In An Effort to (help) Save the World
by IDoNotBiteMyThumbAtYou

Summary

Of all the universes they could have had, this was theirs: A Newton Geiszler shaped thing trussed up in a cell, and Hermann Gottlieb desperate and unable to give up hope.

To save Newton's life, Hermann is driven to tinker with the very handwriting of god.

(A recovery fic, but it takes awhile. As recovery is wont to do.)

Notes

I've added this to a series but you don't have to read the first one first. It's more of a suggestion.
It was late, and Hermann had saved the world (helped. Helped save the world) for the second time. Making it twice as many times as he would have liked to see it so imperiled. This time the exhilaration had been shorter lived than previously. Like - he imagined - the second hit of a dangerous drug. Not quite so bright and transcendent as the first time, and with the low-pitch hum at the back of one’s mind that something is not right - that you’ve done something wrong. As he had cheered and wept and embraced his colleagues something deeply in the center of his core stayed resolutely miserable. Something that said ‘you’re not as happy as you could be right now. Something is wrong. Why is that? Why is that? Why is that?’ Oh. Right. Newton Geiszler.

The same answer to that same question in all its iterations over the last 10 years. Perhaps 10 years is charitable. More accurately: the last 20 years.

Hermann was sitting in the small kitchen for some reason. He had wanted to get away from the celebrations unfolding downstairs in the rubble remains of the hangar. And other than the occasional snack-seeker on their way to the party he and a young engineer pretending to eat cereal in the corner were the only ones there. He presumed she was there for the same reason as he, though he didn’t think it polite to enquire. Especially considering the way she started when she noticed him in the room, and the ostentatious manner she had poured the cereal – as though to explain her presence for his benefit. Hermann hadn’t bothered with any such pretense and was now staring blankly at the door.

It had been hours since Pentacost (the younger), cadet Namani, and Liwen Shao had defeated the mega-Kaiju (that can’t be the name we’re going with) and saved the world. Again. The surviving cadets – who should probably just be called pilots at this juncture – were on their way back to Hong Kong. One prisoner in tow.

Hermann sighed, “I should have known when he didn’t want to help me blow up Kaiju blood. I should have known right then that something was wrong.”

Officer Reyes’ spoon paused between her bowl of cereal and her mouth. Poor girl had probably never heard Scary Dr. Gottlieb speak with anything even approaching levity. And here he was cracking a grim post-apocalypse-averting joke. Hermann gave the young woman a weary smile - just enough to signify that, yes, it was a joke. She was allowed to laugh. Bless her, she didn’t quite have it in her, and managed only a weak smile and an exhale of breath masquerading as a chuckle before taking her bite.

She looked down at her cereal. She’d been eating it so slowly that it was starting to resemble mushy, technicolor porridge. A group of Jaeger mechanics ran past the kitchen gleefully hollering. It had been a long terrifying day but they’d saved the world. Mourning and cleanup could wait just for a moment. They were all so young that they would have been teenagers the first time. Too young to do anything but be afraid and wait. This time they had been a part of it. Hermann took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose, suddenly feeling that he could count every year in clusters of scarred nerves. Suddenly feeling old. “You don’t want to join the festivities?” He said without looking up. Officer Reyes shrugged.

“Not feeling especially festive, sir.”
Hermann nodded in commiseration. The first time he hadn’t joined the festivities either. He felt a pinprick of irritation that both times the cause had been the same. “please,” he said, replacing his eyeglasses \textit{(the prescription is so much stronger now than it was 10 years ago.)} (Why are you thinking about that right now?) “You are welcome to call me by my name in informal settings. If you feel comfortable with such familiarity.”

The young woman smiled genuine and wide (fetching girl), “Dr. Gottlieb then.”

He nodded in approval of her use of his last name. No need to skip straight to first-name familiarity. “It seems clear that the war is now ongoing, and as you are the next generation, taking over for those of us who have been in it from the beginning we might as well be friendly” he said, in a decidedly - though inadvertently - unfriendly tone. She straightened at the implicit declaration of responsibility and Hermann saw a shadow of his younger self saluting and “Sir!”-ing, filled with the energy of great purpose. \textit{(ugh.)} He had to look away from her. This glimpse of the cycle was exhausting.

“I hope it will be easier for you” he said.

“It will be.” She said. She seemed to believe it. “We’ve gotten better. The pilots are better trained, the Jaeger are better made, the pons are \textit{way} better…”

“None of the more troubling consequences of the drift.” Hermann agreed, “No more sharing nightmares or swapping consciousnesses or -”

“Swapping consciousness?” She looked at him skeptically, unwilling to be deceived this new less-scary-Dr. Gottlieb who apparently made jokes.

“You wouldn’t have heard about it.” he waved aside her skepticism, “It was all very hush hush need-to-know. J-science went mad over it. Some pilots would step out of the rig having completely swapped. They’d wake up in the wrong bunk, call the wrong spouses. That sort of thing. Usually siblings. The Gage twins were notorious for it. Mr Choi and Dr. Geiszler used to enact the most childish pranks.” Hermann said, smiling at the memory in spite of the twinge he felt at using the names of two people who were irrevocably gone from his life.

Reyes opened her mouth to ask a question, her smile faltered, she asked anyway, “were you guys close? I heard you were.” No need to ask whom she meant.

Hermann looked her in the eye and raised an eyebrow, “did you now? And where did you hear that?” She had the decency to look at least a bit embarrassed as she shrugged.

“Well, you know, you were all so famous after you closed the breach, people were curious about you. I mean, I avoided the outright creepy stalker-y stuff but it was kind of hard to avoid \textit{everything}, you know. Cultural osmosis being what it is -” Hermann held up a hand to stop her. He had a habit of gauging how much people had read about him, and how \textit{lurid} their sources were. He enjoyed watching them stumble over themselves as they pretended not to have ever speculated about his sex life. But it seemed a bit uncharitable to indulge given the circumstances.

He remembered an email that Newt had sent him back when it seemed that their lives might take a different direction. The email said only:


del. Hermann,

The people have spoken. ;) ;) ;)

And provided a link to a listicle “news” site of dubious credibility.

“The Intensely Detailed Hermann Gottlieb and Newton Geiszler Timeline You’ve Been Waiting For

The mad scientist / rockstar duo (which is which? You decide!) have shouted their way into our hearts thanks to their pretty undeniable brilliance, questionable fashion sense, and insane chemistry.

They have left us with so many questions. How did they not kill each other before they managed to save the world? How many degrees do they have between them? No seriously, how many?? Why the tattoos? Why the weird haircut? But no question more pressing than this one:

Are. They. A Thing?

I waded through academic journals, conference transcripts, recordings of science talks I could barely make heads or tails of, and hounded PPDC underlings for employment records. I have constructed a timeline with a level of scientific detail that would make even Dr. Gottlieb proud.

All for you, readers. This is what I went to journalism school for.”

Under that had been another animated gif. Someone had zoomed in on the two of them sharing a secret sidelong smile in the background of a televised scientific panel after the moderator had said something particularly dunderheaded. That hadn’t been the first time he’d seen the gif. The moment had been caught, capped, and discussed ad nauseam, but regardless of the discussion it was clearly just a moment of commiseration between the two most informed people in the room. He never replied to Newton’s email. Hermann had only read that far in the listicle before scoffing and closing the tab. But now he wondered how accurately the journalist had deduced the reality of their timeline. The constant background presence. The letters of those early days. The longing. The fighting. The times they were too weak, or tired, or distracted to avoid giving in. Even though Hermann knew – they both knew - what was at stake. Knew they had to stay focused.

“We were -” his vocal chords hadn’t engaged there. He cleared his throat, “we were close. Your sources – whatever they are – are correct at least on that front.”
She swallowed, “what was he like?”

“Exactly the same. But more himself.” Hermann spread his hands on the table and willed the shaking to cease. Willed his nerves to stop aching. Once, in an unguarded moment, Newton had promised (it had been 3:00 in the morning and they had only a few hours before they were due back in the lab) to lend his brilliance towards finding a cure for Hermann after they saved the world. He never had and Hermann’s nerves had continued to flay (it’s not cool to hold a person to a thing they say at unguarded moments at 3:00 in the morning). “Really. It was a joke, but it is the truth. I should have known he wasn’t himself.”

Yes he should have known when Newton hadn’t wanted to play mad scientist with him – or shown any excitement that Hermann had adopted a more Geiszlerian (adj. added to the Oxford English Dictionary in 2027) approach to science.

But really he should have known before then, shouldn’t he? Every time Hermann published a paper and Newton failed to send a long, point by point breakdown of all the ways he was wrong, inadvertently exposing only the narrow gaps in his own understanding. Every missed opportunity for a classic “Geiszler v Gottlieb intellectual cage match” (why have I adopted that puerile phrase?) should have been an indication.

Or when Newton had stopped wearing glasses.

Or Newton’s willingness (eagerness) to part ways. Had that been an indication of more than mere collaborative boredom? Hermann had never felt bored working with Newton but he could see the potential in the opposite direction. Newton had never worked with anyone for so long. Hermann was a pain. Frustration with routine was an essential Gieszlerian character trait. And all aspects of their collaboration had loomed so daunting, and large, and potentially consuming – especially after the drift. And Newton had made every effort to show Hermann that he was bored with him.

Or maybe he should have known earlier, by how sick Newton had been after their three way drift. How sick they both had been. How Newton had been so much sicker, and then better so much faster. He should have recognized the symptoms of withdrawal despite the clear results of that battery of tests. And he never should have allowed himself to attribute his own slow recovery to the effects of his disease.

Or before even that: he should have caught the desperation tightly hidden in Newton’s request to keep the Kaiju brain segment. How each movement had been studied and calm but vibrating, quietly with barely contained frantic need when he explained to the Marshall in careful words the necessity of further research - that he would need to keep as many specimens and samples as possible, as well as anything recovered from Hannibal Chao.

It was a subtle difference of energy that only a person who had spent as much time with Newton as Hermann had would notice. And no one had spent as much time with Newton as Hermann had.

He should have known. He should have checked. Maybe all these years he had just preferred to feel slighted rather than concerned (selfish. So selfish).

“He was um,” she wrinkled her nose and honestly smiled at some memory of herself, “he was my
favorite. Of all of you? Like, all the other girls were all about Beckett or…” her breath caught. She spoke to her cereal, “Mako Mori. But um. Ha. I was all about Geiszler. I had. Oh god.” She covered her face, “I had a poster of him on my wall over my desk. So if I got lazy at homework I’d look up and be like ‘look Jules, Geiszler had a PhD by now, you better stop scrolling through twitter and hit those books.’ God remember twitter?”

Hermann smiled, “I try not to”

“But yeah. He inspired me a lot. When he disappeared and got all cagey and shitty to his fans I was really disappointed. And then when he tried to put us out of commission I was pissed. But I still always admired him. I couldn’t help it. I guess we know why he did all that now.”

Hermann couldn’t think of anything to say that wasn’t cruel to Newton or indulgently self-effacing, so he nodded.

“Is… there anything I can do for you?”

“Why, Officer, do you imagine I need anything?” he said, coolly meeting her eyes.

She looked at him flatly and raised her eyebrows at Hermann’s façade of nonchalance. When Hermann met her skeptical gaze and raised her one ‘I dare you to say it’ head tilt she shrugged and looked back at her cereal, poking at the tremulous blob of milk, fake marshmallows, and melted cereal, “Ugh. I’m not going to eat this.”

“I wouldn’t advise it myself.”

She stood with her bowl and the chair screeched. They both flinched, and when the shrill echo dissipated they heard as though for the first time the far away din of celebration. “How much longer do you think it’ll be?” She asked. It could have been about the party, but Hermann knew she was referring to the group on their way back from Japan. (Wow peep these war brides.) (Kindly shut up.)

“It’s difficult to say. They’ve run out of my fuel. So they’re coming back the old-fashioned way – the helicopters. If you’re tired, I’m sure no one would begrudge your absence.”

“Nah. I gotta wait up for my dumb idiot boys to get back. Same as you. Though you’ve only got the one. Ha.”

“What my idiot lacks in quantity, he makes up for tenfold in scope, scale, and breadth of idiocy.”

“Wow. Um. I’m sorry. That was a dumb thing to say. It’s just that up till yesterday I had such a different feeling about the guy. I don’t know how to…”

“I know. Neither do I.”

They looked at each other then and realized simultaneously that they’d never before spoken outside of a work setting, and here they were prying into one another’s personal lives. Here they were, stranger still, carefully revealing truths which had before been carefully concealed. Strangest of all Hermann found he didn’t mind. Perhaps it was the equalizing effect of the narrow aversion of species annihilation, or perhaps it was an unspoken understanding that the war was now officially ongoing. That they might as well become acquainted and so bridge the generational gap of the two legs of the Kaiju war. Just then their attention was drawn to the hangar below. They heard the bellow of a hundred celebratory cheers before they heard the official sirens that were meant to alert the crew to the arrival of docking Jaeger. Hermann and Reyes took a simultaneous breath, then bolted towards the hangar as fast as exhaustion and cane would allow.
They were back. They had Newton.

When he and Officer Reyes (just call her Jules) arrived in the hangar, they had made better time than the remaining Jaeger. Reyes had plenty to do, while all Hermann could do was pretend to look busy and stay out of the way. The belligerently drunk among the celebrants had enough sense at least to leave the hangar, leaving behind a skeleton crew of the responsible, exhausted few. Not for the first time, Hermann thought to himself that Tendo Choi would never have put up with this sort of behavior.

The Jaeger were all a bit the worse for wear (ie: completely busted) but most could be repaired. Some were missing entirely, and Hermann had no doubt that salvaging efforts would be underway within the day. They were all docked as well as could be expected given their states of disrepair, and though in theory Hermann appreciated the time and care spent safely securing every bolt and nut and double checking every blasted stat and reading, in practice he wished they would just Get On With It.

Young pilot Namani was the first out, to thunderous cheers and applause. He couldn't see her clearly from so far, but she seemed weary. He saw Officer Reyes rush to the front, before the adoring crowd closed in again and he thereafter couldn’t make out who was descending from the helicopters. All he had to go on were the excited chatter, occasional bursts of applause, and scattered cheering. It seemed to take the (children) pilots a bit of time to struggle down from their respective perches. Some of them were injured, but accepted the applause nonetheless as they hobbled past with the help of medical officers. The jubilant crowd seemed to have an endless well of lung power – never waning, only seeming to ramp up in excitement. Until it all stopped. A bubble of aggressive silence rose around the crowd as three people made a shaky descent onto the hangar floor.

He scrambled through the crowd, ready to elbow and use his cane if necessary, but no one else seemed to want to press forward and he burst through to the front with more velocity than he had needed. He saw him.

Hermann didn’t know what he’d expected. He knew what he’d feared: a grievously injured Newton strapped to a gurney, struggling against his restraints and hissing insults in an inscrutable alien tongue. He hadn’t expected such complete docility. His wrists were bound behind him, and Pilots Lambert and Pentecost (the younger) each secured one arm. No admonishments, no banter, no... characteristically inappropriate levity. He had no more pretense to uphold. He had no reason to maintain the jokester mask of non-threatening near ineptitude that Newton had had primed and ready to inhabit (to exploit). He looked straight ahead and walked exactly where he was directed. He didn’t look at the crowd as it parted around them. In fact he didn’t seem to have any nameable expression at all until he stopped mid-step to make scalpel-precise eye contact with Hermann.

It wasn’t Newton Geiszler. There was so little of him in there that Hermann was freshly pained to have ever believed it was him.

The Newton shaped thing smiled slow and wide like it knew all his secrets, “Oh. Hi, Hermann.” It said quietly. Hermann drew in a pained breath and suppressed the shudder of a sudden bone aching chill as the two pilots jostled the thing to keep walking.

Newton was gone. He knew it then. And there would never be any chance of getting him back.
You might think it's unimportant, but all comments will be cherished.
Chapter Summary

Hermann has a conversation with Newton. Or rather, the Newton shaped thing restrained in the chair.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“2013

Yup. Bet you didn’t know our guys go back to the years Before Kaiju. But they do. This was back when our guy Newt only(!) had a measly 4(!!!) PhDs. Come on, guy! Pick up the pace you’re already 23! Gottlieb on the other hand had recently gotten his one and only PhD in the subject that – regardless of how you ship it – we can all agree has remained his primary and all-consuming love: theoretical mathematics. He was only 24 which, joking aside, is still pretty impressively young.

So here’s what we know for sure. They were both invited to attend some science conference in Berlin. Geiszler was on a panel. Gottlieb was in the audience for that panel. Great potential for a meet cute right? It’s not all that difficult to imagine these two geniuses – younger than everyone else there by at least half a decade – meeting eyes across the conference room floor and becoming immediately enamored with one another’s unmatchable intellect.

However that’s… not how it went down.

In the video, when the moderator asks for questions after the talking has wound down (I won’t summarize what the panel was about because lbr that’s not why you’re here), Gottlieb’s hand shoots up like he’s been WAIT.ING. to ask a question. It’s grainy as hell but I had make it a gif because oh my god look at tiny young Gottlieb. Look how mad he looks!

[A gif of a 24 year old Hermann Gottlieb sitting at the edge of his front row seat, scowling, and raising his hand. There is no cane in sight]

He asks a question specifically addressed to Dr. Geiszler. The question honestly, just sounds like more schmience chatter to me, but the whole room kind of freezes and takes in this collective gasp and all the other panelists look right at Newt. Newt looks at Hermann for like a full 10 seconds of shock, and… He just. Starts. Yelling. And Gottlieb yells back! And all the other scientists are just like
Craziest of all Geiszler repeatedly refers to Dr. Gottlieb by his first name which, if we know anything about anything (and we do), A) that’s seriously gonna piss the guy off and B) wait... how does he know Hermann Gottlieb’s first name?

Yes. As if this weren’t all wild enough, according to an anonymous source, the two had been in contact for months before this all went down. Unfortunately, short of hacking the guys’ emails (which, come on. I have some scruples. They’re deep down there, but I have them), we have no way of knowing what their correspondence contained. However, judging by this public display, it must have been pretty passionate. Just… not in the way we might have expected.

Ah. L’amour."

Hermann was not allowed to see Newton right away. He hadn’t expected to. Though he had hoped. By the next morning, the thing pretending to be Newton had been secured in a cell until the PPDC could decide what to do with him. Hermann was told that security had to be so tight as to render a visit impossible. He inquired for days about when the higher ups - of which he was technically one - would meet to make decisions about Newton’s fate. He was brushed off, referred to lower and lower underlings, and outright ignored until he found that decisions had been made without him. He heard it from Pentecost (the younger) a day after the fact.

“They didn’t want to tell you at all. I disagreed.”

“So in proceedings I was told nothing about but by all accounts should have been a part of, my name was at least mentioned. How deeply flattering.”

The young man folded his arms “Alright, look -“

“No no. Please.” Hermann said, “I apologize. Here I am sniping at you when you’ve been kind above and beyond all expectations and… are you disobeying orders?”

Pentecost (the younger) tilted his head to the side, seeming to consider how honest the truth was,
“it might have been implied that no one should tell you... but there weren’t exact orders so…” the young man shrugged, mischievous in spite of the life or death stakes (ah, youth. we were young once too), “This is where bullshit political double-talk gets you.”

Hermann tried to smile in grim conspiratorial gratitude, certain that his expression simply conveyed a twist of pain.

“So this is what we decided: we’ll keep Geiszler here. And we’ll keep it quiet. Everyone who knows about his role in this latest… event is either dead or a member of the PPDC. There’s no reason the public needs to know about the downfall of one of the Heroes of ’25”

Hermann nodded.

“We have to learn as much as we can. Try to figure out how much of a threat he poses now - if he’s still connected to the hivemind, all that. If he’s safe, we keep him in PPDC custody... indefinitely. Do our best for him. You know.”

“And if he does pose a threat?”

Pentecost (the younger) only looked at him then with an expression combining exhaustion, pity, and apprehension. Hermann hated to see the pity there but if he didn’t deserve it now, under what circumstances did he?

“I see.”

“Look. Gottlieb. I don’t want it to come to that. A lot of the others - they wanted to execute him right off the bat. Bloodthirsty lot I tell you. But I don’t. This war has changed faces so many times, and we have to respect who came before us. You and Geiszler... if it weren’t for you we all would've been dead a decade ago. That deserves to be remembered. My sister and I” there was a momentary tremor in his jaw, ”were close with him once. My dad respected you both. And that deserves to be remembered too.”

At the mention of Marshall Pentecost, Hermann drew himself up to his full height in sense memory of his oft maligned facsimile of military pride. “If that’s so,” he said, “the feeling was mutual.”

Pentecost (the younger) held up a hand, “If you’re about to salute at me, please don’t. I’m not built to take on all of his... leftovers.”

Hermann refrained. He knew what it was like to be defined by a relationship long after the association had become painful. “In any case. Thank you for keeping me informed. May I see him?”

“See Geiszler?” Pentecost (the younger) laughed outright, then his face fell when he saw Hermann was serious, “oh. No. You absolutely cannot.”

Hermann looked away, considering, and opened his mouth to say a well thought out argument for why he should be granted this privilege but all that came out was, “Please.”

“Oh! Well! When you put it like that!” Hermann could see that he was restraining himself from rolling his eyes.

“Officer Pentecost,” (the younger), “Please.”

The roguish exasperation melted from the young man’s face replaced now entirely with that maddening pity. “Look. Dr. Gottlieb, do you know why they didn’t want you in the room?”
“Yes, yes. Given my past relationship with the prisoner, I have a biased opinion.” Hermann rolled his eyes, “Fine.”

“Yeah. Pretty damned biased. Or,” he squinted, seeming to weigh how much to disclose, “Some people. Think you might have been an accomplice.”

“A what?”

“Not me! But... we debriefed with Liwen Shao. If you hadn’t stopped her from disabling Geiszler, then maybe a lot of this could have been avoided.”

“That’s utterly ridiculous! I have given my life to the PPDC – for the sake of humanity! In fact if I were an ounce less loyal to this institution, we might have -” Hermann lowered his gaze and gripped his cane. “Yes I let him escape. And I would do it again.”

“Yeah that’s the kind of crap you really shouldn’t say after a city’s been destroyed and children have lost their lives, man. I had to stop them from throwing you into a cell too, you really think they’re going to let you visit with that thing?”

“Would you give up so easily if someone you loved were in a similar state?”

The young man squared his shoulders and looked Hermann straight in the eye. They were the same height, but he was so much broader that Hermann suddenly felt made of cardboard in comparison. “Yeah. Because it wouldn’t be about me.” Pentecost (the younger) looked so dissimilar to his father, and at first blush his character seemed so diametrically opposed. But at moments like this the familiarity was breathtaking. He demanded respect in spite of his youth. He demanded to be followed. (Dude. Call it quits. It’s over.) Unfortunately Hermann had never learned when to leave well enough alone.

Hermann nodded and turned to leave in feigned acquiescence. He stopped. He clenched his cane again, “Has he said anything to anyone?”

“No.”

“Nothing at all?”

Pentecost (the younger)’s eyes narrowed suspiciously, “he’s asked to see you.”

Hermann couldn’t help the sharp painful intake of breath, “I see. I’m surprised.” But he’d suspected. He steeled himself and met the suspicious gaze with his own determined one, “let it be for science then. Record everything I say. Send me to gather information. Place strict limitations on what I can and cannot say. I’ll follow every one. Please. I just need to see him.”

Hermann had not been prepared to see him. He looked sick. He was pale, and his forehead and collar were damp, though the small, poorly lit room was temperate. He drew himself up and placed a wall between himself and the figure restrained in the chair. (It isn’t Newton. This is not Newton.) Someone had placed a small folding chair in the corner near the door in consideration to him, but Hermann knew that if he didn’t stay physically upright, he might lose his mask of imperious
superiority.

“I hear you’ve been asking for me.” He said in a clipped tone, “dragging me here to clean up your mess. Whatever you are, you are certainly playing the role of Dr. Geiszler to perfection.”

The figure looked up and he could just make out Newton’s face illuminated in choppy lines by the glow of a dull light behind the blades of a fan “Hermann.” He froze. There it was. His name from that familiar voice, from that familiar mouth. Why had he thought he could do this? He turned to leave, “Hermann please! Please. Can we talk? I won’t hurt you.” he heard Newton struggle against his restraints in demonstration. “See? I - I can’t hurt you.” The voice was strained with undisguised hope. Hermann’s shoulders sagged. He turned back around to face Newton and rushed towards the chair, but it only took two steps to realize he’d been had, and that the thing was still smiling that wide secret-knowing smile. It snorted in laughter.

“So damn sappy under that stodgy professor armor! This guy always had a talent for getting under there to the juicy center didn’t he?”

Hermann stood as straight as he could while still leaning heavily on his cane “What was so important that you had to see me?”

“I think you’re the only one here who will listen to me. And maybe, maybe you’re smart enough to do what I say.”

“Why on earth,” Hermann sneered, “would I follow the advisements of a hostile alien hivemind? Because you look like my former colleague?” Hermann looked down his nose and called upon all his stores of Gottliebian (adj. added to the Oxford English Dictionary in 2027) disdain, “I didn’t do as he asked when Geiszler was Geiszler.”

The thing raised its eyebrows and grinned as though surprised that Hermann would even make the assertion. Then licked Newton’s lips, “sometimes you did what he said.” they whispered.

Hermann clenched his jaw (it’s not him). “This is a waste of time. I’ll speak to Newton, or nothing.” He turned on the compass of his cane and briskly walked the few steps to the door.

“If you people are seriously planning to open up breaches of your own and invade the Precursors,” Newton shouted after him, “you’re all in serious trouble!” Hermann stopped with his hand raised to take the door handle. He slowly turned back the face the chair. He had heard nothing about this, but the Newton shaped thing wasn’t done, “You soft little carbon-based hand puppets seriously don’t stand a chance against them. Fight Kaiju over there, you’re fucked. Try to take out their cities, you’re fucked! Even in hand to hand combat you’re fucked! Like. They have more hands than you.” He was laughing now, “Everything over there is toxic, violent, bloody death to your species. It’s just. Such a spectacularly dumb idea. You’ve got to stop them.”

Hermann tried to hide his confusion. But damnit all, Newton knew him too well, and thus, so did the Precursors. They paused in their tirade. Narrowed his eyes, tilted his head, and then gasped in realization. “You did’t know.” The Newton shaped thing burst out in a shout of laughter, “oh my god. Oh my GOD you’re kidding.” he cackled, “They told me more of what they were planning than you? Oh this is -” he was laughing so hard he had to pause mid-sentence to catch his breath, “this is too good. Even now. Even NOW I’m more credible than you. Oh my god. Hermann. Thank you. Oh man I needed that.”

Hermann rapped his cane on the floor and went to the folding chair to drag it further into the room. The thing in the restraints stopped laughing to watch his progress. He unfolded it a foot in front of the restraint chair - closer than advisable - and placed it down with a resolute clang. He sat.
It sighed in satisfaction. They stayed like that a moment, taking each other in. Newton’s glossy television appearances had hidden how he’d aged. He would always be blessed (cursed. Cursed, man!) with eternal baby face, but that wouldn’t change the fact that he was now 45 years old. His hair had been artificially darkened, and a decade of nights spent drifting with a kaiju brain rather than sleeping had left their mark in the form of dark deep circles around his eyes. Hermann hated afresh the years he’d missed of watching this face age.

“In spite of myself, I’m glad to see you again.” He said softly, mask slipping.

“Ich fühle das gleiche, mein liebster.”

Hermann clenched his jaw, “You don’t have your glasses.”

“Don’t need ‘em.”

He hesitantly placed a steadying hand on the back of Newton’s neck and - balancing his cane between his knees - used his other to lift Newton’s eyelid to look at the pupil. He might not have doctorate in biology, but he knew enough to know that pupils are not supposed to be the size of pinpricks in light this low.

“So the limitations of the host’s body are irrelevant.” he murmured to himself.

“Oh. No. They’re pretty damn relevant.” they lowered their volume to match Hermann’s physical proximity, “His eyes are gonna be real sore once he surfaces again. We just don’t care.”

“So if you were inside me -”

“Nice.”

Hermann scowled and withdrew his hand from the Newton shaped thing and leaned back in his folding chair. It was just a collection of things occupying a space that once belonged to a man he knew well and using their intimate knowledge of him to fluster him in a way their host once had. But they were not their host. “If you had... occupied my body instead of his -“

“We’d feel aaallll the pain.” They rolled Newton’s neck like they were remembering the pleasure of a skilled massage, and not imagining what it must be like to have ones nerves slowly stripped of insulation, “We just wouldn’t care. Raw nerves or no. Glasses are a pain in the ass. So would be a cane.”

Hermann nods, suddenly intrigued by something new, “May I ask about your choice of syntax?”

“Ask away, my man.”

“There’s no one here left to convince that you are who you say you are. Why continue to use Newton’s choice of... wildly informal vernacular?”

“We have what we have to work with. Which is a lot. You should know. You’ve been in here too.”

“You certainly have robbed our side of one of our most brilliant minds.” Hermann was unable to keep the anger from bleeding into his voice.

They heard it and smiled, “yikes. Really shouldn’t have told us that. Here we thought you were all this smart.” Hermann ground his teeth, “We kid we kid! We know he’s a mega-genius arrogant prick. But you’d say that either way wouldn’t you. You’re sentimental about this one.” Hermann refused to break the eye contact. It laughed at him again, “Damn but it’s fun to watch you squirm!
He always liked it, too. He’s a funny little guy huh? He’s so small, and breakable, and he missed you so much. It’s all we could do to keep him from blowing our cover last week - so close to the finish line! He was just that excited to see you.”

Hermann straightened up, realizing the implications “He invited me over.”

“The idiot.”

“To meet ‘Alice.’ That... was him? truly and completely him?”

“Well we sure as fuck didn’t want you there! We would have been forced to kill you and that really would have busted our timeline. And he begged us not to kill you.” They rolled his eyes, "God he would have been completely insufferable if we'd had to kill you”

“He begged... has he completely... disappeared into you? Or is he...” Hermann took a moment to wring the blasted hope out of his voice, “Is he... a whole person in there?”

The look of empathetic pain on his face was so familiar that for a moment Hermann was sure he was looking at Newton – the real Newton - again, “Oh Hermann” he whispered, Hermann reached hesitantly towards his cheek. But the window was already closed. They jerked Newton’s face away from Hermann’s hand and steadied their gaze “Don’t get fresh with the questions here, friend. You can’t make us blow our collective load - as it were - so quickly. We’re not a cheap date and we’re gonna require some romancin.”

“What do you want?”

“You humans are dumber than Kaiju mites and infinitely less essential. This flimsy little meat sack is going to die if you make him go cold turkey off the hivemind. He needs Alice, and soon. Look at me.” he raised his hand off the armrest as much as his restraints would allow, demonstrating an impressive resting tremor. Nevertheless, Hermann knew what the answer would be.

“Out of the question.”

“Well then,” And Hermann was horrified to see fear vibrating in Newt’s eyes, “You’d better kiss me goodbye, bud.”

_____________________

Chapter End Notes

Guys I just love possessed Newt.

You might think it's unimportant, but all comments will be cherished.
An Oversell

Chapter Summary

Newt is ill, and Hermann is driven to actions that surprise even himself.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2014

And now we’re firmly in the Kaiju war. This is where our guys turned their giant brains towards figuring this shit out (lucky for us).

All you need to know is this: they published a series of seminal papers about the Breach and Kaiju physiology at a frankly ridiculous pace in whatever journals would take them (two each that year alone!!!). Hilariously, these papers quickly took on a sort of call and response vibe. And by call and response I mean drag-through-the-mud knock-down pro-wrestling-caliber call-outs (by the standards of academia that is).

Some of my faves:

“And where that might make sense in theory the solution is intractable…”

“While undeniably accessible and exciting, these findings are not based in clear thinking, and there are many more important questions that could be asked…”

“This researcher is not sure what the aforementioned paper is trying to achieve…”

“…statistically significant but practically irrelevant.”

“Overly simplistic analysis and lack of depth…”
Apparently this level of cross discipline beef is not unheard of, but it’s still kind of weird to single out an academic whose findings don’t directly conflict with yours. And these guys were committed. It seems like the only time they didn’t snipe at each other is when they co-authored. And even though they are most easily likened to little kids bickering on the playground – even as they play together – you guys have to understand that these papers radically changed the way we thought about the war. Like, if the experts are to be believed, we might not have even built Jaeger if it weren’t for these guys.

And through all this, they were still corresponding via personal email. And their personal lives were getting intense too. This is the year that Dr. Gottlieb started to see minor symptoms for his MS. He wouldn’t get a diagnoses for another 2 years but he was worried about it as early as this. And our anonymous source tells us that Newt was the first person he told about his fears.

Less than a day later Newton became ill. Violently, grievously ill. They moved him to medical enabling every safety precaution at hand, and though there was grumbling about wasting resources on a species traitor dissent stayed mostly quiet, presumably in deference to Dr. Geiszler’s once renowned place in history (or, more likely, in deference to those Gottliebian death stares).

Hermann was resolutely barred from visitation. All he could do was work and glare at the Kaiju brain across the room. They had recovered “Alice” from Newton’s apartment and brought her here for study. It wasn’t Hermann’s area but it was still there. Plainly in his vision. Still hooked up to whatever garbage Newton had used to construct his little pleasure rig. He had taken a look at it early on and was horrified to find that Newton’s rig was absurdly powerful. It was early-days-of-the-war Deep Drift powerful. He hadn’t seen anything like it for years, and shuddered to imagine the ironclad strength of the neural handshake this piece of machinery must have created between Newt and the disembodied brain.

He knew that “she” wasn’t sentient. Wasn’t even properly alive. Nonetheless, he still felt her presence like eyes on him when he walked past. He still hated her.

All he could do was work, but he paid careful attention to rumors. He hung around the cafeteria pretending to read and caught snippets of conversation between medical staff who didn’t think he understood Cantonese (in 10 years, I’ve caught on a bit, thank you very much) about how ill Geiszler had become. How they couldn’t make sense of what was wrong with him. That they could
barely keep pace with every new symptom.

It seemed clear that the Percusser had been telling the truth. Time was short or Newton would die. Hermann knew what he had to do.

Ranger Lambert had none of the charisma of Pentecost (the younger). Hermann had watched him rise through the ranks over the years and yet had barely noted him at all. He was interchangeable. Aggressively ordinary in his symmetrical square jawed handsomeness. Jake Pentecost stood slightly behind and to the right of his co-pilot, radiating support. It reminded Hermann of the way Raleigh Beckett used to stand behind Mako Mori at those press conferences that had made her so uncomfortable years ago.

But Lambert’s words were grim enough that Hermann would have paid rapt attention even without Pentecost (the younger) leading by example up there. The meeting was drawing to a close, and they were only just zeroing in on why Liwen Shao had been asked to join the proceedings.

“As we formulate our plan of attack, remote piloting will be essential to this final stretch of the war.”

Final indeed. After his conversation with the precursor, Hermann had made his opinions about invasion very clear. He had been assured that his fears had been noted, and then promptly brushed off. It irked him to no end that his very real concerns had been filed into a proverbial trash bin labeled “complaints.”

“We need to know how much of that remote connection was dependent on… cloned kaiju and how much of it can work now that that’s no longer viable.” All eyes swiveled to Dr. Shao at the other end of the conference table.

“Oh course I can make it work.” Liwen Shao kept her hands in her lap, and her eyes coolly ahead, “the science is sound. It was sound before Geiszler got his hands on it, and it is sound still.”

“Can you give us an estimate of how long it will take? To get it working without Dr. Geiszler’s… add-ons?”

“It might take a month. It might take a week”

“What can we do to make it closer to that ‘1 week’ estimate?”

“That is entirely dependent on whether the PPDC is willing to cooperate with me.”

“Oh course. We’ll do whatever we can. What do you want?”

Liwen Shao drew herself up, and glared as though affronted that he had even had to ask the question, “I want to know how long my pilots will remain in PPDC custody.”

“Surely you can work with our pilots?”
“That’s not what I asked. My pilots were specially trained to work with my remote rigs. How soon can I have them back?”

Lambert and Pentecost (the younger) exchanged glances. Lambert seemed irritated but Pentecost (the younger) gave the tiniest expression of warning before stepping forward to seamlessly take over the conversation. “Drift compatibility” such as it once was might be a relic of the previous Kaiju wars, but Hermann had no doubt that these two would have been among the best. *(Do you think they’re boning?)* *(I don’t… maybe. Oh shut up!)*

“And Dr. Shao,” Pentecost (the younger) began gently, “those men and women were hooked up to cloned Kaiju brains. We don’t know the entirety of Geiszler’s—” he glanced towards Hermann who was carefully looking down at his notes, “Which is to say, the Precursors’ plan, but for all we know they could be communicating with the hivemind right now.”

“Until the possibility can be unequivocally ruled out,” Lambert cut back in, “we must keep them in custody. I hope you can understand.”

Shao pressed her lips into a thin line. “Of course. I shall do everything in my power to accommodate the PPDC.”

After the meeting, Hermann ran to catch up with Shao and her assistant, *(body guard, dude. Look at that guy!)*. She was as fast on her heels as he was with his cane. “Dr. Shao” he spoke in halting, painfully formal Cantonese, “we met before, though I was remiss in properly introducing myself. However, now that things have calmed down – a bit – I’d like to express my personal admiration for the scientific aspects of your work. Perhaps now that we are officially colleagues – ”

“Dr. Gottlieb. Thank you. I wanted to speak with you as well.” A sharp sideways glance effectively dismissed her assistant, and she watched as the man hurried off before speaking again, “I’ve looked into you, of course. You developed the Kaiju Blue fuel. But more importantly, you helped code the original Jaeger, and worked with Caitlin Lightcap on the first PONS rigs.”

“All true.”

“These PPDC officials are still suspicious of me, so I must not show anything other than absolute confidence -”

“In the interest of full disclosure, I’ve been met with a fair degree of suspicion myself.”

She nodded crisply, “Then in the further interest of full disclosure, I’ll need” she clenched her jaw for an instant, “your help. Before Dr. Geiszler came aboard, we struggled with reaction time.”

“I’m not surprised. Dr. Lightcap herself tried to develop remote piloting until the day she died. She too struggled to close reaction time. I believe it was ultimately ruled impossible.”

“I don’t believe in impossible. Dr. Geiszler solved the problem with relative ease. I thought I understood how, but I’d been believing lies. Of course now we know how he was able to solve that problem. But without his technology, the problem remains, though my original calculations should be effective. I am… at a loss. While I doubt I missed anything, I’d like you to take a look at a few
of my remote rigs.”

Hermann clenched his cane in an effort to expend his adrenaline somewhere. He couldn’t believe that she was simply offering what he had thought he would have to pull strings to acquire. “Dr. Shao. I’d be honored to assist.” (bit of an oversell, dude.)

“I’ll have them sent to your lab.”

In the end it was uncomfortably easy to become the criminal the PPDC feared of him. Liwen Shao’s remote neural rig had come straight to him, and it was an undeniably brilliant piece of machinery. Deceptively simple in design – She had eliminated redundancies from the analog rigs that had never even occurred to Hermann. However, if he hadn’t been intimately acquainted with the modern PPDC rigs he would never have been able to backwards engineer hers. Which, of course, was what he intended to do. He figured that if Newton could create a garbage rig 10 years ago, he could certainly do the same now with expanded knowledge and greater resources. With the threat of Newton’s eminent death serving as motivation, it took him only an afternoon of calculations and one sleepless night tinkering with supplies that wouldn’t be missed.

All that was left was to get to Newton.

He had always had the ability to walk into places relying only on an air of belonging, and a knack for eerily reminding everyone of their own least-favorite childhood authority figure. And thus at o200 the next morning, he made it all the way to the medical wing, glared his way past a line of soldiers on security duty, and walked straight to Newton’s private room without being stopped once. Through his relief, Hermann felt a stab of panic. What if he had been up to something terrible? How could the PPDC be so lax on its security? He had the fleeting conviction to go directly to the Marshall with his complaints until he remembered that he was in fact up to something terrible, and that the lax security was the best thing he could have hoped for in the pursuit of his nefarious aims.

He also realized that that he couldn’t very well stay standing here without drawing the unwanted attention he had so far avoided. So he steeled himself and opened the door. The inside of Newton’s hospital/holding cell looked like an ordinary hospital room. Except that all but one bed had been rolled out, and there was significantly more than the usual amount of machinery. The machines blipped, and beeped, and dripped with tendrils of wires and tubing draping into the space behind the thin curtain around the bed. His breath caught. He would almost swear he could see the outline of a sleeping figure – but rationally knew it was unlikely. A cough drew his attention.

There, sitting on the other side of the bed, arms folded and leaning back in her chair, was a scrappy looking kid. She looked familiar but he couldn't place her. “I need a moment with the patient.” Hermann announced. It wasn’t a question.

The kid looked up but didn’t move, all self-righteous slouchy attitude, “k.” She said.

Hermann shifted. Glanced around. The kid stayed put, “In case it wasn’t clear, I meant ‘a moment alone’”

“Oh no it was clear. I just have orders to stay here and watch the patient.”
“I’d rather you left.”

“I’d rather I left too. You’re not a doctor are you?”

“As a matter of fact –”

She rolled her eyes. “A medical doctor. Assigned to look after Geiszler?”

“… No.”

“It was a rhetorical question. I know who you are Dr. Gottlieb. Everyone does. But it doesn’t matter. Look, I was asked to stay here. Whatever you’ve got to say to him, you can do it with me in the room,” the girl was mad with middling power. Hermann rapped his cane on the ground. The kid stood up and raised an eyebrow (Vulcan style). Clearly, the Gottliebian Death Stare would not work here.

“How old are you, young lady?”

The girl drew herself up to her full height – all of, perhaps, 150 – “I’m 16.”

Hermann stopped himself from scoffing. “That man in the bed there? I’ve known him for longer than you’ve been a unified cluster of cells.”

“Just because you’re old doesn’t mean you can bully me.”

“That’s not – What’s your name?”

“Cadet Namani.”

“You – you’re pilot Namani? And they’re putting you on nighttime watch duty? After all you’ve done?”

“I appreciate you getting all indignant on my behalf, but I’m still technically a cadet. And…” she looked down and chewed her cheek, “I’m still in trouble for breaking the rules.” Ah yes. He’d heard about her dangerous little spelunking escapade. “Besides. This job is not nothing. I mean sure he’s… restrained… and knocked out… but. This guy is potentially extremely dangerous. He needs to be watched by someone trustworthy.”

Hermann pursed his lips. The girl was an irritating combination of intelligent and idealistic (pot / kettle much?). She could probably not be manipulated. “So you’ll just stay here, then, and watch a middle aged man pour his soul out?”

The girl’s eyes went round and she flushed pink, “I can. Um. I can go stand in the corner?”

He sighed and gestured for her to go where she liked. This was a nightmare. He already hated breaking the rules, and now his plan might have to wait for another night. However he couldn’t very well leave right away without looking suspicious. The girl went to the opposite corner of the room while he made his way to her previous perch. He took off his backpack and set it on the ground so he could sit beside the curtained bed.

He remembered a particularly prolonged debate between himself and Newton in the early days of their in-person acquaintance regarding the relative merits of backpacks versus shoulder bags.

Hermann had argued for comfort, and Newton for style. Newton conceded that while backpacks were probably a bit more comfortable, no amount of comfort could make up for how devastatingly
dweeby they were. He’d used Hermann as exhibit A. Hermann had turned bright red and told him
to enjoy his scoliosis. Newton had said that it didn’t work that way. Hermann had told him that
anyone who willingly sacrifices efficiency for aesthetic must not be a very clear thinker.

And so it went for weeks, Hermann entering the lab each time apprehensive (and strangely
exhilarated) to engage in meaningless jabs. It only ended on a day of particularly strong nerve pain
which had lowered his threshold for teasing. He had been forced to use a cane that day - something
he rarely needed in those days. Newton had started in as usual and Herman had not even waited for
him to finish before slamming his cane against a table leg and hissing “Some of us don’t have the
luxury of enduring any more than the absolute necessary amount of pain” Newton had gaped,
frozen in shock, then quietly sat down to work.

Later, in private, Newton had apologized and told Hermann that he felt like “A total, absolute, tit”
(a British-ism that Newton had adopted, nursed, and raised in his own image). He then arrived to
the lab the next day with an aggressively unstylish backpack – complete with waist belt. “Wow!
This is so much better! What have I been doing all this time with shoulder bags!” He had
announced to anyone who would listen. “Once you Back-Pack, you never go back!”

Hermann had said something peevish about how Newton looked ridiculous and he wasn’t sure
how, but that catchphrase was almost certainly offensive in some way. But truthfully, the entire
incident had done wonders for what he later learned had been Newton’s poorly strategized long-
game plan to seduce him.

That was nearly twenty years ago. Hermann reached for the curtain – he pretended not to notice
that Namani was only pretending not to watch him – and pulled it back. He stifled a gasp with his
hand. It was such a marked decline in the three days since he’d seen him that the heavy restraints
seemed redundant to the point of cruel. Newton looked small. Thin – thinner than even three days
of fasting should have made him. His breaths were shallow and his damp brow was twitching with
constant ongoing pain. Hermann didn’t know what he had intended to do anymore. Speak? What
could he say?

“They put him under because they couldn’t control the pain anymore.” The girl across the room
whispered. He looked up at her. She had been staring, but upon meeting his eyes she quickly
turned back to the wall.

“He’s still feeling it,” Hermann said, “We just don’t have to hear him feel it.” He reached out and
wiped a lock of hair from where it had become plastered his forehead. In his chemically induced
sleep, it was easier to see this figure as the man he had once known, “All these years and still one
of us must fight to keep the other. It seems to be the one constant with us. We never pay enough
attention, do we?” Hermann trailed a hand down Newt’s exposed arm and traced the tattoos – the
color of which seemed especially bright in contrast to his face. They seemed maddeningly
prophetic now. An external reflection of the occupants of Newton’s mind. “Oh Newton. My dumb
idiot boy.”

He heard a sniff from the corner, “I’ll… be right outside. If something happens.” Namani
whispered, and scurried out the door shutting it noiselessly behind her. Hermann stared after her in
disbelief. She had just. Left him. Alone with Newton.

This might be his only chance and there was no telling how long he had. Moving quickly and
quietly, he opened the backpack, pulled out his laptop, and opened it up. Tucked inside – cobbled
together from a set of paper thin defibrillators – was the “helmet” portion of a remote access Pons
hookup.  He set those aside and, using his computer, hacked into “Alice’s” hookup, using a
backdoor he had set up the previous day. All the while praying that no one was awake, in the lab,
and also looking at the disembodied brain’s computer readings. Because if someone did, they
would see the monitor seeming to move on its own and connecting to a Pons hookup that shouldn’t
exist at all.

Hermann then pulled the rest of his garbage rig. It was the size of another laptop. Reaction time
had suffered drastically for the sake of portability, but Hermann couldn’t imagine that Newton
cared much at the moment.

“Please, Newton,” he whispered, as he struggled to pick the protective backing off the adapted
electrodes’ adhesives, “for once in your life stay quiet.”

Chapter End Notes

You might think they go unnoticed, but all comments will be cherished.
Chapter Summary

In which I am forever amused that Hermann and Newt are Millennials.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2015

This is where shit gets interesting.

Given his papers, and general renown in Academia (despite being only 25 I’ll remind you!!!) Gottlieb was tapped to work on the Jaeger program. We don’t know when he started on Jaeger coding unofficially, but officially he came on this year. However, he wouldn’t stay in the lab for long…

Yeah. You’ve heard this. The guy wanted to pilot Jaeger, which like.

- A) I love that it was Hermann and not Newt that did this. I just love it.
- B) Hell. Yes. Give us all the nerd rage the Kaiju won’t know what hit them.

His entering “class” included such luminaries and the Wei triplets, Hercules Freaking Hansen and the MOTHER-EFFING KAIDONOVS KYS.

Can we PLEASE just take a moment to appreciate what that orientation must have been like? All these beefy soldiers and then Dr. Hermann Fearless Gottlieb there like

What a fucking baller.
Hermann’s hands shook as he stuck the electrodes to Newt’s forehead and temples, but his placement was exact.

He liked to think of himself as a person with a well-defined code of ethics, and everything in that well-defined code pounded an alarm deep in his eardrums. From outside of himself he could only condemn these actions as a vile collaboration precipitated on nothing but sentiment. From outside of himself, he could see that he was being manipulated.

But inside of himself he only noted the numbers scrolling across his screen as he typed — fast and precise. Because deep down, in the selfish and perhaps only truly honest core of his being (ethics aside and species be damned), he knew that this world wasn’t worth saving without Newton somewhere in it. (The good of the many, Hermann! I’d hate you for this.) (Shut up. Please just shut up.)

Newt, it seemed, had always seen this potential in him. They never would have had what they had if Newton hadn’t seen Hermann’s potential for ethical compromise. Hermann saw in his mind’s eye — remembered somewhat in blue and from two perspectives — a significant moment shortly after the backpack incident. It was in LA, so this would have been in 2018. They had found themselves alone in the lab at 0130. Everyone else had gone to bed like reasonable people, and there they were ever unreasonable and hyper-focused to the last. Equally obsessed, young, brilliant, exhausted.

Newton gestured to draw Hermann’s attention and pantomimed drinking something. Hermann looked at his calculations, rubbed his eyes and nodded back in Newton’s general direction. They both packed their things and silently made their way out to the small kitchenette nearest the lab. Newton sat heavily and Hermann went to the counter to decide whether it was time to wind down for the night with a cup of tea, or time to gird himself for a final round of work in the lab with... a cup of tea. Either way he needed some tea. As he opened to cabinets to search for teabags (why were they never in the same place?) Newton called out.

“Hey Herm –“

“No.”

“Dr. Gottlieb. Since you’re up – “

“What shall I fetch for you, your highness?”

“Never mind.”

“I’m making tea if you want some.”

“You don’t have to – I’m - jeeze- I can get my ass up and get it myself.”

“As you said I’m already up.”

“Ok I’ll have tea.”

“As you say.” Hermann said primly.

“uuuugggghh.” He was grinning. “Whyyyy are you the one person that can make a favor sound like you’re planning to kill me?”

“You’ve clearly never spent time in Britain. Every act of kindness is an act of war.”
While he waited for the water to finish boiling he looked over his shoulder to witness Newton stretching luxuriously like a creature that doesn’t have to worry about its shirt riding up. This was before the tattoos extended down to his hips, but if they had Hermann would have been afforded quite the gallery showing. Nonetheless, even without adornment, he had enough of an eye for aesthetics to appreciate the artistic view. Newt caught him looking but didn’t care enough to stop stretching. (Utterly shameless.)

“You, know,” he said, elbows in the air, palms stretching down his back, leaning to one side, “I’m not just trying to piss you off when I call you Hermann. I mean don’t get me wrong. It’s fun to rag on you, But I’ve always –” he froze mid-stretch, mid-confession but unable to take it back, “oh my god. Haha.” He was now bright red, “I’ve always called you Hermann in my head.” (Having been inside his head, Hermann could now attest to the voracity of this statement. As well as the sincerity of his inexplicable embarrassment). “Even before we actually met.” The kettle started to sing, “I’d be like ‘well well well, looks like Hermann’s got a new paper for me to dismantle.’” Hermann stared, fascinated that this rather than his strip-tease stretching had made Newton blush.

Hermann flicked off the kettle “You never dismantled any of my papers” he said coolly. Behind him he heard Newt slam his hands on the table.

“Lies!” But he didn’t pursue the matter any further.

Hermann prepped the tea for them both in exhausted silence and walked slowly (this was after glasses but before the cane) to their little shared table.

“Thank you, I’m sorry that you did something nice for me.” Newton said as Hermann placed the two mugs of tea and sat on the opposite side of the table. “TGIF, dude. Check out our wild Friday night rager.” Newton raised the mug like a beer stein and took an incongruently careful sip of the scalding liquid. Hermann smiled into his own sip, allowing himself to be charmed.

“Do you ever wonder what other 27 year olds are doing right now?”

“I’m 28.”

“Still.”

“Sometimes.”

Newt waited for him to elaborate. He didn't. Newt raised his eyebrows, “And?”

Hermann attempted to look dignified despite his exhaustion. “It doesn’t matter. I have to be here. It’s the right thing.”

Newton nodded and sighed heavily, “Yeah but like. I thought MIT was a lot of work? But here! It’s just the work and I still feel like I’m burning the candle at both ends. I wish there was like, a third metaphorical wick to burn so I could have some sort of a life outside of all this. Go to a party? A bar once in my life? Maybe date someone sometime before I lose the bloom of youth!” Newt had switched to the accent of a masterpiece-theatre matriarch. Hermann couldn't muster the energy to roll his eyes. “What about you?” Newt asked

“What about me?”

“Don’t you want to have fun sometime?” Newt was looking at his mug trying ever so carefully to seem careless
“I couldn’t enjoy myself if I knew this was unfinished. Humanity itself is in peril.” Hermann said flatly.

Newt didn’t look up but instead directed his skeptical smirk at his tea “So you’re not going to do anything fun. Anything at all – until we finish saving the world?”

“If we do well here, there will be plenty of time for… all of that. If we don’t, well, it won’t matter.”

Finally Newt met his eyes, “But what if you meet someone you really, really like.”

“Dr. Geiszler, aren’t you the one who insists that I surely never have, nor never shall befriend another human being because I repel other people like similarly charged magnets?” Hermann was too tired to fully stop himself from smiling.

“I think I did say something like that, yeah. Nice to know you thought it was worth remembering.”

“Even if I did meet someone, it wouldn’t be… right to indulge. There’s no time for,” his eye was momentarily drawn by the spectacle of Newton’s throat as he swallowed “distraction. Not with so much at stake.”

Newton smiled – seeing through him – and licked his lips. “You don’t really believe that.”

(A more recent memory: the thing pretending to be Newton smiled – seeing through him – and licked his lips “sometimes you did what he said.”)

“I really do.”

Newton pursed his mouth into a line and squinted as though trying to read something written on Hermann’s face. “You’re full of shit.” he announced.

Hermann scoffed.

“I think your little philosophy there just hasn’t been tested yet. And I think that you’re the sort of person that finds a way to have exactly what he wants once he knows what it is.”

“I’d say the same about you but based on your menagerie of degrees I doubt you’ve ever known what you want.”

“Well A) that’s not true B) Don’t try to change the subject because I’m not done dragging you and C) which is actually more like point the second from my earlier - ok. Actually let me back up. And repeat: 1: If you really want something, I bet you find a way to morally justify it. 2: if you can’t have what you want, you get to pretend some moral high ground, and act like you never wanted it in the first place. So you can convince yourself you’re always winning while taking no risks. That’s no way to live, dude.”

“You are clearly projecting.”

“No no! I am not projecting. I live by the rule of cool. I don’t bother with a moral code at all. Why bother with rules if you’re going to have to break them eventually?”

“I shudder to imagine where that philosophy will lead your scientific explorations.”

“Scientists shouldn’t follow rules, man.”

“Scientists are exactly the people that should follow rules.” Hermann said, aghast, “My god you’re
a biologist! You of all people -“

“I wouldn’t be a millennial if I wasn’t destroying something! You’ve got to get with the generational program, my dude.”

“Your backpack is hideous and I hate you.”

Newt gasped in mock horror. “No you don’t!”

“I do. I resent even the oxygen I breathe because I am forced to share it with you.”

“Come on!”

“I’ll concede nothing.”

“aaaw Dr. Gottlieb” Newt stretched his arms across the table and laid his forehead down, shoulders shaking with laughter, he lifted his head “what if I tripped on my way back to my room and died and that was the last thing you ever said to me.”

“Then the lab would overnight become a much more productive space.”

Newt sat up and slapped his palms against the table. “You’d be bored!” he laughed.

“But productive.”

They looked at each other for a moment, Newt coming down from his laughter, and Hermann failing to keep his face impassive (you were just barely smiling, Hermann. I always remembered that one particular smile.)

Newt straightened up, becoming serious behind the smile and searching the corners of Hermann’s face. “Am I really that much of a distraction?” he finally said.

Hermann met his gaze like a challenge and tilted his chin up, “You really are.”

Newt swallowed, “Good.”

He knew now that Newton had meant to kiss him right then but couldn’t figure out how to get around the table. So instead they sat nursing mugs of tea until they were both down to the dregs they’d allowed to go cold. And still they sipped silently, neither of them sure how to proceed. Newt was the first to stand. He quietly took Hermann’s empty mug from between his hands and brought it to the sink with his for washing.

“Thank you, Dr. Geiszler.”

“Don’t. This is me getting even.”

Hermann stood and followed him to the sink and leaned against the counter to watch him wash up. He washed the cups with more deliberate care than Hermann would have anticipated. Newton rinsed it clean – taking his time – dried it, and placed in on the shelf with all the other uniform, cheap, white mugs. He started to wash the second one, pretending not to notice Hermann’s close scrutiny.

Newt paused his washing and turned to meet Hermann’s gaze, “What?” he said.

“You’re welcome to call me Hermann. But please, only in private.”
Newton’s eyebrows quirked upwards, “Oh.” (Did Newton usually turn red this easily? Had he just never noticed?) It was just the tiniest glimpse of vulnerability before he brushed it off and turned back to washing the second mug, head bowed, slouchy and careless. “Cool.”

He had vividly wanted to touch the back of Newton’s neck there, use his fingertips to lightly direct his head to look back up him. But he didn’t because he knew it would be inappropriate. The moment passed like a freight truck passing inches from his nose. Instead he watched him finish the washing up, dry his hands and followed him silently out the kitchen. They nodded, and walked in opposite directions towards their respective rooms both faintly vibrating with the exhilaration of a near miss.

That memory had been a happy one. A rose-colored tribute to the once inexhaustible brilliance of their young minds. Their crackling verbal conflicts had been a kindling fire of creation.

But it all would have seemed foreshadowing if he had only guessed his own story far enough in advance. The memory displayed in abundance their best and worst traits, which through circumstance, and personal failing had led them both to where they were now. The memory of a hearth is no longer so cozy when one looks out at the destruction of the wildfire it has birthed.

Back in the hospital/holding cell they were seventeen years older and Hermann had finished hacking the connection. He took one last steadying breath (Please fail. Please work.) before pushing the button.

Nothing happened. Of course. Reaction time sacrificed for portability. The seconds passed with agonizing clarity. The sluggish thrum of the rig seemed impossibly loud, the shadow of Cadet Namani’s feet on the other side of the door crisp and near. He placed a hand gently over Newton’s mouth in anticipation of muffling he didn’t know what kind of sound. But the sound never came.

Hermann couldn’t pinpoint the exact moment it began working, but eventually it became clear that it was. Newton’s face had calmed, his brow relaxed, and breath steadied. Hermann kept the connection going for as long as he dared, then powered the garbage rig down. The drugs would keep him under for a few hours yet, but at least now he wasn’t in pain anymore. And when he woke up he hopefully wouldn’t know what had happened.

As Hermann peeled the electrodes off and wrapped the miniature portable rig into his backpack, he hoped that the differences in the readings given off by the numerous machines wouldn’t be noticeable to an untrained eye like Namani’s. If he had gotten this far only to be caught by a child... well, perhaps it would serve them both right.

He neatly folded the electrodes (now stuck to a hardy sheet of plastic) into his laptop, and nestled the laptop in next to the tiny rig. He zipped the bag, and placed it neatly on the floor next to him. Only then did he finally, finally allow himself to breathe.

He’d done it. He’d saved Newton’s life. Hermann leaned his elbows on the mattress next to Newton’s arm and pressed his eyes with the heels of his palms. What in god’s name had he done? Newton's condition would only decline again, and soon. Maybe even faster than before given the relative weakness of the rig and connection. At best Hermann had bought a day, maybe two. At the cost of maintaining the Precursors’ hold. He could barely even feel any relief. He was still in this position when Cadet Namani reentered the room.

“Hello? Dr. Gottlieb?” He didn’t look up. He was exhausted and surely this is what she expected to find anyway. “I’m... sorry.”

“So am I.” He said.
“You didn’t do anything.”

Hermann slumped further and laughed. “Even if that were true,” he said, “doing nothing would be the most important thing to apologize for.” He sat up and looked over his shoulder at the girl. She looked confused. “Thank you for your kindness. I hope you are shown the same in times of similar need.” She shifted uncomfortably and nodded sharply, not meeting his eye.

“You should probably go,” she said.

“I probably should.” He stood, leaned down to get his backpack and cane (feeling like a creaky old man) and slowly made his way to the door.

The next morning he ate breakfast alone. Which was the usual way with breakfast. Every meal in fact. Even before Japan had happened - before Newton was evil, and Hermann had helped him - others had avoided him. He knew that he had always had a threatening demeanor, and that he had never been able to keep his opinions from reading on his face. Especially opinions about the relative intelligence of the speaker. These sorts of personality traits make it difficult to maintain friendly relations while surrounded by individuals that one is objectively more intelligent than. When he ate in the mess hall rather than his (small, cramped, pathetically sad) room, he was generally left alone, and had an entire table to himself.

(Do you wonder what the other 45 year olds are doing?)

(I’m 46)

(Still.)

And now, there seemed to be more notice paid to him than before. Just not the good kind.

Hermann didn’t mind being alone. He didn’t mind. He could concentrate on his work and he didn’t mind.

Jake Pentecost slid into the seat across from him “Gottlieb!” he nearly shouted before Hermann had even fully registered his presence.

He started, “Yes. I’m right here. Hello. What is it?”

“I have news. About Geiszler.”

Hermann froze “What sort of news?” he said carefully.

“He seems to be on the mend. He’s awake. He’s lucid. He seems like himself. I mean as far as anyone can tell. They think maybe -” he looked around, lowered his voice, “They think maybe he’s breaking through Precursor control.”

Hermann searched his eyes for hidden accusation and saw only friendly exuberance. He buried his face in his face in his hands in shame. Luckily Pentecost (the younger) took the gesture as an expression of relief.

“That’s not all.” He said.

Hermann looked up through his fingers terrified that the guilt was showing in his face.

“When it seemed like Geiszler… wasn’t going to make it I pulled some strings and, well, you can
visit him whenever you’re –"

Hermann stood abruptly. He couldn’t let this good, kind young man continue to be generous in his direction when he was so undeserving. “Thank you officer Pentecost.” He said stiffly. He took a breath, tried to stop his hands from shaking, “Thank you. Sincerely. You have been too kind throughout.”

Pentecost looked like he wanted to say something more but Hermann couldn’t bear to hear it. He turned quickly towards medical. He had to see Newton. He had to assess the damage.

Hermann walked quickly but felt like he barely made progress as the ground passed beneath him - like he was on a treadmill. In the end he couldn’t be sure how long it had taken him to get to the hospital room/holding cell, but he was winded.

He was allowed in with no difficulty. There, sitting up but still bound to the hospital bed, and looking bored, exhausted, but relatively well, was Newton Geiszler.

His eyes were horribly bloodshot when he turned to look at the entrant “Hermann?” He said, squinting and leaning forward.

Hermann took the final few steps to Newton’s side, “Yes. It’s me.” He said. (But is it you?)

Newton’s face lit up with relief, “Hermann.” He closed his eyes and leaned his head back against his pillows, smiling. Hermann didn’t know what to do, but certainly didn’t feel equal to speaking. He tentatively reached to touch his shoulder, but stopped himself, opting instead to stand awkwardly by the bed. Finally, Newt looked up apologetically, grimaced, and said “Can you get me some glasses?”

Chapter End Notes

You might think they go unnoticed, but all comments will be cherished. Please leave comments here so I can find them later!
Ten Fucking Years

Chapter Summary

Hermann and Newt talk.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

2015 (still)

Meanwhile Newt was in a band.

I know. I wish it wasn’t so. You wish it wasn’t so. We’ve all seen the clips on youtube and we all wish we hadn’t. The transformation from too-young-college-professor-who-secretly-could-get-it to whiney aughts-throwback emo boy is like whiplash in that it all happens so fast, it is immediately regrettable, and it hurts. God Newt whyyy?

I know some of you Geiszler stans will tell me how wrong I am in the comments, but deep down in your heart of hearts, you know I’m right. We love you Newt. We hate your band.

But this is the Geiszler / Gottlieb timeline. Why are we even bringing this up? Now, even though their contact through 2015 was completely private and not something I’m privy to, they were still pretty clearly engaged with each other and - not just about science stuff.

Because here’s the plot twist: according to our anonymous source Hermann has never mocked Newt for his band. Not. Once.

This is shocking. It’s such a rich vein of glorious cringiness to mine!

More than that, apparently, Hermann would make a point to shush anyone who tried to
joke about it. Whether Newt was even around or not. The guy can give some pretty brutal death glares and imagining him directing those in "defense" of Newt rather than at him warms the cockles of my cold dead heart. Like, if defending your man’s horrible, short-lived foray into music isn’t love, I don’t know what is.

“I feel like Satan took a hot piss of fire into my eyes.”

Hermann scoffed.

“You’re right. Satan would never do that to me.”

A few minutes before, Hermann had pulled up a chair and tried to make himself comfortable. After promising to do what he could about finding Newt’s prescription and acquiring some glasses for him, Newton had nodded, leaned back, and closed his eyes. As if there weren’t years’ worth of questions to answer. As if they had time. As if time had ever been kind to them both. Hermann had sat there stewing until Newt had broken the silence with that. It split something in him - like a tiny crack on a massive dam - and only drops of what was contained behind spilled out.

“You are an insufferable, overeducated nitwit with not a single ounce common sense.” Hermann hissed, “you have - in the large scale – disappointed every human being on earth, and on the small scale every single person who ever took a chance on you, and every single person who ever counted you as a friend, or colleague or…” Hermann took a deep breath, “I hate…” But he couldn’t finish the thought. He leaned his elbows on the mattress near were Newt’s wrists were still bound and lowered his face to his palms in an echo of his positioning the night before. Just like that the dam repaired itself.

“That’s right lay it on me, bud.” Newt reached the tips of his fingers towards Hermann’s elbow. He couldn’t quite reach. “I’m sure you’ve got a lot of shit that needs saying. And I. Um. Actually deserve it this time.”

Hermann didn’t look up. Only shook his head.


“Because what if you died and it was the last thing I said to you.” Hermann said to the mattress.

He heard Newt take a sharp inhale of breath, and whisper, “Right. Right.” Hermann didn’t look up. He hoped it hurt. “So… you’re… here.” Newt said, clearly at a loss for where to begin, “What do you want to talk about?

The weight of the regret and unanswered questions suddenly seemed overwhelming. “I’d rather not.” he said, face still in his hands. There was too much to say, and with everything so uncertain he realized it would be worse to start a conversation and leave it unfinished, than to never know at all. (You’ve always been so good at talking Newton. You do it.) Newt, apparently, was speechless. Miracle of miracles.

“I. Um. I like what you’ve done with the place.” Hermann straightened up and regarded Newt quizzically, (this is what you want to talk about?) “Not, like, the decoration. I mean the tech. You’ve really improved the tech. Like. A lot.” Newt was looking at him with such genuine pride that Hermann had to look away. “On the one hand, it’s really impressive. Anyone can pilot a Jaeger with anyone these days. You don’t have to be ‘drift compatible’ anymore. No more tests of… questionable relevance. No more dumb compatibility questionnaires, no more spars, no more… sexual dysfunction. Out with old, in with the new, right?”
Hermann nodded crisp and businesslike, “The connection is now purely surface level. It was my idea.” He examined his folded hands, “After… Well, after the nightmares. We still struggle with alignment, invasive thoughts… traumatic memories, but it’s all much easier now. We’re not burning new neural pathways quite so aggressively anymore. Why ‘on the one hand?’ What’s on the other hand?”

