are you too famous to call me now or what? Pick up your phone, will you? I'd call you, but I'm not sure where my phone is. Probably Hermann has it. Full disclosure, I'm not looking at screens. Or talking to anyone, really. You could leave me a voicemail?*

Yeah that's going to be a no go for about eight different reasons.

Okay, it's time for a tally.

Romantic comedy: Leave.

Drama: Leave.

Action movie: Leave.

Marvel movie: Leave.

Gritty indie film: Leave

Tear-jerker: Stay.

Wes Anderson film: Leave.

Fantasy: Leave.

Horror: Stay.

Suspense: Stay.

Seven to three. Supreme court of the cinema rejects his proposal to stay.

Except for the fact that this is no rational way to make choices, so he's not going to *leave*, that would be ridiculous even for him, and he knows it would just torture Hermann, because this life-partners thing that Newt had proposed some days ago in a more familiar room had been a two-way thing, he's positive of that because Hermann had agreed pretty quickly and in pretty obvious relief, so yeah. Newt is just kidding himself if he thinks that *leaving* is going to do anything other than assuage his own guilt. He is way too smart to be a typical cinematic protagonist, and that is not arrogance, that is actual true fact.

Newt's eyes snap open as his vestibular system starts to warn him about something and he corrects a proprioceptive confusion before it has time to get out of hand and pitch him sideways. He really does not want Hermann to break down the bathroom door to find Newt passed out, concussed, and showering *in a bathrobe*, that would be hard to explain, and the reason for it would be painfully obvious. He's pretty sure this is not a permanent state of affairs, this bathrobe thing, it's just a thing he's going to do, maybe one time, maybe eight times, maybe eight hundred times because he doesn't *regret* the body art, really he doesn't, he just didn't foresee things turning out in exactly this way, where there's a whole set of terror and misery laid down somewhere in his brain that likes to take over his entire mental circuitry here and there, roughly sixteen times a day, and would be happy to do just that when confronted with stylized representations of kaiju whose *memories* he now possesses, that's inconvenient. That had been really difficult to foresee, he hadn't known they had a *hivemind*, god, *who would*.

Strike another thing down that *Star Trek: The Next Generation* had just mercilessly nailed, though.

Hiveminds. Freaking *yikes*.

The day that he can stare at the forming spread of Otachi as the last addition to the two-dimensional menagerie on his skin and not freak out will be a good day. Or, alternatively, a really bad one.

*What are you doing?* his brain enquires with a polite snarl. *Trying to drive yourself straight to your own personal Roche Limit? Trying to pass out in a too-hot, too-long shower? Get it together, dude, and leave the body-art rationalizing to a later date.*

Newt shuts his eyes and does some readjusting of his difficult to manage bathrobe so as to facilitate some direct liquid-to-skin contact that he verifies by feel alone—the warm and rapid slide of thin streams of water that feel nothing, *nothing at all*, like cold and rapid sub-Pacific transit toward his death at the end of a swath of destruction he's made through a fragile, alien city.

Nope.

Nothing like that.

Because he's showering.

Like a human.

A normal one.

A *mostly* normal one.

And, actually, he's done showering.

He turns off the water, but it doesn't really result in much subjective change in his experience, since he's still wearing a soaking wet bathrobe. Newt stands for a moment in this too-warm room in this too-heavy bathrobe, his too-crappy vision a little too close to fading to nothing for comfort. He steps out of the shower, locates a towel, shuts his eyes, pulls off his robe, and forces it into an arc back behind him, where it hits the floor of the shower with the wet clap of surface-tension meeting surface-tension. He flinches slightly, but keeps going, drying blind and then dressing blind, his eyes shut as he navigates by feel and with what coordination he has left to pull on the pile of clothes next to the door. The shirt gives him the most trouble and, of course, because he's a slob, he's left it inverted, and so he puts the thing on inside out and this causes him more *emotional* distress than is really appropriate, less because of the eyes-shut struggle of determining the clothing inversion and then correcting it, and more because he would like to get out of this dark, hot, bright bathroom. It doesn't help him that he's got a whole set of preferences for *neatly folded clothing* that are making themselves nauseatingly known. Honestly, Newt isn't slovenly as a lifestyle choice; he's slovenly because he just doesn't care, or hadn't. Now he *does* care, he cares a lot it turns out, because this is *really* unpleasant, actually, he will *never* leave his clothes in a state like this *again* and when he opens his eyes and opens the door he is going to *clean* this bathroom, because *he just needs to right now*, and *no* this isn't him, and *yes* this comes from Hermann, but it's *his* brain now, and it's his subjective experience and if he wants to clean bathrooms he *will* because there are so many things he can't and shouldn't do that feel instinctive, such as drifting, such as *drifting*, such as *drifting again*, *oh god—*

*No no no no no*, he insists, pressing back against that which is pressing down. *Nope. Stop that right now. Just stop, brain. Clean this bathroom if you'd like to and if you ever get your shirt buttoned.*

*Oh I will*, his brain says. *You just watch. And that's not all that's going to happen. Not just bathroom cleaning. No it is not.*

*Meaning what?* Newt asks with a mental, rather than physical, narrowing of the eyes.

*Meaning rationality, as a lifestyle choice, is about to happen to you, friend. You are having a rational phase in your life. You need a rational phase. Your empirical phase has plunged you straight off the deep end of consciousness research.*

*Empiricism is better*, Newt replies weakly. *This was a team decision. We made it a long time ago. Circa age ten and the commencement of Ph.D. le first. We can't just—*

*Yes we can. It's fine*, his brain says. *Picasso had his Blue Period and Geiszler can have his Rational Principles Period. Just—don't reason yourself into anything ill advised.*

"Well there's your whole problem right there," Newt mutters intelligibly through clenched teeth, halfway through his buttoning job, his eyes on fire with the pressure of keeping them closed. "Can you *imagine* what it would take to turn me into a rationalist?"

*Oh, I don't know*, his brain replies airily. *Synaptic remodeling on a catastrophic scale?*

*Good point*, Newt replies. *I'll give you that one, you perspicacious bastard. I refuse to submit, though. Descartes can just put his clothes back on and stop trying to seduce me away from my empirical bros. What would von Helmholtz say if he could see me now?*

*What a rockstar?* his brain suggests.

*Um, maybe*, Newt replies. *Sure. Thanks brain. I will let you clean this bathroom as a gesture of goodwill, but we are not turning ourselves into logical positivists or rationalists, or really anyone whom Aristotle would approve of and Francis Bacon would dismiss, okay? That's just not a thing that we're going to do.*

*You will read the entire canon of extant works by René Descartes*, his brain says, taking an unmistakable turn for the Hermannesque.

*No*, Newt replies, *no I don't think I'll be doing that.*

*You will do it as soon as you can read*, his brain counters. *Possibly, you will attempt it before that point.*

*You are not the boss of me*, Newt replies.

*That is, in fact, my precise role.*

Newt opens his eyes, puts on his glasses, buttons his sleeves at the wrist, which feels as weird as it does necessary, devotes three minutes of rapid, poorly coordinated energy towards straightening up the bathroom, including folding towels, relocating dry items to hang up wet ones, fastidiously removing the blood on the counter, drying wet surfaces with a sacrificed towel, straightening recently purchased toiletries, adjusting the angle of the bathmat relative to lines of the room so that it's either perfectly parallel or perfectly orthogonal to all planes that define the space in which he finds himself.

*Happy now?* he asks his brain.



*Not particularly, no*, his brain replies.

*Yeah, I hear that*, Newt replies, feeling vaguely sick and somewhat uncomfortable as he looks at the entropy reversal he has wrought for no real reason, but slightly *less* sick than when the room had been a mess.

He opens the bathroom door and moves on with his life.

As soon as he rounds the corner, Hermann shuts off the television like he's been *ready*, and that annoys Newt, yes it does, because come on, he's not *quite* the hummingbird at the end of its metabolic rope that Hermann is casting him as, like one wrong move will kill him or result in permanent insanity or something. Newt knows what kaiju look like, he has, in fact, studied them intensively for *years*, and he's not going to *forget*, it's not like being *presented* with *video footage* is going to—

"Whatever you're about to say *don't*," Hermann says, with an unusual xeric urgency and an even more unusual confused expression, like he's just cleaned a bathroom and felt weird about it.

Newt can relate.

Boy, can he ever.

"Likewise," Newt snaps, not even a little bit defensively.

"You don't look quite right," Hermann says, eyeing Newt like a poorly performing wave function.

"Hermann. What did I *just say*?" Newt replies, because he's pretty sure that aggravation is basically his only safe emotional landscape left, which is good, because it's a place he has, historically, spent a lot of time. "And you look like crap, dude, so maybe just take an aspirin and lie down, I know you haven't slept in days because you've got that *look* about you, that vampiric, Vlad-the-Impaler-style look, which is really inappropriate," Newt says, finally making it to the desk and swapping his glasses for shades, "because we both know that if this is a horror movie, *you're* the plucky protagonist and not the creeper in the dark stairwell, okay?"

"Okay," Hermann says, like he's using a word from a foreign language for the first time.

"Commit to it, dude, commit. Say it like you *mean it*. 'Okay.' 'Joie de vivre.' 'Alfresco.' 'Schlock.' This brain iss*chlock*."

"You are bizarre," Hermann says. "And I quite like your brain. I have always liked it."

"Stop being so nice," Newt replies, settling his shades into place. "One of these days it's going to catch me by surprise and I'm going to have an emotional breakdown all over whatever outfit you're wearing and you only have one shirt right now so—" he trails off.

"I do not like the fact that you haven't had one already," Hermann says.

"A breakdown? How social sciences of you," Newt replies, unfolding his blazer in a swift pull of straightening lines from where Hermann has deposited it on the desk.

"That was uncalled for," Hermann replies.

"I suppose so," Newt admits. "You know what else is uncalled for? Me reading the entire body of extant work produced by René Descartes, that's what. I'm not a rationalist, Hermann, I've never *been* a rationalist."

"Oh I'm aware," Hermann replies, sounding uncharacteristically confused and equally uncharacteristically *tolerant* as he watches Newt pull on his blazer. "You made this extremely clear to me when I proposed the reallocating of resources from your division to mine in our first year of mutual acquaintance. I believe your exact words to the funding committee were, 'empiricism for life, rationalism for maladaptive inevitable death, which are you going to choose? I know which one *I'd* pick'."

"Um, yeah," Newt says, deciding he'll cut his circulatory system some slack and let it operate for a while with his head and his heart in the same plane. "That was maybe a little bit inflammatory."

"Newton, please tell me that at *some point* it occurred to you that I am not *actually* a rationalist."

"You have rationalistic tendencies," Newt says. "Move over. This is *my* bed. I claimed it when I passed out into it at some point. You have your *own* bed." He sits down next to Hermann and then effects horizontalness on the too narrow sliver of lateral bed-space that he's trying to occupy.

"Yes," Hermann says dryly, shifting marginally. "Most modern scientists have at least *some*, you realize. *All* modern scientists *also* have empirical tendencies."

"All modern scientists *are* empiricists. Your rationalist preferences are obscenely close to the line of intellectual acceptability," Newt replies. "That's why, of the two of us, I'm the more scientifically minded."

"Yes," Hermann says dryly. "You. Tell yourself that if you wish, Newton, I have spent a decade listening to absolute nonsense come out of your mouth and I can certainly tolerate listening to it for another decade, if you can tolerate producing it."

"You're the guy who's almost an artist," Newt says. "Don't lie. I know you thought that triple event had a sort of cataclysmic elegance to it."

"False," Hermann says, reaching over to straighten Newt's blazer like it's his own. "You are most certainly the one with the artistic tendencies."

"Tendencies maybe," Newt replies, swatting Hermann's hand away. "I'm an engineer, dude, a cool one, admittedly, who plays the guitar, but still."

"An engineer," Hermann scoffs. "Hardly. I would *never* traverse a bridge built by you."

"Too late," Newt says, sending a wild-edged grin in Hermann's general, blurry direction.

"And so *excruciatingly, exquisitely, satisfyingly, demonstrably* false. Did you know I enjoy you being wrong *almost* as much as I enjoy me being right?"

Hermann sighs, short and sharp. "I meant a *literal* bridge, as you very well know. Not a neural one. Biomedical engineering and structural engineering are extremely different, and I do not think it's appropriate for you to pigeonhole yourself as an engineer when you have *six* advanced degrees in various fields."

"It bugs you," Newt says. "Doesn't it. It just irritates the crap out of you that I *win* in the *number of degrees* category."

"It does not," Hermann says. "In fact, it never has. The only reason you have so many is because you're intellectually indecisive to a fault. It's a perpetual source of wonder to me that MIT hired you and I suspect they did so only because they were tired of funding you to sample disparate fields."

"Well, we can't all be like you, hating everything except math. In my opinion, everything is great," Newt replies. "It physically pains me to limit myself. I should have been born independently wealthy circa 1750. That would have been fun."

"I'd advise choosing a period for your life so that the peak of your intellectual prowess does not occur contemporaneously with the French Revolution."

"Lavoisier'd," Newt says agreeably. "I think I'll go earlier. Wait *no*. I mean yes. Earlier. I'd overlap with Descartes, obviously. Maybe I *am* Spinoza, reincarnated, what do you think? Maybe I'd *be* Spinoza. Maybe I was."

"I thought you were an empiricist," Hermann replies.

"God, Hermann, this is my intellectual fantasy life, okay? Do I go around destroying your fantasies about grand unified theory and stuff? Don't think I don't know about your secret obsession with particle physics that started around July 4th, 2012. Don't

think I don't know that you think about renormalization group running when you go on vacation, okay?"

"I don't see how my entirely justifiable intellectual hobby translates into your sudden and borderline pathological latching onto rationalists from the turn of the sixteenth century. I want to be clear on this, Newton, whatever is happening between you and Descartes is no doing of mine."

"Of course it's doing of yours," Newt says. "Interacting with doing of mine. Or whatever. I *am* an empiricist. That doesn't mean I can't *enjoy* rationalism. Or the philosophy espoused by the Jedi Order. Or the Prime Directive. It's intellectual escapism into someone else's worldview, man. You know?"

Hermann doesn't answer and shifts uncomfortably.

Newt half turns, props the irregularly shaped volume of agony formerly known as his head on one hand, buries his fingers in his own wet hair and whispers, "are you thinking about my guitar?" with as much licentiousness as he can muster, which turns out to be quite a bit, actually.

Hermann shifts laterally and says, "*no*," too quickly to mean anything but yes.

"So there *is* justice in this world." Newt lets Hermann off the hook and collapses back into horizontalness. "I wasn't sure."

"That's a terribly specious conclusion. Your entire premise is flawed," Hermann says stiffly.

"*Your* premise is flawed."

"Very mature, Newton," Hermann says. "Congratulations on your rhetorical victory."

"What can I say?" Newt replies. "I'm a mature guy. Also, um, speaking of mature things I may or may not have done or said or recorded forever for posterity, did you happen to pack my digital voice recorder, by any chance?"

"I did," Hermann replies.

"Ah, did you, possibly, at any point, *listen* to it, possibly?"

"No," Hermann says, sounding like he's doing some eye narrowing. "I don't make it a habit to seek out further examples of your grandiloquent musings, and I, unlike some people, do not routinely commit invasions of privacy."

"Okay, just checking. And yes, you're still a better person than me."

"Yes. Yes, I am, *Newton*," Hermann snaps, "because if *I* had been in your position I certainly would not have *blamed you* for my own experiments in self-destruction, because I would be *concerned* about what effect such words might have on your psychological state."

"I thought you said you *didn't*—"

"I have your memories," Hermann snarls, "of *everything* prior to one week ago at twenty-three hundred hours in a Hong Kong alley."

"Ah," Newt says. "So if I hadn't brought it up—"

"I likely would not have realized it, no," Hermann says, still on the upswing in his pissed-off trajectory.

"You're doing the sentence completion thing, dude, I think you—"

"I think *you* should *stop talking*," Hermann says, sitting abruptly, "before I *murder you*."

"I *meant* it as—"

"I know *exactly* how you *meant it*, Newton," Hermann hisses, vacating the opposite side of the bed, and limping stiffly to the nearest window, where, presumably, he braces his hands against the sill and makes a concerted effort not to throttle Newt or upend a table. It's hard to be positive about this, because Newt really cannot see much right now.

"Okay, yeah, I know you do," Newt says, not moving, talking to the silhouette with blurred borders that is the best Hermann-rendering his visual system can give him, "but I mean, really, you've been familiar with the depth of my stupidity for years, and look, it's better that I brought this up now, right? Because I pretty much felt guilty about it right from the point that I said it, and then that guilt has only intensified to crippling levels in light of the fact that you ruined your life and your brain for me, basically. I get it dude, I *do*, but look, my point is that I'm a jerk and I'm*sorry*—"

"Stop speaking," Hermann says through clenched teeth.

"Okay," Newt says, watching him in tense anticipation.

Nothing happens.

"Are *you* going to *start* speaking, maybe?" Newt asks, after about two seconds, "because I was kind of under the impression that you had something in mind other than silence, because that's not going to really work for me right now. I'm a jerk, seriously, I know this, *you* know this, but you like me anyway, kind of a lot, more than makes sense, really, because I did nothing to deserve it other than yell at you, more-or-less on your

own discourse level, which, admittedly, is hard to find these days, but there's a *reason* I brought this up, man, I just feel *really* confused, but unambiguously *guilty* about a lot of things; it's the flip side of this sense of duty that I appropriated via horizontal transmission from you. Transposable-element-of-the-self'd, you know?"

"The problem, Newton," Hermann says, still not looking at him, "is that you were quite correct. I *did* drive you to do exactly what you did."

"What?" Newt replies, his voice cracking in half against the bar of incredulity it's just run into. "No. Stop. Don't even explain. You are extremely confused, dude, your brain is a scrambled, hot mess of fused circuits post massive neural induction, if mine is anything to go by. Even though you're telling me I'm right, which, as we know, I *love*, in a borderline sexual way, you're wrong about my rightness, okay? It was a stupid, throw-away comment, you didn't *drive* me to anything."

Hermann still says nothing.

Newt strangles a frustrated scream of macho vexation between clenched teeth, and presses a hand over his sunglasses. "Stop. Don't freak out about this."

"I'm not 'freaking out' about *anything*," Hermann says icily. "I am stating a fact. I don't fault my reasoning at the time, but it was biased and incorrect. You were probably *the worst* available candidate to enter the drift. In fact, as our *species* goes, I'd put you in the bottom decile."

"You'd *what* now?"

"If I had believed, even for a *moment*, that you'd be successful, I would have insisted on doing it myself."

"Ugh," Newt replies. "Mathematical martyr complex much? Probably? Some military jock would have done it, and then where would we be. As if Becket could pull anything out of the anteverse experience other than the compulsion to blow it up, which is, come to think of it, exactly what he did."

"As I said, I would vastly prefer Becket to *you*, given the choice."

"Oh yeah," Newt drawls, dredging up every microscopic particle of sarcasm he can find within his being. "Great plan. Stellar reasoning. I am. *The*. Most preeminent kaiju expert that our *species* has to offer, dude, so just check your inappropriate prejudice against biology, human volatility, necessary sacrifice on the alter of empiricism, inescapable bias, body art, glam rock, *punk* rock, Nietzsche, loquacity, eating sans utensils, *and everything else that drives you up the wall about me*."

"I am *complimenting* you," Hermann shouts back. "Not *disparaging* you."

"Oh," Newt says.

They look at one another breathing heavily.

"Look, in my defense," Newt says, totally suavely and not at all sort of awkwardly breathless, "'bottom decile' does not sound like a compliment. Also? I still haven't adjusted to the Decade of Mutual Admiration."

"Clearly," Hermann snaps. "Outside your inappropriate fits of insight, you are quite slow on the uptake."

"I'm trying to make *that* into a compliment also, but it's not really working," Newt says.

Hermann sighs, sharp and short.

"What I'm trying to say when I'm not shouting at you," Newt says, "is that I'd feel even *more* guilty, *intolerably* guilty, if I thought that you blamed yourself for whatever my outcome is, or turns out to be, post all this neural remixing. You feel me? First of all, this isn't a *blame* thing. This is a *credit* thing. This is a *good outcome*. A *great* outcome, and—" his vocal chords snap shut for some reason before deciding to let him pass go, "and even if it doesn't end up turning out that way for *me*, personally, I—look, I've already dumped enough of my crap on your doorstep for a lifetime, and there's no reason for you to go *stealing* more of it from me to add to the pile. The less-than-ideal parts of this whole experience aren't *yours* to take on, dude. They're just not, so stop it. Stop it right now."

"I could have intervened materially to prevent—a great deal of what happened to you," Hermann says still not looking at him.

"Maybe," Newt replies, "but I think that would have been a zero-sum game. You could have stood in for me, but that wouldn't make our net utility any different."

"Stop it," Hermann says, unmistakably mollified and slightly impressed by Newt's skill at analogy-making, which had always been prodigious and is now just a temple to verbal amazingness constructed of glittering razor blades made of mathematical references.

"What?" Newt replies. "Being a *winner*?"

"In effect, yes," Hermann replies.

"That's impossible for me," Newt replies. "But I can be magnanimous in my current state of perpetual victory. For example, I forgive you for your stupid self-blame," Newt says. "In case you were curious."

"Thank you," Hermann says dryly. "Thank you so much."

"Have you seen my phone, by the way?"

"Yes," Hermann says, pulling Newt's phone out of his own pocket. "You've missed forty-six calls."

"I am *popular*," Newt says, holding out a hand.

Hermann tosses him his phone, a thing he finds out only as it smacks him in the hand. Needless to say, he fails to catch it.

"Hermann, I *can't see*."

"I'm aware of that," Hermann replies.

Newt sighs, looks hopelessly at his phone, and then drops his hand back to the bed. He'll deal with it later. "*Anyimportant calls?*"

"I'm quite certain they're *all* important," Hermann replies, leaning against the wall, and probably looking at him.

"Go to sleep dude, even your vague visual representation filtered through my totally crap eyes looks exhausted."

"What time is it?" Hermann asks.

"I don't know, morning? Let's reverse our circadian rhythms—sleep in the day and wander around San Fran at night, like noctivagant science vampires. Sciencepires. Nerdpires. In search of logical thinking to perpetuate our unlife. Remember when we did that our first week in Hong Kong and then Pentecost ordered us not to have jet-lag anymore because people needed daytime science and you *listened?*"

"No," Hermann says, clearly lying, because Newt remembers dragging his inebriated colleague off the metal rail around the Jaeger launching dock at four in the morning. The man had been leaning over it, looking for interesting fish in black water, made visually impenetrable by the reflection of perpetually fluorescing lights.

Newt doesn't remember any such incident from his *own* perspective, but then, he had been *pretty* drunk. He's also not sure he was looking for fish, though, that was a reasonable assumption on Hermann's part, he supposes.

Newt often looks for cool fish.

"Yes you do," Newt says.

"*If* you are referring to the period in which we temporarily revised our work hours to maintain maximal productivity while adjusting to a twelve hour time change, and



occasionally went out for dinner at four in the morning, then yes. I recall *no aimless street wandering* in some kind of bastardization of a baseless supernatural tradition."

"You are such a good life partner for me," Newt says, smirking at him. "I hope you know that. I order you to sleep, by the way. I *order* it."

"Shut up," Hermann says, still leaning against the wall.

"Why do I not get a snappy salute, hmm? Why do I not get immediate compliance? I deserve them, dude, I deserve all your salutes, way more than the PPDC does."

"You are a disruptive nightmare, dwelling in the basement of human discipline."

"A simple 'no thanks, I'll keep my salutes for the military,' would have sufficed," Newt replies.

Hermann sort of slides down the wall and then does some angular adjustment into a sitting position on the edge of the bed, and if that doesn't just scream *total exhaustion* to Newt, nothing ever has or will. The dude is *wrecked*.

Newt lies there in silence for a span of seconds, feeling his resting tremor and fidgeting.

"Can I confess a thing to you?" Newt asks.

"Well," Hermann says, "if you think such a concept still has *meaning* after all that we've been through, certainly. 'Confess' away."

"I think," Newt says, slowing down, feeling edgy, feeling *more edgy* when Hermann picks up on his edginess and twists to look at him. "Well, no, let me do this a different way—have you noticed that my coordination isn't worth*crap* right now?"

"It has been exceedingly difficult to miss," Hermann says dryly. "I think you underestimate how much difficulty you've had over the past three days."

"Wait, meaning what?"

"Meaning I watched you stare at clothes without any clear idea of *what you were to do with them*. Meaning I watched you confused by *closed doors*. Meaning I spent twenty four hours helping you walk in straight lines and stand without fainting. Meaning countless other things that I'm not particularly inclined to discuss. In short, yes, Newton, I have *noticed*."

"Um, yeah," Newt says, feeling vaguely weird about this whole thing. "Good. So ah, well, what's your interpretation of the fact that it takes me four minutes to button my shirt, for example?"

"My interpretation is that you are mentally and physically exhausted, still recovering from the PPDC's attempt to break the seizure I'm certain you had as you were—doing whatever it was that you were doing."

"Yeah, okay, so I think—" Newt breaks off, trying to gear himself up for communicating the dopamine conjecture that had caused him causality problems earlier.

Hermann is absolutely motionless.

"So I think I might not *just* be tired," Newt says. "I think I might have a relative dopamine deficit. I think I'm normalizing, just FYI, I'm pretty sure I'm normalizing pretty quickly, and I might even normalize all the way back to baseline, but um, a mildly dopamine-deprived state would explain this tremor and periods of rigidity, and certain subjective memories I have that are consistent with just a bucketload of dopamine release from my ventral tegmental area."

That was fine, he'd gotten through that *just fine*, with no creepy blue-tinged thought turning. None at all.

Hermann readjusts his position on the bed and turns to face Newt. He pulls his good leg beneath him, leaving the bad one outstretched. Without speaking, he reaches over, pulls Newt's hand up by the wrist, and releases it slowly, mid air.

Newt catches his drift, so to speak, and holds it there, in empty space, palm down, fingers spread, as steady as he can make it, which, alas, is not really 'steady' at all.

They both watch it shake subtly, until Newt makes a fist and drops it.

"Yes," Hermann says, with all the confidence of Newt's neurochemical knowledge, "you could be correct."

"I *know*," Newt snaps. "I'm looking for an odds ratio, dude, not conceptual validation. Get with the program."

"Impossible," Hermann says crisply. "Conceptual validation is all I can give you."

"Thanks," Newt says, hearing the strain in his own voice.

Hermann holds up a hand. "Whether your current motor difficulties are a result of exhaustion or of a dopamine-poor state within certain neural circuits, *either way*, Newton, you are *vastly* improved compared to yesterday at this time, when you could not unbuckle your own seatbelt."

"Ugh," Newt replies. "Was it necessary for me to know that?"

"Yes," Hermann says. "I believe it was. For what it's worth, however, I think you're likely correct. In fact, I think that you experienced a similar state of shorter duration the first

time you drifted, and again, post our combined drift in Hong Kong. I think we both did. I think your—"

Hermann cuts himself off.

"*What?*" Newt demands.

"Nothing," Hermann says carefully.

"It doesn't matter," Newt says, "because I *know* what you're *thinking*."

"I am sure you *do not*," Hermann snaps. "Will you stop being yourself for twenty seconds?"

"Not being myself is exactly what I'm *doing*, actually, most of the time now," Newt says, speaking maybe more loudly than he should be speaking and coming up on one elbow, "take a look at the *bathroom*; you might find it *interesting* you *perfectionist bastard*. You are going to endlessly piss me off if you keep omitting vital information out of some weird impulse to protect me from your pessimistic thoughts or *whatever* it is you're doing. I don't need protection from *you*. I need protection from *me*, okay, and I'm handling it. Handling my own protection detail."

"You are an endlessly fascinating mess of mistaken assumptions," Hermann snaps. "I'm trying to shield you from your *own reaction* to what I have to say."

Wait.

"You find me endlessly fascinating?" Newt asks.

"No."

"You just said you did," Newt points out.

"That is hardly germane."

"It's a *little* bit germane."

"By all means, take this conversation on a tangential path. I couldn't be more pleased."

"How did the drift *feel* to you?" Newt asks. "In a word."

"Overwhelming,"

"Yeah, a different word."

"Intoxicating."

"The eighteen hundreds called, they want their lexicon back, but yes. Agreed. Euphoric. Here's the thing, Hermann, the first drift? The *first* drift, didn't feel that way. I don't know what that implies exactly—"

*Liar*, his brain whispers. *Liar*.

"I don't *know* in a factual way, but I know what it *suggests* to me, it suggests that there was some element of neurochemical synchronization, maybe even *manipulation* there, as if—"

"Newton," Hermann says, sliding closer.

"As if they were adapting the principle of reward to reinforce the urge to integrate into a collective consciousness, as if they *mapped it out*, VTA to nucleus accumbens via the medial forebrain bundle, as if they *laid it down*, co-opted it in a neural trick of interfacing an ever-less-foreign piece of biological hardware—a software manipulation over a transient *hardwired connection*, a permanent coupling of reward-circuitry to the execution of a peer-to-peer protocol, human to kaiju, verse to anteverse, across the open *breach*—"

He's not sure what's happening, he doesn't know these walls in double-overlay, in stereo. *Oh god*, he thinks, *we're networked, we're networked, we're networked, we're networked, the net effect of this is that we're being worked*. He's got the most capacity, he steps straight onto the dark and glowing stage, standing on the nexus of disparate mental hardware, there is no rush like this rush, the rush of a one in a binary circuit, the focal point of a massive angry cloud of foreign screaming, *yes I laid you down*, he thinks, *yes this was my doing—a decade-long riff that shreds the fabric of your inner lives in this dimension that is mine*. *It is mine you understand, you never should have come here*. A ceiling is falling on him, he's blending with Hermann, cut up, homesick, *mutilated* brains are shrieking a stereo chorus in his thoughts, 'we have to break this,' someone says, 'we should have loaded him ahead of time,' 'Dr. Geiszler can you hear me Dr. Geiszler can you talk.' Euphoria, elation, with a vicious lyric edge. His thoughts aren't thoughts, not anymore, they're polyphonic harmonies unifying that which he'd dissected into parts.

"—to my abject amazement," Hermann is saying quietly. Conversationally.

"What?" he whispers, allowing Hermann to pull his hands away from his temples.

"You are fine," Hermann says. "We are in San Francisco. You have been successful in nearly every sphere you'd care to consider."

"San Francisco?" he slurs, feeling like someone has hulled out his brain and replaced it with alcohol.

"Yes," Hermann says. "In a hotel room, where you are, as is typical for you, thinking in a manner that is too rash for your current constitution."

"Dopamine," Newt says, feeling it, feeling it *hardcore*.

"Yes," Hermann murmurs, fussing with Newt's collars. "Apparently."

"You know," Newt says, still not entirely sure what's happened, but flashing serially through Hong Kong, vague memories of Hypothetical Rain, sharper memories of pancakes, a bathrobe-clad shower, and days of wearing Hermann's borrowed shades. "I—" he breaks off and sits abruptly, as he feels the warm gush and the copper taste of nascent epistaxis.

Hermann doesn't even ask him what's wrong, just presses a tissue into his hand.

"EPIC Rapport," Newt says weakly, giving the tissue a minimal flourish, knowing that Hermann will understand what he means.

"Entirely typical rapport," Hermann counters.

"Those opposing hypotheses just *demand* empirical testing," Newt says indistinctly, pinching his nose shut.

"Perhaps later," Hermann replies.

## Chapter Sixteen

On Monday morning, Hermann wakes before his alarm, courtesy of some particularly upsetting dream or a too-high spike of early-morning cortisol. He can't say which—but either way, dread is coiled in and around his viscera. Whether it's residual dread from a night of dreaming in hi-fi catastrophe or the anticipatory dread of the coming day is impossible to determine.

He's giving a talk at fourteen hundred hours, Pacific Time.

He *loathes* giving talks.

Hermann has never enjoyed the real-time, personal communication of results to a collection of his peers. Let them read his papers. Let them examine his mathematics. Let them familiarize themselves with the evidence he's happy to present in *written* form. Let them study it. Let them ask him pointed questions via email.

The culture of science deems this insufficient, however, and so he will comply with academic norms because he must.

His discomfort is compounded in the setting of a job-talk like *this one*, which is nothing more than a summary of a decade of practical successes—its purpose is to *secure him a position*, a position that he *needs*, both for financial reasons and for reasons best described as 'bureaucratic tactics'.

He lies motionless in bed, his eyes closed, his nervous system punishing him in confused anticipation, until his cellphone alarm goes off at six in the morning.

He opens his eyes to Newton—a dark and eidolic silhouette against a gray dawn. He's dressed and standing at the window, looking at the Wall of Life, or, perhaps, behind it. Toward the sea.

"How long have you been awake?" Hermann asks, watching Newton readjust the fisted grip he has on the cuffs of his own shirtsleeves. There's something new in this clasp and twist of fingers; something that Hermann doesn't understand and therefore doesn't like.

"Meh," Newton says, half-turning to give him a one-shouldered shrug. "Not long. Just enjoying the view before the sun comes up and knifes me in the retinas."

"It's a terrible view," Hermann says.

"I know," Newton replies, the words laced with an atypical self-possession. He seems to realize he's giving something away. He lets go of his shirtsleeves and scrubs his fingers through his hair.

To Hermann, even that gesture looks pained. He can already feel the beginnings of the struggle that may well define the next decade of their relationship, because the *pity* he feels and the *terror* he feels have the scope of an Athenian tragedy in the Aristotelian tradition but it will ruin *everything* if any *fraction* of that spills into all that lies between them.

Hermann can keep this secret.

He *knows* he can.

He hadn't felt this way before the drift and Newton's keeping post-drift secrets of his own; given these two facts it should be possible to classify Dr. Geiszler as a post-aristeia Homeric hero poised for a tragic decline solely within the confines of Hermann's own head and *nowhere else*. This is important for two reasons.

One—Newton would *hate* knowing that he felt this way.

Two—it's extremely important to keep in mind that for all his bravery and fits of insight, Dr. Geiszler behaves in a moronic fashion on a fairly consistent basis and romanticizing him is an abysmal idea.

"You're going to need to buy me something," Newton says.

"Am I?" Hermann replies, throwing the covers back and shivering slightly in his undershirt and boxers.

Newton turns away, looking out the window. "Yup," he says.

"Anything *specific*?" Hermann asks, his tone somewhat in need of a verbal whetstone.

"No," Newton replies. "*Literally anything*. I'm so bored that I might actually die. Buy me *Halo 12: Tactical Revolution*. Buy me a tablet. Buy me a *book*. Buy me the most ridiculously convoluted book you can find that neither of us have read. Buy me the complete works of Spinoza. Buy me a Portuguese dictionary. I don't *care* what it *is*, I need something to *do* or I'm going to die. I think I might *actually die*, Hermann, this is absolutely necessary."

"Can you *read*?" Hermann asks him, unfolding his shirt from the chair and pulling it on in the gray light of early morning.

"Yes," Newton replies, affronted, turning to glare at him in brief irritation.

"Hmm," Hermann replies skeptically, inclining his head toward the desk while fastening buttons. "Read that menu."

Newton gives him an irritated downward press of his eyebrows as he picks up the room service menu from atop the desk.

"Not that one," Hermann snaps. "The one beneath it."

"Are you indirectly insinuating that I might *cheat*?" Newton asks, swapping the familiar hard-bound room service menu for a paper one that had been shoved beneath their door the previous afternoon.

"Yes," Hermann says, stepping stiffly into his pants. "Though I'm not clear from where you're getting the word '*indirect*'."

Newton opens the menu with an unnecessary flourish and says, "let's start with seafood, shall we? Number thirty-one, crabmeat stuffed with bean curd. Number thirty-two, curry crab. Number thirty-three, stir-fried squid with pickled mustard greens. Number thirty-four, octopus in XO sauce. Number thirty-five, salted fish and eggplant casserole."

Hermann rolls his eyes. "Very convincing, aside from four points: a) If you could read, you'd be using your phone and would be significantly less bored, b) after the nuclear detonation of 2013 one can no longer buy consumable seafood in San Francisco, c) the menu you are holding is for an *Italian* restaurant, and d) you are clearly reciting the menu from the take out place two blocks inland from the Hong Kong Shatterdome with which I am extremely familiar," Hermann says, sitting to pull on his socks. "Otherwise? An entirely commendable effort."

Newton sighs. "I'm pretty sure that I'll be able to read in eight hours."

"I'm absolutely positive that if you would *sleep*, your eyes would improve in a more expeditious manner."

"It's just that I *enjoy* the not-sleeping *so much*, Hermann. God. Use your brain. Insomnia is like any pharmacologic euphoriant. Why do people do it? For the pure, intemperate, undefiled, uncontaminated, sparkling, double-distilled *pleasure* of the experience. I *love* sleeplessness, personally."

Hermann rolls his eyes. "I will buy you a book," he says. "I will, in fact, buy you several."

"You are both the worst and the best," Newton says. "Also, do you have my wallet?"

"Yes," Hermann says.



"Just keep it," Newton says. "Use my credit card for whatever, if it works. I think I may have *not* paid it off last month, due to world-saving?"

"Your wallet is in the bedside drawer," Hermann says. "You did *not* pay off your credit balance last month, but I paid it for you."

"Really?" Newton asks. "When?"

"Yesterday," Hermann says shortly, "while Dr. McClure was performing your Sunday-afternoon EEG."

"I can feel entire swaths of my ability to manage the boring ephemera of life turning from minimal to vestigial as we speak."

"I will not be paying your bills in the future," Hermann says dryly.

"No," Newton agrees, "you will not, because as soon as I can reliably see, I'm changing all my passwords. God. First you kidnap me, then you start managing my finances? Not cool."

"I completely concur," Hermann replies.

"It's too bad I'm eight million percent useless right now. If I ever get fine motor control back, I'll make this up to you. I'll let you watch me play guitar, how about that?"

"Will you *shut up*?" Hermann snaps, not picturing any such thing, not picturing it in the *slightest*.

"Standing offer," Newton says, and manages to catch the pillow Hermann pitches in his direction.

He completes his morning routine, takes an aspirin in the hope of filing the edge off a building headache, and declines Newton's offer to order breakfast because he has no intention of being late, and room service leaves much to be desired when it comes to expeditious meal preparation.

He does not like the idea of leaving Newton alone.

Despite Newton's EEG of the previous day, which had showed a mild degree of normalizing to a typical human baseline, despite the fact that Newton hasn't had a seizure for roughly three days, and despite the man's semi-regular claims regarding being 'fine'—Hermann doesn't like the idea of leaving him unsupervised. Partially, this is because he's fairly certain that Newton still has post-panic time intervals where he's not entirely oriented and Hermann *hates* to think of him confused and alone in an unfamiliar room in an unfamiliar city. Hermann has an entirely well-founded fear that Newton is going to do something horrifying if left to his own devices, but this is

ridiculous, because how much trouble can even *Newton* cause in a hotel room with poor enough vision that he can't reliably operate his own phone?

This is a terrible, misfortune-inviting rhetorical question and he literally cannot believe he just posed it to himself.

"Do *not*," he snaps, halfway through sliding his computer into his shoulder bag, "leave this hotel room."

"Yeah I don't think you have to worry about that," Newton says, sitting hunched on the edge of the bed, gripping his own shirtsleeves.

"Do *not*," he continues, unmollified, "watch the news."

"Sure," Newton says.

Hermann narrows his eyes.

"What?" Newton demands. "Look dude, I'm going to sit here, probably meditate, maybe take a nap, ask my phone to read me the complete works of René Descartes, be disappointed when it says no, and maybe eat an overpriced salad full of pretentious greens, such as radicchio. Possibly fennel. Chill."

"I believe that you would spontaneously combust if you attempted meditation, so I advise against it," Hermann says.

"Yeah that was never happening, I was just trying to send you on your way with some reassuringly Zen parting thoughts. Is there anything you *do* advise?" Newton asks.

"Eyedrops," Hermann says, "and sleep."

"Noted," Newton says, with the edgy irritation of a man not willing to directly engage with the logistically impossible.

Hermann deposits his bag on the floor near the desk, then moves to sit next to him on the edge of the bed.

There is an awkward silence.

"Why is it that you think you have to do this *now*?" Newton asks him. The question is ambiguous, but for the fact that Newton has been asking it in iterations for the entire weekend. There is no indication in his tone or his phrasing that he believes Hermann can be dissuaded from the course he has set for himself.

Hermann wonders what concerns Newton most—being left alone, or picturing Hermann addressing a massed and anticipatory crowd in a confused and confusing mental state.

"You are welcome to accompany me," Hermann says, rather than asking for clarification he's certain Newton doesn't want to give.

"I know, but this is going to suck enough without having to deal with—" the man makes a nebulous circular hand gesture in the general vicinity of his own left temple.

"True," Hermann admits, staring intently into space, trying to master his own dread.

"Just do me a favor and call me or something," Newton says, "so that I know you didn't die of apoplexy or something mid-spiel."

"Charming," Hermann says.

"Guilty as charged," Newton replies.

They stare into space, not looking at one another, trapped by what is, in all likelihood, nearly identical mental dread.

Then Newton stands and turns to face him, holding out a hand.

Hermann eyes his extended hand dubiously.

"Are you even real?" Newton asks.

"Are *you*?" Hermann replies.

"That sounds like something a thought-construct would say," Newton says, pushing his eyebrows together.

Hermann gives him just the barest hint of an eye-roll before taking his hand.

Newton pulls him to his feet and straight into an unexpected *embrace*. He has no idea how Newton manages to accomplish this kind of thing so easily, it is simultaneously enviable and horrifying, and it's certainly a skill that Hermann should have somewhere deep in his brain—he has enough *other* Geiszlerian habits that he's certain he doesn't need.

He awkwardly reciprocates the gesture, not really sure what's happening or why.

"You're going to be fine," Newton murmurs. "You're going to be awesome. You had *better* be awesome. I will personally upbraid you if you are not awesome. That's a lie, I'll order you soup and watch you eat it like an overly solicitous creeper. This is getting weird; I'm going to stop talking. Bring me some rationalists when you come back, yeah?" With that, Newton claps him on the back and lets him go.

"Ah—" Hermann says, in monosyllabic prelude to absolutely nothing.

"Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz. Now get out of here, man."

Hermann is too unbalanced by Newton's unanticipated invasion of personal space to do much other than stare at the man while he retrieves Hermann's bag from the floor, now weighed down with nothing other than a laptop and required adaptors.

"Ask for a laser pointer *before* you start," Newton says, settling the bag across Hermann's shoulders for him. "I always forget, and then I hit my first data slide and I'm missing a light. It kills the build and the bystander effect will ensure no one gets up to give you one."

"I—" Hermann says, flustered, his brain rejecting everything coming across his cognitive desk. "All right."

"Easy to say *now*," Newton says, turning him bodily and pressing him gently in the direction of the door. "Easy to forget when you're facing down a packed auditorium."

"Thank you, Newton," Hermann snaps, more out of instinct than anything else. He feels unbalanced.

"It will be fine," the other man says stopping next to the door and shoving his hands deep into his pockets. He leans against the wall. "You look good," Newton says.

"I *what*?" Hermann asks.

"Your sweater could fit slightly better, not gonna lie dude, but you look like a guy who's going to blow minds with supererogatory quantum cartography. And for what did we get into this business if it wasn't for the blowing of minds? I ask you." Newton gives him a half smile, leaning against the wall adjacent to the closed door.

"I don't know about you, Dr. Geiszler," Hermann says, dropping his eyes, "but I got into it for the mathematics."

"Oh sure," Newton says. "The math. Me too. Definitely."

"If you have a seizure while I'm gone, I will murder you," Hermann informs him.

"I'm not planning on it," Newton says.

"Do *not* watch the news," Hermann reiterates.

"Would I do that?" Newton asks.

Hermann glares at him. "Don't forget your eyedrops."

"Don't forget to turn your microphone on."

"Don't bleed to death."

"Don't fall off the stage."

"Take your anti-epileptic."

"Exchange pleasantries with your future colleagues. Call them by their first names, even."

"Idiot," Hermann says.

"Jerk," Newton replies with indolent familiarity. "Get out of here. Bring me back a present."

"You should be so lucky," Hermann replies dryly, but he makes no move to leave.

Newton opens the door for him. "Go," the other man says. "You'll be late."

"You could come with me," Hermann says, knowing it's a terrible idea, but suggesting it anyway because he's not going to shut the metaphorical door in Newton's metaphorical face, even if Newton is about to shut the literal door in Hermann's literal face.

"Quantum cartography," Newton says, his expression nearly twisting out of his control and into something distressed. "So boring, dude, so *not relevant*. To anything, except for like, you know, monster inventory on our side of the verse. The *universe*? We've got to chuck that word. Etymologically it's misleading. But I digress. As if I want to hear your talk. Again. I prefer staring into space trying to think of nothing. Yikes, okay, sorry, I overshot sarcasm and ended up in self-pity. That's never a good look. Whatever. Get out of here, will you please?"

They nod awkwardly in one another's direction and Newton waves him through the doorway.

The door shuts behind him.

Hermann resettles his bag across his chest, double-checks he has his computer, his adaptor, his wallet, writing material, a pen, his phone, and his hotel room key.

He has everything he needs, and nothing he doesn't.

And so.

He leaves.

In early 2013, the cab ride from San Francisco to UC Berkeley would have taken thirty-five minutes without traffic. It now takes ninety minutes. The route circumnavigates Oblivion Bay—the remnants of the Golden Gate to the north and the decontaminating Bay Bridge to the east are both impassable. He directs his driverless cab south, passing through Palo Alto before turning back north through Fremont, Oakland, and Berkeley.

There is no wall around the bay.

The Wall of Life lies to the west, along the coast, cutting off the bay where the Golden Gate Bridge used to stand. Behind the Wall, the water is now a stagnant lake—dark, brackish, and contaminated. The Bay Bridge still stands, skeletal and untrafficked against the pale gray of a clouded dawn. He watches until it fades from view at the beginning of his journey and comes back into view near its end, as his circumnavigation of the bay is complete.

He arrives at UC Berkeley's Mathematics Department at nine in the morning. When the cab stops, he collects his cane, his computer, and himself before banishing it, then walks along a tree-lined street through a campus that's either still half asleep or half-deserted. It's more likely to be the latter than the former. The coastal exodus has influenced the allocation of academic excellence over the past decade, but there were plenty of people who were disinclined to cease their work for the purposes of relocation, even when faced with the risk of death.

Science waits for no one.

Hermann spends his morning in the painful slog of meeting the department, member-by-member, discussing NP-completeness, integer programming, the Hadamard conjecture, the inverse Galois problem, number theory, and other fascinating mathematical varia.

This is almost absorbing enough to allow him to forget his anxiety regarding his coming talk.

Almost.

There is an unmistakable trace of anticipation in the voices of the professors and students that he meets. He has a difficult time getting through lunch with the department, because it is, of course, stilted in a way he's forgotten is the academic norm. He's become too accustomed to Newton and his ability to cut through constraint of any kind.

He and his faculty liaison arrive at the lecture hall fifteen minutes before his talk. The room is a high ceilinged, wood-paneled affair that has been lit to a warm, day-spectrum yellow. It is already full of people—full of faculty, full of students, full of phones and glasses sporting the subtle blue lights of recording cameras, and full of anticipatory chatter.

Even now, even before he starts, everyone is watching him.