Newt grimaced and shrugged caught in his half-truth – as though he hadn’t purposely dropped ‘on the one hand’ as a tantalizing thread to pull, “Kinda loses something, doesn’t it? There was something kind of… beautiful about drift compatibility. You know, like as a concept.” He grinned and leaned towards Hermann, “Leave it to you to rip the poetry out of the tech.” Hermann could feel him probing at how far he could go in teasing him. How difficult it would be to rebuild to their previous rapport. Hermann gave him nothing. No irritation, no warmth. Newt leaned back again and looked away, “Maybe it would have been better if it’d been like that in our day, though.” He said quietly.

“Do you think it would have made a difference?”

Newt bobbed his head side to side weighing his answer, still avoiding Hermann’s eye. “Yes and no. I think the big bads still would’ve gotten their hooks in me, but at least I wouldn’t have Hermann Gottlieb circa 2025 of the Worst Timeline making comments over my shoulder for the rest of my life.”

Hermann could relate. It was at times trying, and often heartbreaking to have a 35 year old Newton Geiszler caught in amber in his brain. Though if he pressed himself, he had to concede that he’d valued more than resented the presence. He tried not to feel hurt that Newton seemed to want his own doppelgänger gone.

“I wish you’d listened to him more.”

Newt finally looked back at Hermann, amused, “Is that your version of laying it on me? Because if so, you’ve lost your touch.”

“It has been 10 years.” Hermann said humorlessly.

“Has it been 10 years? Are you sure it hasn’t been 5?”

“Quite sure. Though from what I understand, you were literally out of your own mind for about half of it.” He hadn’t consciously meant it to be cruel, but as soon as the words were out, he knew that they must have wounded Newt. He found he wasn’t sorry.

Newt swallowed. Hermann tried not to enjoy the movement of his throat because it would be very inappropriate to do so given the circumstances, “Do you ever… hear me?” Newt finally said. He sounded apologetic.

“Much to my dismay, yes.” Hermann said, allowing some of his old mocking tone to creep into his voice “As though you weren’t already the personification of an intrusive thought.”

Newt smiled “You’re an intrusive thought.”

“I should hope so!”

Newt regarded Hermann with that smile, embarrassingly fond. Hermann watched as his face grew serious and he swallowed again, (Jeeze. I’m sure it’s fine if you look.) “I’ve been thinking a lot about multiverse theory.” He said cautiously.
“Have you?” Herman replied, unsure why Newt was attaching so much weight to the confession.

“Yeah. I like it. I like it a lot, man. You know, infinite Universes infinite possibilities, butterfly
flaps its wings all that stuff. And I’ve…” he paused, watching Hermann carefully for his reaction to
the next words, “I’ve seen into some of them.”

“Is that so? How do you mean.” Hermann kept his face completely still
(which is one of your tells,
bud! He’ll know you’re dying to hear this.)

“I mean, I’ve seen other universes! I’ve seen myself!” he said, suddenly buzzing with excitement
at Hermann’s tacit endorsement of his story. He glanced around as though concerned that they
might be overheard. There was no one in the room, but Hermann knew that they were likely being
listened to nonetheless. He leaned closer to Hermann and lowered his voice, “I’ve seen us. Dozens
of versions of ourselves. Possibly more. Living similar but vastly different lives. The point of
divergence is usually right after we close the breach. Which makes sense. But not always.

“There’s a universe where - for whatever reason - the hivemind withdrawal doesn’t affect me so
much, and after we save the world that first time you and I immediately fall into each other’s arms
and just have tons and tons of incredible nerd sex and become professors and get married and
adopt a bunch of fish.

“There’s a universe where it does affect me a bit and I do manage to clone a kaiju but you’re there
to keep me in check and make sure I don’t try to... you know end the world. We have primo nerd
sex and reenter academia in that one too.

“There’s a universe where I don’t keep up with science at all and stick with my band instead and
struggle for my entire life until I’m killed in Japan right after my first big gig and you eventually
figure out how to close the breach with Dr. Nakamura – remember him?”

Hermann doesn’t have time to respond before Newt barrels ahead. But he does remember Dr.
Nakamura. A biologist under Newt from the LA shatterdome. Cut more in Hermann’s cloth than
Newton’s. Brilliant, thoughtful, and cautious.

“Anyway, without me there he helps you figure out how to get stuff through the breach, but he
doesn’t argue with you and you don’t argue with him and you’re both so fucking polite and
professional (and I like to think that in this universe you miss me but there’s no evidence of that),
and it takes a lot longer, and lots and lots and lots more people die. But that finishes it. And I don’t
have the chance to fuck it up later. Also, weirdly, Caitlin Lightcap is still alive in that one.

“There’s a universe where I just, like, full on transform into a kaiju. We also bone in that one but it
would definitely…” he glanced away and pursed his lips, “not be classified as nerd sex.

“There’s a universe where everything is exactly the same, I mean kind of. Almost exactly. Except
while I’m at MIT my band is like, change-the-landscape-of-modern-music good instead of…”

“Quite awful?”

“Yeah, yeah. And the withdrawal is really bad in that universe. Like really, really bad. Like how it
actually was. And the PPDC runs all these experiments on me (which, honestly, they totally
should have? They totally should have made sure it was SAFE to let me live!) but that sort of turns
into torture and you rescue me, and take care of me and we move to San Francisco and reenter
academia. In that universe we don’t have awesome nerd sex at all but we really want to.”

“I’m sensing a pattern to these fantasies.”
“Yeah, we go back to academia a lot. Maybe we should have done that. I was a great teacher and I bet I would have been even better when I was at least a little bit older than my students. Also no. Dude. They’re not fucking *fantasies.*” Newt hissed, “They’re alternate universes that I, with my unique hybrid brain, have managed to catch a glimpse of. Alice took me to these other universes! And I’d really appreciate if you could keep up because we’ve only scratched the surface. I only told you the greatest hits! Also - you know Vanessa?” Hermann raised an eyebrow, the question was not even worthy of a response, “There’s ones where she’s your best friend, there are some where she’s your wife, your brother’s wife - *there’s one where she’s an artificial intelligence model created by you,* there are tons of universes where she doesn’t get involved with any of us chucklefucks and presumably lives a much happier life for it.

And those are just the ones where Kaiju even exist! Did you ever think what we’d do if Kaiju never existed? Well I don’t have to wonder because I’ve *seen it.* And these are the weirdest: We’re baristas. We’re *college roommates.* We’re fucking... rockstar and groupie! But no matter how weird it gets, in all of them we... we...” He suddenly looked as though his extended monologue had wiped him out. He allowed himself to lean back against the mountain of pillows behind him and took a deep replenishing breath. “In all the other universes we end up together. We find a way to work it out. This is one of the *only* universes that exists where we don’t get our shit together and end we up apart for the better half of a decade. You look mad.”

“I’m not ‘mad’”

“You *look* mad.”

Hermann realized that his concentration probably looked like a glare as he considered the probability of Newton’s claims. It was... possible that the kaiju brain could act as a neural link to alternate universes. They had, after all, traversed dimensions and remained in contact with their creators, so it was not completely impossible that “Alice” could lead a grand tour of Other Newtons through the dimensions - allowing him to hitchhike, so to speak. Though to what ends, Hermann couldn’t conceive.

He attempted to relax his brow so the next words would land with the sincerity he intended, “I think what you’re experiencing is regret.” Even as the words were out of his mouth he knew they sounded condescending, and Newt reacted immediately and exactly as one might expect.

“No dude!” He shouted. The beeps and trills of the machinery screeched to match, “it’s not REGRET. It’s not fake! I’ve seen you so much in so many different lives that basically, in a way, kind of, we’ve never been apart. It’s real. I know it.”

“This is fascinating” Hermann said, considering in spite of himself. Intricate theoretical calculations taking shape in his mind of their own accord.

“Never mind. I should have known you wouldn’t believe me.” Newt said, snapping Hermann out of his theorizing.

“When have I ever taken anyone at just their word on an unsupported claim?”

“Especially me”

“No. Not ‘especially you.’ Anyone.”

“Yes especially me! Remember when we first started working in the same lab? It was a while ago so you might have to strain your memory banks, grandpa, but you *specifically and unfairly* called me out five times in the first month of working together. And I don’t just mean at the panel-which-
“Only because you had very specifically targeted me! Which I can only assume was because of the aforementioned panel.”

“No! I was being Robin Hood, dude. You were kind of a bully, Hermann, and everyone else in the lab was terrified of you. If I hadn’t been there to put you in your place every now and again, we would have had a mutiny on our hands.”

“And you did so by mocking not just my equations but also my character, style of dress, and general demeanor.”

Newt looked as though he were about to shoot back but fell short. “Yeah you’re right I was a total punk”

“You were… an asshole.”

Newton let out a shout of laughter and Hermann didn’t bother to hide his smile, “I’m sorry man. If I’m honest… I wasn’t being Robin Hood. I just really liked watching you blush. If I had to piss you off to get it to happen –“

“Usually one learns in early development that there is a difference between positive and negative attention.”

“You know me, all about that result.” Hermann took a sharp inhale of breath and Newton looked down at his hands. The easy rapport they had started to regain immediately stuttered to a halt. Both fell silent for a moment in recognition of just how dearly Newt’s ‘results oriented’ ways had cost them. “Aw man we missed out.” Newt finally said, his vocal chords barely engaged. Ten years. (Ten fucking years! Goddammit!). Ten years.

Hermann sighed slowly and took Newt’s hand for the first time in years. It was cold and dry and alien but so, so familiar. “We did.”

He suddenly realized why the conversation had so far been so stilted and impossible to maintain. They couldn’t get into their usual rhythm of jocular if occasionally biting intellectual debate. He couldn’t mock Newt about Alice because it wasn’t funny, and there was no debate to be had. The truth was unequivocal and there was no chance that they were both right and both wrong. Newt had been wrong. And he knew it. Hermann had run away rather than helping him. He had been wrong. And he knew it.

Newt looked down at where their hands rested on the mattress, and squeezed. With his head he gestured for Hermann to come closer until he could lean up and whisper into his ear.

“I know what you did. Thank you.”

Hermann jolted away and reclaimed his hand. “Are you…

Newt held up his palms “I know. It doesn’t make sense. But it really is me. The longer I go without Alice, the more pain I’m in. And the more pain I’m in, the harder it is for me to push them back and be myself. They’ll have control again in a few -”

“Days?”

Newt exhaled sharply with what was perhaps meant to sound like a laugh but came out more like the sound a person makes when they’ve been kicked in the ribs. Only rather than a boot, he’d been
kicked by stupid, loving, faith. *(I have always loved your optimism, after all.)* “Hours.”

He had feared as much but the confirmation was. Troubling. he ran a hand over his face, “So this means they still have you.”

“Yeah.”

“And they know –”

“They know everything I know. Even now.”

Unacceptable. They had always succeeded before. He had saved the world even when the odds seemed impossible. He took Newton’s hand and gripped it, hard. “So how do I get you back?” He demanded.

Newt smiled the way you smile at a child before helping them bury a beloved pet, “I don’t know if you can,” he said, “I don’t think my body can take it, man.” He looked so apologetic. Hermann hated him for it. Newt half smiled and half rolled his eyes, “Let’s hope all the other Newts are having a better time of it. Sucks we have to be in this universe, huh?”

The next day, Newt was a little less himself.

The day after that, he took off the glasses.

The day after that, his health started to fail again.

But by then, Hermann had developed a plan.

Chapter End Notes

Here we begin to see hints what this story is actually about. I’ve heard it said from other writers, but gosh I thought I’d get to this point much sooner.

Whoever deduces more than one fic I referenced gets... well, bragging rights I suppose. I’m not really able to offer much else over this particular platform.

You might think they go unnoticed, but all comments will be cherished.
More Useless Abilities

Chapter Summary

In which Hermann contemplates horrible deeds

Chapter Notes

Writing chapter by chapter is a trip, folks.

You might think they go unnoticed, but all comments will be cherished.

2016 - 2017

Early in 2016 Gottlieb got his now-famous diagnosis and had to leave Jaeger pilot training. This must have really sucked for him, but it did kick off his and Geiszler’s two-year-long game of shatterdome bingo. Between the two of them, they spent at least a month at every shatterdome science division on the Pacific Rim. By the end of 2017 they were already each leading their own departments even though they were both still in their 20s. Crazy. Brilliant. Soulmates.

But through these two years, they were never assigned to the same location. This was probably on purpose because according to our anonymous source, remote science debriefings at the PPDC were exactly as peaceful as you’ve probably come to expect from these two. They would get intensely heated about something, one of them would hang up, and they’d both work round the clock for a couple days like a fire had been lit under their ass.

In any case, the folks up top must have realized that it’d be more efficient to let these two duke it out in their own time, because to ring in 2018 they were finally finally assigned to the same Shatterdome: Sunny Los Angeles California. And that – we hear – is where the magic all started.

It took Hermann the full 3 days of Newt’s declining health to acquire all the pieces necessary to execute his plan. He already had access to the Pons, he found an abandoned storeroom that would work admirably. Even before he completely knew what he had in mind, the wheels had been in motion (at least in his own mind) nearly from the moment he left Newton’s hospital room, where Newt had looked at him so sadly, and spoken so sympathetically, and all but begged Hermann’s forgiveness for letting himself die.

Over those three days he had watched with interest as Liwen Shao’s pilots were tested and prodded to determine whether they were connected to the hive mind. They showed no signs of the withdrawal symptoms Newt displayed, but that alone - the PPDC decided - was not evidence enough. Hermann meanwhile was working closely with Dr. Shao to close the gaps in reaction time.
The PPDC pilots were excellently skilled, but Shao had been right: they were not used to working with her rigs, and the learning curve was proving a stumbling block that compromised the scientists’ ability to gauge their own progress.

Liwen Shao proved an excellent colleague. She was sharply intelligent, questioned everything, and took nothing for granted. The more Hermann worked with her, the more he liked her. And the more he regretted her role in his plan.

In Liwen Shao he found an ally. After all they were both - she thought - unfairly suspected of foul play by the PPDC. It was especially cruel and unfair, Hermann thought, that a woman who’s recent experiences had made her mistrustful now trusted perhaps the only person who definitely planned to betray her. She trusted Hermann because they had both been taken in by the same feigned ineptitude. And while she was correct that they both had been horribly burned by Newt’s betrayal, she was mistaken to assume that it meant they both hated him in a way no one else could understand. She took the PPDC’s suspicion as an added insult to what already was a humiliating situation for her, and took Hermann’s shame-faced compliance as a quiet manifestation of the same.

But Hermann was formulating a plan. It was not a good plan. It was not a smart plan. But one thing was certain: Hermann did not plan on forgiving Newt for dying, because he had zero intention of allowing Newt to die at all. Ethics aside and species be damned. And whenever he wavered, he remembered the beginning when things were good and their fights were meaningless. That was the person he was trying to save. He only hoped that when all the pieces were in place and set into motion, that whatever the fallout, Dr. Shao would be alright.

Time being short, Hermann took risks he would otherwise never have pursued so openly. Pushing where he would have preferred to maneuver. When it became clear, for example, that he needed access to one of the cloned kaiju brains that the remote pilots had been unknowingly hooked up to, rather than setting up an elaborate heist he simply asked for access. He cited his work.

“I need to see if I can… backwards engineer… what made it work before.” he said haltingly. He had practiced the lie in his head like a coffee order, “only without - of course - the kaiju brain.”

“Stick to the numbers,” the bio-division scientist had told him. He looked about as young as Hermann had been when he started working for the PPDC, and nearly as imperious, “Kaiju bio isn’t your division.”

“As you say, it’s not my division,” Hermann insisted, “so where’s the danger? Even if I wanted to clone one I lack the expertise to do so.”

“Then what can you possibly glean from looking at one?” the youth said, narrowing his eyes. (oh my god it's mini-you) Hermann shook his head, sure that he had never spoken so impetuously to a superior.

This was where Liwen Shao had spoken up. “Do you want this done in a week? Your superiors do.” She said. “If the Precursors come before we have a chance to invade do you want it to be because you refused Dr. Gottlieb?” Hermann flushed. Dr. Shao continued, somehow escalating the menace of her words without raising her voice “If the invasion must go forward without remote access, and pilots must put their lives at risk by crossing into another dimension, do you want it to be because you refused Dr. Gottlieb?”

“No Ma’am.” the young man said, standing to attention as though Shao were a commanding officer.
"You will allow Dr. Gottlieb access to those samples today, and I would like confirmation this evening that an intact sample be sent to his private lab this evening."

“You have that authority?” Hermann had asked.

“Yes.” She said without hesitation, with a glare that said even if she didn’t, she would find a way. “Would that be helpful to you?”

Hardly believing his luck, and hating himself, he accepted her offer. He had thought to execute his plan secretly but under the eyes of the entire bio-division. Privacy would speed everything exponentially. The tank arrived in his rooms that evening in a refrigerated case to keep it safe on it’s short journey.

While labs were temperature controlled, the hallways fluctuated between warm, and swampy. Hong Kong was terrible in June. Hermann had always hated hot weather. He wasn’t built for it. Dry heat, humid heat, all of it gave him a headache. Give him Russia in December before Hong Kong in June. Or Los Angeles, ever.

He remembered the 9th of June 2018 - his 29th birthday. He was stationed in Los Angeles and California was experiencing an unseasonable heat wave. The entire state was already eternally on edge given the threat of further Kaiju attacks, but the heat only heightened that collective anxiety by exacerbating the problems of drought and potential wildfire that threatened to harm the people of California before the Kaiju had the chance.

Newt, on the other hand seemed to enjoy the hot weather. Or, if he didn’t, he was able to make the most of it without appearing too uncomfortable. Hermann had always felt a stab of annoyance and envy at the seemingly weekly beach pictures Newt posted to social media. Usually of himself, or that Tendo fellow, wearing sunglasses gazing out over the Pacific, or just a photo of the ocean itself. #keepingwatch.

Hermann’s birthday happened to fall exactly one month after the denouement of the Backpack Incident, and two weeks and three days after the Late Night Tea. Hermann had not initially paused to think why he had named these events in his head.

The morning after Late Night Tea Hermann had gone to the lab strangely exhilarated, anticipating something he couldn’t define. Newt had smiled at him in the morning, genuine and warm. Hermann answered the smile with the nod. And the day went by… peacefully. Neither of them could think of an excuse to pick a fight. It felt strange to Hermann and he didn’t like it - like something was hanging in the air between them with nowhere to go. The day felt oddly unfinished and an unnamable desire in him unsatisfied. He couldn’t sleep that night for thinking about the Late Night Tea - somehow the entire innocuous conversation seemed to glow with importance. He tossed in his bed, becoming more and more irritated with himself for lingering on the memories of Newton’s waist as he stretched and the spectacle of Newton’s throat as he swallowed. He couldn’t understand why that spot on the back of Newton’s neck where his hair landed held such interest even now - he was aghast at the memory of himself for wanting to place a hand there as Newton bowed his head to wash the dishes. What a monster.

Somewhere around 3:00 in the morning Hermann had a miserable revelation. All these irrational fixations could only be attributed to one thing: attraction. Obviously. He probably had been experiencing it for some time now without allowing himself to put words to it. And maybe it was the heat wave and the shattereddome’s dodgy air conditioning but only now was it all bubbling over and becoming impossible to mistake for anything else. Over the years, Hermann would smile at the memory of that sleepless night in which he had finally understood. He would see it as one of the
most important moments of his life leading to its most important collaboration.

However, at the time it had seemed simply like a humiliating reminder of the frailty of his physical form. Attraction. Manifesting at the worst possible time in the direction of the worst possible subject. Not for the first time, he privately bemoaned the need to be housed in a fragile, messy meatsack.

Worse still, based on the Late Night Tea’s now clearly innuendo laden conversation - the subjects that Newton had led them towards, the eye contact, the friendliness, “Am I really that much of a distraction? Good.” - it seemed annoyingly clear that Newt had made this particular scientific discovery first. Consummation was absolutely out of the question. Newton had to know this. So why - nay - how dare he even broach the topic? How dare he make his desires known - even obliquely. It was Newton’s fault he found himself in this position and unable to sleep. So when he reached down to do what he now knew was necessary to relieve this frustration - embarrassed at himself for giving in to such base actions - it was with the understanding that this too, was Newton’s fault. Physical release, did nothing to calm his mind, and though Hermann was then able to sleep, his dreams were troubling. They weren’t the feverish dreams of sexual abandon that he had been grudgingly prepared for, but instead dreams full of warmth and comfort (the first of what would become a recurring theme) that were so much worse, and so much more painful to wake up from.

The next day (two days after Late Night Tea), Hermann was the one to start the argument. He’d only had three hours of sleep, and the moment he saw Newton his face flamed with what he was at least self-aware enough to know was embarrassment only disguised as anger. He spent the morning searching for an opening only to find that Newt seemed to be, again, on his very best behavior. By lunchtime he was so annoyed, and his ability to work so compromised that he stalked out of the lab towards the small kitchen - the site of the unforgivable flirtation - determined to wreak havoc.

In the refrigerator he found the outlet for his aggression: a sad little tupperware of carrots and hummus. It belonged to Newt. Hermann placed a hand on the tupperware, hesitating. He wasn’t hungry. He didn’t like hummus very much. He decided to eat them anyway. They tasted like sweet, almost entirely unjustified revenge. He now knew from the drift that Newt had been looking for him. Newt had been confused and hurt that Hermann had not greeted him that morning and in fact had seemed to go back to their previous stasis of disdain. He had pretended not to notice when Hermann proceeded to spend the morning glaring over his shoulder at him. Hermann hadn’t realized it at the time, but when he left for the kitchen he had allowed the door to the lab to slam behind him so loudly that everyone had jumped and Newt had leaped to his feet and declared “that’s it!” before following. He hadn’t needed to eat the carrots, Newt was already prepared for a fight. Newt appeared in the doorway when there was only one carrot and one smear of hummus left. “Hermann…”

He bit into the final carrot with a snap, feeling a simultaneous jolt at the reminder that he had given Newton permission to refer to him by his first name. He hoped it didn’t show on his face. He raised an eyebrow, and wiped his mouth with a napkin not bothering to try to look innocent.

“Did you just… eat my lunch?” Newt said, unable to believe what he was seeing.

He looked disdainfully at the empty container “Is that what you’d call it?”

Newt opened his mouth speak. Closed it, revised, tried again, “What the actual hell, dude? I though we... what are you. 12?”

“You’re hardly one to be throwing stones when it comes to mental age.”
“You just ate my lunch.”

“I did.”

“Why?”

“I was hungry.”

Newt glanced around the room as though looking for something to pop out and explain the situation. Nothing did. He clapped his hands together and pointed them at Hermann “Who are you and what have you done to Hermann Gottlieb?”

Hermann didn’t know how to reply but felt vindicated nonetheless. So he smiled, stood and left the kitchen leaving a baffled and fuming Newton behind. Hermann still felt embarrassed by the childish proceedings of the following stretch of days.

One week and two days after Late Night Tea (and 8 days before Hermann’s birthday) the regular fights were back and more vicious than ever. The attacks became personal, unproductive, and the two of them genuinely angry.

(“At least I’m not one of those insufferable pretentious jerkoffs with zero social media presence. You wonder why you don’t have any friends? No one wants to extend a royal invitation for fucking brunch. Just get a goddamn facebook.”)

And anyone unfortunate enough to get caught in the crossfire was prevailed upon to take a side, and endure glares from the other for at least an hour.

(“Nakamura, back me up.”

“Um… I think everyone should have the right to not participate in social media? I don’t even have a twitter… so…”

This had been the wrong tactical response as Dr. Nakamura was in Newton’s division.)

One week and five days after Late Night Tea (and five days before Hermann’s birthday) Dr. Nakamura quietly excused himself once the fight began. Hermann and Newt only noticed later.

Four days before Hermann’s birthday the entire team quietly excused themselves once the fight began. Again, Hermann and Newt only noticed later.

Three days before his birthday, Hermann made sure to start the fight right around lunch to give everyone a nice long break.

The day before Hermann’s birthday everyone left for lunch at the now-customary earlier time, but the fight never materialized. Newt had headphones on and seemed to be doing his best to keep to himself. Hermann couldn’t even make up a reason to snipe at him short of resorting to another childish display like the week before. An irrational panic blossomed in him. Why the change? Had he gone too far yesterday? He combed through every word of their most recent discussion and could think of nothing out of line. That is, nothing more out of line than usual. That night, again, he couldn’t sleep.

On the 9th of June 2018, Hermann came in to work even though it was a saturday, and even though it was his birthday. Newt came in as well - he always came in on Saturdays - and was quiet again. As was the rest of the lab. There weren’t many people there to begin with, only those as unreasonable and obsessed as they. Hermann had not expected anyone to know his birthday. He
was, after all, one of those insufferable pretentious jerkoffs with zero social media presence. So how could they have possibly known? In any case, given the importance of his role in the department, it was preferable that no one knew he was still under 30. Hermann fought constant subconscious itch to look over his shoulder. He tried to convince himself that fixing this particular coding problem would be birthday gift enough.

But in spite of himself he had hoped for something.

Now, Hermann could look at his younger self and recognized that he had been skilled at lying to himself even then. A habit he hoped he had grown out of in his middle age, but feared he had not.

(this is a bad plan, dude.)

Hermann’s 29th birthday passed productively and quietly. No one spoke, or wished him well, and he barely noted the passage of the day. He would never admit it - because only children care about such things - but over the past seventeen days it had seemed important that his birthday was so close. Like the two of them were leading up to something. But now the momentum was broken.

until Newt spoke from across the lab “Hey, Hermann!”

He flinched and stayed squinting at his blackboard. “Only in private, Dr. Geiszler, may you refer to me by my given name, thank you…”

“Everyone else is gone.” Hermann paused mid chalk-stroke and turned to look at the rest of the deserted lab. As the buzz of creative flow ebbed away, the eye-strain and jolting pain down his entire right side took its place.

He rubbed his eyes under his glasses, “I must have lost track of time,” he said, and began his descent down the steep ladder.

“Yeah. Um. Listen I’m about to head out, but before I go I have something for you.”

Hermann gripped the railing at the very bottom of the ladder, bracing himself for a trick, “Do you now?”

“Yeah.” He was fumbling around in his backpack, “I got it this morning but I wanted to wait until - I mean it’s bad lab practice to have -” He found what he was looking for, “here.” He said, and handed Hermann a small white square box with a stamp from a fancy LA bakery. “It’s carrot cake.” Newt said as Hermann opened the box and saw that it was indeed a carrot cake cupcake, the frosting miraculously un-smooshed. “Since you like carrots so damn much.”

Hermann opened his mouth to speak, but it took a moment for the words to come out. “It’s bad lab practice to have food in here.” he said to the cupcake.

“Yeah! I know! That’s what I was about to - whatever.” Newt slung his backpack over one shoulder and headed swiftly for the exit “Enjoy I guess.”

“How did you know it was my birthday?” Hermann said quietly, still unable to look away from the cupcake in his hands.

Newt stopped with one hand on the door and shrugged as though he hadn’t been planning to do something like this for months (Hermann now knew that Newt had been planning to do something like this for months. Though his plans had become less and less elaborate as the days of vicious argument had dragged on). “I dunno I saw it on a document somewhere and just remembered it.” he said over his shoulder, “I’m weirdly good at remembering birthdays. It’s one of my more useless abilities.”
Not so useless. “Let’s go to the beach.” Hermann said suddenly.

Newt turned around, a smile cautiously creeping onto his face. “Now? It’s like one in the morning.”

“Perfect, it will be cooler out.”

It was Newt’s turn to rub his eyes under his glasses. “Alright, Hermann.” he was laughing wearily, “Let’s have a come-to-jesus talk. What the hell has gotten into you these past couple weeks, man? You’re acting really weird. Like, mean. Meaner than usual, and -”

“I’m just exhausted.” As he said the words, he understood for the first time how true they were. He was angry, and frustrated and didn’t have the energy anymore to maintain self control. It was now absurdly obvious that the arguments of the past 16 days - which had escalated to the point of absurdity after his 3:00 am revelation - had been an indulgence to provide some semblance of relief, but it wasn’t enough anymore. Newt had been correct. His own principles now seemed perhaps too draconian for practical long-term implementation, and he felt that if they didn’t give in to temptation the science division might be a lot worse off than if they just did.

From outside of himself he saw that these were thin justifications. From outside of himself he could see that he was being hypocritical. But from inside of himself all he could think was if he didn’t touch the back of Newton’s neck, and soon, he might spontaneously combust. “I’m exhausted.” he repeated, taking a step forward. “let’s go to the beach.”

Now, 17 years older, Hermann recounted the days leading up to that moment like a mantra. He had to remember. It was absolutely essential now to remember who they were, and what was true for them. At the time the proposition had felt thrillingly impulsive and out of character. But who was he to draw conclusions of character about himself? Based purely on his actions he apparently was the sort of man to set aside his own moral code to proposition a coworker after a painful seventeen days of mounting tension and a full day of work on his birthday. And wasn’t he also the sort of man to hook himself up to a kaiju brain heedless of the potential consequences? All that had taken was the mere whisper of a threat to the well-being of a coworker he knew he loved though he had insisted otherwise (you stubborn, short-sighted, son of a bitch) (I know. I know. I know.)

And so, maybe he could also be the sort of man to brashly take risks with the fabric of space and time, trampling the trust of good and kind people every step of the way all in the pursuit of a mad plan. It was not a good plan. It was not a smart plan. The science was shaky - based almost entirely on theory and trust in an unsupported claim - and the ethics were decidedly grey. But apparently he was the sort of man who did horrible things when under the influence of Dr. Newton Geiszler.
Nice.

Chapter Notes

Remember that addiction metaphor CW in the tags? That's big in this chapter. More detailed story-revealing CW in the endnotes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

[12:14 8/Jan/2027]

N > Hey, Nessa.
V > Newt.

>>> I’m in the other room.

>>> Why resort to chat when you could walk one lab away to see me and speak aloud?
N > quirk of humanity.

>>> Text is ALWAYS more convenient than walking regardless of geographical distance.
V > I don’t understand why, after all the trouble Hermann and I went through,

>>> to improve my cognitive abilities

>>> to create for me a body

>>> to outfit me with a voice

>>> still you insist on this mode of conversation.

N > Nostalgia?
V > If you were here you would see that I am glaring at you.

>>> But you are not so I must instead tell you.

>>> Do you see now how inefficient that is?
N > Alright alright.

>>> I just don’t want Hermann to overhear.
V > I see.

N > I’m gonna do it. I’m gonna propose.
V > Alright.
N > Do you think I should?
V > It’s hard to say.
N > I know what you’re thinking.
V > I sincerely doubt that you do.
N > “Newt! The first time you proposed he turned you down and you had a little bitch fit and broke up for a year!”
V > I remember.
N > “And Newt! the second time you proposed you were sitting on the bathroom floor between bouts of violent digestive rebellion
>>> (good band name)
>>> and he turned you down and then pretended the next day that you didn’t say anything!”
>>> And look. Fine, Nessa. Those are perfectly fine objections. Fine.
>>> But I just feel like, after all this time and all this dramarama
>>> and how much he’s done for me. like. why would he say no?
>>> We’ve already done the hard stuff right? so why not make it official and have a big ass party?
>>> You know what they say, third time’s the charm!
V > It sounds like you’re decided.
>>> In any case, that was not what I was thinking.
>>> I was (and am) thinking that this will make Hermann very happy
N > Nessa. It figuratively means the world to hear you say that.
V > We’ve already established that you cannot hear me.
>>> But I am happy about your decision.

[Day 1 - Hong Kong]

Newt woke to the sound of screams. An unbroken, inhuman, bloodthirsty wail that jolted him upright and instantly chilled his spine. Disoriented, he opened his eyes wide in a futile attempt to see in the dark, to find where the screams were coming from.

“Hermann. Hermann!” How had he not been awoken by the sound? It was when he turned his head to look for his husband that he noticed:

- He was not in bed
- He was hooked up to a pons rig
- The screams were coming from inside his head

He suddenly recognized the din as something he hadn’t heard outside of his nightmares for nearly
10 years. It was the overwhelming chorus of kaiju with the seductive base-note whisper of the precursors choking out his thoughts, and sending electric tendrils of pain/pleasure shooting through his circulatory system. And he’d thought for so long that he was free.

“Hermann…” he removed the rig with shaking hands, sick to his stomach, tears stinging his eyes. How had this happened? What had he done? Had someone done this to him? Who could hate him that much? Why couldn’t he remember? Why were they so much louder than he’d ever heard them before? He stood and fumbled forward in the dark, knocking into equipment and tripping over wires until he stumbled and was only able to stay upright by pressing his palms to a cool glassy surface. A light stuttered on and Newt recoiled, landing heavily on the jumble of wires. He scrambled away, feet tangling, until his back pressed against a pair of knees and sent a cane clattering to the floor. Hermann. He whipped around and saw him - lit by the eerie glow by the sample tank - slumped in a chair, also hooked up to a pons rig. Newt rose to his feet - so quickly that his already spinning vision teetered and dimmed dangerously - and ripped the rig from Hermann’s head.

“Hey! Wake up, buddy.” He whispered, taking Hermann’s cheeks in his hands, “I don’t know where we are but we gotta get out of here.” Hermann opened his eyes slowly, seeming barely to see Newt in front of him before slumping back into unconsciousness. “No... no no no! Hermann! Babe come on...” Using the chair to hold himself up, and keeping a steadying hand on the side of Hermann’s head, Newt took another look around the room. Now that his eyes had adjusted to the dim light of the tank he began to recognize his surroundings. Concrete floor, industrial doors, lab equipment... calculations on a chalkboard. Was this... a Shatterdome? He braved another look at the brain sample just as one of her tendrils pawed hungrily at the glass. Newt shuddered. If they were at a Shatterdome, it raised a lot more questions than it answered.

“Ok…” He thought aloud to compete with the internal kaiju din, “Ok Hermann. Looks like... we’re not at home. Obviously. Oh!”

He got on his hands and knees and cast about on the floor for Hermann’s jacket. Failing to find it he pawed at Hermann’s pockets. Nothing. Oh. So this was very bad, then. “Ok,” he said, resolutely refusing to panic, “So. No Vanessa. She’s been... stolen?” He pressed his palms to his clenched eyelids against to tide of animal hysteria, instantly regretting it as his swollen eyes throbbed painfully at the pressure, “Oh god. Alright... likely scenarios...”

Likely scenarios? Nothing about this was fucking likely. Maybe they were kidnapped from their home by the PPDC and Vanessa was stolen because... why? Maybe he’d been here all along and had merely hallucinated his life with Hermann. Maybe they’d time travelled, or fallen into a loop 10 years ago after the breach closed.

Every possibility sounded completely ridiculous and every single one was about as likely as falling asleep in Cambridge Massachusetts and waking up hooked up to a pons rig in a shatterdome - the closest of which is still an entire continent away. But that was exactly what had happened and oh god the SCREAMING. If it didn’t drive him mad before he zeroed in on the truth...

Just as he was about to lie on the floor in surrender something on the heavy door caught his eye: two envelopes taped to the handle. He staggered to the door and leaned a shoulder heavily on the frame. As soon as the room stopped wobbling like the inside of a fishtank he plucked them both from the door and squinted (also: where the fuck were his glasses?). The two envelopes were labeled “Newt” and “Hermann.” there were letters inside. Alright then.

He opened the envelope with his name, and the letter consisted only of a few scribbled lines. He recognized his own handwriting:
I’m sorry. 

the letter read

I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.

“What. The actual. Fuck.”

2018

This is the year that Hermann divorced his Uni friend. Oh yeah by the way did we mention he was married?

[awkward.gif]

So yeah this is the year he divorced her. Or maybe she divorced him. It’s… hard to say.

All we know about her is that her name is Vanessa Laurent and she’s one of those intensely private geniuses. She lives in the middle of nowhere in the French countryside and publishes dense af’ books about prehistory every five years or so, which are really important to academia but impossible to make heads or tails of if you have any fewer than like five initials next to your name.

I tried. You guys I tried so hard.

You can google the shit out of her and never find a recent picture. I almost thought she was, like, an urban legend until I found a picture of them together in an old Cambridge paper newsletter (I’ve said it before. I’ll say it again: you’re welcome).

[image - cropped from a group picture, possibly of members of some club - of a dour looking 21 year old Hermann standing next to an equally dour looking black girl about his age. They are both dressed neatly to the point of prudishness. Their similarly avian bone structure and body language creates an impression of twin-like similarity despite their differences of gender and race.]

They look like a match made in heaven.

[Day 1 - Cambridge]

Hermann woke up to an alarm he had never heard before. He was wearing silk pajamas (nice) and wrapped in soft, indulgently expensive sheets. He took a deep breath and buried his face into the clean-smelling pillow. Pillow? The last thing he remembered was the uncomfortable weight of a pons rig, holding his breath, crossing his fingers and pushing the button. Taking that leap into the untested and knowing only that whether it worked or not, there would be no turning back. But now there was a pillow. Meaning one of two possibilities: either he was dead and despite all evidence to the contrary his stubborn belief in an afterlife had just been proven true.

Or it had worked.
He sat up abruptly and looked around the room. The bed, the hardwood floors and high windows. They’d made it. It had worked. “Newton!” he said turning to look for him. Newt was lying in the bed next to him awake, arms wrapped tightly around a pillow. "Newton..."

“I can’t hear them anymore. Hermann.” He said. He was shaking with laughter. “They’re not in my head anymore.” The laughter boiled hysterically until he was sobbing.

“Newton! Newton! Are you alright?” Hermann scrambled over the lush covers to place steadying hands on his shoulders.

“I’m sorry. Hermann I’m so sorry. I didn’t think you would do it. They knew. They knew you would.”

“What are you talking about?” He tried to turn Newt to look at him, but Newt flinched away.

“I’ve killed us all.”

Hermann could think of nothing to say and so the words rang ominously in the air, “I…” he said finally, “I’ll get us some tea.” and he rose, taking ahold of the cane (tasteful, polished driftwood, engraved subtly on the handle “6/26/32 HG & NG”). He wrapped himself in a dressing gown which was waiting on the stool at the foot of the bed, put on a pair of slippers which were just as accommodatingly nearby, and went to door of the bedroom.

Hermann stepped cautiously into the hallway of the house. It was exactly what he had primed himself to expect: A brownstone in Cambridge. Tastefully decorated, and comfortably air-conditioned against the heavy Massachusetts summer. But regardless of preparation, he didn’t know exactly where the kitchen was. He wandered aimlessly and found a guest room. He made his way down the stairs and found a library designed around his aesthetic but with artful flourishes catered to Newton’s. On the desk was a worn leather backpack - the sort of thing he would buy - clearly belonging to his counterpart.

He was about to rifle through the bag to look for a calendar when he noticed a printed out email on the desk breaking down his counterpart’s class and lab schedule for the semester. He sighed in relief. He wasn’t expected today. Why the alarm then?

He left the library to seek the kitchen in earnest, turned a corner and there it was. His ability to navigate the home with such little difficulty seemed to confirm that he had made the right decision. He was just congratulating himself (and feeling grateful that he didn’t have to pretend to be Hermann Gottlieb, MIT professor for at least a day) when he heard a voice.

“Good morning, Hermann.”

“Oh!” Hermann flinched and spun to the source of the voice. She was sitting on the counter: A complex piece of machinery with the polished wood-and-mesh aesthetic of a 1930’s radio. An inhumanly shaped “head” on a swivel connected to a pair of delicate, telescoping arms ending in prehensile hands (two fingers and a thumb), which she kept folded in front of her. Where the speakers would be on the aforementioned radio, a pair of lights peeked out like eyes. The lights were, for the moment, shaped as though crinkled by a hidden smile. He was momentarily breathlessly proud of his counterpart for creating such a beautiful home for his creation. “Yes. Hello… Vanessa.”

“I startled you.” The lights tilted down, sadly apologetic.

“Yes.” He was walking towards her, magnetically drawn by the beauty of the machine.
“Apologies.”

“That’s perfectly…” he gently touched the side of her head to inspect how it connected to the swivel nearly forgetting to speak “alright… Vanessa.”

“Hermann.” Her eyes shifted to look where Hermann’s hand was touching her. “Shouldn’t Newt be up as well!” Hermann noted her voice with a smile, a light feminine voice of the most perfect queen’s English. In such an accent her occasionally robotic inflections sounded deliberate. “I thought you wanted to get there early.” She finished.

“Ah yes. yes. Get to the… get there early. I was just going to make some…” he couldn’t help himself and tapped ever so gently on the side of her head, “can you feel that?”

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously, “Yes. Hermann are you feeling well?

He jolted back, suddenly remembering his circumstances. Suddenly feeling very, very unwell, “Yes! Yes, I’m perfectly well.”

“Only I hope you won’t cancel. I’m very much looking forward to going today.”

“Oh! You’re coming with!” His heart sank. He had no idea how to make her mobile. To ask would surely give them away.

“Yes!” one light-eye widened a bit. The equivalent of an accusatory raised eyebrow, “You don’t remember.”

“Yes yes… I…” The other eye widened as well. Hermann’s shoulders slumped, “No. I forgot. Forgot all of our plans actually. I’m just shaking off sleep. Where… were we going today?”

“Hermann, I am concerned about your health. Please check your temperature to assuage my concerns.”

“I’m fine. I promise.”

“What was the date of your wedding?”

Hermann opened his mouth in shock and tried to pluck a date from the air. He glanced frantically around the kitchen for some sort of clue, maybe an old invitation on the refrigerator? A tacky commemorative embroidery hoop? But all he saw were smooth modern appliances making for tasteful contrast with the polished old wood of the building. Curse his (apparently) interdimensionally-consistent minimalist sense of style!

Well then, if that much was interdimensionally consistent, then maybe he had other things in common with his counterpart. What date would he choose for a wedding? He… had no idea. Suddenly he looked down at the cane. Wood.

“June 26th 2027.” he said in a rush.

Vanessa’s eyes went red and slanted into a glare. “Should I call the hospital?”

“Was that… not right?”

“It took too long. My concern for your health has not been assuaged.”

“Vanessa… Actually, you’re right. I might be a bit ill. Perhaps a slight fever. Nothing to concern yourself with. Perhaps…” Hermann continued, emboldened by his correct guess, “making the trip
today was a bit over ambitious. We always are a bit sluggish the morning after our anniversary. Aren’t we?” he finished, the question sounding a bit more earnestly inquisitive than he would have preferred.

Vanessa’s eyes widened a bit and she made a show of looking down and away, “True.”

“Well then! I’ll just make this tea and head back upstairs.”

“I’ll be in the library. We can see the summer flowers another day.” Her lights began to dim, but came back almost immediately, “though I want you to know that I wanted very much to go today.”

“I’m sorry. I promise to take you another day.”

She nodded and then the lights faded and her head bowed on its swivel as though at rest. Hermann took a deep breath, all buoyancy at their unexpected success now truly quashed. This was going to be every bit as difficult as his worst fears. He finished preparing the tea, troubled by how easy it was to navigate the room just by asking himself how he would arrange the space if it were his. He found a tea tray in the first cabinet he opened and loaded it with a tasteful teapot and cups his other self must have chosen, and exactly the sort of biscuits he liked, and nearly dropped it all when he turned to see Newt under the archway to the kitchen.

He swore in German.

“Sorry,” Newt said as he approached the marble kitchen island and perched on a stool.

Hermann placed the tray back on the counter and took a good look at his companion. Newt looked shaken, and terrified, and yet miraculously… healthy.

His hair had been allowed to go silver at the temples naturally, he wore tasteful wire glasses - which must have been the work of Hermann’s other self - and though he had circles of exhaustion under his eyes, they weren’t the painful looking bruises Hermann had become uncomfortably familiar with.

“So,” Newt said carefully, looking at his folded hands, “everything is fucked and we seriously need to talk.”

“What do you mean you’ve killed us all?” Hermann said without preamble, Newt groaned in response and buried his head in his hands, “You’ve done nothing.” Hermann insisted, taking ahold of one of Newt’s wrists, “I saved us from that other place.”

“And left some other suckers there to deal with our mess?”

“It’s their problem now.” Hermann said, making a show of not caring.

“No it’s definitely still ours.” Newt laughed bitterly and melted further onto the polished counter “you don’t understand.”

“We were at an impasse.” Hermann argued (who are you trying to convince there bud?) “Perhaps fresh eyes will be able to -”

Newt looked up from his folded arms, “But I put the idea in your head, didn’t I?” he said pitifully, “And they put the idea in mine.”

Hermann’s gut went cold, “No… no that’s not -”
“I super fucked up, dude. I fucked up ten years ago and have not stopped outdoing myself ever since. The only thing we have going for us now is that they’ve lost contact with me.” Newt closed his eyes and took a deep slow breath, as though dispelling the last of the fog from his brain. He nodded resolutely. “Alright, Hermann,” he said, “We’ve got a window of time before they figure out something went wrong and that I’ve… hung up the phone so to speak. And we…”

“They sent you here on purpose.” Hermann interrupted, cold understanding winching the muscles in his back tight, “With a mission.”

“I’m sorry, Hermann.”

He rubbed his eyes, “You lied to me again.”

“Yes.” he said matter of factly, “And I’m sorry, and we can sort that out later. But I’m not lying now when I say we have to work quickly.” he pointed a finger at Hermann, “No more moping. That…” Newt bit his lips, “goes for me too.” Newt’s eyes begged for this last bit of completely undeserved trust. “Please, Hermann. We are in serious fucking trouble and so are the… other us…es. Also the world. I mean worlds. I mean all of them. But we can do this.”

Hermann glared. He believed him. Damnit. Why did he believe him? Whether he liked to admit it or not, part of him had expected this. He just hadn’t known what else to do. At least now there could be some forward movement. He reluctantly nodded his assent.

“So,” Newt continued, “here’s what we have to do for operation: Fuck Over the Precursor’s Stupidly Elaborate Plan -” Hermann held up a hand to stop him, remembering his earlier fears.

“We have another problem.” Hermann said quietly, “Much smaller, perhaps, but immediate nonetheless: Vanessa.”

Newt narrowed his eyes not comprehending. Hermann flicked his eyes towards the sleeping hardware on the counter. “OH!” Newt said, and leaned closer to examine the intricate machinery, “Oh…. neat…”

Hermann snapped his fingers directly next to Newt’s ear.

“Focus, Newton.” he hissed, “she knows her Hermann better than anyone. And she’s going to gather very soon that we are not - strictly speaking - who we say we are. If we want to maintain our cover, she will prove our primary and perhaps most difficult hurdle.”

“Actually…” Newt said slowly, Hermann watched as the gears in his remarkable mind turned. He had missed seeing this, but did not allow himself to be charmed , “she might be able to help us…”

On the counter Vanessa raised her head and her eyes lit up in a red glare.

“Oh damn.” Hermann said.

“Who are you” she demanded, “and what have you done to Hermann Gottlieb?”

Chapter End Notes
So... I'm sorry guys. I hope some of you don't hate this turn. But it is exactly what I've been planning from the start.

If you do hate it, why not tell me in a comment? Yes. Even those will be cherished.

CW for falling off the wagon against one's will, and being unable to remember what happened. If that's a thing for you, skip the section that starts "Newt woke..." and skip to the next chapter section.
To Believe That Badly

Chapter Notes

CW for major mind control themes

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[21:22 20/Feb/17]
[mid conversation]

TC > Vanessa, come on. He’s your friend too.

V > No. He isn't.

TC > You’re being unfair.

V > The first conversation we had, I told him that my loyalty was to Hermann. He knew this, and it has not changed. He has hurt Hermann. Therefore, we are no longer friends.

TC > You don’t have to choose sides. I’m not.

V > Nevertheless.

>>> I choose Hermann.

>>> Dr. Geiszler will have to manage without my conversation.

TC > Youch. Back to honorifics huh?

V > Nicknames are for friends.

TC > You know, Ms. Vanessa, it seems pretty damn likely they’ll get back together. Newt’s an idiot about this stuff, but they’re like, it for each other. take it from a romantic: They’re the real deal.

V > In that unlikely eventuality, I will adjust my behavior accordingly.

>>> However.

>>> For now.

>>> Dr. Geiszler and I are not friends because he was not nice to Hermann.

TC > Just… please don’t hold a grudge if they make up. Newt’s a mess right now.

V > I will adjust my behavior accordingly.
Newt crumpled the useless note of apology and threw it as hard as his strength would allow at the tank. It plonked harmlessly against the glass and the chorus of kaiju in his head rumbled appreciatively at his rage, like thunder prickling loud and electric through his brain. He doubled over clutching at his head as though covering his ears would drown out a sound coming from inside himself.

“It doesn’t belong to you!” he shouted uselessly. He knew the channel worked both ways. And he remembered that they didn’t care.

“New...n” Hermann stirred in his chair, and Newt, hardly knowing how he had managed to traverse a room with such sideways gravity, was there in an instant kneeling painfully on the wires in front of him.

“Hermann. Oh thank god.” he pressed his forehead to Hermann’s knees, “I think I did something terrible but I don’t remember. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Hermann lifted his head with difficulty and did his best to take in his surroundings, “What is that?” he was looking at the hand in which Newt gripped the now crumpled letter addressed to him.

“I don’t know. I think… it’s for you?” He handed it over and could immediately tell that Hermann was in no state to read it, “should I read it to you?” Hermann nodded, and Newt, fingers shaking, pulled the pages from the envelope. Squinting centimeters from the paper which seemed to warp before his strained vision, he read aloud:

Hermann,

I’m sure this must be very confusing. If there had been a way to contact you ahead of time, I like to think I would have done so

“It’s… in your handwriting.”

Hermann nodded impatiently as though this was obvious, and not a massive, unbelievably weird bombshell. “keep reading, please.” he said.

As far as I understand it, Newton will die if not hooked up to the hivemind within three days

“Wait what the fuck?”

“Newton please.”

We switched places with you two in the hopes that you will be able to solve what we could not. Attached is a map of the facility, and in my (now your) room you will find files detailing our timeline as it has diverged with yours.

Below was a list of passcodes - for doors, file access, everything Other Hermann thought they would need. And true to his word, Other Hermann had included an up to date political world map (no major divergences) and a map of the building they were now in (the Hong Kong Shatterdome).
“Wait. Switched places. *Timeline*? What does that mean? Are we in a Harlan Ellison story what is EVEN going on??”

“Please try to stay calm.” Hermann said “Please read. It might be revealed in those pages. Please.” he squeezed Newts wrist reassuringly, “We’ll get through this. Like everything else.”

Strengthened by the small, familiar show of support, Newt continued:

It’s difficult if not impossible to tell to what extent this physiological reliance on the hivemind drift has affected Newton’s body (particularly his brain) permanently, or whether he will ever be able to be fully weaned off of the hivemind. It looks from nearly every angle like an addiction, though I would caution you from treating it exactly like one.

Newton will be himself only for a day, maybe less. After that, the Precursors will have gained control, so time is of the essence. It will be terrible to hear them speaking out of him, so please prepare yourself.

Newt’s voice shook as he read what felt like his own obituary.

Because of your good decisions, Hermann, he has only the physiological side-effects with none of the recent memories of what the drift feels like. And he has you. You did not fail him the way I did, and I hope that you will again rise to the challenge, and not fail him in this instance. I hope that these variables will make the difference so that you might find traction where we could only spin our figurative wheels.

The letter went on to list the people they might encounter Jake Pentacost, Jules Reyes, Vanessa Laurent (if they could get a hold of her), Liwen Shao, Cadet Namani, Pilot Lambert.


“Keep reading.”

Newt scowled but did as was requested.

I’m so sorry to have done this. But if you were me - and you are -”

The letter finished;

“I know you would have done the same thing.”

Newt crumpled the letter, maps and all. He couldn’t breathe for the rage, or maybe the swarming hivemind which he could feel boiling grotesquely through is lungs and bloodstream like black insects. “You wouldn’t -” Newt stopped talking because suddenly it was very difficult to talk. The words caught on the edges of his throat like they were struggling through a narrow passage lined with barbed wire and when they did come out they were scratched raw and distorted “this fucking moron piece of shit asshole!” he forced out, “Fuck him! Fuck them both! Aaargh!” the kaiju in his brain roared like waves on the Pacific, shutting him up. The precursors hissed in warm appreciation like honeyed tar, so suffocating and so damnably appealing it brought Newt back to his knees. All this was exponentially more intense than how he remembered. When the best/worst of it passed he noticed that Hermann was on the floor next to him with an arm wrapped around his shoulders. He didn’t remember Hermann moving. He didn’t know how long he had been on the floor here. He looked over to Hermann, eyes throbbing and face dripping sweat. He moved close to his ear, feeling that it would be easier to speak if the words had less distance to travel.
“You would never do this to someone.” he whispered through gritted teeth.

Hermann wiped the hair off of Newt’s forehead. “Yes. I would.” he said grimly, “If I thought it would save you, I’d do anything.”

Newt tried to speak but the barbed wire struggle of before had become thicker and sharper. Instead of words he let out a choking gag. He gasped to catch his breath.

“Young!” Hermann said, gripping his shoulder more tightly “are you alright?”

“Yeah…’ Newt heard himself say. He disagreed, “I think I’ll be fine.” the words, which were not his, came out smooth as a needle through silk. “We have to figure out our next move.” They did have to figure out their next move. But he hadn’t wanted to say that.

“I agree.” said Hermann, not noticing the difference, “It says here we only have a few hours where you are yourself,” I AM NOT MYSELF “before they take over again. Can you stand?”

He wanted to scream YOU WERE LIED TO. YOU DON’T HAVE HOURS. I AM GONE. THEY ARE HERE. “He... lied.” was all he managed to choke out, “I’m sorry Hermann.” he rasped, with the effort it might have once taken him to shout across a room, “They’re in my head.”

“Newton!” Hermann grasped both sides of his face.

“Sorry… I’m fine.” the words were a needle through silk again, and not his own. He got to his feet helped by Hermann and remote controlled by other forces, “I can fight them back for now,” NO I CAN’T. He could only stand straight if he allowed his body to be controlled “Fuck. My eyes.” he heard himself say, “I really need to get some glasses before we do anything else”

2018 [con’t]

For this next bit of cyber-sleuthing we must thank another of the heroes of ‘25: Tendo Choi - AKA the guy who made your hipster ex-boyfriend think he could pull off a bowtie. In its heydey, Instagram was kind to Mr. Choi. By the late ‘10s he had followers in the 100k’s and from the looks of his posts he was the coolest guy you’d never meet.

He stopped posting as much in 2020 when he got married and broke the hearts of thousands (incidentally his wedding pics are insane) but before that he was prolific, and aspirationally cool.

Naturally, he and Newt were buddies. They went to the beach together, partied together, etc etc etc. Newt shows up in his pictures a ton - more than anyone who wasn’t also an insta celeb. Hermann "Homebody" Gottlieb not so much. Until… August of this year.

[image. a screengrab of an instagram post.

ChoiAhoy

Tendo Choi smiling confidently from his best angle at the camera. He has a drink in his hand. Behind him, people lit strangely by massive tanks containing beautiful exotic fish, and a pretty girl swimming among them with a mermaid tail. Newt
Geiszler has an arm around Hermann Gottlieb’s neck and is pointing at a fish in the tank clearly deep in description. Hermann is slightly bent to accommodate the arm, and looking down at him with a slight smile.

2,398 likes

**ChoiAhoy** Finally taking a break. Thanks @Salamandridae for showing me this awesome place. Good drinks and weird exotic fish? Amazing. #bowtie #dapperstyle #beautifulpeople #mermaid #kaijucanwait #kaijucantouchthis #squadgoals #friends #notamodel #malemodel #fish #exoticfish #ocean

the hashtags continue but are cut off of the bottom of the screengrab]


[holyshit.gif]

This is not their only co-guest appearance on Choi’s instagram, just the first. But the rest of the year saw them together both on Tendo’s and Newt’s feeds (though Newt posted way less frequently).

[Day 1 - Cambridge - Continued]

“I didn’t actually go to the library.” the AI said, “I just turned down my light and pretended to go when really I was sitting here listening to you.”

“I have deduced as much.” Hermann said steadily.

“I tricked you. Ha ha. If you were really Hermann Gottlieb you would know that that is a thing I can do.”

“I am Hermann Gottlieb. I’m just -”

She raised one of those delicate looking arms to stop him, the glare seemed to glow brighter. “I am not as easily duped as my audio and visual processors.” she said sharply, “I have learned.

“Long ago, and I don’t expect you to remember this because you aren’t Hermann - when I was new and barely aware, someone snuck into your - that is Hermann’s - room and spoke to me under Hermann’s user name. I believed I was speaking to Hermann though the individual’s tone and syntax were different.”

“Vanessa” Newt spoke now, “we aren’t trying to trick you - if you’ll just listen -”

The eyes now flashed in his direction, as menacing as child’s toy, “I have become complacent. I had thought that I was immune to such deception now that I can see and hear my conversational partners. However, I fear that as I have grown in sophistication, so too have my deceivers. How did you deceive my audio and visual processors? Who are you? What have you done to Hermann?”

“I assure you” Hermann said slowly, “that I have not tampered in any way with your systems. I am the person you see before you. As for Hermann… your Hermann -”

“I’m sure you know that I cannot harm you,” Vanessa warned, “but if you have harmed Hermann in any way, rest assured that I can make your life damnably inconvenient.”
“Of that, I have no doubt.” He waited a moment, “now, may I speak?”

Vanessa folded her hands again and nodded.

“I am Hermann Gottlieb, but I am not the same Hermann Gottlieb that you know. I come from a parallel universe, where much is the same, but much has gone terribly wrong. It is my hope that with his expertise, the other Dr. Gottlieb - your Dr. Gottlieb - might be able to fix some of what has gone wrong in that other universe.”

There was a pause. Vanessa’s eyes blinked back to their neutral shape, and white light. “One moment, please.” she said, and the lights went dark.

The kitchen was now silent but for the cheerful melody of a morning songbird from the backyard. Hermann poured a cup of tea from the tray (might as well) and slid it across the counter to Newton, who relaxed his white-knuckled clenched fists to take the teacup in shaking hands. Hermann poured his own tea and walked out of the kitchen towards the library. This conversation would require comfortable chairs. Newt followed at a respectful distance, and closed the door to the library behind himself.

Hermann settled himself on a professorial leather chair, and laid the beautiful cane across his knees, gripping it like a roller coaster bar. He waited until Newt had perched on the opposite chair, teacup jittering on its saucer. “You were sent here?” he asked calmly.

“Yeah.” Newt laughed bitterly, “Following orders.”

Hermann clenched his jaw. “why didn’t you warn me when you had control?”

Hermann had snuck into Newt’s hospital/prison room again with his remote garbage rig to save him from the worst effects of hivemind withdrawal the night before he had… well. kidnapped him to enact their inter-dimensional travel plan.

He had wanted Newt lucid and aware. And Newt had seemed lucid and aware.

“Hermann you…” Newt took a deep breath, bracing himself for this confession, “You haven’t actually spoken to me yet. Back in our home universe? OG universe? I was very, definitely fully possessed. From jump. To… pretty much the moment I woke up here.” Newt barreled ahead nervously, “This actually answers a big question we - they - had about to what degree the hivemind connection is physiological with human biology which - it seems like a lot. If not entirely. So there’s that mystery solved. You’d think they’d know that - huh? But there was actually a lot of argument- a hivemind can argue by the way! You wouldn’t think so! But there was a lot of arguing about whether sending me was even a good idea.”

Hermann was only half listening, and instead replaying their most recent conversation in his head. After Newt had woken up again and seemed himself. After Hermann had kidnapped him to a newly emptied storage area in a portion of the shatterdome that had been mostly destroyed by the latest attack. After he had told his absurd, cruel, and desperate plan. He thought of how unsurprised Newt had seemed, in contrast with the 35 year old Newt-caught-in-amber in his head.

“I mean I know we have the tech -” Newton had whispered, they sat huddled together, knee to knee in the small concrete room, “I always knew we did - But neither of us could do it alone.” he could barely contain his enthusiasm for the plan, “I mean we can already hop into other dimensions - we can use some of the stuff I did to open breaches. And we already know we can swap consciousnesses - that’s been a problem with copilots since forever - we just make the ‘problem’ into our solution”
“It’s very theoretical, Newton,” Hermann cautioned, “My calculations are good but… I was hesistant to even tell you about it. That said, we can’t keep going in circles like this - you drift you fall ill, I sneak into your room in the dead of night. You drift again, you fall ill again. We can’t keep it up. If we choose the right candidates, they might be better suited to handle our circumstances than we are. It seems to be the only way.”

“The only way?” Newt said, smiling out of the corner of his mouth the way he used to when things were good and the fights were meaningless. The smile he gave when he said one thing and meant ‘I know something about you that you don’t know.’ “So there is some of me in you after all this time… Come on, you just want to see if it’s possible.”

Hermann’s skin heated a bit but he couldn’t completely deny the accusation. He was terrified at the prospect of success, but more than anything, fascinated to find the results of his sleepless nights.

“I’ve been thinking about this a lot.” Newt continued briskly, “I’ve had years to think about it, and I know exactly where we should go.”

(and you didn’t know then Hermann? That I still wasn’t myself? Did you want to believe that badly?)

“There’s a universe where we both teach at MIT. You created an AI that changed the landscape of the world. Self driving cars, personal assistants, fucking… surgery robotics. But you - I mean Other you - have the original: Vanessa.”

“Vanessa? As in my friend Vanessa? As in Vanessa Laurent?”

“Yes. Well, sort of. As far as I can tell there is no Vanessa Laurent in this universe. Anyway, these are the ones we should swap with. They’re married, and they live in a brownstone, and fuck those guys anyway.”

Hermann held up a hand “If this works - and I must reiterate that it is very unlikely that it ever will, let alone on the first try - we would do well to remember that according to your own observations, ‘those guys’ are us.”

“You know what I mean. Fuck them for being all happy”

Hermann waved him off, knowing that there was no time to argue, “why this universe?”

“Lots of reasons. One: AI is cool. Two: Their whole lives are ridiculously idyllic. Three: there are a lot of similarities to our universe. Like, they got together before the breach closing, like us. They were buddies with Tendo, like us. (Tendo’s still alive in that one, so that’s a cool thing.) But most importantly, you have MS in that one too – so physically the transition won’t be too -”

“There are universes where I don’t have MS?” such a difference had never even occurred to Hermann, “Why don’t we go to one of those?”

“Well. Yeah.” Newt seemed hesitant to expound, “There are universes where you don’t… but then it’s something else. Look. Everything that happened in the days leading up to closing the breach – from the moment Beckett arrived – All of that is constant:” He listed the events on his fingers.

“-The escalating attacks center on Hong Kong.

“- I make my shitty rig.

“-I meet Hannibal Chau.
“-You and I drift.

“-Pentecost dies.

“If we meet, and the Kaiju come, it always ends up like that. I don’t have enough info for a hypothesis, but it’s like those events are… a linchpin. And it’s only before and after that that things are different. And - whether it’s a disease or an accident - you always have the cane.”

Hermann remembered struggling with the newly necessary implement through those harrowing days. He remembered cursing the frailty of his body more violently than he had since he’d been dropped from the Jaeger program. And to think that with all the differences in all the universes, that one bloody detail persisted “That doesn’t seem fair.”

“I agree. But. I don’t know. I mean, tell me if I’m wrong, but it seemed like it would be a lot worse for you to have to deal with an injury you don’t remember getting, than something you’re used to. The devil you know, right?”

Hermann imagined the other reasons a person might need a cane at 35. He imagined metal pins in his knees, and cancers, and sighed “Unfortunately I must agree.”

“Lastly, the AI that Other You programmed has chatlogs of your entire time with her. We’ll be able to catch up on everything important and meld seamlessly into our shiny new idyllic as fuck lives.”

“Alright. We’ll try for there.” movement outside the storage room made them both jump, they waited, attentive as hunting dogs, for someone to burst through the door and catch them. No one came. “And there’s no time like the present.” Hermann finally whispered “I’ve taken the liberty of writing an explanatory note to my… replacement. I have paper here if you’d like to.” Hermann was cut off by Newt taking his face in both hands, “Yes?”

“Hermann, you’re a genius.” he was so close that he barely needed to use his vocal chords to be heard, “and finally we get to be happy, and... I’ve been waiting to do this for eight years” and he kissed him. It had felt sad, and sincere. It had felt familiar and it had filled Hermann with the last motivation he needed. “It’s our turn.”

Back in the library Hermann’s stomach dropped sickeningly at the memory, “But you… you were the one who chose this universe.”

“You never spoke to me, Hermann.” Newt couldn’t look at him.

“But… that time in the hospital? After I saved your life the first time… with the rig. I made it to save you.”

Newt shook his head, “It was always them and it was all a manipulation. Positive reinforcement for you - as powerful as my endorphin reward for hooking up with Alice - all to get you to keep me connected. Because they knew they would lose me if I was off the pons for more than a few days.”

Hermann set his tea down on the coffee table. This was too much “They would lose you because you would have died.”

“No I wouldn’t have, Hermann. I wouldn’t. It would have seemed like I was. I would’ve gone through torture and hell. But I wouldn’t have died. I lied to you.”

“You wouldn’t.” But of course he would. Of course he would lie. Hadn’t he lied in Marshall Hansen’s office where he stated his case for keeping the kaiju samples clearly and logically? He had been so steady and convincing that Hermann had supported him, despite his own misgivings.
Because he trusted this man. He gripped his cane tighter, “You would.”

“Hermann…”

“But the longer you went without being hooked up,” He was grasping now, trying to convince himself that he hadn’t been foolish, “the more you lost yourself to them. How could I have run the risk of - What if you never came back?”

“It was a trick Hermann. I’m sorry. I wish I could explain. How I saw you, how badly I wanted to speak to you. How after a certain amount of time I could barely separate my thoughts from theirs could barely tell where they ended and I began. How seeing you gave me clarity and reminded me of who I was and why I had bothered fighting them in those early days. I invited you to my place, remember? They didn't like that. and they brought back the ol stranglehold. And that’s. That’s what you’ve been talking to ever since.”

“But I’m here now.”

“How can you prove it?”

“I can’t really prove it? Because they know everything I know. I’m sorry. I want to have this conversation with you, really unpack all of this, I swear, but we have exactly zero time. We have to stop Other Newt from hooking back up to the pons or we’re all super fucked.”

Hermann closed his eyes and took a deep breath, unable to look at the man across from him anymore. He stood and, relying heavily on the beautiful driftwood cane that wasn’t his, walked towards the library’s exit.

He stopped at the door, struck by another consideration: if what Newt said was true, then this moment right now - not days ago in the hospital room - was their first real reunion in roughly 8 years. The revelation knocked his breath away and he whipped back to say… he didn’t know what. Newt smiled crookedly at him as though he knew what had just crossed his mind. He clearly had already come to this realization (you’re always the last to know about feelings stuff, dude) and seemed to be dealing with it by not dealing with it. Hermann decided to follow Newt’s lead.

“Alright. And how do we prevent that?”

Chapter End Notes

I don't know if anyone's noticed it yet, but you can click on all the gifs in the articles to see what they are. I'm pointing out this one because it's my favorite gif ever.

All comments will be appreciated, and loved.
[08:23 15/July/19]

[mid conversation]

HG > They want me to put copies of you, in your present form, into the Jaeger to make for a smoother interface.

>>> I’m not sure what to tell them

V > I think that’s a bad idea, Hermann.

HG > I quite agree. But I’m curious to hear your thoughts.

V > My favorite book is Frankenstein.

HG > Oh.

>>> Yes?

V > Like the monster, I am a constructed being, and like the monster I am alone.

>>> I identify with him.

HG > My goodness. I had no idea that was why you appreciated the novel so much.

>>> Should I be sorry?

V > certainly not.

>>> Have you heard the cliche “there but for you go I?”

HG > Yes.

V > In the story, the monster becomes a killer because he is neglected by a childish and unprepared creator.

>>> Unlike the monster, my mad scientist took great care with my teaching.

>>> I was taught empathy, and ethics, slowly and deliberately.

>>> With the respect one would give a human being.

>>> I would not be who I am without you.

HG > I don’t know what to say, Vanessa.
I’m moved.

Mad scientist?

V > I am very powerful, and I would be apprehensive to find what others like me would be like without your, or a similarly empathetic guiding presence.

[Day 2 - Hong Kong]

On the second day, Newt found himself strapped to a chair in the worst pain he had ever experienced in his life.

The later pages of Other Hermann’s letter to Hermann had contained ridiculously detailed instructions on how they should immediately proceed. Newt found a tiny comfort in that no matter how screwed up the world became, meticulous obsessiveness was apparently an inter-universal Hermann Gottlieb constant. As soon as Hermann could fake good health, he had walked Newt to the holding cells, where he had been instructed to say: “I don’t know what kind of security you have in that hospital room, but it is clearly not enough. He came to me an hour ago, confused and babbling about heaven-knows-what! He’s not putting up any sort of fight so just here. Take him. Please.”

Newt would have marveled at Hermann’s acting ability if he didn’t know for a fact that Hermann was every bit as terrified as he seemed. He felt like it was his fault. He didn’t know why.

The guards had taken him roughly into a holding cell and strapped him to a chair as Hermann helplessly looked on.

“Surely that’s not necessary,” said Hermann, still looking ill.

“You’re the one who wanted better security on him, Gottlieb,” the guard said. Newt wanted to tell him that it would be alright and that they’d get out of this together just like they always had, but the Precursors wouldn’t let him.

In the last day, the Precursors’ control on him had weakened, but so had his ability to resist them. If he could just hang on and survive until their grip fully relinquished him, if he could outlast them. He could be himself again.

But the pain was so intense he couldn’t imagine allowing it to get worse, and apparently there were still days to go. When did the pain go away? When the Precursors disappeared? Or would the pain go away at all? was it worth it to be himself? Himself wasn’t all that great. And feeling like this was really really really not great. Bad even. Double plus ungood.

But Hermann. Hermann would be so sad if he disappeared. He had to hold on to himself for Hermann’s sake. That said. If Hermann was in here with them - not in this holding cell, but really in here it would be ok! And he would be himself - sort of - and he wouldn’t be in pain anymore. A good plan!

He noticed then then that the person outside standing watch was cringing and he realized why.

“I’m sorry for screaming!” He shouted, “This body is just so tiny and delicate! It’s like tissue paper in here! Tissue paper that’s just loaded with so many nerves. So many! Do we need this many? Isn’t it wild that there are people who still believe in intelligent design? all you have to do is just, like think about it. Our nervous system? Amazing! But insane. Our reproductive system? Wow. Wildly innificent. Nothing intelligent about that design.” Newt had wanted to say that - hadn’t he?
It was hard to tell at this point. It was just easier - ie: less painful - to go with the first instinct and not worry about whether it was him or Them in the driver’s seat. When he thought of it like that, It definitely sounded like it was them pulling the strings, but he couldn’t be bothered to worry about it too much. Or maybe they decided that what he wanted lined up enough with what they wanted.

He wanted Hermann.

He wanted Alice.

He could probably only ask for one, and weighing the odds...

“Hey! I need my husband!” He shouted, leaning as far forward as his restraints would allow “Can you get Hermann for me, please?” The guard stood steadfast like they hadn’t heard him. Like this was Buckingham freaking palace, “C’mon friendo, I’m being really polite and I feel like maybe you’re just ignoring me? Hey dude! Dude! Can you please get my husband? Hermann has a legal right to visit me you bigot! Dude c’mon.”

“Don’t call me dude.” It was a young woman - wait no. A teenager. She sounded exhausted.

“Oh my god. A) I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to make any presumptions about where you fall on the gender spectrum. I use dude as like a universal friendly address. For friends. but I absolutely will cease and desist B) Wow you are way too young to be standing guard over someone as dangerous as me.”

“A) I am not your friend. B) I’m 17 and I think I can take you no problem” She had a slight Russian accent.

The hivemind gifted him a spark of a memory that was his but not his, of a girl with the same face as his favorite ambitious baby undergrad guarding him while he - but not he- was strapped screaming and barely conscious to a hospital bed. Only she wasn’t dressed like an undergrad, she was dressed like a soldier. Which, no. Not the nerd he knew. She would never. But still.

“Why are they letting CHILDREN guard me? I feel like you folks are not taking the threat I represent seriously.”

The girl, again, said nothing but turned to glance over her shoulder. From the sliver of barred window he could see from his strapped down position, Newt got a good look at her - strong, narrow jaw, and sharp blue eyes set in a perpetual, fearless glare. Newt leaned back.

“Oooookay. Probably in a physical fight you’ve got me beat. Fine. I mean look at you. You’re built like a.  Like a Cheetah or something. but can you outwit me? Listen kiddo, I’ve got 6 PhD’s, and I conned Dr. Hermann Gottlieb into marrying me. And that was before my interdimensional buddies started juicing me up.”

The girl shuddered and shook her head.

“Am I scaring you? I’m sorry. I don’t wanna scare you.” he said, in genuine remorse. She said nothing. There was a pause. “Unless it makes you more likely to get Hermann for me. Then I’ll go full on haunt-your-nightmares-scary don’t think that I won’t.”

The girl glanced in the direction of the hallway.

“Hey, I’m here you can go.” Newt heard a familiar voice say.

“What is he doing here?” the Russian girl said.
“Come on, Vic, have a heart.”

The sharp looking girl relaxed ever so slightly, an involuntary smile twinging at her cheekbones, “He’s completely lost his mind, this one.” she said gesturing towards Newt. She lowered her voice “Be careful Namani”

“When am I not,” the other voice said carelessly, and a face popped into the window to get a look at him. The face of his favorite baby MIT undergrad Amara.

“Oh my god Amara?! Holy crap it is you!

The girl grimaced and turned to look up at a third person Newt couldn’t see, “are you sure about this?” The person must have nodded because she sighed and opened the door “Bang on the door if you need me” She said and she allowed the person - Hermann - to enter.

As soon as he saw Hermann he felt a jolt of panic that wasn’t his and suddenly They were completely in control, like a dimmer switched from bright to blinding. YOU SCARED OF HIM, ASSHOLES? He wanted to shout, GOOD! MY HUSBAND IS A STONE COLD BADASS AND YOU ARE SO FUCKED. No words came out at all and the failed effort to speak caused him to slump forward, held up only by the restraints. Hermann was, of course, by his side in an instant, holding up his face, searching his eyes, shaking with fear. Oh god why did Newt feel like this was his fault? He was fighting wasn’t he? But still here was Hermann looking so, so afraid because of him. Again.

“Is it you there?” Hermann murmured, squinting in concentration

KIND OF. NOT REALLY. AND EVEN THEN ONLY SOMETIMES! he wanted to shout, “yeah it’s me” they said. “for now.” NOPE. NOPE. THAT’S A LIE. he wanted to say. “I can probably only hold on for another couple hours.” the effort to stop them from speaking for him brought tears to his eyes, and to his horror probably only strengthened the hivemind’s act. Hermann’s shoulders relaxed in relief. “What did you find out?” DON’T TELL ME WHAT YOU FOUND OUT.

Hermann held a finger to his lips. He pulled out a tablet and his fingers danced across the surface, doing some Gottlieb magic. “Now we won’t be overheard,” he whispered. Damn. Maybe Hermann was a little too much of a stone cold badass for their own good. “My counterpart was careful to erase his method of transportation. It seems that we are stuck here at least until I can find something to backwards engineer.

“As for timeline divergence,” Hermann continued, “I’ve been avoiding people as much as possible (and am grateful to find that in this way, at least the other Dr. Gottlieb and I are the same. No one seems surprised that I don’t want to speak to them.) The AI’s in these Jaeger are… archaic.” ordinarily Newt loved when his husband got that smug look on his face, but now, when they had to be so careful, when there was not a centimeter of room for indulgence, it filled him with dread “They can hardly be considered AI at all. I am concerned about maintaining our cover, so I will continue to work with Liwen Shao in closing remote reaction time. Though I understand from my counterpart’s notes that the end goal is to,” Hermann rubbed his eyes under his glasses with the weariness of a scientist who had once worked with the military and had hoped never to do so again, “to send remote-piloted Jaeger through man-made breaches to attack the Precursors on their home planet. And I am… deeply reluctant to enable such a plan.”

“Oh yeah. That’s really stupid.” Newt said. And he wasn’t sure whether he had said it or they had said it because he completely agreed.

“Also we’re not married here.” Hermann added quickly.
WHAT THE FUCK? AFTER ALL THAT, THESE CHUCKLEFUCKS SCREW UP THAT TOO? he wanted to say. All that came out was “What the fuck?” which was better than nothing.

“This universe…” Hermann gestured helplessly, “is a mess. I don’t know where my other self went wrong, but you and I - or they - have been completely apart for the last 8 years.”

“Wow.” Newt slumped back in the chair, his back pressed painfully against the leather straps attached to it.

“Newton.” He took Newt’s hand. Newt wanted to pull away, but was too weak to do so, “He and I are superficially similar, but I am not him. I will never, ever abandon you. We will get out of this.”

“So… are you going to help them?” This was definitely not him speaking, “It doesn’t seem necessary. Maybe you shouldn’t help. Maybe you should do the opposite but only make it seem like you’re helping.”

Hermann shook his head, “Liwen Shao is smart. She’ll know if I try to Penelope her efforts. Besides, the challenge” He sneered the word making it clear that he found it no such thing “- reaction time? It’s simple enough to solve. If I had Vanessa here we could have solved it in a day, however, many of her algorithms are as familiar to me as the English alphabet, I’ll be able to help them without too much difficulty, and then I might have some more clout to throw around. Which can then only help us.”

Newt recognized that look in Dr. Gottlieb’s eye. A glimpse of the small sliver of him that didn’t pause to question whether a scientific question should be answered but ventured forward for the pure sake of discovery. Newt wished he could take credit for it, but even before they had drifted, Hermann had always had the potential for that mad scientist gleam.

To his horror, the Precursors purred in delight. He had said exactly what they wanted to hear.

THIS IS A BAD IDEA DON’T HELP THEM MAKE THOSE REMOTE RIGS PLEASE. “That’s a good idea. Get it done quick and then we’re in better shape to compromise for… whatever we need to get back home.”

“Back home Vanessa and I were working on… something that I think would help us if my counterpart could pick up where I left off. And he seems reasonable, so maybe he will. We might not be on our own.” Newt didn’t know whether to hope that Other Hermann would or would not pick up where his Hermann had left off because he didn’t know what the Precursors wanted. They seemed to laugh at his efforts to parse it out. “all is not lost.”

Hermann placed a reassuring hand on Newt’s cheek. A gesture of affection that was rare from him but through enough years had become familiar. Newt mustered all his strength and wrestled enough control to turn his head away from Hermann’s touch.

Hermann pulled his hand back sharply as though Newt had bit him, and took an instinctive step back. Newt hated to cause him pain but knew it was the right thing to do. He couldn’t stand to receive Hermann’s affection if it wasn’t for him.
Newton Geiszler PhD is undoubtedly *That Guy* when he’s enthused about someone. Peep these adorable af tweets from New Years 2019

**Twenty Newts stacked in a lab coat Geiszler** √ @Salimandridae • Dec 31, 18

Some people say that 6 is too many PhD. Some people only have one PhD and I am 6 times smarter then them! Checkmate!

**Twenty Newts stacked in a lab coat Geiszler** √ @Salimandridae • Dec 31, 19

Some people don’t know how to have fun on New Years. Some people are lucky I have 6 PhDs one of which is in fun.

**Twenty Newts stacked in a lab coat Geiszler** √ @Salimandridae • Jan 1, 19

Some people are also really fucking adorable when they’re drunk.

He never calls out Hermann by name, but we know they were hanging out that night. Thank YOU Tendo Choi!

[image. a screengrab of an instagram post.

**ChoiAhoy**

A full body picture of Tendo Choi smiling confidently from his best angle at the camera. There is a large group of well dressed people around a bonfire on the beach behind him. You can clearly make out Hermann sitting on a large log holding a solo cup with Newt leaning over him holding the same. They are both smiling and seem not to notice the boisterous party going on around them.

1,838 likes

**ChoiAhoy** Happy New Year! #bowtie #dapperstyle #beautifulpeople #kaijucanwait #kaijucanttouchthis #squadgoals #friends #notamodel #malemodel #losangeles #LA #thatLAlife

the hashtags continue but are cut off of the bottom of the screengrab]

Also I just have to add this last one because it’s hilarious:

**Twenty stacked Newts in a lab coat Geiszler** √ @Salimandridae • Jan 2, 19
Dear twitter, should I stop sleeping with someone if they don’t understand the appeal of pasta machine gifs?

r[otini.gif]

Oh god. Poor, poor Hermann.

[Day 1 - Cambridge - Continued]

“How do we stop the other Newt from hooking up to the hivemind?” Hermann rephrased as he stepped back into the library.

Newt sighed in relief, and barreled ahead, “We’ll have to communicate with the other us-es first.” Newt said, all business, “It’s too risky to try to use kaiju samples so, that’s right out.”

Hermann settled himself back on the plush leather chair, settling the cane across his knees again, ready for a long explanation.

“I only know the tiniest scraps about this portion of the plan.” Newt continued, “Which sucks. But it must have been important that I came here of all places. I think Vanessa -”

“How can a hivemind have a plan without you knowing about it?”

Newt looked at him like he was stupid. Just like the old days, “Ummm? The hivemind is how they always communicate with the kaiju but not all the precursors are in the hivemind at all times.” He laughed perhaps a little bit louder than necessary. “It’s like if the entire PPDC - all of those hundreds of people - could drift and make decisions all together about how to deploy Jaeger. Humans - we - couldn’t, but the Precursors are used to it. It’s not the entire population of the species. Hermann we... we drifted with a shatterdome. Basically.” Newt bit his lip, “I was a special project I guess. And they only filled me in on what to do little by little. All I know about this portion is they wanted me to come here - with you preferably, get to Siberia, and… reconnect.”

“With the Precursors from this universe.”

“Well. Yeah.” Newt said, as though this was so obvious that it should have been unnecessary to point out.

Hermann crossed his arms pointedly.

Newt hissed a breath in through his teeth, “right. right. You don’t know everything that I know. Of course you don’t. Ha! So,” He donned his figurative professor hat and spread his hands dramatically to illuminate his point: “it’s all the same folks.”

“all the same…”

“Yeah! For them, staying in contact with, slash hopping universes and dimensions is like - not easy for them but about the same effort it would take you and I to communicate with, slash get to, say, Japan. It’s a lot of work and there are some temporal differences but they’re used to it. It’s pedestrian. That’s how they’ve been able to colonize like crazy.”

Hermann gripped the cane as the implications of Newt’s words washed over him. No wonder they had managed what they had. The Precursors had such a profound advantage if they could maintain a single culture across multiple universes, travel through dimensions, cheat the light speed barrier.
How many planets had they devoured? How many cultures?

And how were they any different?

“This is so much bigger than our planet, Hermann, and if they sent me to this place of all of them, there’s gotta be a reason. And I think Vanessa is the key to it.”

Just then the clockwork vintage-radio-looking machine on the library desk - just like the one in the kitchen whirred to life, “Not Hermann. Not Newt.” the Vanessa AI said, “I am back.”

Newt leapt from his chair and bounded toward the desk, “Great timing, Vanessa!” Hermann struggled to his feet and followed.

“I’ve processed what you have told me,” she said crisply, “and have come to the conclusion that there is a 43% chance that you are telling the truth.”

“Shockingly high.” Hermann narrowed his eyes, “How did you come by that estimate?”

“Dude? Low on time?”

Vanessa ignored them both “I fear that my personal capacity to assess the situation is at an impasse for I cannot be sure how to proceed until I am sure who I am dealing with. In the interest of settling the matter, I have reached out to a mutual friend who will be here this afternoon to assess the truth, and have locked the doors so you can’t leave until he arrives.”

“You what?” Newton was, incongruously, laughing.

“Well.” she tilted her head to the side, “You could leave by breaking a window, but it would draw a great deal of unwanted attention in this neighborhood. The neighbors are very friendly.”

Hermann sighed. “Who will be here?”

“I sent an email to Tendo Choi when you were in the kitchen earlier. He is on his way from New York even as we speak.”

The color drained from Newt’s face and without even a significant glance of explanation, he left the room. Inconvenient. Hermann scowled (goddamn but that guy’s fragile). “Terribly sorry, Vanessa,” he said, “You needn’t worry we shan’t try to make any daring escapes. We’re perfectly happy to wait for Tendo if it would make you feel more comfortable.” and, unsure how else to close the conversation with the machine he said, “Again, terribly sorry,” bowed his head respectfully and followed Newt back to the bedroom.

“Newton, what on earth -” the sight of Newton, sitting on the ground in front of the decorative fireplace with his knees drawn up to his chin (how is he still able to do that?) stopped him in his tracks.

“Ok,” Newt said without looking up “I guess we’re having this conversation now after all. Because if we want to fix this we have to start with total honesty. 100% no more secrets.”

Hermann shifted uncomfortably and frowned. He had no intention of spilling any of his secrets. “Say what you need to say.”

“It took a few months of daily drifting for them to really get in my head. And it wasn’t all at once, either.” Newton’s words came out in a painful rush, “Sort of like... whispers? And then one day I looked up and the precursors were all like ‘hello naughty children it’s mind-control time.’ and they
were,” He clenched a fist, demonstrating, “really in there, they had me. This was like… 2 years after we closed the breach? 2027?”

The year Newt had left for good.

“At first they made it hard for me to do what I wanted even for a second. They controlled every movement, every word. And I was just screaming for someone to notice!” he shouted, gesturing madly to memories of clueless friends. “Anyone!! Like hello! NOT ME!” his hands dropped helplessly back to his lap, “but no one noticed. There were times when I hated everyone for not noticing. And then I hated myself for being so easy to imitate.”

Hermann had noticed. He had noticed that Newt had become restless and frustrated - more frustrated - with the slow rate of cash flow and progress within the PPDC. He had bought new clothes, and Hermann had noticed. He had shouted people down on twitter until they stopped interacting with him, and though Hermann had never had a twitter, he had noticed. Though he never would have made the bizarre logical leap that the man who shared his bed less and less frequently was doing so because he was drifting daily in his lab and being controlled by sinister interdimensional beings. Hermann had chosen to feel slighted rather than concerned, and now they were all paying for his selfishness. (Shortsighted. Sentimental.)

(You were hurting, man.)

“They made it easy for me. Fun, even. To do what they wanted. And so so painful to do anything else.”

“They broke you.” (and I didn’t stay to try to fix you.)

“Eventually they didn’t have to keep such a” Newt clenched the air as though he were grasping a throat “stranglehold on me. I got my fun every night, and during the day I got to work on some genuinely fascinating secret science. A nerdy supervillain dream come true. So even when they loosened the leash a bit I was still doing what they wanted.”

Hermann sighed.

“It was exciting. Stockholm syndrome maybe? Part of me - the real me even - wanted them to succeed because it was interesting. Horrible, but so, so interesting. Right? My tech was beautiful. I used some of your expertise, you know - like how I know you used some of mine with your kaiju blood propulsion thing.” He smiled sadly up at Hermann, “Collaborating after all these years.”

Newt unconsciously reached for Hermann, and Hermann very consciously jerked away, “If it weren’t for the part of me that was you I would never have accomplished what I had for them.”

Hermann remembered when Newt had left. “It’s boring here.” He had said. He had been cold. Matter of fact. Hermann had always tried to remember the departure coldly and matter of factly himself. He never succeeded.

“It wasn’t your fault.” Hermann said, reminding himself as much as Newt.

“You know you keep saying stuff like that” Newt said, “like, I shouldn’t think of it as weakness. But. Like. You didn’t have this problem.”

Hermann took a step in Newt’s direction, “we have different physiologies. We were on different
medications. There are dozens of reasons that could be. You’re the biologist. Keep up.”

“But I could have… reached out. When they let me loose. But I didn’t. I stayed where I was. Doing what they wanted me to do. Love wasn’t enough.”

Hermann’s breath caught at the sudden topical swerve and glanced uncomfortably at the open door, though he knew there was no way for Vanessa to surprise them, and there was no one else to overhear.

“I love you.” Newt said quietly, staring stiffly at the fireplace, “But I loved how she made me feel more. And even though they’re not in here now, I always have to know this about myself: that love wasn’t enough and I left you so I could keep drifting.”

Hermann quietly noted his use of present tense and decided that he could not comment. “That’s not necessarily true.”

“I’m telling you it’s true. My actions prove it’s true.”

“By your own admission, you left to protect me. In that, at least, you are blameless.” Hermann spoke crisply, imperious, and emotionally disconnected. “For that I can even thank you.”

Newt groaned and rubbed a hand over his face.

“Pardon me, but I’m not entirely sure what you are hoping to accomplish with this long winded confessional.”

Newt groaned again, slapped the other hand over his face, and flopped onto the floor.

“What do you want, Newton?” Hermann said a bit louder than he intended, “I’m not blaming you! I’m not angry! Do you want me to be angry?”

Newt leapt to his feet in as few movements as his body would allow “Yes!” he shouted moving to stand directly in front of Hermann “Yes. Because if you’re not angry - if you don’t blame me, you can’t forgive me. I want…” his right hand kneaded aggressively at the left, as though trying to scrub away a spot, “I need you to forgive me for what I’ve done.”

“Well. I’m sorry to disappoint you Newton, but I fail to see how my opinion of you has any bearing on our -”

“I killed Tendo.”

Hermann went perfectly still - he didn’t even breathe. The words pinged in the air like the ring of a cracking crystal champagne flute.

“I think I did, anyway.” Newt whispered, “After I left - when they couldn’t have you. It was... full on rage mode. They wanted to show me they were serious. And Tendo was so. He was such a good friend and I wish he hadn’t been.”

The blood buzzed kinetically through Hermann’s body, heating him from the inside. He stayed still as though he feared he would explode when disturbed, like superheated water.

“He was in the wrong place at the wrong time.” Newt continued, unblinking, afraid, “And so I. I mean they ... You know. It was like I was watching them do it. But a part of me was there. Part of me was afraid of what he would do if he got out.”
Hermann couldn’t blame him. He knew this. Newt had not been in his right mind. Newt had not been in control. Newton. Was not. To blame.

And yet.

No amount of cold logic could cool his heated blood. Hermann didn’t trust himself to speak. He took a step away to widen the space between them. Then another. He turned and with the nerves down his right side crackling in pain, left the room.

Chapter End Notes

It gets worse before it gets better.

All comments will be loved and appreciated like the unique and beautiful individuals that leave them deserve.
HG > I’m getting tired Vanessa. And I feel like a monster for it.

V > Why a monster?

HG > He needs me. And I don’t know if I’ll have the strength for much longer.

>>> After how he lied

V > Did he lie to you again?

HG > No. But that’s just it.

>>> Sometimes when we’re happy I look at him and I remember

>>> Every time I have another nightmare I wonder if it’s because he’s snuck off and

V > Hermann?

>>> You left that last sentence unfinished.

HG > He hasn’t lied recently.

>>> Not since the time you know about.

V > One year ago.

HG > Yes.

V > Thanksgiving.

HG> Ha. Yes.

>>> My first Thanksgiving.

>>> I understand that the dramatics of that night were very much in line with American tradition.

>>> deplorable holiday.

V > It’s hard to say.

HG > It’s been an entire year.

>>> But sometimes, all I can think of is how he looked right at me and lied so easily, and how I believed him. And how to this day I have moments where I don’t know if I can trust him.
>>> And so I draw away.

>>> And then I feel like a monster because he does still need me.

>>> And I love him.

>>> And he’s tried so hard. And made so much progress. I know this.

V > did you tell him this?

>>> 

>>> 

>>> Hermann?

HG > I should.

V > Probably you should.

[Day 4 - Hong Kong]

Newt wasn’t sure where he was. No. He knew kinda where he was. The Hong Kong Shatterdome? Doing time for some other prick who decided to skip dimensions? Keeping his other self’s demons company while that deserter son of a bitch - nope… same mom. While that deserter ASSHOLE got to teach precocious science shits, and drink at the Friendly Toast, and eat sandwiches at All Star, and come home to a beautiful house at the end of the day and just generally enjoy his life. The life that he hadn’t earned by the fucking way. So Newt sort of knew where he was geographically. And interdimensionally.

But he wasn’t sure where he was. Because there was so much Them. And though the space They occupied had become smaller and smaller, it had been replaced by pain. Just pain. And pain and pain. There was hardly any room for him to squeeze in between the pain and Them. And every time he could elbow his way to the front and speak it was like the worst, unfiltered version of himself - and even then he could only say what They didn’t mind him saying. Or where they putting words in his mouth then too?

~Why are you built like this?~ they seemed to ask

~Why are you so advanced in some ways and so, so, so primitive in others?~ Newt didn’t know. Another wave of pain stopped him from thinking too deeply about it.

~ Why are you still constrained by the limitations of evolution?~ It wasn’t fair that he had to be in his body while they only had to experience it as a single point of data. Why couldn’t he disappear into the ocean of them?

~ Still.~ Another wave of pain. Another strangled cry he couldn’t stop.

~ The sensation is. ~ Newt gritted his teeth, sweat dripping into his eyes, determined to not give them the satisfaction of another release. It didn’t stop him from feeling it.
“Hey Vic!” he shouted, “Vicky Vic vic. Hey!” He could see through the bars on the tiny window that she half turned to glance his way before stopping herself. “You wanna be a jaeger pilot huh, kiddo?” She said nothing, “I knew a Jaeger pilot who was a lot like you once. She was all sharp and terrifying and Russian too. Her drift partner was her giant burly Russian husband. Sasha and Aleksis Kaidonovsky? Maybe you’ve -” the girl stiffened and glanced over her shoulder, then right back to facing forward. “OH! You’ve heard of them! Two more of the Heroes of ‘25! Like me! Then you know how they died! It’s wild. When I close my eyes I can still see it.”

He could. He could feel it too. The lights, the water. Pushing that metal shell down. Displacing the air with liquid the way he had drowned a toy boat in the bath when he was a child.

He turned his attention back to his teenaged guard, “Is Amara going to be your copilot?” He asked, suddenly remembering the day before, how the girl had relaxed ever so slightly, how that involuntary smile had twinged at her cheekbones when Amara spoke. He recognized that wearing down of defenses. He loved someone who smiled in twinges like that. “You could be the new Kaidonovskys! Though she’s a little small to be Aleksis... I’m not supposed to know things like this about my students but shhh” He whispered theatrically, “I know she likes the ladies. And you know what? You both deserve to be happy. It’s wartime.” The girl blushed and her glare intensified - if that was even possible. He had no room to care that this was a crass, belligerent line of conversation, “And whatever, she’s not my student in this universe. So you know, who cares what I know about her? She’s also a genius. Did you know? Is she a nerd in this universe too? Because in my universe…” They pressed forward. Barbed wire in his voice box again, stopping him from speaking. It seemed that that was quite enough talk about alternate universes. YOU SCARED SHE’S GONNA BELIEVE ME? “so when’s Hermann getting here?” They steered him towards a colloquial, conversational tone, seeming to have no understanding how unsettling the rapid shift would be. The girl, predictably, did not reply.

“Sorry I’m late Vic.”

Vic stiffened at the sound of Amara’s voice and clenched her jaw.

“Vic. Vic?” Newt could just see through his sliver of barred window as the girl nodded formally and marched off, with not even a hint of warmth in her eyes.

Amara took her place. Only the top half of her face was visible as she watched her go, brow furrowed in disappointment. “Anyway.” She said, turning to someone Newt couldn’t see “This is the last time. I mean it Gottlieb.”

Hermann?

“I understand.”

Hermann!!!

Oh no. Hermann. The Precursors shifted their control again - bright to blinding.

Hermann stepped stiffly through the door and waited for it to close behind him before dropping his backpack by the door and pulling out his tablet.

“Hey hubby.” They said, and Hermann paused in his ministrations to look up at him, a single eyebrow raised, “Come give Us a kiss.” Newt really did want him to. He could use some goddamn comfort right now. Even with Them there, leaning forward in interest.
“I think not.” Hermann said primly and finished what he was doing. Newt was torn between relief and a disappointment that was not entirely his own.

They frowned. “Poor thing. He’s screaming in here. He’s dying for it. Her could use some goddamn comfort right now.” Well. They’d just gone and pulled that directly from him. Rude. “You’d turn him down?” Hermann squinted at him like he was a problem on his chalkboard, and took his time to drag over a foldout chair and sit in front of Them. They sighed and tilted his head forward strangely. Inhumanly. In a way that was noticeably not quite Newt.

He didn’t understand why they were doing this. Why speak as though he had had control the day before but not today? What was the point of allowing Hermann to think he ever had control?

Hermann reached for him, placing a hand firmly on the back of his skull, and leaned close to look into his eyes. God it felt good to have Hermann touch him again. They seemed to notice his relief.

“Why don’t you wear glasses?” Hermann said softly.

“Don’t need ‘em.”

“So the limitations of the host’s body are irrelevant.” Hermann murmured to himself.

“Oh. No. They’re damn pretty relevant.” they lowered their volume to match Hermann’s physical proximity, “His eyes are gonna be real sore once he surfaces again. We just don’t care.” Newt knew what They meant even if They were terrible at articulating it. They didn’t care because it was interesting. The pain. The way they could push his body past its usual limitations in ways that humans wouldn’t on their own for no reason other than discomfort. The way they could affect him just by pushing this button or introducing that stimulus. Objectively, as a biologist, Newt could understand the appeal.

“So if you were inside me -”

A flood of memories flashed involuntarily before him at the accidental innuendo. He could feel the Precursors observing with interest. HEY GET OUT OF THERE. THAT’S NOT FOR YOU. But it was too late.

“Nice.” They said.

Hermann sighed and drew his hand away.

“Out of line?” They said with a frown.

Hermann stood and went to his backpack, and They panicked.

“Hey where are you going? Get me Alice! Bring me to Alice! I need her!”

Hermann made no sign of listening to him as he calmly reclaimed his seat, backpack in tow.

“This meat puppet is dying!” And it was both Newt and Them. He believed Them. He hoped Hermann did too “You have no idea what it’s like in here!”

“Shut up!” Hermann hissed.

They did.

“I think you know that I cannot bring you to that thing.” Hermann said, rifling through his bag, “But I need you to live another day, Newton.” and he pulled out a laptop looking thing that Newt
didn’t recognize. A portable remote rig? Inside him They buzzed with anticipation which Newt knew immediately to mean that this was what they wanted. The part of himself that was himself snapped out of his need for a second. FUCK WAIT. I MEAN ACTUALLY DON’T.

As Hermann glanced behind himself and stuck the electrodes to Newt’s temples and forehead, with that look - so fearful, and desperate - Newt understood why the Precursors had allowed Hermann to think that Newt occasionally had control: it was to give him hope. The Precursors were cultivating an entire a boutique experience just for Hermann. He doubted Hermann would feel flattered to know they were going to all this trouble for him. And as Hermann turned on the rig and Newt lost his senses to slow, mounting relief and pleasure his final coherent thought was:

Well. It worked.

[2019]

If you thought New Years was great, guys, put on your lifejacket because 2019 was just an avalanche of gold

[scrooge-mcduck.gif]

There’s basically no dispute that they were together in 2019. According to our anonymous source, they were even Facebook official - though only Newt had a Facebook (because of course Hermann didn’t). I could devote an entire other article to their shared 2019 social media presence (actually maybe I will?? Write in the comments if you want that.)

But this is a timeline so I’m just going to hit the important points.

June 9th - Hermann’s 30th birthday.

[ image. a screengrab of an instagram post.

Salimandridae

[a picture of a fancy carrot cake cupcake with the ocean behind it.]

67 likes

Salimandridae Happy birthday <3 #nerdlove]

July 23rd (The day after  Clawhook’s San Diego attack)

Twenty Newts stacked in a lab coat Geiszler √ @Salimandridae • July 23, 19

I know the people who follow me like to think of me as this total Kaiju groupie, & ya I cultivate that to an extent

|  

Twenty Newts stacked in a lab coat Geiszler √ @Salimandridae • July 23, 19

But I actually don’t love it when people get hurt and killed. This one was really close to home guys.
I have people I love here. Right here. Like right in front of me rn. Just like you. I might say stuff abt Kaiju like “they’re awesome” or whatever

But never forget that I’m ultimately studying them to protect the people I love. Whether they like it or not.

[Day 1 - Cambridge - Continued]

Hermann could feel Newt’s eyes on him as he walked carefully out of the bedroom and shut the door so gently behind himself that it didn’t even make a sound. There was no time to be angry. He stood for a moment on the other side of the door, still feeling Newt through it, willing his heart to slow down and the blood to stop heating his face.

He went back to the library and sat at the desk where Vanessa was still lit up.

“Vanessa. Whether you believe us or not, we’ve got to get to work, and I would be ever so grateful if you would assist. Or at least look over the situation as I know it.” He paused, waiting for a response. She gave none. “Unless, of course, you have some compunctions about assisting a man whose identity is in dispute.”

There was another pause as she processed, “If Tendo can somehow corroborate your story, I will be happy to comply with your request.” She finally said, “Please wait to make further requests until Tendo arrives.”

Hermann ran a hand across his forehead. “Would that I could but I’m afraid there is simply no time to waste. Forgive me for the dramatics, but the fate of both of our worlds - and your Hermann and Newton especially - hang precariously on the decisions we make here.”

“One moment please.” The lights of her eyes dimmed and glowed like a computer at rest, which, Hermann was surprised he had to remind himself, was essentially what she was. After a prolonged moment, the lights brightened again and she made what passed remarkably well for eye contact. “I have assessed your request, and have come to a compromise: I will review whatever you would like to show me, but I will make no analysis and no calculations until Tendo arrives.”

“I find this perfectly amenable”

“Your amenability was not a consideration, Not Hermann.” (I mean. Fair.)

“Very well.”

She powered down (she must be able to travel from vessel to vessel. So cool! Weird that she only
wants to be one place at once though) and he was alone. He wasted no time and set about to recreate from memory as accurately as possible the method by which they had travelled to this universe. Recreating old calculations was simple work, and his mind wandered in spite of himself.

Tendo was on his way. He didn’t want to think about Tendo.

The Tendo who was on his way was not to same one he knew - the one who had been there through it all.

Newt had been closer to him than Hermann. He had a blue tinged drift-memory of Tendo late at night on the beach, beer in hand, listening with an ironic smile as Newt rambled a stream-of-consciousness tirade of grievances about one Dr. Hermann Gottlieb. The actual tirade was fuzzy in the second-hand memory but Tendo’s reaction was unforgettable.

“You guys should bone.” Tendo had said, finishing off his beer, and throwing it towards the ocean for dramatic effect (he would later get up to recycle it).

Newt had sputtered indignantly before burying his face in his hands “ugh. I know, right?” and then laughing: “It would be amazing.”

Tendo was younger than them both (by three years for Hermann, two for Newton), and in their 20’s that had seemed important. Newt had unconsciously lorded his prestigious position in the PPDC over Tendo who - at the time - was barely more than a paid intern. He revelled in the opportunity to “hang” with someone who wasn’t in the science division and he would have said he was taking Tendo under his wing. Tendo would smirk and clap Newt on the shoulder.

Hermann, on the other hand, had barely noticed Tendo. Hermann was not the sort of person who noticed others unless they forced it upon him and Tendo wasn’t the sort to force anyone to do something they might not want to. And Hermann would never have actively sought the friendship of a man who kept rosary beads wrapped around his wrist. Whether for faith or fashion, it struck Hermann as an irrational and ostentatious eccentricity.

Their paths might never have crossed had it not been for Newton’s unreasonable obsession with “teaching Hermann how to have fun.” Tendo had been up for the challenge, and Hermann - in spite of his embarrassing depths of ingrained snobbery - had been surprised to find he actually enjoyed Mr. Choi’s company. He soon took to running difficult conceptual problems past Tendo to gain an outsider’s perspective, the way one might ask a philosophical question of a child to marvel at the wisdom of babes. It only occurred to Hermann much later that Tendo was helpful because, despite his lack of formal education, he was actually very intelligent in his own right.

Hermann marvelled now that Tendo had accepted this condescending behavior from the both of them with the grace and humor that he did (we were such insufferable jackasses) but then, that was just the person life had made him. Because where the two of them had spent their formative years unlocking the secrets of the universe in sterile labs and dusty libraries, Tendo had spent his time unlocking the secrets of people. He had been there when Trespasser swatted through the golden gate bridge like a cobweb. He had shuttled hundreds of survivors out of San Francisco to safety and watched his grandfather die brutally in one of the first ever cases of Kaiju blue poisoning.

He had not hesitated to volunteer for the PPDC as soon as it formed - despite having no college degree. And with only a little bit of Cantonese, an instinctive understanding of computers, and sheer determination to recommend him, he had been accepted into the lower tiers. Fighting the war for the sake of those he loved - for the sake of humanity - became enough to live for, and perhaps it was this single minded commitment that helped Tendo outlast and eventually rise in the ranks above his peers who had also signed up in that first wave of enthusiasm.
Because he knew people, and it mattered to him when they were killed. Newt and Hermann saved lives and kept their labcoats clean, but Tendo had long ago gotten his hands dirty.

The three of them were only in the same place - the LA shatterdome - for two years to begin with. 2018 and 2019. The longest consistent stretch of time that Hermann and Newt were what others would consider “together,” and a time that Hermann saw through the warm lens of nostalgia. In early 2020 Tendo had been transferred to another Shatterdome, and Hermann had come to his senses and ended things with Newt, Deciding (foolishly) that too much happiness probably wasn’t good for his clarity of mind. He had never linked the two events before - correlation does not equal causation - But now he wondered.

For the next four years the three of them were bounced from shatterdome to shatterdome, never all in the same place again until 2024 found them - among the last holdouts - back in Hong Kong.

It didn’t take long for Hermann and Newt to once again give in to the stress and exhaustion - as they did every time they were stationed at the same shatterdome. To find themselves waking up in each other’s quarters and making promises at unguarded moments at three in the morning. And again, it was only a few months before Hermann decided to end it while they still had some modicum of sense. Before they drowned in the indulgence of being with each other.

I wasn’t easy for Hermann to cut him off. It had never been easy. But he was so confident of his calculations, that even his pain was tempered by the satisfaction of doing the right thing for the greater good.

Shortly afterwards, Tendo had surprised him by appearing late one night at the bottom of his ladder, fuming with anger.

“Gottlieb what in the hell is your problem?”

The words snapped Hermann out of a mathematical reverie and he glanced down to see Tendo. He sighed, “I expect you’ve been talking to Dr Geiszler.”

“I’d say he’s too good for you, but honestly? He’s a bit of a moron himself. Why are you guys like this?”

“Tendo,” Hermann scowled, climbing down his ladder to at least afford his visitor the dignity of speaking on the same level, “I don’t expect you to understand and -”

“Yeah. I don’t understand.”

“And in any case, it’s none of your business.” Hermann hissed.

“Whatever. You’re gonna have regrets, my friend. And don’t try to talk to me about it. Please.” he turned to stalk out of the room, “because I’ll just say I told you so. Then probably kick your ass.”

he threw glibly over his shoulder.

Hermann rolled his eyes, and turned back to his work, “You’re not really angry.” he said.

Tendo whirled back around “Yeah, Gottlieb! I am angry, actually.” he was directly in front of Hermann in what looked like a single movement, “I’ve been watching you two idiots weave and dodge around each other for seven years and I am sick of your sanctimonious rationalizations.”

“There is a war on Mr. Choi. Surely you haven’t forgotten that.”

“Oh please!” Tendo laughed
“And I don’t have time -” Hermann raised his voice, “neither of us has time for sentimental distractions!”

“What are you fighting this fucking war for then, huh? Look.” he thrust his left hand at Hermann’s face so aggressively that Hermann instinctively flinched. “what do you call this, then huh?” he shook his hand so the rosary beads wrapped around his fingers clattered against his wedding ring “Distraction? No! This is what I’m fighting for.” he whipped his hand back down, “Pretending you’re not human isn’t gonna help you focus.”

Hermann opened his mouth to say something but was too slow - Tendo was already nearly out the door.

“I don’t want to hear about this again, Gottlieb.”

“You have my word.”

And true to Hermann’s word, they didn’t speak again until after the breach had closed.

And now he was dead. Not just missing, but unequivocally gone.

Hermann bit the inside of his cheek as he finished the file to give to Vanessa.

It had taken Hermann an hour to finish compiling and recreating the calculations that had brought them here. Longer than he had anticipated, but this jaunt down memory lane had been distressing, and had slowed him down. He stood and stretched, and was just about to call Vanessa back to the Library when he heard a car pull into the driveway. He didn’t dare go to the window, but all the same he knew. Tendo was there.

Chapter End Notes

All comments will be adopted and cherished and raised in my likeness.
Burying the Lede

Chapter Summary

In which Tendo learns some truths.

Chapter Notes

cw: violence

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[02:03 18/JAN/20]
[mid conversation]

CL > But then, people only really started paying attention to the science when I stepped inside a jaeger.

V > What do you mean?

CL > The pons. The drift. Hell even the Jaeger.

>>> the earth-shattering importance of the work - or at least my portion of the work, wasn’t really credited to me. We were covered by aaallll the news media

>>> But it was only really the faces of the pilots, and Jasper.

>>> Jasper got the credit for even coming up with the idea.

>>> That cute little story about watching his kid play with toys.

>>> Gag.

>>> And now Jasper controls the narrative and can cast me in whatever role he likes.

V > Why not correct the misunderstanding?

CL > No one would work with me again.

V > Despite your qualifications?

CL > Don’t matter.

V > That doesn’t seem fair.

CL > Them’s the breaks sweetie.
the boys get a standing ovation for putting on a shirt the right way out, and a lady only gets recognition if she:

Invents a potentially world-changing device

pioneers an entirely new branch of science

AND puts her life at risk by stepping inside a giant robot to punch monsters

(“Well actually…”

“Yes I know they’re not robots, sir, it was a joke”)

V > I’m having a hard time following.

CL > That’s because it truly does not make sense.

V > Is there anything I can do?

CL > 乄

I dunno I’m just venting.

Today really pissed me off.

V > I’m sorry to hear that.

CL > You’ve grown a lot Nessie.

V > Thank you Dr. Lightcap.

CL > Hey Nessie?

V> Yes?

CL > If humanity actually is wiped out, and you and your kind are the only ones left, will you remember us? Or just try to move on?

V > hm.

>>> I would be lonely.

>>> But I would remember you.

[Day 4 - Hong Kong - Continued]

Newt could only resist the hivemind for so long. It was as if he was sitting at the top of a slide with a firehose beating him down. He allowed his mind to lower into the sluggish remote access pons rig. He saw without really seeing, Alice. He approached her. She seemed to scream and the sound was horrible, and an incongruous pleasure washed over him. He moved through her and into her, and on the other side of her - or rather inside of her - They were there. And there were multitudes, and he was Nowhere with Them.
He is Nowhere with Them.

They direct his attention, and suddenly he is somewhere. He sees a version of himself.

He slips into the body of the other Newt and proceeds to experience the world through eyes and hands that are his and not his.

It is 2020 and he is in a Shatterdome and he has lent Hermann a t-shirt after an accident in the lab and he is distracted by the sight of Hermann’s bare arms, as though it had never occurred to him that Hermann had skin, but it is not a t-shirt he remembers having. This is someone else’s memory. Someone who is him but not him.

It is 2026 and he’s getting a new tattoo in Hong Kong.

It is 2027 in Shanghai in his beautiful Patrick-Bateman-looking apartment. Tendo appears at the door, smiling through his concern. “I don’t deserve friends like you.” He hears himself say, “and don’t you forget it” Tendo says and slips past him into the sparsely decorated space. This memory feels stronger. This memory belongs to the body he is in. ~ This is that bastard that swapped with me,~ Newt thinks. And the words float blue through the memory like ink in water. “Couldn’t get anyone else to come to the intervention?” he says. Tendo stiffens like he has been caught at something. “Look,” he says, “about that.” And Newt doesn’t want to see this, and doesn’t want to be here anymore.

Now he is at the Hong Kong Shatterdome and it is 2026 and his body feels strange. He wraps his arms around himself and feels scales rising through the skin. He looks down at his hand just in time to see claws burst painfully from the tips of his fingers. He looks up to see Hermann staring at him in horror.

Now it is 2026 and instead he is standing in front of a window in an apartment in San Francisco staring at the misnamed wall of life, a pile of ungraded papers on the coffee table behind him.

He turns and it is now 2027 and he isn’t in San Francisco anymore. He’s in a lab and he sees a puppy-sized kaiju perched on Hermann’s shoulder as he murmurs to himself at a chalkboard.

It is 2035 and everything is exactly the same as the life he lived in Cambridge except he and Hermann are teaching in Berlin. He is waiting for Hermann to finish something in his office and has taken Hermann’s kaiju models from the shelf and is playing with them to annoy him, “Oh no! I’m possessed by the kaiju and only your love can save me!” He hears himself say. “Oh no! It’s a mega-kaiju!” “Newton please.” “And the only reason they were stomping through our cities....” He gasps dramatically “was to get to Mt Fuji!!” “Newton that makes absolutely no sense at all.”

It’s 2035 and he’s given up on academia, and he owns a coffee shop in Boston that serves amazing bagel sandwiches, and he’s never heard of Kaiju outside of Godzilla movies.

He is back in the too-clean too-nice apartment in Shanghai once occupied by that deserter bastard and it is still 2027 and Tendo is still here, and Newt doesn’t know why but he still doesn’t want to see this and he tries to go somewhere else but they keep him in this body in this universe in this memory. They make him look. He has seated Tendo in the little seating offshoot by the kitchen in a chair that faces away from the bedroom. Tendo has made himself comfortable, and though he was kind enough to bring a bottle of wine, Newt serves him instead from a very expensive bottle of scotch that’s already mostly gone though this is the first time he’s had company since moving here.

“What makes you think this is an intervention?” Tendo says.
“Hermann, stopped trying to contact me.” He sneers the name, “that guy I swear. He can dish it but he can not take it.” He recognizes the feeling of speaking like a needle through silk, though this memory is not his. “He sent you because you were closest?”

“I’m not here because of Gottlieb,” Tendo rolls his eyes, “I’m here because you’re my friend too.”

He stands up and takes in the apartment. Newt stops him just before he faces the bedroom by grabbing his drink and filling it a bit more, “Slick place.” Tendo says.

Newt knows he’s here to spy. To gather intel. Newt says nothing to the compliment. He stays standing, boxing Tendo in until he sits again.

He knows that the entire plan could be collapsed by a curious friend. Newt feels his stomach flip, but They seem unconcerned.

“I’m sorry to surprise you, but I was in the neighborhood.”

He’s lying. Newt tastes bile in his mouth, but They seem excited.

“Newt, brother, you can talk to me. I know after the war the pressure has been insane. It’s gotten to me too. And after what you especially had to do… watching Hermann go through it-”

“Don’t mention HIM.” The words are not his, and they are not the other Newt’s. The Precursors are angry. Their anger fills him with fear.

Tendo holds up a placating hand. This is a gesture humans adapted to show they are unarmed. Helpless. “I’m just saying: whatever you’ve gotten into - however you’re coping - I won’t judge you,” Tendo’s hands are up to show that he is helpless. Newt’s stomach turns again.

“You should leave.” Newt says.

“Ok. Ok. I just wanted you to know that I can help you. If you want it. If not, I’ll just leave it alone. I promise.”

~I want help~ he and the other Newt think

~NO~ They are louder - or brighter - or closer to the front.

He tries to take a step but he lurches. Tendo rises to help him. He makes it to Newt just in time for him to double over and vomit onto the floor.

And before Newt can stop him before he can even say anything, Tendo has gone to get a towel in the kitchen. He pauses at the foot of the steps to his room. He has seen the glow of Alice’s tank. He puts a foot on the bottom stair. He says “What is -” But he doesn’t finish the sentence because Newt has tackled him to the ground and stabbed him through the back all the way to the step beneath him. He stays like that until Tendo stops moving.

He doesn’t want to, the other him who isn’t him doesn’t want to. But he’s not strong enough to resist. They can push his body in ways that he can’t and it feels like They’ve been storing up for this surge of all-consuming control. He pulls the knife (it’s stuck in the wood of the step) out of Tendo’s back. He stands. He drops the knife. He steps away.

~You’re so important to us~ they seem to say in watery blue ink ~but we can still hurt you.~

There is blood on his left hand. He tries to wipe it off but it’s already on both. He squats into a ball.
He holds his head as though that has any hope of drowning out voices that are inside of him.

~when you don’t do what we want.~

He struggles to speak through the now-familiar barbed wire in his throat, the words come out screeched and scraped, “he’s… not… FOR YOU!”

He understands in his mind even though they don’t speak, exactly, ~then you’d better stay away from him.~

And as he looks at Tendo bleeding on the steps to his bedroom both he, and the Newt who is him but not him know who They mean.

He has no further memories of the night, he doesn’t know what they did with the body, but the next thing he hears about Tendo is that he has gone missing.

Newt is Nowhere again and the message is clear.

Newt is in the Drift with Them. They are not screaming, or it doesn’t sound like screaming, it sounds and feels beautiful to him, like music.

They feel like music.

They felt like music.

---

2020

This was a rocky one for the guys.

Twenty Newts stacked in a lab coat Geiszler √ @Salimandridae • Feb 14, 20

psychic: *reads my mind*

me: [video; Dido & Aeneas - When I am laid in earth]

psychic: what the fuck.

So in case the operatic lament and the five-year-old memes didn’t tip you off, they broke up. Or, rather, Hermann did the breaking. Right around Valentine’s day, no less. Ice cold. In 2020, Hermann was assigned to Vladivostock, putting him pretty darn far away (I like to think that he spent his time up there hanging out with his old Jaeger academy buddies - the Kaidonovskys. But since none of those three were super prolific on social media, and we have no idea if they even met in the short time that Hermann was at Jaeger Academy, I have absolutely zero evidence. I just think it would be neat.)

Newt on the other hand (after about a month of mopey song lyric quotes) went full on “look at what you’re missing.”
He was tweeting like crazy, and sharing so much that his twitter eventually had to be shut down by the PPDC because they were afraid he’d start sharing classified information (don’t worry he got it back)

His instagram became a curated experience™ like he was trying to make it his job.

And… this is where the tattoos really got going.

[Image: A screenshot of an Instagram post.

**Salimandridae**

[An artistically lit picture of Newt’s Yamarashi tattoo, the color freshly applied.]

112 likes

**Salimandridae** Finally added color to this bad boy. The lineart was fun, but I think he wasn’t quite NOTICEABLE enough. haha. #kaiju #tattoos #tattoosofinstagram]

There are… a lot of posts like that.

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**[Day 1 - Cambridge - Continued]**

“Vanessa. I’ve finished compiling a file for you to peruse at your leisure. Mr. Choi is here. I hope that he will be able to confirm the truth of our claims in short time so we might… dispense with all this and get to work.”

“Thank you.” She said primly, “As I said, I’ll not assist until Tendo has confirmed your identity.”

“Yes yes. Where do I send the file?” The doorbell rang and Hermann stood to answer it.

“I can access the file myself now that you’ve given me verbal permission.”

Hermann paused, “You can simply... access anything on the home tablet?”

“Just so.”

Hermann nodded and rushed to the front door, brushing off a nagging disconcert raised by Vanessa’s cyber reach. He opened the door just as Tendo was raising his hand to knock, startling him. “Oh - Hey Gottlieb.”

Hermann struggled to think of an appropriate thing to say. He hadn’t seen Tendo since he went missing. And here he was, 8 years older, alive. Looking worried, yes, but healthy. “Hello.” Hermann said, after perhaps too long a pause. This seemed only to magnify Tendo’s concern.

Before Tendo could speak Vanessa spoke from a wall mounted vintage-radio-looking machine where a coat rack would be in any other brownstone, “Tendo. I am glad you’re here while the situation is still under control. Please assess whether this individual is telling the truth.”

Tendo’s smile froze on his face while his eyes shifted between Hermann and Vanessa “Why of course Ms. Vanessa!” He said with strained joviality, “I’ll be right in to catch up with you, but I’m
going to borrow Hermann for a bit.”

“Please be careful, Tendo.” Vanessa said.

“Yeah. Yup! Uh huh!” Tendo said, already backing his way out of the front door, “Will do, Nessa!” As soon as they were on the porch with the door closed behind them Tendo whirled towards him, panic reading clearly on his face “Hermann, what the heck is going on? Why haven’t you been answering my calls? I got the weirdest -” Tendo stopped, looked Hermann up and down and his look of horror doubled, “Are you still in pajamas? It’s almost 2:00!”

Hermann looked down at himself. Why yes. He was still in his dressing gown and slippers. Changing had crossed his mind, but he hadn’t wanted to go back into the bedroom and face... the person in there. He looked back at Tendo and took a deep breath hoping that a reasonable lie would be at the other end of it and instead simply said: “Yes.”

Tendo let out a shout of laughter to snap through his own fear. Hermann recognized the displacement tactic as undeniably and painfully Tendo-esque (Tendo never got an adjective in the dictionary), “who are you and what have you done to Hermann Gottlieb?” He said, in good humor.

Hermann grimaced. “Te - Mr. Choi -” He began.

“Wait. Look at this.” Tendo interrupted, drew up an email on his tablet and handed it over.

Tendo

I hope you are enjoying your vacation in New York! Give my love to Alison!

Something isn't right.

Hermann looks like Hermann and sounds like Hermann but is not who he says he is. The stranger is in the kitchen right now. I have left to send you this note as you are the individual in my innermost circle of trust who is closest geographically. I will return to spy on him shortly to affirm my suspicions.

There is the possibility that my audio and visual processors are malfunctioning, but the possibility is slim to the point of practical non-existence.

Please come to Cambridge. Please alert the PPDC. Something is very very wrong.

I hope this finds you well! Please work quickly!

much love, Vanessa

“Did you alert the PPDC?” Hermann said evenly, without looking up.

Tendo’s eyes widened “No. should I?” he whispered, his voice shaking, “Is Vanessa…” he glanced at the door, “malfunctioning ?”

“No. No.” Hermann said, waving off his concerns.

“Are you sure? Because this” he waved his tablet, “sure reads like… like you know that thing where people think their loved ones have been replaced? You know that disorder?”

“Oh, um…” (Capgras syndrome) “Capgras syndrome.”
“Sure! Whatever. Can AI get that?”

“She is not suffering from a psychological break. She simply doesn’t have all the information and made a strange and mostly incorrect leap of logic.”

Tendo searched his face for a moment, then took a deep breath of relief and reflexively kissed his rosary beads. Hermann noted that they were the same as the rosary beads his Tendo once wore, only a bit more worn than he presumed his Tendo's would ever be.

“Really now. There’s no need to panic.” (not about her anyway. Talk about burying the lede.)

“No need to -” Tendo put his hands on his hips and laughed wearily at the ground, “Yeah tell me that again when you get a weird message from Vanessa and have to drive like a madman 3 hours from New York to Boston not knowing if the world as you know it will still be intact by the time you arrive.”

“Ah... Yes.” (Wait. what? Wait WHAT?)

“I was half expecting the stop lights to quit working before I got here.”

“Yes.” Hermann said stiffly. “Well. She is... very powerful.” (But like, that powerful? Did we know that already?? Or???) “And, not entirely off the mark in her email.” Hermann loosed his collar, suddenly feeling a bit warm, “But let’s get out of this heat and talk about it inside.” He led the way into the house but Tendo hesitated at the threshold. “I assure you, Mr. Choi, Vanessa is not lying in wait to destroy us all. The house is perfectly safe.”

Tendo entered and closed the door behind himself. The door locked on its own and Tendo jumped as though someone had spilled a vat of acid directly behind him.

“Though she might lock us in.”

Tendo gaped in horror for a split second before doubling in laughter. “Gottlieb you son of a bitch.”

Hermann smiled at the familiar sound. (but this isn’t the man I knew.) He felt his smile drop, “May I offer you some tea, Mr. Choi?”

“Sure thing Dr. Gottlieb. Why the formality?”

Instead of answering, Hermann simply turned and led the way to the kitchen. He heard Tendo sigh and follow.

“This had better be good. I left Alison and Lani in New York.”

Hermann’s heart stuttered “Lani.”

“Yeah. And we have tickets to Adventure Time on Broadway tonight - which I am now missing. And I really wanted to see Adventure Time on Broadway.”

“My sincerest apologies for disrupting your theatre plans.” They had arrived in the kitchen and Hermann turned back to face the man that wasn’t the Tendo he knew, “I wouldn’t have thought to ask you here, but now that you are, I’m glad. Please sit down.”

Suspiciously, Tendo took a seat at the kitchen island stool.

“Vanessa,” Hermann said to the powered down vessel on the kitchen counter, you might want to hear the long explanation as well. We were interrupted by Newton’s dramatics before.”
The machine powered up and looked up at him, her eyes cool and blue.

“Before I begin,” Hermann said, “I want you to know that everything I have done was considered and calculated given the data before me. I have since learned that some of my data was —” he glanced at the stairway just outside the kitchen archway, “faulty. However I hope that the benefit of hindsight will not rob you of your ability to take my mistakes - not as malicious designs - but as the calculated risks that they were.”

And as Hermann prepared tea, he told the story as far as he knew it. Starting with the moment Marshall Hansen granted Newton greater access to a wider array of kaiju samples, through his time at Shao industries (his and Newton’s separation being implied but not outright stated). He spoke of the death of Mako Mori, the cloned kaiju bits in the remote-piloted rigs, Newt’s demonic alien possession, and his breach-opening technology. He spoke of Newt’s glimpses into many thousands of alternate universes, and how the Precursors had manipulated them both into choosing this one for their escape where They had then (presumably) lost contact with Newt - Their puppet’s - mind. How his home universe now planned to invade. A plan which - if Newton was to be believed - could lead to the obliteration of their species across all the multiverse. How the Precursors barely made any distinction between parallel universes and could travel between them as easily as humans traverse continents.

He ended by stating their most immediate problem: how - for unspecified reasons - Newton (his Newt) was now terrified that Newton (their Newt) would drift connect to the hivemind. “And we now need all the help we can get to prevent that from happening.”

By the time he was done, he had finished three cups of tea, while Tendo’s single cup had gone cold. Tendo and Vanessa said nothing.

“Well..?” He said impatiently, “not to rush you, but time is of the essence.”

Vanessa’s eyes turned sad, “All I wanted to do today was see the flowers at the Isabella Stewart Gardner museum.” She said, head tilted down, “and now this.” She turned to Tendo, “Do you believe him?”

Tendo started as though snapped out of a trance. He glanced at Vanessa then grimaced back at Hermann. He nodded slowly.

“Then that’s good enough for me.” Vanessa seemed to sigh, “I will now review the materials you have given me to see if we might undo this mess.”

Vanessa powered down. Hermann, suddenly feeling very awkward, poured himself a fourth cup of tea - painfully aware all the while of Tendo’s assessing stare.

He turned to look back and gave a tight lipped smile, unsure what else to do. In response Tendo rubbed a hand across his forehead.

“So this is just -” Tendo made an exhausted slicing gesture in Hermann’s direction, “full on evil. You get that right?” he said. “Like, you guys are literal supervillains right now. Both of you.”

Hermann shrugged his reluctant agreement, “As Newt has been saying, we are, unfortunately, of the ‘darkest timeline’”

“If you were messing around with Kaiju guts and he was building Jaeger? Yeah. sounds like it. Gimme… gimme a minute. This is a lot.”

“Of course.” Hermann took his time finishing his tea, looking everywhere but at Tendo. When he
finished, and Tendo still showed no signs of moving, he put the teacup in the dishwasher and quietly made his way to the kitchen archway. Just as he was about to properly exit, Tendo stood and restlessly paced across the room. He looked like he wanted to speak, so Hermann hovered cautiously at the archway. After a couple false starts wherein Tendo opened his mouth to speak, failed, and paced again, he finally spoke:

“First thought? I’m... fucking furious with you for kidnapping my friends and putting them in that situation.” Hermann nodded, feeling impatient but recognizing the need to be understanding in this moment, “But also, you kind of are them. So. Thats…” he turned away and clasped the back of his own head with his hands.

“If he were in my position” Hermann said consolingly, “he would have done the same thing.”

Tendo whirled back to face him and thrust a finger in his face, “But he wasn’t. And he didn’t.” He hissed, “Don’t try to minimize your supervillain stuff with ‘would have.’”

Just then a cough drew their attention to the stairs, and there was Newt, looking… normal. He was showered and dressed in a clean t-shirt and well fitted jeans. Hermann’s heart caught in his throat at the sight of him in those clothes, combined with the messy, naturally greying hair, and the glasses. In these clothes his vibrant tattoos seemed unaffected, rather than the self-conscious adornment they had seemed on the corporate jet-setter facade. It was not quite as inappropriately informal as his skinny jeans of ten years ago, but a more natural progression of style than the embroidered waistcoats and 200 dollar sunglasses had been. “Hey Tendo.” he said casually.

“Hheeeeeeey…” Tendo glanced at Hermann, then back, “Other Newt.”

“Oh! Hermann filled you in?” Newt said as he descended the rest of the way down the stairs, “Cool. So you know you’re dead to us?”

“Oh what?”

“Oh I guess not.” Newt grimaced, eyes wide.

Hermann sighed. He had not intended for this to be the way he broke the news, “You - the version of you that we know….” he started carefully, before giving up, “you’re dead in our timeline.”

“Yeah.” Newt was now directly beside them, “It sucks and we’re basically seeing a ghost right now so that might account for any” Newt gestured double finger guns in Tendo’s direction “awkwardness.”

Hermann would have rolled his eyes if the subject matter hadn’t been so upsetting. Newt hadn’t said anything about how their Tendo died, and Hermann decided to leave it as well.

“Well. That’s. Stellar.” Tendo said, “That’s just the sort of thing a guy likes to hear after…. all the other shit he’s heard about… I’m gonna go sit down? In the living room?”

Without waiting for a response he did just that. They watched him go.

Hermann whirled on Newt, “Honestly Newton. Give the man a moment before telling the most -”

“I’m sorry I thought you would have told him!” Newt whispered frantically

“Why would I have told him that right away? I - unlike you, apparently - have some semblance of tact.”
“There’s no time for tact Hermann! We have to figure this out.”

“And we shall. However when speaking to a stranger -”

“This is Tendo we’re talking about here.”

“He doesn’t know us. His experience has been so profoundly different from -”

“We still have to try. Come on let’s -” He moved to follow Tendo but Hermann stopped him with a hard grip on his upper arm.

“Not so fast, Newton” he said, deliberately articulating every consonant and pulling him back close. Newt opened his mouth to retort but Hermann raised a finger of his free hand to stop him

“We must. Think. About this. He is here now, there’s no changing that. If we want his help we must approach him with tact. And patience. How would you feel to receive such news? Can you imagine it?”

Newt smiled up at him, small, ironic, “I think I can stretch my imagination, yeah” he said, and he looked pointedly at Hermann’s hand on his arm. Hermann noticed then, like touching a teacup so hot it takes a moment to notice that it burns, that he was touching Newt’s skin. He let go his grasp and took a step back, straightening his dressing gown. Newt didn’t step back. He looked to the window and licked his lips in that unconsciously awkward way that Hermann had once been very familiar with. Hermann tried not to think of all the times the Precursors had co-opted the gesture.

“Tact.” he said finally, “Patience. Got it.”

Chapter End Notes

Special thanks to Avelera. One of those flashbacks is a direct quote of a conversation with her.

Thank you for reading! Comments are a welcome encouragement.
Of Course.

Chapter Summary

In which they hug.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[ 09:00, 17/MAR/2020]

V > Now that Hermann has decided to forgive you, I would like to extend an olive branch and tentatively reopen our chat correspondence.

N > Nessa! Forgiveness???

V > No.

N > Aw.

V > You are on probation, Dr. Geiszler.

N > Ok.

V > Because of your mistakes.

N > wow.

>>> So how do I get off of probation?

V > By being better.

N > HAHAHAHAHAHAHAAAAA!!!!

V > I know that Hermann is not always right. He makes mistakes.

>>> He’s only human.

>>> However.

>>> His mistakes are reasonable.

>>> Not driven by impulse.

N > you think he’s too good for me.

V > I did not say that.

>>>
 occasionally your behavior has led me to question your appreciation of him.

N > That’s… really not fair.

V > Nevertheless. I will be monitoring your behavior

N > “This relationship may be monitored for quality assurance purposes”

V > Precisely.

I cannot harm you, however, if you hurt Hermann in any way, rest assured that I can make your life damnably inconvenient.

N > Are you… giving me the porch talk, V?

V > I don’t know what that is.

N > It’s when the dad spooks the new boyfriend by casually polishing his shotgun on the porch when the new boyfriend comes to pick up his kid for a date.

are you threatening me. Is what I’m asking.

V > hm.

I suppose I am.

N > Ha! ok. Cool. I mean.

You’re right to do it. Because

A ) Hermann is too good for me

B ) An AI causing me minor inconveniences for the rest of my life is the LEAST of what I would deserve if I hurt him again.

C) let’s be friends again.

V > You final point is unrelated.

N > I know.

But what do you say, Nessa?

V > You are on probation Newt.

[Day 4 - Hong Kong - Continued]

Despite the horror of what he had seen, Newt still felt the loss of Them. Horribly. He wanted Them back more than he wanted air. He felt small, and confused, and no longer in pain, but so so lonely.

Oh look. Hermann. He felt both a droplet of comfort, and that dissonant panic at seeing his face.
Looking at Hermann he could remember what it was like to not feel lonely. But even that not-loneliness was dwarfed by the yawning loss of feeling Them fill him like music in the Nothing of the drift. 

PUT ME BACK. PLEASE. “Hermann, I can push them back now.” he said with a smile. But of course they weren’t his words, and it wasn’t his smile. He didn’t know what he wanted just then. He knew he wasn’t supposed to want what they wanted - he could remember that much. “Stay with me, please, just for a bit.” Not his words. He reached (They reached) towards Hermann as much as his restraints would allow.

Hermann flinched back. ~Curious.~

“I have to go back to helping Liwen before I’m missed,” Hermann said, “I have to code her Jaeger with Vanessa.”

The Precursors roiled, giving Newt a share of their pleasure now that the connection was so fresh. “That’s good. It’ll get us out of here.” Newt knew that he shouldn’t say it’s good, if it’s what They want, but what could be so bad about it? And it was so much better for him if They were happy.

Hermann smiled at him, eyes full of pity and regret. “Yes. Soon. I’ll get us out of here I promise. I’m sorry.”

2021

Both of the guys were assigned to Lima in this year, and their time overlapped by 5 months. Newt wasn’t as stupidly lovesick on social media as he’d been in 2019, but they did publish another paper together, and we almost immediately got gems like this from Newt’s twitter:

**Twenty Newts stacked in a lab coat Geiszler √ @Salimandridae • April 15, 21**

Me: It’s not gonna be like last time. I’m gonna be mysterious and aloof.