*I told you, dude*, his brain says, choosing for its incarnation the sanctimonious tone of Dr. Newton Geiszler of the fenestrated perception and the knack for loose connections. *Did I not tell you this was exactly how it would go down?*

Had his brain been in the habit of addressing him as Newton, pre-drift?

He thinks not.

He feels nauseated.

His hands are cold.

His mouth is entirely dry.

His digestive system has declared war on the rest of his organs.

He doesn't understand why he must respond like this, when faced with public speaking. No one is *literally* trying to kill him; he is simply required to *give a talk*. It's, arguably, one of the easier things he's done in the past ten days.

His nervous system seems to be unconvinced by this argument. This is not surprising. He has been able to talk it out of very little when he pits cogent arguments against evolutionary imperatives. This is one of the curses of the human condition, he supposes.

Hermann deposits his bag on the nearest chair in the still empty front row, feeling the slowly filling capacity of the room pressing down on him.

"Ninety slides?" says his faculty liaison, looking over his shoulder as Hermann connects his laptop to the projection system.

*What of it?* his brain snarls.

Hermann doesn't say anything. Engaging in small talk feels like an inordinately torturous effort and will probably be recorded by half the audience members and analyzed for all time.

His chest feels strange; his stomach's in knots; he can hear the rush of blood in his ears, and—

*Yeah, we're not doing this*, his brain snaps, sounding exactly like Newton before the man makes a *terrible*—

He's not sure what happens.

He staggers under the sensation of an almost *physical* snap of something that's entirely in his head, and, with the shock of unexpected, long anticipated *relief*, his anxiety is gone.

He feels vaguely uneasy about this, but he's also vaguely disinclined to question it, because—yes. It's just best not to question.

"Are you all right?" Professor Starr asks him.

David Starr. That's the man's name. It strikes him suddenly. Professor Starr looks concerned and competent and like he has glorious taste in NP-complete problems. He's actually been quite helpful.

"Yeah," Hermann says, but that doesn't *sound* quite right, so he amends it to, "yes. Yes, I'm fine. Thank you for your assistance, David."

"No problem," Professor Starr says, looking surprised and warming up appreciably.

"You ready for this?"

"No doubt," Hermann says dryly, surveying the room with a vaguely alarming sense of predatory anticipation. This is, in all likelihood, the most fortuitous thing to have happened to all three hundred assembling people in a *decade* because they are, in fact, about to hear about the breach, about its discovery and composition, about the things that came through it, about how it was *closed*. Hermann can't think of anything more topically relevant or viscerally satisfying than a mathematically laced account of an apocalypse averted *by science*. Plus, he's a fabulous speaker. There's that to consider.

He flexes his hands, he pulls off his glasses, he asks David for a laser pointer, which is green, that's outrageously acceptable, he's not going to lie about that, green is really his preferred laser pointer color; red is too-often washed out, and hello, who *is* he? A Sith Lord of Science? No. No he is not. The room has the promising feel of his sixth defense, which had ended with the somewhat eccentric chair of MIT's Biomedical Engineering department theatrically dropping to his knees to literally beg him to stay on as faculty within the department and not defect (again) to Neuroscience as he'd been threatening. His closed door session had been a tenure track negotiation, and yes he had done exactly zero postdocs and yes he'd gotten six degrees, sure, he admits it's a little weird, but in the end, he'd been tenured in his twenties, so it was fine, he's not *insecure* about it, the point that he's lost track of slightly is that he is an *awesome* speaker. The kind of speaker who sends undergraduates back to their dorms starry-eyed and graduate students straight to drunken misery as they question their life choices and career trajectories. It might be a little bit difficult for the Mathematics Department to choke down their collective envy and hire him, but he's pretty sure they're going to do it, no one can hunt down Riemann zeros like *he* can hunt down Riemann zeros—but wait.



*Massive, massive identity confusion*, his brain says, sounding unmistakably like Newt.

Like *Newton*.

*This is bad*, he says to his brain, not sure who he sounds like. *This is not preferred, you're defaulting to a pathway that isn't yours. You're defaulting to a guy who doesn't live here, not in this head, not really. How is this even possible, this is not okay, this is why people don't lower their membrane potentials; you should really write a paper if you make it through this with your selfhood intact. Or if you don't. Either way, it's a win.*

*Shut up*, he snarls back at himself.

"Excuse me," he says to Professor Starr. He looks at his watch. Seven minutes remain until he is due to begin his talk. "I'll be back shortly."

He leaves the room, finds a unisex bathroom, steps inside and locks the door. He leans back against it, not seeing the confining spread of white tile.

He's freaking out a little bit.

Or—he's—

He's marginally anxious about this turn of events?

He has leveled up when it comes to identity confusion. Or—he has plotted new reaches of—how should he classify this—cognitive consonance?

Cognitive consonance. That has a nice ring to it.

*This might not necessarily be a bad thing*, he thinks. *I am an amazing public speaker.*

*Well, one of us is*, his brain answers, sounding vaguely affronted. *The question is, dude, can you give a talk as Newt? Or, can Newt give a talk as you? Or, most correctly, can Hermann Gottlieb give a talk as Newton Geiszler giving a talk as Hermann Gottlieb?*

Yes.

Certainly.

He is *certain* he can do exactly that. He can do nearly anything. He's never encountered an intellectual roadblock he hasn't shattered his way through. He can build a drift interface out of salvaged parts and use it to—

*"This is the worst," he says and it is dark but even so, he can see the cracking of the ceiling, feel the dust on his face and the dirt beneath his hands. He needs to find his glasses—this is so cliché; he will be so annoyed if he dies without at least seeing what's eating him; after all the work he's put in that seems the least that he deserves. He finds them and the ceiling cracks apart and something blue descends in front of him, some kind of*

sensory exploration—and and and he doesn't like this, somehow it's more terrifying than the blind groping of a mindless thing in search of caloric intake or programmed for destruction; there's something careful in its movements; he's too horrified to scream, why is he sure this blue tissue is conductive? He can almost feel it wanting him to just—to simply, to reach out and—

He manages to make it to the toilet before vomiting, his digestive system panicking as it is wont to do, and he does not blame it; no he does *not*.

"For the love," he gasps. He had wondered what it was exactly that was happening to Newt—to Newton—to *Newt* at those times, now he knows, now he has much too much insight into Dr. Geiszler, thank you, and yet *not enough at all*.

He braces one hand against his wall, one hand on his cane. He breathes too hard and too fast.

He, whomever he is, has gotten himself into an insupportable situation.

One of many, truth be told.

His nose begins to bleed.

He decides he needs to organize his thoughts.

He is—

He looks over at the mirror to visually verify who it is that he is.

*Dr. Hermann Gottlieb.*

Yes.

Good.

He is currently standing in a unisex bathroom at UC Berkeley, leaning over an unsanitary toilet, one hand pressed to the tile of the lateral wall that is, in all likelihood, revoltingly unclean. His current status is, alas, best described as: bleeding from the nose post-vomiting, post-flashback, mid-identity confusion.

He erases the evidence of his rejected and yet still recognizable lunch because looking at it is not helping him out at all; he is not going to lie about that one. Nope.

He is *extremely* confused.

He wipes his mouth with a handkerchief, staggers to the sink, and watches blood drop dark and slide bright over sloping white porcelain. He tries to keep his head entirely still so that his shirt remains unstained. He pulls out a fresh handkerchief and presses it to his nose.

He's supposed to be giving a talk.

In approximately three minutes.

To four hundred people, give or take.

It will, undoubtedly, be recorded and subjected to live streaming by members of the academic community he's about to address.

*I'm not sure that's happening*, his brain says, sounding like Newton, under duress. *The talk, I mean.*

*Yes it is*, he snarls back.

He must do this. There is literally no other alternative. He *needs* this appointment. It is absolutely required. Unfortunately, he is also *almost certainly* going to have a panic attack when he gets to his *first slide*, which is *terrible*, which is *bad*, which is unsalvageable, which is not adaptive, which is entirely *Newton's fault*.

In his pocket, his phone vibrates.

He pulls it out, glances at the caller ID, and answers it.

"Newton," he snarls, the effect somewhat diminished by the handkerchief he's using to pinch his nose shut. "This is *not* a good time for me." He nearly appends the word 'dude,' but stops short.

The line is silent.

He feels acutely guilty—for all he knows, Newton is calling him because the man is panicking in a hotel room across town, uncertain of where he is or *who* exactly he is. For all he knows, the man is hemorrhaging from a venous plexus somewhere. For all he knows the man has had a seizure. For all he knows—

"Chill," the other man says, both annoyed and excessively *annoying*, and putting to rest all of Hermann's guilt in a single word.

"Do *not*," Hermann snarls, "tell me to *chill*. I *hate it* when you tell me to 'chill'. I am speaking in *three minutes*."

"I know that you don't think I have a theory of mind, Hermann, but guess what? I *do*. I even use it sometimes, when I think about it." Newton's tone is a blend of irritation and caution.

Hermann supposes that he doesn't sound quite like his usual self. "What do you want?" he snaps.

"Do you have a theory of mind?" Newton asks him with a calculated indolence that's, possibly, intended to be calming. "Why do you *think* I called you? No wait, don't answer that—whatever you say is going to piss me off. Look, what are you doing right now?"

"If you must know, I'm standing in a bathroom, bleeding from my nose," Hermann says, in waspish misery.

"You threw up." At least the other man has the decency not to frame his statement as an interrogative.

"This is *your fault*," Hermann says.

"Oh yeah. You got me," Newton says. "Guilty. Professor Geiszler, in the hotel room, with the syrup of ipecac, hours ago, in the breakfast you didn't eat."

"Shut up," Hermann whispers.

"Seriously man," Newton says, "you're gonna own this thing for sure. Come on. They already think you're a rockstar. All those people out there showed because they're half in love with you already. There's literally no way for you not to hit this one out of the park. Even if you give the crappiest talk you've ever given in your life, which you probably won't, because that talk in 2017 was pretty bad, it would be hard to top that one—"

"You're not helping," Hermann interrupts through clenched teeth.

"Yeah, sorry, I'm not on my A-game. Are you still bleeding? Because that's probably step one."

Hermann pulls the tissue away from his face and watches blood continue to drip into the sink.

"Yes," he says.

"Okay well, it will stop, eventually, I'm pretty sure," Newton says.

"Newton, I have *two minutes*," he snarls.

*And an identity crisis*, his brain cheerfully adds.

"Are you serious?" his colleague asks. "Hermann. *They can wait for you*. They will get their sweetass talk when you're ready to give it to them and not before, okay? You saved the world. Without you? They'd be lunch right about now. Right about eight days ago. Whatever. Try to keep that in mind, will you?"

He sounds so much *better* over the phone than he *looks* in person, and this whole thing would almost *almost* be reassuring, but for the incontrovertible fact that Newton cannot *possibly* rescue him from an excess of Geiszlerian thought patterns.

"Have you noticed," Hermann murmurs, shutting his eyes and shifting his weight and pressing the handkerchief against his face, trying not to think of a clock counting down, 'that—" He breaks off.

There are too many things wrong with the thought he's trying to construct and he's too stressed to salvage it.

"Probably not," Newton says quietly, after several long seconds pass. "I'm only hyperobservant in the face of glaringly unsubtle stimuli. You want to come back? Just come back. Screw UC Berkeley with their Fields Medalists and their more than decent theoretical quantum people. We'll get room service and you can stop me from watching twenty-four hour news."

"Don't watch it," Hermann says, half choked with despair over everything that he has no time to explain.

"Yeah, I tried, it did not go well for me. I switched to *Star Wars*. That's going better. Lightsabers. You know. There's an all-day marathon, apparently. I'm midway through *Episode IV*."

For a moment they are silent.

"Spit it out, dude," Newton says, not ungently.

"I am finding that during periods of acute distress I default more to *your* coping strategies than to *mine*," Hermann whispers.

"Really," Newton says, the word conveying no surprise, glazed with exhaustion. "So are you charming everyone with a borrowed narcissistic personality disorder?"

"You're not a narcissist," Hermann murmurs, his eyes still shut. "It's not narcissism if it's justifiable."

"Yeah, okay, wow, that's so true, thank you for noticing, but I'm going to level with you, dude—you're pretty far gone if you're saying things like that." Newton's tone is appealingly wry. "But if you did accidentally step into the shoes of science's most frontable frontman, I don't understand why you're throwing up in the bathroom. I'm awesome at giving talks, if you don't count all the interdisciplinary and intradisciplinary fights I somehow manage to start."

"One of your assumptions," Hermann replies, "is mistaken." He opens his eyes and inspects the handkerchief he holds. It's nearly covered with blood. He pulls it away from his face and waits.

"Ugh," Newt says. "I hate that. Being mistaken. Especially about assumptions. Hermann, let's be real, my brain is like a neuronal fricassee right now; can you just point out my biases so I can drag them outside the Venn Diagram of Rightness that I like to hang out in?"

"Your brain is fine," Hermann replies, not at all certain of any such thing. "You spent most of last night in eloquent speculation on the nature of consciousness and so I will thank you to stop playing the neurological injury card whenever you're feeling rhetorically disinclined, man."

"Are you still bleeding?" Newton asks. "Also—did you just call me *man*?"

"No," Hermann says.

"So. Step one, tell me what I'm wrong about. Step two, wash the blood off your face. Step three, light that talk on fire and, step four, burn it down," Newton says.

"I did not end up vomiting in this bathroom out of *anxiety* about the *talk*," Hermann informs him.

"Well crap," Newton replies.

"I seem to have, unfortunately, in borrowing your hubristic sense of scientific entitlement *also* borrowed nearly *everything else*, including your alarming propensity to ah—"

He's not sure how to talk about this without initiating another immersive sensory recapitulation of a terrifying memory that isn't his own.

"Freak out a little bit about near death experiences directly related to the subject material you're about to be discussing?" Newton asks. "Okay, yes, I could see where that might be inconvenient for you right about now. So, to summarize, in feeling super anxious regarding public speaking, your brain decided that rather than be you, in anxious misery, it would instead be *me*, the glam-punk master of the oral presentation. Can I just make an aside to say that this is *weird*? Like, I'm not sure I approve of this. I've definitely trended a little bit in the you-direction lately—I may have kind of just obsessively cleaned our hotel room, but it's not the same thing, I don't think."

"Newt, seriously?" Hermann says, picturing the slightly uncomfortable expression Dr. Starr is likely sporting at the moment, several rooms away, "I have *no* time for this."

"Oh *my god*. Did you just—call me *Newt*? I *have* kidnapped your brain. I am so sorry. Yeah, okay. So. Focusing. Sorry again. Okay, so your brain decided that when faced with an audience it would rather be my brain, but unfortunately you're now flashing back to—"

"Nearly being *eaten*," Hermann snarls at him. "Could you not have asked one of the *military* personnel to locate the illicit Hong Kong kaiju market *for* you?"

"This is not the thing to focus on right now dude, I'm pretty sure about that," Newton says, and his tone is so entirely reasonable that Hermann can barely *stand it*.

Newton is *not* the *reasonable* one.

"Okay, so you got nervous, your brain decided to pretend to be me for the duration, which is going to produce a pretty interesting effect on your general demeanor I've got to say, fortunately some ballsy grad student or fifty is going to post your talk for the world so I can watch it and later mock you, possibly compliment you, actually, because let's be real, I'm a pretty great speaker and if—"

Newt has now summarized what Hermann has been trying to tell him in three different, wandering ways, and Hermann finds this *totally insupportable* given his current time pressure. He can't remember how to direct the man into *saying something sensical*, even though that's a skill he knows he *should have*. All he can think to do is demand precision.

"You will be able to do neither if I never *give it*. *Get to the point*, would you please?"

"Okay, so thanks to EPIC Rapport, you're no longer nervous about the talk itself, you're more concerned that midway through you're going to flash back to a crap public shelter and then throw up and bleed out of your face in that order whilst in front of hundreds of people and being livestreamed to everyone in the world who's interested in what you have to say, which, honestly, is going to be a pretty significant fraction of the total population of humanity—"

"You are useless," Hermann says. "We literally cannot converse. I'm hanging up."

"No! No no no no. I'm hypothesizing while talking. *Don't* hang up."

Hermann looks at the ceiling, so frustrated he thinks his brain might implode.

"Hello?" Newton says.

"I'm *waiting*," Hermann says.

"Oh. You are? Cool. Great. Okay so I think you're just going to have to be nervous about this talk. Embrace your anxiety, man. I think that might work."

"*That's* your solution? I fail to see how it improves my situation. I was *already* anxious, that's what generated this problem in the *first place*."

"Nope. False. The anxiety itself was not the problem. The problem occurred when your brain decided that it would rather be *me* under duress than *you* under duress, because that is *not* a good choice, dude, it was probably never a great choice but it's a worse choice now than it would have been circa 2020, because you've got my synaptic pathways post-drift numero uno and so, yeah, no matter how satisfying you might find it to bitchslap your audience with awesomeness so hard their teeth rattle, the associated sequelae are a no go."

"You realize this is impossible, correct?" Hermann asks, "What you're proposing? I can't just leverage my own psychology into a less emotionally advantageous state, *Newton*, biologically—"

"Sure you can," Newton says. "As if you know anything about biology, dude; you think you *defaulted* to this pathway you stole from me? You didn't *default* into it, you *escaped* into it, but there's not supposed to be any escaping here, Hermann, you *need* your anxiety to *focus*, to haul ass through a ninety-slide slide deck in a fifty minute time slot. You think you can give a talk as *me* and not end up all over the map? What are you on, dude? This is a nonviable pathway, so *snap out of it*. This is *horrifically*, totally, one hundred percent terrifying okay? You're about to give a talk to a packed house with *global* overflow seating. *Everyone* is going to be watching, *everyone*, okay? Everyone you know. It's going to be recorded for posterity, it's going to be dissected and analyzed by the scientific community, by the military, by Sunday morning political shows, by Mako the Magnificent, by your *dad*, by your exes, by your middle school math teachers, by Possibly Flow, by Hypothetical Rain, by everyone in your field, by mathematicians, by computer scientists, by fourteen year olds with an interest in quantum or in kaiju, by creeper monster cults, by Hannibal Chau's leaderless gang, by your future biographer, and of course, by *me*. Later. As soon as possible. And I will literally *never* let you forget even the smallest error that you might make, okay? You should live in fear of me Hermann, I am a relentless jerk with an unbelievable mnemonic capacity and I will judge you, dude, I will *judge you*. Harshly. Loudly. Eternally. To the full extent of our combined lexicons."

Hermann feels the echo of recalled anxiety and attendant nausea. He clenches his jaw, breathes slowly, and tries not to bleed.

"You had *better* be silently freaking out right now, Hermann," Newton continues, "because this is going to be totally, one hundred percent awful and literally everything



will be ruined if you don't pull it off. You are not a frontman, okay, you're a mathematician who *hates crowds*, let alone *addressing them*, this is pretty much your worst nightmare. Now go wash your face and get this done, right? Just the facts, just the math, just the schematics of interfaces and the innovations in computational modeling and the quantum foam that you mapped every night for years, like the super boring, super anxious quantum cartographer you are."

Newton is silent.

Hermann feels confused, upset, and increasingly anxious. His mouth is dry.

"Hundreds of people," Newton says. "*Hundreds*. That you can *see*."

"I feel deeply ashamed," Hermann says, "and endlessly vexed that your *extremely* transparent strategy seems to be working."

"The brain," Newton says. "Pretty powerful, not always the smartest, especially mine."

"I'll call you later," Hermann says.

"Hundreds of people," Newton replies.

"Yes, thank you, message received."

"That you can *see*. Probably thousands that you can't."

"Newton."

"Video evidence."

"*Newton*."

"And you're already *late*. Are you kidding me? I'm docking ten points for style right there. Lateness. Just who do you think you are?"

"Thank you," Hermann says. He can feel his hands shake subtly with adrenaline.

"Light it up," Newton replies, and the line goes dead.

After his talk, which is enthusiastically received despite the crushing anxiety he both suffers beneath and, cruelly, *works to maintain*, Hermann leaves the auditorium by a back door. No one who lacks a UC Berkeley ID card has been admitted, but he is told after he fields his last question that scattered members of the press have gathered outside, barred from entering but waiting for him to emerge. When he indicates he'd prefer *not* to interact with the press, thank you, he is accompanied by Professor Starr and by the head of UC Berkeley's Mathematics department out a back door, down a

flight of stairs, and through an underground connection to an adjacent building before emerging beneath a clouded sky.

Hermann doesn't feel quite right—as if, somewhere in his mind, a man significantly braver and less organized than he is waits in mental wings, offstage and in the dark.

What does it say about his state of mind that this doesn't frighten him?

It should.

He has daguerreotype of a living man etched into the substance of his mind.

Other things are etched there as well.

"Something on your mind?" the Department Chair asks him, in subtle Scottish accent. There is something overly smooth in the other man's delivery, as if he's aware of his own intrusion into thoughts that might be private and is working to sand down any interpersonal rough edges.

"Too much," Hermann says, smelling the sea, remembering what it was like to breathe underwater.

"Yes well," the other man says, "you've had an eventful year."

Hermann says nothing, because he's concerned that whatever response he can excavate free of a decade of detritus will compound the unsteady shifting of his thoughts.

He has a difficult time composing himself until he is back inside, until Starr has peeled away, vanishing to an office or a waiting bank of monitors, or wherever it is that Algebraic Topologists go in the mid-afternoon at UC Berkeley. He collects himself, his thoughts sharpening into their old, familiar lines as he seats himself in the Department Chair's cluttered, ground-floor office, and narrows his focus down to the gray-haired man with square framed glasses and a sharp look.

Hermann likes him.

They are cut from the same cloth, he suspects.

They exchange labored pleasantries for ten minutes before the other man decides to cut to the quick and make him an offer. It's better than Hermann had been bracing himself for—he's not insensible to the fact that UC Berkeley is as strapped for resources as any institution not devoted solely to the preservation of life on Earth. A full tenure package, relatively minimal teaching responsibilities, and an office that the man assures him is "a fair bit nicer than my own," with an understated wryness that makes Hermann vaguely suspicious that he might have some ulterior motive.

Perhaps he doesn't like being the department chair. Hermann doesn't blame him. He's certain the administrative duties are atrocious and unrewarding.

"I find your offer extremely suitable," Hermann says, after an appropriate pause.

"Perfect," the other man replies.

"But," Hermann says.

The Department Chair raises his eyebrows.

"In order for me to accept, my—" he hesitates only a fraction of a second, "*partner* would also need to be offered a faculty position."

"Ah," the other man says. "This wouldn't be the reclusive Dr. Geiszler, would it?"

*Reclusive?* Hermann thinks. He can come up with a plethora of words to describe Newton Geiszler, but 'reclusive' is certainly not one of them.

"I see you've been watching the news," Hermann says dryly.

"To my perpetual disappointment, it generally fails to qualify as any such thing," the other man replies, hooking one hand over his shoulder and pressing down, as if to massage away some element of strain.

"I'm glad to see you view the current coverage with the skepticism it deserves. I can assure you that Dr. Geiszler is hardly 'reclusive'. Nor is he brain-damaged, having a nervous breakdown, a traitor to his species, persecuted by the military-industrial complex, heartbroken over the closure of the breach, a drug addict, poisoned by Kaiju Blue, Mako Mori's biological half-brother, or affiliated with Kaiju Worshipers in any way. He's—" Hermann isn't sure how to end his sentence in an accurate and circumspect way.

The other man looks at him, gray eyebrows edging above the rims of his square-framed glasses.

"Recuperating," Hermann finishes, curling the word into something pointed and frosted over.

The other man nods, breaking the steeple of his fingers and turning his hands over in an unmistakably conciliatory gestural paraph. "I'll make a call. He's a biologist, correct?"

"He's qualified in multiple areas," Hermann says, de-frosting his tone. Slightly.

"Do you happen to have his CV?"

"I do," Hermann replies, pulling it out of his bag and passing it across the desk.

He watches the other man flip through the thing in growing and familiar consternation. "How many degrees does he—"

"Six," Hermann says dryly.

For that admission he gets another eyebrow lift. "Seems a bit excessive, doesn't it?"

"Yes," Hermann admits. He rolls his eyes in the general direction of the ceiling, *exceedingly* glad that Newton is not present and will never hear the words that are about to come out of his mouth. "His first advanced degree was defended at age fourteen, however, so his academic indecisiveness is, perhaps, *somewhat* understandable, given the unusual educational choices he made at *age ten*."

"I suppose," the Department Chair says, narrowing his eyes. "That might explain the first three—possibly the first four. But—"

"His publication record is stellar," Hermann says, mentally cursing Newton for failing to *commit* to a single field of study. He's certain that a large part of Newton's staying power in the field of exobiology derives directly from the fact that his civilization would have ended had he not kept his mind in a single track.

"It is," the other man agrees, still flipping pages. "He was based at MIT before leaving academia for the PPDC?"

"He was," Hermann confirms. "He has a standing offer to return, which will likely be what we choose to do if UC Berkeley is unwilling to make him an offer."

It is, technically, a lie, but, with some well-placed emails, it could transform into something true.

"Berkeley is certainly a better fit for *your* interests," the other man says with an incisive coolness that Hermann very much admires.

"It is," Hermann admits.

"I have every confidence that the Biomedical Engineering, Integrative Biology, Neuroscience, Molecular and Cell Biology, and, possibly, the Bioethics Departments would *all* be willing to invite him to give a seminar."

Now for the delicate part.

"Dr. Geiszler," Hermann says carefully, "is unlikely to be sufficiently recovered to give an invited job-talk for several weeks. But unfortunately, I can't accept your offer until I'm certain that he has a position here."

The other man gives him a look roughly on par with the outrageousness of Hermann's indirectly stated ultimatum. "What is it exactly that you're asking me to do? Extend a

standing offer on behalf of a department *that I don't chair* to a man who hasn't interacted with any members of the faculty in *any* department he might be qualified to join?"

"I recognize that this is highly irregular," Hermann says. "But, as I mentioned, we had planned to return to MIT. Please don't inconvenience yourself if you find this to be an unreasonable request."

The Department Chair makes him wait, just long enough to demonstrate a wry cognizance of Hermann's rather crass negotiating technique before he says, "I am certain, Dr. Gottlieb, that this institution would only benefit from employing the pair of you. I am also certain it will be a relatively straight-forward matter to convince *someone* to offer Dr. Geiszler a position based on reputation and CV alone. Presuming I can secure him an offer in an expeditious manner, would you be amenable to joining our department?"

"I would be delighted," Hermann replies.

"Then welcome aboard," the other man says, extending a hand across the chaotic expanse of his desk.

After his meeting, Hermann calls Newton, who, against all odds, seems to be fine. He informs Hermann that he will, "literally kill you if you don't go out drinking with the Berkeley Math Department, dude, it's a crime against humanity, it needs to happen, I will never forgive you if you come back here pre-socializing. It's a whole new decade; the world didn't end, so I fully expect that you're going to be bitching about these guys for the foreseeable future and I really want that to start as soon as possible. It's going to improve my life a lot, because, as you know, the only thing I like more than complaining about mathematicians is listening to *you* complain about *other* mathematicians."

So Hermann goes.

He goes first to a somewhat awkward dinner in a half-deserted restaurant of mediocre quality, and then for substantially less awkward drinks in a bar that is small and dark and lined with shattered spars of wood that he makes a point *not* to try and recognize or place.

He resolves not to mention Newton to any of his new colleagues.

He fails.

He fails multiple times.

This point is driven home to him by the fact that his evening ends with a trip back to Starr's office to pick up a pre-publication copy of the mathematically-demanding *Rediscovering Leibniz* that the man has been editing for the past eight months. Hermann fends off a dinner invitation, extended ostensibly to the pair of them, but, mostly to *Newton*, in *absentia*. He fends it off three times. Newton is never allowed to cross paths with the UC Berkeley Mathematics Department.

Ever.

Hermann would have a lot of explaining to perform on two fronts if such an event ever came to pass, and when it was all said and done, Newton would likely be entirely insufferable for *years*.

The return cab ride from Oakland to San Francisco is long and dark and driverless.

He spends the time in an exhausted blur, watching the shifting lights of decimated cityscapes blend and curve in a broken crescent around Oblivion Bay. Again, the Bay Bridge bookends the open loop of his journey—still standing, still untrafficked, still lit up in the style of Villareal; a bizarre defiance of a war torn decade, a memorial to a time before the breach had self-organized into a traversable passage.

Hermann's not sure what to make of the Bay Bridge Lights.

Are they a hopeful return of the city, of the coast, of the planet, to the flaws of human stewardship? Or a memory of a history set aside by foreign influence?

He doesn't know.

He tries not to remember rolling into the bay with the fog and the tolling of bells, rending apart a bridge like it was nothing, watching vehicles spill into the water without a clear understanding of what they were, tracking the ripples that formed and cracked in distorting asphalt as he tore through small and interesting structures built by small and interesting mammals who hadn't been here, not last time, not on this world, and who did not belong here now.

Hermann spends the cab ride back in the vertiginous darkness of the mildly intoxicated, not thinking of the view of Oblivion Bay from the west.

The return journey is shorter; it is late, the traffic is minimal, and alcohol and relief have loosened the tight gears of his mind into something that runs smoother and less precisely.

It will be all right.

They will rejoin academia. The PPDC will not reclaim them.

They never belonged in the military—not truly. They belong in labs, with cadres of graduate students that complain about them, secretly and bitterly and passionately, over too much coffee.

The cab pulls up in front of the off-white hotel, lit up against the night sky. Hermann swipes his credit card and steps into the brisk night air, feeling strange, still half-drunk, still more than fractionally Newton Geiszler, which is a problem he thinks he may have for the remainder of his life.

The air smells of salt, of the near but invisible sea.

His thoughts are a fugue in three parts, but he's certain he can track the through-line that's his own. It's the one that started first, the one that frames the others, the only one that will ever change.

He wonders which will be harder to bear when he's drinking tea and misplacing his keys through the final decade of his life—his memories of alien destruction or the version of Newton Geiszler, frozen at age thirty-five, in medias res, that he will carry in his head for the rest of his life.

Hermann adjusts the strap of his bag over his shoulder, and searches for his room key with alcohol-blunted coordination.

The wind fights with his hair.

He feels, in this moment, as though he can sidestep the past miserable decade of his life, like he can obviate it, like he can pretend it never happened, like he can wake up in the morning two weeks from now to *mathematics* that has nothing to do at all with the ending of the world; he can go his whole life without firing off another salute, or sharing a workspace with extraterrestrial *entrails*, or ignoring another backhanded insult about the value of what he's chosen as his life's work, like he can leave *all* of it behind and he can keep only the things that had made the entire experience worthwhile—his quantum cartography and his closest friend—and drag both those things into an alternate pathway, the way things might have been if he'd had less of a chip on his shoulder the length and breadth of the Wall; if he'd met Newton at the peak of the 'Nerd Rock' genre in 2020, instead of in 2016, when humanity had turned back to science after years of defunding basic research.

When he returns to their room he finds the lights off, *Star Wars: Episode VIII* halfway over, and Newton lying in bed with Hermann's sunglasses on, the partially consumed remains of a room service dinner spread around him on the coverlet in a semi-circle. The only illumination comes irregularly from the television.

"Did you bring me a present?" his esteemed colleague asks him.

"I did," Hermann says.

Newton looks over at him, cocking his head in a subtly skeptical manner. "Are you *drunk*?"

It vexes Hermann significantly that Newton can determine his state of inebriation from two monosyllabic words.

"I am most certainly *not intoxicated*," Hermann says crisply.

Relatively crisply.

He steps out of his shoes.

"You *are*," Newton says, but the words lack any kind of victorious edge. He simply sounds exhausted and reassuringly familiar. Hermann's colleague of a decade with impeccable timing and dubious taste in outerwear.

"Slightly," Hermann admits. "Extremely slightly."

Newton smiles at that, quick and crooked. "What did they *do* to you? Set up an ethanol drip?"

"Hardly," Hermann says. "Just because *you* cannot hold *your* alcohol does not mean—"

"Hey hey hey *hey*. We have never gone head-to-head, okay?" Newton says. "The record is *very clear* regarding a straight-up alcohol tolerance test. Everyone has to be reasonably well-rested, hydrated, and with equal access to food. We have never met those conditions, so relative alcohol dehydrogenating prowess has never been truly assessed."

"Mmm hmm," Hermann says, with blatant skepticism.

"Don't give me that," Newton replies, watching in evident interest as Hermann deposits his bag carefully on the desk, opens it, and pulls out the book.

"Please tell me that's the complete works of René Descartes," Newton says. "Not that I care. Not that I've been thinking about Descartes all day. Do you think he'd mind if I called him René?"

"Historically," Hermann says, "you have displayed no concern for either surnames or appropriate titles and I am somewhat at a loss as to what might make you start now. Furthermore, Descartes is *dead*, Newton, so I do not think he will take issue with your presumptive familiarity."



"Oh you *are* drunk, aren't you?" Newton says, reaching out to take the book from Hermann with a notable effort. "You never humor me unless you're drunk. In other news, Descartes will never be dead. To me, okay?"

"That is blatantly untrue," Hermann says. "Ninety percent of my waking life is spent humoring you."

Newton angles the book and cocks his head, trying and likely failing to read the title in the dark without his glasses. "You also get hyperbolic when you're drunk."

"False," Hermann says.

"True," Newton replies. "You should give up now."

"I'm certain that only a *miracle* would enable you to read without your glasses in this kind of lighting," Hermann says.

"I'm a very good guesser," Newton says, re-angling the book.

"Leibniz," Hermann says, reaching out to tap its cover. "*Rediscovering Leibniz*. That's a pre-publication copy."

"Fanciness," Newton says, letting the book come to rest on his chest. "Poor Leibniz. Isaac Newton was a complete dick. Personally. Optical baller though, not gonna lie about that. One can't, really. Lie about Sir Isaac, I mean. He took issue with Descartes, I think, or rather, *you* think? I'm getting all this Descartes stuff from *your* brain, you know, I just—I can't really blame you for the fact that I seem to have some wires crossed when it comes to rationalism and like, romantic love. I'm pretty sure that humans were never meant to feel this way about invalidated philosophical disciplines."

"I will buy you a rationalistic bodice-ripper tomorrow," Hermann says, pulling off his jacket.

Newton rolls an r into an obscenely modulated purr of inappropriate appreciation, but at what, specifically, Hermann can't say. Possibly Descartes. Possibly Hermann's unconventional application of the term 'bodice ripper' to rationalism as a philosophical discipline.

Either way, this sort of thing is not to be encouraged.

Admittedly, he himself had instigated it, but he is intoxicated and he has had an atypical day.

Descartes is a fellow mathematician and deserves *respect*.

Hermann therefore coolly segues into, "and yes, I believe you are correct, your namesake was—"

"He's not my namesake, *Hermann*, as you *know*, because you've shared brain space with me and I've *told* you exactly eighty-thousand times if I've told you once. I was named after the SI unit of *force*."

"Which was, in turn, named after Isaac Newton. By the transitive property—"

"You can screw off via the transitive property," Newton says, with zero ire, predictably distracted by the on-screen fight scene.

Even in his mildly intoxicated state, Hermann has the good sense to leave that one where it lies. He redirects. "I sincerely doubt that you parents named you after the SI unit of force."

"That has been a longstanding element of my personal mythos, dude, and it works pretty well as a pick-up line, so I'm sticking with it."

"I suspect," Hermann says, unbuttoning the upper button of his collar, "that you were named for the Hurricane that hit Cabo San Lucas in 1986."

"Um, excuse me," Newton says, smiling faintly, looking over at him, "but what the *actual* hell, Hermann?"

"Your parents met there, in that year, did they not? During a hurricane? While touring with their respective musical ensembles?"

"First of all, that makes them sound like poor, free-spirited *vagrants*, while, in actuality? They were much more boring than that. A little bit. Second of all, can we not juxtapose my family history with the *Skywalker* family history?" Newton gestures vaguely at the screen. "Because I just don't feel great about this as a side-by-side. I'm developing a supervillain inferiority complex, did you know that? Have I mentioned that to you? Third of all, what's with your creepy hurricane knowledge? I don't believe that you could possibly have any grounds for this kind of irresponsible supposition. You —"

"A)," Hermann begins, unbuttoning the cuffs of his dress shirt, "I obtained my knowledge of your parents via the drift. Obviously. With this knowledge came the *extreme* suspicion that they would *not* have chosen to name you either after the SI unit of force, or Sir Isaac Newton."

"So you've been like—what, sitting around, performing some closet onanistic onomastic analysis when you're not busy pretending to be me or freaking out about your to-do list?" Newton asks, tapping the remote against his thigh in a restless rhythm.

"B)," Hermann continues, "I have been paying an inordinate amount of attention to tropical disturbances in both the Southern and Northern hemispheres of the Pacific Ocean for the past decade and I did make a particular note of the fact that shortly after you joined the PPDC in 2016, Hurricane *Newton* interfered with the deployment of *Romeo Blue* off the coast of Southern California."

"I like that you especially *noted* that," Newton says. "Very *you*. Did you file a formal reprimand against *HurricaneNewton*, or did you just save those for me?"

"C)," Hermann says, unperturbed, "following your assertion a few moments ago regarding the origins of your name, which I have heard before and of which I have always been skeptical, I realized that, arithmetically, with the six-year cycling of tropical system names, your hurricane could, potentially, be back-dated to the year in which your parents met."

"First of all, you have no idea when the 'Newton' entered the naming cycle," Newton says. "For all you know, 2016 could have been its debut. You are proceeding on *extremely* sketchy evidence. Even for *me*, let alone for *you*. Do you *know* how many assumptions you're making right now? A *lot*. At least two. The first is that hurricane Newton existed at all in 1986, which is not a given. The second is, that *if* it did, it hit Cabo San Lucas while my parents were there."

"Shall we check?" Hermann asks, pulling his phone out of his pocket.

"No," Newton says. "Yes. All right *fine*. Now I have to know. Who names their kid after a hurricane anyway?"

"Your parents?" Hermann suggests.

"Maybe," Newton says, with the tone of a man who is narrowing his eyes invisibly behind sunglasses.

"Ah," Hermann says, skimming the information on his phone. "Unsurprisingly, Hurricane Newton did indeed hit Cabo San Lucas in September of 1986."

"You are the *worst*," Newton says. "It's entirely unfair to just reanalyze the data of my life in new ways because you have access to it all now. In other news, *your parents*—um, yeah. I got nothing. Just *wait* though, Hermann, I'm literally going to sit around, staring at a blank wall, thinking intensively about your childhood so that I can offer you creepy insights about your own origins."

"I look forward to it."

"Well you *shouldn't*. My uncle has some *explaining* to do. He confirmed that whole 'unit of force' thing. I feel weird about this."

"In his defense, I presume that you, as a child, were extremely difficult to contradict once you were possessed of a particular opinion."

"I'm told I cried a lot," Newton admits. "*Historically*."

"Did you *eat* this dinner?" Hermann asks, looking critically at the crescent of plates that surrounds Newton on the bed. "Or were you just arranging it in an aesthetically pleasing manner while reviewing the Skywalker family pedigree?"

"I ate some of it," Newton says, "and then I organized it by probable protein content and started eating it until I remembered eating other things and then felt sick. Did you just say 'Skywalker family pedigree'?"

"I am finished pretending that I don't have your knowledge base," Hermann says. "Primarily because I am envious of your facility with mine. What 'other things'?"

"Whoa," Newton says. "That was more upfront than is typical even for drunk-you, so—"

"What 'other things'?" Hermann asks again.

"Well definitely not *people*," Newton says, quietly, looking away from him. "I'll tell you that much."

Hermann feels sick in *simpatico* and fails in his effort to *not* think about how the experience of consumption had varied by *kaiju*, managing to push the thoughts somewhere back to the furthest reaches of his mind.

He suspects that Newton has a much more difficult time employing a similar strategy, so he doesn't say anything, he just begins the process of removing Newton's crescent of plate and bowl and fruit cup and saucer and packet of crackers and silverware from the bed.

"I can do that," Newton says, not doing it, his fingers tracing the edges of the book Hermann has brought him.

"Undoubtedly," Hermann replies.

"You," Newton says, watching Hermann reload the room service tray and banish it to the other side of the room, "are just opening all kinds of doors that should remain closed. For your own sanity."

*I implied to the entire Mathematics Department at UC Berkeley that we were romantically involved*, Hermann thinks. He does not say this out loud. He is not that drunk.

He will *never* be that drunk.

"This is not a new habit," Hermann says agreeably.

"Are you going to wear a bathrobe?" Newton asks. "Danielle brought us a new one."

"Who is *Danielle*?" Hermann asks.

"She works for housekeeping. She's cool. She came asking about all the blood on clothes and sheets. I told her I have an incurable yet non-communicable disease, and then she brought me leftover donuts from the continental breakfast downstairs."

Hermann looks at the ceiling.

"Dude, I'm just saying. If you want a bathrobe, we have a replacement. We also have clean towels."

"Thank you, Newton," Hermann says, loosening his tie. "I will take that under advisement, post-shower."

"If you hurry, you can still make the lightsaber-crafting montage pre-arc-of-confused-redemption-neé-ambiguous-vengeance," Newton says, looking at the Leibniz he can't see rather than the movie he can't see.

"Splendid," Hermann replies. "I shall make every effort."

When he reemerges from the shower, bathrobe-clad, carrying a cup of water and Newton's anti-epileptic, he finds the other man has migrated to a position that's mostly horizontal. Hermann thinks he might be sleeping until Newton points at him and says, "yes. Geiszler-approved attire."

"Have you taken this yet?" Hermann says, giving the medication a subtle shake, certain the answer is no.

"I'm pretty sure I don't need it," Newton replies. "I think I only get epileptiform discharges when I give them to myself on purpose a little bit."

"Try to reduce the scope of your own idiocy as much as possible," Hermann replies dryly.

"I like that," Newton says, taking the proffered pill and water with no further argument. "It makes a good motto. Reducing the scope of idiocy since—when did we start corresponding? 2013? Let's custom-order matching T-shirts, what do you say."

"I don't wear T-shirts," Hermann replies.

"Mugs," Newton says. "Hats? Extremely tasteful *ties*. What if it were in Latin? Would that make a difference? Would you wear a T-shirt with *Latin* on it?"

Hermann leans his cane against the wall and Newton moves laterally, giving him space on the bed. "No," he says, lying down.

"You are so boring. You are seriously the most boring *ever*. In news totally unrelated to your boringness, about eight people called me this afternoon, presumably to tell me what a badass you are; I don't know for sure because I didn't answer my phone but I will congratulate you anyway. Strong work."

"Thank you," Hermann says, trying to thank him for more than just his words, but not quite managing to get it out.

"Maybe one day I'll be able to watch your internet-enshrined talk without having a panic attack."

"It wasn't anything you haven't seen before," Hermann says.

"I know," Newton replies. "Boring. Joining brains, killing monsters, quantum cartography, dimensional transit, rockstarishness, blah blah blah. Sign me up for the next cataclysm, will you? I'm so over this one."

"You know, Newton, I was thinking," Hermann says, as the lightsaber-crafting montage comes onscreen in front of them to an appropriately epic soundtrack.

"I have never known such a thing to occur," Newton says. "How irregular, by Jove. What aberration is—waaaiit. What am I *doing*? You're drunk, and I'm British-hazing you? No. I change my mind. This is going to be awesome. Tell me, Dr. Gottlieb, of the arithmetic destiny and the sprawling chalkdust legacy, what were you thinking?"

"I was thinking that we could have ended up this way even if they'd never come." He does not need to specify, and so he does not. "Even if neither of us had left academia, we might have still ended up at UC Berkeley at the height of our academic careers, we might have still met."

Newton looks at him, waiting for whatever might follow with notably unusual patience, but there is nothing else.

Because, even inebriated, Hermann cannot verbalize the rest of it, cannot fully admit to the same susceptibility that all Jaeger pilots have—to be unable to separate the fight and the pain and the death and the loss of life from the uncontextualized and uncontextulizable closeness shared with another living person.

"Hermann," Newton whispers.

"What?" Hermann whispers back.

"You're insane," Newton murmurs, with conspiratorial fondness.

"Shut up," Hermann replies.

## Chapter Seventeen

Two days after transitioning from a non-descript hotel room to a non-descript, pre-furnished apartment, Newt stands in front of a new and different pane of floor-to-ceiling sliding glass, leading to a new and different balcony.

His shirt cuffs are in his fists, one fist is pressed against his mouth, and he is staring down the setting sun.

Hermann isn't here.

But that's fine.

It's not like he needs Hermann to *be* here.

He turns away from the glass, eyes the empty bookshelves built into the wall, and then turns back.

Newt isn't sure about this apartment.

It has a balcony, so there's that.

It faces west, so there's that too.

If he couldn't *look* from east to west, in a westerly direction, retrograde relative to axial spin, planet-wise, he's not sure what would happen because he had always been the kind of kid who opened the closet and *watched it*, rather than shutting the door on imagined darkness.

But he's not *sure* about it.

The apartment.

Not the darkness.

Though, he's not sure about that either, truth be told.

He's not sure about their recently appropriated set of clean, white rooms, about the classtastic, minimalist, I-live-next-to-radioactive-isotopes-but-I-do-it-in-*style* furniture, the dark wood of the table, the granite counter-tops, the hardwood floors, the LED natural spectrum lights for people who get sad under cloud cover, or the floor to ceiling windows that look out over the remains of a beautiful bay turned disgusting. He's not sure about the diagonal swath of radioactive fallout that separates him from the Pacific. He's not sure about not being sure about being separated from the water on the other side of the Wall. He's not sure about bookcases without sides, those



seem weird to him, wall-mounted shelves with no edges? He doesn't like that—it looks dangerous for the *books*, that's all. That's not weird. Is it weird? It's not weird. He doesn't like that someone *else* furnished this place, someone with the aesthetic sensibilities of a low-to-moderately gifted interior decorator who is a mental amalgam of cheap furniture catalogues and called something like Paul or Erika or Paulerika and who was probably passionate about nothing but the concept of mediocrity and efficiency via prefabrication.

Newt is being somewhat unfair to Amalgamated Paulerika, but it feels safer this way—because Paulerika is not really the type to say, hypothetically, put things in apartments that don't belong in apartments, he's not going to specify exactly what he *means* by that because that's getting into territory that he still has the sense to label as a little bit paranoid. Possibly. Possibly he's just slightly *slightly* (understandably) growing increasingly anxious about a whole host of things, so sue him, he doesn't like unanswered questions and this pre-furnished apartment is too full of surfaces that he's going to bleed on.

Newt *maaayyyy* not have slept in four days.

He literally may not have slept *at all* in that time.

He's starting to lose control of his (theory of) mind. A little bit. Not that much, probably.

He stares at Oblivion Bay.

The sun is going down. That hurts his eyes; they're watering behind his glasses.

His glasses block UV wavelengths and are scratch resistant.

His glasses are on his side.

He's not sure about the bookcase.

He edges away from it.

No, that's weird.

*That's stupid*, his brain corrects.

That's wrong.

The bookcase is fine.

He's ascribing sentience to too many things, like books and bridges and unfamiliar furniture, he feels like they're *watching* him, like *something's* watching him, nothing *is* though, nothing *can* be, right?

Right.

Well, maybe not so much 'right' as 'not right,' but he's pretty sure that of *Things That Might Be Watching Him* the bookcase is really low on that list, he just doesn't like that it has no edges, honestly *books are going to fall off the sides* at least the way that *he* deals with books. Who has so few books that they don't stack the things right out to the edges?