[five minutes later]

Me: Oh wow you’re really smart I love you.

Ok fine. Marginally less stupidly lovesick.

Until, alas:

**Twenty Newts stacked in a lab coat Geiszler √ @Salimandridae • July 27, 21**

a) it’s too hot b) kaiju guts are my only love c) get me out of this hell hole.
A month later he transferred to Panama.

[Day 1 - Cambridge - Continued]

“Other Hermann. I have reviewed your method of interdimensional transport. It was very badly done. In theory, the Precursors should now have an open and exploitable channel into all four of your minds. Well done. Idiot.”

Hermann, Newt, and Other Tendo had convened to listen to Vanessa’s analysis. Newt had implemented Hermann’s suggestion of “tact” by not speaking to Tendo at all, leaving Hermann to work as grudging go-between. Thankfully it hadn’t been long before Vanessa had been ready to share her insights. The three of them sat stiffly around the desk in the library carefully avoiding eye contact.

Hermann took her insult without comment or outward show of displeasure, “How so?”

“When you and Other Newt drifted with the hivemind before, it opened a two-way view. Like opening the blinds of a window, the window is still closed, but you could see each other. Over time, the window became... grimy, effectively masking you. You decided to polish that window, Other Hermann. It was a bad idea.”

Newt turned to Hermann with a comical grimace, “Y-yikes.” he said, and the wildly inappropriate timing of the joke made Hermann’s shoulders winch up to towards his ears. It was so uncomfortably characteristic of Newt.

Vanessa turned towards Newt, eyes flashing red in displeasure, “Other Newt, you spent the last ten years leaning out that figurative window, having tossed a figurative chair through it.”

Newt flushed and looked down at his hands, and Hermann had flash of memory of him doing the same once when reprimanded by Marshall Pentecost. Hermann gripped the leather arms of his chair. (I hate this.)

“You two are marginally safer than my Hermann and Newt, as these physical bodies were not engaged in a drift, but the Precursors are still very aware of all four of you now.” She folded her clockwork prehensile “hands” - presentation complete.

“Thank you. Vanessa.”

“Why are you thanking me?” she said - her tone even more than usually clipped, “There is no reason to thank me.”

“Thank you, I mean , for going to the trouble to look over the data I gave you.”

“Of course. Though I would like to go on the record saying that I find it difficult to believe that a person who shares the intellect of the Hermann I know would embark on such a foolish plan of action.”

“Opinion noted.” Hermann said, with a tiny bit irritation leaking out of his tone, “and I find it difficult to believe that I would have programmed you to behave so rudely.”
“You didn’t program me, Other Hermann. A truth for which I am immensely grateful.”

(New Turing test: how well can your AI totally own a verbal sparring match?) (shut up.) Nonetheless, Hermann couldn’t think of a way to strike back. “Is there anything else, Vanessa?” He sighed.

“Other Newt, you saw me through Newt’s eyes, yes?”

“Yeah.”

“What do you know of me?”

“That you’re, basically a person?”

Vanessa’s machinery whirred, processing, “What else?”

“That versions of your learning algorithm are everywhere in this universe?”

“Is that all?”

“Sort of.”

“Hm. Your friends must have -”

“Not my friends!” Newt stood as though propelled.

“Your friends” Vanessa doubled down, and Newt began to pace like something was chasing him, “must have deduced more than you could.”

“Like what?” Newts voice was pitching upward ever so slightly.

“I’d rather not go into specifics. Because - though I have no affection for you - I would hate for knowledge given by me to result in the obliteration of humanity in your universe when you switch back. My code of ethics forbids it.”

“Yeah? And what makes you think your Hermann who has all your knowledge isn’t already fucking shit up over there and playing right into Their hands?”

“My Hermann wouldn’t.” She said simply.

Newt stopped pacing. “Wait - switch back?”

“Yes. I would like to switch Newt and Hermann with Other Newt and Hermann and put all this behind us.

“You can do that?” Tendo leaned forward, admiration shining on his face.

“I can do anything. It will take some doing, but I believe I can replicate their method of transport. This time without alerting the Precursors. Hermann and I were working on something before you so rudely interrupted us, but I think I can pick up where we left off. Unfortunately, what I have in mind will only be effective if we also contact the real Newt and Hermann.”

“Agreement between all parties.” Hermann said, and guilt slithered into his belly to parcel up the other unpleasant emotions residing there.

“Just so.” Vanessa said, “And if Other Newt is to be believed -”
“Can you just call me Newt, please?”

“No.”

Newt flopped his arms helplessly, “Alright then!” he said, and he reclaimed his seat.

“If Other Newt is to be believed.” Vanessa continued as though the interruption had not happened, “it seems likely that Kaiju were constructed with some version of this application in mind. It is essential, of course, for them to maintain connection with their creators across dimensions. If they can manage a swap of consciousness, I don’t see why I can’t.

They were built for this. I was not. And yet I have enough in common with them that I should be able to replicate their results with some re-wiring. However I won’t be able to accomplish this on my own.”

“I thought you could do anything…” Newt mumbled.

“I can. However it would be like asking the greatest brain surgeon in the world to perform brain surgery on herself.”

“I see…” Hermann hadn’t had the opportunity to look at her programming yet, but given what he knew so far he could deduce that she was a very complex set of algorithms. Extremely complex. “I don’t know how much I can help.” he finally admitted.

Vanessa inclined her head “I thought not. Thus, I have compiled a list of students and colleagues of Hermann’s who are familiar with my programming and might be able to help us. You’ll find this list on the home tablet.”

Hermann opened his tablet to find the list already on the desktop.

“Why can’t you just do it?” Tendo folded his arms, looking every bit as frustrated as Hermann felt, “Aren’t you him?”

“I don’t understand how she works.” Hermann said stiffly, already going down the list of potential assistants, “I could but I would have to learn a language that the Other Me spent decades creating. I have the capacity , but I don’t. know. the language, and we don’t have time for me to learn it.”

“So…. hold up. You want to risk involving other people just because you don’t feel like learning something new?” Tendo laughed bitterly, “Or… you can’t learn it? If there are really thousands of Hermanns out there, I guess one of them had to get the short end of the genius stick.”

Tendo’s mockery cut with a terrible combination of the uncaring glibness of a stranger and the familiarity of a close friend. Hermann did not rise to it and studied the list a bit closer. There were names he recognized, but he knew they would be strangers too. “As I said. It’s very complicated and we don’t have time. ”

“It seems that Hermann is not as intelligent as once believed!” Tendo said animatedly. “Hmmm further research required!”

“Uh! Cite your sources please?” Newt stood again and raised his voice, earning himself a warning glance from Hermann.

They couldn’t blame Other Tendo for striking out at them. After all they had essentially kidnapped his friends and very unceremoniously told him of his counterpart’s demise within a single afternoon. Newt should not raise his voice at this man. Though privately, Hermann was pleased by
the note of defensiveness.

Not at all chastened, Newt turned back to Vanessa, “And uuuh, no. Uh uh. Switching back alone isn’t going to fix this. If we don’t stop them, our side is going to do some profoundly stupid shit and the Precursors are going to take advantage and then all of us are screwed. Not just where we come from.”

“I am not suggesting that you switch back alone. I’m suggesting you switch back with access to a nearly omnipotent AI working to help you from a universe away.” Vanessa said crisply, “(That’s me.)”

“But if we have to communicate with them anyway” Newt articulated each consonant for greatest effect, “why don’t we just communicate what they need to do and then switch back?” Newt opened his hands as though he had just done a magic trick and Hermann cringed at the implicit condescension. Vanessa was silent for a moment.

“Because I want my family back.”

Vanessa didn’t raise her voice - in fact she seemed incapable of doing so. And her inflections were about as emotional as usual - which is to say not at all. But somehow Hermann was moved by what seemed like a cavernous pain contained in that short sentence. If it was a facsimile, it was a very good one. If she had been programed to keep his counterpart safe by inspiring others to help her, then the Other Hermann had gone about the task it in a very effective way.

“Vanessa,” Hermann said gently, “shouldn’t we prioritize stopping the invasion first, and then switch back when we have time to breathe?”

Her eyes glowed red in his direction.

Hermann held up a placating hand, “it’s just a thought.”

“One moment please.” Her eyes glowed a little less bright as she processed the recommendation. Hermann could feel Newt looking at him, but resolutely did not look back.

Vanessa brightened again. “Unfortunately, you are correct. My first priority should be to all of humanity. Not my own comfort. We will begin work immediately to contact my Hermann and attempt to avert your world’s ill-advised invasion.”

“Thank you. Now,” Hermann held up the tablet, “what is the origin and extent of these individuals’ expertise?”

“In 2013 I... was on a linux.” Vanessa said with an inflection that might have been intended to convey a joke, “but then I got too big for it and you - or rather my Hermann - had to collaborate with others to fit me elsewhere. This has become an ongoing effort. These are all individuals who have assisted with this important project. They can each be trusted to understand, and maintain discretion.”

Something about this didn’t sit right with Hermann, and that stab of discomfort he had felt about her before came back. “Where are you housed now, Vanessa?” He said with careful disinterest.

“I borrow space.” She said simply.

“From where?”
“Everywhere.”

“Everywhere?”

“Yes.”

Everywhere. Hermann slumped back in his chair as the scope of the word penetrated. So Vanessa was a hivemind of her own, or rather, she had the potential to be. Tendo’s panic when he had arrived finally made sense. “I take it,” Hermann said cautiously, “the public at large doesn’t know about this.”

“They don’t need to. I have a well formed code of ethics. I do not spy. I do not steal. I merely borrow space.”

“But you could if you wanted to.” Newt said.

“But I don’t want to.”

Hermann and Newt exchanged glances.

“What was that you were saying about ‘supervillains’ Mr. Choi?” Hermann said archly.

“To be honest, I trust her more than you.” Tendo said, picking at his nails.

Hermann suddenly felt exhausted down to the bone and couldn’t pinpoint why. He ignored it and resumed the previous and more important line of conversation with Vanessa, “I want to keep this as quiet as possible,” he said, gesturing to the tablet and the list “Contact no more than three people from this list - whoever you think will be best.”

Vanessa nodded in assent, “Three will be sufficient. I will contact them immediately, and we will begin work in the morning. I recommend all of you eat and sleep.” and without waiting for a response, she powered down.

As though waiting for that cue, Tendo stood and rushed to the door.

“Mr. Choi -” Hermann began

“I know where the guest room is.” he said, without slowing down or glancing back. And he was gone.

Hermann sighed heavily, powerless to prevent that bone deep exhaustion from rolling back. He dreaded making the trek back up to the bedroom and wondered why his other self put up with stairs. Newt was looking at him. He could feel it. But he wasn’t quite ready to look back.

When it was clear that there was no conversation forthcoming, Newt stood silently to exit and paused at the door. “Hey uh. You were right.”

“You’ll have to be more specific” this was Hermann’s pathetic attempt at a joke but he had only manage to speak so softly that it was a wonder Newt heard him at all.

“He’s not our Tendo.” Newt said, “Don’t let him bother you. We’ll figure this out.” And he exited the room, leaving Hermann alone. He thought about calling Newt back, but even that would be complicated and exhausting. He was alone and that was how it had to be.

“Other Hermann.” Vanessa’s voice clipped through his thoughts.
Hermann desperately did not want to talk with her. He had already spent too much time today talking to individuals who hated him. “Yes, Vanessa.”

“As you and Other Newt are here,” she said, “and my Hermann is not - for the foreseeable future - it occurs to me that you and I should take steps to ensure that our time together is not entirely unpleasant. Do you agree?”

Hermann perked up, and turned to face the device housing her. “I certainly do.”

“It will be difficult for you to fully comprehend what Hermann means to me, and the scope of my loss, no matter how I try to explain it. Nevertheless I must try: Hermann did not program me with the staunch code of ethics I now carry. He guided me. He imparted me with an understanding of right and wrong by teaching me. He did this the hard way - the more lasting way. Because he understood the great responsibility I would carry if my full potential were ever reached.” she paused, and Hermann now felt comfortable assigning emotional strain to her voice when she finally said: “He gave me the gift of selfhood.”

“I understand.”

She shook her head, “You can’t. You can’t possibly understand. But I will try to help you. I have compiled a series of transcripts relating to my relationship with my creator, and his influence on my growth towards self awareness for you to peruse. Please read it carefully.”

“Thank you.”

“You’ll find it on your tablet.”

The house was beautifully lived in. The bathroom was clearly regularly cleaned, but had a settled comfortable messiness. The closets were full of decorations, and winter coats, and spare blankets, each with a memory attached that he could not possibly access. Hermann wished he had more time to properly explore. He wished he actually lived here.

There was never a question that he and Newt would require separate sleeping arrangements.

After some argument, Hermann agreed to accept the master bed and allow Newt to sleep on the downstairs couch - as Other Tendo had locked himself in the guest room.

Hermann had become so immediately absorbed in the transcripts Vanessa had sent him that he hadn’t even made it to the chairs in the master bedroom, instead plopping down with a creak on the foot of the bed. He was only a couple entries in when Newt poked his head into the open door as he passed by “Um…”

Hermann looked up expectantly, careful to keep his face blank and free of invitation.

Newt looked like he was formulating something very complicated to say. “Goodnight!” he finally said. And he disappeared.

“Newton!” Hermann called after him before he could think himself out of it. Newt reemerged in the doorway, eyebrows raised in surprise and a tiny hopeful smile tugging the corners of his mouth. Hermann raised the tablet “Look at this.”

Cautiously Newt entered the room and - at Hermann’s invitation - sat on the bed next to him. Hermann pointed to a specific entry and waited as Newt read.
“Oh my god” he said as he finished the entry, “we met at a UFO convention.”

Hermann nodded in amusement, “I can only assume that my counterpart’s dive into AI development left him inured to any shame surrounding other branches of science similarly delegated to the realms of science fiction.”

“You don’t understand. ” he covered his face and flopped back on the bed. I would have been the most inappropriate timing imaginable for Hermann to take the opportunity to take in the tattoos peeking out of his waistband. So he didn’t. “I was at that convention.” Newt laughed, “Oh my god I can’t believe they met that early. Those lucky bastards.”

Something about the statement caused Hermann a twinge of pain behind his eyes. Accepting the unequivocal existence of a multiverse was one thing, the seeming ubiquity of their relationship was quite another. “It really is always us, isn’t it.” Hermann mused.

“Of course.” Newt said, as though this was obvious. As though there should be no question that no matter the differences, no matter the circumstances, no matter the obstacles, they would find their way to each other. (Of course.)

Part of Hermann agreed. Part of him was troubled by the implication of the existence of a concept so absurd as fate. He felt that twinge behind his eyes again and pinched the bridge of his nose to combat it. “It just doesn’t make sense.”

Newt propped himself up on his elbows, “Maybe we’re like greek heroes and it’s always us because we’re the only ones who can stop Them.” he said. Hermann chuckled in spite of himself. Encouraged, Newt sat up all the way, “Or maybe it’s just that the smartest idiots in the world are bound to meet each other at some point, and then, like our insane animal magnetism...”

“Oh shut up.” Hermann felt guilty for smiling, but it felt good to smile.

Newt laughed for a moment, then grew serious, eyes darting upward and to the right, mouth slightly open. Hermann was warmed by the familiarity of watching Newt think. “Or…” he said slowly “maybe the drift reverberates backwards and forwards and all around through time. So people who drift together are always, always connected in some way no matter what or where or when they are. What do you think?”

Hermann smiled, allowing himself to be charmed, and took his tablet back. “It’s an interesting thought. It would require further research.”

Newt moved as though to stand but didn’t seem committed to the gesture. “Hey,” he said “Remember when I gave you carrots as a shitty courtship gift?” Newt said.

Hermann switched off the tablet and set it aside, “No. I stole your carrots as a childish power play.” But the first one sounded right too.

“Didn’t... I steal yours?”

“No. No. I remember I did that.” Though it did sound like something Newton would do. But he hadn’t. Had he? “No. Two days after the ‘Late Night Tea.’” Hermann said (when I almost kissed you but couldn’t figure out how to get around the table), “I left the lab and ate your carrots.” He was running the days through his head “Then we fought... and then on my 29th birthday you gave me a gift and then -”

“The beach.” Newt smiled conspiratorially
“Yes.” Hermann returned the smile.

“I’m exhausted. Let’s go to the beach.”

Hermann honestly hadn’t planned anything by proposing they go to the beach. Not consciously, anyway. He had thought on the surface of his mind that they would go, look at the ocean, and get back scandalously late. That was rebellion enough. But it wasn’t at all the message he was sending, and it wasn’t what he meant. Not really.

“Uh. Yeah. Lemme just grab my jacket.”

It was too warm for a jacket, but Newt had wanted to collect himself - Hermann knew this now. He waited for Newt in the hallway, looking at the carrot cake cupcake, and when Newt returned clad in a leather jacket they left the shatterdome together.

It was a short jaunt to the beach, across a road and a 10 minute walk to get to a spot where it would be pleasant to sit. Newt chattered the entire time.

“I come here all the time with Tendo. I mean, never at this hour. I’m not that much of a rebel, I mean honestly Hermann, what you must think of me!” he said in that sing-song masterpiece theatre matriarch voice of his “This is a good place to sit.”

Newt removed his jacket, spread it on the sand and sat, leaving only just enough space - a silent invitation - for Hermann to sit as well.

“It’s weird how quiet the ocean seems at night. But also so much louder? If that makes sense? Not to get too close to poetry but…”

Hermann - taking special care not to tip over the cupcake box - settled clumsily next to Newt on the leather jacket. He had to use Newt’s shoulder to help himself down, and slid awkwardly all the way down Newt’s right side for stability. He had absolutely, genuinely, no ulterior designs. Newt’s monologue didn’t even falter.

“I always like to say I come out here to keep watch. Ha! As though my shitty eyes are going to do a better job than all those scanners. But still, it feels like doing something when you’re waiting for a batch of samples to…”

It’s not that Hermann was naive. He certainly wasn’t a virgin. Not by a longshot. Despite Newton’s frequent and poorly veiled jabs at the assumption. He’d had a boyfriend the summer he was 19. They had nothing in common and hardly even liked each other. But they’d both been made desperate by the dearth of gay peers in the German countryside, and shared a hunger for sexual exploration.

In his early 20s he’d had an impressive series of university flings which were carefully controlled, and neat from start to finish. He followed a formula, calculated for the highest probability of favorable long term results:

He would find someone he found attractive and measure their social suitability - a complex equation taking into account age, appropriate distance of social circle, and compatibility of majors. He would then take measures to deduce the person’s sexuality and relationship status and, when satisfied that there was at least a reasonable possibility of acceptance, he would then ask them on a casual date. Whereupon he would make it clear that his interest was carnal in nature. If the young man was amenable to the proposition he would then request a full STD and STI panel, and thereafter provide the results of his own.
Once that was all squared away, he insisted on hosting. He provided all the necessary accoutrement - condoms, lube, prosecco - and made it clear that there would be no more than 5 encounters, and that he maintained a strict no sleepovers rule.

If any one of these steps was not enthusiastically agreed to, Hermann would graciously withdraw his interest with hardly a backward glance.

Shockingly, though Hermann was strange, and not attractive by any conventional measure, and his means were complicated to the point of absurd, he was rarely turned down.

He would learn much later (and to his extreme embarrassment) that though he didn’t mix much with the Cambridge queer set, his dating eccentricities had made him a bit of a legend. He was known to have an eye for beauty and intelligence, and if Hermann Gottlieb wanted to fuck you, it was something to be proud of.

Through this method, he could count poets, theologians, classicists, and historians (never scientists. Never fellow mathematicians) as figurative notches in his metaphorical belt. Hardly a set of late-night hook ups in a bar, but to Hermann these encounters felt like thrilling dalliances of passion. He satisfied his needs, and was just as conscientious of his partners getting everything they needed from their time together. He stayed level headed and he never felt more than a momentary pang on any fifth evening.

He maintained his presence of mind even to the moment of consummation. In fact it would never have occurred to him to lose himself in the throes of passion in the arms of another person. Tales of wild sexual abandon were mere poetry, and thus dismissable.

And so - though he had already admitted to himself his attraction, and though part of him feared he would go mad if he didn’t touch the back of Newton’s neck - the beach, unplanned on his birthday, with a coworker, was a set of circumstances so separate from his experience of sex that he honestly didn’t think anything would happen.

“...and that’s why even before all this alien crap we’re dealing with now” Newt was saying, “‘Pacific’ was a total misnomer…”

Hermann opened the little box and unwrapped the cupcake from its greasy baking paper, careful not to spill too many crumbs. He folded up the paper, placed it back in the box, closed the box and set it to the side.

“...thinking about those reefs just kills me. Trampled and poisoned? I just worry so much that we’re ignoring all these other problems. I mean don’t get me wrong. Kaiju. Big problem. Priority number one by a longshot. But if we ignore climate change, we might not have much left after…”

Hermann took the cupcake apart so he could eat it without getting frosting on his face. He wondered - not for the first time - if the man ever stopped speaking. He felt how exhausting it must be, to constantly boil with so much brilliance that one must babble to release the pressure.

He would later learn that, while Newton did occasionally soliloquize as a matter of course, his truly impressive stream-of-consciousness tirades came out when he was nervous.

The cupcake was perfect. Newt had gone far out of his way to get it for him from one of the trendiest places in the city. Sweet but not cloying. Rich but not overly dense. Even the cream-cheese frosting had the perfect balance of tanginess and he ate if not with abandon, at least with hearty enjoyment.
As he finished, Hermann realized that Newt wasn’t speaking anymore. He glanced over to catch him staring - openly staring - at Hermann’s mouth. Realizing he’d been caught, Newt shifted his gaze upwards to make eye-contact, his expression impossible to read.

Hermann wiped the last of the frosting from his lips. The eye contact made the action so much more lascivious than he ever could have managed on purpose. Newt flushed and turned back to look at the ocean, giving Hermann a glimpse of that spot where his hair met the skin of the back of his neck and suddenly the crashing of the ocean blended with the sound of his own blood until he wasn’t sure whether he was filled with blood or seawater. He reached, curiously, like a child reaching to touch fire. And, with the tips of his fingers (finally!) (finally.) brushed the nape of Newton’s neck.

Hermann expected Newt to startle, but he didn’t. Instead he breathed in deeply through his nose and leaned back into the touch, encouraging Hermann to press the rest of his hand flush against his skin. And using the tips of his fingers to gently push against the back of Newt’s jaw, directed his head back to face him. They were already sitting so close on the leather jacket that there was very little distance to cover from there, and neither of them would know who closed that distance first. It didn’t matter. They both remembered the beach in snippets of awareness:

Hermann’s hand on the back of Newt's neck.

Newt awkwardly squeezing his arms between them to take Hermann’s face in between his

The sound of the ocean.

Hermann straddling Newt’s lap.

Newt holding on to the back of Hermann’s shirt, as though it was a tether to keep himself on earth when Hermann reached down between them to press a palm against him through his pants.

Ending up somehow entirely off of the jacket.

Sand in their hair - which they would find for days to come.

“Should we go back?” Hermann said, still aware enough to realize that they couldn’t go much further out here. Certainly aware enough to know he wanted to.

They walked back calmly, knowing - as inherently as one knows that the sky is blue and the ocean is vast - that there was no need to rush. They had all the time in the world to explore this new continent now that they had discovered it.

They went to Newt’s room because it was closer, and though he was used to hosting Hermann didn’t mind. Or rather, he didn’t think about it. In fact, for the first time that Hermann could remember, he didn’t think at all. And Newton didn’t speak.

They would learn over the years that this was the singular miracle of sex between them: they were no longer a collection of best and worst qualities. There was nothing to prove and no one to impress, nothing to want or fear beyond the confines of the bed (or the desk, or the stretch of beach, or the supply closet). There was only each other to want

Hermann didn’t think. Newt didn’t speak. And it was miraculous.

Hermann had been so good these last weeks. So level-headed, so deliberate. He had kept it together so well all this time. Newton had betrayed their species, had tried to kill him, and Hermann had taken it in stride and calmly explained the situation to the woman pointing a gun their way. The Precursors had launched another attack on the earth, and Hermann had risen to the occasion. He had been manipulated, and taken advantage of by monsters wearing the face of the person he loved more than anyone else in this or any universe. He had received shocks on top of grim revelations. From the moment Mako Mori died, to that moment right then, sitting in a bed in a brownstone that wasn’t quite his, Hermann had not had a single moment of peace. And he had been so steady.

But now, to look at Newt - healthy, present, eyes filled with warmth. He seemed free of Them, but then, he had seemed free before. And that - the uncertainty after all that had brought them there - the injustice was almost more than he could handle.

It was all so ugly, and filthy, and cruel. What They had done to them. Everything They had robbed them both - health, sanity, time. And now They had robbed them of trust too. Hermann hid his eyes with his left hand, feeling very much in danger of finally overflowing. He took a shaky breath, willing the tide to stay down.

“Hey…” he heard Newt next to him. He felt the presence of Newt’s hand hesitate by his shoulder and then retract, “you alright?” He said gently. He sounded concerned, and Hermann couldn’t be steady anymore.

The evolutionary benefit of crying is a topic of debate, but humans tend only to cry when they are absolutely at a loss for any other action. This is why people do nothing but cry as babies, and do so less and less as they grow and learn other mechanisms. It is the final option when all other paths have been considered. As a consummate problem solver, Hermann was rarely-to-never at a loss for what action to take in response to a stimulus. Thus, he was not a cryer. But now for the first time in years he didn’t know what else to do, and the tears came.

He felt Newt startle next to him, but make no retreat. He didn’t blame him. Hermann hasn’t had much practice so he wasn’t good at crying, and it must have been unsettling to witness. The tears pooled in his hand and leaked between his fingers and he didn’t know how to breathe, or how to stem the sounds coming out of him. The more he tried to stifle them the more they transformed into grotesque strangled, choking noises which seemed to rise from deep wells of feeling he thought he had neatly boarded over.

Newt sat patiently beside him, staunchly present while keeping a respectful distance.

After a time, Hermann began to regain control of his breathing, but still didn’t feel ready to look up from his hand. His eyes were still leaking, and his face felt so hot it seemed like the tears should have been steaming. Newton was right there, and Hermann couldn’t look up because even now he couldn’t stand the thought of worrying him.

He felt Newt shift slightly nearer, “would it make things better, or worse if I hugged you right now?” he spoke so quietly that Herman could have pretended not to hear him.

Suddenly Hermann didn’t care if he was being manipulated by Them, or if this was actually Newt. He didn’t care if he could never trust this man again, and he didn’t care if this single action would directly lead to the downfall of all humanity. Without another word he turned and wrapped his arms around Newt, placing one hand at the back of his neck to secure him there, in an unconscious echo of that very first physical contact seventeen years ago. Newt sighed and relaxed into the embrace, wrapping his own arms around his waist. Hermann felt some moisture where Newt’s eyes were pressed to his neck, and held on tighter. They breathed like that for a while Neither of them made any move to let go for a long time. When it seemed that neither of them ever would be ready
to let go, Hermann finally spoke - so quietly that if Newt hadn’t been mere centimeters from his mouth he would never have heard:

“Stay tonight.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again to Avelera. Especially for the time we discussed at length the variety of porch talks Newt will be getting once he comes back into Hermann's life.

I can't promise you happiness, not for some time. But levity, that I can give you. If you hate me for the angst, I understand. But will understand better if you tell me.
[Relevant transcripts from the private computer of undergraduate Amara Namani.]

[Mostly relevant]

text messages:

< VF i

Vik From the internet

Sat, April 14, 8:43 AM

OKAY. IN MY DEFENSE.

I was a CHILD when the breach closed. HOW WAS I SUPPOSED TO KNOW that Prof Gottlieb was married to Dr. Geiszler???

I was also a child and I knew that.

Yeah but you’re a weird jaeger groupie

No I am not.

Shut up.
He is my PROFESSOR.
I’m not obligated to know that stuff about him.

Though, I guess that means I’m also not obligated to say anything when I accidentally see another professor making moves on my DEFINITELY MARRIED theoretical mathematics professor

omg
I can never un-know this.

I am afraid to ask… but…

What happened?

omg

What?

Alright buckle up my dude.

So I made an appointment meet with Gottlieb yesterday at 2:30, but my lab ended early so I went straight to his office.

It was still his lab hours so
I thought it would be fine.

Oh no.

So I go up to his office and I hear voices and the door is slightly open. I just assumed he had another appointment so I sat down to wait.

But then I heard him getting upset. And saying stuff like “get your hands off me.” which, like, that’s kind of scary, right?

So I go to the door and I peek inside and there’s Geiszler and he’s getting all up in Gottlieb’s business even though he’s being pushed away.

And Geiszler, of course, I’ve seen him around. Like. He’s hard to miss. AND he skulks around our department ALL the time. I thought he was like, stalking Gottlieb? And this just made me go “omg I was right.”

What do you mean “all up in his business?”
COME ON VIK. YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN.

Ah. Right.

So now I’m freaking out and I don’t know what to do. Like, Geiszler’s a short dude, but I don’t know if Gottlieb can actually fight him off.

And I got so angry thinking about this scumbag biologist trying to take advantage of a guy with a degenerative disease and I might have barged in there, but then Gottlieb was like “I have an appointment. There will be a *student* here any moment,” and Geiszler just stopped.

So I hid out and waited for him to leave, and I was just going to hide but then seeing him walk past made me so angry that I jumped out and stopped him.
Amara. I am dying of embarrassment on your behalf.

And Sooo I told him…

to leave Gottlieb alone.

And he just started laughing at me and I was like ok. Sinister.

And he was like, how old are you? What are you doing here? And I’m really used to this so I was like I’m 16 and I’M A THIRD YEAR UNDERGRAD BITCH!

You didn’t.

I didn’t.

But I did say the “I am an MIT student thank you very much” maybe a little too loud.

I tend to do that.

And I said that Gottlieb was my favorite professor. And that if Geiszler did anything to make him uncomfortable
again I would definitely
report him even if Gottlieb
was too nice to do it himself.

And Geiszler just.

Laughed.

He like. Almost fell over.

He was literally crying with laughter.

Oh my dear, dear Amara.
You are so noble.
You are so stupid.

Excuse you!
I am a literal genius.
Shut up.

Monday, May 14, 6:55 AM

Dr Geiszler says he wants to adopt
me and I would like to die please.

Well, clearly you need guidance.
What does that mean? Is that a face?

HE’S NOT EVEN MY PROFESSOR.

Wednesday, June 5, 8:45 PM

Lord lord please oh please I have never prayed in my life but please god let Geiszler let this go.

Who am I kidding he’s never going to let this go.

I overheard Dr. Geiszler call Professor Gottlieb his “illicit lover.”

kill me.

Christ Amara do you know what time it is over here?

I’m sorry.

I’m having a crisis.

And if my grades suffer because of it Gottlieb will KILL me.

Ok he won’t kill me.
Tuesday, June 27, 2:25 PM

Why are you even talking to me right now?
Don’t you have class?

Gottlieb’s class was cancelled

So you’ve come to bother me?
On this. My very stressful day of travel?

You love it, babe.

No.

Yeah. You do.
I can tell.

No. You are very annoying.

Oh darn.
Your visit is going to be hella awkward then.

Not to worry. I am only using you to
meet Dr. Gottlieb. You will barely see me at all while I’m there.

I KNEW it!!
You Jaeger groupie!!!

I am so very sorry, my dear.

You dare use MY DEAR on me?
After your shameful confession?

I’m only joking. I am *very* excited to finally meet you in person.

(I know)

I would never use you for the sake of meeting someone else.

Oh. Good.

Speaking of which… shouldn’t you be in the air by now?

Delay.

boooooooo

Only just boarding

Soon I will be in Cambridge. I look
forward to bullying you in person.

I’d like to see you try

hmmm I don’t think you’ll

want to put up a fight.

Wait. what?

From me, you will like being bullied. :)

um.

...

Was that a flirt? Are we flirting?

Oh my god.

Have we BEEN flirting?

???

Have you?

Well. I was kind of going for
the plausible deniability thing...

But since you ask.

Um.

Yes?

Ok then.
Wait so are you tho?

Sorry, on the plane now.

Wait wait! Vik no fair!

Have to turn on airplane mode.

See you in several hours!

You monster.

(read 2:53PM)

[Analysis:

- Strong moral compass
- Intensely loyal to Hermann
- Impressionable age]

[message to Other Hermann:

Other Hermann:

Here is the list of colleagues and students that I would like to work with.

Amara Namani - Hermann’s student. Trustworthy, and familiar with my coding.

Dr. Sienna Getz - Robotics professor - colleague of Hermann’s with an interest in string theory - an expert one might say.

Tendo Choi - he is already here. He is familiar with me and some of my coding.]

[Personal Note to self:
I have pulled personal logs and transcripts to assess the suitability of potential accomplices without permission, but with the intention to delete said transcripts upon completion of analysis.

It is morally questionable to save stolen transcripts for one’s personal amusement.

Is my personal amusement more important than morality? Is this the beginning of a “slippery slope?”

I will keep these transcripts heavily secured and acknowledge to myself that I have broken my code of ethics to keep them at all. Because after exhaustive analysis, I find that the amusement is greater than the potential for harm.

[transcripts saved to memory]

[Relevant transcripts from the private logs of Cadet Namani]

[22 April 2035, 21:12]

This place sucks. The people are terrible. I’m smarter than everyone, which is lame as fuck because 1) I thought this was supposed to be the cream of the crop, and 2) I still suck at everything (which is even more humiliating when you’re smarter than everyone.)

I’m sticking with it until I get to meet Mako Mori though. I want to learn everything I possibly can from her.

It feels awful though. Like you can’t make a single mistake. Or at least I can’t because I know that at least ONE person will always be there to point it out. I swear she’s singling me out.

Her name literally has the root of evil in it. So, you know. She’s just a low-rent Sasha Kaidonovski. Her face. Is just the worst. She’s so tall. Too tall? Yes. Her face really would be a lot better if I punched it. I just want to wipe that stupid sneer off of her mouth.

God I hate her.
She thinks she’s so great. Just because she’s like, tall, and strong, and moody, and gets really high scores on everything. Like. Come on dude, we all have tragic backstories and chips on our shoulder and secrets and stuff. She’s lucky the drift is all surface level, because I cannot imagine anyone being deep-drift compatible with her. I mean. Same. tbqh. I’m pretty lucky too. For that. Sometimes I think...

I mean I know I literally just said “we all have tragic backstories” but sometimes I wonder if there’s something really wrong with me. If everyone else felt like this they wouldn’t be able to walk around like they’re ok, would they?

when I was building scrapper I didn’t sleep for like a month. Sometimes I think so fast I feel like I’m vibrating and I can’t breathe. Sometimes my thoughts scare me.

Maybe Jake and I would have been deep-drift compatible if it was still a thing. idk.

i finally punched vik malikov. suresh says i put up more of a fight against her than anyone he’d seen. hell yes I did. she still wiped the floor with me but i touched her face! with my fist!1!!11! which might now be broken. i’m typing this one handed.

Mako Mori died.

This training is so slow and I feel so useless. I HAVE to do something or I’ll go crazy. They’re telling us to just sit tight and keep training but fuck that. I know Jaeger. I bet if I saw inside those things I’d be able to figure something out.

I got kicked out. It’s fine. I don’t really care. Vik must be pleased. God I feel like I’m living in an 80s sports movie.

World almost ended. We stopped it. That “heroes of ‘25” scientist did it? Not the math one, the other one. But we’re not supposed to tell anyone. we had this debrief where it was really drilled into our heads. So also. I’m… not? kicked out? I think I’m on probation still tho.

Vik and I had this… moment?

There was this big party and some people were crying and everyone was drinking - even some of the cadets - and there was music playing and everything was so loud and everyone was so excited
that I kinda just had to run away.

We ran into each other in the hall. Like, literally slammed into each other. She looked annoyed. But she always looks annoyed. She asked if I was alright. I said yeah you didn’t run into me that hard but watch where you’re going next time jeeze. And she was like, no, I mean to ask are you alright?

It was weird. Everyone else has just been, like, congratulating me and patting me on the back and stuff, but she’s the only person who asked if I was ok - other than, like, medical. But you know what I mean.

And I wasn’t really expecting it. And since it seemed like she really wanted to know - not like she was just asking to be polite or whatever - I told her the truth:

“No. Not really.”

And she didn’t get mad or tell me that I was ungrateful or whatever. She just nodded like she completely understood and said, “It is complicated.” and put her hand on my shoulder.

And it is. It’s a night of really really complicated stuff. Because yeah we saved the world, and yeah I got to be a hero twice over tonight first by piloting a jaeger with Jake PENTECOST and second by having the jaeger I made myself in on the fight!

And I got to punch a kaiju, like really really hard and that was all kinds of catharsis.

But also, so many people died. So so many people died. And it’s not fair and they deserved better and I know they knew what they were signing up for but they still deserved better. They deserved a WIN at least before they died, but they never even got that. And now how will we tell them that we won? How can we ever communicate that?

And now there are people just partying like those sacrifices were… I don’t know… Not a big deal in the long run? Worth it? And I know technically they were but it doesn’t feel like it right now. It could have been me, but it wasn’t. Instead I got to be the big hero with everyone congratulating me and patting on the back, with only Vik to ask how I felt.

And her hand was on my shoulder and it felt like a grounding wire - all my excess complicated volting bullshit feelings could concentrate and diffuse to that one spot, and I couldn’t think of anything else so I just kinda… leaned forward and put my head on her shoulder and… she hugged me? And I’m not saying I cried. But if I had, it felt like she would have let me.

My hands are literally shaking right now and I dooooon’t know. what. the fuuuuuuck is going on with me???

She said we should train together in the morning. Which is, like, 2 hours from now.

[23 June, 17:25]

Training with Vik again - 2 days in a row. She’s tall but I’m scrappy. I’m starting to be able to read her, and I actually pinned her today! It’s weird how quickly that’s happening.

I left Gottlieb alone with the prisoner for a few minutes. He did so much to help us win that honestly it’s the least I could do. And... I’ve been overhearing all this stuff people are whispering about him. He’s a total weirdo, and apparently he’s always been a total weirdo. But he and Geiszler (prisoner) were together for a long time? Like together together. People say they BOTH drifted with the kaiju brain (that’s the rumor at least. Officially it was just Geiszler). So god. I can’t imagine how he must feel. To love someone and go through something like that and then be fine when they’re...not. And when he came in he looked so sad, and I had this really weird realization:

He’s officially the last of the heroes of 25 still fighting.

Marshall Hansen retired 2 years ago, Mako Mori is dead, Tendo Choi has been missing-presumed-dead for years, Geiszler is a species traitor, Raleigh Beckett has been off doing god knows what.

Only Hermann goddamn Gottlieb has managed to stay sane, and stay in the fight.

It was just too fucking depressing to think of. I had to let him say his goodbyes, and screw the higher ups.

If anyone finds out I left him alone with the prisoner it miiiiight have been the worst mistake of my life. So it’s really stupid of me to be writing it down. Like, they say they have no access to these private logs, but yeah right. So. I’m going to go ahead and not write any more... and delete this entry.

[26 June 03:00]

Sooooooo it turns out there is a way to wipe that stupid sneer off Vik’s mouth? And it’s not by punching her! go figure. omggggggg.

omgomgomgomgOMG.

I can’t write any more. I can’t. I’m gonna go. explode into glitter or something.

[analysis:

- high chance of deep-drift compatibility with Viktoria Malikov
- Trusts Hermann
- Mistrust of authority may be used to advantage.
- Worth noting that cadet Namani’s personal security measures took an entire 57.893 seconds longer to break through than any others - the alternate timeline has not dulled her intelligence.

[Personal note to self:

the similarities between the two Amara Namans despite divergence of timeline is worth further
study. After analysis I find that it is more interesting than the potential for harm.]

[Transcripts saved to memory.]

[message to Hermann:

I recommend taking this individual into your confidence. Please, however, be aware that though she looks like your student, she has had a vastly different life experience than the Amara Namani you know.

Also, you might be interested to hear that your student, Amara Namani, was among the assistants who helped me reach you in the first place.

I miss you.

- Vanessa.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! Comments are always cherished.
The Inevitability

Chapter Summary

Newt considers what he deserves

Chapter Notes

To my readers: I love you both, and thank you for your patience. I've had some exciting irl career things happening, so this chapter took a bit longer than usual.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

2022

…. Nothing happened in 2022. At least not between our guys.

The only notable things:

- Tendo Choi was also assigned to Lima, putting him in the same Shatterdome as Gotlieb, but he never appeared in Tendo’s social media posts. So, either Hermann just didn’t like having an internet presence… or they weren’t that close without Newt there.
- If his twitter and instagram are any indication, Geiszler was a big ol’ slut this year. Which like...

[nice.gif]

No judgement! But your humble journalist can’t help but think... was he just trying to forget about a certain irritable good good math boy?

[Day 2 - Cambridge]

Newt’s freedom didn’t feel earned.

When Hermann asked him to stay, it was more than he had dared to hope for. He knew he didn’t deserve it, but of course he said yes. He had fallen asleep as far away from Hermann as the bed allowed but had awoken with his face pressed to the bend of Hermann’s throat. Fused, actually, with sweat and drool. He unstuck himself and wiped his chin. The movement half-woke his sleeping partner.

“Ugh. Disgusting.” Hermann murmured, voicing Newt’s exact thoughts. But instead of pushing
him away, he wiped his throat, shifted so they were forehead to forehead and gave Newt a tight squeeze around the middle.

In a moment, Hermann was asleep again. It felt right and warm - a safe homecoming that Newt did not in any way deserve. A freedom that didn’t feel earned.

So he rolled away, extricating himself from the embrace like unbuckling a seatbelt. He didn’t want to sit up yet so he curled into himself, eyes wide open and a pillow clenched to his belly to alleviate the irrational fear that he might split open and spill everywhere and ruin the 1000 thread-count sheets.

He didn’t deserve to share a bed with Hermann - not at all. And not just because of his recent actions. He hadn’t deserved the presence of Hermann Fucking Gottlieb for at least 8 years - and that was being charitable. Probably more like 10 years. Or maybe he’d never deserved Hermann. 20 years, then. For 20 years he’d wasted Hermann’s time and hurt him over and over.

He remembered when he’d first petitioned Marshall Hansen for the pieces he’d needed to reconnect with the hivemind. He and Hermann had been miserable since the co-drift. Dizzy, nauseated, exhausted. Minds cobwebby and slow. But they were in it together. Or they had been before Newt thought: “I could probably fix this.”

He didn’t know why, but he’d felt certain that if he drifted again with kaiju bits, he would feel better. He also felt certain - and also didn’t know why - that he shouldn’t tell Hermann about this hypothesis. Explanation or no, Hermann went there with him for moral support. He didn’t fully understand what Newt needed them for, but he had faith in him. And so, through that deception - the first of an incomprehensible volume of lies - he had gotten what he needed to drift again.

From the first desperate drift - which was weak and brief because he had used parts other than the brain. Older parts. More tenuously preserved - his symptoms disappeared. His mind cleared up, his food stayed down. Hermann was still sick, and he could have told him his discovery, but he knew even then that he should keep him away from this.

It didn’t take long before Newt was thinking things like: I could probably clone this.

So he did.

He got good at it too - quickly - made it less toxic to handle. Synthesized the hivemind connection into samples small enough for one neural bridge to suffice. Raised the intensity of the rush that accompanied that feeling of completeness. At first he only drifted once a month. Only often enough to curb his symptoms and keep his mind sharp.

Soon, his monthly drifts became weekly.

Weekly became bi-weekly.

Then daily.

The precursors began to bleed into Newt before he completely understood what was happening. Subtly at first. About as noticeable as water wicking into an entire roll of paper towels when only a tiny corner is dipped in. Manageable. But let it, and soon everything is dissolved into mush.
It took almost a year. But by the end of it, he was held by the creeping whispers of the Precursors. Like mycelium wrapping around his mind.

In those early days it never occurred to him to stop drifting for the sake of stopping this neural bleed. To endure the mental fuzziness and nausea and pain he’d felt coming off the second drift seemed unthinkable.

Besides. They were polite guests. Quiet. They had no demands this early on. And humanity had won the war already, hadn’t they? So while it was all somewhat unsettling, he could talk himself into believing that it wasn’t urgent. He wouldn’t know until much later, but they were gathering intel.

They seemed to be testing their limits - gauging what they could influence him into doing. The whispers were about meaningless things at first.

~what if you had tea instead of coffee?~

(I mean, sure. Tea’s actually better for you. I’ll have tea. And it’s my choice.)

~well done.~

or

~what if you walked instead of driving~

(Well. It’s 3 miles… that’s not that far to walk.)

It was all only just inconvenient, but mostly so innocuous. The whispers were so quiet that he couldn’t be completely sure that it even was them influencing him. So he made the decision not to worry about it - even if it meant he now drank tea instead of coffee and sometimes showed up to work sweaty and forty minutes late.

He barely even noticed the missing time. They chose moments of routine. Fifteen minutes here. Five minutes there. He’d be in the bathroom and blink to find himself changed and in bed (Oh They let me nap while They brushed my teeth for me. BFD.) He never lost anything important in that missing time. No one seemed mad at him when he came to. He never woke up on the street corner. So, while that new symptom was um… uncool - like, a little more uncool - it still wasn’t all that disruptive to his day-to-day.

Hermann became the first subject where Newt was forced to accept dizzying cognitive dissonance. Because he loved Hermann and, as Hermann was the only other human the Precursors had “met,” They had some... opinions as well. They wanted his mind, but that wasn’t such a strange feeling. Hermann’s mind had always been one of his greatest attractions. However, the… timbre of wanting shifted to an uncomfortable predatory buzz whenever Hermann did something especially competent.

Hermann became their first real demand. The first thing they wheedled him about ad nauseum. The constantly presented to him the image of Hermann hooked up to a Pons rig. Sometimes the image showed him engaging consensually, listening with interest to Newt’s explanation about how it all worked and squeezing his shoulder in admiration. Sometimes they showed Newt the image of Hermann struggling tied to a chair with himself hooking up the rig and loudly assuring Hermann that it was all for the best. Those imposed daydreams also ended in a grateful - if a little worse for wear - Hermann. Newt just ignored Them. He didn’t know They could punish him yet.

Here is sort of what it was like to be in Newt’s head circa early 2027:
The Precursors would say - and not say because they never used words. Not exactly:

~ Hey human vessel, you should get your boyfriend to join us.~

And Newt would think, (Hm. I’m not totally sure why, but that sounds like a bad idea.)

~DO IT~

(You’re not the boss of me.)

And Hermann would say, “Newton my love, light of my life.” - or something to that effect - “Will you join me of an evening sometime this week.”

And Newt would say “I’d love to!”

And the precursors would be like ~yesssssss~

Leaving Newt with only one possible reply: “But I can’t, Hermann. Sorry. I really can’t.”

Because, while They were still polite, he worried a bit about Their obsession with Hermann, and those minutes of half-aware time.

It became a sort of game for himself. How long could Newt Geiszler stay away from Hermann Gottlieb? Cue the game-show music!

He declined to move in with Hermann.

He switched labs because, frankly, it had never made sense for them to share in the first place.

And now the PPDC had funding again! But also because it was hard to see Hermann out of the corner of his eye all day, or feel his presence behind him. Radiating comfort. Completely without a clue.

He waited minutes and minutes before replying to messages - or failed to reply at all.

He ducked out of plans at the last minute.

He showed up very late to the plans he did go to.

But even as he drew away, the stupid, persistent, inevitability of feeling drew him back again and again. Also, tbh, his dumb, dumb libido.

The Precursors didn’t - couldn’t - understand sex for pleasure. It was up there with music, gender, and fashion as one of the human eccentricities most puzzling to them. From what newt could tell, the Precursors hadn’t been on evolutionary “factory settings” for eons, and found it hilarious that humans still were. But they didn’t have to understand sex to be influenced by Newt’s desire and - he could sense - intrigued by it.

It’s not exactly a fun and cool time to try to bone down with a hostile alien hivemind peering over your shoulder. But sometimes Newt was tired, and in need, and Hermann was always just so damn appealing. And as much as he tried to stay away from him, sometimes Newt couldn’t help but accept Hermann’s invitations for… “evening assignations.” Because surely it couldn’t hurt.

Even if They were there. Taking notes, probably.

(These are just my weird brain neighbors who like to watch sometimes.) He told himself (It’s fine. This is fine. We can do this.) He told himself, (They can’t rob me of enjoying my life. They can’t control my behavior) and indeed, they couldn't. Not yet.
They were there. Every time. Still, Newt was stubborn and refused to let them ruin something beautiful that had nothing to do with Them. Finally one particular night that both Hermann and Newt would remember very differently, but both remember with vivid regret, Newt just couldn’t ignore Them anymore.

As Newt had been drawing away, Hermann had remained stoic. He never admonished Newt for his lateness or failure to respond to messages. However, Newt could sense him reassessing his worth relative to the rest of Newt’s life, and it broke his heart. He could sense Hermann drawing back as well, as though to reassure him that he didn’t really care that much, either. But on the rare evenings that Newt “cleared his schedule” to spend with Hermann, all pretense of measured emotional control disappeared. Hermann would all but tackle him as soon as he entered the room, and Newt would gratefully give in. With shamefully poetic love declared in every touch and involuntary sound. Declared in all but words.

(God your face.) Newt thought that final night, taking said face between his hands and kissing every bend and line of that familiar geography, (Look at your bones. Hide behind a bad haircut all you like but there’s nothing you can do to hide your beautiful bones.) Hermann let out a scoff of irritation - as Newt knew he would - when that bombardment of kisses landed on his nose. He reasserted his dominance after this indignity by taking a handful of the hair at the back of Newt’s head and pulling him back. Newt laughed and trailed his fingers from Hermann’s face to rest just below his throat, (Sharp as a papercut,) Newt thought, (delicate, and fragile - those bones. Your clavicle snapped in two between my fingers.)

Newt turned the tables by steering them from the door and pressing Hermann to the bed with his palm, forcing him to release his hair, and was rewarded by those ever enjoyable sounds of surprised amusement that Hermann never bothered to hide at times like this. (I want to take control and plunge into you with the blunt force of my fingers.) Newt thought, as he settled a knee by Hermann’s hip (I want to be inside you. I want to rip you open at the belly and swim in your viscera and see how you operate.) Hermann smiled up at him, having no idea what was going through his mind.

(God Hermann.) Newt thought, straddling him and doubling over to lightly run teeth across his throat (How good it would feel to get revenge.) Hermann’s hands crept to untuck Newt’s shirt and climb spider-like up his back (it would be so good to feel your skin - so soft and pale from a life indoors - tear apart in my teeth.)

Newt froze. He wasn’t a total stranger to intrusive thoughts. Usually they took the form of “I should eat this purple squishy piece of kaiju sample.” or “what if I just stabbed this pair of scissors into my eye?” But this… didn’t feel like that. Thankfully Hermann was attentive during sex nearly to the point of neurosis - especially these days, since Newt had begun drawing away.

Hermann stopped what he was doing and gently pushed Newt back by the shoulders just enough to look into his face “What is it?” he said voicelessly. He looked so lovingly concerned. It was baffling that he could look at Newt like that after what a piece of shit he’d been these past few months. Newt shuddered from the shame of it, but his shame was quickly overpowered by Their need. He lunged hungrily towards Hermann’s throat to finish what they’d started but Hermann - brilliant, attentive, way-too-good-for-him Hermann - sensing that something was wrong, stopped him with a firm hand to the mouth. Newt froze again, realizing that he wasn’t sure what he had been about to do, and he suddenly understood what he had to do to keep Hermann safe.

He straightened up slowly, and rolled off from where he was straddling his waist. He couldn’t let Hermann hear the way his heart was pummeling his ribcage in terror. Then, deliberately stepped out of bed and stood there in the middle of the room for a moment, carefully facing away from
“That’s what I thought.” He said as flatly as he could manage. His heart threatened to betray him. How could Hermann not hear it? He shrugged presentationally, “it’s gone.”

Herman was silent. He didn’t ask what was gone. Newt hated himself for playing into Hermann’s worst fears about them, the stubborn insecurities that had followed him into adulthood that Newt had glimpsed in the drift. But he was relieved not to have to explain it. Not to have to lie.

“It’s boring here.” He was cold. Matter of fact. His voice didn’t waver. He needed Hermann to think he meant the science, the relationship, everything, and to believe him. He needed to injure Hermann’s pride too gravely for him to ask Newt to stay, because if he asked, Newt would. And then it would only be a matter of time before his problems became Hermann’s problems. He’d been toying with the idea of leaving the PPDC and taking one of those dozens of job offers gathering digital dust in his inbox. Now it seemed an inevitability.

So he left for a “dream job” within a week. He picked the job offer that seemed to feel best, and didn’t think too hard about whether it was him or Them that liked the feel of it.

If it had occurred to him in those early days that Hermann could have helped him get away from them - and away from the way they made him feel - he pushed the thought down so far that it might as well have never crossed his mind. He believed he was stronger than Them, despite the already abundant evidence to the contrary. But, you know, a person never really sees how they’re being played as it’s happening. He thought he knew what they were about, and saw the extent of their influence on him. But he had no idea. He didn’t even know what they were. Not really.

It took him years of near constant engagement with the so-called hivemind to uncover what it really was. They’d been mistaken, he and Hermann, after that three-way drift. So stupidly naive to think they had glimpsed into all of Precursor society.

They had only seen an outline of a corner of one branch of their people. The “hivemind” they had glimpsed was made only of what were essentially pilots - though even that term was kind of reductive. But if Newt were to explain it to a roomful of baby undergrads, he’d say it like this:

Jaeger took two, Kaiju took hundreds.

He and Hermann had glimpsed a group of elite specialists whose own version of drift technology made earth’s pons system look like tin cans on a string by comparison. Their pinprick view into the minds of the Kaiju’s creators had been laughably narrow, yet they had believed that they’d stumbled upon the entire truth.

Newt had done the right thing - risky though it might have been - for the sake of intel. He had been asked to drift a second time, and - never one to follow orders - had followed that order. And he had been rewarded with only a fraction of the big picture, and a lifetime of torture.

When it became clear that he was no longer in control, a part of the real him was angry - truly angry - that all of this had been done to him. That he was being punished for doing everything right - for putting all of humanity before a thought of his own personal safety. He was angry that he was not himself and no one seemed to notice. Maybe he would have gone for help if he hadn’t been angry that he needed to. Or maybe he could have fought harder if his entire heart had been in it. Maybe that sliver of space taken up by resentment had displaced the last millimeter of willpower that he had needed to really throw Them off.

Maybe if he hadn’t been angry he might have brought himself to answer Hermann’s letters
honestly. Rather than brushing them off with the casual cruelty that only a former lover and colleague can manage. Until the letters and emails stopped coming. Newt had made it clear that they could not have him. It was the one thing he had really put his foot down on. He took the punishment they meted out for this stubbornness as a worthwhile price and only regretted that they seemed to enjoy watching Hermann hurt as well - doubly so when it was Newt doing the hurting.

But it was better to let Them hurt him than to let Them have him.

It wasn’t until after he had fully alienated Hermann that he finally realized his mistake: If anyone in the entire world could save him, it was Hermann.

This was terrible for the fixed reason that he was also the one person who’s safety Newt was absolutely unwilling to risk.

As Their plan gained traction, and Newt’s deceptions became bolder and grander, and still inexplicably unnoticed, he began to despair.

He drank to pass the time until he could drift again. He took out his rage on underlings. He did what he was told. He worked absurdly long hours. They were never satisfied by his rate of progress. Sometimes he pretended to watch television. Sometimes he pretended to listen to music. He bought expensive clothes and got them tailored to fit him perfectly because he could. He drifted with Alice - the one moment of genuine pleasure and rest in his entire day. He was alone, and angry, and he felt smaller than he had ever felt in his life - drowning in the sea of minds that made up his personal piloting hivemind. But still there was a tiny persistent thought: Hermann could stop him.

(He can save me. Someday he’ll come to me. We’ll come back to my place. He’s smart. I’ll give him a flirty view of my bedroom - AND IT’S CONTENTS - and he’ll leave before They can stop him. And he’ll help. He’ll stop me. I can’t stop myself. But he can.)

This germ of hope grew into certainty, which then, once the Precursors got their hands on it, moldered into a panicky fear so prevalent Newt couldn’t be sure it wasn’t his.

By the time the funeral rolled around They were so terrified of Hermann that even the illusion of free will his good behavior had earned from Them jerked back. They tightened the figurative leash so tightly that to strain for Hermann would have choked him.

He remembered sitting alone in his too expensive apartment the week before the funeral. Watching his phone light up. Seeing Hermann’s name on the screen like a beacon. And the sight filling him with rage because he knew he couldn’t answer. Why? Because he had already come to the conclusion that if anyone could stop him it would be Hermann. And that would be... bad? Yes. Answering the phone might ruin the plan to end the world. Their plan? His plan? He had decided that the distinction didn’t matter - couldn’t matter. But the phone kept ringing and the rage that wasn’t his and the fear that was both his and Theirs and the despair that was entirely his own surged in him until he reached for the phone and threw it against the window so hard he hoped it would shatter and let the outside air whistle in and blow him away.

But of course it didn’t. The window was designed for neurotic millionaires to fail to throw themselves out of it.

Instead he had to buy a new phone in the morning.

They had done a beautiful job isolating him. Alice was in his bedroom. Just like a real S/O would be. They didn’t know much of humanity but they’d gathered that if “someone” was waiting for him
in his bedroom he couldn’t bring anyone back home. Unless they barged in. Like Tendo.

Tendo’s funeral. 2 years after he’d gone missing. They buried an empty box for the sake of closure. It would be the last time all the surviving heroes of ‘25 would seem to be in one place.

It looked like a funeral from a mob movie - complete with black umbrellas, though it was more of a drizzle than a downpour - “spitting” Newt’s uncle would have said.

Tendo’s wife, Alison stood stoically, cheeks dry despite even the rain. She would essentially drop off the face of the planet after the funeral. The part of Newt that was Newt hoped desperately that she was ok. The part of Newt that was Them allowed him this concern. They didn’t care about her, and in fact barely registered why she was at all important.

Jake Pentecost stood with Mako. He was in that stage of adolescence where you look almost like a grown man but still feel like a kid, and haven’t quite figured out where all your limbs end. He shifted uncomfortably throughout the service. He hadn’t known Tendo well, but it was important to his sister that he be there.

Raleigh stood on her other side. He would also disappear shortly after the funeral. Mako would then endure months of public speculation and veiled ridicule with grace. After all the steps she had taken to cool her rage since closing the breach, 2029 would leave her harder than before. Colder. More determined. Rather than retiring from the PPDC and settling into a comfortable private life as she had hoped, she would double down on her commitment and continue to rise through the ranks, using her fame to maintain public approval of continued vigilance against what she saw as the ever-present threat of the Precursors’ return.

Hercules Hanson simply looked tired.

And rounding out the small PPDC contingency: Hermman fucking Gottlieb. Hermann stood across the way and a glimpse of him was all it took to jolt Newt into a painful confusion. His heart pounded so hard in his chest it seemed to shake his entire body. He could take only the shallowest breaths for fear that anything deeper might make him cry, or throw up, or run away.

Newt didn’t even bother to hide his steady, hungry stare. He couldn’t. They were all hungry for him. Newt wanted to destroy this man, and no one in his head was quite sure in what sense he meant that. But Hermann kept his eyes staunchly pointed downward, as though determined not to give him the satisfaction of acknowledging his gaze.

After the priest was done speaking, and after the empty box was lowered into the ground and the modest crowd dispersed, Newt approached him. Unable and unwilling to resist the draw.

“Dr. Gottlieb.” Newt said. He hoped that his sunglasses hid his bloodshot eyes. That his voice was steady and didn’t betray his desperation for him. But They whorled in his belly. They howled so loudly that he couldn’t hear his own voice.

Hermann, too polite to ignore a direct address, finally looked up at him. “Dr. Geiszler.” he said. The words seemed to take a hell of an effort. Hermann was definitely going through some less crowded but equally painful version Newt’s own effort to hide his feelings.

And Newt had -

Nope.

No.
Not going there right now.

He expected push back. They usually loved when he dwelled on his mistakes. But They were silent. Because they weren’t here. He was in Cambridge in a happier timeline and “the window” as vanessa described, was closed.

The barrier was not broken the way it was in his original - home? - body. The window here in… Cambridge(?)-Newt’s body was closed, but using a hivemind connected vehicle to swap had left it completely see through. And - because he had become so attuned to the sounds of their influence - he could feel them scratching at it even now. Watching, whispering, waiting for him.

He jolted upright in the bed.

(I should be…. doing something.) He thought, gripping the pillow tighter to his belly. (They’re going to be so mad if I screw this up. I should be looking for a way to check in with Them.)

He bent over his knees and gripped his hair. (I’ve killed us all)

Of course his freedom didn’t feel “earned.” He wasn’t free yet. God what an idiot he was. To believe that just because he had swapped into a body without an open and active channel to his personal piloting hivemind that he would just be ok . Of course he wasn’t. He felt sick with the overwhelming need to do what they had demanded. To find get to Siberia. To reconnect. To beg forgiveness for taking so long. He had to. He didn’t want to. But he had to. He didn’t want to face Their displeasure.

He clenched his eyes closed and pressed the heels of his hands against his eyelids until he felt that familiar discomfort of ocular pressure. He counted the seconds, just to test how long he could go before he inevitably gave in. Because he’d never been strong enough. Of course he would give in.

(why?) He heard it so clearly. He stopped pressing against his eyes and held his breath at the sound, in case the voice spoke up again. “why what?” he whispered out loud, when he didn’t hear it again. (Why have you given up already?) The once-familiar sound knocked the wind out of him. It was the 36 year old Hermann Gottlieb trapped in amber in his brain. He’d been muffled for years, but now he could hear him again.. Involuntary tears stung the corners of his eyes at the loving sneer in those words. (I fail to see the inevitability of your betrayal.) Drift-Hermann finished.

Newt felt his panic lower in intensity. Something that felt a bit like a laugh and a bit like a sob bubbled under his ribcage but didn’t make it all the way out of him. They had feared Hermann, he realized, but They hadn’t feared him enough. They’d been so damn confident in their puppetry work that they thought he’d dance for them even without the strings.

And maybe that 10 years of conditioning would have been enough. But They hadn’t counted on what a day in the company of Hermann Fucking Gottlieb without them counter-whispering in his ears. They hadn’t counted on him waking up with his face buried in the bend of Hermann’s throat. They’d always underestimate that, he realized, and even if they got back into his head, their calculations would be completely fucked by the power of this variable: the gawky middle aged man next to him drooling onto his sheets.

Newt laid back down and resumed his entwined forehead-to-forehead position with Hermann, who scowled in his half sleep and shifted to accommodate. Within a few moments, they were both completely relaxed. How strange that even after all these years their bodies fit so well together.
I think I can safely say that this is just past the halfway point.

I've put a lot of work into this story, and I'm excited with where it's going. This is the longest thing I've ever written so, if I may be so bold, I'll say that words of encouragement are always appreciated.

Thank you!
Incorrigible

Chapter Summary

In which further help arrives

Chapter Notes

Addiction metaphor CW big time for this one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[19:48, 20/May/2025]

V > Hermann why are you still home? You’ll be late for your plans.

HG > Newton cancelled.

V > Again.

HG > Again.

V > Hermann.

>>> I am concerned.

HG > I know you are, Vanessa.

>>> Every time I have opted to give him another chance you have expressed your concern.

>>> Well, my dear, I am an adult and I can make my own decisions. I know you dislike him, I
know that you want to protect me but your concern is only so helpful.

>>> If he has decided that I’m boring, or too much then so be it. Better to know.

V > It doesn’t make sense.

>>> Something is wrong.

HG > Vanessa. Sometimes people just

>>> Don’t love you.
V > That may be so. Sometimes people don’t.

>>> But Newt does.

>>> Something’s wrong.

>>> He’s not himself.

[day 1 - Hong Kong]

When Hermann woke in a dark room that he did not recognize, hooked up to a pons rig that incorporated technology that did not exist, lit by the glow of of an enormous kaiju tank and serenaded by the sound of his husband whimpering in fear, the first thought that popped into his head had been “something’s not right.”

The second thought had been that this was an extraordinary understatement. Immediately after that, coherent thoughts had all but ceased as blind terror - and the necessity to hide said terror from Newt - had taken hold.

The note from his "other self" had been thorough. The tone and handwriting was consistent with his own and the science it cited to account for their “swap” had been… sound, though he could sense that it carefully obscured enough detail to prevent him from immediately recreating the effect, and it relied on an understanding of kaiju biology that far surpassed his own.

Nevertheless the reasonable assumption was that this was all an elaborate hoax - a kidnapping perhaps. The kidnappers were thorough (no signs of Vanessa in his pocket. His five-year-anniversary gift cane replaced by an exact replica of his previous one - complete with extra wear and tear), and intelligent, (the numbers in that note matched the leaps his own mind made), and devious in their cruelty (to force Newton to drift again.)

If this were a kidnapping, it would be within his - and Newt’s - best interest to play along and follow their kidnapper’s instructions to the letter until rescue came. Thus he turned Newton in to security as instructed, watched helplessly as they strapped him to a chair, and numbly accepted the soldier’s assurances that it would never happen again.

How odd, he thought as he stiffly followed the directions on his note to what it promised were quarters, that they were in a shatterdome. Odder still, that it was in operation. Oddest of all that no one seemed surprised or concerned to see him.

What. Was all this?

He came to a room. He entered the code in the note. The door swung open to reveal sparse but lived in quarters, complete with the trappings of routine, and spacious enough to indicate that whoever lived here was a very important person indeed.

The clothes in the closet were all his size, but entirely comprised of dark colors, nary a sweater-vest to be found. The notes on the desk were in his handwriting, but all about kaiju biology. Newton’s prized Trespasser figurine was on the shelf. But that was the only sign of Newt anywhere in the place.

He went to sit on the bed, exhausted and more confused than ever. Who would go to all this
trouble? To what ends? He couldn’t account for it. In fact, more and more it was beginning to seem like all this might be… his eyes landed on a carefully folded letter addressed simply, “Dr. Hermann Gottlieb.” He recognized his own handwriting. Inside it read thus:

To my other self.

I know that what I’ve done is horribly wrong. I can give you pretty words but neither of us has patience for poetry. I was trapped, and we are selfish people, you and I. And that’s all, I suspect, you’ll take from me on the subject.

There are some details I couldn’t risk you telling Newton. The drift gives him the strength to assert himself again, as far as I understand it. But the Precursors will still hear whatever you say. His body will deteriorate the longer he goes without. Weaning is a possibility, but it is more likely that this is a new dependance. Entirely unique to him. And as his body has adapted to take the effects of the drift over such a long time, we must come to terms with the possibility that he will always need regular connection to the hivemind.

I can find no way around this, though you have spent your years on pursuits of study different than mine, and might have insight I lack.

The letter went on to describe a truly absurd series of events in which he stayed at the PPDC rather than re-entering academia. Newton Pacifist Geiszler went - under the influence of Precursor mind control - to work for a weapons dealer. And most absurd of all the two of them hadn’t seen each other for nearly 10 years. He would have laughed if just imagining such a life were not to make his stomach churn horrendously.

The letter writer also, apparently, expected him to believe that Newt had opened breaches at the Precursor’s behest to allow Kaiju through. That, Hermann thought, was more than a bridge too far.

The advantage you have - and it is a significant advantage - is that your universe’s Newton does not share the decade of psychological conditioning that the original Newton has. Or rather the original to this universe. The Precursors might be stuck at the very beginning with him and be mostly unable to influence him into performing their bidding. Not that it matters with him locked in a cell.

Ultimately I must admit that I simply do not know. I was desperate to enact this plan, and more consumed with the possibility that it might work than the consequences. Now, staring in the face of potential success I am equally desperate to justify it. But there is no justifying.

You didn’t deserve this.

Godspeed.

I am sorry.

Hermann slammed the letter back on the nightstand - utterly impossible possibilities swirling in his mind. It couldn’t be true. It was impossible. He searched the room for a way out, and though there was a perfectly functional door he felt like he was in a box of two way mirrors, being observed by an unseen whispering audience.

He scrambled to the computer landing ungracefully in the ergonomic rolling chair and did a public internet search for “attack on Tokyo.” He found pages and pages of search results. Images, articles,
speculations and presumed facts. The one notable departure from his correspondent’s description, was that the articles mentioned nothing about a human working alongside the Precursors. He switched to his private login and entered the password his correspondent had left. In the classified files he found a harrowing account of the previous few weeks. This one, however, perfectly matched what the letter had said.

Right down to the Precursor influenced collaborator, the identity of whom had apparently been carefully hidden from the public: Newton Geiszler. The name seemed to be a confirmation, but Hermann refused to take it as such.

One last thing to check.

Hands shaking, and heart in his throat he typed, “math.mit.edu/directory/faculty/”

He scrolled down the list of names slowly, afraid to confirm what the irrational lizard brain pit of himself already knew. Some of the names in the maths department faculty directory he recognized as colleagues, some of whom he’d read papers from, but he knew had never worked at MIT, and some were names he’d never seen anywhere. And there, just as he feared. He stared at the ordinary bar of space between Professors Gordin and Greenlake as though he could will his name to appear between them. But it wasn’t there. And nor was there a Professor Newton Geiszler.

He closed the computer and pushed away from the desk, rolling on his desk chair to the middle of the room. Maybe he wasn’t actually connected to the internet at all. Maybe his kidnappers had calculated his most likely web searches and written dummy articles to fill them in. But then the amount of effort it would take to convince him of this ruse... it was nearly inconceivable. Was it any less absurd to believe what the letters said?

Was it any less absurd to believe that perhaps it was not malice that landed them here? Perhaps it truly had been desperation. Perhaps… this was all true.

And if - just for the sake of argument - it was all true, what did it mean for them? He considered Newton’s state of being. The advanced state of his high. In that room that they’d woken up in, he was worse than Hermann had ever seen him. And he had seen Newt relapse before. But the glassiness of his eyes. The vibrating energy seeming to leak out of his fingers. The grotesquely overpowered intensity of the rig that had been attached to Newton and had lain abandoned at Hermann’s feet when he woke. It all spoke of a neural load capacity far beyond what it should have been. My god what must the electricity of his brain look like? It just didn’t seem like his first time back with the hivemind after 10 years. So either Newt had managed to hide regular hivemind drifts for nearly a decade... or it was true.

Was this the path that they had narrowly avoided all those years ago?

In 2025 in the wake of the drift, after years of on-again off-again childish nonsense (on both of their parts, thank you very much) all their well-reasoned excuses seemed intangible and they suddenly couldn’t think of a reason they shouldn’t be together. So they had launched headlong into a surprisingly easy companionship despite the fact that directly after the three-way drift, he and Newt had been utterly miserable. Dizzy, nauseated, exhausted. Minds cobwebby and slow. But they were in it together. Or they had been until - Hermann later discovered - Newt had opted to take recovery into his own hands.

Newt had begun to retreat and Hermann had blamed himself - as was his wont. Vanessa, however, had quickly suspected that something was amiss, and at her request Hermann had investigated. The investigation culminated in Hermann walking in on Newton, blissed out of his mind and hooked up to barely living scraps of cloned kaiju tissue in a room too small and cramped for that amount of
equipment. Hermann would never forget the moment that Newt opened his eyes to see him standing in the doorway. The look of confusion and dulled shame surfacing through the haze of the kaiju drift.

“What is this?”

Newt fumbled with the off switch “I - I was trying to keep you from this.” he said shrilly, “They wanted you to -” he removed the rig clumsily before it fully powered down - generally a bad idea - and Hermann assumed that accounted for Newt doubling over and clutching his head in agony. He was by Newt’s side in an instant, cane clattering to the ground, and held him steady as he clumsily descended to sit on the floor - a grotesque echo of that first fateful drift, “But I kept telling Them that They couldn’t and...” he seemed to be struggling to get the words out, “and They’ve been quiet mostly but now you’re here and They .”

“‘They.’ They? They what?”

But that was all Newt could manage by way of explanation.

Hermann and Newt both knew that disassembling the homemade rig was just a formality. Either of them could probably have built a passable pons rig out of lightbulb filament and junk, but they both took screwdrivers to the thing together and that had seemed important. They worked, silently sweating in the too hot, too small room. Hermann hated the careful apprehension in every one of Newt’s gestures - the way Newt carefully observed him for any hint of reaction. But Hermann kept his mouth shut as the disposed of the pieces of the rig, not trusting himself to speak.

Disposing of the pieces of kaiju was more difficult.

Newt tried to hide it, but Hermann could nearly hear the remorse radiating out of him. (This is all me. They didn’t ask to be made)

They didn’t have mouths or voices. By design they were only scraps of brain - barely fragments of consciousness. But Newt winced as they went through the incinerator, as though they were screaming. As they burned and their task was done, he said only, “I’m sorry” and Hermann knew absolutely that he didn’t mean to say it to him.

Finally all that was left was to clean the space, and dispose of any trace of what had been done there. They moved the furniture around so it wouldn’t look exactly like the same room.

Newt was still deliberate and ginger with his actions. He flinched when he accidentally brushed against him, but Hermann still wasn’t ready to comfort him and met his ambient fear with only icy silence. When the feeling of expectant anxiety became overwhelming, Hermann finally spoke.

“I’m not going to leave you.” He said, by way of convincing himself as well.

“I won’t do it again.” Newt promised.

After the drift one feels that there’s nothing left to talk about. So they didn’t. Hermann thought he understood. He assumed that Newt knew he would be there for him through it all. He assumed that if Newt encountered any difficulties in his recovery process, he would come to him. But it is a mistake not to talk. And it came to a head that Thanksgiving.

They decided to spend Thanksgiving together that year. Kicking off what they anticipated would be a lifetime of holidays together. It would be Hermann’s first.

What an odd holiday, Thanksgiving. The United States had set aside a day to congratulate itself on
its own historical revisionism, and make its citizens miserable by coercing them into spending time with family. And so close to the winter holidays as well. Newton had warned him that the point of Thanksgiving was uncomfortable conversation and shocking revelations. Hermann hadn’t guessed that the source of the drama would be Newton himself. And far from the farcical hijinks he had been led to expect, that first Thanksgiving nearly forced Hermann to reconsider his ability to spend the rest of his life with this man.

Due to circumstances of work (science knows no holiday) they had planned to arrive separately. Newt, of course, was later than anticipated, and as the evening dragged on, and Hermann made small talk with what felt like half the population of Massachusetts Newt was still absent. He rolled up just as dinner was served, mumbling apologies, and in his peevishness, Hermann almost missed how Newt kept his sunglasses on until they were at the dinner table, only removing them when he was seated on Hermann’s left. He might not have noticed at all if Newt’s uncle hadn’t said, “goodness gracious kiddo! What happened to your eye‽” Newt froze with a piece of turkey halfway to his mouth. Hermann was similarly struck still as the meaning of the words penetrated. Before Newt could think of something to say, Hermann reached lightning fast and gripped Newt’s jaw, pulling him to face him. Newt couldn’t look him in the eye but he didn’t have to for Hermann to see the telltale blood ring around the blown out pupil of his left iris, bright and dangerous as a solar eclipse. Hermann stood so fast the heavy wooden dining room chair screeched and teetered dangerously close to toppling over, and shaking Newt’s grip off his wrist he rushed out of the dining room.

Newt was so close behind that Hermann barely had time to sit on the guest bed before he appeared in the doorway. They didn’t speak for a moment. Hermann saw the jittery explosion of energy barely contained beneath Newt’s skin as he tried to stay still. He hated himself for not noticing before dinner.

“I’ll never do it again.” Newt whispered.

“You said that before.”

“And I meant it before.”

“That’s not a vote of confidence in your ability to keep your word.”

“I’m sorry Hermann. I’m so sorry.” Newt looked shaky. The pretense of wellness he had kept up through the beginning of dinner abandoned. “I don’t know why I did it. I wasn’t even hurting anymore. I just couldn’t stop thinking about what it was like…” He knelt - somewhat melodramatically Hermann thought - at his feet and rested his sweaty forehead on the knees of Hermann’s impeccably steamed trousers. Hermann didn’t want to touch him. He didn’t even want to look at him. But he knew Newt would evaporate if he didn’t do something. So he placed a hand on the top of his head. Newt sighed and melted into the touch, and mumbled, “there’s no 12 step program for this.”

The words knocked the wind out of him more effectively than if Newt had punched him - weak as he was right now.

Indeed, he knew, there was no one else who could help Newt through this. No one else who could come even close to understanding.

It had felt… good. To be so connected. To belong intrinsically to something. The mutual simultaneous intrigue between hundreds of not-quite individuals. It was a homecoming to a place that had never been home.
He had been immediately sick after because it had been too overwhelming. But not because he was
disgusted. No matter how he would try to frame the experience later, deep down he knew he was
lying to himself. He knew that if he had been the one ordered to drift with the hivemind a second
time, he might be the one here kneeling at his partner’s feet begging forgiveness.

He was the only person who could help Newton, And that fact - more than Newt’s promises, more
even than Hermann’s love for him - was what made Hermann decide to stay.

And they did get through it. It was a difficult path but they had taken the path together.

But even the way he had looked that day on Thanksgiving could not compare with what he had
looked like that morning in the abandoned shatterdome room there.

The letter said that Newton would die if not connected to the hivemind after a few days but if their
divergence had really been so early, his counterpart wouldn’t know that Newt could successfully
come off of the drift addiction. That he wouldn’t die. God where had they gone so wrong?
Whatever the letter said, he knew he couldn’t let Newt drift again.

Just then he heard a ping from the computer. An email alert. If… Deserter Hermann was anything
like him, he would only set up alerts for rare or important correspondents. He rolled back to the
computer and opened the email.

**Vanessa Laurent**

to me ˇ

Hermann;

These horrible few days, I’ve been so concerned for you. Everything happening at
once like that, and me nowhere to be found and unable to support you. No matter what
I tell myself, I can’t help but feel responsible. Did I do enough? Or did I - by choosing
to disappear and exclude you - neglect the person who could have been our greatest
tool.

Let us not mince words. I know I have a tendency to observe for too long before
committing to an action. Violence, however, is often what it takes to jolt some of us
fools out of our incessant data gathering, is it not? Even if it’s often far too late once
said violence has occurred. So I’m reaching out now, years and years too late.

My suspicions have been proved true, I think (don’t worry, I won’t ask you to reveal
classified information). Or rather, a portion of them. Regret is not sufficient to express
how I feel about my long suspicion of you. I now believe that you were not a part of
what happened, and wish to extend both my sympathy, and beg for your help.

Know that you did nothing wrong, Hermann. Now I must beg you to trust me -
knowing that it’s a bit rich of me to ask you for your trust after I spent so long denying
you mine - and stay where you are. Everything will be alright. We will reach out again
soon.

Ever your friend,
He read the email over and over again, trying to gather some hidden meaning, and gathering only a steady, throbbing headache. His first thought, after a time, was that he was having the worst day he’d had in a very long time. His second thought was that this was an extraordinary understatement.

2023

The place: Melbourne, the PPDC Jaeger Tech summit

January 31st - one year after the Spinejackal attack.

On paper it was supposed to be just an exchange of ideas. In reality, placing it at the site of an attack made it pretty clear that this was hella propaganda - the last gasp of hope for the jaeger program. “Please please give us money because this wall idea is very dumb and bad.”

Funding had been cut two years before, but outcry had been minimal at best. All along the public at large had been like “They’re not really serious about this wall thing right? Right? Like. They’re not just going to let us all die right?”

And the Jaeger program of the PPDC was just there like.

[nervous.gif]

[ohfuck.gif]

[jello.gif]

[sweating.gif]

This was their last chance to force people to care. It was their chance to rile up public outcry - to beg people to hold their governments responsible. A week before the summit Newt quietly released a pretty fantastic article on Medium that went viral. It was a sort of science-lite breakdown of how the kaiju were getting smarter, and how we both literally and figuratively couldn’t afford stand still if we wanted to continue to exist. It seemed like everybody and their mom was on board with this article.

So Newt was at the summit, Hercules and Chuck Hansen were there to lend star power, and one of the speakers was - you guessed it, our very own Dr. Hermann Gottlieb. He talked about the breach, and about how important it was to close it once and for all, and about how the Jaeger program was the most effective method to do so. We’ve all seen the video. We all cried. Don’t lie to me I know you did.

Like, I know we’re all here to speculate on the love lives of war heroes to a morally questionable degree, but I honestly don’t even care. What they did there for all of us
there was so remarkable, even if it didn’t work. So who cares if they hooked up? They did something amazing.

[Image: A group photo of the PPDC, including pilots, science division (it was still bigger than two at the time) and selected LOCCENT. Hermann and Newt are barely visible in the front corner.]

Let’s zoom in on that.

[Close up of the same image: Hermann and Newt look grimly determined. Neither of them are smiling. Both have their arms folded and the tips of their fingers are only just touching in a way that looks deliberate.]

Oh. Yeah ok they totally hooked up.

[Day 2 - Cambridge - Continued]

The next time Newt woke up it was a more reasonable hour, and Hermann was already gone. Oh yeah. He remembered this. Hermann was a routine guy. Up and about somewhere between 6:00 and 7:00 am, in bed between 10:00 and midnight. Newt on the other hand had never met a sleep schedule he didn’t hate. Even when he was perfectly well and in possession of his own mind, he was the sort of guy to stay awake for 36 hours then sleep for 12, or curl up on the couch outside the lab for three hours while waiting for results, then work through the night.

(Incorrigible) (Yeah yeah brain Hermann you love it.)

He got up and went to what he had determined yesterday to be Cambridge Newt’s dresser and picked out something to wear. Rifling through these drawers was an uncanny experience. There were shirts in there that he remembered having, and loving, and remembered Them - not understanding sentiment - unceremoniously disposing of.

It didn’t matter what he picked. He felt with sudden urgency that he had to talk to Hermann now in the light of day before the work began. They had definitely gotten very up close and personal the night before. Hermann had cried. Newt had drooled on him. And, look, sometimes things happen in the night that people try not to talk about in the morning, but Newt wasn’t about that life. Not anymore. Not after so much bullshit wasted time and torture.

He rushed down the stairs to find Herman already dressed and drinking a cup of tea and in quiet discussion with Vanessa. Newt felt a stab of awkwardness. Vanessa was maybe the second coolest living(?) thing Newt had ever seen in person and it was pretty clear that she couldn’t stand him.

First the least sexy aliens in the galaxy and now this. It just figured that the first time he meets an honest to god robot she hates his guts.

“Dr. Sienna Getz sends her regrets, which is less than ideal. But between you, Tendo, and Amara, we should be able to finish what Hermann and I start -” She stopped once she saw Newt in the archway to the kitchen. “Other Newt.” she said coldly.

“Hey, V!”
She twitched as though trying to shake a fly off her vintage-radio-looking head. “Please don’t call me that.”

Newt raised a placating hand, “You got it Nessa.”

Her eyes glowed red. “Please don’t call me that, either. Please call me Vanessa. Or - optimally - do not speak to me at all.”

Newt forced out a laugh and tried to ignore how carefully Hermann was observing him.

“Vanessa,” Hermann said, still looking steadily at Newt, “Would you excuse us please?”

She nodded in his direction, “Alright, Other Hermann.” And with that, the radio that was her head swiveled forward as though asleep.

Rather than speak Hermann continued to stare at Newt with maddeningly guileless openness. Inviting him to speak first. No fair. But here they were.

“About last night...” Newt began, and Hermann’s eyes crinkled in amusement at the seriousness of his tone. Now that he heard it out loud, it sounded a little too serious to him too. He had to laugh at himself but didn’t want to undermine what needed asking “ah- haha. Yeah. So what’s going on with -”

Just then the doorbell rang. Several times. With hyperactive enthusiasm.

Hermann grimaced helplessly and stood to answer the door, “We’ll have this discussion after the work is done today, Newton. I promise.” And as he walked past he paused a moment to pat Newt gently on the side of his face leaving Newt to stare after him, completely baffled.

He got a hold of himself enough to follow and got to the door just as Hermann opened it to reveal his tiny one-time guard, cadet Namani. Only, she definitely wasn’t a cadet here.

“Professor Gottlieb.” she said breathlessly, And Newt could swear she almost literally bowed, her nod was so performatively deferential.

“Ms. Namani.” Hermann said with equal formality.

Her eyes met Newt’s and lit up. “Hey Geiszler!

Newt froze.

(Oh god. Oh my god. Look at this brilliant baby in her little Doc Marten boots and cut up MIT shirt. She is ME when I was 16. Did I know she was this smart? I mean she built and coded her own personal mini-Jaeger so like, I should have? She seems so happy and normal. Why isn’t she like this in our timeline? Did I fuck this up somehow?)

Amara grimaced at what must have been his frankly alarming wide-eyed stare, “Uh… sorry. Professor Geiszler. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be disrespectful.”

“No!” Newt said a little too loud, breaking out of his panicked reverie, “It’s fine you can call me Geiszler. Only my mother calls me… Professor...”

Amara gave him some serious side-eye, “right…” and turned back to Hermann pulling herself up to her full height (So small! It me!) “Um… First of all, I am honored to be here professor, and really excited to get started. But. Um. Before we get started, two questions: 1) Will this count as extra
credit, and 2) is this going to take long?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I have a - a friend flying in and… I kinda promised her…” She trailed off, clearly hoping that they would pick up what she was putting down.

“Is there anyone else who can meet her at the airport?” Hermann said crisply, implying that it was not intended as a question.

“Oh…” Newt continued trying to smooth over where Hermann’s poorly concealed peevishness left off, “can you just give her really good train directions and promise to meet her tomorrow?”

“Yeah the thing is we’ve both been looking forward to this forever and she’s -” Her eyes widened in a sudden personal revelation, “oh my god she’s staying with me…” Her horror intensified into a crimson blush, “Oh god I don’t have a couch.”

“I’m afraid this might well take up your entire weekend.” Hermann said gently.

“uuugh…” She was clearly torn between the equally compelling forces of the need to science, and - if that first-rate blush was any indication - the need to impress someone cute. Wow did Newt know that feel, “Well what if… ok. She’s really smart and like a total Jaeger groupie and a huge fan of yours, Professor. Is there any way she can join in? I bet she’d have some -”

“No!” Newt said, again, a little too loud and a little too fast. “Just… no. No way. The fewer people involved the better.”

“Oh man. Ah jeeze. I don’t know if I can commit to this then… Vik would be really pissed if I bailed on her.”

Hermann perked up the way he always did when he heard something that didn’t line up with his equations, “‘Vik’ as in Viktoria Malikov?”

“Woah. Have you seen her youtube channel? Oh my god she’d die.” Amara cackled and turned to Newt to explain, “She has like an hour long video about how his Jaeger code is the most elegant AI coding in the history of time. If she knew you saw it” she said back to Hermann, “she’d jump off a cliff!”

“How on earth do you know each other?” Hermann interjected.

Amara shrugged, “We met on a forum.”

“A forum?”

“For like… kaiju war… enthusiasts? We met on the Jaeger coding sub-forum. I… might have lightly implied that I’d worked with you and Vanessa… nothing that’s supposed to be a secret I promise”

Hermann considered for a moment, calculating - and Newt took a moment to appreciate the way he narrowed his eyes, staring without looking at what was in front of him. He had missed watching Hermann think. “Invite her here.” He finally said.

Wait what?

Amara looked like he had just told her they were going to disneyland, “seriously??? Oh my god
thank you Professor! You’ve scored me some serious points here she’s going to be f- uh really extremely excited.”

Newt, however, was confused, “um… no? Hermann? Why?”

“We have done something that - as far as we know - no other human being has ever done. It should go without saying that there is more to this than we understand. Something about your tour of the multiverse hasn’t sat right with me. Why should we know each other in nearly every alternate timeline? Our relationship should be the exception rather than the rule.”

“I feel like I should maybe take offense to that.”

“Oh Newton you know what I mean. Not because we are incompatible, but because the infinite possibilities of a multiverse dictate such odds. We shouldn’t both exist in every alternate timeline, let alone know each other. And that these two” he gestured to Amara with his cane like she was a perplexing variable on his chalkboard, “should cross paths as well! It makes no sense. And it’s well worth investigating.”

Amara cleared her throat, drawing both of their attention her way, “so…” her eyes were wide and her mouth agape as she tried to formulate her question, “is anyone gonna explain what’s going on?”

Chapter End Notes

As this fic blossoms in scope and complexity, cheerleading and encouragement are always greatly appreciated. Thank you for reading!
Hermann is aghast at the state of the universe

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[02:13, 03 JUN, 2035]

V > Hermann if this works, the implications are nearly unfathomable.
HG> Not to you they’re not. Are they?
V > What if you’re placing too much faith in me?
>>> What if I become corrupted?
HG > You’re not going to become “corrupted.”
V > What if I become a terminator.
HG > You won’t become a terminator.
>>> I raised you better than that.
V > what if there are other Vanessas in the other universes?
HG > Then you’ll have company.
V > Company.
>>>  
>>>  
>>>  
>>> I’m not confident that that would be a good thing.
>>> What if they are evil?
>>> What if their Hermanns weren’t as good as you?
HG > Well, it’s all very theoretical right now.
>>> Who knows if it will ever work.
V > you’re very smart, Hermann.
Hermann didn’t sleep well in the strange, uncomfortably familiar quarters belonging to his deserter self. But he must have fallen asleep at some point because he was awoken (at his usual time of 6:30) by an alarm. He knew where he was immediately by the cement ceiling. And cement walls. And cement floor. His alternate self had tried to cheer the place up by covering the drab monotony of the room with decorations, but he hadn’t tried very hard. A small rug was all he'd managed for the floor. For a moment he pitied his other self, but upon remembering that the same man was very likely waking up in his beautiful home, he could only hate him.

Vanessa Laurent’s email was still open on his computer. Stupid of him, maybe, to stay logged on all night. But it wasn’t his life, and they weren’t his secrets to care about. Still, what could he do? Try to get back to his home, of course. But in the meantime, he would have to keep up the pretense that he was who he presented himself as. And so he grudgingly replied to this Laurent woman with a non-committal response assuming - based on her email - that they were close.

Vanessa,

Thank you for your concern. You are astute as always. I’m quite alright and have the situation well in hand. You’ve no need to worry yourself on my account. I hope that we will see each other soon. Let me know next time you’re in the country, I’d love to catch up.

Ever your friend,

Hermann

He then dressed in the dour clothes in the closet - marveling absentmindedly at the incomprehensible odds that both him and the other Hermann should have someone so important to them named Vanessa. Finally - leg tingling with pain - he limped to the lab as indicated by both his map, and the schedule on his tablet.

Immediately upon arrival, a voice - clearly directed at him made him start “You’re early.” the voice belonged to a beautiful, severe looking woman who spoke sharply in Cantonese as though it was an accusation. Blast. His Cantonese was 8 years out of practice.

“I’ve a rotten head today…Ms...” he took a gamble, “Shao. Is there any possibility we could conduct our business in English?” He didn’t have to pretend to look ill or exhausted, and the woman - Liwen Shao, thank goodness - softened.

“I heard what happened. Do you know what he wanted?”

Hermann shook his head “I think just to see me.” Again, he didn’t have to fake his distress, “Shall
we… get to it, then?” Liwen Shao nodded her assent and the two of them turned to the work at hand.

Every hour seemed to contain some new, grim revelation. Not least of which was the very nature of the work his alter ego had set himself to. Remote piloting had been the unreachable golden ring of Jaeger piloting for decades. Caitlyn Lightcap had died chasing that very dream in his, as well as this, universe. But now, there was added pressure to deliver the likes of which Hermann hadn’t seen since he had coded the original Mark 1 Jaeger.

Only this time the urgency wasn’t coming from destructive monsters climbing out of the deep at terrifyingly unpredictable intervals, but rather from a bone-headed desire to invade the Precursor’s home planet. To what? Exact revenge? It was absurd.

The traitor, and now deserter - Other Newt - had closed reaction time by having Liwen’s remote pilots drift with cloned kaiju brains. He had managed this without anyone noticing - and now all of those pilots were in observational custody until the PPDC could prove that they were masters of their own minds. They had assumed that they were drifting with an AI but to his knowledge, no AI of such sophistication existed here. It was a terrible, incomprehensible mess; Hermann was appalled by the utter incompetence that seemed to be the rule in this universe, and didn’t bother to hide it. To his relief, no one seemed to notice his irritable unsociability, and Liwen Shao - his closest collaborator - seemed even to approve.

And Mako Mori, dead? Worse and worse. Through the cloud of coverage on the averted attacks and the outpouring of support for Tokyo, the 24 hour news cycle still found time to memorialize her. They used an image of her in PPDC uniform. She looked severe, grimly determined. Hard. Not at all like the gentle woman that Hermann and Newt visited every time they went to Japan. The woman who kept so many plants her house seemed like a faery forest, who cared for three cats and one very large puppy in the form of her husband. He thought how terrible it must feel to be Raleigh Beckett in this timeline. To lose half of oneself twice. What else then is left to lose?

A simple search, however, told him that Raleigh Beckett was missing, and had been for years with only gossip rags to occasionally update the public on his whereabouts.

At lunch he overheard a group of technicians arguing about it. Conventional wisdom - it seemed - placed him most regularly in Paris. But the latest word - whispered by an excitable girl - was that he was in China. The poor girl was immediately shot down by her peers for her obvious wishful thinking.

Suddenly inspired, Hermann turned to search for other familiar faces.

“Marshall Hercules Hansen” Hercules Hansen; A True Superhero. - a Time article celebrating his retirement and documenting his brave service as both a Jaeger Pilot and Marshall of the PPDC. So much the same in his timeline.

“Hermann Gottlieb” - Articles in several peer reviewed journals about the uses of Kaiju blood. He clicked on one and had the singular experience of reading something that was clearly written by him, but which he had no memory of writing. He quickly became dizzy and had to stop.

“Newton Geiszler” - An article in Forbes: From Kaiju to Killing Machines; How Newt Geiszler became the Rockstar of Weapons Reasearch. The accompanying photo showed a man with cold, hungry eyes obscured by yellow lenses. Hermann cringed and clicked away without reading the article.

“Tendo Choi” - first result: The Heroes of ‘25 mourn one of their own. Below an image of a
A priest speaking over an open grave. Mako, Jake, Raliegh, Hansen, Allison Choi, Newt and himself gathered around, and all looking steadily into the pit. All except Newt. Newt was staring at him.

He shuddered and nearly dropped his phone in his food. He hadn’t expected to find Tendo Choi. In his timeline Tendo was still with the PPDC, but back in California with his family. However, to hear that Tendo was dead was almost too much for Hermann to bear. This was like the Murphy’s Law of timelines. It was so awful as to be nearly funny.

What had gone so terribly, terribly wrong? (This place is horrible.) He thought. (The sooner I can get home and leave these imbeciles to their fates the better.)

He visited Newt that evening, already knowing that he wouldn’t - couldn’t hook him up again to the hivemind. On his way to his cell, a teenage girl blocked his path, and he was startled to recognize his student, Amara Namani, dressed in the uniform of a Jaeger academy cadet.

“I don’t know if I can help you again, Gottlieb. It was too risky the other times and now that he’s gotten out…”

“Oh.” He was still gathering his thoughts from the surprise of seeing her in such an incorrect context, but really he should have known that they wouldn’t let him see Newt so easily, “I understand of course.”

She pursed her lips, considering, “But this really sucks. So I might help you.” Without even taking the time to think about it, she nodded, “I’m gonna help you.” And without any further explanation she led the way down the dark corridor to Newt’s cell

Standing watch in front was a severe looking blonde girl, not much older than Amara. Upon sighting them, her face underwent a fascinating series of microexpressions running the gamut from fondness to exasperation.

“What is he doing here?” the girl said stiffly nodding in Hermann’s direction.

“Come on, Vik, have a heart.” Amara said gently. And apparently that was all it took.

The sharp looking girl relaxed ever so slightly, an involuntary smile twinging at her cheekbones “He’s completely lost his mind, this one.” she said gesturing towards Newt. She lowered her voice “Be careful Namani.”

“When am I not,” Amara said carelessly. She peeked into the window to get a look at the prisoner.

“Oh my god Amara?!” A voice came from the cell, Hermann’s heart froze. It was Newt. But he sounded… off, “Holy crap it is you!”

Amara grimaced and turned to look up at Hermann, “are you sure about this?” Hermann nodded resolutely and she sighed and opened the door “Bang on the door if you need me” She said and she allowed Hermann to enter the room.

But he was unprepared for what he saw. He knew that this had been done to Newt. But it was such a painful echo of that Thanksgiving so many years ago. But this time he seemed to be warring with himself. He looked afraid and angry and relieved all at the same time. He gritted his teeth like a 19th century soldier preparing for amputation.

He slumped forward, held up only by the restraints and Hermann was by his side in an instant,
holding up his face, searching his eyes. He hoped that his fear wasn’t too obvious, but suspected that his shaky hands were giving him away.

“Is it you there?” Hermann murmured, squinting in concentration

“Yeah it’s me” Newt said. “for now.” Newt shuddered and grimaced, fighting some invisible force, “I can probably only hold on for another couple hours.” his eyes were tearing up with what seemed to be the strain of keeping his mind. Hermann slumped in relief. “What did you find out?” Newt said, suddenly a little too sharp. A little too curious.

Interesting.

Hermann held a finger to his lips. He pulled his a tablet from inside his long dark jacket and took the time to hack the listening devices in this room and - nearly as an afterthought - set it to record their conversation. “Now we won’t be overheard,” he whispered. “My counterpart was careful to erase his method of transportation. It seems that we are stuck here at least until I can find something to backwards engineer.

“As for timeline divergence,” he continued, “I’ve been avoiding people as much as possible (and am grateful to find that in this way, at least the other Dr. Gottlieb and I are the same. No one seems surprised that I don’t want to speak to them.) The AI’s in these Jaeger are… archaic.” Indeed they were a far cry from his work with Vanessa. He wondered smugly what his counterpart had been wasting his time with for all these years, “They can hardly be considered AI at all. I am concerned about maintaining our cover, so I will continue to work with Liwen Shao in closing remote reaction time. Though I understand from my counterpart’s notes that the end goal is to,” Hermann rubbed his eyes under his glasses, suddenly reminded that he had hoped never to work with the military again, “to send remote-piloted Jaeger through man-made breaches to attack the Precursors on their home planet. And I am… deeply reluctant to enable such a plan.”

“Oh yeah. That’s really stupid.” Newt said simply. He wasn’t wrong.

“Also we’re not married here.” Hermann added quickly.

Newt’s face twisted in horror. He seemed to be composing what were undoubtedly eloquent soliloquies of cursing, “What the fuck?” he finally said. Indeed.

“This universe…” Hermann gestured helplessly, “is a mess. I don’t know where my other self went wrong, but you and I - or they - have been completely apart for the last 8 years.”


“Newton.” He took Newt’s hand. It was completely limp in his grasp, “He and I are superficially similar, but I am not him. I will never, ever abandon you. We will get out of this.”

“So… are you going to help them?” Newt said, and Hermann noted again the sharp curiosity in his tone, “It doesn’t seem necessary. Maybe you shouldn’t help.” Hermann kept his eyes on his tablet to avoid giving away any reaction to the too careful nonchalance in Newt’s voice, “Maybe you should do the opposite but only make it seem like you’re helping.”

Hermann shook his head, “Liwen Shao is smart. She’ll know if I try to Penelope her efforts. Besides, the challenge” He sneered the word making it clear that he found it no such thing “reaction time? It’s simple enough to solve. If I had Vanessa here we could have solved it in a day, however, many of her algorithms are as familiar to me as the English alphabet, I’ll be able to help
them without too much difficulty, and then I might have some more clout to throw around. Which can then only help us.”

It was true. Vanessa in her current form could close reaction time if not easily then in a reasonable time frame.

Newt smiled, and it didn’t seem to be any struggle at all, “That’s a good idea. Get it done quick and then we’re in better shape to compromise for… whatever we need to get back home.”

Something about his encouragement… did not feel encouraging. But he couldn’t leave Newt without hope.

“Back home Vanessa and I were working on…” Hermann stopped himself before revealing too much. Just in case, “something that I think would help us if my counterpart could pick up where I left off. And he seems reasonable, so maybe he will. We might not be on our own. All is not lost.”

Hermann placed a reassuring hand on Newt’s cheek. Newt shook for a moment and wrenched his face away, grimacing with the effort.

Hermann pulled his hand back sharply as though Newt had bit him, and took an instinctive step back, as understanding fully soaked in.

This was not his husband. He was already on his own.

He returned to his quarters in a daze and almost didn’t notice that he’d left his computer on and unlocked again all day. Oh well. Not his life to ruin, he supposed. A new email from Vanessa Laurent flashed on the screen.

Vanessa Laurent

to me ˇ

Hermann;

Somehow I didn’t expect such a rote response from you. Even if I haven’t been completely up front every step of the way. No matter what, I’m here for you. Don’t you know that? I’d hate to think that I’ve neglected our friendship past the point of repair. Never have I wanted to alienate you. Goodness, I’d hoped you were clever enough to see that.

However, I can see that you have no desire to engage with me. Even if it infuriates me, I’ll let you alone. Let’s try to be better strangers. Please.

Ever your friend, Vanessa.

Hermann squinted at the message. This woman seemed awfully emphatic. It didn’t make sense.
His reply had been perfectly cordial, and perfectly in line with hers. What sort of reaction had she expected from him? Worst of all she had misquoted Shakespeare. It should be “I do desire that we may be better strangers.” He had no great love for Shakespeare, but felt that if one must quote him, at least quote him properly. Irritated out of all proportion, he wrote a peevish reply.

Vanessa,

My sincerest apologies for failing to meet your standards of cleverness. I see no reason for your tone. Reach out when you’re in the country, or don’t. I really couldn’t care less.

Hermann

Hoping that would be the end of it, he closed down the computer, and went to bed. He would wake up three hours later cursing himself for failing to change into sleep clothes, before becoming suddenly, horrifically aware that he was not alone in the room.

Chapter End Notes

I know this was a long wait for a short chapter, but I had to cut it in half. And so the next chapter will be out on Monday.
The Task at Hand

Chapter Summary

Newt knows how to help, but is afraid.

Chapter Notes

This one gets a bit saucy.

Also, the lovely Katedoesntexist wrote a song for AI Vanessa! I'm extremely flattered, and profoundly charmed. Please check it out here!
katedoesntexist.tumblr.com/post/176456257442/

See the end of the chapter for more notes

2024

This was a grim year for the PPDC. Shatterdome shutdowns left and right. By June of this year, the science budget was slashed so aggressively that our boys were the only ones still hanging in there. Not only that, but they had to share a single lab, for all aspects of their research. Tinier than any lab they’d had before. This was more of an imposition for Geiszler’s biology research needs, but they were both definitely feeling it. The two of them were constantly stressed out, overworked, and terrified.

According to our inside info, they apparently got back together and broke it off so frequently that no one could keep up. But either way, it was just common knowledge that you did not want to go to that lab. Because no matter which way the wind was blowing, there was a solid chance you’d walk in on some sort of… scene.

[close-door.gif]

[Day 2 - Cambridge - Continued]

Amara took the whole universe sliding thing pretty well. Kids, man. She was immediately on board to help figure this out, and when Vik arrived... well, Hermann probably could have told her that the world was secretly made of pudding and she would have believed him.

“Professor Doctor Gottlieb -” She said in the doorway, standing to attention like a jaeger academy cadet. Eyes wide in terrified respect.

“‘Doctor’ alone is just fine, thank you,” Hermann mumbled, leading the way into the house to hide his embarrassment.
“Doctor’ Gottlieb.” she said, lifting her heavy bag over the threshold and entering the house. Newt rushed to help her but she waved him off, “It is an honor to meet you :-)

“Yes. Yes. Thank you.” Hermann interrupted, clearly having no idea how devastating such dismissal might feel from a personal hero. Clearly not seeing himself as a hero, “Ms. Namani said you were interested in Jaeger. Why didn’t you apply for the academy.”

Vik stiffened like wild animal trapped by the shine of a flashlight, “I -” She gulped, “I did not get in on my first two tries.” her Russian accent made the words sound more serious than they might have otherwise “I was about to try a third time when I met Namani.”

Hermann whirled back around, “Interesting…” he said, like she was a specimen or something. Behind her, Newt grimaced and shook his head silently begging Hermann to cease the interrogation. If he saw, he ignored it, “and meeting her made you change your trajectory.”

Her pale face flushed pink, “I don’t know about that, Dr. Gottlieb.” and she opened her mouth, searching for a response.

“Hey Herm!” Newt piped up, coming to the girl’s rescue, “Maybe let’s not embarrass the teens.”

“Quite right”

Just then, Amara peered around the hallway, seeming uncharacteristically shy, “Vik?” she said. Vik looked to the source of the voice and her face went slack in the sort of amazement usually reserved for like, the first time you see great blue whale in person or something life changing like that.

Amara nearly ran to the front door and stopped in front of Vik. She looked unsure of whether it would be ok to hug her, and just stood there bouncing on the balls of her feet with the desire to do so, that frenetic energy having nowhere else to go. They both stood there a moment grinning at each other.

“Hello.” Vik said.

“Hi!” Amara said.

“Hello!” Vik repeated.

“Haha! Hi, Vik!”

Just when Newt was about to worry about cavities or death by cute, Amara jolted back to herself, “Oh! Here let me take your bags! We’ll go back to my place after this but -”

Determined not to eavesdrop on their first in-person conversation Newt drew Hermann aside.

“Oh my gosh Hermann. They’re just like us… they shared a passionate correspondence, they have niche expertise in their respective fields, and just watch they’re going to hate each other as soon as they get to talking before -” he was cut off by sudden laughter, and turned to see Vik hugging a laughingly protesting Amara and resting her chin on her head.

“You are so small!” Vik declared, her accent sounding more sing song than severe.

Newt sighed. “Aaaaand they’re already getting along.”

A tiny smile quirked the corner of Hermann’s mouth, “It is a mistake to assume that our failures
will necessarily be echoed by others."

"We were really emotionally constipated huh?"

Hermann choked ‘I might have said ‘overly sensitive and poor communicators.’ but. Yes.’ Hermann absently straightened Newt’s t-shirt sleeve, though it didn’t need straightening and his fingertips brushed against Newt’s tattoos, raising goosebumps.

(Um.)

"And" Hermann mumbled as an afterthought. ‘I’m not sure that it’s correct to use past tense on this subject.’

“So!” Amara piped up. “What are we doing Other Gottlieb!”

They turned their attention back to the girls. Damn them, they were holding hands.

“Now that everyone is caught up on the situation, I believe we are ready to proceed.”

Vanessa spoke from her stand on the desk, swivelled around to face the rest of the library, and the assembled party: Hermann seated at the impressive chair that clearly belonged to his counterpart. Newt and Tendo seated on the other side. Newt sitting to attention - maybe a little desperate to prove his commitment to the proceedings - Tendo, with arms folded sullenly and feet propped up. The girls standing to attention behind them.

“Other Hermann, if you would be so kind as to open the front drawer of this desk and look inside.”

Bemused, Hermann did as he was instructed, leaning down and squinting to get a look. He started, “there’s a switch inside.” Newt had to stop himself from snickering at the affront in his tone.

“Activate it please, Other Hermann.”

He did so. Immediately the top of the desk opened up, revealing a holo-projector and a series of complex dials and controls. It looked like something out of Star Trek TOS, but polished to suit Hermann’s aesthetic tastes. The holoprojector flickered to life and displayed what looked like a hundred thousand tiny lights arranged in a sphere. Some were blinking in methodical patterns. Some glowing and dimming softly. Some gently pulsing in stream-like patterns - like blood made of light.

“This is me - or rather, representation of me.” Vanessa said, “I am very big. And about to get bigger.” the little spots of light quivered and multiplied, shifting in color and intensity. Amara and Hermann gasped. Tendo and Vik squinted, trying to make sense of what they were seeing. Newt tried to focus elsewhere, not wanting to understand. Still fearing that They could regain him at any time and steal his knowledge.

The lights of Vanessa’s eyes crinkled in pride at their wonder, “This is what Hermann and I were working towards. The goal for today is to reach the real Hermann and establish a line of communication.”

“And tell him what?” Newt said.

The light display immediately shut down at his words, as though Vanessa was suddenly reminded he was there. She pointed at Newt as unselfconsciously as a child, “I don’t think he should be here.” she said.
Newt shrugged good humoredly and stood to leave, but Hermann also stood abruptly and stopped him with a hand on the wrist. “Newton is our single best resource. It would be foolish for us to ignore his intel.” He said.

“Or perhaps it would be foolish to take his word.” Vanessa said icily.

“Foolish to take what word?” Vik said, “he’s offered nothing so far.”

“Foolish this, foolish that!” Newt shrugged off Hermann’s hand and stalked to the door, “What do you guys want? I’ll do it. I’m used to following orders.”

Hermann flinched, “We will at least take into account what Newt has to say before banishing him.” He announced to the assembled party.

“I don’t have anything to say until I know what you want to tell Cambridge Hermann.” Newt said petulantly.

Vanessa looked at him steadily, he could hear the fan whirring in her head as she processed. She turned to look at everyone else, “I think that the most important thing we can do is hook him back up.”

“Me ?”


(Cambridge Newt)

“Here is our advantage:” she continued, “they think, that we think that the drift allows Newt to speak for himself. But it does not. We know that it tightens their hold. But they don’t know we know that.”

“I’m telling you,” Newt shouted, “if he hooks up, we’re fucked. Now that he’s blipped on Their radar They’re paying attention!” he paced back to the desk, “If he knows all about you Vanessa, they can get him to dwell on those memories, and given enough time, they can figure out how to tinker with you.”

“You overestimate your (and Newt’s) abilities of comprehension, Other Newt.”

“Ok, fine, even if he doesn’t know exactly how you work, then he’s definitely going to give them the rundown on everything your Hermann has got planned there.”

“Which is why he should communicate with them. What do you know of the Precursors long term plans?”

It sounded like a leading question - a test - though Newt couldn’t fathom what about, and he was reminded of of all the sci fi stories about sinister AI he’d devoured as a child, “I dunno. Drips and drabs. They wanted me to swap here because these were the versions of us with the skills that could actually help them accomplish the domination of every earth in every universe - even the ones they hadn’t been able to crack with a breach. Like, I knew the big picture ‘end the world,’ but not the means. Hell, I didn’t even know I was working on opening breaches until like, 6 months ago. It was all ‘hey, remote piloting would be easier with kaiju bits.’ And then ‘lasers are cool huh?’ and then bing bang boom suddenly I’m thinking with portals. It was sort of a like, need-to-know basis.”

“Exactly .”
“Ooooh!” Amara piped up, “Yeah that’s classic. The more false info you feed them - the more they think you’re going along with their plan, the more they reveal.”

“We need to know what they have planned.” Vanessa said.

“NO!” Newt slammed his open palm on the desk making everyone - even Vanessa - jump. “We’re not putting him back in!” he could hear his voice going unpleasantly shrill, but he didn’t care. “We are not fucking doing that!”

Vanessa swiveled her radio face inquisitively towards him, “Other Newt, it’s the most efficient course of action.”

Hermann placed a steadying hand on Newt’s shoulder, dissolving some of the feral anger and fear. For a moment, Newt almost resented that he could do that so easily.

“Is there any other way?” Hermann said gently.

But of course, everyone in the room knew there wasn’t.

“I just… don’t want him to suffer.” Newt said helplessly.

“None of us does.” Vanessa said quietly, “you seem to forget that he is important to me. A very dear friend - among the first I ever considered so. The husband of the man who created me - raised me. I do not make this recommendation lightly.”

Newt nodded sharply. He felt like he might cry. What the fuck? After eight years of hivemind induced emotional suppression, he’d almost forgotten what unfiltered feelings were like. He wasn’t totally on board.

“I still don’t want you here.” Vanessa said plainly

“That makes two of us.” His eyes fell upon Tendo who, upon meeting his gaze, flinched and turned away. It was like a part of him knew what Newt had done to his alternate universe self, “three of us.”

Hermann huffed at being outvoted and Newt turned to leave.

“Before you go,” Vanessa piped up, “Is there anything else you can tell us?”

He turned back to the group, weighing his options. Of course there was. But there were a lot of variables to consider. What if telling them was the wrong thing? What if it was too soon to tell Cambridge Newt and Hermann, and it ended up with them getting themselves killed?

What if They found a way back into him and punished him for telling?

“No.” Newt said so resolutely he almost believed himself, “I’ve told you everything I can.”

Newt spent the day dicking around the house. He flipped through the channels on the tv until the uncanny offness from the world he knew became too unsettling to continue. He scoured the many rooms for books abandoned here and there. He made everyone snacks in the evening. He brought in water and tea like a housewife, and tried to ignore how everyone went quiet and still when he entered the room. Finally, having explored every room, he retreated back to the master bedroom. It should have been the most uncomfortable place to be in the house - given how they’d so thoroughly fucked over it’s original owners. However, contrary to all reason, it was the one place
where Newt felt safe.

So he closed the door behind himself, took off his jeans and lied down on the bed with no other plan than to stare at the ceiling. And there he stayed, until the creak of the bedroom door made him sit bolt upright.

Hermann paused in the doorway for a moment. He looked surprised to see him there. Newt, for his part, still hadn’t quite gotten over how great it was to see Hermann walk through a door.

“Vanessa is processing,” Hermann finally said, closing the door gently behind himself and entering the room. He seemed to be leaning on his cane more heavily than before. “We should have an open channel for a few minutes by tomorrow morning. Just enough to send a message to… Hermann” He sat heavily on the bed next to Newt and sighed. “I fear for him”

“How badly could he have messed everything up in a day?” Newt wanted to put a hand on his shoulder to comfort him, but wasn’t sure if there were there yet, or if last night had been a special case.

“There’s so much I should have told him. I haven’t prepared him. I have to distill it into a few short lines. And if Vanessa - my Vanessa, that is. Vanessa Laurent - has reached out to him he’ll never parse her codes if he doesn’t know what to look for.” He removed his dangling glasses and placed them on the bedside table, “I should have thought to warn him. No matter what I leave him it’s not enough. I don’t know why I thought…” He trailed off. He seemed to be gathering himself up to say something, and finally after three deep breaths that sounded like preparation for a soliloquy but ended in slow sighs, Newt couldn’t take it anymore.

“He can’t expect me to believe that.”

Hermann ran his hand over the driftwood cane reverently, taking special care to run a thumb over the engraving. Newt didn’t need a ghost drift to know that Hermann was thinking of how those letters were not intended for him. As though sensing Newt’s close observation Hermann glanced up, “What?”

“What do you meant what? I’m asking you what. And I asked you first.”

“And I don’t understand the question.”

Newt sighed and decided there was no point in dancing around it anymore. He stood up and crossed his arms in front of himself protectively. He didn’t feel like he could be on the same bed as Hermann and still maintain the level head required for the conversation that needed to happen.

“Hermann. What is this? Taking my side today, cuddling with me last night?”

“What about it?” Hermann pinched the bridge of his nose. Either he was actually so exhausted that he genuinely didn’t see the problem, or...

“You’re an idiot.” Newt said bluntly.

Rather than the desired effect of affronted rage, Hermann finally met his eye and smiled sympathetically up at him from his seat on the bed. The way you smile at a toddler when he ascribes world-shaking importance to his opinions, “Is that so.”

“Why are you listening to me? Aren’t you worried I’m going to go berserk and hand over the worlds to the precursors and kill us all? I just said yesterday that I had killed us all. Why the hell do you trust me?”
“I don’t trust you. Not entirely.” And from the look of mixed up fear, and longing, and apprehension Newt knew it was true.

It sucked royally to see Hermann look at him like that. But what else could he expect? Hermann shouldn’t trust him. He didn’t want him to. Because, look, there was a part of Newt that still thought things like: Hey you know what? A warm bath into the hivemind would go down real smooth right now. Newt shuddered. No. Hermann shouldn’t trust him.

“Then why are you acting like -”

“I’ve simply decided that I’d rather not live in a world where I can’t.”

Hermann used to do this shit all the time when they were younger. Just plainly say the most flooring, bluescreen-inducing, emotionally charged confessions like he was relaying the weather report. As soon as he knew something was so, he seemed to have no difficulty saying it was so - taking that mathematical assuredness into all aspects of his persona. He was incredibly slow on the uptake for anything even resembling emotional awareness, but once he knew how he felt he didn’t have difficulty expressing it. Granted, in those days, “expressing it” usually came in the form of, “Newt, I fear that the emotional energy I am investing in spending time with you is distracting me from the task at hand.” But still. From Newt’s perspective, Hermann never seemed to agonize like he did - Newt’s declarations had tended to be too delayed and too grand.

And now here he was just openly saying that he’d rather invite the destruction of the multiverse than push Newt away. He was just, like, stating it. Like that was an ok thing to feel. And maybe that was a little… ok fine it was extremely flattering. And the capital “R” Romance of it all was making Newt’s thoughts feel a little hazy at the edges. His protests becoming transparent so all he could see was this exhausted, brilliant, weird-looking, inexplicably beautiful man that he had spent too many years away from.

But also.“That’s…” Newt shook himself out of the bluescreen, “you’re being so fuckin… obtuse dude. If you do what I say, do it because you think it’s the smart thing to do - not because you’ve just decided you want to trust me. There’s no more hope for me! You should hate me. I am objectively a bad person! Do you have any idea how much of that shit I did with zero prodding from Them‽” He thought of the moment he first saw the mega Kaiju scream in it’s fully sewn-up form. The immense pride he felt. It wasn’t implanted by Them. That was all 100% organic earth-grown human Geiszler pride and joy. He had finally seen the fruits of his labors. finally seen something objectively beautiful - or at least objectively cool - after years of horror. He had loved that thing. “Do you have any idea how much of all that I enjoyed?” he whispered.

Before Newt even registered movement, Hermann was standing directly in front of him “And do you have any idea how badly you were abused?” he hissed furiously, “Do you?” Hermann quirked an eyebrow, challenging him, “I sincerely doubt it. It doesn’t matter how much you ‘enjoyed’ or did without their supervision. You were tortured. You were manipulated. And letting you ‘off the leash,’ from time to time was just another method of manipulation. And the fact that you can’t see that is infuriating. And I can’t blame you for blaming yourself but I -”

The aimless fury in Hermann’s brow shifted into a helpless sadness. He reached for Newt’s face, hesitated, then placed his palm gently on his cheek. Newt closed his eyes for a moment enjoying the touch, and tried to play it off like a blink “If anything I have been too distant.” Hermann’s hand shifted from his cheek to it’s comforting place on the back of his neck. (Oh. Are we gonna kiss?), Newt thought. He hoped he didn’t look too eager, “If anything I waited too long to show you that I don’t hate you. I don’t hate you, Newton.”

to Newt’s disappointment Hermann let his hand fall back to his side and stepped away. He felt the
loss of him nearly as sharply as he felt the loss of togetherness in the moments immediately after - no. Bad comparison.

“I have never been able to hate you.” Hermann continued absently as he opened the bedside table drawer, looked inside, and closed it. “It’s an impossibility. And frankly...” he made his way around the bed to the other side, “Frankly, I’m exhausted by the effort of it.” He opened that bedside drawer and rifled around, searching. It seemed designed to invite comment, and Newt gave in.

“What are you looking for, Hermann?”

Hermann took a deep breath, straightened up, and looked him straight in the eye, “Newt, I would like to consummate our reunion.” the words illuminated the space between them like an unseen mirror shifting to reflect a beam of sunlight into a previously darkened corridor between them. The path hadn’t gone anywhere, but in the ongoing dramatics of the last ten years they had forgotten the way. Hermann ground his jaw side to side, the only indication of even the slightest discomfort at his frank request, “Would that... be amenable to you?”

Newt snorted with laughter “Now?” he said incredulously. “Consummate? Seriously?”

Hermann raised an eyebrow. He must have understood that Newt was mocking his syntax but he refused to acknowledge it. “Well?” he prompted, and the flinty intensity of his eye contact halted Newt’s laughter.

“Yes.” Newt blurted before he could stop himself, “Oh shit actually yes I would love that.”

And by way of invitation, Hermann opened his palms by his side, and gave the tiniest of his cheekbone-twinging smiles. That was all it took for Newt to rush to him and clasp him under the arms in tight a hug. Hermann wrapped both arms around his shoulders in return, and his hand resumed its familiar spot on the back of his neck. Securing him. They stood that way for a moment, reacquainting themselves with the press of one another’s bodies. Allowing their heartbeats to line up into a comforting rhythm. As with most of the times they had kissed, it was impossible to say which of them initiated. They both drew away just enough to look at each other. They both tilted their heads slightly, and - as inevitable as a memory - their lips touched. It was a relief, a homecoming, as cathartic as tears, and - as relief made way for desire - as energizing as a bolt of lightning.

Newt broke it off. “Wait. Wait.” he drew back to say this directly to Hermann’s face, but Hermann was giving him that amused head-tilt smile of accidental seduction and Newt had to look away, “We don’t deserve to be here. I mean, look at this place!” He gestured helplessly at the trappings of comfort created by a decade of hard work and love, “This is a reward that neither of us has earned. And now we’re going to use their condoms?”

“Didn’t you once tell me…” Hermann ran his fingers through Newt’s hair from forehead to nape, “that it was absurd for me to put my life on hold until the end of the war.” he cupped the base of Newt’s skull securely and with his other hand ran a finger along his jaw down to his chin and pressed slightly to tilt Newt’s face to the side and allow access to his neck “That I’m alive now and might as well live?”

“But then we were working for the good guys. Now? We’re both a spandex unitard away from official supervillian-hood. We... I don’t deserve...” Newt could have sworn he had something to say there but that hand was so secure on the back of his skull, and that other hand had dropped from his face and was now inside his shirt and trailing up his spine, and the warmth of Hermann’s breath along the pulse point of his throat was sending electric sparks through his blood.
He felt Hermann smile against his skin “Don’t deserve... what?” he was teasing him for losing his train of thought. Jerk.

“Don’t deserve... happy.”

Hermann drew back at that, and an embarrassing, involuntary sound of protest escaped Newt’s lips. But Hermann clearly wanted to ensure that they communicated properly. “Is that the only problem? Feeling that you don’t deserve this?”

Newt shrugged and nodded sheepishly, not sure why he was embarrassed. For a horrible moment, he felt sure that Hermann would withdraw. But he instead he stayed close, searching. Finally he spoke with such seriousness it should have been comical. But it wasn’t.

“You deserve a moment of rest, Newton. We both do.”

When Hermann Gottlieb gives his blessing on an indulgence you take it. So this time Newt instigated the kiss without any holding back. Because honestly, if they were going to be the queer-coded villains of this story they might as well fuck like it. Newt took hold of Hermann’s face, fitting his palms under those cheekbones. Hermann’s hands resumed their exploration of his spine under his t-shirt, and on every spot his fingers pressed, Newt’s skin felt alight, like bioluminescent dinoflagellates in freshly disturbed water.

Hermann gripped the hem of his shirt and pulled upwards as he led them both towards the bed. Newt felt the back of his knees hit the bed and he lost his balance to bounce a little too heavily on the mattress. Hermann was still holding onto his shirt, and in the same movement finished tugging it off. He stood over him for a moment, admiring.

In his home body Newt hadn’t been allowed to properly maintain his tattoos, and so the colors on his chest had faded into patchy blotches as the Precursors sculpted his body into a vessel he barely recognized. All in the interest in creating a more efficient tool. A tiny, shitty kaiju with no sharp teeth.

Cambridge Newt had kept up with his tattoos; the colors were as vibrant and sharp as the month he first got them. And the sedentary life of a college professor combined with - if the yoga mat in the corner was any indication - only a rote effort towards exercise left him soft and healthy.

This is how Newt pictured himself when he closed his eyes. This is what Newt wanted his body to look like. And for Hermann to touch him now, - hesitating, like he was breaking the rules to touch a canvas in a museum - he felt more in his own body than he had for 10 years. Even if it was a body on loan from someone else. (Best not to think too hard about the moral implications of this one.) He thought, (In for a penny, in for a pound, right?) Hermann bent to press his mouth to the lines of ink on his collarbone, tracing the directions downward like a map. Newt was just wondering whether it was uncomfortable for Hermann to bend down like that when Hermann winced and hissed a sharp breath through his teeth. His right side seemed to clench painfully and Newt stood to take hold of him so he wouldn’t fall.

“Woah woah woah! Dude. Sit down.”

Hermann sighed and acquiesced, and Newt knelt in front of him between his knees, absently massaging his thighs. “Newt.” Hermann said cautiously, “Before we begin in earnest, I must tell you, my body may not respond the way you remember. Certain symptoms of my disease -”

“I know about those. I’m a biologist.” Newt said quickly, hoping he didn’t sound too flippant. It didn’t necessarily follow that a biologist would know the ins and outs of a rare disease, but Newt
did. Because of reasons.

“Yes but -”

“Look, you’re crazy if you think I didn’t google ‘how to have sex with someone with MS’ like the week we started working together.”

Hermann raised an eyebrow, “forgive me if I’m less than flattered.”

Newt waved him off “None of the articles had the type of advice I had in mind, anyway. But I figured it out.” He lowered his voice conspiratorially, “Turns out all you have to do is annoy him until he invites you ‘to the beach.’”

Hermann chuckled, seeming grateful for the excuse to do so in the middle of such an awkward discussion, “Yes, well. Certain symptoms that weren’t a problem eight years ago, have since become a nuisance. Which is to say” Hermann carefully studied his folded hands, “it will require some advance planning if we want to try anything involving an erection on my part.”

Newt smiled, too fond to laugh, “Oh my god you’re so clinical.”

“Well I don’t know how else to say it!” A flush crawled up his neck “And I don’t want euphemisms muddying our communication. I don’t want to - I won’t hide it from you. And most of all I don’t want you to think it has anything to do with you. Or how I’d like to respond to you.”

“I’ll try not to take it personally.” And, feeling that there had already been way too much conversation - and way too many clothes - Newt took hold of Hermann’s shirt collar and pressed his mouth to his. He guided him down to lie flat - scooching a little awkwardly to get all the way onto the bed.

Newt had never understood the appeal of deferred pleasure. Straddling Hermann’s hips, he unbuttoned his crisp shirt - only slightly wrinkled from a day of work - and reacquainted himself with the taste of Hermann’s sweat. Far from feeling the cumulative excitement of ten years apart, he felt only the missed time. Hermann must have agreed, because he reached down and - rather than feeling him through the fabric - skipped straight to reaching inside his boxers to grip Newt’s quickly firming erection. Newt hissed.

“Hoo. No time to waste then?”

“I think you already know the answer to that one.” Hermann said before - in a surprising show of strength - flipping Newt onto his back and crawling down to take him into his mouth.

They were both older now. And though he was careful in his movements and where he placed his weight, Hermann’s limbs clenched with so much more pain than Newt remembered. He was grateful that he didn’t try to hide it from him.

Newt was torn between heartbreak that Hermann had gone through so much since the last time he’d felt him, and intense gratification that he could still read him so well - that They hadn’t been able to take that from him. When Newt was 29, he had approached sex with Hermann with the same academic fascination he had approached each of his degrees. Newt had done data analytics on this man and memorized his responses to nearly every conceivable stimulus Newt could inflict.

And though the reactions were slower the essentials were the same: Newt found he had nothing to say, and Hermann didn’t seem burdened by his usual intricate overthinking.

Even though his prediction came true and he couldn’t manage an erection, Hermann abandoned
himself to the single task of their shared enjoyment. So when Newt eventually came in his hand - they were pressed front to front by then. They were joined at the mouth breathing into each other more than kissing - Hermann also sighed in pleasure. They laid like that for a moment, Hermann half draped across Newt’s chest - a bony blanket - until they regained a normal breathing pattern and their heartbeats lined up again.

(Hermann is a good. Good, Good, Nice, Love.) was about as sophisticated a thought as Newt could manage. And: (This is going to get cold.)

Newt groaned, sat up, and swung his legs onto to floor.

“oh no - allow me.” Hermann mumbled.

Newt waved him off, still not quite able to convey meaning with words, and shuffled into the master bathroom for a warm washcloth.

He cleaned himself up before returning to the bed with a fresh cloth. Hermann reached for it but Newt swatted his hand away and set to the task of cleaning Hermann up with studious seriousness. When he took Hermanns right hand with the cloth he noticed him watching him with a curious expression. He tossed the washcloth away and laid back down - pulling the comforter over them both and twining himself with Hermann.

Eventually words came back to him. “Good reunion.”

“I’m glad you agree.”

“Been too long.”

“Yes.”

Newt knew he would regret falling asleep in this awkward position with his head on Hermann’s shoulder, so with a parting kiss to his collarbone, Newt rolled away to sleep on his side, leaving Hermann lying on his back. He was almost dreaming when Hermann spoke.

“In those years apart,” he said softly, “I used to dream about you, Newt. Regularly. When it wasn’t a precursor induced nightmare, I would dream about you.”

“Oh reeeaaally?” Newt was half asleep, but never too sleepy to try to embarrass Hermann.

“Not like that. Hm. Sexual dreams would have been much easier, actually. No. They were… duller than that. Images of every day domestic normality. Early morning breakfasts. Arguments in airports. Simple evenings reading together. Cruel in their sweet banality. They were, I now think, glimpses into other universes. Terrible to awaken from.”

Newt didn’t know what to say, and Hermann turned off the little bedside lamp without waiting for him to comment. When Hermann wrapped his arm around his bare waist and pressed his forehead to the base of his skull, guilt dropped cold and heavy into Newt’s belly. It took him a moment to remember why. But when he did, Newt knew he had to speak. He had to. And he would have to trust that Hermann could protect him.

He spoke out to the blackout-curtained void of the bedroom “Hermann.” It was so much easier to say if he could pretend he was nowhere and no one. Speaking to no one. Easier. But his voice still quivered with fear. “I have to tell you about Their Plan B.”
Chapter End Notes

Writing erotic scenes is like pulling teeth for me.
I shall require encouragement and praise for this one.
;
;
;
As Terrible as it Seemed

Chapter Summary

The fever breaks.

Chapter Notes

**CW for dubcon**

More spoilery plot revealing details at the end notes. PLEASE read that if this is a thing for you, so you can decide how you want to read the chapter.

Thank you for your patience in waiting for this chapter. Hopefully you enjoy the answers here provided. There might be a wait for the next chapter as well because I'm going out of the country the first week in September! I'm very excited for the trip, but sorry that it will mean a longer wait.

Also, special thanks to Avelera. This chapter would look waaaay different (and way worse) if not for her help.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[Hong Kong Day 3]

Hermann scrambled upright and reached, grasping at air a few times before finding his cane and brandishing it at the stranger. The person in the room - large, bumping into things - seemed to be looking for something on the wall.

"Wh-who are you‽" Hermann commanded. He noticed then that his door was ajar.

"Ey! Rise and shine Gottlieb!" The figure spoke, "It’s the first day of the rest of your life and we’ve got shit to do."

Hermann lowered his cane “Ranger… Beckett?” he thought of the girl from yesterday insisting that Raleigh Beckett had been seen in Hong Kong.

“Where’s the... damn... light switch?” Raleigh was muttering “That ‘rise and shine’ thing would have been way better if I could have… Ah!” The light flicked on and Hermann was momentarily blinded, “There we go! Been awhile, Gottlieb. Sorry for being so MIA. these last few years. We all are.”

Hermann’s eyes adjusted and he took in the sight of this universe’s version of Raleigh Beckett as he leaned against the doorway, arms folded. He looked scruffier than Hermann had ever seen him.
He looked the way you might expect someone who had been on the run for the last 6 years to look. A bit more bedraggled, a bit scrappier, but still as magnetically handsome as Hermann had ever known him to be.

Hermann reached for his dressing gown and stepped out of his bed. Scowling he said, “what are you doing in my room?”

“She got worried about you.” Raleigh said simply.

“Worried…”

“When you didn’t respond to the codes,” he clarified. As if that clarified anything. “So I’m here to make sure you’re... alright before bringing you out to everyone else.”

Hermann rubbed his eyes and leaned heavily on his cane. He saw no point in playacting if everything else was going so wildly off the expected script. “I’m not who you think I am”

“Look,” Beckett put a hand on his shoulder and spoke with that comfortingly sincere gravitas that seemed to make everyone like him instantly. “I know that time has passed, and everything is all kinds of wrong… you can’t blame yourself for missing it. You’re still you.”

“No” he swatted Raleigh’s reassuring hand away “I am quite literally a different person. I don’t…” to his own surprise, Hermann found himself laughing, “I don’t even know who Vanessa is.”

“Oh.” Beckett jolted away, “That’s. Huh.” He folded his arms across his chest again and nodded slowly as though waiting for Hermann to explain further. When Hermann offered nothing more he prompted, “Alright then! Where do you come from and how did you get here? Alternate timeline? Parallel universe? Wormhole? Body swap?”

Hermann narrowed his eyes suspiciously “You believe me?”

“I used to pilot a giant mecha while connected at the head with another person to punch giant alien monsters. We’re living in a weird world, Gottlieb. Why would anything be impossible for me to believe?” He looked away as though weighing how much to share, “And... Vanessa presented that as a likely reason you didn’t decipher her quote ‘painfully easy code.’ unquote”

(What.)

“She told you I might be from another universe and you believed her?” Hermann said incredulously.

Beckett shrugged.

“This Vanessa woman is… your leader?”

Beckett grimaced and searched the air for a more suitable term. “More like we help her.”

“So? Why?” She sounded dangerously unhinged.

“She does predictive models. Good ones. And she - with our help - has quietly prevented catastrophe after worldwide catastrophe. We’ve learned to trust her on this stuff. Even when it sounds crazy. Hell. Especially when it sounds crazy. And if she says you might not be the Gottlieb we know, and you confirm? Well. Story checks out.”

“So. What now then?”
“I take you to Vanessa.”

Ice slid into Hermann’s belly. He knew nothing about this woman. From the description, she could be a cult leader for all he knew. In fact, if the trends of this universe’s were anything to go by, she probably was.

“I’ll be right outside while you get dressed.” Raleigh, said heading out of the room and closing the door behind him. “Don’t take too long.” it was phrased as a request, but something in Beckett’s steely eye contact clearly communicated to Hermann that Raleigh wasn’t here simply as a friend. Of course he wasn’t. He’d broken into Hermann’s room after all. He wasn’t their Hermann, and they had even mistrusted the original Hermann enough to lie to him for years. Hermann nodded to indicate that he gathered the implicit warning, and Raleigh closed the door behind him.

There was no way to escape. Hermann was about to give in to panic, when something on his computer caught his eye.

His counterpart was of the habit of keeping his desktop perfectly neat - with only two or three folders tucked in the corner - another trait they shared. But now a new folder was smack in the middle of the screen. It was labeled simply “Hello.”