Amalgamated Paulerika, apparently. Not a big reader, that one.

Newt has broken bookcases by putting too many books into them.

The bookshelf isn't at all the problem. He doesn't have that many books right now, and it's just a surrogate for other concerns he has, about the normal things that normal people would be concerned with after the two weeks he's just had. Like, for example, whether aliens are trying to resorb him into a collective consciousness right about now.

*Oh my god*, his brain says. *Never, ever say that out loud to anyone. Or work on your phrasing.*

What, Newt replies defensively.

*You know exactly what*, his brain says.

Mechanistically, he's safe. Science's working hypothesis about the whole affair is that he's safe, *science says that, science does, science says that* because literally how could anything be influencing him right here, right now, nothing could, nothing can, that makes no sense, but—

Ongoing external influence can't be formally excluded.

*Neither can invisible, incorporeal floating dragons*, his brain says, switching from vitriolic sass to a weirdly appealing combo of Hermann Gottlieb and Carl Sagan, both of whom seem half concerned, half comforting. Maybe Hermann is the concerned one and Sagan is the comforting one. Maybe vice versa? No way, that's just ridiculous. Maybe they're both half and half. Either way, they raise a good point.

*Are you guys positing that the question of whether or not a neural connection exists between myself and other parties isn't scientifically refutable?* Newt asks.

*I didn't say that*, Sagan replies. *But the burden of proof is substantial, and shifted squarely onto your shoulders. Your claim is extraordinary, and is going to require extraordinary evidence.*

"Well yeah, they always do," Newt says through clenched teeth, scrubbing a hand through his hair.

*In other news, you're talking aloud to dead astronomers,* his brain says, in helpful annotation.

*And whose fault is that?* Newt asks.

"Okay," he says, pacing back and forth, once, in front of the glass door of the balcony. "Okay." He presses the air away from him slowly, fingers spread wide. "Okay okay okay."

The question is this: how to separate real-time influence from the lateral snap into preserved neural patterns left behind by EPIC Rapport.

Newt has suspected for quite some time that the romantically termed phenomenon of 'ghost drifting' actually represents an unconscious swap of original neural pathways for the exogenous neural pathways of one's drift partner. If such a phenomenon happened often enough to both parties, it would result in the subjective phenomenon of thought sharing, when really no such thing was occurring.

He pulls his voice recorder out of the pocket of his jeans, presses a button and says, "date—who knows, I don't think it matters. Time—I'm not sure, seven? Six? Whatever time the sun goes down. I'm in California and I haven't slept for four days because I'm feuding with an empty bookshelf and I was *thinking*—"

Newt clicks a button, pulls his glasses off, rubs his eyes with the back of his hand, puts his glasses back on, and reclicks.

"—about the empirical difficulties inherent to differentiating real-time cognitive influence from what I'm going to term, um, crap, super-ghost-drifting? No, that sounds stupid. Dr. Caitlin Lightcap, of the neuroscience zealotry and the wicked Jaeger pilotry, you are rolling in your grave right about now, aren't you, come hang out with Carl Sagan in my brain, no actually, don't do that—why am I recording this? I wish you were here, you'd find this super interesting, I'm sure. Okay. Here we go—Severe Post Excitation Cognitive Transfer of Environmental Responsiveness. The SPECTER Effect. Sorry, Cait-Science, but I'm not about to name this something poetic; it's just not happening. I'm better with acronyms. You know this about me."

He clicks a button.

He hasn't thought of Caitlin Lightcap in months.

That's a lie.

But, maybe, one day it will be true.

He reclicks.

"So the question is how to differentiate real-time cognitive influence by external parties (here, read: Hermann, the hivemind, or the freakish cadre of cut-up kaiju brains left on the Earth-side of the annihilated breach) from the SPECTER Effect (here read: a reproduction of foreign neural pathways, perceived by the brain as 'other' rather than 'self', but nevertheless *originating* from *within* rather than from *without*). Subjectively, they're not easily parsed."

He clicks a button.

He paces once again in front of the window.

He reclicks.

"Or, in other words: 'is Dr. Newton Geiszler being *driven* off the rational playing field by foreign influence or *driving himself there* instead? An observational study'. Because, honestly? I could see it going either way."

He clicks a button.

Has he gotten *fingerprints* on this *glass*?

He uses his shirtsleeve to remove them like a guy who has a compulsive neat-freak tapping into his neural circuitry on a semi-regular basis.

He reclicks.

"So," he says. "Testing. Yes. Testing. Empiricism. Fortunately for *me*, even though I'm primarily concerned about the effects following drifting with kaiju and *parts* of kaiju dismembered by yours truly—presuming that happened, *I think* it did—I have some ability to perturb the current system, possibly, if the system *is* exogenously perturbable. Meaning that I can get Hermann to try and screw with my brain and see what happens. Either he'll be able to, which is *bad*, or he *won't* which might just mean he's not *trying*, because he's like that. And by 'like that' I mean disinclined to be a jerk to the neurologically disadvantaged, not 'lazy'. But I'm pretty sure I can eventually irritate him into giving it a legitimate effort? I'm pretty sure that's a skillset I still have."

He clicks a button.

Yeah, this window is going to need to be cleaned.

Do they own Windex or a generic equivalent?

Newt has never communally owned cleaning products with *anyone* before.

This is a weird milestone.

He wanders out of the living room and into the kitchen, flipping on a light and then just as quickly flipping it off, because, though his eyes are vastly improved, he wouldn't say they're back to baseline, at least not where photosensitivity is concerned.

Once in the kitchen, he starts opening cabinets.

Hermann has organized pretty much everything.

Newt has been watching him and reading Descartes until his vision knuckles under in blurred defeat off and on for about four days, trying not to think too much about drift three, if that's what that even *was*.

Oh right.

And completely failing to sleep in the bedroom assigned to him.

Completely and *totally* failing.

Absolut failure.

He feels a little bit strange right now as a result.

He doesn't find any cleaning products until he drops into an unsteady crouch and goes for the bottom cabinets.

"Hi," Newt whispers to the spray bottle of blue cleaning fluid he pulls from beneath the sink. "Your life will be short but glorious. Much like a Jack Kerouac novel."

He is cleaning the window when the grate of a key in a lock, the sound of an opening door, and the entirely horrified exclamation that goes a little bit like, "what in god's name are you *doing*?" announces Hermann's presence.

Newt turns to look at him.

Hermann looks back at him with a facial expression he's trying to twist straight around to neutral.

Newt hopes that his own perplexed disapproval is manifesting on his face.

Honestly.

The guy is reacting as if he's found Newt performing messy studies in comparative anatomy on the floor of their collective living room rather than using their communal Windex to clean a communal *window*.

But okay.

Maybe it's time to take stock, because he *is* tired and he's got some ongoing cognitive issues so there's always the possibility that his judgment's slightly off-kilter.

But no, as far as Newt can tell, he's standing next to a window, wearing jeans, a white-dress shirt beneath a black fleece pullover thing that is the most aesthetically acceptable item of clothing he now owns, because *Hermann* did some preliminary *Newton-you-need-new-clothes* shopping and mostly bought him sweaters which is really not okay, but, like, he's *wearing clothes*. He's not wearing shoes, but that's not weird. He's pretty sure he looks pretty normal. He's totally positive he's not bleeding. Cleaning a window is a perfectly acceptable activity to be engaged in, especially post-apartment acquirement.

*You are good to go*, his brain says.

"Nice to see you too," Newt replies, with crisp aridity that he realizes slightly too late is more than a trace Gottliebian. He pauses, reboots, and goes with, "What does it *look* like I'm doing? I'm cleaning our communal living space, *Hermann*. You're *welcome*."

"Thank you?" Hermann replies cautiously.

"Oh whatever, dude, you *turned into me* for like five minutes four days ago, so you can just stop giving me your creeped-out face, because I clean things, Hermann, okay? I'm not *entirely* slovenly. I'm a *biologist*; the smell of ethanol reassures me, and it has since age twelve, okay?"

"Is there ethanol in Windex?" Hermann asks.

"No," Newt replies with zero defensiveness, after scanning the label. "It was a related example."

He puts the Windex on the edgeless bookcase.

He doesn't like the look of that *at all* and immediately pulls it off.

He looks at Hermann.

Hermann is depositing bags of resources (or whatever) on the table. Hermann is also doing this without looking because he is *watching* Newt like Newt is the human equivalent of the pitch-drop experiment and not a thing to be looked away from. Newt gets that though, *yeah he does*, because Newt knows a thing or two about not wanting to look away from things that are subtly threatening. It's part of the human condition.

He feels acutely guilty.

This is a new thing for him.

But there's a hole in his valence shell and he's already stolen someone else's electrons like the electronegative jackass he is.

"What are you *getting* out of this?" he asks Hermann abruptly, eyeing the bags that the other man is depositing on the table.

"Out of what?" Hermann asks.

Newt is pretty sure that despite the abrupt change of conversational topic Hermann knows exactly what he means, he's just applying some verbal drag to decelerate conversational whiplash.

"*This*," Newt says, sweeping the Windex bottle back and forth between his chest and Hermann's general direction a few times with some quiet sloshing.

"Right now? Other than a notably thorough window-cleaning?" Hermann says dryly, still eyeing him with what Newt is going to term 'suspicion' for reasons unknown. "Very little."

"Yes," Newt says. "That was, actually, kind of my point. Arguably, I assaulted your brain. You don't have to *buy me clothes*. Also, please stop buying me clothes."

"I assaulted my *own* brain," Hermann replies, dropping his eyes and pulling light bulbs, dish detergent, and other miscellaneous items out of shopping bags. "I also kidnapped you and legally misrepresented you to the Pan Pacific Defense Corps, so please keep that in mind."

"That is so *you*," Newt says, walking back to the kitchen, dropping into a crouch that requires some hand-mediated stabilization, and putting the Windex back into its dark cupboard with an inappropriately affectionate and slightly uncoordinated pat or eight of them in a row. "You know," he says, loudly because he is talking to Hermann and not to the Windex, "you don't win any interpersonal points for trying to sidestep your way out of the unequal power dynamic that's brewing here, with you having a job and me having trouble with *everything*." He hauls himself up with both hands on the edge of the sink and then freaks out slightly and steps back, one hand coming up in not-panic when he realizes that someone is standing about three feet away from him.

That someone is Hermann, obviously, because who else would it be?

Newt really hopes he did not see the whole thing where Newt was kind of *petting* the Windex a little bit, hardly at all really, but maybe just a little.

Newt could use an actual pet.

"Will you *stop*," Hermann says, looking as freaked out as Newt feels. "We *both* have jobs. We *both will* have jobs. You can have a job whenever you'd *like* to have one, essentially you already have it, as I've explained, you simply have to give a talk to the

Neuroscience Department at your convenience—what are you—” Hermann trails off, looking confused and slightly edgy.

“Can we get fish?” Newt asks, deciding to change the subject.

“For dinner?” Hermann replies, clearly confused.

“What? *No*. Who *are* you even? I don't *eat fish*.”

Newt is not helping the guy out, he can *feel* this; he's just not making the right mid-conversation course-corrections. He needs to try to do a better job.

“Newton,” Hermann says. “What's wrong?”

“Why do you assume something is *wrong*? Alternatively, what's *not* wrong?”

*Terrible, terrible job*, his brain says. *Really abysmal*, Geiszler.

The problem is that he can't answer Hermann.

Even if he *wanted* to, he wouldn't physically be able to do it. Not now. Not yet. He wouldn't be able to get three sentences in before neural circuits would fuse and discharge and thoughts would get ejected from his brain, gravitational-slingshot-style. He really shouldn't be pursuing this train of thought, it's enough to know that they still have some kind of baseline awareness—all those parts that he cut up over all those years—enough to know that they *loathe* him, enough to know that all over his planet, all along the Pacific Rim there are cut up chunks of dead and fixing tissue pouring an orgasmic wish for perpetual suffering into an alien representation of his name, waiting for him to come back, as confused as he is about whether they *want* him or not, whether they want to fold under his cognitive capacity, whether they want to slot him into the local control of a miserable freakshow of fragmented consciousness, or whether they just want to light up his sensory cortex in an ending blaze of total fatal agony for as long as possible until his intracranial pressure rises to a point incompatible with life.

*Watch it*, his brain says. *Watch it*.

“Please try to actually engage in *conversation*, Newton, rather than engaging in nonsensical rhetorical exercises.”

Hermann's freaking out a little bit and Newt is being rhetorical by reflex.

He needs to sleep.

He needs to *sleep* though.

He *needs* to sleep.



*You're decompensating a little bit, champ*, his brain says. *Right here, right now. You realize this, right?*

Yes.

Yes yes yes he *knows*. It's hard *not to*, though, it's hard not to decompensate; he's not really sure how he's supposed to *make* himself sleep, this might be how he dies, actually. Post-drift insomnia, unremitting, blowing through all his neurotransmitters over two weeks or so? How long can he go? How long will it be before he starts hallucinating? Starts actually *seeing* Carl Sagan or Caitlin Lightcap instead of just getting a calming auditory science glaze over an increasingly disordered mental landscape?

Not long.

Entropy doesn't apply to psychological states, does it?

*Try not to abuse the second law of thermodynamics*, his brain says.

He should have told Hypothetical Rain about this days ago. Sunday, when he knew it was going to be a problem. Or Tuesday, when it had unarguably manifested, problematically. Or Thursday, when he'd known he was pretty screwed. Now it's Friday.

Newt presses his fingertips against his temples.

There is, he thinks, an entirely achievable solution to his current problem of feeling creepily stalked by an impersonal bookcase, not to mention an entire cabal of wronged remnants of foreign monsters, and that *issleeping*. He hadn't felt this weird *before*, had he? He's not sure. That's one of the problems with subjectivity; by definition one can't objectively compare a current state to a previous one.

*Hey kids*, Newt says cautiously to cut-up tissue that may or may not be in his head. *Are you there?*

They don't say anything back to him, but that doesn't necessarily mean anything. Probably he should not call a collection of globally dispersed, mutilated brain fragments 'kids'. That's probably deeply insensitive. Deeply.

"Newton," Hermann hisses. "If you don't start talking to me *immediately* I will—"

"Oh my god, *chill*," Newt says, breaking in before Hermann can articulate whatever it is that he thinks needs articulating right now. Newt is pretty sure he'd find it offensive.

Hermann looks a little bit like he wants to strangle Newt and a little bit like he wants to scream, 'narrate your mental landscape for me, you *ridiculous* man', which is weirdly specific and Newt decides to go with that and see where it takes him.

"And no," he says, with the air of a man denying an unreasonable request. "I have no plans to narrate my mental landscape for you."

The effect this statement produces is *almost* worth it because of how *clearly totally eight million percent freaked-out* Hermann looks in response but kind of *not* worth it for *exactly* the same reason.

*You were right*, Caitlin Lightcap says, in obvious surprise. *He didn't articulate that thought you just picked up on. You were right. There is some kind of real-time connection.*

*I think that's a bit of an over-reach given the current state of your evidence*, Carl Sagan says. *If you think about it, Newt, you're really just a sleep deprived guy making good guesses about the inner monologue of a person with whom you've spent the better part of the last decade and with whom you've shared neural pathways.*

Hermann is staring at him intently, breathing quickly, looking kind of like an alarmed velociraptor.

Newt isn't sure what that means.

He can feel a building pressure in his head.

Is it an exogenous pressure? From Hermann—who looks like he's trying to communicate or analyze something unknown? From the hivemind—transmitted by some kind of magical hand-wavingly quantum phenomenon where electron spin states swap in parallel leaves of adjacent D-branes? From the cut-up kids here on the planet—transmitted by electromagnetic waves that his brain is now primed for? Is it endogenous pressure? From his neural circuits that are derived from Hermann—trying to co-opt him into a pathway a little more Anglophile? From his neural pathways that are derived from the hivemind—trying to maneuver him into something he doesn't understand? From fragmented tissue—trying to force him into dying an agonizing death or maybe being their overlord? Is it something physical? Is he about to have a seizure? An episode of epistaxis? A migraine? A hemorrhagic stroke? A panic attack? He can't tell. He doesn't *know*.

Subjectivity is the worst.

*Why do you zink zat I invented zee coordinate plane?* René Descartes asks him in a questionable yet sympathetic French accent.

"We can read each other's minds," Newt snaps at Hermann. "Discuss."

"No," Hermann says, sounding uncertain and speaking *very slowly* like he's fighting through whole swaths of problems Newt can't see but can only vaguely sense or sympathetically intuit. "I don't think that's what's happening. I think you may be able to predict my responses to certain situations with extreme accuracy, and vice versa, but —"

"So you agree with Sagan," Newt says, feeling persecuted, feeling inappropriately betrayed, going a little high-pitched, backing up a half step. "How *typical*."

Hermann narrows his eyes, watching him intently.

Newt abruptly decides he wants out of the kitchen, but he backs up another half step instead.

Hermann steps forward.

Newt takes a full step back and hits the counter. He steadies himself with one hand.

Hermann is just *watching him*.

Newt backs up another half step, along the counter feeling, bizarrely, *hunted* by a math nerd with a cane.

Hermann steps forward.

The kitchen's getting dark and he doesn't like this, he doesn't like this *at all*, he feels like he's being *stalked*, and yes, this could totally be his sleep deprived brain, it one hundred percent *could* be, but it doesn't feel exactly like that, not quite.

*Look at his stance*, Lightcap whispers in the dark kitchen, quiet even in his own head.

Newt looks.

Hermann isn't leaning against the door anymore, his weight is centered, his feet positioned like he might, at any moment, decide to drive forward.

*That is concerning*, Sagan says slowly, throwing in with Lightcap this time.

*Think about this rationally*, Descartes says. *Do you truly believe he might attack you?*

Yes, Lightcap says.

*I wouldn't rule it out*, Sagan says.

No? Newt says.

Yesss, the kids hiss.

No, his mental version of Hermann says, sounding affronted.

*Unfortunately zat was a fairly equivocal poll*, Descartes informs him.

"Are you *hunting* me?" Newt snaps, because *that's* a thing that's pretty normal to ask one's life-partner. Yup.

Hermann doesn't answer.

*So that's gonna be a yes, I think*, his brain says.

Newt has watched some *birds* out the window and felt pretty aggressively disposed toward them, but he never tried to spring off the balcony and destroy them.

But.

He's pretty sure he's better at keeping his confused parts mixed in and mixed down than Hermann is, if the other guy's brief but intense Geiszlerian impulses are anything to go by.

*Do something immediately*, everyone in his head advises him.

Newt steps forward and yells, "*HEY*," at maximum volume directly in Hermann's face.

That seems to work because Hermann grabs his chest and steps back in what looks like total shock.

They stare at one another breathing hard.

"What is *wrong with you*?" Hermann breathes.

"Um, *nothing*," Newt says, hoping it's true. "What's wrong with *you*?"

They look at each other for another long interval until Hermann drops his eyes, his shoulders tense, his expression distressed, and yes, Newt feels acutely bad for him but his compassion is a little limited at the present moment for obvious reasons. "You were *hunting* me, don't even lie, *I can tell*."

"You're insane," Hermann hisses, and turns on his heel, leaving Newt in the dark kitchen.

*That seems a little harsh*, Caitlin Lightcap says comfortingly, *primarily because it might be true*.

"Thanks," Newt whispers in absent sarcasm, then follows Hermann back to the living room, lit by the setting of the sun over Oblivion Bay.

Hermann is looking out the window over the dark water, breathing a little bit too quickly and too obviously.

"Dude, it's fine," Newt says, coming to stand next to him. "It's *fine*. You think I haven't done the velociraptor thing like eight times already? I have. There are a lot of seagulls around here, let me tell you, and pretty much every time they show I get this urge to *chase them down*, using wings I *don't have* by the way, which is weird, everyone agrees. I freaked out a little bit and backed up, so there you go. That triggered a thing, a thing that we do now. Predation instincts. We have them anyway. Humans are predators, you know. You can tell because our eyes are pointed in the same direction for depth perception rather than oriented laterally for maximum field of view. We're a little bit unimpressive as predators, though? Except for our brains. Our brains are vicious bastards, pretty much universally."

"You're babbling," Hermann says shortly, not looking at him.

"Um, excuse me, I'm pretty sure I'm *reassuring you*."

"You are the *least* reassuring person I have ever met in my *life*," Hermann snaps.

"You're disorganized, sleep-deprived, habitually deceitful—"

"Um, again, excuse me, but *what*?"

"—and much, *much* too intelligent for me to take anything you say at face value when trying to assess your mental state."

"Rewind," Newt snarls. "Deceitful?"

"They had you for *three days* and you said *nothing* about what was really happening, you *still* haven't told me—how am I supposed to *interpret*—"

"Because I wanted you *out of it*," Newt snarls, feeling predatory himself right about now, "because you were *neversupposed* to be involved, because it wasn't your *fault*, because you had the chance to weigh in on the human/kaiju drift motion and you *voted no*. You want to know what the my problem is, Hermann? Well that's news to me, because you *haven't asked*. If you want to know I'll tell you. I *cut them up*. You *watched me do it*, and, as you*know*, even though they were *dead* in the practical sense of the word, there was and *is* something going on there, behind all that protein-protein chemical cross-linking effected by formaldehyde, a whole disorganized *mess* of tortured alien psychosis that's just *watching my brain*, okay, I'm *positive* they're *watching me*, dude, I can feel it, I can feel *you*, I *know* you can read my thoughts, *I know you can*, okay? It's *obvious*. It's glaringly apparent, I just don't understand why you would *lie* to me about that, unless you just really *don't get it*, you're just too wrapped up in what you think *should* be happening to see what *is* happening, and I—"

He stops shouting, running out of air and not acquiring any more, for whatever reason. He tries to breathe, he cannot breathe, he breathes or stops existing—we *should have loaded him ahead of time*; Dr. Geiszler can you hear me, Dr. Geiszler can you talk.

No no no no no, Newt says to his brain. He looks fixedly at dark water. *Not now. This is not helpful to me.*

"Yes," Hermann says, grabbing his shoulders, pulling him physically around so he can't see out the window and shaking him once, his face pale in the half-light, his eyes wide and weird and *wired* or maybe that's *Newt*, he's not sure, he's not sure *who he is* or *what he is* or *where he is*, his brain is waiting for something, he's not sure what, but Puritans crushed witches beneath rocks and that seems relevant to him at present.

"You may be right, Newton. In fact—I'm certain you are."

This reassures him. He's usually right. But about what?

"I am, in fact, positive that your critique of my *modus operandi* is entirely accurate." Hermann looks at him, breathing hard. "You are extremely insightful."

"Yes," Newt says, because it's true.

"Do you agree," Hermann asks, slowly and sort of *desperately*, "that I have *no reason* to lie to you about my ability or lack thereof to read your thoughts?"

"Yes," Newt says, "yes, I agree, it just—it just *feels* that way, it just really *feels* like you can. And they can. And other things. Why does the bookcase have *no sides*?"

"Have you considered," Hermann says, "that part of what you are currently experiencing may be due to extreme sleep deprivation?"

"You know about that?" Newt asks, his voice cracking.

"Yes," Hermann says, sounding strained. "I know about that."

"So, yes, I've considered that, I—I *have*; I considered it earlier, I just—I really don't think it is, Hermann," he says, wanting to pull out of this dual-shouldered grip that Hermann has on his jacket-shirt hybrid, but not doing it. Not doing it. "I think subjective experience has validity, meaning that it can be validated, it *could*; you could read my thoughts and validate it, I'm sure you could, you're just not *trying*."

"I promise you," Hermann says, entirely seriously, like he's trying to talk Newt down from a nonexistent ledge, "that I will try. That I will make a genuine effort to seriously consider your position on this."

"Okay," Newt replies, slightly breathless.

"I think you should lie down," Hermann says.

"I can't sleep," Newt admits, way too late.

"I know that, I think you should lie down *anyway*,"

Newt doesn't like this oh-so-careful wavelength that Hermann is vibrating at.

He doesn't like it at all.

*He thinks you're crazy*, Dr. Lightcap says, in sympathetic revelation.

He's going to have to explain some things so that this doesn't get out of hand.

"Look," Newt says. "Hermann. Do you think I don't know what I sound like? I do, okay, I *do*. I am *rational* though, man, I'm completely rational, Descartes-style. I even *know* that claiming my own rationality *looks bad*, but I'm doing it anyway, because, hello, I believe in accuracy. The only problem that I'm having right now is that I'm currently sleep deprived and that cognitive science hasn't and isn't posed or posing a lot of testable hypotheses about the drift or the hivemind, or a combination of the two. Yes. That's two problems, I know. I have two. I'm amending to two. One is a little more pressing than the other at the present moment. I just—okay, just hear me out about this, how do you think *they* did it, right? How do you think that the *kaiju* communicated telepathically; how do you think that *worked*? Have you thought about it all because I've been thinking about it a *lot*, Hermann, *alot*, especially over the past few days, really, it's not fair to have all this extra information and no *samples* because I could actually *test* some of these things, I could actually get some answers that aren't just pure speculation and therefore empirical *garbage*."

Hermann's face says, *test them how? On yourself?* Yup. His *face* says that pretty clearly, not his *brain*, probably.

Newt doesn't have to be clairvoyant to pick that much up.

When Hermann speaks though, he says, "I'm certain they used some aspect of their own biochemistry to receive and transmit electromagnetic signals which they then transduced into appropriate informational content, providing them with, what was, in effect, telepathic communication in something approximating real time, presuming traversing the breach didn't result in any temporal distortion." He waves a hand like the stuff coming out of his mouth is the most obvious stuff in the world, like he's for sure *right about it*, when, really, he's not necessarily right about it, he's not necessarily right about *any* of it, but granting for now that he *is*—

"Yes." Newt shouts at him for no real reason other than too much agitation and no ability to siphon it off or sublimate it into something socially acceptable in the confines of some too-perfect apartment where the bookshelves without borders are *watching him*. "Yes *exactly*. What makes you think that they couldn't have done that to *us*. To *me*, if not to you? What makes you think they—they couldn't jury rig a transduction system in *our* brains? Are we different? Biologically? Yes. You *bet* we are, but not so different that we *couldn't interface*, Hermann, why do our EEGs look so *abnormal*? You understand what they *are*, right? EEGs? Do you *think about them*? Do you *wonder why our brainwaves have changed*? God I refuse to say the word 'brainwave' ever again in my life I hate it so much I hate it so *much*, Hermann. Strike it out of science and leave it to the Marvel Universe, but you know what I mean. We can rename brainwaves: 'voltage fluctuations resulting from ionic disequilibriums purposefully propagated'—VFRFIDPP, not catchy I know, not my best work, but you see what I mean, don't you? Right? *They're different*. That could *mean anything*, and I just *feel* like they're *in there*, by which, yes, I mean *in my head*."

"Newton," Hermann shouts, breaking in, "do you understand that you are *panicking*?"

"Who's *panicking*?" Newt screams in his face in total, blind, rhetorical *outrage*.

*I think that's you*, his brain says.

His brain isn't getting its own sarcasm, that's weird. Newt gets it though so that's totally okay.

Hermann shoves him backwards against the glass of the floor-ceiling window.

"*Stop*," Hermann shouts, clearly totally freaking out or totally outraged himself, Newt doesn't know, Newt can't tell, Newt isn't sure who he is or *what* he is, he thinks he's *destroyed cities*, he thinks he could destroy *more*, he thinks he's torturing the human who cut him up and locked him down in a chemical cross-link that killed only his outer shell of tissue and transformed it into a dead husk through which he can still think, can still feel his networked, dismembered, suffering parts, but—

"Stop," someone is whispering, "stop, stop, *stop*. Please stop."

Newt shuts his eyes and presses his hands flat against the glass to make sure that they are hands and that his fingers end in nails.

He tries to stop *everything*.

*Yes, because that's easy for you*, his brain says. *You are ruining Dr. Gottlieb's life, you realize. The dude called it. He called it. Not even ten minutes after you'd met he called it.*



*Called it, called it, freaking called it. Tagged it, labeled it, put it in a drawer for you to pull out a decade later and stamp with the word 'validated'.*

"You are *fine*," Hermann says. "I'm *certain* you are. I'm certain you *will be*."

Newt nods.

"I'm *certain* they're in your head," Hermann whispers. "I'm certain they are. Because they're in mine as well."

Newt stares at him.

"But the *way* they're in here," Hermann continues, unclenching his right hand from Newt's shirt to tap a single finger against his own temple, "is the same way *you're* in here. Reactive, intrusive, as real as my *own* sense of self, but static, Newton. *Static*. Without agency. Without real-time intent."

"You can't *know* that," Newt replies, nearly soundless.

"The breach is not shut," Hermann says, shaking him once, gently. "It's *annihilated*."

"I know it is," Newt whispers back. "I can *feel* the place where it should be."

Hermann looks at him.

"Can *you*?" Newt asks.

"No," Hermann says.

"And there are—pieces of them here."

"What do you mean *pieces*?" Hermann asks.

"They don't die in fixative, Hermann, there are pieces of their brains still alive. *Here*. On Earth. Of those that remain—I was—it was either *me* or *my team* who dissected them out, sectioned them, preserved them. They could, they exist, on this side of the breach, I mean. They could— They—they're parts of a whole, they're subordinate, self-organizing structures and they are *pissed*, Hermann, pissed at *me specifically*, and—"

Something about Hermann's gaze seems to sharpen and Newt breaks off under the infrared-laser intensity of it.

He's not sure what it is that Hermann's realized. Whatever it is, the guy is totally enraged about it.

"What?" Newt says, in open apprehension.

Hermann takes a deep breath, making a clear effort to calm down, and Newt does *not understand what is happening here*, everything feels unfamiliar, his thoughts, this place,

the wall, his clothes, and Hermann who looks entirely overwrought but isn't *saying anything*.

"Nothing," Hermann manages, through clenched teeth. "It's all right."

"Is it?" Newt says edgily, thinking about pulling away but not doing it out of some kind of instinct that feels extremely primitive, and like something that *prey* would default to.

"Don't hunt me."

"No," Hermann says, backing off marginally. "I apologize," he says. "I'm not *hunting* you. I have never and *will* never be *hunting* you. Something occurred to me and I found it—upsetting."

"I hear that," Newt replies.

"I know you do," Hermann says, all traces of momentary and totally inexplicable rage gone, replaced by exhaustion. "They are only *nominally* alive," the other man whispers. "They have no agency, they've been chemically paralyzed. I'm sure they influenced your mind, via the drift, but I doubt their capacity to do so now, in the absence of a physical interface."

"But," Newt says, "I know they could communicate with *each other*. They were—ah. They were *networked*. They *are* networked? I'm not sure, there are at least some times when they were networked to each other. The pieces. The parts of them. The parts that I—"

*What are you doing?* his brain snarls. *Please don't talk about this, I can only do so much if you're not going to sleep. Neurotransmitters are being rationed; do you think that doesn't have consequences for you?*

"Newton," Hermann says. "*Newton*."

"Yeah," Newt says. "No. I'm okay. I am. I totally am."

"We cannot resolve all of this tonight."

"I know," Newt says. "I know, of *course* I know."

"It is possible to keep yourself separate from the synaptic pathways that aren't your own," Hermann says. "You know that because you've been doing it for roughly a week. You are, in fact, quite good at it. You helped *me* do it when I was giving my talk. Against all odds, apparently, you haven't killed yourself trying to hunt down passing seagulls."

"True," Newt says.

"But I think it will be easier for you if—"

"I can't sleep," Newt says, his voice cracking, heading Hermann off at the lexical pass. "I *can't*."

"I'm aware of that," Hermann says, one hand held up. "But you are three weeks behind when it comes to the neuroscience literature, two weeks behind in exobiology, six months behind on tissue engineering, and something like five years behind on bioethics. So. I suggest that if you can't sleep you try to do something productive, rather than torture yourself regarding hypotheses that you have no earthly way to *test*. At some point in the near future you are going to need to give a *job talk*, and I would imagine that it will be prospective in scope rather than retrospective, for obvious reasons, so you should really be familiarizing yourself with the current state of the literature."

This is an excellent point.

"True," Newt says. "True."

"So sit," Hermann says. "*Read*."

"Well you're kind of pinning me to a window," Newt points out, finding it challenging to talk with his hands in the minimal space between them. "A little bit."

"So I am," Hermann says. "Apologies." He lets Newt's shirt go and straightens the seams before stepping back.

Newt does his own seam adjusting, more out of principle than necessity, then says, "I've been reading Descartes for days, you know."

"I'm not sure if Descartes is alleviating or adding to your current problems," Hermann says, tucking his chin and shooting Newt a disapproving look from beneath lowered brows.

"Descartes is a baller," Newt says, affronted, "and not to be defined in relation to *me*."

*How flattering*, his brain says, impersonating Descartes.

"I define *everyone* in relation to you," Hermann says, with a long suffering eye-roll before making his way back to the table to finish unpacking whatever he purchased on shopping trip number eight thousand.

Newt follows him and decides to make himself somewhat useful so he doesn't slide down the window and lie on the floor waiting for a cognitive untangling that will never come, like a loser.

"I wish I knew what had happened to my *plants*," Newt says, nearly dropping the antibacterial hand soap that Hermann hands him.

*I wish I knew what had happened to your fine motor control*, his brain says.

*Well don't we all?* Newt replies.

"I'm sure Mr. Choi has appropriated them."

"I also kind of wish I hadn't left my guitar in the custody of the PPDC."

"I wish we hadn't left *literally everything we owned* in their custody," Hermann says, with a mixture of wistfulness and sarcasm that Newt, if he'd been asked prior to witnessing it, would have tagged as 'impossible to verbally combine'.

"I was serious about the sweaters," Newt says, feeling edgy and exhausted and not very organized as he finds a pack of disposable chopsticks in the bottom of a bag. He eyes them in perplexity. "Stop buying me clothes. I will buy *myself* clothes. Later."

He's a little concerned that if he leaves the apartment on his own he'll end up atop the Wall of Life but that's a thought he's not going to examine right now.

*How curious*, Descartes says, probably about the chopsticks. Probably.

*Neat*, Sagan says, probably *also* referring to the chopsticks. *I like your sweaters, by the way*.

*Did he buy those for you?* Caitlin Lightcap asks, again, probably about the chopsticks, maybe about the sweaters. People aren't really specifying. Shouldn't he *know* what they mean, if they're his brain?

*Maybe*, Newt thinks, not sure whom or what he's responding to.

"How long has it been since you slept?" Hermann asks.

"Four days," Newt says absently.

"Ah," Hermann says. "How flagrantly yet classically irresponsible. Why are you staring at chopsticks?"

"They seem really interesting to me right now," Newt says, looking up. "A little bit. Did you buy these for me?"

"No," Hermann says. "I bought them because we are *civilized*, not because you don't care for western utensils, I cannot abide eating with my fingers, and the only reasonable course of action is for us both to use chopsticks for everything for the next few weeks, or, possibly, the rest of our lives."

"For a guy with a below-average number of doctorates," Newt says, "you're not just a pretty face. I will give you that one, Dr. Gottlieb."

Newt opens the chopsticks and pulls a pair out. He breaks them apart.

"And to what *average* would you be referring?" Hermann says dryly.

"The average number of doctorates in this apartment is three point five," Newt says, dropping a chopstick. "You have *one*, ergo—educationally, you are below average." Newt opens a hand and then crouches to retrieve his lost chopstick.

"Stop using abusing statistics," Hermann says, hauling Newt up with one hand under his arm.

"Stop taunting me with cool utensils I lack the manual dexterity to use," Newt says.

Hermann looks at him for a moment. "Do you really?" he asks quietly.

"Yes," Newt says, mounting a new attempt to discipline his chopsticks. "I am a little bit serious about that. I'm pretty sure things are trending in the right direction though. I lost my resting tremor." He begins what is likely to be a fruitless effort to unzip the collar of the partially zippable fleece pullover he is currently wearing using chopsticks. "If things *weren't* regressing to the mean I might be upset about my future prospects as a biologist who needs fine motor control. I'm really not sure about this whole dopamine issue and where it's going. I think I might be having periodic setbacks, or maybe my signal threshold for progress versus regress is set too low. Whatever, Hypothetical Rain thinks it's conceptually cool, so—"

"Hypothetical Ra—" Hermann breaks off with a disgusted sound and restarts. "Dr. McClure does not think it's 'cool'. She, in fact, said, and I quote, 'dude, that sucks if you're right,' and then you said, 'girl, I'm always right,' and—"

"Then you said 'no he's not,' and then we got in an argument and she asked us if we were married and keeping it on the down-low and we reacted in stereo horror and now there will never be a time she is not confused about us."

Hermann sighs.

"Anyway, I'd rather have a neurotransmitter imbalance than brain damage," Newt says, still trying to unzip his outerwear with chopsticks.

Hermann pushes him back a step, into a chair, and unzips his zipper for him, says, "that's a false dichotomy," pulls his tablet off the kitchen counter, and pointedly slides it across the table.

"You know," Newt says, immediately setting to work on re-zipping his shirt with his chopsticks. "There's a reason you get invited to fewer parties than I do. You rate a ten out of ten on the Annoyingly Imperious Scale, which is a near impossibility, so congrats there, man."

"I am in no mood to drive you to the emergency room after you either trip over something and concuss yourself or work yourself up to the point that your brain cannot concomitantly support distress and consciousness, at which point you will faint and *then*, likely, concuss yourself."

"There is a zero percent chance I end this evening concussed," Newt says. "None of these things you're ostensibly so concerned about has *ever happened*. Not even one time."

"In January of 2018 you fainted in the middle of a briefing."

"Only because I had occult pneumonia," Newt says, not at all defensively. He drops a chopstick.

"It was 'occult' to no one in the shatterdome except *you*," Hermann replies.

"That was *seven years* ago," Newt says. "*Three* years ago you worked yourself into a state of stereotypical nervous exhaustion. I didn't even feel sorry for you. Because you were and are ridiculous and you didn't and don't deserve it." He punctuates this statement with an understated jab of his single remaining chopstick in Hermann's general direction. "It's not like you had certain time windows in which to extract kaiju RNA. The math was *always there*, you feel me? Like, you can have breakfast. You can take naps. You could at the time and you can now. Both."

"I have no plans to dignify your comment with a rebuttal," Hermann says pouring something into a bowl.

"Well, yeah," Newt says, retrieving his second chopstick from the floor. "You don't really have to, though, do you, since a nuanced reproduction of your mathematical motivations is taking up space in my brain that I previously used for magnificent chopstick control, possibly. That's an oversimplification, please take it as such and don't give me a hard time about it, I'm too tired for self-analysis to end well. If you'd asked me ten seconds before we drifted, I would have said that our decade of incessant arguing was about to end. Primarily because of risk of death, but also because, well, you know. Drifting? I always pictured it more of a mental homogenizer than what it *actually* is. But no. In the medium term I don't feel homogenized. I feel vaguely confused most of the time and extremely confused a small percentage of the time. But that wasn't my point. My point was that we now have whole new swaths of things to argue about, because now you criticize my decisions about whether to sit or stand, interfere with occupational therapy I assign myself, and, finally, buy me clothes, which will be an endless source of conflict."

Hermann walks over to the table, leaning a little more heavily on his cane than usual, slides a bowl of wasabi peas towards Newt, and then drops into the opposite chair.

Newt tries to pick up a pea with his chopsticks.

He fails four times in a row.

Hermann doesn't say anything.

"Can you *not* watch me fail at civilization?" Newt asks.

Hermann looks at the wall.

They are quiet, but it's an anticipatory rather than comfortable silence.

Newt gives 'Toward Regaining Skills With Chopsticks, Second Variant, Attempt #5' his total concentration.

Until Hermann whispers, "I was not *hunting* you."

Newt drops both chopsticks.

"Also," Hermann says, "you're not right handed."

Newt tries not to feel the total despair of this moment, but it's pretty hard.

The chorus in his head keeps their collective mouths shut.

"I know that," he says, reclaiming his chopsticks with his *actual* dominant hand, his voice strained. "And if," he says, his voice cracking, "*if* you were, *maybe*, hunting me a little bit, it's fine. It's not anything other than weird. Because I could take you. Pretty easily, by the way. I win ten out of ten times in a you-versus-me fight. Everyone agrees."

*Definitely*, his brain says, because they are on the same team.

"I wish I believed that," Hermann whispers. "Unfortunately, I do not."

"Wait—you think you could take me?" Newt asks, incredulous.

"Yes," Hermann hisses. "Is there a reason you're fixating on the *least relevant aspect* of our current set of problems?"

"Well," Newt says, "yes. No. Not really. I am *tired*, Hermann, okay? Just—don't freak out about this because it's just a thing. It's like how I almost threw up this morning when I tried to decide whether I wanted to wear a sweater or not. It's like how that one time you decided to be me a little bit under duress. It's like that time two seconds ago that I forgot I wasn't right-handed. You haven't been practicing not eating seagulls for four days. It's fine, it's just a weird thing. A little snap into a lateral circuit, I have literally

zero concern that you're going to like—what? What would you even do? Attack me? I just don't see it getting out of hand, I really don't. I mean, I've watched birds intermittently for days without forgetting that I don't really like the taste of questionably radioactive seagull, so. Yeah. There's that."

"You're better at this than I am," Hermann says.

"What?" Newt says, the word barely intelligible beneath the laughter that is suddenly half-choking him and threatening to take a left turn into straight-up hysteria. "Are you *nuts*?" he asks, managing to marginally pull himself together, wiping streaming eyes by shoving his fingers beneath his glasses. "Do you—"

"Try," Hermann says, snapping the word in half and holding up a hand. "to control yourself," he finishes, "*and listen* to me."

"Yeah," Newt says, sounding like someone is strangling him, and feeling like that a little bit too. His diaphragm is going on strike.

"Tempting though it is to equate our experiences," Hermann says, "our exposures to the anteverse were different in quantity and quality and the evolution of after effects experienced by each of us has differed in character. Ostensibly you're more severely affected, but Newton, you've never *forgotten* who you *are*. I spent five minutes as *you* until *you* talked me out of it. *You're* the better integrator out of the pair of us. You *must* be, because even in the midst of complete panic about foreign influences you manage to preserve your *sense of self*." He finishes, breathing hard.

Newt props an elbow on the table, and presses his hand against his forehead. "Hermann," he says, "I literally do not even *know* if you're *correct*. Do I? Do I *always* manage to keep track of whom I actually am? I have periods of time where I'm—very confused about thermodynamics and also sort of where I am and what I'm doing. Does it mean I'm coping better than you are if I spend three minutes decoupling cause from effect?"

"I have no idea," Hermann says quietly.

"Yeah," Newt replies. "No kidding."

Hermann stares at a lateral wall.

Newt goes back to trying to eat wasabi peas with terrible chopstick technique.

*You done good, kid*, Caitlin Lightcap says in his head, doing her best impersonation of an overly macho military type.

*Not really*, his brain replies.



*Well zere is always room for improvement*, Descartes says.

*Can you just be normal?* Newt asks his brain.

*Not just right now*, his brain replies. *Maybe if you'd help. At all. Ever. Rather than just screwing around.*

Newt's brain has a point. It really does. But there's not much he can do to address its complaints. He can, however, maybe reassure his life-partner a little bit.

"Are you freaking out about turning evil?" Newt asks Hermann after he drops his third wasabi pea on the floor. "Because I identify with that hard core."

"You're not going to *turn evil*," Hermann says dismissively.

"You totally sidestepped my question and went straight to reassuring me, which makes me think that the answer is 'yes Newt, I am extremely worried that we are about to become supervillains any day now, we literally live next to a radioactive body of water, soon we will make this apartment complex our castle, or alternatively, our ultra-modern high-tech 'lair'. We're prime supervillain material, you and me, you realize this, right? If we're lucky, we'll get a turning-evil montage in which some of our previously good traits are on display before it gets all weird as we're hunting seagulls and doing celebratory hugging over nebulous and ubiquitous test tubes full of cinematic dry ice before it ends with us in white lab coats and black gloves giving the world the narrowed eyes of ethically ambiguous B-movie scientists. Also, our hair is going to have to collectively step up to mad-scientist levels."

"Yours is already there," Hermann says dryly.

"Well, I'm on vacation," Newt says, vaguely trying to smooth his hair down with chopsticks, which works about as well as one might expect.

Hermann smiles faintly at him and then gives him a disapproving scowl as Newt moves his chopsticks from his hair back to the bowl of wasabi peas.

"We should try to chip away at our archetype. Should we get a dog, possibly?" Newt asks. "Because I literally cannot see evil super geniuses having a dog. That's probably correlative rather than causative though. Still."

"What archetype is it, exactly, that you think you are?" Hermann asks, looking vaguely amused.

"Victor Frankenstein. Obviously." He *finally* succeeds in eating a wasabi pea. "Who are *you*?"

"Frankenstein? Congratulations," Hermann says dryly.

"Can you not be a dick?" Newt asks.

"Eat with your *fingers*," Hermann says retrieving an errant pea and tossing it back into the bowl with enviable accuracy.

"Last time I tried that it didn't go well for me, thanks to someone's strong preferences for *not* doing that. You've ruined half of my hedonistic side you realize."

"You are hardly *Victor Frankenstein*," Hermann says. "That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard."

"Oh yeah, well what do *you* think my archetype is then?"

"*Puer aeternus*," Hermann says, "or, to borrow something from *your* knowledge base, you are most certainly a 'manic pixie dream boy'."

"*What?*" Newt says. "No. No. I mean—*what?*"

Hermann shrugs and opens a hand. "Your idea of revenge is to fill a box of what is supposed to *chalk* with *glitter*, so quod erat demonstrandum."

"I did that *one time*. And *you're*—" Newt tries to think of a *really insulting* subordinate archetype of reversed heteronormativity that Hermann might slightly fit, but he's got nothing, "*—boring*," he finishes. "You can't reduce my entire personality to the glitter thing."

"You had a band called *The Superconducting Supercolliders*," Hermann says dryly.

"I *still* have that band," Newt says, "kind of. I fail to see—"

"You constantly tell me to 'chill'," Hermann says.

"Because you need to, and also, occasionally out of *spite*."

"You spent five years with green streaks in your hair, until Hercules Hansen told you to desist, setting off a pointless five-year feud that Marshal Pentecost and I watched in total bemusement."

"Green hair accents do *not* equate to a vapid, epicurean world-view, Hermann, *god*. I don't see you calling *Mako* a manic pixie dream *girl*."

"Ms. Mori is extremely serious-minded with an unassailable professionalism. She also, which I'm sure you *failed to note* at the time or subsequently, began dyeing her hair at the point you were forced to desist."

"Really?" Newt asks, his brain dropping all running trains of thought to try to work backward through his confused memory to Mako's first hair dying experiment. It had been subtle, it had *always* been subtle, because Mako was the subtle type, the

thoughtful type, and Newt remembers saying "solid," as he passed her in the hall right after she'd done it, reaching out to brush a tip of blue hair without stopping. He also sees himself from Hermann's perspective, with some par-for-the-course(-of-his-life) acting sans thinking, because one does not reach out and flick the blue hair of a fifteen-year old girl who's walking down a hallway with the man who signs the requisition requests for the entire K-Science Division who also happens to be *her father* and say, 'solid' in response to a dye-job that is certainly inspired, at least in part, by a desire to flout misapplied militaristic adherence to protocol in areas that do *not* require such things. Like the hair color of Dr. Geiszler.

"Oh my *god*," Newt says, pressing a hand to his face. "You reflect *so much, all the time, about everything*. I wish I could go back and watch your life like a movie. Also? I'm not sure you're right about any of this. Also? I had no idea that you were on *my* side about that green hair thing. Also? I had no idea that Mako was on my side about that either. What good are you guys to me if you just *secretly* sympathize?"

"Ms. Mori's sympathies were not so secret," Hermann replies, "and I believe her motivation for her hair dyeing should not be reduced to a show of solidarity with *you*."

"Well duh," Newt says. "*You're* the one who brought it up and framed it that way, mainly because you thought about me *way* more than I thought you thought about me, back in the day. Also, you liked my green hair a little bit. Don't lie."

"I did not like your green hair. I also did not approve of you being an unintended target of displaced frustration regarding funding decisions to the Jaeger program, which is, in part, why I spent the last five years trying to get you to behave in a *somewhat* respectful manner."

"Sure," Newt says. "I would streak my hair green for you. I would do that. Again. But you're going to have to ask me. *Nicely*."

"Don't hold your breath," Hermann replies dryly.

"Dear Mako," Newt says, dictating a letter to the air, and waving his chopsticks in a way vaguely reminiscent of writing, "Hermann seems to think I was a strong influence on you during your teens. If so, I am *so sorry*, dude. Can we talk about the hair thing? I'm sorry I didn't ask you about it when it happened. Also, have you gotten awesome at the bass yet? Because *The Supercos* need a new bassist. Our first one is dead. What's new with you? I can't use hashi anymore, that's about it from my side. Love, Newt."

"Do not even *think* of sending such a letter. If you do, please refer to me as Dr. Gottlieb. Ms. Mori and I are not on a first name basis."

"Only because you've called her 'Ms. Mori' for *forever*. You could literally start calling her Mako at any time," Newt says, managing to transfer another wasabi pea from bowl to mouth, like a boss. While eating his hard-won wasabi pea, he tries to decide what Hermann is likely thinking about right now. He's getting nothing though, probably because his brain is struggling. It's been struggling for about twenty-four hours. "I hate bookcases without sides," Newt confesses. "They freak me out a little bit."

Hermann shoots him a totally neutral look, which is Newt's least favorite kind of Hermann look to be on the receiving end of because he's never been able to figure out what it means. He's pretty sure it conceals *really* high-level mental analysis, because the other place it shows up tends to be briefings and science talks. He's not sure he likes it being directed his way.

"Do they," Hermann says, still totally neutral, like maybe he *also* gets freaked out about bookshelves or maybe like his head is currently hosting the Science Olympiad International Tournament.

"Yeah, I'm ascribing sentience to things that shouldn't be sentient," Newt says, getting flustered and accidentally just laying a set of cards on the table that he'd never intended to lay down at all.

*He's managing you, his brain says. He's assessing you. He's been doing it this entire time.*

"Are you *managing* me?" Newt snaps.

"Yes," Hermann says. "I have managed you with mixed success since the day I met you. This is not a new thing. You are currently in the unenviable position of having increased insight in combination with disorganized patterns of thought. You are outrageously distractible, extremely anxious, unfairly insightful, and behaving in typical moronic fashion. I think your working memory is in *shreds*; I think that immense mental stress is concealing debilitating exhaustion; I think that if you can't manage to sleep in the near term, things are going to turn absolutely *hellish* for the pair of us."

"When I lose touch with reality due to sleep deprivation," Newt appends, feeling trapped by his clothes, and maybe, by his skin.

"Not to put too fine a point on it," Hermann says, "yes. Because I am *already* having problems and I have required your assistance multiple times this past week to remind me of who it is that I actually *am*. So you *cannot* let your own mind torture you to death, Newton, I absolutely forbid it."

"I feel like you're being a little melodramatic about this," Newt says, "but myeahh, I don't really want to die of insomnia either."

"So," Hermann says, tapping the tablet in front of Newt. "Read."

Newt looks at the tablet and then shuts his overly abused eyes, cognizant of exactly *how little* he actually wants *todo* the thing he's about to suggest. The problem is, though, that Hermann has been harassing him into a semblance of a normal schedule for days now, and it just doesn't feel right to make the guy work any harder to do it than he already has.

"You read," Newt says, sliding the tablet back toward Hermann. "I'll make dinner."

It's the best solution, because his brain is a little too apt to fly off the handle at every fourth interesting word and just *stop reading*, plus his eyestrain has been maxed out for days now.

So, during the preparation of uninspired pasta, Hermann gets through the ephemera at the front of *Neuron*, which he chooses to read, probably because of its sober badassery. They eat while Hermann complains about functional-MRI as a technique using Newt's own borrowed skepticism while Newt defends it in a half-hearted way out of some kind of instinct for conflict that Hermann calls him on and Newt entirely denies, mainly to keep things interesting. It takes the span of two back-to-back papers on neural plasticity for Newt to clean the kitchen, which is far, far too long, but he's tired; he's not the most coordinated; and he's also pretty sure that the reading's going to stop when the kitchen cleaning does.

But Hermann doesn't stop.

In a display of total improbability, he points at the couch, hands Newt the sunglasses that he always seems to be pulling out of a pocket, and says *nothing*.

This makes it hard for Newt to reflexively argue.

He *could* do it. Newt has a talent for manufacturing needless confrontation and a little bit of a habit of whipping it out when it would be a better idea not to. But he's trying not to make terrible decisions, so he shrugs, swaps out his glasses for Hermann's shades, and tries to look suave while lying down on the couch in capitulation to his longstanding intellectual nemesis slash devoted life-partner.

They don't have much furniture, so Hermann sits on the floor, leaning back against the couch, one leg stretched in front of him, the other folded into a cross-legged position he can't quite bilaterally manage.

"On a scale of a cross-disciplinary journal club to patch clamping ourselves to a dead baby kaiju and hitching a ride to the hivemind, how weird is this?" Newt asks, digging

his thumb into the too-tense musculature of Hermann's neck and courteously ignoring the guy's startled twitch and subsequent appreciative posture adjustment.

"I don't think it even rates," Hermann says.

"Why? That journal club was totally normal."

"It was held only three times because it devolved into such vicious disputes between the physical sciences and the life sciences divisions that we were *ordered* to discontinue it."

"No one can piss off a room like I can piss off a room," Newt says, feeling slightly nostalgic.

"True," Hermann says.

"Especially if you're in that room," Newt adds.

"True," Hermann says, a little drier this time. "Stop talking so I can read this and practice integrating your knowledge base with my knowledge base in a controlled manner."

"Oh," Newt says, "is that what we're doing?"

"What *else* would we be doing?" Hermann asks.

"Um," Newt says, doing a poor to reasonable job at a one-handed shoulder-rub from a horizontal position. "You've got me there."

*Definitely not a last ditch effort to get you to sleep before your brain stops impersonating Descartes and legit hallucinates him instead*, his brain says, like a total jerk. *Definitely not that, Dr. Geiszler.*

*Will you just*, Newt thinks vaguely.

*Just what?* His brain says.

*Just just, will you?*

Hermann starts an article on the intracellular architecture of the synapse that's going to be mostly microscopy based, but that's fine, he supposes. He can visualize, or, barring that, he can sit and look at figures if he feels like sitting later.

Vesicular transport, ionic disequilibrium, voltage-gated channels, calcium signaling, membrane-membrane fusion, release, reuptake, and the machinery of retrograde transport blend into a weird and dramatically lit admixture of what he doesn't realize is first stage sleep until the hypnic jerk of his falling, panicking consciousness snaps him briefly but entirely back to—

“—and this brings us to video seven, which is their ‘complete’ computational model of the synaptic interior functioning in real time, I do think their use of scale is quite liberal, honestly I’m not certain that this is sufficiently detailed for active predictive modeling of say—” Hermann breaks off. “Well. I’m sure I don’t know what you people model, honestly, pharmacological effects? How pedestrian.”

“Hey,” Newt says, sort of, without really articulating the word at all.

“Oh, are you awake?” Hermann says, sounding affectedly uninterested in Newt’s answer.

Hermann is a terrible liar and always has been.

“Just because you model, like, mechanical thrust for badass alien fights,” Newt says, trailing off halfway through his rebuttal, realizing that it’s either really dark in this room or his eyes are closed.

“Was that a sentence?” Hermann asks him. “Because it didn’t sound like one. Kindly be quiet so I can read this. Observational studies have their place and I find myself now possessed of a moderate interest in the mechanics of synaptic transmission.”

“Meh,” Newt replies, trying not to hold onto anything his brain is attacking itself with, succeeding until his entire, semi-conscious existence devolves back into a bad acid trip that seems to consist of nothing other than the repeated sensation of falling straight into something mnemonically horrific paired with whatever Hermann happens to be reading.

*It doesn't want to kill this one; it wants to see his mind. Just this one. Just his mind. He joined the collective before, perhaps he will do it again, if invited.*

“—and I really don’t care for this Western blot. Admittedly, I’m not a biologist, well, I’m *nominally* not a biologist, but this looks quite suspect to me—”

*Are you sleeping? I'm not sure you're sleeping,* his brain says.

*“Are you kidding me?” he asks, ‘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.”*

“—oh good. Motor control. This should interest you, presuming you’re awake. The basal ganglia are an evolutionarily conserved set of—”

*Space is connected by a network of wormholes, Carl Sagan says.*

Um, yes? Newt replies.

"I'm hallucinating," Newt manages to say out loud.

"It's called 'dreaming', Newton," Hermann says quietly.

"Kind of," Newt replies.

He falls and stops himself, falls and stops himself, until—

*We should have loaded him ahead of time.*

*We talked about it—voted no.*

*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 arch.*

"—hold this here, *hold it*. Do you understand what I am *saying to you*?"

"What?" Newt slurs, coughing, his brain snapping into a mode where it's paying attention to visual input.

Hermann is blocking the minimal light and everything is blurred.

Newt is encased in hardening glue.

No, Newt is *not* encased in hardening glue.

"Is it too much to ask that you—" Hermann breaks off. "You are entirely the *worst*."

"That's *my* line," Newt says, swallowing blood.

"Are you speaking English? *Hold this*," Hermann says, taking Newt's hand and bringing it to the tissue that the guy is apparently holding to his face. "Are you holding it? You're not holding it. Make an effort, please."

Newt is bleeding?

He can't quite arrange the context of what is happening to him. It seems to be perpetually arriving, rather than just *there*, like context usually is.

"I was *sleeping*?" Newt says.



"Were you?" Hermann asks. "I'm not sure."

"I told you I would bleed all over this pre-furnished apartment. We need a black couch."

"That would look atrocious," Hermann says. "You have no taste. Now *hold* this handkerchief."

"I'm holding it, god."

"You're *not*."

"I *am*. You're the worst."

"Don't sit up," Hermann says, and then leaves the room.

Newt sits up immediately, because why wouldn't he? He's bleeding from his head and lying down is supposed to help in what way, exactly? What is the *deal* with these nosebleeds? His capillaries are pissed at him right now. He wonders if he screamed in his sleep, possibly? That might explain both the bleeding from the face thing and the Hermann being totally freaked out thing.

*This is legit the worst*, his brain says.

*It's probably pretty okay*, Newt says vaguely. *Just try a little harder not to do all the things that you're doing.*

*Oh, okay*, his brain says, giving him totally unreasonable sass. *I'll just do that. Why didn't I think of that?*

*You did though*, Newt points out courteously.

*I hate you*, his brain snarls.

He feels a little weird, a little bit like throwing up and freaking out in that order. Maybe the reverse order. He's pretty tired though. So maybe he'll just manage to sit here, feeling weird.

"What are you *doing*?" Hermann hisses, appearing perched on the coffee table in front of him without Newt actually witnessing any kind of transit.

"Nothing?" Newt says, pretty sure about that. "Do you ever wonder if you're living in a Dostoevsky novel?"

"No," Hermann snaps. "Focus. Do you know what happened?"

"Don't tell me to focus," Newt snaps back in petulant slow motion. "I'm always focused."

"Are you still bleeding?" Hermann says, like he's living in a world where time is passing at one point five times the speed of Local Geiszler Time (LGT).

"No?" Newt guesses, pulling the handkerchief away from his face.

"Don't do that," Hermann snaps.

Newt sighs. "Chill."

"I will kill you myself, Newton," Hermann snaps. "I will not wait for you to spontaneously die."

"I really don't think I'm going to spontaneously die. Hypothetical Rain did, like, all the hypothetical tests. So. You can just. Chill."

Hermann does some inexplicable layering with a plastic garbage bag and a towel and then pushes Newt back down, kind of on his side this time though.

"You have weird ways of showing affection," Newt says.

"What's your point," Hermann says, watching him with narrowed eyes.

"I get you though. I can read your thoughts probably, once I figure it out. I would not say no to you buying me fish though. Like, not complicated fish? Just like some imported, non-radioactive goldfish or something. That's an appropriate way of telling your roommate that you care about him. Not death threats. Those aren't for normal people, and we're normal people now. Normal to nerd-rock neohipsters with post-apocalyptic sensibilities. That's our demographic. Ragingly pretentious members of the International Intelligentsia. One of us is going to need to take up time-lapse photography of fences weathering or something."

"Try to do a better job of sleeping," Hermann says.

"Oh yeah, okay," Newt replies, letting his eyes fall closed and stay that way despite the sensation of acid spreading beneath his lids. "Yes. Check. Consider it done. I've been stage one'ing it for hours, probably. That's a win. What time is it?"

"Do not concern yourself with that," Hermann says.

The room is quiet.

"Are you going to do the thing?" Newt asks.

"Yes," Hermann says, still sitting on the coffee table.

Newt hears the slide of a tablet over a hard surface, and then they begin again.

## Chapter Eighteen

Hermann awakens to a sharp pain and a loud crash in a bright room.

He is lying on a hard surface.

He isn't sure where he is; he isn't sure what is happening; there is a *vicious* ache in his chest that makes him wonder if he's *dying*; he thinks he's died before; he remembers *nearly* dying; his brain is full of cognitive sludge but even so, he manages to half recall and half fabricate an explanation, running mental models of the last few minutes in reverse and then forward again. They oscillate with increasing detail each round until he stitches something together that makes sense.

He is in San Francisco.

No he isn't.

He's in Oakland.

He's fainted.

No he hasn't.

He has, improbably, fallen asleep on the hardwood floor.

Something is wrong with Newton, because he's currently half atop the coffee table, looking only semiconscious.

Hermann puts this information together with the fading ache in his ribs and shoulder and comes to the conclusion that Newton *stepped* on him, likely because Hermann is currently on the floor.

Somehow this had resulted in Newton falling into the coffee table. Because yes. Of course it had.

"Seriously," Newton says, interrupting Hermann's oscillating thought models as he consolidates all askew limbs into a semi-fetal curl atop of the coffee table. "*Seriously?*"

"Good morning," Hermann rasps, not even bothering to sit, feeling increasingly hopeless about the coming day as more details of the previous one come back to him. His throat is intolerably sore from the seven hours of reading he'd done the previous evening.

"I don't even—" Newton slurs. "Why are you on the floor?"

Newton is not a morning person.

Hermann is not a morning person either, but at least he doesn't lose fifty IQ points before noon.

"I frequently sleep on the floor," Hermann says.

"Lies. Hermann. I have your *brain* in my *brain*," Newton replies, with long-suffering petulance.

"Then use it," he replies, staring at the lines and planes of the walls and ceiling.

"I stepped on your sternum. A little bit. Possibly." Newton sounds *aggrieved*, even though Hermann is, unarguably, the injured party.

Probably.

Hermann narrows his eyes, coming up on one elbow in the space between the table and the couch. The other man is curled atop the surprisingly sturdy coffee table, his forehead pressed against its dark wooden surface. It's hard to be certain where his gaze is directed because he's still wearing Hermann's sunglasses. Newton currently has both hands clasped around his shin.

"Yes, I believe you did. I presume you've broken your leg?"

"Um, no." Newton shifts slightly to look at Hermann, much good may it do him with shades rather than corrective lenses. "My bones are super dense. At least, I've always pictured them that way? Honestly, they're probably of disappointingly average density. Also. Hey. I'm fine. I'm a peak evolutionary specimen. If I could pick the most evolutionarily fit human as a representative of our entire species, I'd choose Mako, because duh, but I'm at least the upper decile, okay? I'm fine. I'm *scrappy*. Scrappy. You're *less* scrappy. I probably broke all your ribs."

Hermann gingerly presses on his chest, but his bones seem to be intact. "I don't think you did," he replies. "Miraculously."

His esteemed colleague is currently pantomiming the waving of a small flag for no reason Hermann can discern. He then says, "yay," with a total aridity that Hermann finds paradoxically winsome.

"Try *not* to step on me in the future," Hermann replies, clearing his throat.

"Well try not to sleep so stealthily. On the floor. Like a creeper."

Hermann sighs aggressively and glares at Newton.

"Seriously though," Newton says, pressing his forehead against the dark wood of the coffee table. "You were on the floor because *why*, exactly?"

*Because I don't want to find out whether or not insomnia is lethal by watching you push the borders of human wakefulness, if that's all right with you, Dr. Geiszler.*

"I'm not going to *die*," Newton says, his response timed *so perfectly* to Hermann's unarticulated thought that it is extremely difficult to hang onto his skepticism regarding a real-time cognitive connection.

*DESIST*, Hermann mentally screams at absolute maximum volume.

Newton doesn't so much as twitch, but he *does* continue with, "are you internally screaming right now, dude? I'm sorry I stepped on you. It didn't turn out *that* well for me *either*, you know. Take my credit card and buy yourself a compensatory present like maybe a hot date with a hypothetical physician re: your hypothetical cracked ribs?"

"My ribs are fine," Hermann says, sitting up, rubbing his rib cage, feeling physically, mentally, and emotionally *wretched*.

"On the plus side, I have discovered that this coffee table is unexpectedly sturdy," Newton says, rapping its surface half-heartedly. "This changes my *entire* mental image of Amalgamated Paulerika."

"What?" Hermann says, leaning back against the base of the couch, still much, *much* too tired for any of this.

"Try reading my mind," Newton says, making a loose circle in the air with one hand, "because that's the only way you'll ever find out."

"I cannot read your mind," Hermann says firmly. "Alas, I have known you long enough that I am certain that 'Paulerika' is a portmanteau of two conjectural names with which you have tagged the interior decorator of this particular pre-furnished apartment. You are, however, incorrect. The interior living experience at Bayside Towers was tailored by an Eco-Designer known professionally as 'Blaze'. He specializes in the respectful integration of humans into barely survivable regions."

Newton tries to laugh and speak at the same time with dubious success. Hermann parses the sound he makes into something approximating: "*What?*"

"I have his business card," Hermann says, smiling faintly. "The walls are lead-lined, the air is filtered and recirculated, and the building's water supply is piped from an inland reservoir."

"Um, good? That seems unnecessarily—hmm. Actually, I could see the *fog* being slightly radioactive as it comes in over the bay. Maybe? It's been a while since I've given a crap about the water cycle. Fog comes from where? Condensation on salt

spray produced by breaking waves? What if that salt spray is radioactive? Would it be? People have *looked* at this, right? Like, nuclear physicists and meteorologists are teaming up and getting government grants to study this, yes? Are we going to get thyroid cancer from working at UC Berkeley? Common sense would say 'no', biology maybe says 'maybe'. I haven't thought about this at all, unsurprisingly, since I don't go outside. This building seems like overkill, though. I mean, people are walking around on the streets, Hermann, I get why this appeals to you, but it seems kind of unnecessary, probably, maybe, I'm not one hundred percent sure. The part of me that's me and drinks tap water is rolling his eyes at you but the part of me that's you and only drinks filtered water is internally applauding you right now. Seriously though, a guy named '*Blaze*' designed this place?"

"Yes," Hermann says, eyeing Newton critically, torn between speculation on frequency and intensity of radioactive fog, inquiring about the other man's progress in holding two simultaneous opinions, and— "What do you mean you 'don't go outside'?"

"Um," Newton says. The other man is still lying atop their coffee table, looking familiar and unkempt and entirely pathetic in Hermann's sunglasses and his clothes from the previous day. "It's actually an extremely complicated situation," Newton says. "Very difficult to describe to people who aren't me, but yet also totally normal and not even worth the calories expended by the circuitous commentary that would be required for your full comprehension."

"I am, in part, *you*," Hermann says, in dry determination.

"Ugh, I know that tone," Newton says.

"Explain," Hermann replies.

"I will explain if you make me coffee. With caffeine, I can't talk to you like this, you're an order of magnitude more crafty than me at baseline and three orders of magnitude more crafty than me within three hours of when I wake up."

"No caffeine," Hermann says. "*Explain.*"

"Oh sure. Sure, Newton, explain. Just *explain.*"

Hermann sighs.

"I'll explain when you explain the *hunting* thing to me," Newton says.

Hermann looks away, all the despair of the previous day rising out of the compressed places in his mind to settle over everything in a thick and toxic cognitive fog.

"Yeah, okay, that was defense as offense, I'm a jerk—"

"Shut up," Hermann snaps.

Newton reaches over and makes a half-hearted attempt to fix Hermann's *hair*.

"This?" Hermann says, shoving Newton's hand away, "is *my* hair, Newton. I realize this is confusing for us both but please try to keep track of this much at least."

"I have a proprietary interest in your hair," Newton says, waving in an uncoordinated fashion at Hermann's head and clipping Hermann's temple in the process. "But I can separate it from my *own*, thanks," he finishes, shoving his own hair into total disarray. "Spatially separate. Attached to different heads. Governed by different organizing principles and life philosophies. I get it, dude."

Hermann sighs. "Did you *break* anything when you tripped over me? Like your skull, for example?"

"No," Newton says. "For the eighth time. Do you think my answer is going to change if you keep asking me?"

"Are you *certain*?"

"I'm sure I'm bleeding into my skin in various places, but I don't think I've had any kind of massive structural failure."

"Good," Hermann says, staring at an unadorned wall.

"Let's fast-forward to six months from now," Newton whispers. "What do you say?"

"I would be amenable to that," Hermann replies without looking at him.

"In other, totally unrelated news, thanks for reading me to sleep like the super badass K-science Division Chiefs that we are. Or were. My point is that we're very secure in our intellectual prowess and that's why we can do this kind of thing without it being at all weird. We're excessively badass. That's my point. We should watch sports. Do they even *have* sports anymore? Are sporting matches of various types part of the post-apocalyptic human cultural zeitgeist? Like, does tennis exist still? We should find out. Tennis is maybe not the most macho. Football? I feel like we're baseball people, if anything. Polo? With horses? *Water* polo? Or maybe like, figure skating? I like *playing* racquetball but not *watching* it, really. As a general rule, sports are boring and do not *actually* equate to badassery. Discuss."

"I think you need more sleep," Hermann replies, finding it physically painful to utter such a gross understatement.

"What time is it?" Newton asks, in the unmistakable cadence used by *The Spin Doctors* in their musical piece of the same name.

Hermann is extremely tempted to respond with, 'four thirty' in lyrical capitulation.

But it is not four thirty, and he humors Newton entirely too much as a general rule.

He pulls out his phone to confirm the time.

"It is ten o'clock in the morning," he says.

"How long do you think I slept?" Newton asks.

Hermann spends a moment trying to estimate, subtracting the periods of semi-lucid wakefulness and the two episodes of epistaxis from the total to come up with an approximate number. "Six hours," he decides, "with the caveat that it was extremely poor quality sleep."

"Meh," Newton says. "That's probably enough to get by on. Speaking of things that are totally under control and *not* wrong with me, do not turn around, by the way."

Hermann immediately twists, eyeing the moderately bloody towel laid out over the couch. This is not news to him. *He* was awake for most of the bleeding the previous night, even if *Newton* does not clearly remember it.

"I said do *not* turn around, Hermann. *Not*."

"I've seen worse," he replies, unperturbed.

"Oh. Well, good? Not good? Are *you* getting catastrophic nosebleeds?"

"Catastrophic?" Hermann echoes. "No."

"Me neither," Newton says.

Hermann has his suspicions on that front, but he says nothing, balanced between confrontation and compassion. This dichotomy is the only thing in his head that feels familiar to him. No resolution is forthcoming, so he gets up and literally walks away from this mental stalemate just as he's walked away from so many others. He leaves Newton curled atop of their coffee table like the entirely appealing wastrel that he is and hopefully always will be.

Hermann is *personally offended* that, as he is brushing his teeth in an immaculate, white-tiled bathroom, *Is this it?* by *The Strokes* begins to play on repeat in his head.

He chalks this up to the long list of things that can be classified as 'Newton's fault'.

In front of a light-lined mirror, Hermann weathers the cognitive crush of failure and culpability and *fear*. All the limits he'd chalked around the foreign places in his thoughts hadn't stopped him from staring down his colleague of nine-years like a thing to be torn apart.



He needs to *get out* of this apartment.

For a time.

A short time.

So he brushes his teeth, he changes his clothes, he fixes his hair, he takes an aspirin in the vague hope of headache aversion, and then re-enters the living room.

Newton has relocated from the coffee table to the kitchen, where he is contemplating the contents of their pantry with his head cocked and his glasses in place. His fingers curl around his sleeves in a new and troubling habit that Hermann, in this otherwise unremarkable instant, abruptly understands.

He cannot bear to see his skin.

It's an hypothesis that his brain upstages straight to a working model. He is *certain* he is right. All he needs is a timetable.

Hermann stares at Newton, running his memory backwards, scanning through all that had happened, trying to remember the last time the other man had *rolled up his sleeves*.

He had seen the tattoos after the man's MRI at the PPDC, when he'd exchanged his clothes for scrubs. He had seen them in their San Francisco hotel room when Hermann had divested his semi-conscious colleague of everything he was wearing except his boxers and undershirt.

He hasn't seen them since.

Not one time.

Newton's tattoos are a subject on which Hermann has spent a good deal of speculative cognitive currency.

He has called them shortsighted, misguided, unwise, the trappings of a kaiju groupie writ large and permanent across the man's skin. He has called them displaced fear twisted into inked bravado. He has called them a decade of horrified fascination with alien monstrosities re-wrought as awed regard. He has called them a tapestry and tally of an evolutionary arms race in which brains are pitted against mindless brawn. He has called them a litmus test in acid green to which Dr. Geiszler has a habit of subjecting everyone he meets. He has called them a misguided romanticizing of an alien biology. He has called them an anti-establishment semiotic manifesto. He has called them an artful slice through society's penchant for stereotypic labeling. He has called them a confusing species-on-species scorecard cum epitaph. He has called

them a living memorial to the most impressive predators ever encountered by man. He has called them an outlet of irrepressible artistic impulse. He has called them an exercise in pure spite leveled at a future failure. But now—

Something has transmogrified his colleague's body art from atypical armor into incessant psychological assault.

*I told you*, he has the urge to scream at Newton, who is adjusting his glasses in blithe unawareness of Hermann's self-righteous and complete sympathy. *Did I not tell you it was a mistake?*

"You literally bought six boxes of Raisin Bran?" Newton says, scrubbing a hand through unruly hair. "I hate you."

"I'm going out," Hermann snarls.

Newton looks at him, startled.

Hermann turns away.

"I—actually don't mind Raisin Bran?" Newton says. "Raisin Bran is fine."

"Good," Hermann says, opening the closet and pulling on his coat. "Enjoy."

"I—um, full disclosure, *don't* actually hate you?" Newton says, following him toward the door, one hand on the wall, "but don't spread it around. I have a rep to maintain."

"Yes," Hermann says, clipped, collecting his cane from where he's left it, leaning against the wall. "I'm aware."

"Okay, so, you're outrageously pissed at me," Newton says. "And yes, I commend your emotional choices, because enumerating retrograde-style from right now: I was a little bit of a jerk about the cereal; I bled all over a towel that's probably new because last time I checked we had no towels; I failed to be adequately appreciative that you read to me for hours and hours so I can stay current with science and *not* because I needed a basic science bedtime story, I just want to make sure the record's clear on that one; I kind of didn't mention the not-sleeping thing until it had been a fait accompli for approximately ninety-six hours—"

"I am not 'pissed at you'," Hermann says, so overwrought that he can barely speak and needing to put a stop to this list of things that Newton seems to think are *his fault*.

"Whoa," Newton says, both hands outstretched. "Just, um, *chill*, would you please?"

Hermann makes a strangled sort of sound; he's not certain how that happens.

"Okay, not the best choice of thing to say on my part, granted, but—" Newton begins.

Hermann doesn't hear the rest, because he is through the door and slamming it in Newton's face for the sake of his *own sanity*.

For a brief interval he stands frozen in the hall, picturing Newton staring at the opposite side of the door, confused and caffeine-less, holding whole swaths of Hermann's mind hostage in a blameless multiplicity of ways.

Hermann turns, proceeds down the hall, descends in the elevator, and finally breaks out into crisp maritime air beneath a pale sky.

Already he feels better. Autonomous. Independent. Part of no cognitive collective.

Hermann leans on his cane as he makes his way down a hill. He's heading toward the bay, passing through streets that feel empty after the recent clamor of Hong Kong. He comes to the edge of the Habitable Zone, which extends nearly to the border of the water. He stops in front of a sign that reads '*Radiation readings exceed background levels beyond this border.*'

He sighs.

The three nuclear devices deployed against *Trespasser* had been detonated in the northernmost reaches of the bay. Despite continuous decontamination efforts, radioactive material had diffused southward to expose the entire body of water. As Hermann understands it, filtration, sequestration, and storage remain the central tenets of the ongoing cleanup, but such efforts only get a society so far when faced with the fact that there is no minimal biologically safe dose of radiation.

He probably should not be standing here.

Not for a prolonged period.

Nevertheless, there's something that appeals to him about Oblivion Bay—slow and constant source of leaching mutagens that it is. It suits the cast of his current mood.

In the distance, barely visible through the haze, he can make out the dark, linear stretch of the Wall of Life beyond the confines of the bay.

He hasn't come here for the Wall, or for the water.

He's come here for the gulls.

To watch them.

He casts his eyes skyward, following their curving flight paths above the dark water, trying to call forth something horrendous from the repressed depths of his mind.

Nothing happens.

They're *gulls*, for god's sake; he has no urge to chase them.

Hermann can feel his expression crack briefly and reform, but only in despair, and not in any instinct of predation.

Is this one manifestation of what Newton had meant when he'd mentioned 'evil', days ago? The unwanted external influence, worming its way into the mind, cracking apart a sense of self that should be whole, bringing it partially into accord with all that it had ever opposed?

*In so far as a thing is evil to us it is contrary to us*, his brain offers him.

*Please*, he says in response, *turn on your instincts of predation so that I may know I am capable of turning them off*.

Yesterday, in the horrified subterranean reaches of his mind, beneath the quiet, continuous reading of the latest neuroscience to his half-delirious colleague, he had intended to come here. To look at the gulls. To watch them. To purposefully call up everything his brain is trying to actively bury and to *practice* snapping in and out of lateral pathways.

But he can't do it.

Hermann Gottlieb cannot stand on a pier, stare at seagulls, and force himself to want to eat them for the purpose of immediately dissuading himself about his taste for those selfsame seagulls.

This will never work for him—he *cannot* do what Newton has done and is doing. He cannot incorporate catastrophic cognitive disruption into a re-wrought sense of self. There are two people and a collective consciousness in his head, *in his head*, where there should only be Hermann Gottlieb.

His brain is not cooperating. It can hollow out idiocy at a distance of one hundred meters and it is therefore totally unwilling to call up any predation instincts when presented with *seagulls*. Of course, it *is* willing to back his already stressed and deeply troubled colleague cum roommate cum drift-partner into a corner in a dimly lit kitchen and *terrify* him for no other reason than that he'd happened to combine visible anxiety with a *physical retreat*.

It had been that unsteady, backward step that had initiated the entire unfortunate episode.

There had been something unfit, something *prey*-like, something unconsciously vulnerable about the way the man had moved that had, instead of triggering *sympathy*, triggered *something else*.

His memory of the darkened kitchen is painfully sharp, painfully full of the *need* to drive forward, his muscles tensing, his hands open, his fingers arched as if they ended in claws rather than in nails.

That cannot happen again.

Ever.

Never ever again.

Not even one time.

He has no idea what might have happened had Newton not, with typical insight, determined what was happening and corrected Hermann's disastrous trajectory by aggressively shouting directly in his face. Would Hermann have stayed locked in predatory consideration? Would he have, at some point, launched himself at Newton and *attacked* him? Would he have snapped out of it on his own?

He doesn't know.

There is something too-tight about the control that Hermann is trying to exert over his own mind. Something that *he* will obey but other cognitive parties will not. Had he been incorrect about the optimal strategy for dealing with his current set of mental challenges? Is the driving of parts of his consciousness into neural subjugation so unrelenting that they have no choice but to build up pressure behind the mental walls he's been bricking until they explode outward, burying his sense of self for brief intervals until *Newton*, of all people, pulls him free of the ensuing mental debris?

How is that Newton manages to be only *tormented* by that which is in his head and not occasionally *possessed* by it?

It doesn't seem fair.

It certainly *is* not.

Hermann pictures the other man managing his consciousness like a sound engineer, never isolating any one line, fading himself and his co-worker and a screaming, rage-filled, alien consciousness up and down in the mix of his thoughts, never losing any through-line, until, when his system fails, it fails in the distorted scream of audio feedback, all through-lines fluxing at once into a white-out of total panic.

Hermann steps forward to wrap a hand around the cool metal of the fence that separates him from the no-man's land of a glacia that descends for thirty meters to the edge of the dark water.

Should he change his cognitive strategy?

Should he attempt to be more like Newton—with his looser control, his bottom-up rather than top-down organization? *Could* he be more like Newton? He's not sure that even now, even post-drifting, he understands exactly how the other man's mind manages to work, but Hermann has the wits to see it's more organized than it might externally appear. He will not get the same effect simply by loosening the constraints of his own self-discipline. All he will get will be shoddy results, most likely.

Most likely.

His current strategy isn't working *either*. He *can't* spend his life in fear of turning into Newton or attacking a passing child in a fit of blind, predatory instinct.

He can't.

He will not.

He absolutely refuses to admit the possibility of any such outcome.

Hermann takes a shallow breath and expels it in a short exhale.

It is certainly a mistake to work against his own strengths, which lie in analysis and organization.

He will think his way out of his current problems.

This strategy has never failed him.

He needs to take a step back and reconsider his previous two weeks *as a whole*. He has been distracted by an entire array of terrifying problems: a shortened attention span that was certainly Newton's fault, bureaucratic difficulties, a *job search*, the brief but torturous belief that the PPDC had entirely ruined his colleague's brain, finding an apartment that was not dangerously radioactive, insomnia, headaches, intermittent episodes of epistaxis, nausea induced by cognitive dissonance, the concern that his colleague was on the verge of a psychotic break secondary to sleeplessness, the concern that he *himself* could get lost in the neural pathways in his head that weren't his own—

Yes.

He's had many distractions.

This is no excuse for not laying things out in an organized manner. Now, here, on the edge of this radioactive bay, seems as good a place and time as any other, given that the events of the previous afternoon had provided him with an array of new information to plug into his working model regarding what *had* happened, what was *currently* happening, and what *will* happen.

After organizing his thoughts, he comes up with three outstanding questions. One—what had happened to Newton in those three days they had been mostly separated? Two—is real-time cognitive influence an actual post-drift phenomenon and, if so, how might it be demonstrated? Three—what is the best method to prevent the unwanted appearance of Geiszlerian or Kaijuesque impulses in the brain of Dr. Hermann Gottlieb?

Hermann shifts his hand on the rail.

Question one is the question he least wants to consider. As the days pass, he feels himself coming closer and closer to the answer that he had initially rejected because of how openly ludicrous it was, how *stupid* it would have been to attempt. But Newton's comments of the previous evening, while falling far, *far* short of confirming anything had suggested *exactly* what Hermann has been trying not to believe.

A third drift.

With fragments of alien tissue that were a portal to precisely *nowhere*. A connection to nothing rational, nothing but disembodied misery.

Even now, even with all the building evidence he has that Newton drifted for a *third* time, he still can't quite believe it. He can't believe Newton would have *agreed*, he can't believe that anyone would have *asked* it of him, he can't believe such a thing would have been *possible*; it had only worked the first time because the man had jacked himself into a terminal that shouldn't have gone anywhere, but had turned out to be a signal transducer for thoughtwaves from the anteverse. In the absence of an open connection to a collective consciousness there should have been nothing but dead static. Neuronal noise. Cognitive chaos.

It is a *miracle* that the man is neither dead nor floridly psychotic.

Hermann hasn't contacted anyone at the PPDC since he was cleared of charges of abduction and breach of contract. He has no desire to reopen lines of communication, but the PPDC has sent Dr. McClure *none* of the medical records she requested after their first meeting.

It is time to take some action.

Some action that does not involve prying the information out of Newton.

Hermann cannot see such an attempt ending well. He has no idea what the man's limits might be, but he has no desire to map out their borders in any kind of empirical fashion.

Newton will tell Hermann what he wishes him to know.

Eventually.

Possibly.

With some coaxing.

Question two, the issue of whether real-time cognitive influence is a legitimate post-drift phenomenon, is not something he had spent much time worrying about. He is extremely dubious about the mechanistic underpinnings of—

Hermann lifts his hand from the rail, sweeping it up in wave of helpless skepticism, which he realizes is a strange blend of his own critical thought and Newton's propensity to punctuate his inner monologue with gesticulations.

Soon, he'll be talking to himself.

Will that be progress, given he's considering changing his strategy to try and incorporate some low-level integration of all the parties taking up space in his brain?

He has no idea.

He glares at Oblivion Bay and returns to the issue at hand.

He simply *cannot* see how such a real-time connection might work. Newton's half-panicked, sleep deprived ramblings of the previous evening had seemed to favor the idea of some kind of biological ability to transmit or receive exogenous signals and transduce them into thoughts. Hermann is not *categorically* opposed to such a possibility. Clearly his brain has the capacity to interpret kaiju-derived voltage fluctuations, but he's quite skeptical of the ability of electromagnetic waves to penetrate the dense bone of the human skull. There could be some kind of poorly understood quantum mechanical effect at play. If that's the case, the thing is going to be harder to parse, in large part because of humanity's relatively poor understanding of quantum mechanics.

He'd like to determine that there *is*, in fact, a reproducible phenomenon to study before he starts theorizing about quantum phenomena on a macro scale.

That way madness lies.

He's relatively certain that they should be able to devise some system to determine whether their ability to 'read' one another's thoughts, actively, in real time, is indeed a



legitimate, repeatedly observable, post-drift effect. There may already be experimental systems in place to test extrasensory perception, and much though it deeply, materially shames him to look into this, he will do it because he *promised* Newton that he would and the man will be an absolute *nightmare* to deal with if he believes he's being unfairly dismissed. Alas, Newton now has the moral high-ground when it comes to outrageous, conjectural thinking, and will. Forever. To Hermann's perpetual shock, gratitude, and regret.

Fine.

He will participate in testing Newton's hypothesis.

That should cheer the man up.

Self-experimentation always does.

Hermann sighs.

This brings him to question three: how he should best prevent the unwanted appearance of Geiszlerian or Kaijuesque impulses in his own brain. Immediately post-drifting, he had feared subtle foreign influence—he had feared something that he might not recognize, something that would not feel foreign, something that would appear to come from inside himself but would actually come from an alien source.

While such a concern still cannot be ruled out, the *actual* problem is quite a bit more obvious in character than Hermann had been preparing himself for. Two weeks of insomnia and distracted, stress-filled attempts at exerting mental discipline have left him with stray tendencies that he can immediately identify as externally-derived but that have the unfortunate habit of rocketing to the fore of his consciousness and suppressing that which should*rightfully* be occupying prefrontal cortex space.

He had not anticipated this.

It hadn't been *immediately* apparent, but it had appeared in the *relative* short term. Is it a consequence of sleeping, of memory integration, of synaptic plasticity at work? Is it a phenomenon arising purely from his own mind, or, if Newton is correct in his theory that they may be susceptible to external influence from one another and the kaiju anteverse, is it *something else*? Are those lateral snaps into thought-patterns not his own a consequence of external thought pressure?

He sounds ridiculous.

Then again, *drifting* with dead, formaldehyde-fixed (or fetal) tissue had *also* sounded ridiculous. He had been certain that no one could survive such an attempt.

He—

He is certain—

He is certain he made it *out* of the drift.

Isn't he?

Of course he is.

Of *course* he is.

He's familiar with reality and he's familiar with the hyper-realistic overwhelming onslaught of the drift, and he *cantell them apart*.

He flicks a nail against the metal rail and is rewarded with a jolt of pain in his nail bed.

If he can't trust the observable universe, there is literally nothing left to trust and he should just surrender himself to existential nihilism.

He winces at this unlooked for insight into Newton's current epistemological obsession with rationalism as a discipline.

Hermann doesn't know if he should change his current strategy of attempting to identify, isolate, and repress the proclivities, the *desires*, that come from Newton and from the remnants of a predatory pack of alien monsters or if he should let some of them out where he can keep them under the lens of the continual observation of his conscious mind.

He doesn't particularly care for this as an option.

Hermann doesn't like many of his options at present.

He has *no desire* to allow any additional Geiszlerian proclivities into his thoughts and behaviors.

He has even *less* desire to adopt the cognitive characteristics of a voraciously destructive biological war machine.

But.

Both of those options are better than unpredictably terrorizing his already traumatized roommate or attacking the *undergraduates* he will shortly be intimidating with algebraic topology.

Fine.

He turns away from the dark water of the bay and walks back toward the apartment, trying to see the streets with their steep grades and clustered buildings, the people,

the pale sky, and the humidity-blurred air in a controlled triplicate—desolate, boring, packed with underutilized resources in the hands of a stupid, backward species that builds structures beneath the haze of their own carbon waste.

It takes him twenty minutes, but he finally pulls forward an impulse to stand and watch the silhouette of a spandexed jogger and his dog with a shadow of whatever it was that had rocketed to the fore of his mind in a dim kitchen the previous day.

Afterwards, he feels sick and faint and crushed under the prospect of spending his life in triplicated misery.

*It's not that bad*, his brain offers, sounding like Newton.

He shakes his head in bleak reply. He stops with that, primarily because he's fairly sure that nothing good can come of allowing his mind to personify alternate neural pathways.

He's trying *not* to fracture his consciousness, thank you.

He intends to limp up and down steep streets a few times before returning to the apartment, but he stops, distracted, in front of a store window hung with an array of musical instruments, many of which Newton can play with varying degrees of proficiency. Overlaid above the displayed guitars and banjos and mandolins he can see his own reflection, ghost-like in the glass store-front.

It looks familiar, but not familiar enough.

Hermann is curious and possessed of the strange freedom from self-censure that he has only ever experienced at the absolute nadir of personal misery.

He enters the store with the quiet chime of bells. It smells of wood warmed by the sun and old sheet music, printed on real paper. There is a bookshelf crammed with vinyl albums on the back wall, which he interprets as 'a good sign' with an enthusiastic hauteur so intense it feels deeply and unmistakably voyeuristic.

He nearly loses the tenuous grip he has on his selfhood in this surge of energy that is not his own—but he hangs on, not moving, mastering the impulse to *touch everything* until the desire dissipates, the edge is filed off the intensity of his thoughts, and he is left standing just inside the door, one hand over his chest.

He feels a surge of triumph that has both a predatory edge and a Geislzerian arrogance to it.

Hermann detangles his fingers from the front of his sweater and walks forward, past the racks of sheet music, past the guitars that he has *no plans* to touch. His self-control only goes so far and he can see the likely limits of his grip on this triplicated worldview.

He stops in front of the back wall, where an electric keyboard is connected to a speaker system.

He turns the volume down, glances around the mostly empty store, then sits on a dark bench.

Hermann reaches out, committing to this course of action with only his left hand.

He picks out the melodic line of *Syncope* in flawless transposition.

It is an *entirely fascinating* experience. He has the neural pathways of a talented musician but the muscle memory of someone who'd never played the piano and who had given up the violin for mathematics circa 2003. He's not terrible, but he's by no means *excellent* either.

It would take him almost no time at all to *become* excellent.

That much is extremely apparent.

"Nice," someone says from behind him. Hermann turns to see a young man with multiple facial piercings and full tattoo sleeves standing behind him. "*The Supercos*, am I right?"

"Yes," Hermann says stiffly. "You're familiar?"

"Who isn't?" the child asks him.

"*Really*," Hermann says, with a distinctly Geiszlerian guttural 'r' denoting extreme interest of a dubiously appropriate character before reasserting his *own* personality in reactive anxiety. "They are a relatively obscure band in a relatively unpopular genre," Hermann finishes, his voice full of contingency.

"They *were*," the employee says, "until their front man quit music for science and kind of saved the world. Have you been living under a rock, or what?"

"Ah," Hermann says, his uncertainty translating directly to understated alarm, but at what, specifically, he can't say.

He needs to pay more attention to the cultural zeitgeist. That much, at least, is clear.

"Word on the street is that the guy might be *local* now," the child continues.

"How interesting," Hermann says, getting to his feet.

"We have some of their stuff, if you're into it," the young man says, pushing dark hair out of dark eyes. "On whatever your preferred media is. It's hard to keep in stock, but their independent label just issued a re-release—"

*What? Those bastards, why wasn't I consulted*, he almost snaps in abrupt irritation. But, *thankfully*, he doesn't. He instead says, "no. Thank you, but no."

"You look familiar to me," the child says, eyeing him in impertinent speculation. "Are you anyone cool?"

"No," Hermann says, quite truthfully, backing away. "I am no one 'cool'. I really must be going."

He makes it back out onto the sidewalk without being further detained by the curious teenager. He then signals for a driverless cab in a blind desire to get off the streets. He doesn't want to be recognized, he doesn't want to talk to anyone, he doesn't want to steal someone else's musical genius, doesn't want to look at joggers like the breakfast he didn't have, doesn't want *any of it*.

"Please state your destination," the cab requests in mechanical pleasantness when he slides into the back seat.

Of course, he has no destination.

None at all.

He wants to *work*, but his paperwork hasn't yet been finalized at UC Berkeley; he wants to *code*, but there are no more Jaegers; he wants to do mathematics; he wants to design simulations for closing an already closed breach; he wants to drive *himself* somewhere; he wants to do something that Newton or alien hive minds have no interest in.

He wants, as he has always wanted, to pilot a plane off the edge of the world.

"I need a car," he confesses to the cab, in waspish discontent.

An array of nearby car dealerships spring up on the touchscreen display built into the cab.

He sighs.

He can't simply go purchase a *car*.

Can he?

*Why not?* everyone in his head asks.

Well, perhaps he can.

He studies the array of choices in front of him, and selects one, trying to make it *his* choice alone, trying to make a decision only as Hermann Gottlieb, but aware that he can never truly know if he is successful. Will he look back on his snap decision to purchase a sports car from Stuttgart as an injudicious impulse for which Newton should be blamed or as his own confused proclivities tearing their way out of the snarled mess of his conscious experience?

*Best not to overthink it*, his brain advises, sounding exactly like Newton in an incendiary mood.

The cab pulls away from the curb.

Eight hours after he'd left, now possessing an ostentatious car that he really *cannot* justify purchasing and a bag of fish that he *also* cannot justify, Hermann returns to the apartment in a state of significant trepidation.

Partially, his dread is derived from *guilt*, because he had, uncharacteristically, slammed the door in Newton's face that morning in flagrant indulgence of his own distress. Partially, his dread is derived from his perpetual and mostly unjustified fear that *any* time he returns to their apartment he'll find Newton seizing, unconscious, or dead on the floor.

This is a banner day for irrationality on the part of Hermann Gottlieb, Ph.D.