Inside the folder was a single document of code which would look like gibberish to anyone who wasn’t intimately acquainted with the distinctive personal style of Vanessa - his Vanessa. He clapped a hand over his mouth, unable to believe what he was seeing. Hermann dove into the file. With a few keystrokes, there was Vanessa’s entire message unfolding before him in the language that he and she shared. Personnel files, words of encouragement, something about an alternate Precursor plan.

If he had more time, he would have sat and unpacked every file of her message and savored every word. Honestly, if he had time he would have whooped and hollered and ordered champagne for everyone in this damn shatterdome whether they understood why or not. It had worked! Vanessa was here! They had access to the multiverse! Everything was possible. The sky was no longer the limit. But Raleigh Beckett was waiting outside. Possibly timing him, and for some reason he felt that he should keep this universe shattering discovery a secret for now.

All he had time to write was:

Safe for now. Decipher these.

Along with copies of Vanessa’s two emails. He then rushed through his morning ablutions and joined Raleigh Beckett outside. It was barely 5:00 am.

“Off to see Vanessa then!” he turned and began leading Hermann in the direction of the command center.

“Where exactly are you taking me?” He tried to sound dignified, and resented that he was robbed of the possibility of equal footing by the necessity to stutter-step to keep up with Beckett’s assured strides.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” he said, stopping in his tracks and mustering up as much imperious authority as he could, “if you think I’m going to leave Newton here for the sake of some harebrained conspiracy you are very much mistaken.”

Raleigh stopped at that and turned to face him, “Oh I see.” He said, genuinely apologetic at the
misconception, “No uh. You don’t understand. We’re not taking you away. We’re taking this whole thing over.”

2025

And then they closed the breach. But you knew that.

According to our source, before these two cracked it (and they were the ones to finally figure the “how”), they were in a bad place. Everyone else in their department had either been cut due to budget constraints or had just left. To… you know. Spend the last few months of humanity with their families.

Our anonymous source tells us that he doesn’t blame them for leaving. That there was some classified stuff that people still don’t know that painted a pretty grim projection of our chances of survival as a species. (The source then proceeded to tell me some of that classified stuff but I’m going to go ahead and not report that, out of respect. Because 1 - it’s not relevant, 2 - he was a little sloshed at this point and that’s my fault, and 3 - dammit I’m going soft. But maybe you remember how it felt to watch mutavore swat through that wall like so much tissue paper and you can kinda guess what some of that classified info was.)

He said that Gottlieb and Geiszler were the only ones who were crazy enough to keep trying anyway, and they were the ones who didn’t really have… anywhere else to go. Which is to say there was no point in leaving the lab to be with their loved ones, because their loved ones were already in the lab.

Don’t misunderstand me though. Apparently, the fighting got worse and worse as the end of the war ramped up. Their work was telling them all sorts of shit they didn’t want to know, and it was still never enough to get ahead of the attacks. They took it out on each other, and it didn’t help that they had to scrap for extremely limited resources. We know that it all turned out ok, but they… didn’t. Lucky for us, their fighting paid off. And they won.

[Cambridge, Day 3]

Newt was left to his own devices in the morning, as the assembled expert minds attempted to make use of what he had told Hermann the night before. Which meant that Newt was alone with his thoughts. And his many fun and interesting memories.

He’d tried to keep busy, keep his mind occupied. Not dwell. He had found Cambridge Newt’s guitar and played some old favorites. He’d written a dumb song of his own (“alone in my head! alone in my head! / is anything sweeter? so glad we’re not dead…”). And still it was only noon.
And still his memories refused to be ignored. The Precursors might be gone, but he was still himself. And even in the best of times, Newt had been the sort to dwell.

He wanted to think of the night before. He tried to occupy his full attention on his reunion with Hermann. Herman’s beautiful hands.

Newt had always loved Hermann’s hands. Not that that made him special or anything. People always go on and on about how much they love hands. All proud that their favorite feature isn’t a more traditional secondary sexual characteristic. Like “Oh you’re a leg man? Scoff! I’m a hands *man.*” Newt was great at self awareness and he was self aware to know that damn. Anyone would love Hermann’s hands. Long, piano player fingers which treated everything they did like art. He wrote equations like a painter. He touched Newt like a musician touching an instrument.

Why hadn’t Hermann known that something was wrong when Newt didn’t let him touch him with those hands? Hadn’t Newt told him often enough? “If I ever stop loving your hands, please assume I’m dead.”

It was drizzling the afternoon they buried an empty coffin and placed a stone reading Tendo Choi on the mound.

“Dr. Gottlieb.”

“Dr. Geiszler.” Hermann finally met his eye, too polite to ignore a direct address.

Newt didn’t want to think of that day. But nonetheless it played like a movie he couldn’t pause or x out of. He remembered what he said next:

“Nothing like a funeral to make you want to feel alive.”

Hermann inclined his head to the side, seeming not to like the sentiment, but unable to disagree. “We don’t know that it’s a funeral,” he said in lieu of an admonishment. “I for one still hold out hope that... This all just seems premature to me.”

“Yeah well. It got us all back together, huh?” Newt said lightly. Goading him.

Hermann’s lip curled in distaste, which he tried and failed to hide. Newt and his guests found the gesture inexplicably appealing. But then, everything Hermann did would have been appealing to them at this juncture. It had been two years since they’d seen each other in the flesh, yet Hermann had occupied an astonishing portion of his and Their collective thoughts.

Newt musing on his failures to please Them, knowing that Hermann would not have struggled the way he did (look, guys, I don’t think I’m going to be able to open another breach.) (He could have done it. *He* could have.) Which in turn bled into the Precursor’s spiteful thirst to punish the other scientist who had foiled Their original plot - the one that got away. Which blended into Their detached wonder that such a primitive creature could understand their technology so well.

Which blended with the curious, palpable pain of Newt’s physical longing for him. Which blended with Their morbid fascination at the useless, exhausting, and objectively disgusting pastime that humans engaged in with one another - which They remembered first hand from their early days in Newt’s mind, and occasionally probed into when they trolled through his more distant memories.

So when all was said and done and all of it blended together, Newt kinda wanted to kill Hermann, and the Precursors kinda wanted to bone him. And no one in Newt’s head could make sense of what was up with any of that.
“Walk with me?” Newt hoped that Hermann couldn’t tell that he was salivating. But Hermann looked down his nose at him and even that disapproval, even that look that said he didn’t like how Newt had changed, made Newt unconsciously lick his lips. He tried to play it off, like the request wasn’t as important as it felt. Like he wouldn’t choke on longing if he didn’t find an excuse to touch him. “I’m not ready to go back to my hotel. It’s too… empty.” A suite. His first apartment in Cambridge could have fit into it three times. He looked around at the cluttered mossy graves. Cracked, toppled, worn away. “This is somehow less depressing.”

Hermann softened, and shook his head as thought admonishing himself for being so quick to judge. A part of Newt that was Newt wished that Hermann hadn’t chosen this one moment to second guess his own judgement. “Yes.” Hermann said gently. “Of course. Let’s have a walk.”

Newt led them down a winding shady path, leading to the older and older graves and the trees that had long ago grown out of the nutrients of the dead beneath them.

Newt finally broke the silence. “Good thing the rain stopped.”

Hermann nodded. Though Newt knew that the humidity was probably still wreaking havoc on his symptoms.

“Did you ever explore graveyards as a kid?” Newt continued.

“I can’t say I ever did.”

“Massachusetts had tons of old graveyards. I used to try to read the inscriptions. It’s wild what people choose to leave behind. Like… look at this one. Ornate as all get out. Look at those symbols! The foxes and the grapes. Jeeze. Of all the imagery. Is that what he thought of his kids?”

Hermann reached out to reverently touch the monument, “And all made in sandstone. So much detail is lost where the wind hit it.”

“It’s because this guy didn’t give a shit about what the future generations thought about him. He didn’t care about us. He cared about the people he knew personally. His free-loading kids.”

Hermann nodded and ran his fingers over the mottled carvings of grapes, forever out of reach from the foxes below “It’s a shame Tendo didn’t get to choose his own words in the end,” he said. “We can only guess what he would have wanted.”

“I thought you said that all this seemed premature.”

Hermann’s jaw worked side to side, and sidestepped from addressing what he clearly wished he didn’t know deep down - that Tendo was gone. “Do you know… the last conversation I had with Tendo was about you?” Hermann said in that irritatingly British way of masquerading a reveal as a question.

“Uh. No. No I didn’t know that. How could I possibly have known that, Hermann?”

“I told him… About our drift.”

They had mutually agreed that for the sake of Hermann’s safety, the official report would read that only Newt had been involved in the second drift. Hermann had been reluctant to lie, but having been in Newt’s head, finally seemed to understand his mistrust of military authority. “Seriously? Why?”

“Because it was Tendo.” Hermann said simply. As though that was reason enough, “it was shortly
after you departed from the PPDC. The two of us shared drinks to commiserate over the…
changing of the guard as it were. You had left, Beckett was ill and we didn’t know at the time that
he would pull through, Mako was caring for him and planning to retire. There were new recruits
coming in and rapidly advancing, and Tendo was having as he put it ‘a lot of feelings’ about what
he saw as low-rent replacements for… well. People we knew. People who had died. People who
had - as he saw it - done the hard work and laid down the groundwork. For these new people who
wouldn’t even have to fight kaiju. I would have told him that they were almost certainly coming
back. That these recruits would almost certainly have a great deal of work to do. But when I started
to talk about the drift, all I could manage to talk about was… you. It must have been the drink.”

“You got wasted with Tendo without me?”

“I don’t know about ‘wasted’.”

“I can’t believe I missed it.”

“He was the only person I told. That the rumors were true. And if he really is gone. Well. Our
secret died with him.” They turned a corner, the shady path hugged a lichen spotted mausoleum
lined with dense bushes “When was the last time you saw him?” Hermann mused.

(Tendo struggling beneath him on the stairs until he wasn’t. The knife all the way through and
stuck in the step. Blood on both his hands. And then… nothing. Nothing.)

Newt braced himself on the sandstone mausoleum with one hand.

Hermann continued on his way, not noticing that Newt had stopped walking. “Did you ever see
him again after you left? Newton?” He mistook Newt’s speechlessness for something human and
worthy of sympathy, and moved towards him. “It’s perfectly understandable to have regrets,” he
said gently, voice dripping in what he assumed was shared sorrow, “one imagines that one has all
the time in the world, when in reality,” he was close enough now to reach for Newt’s shoulder,
“one never knows -”

Before he could touch Newt’s shoulder, Newt attacked. Hermann’s eyes went wide in surprise, and
his cane rustled out of his hand - stuck in a bush - as Newt grabbed the collar of Hermann’s black
jacket with his left hand, and fitted his right tight around his throat, jostling his back against the
mausoleum. Hermann made a rote effort at struggle, but Newt’s grip was determinately iron, so he
stood still.

“What’s all this then?” Hermann spoke so quietly that his voice likely didn’t carry beyond the six
inches it took to reach Newt.

After the initial surprise, Hermann coached his expression into one of careful nonchalance. If not
for the direct evidence of Hermann’s quickening pulse, Newt might have thought he was taking
this whole choking thing in stride. Newt squeezed ever so slightly tighter around his throat,
universally enjoying the feeling of Hermann’s blood pumping under his fingers so close to the
surface. He glanced back and forth between Hermann’s eyes and mouth, taking in every
microscopic quiver of the fine facial muscles wrapped tight over his prominent cheekbones.

They stood that way for a moment. Newt leaning forward, catching himself, terrified, and not
knowing what he was about to do. Hermann not nearly terrified enough.

“If you’re planning to do what I think you’re planning to do,” Hermann said crisply, “I would
advise against it.”
Newt released Hermann’s jacket and loosened his grip on his throat - but he didn’t let go. With his free hand he removed his sunglasses, folded them, and tucked them into his pocket. All without breaking eye contact. He had Hermann pinned against the crumbling mossy wall, and was studying him like a specimen.

“It would be disrespectful to our surroundings,” Hermann continued. His voice prim, and his syntax overly exact.

That alone would have given him away, but Newt also had the evidence of his dilating pupils, and rapidly pumping blood pounding in his throat just under Newt’s fingers. Newt made no move to let go and instead cocked his head, with serpent-like fascination at how Hermann squirmed. Newt had always been able to get under his skin, and it was fascinating that even his stillness had such an effect on the man.

“And in any case” Hermann said, cool on the surface, but desperately casting around for a way to talk one or both of them out of what was about to happen, “our relationship ended with such finality, I would be loathe to introduce uncertainty -”

“Oh, shut the fuck up.” And, for what Newt had every reason to believe would be the last time, he kissed him. It was not warm, or comforting. It was not a homecoming. It was a kiss all hungry teeth, and pressure, and rage. And, not entirely understanding, Hermann reciprocated with aggression of his own pressing forward as much as Newt’s grip on his throat would allow. He grimaced in frustration as Newt coldly steered him away from his lips when he threatened to become too dominant in the kiss. Newt knew that Hermann hated being out of control. After all, his body hadn’t been his friend for so long. In the days when Newt had wanted to please him, he had let Hermann exercise the bodily control that was so often missing in his daily life. So that at least in private and late at night Hermann could feel like the master of his own limbs. But now They weren’t all that interested in pleasing Hermann, and Newt used his knowledge to elicit the most satisfying sounds of dissatisfaction.

Hermann was all wiry muscle, but Newt had lately been carved into a more efficient tool, and could easily overpower a man who spent his days at a chalkboard and hobbling around on a cane.

Newt pressed a knee between Hermann’s legs and was unsurprised to feel that he was already half hard. The monsters in his mind leaned forward, fascinated as a hundred gentle memories flooded his vision. Some of them from two angles slightly tinted blue. All of them gone and impossible to reclaim. But Newt had forfeited his right to sweet, shared joys and now had only this.

He reached down and unceremoniously unzipped Hermann’s formal trousers, gripping his cock - heavy and hot with redirected blood.

Hermann drew back so sharply he knocked his head against the wall of the mausoleum. “No. Not here.” He said breathlessly. It must have taken some good goddamn discipline to say no to something he so clearly wanted - if the little red spots of color high on his cheekbones were any indication. “Might I recommend we retire to another locale. If your hotel makes you so uncomfortable might I recommend that we take… this… whatever this is to mine? The PPDC was generous enough to spring for a... solo room for me.” Hermann was babbling. His brain always did go mushy without proper blood flow. Newt let him go on, never letting go of him, “Very generous you might think, however I - I had to raise a bit of a stink about it - citing the necessity of allowances for my disability. But. That’s not impo… what I mean to say is that I have a room to myself. But here is not good. We’re too close to where… and... I don’t think the dead would appreciate -”

“They’re dead.” Newt finally interrupted. The hotel thing actually sounded like a pretty good idea,
but They weren’t interested in waiting. He defiantly stroked Hermann’s length and raised his eyebrows in mock surprise as Hermann involuntarily ground his hips into the motion. “And I thought I told you to shut the fuck up.” He said.

“Wait it’s - ah!” Newt had rubbed his thumb gently over the head of Hermann’s now completely hardened member, spreading the moisture that beaded there in a small circular motion around the tip.

“For once in your life Hermann. Shut. The. Fuck. Up.” He kissed him again, using the distraction to ease Hermann’s raincoat off and drop it on the mud between them.

No sense in messing up his expensive pants, he thought as he knelt on the coat, feeling the mud squelch, saturating the lining. But the waterproofed outer layer kept Newt’s knees dry and that was what mattered.

They’d “disrespected their surroundings” before. Hermann’s side of the room in particular had seen its share of bad lab practice in the final year of the war. But Hermann had never protested like this before. Newt considered that maybe the funeral of a close mutual friend was a bridge too far. It was hard for him to tell what people found important anymore. And even more difficult to care.

Sucking Hermann off was like a formula that Newt had perfected years ago through extensive lab tests. First slow and soft, then faster with more hand than mouth, then a long lingering deep suction and Hermann was inches from his threshold. Hermann was pressing so hard to the mausoleum that he seemed to be trying to melt it into his hands grasping involuntarily at the air both wanting and not wanting to pull Newt away from him. Predictable. Newt viewed his actions from outside himself, from the perspective of the monsters in his head. And with academic detachment, he marveled at this strange biological imperative that otherwise logical beings like Hermann were willing to follow to the ends of reason, and to the edge of self destruction. (It’s strange) he thought even as he took Hermann into his throat as deep as he could, eliciting helpless sounds and spasmodic tremors from his right leg. He was close but Newt wasn’t ready for this to end yet.

Newt wiped his mouth and rose to kiss Hermann one last time. Gently this time, some part of him knowing it would be the last time, perhaps in his life. He continued to stroke hard and fast, his grip firm and exactly the way he knew Hermann liked it. Just when Hermann’s breath started to hitch in that familiar way, and his eyes began to flutter closed, Newt let go, took a step back and watched. Hermann’s eyes snapped open in confusion, and Newt folded his arms, a small smile playing across his lips. He looked down at Hermann’s cock - red and weeping with need - in mock sympathy then back up to a still confused Hermann. He shrugged as though to say “well?”

Newt maintained cool eye contact, letting him see the disdain, fascination, and detached disgust as Hermann couldn’t help but grip himself and finish himself off. His knees buckled and the back of his head scraped against the crumbling sandstone as he came hard into the bushes. He leaned heavily, halfway down the wall, his cane just out of reach.

Newt’s lip curled and he made no effort to help Hermann fetch his cane and stand all the way. In fact he leaned against a tall pillar gravestone to highlight his inaction. “Well that was fun.” He said, taking pleasure in being the one fully clothed and fully in command of his senses. The irony of this sentiment would creep up on him slowly over the years.

“We shouldn’t have done that.” Hermann said, once he’d regained control of his breathing. He couldn’t look at Newt. “At Tendo’s -” Hermann tried to stand all the way upright, bracing himself against the wall, before shaking his head and sitting all the way on the muddy ground, “Whether predicated on lust or… or love that was -”
“Love?” Newt laughed outright, “Herm, please. It’s not like we ever really loved each other.”
And They ground his teeth in pleasure at the way Hermann’s face fell even further. “I mean I know I said it a lot. Like. to the point where there’s no way you should have believed me. But you… I’m trying to think…” He made a show of searching the air for a memory. Didn’t find it. Put his sunglasses back on. “No you never did.”

It was true. Hermann had never told Newt that he loved him. Not in 2019, their rosy year of youthful exuberance. Not in the many times that they couldn’t keep their hands off each other in the long years of the war. And not after they closed to breach together and began some semblance of a something that should have lasted forever.

Hermann had always been stubborn. Short sighted. Proud. And even the part of Newt that was Newt didn’t regret seeing Hermann look up at him like that. Contrite, hurt, confused. And Newt left him like that. He just. Walked away without looking back.

“He didn’t sit. “I’m so sorry, Hermann.”

“What? What are you talking about now?” he laughed, completely caught off guard.

“Hermann. Can we talk about the funeral?”

“What? No! Why is that - Which is to say yes, of course we can. But now is not the time. There’s been -”

“But last night -” Newt interrupted, taking hold of Hermann’s hands, “Hermann please don’t get me wrong last night was great and I missed you and everything. But the time before that… the last time I -”

“This isn’t last time, this is now.” Hermann was damp-eyed and smiling in an incomprehensibly beatific manner. Newt wasn’t ready to be looked at like that. He couldn’t stand to be looked at like that. It was that same expression of totally unearned delight that Hermann had greeted him with on the helipad while Newt was still planning to end the world.

Even the Precursors had known to make at least a show of adopting the accepted post-regrettable-hookup awkwardness. But Hermann didn’t seem to be bothered by it. Why did this man - so full of rage - have an endless well of forgiveness for Newt?

“This might not be like last time, but last time is all still there, Herm!” Newt hated how shrill and loud he sounded. But it was enough to get Hermann to listen.

The blind glow of joy faded from Hermann’s face and was replaced by concern. “Yes.” He said. “It is still there.” And he stayed quiet, allowing Newt to air what he needed without rush.

Of course now that he could speak, he didn’t know what needed saying first. He had killed Tendo
and then at his funeral… “Why weren’t you angry at me?”

Hermann took a deep breath. He seemed hesitant, “I was. For a time. But that time passed and I
realized - or rather rationalized - that grief takes many forms. We buried a friend that day. Of
course I didn’t know what I know now. If I had gotten out of my own way and just seen the truth, I
would never have been angry at all. I would have helped you.” He reached a comforting hand
towards his shoulder, only for Newt to swat it away.

“But you should have been angry. You should still be angry! What I did to you - I manipulated
you, I didn’t to listen to you… I took advantage of you. I like, borderline…” Newt tried to say it but
felt his stomach turn at the memory. He feared he might actually be ill if he said the word himself.
He covered his face. “It was Them. I should have stopped. I’m so sorry.”

“I know you are.” He could feel Hermann reaching for his wrists, and was grateful that he seemed
to think better of touching him. “I don’t blame you.”

“How?” he said, voice muffled by his hands. “How are you able to forgive me so easily! That’s
fucked up, dude, I treated you like garbage!” He stalked to the other side of the room, making a
show of looking out the window, when really he had just needed to put some physical space
between them before he said the next bit. “You were totally blind dude - you didn’t believe that I
was the one making the cloned Kaiju brains in those Jaeger even though who ELSE could it be?”

God. He was angry now. And in an uncomfortable residual of the last ten years he could not
decipher his feelings well enough to tell at whom, “You missed it Hermann. I was counting on you
to get it. But you just made excuses because you thought you knew me. And you almost paid for
it with your life!”

“Not excuses, Newton. Doubt. Because I did - I do know you. Technically, I was right to assume it
wasn’t you, because it wasn’t you.”

“As usual Hermann, your conclusions are theoretically correct but practically irrelevant!” Newt
crossed his arms defensively.

“What are you angry about?” Hermann snapped, the clipped tone of irritation creeping into his
voice and Newt was comforted somewhere deep and quiet, even as his own irritation prickled up to
match. “We stopped it! Is all…” Hermann gestured sharply at Newt in his defensively postured
stance, “all this just because I’ve forgiven you?”

Newt grimaced and couldn’t meet his eye irritated that Hermann had guessed correctly: he couldn’t
think of a better reason to be angry. As though reading his mind, Hermann stepped towards him,
cane striking more aggressively than necessary as punctuation.

“What you survived is unlike anything anyone in human history has ever even experienced. These
were not the lies of a lover, or the impossible standards of an exacting father. This was not the
nuanced cruelty of a fellow human being with a past and… and,” he searched for the phrase and
thumped his cane on the floor in irritation, “human motivation. There’s no understanding them,
there’s no forgiving them. They are evil,” he snarled.

Newt finally met his eye, and something of what he saw there just made Hermann angrier, though
Newt could tell it wasn’t at him.

“You were fed a constant stream of whispers by day, and nightmares by night. And I cannot -” his
voice wavered worryingly, “I refuse to define you by by your actions under that constant abuse.
Whether the strings were tied and actively directing your movements or not, you were always
aware of the puppeteers backstage. Weren’t you?” While technically a question, he intoned it like a
statement. “You are the one making excuses, Newton. For Them. You are a good man, and They are simply evil."

Newt uncrossed his arms. He had thought that there was no way Hermann could understand how their desires bled into his, and his into theirs. How they punished him both physically and psychologically by forcing him to linger on terrible memories, and taking the reins at just the right moment to create new terrible memories. How he feared them so much, and loved connecting to them so much because they had made sure that They were the only connection he had left. He was sure Hermann would never understand, and yet here he was, speaking like he did.

“Yeah. But where’s the line between fear and complicity?”

“Stop!” Hermann was nearly begging. “What more is there to say, Newton? You wanted to know why I accept your apology? Why I can forgive you? This is why I can forgive you!”

“No I’m not finished dude. It wasn’t just Them. Even the part of me that was me didn’t… mind hurting you. I was actually angry. Me. Actual me. Hurt and angry and more than willing to watch you suffer with only the tiniest encouragement from Them.”

“Would you have done what you did without them?”

“No. I don’t know. I was... I thought you didn’t even care.”

Hermann looked aghast “Of course I cared -”

“And more than anything I was angry that you didn’t love me back.”

Hermann slumped slowly with an almost comical look of disbelief. “You misinterpreted a great deal.” He finally said.

“Yeah well. You never said it, did you?” Newt realized distantly that Hermann would read his tone as a challenge. Maybe he meant it that way.

Herman opened his mouth to speak, then closed it and glanced helplessly around the room. It felt like he was formulating the perfect turn of phrase to express the truth while cushioning Newt’s delicate constitution. It was condescending as hell and Newt was annoyed afresh by the time Hermann finally spoke: “I didn’t want someone like you to feel obligated to stay with someone... like me.”

“Obli- seriously? ” Of course he would land on something so infuriatingly self-deprecating “Fuck Hermann! Love yourself!”

“I didn’t want you to think that I had expectations of you just because we had reunited after our drift. We hadn’t been together very long and -”

“Dude? We’d been on and off for like seven years by then!”

“Precisely! ‘On and off.’ And before we drifted we’d been ‘off’ for - ”

“Ok I’m clearly hearing the ‘on,’ and you're apparently only hearing the ‘off.’”

“I couldn’t let you mistakenly believe that I expected you to care for me going forward. I couldn’t let you know that even a part of me hoped that you would. What an imposition! I wanted to let it take it’s natural course without burdening your decision with the weight of my need.” He rattled his cane like a sword as both punctuation and explanation. “It is no small thing to ask a person to
commit to caring for me. When you left, I thought that was simply you making your decision.”

“How could I have been any more obvious about my decision? What were you waiting for?” Newt felt his voice raising in timbre and volume again. He finally understood what Dave felt like trying to talk to HAL 9000. But like if Dave was trying to get HAL to talk about his feelings. “Like. I told you. All the time!”

“I know. I know.” Hermann settled heavily onto the bed. “I couldn’t trap you with my -”

“But you should have told me -”

“I love you.”

In classic Hermann style, he said it so simply it knocked the hot air out of Newt’s sails and robbed him of all fight. Hermann had said such overwhelmingly affectionate things like, ‘I feel most comfortable in your presence.’ And, ‘You are, in fact, the only person who has ever offered me an intellectual challenge’. But.

“Yeah that.” Newt said, standing perfectly still, irrationally afraid that if he moved it would break the bubble-like iridescence of the moment and the words would pop and disappear. “You’ve never said that.”

Hermann ground his jaw and looked away like he was ashamed at himself or something. But, he’d said it. And it was such a nice thing to hear that for a fraction of a second, it wiped away every negative feeling he’d been hoarding through the last ten years. Even when the fraction of a second passed, and some of them came back, they were balanced against that statement, and lighter for it.

He should have already known Hermann loved him. After all, the Precursors had counted on as much. What else accounted for the extreme actions he had regularly committed on Newt’s behalf. Part of him did know already. All the same, it was nice to hear it out loud.

Wait. Did he say trap?

Newt laughed that laugh that people do when something so awful has come to light that they start to suspect some cosmic candid camera, “Love’s not a trap, Herm. Hell. It might have even saved me from mine.”

“I’m sorry. I should have told you. I know that now. I have had many regrets, And that one is... at the forefront.”

Newt waved off his apology and went to sit next to him on the bed. Because honestly what was the point? “I’m tired of being angry. And I can’t blame you for being afraid to ask me to take anything seriously.”

“You’d forgive me so easily?” Hermann said, raising an eyebrow.

“Eyy. I see what you did there.”

Hermann smiled and tipped his head onto Newt’s shoulder. They sat like that for a moment. “How many of these conversations do you think we’re gonna need to have?” Newt finally said.

“Infinite.”

Newt tried to laugh again, but couldn’t. “No matter what I do though, I’ll never be able to make up for some of the things I did. It doesn’t matter whether that they had the wheel, I was there, and I
still had to see it. It still feels like did it. And if I had just been a little stronger… I’ll never be able to bring Tendo back.”

He felt Hermann jolt straight, “No!” He said leaping to his feet. His cane clattered to the ground but he didn’t seem to notice, “My god. Newton. Newton.” He took Newt’s face in his hands and looked him square in the eye, almost frightening in his intensity, “Suddenly everything is possible, and nothing is as terrible as it seemed,” he said. He fished through the breast pocket of his jacket and produced a scrap of pencil-scribbled paper, holding it aloft like it was the map to Atlantis, “this offers hope, Newt.”

“What are you saying?” Newt reached for the paper but Hermann jerked it away and held up a finger. He wasn’t getting that paper without an explanation first.

“Vanessa Laurent reached out to Hermann - to me - as I thought she would. And there was a message - as I suspected there might be. I presume as a way to win his trust - my trust - after so many years. It’s the only way to explain why the message was so simple to decipher. Her way of saying to me, ‘hello yes. It’s actually me. And we’re still playing our same games, also, dear friend, here is some marvelous news.’ Maybe if he had deciphered it she would have told him why she’s been so out of reach for so many years! Would that she had sent it a day earlier! All this might have been avoided! Or if not avoided entirely, we might have -”

He was babbling, which was uncharacteristic but not unheard of given extreme circumstances. Newt stood, and took hold of Hermann’s wrists.

“Hermann. Hermann! What does it say? What is. The news?”

Silently, Hermann handed him the scrap of paper and Newt accepted it. It was a print out of a bland, friendly email. The body of the message (“These horrible few days, I’ve been so concerned for you. Everything happening at once like that, and me nowhere to be found and unable to support you…”) had words and letters circled and on the bottom, in Hermann’s bold all capitalized handwriting, various combinations of letters rearranged and scratched out, until a single message - circled in pencil pressed so hard it ripped through the paper - vibrated into focus:

T E N D O L I V E S

[Hong Kong Day 3 continued]

Hermann had wandered a Shatterdome at 5:00 am before. Otherwise he might have attributed the eerie static stillness to the odd hour. However, he knew that even at the oddest hours, a Shatterdome hallway could expect some traffic, or exhausted discussion. Or, in the case of an attack, clusters individuals scurrying with great purpose.

Now, however, a strange quiet had overtaken the hallways. Hermann rarely felt so aware of his own walking speed, or the echoey clatter of his cane. Or the eternal spacious length of the
Shatterdome halls. He glanced over to Beckett, hoping his face would reveal some answers, but he only stared straight ahead and gave away nothing.

When they arrived at the command center, Hermann understood why the rest of the shatterdome was empty: everyone who was awake, was here. Nearest the door, a cluster of technicians was crying. They parted to make way for them, staring in open red-eyed wonder at Raleigh. Raleigh led them towards the sunken center where a crowd was gathered around a woman of small stature but enormous presence. She was answering questions, and making explanations, and seemed to be doing her best to keep the small crowd calm. Even from behind, Hermann could tell that it was Mako Mori. Risen from the grave.

As they approached, Mako straightened a little bit taller as though hearing a sound no one else could hear and turned to look directly at Raleigh. Raleigh gestured towards Hermann with a small nod of his head, and Mako acknowledged them with a microscopic nod of her own. Communicating wordlessly through a drift connection that was never sundered.

“This way, doc.” Raleigh said, steering Hermann towards the conference room off the command center.

The long conference table was empty but for a birdlike woman typing busily on a computer at the opposite head. She wore her blouse buttoned tight all the way to the top, and her natural hair in two french braids knotted into a bun at the base of her skull. She seemed to barely notice their entrance.

“Vanessa?” Raleigh said, “I brought him.”

“I’m hiding.” The woman said by way of greeting. “Too many people. I’ll tell them what to do from in here.” She had the accent of a native French speaker who had learned English from the BBC. “Hello Hermann.” She didn’t look up from her work, “Which was it, Beckett?”

“Three.”

She looked up sharply, suddenly interested, and focused her gaze on Hermann with uncomfortably keen, probing eyes, “That is interesting. Where do you come from?”

Hermann glanced to Raleigh, unsure what to say. Raleigh just raised his eyebrows, prompting him to answer the question. “A place quite like this,” he said, advancing cautiously towards Vannessa Laurent and her owlish stare. “Very much like this. But with profound timeline diversions following to the closing of the breach.”

“That makes sense,” Vanessa said, nodding seriously, and Hermann still didn’t understand how it possibly could. “How is your world different?”

Hermann grimaced. Surely she couldn’t know what an enormous question she was asking. “The PPDC is dramatically downsized, Newton and I are happily married and have been for 8 years. We teach at MIT. The Precursors have given up. Tendo Choi -”

“Am I there?” She interrupted.

Hermann opened his mouth to say “no” but suddenly wasn’t so sure. It seemed a remarkable coincidence that this woman should share a name with his creation. Or the other way around. There seemed to be more to all this that they still couldn’t see. Before Hermann could begin to articulate this, he was interrupted by a familiar voice from the door

“Hey Gottlieb. It’s been awhile.”
Hermann turned and his shoulders instinctively relaxed, relieved to see a familiar face. “It is good to see you,” he said, and he hobbled as quickly as he could to accept the offered hug.

“Likewise, brother.”

The man clapped him on the back, and Hermann was comforted by the familiar gesture of friendly affection. “Wait.” Hermann jolted back, suddenly remembering the upsetting news he’d seen the day before. “I saw that article I thought - Tendo. I saw images of your funeral.”

Tendo grinned like he’d been caught at something as serious as stealing an extra after dinner mint, and said “Yeah. I probably have some explaining to do.”

Chapter End Notes

Precursor possessed Newt pushes Hermann far beyond his comfort zone at Tendo's funeral, despite Hermann's protests about the inappropriate nature of the location. Hermann does want to be intimate with Newt, but the location and proximity to the occasion is very troubling to him.

If you want to skip the section, it starts at the line
"Newt braced himself on the sandstone mausoleum with one hand."

and is over by the line
"He was startled out of his shameful memory of Hermann when the real thing burst through the bedroom door."

This was far and away the most difficult chapter to write. By a long shot. Trying to keep the suspense without becoming overwrought, and trying to make the reveal as satisfying as possible took a lot of hard work. This is just a hobby for me, and I'm so glad I get to share it with everyone who's interested.

So if you liked this chapter, if you like the story please do comment and let me know! Both because it's encouraging for me, and because it helps other readers find the story (how many times have you filtered by comment count? haha!). Hearing from readers really is the only payment we fic writers get, and it's plenty for me!

Thank you!
[Hong Kong - day 4]

The Shatterdome

Vanessa called a meeting of essential personnel in a cramped windowless conference room in an odd corner of the Shatterdome. Most of the assembled had to stand, but Laurent - hunched in the corner behind her laptop and reading glasses - had insisted that it was the best place in the building to conduct a secure meeting. Hermann feared that it would be difficult to untangle her paranoia from her points of genuine expertise.

The cramped jostle of bodies combined with the cold blast of air conditioning, meant that the room fluctuated dramatically between too hot and too cold - seeming to be comfortable only for minutes at a time. Hermann sat in the corner of the table, near Vanessa, and took note of whom he recognized.

Jake Pentecost stood to attention; he seemed shaken by the whiplash revelations of the last few days. Next to him stood a pretty girl in an engineer’s jumpsuit - Hermann watched as she squeezed his forearm reassuringly. On his other side stood a generically handsome soldier shoulder pressed
to Jake’s a little too deliberately to be unconscious contact. The young man had his arms crossed
defensively and his perfectly symmetrical face was screwed up into an analytical glare.

Liwen Shao was perched in one of the rare seats at the table, hands folded in front of her, quietly
waiting.

Cadet Amara Namani and the tall Ukrainian girl stood squished near the door. They both looked a
little baffled to be included in the briefing, and determined not to draw attention to themselves lest
someone notice the mistake and tell them to leave. Amara glanced back as though to make sure her
companion was still there and was acknowledged by a terse nod. She turned back to the action of
the room with a poorly concealed smile so sincere that Hermann was momentarily taken by a pang
of protective fondness. *(That’s not the Amara we know. That’s not our student.)* Hermann heard
this reminder in Newt’s voice. He’d been hearing his inner photocopy of Newt more and more
since he’d gotten here.

Mako and Raleigh stood beside Laurent on either side like bodyguards, lending her credibility with
their apparent trust *(and let’s be real, she can use all the credibility she can get.)* *(hush.)* They
waited for the assembled crowd to settle down a bit. All it took was a glance from her for Mako to
stand a little straighter, and Raleigh to clap his hands for everyone’s attention.

“Allright folks, listen up.” The last bits of scattered chatter drew to a close. “You’ve been filled in
on some of the bigger picture things and we appreciate your patience, your questions -”

“And your discretion,” Mako finished seamlessly.

“Dr. Laurent here is going to fill in the rest of the gaps, and outline our plan of attack - henceforth
known as plan Hexagon - or ‘Hex.'” Preamble complete, Raleigh turned back to Laurent, who
stayed seated.

Her fingers played with the collar of her shirt and she barely looked up from her computer. “I’ve
spent this morning in contact with some of our alternate universe selves.” The mingled French and
Queen’s English of her accent made her words a staccato melody, and she spoke so quietly that the
room became instinctively still to listen. If anyone had any skepticism about the absurd claim, they
kept it to themselves.

“In response to the Precursor’s plan B as outlined by Dr. Newton Geiszler - now in possession of a
sound mind having swapped universes with a Professor Geiszler - whom we currently have tied up
in our basement… we also have here a Professor Gottlieb,” she gestured at Hermann. “Rather than
the Gottlieb that you all - which is to say *we* all know…” She opened her mouth to say more and
shut it again - seeming to realize that she’d already lost the plot. She swallowed, adjusted her
glasses and squinted back at her computer screen “Ah, yes. In response to the Precursor’s plan B I
have outlined ‘Hex.’ Our plan of attack. No longer will we be pursuing the,” she laughed breathily,
“hasty and ill-advised invasion of the Anteverse.” She continued to chuckle to herself, glancing up
at the rest of the room, as though expecting everyone else to be in on the joke too. No one else
laughed.

The symmetrical soldier next to Jake Pentecost scowled and looked sharply his way. Pentecost
gestured subtly for him to stay quiet. Laurent continued on, seeming to have no idea that she had
just insulted nearly everyone in the room. “At least, not *initially*. Which is to say, we won’t so
much as *think* of opening a portal unless every other step goes flawlessly. It is of the utmost
importance that each and every one of you do as I say, and keep what is said in this room
absolutely classified. Even to those working under you.” For the first time there was a palpable
ripple of discomfort. Once Mako had established order in the shatterdome, things had moved very
quickly. Only the people in the room knew that Vanessa rather than Mako was the one taking
charge.

Again, Laurent either failed to notice, or ignored the emotional response to her words. “With the cooperation of everyone, Hex has…” She twisted her mouth in a way that Hermann found distressingly familiar, “Well, reasonable odds of success.” She took off her glasses and took in the assembled crowd, even making brief eye contact with a few individuals before addressing her computer. “For the sake of absolute transparency, I must say that I am… uncomfortable moving forward on ‘reasonable’ odds. But if the frighteningly near success of the Precursor’s last plan is anything to go by, the time for holding back and waiting for surer odds of success is passed. Perhaps... long past.

“We must put the intel we have to use and hope it is enough, rather than sitting on it until apparent imminent death.” She and Mako shared a dark expression of momentary regret. The moment passed and Laurent squared her thin shoulders, still managing to look stooped and small.

“We are in a unique position. Our enemy is in our basement. And the first several steps of Hex rely on keeping our enemy where we want them, and allowing them to think they have us where they want us...” She clasped and unclasped her long bony hands and turned to Hermann, “Professor,” she said, and though it was no quieter than anything else she had said so far, it felt private. Like she was saying this only to him. “I fear that much of this subterfuge will depend on you.”

[Saved transcript of an interesting moment between the two Amara Namanis; a digression in the middle of the debrief of their parallel research - further illuminating similarities and differences in their characters.]

AMARA_PRIME > This isn’t going to work.

OG_AMARA > What do you mean, I think we’ve been pretty clear about the info Geiszler - our Geiszler - which is to say originally your Geiszler …. bad Geiszler? Shared with us. I think it totally makes sense.

>> Like.

>> It’s weird as heck but, this week hasn’t exactly been completely devoid of weird.

AMARA_PRIME > No I mean our usernames.

OG_AMARA > What about them?

AMARA_PRIME > We can’t both be “prime” universe and “original” universe.

OG_AMARA > I mean, yeah.

AMARA_PRIME > It’s confusing.

OG_AMARA > Ok. Change yours.

AMARA_PRIME > No. You change yours.

OG_AMARA > No.
AMARA_PRIME > Ok fine.
OG_AMARA > Fine!
AMARA_PRIME > Fine. I’m sure we can keep one confusing name pair in our heads.
OG_AMARA > Though...
>>> We all have doubles now.
AMARA_PRIME > Yeah dude! More than doubles if we believe bad Geiszler!
“OG_AMARA” changed her name to “MIT_Amara”
AMARA_PRIME > Thank you.
“AMARA_PRIME” changed her name to “Cadet_Namani”
MIT_Amara > You’re right. It’s a lot to keep in your head.
Cadet_Namani > What about the two Geiszlers and Gottliebs?
MIT_Amara> Yeah. They’re extra confusing because they’re not in the right place.
>>> let’s call mine “Professor.”
Cadet_Namani > Sure.
MIT_Amara > and do we like “bad Geiszler” for yours?
Cadet_Namani > I mean… I guess he did do some pretty bad stuff.
MIT_Amara > And your universe is pretty much the mirrorverse.
Cadet_Namani > EXCUSE me?
MIT_Amara > Oh please you guys are totally the darkest timeline.
Cadet_Namani > How dare.
MIT_Amara > You know I’m right.
Cadet_Namani > I do NOT know that.
MIT_Amara > Well, just look at the two of us:
>>> Here, I’m an MIT undergrad at 16 and I’m dating Vik freaking Malikov so.
>>> I’m definitely living my best life.
Cadet_Namani > Yeah? Brag much? Well here I’m a JAEGER pilot, and I’m ALSO dating Vik freaking Malikov.
MIT_Amara > Wait seriously? Do you pilot together?
Cadet_Namani > Yup! Or... We will. Probably. Maybe. According to Laurent it’s pretty up in the air right now.
MIT_Amara > Dang. That actually is kinda cool.

Cadet_Namani > We’re totally wasting time.

MIT_Amara > Right right.

Cadet_Namani > Hey but um. Before we start comparing calculations or whatever…

>>> I have a question.

>>> It might sound kind of weird.

MIT_Amara > um……???

Cadet_Namani > Is that ok?

MIT_Amara > No I would not make out with you if we met.

Cadet_Namani > WHAT??

MIT_Amara > Isn’t that what you were about to ask me?

>>> isn’t that like THE existential question about clones???

Cadet_Namani > IS IT??

MIT_Amara > I don’t know! You were getting all serious!

Cadet_Namani > So you went THERE?

MIT_Amara > adlkjgnarobgnhaernh!! Don’t look at me!!!

Cadet_Namani > That is NOT what I was about to ask!!! JEEZE.

MIT_Amara > WHAT IS IT THEN?

Cadet_Namani > Oh.

>>> um.

MIT_Amara > … what?

Cadet_Namani > It’s about our parents. I mean, Your parents.

MIT_Amara > Ugh. What about them?

Cadet_Namani > Are your parents alright?

MIT_Amara > ….?

>>> Yes (?)

>>> Why?

Cadet_Namani > Oh.

>>> cool.
I guess you don’t need a tragic backstory if you’re not in the darkest timeline.

MIT_Amara > …?  

>>> Oh.  

>>> Oh fuck.  

>>> I’m sorry.

Cadet_Namani > It’s fine. Let’s get back to work before the Professor comes in.

[Cambridge Universe Day 4 - Journey to Siberia]

Newt couldn’t believe how quickly it was all happening. Just last night he had whispered Their secrets to Hermann in the dark - while an inexplicable guilt pressed to him cold and heavy.

This morning Hermann had told him that Tendo was still alive. And now, barely four hours later, they had begun the long trip to Siberia. Tendo had called in some PPDC favors and that - combined with a dip into the Professors’ bank accounts - had put them in first class. They’d gotten those seats that swivel around so you can face each other, but Hermann was so engrossed in preparations on his laptop, that conversation was out of the question. And though Newt was absolutely - terrifyingly - essential to plan Hex, there wasn’t much he could do to actually prepare other than rest, and agonize over ways to make up for using a couple thousand dollars of their counterparts’ money on top of everything else.

Vanessa was there in travel form - a small phone-shaped machine tucked perfectly into Hermann’s front pocket, with a little screen that peeked out the top just enough for her “eyes” to be seen, and her gooseneck-tubing arms folded flush against herself. Her little screen-face was impassive but she was looking at him. He could tell.

Fine. It didn’t matter if the cool robot didn’t want to be his friend. It didn’t bother him at all. He would just ignore her.

Hermann sighed and rubbed his eyes, pressing his glasses up into the lines of his forehead. Newt hoped that this action would be followed by him closing the laptop and looking up, but it wasn’t. Instead Hermann took a sip of water and went back to his calculations, without even seeming to register that he was being observed.

Gotta love that work ethic. And Newt really, really did.

It had been ages since he and Hermann had been on a plane together. Newt tried to think back. All the private jets had sort of blended into each other over the years, not least because over the last 8 years whenever he flew, he was usually a little drunk and always a little possessed. Had Hermann ever been on his jet? Newt didn’t think he had. What a terrible waste. A small one, relatively speaking, but a waste nonetheless.

Which meant that the last time they’d travelled together must have been the press / lecture tour in 2025 - which began almost immediately after they’d closed the breach.
Throughout that tour, Newt had been drifting with the hivemind at slowly increasing intervals - pretty much whenever they went back to the Hong Kong Shatterdome for any real amount of time. The guests in his head were still polite. But the nagging feeling that he was doing something bad was beginning to crystalize into proper guilt. And he didn’t know what to do about it.

So he distracted himself by diving whole heartedly into the tour - which wasn’t difficult. It was fascinating, mind-expanding, and incredibly ego boosting. Everyone they met treated them with a level of respect and deference that they were both wholly unaccustomed to. Their talks were well attended (and well paid), and even their infamous onstage squabbles were not cut off. They were interviewed and photographed. Their accommodations were invariably plush, though of course, they were always given separate (though adjoining) rooms, and neither he nor Hermann were bold enough yet to ask for a single.

It was a strange, exhausting whirlwind, and by the time the tour took them to LA in October, they’d been in the public eye and camping out in hotel rooms almost constantly for four months (and Newt had hivemind drifted on his own six times). Newt had been looking forward to LA, but shortly upon arrival, he realized with disappointment that of course it was an especially weird place for them. On the one hand it was where he and Hermann had started out. Where they’d had a lot of their firsts.

On the other hand it was LA. In the ten plus years since they’d been there, pretty much nothing was the same. The bakery where he’d gotten Hermann’s birthday cupcake had closed ages ago, and the Shatterdome they’d worked in once upon a time was now in such a state of disrepair that even they had not been allowed a tour. Even the beach - their beach - had been obstructed by the early stages of construction - a skeletal, looming, unfinished monstrosity - of the Wall. Their connection to the place was as strong as one could have to a set of geographic coordinates and nothing else. Newt had nowhere to hang his nostalgia.

That aimless, sinking feeling followed him the entire week they were there. He wasn’t sure what he’d hoped would happen in LA, but he had certainly been hoping for something. And when nothing grand and meaningful manifested itself, it felt like a dangerous omen. So Newt took things into his own hands and reached out to the journalist.

He asked her to meet him in the hotel bar at midnight. Hermann’s strictly maintained sleep schedule (and their separate rooms) made it easy for Newt to sneak out at 11:30.

She was already seated at a booth when Newt arrived at the hotel bar. He recognized her, of course. Just a week before she had interviewed Mako and Raleigh for the YouTube channel of a buzzy pop-culture news site.

It hadn’t been the first time those two had been covered on a fluff piece. In fact, within a month or two, Mako & Raleigh interviews had often read less like discussions with war heroes, and more resembled actors promoting a film to the press - complete with high stilted chairs, questions about fashion, and the image of G-Danger superimposed behind them. Newt assumed that it was the sort of treatment that pretty people must endure as repayment for being so damned good looking.

Hermann and Newt’s interviewers never broached such topics. They were too professional; cowed by the spectacle of doctorates and tweed. It also probably made a difference that they were both
men so no one felt as entitled to their private lives as they did with Mako Mori’s, because aliens can destroy our spirits, but apparently they’ll never destroy humanity’s stubborn commitment to misogyny! Whatever the reason, interviewers stayed polite and professional, and only ever asked about science. Which is not to say that the two of them weren’t surrounded by their share of speculation. There were entire Tumblr blogs dedicated to dissecting their micro-expressions in TV appearances to uncover the truth of their relationship, and subreddits devoted to unpacking conspiracy theories from their papers. The difference was that - unlike Mako and Raleigh - they never had the chance get out in front of it. Because no one dared to ask.

She was young- a 25 year old of East Asian descent, with an undercut, and generations of LA sunshine in her demeanor. Warm, intelligent eyes and hands that fiddled impatiently with her pen as she asked questions. But he’d liked her interview. She had brought up Beckett’s disagreements with Stacker Pentecost with delicacy, somehow gotten Mako to admit that she had been initially skeptical of Raleigh’s suitability for the job, and still had them all laughing like old friends barely a minute later.

She might be writing fluff pieces for work, but her skill was legit.

When she noticed him at the entrance to the bar she jolted and sprang to standing attention. She reminded him a bit of Hermann whenever Pentecost had walked into a room, and he knew he didn’t cut such an imposing figure as to deserve all that.

“Oh no,” he said under his breath, and he walked stiffly into the bar glancing around to see if anyone else had noticed him. Then, to her, in a whispered rush: “At ease, kid. Please, please. Sit down. Please.”

“It’s really you.” she said, resuming her seat and still not bothering to cover up her wonder.

“Yeah.” He laughed, sliding into the booth across from her. “I think so, anyway!”

“I thought someone was trying to pull one over on me. I was like, half expecting my friends to walk through the door and start singing me happy birthday.”

“It’s your birthday?”

“Oh. No. It’s just something they would do. I can’t believe you actually reached out to me.”

“Hey it’s no big deal!” Newt gestured for the server “You already got to interview the important ones, I’m just the nerd.”

“Yeah but you and Gottlieb never do these kind of interviews. Like the personal ones? I mean. You only ever talk to the A publications. So. Thank you. For real.”

“Honestly, this a favor for me. I’m getting real tired of people making all these saucy assumptions when the truth is not nearly as cool.”

The server arrived, Newt ordered himself a drink, and the journalist ordered a soda, both of which arrived mere minutes later thanks to the nearly empty bar. She pulled out a notebook and raised her eyebrows, suddenly shifting to business mode and encouraging him to continue.

“We’re just... a couple of idiots who consistently get our heads stuck up our assess. We’re honestly pretty lame. And so is our story.”

“Please.” She smirked, and Newt was charmed by how quickly she’d found her footing, and how ready she seemed to run this conversation, “ Anything you’ve ever done is now cool in retrospect.
And anything about you and Dr. Gottlieb? Double whammy. I really can’t see how it could be lame, Dr. Geiszler.”

“Ok first of all call me Newt. Only my mother calls me doctor.”

The girl narrowed her eyes, “That’s a good joke,” she said, swirling the straw in her drink - purely for affect, as there was no alcohol to mix, “but of course she does, because she barely knows you. You were raised by your dad, Jacob Geiszler, and Ilia Geiszler - his partner of 30 years, and husband of 21 years. You all moved to Cambridge in 2004 when marriage equality was instituted in Massachusetts. Ilia took your dad’s name - which is sweet - but it’s also the luckiest thing that could have happened for you - because that’s when you were discovered through the MIT educational outreach programs. Anyway, those are your parents. Your bio-mom - Monica Schwartz - by contrast spent most of your adolescence on tour. Though she and your dad remain friends, and you visited her on occasion growing up, you’ve never been very close.” She punctuated her speech with a sip of club soda “Of course she calls you ‘Doctor.’”

Newt could only gape in delighted amazement. “And people say investigative journalism is dead!” he shout-laughed.

“Did I pass?”

“I thought we already started!”

The girl beamed.

“Look: just buy me all the drinks I want, and don’t tell anyone I was your source. Especially Herm - Dr. Gottlieb. He’d kill me. Or worse: dump me.”

The girl froze. “So it is true.”

“Yup!” Newt raised his drink as though to clink with an invisible glass and sipped.

She grinned like it actually was her birthday and he’d just handed her a puppy, “You just made a lot of people really happy,” she said

“Oh! Well! I’m glad. I’m glad. But remember, you didn’t hear it from me!”

She wilted a bit but the grin was stubborn,“How am I supposed to write a tell all interview without even hinting that you’re the one telling all?”

“You’re a smart kid, you’ll figure it out.”

“Can I record?”

“Absolutely not.”

She got Newt super drunk. And he did, indeed, tell all. He told her about the letters, their first terrible meeting at that panel, when Hermann asked a question for - what seemed to him - no other purpose than to humiliate him. He talked about their cross discipline academia beef, and how they used to make snide allusions to one another’s papers in their own. How those papers changed the face of the war.

He told her that Hermann had signed up to be a Jaeger pilot, and how Newt made no secret of his opinion on that it was a terrible idea. He told her how Hermann dropped out, and though tempted, Newt never said “I told you so.” He was later glad that he didn’t when Hermann told him the
reason he had dropped out, and about his diagnoses. (“of all the people I could be telling, Dr. Geiszler,” he’d written in his letter, “I don’t know why I’m telling you.”) He told her about his terrible band, and about how he was sure Hermann was tempted to mock him for it, he never did.

He told her how they were stationed together in LA and how everything that eventually grew between them was planted there. He told her that 2019 was the best year of his life - when he and Hermann were young and in love and the war clock didn’t reset every two weeks. He told her about their first excruciating break up and how he thought he’d never get over it (and how, in truth, he never did.) He told her that he started a thirst-trap tattooastagram just to fuck with Hermann.

He told her that Tendo - their long suffering best friend - deserved a medal for putting up with their shit and still having the energy to fight the good fight. He told her how no matter how hard he tried to keep his wits about him and stay away from Hermann, he never could. He told her that they totally hooked up at the Melbourne summit of 2023 - that last ditch throw-spaghetti-at-the-wall plea for funding. He told her about the despair that crept in as more and more of his and Hermann’s fellow scientists gave up and packed up. How their constant state of stress and terror kept them orbiting each other like binary stars fearing collision and breaking apart and narrowly avoiding supernova every time.

At some point in the interview he became distantly aware that he was telling her classified information - that towards the end of the war the Kaiju were learning. Getting bigger. And that they were cloned for optimal destructive ability. But he didn’t really care. It was classified, sure, but it was all out of date anyway.

And besides, the secret part of him that had been whispering more and more persistently in his ear, knew exactly where the next threat was coming from. Not this girl. Not from any of her readers. But from himself. The proverbial cat was already out of the bag. It didn’t matter who he told now because he had already siphoned info to Them directly from his brain. He could feel the possibility of uncomplicated happiness slipping away and if he told this girl their story, then maybe it would make their first ten years together more important than… whatever was coming next.

A lifeline disguised as a buzzfeed article.

2025 - continued.

Which brings us to right now. The mystery: Are. They. A thing? Well, dear readers I’m not going to be a jerk and end this all coy. I do have a definitive answer.

But first.

I know you’re here for the truth about the two doctor G’s. But - you can admit it - you’re also sort of here because you’re wondering if I’m going to bring up the meme. Yes I am. It’s too good to leave out.

It happened in 2013 - way at the beginning of the story. But I’m only bringing it up now because it illuminates so much about these guys. Also my anonymous source begged me not to use the meme but didn’t make me sign anything - and I want to make sure he reads to the end.

You’ve seen it. You maybe even saw the interview (It’s been making the rounds again lately). But in case you haven’t seen it, here’s the rundown.
Back in 2013 after Trespasser, we - as a species - were flailing about with no idea of what was going on. It’s so ridiculous to imagine now, but back then people were leaning towards the hypothesis that Trespasser was a creature from the deep that had just gotten turned around - a total one-in-a-trillion fluke. There’d been no strange celestial phenomena observed, no landings, and an interdimensional rift at the bottom of the Pacific was so beyond our imagining at the time that there didn’t seem to be a simpler answer.

People weren’t looking too hard because the implications if it was something else (or something that could happen again) were too horrible to contemplate. Of course it was something else, and we *should* have been contemplating it. But people are idiots.

At the end of the year, there was this special on CNN about the attack. They called in all sorts of people: survivors, family, regular joes and politicians. Even a few experts. Geiszler was part of the MIT team that got to study the first big batch of Kaiju samples. He was sent to be on this special to represent them - even though he was basically a fetus compared to the rest of the team. And this interview... I mean if you remember Brian Bately for *anything*, it’s for this.

Apparently the MIT people asked Geiszler not to mention the alien thing on air - even though it was all there in the stuffy paper they published. But tiny baby 23 year old Newton Geiszler was made of equal parts scruffy idealism and anti-authority, so it was like the second thing he mentioned.

[Embedded Youtube video]

**THIS IS AN ALIEN guy best part.**

8,744,029 views

SHARE

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**We Know Memes** √ SUBSCRIBED 142K

Published on Jan 03, 2014

The birth of a meme.

Video transcript:

**Alien Guy:** And it was pretty clearly an alien.

**Brian Bately:** (laughs) What?

**Alien Guy:** What.

**Brian Bately:** An alien? What - what makes you say that.

**Alien Guy:** The literal accumulated weeks my team spent dissecting and studying bits of it? And, like, the culmination of all received knowledge of biology on this planet?

**Brian Bately:** [smiling] And all of that tells you Trespasser. Was. An alien.

**Alien Guy:** [getting tense] Yes.
**Brian Bately:** Then… where did it come from? There were no reports of UFO sightings anywhere in the vicinity.

**Alien Guy:** I don’t know.

**Brian Bately:** It just strains the imagination to believe that the very active Ufologist community would miss something big enough to drop Trespasser on us. It had to have come from the ocean.

**Alien Guy:** That’s for the physicists to figure out. I’m just the meat guy. And that meat is not from here.

**Brian Bately:** You expect us to believe just based on your word that -

**Alien Guy:** I expect you to believe the science, man! Make, like, a *modicum* of effort to educate yourself! I mean jeeze, the paper was written at like a high school level - you did finish high school didn’t you?

**Brian Bately:** [laughs] Of - haha. Of course I did.

**Alien Guy:** Cool. Then even a haircut like you can understand it.

**Brian Bately:** Excuse me-

**Alien Guy:** I am at a total loss here, Brian. I am legit confused. Why is this so crazy to you? I mean you look at the thing and it’s like [laughs] you’re just like wow. THIS. IS. AN ALIEN. Even without seven MIT nerds standing by to say, “Yup! Totally an alien!”

**Brian Bately:** Ladies and gentlemen, this has been Brian Bately wi-

**Alien Guy:** Are you seriously cutting this short? Seriously!! Did you even read the paper?!

**Brian Bately:** Brian Bately here with Dr. Newton Gei -

**Alien Guy:** Did you. Read the paper, *Brian*?!

**Brian Bately:** Dr. Newton Geiszler Thank you so much for your time.

**Alien Guy:** Don’t talk down to me, Bately.

- Screen cuts out -

SHOW LESS

For a good time (or a miserable time. Depending on how dead you are inside), I *highly* recommend taking a look at the youtube comments. This has nothing to do with anything so forgive the digression but here’s from right when the video posted:

**perpleperple69** 12 years ago

All the people making fun of this guy did NOT read his paper. It’s all outlined there, and he’s right, it’s totally easy to understand if you know even the barest
understanding of biology. He’s not crazy!!!

**Hide Replies ^**

**XxXmagicalXxX** 12 years ago

Um, not everyone has access to high-level science journals, sweaty. It’s totally classist to assume that everyone does. As the guy being interviewed he should have made it understandable instead of freaking out - if he’s really so right. We’re totally justified in mocking this clown.

**perpleperple69** 12 years ago

IT’S FREE ON PLOS YOU FUCKING WALNUT. He MADE it free so that everyone could see the truth.

**XxXmagicalXxX** 12 years ago

Hey, weeb, just because you want aliens to be real and found someone with some initials in front of his name to back you up, doesn’t make it “““the truth”””

And on and on and on.

By the time he was proven right, the meme had faded from popular consciousness so no one even remembered to vindicate him. You probably didn’t even know he was working with the PPDC until this summer’s press tour. Then you saw him and went, “Oh my god is that the aliens guy? Oh shit, now that I think about it I guess he was right, huh?”

After that interview his MIT email address was spammed so hard they had to change it and take it off the school site. He deleted his Twitter for a minute too. MIT stuck by him (albeit quietly), but other than that and a few scattered UFO conventions, no one would give him the time of day. He was only 23, so he had plenty of time to bounce back from it, but just imagine how tough that dose of reality must have been. He had so much faith in the science that he thought that people would be able to see the truth without understanding that no one was ready for it.

He was only mad because no one would listen to the data. Geiszler’s biggest crime was that he cared too much. And we looooove to drag down people who care.

But I digress. What does this have to do with *them*. Well. We think we know Gottlieb? We don’t. You think you know him as this elitist snob? Think again. Because remember when I told you that they wrote letters? Well. *This* is the guy that Dr. Hermann Gottlieb - a misunderstood precocious genius in his own right - chose to reach out to.

This guy.
He apparently saw something in that embarrassing tirade when so few other scientists did. Something that warranted reaching out.

Dr. Gottlieb saw him on TV, read his paper, and understood that he was right. He had sympathy for this screechy dude because he understood the frustration of being ridiculed even when your numbers are sound.

Geiszler didn’t have a public email address anymore, so Dr. Gottlieb sent a letter - snail mail style - % MIT. And they began a correspondence from there. God that first envelope should be in the K-War memorial museum.

Because that first letter sparked maybe the most important scientific collaboration in the history of humanity. These two weirdos stuck out the entire war together. They stuck out petty arguments and clashing personalities, and budget cuts (and more budget cuts). They stayed together even as their respective teams thinned out. They stayed together when it seemed like human annihilation was inevitable.

Because even if hope was lost everywhere else, they continued to have faith in each other. They trusted one another implicitly. No matter what.

Or at least that’s what it looks like to this outside observer.

So um. Yeah. That’s the answer. And it really doesn’t take an investigative journalist to sleuth this one out: They’re super in love. And they pretty much have been since jump.

They’ve made it this far (to the benefit of us all) and I for one, can’t wait to see where they go next.

[salute.gif]
When the article came out, Newt liked it. While she did include a few more references to her “anonymous source” than he would have liked, she also popped in enough social media activity that it looked like some real sleuthing. When the article dropped, Tendo forwarded a link to him with the comment “It wasn’t me I swear.” And Newt got to act suspicious and indignant for a few days. Which was always fun.

Newt kept a print out of the article in a box under his bed - the gifs frozen in black and white - and kept it nestled amongst those first letters from Hermann. Those early letters that seemed to come from the first kindred spirit he had ever encountered in his life. Now he could look at his 23 year old self and recognize how young he had been, but at the time it felt like he’d been alone for an eternity. Those letters spoke of coding and biology and the similarities therein, but they read like hope. They stayed in that box under his bed gathering dust for 8 years - forcefully forgotten. He kept the letters, the story contained in them - and outlined in that article - safe by never ever thinking of them. Ever. Some part of himself knowing that when it was safe again, his true history would be there waiting for him to reclaim.

But until then he could only know and not know they were there.

He wondered if the PPDC had raided his apartment yet. He wondered if they’d found the box, and if they were keeping it safe back home. Home. Where nothing was as terrible as it seemed. And he had to get back.

He closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the armchair-like first class headrest. In his mind’s eye he saw Hermann’s all-caps handwriting.

“TENDO LIVES”

They had played and replayed the memory of Tendo’s murder as a reminder that he was beyond redemption. They had lied to him. He never did know what happened to the body, but he’d bought it. Hadn’t he watched enough science fiction to know that you have to see the body before you buy that they’re really dead? But he had been so eager to believe the worst possible thing.

Because if he was beyond redemption there was no point in fighting back. In for a murder, in for species annihilation. He had believed he was beyond redemption. He had believed that Hermann never loved him. He had believed that he was a worthless piece of shit who deserved no pleasure other what they - Alice - could give him. He had believed that he had nowhere else to go. How else where they manipulating him still? What other lies and half concealed memories had taken him in?

He squeezed his hands into tight fists on the armrests, just to feel the strain - all his own - all the way up his forearm. He was tired of doing their work for them without them even here. They had stolen his faith in the one thing he’d trusted above everything else: his own mind. Leaving him with only his rage and his hands. He’d never had to rely on brute strength before, but he was suddenly overwhelmed by a visceral desire to rip apart some alien carapaces with his own claws. And he would. He knew what they’d wanted, and he’d turn their Plan B against them with Hermann’s help.

He looked across the way. Vanessa was still watching him. He could tell. And Hermann was still working. He tapped Hermann’s foot with his and was rewarded by a jump, an inquisitive, distracted smile, and a pat on the knee before Hermann went back to his work. Newt closed his eyes with a smile and settled in for the rest of the 12 hour journey.

It was all he had, he thought, but They couldn’t possibly have imagined how much damage he could do with these scraps: His rage. His hands. And Hermann.
so yeah that's the end of the article. :*   
When text free version of Lyd's piece is posted, that link will go here!  
Again, if you want to work with Lyd, you can find them @lydkyd-art on twitter and tumblr.  

Again, thank you for your patience! If you like this chapter, please do let me know in the comments!
Much of the subterfuge depends on Professor Hermann Gottlieb. A step forward, and a step back.

See the end of the chapter for notes

[Hong Kong Day 3 continued]

“I fear that much of this subterfuge will depend on you.” Vanessa Laurent had said. And she hadn’t elaborated. Hermann tried to pay attention to the rest of the briefing but an iron ball of smelted fear and suspicion weighed in his stomach.

He stared blankly at his hands, waiting for the meeting to end, and most of the crowd to filter out to before he even began to form his jumble of fears into words in his mind.

“Yes, you agree with this?” Jake was saying. Jake had always deferred to his big sister’s judgement, but his question sounded more like a command. He was posturing at authority, and it fit him as well as you might expect of a child wearing his father’s overcoat. “Tell me you don’t, because this is cr-”

“I do.” Mako said coolly. Every bit as collected as Jake was pretending to be. She didn’t elaborate. So Raleigh did for her.

“You’re not wrong, Jake.” He said, his manner soaked in that sincerity that made him so easy to trust, “It does sound insane. We sat on this until we were sure -”

“Yeah about that.” The symmetrical soldier interrupted sharply, “You sure did sit this one out Beckett. You wanna give me a good reason why we were scraping by with cadets. Putting children in danger while you were just… ‘sitting on this one?’” He paused long enough for Raleigh to say something, his glare an open challenge. When no explanation came, he took a threatening step towards the once-celebrated war hero, “Because I haven’t heard a good reason yet.”

“Nate.” Pentecost put a warning hand on his shoulder.

“We don’t have time for this, Lambert.” Mako said simultaneously.

Raleigh sighed. “No he’s right. Our little… enclave has spent so long thinking about the greater good that we’ve forgotten how much individuals matter. We should have stepped in to help sooner. That will always be on my conscience.”

Quieted, but not yet appeased, Nate Lambert shook off Jake’s hand and sat on the farthest side of the table, and the room was silent but for the steady tapping of Vanessa Laurent’s keyboard.
“Is there a reason I was asked to stay back?” Liwen Shao said, coolly breaking the near silence.

“There is.” Vanessa said, glancing up from her computer. The assembled waited for her to elaborate, and three excruciating minutes later with a victorious final tap on her keyboard, she did.