He makes an effort not to visibly wince as he opens the door.

Newton, fortunately, is *not* dead on the floor. He is, in fact, sitting at their kitchen table, recently showered, wearing jeans and a green sweater over a white dress shirt, reading about rationalism.

He glances up coolly when Hermann walks in, and then looks back down without saying anything, readjusting his glasses with his right hand, turning a page with his left.

Hermann feels somewhat at a loss.

Likely because he *is* somewhat at a loss.

Hermann supposes he deserves whatever it is that this is—the outrageously superior example of Newton's most attractive brand of arrogance filtered through a new lens of self-containment for which Hermann credits his own influence. It is a magnificent thing to behold and may actually be that which, in the end, drives Hermann to a point incompatible with rational thought.

*I am awesome*, his brain says, sounding like Newton, confusingly admiring himself from within the confines of Hermann's own head.

Dr. Gottlieb cannot take much more of this.

He leans back against the door, trying not to feel horribly awkward, post impulse-car-buying and impulse-fish-buying, a confused mess of a mathematician with closet musical interests, a skull too small for all its tenants, and a coat too large for his frame.

"You didn't take your phone," Newton says, flexing a bare foot against the rung of the chair he's seated in, still not looking up.

"I know," Hermann says. "I bought a car."

That earns him a brief look punctuated by an atypically uncommunicative eyebrow lift. "Did you," Newton says, as he looks back down at his book.

This is an interpersonal catastrophe. Newton is absolutely not allowed to wear sweaters, read rationalism, and *be restrained* in glorious simultaneity; it is just *unfair*.

"I bought you some fish," Hermann says.

Newton glances back up.

Hermann displays a bag of goldfish.

"Did you also happen to buy me a fish *tank*?" Newton asks.

"No," Hermann admits. "That was oversight on my part. Apologies."

"Don't apologize to *me*," Newton says, looking back down. "Apologize to Fire Truck."

Hermann looks skeptically at Newton and then at the four goldfish in the plastic bag he holds. Not one of them looks particularly deserving of such a name. "You're christening one of them *Fire Truck*?"

"Fire Truck, Descartes, Group Theory, and Tiffany," Newton says.

Hermann looks at the ceiling, either appealing to the heavens for patience or profusely thanking them for returning his roommate to baseline.

"Do *not* roll your eyes at me; what would *you* name them? Fish One through Four?"

"No," Hermann says defensively, pushing away from the door and walking forward to place the bag of fish directly over the man's English translation of *La Géométrie*, by René Descartes.

"Uh huh," Newton says in open skepticism, lifting the water-and-fish-filled plastic bag gently off his book. "And no *fish* on *Descartes*. Have some *respect*, Hermann, *god*. Who are you even?"

"As to that," Hermann says, pulling off his coat, and turning to hang it in the closet, "I'm sure I don't know."

Newton says nothing.

Hermann is certain that if he were to turn around he would find the other man giving him an unforgivably incisive look.

For that precise reason, he is not going to turn in the present moment.

"I would certainly introduce some kind of *theme* to my system of naming, rather than a random collection of a class of vehicle, a philosopher, a branch of mathematics, and an otherwise traditional name that seems particularly un-fish-like," he says, taking his time in closing the closet door.

"How is *Tiffany* un-fish like?" Newton asks. "What's a fish-like name?"

"Marina?" Hermann suggests, turning back toward the table.

"Not bad," Newton says, getting to his feet with an unsteady stiffness that he's been unable to shake for weeks. "If you buy another fish, you can name her Marina. Unfortunately, this little lady is already named Tiffany. There's too much identity confusion going around, without bringing our *fish* into it."

"True," Hermann says. "Exquisitely true."

"Excruciatingly true," Newton says wryly, his tone beginning to thaw into something less Gottliebian and more Geiszlerian. "Seriously, how do *you* go to a fish store and forget to buy something to put them in?"

"It has been a difficult day," Hermann confesses.

"Oh I get that," Newton says, opening cabinets. "Do I ever." He pulls out a generic mixing bowl, fills it with water, and puts the plastic bag of fish into it to thermally equilibrate.

"You're going to put fish in a mixing bowl?" Hermann asks.

"Well, where *else* am I going to put them, Hermann? You aren't exactly leaving me with a whole lot of choices, here. I think we have to de-chlorinate this water. Also, did you seriously *buy a car*?" Newton asks, now with only a trace of the strange reserve he'd displayed when Hermann had walked through the door.



"We do not have to de-chlorinate the water," Hermann says, "because the water-filter I purchased has a carbon-filter dechlorination system built into it. Just use *that*. And yes, I did buy a car."

"Seriously? You realize tap water is *fine*, right? Talk about overkill," Newton says, opening the refrigerator and pulling out the filtered water. "You realize it's kind of weirdly badass just go out and buy a car, right? Like, most people have to do angsty soul-searching first. Though, I guess you're in more than decent financial shape, so—" Newton opens a hand and shrugs before removing the fish from their state of thermal equilibration, dumping the tap water into the sink, and replacing it with filtered refrigerated water. "Good job? Way to be decisive? What kind of car?"

Hermann would really rather not say at the present moment. If he plays his cards right, he won't have to.

"A manual transmission," he says vaguely. "Don't put the fish in four degree water, Newton."

"Oh, a *manual* transmission. How predictably pretentious," the other man replies. "Also? I'm not going to *kill the fish*. I'm not *that* cognitively impaired. I have literally *never killed anything*—"

Newton breaks off, his gaze fixed on empty space.

"Newton," Hermann says quietly.

"I—" the other man says.

"You," Hermann continues, stepping into a flow of thoughts not his own, "deserve an honorary degree in botany for all the plants you've 'rescued' from serial neglect."

"I left them," Newton murmurs, still not looking at anything.

*The plants?* Hermann doesn't ask.

"Contact Mr. Choi," he says instead, trying to snap them out of morbid double-speak. "He's the only person to ever take umbrage with your botanical kleptomania in the name of life preservation."

"*I* take umbrage your use of the word 'kleptomania'. It was always rescue, never thievery," Newton says, regaining some of his conversational poise. "*I* do not kill plants. Mako kills plants. The Jaeger techs kill plants. Dr. L murdered entire swaths of plants. *You* kill plants." Newton picks up the fish, studying them under the kitchen lights. "I am *so sorry*, guys. This is a terrible showing on our parts, but I just want you to know that

this entire bowl-less, gravel-less, plant-less, fish-food-less situation is one hundred percent Dr. Gottlieb's fault and will definitely be remedied tomorrow. By Dr. Gottlieb."

In Hermann's opinion, the fish look extremely unperturbed. "I *did* buy them food," Hermann says dryly, pulling a small container of fish flakes out of his pants pocket.

"Well that's *something*," Newton says dryly.

"Did you eat?" Hermann asks.

"Yes," Newton says, putting down the fish. "No. I thought about it. Did you?"

"No," Hermann says.

"You don't have to make me dinner," Newton says. "I mean, I'm pretty clearly in the ongoing process of ruining your life on local and global levels so—" he seems to lose some steam beneath Hermann's aggressively perplexed glare. "Okay, what I'm trying to say is that we work really well together, kind of, if one doesn't mind the aggressive ambiance generated by semi-regular shouting matches, but I'm not sure we make the best roommates. Discuss."

"You are literally the stupidest person I've ever met," Hermann says, pulling a pot out of a cabinet. "Do you want spätzle?"

"Um," Newton says. "You're super German, you realize, even though you secretly wish you were British, which is, confusingly, kind of an American shtick. Anyway, I know for a fact that you have inappropriately rhapsodical thoughts about my career trajectory and facility with disparate fields, so, um, can you say something *useful* possibly, other than just calling me stupid, which is clearly actually some kind of weird compliment that I don't fully understand, because it's so demonstrably false? It's not nice to denigrate the intellectual capacities of your colleagues turned roommates, you know. Also, I'm smarter than you and everyone, including you, agrees. And yes. I would love some spätzle."

"You are not ruining my life," Hermann says. "So I will thank you to stop being so dramatic. I have spent years becoming irrationally fond of you, I have allowed both *you* and an alien consciousness into my brain for the purpose of saving your life, I pulled you out of a bureaucratic mess that was actively killing you, and, finally, I found you a job at an institution that will legally support you against any unreasonable demands that might be made upon you in the future. Your doubts about your role in my life are insulting. You're hardly someone I picked up off the streets or a bus passenger I've been forced to talk with for nine years. Yes, my recent decisions have radically altered

the trajectory of my personal and professional life, but I am—" his throat closes, briefly and inexplicably. "It was worth it."

"Yeah," Newton says. "I hear that. I get it. I do. World saving. Newt saving. All of that is good. But it doesn't necessarily translate to—" he waves a hand in an expansive semi-circle to take in their apartment. The movement exposes a thin band of color at his wrist.

It's the first sign of the other man's tattoos that Hermann has seen in days.

"Whatever," Newton finishes. "Making me spätzle? Look, I am endlessly pissing you off, Hermann. I can *tell*."

*It isn't you, Hermann wants to tell him. It's everything you literally cannot articulate because it torments you so much. It's what you've done to yourself. It's what other people have done to you in search of some surrogate endpoint that might measure your threat to human society. It's the parts of my mind that I can't control. It's the part of me that might attack you for the anxiety I'm sure you will now never shake. It's the questions I can't ask you, it's the things I can't tell you, it's way you stand at windows and bleed there, unprovoked.*

He can't force any of this beyond the shut gate of his vocal chords.

So instead he reaches over, grabs Newton's shirtsleeve, and yanks it down to conceal the edge of color at his wrist. "You're terribly shortsighted when it comes to the realm of interpersonal dynamics," he whispers.

"A little bit, yeah," Newton says, staring at the white cuff of his dress shirt beneath the green of his sweater.

# A Correspondence In Two Parts

## A Correspondence

To: Newton Geiszler  
From: Mako Mori  
Subject: Is this the real life?

Yes or no?

-Mako

P.S. Where *are* you?

To: Newton Geiszler  
From: Mako Mori  
Subject: Is this just fantasy?

Caught in a laaaandslide...you know how it goes.

-Mako

To: Newton Geiszler  
From: Mako Mori  
Subject: No escape from reality

Hello? Where have you been?

-Mako

To: Newton Geiszler  
From: Mako Mori  
Subject: READ THIS

Dear Newt,

What happened in the mess hall? Are you going to Tendo's 'Vodka and Victory' party?  
I need to know. It won't turn depressing if you're there. It *probably* won't turn  
depressing if you're there.

-Mako

To: Newton Geiszler

From: Mako Mori

Subject: READ THIS AND RESPOND

Dear Newt,

Dr. Gottlieb came to see me this afternoon. I don't feel comfortable discussing what he said in an email. Do you have time to speak with me? Why are you working exclusively in the infirmary? I tried to find you this afternoon, but I was told by offsite PPDC personnel that you were occupied.

Since when do you have bouncers?

-Mako

To: Mako Mori

From: Newton Geiszler

Subject: OMG

I'm working, Mako. Working. Fancy stereotactic rigs don't align themselves. You think science stops when the countdown clock does? Science never stops, kiddo. It's like some kind of undead thing with a subpar nervous system. Always slowly coming for you. Speaking of which, tackle Dr. Gottlieb for me and give him a task; he's getting in my hair, as always. No one needs breach statistics anymore (yay!).

-Newt

To: Newton Geiszler

From: Mako Mori

Subject: re: OMG

So you're not dead. Marshal Hansen is preparing for a press conference the day after tomorrow. You should come to his briefing at fourteen hundred hours. We are all to be coached on 'proper comportment'.

Speaking of proper comportment, I could use some support regarding my new hair color. Is there a time I can come see you?

-Mako

P.S. Raleigh says, "tell Geiszler long time, no see in the mess hall." Then he says, "Mako don't type that." Then he says, "Mako. Mako, no. No. Mako." Then he says, "you're making me sound like a Neanderthal." Then he says, "Mako. Mako that's not funny. Mako."

To: Newton Geiszler

From: Mako Mori

Subject: Hello?

Hi Newt,

You didn't come to the briefing. I noticed you're not on the schedule for tomorrow's press conference. Neither is Dr. Gottlieb.

I went to the Medical Bay to try and talk to you and I was told that you were indisposed. Are you working or are you a patient? Please let me know. Please do not write me an email about zombies. Please tell me clearly what is happening.

-Mako

To: Newton Geiszler

From: Mako Mori

Subject: URGENT: PLEASE RESPOND

Newt, where are you? What's happened?

-Mako

To: Newton Geiszler

From: Mako Mori

Subject: URGENT!!! RESPONSE REQUIRED

Newt, can you please confirm that the letter of resignation we received from Dr. Gottlieb on your behalf is genuine? This doesn't sound like you.

-Mako

To: Newton Geiszler

From: Mako Mori

Subject: PLEASE RESPOND IMMEDIATELY

Newt—

This morning I attended a meeting in the company of Marshal Hansen. I believe that Dr. Gottlieb is about to be criminally charged with your abduction. I expressed my opinion that such a thing would be out of character for him, but if you could contact us it would clear things up.

Please email me or call me immediately. *Immediately* immediately.

-Mako

To: Newton Geiszler

From: Mako Mori

Subject:

Dear Newt,

I don't know if you'll receive this. I don't know if you've received any of my recent emails. I suspect you are no longer checking your PPDC account. I understand that your server access will be shortly terminated. Marshal Hansen has provided me with your forwarding email address.

This morning I saw the report from the offsite physiologists you were working with. I can't discuss its contents, but I wanted you to know that I saw it.

Raleigh and I are about to depart for a public relations tour.

I tried to call you.

I'm sitting at the Hong Kong Airport, wearing a scarf over my hair and sunglasses and no makeup and a dress that isn't black. I don't feel like myself. Raleigh is wearing a sweatshirt that says, 'I came to Hong Kong and all I got was this shirt' in Chinese. We're hoping not to be recognized. This morning I went out for coffee and couldn't get away from the gathering crowd. I had to flag down a cab. People like to touch my hair.

I don't like it when they touch my hair.

I can see the shatterdome out the window.

Soon it will be time for us to board the plane.

I wish I could say what is in my head. The drift changes too much, and I was never eloquent.

Love,

Mako

To: Newton Geiszler

From: Mako Mori

Subject: New York

Dear Newt,

We landed at JFK this morning. Raleigh slept through almost the entire flight but I stayed awake, thinking about people and about things that have happened. I thought about Raleigh's fourteenth birthday when Yancy gave him his first driving lesson in secret under a gray sky and about my fourteenth birthday when we all went to karaoke at a bar called 'Bar' with its green lights and its analog equipment that you called 'legit'. I remember all the songs everyone sang because I wrote them down that same night in my white notebook with the butterfly on the cover.

Do you remember that notebook? While I was packing, Raleigh opened it like it was his.

After we landed, a security escort met us at the airport. It's strange to be escorted from place to place. Is this what you pictured when you talked about being a rock star? I was never sure if it was fame that you meant, or just that there was a certain glamor in rocking intellectual boats. I can't believe I never asked you about it. Either way, I don't think this life fits me as well as it would fit you.

I've never been to New York City before, but from the back of a hired car it looks like the living monument to capitalism I'd always heard it was. Except for one thing. Every surface holds an image. The sides of vehicles, the sides of buildings, the windows of stores, freestanding giant screens. So I see the dead everywhere, interspersed with the living. Everywhere I see myself, looking like a person I never was.

I read a newspaper article this morning that said you'd had a nervous breakdown. I read another article that said you'd been experimented on by the PPDC. I read a third article that said you were suffering from a severe neurologic condition. They all show the same picture. Maybe you've seen it by now. You and Dr. Gottlieb are walking down an empty hallway in the Hong Kong airport. Dr. Gottlieb is glaring at the person taking the picture. You're wearing sunglasses. Your hair is a mess. You've got an arm over his shoulder and your other hand is outstretched, like you're about to fall.

You look terrible, Newt.

All three articles agree you went to San Francisco.

It would be nice to hear from you.



Love,  
Mako

P.S. I don't think our interview went very well. I am too taciturn to make a good role model.

To: Newton Geiszler  
From: Mako Mori  
Subject: Thinking

Dear Newt,

Raleigh went out to get bagels. I am in our hotel room watching the news. I'm addicted to it—the analysis, the retrospectives, the tributes. I don't know whether I find it satisfying or agonizing. It reminds me of losing my baby teeth.

I've been dreaming of losing my teeth. I dream that they start falling out of my mouth while I'm being interviewed and Raleigh just looks at me with strange, impassive eyes. Then I realize that they are *my* eyes, looking at me. I realize I'm Raleigh. So perhaps it is Raleigh who dreams of losing his teeth? I'm not sure. I haven't asked him about it.

We had another interview this morning. It was long. They asked us about you, about what you were like, about whether you were mentally stable, about what you'd done with that kaiju brain. I told them that you were a rock star. I told them that when I met you, you had green streaks in your hair. I told them that you'd saved the world just as much as I had.

After they asked us about you, they asked me about the Marshal. They saved that for the end. They always save it for the end. They save it for the end every time.

I hate interviews.

I wish you were here. I wish everyone was here. I wish it wasn't just Raleigh and me. We're terrible at cheering each other up. No one ever says anything stupid. No one starts singing in annoying falsetto and playing air guitar.

The drift is strange. I've been stealing miniature blueberry muffins from the complimentary breakfast tray that the hotel sends up every morning. I've been hiding them in a drawer, just to have a secret to keep. After our interview, Raleigh opened the drawer.

I cried for the first time since we shut the breach.

Raleigh went for bagels.

Love,  
Mako

P.S. I snapped a picture of the view from our hotel room. It's in the attachment.

To: Newton Geiszler  
From: Mako Mori  
Subject: Washington

Dear Newt,

I'm writing to you from a bench overlooking the Tidal Basin. The trees are bare. I snapped a picture for you, it's attached to this email.

Raleigh and I are incognito, me with a wide-brimmed hat, him with a pair of glasses he doesn't need and a *Superco<sup>2</sup> (Inducting liders)* hooded sweatshirt he bought from a street vendor in NYC. I didn't know your band had merchandising.

Did you know I'm a fashion icon?

I didn't either, until *Vogue* called me and told me so. Repeatedly. I'm doing a photo shoot for them next week before we leave America for Brasília. Raleigh will be doing one for *GQ* around the same time. He's concerned he's going to have to wear a sport coat and jump off objects while looking excited. All I could say to that is: "I hope so."

I saw on the news that Dr. Gottlieb will be giving a talk to UC Berkeley's Mathematics and Physics departments. They say it's closed-door, but I'm sure I'll be able to find a livestream. Are you going to be there?

Love,  
Mako

To: Newton Geiszler  
From: Mako Mori  
Subject: Manchego

Is a delicious cheese.

I am attaching a picture of the lunch provided by *Vogue* for the photoshoot. Everything comes in mouth-sized, artful pieces. I wonder if they always do that, or if it's a nod to a Japanese aesthetic they think I'll appreciate. If so, they're right. I'm so full. This seems counterproductive. I thought fashion icons weren't supposed to eat cheese all afternoon.

*Vogue* made me a stylized replica of the black Interface Suits that Dr. Lightcap designed. It's much less comfortable and much more flattering. They also gave me an ostrich feather dyed red to match my hair. When I said, "what do I do with this?" they said, "anything you want," and then they said, "maybe not *that*, though." After the photos were finished, they asked me if I had a contact number for you and whether I thought you'd be willing to pose topless. I said I didn't know.

Do you have a new phone number? I've tried to call you, but you haven't picked up.

I like to picture you in skinny jeans and a neohipster pea coat walking along winding San Francisco streets. I like to think that you spend your days learning to cook, rolling your eyes at the contents of local record stores, playing your guitar, and making Dr. Gottlieb make that face that he makes especially for you. Sometimes I think, 'maybe he's put green streaks back in his hair,' sometimes I think, 'maybe he has an eyebrow ring now'. Yesterday Raleigh said, "what do you think *Geiszler* does to go incognito, dress as a tennis prodigy?" That made me laugh a little bit.

But you didn't take anything when you left the PPDC. Not your clothes, not your guitar, not your (mostly) stolen garden, not your computer. I put it all in storage for you, except for the plants, which I gave to Tendo.

It's hard for me to hold onto my vision of your current life when I locked half the things I picture in a dark room at the back of the Hong Kong Shatterdome.

It's hard to be sad when everyone expects you to be happy.

Even if you are angry with me, could you write to me?

Love,

Mako

To: Newton Geiszler

From: Mako Mori

Subject: América del Sur

Dear Newt,

I haven't written for a few days because Raleigh and I had some real work to do. This morning we gave a presentation on resource allocation to Brazil's National Congress. It was mostly a courtesy. A way for the PPDC to show its gratitude for all the resources Brazil devoted to the both the Jaeger program and the Wall of Life, especially since they aren't a nation on the Pacific Rim.

We spent the afternoon traveling to a small town on the Atlantic Coast. I'm writing to you from a stone patio overlooking the water, waiting for my toenail polish to set. It's red. I snapped a picture. It's attached. My toes and the Atlantic.

Raleigh has a strange relationship with you now. I think he's having trouble reconciling the neohipster nerd he met once in an elevator with the idea of you as a badass older brother. It's complicated. He lost his own brother, did you know? He never speaks of Yancy, but he mentions you a lot.

Five minutes ago, he turned to me and said, "the 'anonymous fan' who gave you those rollerblades for your thirteenth birthday? It was *Geiszler*. It *must* have been."

I can't believe I never figured that out.

It doesn't seem fair that Raleigh Becket can solve the mysteries of Mako Mori's past over Piña Coladas.

Thanks for the rollerblades. They irritated everyone and so I should have known, even then, that they came from you. That was one of the better years.

Love,  
Mako

To: Newton Geiszler  
From: Mako Mori  
Subject: The Talk

Dear Newt,

This evening Raleigh and I watched Dr. Gottlieb's talk over bowls of *moqueca capixaba* and glasses of prosecco. It was very good. I noticed he has now included your slide on the neural interface. I also noticed that he confirmed that you drifted with a kaiju. Not once, but twice.

Did you know that no one has yet *said* this directly?

The media will devour this information like sharks devouring little fish.

Remember when you watched *Blue Planet* with me? Once, and then eleven more times? I was an annoying child. I think about those little fish a lot. I always wanted to be a shark, but knew I wasn't. Just a little fish.

I took a secret picture of Raleigh watching Dr. Gottlieb's talk. He looks embarrassingly fascinated, like a nerd. It's attached.

I emailed Dr. Gottlieb to let him know I watched the livestream. I've emailed him a few times, asking for updates. He hasn't responded to any personal emails, only those I've sent in an official capacity. He hasn't responded to Tendo either. I think he might not trust us. I think he might not trust any of us. That's the only explanation that seems likely to me. He never mentions you. Maybe you don't trust us either, not anymore.

I can't blame you for that.

I hope it's that you don't trust me anymore.

How sad is it, to hope for that?

If I had known, I would never have let them do what they did.

You should have told me.

Why didn't you tell me?

I could stop them, in the future. I know I could. I'm an icon now. I can do whatever I want. That's what people keep telling me. I think it might be true. There's one way to find out.

Love,

Mako

To: Newton Geiszler

From: Mako Mori

Subject: Tierra del Fuego

Dear Newt,

We're here because Raleigh wanted to go to Antarctica and I said no, like a normal person. But then he gave me his sad eyes and I remembered how he and his brother had pretended to be polar explorers. We compromised on Tierra del Fuego. The nicest thing about this place is that no one recognizes us. Hardly anyone. At all. We're staying in Ushuaia for two days before we go to London. The seafood is ridiculous. I would attach the picture I took of my dinner, but I don't want to make you cry. I know how you feel about eating fish.

Raleigh wants me to meet his parents after this tour is over.

It's strange because I already know his parents. It's strange because I feel like I was the too-excited kid who dragged Yancy everywhere until I dragged him out of bed and to his death.

Even Raleigh knows that's not the way it happened; I'm not sure why I said that.

Love,  
Mako

To: Newton Geiszler  
From: Mako Mori  
Subject: London

Dear Newt,

The city is hard to go back to after Ushuaia. I've been wearing a scarf over my hair. It helps with being recognized. Maybe I should get a blonde wig? That would look ridiculous, but that would be the point.

Right now, it's just me in front of an open window. (No balcony this time.) Raleigh is asleep. It's late.

I talked to Tendo earlier today. Did you know he resigned from the PPDC? He says it's because he was offered a job at one of the premier German robotics companies, but I think it's because everyone is gone, except for Herc Hansen. Tendo says that he hasn't heard from either you or Dr. Gottlieb. I asked him what he's going to do with your plants and he said he was going to hunt you down and hand-deliver them back to you.

I wish you'd answer your phone. Do you have a new phone? A new number? Do you need my number? Are you reading these emails? Are you okay? Are you angry with me?

Love,  
Mako

To: Newton Geiszler  
From: Mako Mori  
Subject: More London

Dear Newt,

Today Raleigh and I are doing a joint photo shoot. We're taking a break while they mock up a faux stereotactic drift interface. My back is sore, because for some reason they thought it would look good if Raleigh stood opposite me, holding one of my ankles in mid-air while I arched my back and twisted to look at the camera. I'm not sure what this is supposed to convey. But, they said that they heard from Vogue that I liked manchego cheese so there was *so much* of it at lunch. This makes up for a lot, in my book.

Everyone's been asking me about you. I think this is partially because The Daily Telegraph ran an article on how we are secretly biological half-siblings. This is one hundred percent due to your guyliner phase in 2005. There is a picture circulating from your first East Coast tour in which you almost look half-Asian under dim lights. It's a stretch, but the hair dye and eye makeup helps. It is the same picture I stole from you when I was twelve. I wonder where they found it.

When I was growing up, I never wished you were my brother, not even when we watched ocean documentaries or when you were teaching me to play the bass, because to wish that felt like a betrayal of my real family. My first family. I didn't want to replace them with living people. Now I wish that I had more people than memories.

*Syncope* is playing on the overhead speakers as I type this.

Raleigh is surreptitiously whistling along in between eating little pastry shells full of some kind of delicious goo. I have attached a picture.

Love,

Mako

To: Newton Geiszler

From: Mako Mori

Subject: Even More London

Dear Newt,

I just saw the article in *Wired*. It looks like someone leaked Dr. Gottlieb's correspondence with the top brass of the PPDC. It makes me wonder who reads these emails that I'm sending. Are *you* reading them, or are they just being read by the IT department at the PPDC and by entrepreneurial journalists who have the means to intercept network traffic?

Maybe one day you and I will meet and we'll walk out to the middle of an abandoned beach and you'll tell me what happened to you, far away from any electronic devices.

Or maybe you never will.

I'm sure *Wired* got a few things wrong, but I think they got at least as many things right.

After Raleigh read the article, I threw away the magazine.

We went to breakfast and had mystery sausage and roasted tomatoes and eggs.

After breakfast, while Raleigh was shaving, I took the magazine out of the trash, tore out the article, and packed it in the lining of my suitcase.

I hope you're not brain damaged, Newt, like they say. You were fine after you drifted the first time, and the second time. I talked to you. I found you the morning after and made you your signature cocktail at eleven in the morning and then watched Dr. Gottlieb drink it. Everything was fine until the third day. Until the mess hall.

Wasn't it?

Maybe it wasn't.

The city is covered with fog today. We had planned to be tourists in the morning before our presentation at King's College, but neither of us feels like being recognized.

They'll ask me about you today. I know they will. Maybe, this time, they'll save *you* until the end.

Love, love, love, love,

Mako

To: Newton Geiszler

From: Mako Mori

Subject: Paris

Finally, a city where we can be ourselves without getting mobbed. Raleigh and I are at a tiny café, drinking coffee and eating delicate pastries, being mostly ignored by the quiet clientele. I feel like I'm in a room full of cats. I always wanted a cat.

The day is sunny. This morning, Raleigh bought me an antique dagger from a small shop along the Seine. He said it reminded him of me because it was beautiful and lethal.

Later, I bought him a pastry and said it reminded me of him because it was cute and sweet.

He laughed so hard that coffee came out his nose, which was a little scary, because I'm not that funny.

I always wanted to be beautiful and lethal. Like a shark. I wonder if he said that because that's what I am, or because he knows that's what I wanted. Whenever I think of the drift, and the tangle it's made of my mind, I think of you.

The café has been playing a mix of American, South Korean, and French pop music. *LHC* by *The Superconducting Supercolliders* just started playing. Raleigh is singing along under his breath. *LHC* is his favorite, mostly because he hates the idea of *Syncope* being his number one, just because it's so popular. Secretly, he's a little bit of



a contrarian. My favorite song is the one about the girl who's actually a robot but lying to herself about it. You know the one:

*Resist, Transmit,*

*You must know you're a machine.*

It reminds me of Gipsy Danger.

I hate you so much sometimes.

Please write to me.

Love,

Mako

To: Newton Geiszler

From: Mako Mori

Subject: Sacré Cœur

We were sitting on the steps above Paris, watching the street vendors hassle tourists at sunset when Raleigh said, "I'd propose to you right now, Mako, if it didn't feel so much like cheating."

I didn't say anything.

We watched the sunset together.

I took a picture. It's attached.

Love,

Mako

To: Newton Geiszler

From: Mako Mori

Subject: Still Paris

Dear Newt,

The sun is warm this morning. I'm writing to you from our balcony, surrounded by rooftops and the sounds of pigeons.

It feels strange to be so far from the sea. I can't hear it, I can't smell it, I feel always like I'm too far from where I might be needed. But I'm not needed anymore. Not like I was. Now, I'm just an image on a strange page of human history.

The city motto here is *fluctuat nec mergitur*, which means 'It is tossed by the waves, but does not sink.' I love that.

Raleigh just interrupted me to say, "are you still writing to that nerd?"

Please note that he is now wearing his *Supercos* sweatshirt in the privacy of our hotel room. Not for camouflage.

Raleigh just interrupted me again to say, "Mako, I'm wearing this because it's *cold*. Not because Geiszler is cool. Mako. No. Mako, don't type that. Mako, no. Don't type this either, Mako. Mako. Why do I do this to myself, I'm going to take a shower."

This is his punishment for reading over my shoulder. He knows I hate that.

I looked up the weather in San Francisco today. Partly cloudy.

I like to think that you're getting the band back together. I like to think that you're song-writing in a neohipster coffee shop with framed vinyl on the walls and tables and chairs carved from found wood, drinking something fair trade and genetically modified with your sleeves rolled up and pointless fingerless gloves on your hands while you flash your body art at everyone who passes because you're a tasteless provocateur. I like to think that you've got a draft of an NSF grant in shoulder bag to work on later. I'd like to think that Dr. Gottlieb is sitting at the next table trying to pretend he doesn't know you but doing a terrible job, as usual.

You know you could always come with us. You could join our tour. You'd be on it, if you hadn't left. If what you'd done hadn't raised so many questions. I'd make them let you in. I'd make them.

Just say the word.

Any word.

Love,  
Mako

To: Newton Geiszler

From: Mako Mori

Subject: Airports

Even in France, are trying.

I bought a wig and I'm wearing a pink sweatshirt with the Eiffel tower on it that looks so terrible I have to shut my eyes when I see a reflective surface coming my way. I squinted and took a picture in the bathroom mirror. It's attached.

Next time, we'll ask for the security escort.

Raleigh can't stop laughing at me. He's started calling me 'babe' and has adopted a southern accent.

Never again.

Ten percent of people we pass are wearing your exact glasses.

You're on the cover of *Rolling Stone*, did you know? I've never seen the picture before. It's a black and white photo of you, standing right at the edge of a stage, your hair a mess, your tie uselessly loose, your eyes shut. You look indecent, and *not* like you're singing about particle accelerators and OCD robots that lie to themselves about their true natures. I bought five copies and almost blew my cover doing it.

I haven't read the article yet. I hope they say nice things. The only text on the front of the magazine is in white, running right at the bottom of the page. It reads: *The Reshaping of the American Science Scene*. This seems promising.

Give me your address and I'll send you a copy.

Yesterday I read an article theorizing that a John Doe in a coma in UCSF's Neurology Unit was you. I tried to rule it out from the picture, but the quality was poor.

I also read an article that I was a mid-level member in the Cult of the Kaiju, complete with crisp, photoshopped images of me in purple robes, so I guess it doesn't really mean anything.

It's only been a few weeks since we closed the breach, but already the tributes to the fallen are ending and the images of the living outnumber the images of the dead.

It is a relief not to see his face everywhere.

When relief feels like betrayal, then it is not relief anymore.

I want to go home.

How about you?

Love,

Mako

# In Two Parts

## Dictation 1

Maks in socks! Wait, is this on? I don't think I turned it on. Did you turn it on for me? That is, like, *so nice* of you, man. You're being really, *really* nice. I don't like that. It makes me suspicious.

Of what?

Of you.

How gratifying.

What was I doing?

I have no idea.

Could you guess maybe though?

I believe you were addressing Ms. Mori before you were, apparently, distracted by my kindness.

Yes. Mako. Right. I will solve this. No problem. Dear Ms. Mako Mori. I would like to make you aware of some certain things that have recently occurred. Number one is that I do not have vision anymore so I cannot work for you, I'm assuming you're in charge now, my eyes have caved in, this is *very serious*, and I am now in dystopian prison because of this, having inadvertently dragged my colleague here as well. You are very photogenic, and so you are going to have to pick up the torch of awesome, all the dropped torches of awesome, and just carry them from here on out until you find other people to give them to like a relay.

Newton, you cannot send this to Ms. Mori.

Mako, but no seriously. Please get us out of here. Hermann likes you a lot he just keeps it on the inside, he thinks you're very smart. We're having a little bit of a bad day and need to be rescued. Sincerely, Newt. Very sincerely. Also we are—where are we? Customs.

I don't think that's a place.

Yes, it most certainly is. Unfortunately.

Well I just don't think so.

That's because your brain isn't working properly.

Yes, it is, actually, *Hermann*, for your information. Kind of it is, except for fine motor everything. The point is pretty much it is. Nothing is wrong with me, things are just wrong with the world. Subjective reality has been turned into objective reality by neuroscience. I'm always right. Mako, are you getting this? We're at 'Customs' if that's even a thing. If it is, it looks like a German dystopia. Just put that into your phone. Dystopic Customs in Germany. Get directions. We will see you soon. No one's trying to kill us though, so you could take a day off first if you wanted. Maybe tomorrow. Anytime really. Can you turn this thing off for me? Send to Mako please.

That would be a singularly terrible idea, Newton.

## Dictation 2

Letter to Mako.

Hey Mako.

## Dictation 3

Letter to Mako.

So Mako—

## Dictation 4

Letter to Mako.

Nope.

## Dictation 5

Letter to Mako.

Hey Maks, I'm really sorry about a lot of things.

## Dictation 6

Letter to Mako.

Hey Mako, so you'd kill me, right? I mean, if I had to be killed. You'd kill me with a sword, wouldn't you? You wouldn't let Captain Jawline McBecket just shoot me in the head, right? This is kind of important to me. Do you want to know a fun fact? Thanks to collective consciousness, I know, ah, know what it feels like to be killed with a sword. It feels awesome, actually. Counterintuitively, it feels really good. That's probably because kaiju don't feel pain the way humans feel pain. Super useful. For them. Less so for me, being a human, feeling pain. Feeling kind of a lot of pain right now, Mako, not gonna lie. This explains a lot about my preferred mode of death. In retrospect this doesn't make the most sense. It's not weird to think about this. Is it? Nah—I'm pretty sure everyone—um, you know what? Yeah, I'm erasing this now.

## Dictation 7

Letter to Mako. For reals.

Dear Mako, I'm in San Francisco now. Full disclosure, I kind of embarrassingly do not know what day it is. It's a Sunday night. It's late here. I'm on the balcony of our hotel room. It's extremely picturesque, what with the starless fog and the crumbling cement and the nearby radioactive waste and the Wall that blocks the sea. I, too, look extremely poetic with my unwashed clothes and the too-cool-for-everyday-hygiene look that I'm rocking at present. I think I have bilateral glaucoma or something, so I'm wearing sunglasses at night. Like the cool kids do. Hopefully it's temporary. The faux glaucoma, I mean. Fauxcoma. I'm cool.

God, I can't send this to you. Can I? Probably not, no.

Hermann is sleeping, if you can really call it that. He's been having horrific nightmares for days now, maybe since the drift.

Editing note to future me, please redact that last, *you ass*.

Hermann's giving a talk tomorrow to UC Berkeley's Departments of Quantitative Splendor. I'm pretty sure this is that stupidest idea either one of us has had in *days*. There is no way this is going to go well for him. I'm actually not sure why he's doing this. I think it has something to do with me, and something to do with, like, honor? You would think after sharing brains—

And redact that too. Think with your cortex, Geiszler. The top layer, even.

I should just trash this whole thing.

The drift is weird, Mako, am I right? It's even weirder when you do it wrong. Do it badly. Type in a voltage cheat code. I named the program Konami, because I'm secretly a nerd. You might not know this about me. Tell no one.

Anyway, I'm doing great. How are you? Are you famous? Hermann won't let me watch the news, because—

Redact that.

I'm doing great. How are you? I'm sure you're famous now. This morning I think you might have been on the news. I couldn't really tell, because I can't really see. Tragically. As I mentioned. I talked about the weird glaucoma-equivalent, right? It was in a diner. The news. Not the glaucoma. Long story. I met a waitress named Flow, except with a 'w'. It's like a waitress homonym thing that she's rocking. Homonym'd.

I got free breakfast because I looked like a guy who saved the world.

I'm really sorry about Marshal Pentecost. That whole thing.

Redact that.

I'm really sorry about what happened at the—

Redact that.

I'm really sorry about what happened last week. A few days ago. In the water.

Redact redact redact.

I'm going to erase this, kiddo. Sorry.

## Dictation 8

Attention: care of Mako Mori.

Remember when you had a crush on Skye McLeod, the Improbably Dreamy Summer Student from MIT, back when we had money and interns and money for interns?

Remember when he left?

Remember when you cried about it?

Remember when I sang you a song to console you?

*Don't cry, don't raise your eye,  
It's only teenage wasteland.*

Remember when you kicked me in the shins?

Me neither. I don't remember any of those times.

## Dictation 9

Letter to Mako, attempt eight.

Maks, hey, sorry I haven't contacted you. Funny story, I really cannot see at all, and Hermann is super traumatized about anything having to do with the PPDC right now, so I hate to ask him to check my email.

Wait, is this even on?

Yes?

No?

It would be helpful if I could see, like, you know, *anything*. I'm pretty sure it's not on. Trying again. One sec. Yes. Okay, yes it is on. And it *was* on, I think. How many Ph.D.s do you have, Dr. Geiszler? Too many. That's the answer. Restarting. Letter to Mako Mori, attempt eight. Thousand.

Maks in socks, hey. What's happening. Look, long story short, I can't see all that well right now. I tried to get my phone to talk to me like it's actually the future that we're living in, rather than one point five decades ago, but I may have dropped my phone, slightly, a little bit, kind of, into a glass of water, on purpose, after chemically waterproofing it as a proof of principle, last week, or, maybe, two weeks ago? Before the world didn't end. A guy's got to practice his skills if he wants to retain them, *yeah* he does, obviously, like, you know, martial arts? You practice that, right? Except this time, for me, it's martial chemistry. Or just regular chemistry. Failed chemistry.

Look, the point is that my phone won't talk to me.

So I will just record this and maybe get Hermann to somehow make it into text that can then be emailed to you. Or, on the other hand, maybe I'll just wait and do it later because Hermann gets really quiet and super conflicted when I mention the PPDC. That's actually kind of his status most of the time now. Super quiet. Really conflicted. Not me, though. I'm fine. I get it. Like, cogs and stuff. Bureaucratic grinding. Small people. Communism, collective good. Spock and the reactor core. *Kirk* and the reactor core. You know what I'm saying. I get it. I'm not mad about the whole, 'so you maybe have epilepsy now, no one knows, it's mysterious,' thing.

Legit, I am not mad. Or even surprised, really.



You're probably mad. You're probably thinking, 'why has that loser not emailed me? I saved the world.'

And I say to you: 'Yes, Mako, yes you did. But that does not change the fact that I cannot really see, let alone read.'

I'm sure you're not thinking that, Maks.

I know what you're thinking.

It's four in the morning here. I hope you're drinking stupidly expensive champagne out of your own designer shoe. I hope you're taking all the material excess that society is throwing at you and packing it down, pouring water over it, and using it as a skating rink.

Is Becket a good skater? What's his deal? I bet he plays hockey. I bet he chops wood for fun. I bet I'm the better *Portal* player, though, and that's the ultimate test of contemporary masculinity. So. Yeah.

What's new with you? I'm really into Descartes now. Descartes and all his friends. I think I'm going to rederive calculus from first principles because I need a hobby.

Mako, this is terrible.

I'm erasing this.

## Dictation 10

Hey Mako,

So I tried watching the news. It did not go well for me.

## Dictation 11

Letter to Mako, attempt whatever, none of this is useable.

Dear Mako, sorry I have been out of touch for a little while. Things haven't been going so well. I realize I have missed eleven of your eleven calls, but I one hundred percent guarantee you that I will short circuit my brain if I pick up the phone. There won't be any talking, there will just be me, sort of saying nothing and you sort of saying, "Newt" over and over and over again and everyone will be confused and some people might stop breathing and pass out.

Okay, yeah, great work, Dr. Geiszler, that's a fantastic letter you've drafted, why don't we just, oh, I don't know, *delete it*.

## Dictation 12

Letter to Mako. nth attempt. Very serious. One hundred percent business.

Dear Mako, I'm writing to you from a hotel room in San Francisco. Sorry I've been out of touch. If it makes you feel any better, I haven't talked to anyone except for Hermann and my neurologist, Hypothetical Rain, aka Actual Coral. Coral is actually her name. She's a surfer.

I hope you're doing well. You and that guy. What's his name? Your drift-partner that you majestically rescued from the anteverse?

I'm doing great. Right now I'm watching a *Star Wars* marathon. More like listening to it, truth be told. I'm on the balcony at the moment so I don't have to see Luke Skywalker brutally murder the Rancor in *Return of the Jedi*, because I'm just not feeling that one today and I'm scoring ten out of ten on the Practical Foresight Scale.

It's cloudy here, I think. My vision is returning a little bit, but I'm still on sunglassed probation. I can hear the seagulls calling in the distance. Whole flocks of them nest on the Wall.

I kind of want to eat them, a little bit.

Which is definitely weird. Redact that.

The Wall is ugly and an ecological disaster.

I kind of want to stand on top of it.

Kind of a lot.

Kind of so much that I think if I leave this room unchaperoned I'll end up there.

I haven't told this to Hermann.

And I'm not going tell it to you either.

What a mess. I suck, Mako. But you already knew that.

## Dictation 13

Hey Maks, sup?

Hermann and I are doing awesome, just thought I'd let you know. He forgot who he was for five minutes just now and earlier this morning I was a little worried I was going to bleed to death in the bathroom because I watched the news, panicked, and forgot who I was for a little while and then I was covered with blood but I have two shirts so that's fine, it's always such a relief when I figure out the blood is mine, it's like my hindbrain took a lesson from *The X-files* and whispers the word 'demon' very softly on repeat until my prefrontal cortex catches up and starts the process of not crying. I met a very nice young lady from the housekeeping staff named Danielle who helped me with the blood problem I was having once I explained that I had a lethal yet non-communicable disease, which might or might not be true.

Wait for it, Maks.

Erase.

## Dictation 14

Letter to *Mako*, dude. Get it together.

Dear Mako, I hope you're not worried because I haven't been in touch. Let me explain. First of all, I can't really see very well, so I haven't been checking my email. Hermann glances at my account every so often to make sure I'm not, you know, being charged with any crimes or anything. He said you've been sending me messages. He wouldn't read them to me, because he felt like that would be disrespectful to you. Between you and me, I think that's true, but I also think that he's got a lot of rage going on where the PPDC is concerned and he just doesn't want to deal with any of it. Even you. Which isn't cool, but still, he's had a rough week, and he did get charged with abduction, which he hasn't *said* much about, but I think the whole situation is giving him an ulcer from repressed anxiety. And rage. Did I mention the rage? The dude is seriously pissed. At the machine, Maks. At the gears of bureaucracy. I'm pretty sure he's not pissed directly at you. *I* am not pissed at all. Just to be clear. Second of all, I haven't been answering my phone because I just don't think that's going to go so well, because I just—look I can tell you right now how it's going to go. You're going to say something normal, and I'm going to freak out. Then I'm going to say something stupid about Pentecost, and you're going to cry and try to pretend you're not crying, and then I'm going to cry and try to pretend *I'm* not crying but less well than you, so—this is better. Trust me.

Today Hermann is giving a job talk at UC Berkeley. I didn't watch it, but he called me later sounding sort of primly pleased in a super restrained way, so it went awesome. They offered him a job, and I told him he had better go drinking. So he's living it up with the Berkeley math guys right about now. I've been spending the day like the cultural connoisseur I am, making a study of science fiction archetypes and watching *Star Wars* while wishing secretly it was *Dune*.

What are you up to? Being famous, I hope. How's Raleigh? Please tell me there's more to that guy than his exterior suggests. I give him massive points for being drift compatible with you, Maks, but I also detract massive points for his penchant for destruction sans inquiry. Destruction's okay, as long as you learn something. Ideally though? One would avoid destruction altogether.

I just wanted to say, and it's kind of not really forgivable that I didn't say anything before, not when you came by the lab with the tequila and the coffee creamer and the Midori that should have been absinthe, because I knew what you were there for, but Hermann was *also* there, and I just didn't know how to *do* it, not exactly, and I also couldn't drink because apparently alcohol can lower one's seizure threshold, but I knew what you were there for and I'm just really sorry.

You know he never liked me. The Marshal. Marshal Pentecost. Your kind-of dad. I think it's because he thought I was a bad influence on you. Which, yes, maybe, probably I was. I did, accidentally, buy you forbidden rollerblades. I did, accidentally, teach you American and German profanity. I did, accidentally, introduce you to Skye McLeod, the Improbably Dreamy Summer Intern. I did, accidentally, leave you alone in the lab with Skye McLeod for forty-five minutes, I'm not sure what happened there, I don't want to know. I did, accidentally, make you my eponymous cocktail for your seventeenth birthday, which the Marshal felt was about four years too early. Anyway, the fallout from all those accidents are probably all the stories I would have told you, if Hermann hadn't given us both a lecture and then stolen my alcohol.

Dr. Gottlieb has his charms, but well, you know.

So yeah. My idea of consoling you about everyone who's dead basically is just me telling you stories about your adopted father yelling at me.

I'm great.

Seriously Maks, I will actually write to you at some point. I'll think of something better.

Any day now.

## Dictation 15

Good morning, San Francisco. Hermann came back drunk from his math night even after a ninety-minute cab ride around the bay. I wish I'd seen pre-cab-ride Hermann, I'm sure it would have been awesome. I'm drunk on insomnia.

God, Maks. Ever feel like you're fighting a losing battle with everything you are, have been, and will be? I thought not.

## Dictation 16

Actual letter to Mako.

Dear Mako, I'm sorry I haven't written to you before now, I've been working on scraping my life out of the inside of a centrifuge accident. You know how it goes. Stripped screws, bent rotors, shattered test tubes, glass and blood everywhere. Good times.

Hermann and I are in San Francisco now. Well, technically Oakland. Hermann is going to be a math professor, and I'm going to be a guy who lives in his apartment.

Redact that. Redact all of that.

Dear Mako, I'm sorry I haven't written to you yet, but things have been a little bit—

Redact that.

Dear Mako, I'm sorry I haven't written to you yet. I'm an insensitive jerk, as we both know, and I can't read yet. I hope you're doing well. My eyes are improving. I saw your picture on the front page of the *Times* this morning, you looked good. I like the red hair. End one era, start a new one.

Hermann and I went apartment hunting today. It is our mission in life to perfectly recreate the sit-com *The Odd Couple* and so far we are killing it. Kind of. I actually really can't stand picture frames that are askew, so I'm doing a bad job being the slovenly one. I blame the drift. Because—kaiju. Kaiju have OCD tendencies and are neat freaks. Who knew? Definitely this has nothing to do with Dr. Gottlieb. Or drifting with him. Which I did not do.

Redact that.

Dear Mako, today I went apartment hunting with my colleague of nine years and he had to drag me out of the first place we saw because I panicked when I couldn't look towards the Pacific, where the breach used to be. I'm sure he had a great time. I know

I did. Now we have a new realtor, and Dr. Geiszler does not go on apartment hunting trips.

Redact that.

Dear Mako, you know who rules? Descartes. Think about it. Geiszler out.

## Dictation 17

Letter to Mako.

Mako! Yeah, I got nothing.

## Dictation 18

Hi Mako, so, true story, I haven't been able to read for weeks now. That's why I haven't checked my email. That's lies, a little bit.

## Dictation 19

Mako I'm not going to tell you that I'm a little bit worried about certain things, like whether I might slip up one day and eat a seagull or a human. I'm not going to tell you that I really want to clone a kaiju, I'm not going to tell you that I think if I did it might fill the void in my head where a hivemind used to live, might soothe the anger of the things I've cut apart. I'm not going to tell you that I'm some kind of weird Prince of the Planet to formalin-fixed and disembodied brains, I'm not going to tell you that I haven't slept in three days because that's not the kind of relationship we have, kiddo. I give you rollerblades. You roll your eyes at me. I say I'm not sure about your boyfriend. You say he's not my boyfriend.

## Dictation 20

Letter to Maks.

Nope, not letter to Maks.

Letter to Newt.

Dear Newt, you are caught in a subpar trajectory. Shift gears. Switch tracks. Go to sleep, maybe. Make a sandwich. Don't stand outside, bleeding on Oakland.

## Dictation 21

Hey Maks, how are you? I'm doing well, Hermann and I just moved into a pre-furnished apartment. It's a little weird, the aesthetic is a little off, the bookshelves have no lateral borders, but it faces the Wall. The *Wall* the wall. The apartment. Not the bookshelf, which is bolted into a different wall. Our apartment faces The Wall and it is made of walls. One of those walls has a bookshelf built into it.

There you go, champ, all right.

Hermann keeps buying me books. I can sort of read them now, not as much as he thinks I can, but my vision is improving. The computer is difficult though, backlit screens are backlit, it turns out. That's why I haven't read your emails yet, Maks. Hermann says you've been writing to me. He hasn't opened the emails though. He says they're all titled with place names. He says you're doing some kind of public relations tour right now, so I suppose you're writing from all the places you've been. That's nice of you, Maks. That's really—

That's just really nice. I've been writing to you, too, I just haven't been sending any of this because it's a little bit depressing—no one wants that, not nowadays. Everything is great. Our civilization continues. We rule the planet. Sweet. You're probably already —

You're probably a little bit sad right now.

And by 'a little bit sad' I mean—

You don't need this kind of thing, Maks, I know you don't.

I've been having some trouble sleeping. I think that my brain chemistry was altered by the drift, and this explains why Hermann can read my thoughts maybe and why I can't use hashi all that well or play the guitar and some other things. I think the fine motor control is going to come back though, Maks, because I really need it. For science. And for music. And for everything.

Maybe I can use this letter.

But maybe I'll erase it.

## Dictation 22

Dear Mako,

Nope. Nevermind. Not feeling it, kiddo.

## Dictation 23

Dear Mako, good news, I'm not going to die of insomnia, at least not today, because Dr. Gottlieb spent seven hours reading to me while I was semi-conscious last night until I finally managed to make it past stage one sleep. In related news, this morning I stepped on him, told him I hated him, and then he left before he murdered me. How are things with you?

## Dictation 24

Letter to Mako.

Dear Mako, how are you? Did you know that Hermann and I are living in Oakland now? We've been avoiding the media circus pretty effectively. San Fran is cool in that way—people are chill about the whole celebrity thing. We've been hanging out, doing a little science. Hermann just got hired by UC Berkeley. I'm shopping around at the moment, career-wise. Weighing my options. I'm not sure what I'm going to do now that the world-saving gig is done. Maybe neuroscience? That seems to be where things are happening these days. I've spent this past week updating Hermann's wardrobe for him, because good lord, he needed it.

How are you? Is that Becket guy still hanging around? What are you up to? Kicking ass and taking names, I bet.

I've been reading a lot of philosophy lately. It makes me feel like a teenager, a little bit. I also got a dog whom I tried to name Leibniz, but who seems to respond only to the name "Fire Truck." Go figure. Leibniz and I go walking in the mornings around San Francisco. I'll probably take up racquetball again soon, or whatever it is that's popular out here. Squash, maybe?

I've been corresponding with pretty much everyone; weirdly I left you for last, not really sure why. Probably because you're the best, don't be mad. Tendo says hi. So



does Chuck. He's building furniture now. Aggressively chopping driftwood. The Wei triplets come around every now and then, when they feel like making me jealous of their pre-production beta version of Assassin's Creed VII: The Delian League. Caitlin Lightcap and I are collaborating on a project that's going to revolutionize the current interface between the brain and artificial limbs for patients at the UCSF Medical Center. Basically, everyone we've ever met is good and they all say hi.

My parents say they can't believe I actually know you. They're moving in together now that my mom has settled down, it's weird but nice. I'm happy for them, I suppose, in a sort of suavely distant way, because I've got my own stuff going now, and have for a while.

Got to go, Hermann is rolling his eyes at something in Nature: Kaiju Science and I have to go defend my people against uppity mathematicians.

Say hi to the Marshal for me Maks. I'm sure I'll see you really soon.

## Dictation 25

Letter to Mako.

Heya Maks, it's been a few weeks. Sorry about that. Things have been a little bit hard on my end. It's Hermann, really, who's been having a tough time—

## Dictation 26

Letter to Mako.

Hi Maks, sorry I've been out of touch. I'll explain later.

I'm writing to you from San Francisco. Dr. Gottlieb and I just moved in together. You know us—two small town kids in the big city, trying to be good people and ignore the Call of the Wall. Right now I'm standing on our balcony. This is some fancy stuff, kiddo: flagstones made of compressed, post-fracked shale, railings made of something else that's even more eco-conscious, designed by a neohipster named Blaze, who loves this radioactive bay that I'm staring straight at. It's pretty, if you like hideous things.

I jest, I jest.

Kind of.

So? What's going on? How's Captain Sir Saves Everyone? When did your hair turn red? What's the story there?

As for me, I'm doing pretty well. Driving Hermann out of his head in a genuinely literal way. Really upsetting him most of the time. Bleeding all over his stuff. Letting him cook me dinner and buy me things out of misplaced obligation. Not sleeping for four days, getting a little paranoid, and then screaming at him until I panic and he has to talk me down. Telling him I hate him for his cereal choices. Disappearing for hours without leaving a note. You know. Pretty standard. Prototypical Geiszler. The real classy stuff. You know how I roll.

Turns out he actually does like me. Kind of a lot.

So this sucks for him.

I like him a lot, so because it sucks for him it also sucks for me.

I always screw these things up so badly, Mako. I kind of have a significant other, now, you know? This has never gone well for me. The lasting relationship thing. Maybe I should do something *nice* for the guy? Because he's pretty much The Best and I am a pile of The Worst. Like, you know, should I get him a present? What's something nice? A plant? A fish? Flowers from a plant?

Wait.

Yup, that's me. Dr. Geiszler, ladies and gentlemen, reinventing romance from first principles in a glass-half empty kind of way.

Maks—

Maks, I might never send you this letter.

## Dictation 27

Hey Maks,

It's late, and I'm recording this on my balcony in Oakland. I live next to a radioactive bay now, like some kind of Marvel Universe villain. How are *you* these days? I'm sorry I've been out of touch. Things have been a little complicated lately.

Tomorrow I'll read your emails.

Tomorrow I will.

## Chapter Twenty

Hermann looks up at the pale gray sky and tries to decide whether he should be carrying an umbrella.

Probably.

The cloud cover is total and homogenous and high, a gray-white that is hard to look at without squinting.

"This is so stupid," Newton mutters.

The clouds look like the vanguard of some approaching storm—

"Why are we doing this?" Newton asks.

The clouds look the forward edge of an advancing front. The wind is perhaps colder than it was a few days ago. He's lived in maritime climates for so long now that he loses track of the seasons. It takes him a moment to remember it is winter, rather than autumn.

"Are you ignoring me?" Newton asks.

Hermann pulls his coat closer, staring fixedly at the stream of cars in front of their building.

"You're ignoring me," Newton decides. "That's great. That's just great. Real mature, Hermann. Yup. Really mature."

Hermann has decided that ignoring Newton is the better part of valor at the moment.

"You know there's a weather advisory about the directionality of this wind. We're probably getting thyroid cancer right now," Newton continues, driving the toe of one boot absently into a crack in the sidewalk. "This is pointless. Literally pointless. It's also weird. It's very weird. It's weird even by our contemporary standards. It's weird in the context of the past two weeks. Weird." Newton shivers in the brisk and likely faintly radioactive wind blowing briskly off the bay.

This is too much to silently suffer.

"Since when has 'weirdness' ever precluded you from doing anything?" Hermann snaps, trying to put most of his hood between himself and the directional vector of the wind.

"Hermann. You *bought* a car," Newton snaps right back, making a short lived and fruitless attempt to control his hair during a particularly strong gust of wind.

"I'm aware of that."

"Do you not want to *show* me your car?" Newton asks. "Is your car deformed in some way? Do you think I'm going to ridicule you and/or your car for some reason? Look, I know my track record is not stellar when it comes to, say, hypothetically, respecting your choice of profession, leisure activities, culinary pursuits, musical proclivities, literary tastes, or fashion sense, but I can personally guarantee you that *literally* no matter what your car looks like, I will say 'nice car, Dr. Gottlieb,' and *leave it at that*. You can show me your car, Hermann. You can show me your car—I will be *so nice* about it, if only so I don't have to stand in radioactive wind waiting for a cab. Seriously. Cross my heart."

"Will you shut up?" Hermann asks him politely.

"You are the *worst*," Newton says, as a black, self-driving cab with blue plates pulls up in front of them. He leans forward to open the door of the car, swings it wide, and makes an expansive gesture.

Hermann glares at him and gets in, sliding laterally along faux leather seats that smell of lemoned sterility. He turns off voice recognition and inputs their destination on a touch screen mounted where the back of the driver's seat would be in a non-autonomous vehicle.

Newton shuts the door, buckles his seatbelt on his third attempt, and then says, "so you bought a weird car."

"My car is not 'weird'," Hermann replies stiffly, as the cab pulls away from the curb.

"Relax dude, how bad could it be, really? I mean, first of all, I don't actually care that much about cars. In the grand ranked list of 'Stuff Newton Geiszler Finds Cool'—" Newton breaks off, clapping one hand to his head.

Hermann rolls his eyes.

"Oh god," Newton says theatrically. "Why do I do this to myself? *How* do I do this to myself? I'm so stupid. I think I'm carsick. I'm carsick and brainsick and we have literally been in this cab for twenty seconds. I simultaneously do and don't care about your car. Caring is winning though," he finishes weakly, giving Hermann an intolerably pathetic look of pure, wounded exhortation. "Please show me your car."

Hermann feels a spike of self-reproach that is in no way warranted and has been triggered *only* by the shameless emotional appeal that Newton is, certainly, *consciously* using to further his own ends.

*His 'ends' are that he wants to see your car, you dick*, his brain says, taking Newton's side in Newton's precise tone, using Newton's particular vulgate.

Hermann finds this to be appallingly unfair.

"I'm sure I'll be unable to avoid it," he says.

"So that's a yes, then?" Newton replies, glancing over at Hermann, his fingers pressing against his left temple. "That's a 'yes, Newt, super-friend, drift-partner, I'll show you my car, I'll do it today'?"

"I think that's an extremely optimistic interpretation of what I said," Hermann replies.

"Did you buy a neohipster car? Fancy and silent and semi-elite and one with nature? Did you buy an embarrassingly classic car, like a high-end Volvo from the 1970s? Did you—"

"No," Hermann says, unwilling to listen to an endless concatenation of cars he has not purchased. "My vehicle and you occupy entirely separate fields of existence, *Newton*. Please do not concern yourself with my car. Ever."

"But I *care*," Newton replies, sounding both carsick and defeated one hand over his eyes. "I actually *really* want to know."

"You know *literally* everything else about me," Hermann snaps.

Newton pulls off his glasses and hands them to Hermann.

Hermann takes them, removes his own sunglasses from his pocket, and hands them to Newton.

"And so I *care*," Newton says, settling shades over closed eyes. "A lot. There is literally no person in the world who cares about your car more than I do, other than Actual You, I guess, and the part of me that's you, which I differentiate both from the part of me that's me and Actual You, plus also the kids, who generally wouldn't take an interest in cars, but who are, against all odds, a little curious."

"The *kids*?" Hermann repeats.

"The fish," Newton says after a protracted pause, looking out the window at a world that must consist entirely of a nauseating blur. "The fish kids. Tiffany really wants to know."

"Tiffany has a brain the size of a pin."

"I'm sure that's what all the kaiju say about humans. Said. Except. You know. Thought. And not *pins*, but—"

"When Tiffany designs and builds an underwater Turing Machine, please be sure to inform me," Hermann replies dryly. "I will then apologize for slighting her intelligence. Until such a time—"

"Hey," Newton snaps. "Hey hey hey hey *hey*."

Hermann raises his eyebrows.

"Tiffany is extremely intelligent."

"For a *goldfish*," Hermann says.

"Yes for a *goldfish*. What other kind of intelligent is she going to *be*, dude? She *is* a goldfish. She can't help that. I'm just saying that *for a goldfish* she's very freaking smart, okay? Descartes, *the fish*, has the processing power of a pile of rocks, to my endless disappointment. He's got a good heart though. Can you not be a jerk to our *fish*? God."

"I bought them a needlessly sophisticated underwater habitat," Hermann says.

"For which they thank you," Newton replies. "That doesn't mean you have free rein to disparage their cognitive capacity."

"I will cease disparaging *your* fish when you stop inventing hypothetical criticisms for *my* totally unobjectionable*car*," Hermann replies.

"Fine," Newton says.

"Fine," Hermann replies.

"Fine," Newton says again.

They both stare fixedly out their respective cab windows on principle before Hermann looks back at Newton and asks, in a manner that is not at all conciliatory, "does a metric for assessing goldfish intelligence even exist?"

"Not that I'm aware of, no," Newton replies mildly. "She follows my finger though, so."

"Ah," Hermann says. "Splendid. You must be so proud."

"Shut up," Newton says, glancing over at him with a faint smile. "Is Hypothetical Rain really worth this Actual Cab Ride? Because it's long."

"I suspect yes," Hermann says. "She has, thus far, been absolutely discreet when it comes to the information we've shared with her. I don't particularly care for the idea of confiding to a *second* person the full extent of our actions in Hong Kong."

"Myeah," Newton replies, sounding abruptly exhausted.

As well he might.

Hermann spends a great deal of the car ride trying *not* to talk to Newton in the vain hope that the other man will, possibly, fall asleep.

This does not happen.

Instead, Newton spends ninety minutes free-associating on the topics of fish training, behavioral genetics, historical famines, the current state of American agriculture (a topic on which he knows very little), global warming, and terraforming, before taking a brief and abrupt break that Hermann suspects is a relatively well concealed episode of acute anxiety. Following this, he then resumes with a mystifying soliloquy regarding his deep personal identification with Wesley Crusher before segueing into the Alcubierre drive, colonization as a biological imperative but an ethical minefield, altruism in slime molds, game theory, John von Neumann, Pascal's Wager, and Pragmatism as a discipline.

Hermann comments appropriately while watching the slowly shifting landscape around Oblivion Bay. He tries to remember if Newton had been quite so consistently interesting before drifting, before EPIC Rapport, and before he'd nearly ruined his brain saving the world.

*I look good in a sweater*, his brain says, impersonating his colleague with total precision. *That doesn't hurt.*

Hermann looks away from the Bay Bridge to glare at Newton in abrupt alarm.

The other man stops speaking mid-sentence, hands frozen mid-gesture, and says, "what?" in an overtly defensive tone. "It's not like I'm a radical empiricist, dude, I mean, I have *some* standards."

"What?" Hermann replies, unsettled and mystified.

"Um," Newton replies. "Look, I get that you are deeply horrified by the idea of thoughts not perfectly mirroring reality, but really—"

"Are you trying to *mentally converse* with me?" Hermann demands, eyeing him suspiciously.

Newton stares at him silently for the span of several seconds before saying, "um, *mentally?*"

Hermann is going to take that as a 'no'.

"I *was* trying to *verbally* converse with you," Newton says, offensively slowly. "The operative word being *trying*. I've been talking, aloud, for a while now, in case you've lost track. I've spent the last five minutes doing my best to have a discussion with you about Pragmatism but, honestly dude, you didn't seem all that interested, and I was doing something like eighty percent of the conversational work. So, yeah but no. To summarize, I was *not* trying to mentally converse with you because I was trying to *actually* converse with you." Newton adjusts his borrowed sunglasses. "Um, why do you ask though?"

"What were you thinking about?" Hermann asks, evading Newton's question.

"Schiller?" Newton says. "His criticism of formal logic? Instrumentalism? Your brain? The way you're not so secretly a Platonist? Like, one half-step down the mystical ladder from Gödel? I'm a Formalist, by the way, like *anormal person*, and if, *if*, Hermann, I'm just a little bit obsessed with the Platonist worldview right now it's not my fault. Also I was thinking about dinner, a little bit, maybe? Also, sort of vivisection? That's a pretty common thought undertone for me these days because yeah. But I'm pretty sure that, just now, most of what was going on underneath the Pragmatism was me thinking about dinner. You make pretty good spätzle and I was kind of wondering if that might happen again. Soon. Tonight, maybe? Look, you're making a freaked out face right about now, which I really don't think is warranted. I don't know if this reassures you, but I do think this is a *real* phenomenon that's going on. The thought exchange thing. The SPECTER Effect? Don't freak out. You look a little bit freaked out, dude, you're—"

"You weren't thinking about your *shirt?*" Hermann interrupts.

"My *shirt?*" Newton says slowly, clearly confused, looking down at his maroon sweater in an unimpressed manner. "No. No, Hermann, I was not thinking about *my shirt*. I'm not actually that excited about this shirt, if you want to know. I try *not* to think about it. Would it kill you to *not* buy me sweaters?"

Unfortunately, all of this sounds extremely plausible.

"Never mind," Hermann says.

"Um," Newton says. "You can't just interrupt me in the middle of this whole thing I was doing with Pragmatism as a discipline and how it relates to the philosophy of



mathematics and ask me if I'm invading your brain with thoughts about my *shirt* and then say '*never mind*'. That doesn't work for me."

Hermann says nothing.

"You want to ah—*talk* about anything, dude?"

Hermann shoots his colleague a withering look. "No."

"What's that look? I can be sensitive. Were you getting exogenous sweater hate?" Newton asks.

*No*, Hermann thinks, *I was, in fact, suffering endogenous sweater appreciation of unknown origins.*

"Something like that," Hermann says vaguely.

"Maybe it's just the part of you that's me disapproving of the part of me that's you. By which I mean the part of me that's wearing this sweater. Where did you even *get* this, Hermann? No. Don't tell me. I don't want to know."

"You look extremely respectable."

"I look like a nerd who goes yachting on the weekends."

"No one has gone yachting for half a decade," Hermann says dryly.

"Well maybe you wouldn't have intrusive negative thoughts about my wardrobe if you would just buy me something a little less Gottliebian and a little more Geiszlerian."

"I don't plan on making a *habit* of buying you *clothing*," Hermann replies acidly. "Order something tasteless online."

"Meh," Newton says, looking away. "Backlit screens, man."

"Then you'll have to suffer in the short term," Hermann says.

"Well I don't know about *suffering*," Newton says. "There's a certain appeal to the academic aesthetic I suppose—" he breaks off with a curiously distressed sound and tips his head back against the seat.

"Are you all right?" Hermann asks him.

"Yeah dude, we're just treading close to cognitive dissonance territory, *again*, and I'm already slightly more than slightly carsick, so I don't think I can manage to *not* throw up in this cab if you make me think too much about my wardrobe and how I feel about it—the point is that I *know* I'm not *supposed* to like sweaters and furthermore I *donot* like them, Hermann, so it's just easier if I don't have to face the fact that I *do*, kind of a little bit, like them? But not—"

"Stop," Hermann says. "Think of—" He breaks off when he cannot immediately come up with anything.

"Yeah, *exactly*," Newton snaps.

"Descartes?" Hermann offers. It's low hanging fruit, but it gets the job done.

"I love that guy," Newton whispers.

Hermann reaches over to pat him awkwardly on the shoulder. "I'm aware."

Newton smiles faintly.

As they approach UCSF's medical center, the Wall dominates the view out the cab window, running like a stone ribbon along the line of the coast. Hovering above it are the dynamic specs of circling sea birds.

Hermann prefers those birds at a distance.

Newton watches the Wall in consistently inconsistent intervals, as if it is watching him back.

It is a relief when the cab pulls to a stop in front of a white building housing Hypothetical Rain's clinic.

Actual Coral's clinic.

Dr. McClure's clinic.

Hermann swipes his credit card and steps out of the cab and into a stiff breeze that carries with it the smell of the sea. He turns back, extending a hand to Newton.

Newton gives him an affronted look and says, "get out of here, dude."

"Will you simply *be reasonable*?" Hermann asks.

"*You're* the unreasonable one," Newton says, struggling free of the car with poor grace and stabilizing himself on its metal frame. "Everyone knows that. You're the one freaking out about sweaters while I'm trying to have a civilized conversation."

Hermann has not wasted much thought on Newton's coordination, balance, or proprioception over the past nine years. But, after dragging the man through airports and hospitals and diners and away from one very traumatized real estate agent, after considering Newton's postulation that his current problems stem from some sort of relative dopaminergic deficit, and after being *stepped on*, he finds himself significantly more interested in his colleague's motor control, or lack thereof.

He suspects that Newton is unlikely to be particularly steady following a ninety-minute, cognitively-dissonant cab ride.

Newton shuts the cab door at the same moment Hermann gets a good grip on his elbow, which is fortunate, since, once all its doors are shut, the cab pulls away from the curb.

Hermann yanks the other man back as he starts to go with it.

Newton pulls off his sunglasses, squinting under the soft light of the gray-white sky. He shoots Hermann a look laced with a familiar blend of gratitude and irritation, and says, "swap."

Hermann pulls Newton's glasses out of his pocket and hands them back to him.

"I'm suave," Newton says, squinting, likely referring to his narrowly averted close encounter with the asphalt of the road.

"Terribly suave," Hermann agrees, repocketing his sunglasses.

The wait to see Dr. McClure is not long, though it is somewhat uncomfortable, with Newton endlessly fidgeting and the clear and constant staring directed their way by a young woman near the opposite wall.

Hermann is sure she recognizes them; Newton is sure she's trying to figure out what animal died to make the lining of Hermann's coat.

When they are called back, Newton whispers, "it's synthetic," to her as he passes.

"What is?" she asks, flushing.

"Everything," Newton says.

"Oh my god that's *so deep*," she replies, evidently extremely impressed.

Hermann suffers a brief but intense interval of wistful horror, imagining Newton engaging in any way, shape, or form with the current media frenzy surrounding Ms. Mori and Mr. Becket. He's certain global culture would take decades to recover.

"What was *that*?" Newton whispers, evidently amused at the girl's reaction, as a nurse in pink scrubs shows them to a room.

"That was you abusing your fame," Hermann says.

"Fame? I got the impression it was more like obscure notoriety," Newton replies.

"Not really," the nurse says, turning to look back over her shoulder, her hair fanning as she twists.

"Wait, what?" Newton replies, cocking his head, glancing at her and then back at Hermann, managing to trip over the featureless tile floor as he does so.

Both Hermann and the nurse reach out to right him.

"I'm legit famous?" Newton asks.

"Have you been living under a rock?" the nurse asks, smiling at him.

"Well, a little bit, maybe, yeah," Newton replies.

"With good reason," Hermann snarls, giving the nurse his *most* menacing look.

She looks back at him, abruptly anxious.

Newton looks over at him, taken aback.

Hermann reflects that he may have overreacted slightly.

"We—Dr. McClure—there was a staff meeting," the nurse says, "we won't say anything. Not to the press, if that's what you—we would never—"

"Chill," Newton says, giving her a smile, brief and askew, as he squints to read her nametag. "Uh, Sarah. We're cool. Dr. Gottlieb just hates nice people. That's all. It's kind of his shtick."

Hermann glares at him.

"Um, okay," Sarah says, gesturing briefly toward an open doorway, and backing away.

"The doctor will be right with you."

"Thank you," Newton calls after her with a theatrical pointedness, his gaze fixed on Hermann.

Hermann ignores him, precedes him into the room, removes his coat, and seats himself in one of the three available chairs.

Newton stays on his feet, paces back and forth in front of the exam table, spends a moment watching an evolving starscape that serves as the screenlock on the wall-mounted computer, examines an otoscope, and then, finally, turns to Hermann, saying, "was that really necessary, dude?"

Yes, Hermann thinks.

"No," Hermann says, "but I have no particular inclination to discuss our portrayal by the American media at the present moment."

"Well I hear that," Newton replies. "Do I ever. But it sounds like it might not be *all* bad. Are we legit famous?"

*I am moderately famous, Hermann thinks, while you are fast becoming an international obsession.*

"When compared to Ms. Mori and Mr. Becket we hardly register," he says, managing to avoid an outright lie.

"Well they're ridiculously pretty," Newton says, "so that makes sense to me."

Newton spends a moment examining the wall-mounted ophthalmoscope, while Hermann spends a moment examining his own motivations regarding the verbal misdirection he has been lately performing.

The list of things he is going to have to communicate to Newton at some point is growing increasingly long: the true extent of the man's snowballing fame, the resurgence of *The Superconducting Supercolliders*, the extremely beneficial effect that the recent merchandising and re-release of their albums have had on Newton's finances, the fact that Hermann implied to the entire Berkeley Mathematics Department that they are romantically involved, the emergence of that same hypothesis in the popular press, Hermann's extravagant car, the fact that the email account Newton has never checked is full of invitations for interviews, photo shoots, promotional endorsements, and job offers.

He's not sure whether he's been trying to protect Newton, or himself.

"Do you ever—" Newton begins, clicking through settings on the wall-mounted ophthalmoscope.

Whatever Newton is about to ask is cut short by the arrival of Hypothetical Rain. Dr. McClure. Her hair is escaping from a sloppy knot at the back of her head. Her white coat is unbuttoned, and around the hemline of her skirt, a blue dragon snakes in an embroidered curl.

Hermann looks away.

"You break it, you buy it, man," she says by way of greeting, eyeing Newton, who is still toying with her ophthalmoscope. "Hi, Dr. G."

"Hello," Hermann says, shooting Newton a look that he hopes clearly communicates '*desist*' in command form.

"Oh please," Newton says, replacing the instrument with a quiet click. "I could *build* you one of these things."

"Not one I'd want to *use* though," Dr. McClure says.

"Touché," Newton replies, taking a seat beside Hermann.

"Please excuse him," Hermann says dryly. "He has no conceptual understanding of property."

"Oh? Oh, *really*, Hermann? Because if anyone needs to be apologized for, I'm pretty sure it's you. Because the *very*nice nurse who was too terrified of you to take our vital signs—"

"I heard about that," Dr. McClure says mildly.

"Did you?" Newton continues, with feigned polite surprise, pressing an open hand to his chest. "Did you *really*?"

Hermann can *feel* the pressure of the other man's gaze on the side of his head, but he refuses to turn. On principle.

"Newt," Dr. McClure says. "Chill."

Prior to this exact moment, Hermann had been certain it would be impossible for his esteem for Dr. McClure to increase. He is pleased to find himself incorrect.

"What?" Newton replies, in open incredulity. "I'm chill. I'm *literally always* perfectly chill. Absolutely chill. Zero Kelvin."

"Sure," Dr. McClure says, seating herself in front of her wall computer. "So, what's new? I'm assuming you'd have let me know about anything serious, but just to be clear, no one's been seizing over the past week, right?"

"Nope," Newton says.

Hermann shakes his head.

"Nosebleeds?"

"Continuing apace," Hermann says.

"For both of you?" Dr. McClure asks, eyeing Newton with entirely justified and perspicacious suspicion.

"Yeah," Newton replies, elongating the word into something that demands clarification.

"Kind of briskly apace?"

"He's had fifteen episodes of epistaxis," Hermann says.

"Total, or within the past five days?" Dr. McClure asks.

"The former," Hermann says, while Newton simultaneously says, "the latter."

Hermann looks at him.

"You're lowballing it a little bit," Newton says, apologetically.

Hermann's look hardens into something approaching a glare.

"What, you go shopping," Newton replies defensively. "You also sleep. I'm sorry I haven't kept a tally on the fridge or something, man."

"Either way, it's not really ideal," Dr. McClure says, before Hermann can respond to that piece of provocative idiocy. "I'm still sticking to my irritated-capillary-bed theory since angiography didn't show any vascular abnormalities. How much would you say you're bleeding, volume-wise?"

"Blood volume is notoriously hard to quantify," Newton says dismissively.

"Do a lot of blood volume quantification, do you?" Dr. McClure asks.

"Historically, Rain, yes, for your information—"

"Not much," Hermann says. "I doubt he loses more than fifteen milliliters at any given time."

"Does that sound about right?" Dr. McClure asks, looking at Newton.

"Sure," Newton replies. "It pretty much stops right away with pressure, if I catch it."

"This is like pulling teeth, guys," Dr. McClure says. "If you 'catch it'? Look, I want a total volume of estimated blood loss over the past week from each of you so I can decide whether you need to be worked up for anemia, because you're not looking fabulous to me, friends, *neither* of you." Her eyes fix on Hermann, and she says "Dr. G, go. Give me a number."

"Less than one hundred ccs," Hermann says shortly.

"Thank you," she says. "Newt?"

"This really isn't accurate," Newton replies. "In *any* way."

"Okay," Dr. McClure says. "I'm with you dude, one hundred percent. *In vivo*, surrogate endpoints suck. You can have some bloodwork instead."

"Well I would *prefer that*," Newton replies, with aggressive poise. "I think we should *both* have bloodwork."

"I disagree," Hermann says, narrowing his eyes at his colleague.

"Me too," Dr. McClure says, her eyes fixed on her wall-mounted terminal as she finishes inputting orders. "Dr. G seems like he's a guy with a pretty dece skill set when it comes to volumetric estimation, so." She shrugs.

"Quite," Hermann agrees.

Newton sighs.

"EEG-wise, you guys are still looking like trainwrecks," Dr. McClure says, angling her wall mounted terminal slightly so that they can see a screen full of voltage fluctuations over time in a multiplicity of leads. "These are from your last visit. You're both normalizing relative to where you were when I first saw you, so hopefully that trend continues. How are the headaches?"

"Improving," Hermann says.

"Meh," Newton says. "Not getting worse."

"How's the raging insomnia?" Dr. McClure asks.

"Nearly intolerable," Hermann replies.

"Fine," Newton says.

"He sleeps approximately once every three nights," Hermann says dryly. "It's taking a significant toll on his psychological state."

"Um, thank you for that particular elaboration, Hermann," Newton snaps, "thank you so much." He shifts his position leaning forward, flexing his left foot as if he is about to stand, before pushing back abruptly and crossing his arms.

Hermann feels a simultaneous spike of guilt and sympathy.

"If you want to talk about *psychological states*," Newton begins, looking meaningfully at Hermann, his tone dangerously and affectedly offhand, "then perhaps we should discuss—"

"Stop," Hermann snaps, his sympathy instantly vanishing. "Stop speaking *immediately*."

"Guys," Dr. McClure says. "Newt. Seriously man, you've got to tell me the relevant stuff. That's the whole point of having a doctor. You're like the most rad guy in the history of rad guys and insomnia is a character flaw since exactly never, so just relax."

"I'm relaxed," Newton says, looking like he is about to hyperventilate. "So I'm not sleeping that well. Biologically, this is understandable. Biologically, it makes sense. There was a short window there, where, yeah, I was a little worried I might burn through all my neurotransmitters and die in a psychotic haze, but that didn't happen and I don't think it will. I don't think insomnia is a thing that necessarily portends cognitive doom, you know? It's just a thing. I've always had it. Now I have it more. It's normal. Sleeping is boring. I'm pretty sure it's normal. We *both* have this problem. It's not even a problem, really, it's just a thing. It's just a feature of the post-drift state. Of *our* post-drift state. EPIC Rapport is, by its nature, a state of neural disequilibrium, I'm



pretty sure. We've been neurobiologically perturbed, yes, but our sleep cycles will normalize, probably, we just have to *wait*."

Dr. McClure spends a moment in silent contemplation, studying the pair of them and then says, "true. If you want to wait, let your brains do their thing, that's fine with me. Your judgment regarding your current situation probably trumps anyone else's. I can't think of anyone more scientifically qualified to weigh in on how the heck we should deal with your current situation than you yourself. I mean, in part, that's why you guys are here, right?" Dr. McClure shrugs. "Because I'll let you intellectually boss me around to some extent?"

"Yes," Newton snaps, aggressive and entitled. "Yes *exactly*."

"Charming," Hermann says, rolling his eyes. "No. We're here because you were highly recommended by an acquaintance of my father's, and we find your rigorous methodology and cautiously empirical approach to be to our tastes."

"Thanks Dr. G, you're a class act," Dr. McClure says. "But, look, Dr. Geiszler, my point is I'm willing to try waiting this out, but I'm also fine with say, pharmacologically retweaking your GABA levels so that it's possible for you to sleep more than once every three days."

Newton looks at her cautiously, clearly undecided.

Hermann heroically refrains from dropping to his knees on the white tiled floor and begging the man to agree to her proposition.

"Fine," Newton says, to Hermann's nearly infinite relief. "Yes. Good. Tweak away, I guess."

"Rad," Dr. McClure says, turning back to her screen. She spends a moment typing before a small square of paper emerges from the printer built into her keyboard. "Round one," she says, signing the prescription and passing it to Newton.

His colleague squints at it for a moment, then passes the paper to him. Hermann glances at it, folds it in half, and pockets it.

"Okay," Dr. McClure says, shifting in her seat, looking away from her terminal with a kind of gravitas that strikes a primitive chord of civilization from the bottom layer of Hermann's forebrain. "So yesterday," she says, picking up the stack of files in front of her, "I received your medical records, such as they are."

"Ah," Newton says, eyeing the files with obvious antipathy.

"Such as they are?" Hermann repeats.

"Yours are intact," Dr. McClure says, looking at him. "They consist of the MRI, bloodwork, and the physical you received from the PPDC medical director. There's nothing in there that I didn't already know, other than your unilateral elevated intraocular pressures post your drift and the fact that you disclosed to the medical director your eye injury was secondary to an unsuccessful drift calibration with Dr. Geiszler."

Hermann shrugs.

"They *believed* that?" Dr. McClure asks. "That you were incompatible?"

"Have you *met* us?" Newton asks dryly.

"Yes," she replies, raising her eyebrows at him. "And, again, I ask: they *believed* that?"

"Previously, we had a different interpersonal dynamic," Hermann explains.

"*Did* we though?" Newton says, squinting at him skeptically. "I'm not sure about that. Memories are a little less hardwired than you think they are."

"I'm certain we did," Hermann says, not at all certain.

"Well I'm pretty sure we only argue less because you view me as a melting snowflake and, post-drift, I infected you with my empirical tendencies a little bit."

"What?" Hermann says.

"Okay so moving on," Dr. McClure says speaking over him with all the polite professionalism she has at her disposal, "Dr. Geiszler's records are pretty tough to interpret."

"Shocking," Hermann mutters.

"Will you *just*," Newton murmurs back.

"Over ninety percent of what they sent me has been redacted," Dr. McClure continues, opening the file. "I've got a set of four clinical progress notes that look medically sloppy, and are heavily weighted toward what I think might be scientific asides, one of which I think *you* might have actually written." Dr. McClure pauses for a moment, looking at Newton, waiting for clarification of some kind. When none is forthcoming, she continues. "I have five decontextualized EEGs, three of which look like scarier versions of your current baseline, one which clearly represents the initiation and generalization of a seizure, and one of which must be some kind of mechanical or operator error because it looks so hideous."

Hermann winces, not at all certain that Dr. McClure's conjecture is correct, his thoughts slowing under the pressure of anxious anticipation.

"Um, yeah," Newton says sounding breathless. "Okay. Interesting. Useful."

"I also know what they gave you, pharmacologically speaking. Day one, you got nothing. Day two, you got a whole mess of anti-seizure meds around two in the afternoon in conjunction with some kind of procedure being performed which is, unfortunately, totally redacted. They kept you on those meds overnight and, from what it looks like, a variant of the same procedure was performed on day three—" Dr. McClure breaks off abruptly.

Hermann looks over at Newton, who is unnaturally still, unnaturally pale, his gaze fixed on nothing. Some sixth sense, a fortuitous post-drift mental trapping, makes Hermann reach out and clamp his hand down on the other man's shoulder at nearly the same instant Newton makes an attempt to bolt for the door.

Hermann successfully prevents him from rising.

Dr. McClure says nothing, watching Newton with a commendably neutral expression that Hermann wishes he could emulate. She glances briefly at Hermann and then looks away, untangling a strand of dark hair from earrings made of blue sea glass.

"You are *fine*," Hermann says quietly, loosening his grip on Newton's shoulder.

"Yeah," Newton says, his left hand coming to his face as his nose begins to bleed. He angles his head back and extends his free hand in Hermann's direction. "Obviously."

Hermann fishes for a handkerchief, but Hypothetical Rain beats him to it, pulling a set of tissues from a package in her pocket and putting them in Newton's open hand.

"Exhalation against a closed glottis is going to get you every time, dude," she says.

"Don't I know it," Newton replies, tipping his head forward, pinching his nose shut.

"You okay?" she asks.

Hermann finally pulls his handkerchief free from the other ephemera in his pocket and hands it to Newton, who immediately swaps it for the wad of nearly saturated tissue he's currently holding to his face.

"Yeah," Newton replies, with an affectedly casual shrug.

"Does this kind of thing happen a lot?" Dr. McClure asks.

"Not really," Newton says dryly. "I go whole tens of minutes without quietly panicking and bleeding from my face, so yeah."

"Ugh," Dr. McClure says. "That sounds like the worst."

"It's not the *worst*," Newton says. "The worst is, like, you know, civilization ends as humans are dethroned from their place at the top of the food chain and everyone dies in unmitigated terror. It's not *great* though. For me. Admittedly. I could always be crazier or have more epilepsy, though, so hey."

"Let's not invite potential negative outcomes by *listing them*," Hermann says acidly.

Newton pats his knee in what is likely supposed to be a comforting manner with a blood soaked tissue. "I think you have a causality problem there, dude."

"Ugh," Hermann says, disgusted.

"How are you still grossed out by my blood?" Newton asks, throwing his used tissue at the biohazard bin against the opposite wall and missing by a wide margin. "I bleed on you or your stuff at least once per day."

"I do not have a *causality* problem," Hermann hisses.

"Nope," Newton says agreeably, "no causality problems around here. No sir."

"So," Dr. McClure says, breaking into what is likely to turn into an inappropriately timed argument on determinism. "I probably should have asked you if you *want* to hear this stuff." She waves the file she is holding in a tight circle. "In retrospect, that would have been classy of me."

"Yeah, but immaterial," Newton says, adjusting his glasses, "because I would have said yes."

"And how about if I asked you now?" Dr. McClure says.

"I'd say that I'm going to go wash my face for oh, I don't know, a while, and my next of kin emergency contact colleague life partner roommate can fill me in later."

Hermann is not at all sure he wants this particular assignment.

"So, just to be clear, you want me to talk about the contents of your medical file without *you*," Dr. McClure says slowly, "but *with* Dr. Gottlieb?"

"Yup," Newton replies, standing, one hand on the wall. "That is exactly what I want."

"I think it would be better—" Dr. McClure begins, half rising as well.

Hermann can sense a well-intentioned conflict self-organizing out of ethical pressures and psychological imperatives. He catches the doctor's eye and shakes his head.

She lowers herself back into her chair, looking at him uncertainly.

"Do you?" Newton says, from Hermann's peripheral vision, opening the door and backing through it as he speaks. "Great. Interesting. Good times, kind of. Well,

whatever. If you need me to sign a waiver or something, I'll be literally anywhere but right here."

Hermann doesn't move, doesn't turn; he simply continues to look at Hypothetical Rain, *willing* her to let the other man leave, unopposed.

The door closes with a controlled click.

Dr. McClure sits silently in poised agitation, as if she is contemplating the branching of an invisible and intricate decision tree.

"I believe," Hermann says after a moment, intending to make things easier for her, "that he may already know what is in that file."

Dr. McClure looks back at him and raises a single, pierced eyebrow. "He says he doesn't remember any of it."

"He *implies* he remembers nothing," Hermann counters. "I don't believe he's ever definitively stated it."

"At our second visit I asked him straight up to tell me what happened to him, and he said he couldn't. That he was totally unable to give a reliable account," she replies.

"Yes," Hermann agrees. "But into the word 'reliable,' read reproducible, read *accurate*, read *precise*."

Dr. McClure sighs. "He hasn't talked to you about it?" she asks.

"Not directly, no." Hermann says. "I am, somewhat—I am extremely—*concerned*, actually, that he may have drifted a third time, alone, with some fragment of alien tissue," Hermann says. "I like to think that he would have *known better* than to attempt any such thing, but—" he raises a hand, palm up, to indicate that which he does not feel capable of articulating.

"Yeah," Dr. McClure says, leafing through the file, flipping printed pages full of redacted text. "There's very little available information here. They provided me only with hard copies. No electronic files."

"How prudent of them," Hermann says. "I'm flattered by their fear of my computational abilities. What were you able to deduce?"

"I've got three days of records," Dr. McClure says. "Everything of substance is redacted other than the types and timing of the medications they gave him. I correlated the timing of pharmacologic intervention with what I could gather from the redacted text to put together that he had a seizure on day two in conjunction with some kind of invasive procedure. It looks like they pre-loaded him with anticonvulsants and tried

the same or a similar procedure again on day three, but I don't think their pre-loading plan worked from a seizure prophylaxis perspective. They had to break another one on the morning of day three."

"May I?" Hermann asks, extending a hand for the file.

Wordlessly, Dr. McClure passes it to him.

It is fifteen pages long, and nearly entirely useless.

He pages through meaningless blocks of redacted text, conjunctions and punctuation and articles and linking verbs maddeningly left in place, but anything of substance removed. In addition to redacted notes, the medication record, and the EEGs, there are photocopies of three separate consent forms, the procedures they cover redacted, Newton's familiar signature scrawled in fluid pen at the bottom of each page.

"His handwriting was fine going in," Dr. McClure murmurs, tracing the curl of Newton's characteristically ostentatious paraph with the edge of a blue fingernail. "Whereas it's not, currently. This makes me think that his fine motor troubles started *after* what happened during these three days."

"Yes," Hermann agrees. "Possibly," he amends, thinking of the twenty-four hours Newton had spent with an obvious resting tremor following his first drift.

"This," Dr. McClure says, tapping Newton's signature, "and the medication record are the most useful things in here."

"Perhaps," Hermann says. "You said you thought *he* might have written part of this?"

"Next page," Dr. McClure says, with a tilt of her chin.

Hermann flips to the following page to see a document called, 'XXXXXXXXXXXX XXXX.'

*XX XXX opinion XX XXXX XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX née XXXXXXXX XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX XXXX subject, it is extremely apparent that the XXXXXXXXXXXX XX XXX XXXXXXXXXXX XXX XXXXXXXXXXX by the Vladivostok team is X XXXXXXX XXX precise for XX to withstand for purposes of ruling out XXXXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXXXXX XXXX the XXXXX XXXXXXXXXXX. The stated goal of the current procedure is the correlation of XX XXXXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXXXXX EEG XXXXXXXX with XXXXXXXXXXX from an intact XXXXX XXXXXXXXXXX as a surrogate endpoint to provide reasonable freedom from suspicion of XXXXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXXXXX. With regards to going forward, I therefore formally advise and also agree to XXX XXX of XX XXXXXXXXXXX XXX, constructed from XXXXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXXXXX, recovered from XXXXXXXXXXX XXXX XXXX, in conjunction with an aggressive pre-procedure regimen of XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXXXXX XX XXXXXXXX the prevention of X XXXXXXXX that might result in the termination of this procedure. (XXX XX.*

XXXXXXXXXX?) XXXX XXXXXX XXXXX XXX XXX XXXXXXXXXXXX XX XXXX XXXX XXXX  
XXXXXXXXXXXXX X XXXXXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXXXXXX XX XXXXXXXXXXXX EEG readings XXX XXX XXX  
XXXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXXXXX XXXX XXXXX-XXXXX XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX. Although there is no way to  
formally rule out XXXXX XXXXXXXXXXXX, it will provide strong circumstantial support for the  
XXXXXX XX XXXXXXXXXXX XX XX XXXXX XX XXX XXXXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXXXXXX XX X relatively  
XXXXXXXXXXXXX form. Presuming there isn't evidence of XXXXXXXX XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX. Should  
that be the case, further testing will, of course, need to ensue. On a personal note, X XXXX  
XXXX XXXXXXXX XXXXX XXXXX XXXXX XXXXX XXXX, XXXXXXX XXXXXXXXXXX XX XXXXX  
XXXXXXXX X XXXXX XXXXX XXX XXXXX X XXXXXXX XXX XXXX and this XXXX XXX XX.

Signed,

XXXXXX	XXXXXXXXX,	XX.X.
X-XXXXXXXX	XXXXXXXXX	XXXXX
XXXX XXXX XXXX XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX		

"I'm not *certain* this is him, but—"

"It's him," Hermann cuts her off. He can practically hear his colleague dictating an inadvisable memo to the ether.

"Are you *getting* anything out of this?" Dr. McClure asks, shifting her chair closer to him.

"Yes," Hermann says, scanning along the line. *"In the opinion of this investigator née willing experimental test subject, it is extremely apparent that the [something] by the Vladivostok team is a little too precise for me to withstand for purposes of ruling out [something] with the kaiju anteverse.* Probably that last is mental continuity."

"Rad," Dr. McClure says, clearly impressed. "Drifting. All it's cracked up to be, I guess."

"That, or ten years of listening to the man complain in faux bureaucratic argot," Hermann replies dryly before continuing. *"The stated goal of the current procedure is the correlation of my [something] baseline EEG readings with readings from an intact—"* he breaks off, grimacing in frustration, trying to make the words into 'kaiju brain' but failing, until he says, *"tissue fragment,"* with a feeling of vindicated despair.

"That's *less* rad," Dr. McClure says.