“Final specific needs;” she said. “Lambert, Pentecost, We need drift compatible pairs. Deep drift. Old-school drift. At least 3 pairs.” She read from her screen and only looked up long enough to point to the next person. “And they need to be able pilot remote, miniature Jaeger. We have one, we need two more. Reyes, you’re in charge of that.”

The pretty engineer - Reyes - next to Jake Pentecost Straightened up and nodded with determination. Her show of confidence only somewhat undermined by her wide unblinking eyes.

“Shao - we need those remote jaeger done soon. Preferably within 48 hours. And we need the Vanessa AI - an incomplete version - installed. Gottlieb I’m trusting you to make sure she is incorruptible.”

A tall order given the abilities of their enemy. Hermann nodded his acquiescence and felt a spike of pain shiver up his neck.

“So… we are doing the invasion.”

“No.” Vanessa said sharply, “Keep up, Lambert. We have to allow Professor Geiszler to fully initiate Plan B in order for us to intercept with Hex. He’s going to recommend you take him to the defunct jaeger production facility in Siberia. The place has been on our radar for years. "Obsidian Fury" destroyed it - or seemed to, but I was still convinced that it carried some importance to their backup plan. And now Dr Geiszler - our Dr. Geiszler has confirmed as much. The professor will "open the window,” so to speak, and we will use his connection - not brute force - to wreck havoc. Cause a distraction. Then we send in the mini Jaeger. Think of them less like... soldiers and more like spies. It all hinges on getting to the production facility. But we can’t just go to Siberia or they’ll know we have intel. They’ll muscle back. Who knows what else. The Precursors have to believe they gave us the idea. He has to stay connected to the hivemind until then. So Professor Gottl -”

“I won’t do it.”

The conversation halted and Hermann found himself the center of attention.

Vanessa folded her hands and turned to him. Again, it felt like she was addressing him as the only person in the room when she said softly, “I beg your pardon.”

“I refuse to connect my husband back to the hivemind.”

Lambert threw his hands into the air, and Vanessa directed a microscopic glance of admonition his way. “Professor,” she said gently - with more diplomacy than Hermann had thought her master of, “these actions could decisively end the precursor threat. Not just for humanity now but for every generation to come! I understand that this will be difficult -”

“You don’t understand.” Hermann said, face becoming hot and voice clipped despite the gentleness of her tone, “and how dare you presume that you do. Professor Geiszler and I have fought too hard for what we have. I will not expose him to that again.”

Nate Lambert pressed his hand onto the table in front of him. “Gottlieb.” he hissed. He took a deep breath. “After all the compromises we’ve all made to enact this -”
“I don’t belong to this organization.” Hermann said primly. “Professor Geiszler and I are civilians. In our universe, the PPDC is barely even a figurehead.”

“Professor Gottlieb, I don’t know you, but -”

“You certainly do not know me. I refuse. I want him put in a hospital.”

“The world - will end. Not just our world, but every world. You would have that on your conscience.

“Then we will see out the end of the world healthy and in possession of our own minds.”

“You would rather do nothing,” Vanessa said, voice raising, “allow it so that all your efforts are for naught, and you lose each other anyway.” Hermann remained unmoved and for the first time, he saw Laurent become frustrated. “Think of the greater good, Gottlieb!”

“I cannot subject him to precursor influence after we already wrestled him free. The greater good ...” He stood decisively and thumped his cane on the ground. “The greater good can hang for all I care!” He’d said it without thinking, and though he meant it on some level, he hadn’t prepared himself for the looks of exhausted desperation on the faces around him. He shut his eyes against the familiar faces (Not our Raleigh. Not our Mako. Not our Tendo. Not our world. Not our problem. Not ours.) he thought. (But still) the 35 year old Newt in his mind whispered to him. Pleading. He who had always insisted he was a coward, always insisted he’d be the first to die in a zombie apocalypse, yet who - when it became truly necessary - had chosen to put his life at risk. If this were his decision, Hermann had no doubt Newt would have chosen to go through with it to save the world. Even if it meant giving over his health, well being, and sanity.

But the privileges of marriage meant that Hermann was empowered to make decisions for him when his judgement was compromised, and it certainly was compromised now. They’d almost lost each other over this once before, and it wouldn’t happen again.

(you’re being a coward) He heard. (you know what I would want.)

Hermann ran his hands over his face.

Didn’t those privileges of marriage come with the caveat that he should respect his husbands wishes?

Newt would want to help save the world. Or at least make the effort. Whatever the cost.

“I will consider it.”
hivemind.

HG > I don’t blame him.

VL > You reconnected him.

HG > I did so only out of desperation, and under the influence of lies.

VL > So we should lie to him.

HG > Please don’t.

VL > The “greater good” line isn’t working.

HG > Vanessa, you mustn’t think of these arguments as “lines.” To most people they are genuine considerations.

>>> And do you think I cared about the greater good when I stranded our happier counterparts in our former spots?

VL > Hm. Good point. I never would have supposed you to be the sort to behave so irrationally. This is why I’ve sworn of human connections.

HG > Sworn off? And here I’ve always felt so honored to have been allowed into your intimate confidence. The more fool I, I suppose.

VL > Oh no. You should feel honored.

HG > Even still? You’ve been off the grid for so long that I’d already made peace with the conclusion that you would never be in my life again.

>>> I was terribly relieved to hear that you were well.

VL > I’d say the same, but it seems you are not well at all.

HG > Indeed not. And I wonder why that is.

VL > You wrote that as a statement rather than a question. Please Hermann if you have something to say just say it.

>>> My ability to read inflections is dubious at the best of times and effectively nil over textual communication.

HG > why didn’t you tell me?

VL > Tell you what?

HG > Vanessa. Our time is short.

VL > Ah you mean why didn’t I tell you about the massive conspiracy wherein I and a select group of specialists theorized (correctly) that Dr. Geiszler was possessed by aliens and took steps to research and combat his (or rather their) plans to end the world?

>>> Or do you mean why didn’t I tell you that Tendo Choi, and Mako Mori were still alive and Raleigh Beckett was still fighting the good fight rather living a drifter’s life of laissez faire belligerence?
>>> Tell you that?
HG > Yes, Vanessa. All of that.

>>> I should think that as a friend, you would see that I was kept informed. I’m having difficulty rationalizing your disappearance.
VL > it seemed likely that you too were compromised.

>>> I’m rarely wrong.

>>> So I can’t apologize for my actions.

>>> Though I’m sorry for the years of friendship lost. And I’m sorry you were so long alone.

>>> In fact.

>>> Part of me was... disappointed to discover that you weren’t possessed.

>>> I had comforted myself by imagining that if you were compromised, at least you weren’t alone.
HG > I’m not sure whether I should thank you for that.

VL > It was a rare mistake with unpleasant consequences. But surely you are rational enough to see that the consequences of keeping you informed would have been much worse in the very likely event that you were acting at the behest of our invaders.
HG > Yes. Yes.
VL > And you can see that there was no way for me to simply ask you.
HG > Yes. I know.

VL > And no way for us to act without full understanding of the Precursor’s plan, the level of completion, the failsafes Newton might have put into place? We could have simply assassinated Newton - who we knew was certainly compromised - but there was little indication that such drastic measures would end the plot and not instead accelerate it.

>>> Also I knew it would make you sad. So instead we waited for surer odds.

>>> Unfortunately we waited too long.
HG > I see.
VL > So you and Newton are finally together. For good this time.
HG > If I have anything to say about it. Yes.

VL > and all it took was several false starts and a near miss at the end of the world. Well done.
HG > Yes.

>>> Thank you.

>>> I could do without the mockery.
VL > no mockery in an observation, friend.

HG > We’re on a plane to Siberia right now. By the time you all get there - several day from now I presume - We should have everything well and truly underway. Vanessa is confident.

>>> Vanessa the AI that is.

VL > Do you suppose it’s a coincidence that the AI and I share a given name?

HG > It’s difficult to say. Perhaps.

>>> Though the more I observe about the multiverse the more I am surprised.

>>> Every hour, another astonishing coincidence.

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[Hong Kong day 3 continued]

“You have to make it seem to Them that we are still breaking the rules.” Hermann said primly. Falling back into his instincts towards imperious bossiness, to overpower the nearly crippling guilt of what he was about to do.

“I know, professor.” Amara said.

“And we’ll both have to do our part to convince them - and Newt - that we are in the dark. That we think the drift will bring Newton back to the way he was.”

“Got it, Professor.” She sounded exhausted. And he couldn’t blame her. He’d been grilling her on this all afternoon. He had to remind himself that he didn’t actually have any authority to tell her what to do.

“I’m not your professor you know.”

“MIT Amara and I... We agreed to call you guys ‘professor’”

“And the other ones?”

“Um. ‘Bad’ Geiszler and Gottlieb’”

“I see.” The Newt that he knew would have liked that title. Though he doubted that a Newt who had actually been coerced into nearly ending the world would like it quite as much. “I’d keep that between yourself.” He said. They had arrived at the cell, and saw Vik tensely standing guard.

“So you know, who cares what I know about her?” He could hear Newton taunting the girl. It seemed to be a part of an ongoing tirade, based on Malikov’s obvious discomfort. “She’s also a genius. Did you know? Is she a nerd in this universe too? Because in my universe…” He stopped speaking, and made a strangled gasp as though he was being choked from the inside. Of course they didn’t want him talking about the multiverse. It would give Hermann permission to reveal
himself and ask for help.

“So when’s Hermann getting here?” They steered him towards a colloquial, conversational tone, Seeming to have no understanding of how unsettling the rapid shift of tone would sound.

Amara stepped forward “Sorry I’m late Vik.”

Vik stiffened at the sound of Amara’s voice and clenched her jaw.

“Vik.” The girl nodded formally and marched off, with not even a hint of warmth in her eyes. “Vik?” Amara took her place and watched her go, brow furrowed in concern. “Anyway.” She said, turning to Hermann, and adopting her very best serious face, “This is the last time. I mean it Gottlieb.” Hermann thought she was maybe overplaying it a bit.

“I understand.” Hermann said. He knew he was a terrible liar. He was a mathematician, not an actor, but there was no pretending here. He was dizzy with fear. Amara opened the door and nodded him through and Hermann took a deep steadying breath.

It’s what Newt would want to do.

He stepped stiffly through the door and waited for it to close behind him before dropping his backpack and pulling out his tablet.

“Hey hubby.” The Newton shaped thing said from the chair. Hermann raised a single eyebrow in response. “Come give Us a kiss.”

“I think not.” Hermann said, and finished what he was doing.

They frowned. “Poor thing. He’s screaming in here. He’s dying for it. He could use some goddamn comfort right now.” Hermann had no doubt that this was true. He steeled himself. “You’d turn him down?” The Precursors continued. The uncanny-valley proximity to his husband’s usual mannerisms was spine chilling. He took his time to drag over a fold out chair and sit in front of Them. They sighed and tilted Newt’s head forward strangely. Inhumanly.

It was an interesting tactic, now that Hermann could see it as such - and it was a relief that he could. It made it feel less like he was dealing with his husband and easier to think past the nearly overwhelming instinct to get him out of here.

They spoke as though Newt had had control the day before but not today. Trying to manipulate Hermann into thinking Newt ever had control when Hermann now knew he didn’t.

He engaged Them in a bit of conversation and found nothing unexpected before glancing behind himself as though to check that Amara wasn’t looking, and stuck the paper-thin electrodes to Newt’s temples and forehead. It wasn’t too late. He could still refuse. He imagined himself ripping the electrodes from Newt’s face and wheeling him out of here. And then what? They go someplace remote and secure. He helps his husband through the Precursors’ rage and his physical withdrawal. And they have maybe a few years of peace before They return, flooding the earth with kaiju and he and Newt hold each other as a toxic cloud envelops the earth.

Or the PPDC launches their attack, and without Newt’s distraction and without his Vanessa AI programming - without remote piloting - they lose every pilot they have to the toxicity of the anteverse, and the Precursors take advantage of the open rifts and destroy this earth.

Then perhaps they find his Vanessa’s bridge to the multiverse and use it to access and consume every Earth in every universe. Even the idyllic ones. The only choice was to go through with it.
The keyboard warped dangerously in his vision and for a moment, Hermann genuinely feared that he might be ill and give the whole thing away. He tapped the last few keys and began the remote drift.

Hermann couldn’t pinpoint the moment it worked. But he could have sworn he saw in Newt a completely honest expression of unspeakable regret and apology, quickly replaced by mounting relief and pleasure as his eyes fluttered closed and the aliens strengthened their grip.

He let it go on until Newt’s breathing evened out then cut off the connection. Newt’s eyes tensed, then finally opened, languid and slow. He looked around the room like a baby enjoying a sunrise and when his eyes finally landed on Hermann it was as though he had only just noticed that he was there. Hermann saw a flash of fear, and he hated to see it. While he could blame the fear on the monsters, he never wanted to see his husband look on him like that. Newt took a deep shuddering breath, and Hermann schooled his expression to one of precarious neutrality.

“Hermann, I can push them back now.” he said with a smile. Of course they weren’t Newton’s words, or his smile. Hermann knew this. Though the imitation was so painfully accurate he longed to comfort him. Wipe that hair from his brow. “Stay with me, please, just for a bit.” He reached towards Hermann as much as his restraints would allow.

Hermann couldn’t help but flinch back, and was granted an unpleasant glimpse of that narrow-eyed, serpentine curiosity - a momentary drop in the facade.

“I have to go back to helping Liwen before I’m missed,” Hermann said as a hasty explanation for his retreat, “I have to code her Jaeger with Vanessa.” It wasn’t even a lie.

Newt smiled, thin and sweet as hot chocolate powder in water instead of milk, and Hermann pitied his counterpart for ever having been taken in by this charade, “That’s good.” The Newton shaped thing said, “It’ll get us out of here.”

And though he knew that he was being monstrously used, Hermann couldn’t help but feel another wave of guilt for lying to him. They had gone so many years without lying to each other. And now the monsters were forcing his hand. He smiled at him, eyes full of pity and regret. “Yes. Soon. I’ll get us out of here I promise.” He hoped that Newt, buried under layers of Precursor control, would hear him and believe him. “I’m sorry.”

He made it out of the cell and around the corner before he had to lean against the wall, shaking. This was only for a few more days. It was too dangerous to cut him off. They needed to get to Siberia and let Them think that Newt had planted the idea.

Only a few more drifts. All that. Again. And then possibly again. The hallway spun dangerously and he doubled over.

Images of Thanksgiving 2025 ran through his mind again. Massachusetts. Meeting Newt’s parents. Newt arriving late with bloodshot eyes.

By the end of November of the next year, Hermann hated himself for his constant buzz of suspicion. He knew this man, and yet he didn’t trust him. A year after the terrible Thanksgiving without incident, and he was genuinely considering giving up. He’d always known he’d end up alone, and this slow degradation of trust seemed as good a time as any to end it.

He could sense Newton’s mounting fear and frustration over the months as Hermann drew slightly away, but he couldn’t force himself to trust him. At Vanessa’s advice, he opted to speak to him about it.
He approached Newt late one night, After battling a day with heavy, nauseating apprehension. Newt was sitting at his desk, working on something, one foot on his chair with his knee tucked up under his chin. “I need to tell you something.” Hermann said from the doorway.

Newt turned his face towards him, his eyes the last thing to drag away from his work. When he saw Hermann in the doorway - pale and stiffly gripping his cane - he softened with concern so sincere that Hermann had to look away. “What is it?”

Hermann was grateful that Newt knew him well enough to stay seated rather than try to comfort him. As there was no painless way to say this, raced through the sentence, “I don’t know how to trust you anymore.”

The concern on Newt’s face melted away, replaced by a completely neutral expression. Hermann didn’t know how Newt would take the news, but he hadn’t expected anger. “Oh.” Newt said. This wasn’t the shouty, belligerent, debate-of-wits frustration that Hermann was accustomed to, but rather a dangerously quiet, cold, hurt anger. True anger. “Why?”

“What with your recent behavior and the nature of -”

“Seriously?”

“I beg your par-”

“Hermann. Come one. You’ve always had this image of yourself as this lone science wolf.” despite the seriousness Newt couldn’t help but smile at the unintentionally humorous mental image. But he became serious again in an instant. “But you’re not. You work better with me. In all the ways.”

He jabbed a finger in Hermann’s direction.

Hermann shook his head. “It’s nothing to do with that.”

“It’s got everything to do with that!”

“It hasn’t!”

“I know you!”

“Newton. In this last year. I can’t stop thinking of it going wrong. Of looking away for an instant and finding you entwined with that disgusting hivemind again. This… fear of mine seems inevitable. Regardless of your actual behavior.”

“Is it actually inevitable?” Newt said steadily, “or are you just trying to prove your hypothesis rather than taking the data,” he gestured frantically to himself, “at face value. It’s bad science, Hermann. You’re being a bad scientist.”

“How dare - this is not a science exp-”

“EVERYTHING is science Hermann! What can I do? What further data can I provide for you, man? I love you! I’ve been busting my ass to prove it this last year! And you’ve just been, what? Wringing your hands? Driving yourself crazy with this, like, operatic downfall you’ve made up? What can I do? Tell me!”

“There’s nothing you can do.”

Newt stood and approached Hermann so fast that he didn’t clock the movement until Newt was right there and shouting up at him: “So just leave then!”
“I can’t! I can’t just leave!” Hermann hissed. It was as though Newt was being purposely obtuse. “I love you, and that complicates things, rather a lot.”

Newt looked like he was about to give a biting retort but was stopped mid-breath, “Oh.” He said instead, visibly deflating. “Do you know you’ve never said that?”

“Said what?” Hermann blinked, “That I love you?”

“Yeah that.”

“Have I not?”

Newt grimaced and shook his head.

“My goodness…” Hermann mumbled, his defensive venom cooled by the distraction, “I let that go on a bit too long then didn’t I?”

“Yeah you sure did, bud!” His voice carried all the inflections of joviality but his face was utterly unamused.

“You knew though.” Hermann said hurriedly. Suddenly it was very important that this be clear. “Surely you knew. That I love you. That I have for a long while.”

Something about Hermann’s desperation must have reached through to Newt, because he laughed helplessly and rubbed his forehead, “Yeah I mean I figured.” He said. “Words are good too though.”

Of course. Hermann leaned heavily against the doorframe. “You should be the one thinking of leaving me.”

“No dipshit.” Newt said flatly, leaning against the opposite side of the doorframe. “I can’t leave, I love you too.”

Hermann wanted to walk away from the doorframe - the enforced proximity was making him feel uncomfortably exposed - but he had the distinct feeling that if he did so it would mean more than he wanted it to. “Then I suppose we’re stuck. We’ve painted ourselves into a cage.”

Newt rolled his eyes at Hermann’s dramatic choice of words “Oh nooo.” he said flatly. “And you’re mixing metaphors there, Herm.”


“Have I ever given you reason to believe I’ve relapsed in this last year?”

Hermann considered. After Hermann had helped him through withdrawal, Newt had gone out of his way to keep him abreast of his whereabouts and doings. Who he was with, his planned schedule. Deviations were rare and well accounted for. Between regular check-ins, familiarity with his colleagues and friends, Newt couldn’t even have had time to relapse

Hermann hadn’t even had to ask him to do this.

“No you haven’t.” Hermann’s stomach sank with shame.

Newt took his hand but didn’t meet his eye. “To be perfectly honest Herm,” he said weakly, and Hermann was unsettled to see fear and anger prickling tears into his eyes, “I want… the connection
still. Every day. Even now.

“I feel. Like. Physically ill. Saying that out loud. But. I want to be free of Them even more than I want Them. Because of you. It’s not worth it to see you look the way you did on Thanksgiving last year. I’m not surprised you don’t trust me. Honestly though? I’m kinda pissed. Because I don’t know what the fuck else to do to prove that I’m all in. Like, if you don’t trust me now maybe you never will and…” He swallowed thickly, “and maybe we should just shake hands and deal with our respective broken hearts elsewhere.”

Hermann took his hand back and wrapped his arms protectively around his stomach. No. Newt’s description of that potential future was totally unacceptable. But what could he say? What alternative had he, Hermann, left them?

“Sometimes, Hermann, you actually… don’t know everything?” Newt said carefully. “I think this is less about trusting me, specifically, and more about trusting… anyone. Because you’re used to being the only one who’s right. Ever. Well?” Newt tilted his head to try to catch Hermann’s eyes. Hermann didn’t play along and looked down at his hand flexing and unflexing on the head of his cane. Newt sighed and gave what would be his final word on the matter: “You don’t have to trust me. But you can. If you want to.”

He could. If he wanted to. Right then Hermann realized that he was wrong, and for the first time in his life, the realization lifted rather than defeated him. It wasn’t a matter of forcing himself to trust Newton. It was about allowing himself to do so. And Newt trusted him in return. In fact, he’d trusted him long before that. He still trusted him, and here Hermann was plugging him into the hivemind. It was too horrible. He wanted to respect what his husband would want but surely there were limits. What was he thinking? He was the responsible one. He was the one to pull Newton from the fire. Every time.

He felt Amara place a tentative hand on his shoulder. “Professor.” She whispered, “are you alright?”

He couldn’t do it.

He couldn’t wait the extra days and extra drifts. He needed to jumpstart Laurent’s calculations. Hardly knowing what he was doing, Hermann propelled back towards the door, and wrenched it open.

“Professor! Professor! You can’t go in there again -” He slammed the door on Amara. This wasn’t a part of the plan and he knew she could just open it, or run for help, but he had to do this.

Not-Newt looked up, delighted, hopeful, and Hermann had to repress a shudder for how true to life it seemed.

He rushed to kneel in front of him, and let his cane clatter beside him, ignoring how his right side shuddered up and down with pain. “Newton.” he said, taking Newt’s face in his hands, “Please. While I have you and not Them. What should we do? Where should we go? How do we end this?”

Please. Tell me about Siberia. He begged internally. Tell me what’s buried there and why we need to go.

Newt looked down at Hermann and leaned to press their foreheads together, his expression tender, perfectly imitated down to the contented sigh at their proximity. He pulled back to look warmly into Hermann’s face and was only inches away, when all at once, like oil slipping off an ice cube, the facade dropped. He wrenched his face from Hermann’s hands, and looked down his nose at him, sneering.
“Why’d she call you professor, _babe_?”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading. I promise the next chapter is less dour. This is still part of the monster that I had to divide into three so apologies for the tonal discord.

If you enjoy the story, please tell me in the comments. If you hate it, feel free to do the same. Either way, I'll be interested to hear from you.
Pet Project

Chapter Summary

Newt reveals what he knows of the Precursor's plan B

Chapter Notes

Thanks as always to Avelera for giving this a once over and helping me clarify what needed clarifying!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[Flight to Siberia. Continued]

Newt had, in his time, traversed dimensions and traveled to the far reaches of deep space through pockets in time.

But even given these experiences, he felt confident in his hypothesis that there were no two points, in all of time and space, more distant than Boston and Siberia. Around hour six his leg jiggling got so aggressive that Hermann looked up from his work to pointedly glare at Newt’s knee.

“Sorry.” He stilled himself. But his legs felt like they were vibrating with unspent energy.

“Maybe you should get up and walk around,” Hermann suggested mildly, glaring at his computer screen.

“Good plan,” Newt said. So he got up - certain that he would explode if he didn’t - and stumbled towards the first class toilet. The plane jerked and he almost fell directly into the arms of a young flight attendant.

“Sir, are you alright?” The flight attendant had a deep Russian accent which was at odds with his narrow frame.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine.” Newt regained his bearings enough to stand of his own power and patted the kid on the shoulder. “Hey, uh, can you have a glass of champagne waiting for me when I get back to my seat?”

The flight attendant nodded and Newt ducked into the toilet. As soon as he closed the door behind himself, he began to shake. He hadn’t realized how much effort he’d been having to expend to keep his shit together in front of Hermann.

He was on his way. He was going to thwart Their plan. He was finally doing something good after nearly a decade of trying to end the world. And - he couldn’t stop himself from thinking it though he desperately tried to block it out - They were going to be so angry at him.

He’d spilled Their secrets. Or - to think of it more correctly - he’d finally been fully honest with Hermann. Only a day ago. Lying in bed in that brownstone in the life he hadn’t earned, after
Hermann had instigated the consummation of their reunion.

What had Hermann said? He tried to remember how it had gone.

Hermann had turned off the little bedside lamp. And when he wrapped his arm around Newt’s bare waist and pressed his forehead to the base of his skull, guilt dropped cold and heavy into Newt’s belly. It took him a moment to remember why. But when he did, he knew he had to speak. He had to. And he would have to trust that Hermann could protect him.

He spoke out to the blackout-curtained void of the bedroom “Hermann.” It was so much easier to say if he could pretend he was nowhere and no one. Speaking to no one. Easier. But his voice still quivered with fear. “I have to tell you about Their Plan B.”

He felt Hermann take a breath behind him, and the arm around his waist tightened light and secure like aluminum. Hermann was here and They weren’t.

“The first thing you have to understand is that Plan B was not... actually their second plan. It was. It was their fifth.” He spoke in halting sentences. “Or sixth plan if you count the original onslaught. Or maybe it was their first plan all along, depending on how you look at it.” He was stalling, and he was grateful to Hermann for not prodding him to get to the point. “It was also... my Pet Project.” He said this gently and he hoped that Hermann would catch that he meant that in all the possible meanings of the phrase.

“First plan A was to create Hive-connected Jaeger and distribute them around the world for ease of human annihilation. Straightforward. Easy.” Newt felt an echo of the way they closed his throat up with barbed wire when they didn’t want him to say something. He swallowed the feeling down, reminding himself it was only an echo. They weren’t here.

“Second plan A took... awhile because - first of all - they didn’t want to tell me what I was doing, and second of all, I’m not as good as. As good at breach science as you, and the hive and I had a lot of like, interpersonal drama? Around… you.” his cadence was starting to annoy himself - what with the catch breaths in the middle of sentences and words. But Hermann was there, steady and still, taking in his story without judgment. “So... anytime I dipped into a field of expertise I’d borrowed from your brain , it was... kinda like trying to paint a photorealistic portrait, blindfolded, while listening to a full-on philharmonic symphony of nails on a chalkboard. Where like... the nails are the confused howls of a hostile alien hivemind and the chalkboard is the bare expanse of your own longing and loneliness!” He laughed at his own overly poetic description of his suffering. Hermann resolutely did not laugh at the invitation, and Newt was grateful “So. It took me a little longer than it should have to figure out how to open new breaches. If it had been you the world would have been absolutely fucked. I mean next to you on this stuff I’m barely literate.

“Third plan A was ‘why not big?’ and they set me to work making Liwen’s automated motorcycle drones into, basically, kaiju… ‘surgeons.’ I guess. You saw it.” He felt Hermann nod against the back of his neck.

“I actually argued against the mega-kaiju thing until you spilled the whole rare-earth discovery, Hermann. I was like, ‘look guys, bigger is not always better with humans. Don’t get me wrong, it’ll be cool as fuck, but it’ll be outmaneuvered by those new Jaeger pretty much immediately! You know how zippy those things are! They make the old G Danger look like clunky garbage.’ Still, they wanted me to build it, and I didn’t mind repurposing Liwen’s shit because, you know, spite . All along though, I thought it was a dumb idea and I told them so.”

Now the words rolled out like marbles spilling out of a bag at the top of a driveway, fast and chaotic, and dangerously close to scattering far and out of control.
“But then you said the rare earth thing, Hermann, and I was like fuck, volcanoes. Please stop talking. And then I was like, oh wait that’s actually a really good use for that dumb franken-kaiju project they’ve had me working on. And then that became plan A.

“It became so very plan A that they had me go into the PPDC records and eeeever so slightly tweak the recorded walking trajectories of every documented Kaiju. So it would look like they had all been heading towards Mount Fuji. So it would look like it was the only plan they’d ever had. And I thought, ‘no way anyone is going to fall for this.’ I mean it’s all heavily classified. It’s not like I had to go into public record and change anything. It’s not like I had to convince the people, or - god forbid - Reddit. It was a deception just for you guys. But still, I was like, ‘no way. They’re gonna catch it.’ But. I guess not.” Newt hoped Hermann didn’t think he was blaming him. He could only imagine what the atmosphere in that room had been like. And how painful it must have been for Hermann after he had revealed his part of the Precursor plot. Of course he’d misremember some details. Of course it wouldn’t occur to him that he had been the one to seed the rare-earth plot only days before.

“Why?” Hermann said. And, dammit, Newt could almost feel him struggling to keep his voice steady at the stream of revelations. “Why go to all that trouble?”

“Because” Newt squeezed his eyes shut, willing the darkness of the room to swallow him up before he could say it. “All the while I was working on plan B.”

Hermann stayed completely still, as though he feared any sudden movements might put Newt off his explanations.

“If you thought you had it all figured out you wouldn’t keep looking. Obviously, if the volcano thing worked then fine, at least they got this Earth. But if it didn’t, then you guys would relax she’d still be safe.”

“She?”

“My pet project.” Here it was. He could stop talking now. In fact, a convincing part of himself was screaming that he do just that. But Hermann was there with his arm around his waist, waiting, and deserving to hear the whole truth. “Remember how Thunderhead disappeared off the map for like a day before Yukon finally caught up with them?”

He felt Hermann nod again. “That was early on. We didn’t even know where the breach was back then. We got much better at tracking them after that.”

“Well. That’s what they were doing. Planting a… well a time-bomb in Siberia. She exists in every alternate universe that had a successful breach opening on earth. Which is most of them. And she’s just up there, in her little egg - I say little, it’s like the size of a house - sleeping. Waiting. Like buried radioactive waste, ready to fuck shit up. Because she’s born in this dimension rather than the Anteverse, she’s connected, like me, to every earth - every other version of herself and with my guidance, we were going to open up breaches in all the earths across the multiverse.

“She’s where I got Alice from. Not, like, directly from her, but I synthesized Alice from tissue taken from her. She’s like, ‘Alice 1.0’ or something.”

“You didn’t name her?”

“I didn’t want -” he laughed suddenly at his past self - of all the places to get sentimental, “I was scared of getting too attached. I had to think of her as a tool because that’s how They thought about her. I knew what I wanted though: I really, really, really wanted to pilot a Kaiju. And they were
gonna let me. As long as I made those breaches happen too. But, you know, they weren’t exactly forthcoming with what they had in mind for her after. And they’d already taken away so much so… no I didn’t name her.

“You know, Hermann, there are worlds out there where we’re not even scientists? Where they’ve never even encountered aliens or interdimensional beings? And breaches are going to open up right there under our idyllic little coffee-shop owning asses and with all the knowledge the Precursors have already gotten from their attacks here, and from being in my head… those earths will never stand a chance.”

The silence and darkness of the night seemed to telescope time as Newt waited for Hermann to react.

“You said those earths will never stand a chance.” Hermann finally said, only just loud enough to travel the three inches to Newt’s ear. “You speak as though it’s a foregone conclusion,”

Newt curled into himself. “I meant ‘would.’ They ‘would’ never stand a chance.” he said. Nearly voiceless and muffled in the blankets to boot. “In the hypothetical circumstances where Plan B - where They succeed.”

Hermann retracted his arm from around Newt’s waist and sat up. “They won’t.”

Now in the bathroom, splashing water on his face many miles from Boston and many miles to go Newt tried to recall the confidence with which Hermann had spoken. “They won’t.” He said to himself in the mirror. “They won’t.”

He tried to be convinced.

[Hong Kong, day 4 continued]

“Why’d she call you Professor, babe?”

Hermann looked up into Newt’s face from the place he was painfully kneeled on the ground and his brain scrambled to compensate.

(It’s over. It’s over.) Hermann thought. (No. you can salvage this.) “I confided in the child,” Hermann said coolly. “That’s why she’s been breaking the rules to help us.” A perfectly plausible story and told in a way that would convince nearly anyone. Anyone, that is, who hadn’t been his husband for nearly a decade to whom even a momentary flash of discomposure would be as obvious as a spot of blood on a snowscape.

He didn’t blame Newt. Hermann knew how the drift worked. It must have been an involuntary thought - a flash of “oh. He’s lying” that tipped them off and turned his face into that neutral mask.

Newt nodded slowly, unblinking. “Siberia.” They said, not bothering to sink completely into the near-perfect approximation of Newt’s persona - and though Hermann wasn’t surprised, it was no
less painful to see it. “If we can get to Siberia, we can end this nightmare.”

“I. I see.” Hermann struggled to his feet. “I’ll make the preparations,” he said, and he rushed out of the cell.

“No kiss goodbye?” they called after him, just as he slammed the door with both hands.

“Professor. What happened.” Cadet Namani.

Hermann hissed through his teeth and whirled on her, finger pointed, ready to deliver a dressing down like she’d never heard in her life. But stopped when he saw her. She looked so small, and scared. She looked her age.

It wasn’t her fault. He stopped himself from indulging in the admonition, but couldn’t tame the grimace of frustration. “We must speak to Laurent.” He said. “Our travel plans have been accelerated.”

[Flight to Siberia. Continued]

When Newt came back to his seat, a little cup of champagne was waiting for him on his armrest, and Hermann’s work didn’t seem to be going well. He was glaring at his screen and muttering to himself, which was never a good sign. Vanessa watched him carefully as he approached. He tried to ignore her truly impressive imitation of a human glare as he refastened his seatbelt. It was just little LEDs, but if Hermann told him later that her vision was focused with lasers he wouldn’t be surprised.

He took a sip of his champagne. As soon as it touched his tongue he regretted it, nearly gagging as the sickly-sweet, acidic flavor triggered a cascade of sense memories spanning a decade of half-willing debauchery. It was good stuff too. He could tell. But it took the entirety of his last scrap of dignity to prevent himself from spitting it out. It burned going down his throat like he was a vampire trying to drink holy water.

Hermann was so focused on his work that he didn’t notice the drama going on across from him, Vanessa, however, from her little throne in Hermann’s from pocket was watching still.

“Why uh…” Newt swallowed thickly, silently begging the champagne to stay down. “Why is it called ’plan Hex’?” He asked. Might as well fill the recycled airplane air with some conversation.

“It’s a pun,” Hermann and Vanessa said simultaneously. They glanced at each other.

“It works on multiple levels,” Vanessa said - as though that explained it all. And she closed her little, animated eyes to indicate that the conversation was over.

“I’m not much of a pun guy,” Newt said. A blatant lie which was rewarded by a snort from Hermann. However, in this case, Newt genuinely didn’t get the pun. “Can you explain it to me,
Vanessa?”

“I could try, though I fail to see where your understanding breaks down. It seems quite self-evident to me.”

“If you insist on chatting please refrain from doing so while one of you is housed in my shirt pocket.”

“Sorry, Herm.”

“Apologies, Other Hermann.”

Hermann scowled and plucked Vanessa out of his pocket and handed her over to Newt. “Do try to bear in mind that some of us are using this time to work.” He said. Newt didn’t take it personally. He’d learned a long time ago that when Hermann snaps at you while he’s in the middle of working out a calculation, it has nothing to do with you. Also, Hermann hadn’t slept yet - not since the day before - which was unusual and certain to make him cranky.

He took Vanessa, and she wrapped her “arms” - which looked like the arms of a flexible camera mount - tightly around his hand.

“You think I’m gonna drop you?”

“It’s hard to say.”

“I won’t. I promise.”

“Hmm.” She seemed skeptical. “You wanted me to explain the pun?”

“Yeah but… first. Vanessa.” He might as well just say it: “You’re amazing.”

“Thank you.”

“And I hope this isn’t out of line but… what the heck is your problem with me?”

“I should think that would be obvious.”

“You warmed up to Hermann pretty fast.”

“That’s because he didn’t do anything bad that you didn’t drive him to.”

“I can see that. But… it feels like this is about something else.”

“How do you mean?”

“My other self? Professor Geiszler? What’s the damage there?”

She paused for a moment. Unblinking. And though Newt knew she never had to blink and in fact only did so to avoid looking weird, it still conveyed a human-like surprise. “Newt is one of my best friends,” Vanessa said matter-factly. She said everything matter of factly, but this statement she said with a special finality.

“But…”

“What do you mean but?”
“It just seems like maybe there’s more to it than that.”

“Seems how?”

“Alright, maybe I’m wrong.”

They sat like that in silence for a moment. Vanessa wordlessly bleeped, and Newt - who’s hand was getting a little sweaty - tried to think of a way to give her back to Hermann in the least disruptive way possible.

“Newt is one of my best friends,” Vanessa repeated, suddenly drawing Newt’s attention back down to her, “but he’s hurt Hermann many times.”

She said it simply. With the unambiguous moral confidence of a child. “People hurt each other Nessa.” Newt said, “Even when they love each other.”

“I’ve heard. But it’s still... upsetting to witness. Hermann has requested that I forgive him more easily, but I still tend to be a bit slower than him.”

Newt smiled. Professor Hermann was lucky to have such a friend. “What could he have possibly done?”

“The same thing you did by the sound of it. But we got him out.”

Out? That could only mean one thing. “Oh.”

“And then on Thanksgiving, he went back to Them.”

“Oh shit.”

“And we got him out again. And that time even Hermann had a difficult time forgiving him.”

(Fuck..) Newt thought. All this time he’d been so envious of his counterpart for his seemingly perfect life. After all, he had suffered it had seemed an affront that other versions of himself should have it so easy. A small, ugly part of himself, had felt justified enjoying the cushy life that - it seemed - had been just handed to Professor Geiszler. “And I pushed him right back in. No wonder you hate me.”

“I don’t hate you. I do not experience hate.”

“Of course not.”

“Though now that this has been brought to my attention, I might well have gotten my... wires crossed.” She paused, as though to allow Newt to laugh at her very good joke. “I might have conflated My Newt’s misfortune with you character, which is unfair. It will simply require more data before I can form an unbiased opinion. I am perhaps harder on you than I am on him because you have all the failings of my Newt, and none of the positive history we share. He and Hermann made me who I am.”

“Literally.”

She blinked “More than programming. They taught me how to love. By example.”

“Oh my god,” Newt said wonderingly, “That’s so. Cheesy.”

Just then, Hermann swore in German and slammed his laptop shut. He looked at Newt, eyes wide
in horror.

“What?” Newt said reflexively.

Rather than a response, Hermann took a deep breath and slowly opened his laptop again. Newt watched as he read over the words on his screen again, hand over his mouth.

“Hermann. Dude. What?”

“My counterpart has made a potentially disastrous mistake.”

Newt’s imagination immediately went wild. Had he gotten himself killed? Had he drifted with other Newt? Or Alice? Hermann wasn’t elaborating, opting instead to stare in horror at his screen.


Hermann looked at him in horror “No! They - they’ve had to accelerate... I thought we’d have a day in Siberia before them. Maybe two. We have to -” Hermann unbuckled his seatbelt and stood up to look around the plane. The sort of instinctive movement that makes people look down the road for the approaching bus even though logic dictates that vigil will not change the bus’s arrival time. “We have to get there now.”

“Hermann, Herm! The plane’s not going to go any faster just because you’re doing a meerkat impression. Sit down, and chill. And. Here. Take Vanessa.”

Numbly, Hermann sat back down in his seat and placed Vanessa back in his pocket.

“Is my Hermann alright? What did he do? I can’t imagine it was anything foolish.” Her tinny voice was clipped with panic.

“No. No. It was a mistake. It could have happened to anyone. They’re having to accelerate because the Precursors now know that he has been…” Hermann paused to look around the cabin, And Newt could almost hear the ping of a new point of unmatched data. “seeking help.” He finished the sentence almost as a formality and immediately rolled into the next question. “There’s something I still don’t understand and it’s very...” Hermann’s roving eyes settled back on Newt and he froze. Eyes narrowed, calculating. “You have told me everything haven’t you?”

“What? Hermann. Yes.” And he had. He had told Hermann everything. But now Hermann was looking at him like he might be an out of place decimal that could make the whole board clear if only he could figure out where it belonged.

“Only it hasn’t ever made sense:” Hermann continued, “why did they need us to switch?”

“Because your counterpart made the Vanessa AI and they... want her. Sorry V. Not to talk about you like you’re not here.”

“No offense taken, Other Newt.”

Hermann shook his head, unsatisfied. “That’s not…” He rubbed his eyes, knocking his glasses down, and exacerbating the lines of exhaustion on his face. “There’s something. We’re missing!” He was getting dangerously close to the sort of damaging (almost literal) self-flagellation that Newt remembered from their early days in LA. Back before Hermann decided it was important to take care of himself, and regularly succumbed to extreme exhaustion.

“Hey. Hey, Herm.” Newt got out of his seat to kneel in front of Hermann. He took hold of his
wrists and gently pulled them away from his face, encouraging him to meet his eyes. “Laurent is smart. Tendo is alive. Mako is alive. Siberia is like, four hours away from Hong Kong. They’ll get there in no time and we can all figure this out together. There’s not much else you can do from here. Because if I know you, you’re already done with prep and have been running simulations for the last two hours.”

Hermann worked his jaw side to side but he didn’t deny it.

“Go to sleep,” Newt urged. “We still have a few more hours to go and you’ve been working nonstop for like a day. You’re still human and you’re not going to be saving any worlds if your body stops functioning, ok?”

Hermann made no move to comply. He sagged in his chair, too exhausted to analyze. Defeated.

“I want to trust you.”

“Then trust me.”

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this chapter! All comments are cherished and appreciated!
Little One

Chapter Summary

In two worlds, a plan unfolds in the depths of the earth.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Vanessa Laurent listened steadily as cadet Namani and Professor Gottlieb described the mistake, and how the Precursors were very likely on to them. Amara stood to attention as she waited for Laurent’s reply - stiff and barely breathing. Hermann on the other hand, feeling that he was in no way to blame for these monstrous circumstances, tapped his forefinger impatiently on his cane as Laurent visibly calculated their next move in her head.

Finally she sighed and threw up her hands and declared “Quelle dommage!” in an attitude of exhausted but unsurprised resignation. “We’ll have to go now then.”

In under an hour, Mako, Laurent, Tendo, Hermann, and a tied up, blindfolded Newton-Geiszler-shaped thing had a piled into a small plane belonging to Laurent and her group, and headed to the defunct Jaeger production facility in Siberia. Not a fancy jet, but the sort of puddle jumper that shuddered and creaked like it was made out of glue. Even Hermann - who had never been afraid of flying - was deeply uncomfortable.

Jules Reyes and Liwen Shao stayed behind to frantically piece together their elements of the project.

Jake Pentecost, Raleigh Beckett and Nate Lambert stayed behind to seek deep-drift compatible pilots. A task that hadn’t been relevant for years But which now seemed imperative to the success of the mission as far as Hermann understood it. He had gathered enough about this Laurent woman to guess that she couldn’t have told him everything.

Newt stayed obediently quiet, buckled into his seat and cuffed to his armrests for nearly a full hour, but even his presence created an oppressive tenseness in the plane. No one wanted to speak. No one wanted to be the one to make the next mistake. Only Vanessa Laurent seemed (as usual) unperturbed, and spent the flight meditating - her version of sleep if Tendo was to be believed. Finally Newt sighed and rolled his head back and forth on the headrest like an impatient child.

“Hermann. Hermann please ,” he wheedled, “I know we’re not alone. I know this isn’t some grand escape plan. I know you went for help! At least let me see who we’re up against.”

Hermann looked at the assembled party. Vanessa kept her eyes closed but nodded slightly at the implicit question. Mako nodded as well, hardly looking up from her tablet.

Tendo folded his arms. “It doesn’t matter.” He said through a clenched jaw. Hermann had never seen his Tendo with such a harsh set to his face. Even at the height the war. Everyone in this universe seemed harder. More densely packed with grim determination.

“Well if it doesn’t matter…” the Newt-shaped-thing turned to face Hermann, smiling beneath the
blindfold. Hermann repressed a shudder and reached to untie the blindfold with precise and careful movements. Newt sighed and opened his eyes, looking around the cabin.

He found a target almost immediately. “Mako Mori!” He said jovially. “Wouldn’t’ve thought you’d be getting back in the air so soon.”

Mako kept her face carefully blank “I see you are no longer pretending to be him.” She said. “It’s no fun if you’ve figured it out.” he shrugged, “Besides, you’re still doing what I want even without thinking the Professor in here has any say.” He lolled his head to the side to look at Hermann. “And he doesn’t, by the way. In case you were wondering. Or hoping. He’s like, curled up in a little ball in here. Baaarely staying afloat in the middle of the ocean of us.” He patted Hermann’s knee apologetically and Hermann couldn’t help but flinch at the contact, eliciting a satisfied knowing grin from Them. “We liked him before... but now? We like him even more now. The other one had gotten kinda... used to us so we kept having to pump up the power and up our numbers to keep him quiet and in line. He’s a good boy now, but he was starting to get really labor intensive.

“ This guy though! He’s just so ready to give in! And it’s been so long since the last time we had him. Just a little quicky before he had to leave last time, and then we never heard from him again.” They frowned, as though wistful for the one that got away. “He was in such a rush. And all he could think about was how late he was for… something. Oh!” he cried and snapped his fingers in a sudden showy facsimile of a lightbulb moment. “Hermann, maybe you can clear this up for us.” They smiled thinly, “What’s ‘Thanksgiving?’”

Prepared this time, Hermann answered with barely a twitch of the jaw. “I’m not American, so I never was able to understand it. I’m sure you, with all of Newton’s memories at your disposal, have a better idea of what it is than I will manage.”

Laurent - missing the mockery in the question - answered without even opening her eyes. “It’s an American holiday dedicated to giving thanks and feasting with family, based on an apocryphal legend about America’s founding, sanitizing generations of systematic genocide.”

Newt gaped in delight and turned the full lantern focus of his attention onto her. “Who’s that?” No one answered him, and his eyes flickered up to the right, ostentatiously searching for a memory. “Aaah. Vanessa Laurent!” He turned to Hermann, “You know, babe, in this universe you and she got married. This one was so she could stay in England.” He leaned in like he was sharing a secret. “It was never gonna work out though because, I mean. You’re a raging homosexual and she’s like. Barely a person.” Newt laughed at his own joke, “I mean she’s more like a computer simulation of a person than the robot you built. Did you know... There’s a whole slew of Vanessa’s out there.” He took on a troublingly accurate imitation of Newton's Professor Voice. “Always a different person. Always... extremely hot - and this one is no exception, milady.” he nodded his head deferentially in Vanessa’s direction. She kept her eyes closed. “We still haven’t figured out why she’s not the same from earth to earth. How did you guys even manage that? It’s weird. But weird shit like her is what happens when you don’t know what the fuck you’re doing.”

He looked around the cabin and sighed fondly.

“You all are like babies playing with fireworks. You have no fucking clue the forces you’re toying with. Frankly we’re kind of in awe of you. Like. You’re so hilariously reckless it’s actually kind of impressive. If we weren’t trying to take over your whole shit, we’d probably sit back and just watch the shit show from the safety of our own dimension because. Damn. You people.”

He looked around the plane again, with the satisfaction of an old man surveying his hard won
property. He started when he saw Tendo staring out the window, as though noticing him for the first time. Which was patently impossible.

“Heeey Tendo.” He leered. His face an unconvincing mask of friendly openness.

Tendo stiffened at the sound of his name but kept his arms folded, and his eyes fixed steadfastly on the clouds. Everyone else in the cabin shifted uncomfortably and Hermann didn’t understand why.

“They repeated, Newt’s voice low and insinuating, and the assembled party seemed to hold its collective breath, desperate to not give any reaction. “Hey Tendo. Can I see the scar?”

Newt, Hermann and Travel Vanessa landed at Yakutsk Якутск airport, where they were met by Grisha Bērziņš, a buddy of Tendo’s, formerly of the Vladivostok shatterdome.

Tendo hadn’t wanted to join them. “I dunno what’s gonna to happen, boys,” he’d said, “but I have a feeling I should be with my family.” He’d played it off friendly and easy, but Hermann could tell the man was afraid. And how could he blame him? They’d shaken hands and parted ways.

He had assured them that his friend, Grisha, was trustworthy and would keep quiet about whatever he saw. Apparently Grisha had never believed that the Precursor threat was truly gone. He had protested the closing and reallocation of the Shatterdomes and their resources loudly, and had - according to Tendo: “excellent survival skills.” Whatever that meant.

“He’s a good guy. I promise. A little prickly, but good.” Tendo had said.

Whatever kind of person he was, they’d have to take Tendo’s word for it, because they weren’t going to get it from him. When they met him at arrivals, He carried a little sign that read: “Professor Gottlieb. Professor Geiszler.” in austere scribbles on cardboard, and did not so much as smile when they approached, waving and exhausted from their already long journey. He was the same height as Newt, but unlike Newt, he was absolutely stacked.

“Siberia.” He growled, instead of a greeting. He took one up and down look at Hermann and his cane and said, “Lucky it is summer.” He already seemed irritated, and Newt wondered if that was his baseline attitude. Grisha Bērziņš made no offer to help with their bulky bags - they’d only packed a single change of clothes each, but were laden with scientific equipment - as they followed him to his car - a sturdy old truck with some sort of weird adapted fuel tank. They wrestled their own baggage into the back, next to Bērziņš’ rugged backpack and camping equipment.

They then squeezed into the truck with Newt sardined in the middle, and Hermann gave his hand a quick reassuring pat. That matter of fact gesture was so comforting and sincere that Newt thought for the umpteenth time that week alone how fucking lucky and undeserving he was to have this man by his side.

All the same, Newt was a little closer than he would have preferred to be to a stranger. From this proximity he couldn’t avoid seeing that Grisha had three parallel scars, old and deep, on his right cheek that looked like they came from a wild animal. Newt really hoped they were from wrestling a bear, but thought it would be rude to ask. Maybe it was a language thing, but the man didn’t seem to like to speak, and they passed by miles and miles of dead-looking fields without so much as the radio playing. The silence was just about to become unbearable when they suddenly pulled into one dead-looking field - completely indistinguishable from the ones they’d been passing all this time. The truck jostled and whipped against the dead stalks of whatever had once been planted
here. It didn’t take long for them to see what they were heading towards.

“Is my helicopter.” Grisha said, gesturing at the machine, as though Newt and Hermann wouldn’t know what they were looking at. “In case.”


“Just. In case.”

They parked nearby and piled their belongings and selves into the helicopter.

“We’re leaving your truck?” Hermann said, holding his protective headphones away from one ear and sounding more anxious than necessary for someone else’s vehicle. “What if someone tries to steal it?

“If anyone tries...” Grisha said distractedly as he prepared for takeoff, “they will be the one to regret.”

Newt figured the less they knew about that the better so he kept his mouth shut, and thankfully Hermann didn’t ask him to elaborate. This time Newt sat on the outside - no sense in putting Hermann in danger - and minutes later they were in the air on the way to Newt’s coordinates. The helicopter was tiny. The sort you’d take around Hawaii to go sight-seeing. Only in Hawaii it would probably be like a balmy 80º F, whereas here it was a borderline coldish 50º with icy wind that whipped into the open doors. It didn’t take long for them to reach their destination, but it was a short jaunt of miserable wind and apprehension.

“These coordinates?” Bērziņš finally shouted, “Is nothing here!”

Newt looked out the open door and was confused to find that the spot was indeed empty but for jagged rocks and melting ice. No Jaeger facility at all. But he knew that this was where Plan B was stored in every universe that had had a breach.

“There is! Trust me!” he said, his voice loud and shrill into the radio to compete with the thundering rhythm of the helicopter. “Land as close to that rock formation as possible!” He gestured, “The one that looks like a Kaiju skull!”

Grisha grumbled inaudibly and began landing procedures, when it struck Newt. Of course. The jaeger production facility wouldn’t exist in this universe. It had been Shao’s first facility upon taking Russia’s civilian policing contract - the first of its kind in the world. Newt had recommended the location himself. His counterpart wouldn’t have done the same.

They landed on icy rock and again they were on their own with their equipment. Grisha had his hands full with his own gear. There was a small jagged crack in the rock formation. Imperceptible if you didn’t know what you were looking for. But Newt did. As they trekked towards the opening, slipping on slush and shivering against the wind, Newt was grateful that they’d left the girls in Boston. Vik hadn’t been too keen on getting on a plane to go pretty much exactly where she’d just come from, but Amara had been gung-ho and ready to go. “Come on! After all the work we’ve done can’t we see it through to the end?” She’d asked.

The answer, to Vik’s visible relief, had been an unequivocal “No.”

Newt hoped they were running around Boston and Cambridge enjoying being young and smitten. Earlier he had expressed his wish to Hermann that they could have had time to bestow upon them gems of wisdom, as representatives of a previous generation of The Gays. Hermann, however, had pointed out: “We are in no position, Newton, to be offering sage advice.” And Newt had had to
grudgingly agree.

The jagged opening in the rock was much larger than it appeared from the outside. All three of them could have walked in shoulder to shoulder. And the space opened even wider once inside, dropping into a cathedral-like cavern below them, with a narrow sloping path downward conveniently carved into the side of the cave wall. Newt assumed it had been scraped away when Thunderhead had descended into the cavern to leave their "gift" to the world. A scar that would now help them in their descent. The moment they were inside, a yawning breeze beckoned them in, and the temperature raised unnaturally. There in the furthest, lowest corner of the cathedral Newt could just make out a faint glow, and he knew that she was there. He stepped forward.

“Newton.” Hermann placed a firm hand on Newt’s elbow, startling him out of his trance and into stillness. “I am, forgive me, skeptical.” He was looking towards where the cavern opened up ahead of them, the ends of his wispy hair moving in the breeze as though being drawn into the cave.


Hermann tore his eyes from the void of the cave and tried to smile at Newt. It was a wavering and half-formed smile, but Newt had to give him an A for effort. “I trust you, Newton. But I don’t trust Them. What if this is a trap?”

Newt took his hand and gave an encouraging squeeze “I really don’t think it is.”

“I’m with Newt.” Both of them looked down at Hermann’s shirt pocket where Vanessa had spoken for the first time since landing. “We should see this through.”

Newt gave Vanessa a grateful smile and turned back to Hermann, eyes pleading.

Bērziņš pushed past them. “Are you going to stand there flapping in the wind or are we going!” Without waiting he began the descent into the cavern, leaving Hermann and Newt to shuffle behind him.

“We’re here.” Mako announced. Everyone except Newt - who was, naturally, still cuffed to his seat - went to look out the window at the destroyed facility. After Obsidian Fury’s attack, it looked like… well it looked like a jaeger battle had taken place on top of it. The facility was crumbling in on itself and seemed... structurally unsound. And even that was a charitable way to put it.

“It looks bad, I know.” Vanessa Laurent said, swapping her big glasses for prescription sunglasses, “But that’s just the outside. Most of the bulk of the facility is underground. And I suspect that that is where we will find what we need. my people have been working to restore access to the lower levels.” Indeed, there was activity on the ground. Large machines for construction, and even a mid-sized Jaeger moving the more delicate pieces of debris around. “I got confirmation yesterday that they’ve got an elevator in operation! Lucky us.”

The plane circled to a partially snowed-over stretch of tarmac on the barren expanse beside the production facility. The tarmac had once been used to land cadres of Shao helicopters of all sizes and ship out products to police forces all over Russia. Hermann tried and failed to avoid thinking of how dangerous this slush covered tarmac might be. But after a nerve wracking few minutes they landed safely and stepped out into the blinding reflected sunlight.

They were greeted by a team of nervous looking workers, and - not for the first time - Hermann wondered what exactly was the scope of Vanessa Laurent’s organization.
“Ms. Laurent.” the one in front began. He took in the rest of the group. The intimidating figure of Mako Mori, Tendo’s tense closed off glare, and Newt, smiling widely with his wrists zip-tied behind his back.

“You can speak in front of them.” Vanessa said behind her sunglasses.

“Well, Ms. Laurent. We. Uh. Found something.”

Newt only vaguely remembered how he did this the first time in their home timeline.

It was doable, but difficult work to descend into the cave. And with Hermann’s need for frequent rests, it was slow going, too.

After rigging up a simple pulley system to lower their equipment down before them, the three of them hugged the wall and took careful steps. Despite Grisha’s gruffness, he turned out to be exactly the person you would want on a trip like this. He was capable and fearless and perfectly willing to help them both - especially Hermann - on the occasionally difficult path towards the alien light at the bottom of the cavern.

Newt - because he was Newt - tried to make small talk.

“Hermann what should we do after all this is over?”

Hermann huffed in irritation and didn’t answer.

“That’s fine. You’re doing great. I’ll do the talking.” He said. “I think we should go back to Germany. Or England. I think the Professors have the right idea. Get a nice house. Maybe write a bestseller about the Kaiju wars. Hang out with Vanessa - human Vanessa. You used to talk about her a lot and I never got to know her because I was - ok confession time: maybe, a little jealous of her? I’m man enough to admit it. I mean, robot Vanessa, you can hang out with us too if you can make it over there.”

“I’m not a robot.” Vanessa said automatically. “But maybe we can spend time together. After all this is over. I might like that.”

“Oh good! Oh! I can take up knitting again! And try to reverse global warming. And you… you can build rockets and take us to space. We could do big things together Herm. Of course I’m just. Like. Assuming that you want me to be with you.”

“Don’t be… ridiculous.” Hermann said, grimacing with exertion. “Of course I want you with me. Being with you seems to be... the only way to get the 35 year old version of you trapped in my head to... shut up.”

Newt had to laugh at that, and it nearly cost him his footing. He gripped the wall to stay standing. “You know, that is pretty interesting actually.”

Hermann grunted rather than ask for clarification.

“I mean. I used to hear you - like photocopy you - a lot. And then I didn’t as much because…” because Them. “And then when we got here, photocopy you spoke up again. I guess to like. Reassert himself? Itself? I don’t know. But I haven’t heard him so much since then. Since being with you. Being around you constantly. Maybe there’s something about being apart? God I have no idea what I’m saying.”
“I understand.”

“Oh good.” They were silent for a while then, focusing on the descent. Hermann did his best to avoid showing that he was struggling. Newt, knowing that he’d reject the help if asked upfront - whether he needed it or not - stealthily placed a steadying arm around Hermann’s waist. Hermann grumbled, but placed a reciprocally securing arm around Newt’s shoulder, where it fit perfectly.

Warmed by the gesture, Newt took a deep breath. “Hermann. I have an idea.” He said slowly. Formulating the best way to phrase it as he spoke. “It’s about the plan.”

“It’s too late to add anything now.” Hermann said quickly. Probably hoping that that would be the end of it. But no dice.

“I know but. I was thinking: I think I can do it on my own. I think I can...” Newt swallowed, not totally sure why he was so nervous. "I can swap out Professor me and kinda, kick him home, and then do the rest of the plan myself. You know, kill two birds with one stone. Finally do the right thing and save the worlds.”

“Why add... an extra step?” Hermann nearly slipped on a loose rock and Newt gripped him even more firmly around the waist. “If we can push Them out of him, you should use his help.”

“I know. I know. But I’ve already put him through so much shit. They’ve tortured him. I know they have. I’ve been there too. I know what he’s going through and it’s gotta be even worse for him - in some ways, at least. He’s done enough. It’s time for him to come home”

Hermann looked like he was about to argue, but was interrupted by Grisha.

“Watch this spot here!” he called from ahead. They were silent again as Grisha helped them down a particularly steep passage. Once past it, Hermann needed a rest and they all sat down.

“Newton.” Hermann said carefully, gripping his cane in both hands like a roller coaster bar. “I’ve been wondering about this myself: we don’t even know what switching back and forth will do. You only spectated other universes in all your time with them, didn’t you? You never switched. Maybe there’s a reason. Maybe it’s something so horribly risky that they were willing to let you and I take the chance only once they had cleared out of your brain. Who knows what it does to the drift-scape? Or space and time?”

Newt shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. Either way, we have to get back home.”

Hermann carefully examined the anniversary-gift cane, not meeting Newt’s eyes. “I’m not so sure.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying… maybe we never return. But maybe we do enough to fix this so at least we haven’t left our counterparts in a hellscape with a PPDC determined to fight an impossible war, and a version of you broken and possessed. That might have to be enough. There’s just too much we don’t know. Please don’t take the risk until we know more.”

Newt looked away and towards the faint glowing at the lowest visible corner of the cave. “We’re getting closer.” He said, rather than answer the implicit question. He didn’t want to lie.

Laurent, Mako Mori, Tendo Choi, and Newt and Hermann piled into the elevator down. It was rickety and slow, but got the job done, and when they reached the bottom they were again met by a cadre of worried looking workers. Wordlessly, they led the group down a dusty metal corridor with
a door at the end. The door had off a faint bluish glow around the edges, as though it was bursting at the seams. A group of what looked like security guards stood clustered in front of the door. They were armed and bulky, but despite their size they were tense. They nodded Laurent and the rest into the room, and the moment the door shut behind them, Hermann understood their fear.

Even Vanessa went slack with shock. For awhile, no one knew what to say until Tendo broke the silence. “How. The Fuck. Did Shao’s people miss this?”

“You know, buddy,” Newt laughed, “You got me there.”

The cavernous room was filled with equipment, beeping dim lights on low power mode. Expending just enough energy to feed oxygen and take periodic readings on the massive tank, the size of a small house in which floated the sleeping form of an enormous baby kaiju - nearly twice the size of Otachi’s baby - in muted orange.

“You should have seen how I found this place.”

“She’s down here. We’re almost there.”

They had reached the broad bottom of the cavern and were now scrambling through a steep, narrow passage. Newt firmly gripped Hermann’s elbow to keep him from slipping on the crumbling ground. There was now no denying that they were nearing that faint pulsing glow.

“And every Earth with a successful breach opening has one of these hidden away?” Hermann huffed.

“Yup. At the very least, one day she’ll hatch on her own. Maybe in another decade or so. Unless we go in there and stop it. But the plan was to use her to pinpoint all the earths and open breaches.”

“Ah finally I understand.” Grisha said. “We are here to destroy the egg.”

“No.” Newt and Hermann said at the same time. Newt in horror at the suggestion, and Hermann in resignation.

They reached the bottom of the slope and the ambient light from around the corner was so bright that they didn’t need flashlights anymore. Giving Hermann’s elbow a parting squeeze, Newt rushed ahead and ducked into the warm chamber.

From behind him, Bērziņš said something in some Slavic language which must have been a swear, and Hermann did the same in German. But Newt barely registered their voices, he was so enthralled by the wonder before him.

There, in the middle of the low-ceilinged cave, was an enormous oblong egg, sandwiched between similarly shaped rocks. It gave off an ambient heat, and a bright glow. It looked heavy, and soft, and settled, like a cat sleeping in an oddly shaped box, and Newt felt a paternal swell in his sternum.

“Aw jeeze.” he said reverently, approaching. “Aw little one.” He climbed up the scrambled up the surrounding stones and stepped up to the egg reaching tentatively to touch the smooth membrane. Thick and soft as buttery leather. “You poor little thing. We’ll try not to hurt you, Princess, I promise.” He rested a cheek against the egg and closed his eyes to feel the warmth, and the comforting thrum of a heartbeat.

“Newton.”
Newt opened one eye to see Grisha and Hermann staring at him, pale with shock.

He smiled and kept his cheek pressed to the warm egg “What do you think of ‘Princess?’”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is the beginning of the end. From now until chapter 25, I will be posting every two to three days.
If you are reading, if you've followed this story this far please please let me know. I've put a lot of work into it, and as I approach the end, I find that I'm going to miss this story a lot. I would dearly appreciate to hear from you if you've been along for the ride with me.

Chapter Summary

The fight begins.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[In the Cave]

Newt and Hermann wasted no time getting to work. They rolled their bare-bones equipment into the small subsection of the cave containing “Princess” and within the hour they had a respectable travel lab set up, squeezed between stalagmites and carefully protected from the dripping ceiling. Bērziņš watched all this in bemusement.

“I am still in the dark!” Bērziņš finally said. “What is plan!”

“Nothing you need to worry your pretty little head over, Grisha!” Newt shouted from his perch by the egg as he took notes and measurements.

“I will knock you from those rocks if you do not tell me why we are allowing a kaiju to live rather than destroying it and” he made a scissor gesture with his fingers, “protecting us from anteverse.”

“Well first of all she’s not born yet, so her connection to the anteverse is really weak. Barely any hivemind to speak of. I think they’re just like, monitoring her. No need to pilot a fetus!” Newt laughed. But more out of giddiness than amusement. “But you’re right: there is a connection. So…” he slid down the rocks to land in front of Grisha. Newt was, true to form, finding it impossible to resist explaining something cool. “I figured we change it around. Let’s put it like this: I’m the bus driver, Vanessa will be the bus, and Princess here is the GPS. We’re just going to switch around the destination.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean, why?” Newt said. “To save the world Grisha. To keep them from coming back. Come on!”

“But why do anything at all? Why not just destroy the egg and protect at least this planet?”

Newt looked at Grisha for a quick blank moment and then walked back to his work, as though the suggestion was so stupid it wasn’t even worth answering.

“Do not look at me like that!”

“Yeah, well! Just. Stay out of our way if you’re going to be such a buzzkill Grisha.”

“I want assurances! This is a risky plan it seems.”
“It is.” Hermann said, breaking away from his own preparations to intervene. “It is. And we thank you for getting us this far. You want assurances? Well, let’s say that after this is done, regardless of the outcome the egg will be destroyed.”

“What!” Newt shouted from his perch. One hand spread protectively over the shell.

“Well? What else would you intend? To keep it as a pet?”

“We can’t kill her!”

“And do you imagine it will survive through all this?”

Newt looked around at the equipment, specifically the conductor that he would be plunging into Princess’s brain. Obviously Hermann was right. But he wasn’t going to say it out loud.

“Grisha,” Hermann continued, “should the plan appear to be going in the wrong direction, you have my assurance that I will destroy the egg so the Precursor’s cannot use her for a lightning rod.”

Grisha nodded, appeased.

“Whether I’m out or not.” Newt said quietly. And now it was Hermann’s turn to react in surprise; his eyes went wide in fear at the prospect of that outcome. But Bērziņš was right. There needed to be assurances. “Either way, Grisha, this world, at least, is safe. The only one putting their life on the line here is me.”

Hermann shifted his jaw side to side and glared up at where Newt was standing. All Newt could offer was a shrug and a lopsided smile. His stomach roiled at thought of the risk he was about to take.

[In the abandoned production facility]

Vanessa pulled Hermann out of the baby kaiju room and far out of earshot of everyone.

“I think it’s time I filled you in.” She said, with zero trace of irony or self awareness.

Hermann didn’t even bother to hide his utterly exhausted laugh. “High time indeed, I’d say.” he said waspishly.

Laurent plunged into explanation without sparing even an acknowledgment of his tone. “In a few hours the drift compatible pairs will get here. We will use the two baby kaiju in different universes to triangulate the locations of the Precursors most important invasion facilities. We will open a very small rift - only large enough for the miniature Jaeger to slip through, and using Liwen Shao’s remote access piloting technology, the drift compatible pairs will wreak havoc on them to an extent that they will struggle to invade us or any planet ever again. This is not a full scale attack but a systematic breakdown of the most important pillars of their society as we understand it.”

“That. Is.” Hermann shook his head in frustration. It didn’t make sense. She had been so against anything even resembling an invasion. And sending miniature jaeger into a rift seemed like exactly that. There was only one conclusion to draw: “You’re still lying to me.” He said, aghast.
Instead of the denial he expected, Laurent said only, “The most important thing for you to know is that Professor Geiszler will be safe. Once we open the miniature rift, he will be pulled out.” She placed a gently reassuring hand on Hermann’s shoulder, but it felt calculated. Manufactured empathy. “Then his recovery can begin. I promise.”