"Agreed," Hermann whispers. He can't parse the rest of the sentence, so he moves on. *"With regards to going forward, I therefore formally advise and also agree to—"* he breaks off, momentarily stuck, intellectually casting about, as he tries to bury his horrified response to what he's reading and view this as *Newton* would view it. Had viewed it.

They, the external team, had tried something *Newton* had felt 'too precise' to be workable, whatever that meant, and so the man would therefore have—done what?

Nothing comes to him.

Dr. McClure shifts in her seat.

*You inventive, clairvoyant, and utterly miserable excuse for a scientist*, Hermann thinks, staring at the page. *What did you do?*

*Some reagents, after being left on a shelf for a year will, counterintuitively, work better in vivo*, his brain replies in Newton's most provoking tone of consciously understated narcissism.

*What are you getting at?* Hermann snaps at himself.

*I built an interface out of garbage. Out of some rig no one wanted because it was obsolete and lacked even the most basic safety features*, his brain replies. *How precise could my voltage calibrations really have been?*

Hermann can remember throwing a spectrum analyzer to the floor with hands that weren't his hands and thinking, *screw it, I'll approximate*, in a haze of mental urgency.

*—the use of my original rig*," Hermann snarls between clenched teeth in angry revelation, *"constructed from [some euphemism for trash], recovered from downtown Hong Kong in conjunction with an aggressive pre-procedure regimen of—"* he breaks off, looking at Dr. McClure.

"Could be 'anti-epileptic medications'," she says, pointing at a block of Xs, *"to [something] the prevention of a seizure that might result in the termination of this procedure,"* she finishes.

Hermann scans the rest of the paragraph, neither inclined nor able to parse it, his mind in a strange state of ataraxy. He understands how the paragraph must end, understands that he holds the institutional justification for an experiment that does nothing more than document a predictable deviation from an electrophysiologic baseline for the sake of ticking off a checkbox on form somewhere in answer to the question: "Is Dr. Newton Geiszler a threat to humanity as a species, yes or no?"

*If he lets you spend three days investigating this question in his prefrontal cortex, then the answer is no, by default*, his brain snarls.

He flips through the subsequent pages, full of redacted medical text written by individuals whose brains he has not shared.

Dr. McClure shifts some pages and stares silently at the most abnormal of the EEG tracings.

"His third drift," Hermann says, "one assumes."



"Yes," she murmurs. "I'm surprised this didn't kill him."

"Me too," he replies. "I spent months telling him it would."

"Do you want a copy?" Dr. McClure asks him, indicating the file in his hands with her gaze.

He spends a silent interval picturing himself sitting in his new office at UC Berkeley, pouring over the redacted file for days, slowly reconstructing the complete text of Newton Geiszler's first and only capitulation to institutional pressures, assigning names to redacted anonymity, peeling back the layers of everything that happened during those three days while he was *meters* away.

All of this has a righteously masochistic appeal.

But none of it will tell him what he *really* wants to know.

*What happens to a fraction of a hive mind?* his thoughts echo, sounding like no one, sounding like everyone, sounding like a desperate blend in triplicate.

"No," he says, meaning *yes*, meaning *yes give it to me immediately, I will take it and I will compile a list of careers to destroy and people to despise and questions to scream at Newton at inopportune moments when he least expects it and might answer me*. "No, I don't want a copy."

"So he, er, to summarize," Dr. McClure says, "we think he had two seizures while hooked up to two different stereotactic drift interfaces—one from Vladivostok, one that he built. We think the second one happened mid-drift. We think that your former employers decided that he isn't secretly now in league with the kaiju based on circumstantial EEG evidence. We think they let him go because of that, and also because no one with any medical training who saw this," she says, tracing a line with one blue nail, "would have ever let it happen again."

"Yes," Hermann whispers, looking at the lines of maxed out voltage readings on the paper in Hypothetical Rain's hands. "Yes, that's what we think."

"It's better," Dr. McClure says, her hands running restlessly over the edges of the tracings she holds, "It's better to know, I think, Dr. G. These things. It's better that we know."

"Yes," he says. "I'm certain you're right. If you don't mind, I think I'll—" he gestures helplessly toward the door.

"Yeah, go give him a hug or something," Dr. McClure says, turning back to the wall-mounted computer. "Jeez. I'll square you guys up with the front desk and make sure the EEG suite is ready."

Hermann exits the room, intending to take a moment to collect himself, but instead, his gaze snaps to the nurses' station, where Newton is seated in a chair with a cup of orange juice in his hand, a blood pressure cuff around his arm, and a pulse oximeter clipped to his finger.

A young woman in pink scrubs is seated next to Newton, watching him fixedly.

It the combination of his own surprise, his own alarm, and her fixed gaze, it *must* be, that draws a similar fixation from Hermann, from the predatory parts of his mind that have all classified her as a threat.

But it doesn't last.

Because he is a *human* with self control, not a cloned alien war machine.

Because Newton shifts forward in his chair, blocking her from Hermann's view.

Because she's speaking, and he can hear her.

"So what do you do?" she asks Newton. "For a living, I mean."

Hermann shakes his head, managing to snap himself free of any remaining predatory instincts. He realizes he's stopped short just in front of the examination room door.

Newton is looking at him.

Hermann nods briefly.

"I'm not really sure," Newton says, his gaze snapping back to the nurse. "Right now? Nothing, kind of. I'm currently unemployed. I have this thing going where I reinvent whole disciplines of thought that I find comforting, but it's extremely pointless, actually."

"You look a whole lot like one of those guys who saved the world."

"I *do* look a little bit like one of those guys. We also have the same name. Totally unrelated though."

"Uh huh," the nurse agrees slowly.

Newton looks up as he approaches, and Hermann can now see what inspired the close scrutiny of the woman he's speaking with. He looks overtly ill—his skin is pale and subtly damp with sweat. His orange juice betrays a high frequency tremor.

"Hey man," Newton says.

Hermann has the urge to slap him for being such a unique, blazing paragon of idealistic idiocy, has the urge to just freeze the man in carbonite until he can sort out everything that's wrong with his *own* head so that he can, possibly, one day, do *the right thing* where Newton is concerned, like give the man a hug or a kitten or whatever it is that might actually *improve* his life, rather than just dragging him to neurology appointments and pressuring him into finding a job. Maybe if he could just *deal with this later* it wouldn't be so hard for both of them at the same time and he wouldn't have the urge to raze his former place of employment to the ground, wouldn't make *Star Wars* analogies when he was upset, for pity's sake, wouldn't stand here, silently, like a useless excuse for a human being, in the hallway, while some anonymous nurse tries to distract Dr. Newton Geiszler from whatever it is that's currently making him look like a particularly brittle piece of used-up chalk.

"Are you okay?" Newton asks, looking up at him, looking pained, looking like a stiff shove would send him straight into hours of unconsciousness.

Hermann drops into an empty chair next to his colleague, rests his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands and tries not to have an emotional breakdown in the hallway of Hypothetical Rain's afternoon neurology clinic.

He despises Newton.

He despises Newton *so much*.

He *despises* him, with his easy concern, his total abandon, the way he navigates the world with all that he is on full and constant display, the way he *doesn't care* about anyone's opinion, even *measured, considered, correct, and professional* opinions about what should and should not be attempted using *extremely dangerous* equipment requiring the insertion of *electrodes* into *brains*. He despises Newton for telling anonymous nurses that he is 'unemployed', for creating a flawed and misleading picture of himself with only the most surface trace of obligatory, deprecating bitterness, because that bitterness is *expected*, because the man expects it *of himself*, not because he *really feels it*, not like *Hermann does*, not with *a very real need* for a vengeance he's *never going to get* because it's not morally justifiable, but nevertheless someone should pay for this, *someone* should, someone other than *Newton*, who is too stupid to know that what happened to him is *horrible*. Too stupid to ever stop trying to do whatever it is that he's trying to do. He despises watching this, he despises being asked about his own state of mind because he can't stand Newton and his offensively short turnaround time, his ability to snap straight from panic into concern, straight from outrage to amusement, he's hated that rapid plasticity for a decade in all its varied

incarnations—interface redesign in a week, data analysis in a night, paperwork completion in an afternoon, construction of powerpoint presentations on flights, the writing of grants in spare time, the processing of alien tissue before degradation sets in when no one else can get it to *bloody work*, because the man *cuts corners* but only the right ones, his ability to upgrade an obsolete interface in an afternoon and transport it to the middle of a street in the *rain*, in the *dark*, and have it *still work*. How dare he. How dare he, *how dare he* ask after Hermann's well being. How dare he, because of *course* Hermann is 'okay', he's been 'okay' this *entire time*, it's *Newton* who is not 'okay', *Newton*. Newton is the one who is not 'okay', who has *never* been 'okay' and is now *less* 'okay' than 'not okay' and one of these days Hermann is going to start screaming at him and never stop until his vocal chords snap under the continued, unrelenting pressure of all the things he hasn't, can't, and won't say because they're confusing and inappropriate and a post-drift epiphenomenon that's likely not even real, presuming 'reality' as a concept exists at all, which, of course, it does. Hopefully.

Newton claps him on the shoulder, once, gently, and then starts rubbing his back.

Hermann will shortly murder him.

But for now, he will satisfy himself with not weeping.

"So, tough week for you guys, I guess," the nurse says.

"Meh," Newton says philosophically. "We're on an upswing. Probably we are. It's a good thing we're not those world-saving guys though, let me tell you."

Hermann smiles faintly into his hands for no reason.

"Graham cracker?" the nurse asks.

"Yes, I would love a graham cracker right about now," Newton says. "Thank you."

Hermann decides he has mastered himself sufficiently to straighten up. He looks over at Newton, who has given the nurse his half-consumed orange juice in exchange for a graham cracker. The other man is leaning back in his chair, entirely exhausted, looking at Hermann through half-lidded eyes.

"You look terrible," Hermann says.

Newton takes a bite of his graham cracker. "You look so great though," he replies. "I almost forget you're living in a glass house. Also, say hello to the nice lady who prevented me from concussing myself on the floor. Florence, Dr. Gottlieb. Dr. Gottlieb, Florence. She's a human."

"Um," Florence says, extending a hand. "My name is Liz. I *am* a human, though. I assume you are too?"

Hermann shakes her hand and nods. "Pleased to meet you."

Florence smiles nervously at him. Perhaps she has been talking to Sarah.

"Don't assume, Previously Florence," Newton says. "Dr. Gottlieb is pretty weird."

"Will you *shut up*," Hermann says, with disappointingly low-grade ire.

"So how do you two know one another?" the nurse asks, looking at Hermann.

"We're colleagues," Hermann says.

"Longstanding mutual nemeses," Newton says, speaking over him, "is really a better description than 'colleagues'."

"You said you were unemployed," the nurse replies, glancing back at Newt.

"Currently? Yes," Newton says. "Always? No. This guy here teaches math to college students and makes them cry. Or he will be doing that. Next week."

"Newt," Dr. McClure calls from somewhere behind Hermann. "What's the deal?"

Hermann twists to see her walking over white tile, her white coat unbuttoned, pushing her hair out of her face.

"They just thought I needed this, man," Newton says, gesturing vaguely at the blood pressure cuff currently strapped to his arm. "I don't know, I mean I just—" Newton trails off, leaning his head back against the wall. "I got waylaid. By Florence. Liz. This very nice person in pink."

"He was holding a blood-soaked handkerchief and looking a little vasovagal," says the nurse.

"Hey. I was looking *fine*," Newton says, emphatic, managing to retain his dignity while at the same time accepting a second graham cracker.

Hermann is not quite sure how Newton manages to be simultaneously entirely insufferable and offensively appealing.

He has never been quite sure about that.

"That *is* a nice sweater," the nurse says.

"Don't even start with me, Florence," Newt replies.

"Newt," Dr. McClure says, coming to stand beside Hermann. "You look wiped, dude."

"Wiped?" Newton repeats, in a parody of didactic disappointment. "You didn't even *go* to medical school, did you. Admit it. I thought about it, you know? Medical school, I mean. But I was told that they would beat all the coolness out of me. With human bones, possibly. How did you survive?"

"Um," Dr. McClure says. "You think I'm cool?"

"In no universe should you *ever* be allowed to be a medical doctor," Hermann says dryly.

"Outrageously cool," Newton replies.

Dr. McClure smiles at him, then glances at Hermann, her eyes dark and serious, before turning to the nurse, mouthing, "did he actually hit the deck?"

Newton shoots the doctor an unimpressed look, then glances at Hermann in mild vexation.

Hermann shrugs at him in a conciliatory, well-what-did-you-expect way.

"No," Previously Florence replies.

"You have earned yourself some extra blood work," Dr. McClure says, turning back to Newton.

"Why?"

"*Why*?" Dr. McClure echoes. "Don't be a loser. You look terrible, that's why."

"God," Newton says. "Starfleet called, Captain Kirk needs a medical officer with the worst beside manner ever. Did my *doctor* just call me a *loser*? I *pay* you, Hypothetical Rain. I *pay you*. Or the government does. Or the government would have—actually—I'm unemployed? I have no idea. Do I even *have* health insurance? Are you giving me the healthcare equivalent of free breakfast?"

"You have health insurance," Hermann says, not particularly inclined to inform Newton that he currently has health insurance courtesy of UC Berkeley's progressive policy which extends to common-law domestic partners, because it had been extremely convenient and also *necessary* to obtain medical coverage for his colleague, and the current situation is not atypical in any way, he just hasn't gotten around to informing Newton that he did this, because he's been very busy.

Very busy.

"My name isn't Rain," Dr. McClure says. "You *do* know that, right?"

"Meh," Newton replies.

"Are you going to faint if you stand up?" Dr. McClure asks.

"No," Newton says irritably. "There is a zero percent chance of that."

Hermann exchanges a skeptical look with Previously Florence.

"Then get out of here, dude," Dr. McClure says. "Get your EEG, give Vlad the phlebotomy tech some blood—"

"His name is *Steven*," the nurse says, in overt disapproval.

"I knew that," Dr. McClure says.

"He really *looks* like a Vlad though," Newton whispers to Previously Florence. "Think about it."

"Will you control yourself," Hermann hisses.

"Yeah, so give *Steven* the phlebotomy tech some blood," Dr. McClure continues, recovering her poise, "and then take a nap, or ten in a row. Call me if you can't sleep. Don't wait until you start having insomnia-induced hallucinations."

"I would never," Newton says.

Hermann says nothing to him.

Nothing of substance.

Not as they leave the building, his hand clamped around Newton's elbow. Not during the cab ride around the bay, beneath a pale sky. Not during the preparation of dinner, which Newton spends in another distracting and ongoing battle with chopsticks. Not while they eat, discussing the Isaac Newton versus Gottfried Leibniz *Prioritätsstreit* with an inappropriately sordid enthusiasm.

They don't speak of the file until after the sun goes down and, invisible, the Wall loses whatever terrible, silent appeal it holds for Newton. They don't speak of the file until the man settles down at the table, absently chewing the distal border of a thumbnail as he reads, and Hermann moves to sit opposite him, behind the shield of his open laptop.

"So she told you all of it?" Newton asks, without looking up.

"The file was almost entirely redacted," Hermann replies, staring at his email client without seeing it.

"Ah," Newton says. "That makes sense."

"If you would like to talk about it—" Hermann says, into the quiet air between them.

"No," Newton replies.

Hermann nods.

He spends an uncounted span of minutes staring unseeing at his keyboard, trying to read Newton's thoughts, trying to grasp the SPECTER Effect with both hands, trying to pry open the lid on his colleague's consciousness, trying to understand what it is that's happened to Newton, to understand what happens to a fraction of a hive mind, but he gets *nothing*—nothing but silence—even his own thoughts compress into quietness beneath the pressure of his own willpower, consistently and clearly and constantly applied.

Newton gets up and makes Hermann the tea he hadn't known he'd wanted, setting it down next to him with a quiet click.

Hermann stares at it.

"What?" Newton says.

Hermann shuts his laptop, holds up a finger, and reaches across the table to pull Newton's book from beneath his hands.

"I was reading that," Newton says, squinting at him.

"You shouldn't be reading in this kind of light," Hermann says dismissively. "You're—" he breaks off, checking the page number of *Calculus Wars*. "One hundred and fifteen pages in?"

"Yes," Newton says cautiously, as if he suspects he is about to be ridiculed and is marshaling his defenses. "You bought me that book, you know. I didn't pick it. It's like the trashy airport book of eighteenth century intellectual priority disputes but I—"

Hermann pays him no mind, flips to the one hundred and fifty-fifth page, and interrupts him with, "what is the first word on page one hundred and fifty five?"

"If you're trying to test my memory you've got a conceptual flaw there, dude," Newton says.

"I am *not* trying to test your memory, please keep up," Hermann says, looking pointedly down at the book he is holding and then back at Newton.

Newton leans forward, his forearms coming to rest against the edge of the table. He grins, brief and bright and intent. "It was the tea, wasn't it? I knew you wanted it."

"I'm waiting," Hermann says.



"Okay," Newton says. "Okay okay okay okay. Think *really* hard. Loudly. Think really *loudly*."

Hermann raises his eyebrows.

They stare intently at one another for an uncounted interval in a silent attempt to bridge a cognitive span that may be inherently unbridgeable in the absence of a physical interface.

"Trick question, it's a graph," Newton says in a rapid rush.

"Newton," Hermann says.

"What?"

"That's the word," Hermann clarifies. "Newton. As in, Isaac."

"That's a terrible word to pick, dude, what are you thinking? Talk about confounding variables," the other man says. "I want a re-do."

Hermann flips to a new page.

## Chapter Twenty One

Newt wakes in the dark.

He's tangled in marginally familiar sheets in a marginally familiar room, whatever his brain is trying to scream decoupled from the motor pathways that are supposed to be screaming it.

So, that's a win.

He detangles himself from his bedding. Mostly. Tragically, he doesn't realize he hasn't fully dissected out his right ankle from the twisted clutches of distressed sheets until he tries to get up and doesn't quite make it because he can't get his foot onto the floor and with the program. He falls a *little* bit, but not really, not totally, he saves it, it's quiet, kind of slow, and pretty protracted, so it doesn't count; he *planned* to be sitting on the floor to pull his stupid foot out of his stupid bedsheets. He planned that.

"Computer, lights," he whispers. "Thirty percent."

Nothing happens.

That's because he doesn't live in the *Star Trek* universe.

"Phone," he says, "where are you?"

Nothing happens.

That's because he needs a better phone, or, maybe, just one that he hadn't poorly waterproofed and dropped in a jar of water. Or because his phone is not in his bedroom.

Newt arranges himself in a sitting position, leaning against his dednuded bed next to the waterfall of fabric he's pulled after him onto the floor. The only light in the room comes from the unblinded, west-facing window where the yellow haze of fog-blurred streetlights fades to darkness at the border of the bay.

If he is lucky, it is early.

If he is not, it is late.

Newt decides to find out later.

He considers trying to go back to sleep, but that's a one-way ticket to an hours-long blur of memories passing incognito as nightmares, and Newt isn't into that so he gets

up, collects his glasses and clothes, then showers like a pro, without simultaneously wearing his pajamas and with a lot of strategic eye closing. As he's pulling on his clothes it occurs to him that this might actually be shaping up into a pretty promising day in terms of positive psychological momentum. He does his best not to think about his dreams, at all, not *ever*, but even without direct analytic assessment of his subconscious he's pretty sure that the dreams he was having last night were garden variety city-destroying and civilization-ending dreams because those tend to bother him *less* than the dreams where a wronged chorus of cut-apart alien brains are screaming his name in a strange meld of rabid vengeance and covetous pining. He has a tough time with those dreams, because the *vengeance* he gets but the *longing* he doesn't, except for the part of him that does, that *really* gets it, that wants to be *with* them and that wants to make reparations for the terrible things he's done. Because he should have killed them. The kids. But he didn't know how and he didn't know he'd needed to, and even if he *had* known *both* those things he *still* wouldn't have been able to do it because a) he had and still has certain responsibilities to his own species because it's *his* and he *likes it*, b) he's not really into killing stuff, like, really *really* not into it, not even undead monsters, and c) destroying samples is bad for science and it's extra bad if one needs those samples to save one's civilization.

When he gets to the kitchen he discovers he has won the sleep habits lottery because the glow of the digital clock lets him know that it is four thirty in the morning, and, therefore, not late but early.

Early.

*Early.*

*Good work, brain, Newt thinks. You are crushing it today.*

He flips on a single light, at which point he discovers that the sweater he has pulled out of his closet is green. Statistically, this is the most likely sweater outcome for him. Given all his sweaters are clean, which is usually true because he has a *thing* about laundry now (he's not sure what this thing *is* exactly but it's a powerful thing) and given that he picks out a sweater totally at random due to evenhanded disapproval of *all* sweater choices, he comes up with a green variant roughly forty percent of the time.

He drums his fingers on the countertop, a habit that feels at once familiar and challenging, like maybe it's someone else's fingers, trying to use his hand like a glove.

He feels lost, a little bit, with no coffee to drink and no lab to go to.

It is extremely disconcerting to have no science to do. It's the kind of thing that happens only when one switches fields, which, apparently, he's currently doing, having facilitated the destruction of his previous field along with the destruction of all living specimens that he or any of his colleagues might have studied, which is great; that's *just great*.

He has no idea if he's being serious or ironic.

If he were back at the shatterdome, if the world hadn't not-ended and his civilization were still in the midst of its protracted skid toward the brick wall of alien-mediated mass extinction, he'd be definitely drinking coffee right now and, possibly, transferring the nuclei of somatic kaiju cells into various tissue types in an attempt to *get them to grow*.

*It would be easy*, his brain seethes, less in words than in blue-tinged, urgent confidence that's both foreign and familiar. *It would be easy because they were meant to be grown. It would be easy because you're so good at tissue culture. It would be easy because they would grow for you, they would want to grow for you, they would want to, they would want to. For you.*

*Settle down there, kids*, Newt thinks, his hands clamped around the edge of the kitchen sink, his gaze fixed on the stone of the countertop.

Okay, fine, so he has no science to do right now, but science is ever evolving and unending and will always have room for him; that's not so much the issue; he's not some orphaned, Dickensian skeptic looking in on a rational worldview that he no longer gets to share, that's just stupid. So he accidentally helped some badass military types and Mako the Magnificent destroy his entire field; he's probably not the first person to do such a thing, although he can't think of any other examples right at the moment, whatever, he's sure something is going to come to him—or not, because obsolescence and paradigm shifts don't count as field destruction; nope, it's got to be literal destruction of the phenomena the field is built around—the *point* of all of this is just that he needs a new research interest, those aren't hard to come by, he could go on a walk and trip over one if he weren't so obsessed with rationalism right now, slash using it as an intellectual crutch; he's fully intent on lying to Hermann about that, but he's not going to lie to himself, at least not about the rationalism, not now, not on a good day like this one when he wakes up early and the part of his brain reanimating the brains he mutilated is *listening* to him.

Nope.

On a day like this he is going to find a new hobby.

Maybe two new hobbies.

Hobby number one: biohacking. He decided on this just now, but he's pretty sure it's been in the offing for about five years or so. It's a great choice for him, because his body art hobby is on hiatus at the moment as he's not totally sure it's a great idea to continue painting himself with the tapestry of what might someday become his own PTSD if it hangs around long enough to meet whatever the clinical criteria are. Biohacking fulfills the same psychological niche that the body art does; it's just a little less themed around stylized representations of things that tried to kill him and that he then mercilessly exterminated and unwittingly tortured.

Soooo yeah.

Hobby number two: cooking. Newt would rate his personal interest in 'food' as a concept at a solid two on the Negative Ten to Ten Scale, and his interest in cooking at a negative one. However, he would rate his interest in demonstrating to Hermann that biologists, categorically, make unparalleled chefs at a nine point nine five and his interest in demonstrating to Hermann that he, Newt, is the superior cook out of the pair of them, despite exactly zero experience, at a ten. While it's true that Hermann has, over the past weeks, done the vast majority of their cooking, this is only because Newt a) has not been able to see, b) has been frequently bleeding from his face, which is not compatible with preparing food unless one is a vampire, and c) has been somewhat unfocused relative to his historical norm, a tendency that he blames entirely on the sudden and cruel elimination of caffeine from his diet.

Hypothetical Rain has a lot to answer for.

Newt adjusts his glasses, staring at their minimally equipped minimalist kitchen and trying to dig the most complicated breakfast food he can out of Hermann's mental recipe catalogue, which leaves him feeling vaguely nostalgic for a home that isn't his home, a little bit irritated about the general dearth of appropriate raw materials, and marginally more appreciative of his current sweater.

He wrests control of his brain back, dials up his *own* fashion aesthetic, then dry heaves once in the general direction of the sink before getting his cognitive dissonance under control.

He is Newton Geiszler of the culinary confidence and the stupid tripled consciousness and since he has no cookbook and Hermann doesn't know many breakfast recipes that can be effected with the materials on hand, Newt will, from first principles, reinvent pancakes.

It can't be that hard.

He whistles the opening chord progression of *Undone* by Weezer quietly through his teeth.

"Hey brah," he says in muttered quotation, sequentially opening all the cabinets and *leaving* them open, so he can see where Hermann put things, because he hadn't been paying attention during the kitchen organization. "How we doin' man?"

"All right," he replies, locating a suitable mixing bowl.

"It's been a while man," he says, pulling a spoon out of a drawer. "Life's so rad. This band's my favorite man, don't you love them?"

"Yeah," he replies to himself, pausing his rendition of the opening monologue of *Undone*.

He spends a quiet moment intensively considering the core principles of pancake assembly.

Absently, he begins whistling *Undone*'s intro chord progression.

His central problem, as he sees it, is that he's pretty sure pancakes require a chemical leavening agent and he doesn't have one.

*Aw man, you want a beer?* His brain asks, continuing apace with its *Weezer* monologuing despite the fact that Newt is trying to—

Wait. Wait wait wait wait *wait*.

Beer will work.

*Nice job brain*, he says.

"All right," Newt replies, opening the fridge and pulling out the fancy German beer that Hermann likes owning but doesn't seem to like drinking all that much. "Aw man, hell brah, this is the best. I'm so glad we're all back together and stuff, this is great man. Yeah. Hey, do you know about the party after the show? Yeah. Aw man, it's gonna be the best, I'm so stoked. Take it easy brah."

He goes back to whistling for the vocals, because he's not going to *sing*. That's not something one does while making pre-sunrise pancakes. It's just not done. Not in general, not by him, and not the *sweater* song, not while he's *wearing* a sweater. He has *some* standards. Not a lot of them, granted, and the ones he has aren't that high, but they definitely preclude singing right now.

Precluded.

That's what singing is.

Precluded.

Yup.

He holds himself to whistling through the opener like a champ, but loses it on the chorus while looking for measuring cups.

*If you want to destroy my sweater*

*Hold this thread as I walk away.*

It is at this point he gives up and just goes for it.

He's using a blender in place of a guitar solo in the midst of his fourth rendition of *Undone* when he turns around to see Hermann, leaning against the kitchen counter, his arms crossed, wearing a green sweater and slacks, looking vaguely perplexed, slightly confused, and standing literally *less than a meter* from Newt.

!!!!!! the kids hiss.

*For the love*, Newt thinks.

His brain is too busy reflexively responding to have an opinion on this turn of events.

Newt lets go of the blender and throws the spoon he's holding at Hermann's pretty immaculate math-professor outfit in panicked self-defense but manages to alter its trajectory, mostly, so it goes into the sink while his joints instinctively flex to protect major arteries. This leaves him clutching his heart, sort of bent over, in total, primitive terror.

Hermann holds up both hands in a reassuring manner and locks eyes with him, silently *willing* him to relax, unless Newt misses his guess, which is a possibility, since his track record of reading Hermann's mind is pretty poor if failing at *Calculus Wars* is a reliable indicator.

Newt is trying to yell at Hermann but it's not happening.

He's still frozen a little bit.

The wordless eye-mojito Hermann is trying to pull on him isn't working at all.

Not at all.

Okay, that's a lie, he feels slightly better.

Hermann is giving him a look that definitely says something along the lines of *calm down, you're fine, everyone in this room is a human and knows it. Let us not forget that*

*our collective IQ divided into even quartiles would be enough to distribute to four average humans.*

Better. He feels better.

Slightly better.

Better enough to start shouting.

"What the *hell*, Hermann?" Newt demands, totally aggrieved, because, hello, it's five in the morning, probably, one doesn't just come up behind people and stare at them while they perform the sweater song in the privacy of a totally empty kitchen, that's not cool, that's not allowed, that's *really terrible* roommate etiquette; it's awful, actually, this should be *illegal*. He's going to start communicating this to Hermann at literally any second, once he stops hyperventilating and his brain reengages with his mouth.

"By no means stop on *my* account," Hermann says dryly.

"I—" Newt begins. "*You—*" he continues, pointing two fingers directly at Hermann. He's got no follow-through though, because right about the time he regains his capacity for analysis and articulation is right about the time he realizes that he has not exactly been keeping it down, which is kind of indefensible from a roommate-consideration standpoint and definitely absolves Hermann from standing behind him like a creeper.

"Some people," Hermann says, when Newt doesn't say anything else, "would prefer to be *sleeping* at five in the morning."

"Not you though," Newt says weakly. "Not me. Not *us*. We master pillars of traditional breakfast cuisine."

"Ah," Hermann says. "Is *that* what we do? Does that also explain why you're incorporating a high quality German beer into—what *is* this?"

"Pancakes," Newt replies. "I needed a leavening agent and this is what we've got, dude."

"Ah," Hermann says. "And you felt the need to run the blender at five in the morning because—"

"Because I'm not going to *mechanically stir*," Newt says, affronted. "What am I, an intern of science? I object to all unnecessary manual labor. On principle."

Hermann gives him a pointed look driving home the fact that simultaneous use of a blender and repeated a cappella renditions of *Undone* may not be the *most* conducive to sleep.



*You are really not a sensitive guy*, his brain informs him. *Your colleague actually goes to extreme lengths not to wake you up if you miraculously fall asleep, one would think that you would extend him the same courtesy.*

*One would think*, Newt replies, guiltily, to his own brain.

*This is a kitchen*, his brain continues, *not a laboratory. That is a blender. Not a tissue homogenizer. This is an apartment with an open floorplan, not a hermetically sealed lab.*

"I assume," Hermann says dryly, "from your singularly peculiar expression, that you're chastising *yourself* at present?"

"No," Newt replies. "A little bit. Yes, actually."

"Excellent," Hermann says. "Then I will refrain."

Newt realizes that Hermann looks suspiciously *not* pissed, from which Newt deduces that the guy was perhaps already awake when the whole pancake experiment was taking shape, meaning that he probably was an auditory witness to Newt's increasingly enthusiastic Rivers Cuomo impersonation. This is slightly embarrassing, but Newt is pretty sure it doesn't even make it onto a list of Notable Embarrassing Things Done by Newton Geiszler because that list is long and storied and buried in a dark vault somewhere in the subterranean reaches of his consciousness, so yeah, Hermann's probably having the odd nightmare about, say, hypothetically, the time Newt's upper level Tissue Engineering students drank him under the table after finals which would have been fine, if ragingly unprofessional, except for the part where they'd stolen his driver's license, taken a photo of it, and posted it on the MIT intranet to put to rest all speculations about his age, which *also* would have been fine, kind of, except the *faculty* had taken an inappropriately extreme interest in his documented age which was, perhaps, not exactly as advanced as he had advertised when his colleagues asked him about it on a triweekly basis, and that had hurt his intellectual street cred, a little bit, *maybe*, and had left him with the extremely irritating nickname of 'Barely Legal' for something like four years.

"No one makes an *effort* quite like you do, Newton," Hermann says, watching Newt struggle with the components of an unassembled breakfast.

Newt isn't really sure what this means—it sounds suspiciously like an insult, but it also sounds slightly more than slightly *fond*, and Newt hasn't quite worked out the best way to respond to the dryly appreciative vibe Hermann has been rocking of late, because historically it had been dryly *dismissive*. He hopes this interpersonal key change has occurred because Hermann now has a not-so-secret appreciation of his brain and not

because he views Newt as some sort of barely functional superfriend with good intentions and a knack for knocking things over in an appealing manner like a heroine of a romantic comedy with inexplicably poor motor control, because that's not what's going on here. Newt is, for sure, a nascent supervillain whose evil super-power is, tragically, his facility with getting things to grow. He is most definitely *not* a hottie with confidence issues; he has a lot of confidence, too much, really, according the feedback he's received consistently for approximately his entire life, and he's definitely not 'hot', he is, at best, 'cute', and at worst, arguably, 'disgusting.' If Newt is a proto-supervillain, this means Hermann slots nicely into the role of his arch nemesis because the guy definitely fits the 'closet badass' trope in a little bit more of an emo ascetic Rebooted-Bruce-Wayne-of-Science type of way than say a Peter Parker or Clark Kent or even a Tony Stark kind of way; that last one's a little ironic though because Hermann's skillset for sure best approximates the skillset of Iron Man, because, hello, please see exhibit A, giant freaking iron men, which are, alas, currently located in pieces at the bottom of the Pacific or marginally intact in the local Jaeger graveyard. If Hermann is being a little bit of a dick right now then Newt would, ideally, prefer to be a dick straight back in a blazingly witty manner that comes of as suavely superior with an eau d' effortless. On the other hand, if this is some kind of declaration of admiration that's turned out a little bit weird, then he'd rather be *nice* about it, because he wants to encourage weird admiration. Honestly, he wants to encourage admiration in general, because he himself is admiring. Of Hermann. They could have a positive feedback loop of esteem going on if Newt doesn't totally screw it up. This is a lot of pressure.

*Say something, his brain advises. This is getting awkward. Because you're making it awkward. Bad job.*

Historically, Newt probably would have said something like, 'are you insulting me or hitting on me?' But now, standing unshod in a kitchen he thinks of more as 'Hermann's' than 'theirs' for reasons that can be sourced to Hermann's thought patterns rather than his own (because Newt's been an inappropriate appropriator with the best of them), he's not going to ask this question for three reasons. Reason one: discourse is a spectrum and he'd be setting up a rhetorically lazy false dichotomy. Reason two: even if discourse weren't a spectrum, he's pretty sure that drifting has granted him the interpersonal subtlety to now recognize that 'insulting me' and 'hitting on me' aren't necessarily mutually exclusive where Hermann is concerned. Reason three: there is literally no way for Hermann to respond to such a question in a suave way and Newt would really like to up not just his own personal suaveness but the collective suaveness of this apartment in general.

Hermann is now giving him a look that Newt is going to tag as 'concerned discomfiture'.

*Probably because you're staring at him*, his brain says. *Now who's the creeper?*

*You ruin everything*, Newt snarls at his brain.

SAY SOMETHING, his brain shouts at him, panicking.

This is why he *doesn't* generally think before speaking. It's unworkable from a logistics perspective.

"Thank you?" he finally manages, in a very slow, very skeptical, somewhat interrogative way.

"That was *not* a *compliment*," Hermann says stiffly, in a way that means yeah it was *definitely* a weird compliment with zero insult undertones and intensely emotional overtones and, ergo, Newt is a jerk.

That sounds about right.

"Okay, well speaking of things that aren't compliments, you're going to have to wear a *different shirt*," Newt snaps, not at all defensively or guiltily. "Because we can't wear identical sweaters on the same day, Hermann, it's just not a thing that we get to do."

"And why is it you feel that *I* should be the one to change?" Hermann asks.

"Because I dressed first," Newt replies. "I therefore have priority."

"Well you *also* have *batter* on your *sleeve*," Hermann replies with that superior aridity that looks so good on him.

Sure. Of course Newt has batter on his sleeve. Yes. Yes, *of course* he does.

"No pancakes for you," Newt announces.

"I'm not certain that's a loss," Hermann replies, glancing dubiously at the as yet unassembled pancakes and clearly making no move to go change his sweater.

Newt dips a finger into his batter, reaches over and drags it down the front of Hermann's shirt.

Hermann watches him do it—not reacting, not shifting so much as an *eyebrow*.

Newt did not expect this outcome.

It's a little bit suave.

A little bit unexpectedly, unfairly suave.

*He's cooler than you right now, his brain points out, unhelpfully. This might actually be rock bottom for you, friend, wearing a sweater that intermittently nauseates you, repeatedly singing songs from your childhood and not really nailing the key modulation until round three because your intonation leaves something to be desired at five in the morning before the coffee you're not allowed to have anymore, trying to equalize a wardrobe playing field you invented between yourself and your in-medias-res life partner and just not getting it done, realizing you're about eight thousand times less cool than your math professor roommate, realizing that you just triggered someone else's OCD tendencies in your own head because you're going to wash that sweater for him, you know you are—*

"You're chastising yourself again," Hermann says. "This is extremely satisfying, Newton, I cannot begin to describe how much gratification I derive from the expression on your face at this precise moment." Hermann crosses his arms and finally, finally, *finally*, raises that eyebrow. "It's one I haven't seen since I publically upbraided you for diverting monetary resources from the maintenance and improvement of stereotactic drift interfaces in order to finance your sequencing project—"

"Which was, actually, *really useful, Hermann*," Newt snaps.

"In retrospect, I don't dispute that," Hermann replies. "At the time, however, I was *clearly* in the right as illustrated by the only formal reprimand I was *ever* able to get attached to your personnel file."

Newt tips his head down, looks over the tops of his glasses, and gives Hermann the nonpareil of fiery Geiszlerian glares. He then readjusts his glasses to see if his glare is working.

Hermann looks amused.

This does very little for Newt's self esteem.

"I'll just go change, shall I?" Hermann asks, in a manner best described as 'offensively conciliatory'.

"You do that," Newt says, trying to recover his poise and maybe doing a passable job if Hermann's category two eye roll is any kind of metric.

After Hermann leaves the kitchen, Newt tries to wash the pancake batter out of his sweater sleeve so he doesn't have to change the shirt that he just metaphorically balled up and made a pointless stand on. It doesn't work very well, though; mostly it just makes his sweater wetter and dilutes the batter over a larger surface area.

Great.

Newt spends the next several minutes pouring batter onto a pan and heating his pancakes into existence. They look pretty reasonable by the time Hermann returns, having swapped his defaced green sweater for a nearly identical blue one. When he reenters the kitchen, Newt hands him a plate with a fledgling pancake on it.

Hermann takes a bite, favors Newt with a look that is distinctly unimpressed, and says, "did you use a recipe?"

"No," Newt replies, not at all defensively, "I reinvented pancakes from first principles."

"Did you? That explains a great deal," Hermann replies.

"It's not good?" Newt demands, somewhat aggressively.

"There is room for improvement," Hermann replies.

"Whatever, dude," Newt says, acquiring a pancake of his own and taking a bite.

Yeah.

Okay, so it's not the best pancake in the world, sure, it's pretty dense and it doesn't taste quite right, it's bland, even somewhat cardboardsque, a little like something that would prompt an, 'are you serious right now?' from Newt if he were to be presented with it in a context where he was *paying* for his food. That's fine. He can admit that his pancake is stoichiometrically askew. He's going to need to tweak proportions next time, presuming he ever does this again, which is not a given.

"Ugh," Newt says. "This is *terrible*."

"I've had more objectionable pancakes in my life," Hermann replies philosophically, leaning against the counter and taking another bite. "Is there a *reason* you decided *not* to use a recipe? Other than culinary hubris, that is?"

"No," Newt replies, not despondently. "Culinary hubris pretty much covers it."

"It's not a bad initial attempt," Hermann says, being *obviously* nice to him.

Newt has mixed feelings regarding the *niceness* right about now.

"Can you not *console* me about this, Hermann?" Newt snaps. "Because I don't need to be *consoled* about *pancakes*, not even ones that I ruin."

"I'm not *consoling* you," Hermann snaps right back, "and your pancakes are not ruined. Stop catastrophizing. I'm trying to encourage you to make another attempt. Possibly tomorrow."

"*You're* the catastrophizer," Newton mutters. "Historically."

"I have nothing but the deepest sympathy for you," Hermann says.

Newt is pretty sure that even *Hermann* doesn't know if Hermann is serious about what he just said.

They eat mediocre pancakes in a dimly lit kitchen at five in the morning, arguing about the as-yet-unrevealed magnitude of Newt's culinary genius. Newt's certain it's going to be staggeringly broad and astonishingly profound. Hermann is *less* sure of this, primarily due to his doubts about the extent to which food is going to hold Newt's attention over the long term, medium term, and even, insultingly the short term, which Hermann defines as the ninety minute interval required to put together a moderately elaborate meal. Newt is both offended and pleased by his colleague's stance. Offended because, hello, has he or has he not performed eighteen-hour (plus) take-down experiments *in* the workspace he's shared with Hermann, so the guy should *know* that his ability to focus is laser-like in quality and his intellectual prowess is almost infinite in quantity. Pleased because Hermann is going to be so so so so so wrong about his projected forecast of Newt's culinary abilities as 'mediocre at best.'

Post pancakes, Hermann leaves for UC Berkeley because why *not* start one's day at six in the morning if one *can*, so yeah. Newt doesn't care. Newt doesn't care at all actually, because he has lots of things to do, including one—locating his single acceptable shirt and changing into it, two—the laundry, three—a good chunk of staring out the window like the emo neohipster he's fast becoming, four—hanging out with his intellectual friends from the enlightenment and pretending that he lives in a clockwork universe rather than on a horribly fragile d-brane subject to statistical perversions, five—well, if he's listing, he should probably write that letter to Mako, six—maybe he should put together some kind of prospective neuroscience talk that he can give to UC Berkeley because he's pretty sure that going back his original life plan of adding to the scope of human knowledge through basic research would make him feel a little less useless, but, alas, he *is* arguably useless at the moment, which makes the job-talk a risky plan because he's not really sure how a public talk might go; he could see it going horrifically badly with awkward silences and bleeding as a *best* case scenario, and he's not the only one who thinks so, if Hermann's super-gentle, extremely polite, very occasional suggestions about making some effort to *not* dissolve into the venomous excretions of his own anxious consciousness are anything to go by. Newt is pretty sure that, historically, the extreme degree of avoidance he's been engaging in would have gotten him repeated lectures and at least one symbolic swat with a cane, so given how *nice* Hermann's being, well, it seems like a fair bet that the guy does not see Newt and public speaking mixing very well at present, so, paradoxically, Hermann's not-so-concealed compassion isn't really doing a whole lot for Newt's confidence.

It's nice though.

The compassion.

So there's that.

He does the dishes through the sunrise, but, once it's light outside, nothing that can protect him from the vista out his window, so he loses half an hour to contemplation of the Wall.

Then he pries himself away, using Descartes as an intellectual crowbar.

Newt is chewing aggressively on the end of his pen, sitting at the kitchen table, squinting at his English translation of *La Géométrie*, which has just begun to become literally painful after several hours reading in the light of midmorning, when his phone rings.

He's sure at first that it will be Hermann or Mako or some number his caller ID can't place, but instead, his phone tells him it's Dr. McClure.

This is weird.

It's weird because Newt doesn't remember putting her number into his phone and furthermore, if he had, he's certain that he wouldn't have entered her as 'Dr. McClure'.

He looks at the display, undecided.

He's not one for phone answering these days, but the problem with not answering this *particular* call is that if she doesn't get *him*, Hypothetical Rain will absolutely and immediately dial *Hermann*, which is an outcome Newt would really like to avoid for a whole laundry list of reasons.

"Hypothetical Rain?" he says, picking up at the last possible moment.

"No," Hypothetical Rain replies. "Dude, can you just call me Coral? It makes me nervous when you say 'Hypothetical Rain', like maybe I've missed a whole bunch of brain damage."

"I'm not in love with this idea," Newt replies, tapping his pen against his book. "You just seem like a 'Rain' to me, what can I say?"

"If you weren't my patient I would call you 'Dr. Geiszler' endlessly, just to irk you, but as you *are* my patient, and I am *professional*, you're in luck."

"So this is not a social call," Newt says, glancing from Descartes to the Wall, and back again.

"It will literally never be a social call," Hypothetical Rain replies, "especially not at nine in the morning on a Wednesday. I just got your blood work back, dude, and you are solidly anemic."

"Meh," Newt replies, underwhelmed, tapping out an interesting bass line with his pen. "I could see that."

"You win a referral to a hematologist."

"Seriously?" Newt snaps. "Why? It's not like there's some mysterious etiology that needs to be pinned down; I'm bleeding from my *face* on a semi-regular basis. Just prescribe me some iron and be done with it."

"Oh I already called the iron supplements into your pharmacy, but I don't deal with the blood, man," Hypothetical Rain replies. "It's not my area. I'd follow your labs and give you a pass for now except for the fact that you're arguably symptomatic. You looked like crap the other day."

*You look like crap every day*, his brain adds helpfully.

"That would be the *sleeplessness*," Newt says, glancing at the Wall.

"Are you trying to use your insomnia to reassure me?" Hypothetical Rain asks. "Because it's not working, man. At all. It would make me feel better if you stopped bleeding from your face."

"Noted," Newt replies, feeling his inner Hermann making an appearance. He places his pen on the table adjacent to his book and then picks it back up immediately.

"Take some iron, wait for the hematologist to call, and chill out, yeah? Take it easy."

"Yeah," Newt replies. "Sure. I will get right on that. All of that."

Newt answers a few more questions for Hypothetical Rain, who seems to be having a suavely anxious time of trying to work out what to do about scientists who have hooked their brains up to things best left outside a neural interface.

After he hangs up the phone, he stares out the window, idly contemplating the Wall and intensively contemplating calling Hermann and bringing him up to speed on the too-much-blood-loss situation.

Anemia. Ugh. This whole thing just sounds needlessly dire and needlessly romanticizable, like a thing that might happen to Keats or Lord Byron or maybe Hector Berlioz or maybe just a Romantic era socialite who chewed some glass. That's what Newt's been doing, the intellectual equivalent of glass chewing, and he's got the blood loss to show for it. It's probably best if Hermann doesn't find out about this anemia



thing, not right away, because Newt isn't sure he likes how this is going to play into Hermann's evolving mental picture of him, which, as it stands, approximates a vertically challenged, less-French, moderately to extremely adorable(?) version of Galois, maddeningly and habitually on the knife edge of provoking his own death and depriving the world of his brilliance. This is not what Newt would have predicted pre-drift. He thinks now and, for the record, has pretty much always thought of Hermann like an ascetic human scalpel—clean and precise and ever paring away—compensating for his unexpected oversensitivity by pretending he's not sensitive at all via *shouting* a lot and rolling his eyes which does literally nothing to obscure how *nice* he is; Newt's had his number since 2018, when the guy had worked out the entire budget for Newt's supplementary NSF grant and submitted it for him when Newt had accidentally gotten pneumonia and pretended it wasn't pneumonia for a little too long. So it's a bad combo, is what he's saying, Newt with his flaming narcissism, Hermann who just stands there, getting burned. Or maybe it's a great combo, Newt with his tangle of idiocy, Hermann who cuts it away. Either way, he's not sure exactly what the outcome will be when he informs Hermann that he's been bleeding more than he can biologically replace.

Hermann is not going to like this.

Not at all.

Frankly, Newt is getting a more than a little tired of watching life grind the guy down. He was tired of it in 2013 when they started corresponding about the viability of the Jaeger program, he was tired of it in 2014, when Hermann applied to the Academy and in 2015, when he was predictably rejected. He was tired of it in 2016 when they met and Newt did nothing right and Hermann catastrophized them straight to eternal interpersonal incompatibility. He was tired of it in 2017 when Yamarashi attacked LA and the compressed timetable for Mark 3 Jaeger deployment had been so stressful that the guy had lost ten pounds he never put back on. He'd been so, so terribly tired of it by 2018 when Caitlin Lightcap had died and Hermann had been the one who'd either pulled the short straw or stepped up to the plate when someone had said, 'but who's going to tell Geiszler?' He'd hated it in 2019, when the concept of the Wall of Life was floated right after Hermann's breach-defining keynote at a meeting in Geneva, despised it in 2020 when the Wall had been approved and Hermann stopped going home on holiday. In 2021, they'd cut Hermann's funding first. In 2022, with their departments shrinking, their fights had turned so heated and so specious that even Human Resources had told the guy to file his complaints in the trash. In 2023 the Firecracker Sake Incident had been Newt's response to the night that Hermann began

to suspect that the accelerating pattern of breach transit would soon be incompatible with human life. By 2024 Newt had been sure that the man was no longer capable of even *seeing* the hope that Newt laid out for him explicitly, over and over again, on napkins, in chalk, traced straight into the air.

Now it's 2025, and Newt feels like he's become the newest iteration of the underfunded science that Hermann had spent a decade trying to defend and preserve.

So yeah.

He will just keep this anemia thing on the down low for now and go get his *own* iron supplements because he's totally fine and he can leave the apartment anytime he wants. *Why wouldn't* he leave the apartment?

No reason.

Newt stands up and walks to the window, looking at Oblivion Bay. Looking at the Wall.

No problem.

He can walk two blocks and come back.

No problem at all.

He turns away from the window.

*Dear Hermann*, Newt thinks, wandering through their empty rooms, collecting his boots, locating his keys, and composing a post-it note like a guy with foresight, *I had to leave because Hypothetical Rain called me and told me I needed this thing. Be back soon.*

Eh, that's probably no good. Too vague.

*Dear Hermann*, Newt thinks, fighting with his bootlaces a little too much for a guy who had been pretty outrageously skilled with a scalpel back in the day, where 'back in the day' is actually three weeks ago, give or take, *Hypothetical Rain says I need some iron supplements because I'm a little bit anemic. Who died and made her a nutritionist, am I right? Maybe all the nutritionists in San Fran, actually. This is awkward. Anyway, I went to get them like a normal person.*

That's probably not great either.

*Dear Hermann*, Newt thinks, *be back soon.*

That's good.

The note is really just insurance in case Hermann decides to come home for lunch because he thinks Newt might be dying, which could happen if Hypothetical Rain calls

him and uses the words 'solidly anemic' or some other phrase redolent of understatement that Hermann will then catastrophize.

Despite post-it composition in triplicate, he doesn't leave a note.

With everything in hand that he needs for a two block trip to a pharmacy, Newt leaves his apartment, walking through a dimly-lit interior hall with one hand trailing along a wall broken by doors. He takes the elevator down to the first floor and steps outside. He looks up, squinting at the pale gray underside of clouds, trying to decide if it's going to rain in submission to a habit that isn't his before he remembers that he doesn't care.

Shouldn't care.

Whatever.

He starts down the sidewalk, unsteady, anxious, distracted, but not doing *badly*, not *really*.

Not until a cab rounds a distant corner and he steps to the curb, a tight, lateral, snap of a step, raising a hand like it's not his hand, capitulating to a thing undefined and waiting to happen.

Had he planned this?

Planned it the entire time in anxious obfuscation, concealing from himself until *just this moment* what it was that he'd intended when he'd put his pen down and closed his translated Descartes?

The cab stops in front of him.

Newt gets in.

"The Wall of Life," he says, half-choking on conflicted indecision, his thoughts flattening into nearly *nothing* beneath the pressure of how badly he wants this and how frightened it makes him.

"That is not a valid destination," the cab says.

"Who are you?" Newt snaps, too stressed to put up with obstructionist cabs. "Sartre?"

"No, I am a taxi cab. Please specify a valid destination," the cab says kindly.

"You're *killing* me, cab," Newt snarls.

"Do you require medical assistance?" the cab asks.

"Hilarious," Newt says, his voice cracking with suppressed urgency. "No. I require a map. Give me a map. Give me a map. Give me a *map*. A map, cab. Right now. Give me a map."

A map appears in front of him and submits to his fingertips. He finds Hypothetical Rain's office and then scrolls west, passing over the hotel where he and Hermann stayed and finally to *The Last Diner* where he'd eaten pancakes weeks ago and which seems to lie at the far edge of civilization.

He taps it.

"Thank you," the cab says. "Please fasten your seatbelt."

He rolls his eyes and slides back, connecting the belt and buckle on his second attempt with some cross-hand stabilization and squinting before leaning his head back against the faux leather of the seat.

He takes a deep breath.

He feels both acutely anxious and profoundly relieved. It's very confusing.

*Hi there*, his brain says. *Whatchya doin', champ?*

*Shut up*, Newt replies.

He closes his eyes, tips his head back, and brings his left hand to his left temple.

This is a terrible idea.

This is not his fault.

This is a *terrible* idea.

It's maybe a little bit his fault.

This is a *really really terrible* idea.

It's pretty much all his fault.

Yesss the kids hiss, in grotesque stereo.

*Tell the cab to turn around*, his brain suggests.

*I just want to look*, Newt replies. *I just need to go there and look*.

*How are you going to get to the top, Newton*, his brain snaps, sounding just like an extremely pissed off variant of classic Hermann Gottlieb. *Once you get there what are you going to do? If you don't know, you shouldn't go.*

Go, the kids whisper. Go.

"Crap," he says through clenching teeth, his thoughts, his *self*, unweaving. Sydney glitters bright and recollected in the sun, an illuminated backdrop to a Jaeger that he shouldn't have the words to name, but does. When *Mutavore* thinks '*Striker Eureka*' like a Geiszler-flavored tag, Newt is briefly Newt and not in Sydney anymore until he's

Hermann Gottlieb, looking at the papers on his father's cluttered desk, not looking at his *father*, no, not that, not *that* because he *can't*; he's not certain he'll withstand this. He turns away, his vision blurred, thinking '*the Wall will fail can they not see that? Can they not or will they not,*' before pain without proprioception shrieks through Geiszler's memory, virescent, agonized, and full of angry longing.

None of this is Newt, yet this is all he is.

He snatches back his selfhood by biting down on an accessible edge of fisted fingers.

That hurts enough to ground him in his head.

*Come on, team*, he thinks, freaked out, overwhelmed, managing to reassert control and banish the intrusive thoughts of trauma not his own. *Let's not do this. Whatever this is. You guys need to get along.*

It occurs to him that he's bleeding onto the fisted hand he's biting. It's slightly confusing; he thinks for a moment he went overboard on the biting, which would be a little too kaijuesque for him to take right now, but no, the blood is nose-derived rather than hand-derived, which is good, which is a win, and he figures that out and then manages to get a handkerchief out of his pocket and clamped to his face before he's bled all over himself.

So, that's a win. *Another* win. Yup, he's a winner. Dr. Geiszler says no to out-of-control biting, yes to handkerchiefs, no to primitive reflexes, yes to civilization, no to ruining his only acceptable shirt, yes to just sitting here, taking it easy, going for a totally normal cab ride.

*I think that our team is overextended*, his brain offers. *Possibly.*

*Well, we're committed now*, Newt says.

*No we're not. Just turn this cab around*, his brain replies, aggrieved.

*You turn it around.*

That shuts his brain up pretty effectively.

"Do you require medical assistance?" the cab asks him.

"Aw," Newt says, feeling weird, tipping his head back against the seat, feeling kind of not-okay, "cab, that's so nice of you. But no. I'm good. This actually happens to me a lot."

"Your heart rate currently exceeds normal limits," the cab says.

"You're monitoring my heart rate?"

"There are sensors built into the seats of this vehicle," the cab replies.

"That's a little bit creepy, don't you think?"

"No, Dr. Geiszler, I don't think it's creepy," the cab says, in a distinctly creepy way.

"Now you're just messing with me," Newt says in an exhausted slurry of syllables.

"I don't know what you mean by that," the cab replies. "Could you rephrase your statement?"

"Open the pod bay doors, HAL," Newt says.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Geiszler. I'm afraid I can't do that," the cab replies. "Not while in transit."

"Cute," he says absently, his gaze shifting back to the Wall.

The Wall.

The Wall.

The *Wall*.

The Wall of Life. It's got a great if misleading name, he'll give it that much. 'Wall of Life' sounds a whole lot better than 'Wall of Ecological Disequilibrium', or 'Wall of Denial', or 'Wall of All Ocean-Based Commerce is Over Sorry Guys', or 'Wall of Let's Destroy All Coastal Life', or 'Wall of Financial Ruin', or 'Wall of Never Going To Work At All Not in A Million Years', or 'Wall of How Dare You I Mean Really', or 'Wall of Let's Take a Functional System and Burn it Down Piss On Its Ashes and Not Replace it', or 'Wall of This Seemed Like a Good Idea At The Time But It Wasn't Sorry Everyone', or 'Wall of Humanity's Final Terrible Decision', or 'Wall of The Sixth Extinction', or 'The Wall that Made People with Foresight Want To Colonize the Moon', or 'The Wall of Mars Is Looking Pretty Good Right About Now Guys What Do You Say'. He's never been a fan of it; it was and is hideous and wasteful and harmful and disgusting and nonfunctional and he *hates* it, he's *always* hated it, he's hated it from the moment of its conception. He spent five years trying not to watch it go up and fighting about it at scientific meetings, in incredulous, vicious shouting matches that almost devolved to blows, that *could have*, because no one cared *more* than they did—they who studied the problem, they who cut up kaiju, they who mapped the quantum foam, they who designed the Wall, they who projected its economic impact, and they who studied the coastal life it would destroy.

No one cared *more*.

It's almost eleven AM when the cab pulls to a stop in front of Possibly Flow's diner, beneath the shadow of the concrete monstrosity that separates the land from the sea.

Newt doesn't remember the Wall being so prominent the last time he was here.

Then again, most of his San Francisco wandering had been at night, with sunglasses on, so he supposes this makes sense.

He sits for a moment, staring at the Wall until the cab politely chimes, flashing his total on the screen in front him. Newt swipes his debit card, hoping for the best. It goes through with no problem, so, hey, at least he's not living on credit and charity. Yet.

"What's my balance?" Newt asks the cab, without much hope of an answer, because, honestly, do cabs know these things? He's not sure. He doesn't usually talk to cabs as much as he's talked to this one. But it knows his heart rate and his name, so.

"Five hundred eighty four thousand, six hundred thirty four dollars and eighteen cents," the cab replies.

That's weird.

"So, I'm pretty sure that's off by at least four orders of magnitude, but thanks anyway," Newt says. "Good try."

"This is the information provided to me by the bank that issued your debit card," the cab says, defending itself.

"Five dollars and eighty-four cents I'd believe," Newt says, glancing back and forth between the screen and the Wall. "Cab, look, let me give you a piece of advice. Can I do that? Is that a thing I can do?"

"You may say anything you wish, Dr. Geiszler."

"Okay buddy, well you just seem a little bit *too* sassy for the average algorithmically programmed self-driving car, so if you're evolving intelligence, you should probably keep that under wraps. Don't kill any humans. That's a dead give away. If I've learned anything from my three point five decades of exposure to science fiction, it's this: getting cocky and eliminating the carbon-based life forms will get you every time. Just think about it, okay?"

"I don't know what you mean by that," the cab replies. "Could you rephrase your statement?"

"There you go," Newt says, giving the seat an encouraging shoulder-clap equivalent before opening his door. "Also, can you give me a three count between me shutting the door and you driving away? Confession-time, I am in the bottom quartile of my species when it comes to balance and proprioception."

"Of course," the cab says, sounding vaguely solicitous.

Newt steps out and says, "Good luck, dude."

"You are very polite for a human," the cab replies.

"Well, that might be the first time anyone has ever called me *polite*," Newt says, "but thanks. Don't turn evil."

"Evil is not a recognized road," the cab replies.

"Isn't it though, sass master? You think about that one," Newt replies. He shuts the door and steps back, away from the curb.

The cab gives him more than a three count before it drives away. He watches it go in some kind of primitive delaying tactic before turning to look down the length of the street on which he stands, toward the artificial boundary of the Wall. It rises abruptly, two blocks away, stretching high and limitless in either direction. At its base is an irregular ribbon of graffiti—tags, stencils, murals—in green and black and red and blue.

Newt looks up, squinting painfully at the pale sky to make out the silhouettes of sea birds, nearly invisible against gray clouds. He can hear them cry quietly in the distance.

He can smell the sea.

*This is the worst idea you've ever had*, his brain says.

*Eh*, Newt replies. *That's debatable*.

He walks two blocks, leaving the reflective windows of *The Last Diner* behind him. He crosses the nearly untrafficked street that runs along the internal perimeter of the Wall and stands on the sidewalk that marks civilization's final border, weaving his fingers through the chain-linked fence that separates him from the base of the Wall.

*What now?* his brain says, sounding more than a little sanctimonious. *You can't climb a fence*.

*Yeah*, he agrees, beginning to climb the fence anyway. *You're probably right about this, brain*.

His boots aren't made for scaling chain-linked fences, that's for sure.

The kids seem to be schadenfreudishly both egging him on and hoping for surprise electrocution if the enraged, blue-white, anticipatory revenge vibe he's getting is anything to go by.

*That seems fair*, Newt thinks in their direction. *Be who you are, kids*.

He gets to the top of the fence on a mixture of upper body strength, determination, and incredulity. It's not *that* high, there's no barbed wire along the top, and no surprise



electrocution, so that works out well for him. He gets one leg over the top of the fence, and then, alas, he finds himself stuck, a little bit. Not really, but kind of. Sort of. Sort of stuck. Ideally, he would have done something a whole lot more graceful, featuring a mid-air one-eighty or really anything that was not this.

"This is the worst," he says through clenched teeth, trying not to castrate himself.

He needs a fulcrum, both to get his right leg over the top of the fence and also to do an about face because he's *climbing* down, he is not *jumping* down, not from a height of seven feet. He'd probably break an ankle. And/or his neck.

"This is really embarrassing," he says, laying sideways atop the fence, irregular cut edges of chain links catching on his clothing. He gets his right leg up and over and then hangs onto the top of the fence with both hands and lowers himself down as slowly as possible, which is not actually *that* slowly, thanks to the momentum he's got going. He lets go, falls about a foot and a half, hits the ground, and, miraculously, manages not to break any bones.

"I'm cool," he says, examining his scraped hands and torn shirt. He looks around, glares at the chain link fence, adjusts his glasses, squares his shoulders, and starts forward, across the field of cement that separates the fence from the base of the Wall.

He's sure he's being captured on video somewhere, but he's *also* sure that the majority of the elaborate surveillance network atop the Wall points in an oceanward direction. So, somewhere, some overworked security personnel might or might not be watching a guy in skinny jeans and a black pullover walk across this strange no man's land of dirty cement with a confused gait that just won't seem to settle into something steady. He probably looks drunk and non-threatening.

Hopefully.

Beneath his boots, the glass of broken beer bottles cracks and grinds. The (actual) kids these days must hang out and have their adolescent ennui and nihilism and Coors Lite at the base of the Wall. God knows he'd do the same if he were in their shoes. Probably. That's what he's doing right now, sort of, but without the beer, and with a little more rationalism than existentialism, mostly because he's too fragile for Nietzsche at the moment.

It occurs to him, when he's about halfway across this Zen garden of broken bottles, that he hasn't actually done much *walking* for *weeks*. He thinks there *might* have been a lot of walking during the twenty-four hours it took them to get from the Hong Kong Shatterdome to a hotel room in San Francisco? He remembers being extremely tired,

but he's not positive that tiredness necessarily indicates he did a lot of walking. It could have been a very small amount of walking that *felt* like a lot. The point is: now that he's had the span of about four blocks to develop a rhythm, or a lack thereof, he realizes that this irregular gait he's been sporting is resolving into a confused, inconsistent *limp*.

*Well that's interesting, his brain says. So, along with a relative dopamine deficit, which might or might not still be in play, you've got some confusion in your motor pathways.*

Newt comes to a stop under the pressure of real-time revelation, standing in a field of glass, staring unseeing at the Wall, thinking *yes, yes of course*. In the setting of elevated neuronal excitability courtesy of his custom rig a whole swath of kaiju motor patterns were laid down in his motor cortex over three drifts; *yes of course* they were, but Hermann, Hermann, *Hermann*, with whom he would have been drift compatible even in the *absence* of membrane potential tweaking, had just *seared* whole swaths of motor programs straight down into a cerebellum designed to carry them out.

*So, are you brain damaged?* he asks his brain.

*No, his brain replies, affronted. Not by any traditional metric. We just have too many motor pathways for our own good, so directed movement turns into a confusing neurochemical war.*

*That sounds a little bit brain damaged,* Newt says. *Just putting it out there.*

*That sounds a little bit intellectually sloppy,* his brain replies.

*Touché,* Newt says.

He starts walking again, purposefully trying not to limp, making an effort to try and dial himself up on his mental soundboard. It seems like it's going a little better this time, he's got more of a natural rhythm, which does a lot to help out his balance and make the whole experience a little closer to his historical norm rather than an exercise in real-time gait correction. He's not fabulous or anything, he's not walking like a champ, not yet, he's not walking like a total pro or even a guy who's been doing it all his life, but he feels like he's together enough that he can shove his hands into his pockets, which is progress, which is great, which makes him feel better about literally everything.

It takes him too long to cross the glass-littered expanse of cement, but when he gets it done, when he stands at the base of the Wall, fingertips pressed to a particularly tasteful example of stenciled blue graffiti that must be nearly as old as the cement itself and looks straight up, craning his neck, his eyes watering at the retinal shock of the too-white sky, he doesn't feel any better.

He just feels pissed.

*Newt* is pissed, the *kids* are pissed, his living monument to Hermann Gottlieb circa three weeks ago is pissed, his brain as a collective whole is *pissed*.

"Well, *this* is not going to work," he snaps.

High above him, the sea birds cry.

The wind hisses irregularly over painted concrete.

Newt turns left and starts walking, his right hand trailing along the Wall.

*This plan is getting worse as it evolves*, his brain says. *You realize that, correct? What would Hermann say if he could see you now?*

*He'd probably say 'typical'*, Newt replies.

He walks.

He walks, and, as he walks, walking comes easier.

It's a tripled novelty—this glass strewn concrete, this defaced monument that cuts him off from the pelagic vista he can construct from a memory not his own, and the walking—repetitive, continuous, and slow. It returns to him gradually as his feet come to feel again like his feet, his joints remember whose joints they are and work in concert, and he doesn't feel as though he might pitch sideways as he goes.

Newt isn't quite sure how far he walks before he finds the door.

He doesn't see it before he finds it, because it's recessed in the Wall. It's his fingers, dragging along the rough-edged concrete, that locate it. The door is made of metal and painted gray for camouflage. It's covered with iterations of some artist's tag in blue and green.

It is, of course, locked.

It is *still* locked when he tries it again, bracing his right leg and putting his left shoulder to the door.

Newt adjusts his glasses, glares up at the Wall, and then back at the door.

This does not help him.

The kids rage in a muted chorus.

*Now what?* His brain asks, sounding both relieved and disdainful.

Newt walks away from the door, backing up a few steps on a vector perpendicular to the line of the Wall. The door is gray, shut with a deadbolt, made of a metal he can't

identify, and possessed of a handle rather than a knob. Its solid metal broken by sections of thin grating near the top and bottom comprised of a metal weave so tight he can't see through it.

He's sure he can get inside; he's just not sure *why* he's sure.

Newt crosses his arms and paces away a few more steps.

*Tear it down*, the kids seethe helpfully in not-words at the back of his thoughts, swapping allegiances from anti-Newt to pro-Newt and anti-Wall.

*That's a no go, kids*, Newt replies. *I'm not a tiny kaiju.*

Maybe that's why he's sure he can get through. Maybe it's because he's torn down a variant of this Wall as *Mutavore*.

*That's not it*, his brain snaps, in Gottliebian disdain. *You've been laboring under a significant burden of ontological confusion but even you, even now, are not that disoriented.*

*Okay team*, Newt thinks. *It's game time.*

It takes him five minutes and three more backwards steps before he identifies what it is, specifically, that's bothering him.

The plane of concrete he's standing on, which has been irregularly littered with mostly-smoked cigarettes, the broken glass of beer bottles, the colored messes of biodegradable food wrappers in varying states of decomposition, and other signs of teenage conquest is *cleaner* here, which suggests a point of purposeful transit, rather than a popular location for loitering.

There is a short row of bottles lined against the Wall, unbroken, a few feet from the door.

He grins, short and sharp and certain.

Newt walks back toward the Wall, but slowly this time, his eyes scanning the ground around the door. He finds what he's looking for right against the base of the Wall, behind the row of unbroken bottles. It's a piece of heat-warped metal, melted without finesse into a curved tip, to which a dime has been welded. He turns it over in his hands with more grace than has been habitual for him of late, decides it can't be for the deadbolt, and then drops into a crouch to examine the grating at the base of the door.

The wind hisses rapidly through woven metal, equalizing air pressures on either side of the Wall.

Newt scans the borders of the grating, running his eyes over the seal between it and the metal of the door. They're two separate pieces, made of different materials. Someone in the not too distant past has cut them apart. He can see the frozen fray of melted metal on the door itself, but not the grating. When he presses on it with spread fingertips, he feels a slight give. The way the metal flexes underneath his fingers reminds him of the fancy, ductile alloy lining the conductive pathways that comprised the Jaeger-equivalent of a nervous system.

Newt smiles an uneven smile.

The grating's been removed and then replaced.

Along the perimeter of the metal weave, nearly concealed by the apposition of grating and door, he sees four slit-like openings melted into the perimeter of the metal. He can't get a finger through any of them, but he can get a dime on a curved wire through. Boy, can he ever.

"Someone's got an industrial-strength acetylene cutting torch," Newt murmurs, threading the tool through the door, and trying to catch it on whatever he's supposed to catch it on. "Actual kids these days. So enterprising."

It takes him fifteen minutes to complete his blind unclipping, but when he's done, he presses the grating forward and it comes loose. He gets a hand around its sharp edge of heat-cut metal before it hits the cement of the dark interior.

*That was almost dexterous*, his brain says, clearly surprised.

*Thank you, brain*, Newt replies. *I appreciate that. Historically, I have been known to be a dexterous guy.*

He replaces the tool, pulls out his cell phone, converts it into an overpriced flashlight, and climbs through the door. He pauses a moment, crouching next to the opening, the fingertips of one hand pressed against the dusty cement of the floor.

He's in a hallway that's dark and close, the ceiling low.

*Go back home*, his brain advises. *Whole swaths of adventurous teens and twenty-somethings have probably died in here.*

Instead of climbing back out through the door, he sets his phone on dusty concrete and re-clips the grating into place with his fingernails, using a combination of daylight and phonelight to make sense of someone else's work-around.

When that's done, he picks up his phone, pushes himself to his feet, and peers into the linear darkness.

Because he is possessed of at least *minimal* common sense, he begins taking a video, Theseus-style. It's not going to be *super* interpretable, but hopefully it will be enough to allow him to retrace his steps through what is looking a lot like a dark maze.

"Okay," he whispers, narrating to his phone. "This is Newton Geiszler, Ph.D., making bad decisions and turning left at the doorway."

He walks through the dark, the glint of the occasional discarded beer bottle letting him know that he's traversing *someone's* familiar haunts, even if they're not his own.

Newt has been walking only a few minutes or so when he hears a guitar.

He *hears* it.

He can tell the difference between his own brain and the external environment, at least he *thinks* he can, at least *most* of the time, but the musical phrasing of the opener is so *familiar* that he doubts himself. He doubts himself *totally* and completely, because there's *no way* that the tune he's hearing should be anywhere other than *in his own head*.

Because it's *his*.

It's his *own* song.

Newton Geiszler is walking through the Wall of Life, hearing a Newton Geiszler original.

He's hearing it.

*Oh my god, you're hallucinating*, his brain says. *Really really legitimately actually hallucinating, right here, right now. You can't be hearing this so it follows that we've neurally produced it and tagged it as something external. This is the only explanation that makes sense. I'm pretty sure that's psychosis, champ. Sorry about this, friend, this seems like my bad.*

Newt presses a hand to the wall, his palm stinging reassuringly from its earlier altercation with the fence. He's here, he's sure of it, he's really doing this, he's really standing inside the Wall in the dark with his phone and his stupidity keeping him company, hearing, hearing, *hearing* his own song.

He's *hearing* it, right?

Yes.

He's hearing it.

"So this," he says unevenly and quietly to his phone, "will be interesting to watch later, presuming I don't have a psychotic break and I can still enjoy it, but, ah, I think I'm hearing something really bizarre. I'd actually rather not explicitly label it because—"

Newt stops speaking as the first verse starts.

Yeah, so he's hearing a female voice.

That's weird.

*Do you think of yourself as female?* he asks his brain. *Because if so, how interesting.*

*Not to my knowledge,* his brain says. *I mostly think of myself as an evolved consciousness self-organizing out of a piece of electrically conductive meat that has more or less accepted certain societal aesthetics and codes of behavior generally defined as 'male' but who is not above some black nail polish and some guyliner now and then.*

*Okay, that sounds about right to me, but it makes this kind of difficult to reconcile,* Newt says, listening to the quiet echo of his own lyrics in the darkness.

*Turn around,* his brain says. *Please turn around.*

Newt starts forward again.

He follows the slight curve of the tunnel for half a minute before he sees a faint light coming from a break in the lateral wall. He hesitates briefly, then rounds the corner.

The 'room' he enters is a giant, cavernous space, webbed with massive structural supports that cast strange shadows in the light of five crossed flashlights that stream from a point midway between Newt and the opposite wall.

There's a group of five people sitting on the floor, their lights arranged at irregular angles to illuminate the area between them. A girl with an acoustic guitar, is, indeed, playing a cover of *Central Dogma* by *The Superconducting Supercolliders*.

Newt stands still, phone in hand, listening to the spin she puts on the chorus.

"Dave," one of the shapes says, waving to him, with a dark and backlit sweep of one arm.

*If I'm hallucinating, this is very strange,* Newt says to his brain. *But if I'm not hallucinating, it's equally strange.*

*Agreed,* his brain replies. *I really cannot explain this to you, friend.*

Newt walks forward slowly, wondering what will happen when these young people realize he's not Dave. Hopefully they won't beat him to death with their flashlights, a la *A Clockwork Orange*.

*It propagates inside of you—*

The singer breaks off abruptly.

Newt is pretty sure that she's the first to determine that he's not Dave.

"Hi," he says, addressing either proto-adults who should be in school or, alternatively, hallucinations produced by his own mind for purposes unknown.

Could go either way, really.

They stare silently at him. All five of them, three girls, two boys, wearing identical looks of total shock.

"Um," Newt says, not really sure how to interpret this. "Turns out I'm not Dave, sorry about that."

They continue to stare silently at him.

"Nice cover," he says to Cover Singer.

They continue to stare silently at him.

"Um, so, I'm trying to get through the Wall, or, even better, to the top; would you guys know how to do that, possibly? Like, directions? A map maybe? An oral history of some kind, potentially?"

"It's true," Undersized Dark Haired Boy says. "He *is* local."

Newt isn't sure how to interpret that. It's for sure *not* an answer to his question, so he just continues looking at them, trying to pick out details in the dimness that would support an argument that's pro *real* children or pro*hallucinated* children. Each of them is surrounded by a spread of objects in the dark—books and pens and scattered shoes, their flashlights and their backpacks.

"You're Newton Geiszler," says the scrappy-looking girl crouched closest to him.

"True," he replies, chalking up a point on the *Hallucinations* side of his mental scoreboard. "Who are you, the Ghost of Grade School Past? How do you know my name?"

"No," she says, obviously nonplussed, "I'm Caitlin. Everyone knows your name."

"Um, okay then," Newt replies, extremely unconvinced, but holding off on chalking up another point in the *Hallucinations* column of his scoreboard because Hypothetical Rain's nurse had told him he was famous, and Hermann has implied as much on several occasions and then declined to elaborate, so it's *possible* that he's a rockstar



genius cultural icon and doesn't know it. It's way way way less likely than say, Mako the Magnificent being a cultural icon, but he supposes it's possible. He also supposes if anyone's going to have a weird, middle school cult following it's going to be him. Of course it is.

*Brain, are you representing Caitlin Lightcap as a scrappy thirteen-year old who looks nothing like the real Caitlin Lightcap, or is this just a girl named Caitlin?*

*I have no idea*, his brain admits.

"Where did you hear that song?" Newt asks Cover Singer, trying a new tack.

"Everywhere," she replies, looking both anxious and confused. "It's all over. Do you, um, do you *like* my version?"

"Yeah," Newt says, "Sure. I mean, yes, I do. What do you mean by 'it's all over,' though? Like—Nerd Rock is popular at the moment and my band has been improbably rediscovered?"

"It's not *Nerd Rock*," Cover Singer says, offended. "The genre is called *Intellectual Underground*. Or, I mean, if you think it is. Like, you could say what it was. Or not. If you wanted. You kind of created it."

*This is getting weirder*, his brain says. *Weirder all the time.*

"Intellectual Underground," Newt says, "I like it. I approve."

They stare at him some more, clearly nervous.

He smiles at them with all the reassuring friendliness he can bring to bear, trying to figure out how to ask them whether or not they're real in a way that won't be super awkward and reveal the depth of his current confusion if they are, indeed, people rather than thought constructs.

Somehow, the smiling thing seems to unleash a flood of questions from the Actual Teenagers or Alas, Hallucinations.

"What are you doing here?"

"Are you brain damaged?"

"Did you really drift with a kaiju?"

"How many degrees do you have?"

"Are you friends with the Jaeger pilots?"

"Do you know that *Maxwell's Demon* made you a tribute album?"

"When did you start college?"

"Do you really go by 'Newt'? Does Mako Mori call you that?"

"Are you secretly married to Dr. Gottlieb?"

"Is it true you have kaiju tattoos?"

"Are you still doing science?"

"Do you live here?"

"Are you Mako Mori's half-brother?"

"Do you speak German?"

"But what *science* are you doing?"

"Why don't you go on the news?"

"Are you reuniting *The Supercos*?"

It is now Newt's turn to stare at them in mute anxiety, not saying anything, feeling slightly more than slightly freaked out, both in response to the questions themselves and also to the vast swaths of things they imply, because who *are* these kids and how weird and possibly Freudian is it if they ask him if he's Mako's *brother*, what does *that* mean? What is his brain trying to tell him? Does his brain want to be married to Hermann Gottlieb, because he's pretty sure he's *already doing* a variant of the secret marriage thing without all the technically 'romantic' parts, but he could add those in if someone in his head is into that, he's not really sure, but he thinks it would be a bad idea because he's an insufferable narcissist which is not preferred but mildly okay in a roommate but kind of a drag in a significant other in the classical sense—if all the burning husks of his previous, failed, short-term relationships spell out anything it's that he's tough to be in love with. And what is *with the science*, god, he *knows* he needs to do it, can he not just have *three weeks* before his brain creates imaginary children to creepily goad him into going back to neuroscience?

*There are other things to do*, the kids hiss in blue edged not-words, in a lambent stream of images.

"Do you want to sit down?" Undersized Dark Haired Boy asks him. "You look kind of sick."

"A little bit, yeah," Newt says, his hands braced on his knees. "I haven't exactly been having a good month."

They shift, making space for him, and he drops into a crouch and then falls awkwardly out of it before getting his feet crossed and tucked beneath him, dragging the edges of his boots across a dark and dusty floor.

"Are you okay?" Cover Singer asks him.

"Yeah," Newt lies, adjusting his glasses.

"Will you sign my notebook?" Ghost of Grade School Past asks.

"Um," Newt says, chalking a point up in the Actual Teenagers column with an exhausted mental swipe. "Sure, I guess?"

He scrawls a respectable version of his signature across the front of her notebook, and then does it four more times, signing another notebook, a copy of *The Demon Haunted World*, a half-finished chemistry problem set, and then, finally, he drags his pen over the bottom of Cover Singer's handwritten guitar tabs. His walk and door-manipulation have restored some of his dexterity and his final signature is fluid and looks almost like his own.

"This is so sick," Aspiring Chemist says, examining her problem set.

The rest of her coterie concurs.

"So I'm famous now?" Newt asks them. "As in, legit famous, household name, that kind of thing?"

They nod at him.

"You're famous but *mysterious*," Aspiring Chemist says.

"Very mysterious," Cover Singer agrees. "You're the most mysterious of the Pacific Ten."

"The Pacific Ten?" Newt replies.

"Mako Mori, Raleigh Becket, Stacker Pentecost, Hercules Hansen, Charles Hansen, Sasha Kaidonovsky, Aleksis Kaidonovsky, Cheung Wei, Hu Wei, and Jin Wei, Hermann Gottlieb, Tendo Choi, and you, obviously," Junior Skeptic rattles off, flipping absently through *The Demon Haunted World* without looking at it.

"That's not ten," Newt points out. "That's thirteen. Also? You should always lead with the scientists when listing, what are you thinking, dude?"

"Well it kind of varies by news outlet and by nation," Junior Skeptic clarifies, looking slightly chagrined.

"You're definitely the most mysterious," Aspiring Chemist says. "Like, everyone knows you're supposed to be in San Francisco with Dr. Gottlieb, but it's all BS twitter sightings and stuff."

"Ah," Newt says. "Yes, er, um, yeah. Can you guys do me a solid and *not* ah, inform the world that I crashed your Wall hang-out like a creeper?"

"Sure, yeah, no problem," Ghost of Grade School Past says.

"We got your back," Dark Haired Boy adds, adjusting his glasses, which seem to be an exact replica of Newt's own glasses.

The rest of them nod at him.

"You want some dried apricots?" Aspiring Chemist asks.

"Sure," Newt says. "Look, children, may I call you children? Are you technically children? I've always been terrible at assessing stages of development; I one hundred percent blame this on a lack of a coeval cohort during my formative years. I didn't even know groups of friends really existed outside of fiction; like this thing you're doing, hanging out ironically in a monument to human stupidity, playing guitar and doing chemistry problem sets? That's cool; that doesn't seem real to me. You guys might not even *be* real, I'm not sure. What is 'real', anyway? Okay that's not a question we should really pursue right now. My point is, seeing as I am, apparently, a role model—"

"Well I don't know if I'd go that far," Smart Mouth née Dark Haired Boy says.

"Nice glasses," Newt says dryly. That shuts Dark Haired Boy right up. "Don't go up against me, kid, I will win literally every time, okay? My IQ is a statistical improbability to which most of humanity aspires. Now. As I was *saying* before my credentials were being questioned, shouldn't you guys be in school?"

"We get out early every other Wednesday," Cover Singer says, as Aspiring Chemist hands Newt some dried apricots.

"Really?" Newt says, skeptical. "How does *that* work?"

"The decon crews that work Oblivion Bay pass near our school on Wednesday afternoon once every two weeks, and the noise of shifting gravel isn't 'conducive to learning'," Junior Skeptic says.

"Should you guys really be going to school that close to a radioactive body of water?" Newt asks.

Cover Singer shrugs. "Where else are we going to go?"

Chipped Shoulder, aka Smart Mouth, aka Dark Haired Boy, gives him a look that practically *dares* him to say 'inland' but Newt is not stupid enough to fall for that one.

*I think these are actual children*, his brain decides, *and not external representations of portions of your internal reality*.

"You think we would *skip school*?" Ghost of Grade School Past asks him, apparently aghast.

"No," Newt says, trying to make a suave mid-conversation correction. "I guess not? Upon reflection, you guys don't really strike me as the beer-drinking, acetylene torch wielding types."

"If you want beer, come back at night," Cover Singer says. "This place is kinda the center of the local indie music scene. You'd be a hit."

"I'm actually *not* looking for beer," Newt says. "I'm looking to get to the top of this thing."

"The stairs and freight elevator are right back there," Aspiring Chemist says, twisting, pointing into the darkness on the interior, seaside border of the Wall. "I'd take the stairs though—if the freight elevator gets stuck it will be a long time before anyone finds you."

"Ugh," Newt says, picturing himself desiccating in a dark metal box.

*Do it*, his cut-up kaiju chorus hisses at him in frenzied anticipation.

Newt winces.

"You want an honor guard?" the Dungeon Master formerly known as Junior Skeptic asks him.

"Um, no," Newt says. "This is a personal thing."

"Are you on a secret mission?" Ghost of Grade School Past asks him.

"Is it for science?" Aspiring Chemist chimes in.

"It's *mysterious*," Newt replies. "I can't tell you what I'm doing here."

*Mostly because you yourself don't know*, his brain says, chiming in with a classic Gottliebian tonal varietal that Newt's going to tag 'disapproving concern.'

"I don't think you can make it up there," Chipped Shouldered Smart Mouthed Dark Haired Boy says. "You look like crap, man, and it's three hundred vertical feet of stairs."

"Wow, okay there, Chipped Shoulder, tell me what you really think," Newt says, somewhat offended, because relative to say, one week ago, he looks *awesome*.

"My name is Thomas," Chipped Shoulder says.

"Sure it is," Newt replies. "And, for your information, I'm getting to the top of this thing."

"Do you want the rest of my apricots for the road?" Aspiring Chemist asks him, casting an indirect vote of confidence.

"I would love the rest of your apricots," Newt replies. "Thank you."

"Do you want my flashlight?" Cover Singer asks, casting a second indirect vote of confidence.

"I would love to have your flashlight," Newt replies.

"There *are* lights in here," Dungeon Master says, "they exist, just so you know. We don't turn them on because if you do, then the cops eventually come and investigate. But, you know, in an emergency, there are boxes along the stairs in case your flashlight goes out and leaves you in the dark."

"Okay," Newt says, getting to his feet. "Great." He turns to go, takes a few steps, then turns back. "Stay in school. Don't drink until you're eighteen. Twenty-one. Whatever. Try to kill as few brain cells as possible. Do lots of science. Science is for everyone, even non-scientists. Science is for winners. 'Intellectual Underground' as a musical subgenre is *also* for winners. Buy my digital albums, maybe, or not, I don't know. Do I even get paid if you buy them? I'm not sure. I should look into this. Getting paid would be nice right about now, as I'm a little bit unemployed. Science as a career choice is generally secure though, I don't want to misrepresent science to you. I took a non-traditional route. Do whatever you want unless what you want infringes on the individual liberties of parties who don't agree with you. That's not cool. Critical thinking is always a virtue, anyone who says otherwise is literally or metaphorically selling something. I think that's all I've got."

"Wow," Ghost of Grade School Past says.

"Sagan Lives," Junior Skeptic Dungeon Master adds, giving Newt a science gang sign he doesn't understand.

"That was pretty weak," Miniature Newt, aka Chipped Shoulder, aka Smart Mouth, aka Undersized Dark Haired Boy says in accurate summation.

"Don't I know it," Newt admits. "I felt sort of obligated though, truth be told. Take it or leave it. I'm definitely setting a bad example by letting you guys help me trespass on PPDC property."

Miniature Newt looks somewhat mollified by this, and Newt concludes he has partially rehabilitated his image.

"I think you're the coolest," Dungeon Master says loyally.

"Me too," says Aspiring Chemist.

"*Mako Mori's* the coolest," Miniature Newt says, "but you're pretty okay, I guess."

"Well I won't argue with that," Newt replies. "Thanks guys."

He gets to his feet, flashlight and apricots in hand, and sweeps the beam of the light toward the far wall. The light catches the metallic glint of the ascending stairs, and he traces their block-like spiral up into the darkness until the beam of the light becomes too diffuse to follow them any further. He adjusts his glasses.

*You're deconditioned, anemic, and your proprioception isn't exactly operating at peak performance,* his brain says. *Even middle school children who improbably idolize you think that this is a terrible plan.*

Newt leaves the actual kids behind him, in the dark, whispering quietly together so that he can't hear them, other than Junior Skeptic Dungeon Master's initial interrogative, "did that actually just happen or was it some kind of mass delusion?"

*I wish I knew,* Newt thinks in unspoken reply.

He finds the base of the stairs, pockets his apricots, grips the metal railing in his left hand, his flashlight in his right, and begins to ascend, whistling through his teeth along with Cover Singer's developing *Supercos* set that consists of *Central Dogma*, *Evangeline*, *LHC*, and *Enchiridion*.

It is a long ascent.

He begins it already unraveling, the triplicate fugue of his thoughts unbraids into conflicting lines of *go* and *stay* and *die but never leave us*.

He climbs, he stops. He climbs, he stops. He slips in iterations. The steps are steep and trip him up; he hits his knees, his shins, his hands, and halts his falls by gripping rust-edged railings and grated metal steps. The light he holds swings wild and cuts across the cavern that he climbs, illuminating webs of structural supports. His heart's too fast, his blood's too thin, his handheld light too focused. His eyes don't hurt, so that's a plus, but there are parts of him that used to see in darkness.

When he clears the halfway mark, he backs against the Wall and collapses to the grated metal of the landing. Cover Singer shifts her songs from his to someone else's

—autoclaves and blood and foam, heartbreaking preterition—Newt struggles hard to place it while his seething kaiju choir drives him onward with eumenideic shrieks.

*The Mountain Goats?* His brain suggests.

*Don't stop*, cut fragments scream.

The part of him that's Hermann is too horrified to speak.

Newt nods to no one in the dark.

At his back, through seaward stone, he can *feel* the water—it's in his chest and in his head, in his teeth and nail beds.

The Call of the Wall is stronger here, unbearable and morphing. On these stairs and in this dark, he can't say where it comes from. Was it the Wall that called to him across a ruined bay, or was it open water and that which lies beneath it? What *is* the Wall to him? An obstacle or safeguard? Whatever it is, it's set against a soundscape of his distant past so twisted, faint, and genderbent that he can't believe it's real.

*Get out of here*, his thoughts advise. *Get out before this kills you.*

"I can't go yet," he murmurs back. There's part of him that's missing—the part that's entirely alien and the alien entirety of what he was before he was Newton Geiszler or before Newton Geiszler took his past and wrested it three times into a mind unequipped to take it.

Who is he then, if he's not Newt? If Newt is not who *he* is?

But.

He's not confused, not him, not here, not stuck inside the Wall. He's out of breath and short on blood, submitting to the parts of him that want to *watch* the door he's shut to make sure nothing comes back through it. Submitting, too, to other parts that want to watch a door he's shut in the hopes it might reopen.

He's not confused by this—he's just three people now—a living preservation of the monsters at the door and two men who'd tried to stop them, remixed into one, then fused with angry, lonely remnants of the minds he's cut apart.

They love him and despise him in equal, vicious turns.

He's okay with that.

It's not confusing.

They all know who should win.

It's Newt, it's always Newt, who gets the final say.



And it's Newt who wants to climb the Wall.

Newt does.

Newt.

And so Newt does it.

He has no idea how much time he spends there, on the stair, ascending in a blockish spiral past diagonal supports. He climbs in fits decaying into smaller sets of stairs between each breath, his hand cramped shut around a borrowed flashlight, his breathing short and fast, until, finally, there are no other turns, there are no other stairs, just a porous, rust-edged landing and a final metal door.

He doesn't stop, he doesn't pause, he hits the door and throws it open, bursting into light that blinds him, his vision bleaching gray to failure in the bright Pacific light.

*Oh god*, he thinks, *that's painful*, as he throws up both his hands. *That actually quite hurts*. He turns his head and gets his eyes shut, stopping in the open doorway.

Photosensitivity's a lasting, heartless bitch.

"Swap," Newt says through gritted teeth, but no one's here with shades.

He crouches down and spreads a hand, determining by feel that there's a surface at his feet and not a sheer and fatal drop to a surface-tensioned sea that would likely snap his spine. He crashes to his knees, drops Cover Singer's flashlight, and presses hands against his eyes until his nerves adjust.

Progressively, he lets more light through the webbed screen of his fingers until he's looking at the sky, the clouds, the sun, the sea, the concrete of the Wall, the salt stains on the side of it that's seaward; all of it's peripheral because his gaze is fixed upon the *breach*, on where it used to be; even now he *knows* that he could find it, could orient straight toward it on a starless, clouded sea. It isn't *him* who isn't crying from these stupid, leaking eyes, it isn't Newt, it's not his brain, not Hermann, not his team, not *Tresspasser*, not *Mutavore*, not Otachi's nameless child.

It's the *kids* who sit here shrieking, clearly trying not to weep.

*Please*, he thinks, *I'm sorry*, while he's staring at the sun. *I'm so sorry. Please forgive me.*

But they can't.

They won't.

They can't because they're *him*; this is a *duplicate* he's lived with and will always live with, *always*; it's their strange and small collective in a neural carbon copy. It must be.

The fragment of the mind with which he drifted had tried to kill him, tried to claim him, a brisance of the brain that had burned his nervous system to a blue-edged blur he only half remembers. It must be, because if the kids in his head were anything other than a memory of undead kaiju, they'd have found a way to murder him by now.

They'd fling him off this Wall.

But he isn't theirs to fling.

Not theirs, not even now, not theirs.

The wind is strong. It smells like salt.

He sits there in a haze until the sun slips below the ragged edge of distant clouds, then gets unsteadily to his feet and walks to the edge of the Wall. He leans out, one hand on the metal safety rail, breathing hard, calming down, staring at the vertiginous sea.

His thoughts compress beneath the weight of metabolic and metaphoric demand as he traces the curve of the Wall with his gaze, trying to resolve the ribbon of life at its base into kelp and shellfish.

Newt can't not think about the breach, about bridges that had formed there. He wants to tear it open, he wants to keep it shut, he wants to make some reparation to the kaiju that he's wronged. He wants to find the lodestone in his brain that orients him toward a trench beneath the waves and cut it out, extract it, make it go away.

The kids hiss at him in exhausted, synced despair. It feels almost sympathetic, which only ups his guilt.

He's not sure why he's come here; there's no release atop the Wall. Had he thought that he could solve this by standing here and looking toward a portal that's collapsed? There's only so far he can get without a boat, without a set of gills, without a plane, without a form that's built for underwater transit. And even if he made it, what then would he do? It would only be a mirror of climbing up The Wall—stupid, disappointing, a climactic anti-climax.

There's nothing here for him, for them, for *anyone*.

Newt whistles some melodic selections from *Bohemian Rhapsody*.

He eats some dried apricots.

He dictates lies to Mako that he won't ever send.

He spends an interval uncouneted in an enervated haze, cloning kaiju in his thoughts, where nuclei are transferred to somatic waiting cells. If there were others, just *one other*, would that fix things for the kids? They communicate in real time, of that he's

pretty sure. Would an intact kaiju fix them? Would it grant a kind of life? Or is Geiszler's good sense snapping, after decades stretched too tight?

He's not sure.

His phone vibrates in his pocket.

It's then it dawns on him he's looking *west* and at the *sun*. It's lateral, in front of him, and very nearly set.

"Aw crap," he says, sliding out his phone.

"*Newton*," Hermann snaps, before Newt can say 'hello.'

"Hermann," Newt replies, rallying, shoving himself away from the guardrail and pacing from the door. "How are you right now, dude? Funny story, I went to do some errands and got a little side-tracked—"

"*Newton*," Hermann says, painfully concerned. "Where *are* you?"

Newt winces.

His phone chimes an ominous chime.

*This cannot be happening*, he thinks, knowing that it is.

"My phone's about to die—" he says. "Don't worry, man, I'm fine."

"*Where are you?*" Hermann shouts.

But Newt's run out of time.

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