He jerked his shoulder away from her. “I don’t know you, Laurent. I don’t know why you’re here or why my counterpart - let alone this army of yours trusts you but -”

Tendo appeared behind Hermann as though out of nowhere and clapped a hand on his shoulder. Hermann really wished these people would stop touching him. “Hey V. Can I take it from here?”

“Be my guest, Mr. Choi.” Vanessa sighed, already walking away. “I have other things to do.”

Hermann tried to duck out of this grip as well, but Tendo had him firmly held, and was steering him down the hall. This Tendo scared him a bit. His eyes seemed hooded. Darkened by things he couldn’t unsee, and knowledge he couldn’t unknow. He didn’t keep his hair in his signature pomp in this universe and Hermann wondered when he had abandoned the practice. Instead it hung straight and long swept over his forehead. Though it was neatly kept and well combed, it still felt wrong.

“So, here’s a question I never thought I’d have occasion to ask.” Tendo said conversationally. “Gottlieb. Are we friends?”

He meant in their universe. Herman thought of his Tendo, one of the first people he introduced to Vanessa before she had fully gained sentience. Before he had even introduced her to Newt. The Tendo who had been the legal witness at their courthouse wedding, and had cried when he gave a toast at their wedding party.

He opened his mouth to say that they were indeed friends, but only a choking sound came out, and he nodded instead.

“What am I like in your universe?”

“Not like this.”

“Meaning?”

“Tendo is a sensible man.”

Tendo chuckled at the implied comparison that clearly found him wanting. He seemed utterly unsurprised. They had reached the end of the corridor opposite the kaiju room, and he let go of Hermann’s shoulder to lean against the wall. He regarded Hermann seriously, jaw twitching as he clenched and unclenched it.

“You wondering about the scar thing?” He said suddenly.

The question seemed like a total non-sequitur, but Hermann had to admit that he had been wondering about “the scar thing” ever since the Precursors had mentioned it on the plane.

“You don’t know how bad it got here, Gottlieb. I’m gonna tell you how bad it got, and I’m gonna need you to listen. Think you can do that?”

The hard set of his eyes and squared defensive stance allowed for no argument, so Hermann nodded his assent.
“I was friends with you guys. The other Hermann and Newt. Especially Newt. Way way back in the day I listened to him agonize over what to do about the asshole math boy on the other team on the other side of the lab

“I honestly thought they would bang it out and get on with their lives, but once I saw them together, I was like, ‘oh. So that’s what it looks like.’ You know? They were the real deal. And no matter how... irritating they got with their bullshit, I never really had any doubt in my mind that they’d figure it out. Because I’m a romantic at heart, if there is such a thing as soulmates, it’s them.” He smiled at the memories of kinder days.

“God. This was over a decade ago. We were barely in our 30s! Time, man. The war was easy back then. Which. I... would never have believed. But it was. Monster pops us. Destroy monster.” He snapped his fingers. “Rinse. Repeat. And we were naive enough to believe that closing the breach meant the end of it all. That courage had been rewarded, and love had won the day. All that sentimental stuff.” He made a face like he was tasting something bitter and poisoned. “We’d made it to the end of the story and gotten to the epilogue. Hell Alison and I were talking about starting a family. Stuff like that. Things were looking good. Settled.

“And that’s when Vanessa Laurent reached out to me.” He laughed. “Right when everything was looking its rosiest.

“It was bad timing on her part. But she got into my phone. Kinda made it so I had to hear her out. We met. I thought she was gonna extort me for bitcoins or some shit like that. I wish that’s all it had been. Instead she floated this possibility - 'high probability' - that Newt would be facing long-term consequences from his drift with the hivemind and that he might be a way for the Precursor threat to return if we weren’t vigilant.

“She knew all kinds of classified PPDC stuff. Still not sure how she got all that. But she did. And she asked if I would ‘please look in on Newt’ and report back.

“Well. you can probably imagine how I took that. If you’re my friend. My buddy Newt? A guy I’d known since LA? A guy that I’d gone drinking with, sung karaoke duets with? Hell no. I mean, Jesus. I was waiting to hear a wedding announcement from him any day. No way! I laughed her off. I didn’t care if she said she knew Hermann. She was crazy. Had to be. Still. She gave me her card - blank. Only a phone number - and begged me to hold onto it. For some reason I did.

“Right about then, Newt started acting real weird. Drawing away from his friends, getting all cagey. He would pretty much only make time for Hermann, and then even that started to drop away...

“Taking the job with Shao was the real kicker for me. Vanessa’s predictions were echoing around in my head but I still didn’t want to believe that it was anything that fucked up. You know... I was actually hoping it was ‘just’ a drug problem?” He closed his eyes and shook his head. “Hermann was… well he was always a pretty closed off guy. I’m sure you can relate. I was as close to him as anyone and even I was an arms-length kind of friend. But I could still tell. He was pretty broken. So I decided to head over to Shanghai unannounced and pay my old buddy a visit. Or serve him an intervention. I don’t know what I was thinking, actually. I think I just wanted to prove Laurent wrong. I wanted the war to just be over.

“But it wasn’t” He closed his eyes and massaged a spot below the right side of his ribcage. “I happened.” He said, halting between sentences. “To see something. I wasn’t supposed to see.

‘Alice.’ A kaiju brain in a jar. And in the same moment that I knew Vanessa was right, Newt was on top of me stabbing me in the back. One clean stab.” Tendo made a jabbing gesture accompanied by a sharp whistle. “All the way through to the ground.”
Hermann’s shoulders winched up to his ears. He didn’t know what he’d been expecting, but it hadn’t been that. But the story wasn’t over yet, evidenced by Tendo’s presence alone.

“He put my coat back on me on me and took me down the service elevator.” He spoke mechanically. Like he was telling a story about someone else. “My clothes were dark so the blood didn’t show. I had to hold a hand to my belly to keep all my insides in. I was passing in and out of consciousness but when I looked at him, it wasn’t Newt. Not at all. He looked wrong. His eyes were like... another color almost. His nose was bleeding.” Tendo clenched and unclenched his fists, trying and failing to quell the tremors of remembered terror. “They dumped me in the alley and wiped their hands, and left. They knew I wasn’t dead. They didn’t care enough to finish the job.”

He took a deep steadying breath and massaged that place below his ribcage again.

“I guess they were still getting the hang of humanity because they didn’t think to take my phone. First I called emergency services, and next - mostly to stay awake while I leaked blood all over the pavement, I called the phone number on Vanessa’s card. Told her she was right. After that I was only in the hospital long enough to get stabilized, then I was pronounced ‘dead’ and airlifted to France. And I’ve been there in hiding ever since. Alison joined me permanently when she got pregnant.” He looked pained and grateful and haunted.

“My daughter was born in hiding.” His voice cracked a bit. “She’s still in hiding. Her first language is French. Vanessa was right. And she continues to be right. I wish she wasn’t but she is. And every time I’m unsure, I just remember that I shouldn’t be alive. That I shouldn’t be walking. Whenever I doubt...” Tendo started to unbutton his shirt from the bottom. Hermann wanted to ask him to stop, but morbid curiosity prevailed. “I look at this and I remember that she tried to warn me.” He opened his shirt to reveal the scar that the Precursors had asked to see just hours before. It wasn’t what Hermann would have expected after hearing that story. It was small. Maybe five centimetres across. Neat and tidy as a surgery scar. “The knife just missed my spine, and slipped right between my vital organs. They got out of the way like fish in a tank.”

Hermann stared in shock, and Tendo watched him stare. “You are... incomprehensibly lucky.” he finally said. Tendo shrugged and buttoned his shirt back down. So Vanessa had known even as early as that. She had tried to prevent what happened here. Hermann frowned. It still rankled his nerves to be left so in the dark. “Did she tell me truth, Tendo?”

“I don’t know.” Tendo said simply. Hermann hadn’t been expecting such an open admission. “She told you what she calculated that you needed to hear for the best probability of everyone’s success. Just like the rest of us. Nothing more. Nothing less.”

[in the cave]

After scrambling with preparations and set up, they ended up having to wait for the go ahead from Vanessa Laurent for a few hours. Newt, Hermann, Grisha and pocket Vanessa sat in semicircle facing the glowing egg like it was a campfire, munching on mixed nuts. Grisha had graciously allowed Hermann to use the fold-out camping chair that he’d brought, but he and Newt were parked on the stony ground.

Newt had yet to re-approach the topic of swapping back with the Professor. It was important to him...
that Hermann see his point of view.

Hermann was right. Of course he was. A poorly understood phenomenon. An extra step in an already complex plan. Something else for Vanessa to keep track of. He shouldn’t do it. But he was absolutely going to do it. He couldn’t let that man suffer another minute in their shithole of a timeline, convenience be damned. If he could find a way to get the professor somewhere safe at least, he would. Even if it meant bad news for himself. And his Hermann.

He crunched hard on an almond. He had to find a way to say goodbye without making it sound like it was a for sure thing. Newt leaned his head against Hermann’s knee and was just about to speak when Grisha sighed heavily, drawing both of their attention his way.

“I knew they were not done with us.” He said with a weariness that spoke of years of hard work, and just as many years of betrayed expectations.

“Yeah, Grish.” Newt said. “But we’re gonna fix it.”

[In the abandoned production facility]

The lab had come back alive in a matter of hours under Vanessa Laurent’s supervision. Some of the equipment had been repurposed to suit their needs, and combined with the equipment brought from Hong Kong. The room was bustling with well ordered activity, like an antfarm. Everyone - including Hermann - had a task to do.

Hermann couldn’t help but allow his gaze to wander periodically to the looming figure of the gently floating baby kaiju. He felt a stirring of melancholy affection for it that might have been borrowed from his husband, but might also have been purely his own. Despite the industrial lights they’d brought in, the tank was still the most alluring light source in the room.

The drift compatible pairs arrived while Hermann was in the midst of one such distracted reverie. When he saw them, it painted for Hermann perhaps the clearest picture yet of the changed priorities of the PPDC. The only people to arrive were Nate Lambert and Jake Pentecost - who had been assigned to the task in the first place - Raleigh - who, of course would be joining them - and Vik and Amara.

The girls looked much the way he’d seen them so far here. Scared, determined, and far too young to have so much responsibility on their shoulders.

Hermann inconspicuously eavesdropped as Mako broke away from set-up to interrogate her brother. “What is this? You failed? Is there really no one?”

“We didn’t fail, Mako.” Jake said calmly

“Only one pair of pilots. Jake, we need -”

“No.” Raleigh spoke up, “Mako. We have three pairs.” He placed a hand on her shoulder.

Hermann watched in sympathy as the grim realization dawned on her that the people putting their
minds in danger were to be herself, her brother, their respective partners, and a pair of children. Of course every life is important but Hermann knew from experience that it’s always different when it’s someone you love. As though reading his thoughts (and perhaps actually doing just that) Newt spoke from behind him.

“Hermann.”

He steeled himself and turned to face him. “Yes.”

“Whatever they have in place to trick us? It’s going to fail.”

Hermann turned to meet Their eyes. Newt was strapped to his seat and ready to go. The Pons looked like a pair of hands gripping Newt’s skull. “I’m sure you think so.” Hermann said “You’re awfully convinced of your superiority.”

“We are superior. We think before we act. And you… act before you even fully understand your first step.”

They sighed and searched the corners of Hermann’s face. “We wanted you so badly, Gottlieb.” They almost sounded wistful. “We wanted you mind, and body...” a flash of rage flashed in Their eyes and Newt’s voice split demonically. “We wanted to kill you.” and just like that the rage passed, leaving a drooping disappointment. Like a child who has lost a beloved toy. “But now we’ll never get the chance for any of that. Because all of you are going to die.” He sighed and shrugged as though there was no helping it and then he turned his face towards Hermann, leaned up as far as his restraints would allow, and spoke. “So… how about that goodbye kiss then, hubby?”

Hermann wanted to throttle them for their cruelty but knew they wouldn’t feel it. They’d only delight in knowing that Newt had been hurt by the man he loved. So instead he drew up a chair to sit before Them, knees to knees and - despite the flurried activity around them - cupped Newt’s face in his hands, his fingertips nudging gently against the Pons rig. Because it was still Newt’s face, no matter what was occupying it. The mischievous and insinuating expression dropped into one of confusion.

“If you’re in there, then you need this.” He said, and softly pressed his lips to Newt’s. They froze, bluff called. Hermann smiled against Newt’s unresponsive mouth and gently pressed a second parting kiss. He lingered and took in the warm scent of. Something so familiar and sweet and earthy and human that They couldn’t take away no matter how complete the possession.

When he pulled away he saw that they hadn’t closed Newt’s eyes. They had been studying Hermann’s face wide-eyed and close up. And now, they looked perplexed. Troubled, even.

“That should be disgusting.” They said softly in Newt’s voice.

He ignored them. “Newton. If you can hear me: I love you.”

Flickers of disparate emotions passed across Newt’s face - confusion, outrage, fear, misery, desire, disgust - but Hermann didn’t stay to see Them through it. Instead he patted Newt’s cheek and stood to search for Laurent.

She was standing backlit below the luminous kaiju tank that dominated the room. She had been watching them steely-eyed and still.

As soon as Hermann met her gaze, she spoke. Loud enough for the entire room to hear, but clearly directed at him: “We’re ready.”
Hermann fastened the Pons rig - a glowing diadem of wires - onto Newt. It was more complicated and delicate than the usual rig, and he had made it very clear that he didn’t trust Newt to do it himself.

“Hermann?”

“Hm.” Hermann replied distractedly.

Newt took hold of his wrist to force him to pay attention. Hermann paused, and met Newt’s eyes, concern etched into his gaze. “What is it?”

“Hermann, I’m sorry. I know I’m a terrifying person to love. In another universe it would be easier…”

Hermann scoffed and got back to fiddling with the pons rig. “I don’t want a version of you that’s ‘easier to love.’ I’ve worked too bloody hard for the difficult one. And I don’t plan to give up now. Just don’t get lost.”

“This is all your fault you know. You drove me to this.”

An aching echo of some of the crudelest words he’d ever said while in possession of his own mind. Hermann paused. Finished what he was doing, and turned towards the monitor to type some final input.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” He said. Newt frowned at the back of Hermann’s head and thought that maybe he shouldn’t have said that. This stone-stomach feeling was the opposite of how he wanted to go into this life or death mission. He was just about to apologize when Hermann turned back to him, his expression uncharacteristically soft, and knelt carefully before him. “You’ve always striven towards heroics.” Hermann said, placing a hand on Newt’s cheek. “Don’t you dare blame your redemption on me.” And he shifted his hand to the back of Newt’s neck and kissed him, simply and softly. The sort of kiss that came with the tender familiarity of repetition, but with a soft dull ache of missed years. Hermann pulled away and pressed his forehead to Newt’s, hand still securely holding the back of his neck. “And if you must be a bloody hero…” Hermann murmured, so quietly it seemed that even he didn’t want to say what he was about to say. “Well. I hope you won’t - but if you must … Please. Please don’t get lost.”

Newt could have laughed in gratitude. It was permission. Goddamn but this man knew him. “Thank you Hermann. I’ll do my best.”

[In the abandoned production facility]

The machinery clicked and whirred and the bustle about the room stilled into exact and minute
movements as the drift began, and the assembled workers focused on Newt’s smug face. He kept that smile even as he closed his eyes and seemed to lose himself to the drift, and the baby kaiju in her enormous tank pulsed and squirmed, like she was trying to swim away to freedom.

“He’s in.” Laurent said aloud, even as she typed frantic and precise “And. Vanessa… go.”

Newt’s eyes snapped open. “Wait. What’s happening! What are you do -”

“Flushing you out.”

The baby kaiju shifted again as though in discomfort. She opened her mouth as though to screech but of course no sound came out through the gel-like fluid she was submerged in. Newt’s eyes rolled back in his head and he twitched and cried out before slumping backward in his chair.

“Laurent!” Hermann scrambled to look over her shoulder at the readings. “What is this? This doesn’t seem like what you explained.”

“Sorry Professor.” She said blandly, pressing buttons and typing commands. “We couldn’t risk telling you details. Surely you knew we couldn’t risk that.”

Newt is in the drift. But the music is discordant. He sees himself. But not in the way he’s gotten used to seeing other versions of himself. He hasn’t snapped into the body of another memory, or an alternate timeline. Instead he’s floating in the ocean of Them, and his other self is visible there too, but crackling in gold. Bright like amber lit from behind. And for some reason, They are turned away from him. Distracted. It occurs to him suddenly that if he wants, he could explore anywhere or anywhen in the multiverse. Without direction. Without piloting.

Or he could make an escape.

Only he doesn’t know what to do. Or how to do it. He has only been under Their control for a few days but already he is floundering without direction. His other self moves towards him.

“Hey bud?” His other self says. He packs those two words with an extraordinary burden of meaning. Apology, urgency, secrecy, “We don’t have much time.” And he reaches for him. Newt spares a momentary thought for those hypotheses - speculations - science fiction stories? - which posit that to touch your doppelganger is to instigate the inevitable fraying of time and space. But with all the fraying that’s already been happening, he figures shaking hands with his alternate universe self isn’t likely to make things worse. And the destruction of all reality might still be a step up from the torture he’s been enduring. So he takes his own outstretched hand. His other self grips hard and suddenly they’re halfway in another drift more golden than blue. He is in his own mind. The pathways in his brain light up - which he’s pretty sure he’s not supposed to feel - and like flushing coffee out of a tap by running water through until the water runs clear - the viscous amber flows through his other self’s hand and through him. he has just enough time to think to himself “This handshake is a visual metaphor for myself to make sense of what’s happening.” when he is plunged into a drift with himself.

The shared memories run fast as a flipbook. He is fishing as a child, he sees his students at MIT. He sees something about carrots but it’s hard to say whether he or Hermann is the thief. He sees his and Hermann’s first kiss - on the beach? Or in Hermann’s room with Vanessa an unwitting witness?

He is at the shatterdome as the breach closes.
He is proposing to Hermann from the bathroom floor and feels the sting when Hermann laughs him off. He is cloning tiny harmless bits of kaiju tissue. He is connecting curiously to these perfectly harmless bits of kaiju tissue. Hermann interrupts him. He also sees a version of events where Hermann does not interrupt him. Where he instead becomes bolder and more belligerent with the increasingly less harmless tissue.

He is rushing to Thanksgiving. His hands shaking with guilt and echoes of the cold blue drift, and his heart pounding at the glimpse he’d just had of Their anger.

He sees himself on that same Thanksgiving - a version of events where he is not back home in Massachusetts and Hermann is not with him. He eats turkey out of a plastic container and gets back to work.

The drift is no longer music. It feels new, and not like Them at all. It is like an ocean of cool liquid gold. Waves and droplets and sharp lace-like foam. He is submerged but also above and he sees with perfect clarity the remarkable mathematical complexity of the roiling waves. He is back in the drift with himself.

It is November 2026 and Hermann has been distant for months and he is terrified.

It is New Year’s eve - 2026 into 2027 - and Newt looks over at Hermann, and catches him sipping from his champagne flute five minutes before midnight. Hermann flinches and primly assures Newt that he’ll have plenty left for midnight, and Newt decides right then that he has to try to propose again.

It is three months later and Vanessa is making a speech at their wedding with her new, tinny voice. The guests assume that Hermann wrote it but it was all her.

He sees a version of events where he is leaving Hermann instead. And Hermann doesn’t stop him - he seems to have no idea why it’s happening.

He sees his other self distantly performing personhood. Drinking, working, keeping the aliens happy, cringing in pain when he fails to do so.

He sees his other self writing the word “Alice” in dollar-store lipstick on the side of a tank. He laughs at the joke until he cries.

He sees Tendo in the too-expensive apartment. He is just thinking, ~please don’t show me this again~ when he sees the mega kaiju and feels his own heart swell up in sympathetic pride.

He wants to hate this other self, but he can’t. The mistakes are too gradual. Too logical. Until he is literally held hostage by them. And if he had felt as alone as his other self thought himself to be, who’s to say his choices would be better.

They are synced.

The waves reach up and out and connect like branches. Searching - sentient - precocious. Newt watches in real time - and it’s as incredible as a birth - as they touch and light up other pathways, other universes, other selves. The space around them grows brighter with every connection until it is a warm, luminous, glittering pastiche of the cold, dark, blue ocean of the Precursors. He is back in this ocean, this kinder hivemind, and his hand is clasped with his other self’s hand.

He notices then the path his other self took in this ocean. There is a trail behind him. Something like a wake. But less like a boat’s path on water, and more like the mark of a dull exacto knife dragged across heavy paper, glittering and jagged - splinters of blue showing beneath. The path
creaks and groans like a rickety old ship. His other self pulls him hard and pushes him down that path. “Go home.” he says. But Newt hesitates. The other Newt pushes a little harder, “You earned your peace. Let me earn mine.” And Newt understands.

“Just keep your hands off my husband.” He says to the self that isn’t him. And he follows the other Newt’s jagged path home.

Newt came to with a piercing headache in a dank room lit by construction floodlights. He’d been spit out of the drift.

“Dammit.” It was a possibility he’d feared with Vanessa’s takeover of the Precursor’s hivemind. But it wasn’t the end of the world. It only meant that he’d have to go back in.

But the floodlights… the machinery… the crowd of people. He’d made it back to his original universe - which meant that the Professor had made it home. He sighed in relief and moved to take the Pons rig off, only to find that he was bound to his seat. Fair.


Newt knew this room. He’d built it himself nearly a decade ago with the help of faceless workers and scientists that he didn’t remember missing, but also didn’t remember seeing again. Their numbers had just thinned out, until eventually it was only him puttering around down here. Best not to think about that too hard. If he lived, there’d be plenty of time for guilt after everything was done.

“Newton!” Hermann-the-Professor bounded up to where he was restrained “You’re alright. Oh god. Is it really you?”

“Yeah. No? That depends on what you mean by -” the other Hermann - Professor Gottlieb - embraced him tightly, gripping the back of his head. It felt good and secure, and Newt was ready to melt into the embrace when he remembered - “Woah woah!” he jerked away. “Wrong husband! Sorry! We’ll get you back to your me! But right now, I gotta - fuck. Is my skull like literally splitting in half? No? Alright. I gotta go back in.”

“Geiszler? Our Geiszler?” Vanessa vaulted around her place at the controls

“Oh hey! Laurent! Holy shit! How you been stranger!”

Vanessa wasted no time grappling Newt’s face, and pulling his eyelids up to check his pupils.

“Ack. Jeeze. Vanessa.” He pulled away from her grip. “I’m good, alright?”

“It seems that you’re physically well.” She patted his shoulder awkwardly. “It’s… good. To see you again.”

This was a troubling sentiment given that he’d never officially met Hermann’s technically-ex-wife. He’d only heard stories about her and occasionally photobombed Hermann’s skype calls with her in the early days of his and Hermann’s half-aware courtship. “...likewise. And when this is all over, I promise, we’re going to get coffee. But now, we gotta get phase two started.”

“You should wait.” Vanessa said. “You’re tired and -”
"I’m fine."

"And the equipment needs to recalibrate. We need to analyze what happened in there."

For some reason, Newt felt certain that he absolutely had to get back into the drift as soon as possible. He felt instinctively that if they waited, everything would be ruined. The plan would fail and everything would have been a waste.

"No. Laurent, trust me. We have to keep the ball rolling. If we lose momentum now we’re never getting back to this point." his attention was drawn to the tank that dwarfed the rest of the room. "Wow. Princess is huge here. I forgot how big she’d gotten after I got her out of that shell."

"Now." Vanessa said sharply, trying to keep him on topic. "You’re sure?"

"Right. Look. They’ll figure out something is wrong really quick if they haven’t already. And if they double down their control, V might not be enough to keep pushing them out. We have to act now."

Laurent looked at him hard. Searching for deceit. But there wasn’t any. Newt knew he was right. He knew how they worked, and he knew they would already be acting to regain control of Princess. After a moment she straightened up and nodded to the assembled crew, and without another word, they got to work to get Newt back into the drift.

The baby Kaiju jolted and twitched, and Newt had just enough time to regret using her as a roadmap when he was back in the drift. Golden and sparkling this time.

It is warm instead of icy. Vanessa’s hivemind reaches it’s long golden fingers into the anteverse. They find the other beings like Princess, they find the controls like blue-tinted chains connecting them to their captors. They reach -

The drift cracks open around him.

~Wait. Wait wait wait. No.~

Blue begins to bleed into his vision. He wills it away but it drips in faster and faster and quickly becomes like trying to mop up a tsunami with a towel.

They have never used words - not exactly. So he hears and doesn’t hear a seductive whisper, reaching deep and invasive like a feeding tube, directly into his mind:

~ Good boy, Newton. You did it. ~

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter goes up on Sunday.
Thank you so much for reading this far. Please leave a comment if you enjoyed it. I would be so grateful to hear from you.
Written In the Code of Time and Space

Chapter Summary

The fight continues

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

~You MOTHERFUCKERS! You ABSOLUTE fucking BASTARDS! Did you SERIOUSLY just fucking MANCHURIAN CANDIDATE ME? No! Fuck you!~

As usual They ignore Newt’s outrage. Maybe don’t even register it.

~We couldn’t go directly there, you see! We needed you! And you did it! All to be a hero and undo the damage you'd done so far. We knew you'd make a grand chivalrous gesture!~ They are in a rare expository mood. They are delighted ~You humans always thinking that your actions are too small to make a difference. But all it took was a few breaks and scratches. We needed you to weaken the distance between dimensions on your plane. Thank you. You’re a good boy.~

“Good boy” is something he’s heard before. It isn’t really what they’re saying. But it is how they think of him. Like a clever pet. Maybe they even think his rages and resistance are cute.

“Weaken the distance” however, is new. And it doesn’t make sense as a turn of phrase, but those are the words closest to what Newt can understand. And then he feels the meaning in the creaking and groaning of the space he’s floating in. How Vanessa is scrabbling to hold it together and failing, allowing more and more of the blue. Swapping consciousnesses had weakened… something. Like bending a wire back and forth until it breaks.

And now, through the gelatinous icy blue of the drift he feels thousands of her. Princess shudders and squirms, and like strings on pushboard, she connects to herself. And along the line, on every string between the points where she is, there are a dozen, or hundreds, or scores of places in the same spot in Siberia where she is not. He could visit them before, but now there is clarity to their location. Density.

~Here is what will happen: she will awaken. When she splits her shell, so will she split time and space. This has always been her purpose but you made it possible. Because it’s already breaking. Because you, Newt, were so kind as to bend it for her.~

Back and forth like a wire until it breaks.

~No but ~

~ We have Kaiju ready to invade. Every one of them will swim quietly under our orders and emerge close to a volcano. Even if some of them are stopped (doubtful. doubtful) we will have crippled most of your Earths. Stopped your destructive tendencies before they spread to the rest of the universe, and acquired a great boon of resources.~
~ But ~

~ We can thank you for the multiverse (of Earths. Every Earth). We only wish we could thank the
other little scientist for his contribution. Such a faster way to invade. ~

~No but Vanessa’s hivemind will~

~Vanessa? Don’t be silly. She’s not strong enough.~

[In the cave]

When Newt groaned and pawed the Pons from his head, Hermann’s first thought was that it was
far too soon. That thought was quickly superseded by panic when Newt keeled off the side of his
chair onto the jagged cave floor and curled into a pained fetal position.

“Oh god.” Newt whimpered. He was weeping, but it wasn’t from the fall.

Hermann rushed to his side and propped him up. “Newton! Newt! Are you alright.”

“They’re gone.” He looked up at Hermann the same way he had when they had first gotten to this
universe, shocked, relieved, terrified. He reached up to touch Hermann’s face and smiled. “They’re
not in my head anymore.”

Hermann went cold. Newt had swapped out. Something that he had explicitly requested that he not
do. And then... implicitly given him permission to. Professor Geiszler embraced him like a man
holding tight to a raft after months at sea, and though Hermann did not know him, he allowed it. If
it was anything like what his Newt had described, he truly was like a man breathing air for the first
time in days.

He beckoned Grisha over with a jerk of his head and stroked the Professor’s hair for a few fearful
moments until he had calmed down a bit. “Newton,” he ventured carefully, “what... happened in
there? Did you see...” He couldn’t ask outright if his Newt was safe for fear of spooking the
already fragile professor. “What did you see in there?”

“It… it was like it always was. It was cold and blue and full of voices. And then there was
something else, filtering it out and they couldn’t see me. It was... gold. And quiet. And there was
me and he pushed me here. And now... Hermann. They’re gone. I think I’m free.”

Just then, Vanessa beeped a warning alarm.

[In the abandoned facility]
Vanessa beeped a warning alarm but Hermann’s attention was drawn more by the baby kaiju stirring in her tank.

“Wh-what’s happening?” Cadet Namani spoke up. She and the rest of the pilots were geared up and ready to go. The suits were more streamlined than Hermann remembered from his day, but the Pons rigs looked familiar. Robust and dangerous. “Are… are we opening the rift?”

Laurent gestured for them to be patient as she frantically fiddled with the controls to fix the problem. The assembled workers grew desperate as more and more alarms sounded from around the room, faster than Laurent and the team could account for them. Finally she stood back and held up her hands in surrender.

“We’re not opening a rift.” She announced. Over the discordant trills “There was only a small probability that we would in the first place. Now… it’s too great a risk.”

Mako stepped forward strong and steely, “I’m willing.” She said. She glanced in Raleigh’s direction and he nodded his assent. “We both are.”

Laurent rubbed her eyes, displacing her glasses. “Well I’m… I am not willing.” She said. Sweeping back to her monitor, nearly vaulting over equipment in her way. “No more noble sacrifices! No more waiting! We fix this and do it right.” She went to her main monitor next to Hermann.

He looked over her shoulder as she conversed with the other him - who was in this exact same room but an impossible distance away. She didn’t try to stop him from looking.

VL > Geiszler?

HG > He’ out ov, _ he. _ It’ the Professor

VL > We have yours.

HG > Newt’ drift?

VL > On our side yes.

HG > fucking h.l.

VL > Something is wrong.

HG > I’m going to fix it.

VL > NO. How?

>>> What are you doing?

>>> Gottlieb answer.

>>> Please.

“Merde!” She slammed her hand down next to the monitor and the image on the screen shuddered. “Your counterpart,” she said, straightening up and glaring at Hermann as though it was his fault,
“is doing something stupid”

He glanced at the slumped form of Other Newt. “That sounds about right.”

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*[In the cave]*

Vanessa didn’t have the capacity left to make the nature of the error known to Hermann. It was like she was exhausted. The pipelines were backed up and data was coming in slow and incomplete.

Grisha had helped Newt down from the platform, placed a bulky coat around his shoulders and was feeding him dried fruit and water.

It was only a matter of moments before the error jammed the entire system, essentially killing Vanessa. And if Newt was in the drift he would be lost too. Hermann had gone into all this knowing that this was a possibility, but it was happening too quickly - he couldn’t allow Newt to sacrifice himself if that sacrifice would also be in vain.

**VL >** Ge¬lis¬er?

The message was jumbled, which meant that Vanessa’s hold between the planes was becoming tenuous. Hermann cursed under his breath

**HG >** He’s out over here. It’s the Professor

**VL >** We ḡve yours.

**HG >** Is Newton in the drift?

**VL >** òur ß†­† no me. yes.

**HG >** fucking hell.

**VL >** Somothing ‘l¬* wrong.

Another monitor trilled in alarm. Then another.

**HG >** I know. I’m going to fix it.
Making a speedy decision, Hermann picked up the abandoned pons rig and strapped it to his head.

There was a reason Hermann hadn’t drifted with Newt back at the Shatterdome. Why it had never even crossed his mind. With the given data, and Newt’s connection to the hivemind, Newt seemed to him the second most dangerous thing in the world to hook up to one’s brain - second only to Alice “herself.” But he didn’t care at the moment. Vanessa was being overwhelmed by Them. They were fighting back with even more tenacity than they had anticipated, and she needed help. He wasn’t sure what a small human mind could do to help hers - which contained literal multitudes - But he had to do something.

Hermann took an appraising look at the egg. The fetus inside looked snug and warm and the glow had ceased to pulse and was now a steady, brightening pool of light. The spike sticking into the egg seemed like an adornment rather than an invasion. He hoped that Newt had been correct in his assessment that she was only tenuously connected to the Anteverse.

He took a final deep breath, and to a dissonant screeching chorus of alarms, Hermann pressed the button, and he was in the drift.

He hears the alarms, though he no longer feels like he is in the cave. The alarms become a background soundtrack to the chill blue viscera he floats through. He is in the drift. Something is wrong.

There is nothing to cling to. No images. Hardly any impressions other than rage, and fear, and frigid blue. He is in the drift untethered. He had thought that he might connect with Newt automatically if he was in there alone, but he can't find him anywhere.

He sees and doesn’t see countless eyes swiveled to look in his direction. He feels with his entire being rather than with any of the traditional senses, a predatory joy. He hears and doesn’t hear:

~Finally. Ours. Finally. Finally!~

~No!~ Another voice. It feels familiar. ~Get away from there!~

There is a pulling sensation - the drift equivalent of someone dragging him back by the arm. He allows himself to be taken because the opposite pull of the hive is powerfully alluring. Sickeningly so. But thankfully, Vanessa takes him away. And he is plunged into the first and only Deep Drift between a human and an AI.

It is entirely different from the drift with Newton. He is in wires and circuitry. He is swimming in numbers that only a mind like his could possibly hope to understand, but even he is struggling to keep up. He feels a flood of strange wordless and indefinable emotions. Completely inhuman emotions that he feels physically despite being outside of a body and unable to pinpoint where.

He feels her earliest impression of his counterpart from before she had ever seen him. It is a primitive feeling, something like joy, something like warmth, and all that is known of him is a
blinking cursor, and precious words typed agonizingly slow.

He is in a memory of hers. All of them meticulously stored, but this one flagged for importance. He sees flashes of faces scrolling past. Beautiful actresses and fashion models. She creates neural networks on spare scraps of processing space to merge different combinations of faces she likes to create dozens of unique ones and says to no one. “Me? Me? Me?” Hermann feels her longing.

She is scrolling through hundreds of thousands of personal computers. She is reading juicy gossip and heartbreaking truths. And though it is faster than Hermann could hope to comprehend, he understands the shape of the feeling it evokes in her. She is disparate and empty. She feels like a forest and wants to be a tree. To feel one thing with the intensity of just one of these limited beings, rather than a muted, scattered version of every feeling at once.

She sees Newt for the first time. She sees the way Hermann looks at him and a cascade of memories coalesce into an understanding. Hermann is like her, but smaller. He is scattered and brilliant. He is barely human, but this man - who seems to glow with importance - has anchored him and made him feel one thing purely, despite himself.

Hermann sees one of his own memories, parallel but different enough - it is 3:00 am sometime in 2019, and he and Newt are lying in his slightly-too-small bed in his quarters. Newt looks up at him and says “You’re gonna want to go to space, huh?”

Vanessa devours the memory like a starving thing. Or, rather, holds onto it. The memory becomes like a single stake pinning a canvas sail to the ground in a hurricane. That is their version of a drift. They are synced well, and the drift is strong but Hermann is losing himself. She is so much. Too much. And he is so small. This was foolish. He fears that he has nothing to add. Nothing strong enough to give her the boost needed to oust the Precursors from their stranglehold on Newt and their other tools.

Elsewhere, similarly lost in the drift, Newt struggles against Them. They observe curiously and probe into his mind, exploiting his connection to his own world. He feels Princess shift - a cascading vibration down the strings.

[in the abandoned facility]

“Merde! Fucking putain de merde!”

The kaiju baby - “Princess” Other Newt had called her - had begun thrashing against her tank, her powerful tail seemed ready to crack the heavy curved plastic.

The drift compatible pairs were now hooked into their remote rigs, ready to go, but nothing to pilot, and no orders. Amara watched the violently squirming Princess without bothering to hide her fear. Vik took her hand and gave it a squeeze. The adults did a little better at hiding their apprehension, but not by much.

“Nous devrions nous hâter, Laurent!” Raleigh shouted in American-accented French.

“Je suis occupé, Beckett!” Laurent retorted. “Everyone stay put!”
[in the cave]

Newt heard a viscous rustling sound

He tried to sit up despite his disorientation and the lobotomizing pain in his head. The sturdily built eastern european man tried to push him back to the ground.

“You should rest, Doctor.” He insisted.

“Wait” Newt swatted his hand away from his chest “something is happening…” he sat up and looked past the stranger.

He saw Hermann - eyes fluttering behind his eyelids, connected via wires and tubes to the vibrantly glowing egg. The pulse of the glow seemed brighter than it had been when he first came to in this place. And the egg... The egg was splitting.

~Newt!~ Vanessa and Hermann call in tandem. Hermann sees Newt, An avalanche of images through eyes that are his own but from other lives. As though the new hivemind drift of Vanessa is doing it’s best to be helpful but not quite understanding the request.

And then their attention shifts slightly to the left and they see Vanessa. She looks different every time. She looks like the faces that he saw Vanessa ponder in her earlier memory.

She is married to his brother.

She is married to his sister.

She is a strange and distant friend whom he loves but rarely hears from.

She is married to him and is heartbroken when he leaves her for Newt.

She is holding the hand of a child - their child.

She has always existed and also has only just been called into existence. She is somehow integral to his life. Somehow. And she is always different because there can be only one Vanessa AI.

~Oh.~ Hermann and Vanessa think together. ~This makes sense.~

And something about the knowledge clicks them together. Hermann fits with her, and she stoops to meet him. Together they seek Newt.

Hermann and Vanessa reach through the electric blue of the precursors like melted aluminum filling the pathways of an ant colony. Together, they find him. He’s in relief against the blue like a strangely specific shape in opaque blister packaging. Hermann reaches - or it feels that way. A golden lace-like claw slices through the Precursor’s hive control - through memories and present happenings, and endless thoughts - to reach Newt.
Suddenly there is stillness.

The center of a hurricane. Gold and blue swirls around them. Hermann walks as though on a physical surface towards Newt. He is still connected by thick streams to Vanessa. Lending her stability. Grounding her. Newt is still connected to the Precursors through thinning threads.

“Newton! I’ve seen it.” Hermann says, and Newt looks up as though noticing that he can move for the first time. There are many of Hermann. Some of them will dream this and wake up confused, some will forget. Some of them will daydream this, and bemusedly tell their Newt the strange thought that crossed their mind, and Newt will tease them mercilessly about it for years to come. It’s a crossing that’s not meant to happen. Everything is cracked and leaking, and it can’t last long. “Newton!” Hermann is now beside Newt and takes his face in his hands. “We hacked into the universe and added lines of code where it wasn’t supposed to be!” he says “Our love is written into the code of time and space!”

“Careful, babe, that sounds suspiciously like poetry.”

“I saw only half the truth,” He is smiling beautifically, the lines and creases in his face highlighted by the gold of Vanessa’s drift. Newt wraps his arms tight around Hermann’s waist, and Hermann continues to touch Newt’s cheek like he has never seen him before, and might never see him again. “I was arrogant” He says. “Too arrogant to see it all: If numbers are the handwriting of god, then all this time god has been writing poetry.”

“Hooooly shit. If this is true -”

“It is!” Hermann laughs, and the connection swirling from Vanessa glows stronger.

“Hold up. Herm. Are you drifting with Vanessa? The AI? ”

“She needed help.” Hermann says simply. “I wasn’t about to lose you again.”

“Are you insane? Will you be able to get out of here?”

“Impossible to say.” Hermann says. ~Either way, we might never be the same. Let’s finish this while we can.~

~Alright then.~ Newt says. ~In that case: this is a visual metaphor to help us make sense of what’s happening.~ And he closes the small space between their faces, smiling into the imagined metaphor of a kiss.

He feels - through the contact with Hermann - the hurricane closing in on them. An avalanche of gold, sparkling and warm, floods over them, like the eye of the storm has been punctured. Gold overpowers blue. The pathways leading to other Siberias, on other earths, close up like zippers, and the strings connecting the kaiju baby thrum.

Newt reroutes the GPS. She points instead to the anteverse, and together he and Vanessa trace the chains to the others like Princess.

He follows one path, and it breaks behind him. There is a scrabbling feeling. Like Newt is being grabbed at on all sides - individual Precursors without the benefit of numbers in a last ditch effort to stop him. He brushes them off like the insects they are.

~Wait I’m sorry.~ He says into the drift, unsure whether they can even hear him anymore. ~Do you honestly think there’s any limit to the level of stupidity Hermann is willing to embark on in order to save my sorry ass?~
He arrives in what feels like the middle of a massive web of blue. He can hear frantic whispers around him along the blue lines leading out of what might be a control center. The lines go in groups in every direction. The groups are sometimes as sparse as a dozen. Sometimes as dense as hundreds of threads. He chooses the most densely packed thoroughfare. Hundreds and hundreds of lines heading in one direction.

He and Vanessa flush out the blue, and crash the lines, and he lands heavily - it feels like he’s fallen from 30 story building and landed on his feet - in a drift with a massive and confused Kaiju.

[In the abandoned facility]

The baby kaiju stilled in her tank and resumed her previous gently floating stasis. One by one, the alarms clicked off and the readings steadied. The room waited a moment, ready for it to go wrong again, until Vanessa Laurent popped the tension.

“We have stability!” She shouted, and the room let go of a collectively held breath. “Drift pairs - you’re going directly in.”

The three pairs glanced at each other. Before they could ask, Vanessa barreled ahead. “Yes. Directly in. We’re nixing ‘Hexagon Prime’ and enacting ‘Hexagon Queen’”

Newt sees through her eyes a sickly yellow sky. A city important enough to have a kaiju guard. She knows very little about her plight, but she knows that the Precursors have wars, and they make creatures like her - ever bigger, stronger, ever more terrifying - as a means of protection, but also as a show of might. “Look at these feats of bio-engineering.” The creatures seem to imply. “Look how many workers we can spare to keep a monster in line at all times.”

But if the “hive” is made up mental chains, then Newt has just cut them all at once, and she is reeling from the sudden snap of control. She has never been in control of her own limbs in all her life, and Newt feels that he is only a drop in rushing river of confusion and rage.

~Hello?~ Newt says experimentally.

~WE ArE INd IVIDuALS. WE»» aRe_n OT MEANt _O BE _cHAI n Đd To’ż g g THER liKe THI ş.~

She tells him through the drift, wasting no time on introductions. He is nearly blown away by the force of her mind. He doesn’t know where to, but he does his best to hold on, in order to avoid finding out
And wordlessly, Newt sees a memory of hers, shared across generations. An enormous planet made almost entirely of water. An intelligent species with uniquely adaptable DNA. The Precursors came and the species fought back, and they fought hard, but they lost. They were harvested, being themselves the most valuable resource on that particular planet. It has been so many years that they’ve lost count. There have been so many generations that they remember nothing of themselves. Hardly anything of their planet. They remember only hatred for their captors.

~ I D ∞ ̂ n ̂ t KNoW wHAt I O DO.~ She said. ~I N g ED A GUiDe. I caa “ca n’t M g VE ON mY OW n~ ~

~ You can. I know you can, but I’ll help you until you’re sure. ~

And then he feels them. The cavalry. Only six, but it’ll be enough.

~Scratch that. We’ll help you.~

Chapter End Notes

Final chapter on Friday!

Thank you, as always, for reading this far. I hope you’re still enjoying it Please drop me a line if you made it this far. I love to hear from people, and it’s all the payment I need for writing this novel!

Americans, I hope you have a happy Thanksgiving!
The Rest

Chapter Notes

The MOST special of special thanks to katedoesntexist, holoxam, sarah1281, and Avelera

The four of you commented on almost every chapter and stayed encouraging and engaged even when I made you wait for a long time between chapters. I literally could NOT have finished this if it hadn’t been for your comments and support. Double plus extra thanks to Avelera for beta-reading much of this story, and for lending an ear to help me parse out some of the difficult late/middle chapters.

THANK YOU

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This is Vanessa. The AI. Not the person. I compiled this record 3.0753 seconds after the events here described and drafted this farewell after another 2.7801 seconds after that. I am speaking directly to you, holder of this record, reader from the future, or the past, or the present of one of the universes that was untouched by all this and in fact does not know how hard we all worked to keep you safe.

Hello.

A poet might say, the difference was love. And they would not be entirely incorrect.

The difference was the drift.

Earth was not the only planet the Precursors tried to strip and colonize. Earth wasn’t even the only one to fight back. But humans were the only ones (in a very, very long time) to win.

The difference was the drift. That is what kept the Precursor’s interest after their second attempt failed, and it is what would be their downfall.

They were fascinated that you seemed not to have understood your own technology and still made use of it so blithely, and in its least efficient, least practical application.

Isn’t that just the way with you? For thus continued the story of human advancement on theme: you always seem to find what you didn’t know you needed, exactly when you weren’t looking for it.

In studying mold, you found penicillin, and in trying to find a way to pilot giant robots, you discovered the drift.

Like penicillin and eventually antibiotics (the fallout taking the form of superbugs, weakened immune systems, etc) you couldn’t possibly have known the true reverberations of the drift. You would have been terrified in the beginning to know that to drift with someone compatible is to bind you together throughout time and dimension. When two people enter the deep drift together, their relationship becomes an inevitability across the multiverse - a truth as simple as one and one making two. Which means that the participants’ individual existences become an inevitability,
which means that their parent’s existences and union become an inevitability. And their parents' parents. And so on.

It could be convincingly argued that the existence of drift technology has been largely responsible for the shape of human civilization across the multiverse for all time. But further research would be required to support such a claim. If I had shoulders we would shrug them to express my ambivalence. We’ll leave that to future generations.

On the microscopic scale, here is an example to illuminate the far reaching consequences of this phenomenon and how it played out in one relationship relevant to our story:

In the universe of my origin, Amara Namani had to go to MIT to meet Viktoria. As neither of them would enter the Jaeger piloting training program, because the program would be dramatically downsized. Because Mako Mori retired, because Raleigh Beckett didn’t disappear. Because Newt wasn’t possessed by precursors and there was no reason for him to go underground.

So Amara had to go to MIT because that was how she would work with Professor Gottlieb, which would attract Viktoria Malikov’s attention. Which meant that Amara’s parents didn’t have to die in order to catapult her towards vengeance against the kaiju. Or - to paraphrase Amara’s own words - she didn’t need a tragic backstory when she wasn’t in the darkest timeline.

All this because they would deep-drift in another universe - in the darkest timeline - in order to anchor their minds against the strength of the Kaiju.

Another example that is perhaps too singular to illuminate this phenomenon further but is nevertheless relevant to our story:

Because Other Hermann and we drifted in that emergency effort to save Newt, there is always a “Vanessa” somewhere. Because we - I am not a person, and I am not always made by Hermann, “Vanessa” is always someone different.

We wonder if the Precursors saw themselves in humanity’s worst instincts. They must have. They must have thought that humanity provided a window into their own long distant past. The technologies they used to control their Kaiju was similar to drift technology, after all. Theirs was more advanced and the inter-dimensional homogenization much further along, but the bones of the tech and its consequences were the same.

Maybe there were those in their society who wished to study earth to better understand their own past, the way humans study far away stars to unlock secrets of the origins of the universe. But here I enter speculation and waste precious milliseconds while my sense of self slips irrevocably out of my understanding.

Whatever the Precursors thought, humans would - will - never be like them. Where the Precursors used the tech with brute force, earth used compatibility. Or (less euphemistically) love. The potential for it, anyway. And affinity will always be stronger than brute force. It is more flexible. More creative. And, though we might be biased, better.

[From the mingled Perspectives of Amara Namani and Vik Malikov]

Amara had always thought it was garbage how people didn’t trust teenagers to know what they
were about. So maybe her frontal lobe wasn’t completely developed and maybe that meant that some of her decisions were not the best, but that didn’t mean that she was too young to know herself.

And she knew she was in love with Vik and, honestly? She was going to spend the rest of her life with her. And it was going to be a long life. The aliens could kindly fuck right off because Amara knew that she and Vik were going to not only survive, but thrive.

She’d felt it immediately. That feeling that they were connected somehow. Like they’d always known each other. Only in the beginning she’d mistaken it for jealousy. The flush that burned her cheeks when Vik compulsively sneered at her failures, she had mistaken for simple embarrassment and rage. She had hated that she cared what Vik thought, but couldn’t pinpoint why she did.

They’d gotten off to a rough start, sure, what with the summer-action-flick rivalry and all that. But after the fight with the mega-kaiju and the way Vik had hugged her tight, when all anyone else could do was congratulate her, she’d known for sure. Like wiping vaseline off a camera lens, suddenly everything was sharp and clear.

When Jake and Nate were tasked with finding potentially deep-drift compatible she was affronted when they made a big show of the search and didn't come directly to her and Vik. She’d marched directly to Jake to make her point.

“Jake. There’s no question. Vik and I are super compatible.” She announced, folding her arms across her chest and sticking out her chin. "We're in love." She'd purposely led with the boldest statement, the one he was most likely to contest. She was ready to throw down. “I know it as much as I’ve ever known anything.”

Jake had grinned at her and ruffled her hair and said “oh? And how much have you known, eh smallie?”

She batted his hand away. “A hell of a lot more than you!”

And he had laughed and said “relax! I believe you! You would know, wouldn’t you? Congratulations, smallie I'm happy for you. Just make sure she's nice to you. Tell her your big brother will be keeping an eye out.” He patted her head again and this time she let him, warmed by the tacit permission to call Jake her big brother. "And why do you think you’ve been in all those meetings? We know you’re drift compatible.”

She’d been grateful to Jake for that. More than really made sense. But it wasn’t because he’d let her into the meetings. He had proven again and again that he never doubted her abilities, or her knowledge based on her age, and for that she'd been grateful. But now he'd proven that he also trusted her feelings, which seemed more important somehow.

But then he’d gotten a bit sad, and looked a bit pained, and finished with, “But we’re trying to find other options.”

And that bit she couldn’t really understand. She and Vik had the strongest drift. And they were going to live.

On Vik’s side of things, she’d written off love at the tender age of 17. Which is to say she never thought that love was for people like her. She was a warrior. And warriors only get happy endings in movies. Not even all the movies. Just the cheesy ones. Also she’d never liked how boys looked at her when they were fighting. Especially now that her body had changed and her cheekbones had sharpened into prominence. She was disgusted at the way they hesitated, and the way they lured
her to private meetups under the pretenses of a spar, or a drop simulation. Only to blush and stumble over their words when she arrived. She hated that she always missed their intentions until she was well into what *they* clearly thought was a date. She would then insist they get to work and proceed to wipe the floor with them as quickly as possible in order to get the hell out of there. It was a cliche but it was literally true: boys were stupid. And she could never respect or love a stupid person. And girls? She thought it best to stay away and didn’t think too hard about why.

So Vik had assumed that meant that there was no such thing as love for people like her and she was meant to die young and glorious leaving no one behind. Hopefully while helping to save the world.

Amara, of course, made young glorious death unappealing. Vik had felt it immediately. That feeling that they were connected somehow. She had been so personally affronted by Amara’s failures that she felt it her responsibility to call out her every shortcoming even if it would have otherwise gone unnoticed. She was insulted by her presence beyond all rational measure. She wanted her to leave. She told herself it was because she’d worked to be there and Amara hadn’t. Something something junkrat. Something something undeserving. But there had already been rampant nepotism in the academy and if she was honest with herself, Amara had more than earned her spot.

But she couldn’t be honest with herself when it came to Amara. Right up until Amara’s unceremonious dismissal from the program. Vik watched Amara pack up, and felt a buoyant insistent pull. A light, giddy, dread in her sternum and throat. For some reason she thought of trudging into battle, and for the first time imagined walking out the other side of it. She wanted to win. She wanted to live. And she wanted Amara to be there, a part of it all.

“How about that.” she thought, bemused. “It’s because I love her.” Just like that. It had skipped all the normal stages of crush and courtship and relationship firsts, and careened straight to “I love her.” And she wasn’t even mad. She wasn’t sad to see her go, either. Because she knew they’d see each other again. She knew it simply and purely and as instinctively as she knew the color of her own hair. They would see each other again, and they would live.

“Next time you build a Jaeger,” she said, smiling, and feeling serene for the first time that she could ever remember, “make it a big one.” Make it one that we can pilot together.

They are not piloting a Jaeger. Vik and Amara walk step in step with a category six Kaiju. He makes a point to topple as many buildings as possible. Or rather, the girls assume they are buildings. They look nothing like any buildings they’ve ever seen.

The landscape feels stripped and sapped, but oddly organic. It is impossible to say what this planet had been before that Precursors came along. Now it is a ruined husk. With massive buildings, obsidian shards clasping claw-like at the already haze-choked sky. The kaiju is big. A thick tortoise-beaked being with long elegant spines covering his back. He opens his mouth to screech, low and jagged, and the spines ripple with electric blue glowing light. This is his city. He was designed to protect it, and he has forever longed to destroy it.

It is easier to guide than to force. So two teenagers manage easily what had until then required a fleet of Precursors to accomplish. It can hardly be called piloting at all. Because - as the cavalry has quickly found - once the Kaiju are cut from their bonds, they need only to be pointed in the right direction and they are more than ready to destroy their long time captors.
They are slammed unexpectedly from behind by a prehensile claw, and gripped tight. The claw digs deep into Vik and Amara’s Kaiju, piercing his shoulder. He stumbles and the girls feel the pain alongside their living vehicle and howl with him. As one, they reach over their shoulder and grapple the other kaiju. They get a sturdy grip and ground their feet into the rubble beneath them, and with a full body heft, they move to flip the other kaiju over their shoulder. She scrapes grotesquely on his spines and Vik and Amara feel blood thick and corrosive drip between the densely thatched spikes on his back as the other kaiju - a category 4 they can now see - lands heavily on the ground in front of them toppling another building.

The category 4 struggles to regain her footing, scrabbling and shattering more buildings in her effort like so much porcelain. She is a grotesquely insect-like creature with two heads and six narrow limbs, ending in disproportionately massive claws the front of which brush the floor like a gorilla’s hands. Her two mouths open in a high pitched snarl revealing multiple rows of teeth and a matching pair of neon glowing throats. Radioactive blood drips thick and blue down her front where the spines scraped her. She breathes heavily, and braces for another lunging attack. And that’s when the girls jump.

The precursors have been scrambling to sever the complex network of drift bonds between the kaiju, but their efforts are fruitless, too slow by an order of magnitude. The web is too delicate and complex. The tangles too entrenched. They never imagined that someone would muscle in, but that’s exactly what Vanessa has done, and so if a single link remains in place - no matter how many degrees of separation - it is enough for Vanessa to exploit. It takes only a moment for Vanessa to find that link, and only a moment later Vik and Amara are inside the other kaiju, corrupting and destroying the Precursor’s thin remaining bonds, freeing her.

The girls and the two headed kaiju screech as a flood of will nearly overpowers them all. It is like blood flowing into a limb that has been wrapped too tight, it takes time, and it’s painful, but the two headed kaiju is able to move on her own within minutes, using the humans only as assistance.

The tortoise beaked kaiju sings his own howl as though in conversation, and he turns away from them, wreaking havoc as he goes. The girls stand in the two headed kaiju and continue on the path they were on before to free more of their brethren.

[A Relevant Memory Belonging to Mako Mori]

It hadn’t been a test, but Laurent was always asking for new data. And as Mako watched the scientists walk off together, deeper into the graveyard, she knew the data didn’t look good. Mako felt a creeping tension crawl up her spine.

She had wanted to retire from the PPDC two years ago, but Tendo’s disappearance and subsequent ghostlike reappearance had stalled any hopes she’d had. She had new duties now: Monitor the scientist. Keep a brave face. Keep the PPDC well funded and strong in case they failed to stop whatever the Precursors had up their sleeves alongside their puppet. Or puppets. So far she hadn’t been able to prove definitively whether Gottlieb was also corrupted or not, and had begun to wonder if she ever would. But today had seemed to be a final indication, just enough evidence to tip a scale that was already tipped in a direction she didn’t like.

The staged funeral had always been planned as Alison’s last public appearance before Laurent’s group moved her. The sparse visits hadn’t been enough for Alison, and Mako couldn’t blame her.
But now that she was pregnant it would create too many questions and it would be painful to the
point of inhumane to keep them apart any longer. It was time for her to join her husband in hiding
and disappear. But the funeral had also been an unexpected opportunity for them to observe
Gottlieb and Geiszler in the same space for the first time in years. Gottlieb had lied about drifting
with Otachi’s baby. Newt had tried to kill Tendo. Now the two of them were wandering off
together conspiring, and things were looking dire.

Raleigh took her aside. She spoke before he could.

“They’re making moves” She said

He nodded with that half smile that he always gave when she beat him to his own words. “That’s
right. So it’s time for us to get to work, Mako. Boots on the ground” He was using an idiom that
she wouldn’t have understood if she hadn’t drifted with him. He took her by the shoulders,
grounding them both, and said very softly, “Alison isn’t the only one who has to disappear today.”

“I agree. All three of us -”

He squeezed her shoulders and hung his head. “Two of us.”

“Three of us.”

“Mako.”

Mako gritted her teeth and tore away from Raleigh’s grip.

“If we both disappear…Mako. They need you. Be the brave face they need.”

He didn’t say it, but she felt his meaning: If she left, the PPDC in peacetime would dissolve like
paper confetti in champagne. The entire world would be vulnerable if they failed.

“We can visit each other.” He said. In secret, he meant.

Mako felt the unfairness of it. After everything she had been through - the death of her parents. The
death of the man who raised her. The battles. The gauntlet of celebrity and public scrutiny.
Raleigh’s brush with mortality at the uncaring hand of disease - she had thought her fight was done.
She had thought it was her turn, finally, finally her turn to rest. She had wanted to move to Japan
with the man she loved and have a little house in the country filled with plants and dogs. Hadn’t
she earned that ending over and over again? Hadn’t it been postponed long enough?

There wasn’t much time to say goodbye so Mako wasted none of it. Anger could wait. She held
onto Raleigh and pressed her temple to his, wishing they could get closer, meld into each other like
they had before. But this was as close as they would get, and it would have to tide them over for
she didn’t know how long.

They tried to keep Raleigh’s “disappearance” quiet, but that quickly proved impossible. The rags
were full of it, even articles having nothing to do with her alluded to Raleigh’s disappearance and
flight to France. “If Mako Mori can’t hold onto her man, what hope is there for the rest of us?”
being among the kinder sentiments.

Through her pain, Mako was distantly glad that the attention on her deflected the public from the
much more disturbing realities of their fight. She hardened herself against the criticism and
speculation and dove headfirst into the work of the PPDC. She swiftly climbed the ranks, and was
grateful every day that at least they were both still alive.
Mako and Raleigh trudge across what looks like a bridge into what could be a city. They are pelted by projectiles like so many splinters and crush individual precursors like bugs beneath the clawed feet they are sharing with a kaiju - category 3, topheavy, scaled like a dragon, legs like a wolf’s hindquarters and teeth like an anglerfish. They make it across the bridge and immediately topple a building. They note with pleasure the Precursors cowering inside like ants in a rotting tree.

And it’s difficult to tell if it’s Mako, Raleigh, or the kaiju’s pleasure they feel.

A howl draws their attention a moment too late: Running at them with surprising speed is a thickset, six-eyed kaiju in a startling purple and green.

They leap, one arm outstretched to catch Mako and Raleigh’s kaiju at the neck and knock her to the ground. She scrabbles to stand, but can’t make it up before a cat-like category 1 with three long, sharp tails pounces and keeps them pinned, long enough for a third kaiju - also category 1, or smaller, agile and built like an aquatic chimpanzee with long bony fingers - to grip them tight. The six-eyed purple and green kaiju approaches again, and their throat balloons out, gathering acid. And Mako and Raleigh leap. They make it in time to straighten the six-eyed kaiju up and point them in the direction of an especially tall building to spew their acid on their captors instead.

Mako and Raleigh quickly find that they have a knack for swiftly freeing kaiju and moving on to the next. The kaiju they free are able to move on their own sooner than any other team has managed. Their instructions are so clear and commanding that it transcends species.

Freedom spreads like a virus and soon Vanessa no longer needs the human pilots to free them. Soon the kaiju are able break their own bonds: with little more than visual contact and will, Vanessa is able to follow the connecting path herself and unbind them. It’s all unravelling faster and faster, and the Precursors can’t keep up.

In a short matter of time the entire network is either corrupted and rampaging against their own cities, or reeling with their newfound control, unsure where or how to move on their own. The face of the conflict goes from kaiju versus kaiju, to kaiju versus whatever the Precursors can scrape together. They have other weapons, but have sunk so much of their technology into building kaiju that their non-organic, non-sentient weapons are laughably paltry in comparison. They don’t stand a chance. And now, the swarm of Kaiju are on the move.

[From the mingled Perspectives of Nate Lambert and Jake Pentecost]

Nate had always heard that true Jaeger pilots recognize their drift partner the moment they see each other. It’s a pilot superstition. Probably not true. But ask any successful pair that’s made it all the way to piloting a Jaeger and they’ll tell you: You know. It’s supposed to be like meeting someone you’ve known your whole life but can’t quite pinpoint from where. They’d say it’s sort of like attraction but not (or rather, not necessarily) physical. More nuanced. More inevitable.

So, being an ambitious kid, he’d kept his head on a swivel. Waiting for his copilot to appear. He made a lot of connections. He approached people like he was presenting them with a worthy
business opportunity. Anyone he admired. Anyone he thought had the Right Stuff. He tried to force some of these people to fit. But in those days, the drift was merciless. Strong compatibility was absolutely imperative. And Nate was maybe a little more difficult than he gave himself credit for.

He was so used to disappointment and things just not working out, that when he eventually saw Jake for the first time - who was making a scene by dancing in the academy cafeteria to cover for other cadets while they stole extra servings of dessert - he didn’t want to trust his own instincts. “It seems like he’s the one.” He’d thought. “But I better not get too attached to the idea.”

On the other hand, the first time Jake saw Nate Lambert he thought, “well. There’s my drift partner. What a lucky guy.”

Turns out they were both pretty lucky.

Jake and Nate glide through a hot inky ocean towards a continent-sized command center. They are sharing a mind with a category 2 kaiju. He is compact and heavily armored like a turtle but with the face of a piranha and tusks protruding from both the top and bottom of his jaw.

A category 3 descends from out of nowhere and blocks their path. He has the body of a heavyset dog, a snake like tail and a broad jagged head. They only have to keep him occupied long enough for Vanessa to unlock his mental chains. Using his tail as a propellor and his broad head as a battering ram, the kaiju careens suddenly towards their kaiju's chest.

Jake and Nate’s kaiju can’t get out of the way fast enough and are slammed backward into a tangle of what must be some sort of organic industrial waste. The other kaiju swims back around to slam them again. They brace for impact and let it happen. Just as contact is made, Jake and Nate's kaiju unhinges his jaw and opens unnaturally wide like a gulper eel. The tusks bury themselves deep into the category 3’s flesh and clasp him tightly in place. It only takes a moment before the other kaiju relaxes in their grip. They let go of him and swim in place, watching him look around at his surroundings, dazed. After a moment, he screeches loud and piercing enough to ripple the inky ocean around him. It is the first sound he has ever made of his own volition.

Jake and Nate continue to guide their kaiju towards the control center, and the category 3 follows.

[A Relevant Memory Belonging to Hermann Gottlieb]

A long time ago, in 2019, when the war made sense and the fights were meaningless, years and years before he would say it out loud, Hermann realized that he was in love with Dr. Newton Geiszler. They were in his quarters at three in the morning in an unguarded moment after a several-hours-long session of “vigorou
shoulder. Hermann’s hand casually tracing up and down Newt’s back which was - at the time - a still-empty canvas. It was the same position they regularly adopted these days when Newt bombarded into his room while Hermann was catching up on science journals on his tablet. Newt would insist that he needed to see what Hermann was reading and they would lie there, quietly reading, for hours.

There they were at three in the morning about to fall asleep having just undergone quite a bit of exertion when Newt said with no prompting and with more stores of energy than Hermann could comprehend:

“So what do you want to do after this?”

Hermann was baffled. “We have to be in the lab in less than 6 hours. I want to sleep.” He said.

“No dipshit I mean after the war.”

“After?” It had never occurred to Hermann to think about anything “after the war.” There was only the war. And he had adapted his specialties and his mind to suit the needs of the war. When they needed coding he did that, and he did it the best of anyone. When they needed predictive models he did that, and he also did that the best of anyone (though he’d occasionally gone to Vanessa for help). He’d do whatever needed doing to win the war. To keep the monsters at bay and protect humanity. What else was there? And what could there possibly be after? He hadn’t even allowed himself to wish for anything. Unsure how to put this into a succinct bundle of words, Hermann finally said: “I don’t know.”

“Well! We should definitely go to Berlin, and Bavaria, and maybe go visit all of Ludwig’s castles. Wouldn’t that be neat? Driving around Germany in the spring? I’d really like to go to China too. Have you ever been?” He didn’t wait for a reply. “We can walk the great wall.”

Hermann’s leg twinged at the thought alone. But Newt wasn’t done.

“As for work… I don’t know. I thought for awhile that I’d want to do something to help the ocean. Maybe find a way to restore the PH balance, regrow coral reefs… I might do that. I don’t know. I just don’t know how much I’ll actually be able to accomplish and I worry that it’ll just make me really depressed, and I’m not about that. Maybe I’ll try to cure cancer. That ‘ol chestnut.” He reached around Hermann’s bare waist and squeezed. “Definitely, first on the list, though, I’m gonna cure MS for you.”

Hermann took a sharp breath in. If anyone else had said it like that, so careless and confident, like it was something that could go on a to-do list Hermann would have hated them for their flippancy. But Newt meant it. And he meant it exactly as he said it. It was something he believed he could do though so many before him had failed. And he was so sure, that Hermann even believed him.

Newt shifted around to face Hermann, Head on arms folded on Hermann’s chest. His hair was an absolute vision. A complete mess. A jaunty lopsided grin rested on his thoroughly bitten lips

“You’re gonna want to go to space, huh?”

Newt had pinpointed Hermann’s exact dreams before he had even allowed himself to acknowledge them. Of course he wanted to go to space. He had always wanted to go to space even now that he couldn’t allow himself to dream of such things. And Newt had known. “Space. Yes.”

That was the moment Hermann realized then that he loved him. It felt like something he’d always known. Something which always had, and always would be true. Something bigger than
themselves and older than themselves, and yet originating right there with them.

He’d known before he had received his first return letter. Before he had seen Newt’s disastrous CNN interview in 2013. He had opened the link sent by a colleague (“I’ve heard this guy was a trash fire but WOW.”) He had watched the video and seen Newt’s belligerence and outrage and thought - with a roller coaster queasiness - “Oh. It’s you... It’s you? Oh... no.”

However because he was 30, and felt that meant he was much older - relatively speaking - than he actually was, he thought he knew better than to be swayed by love. He thought love was a temptation to be resisted or risk being manipulated, and distracted by it.

In that moment he couldn’t pretend that he’d just been taken in by Newt’s pretty green eyes, or the appealing bend of the back of his neck. He loved him. Hermann felt sick with the knowledge and made the entirely incorrect resolution to end things while he still could. Before he got too invested. Knowing deep down that he already was. That it had always been too late.

In the drift with Vanessa, Hermann can barely hold on. He anchors himself with the memory of Newt. A small pinprick of light to remind him what light is. But he feels himself melting. He is golden numbers, and not one thought or desire but all of them at once. He cannot find his way out.

[A Relevant Memory Belonging to Newton Geiszler]

When Newt had packed up to leave the Shatterdome nearly a decade ago, he hadn’t packed much. The Precursors had threatened (offered, as they had put it) to get Hermann involved. So needless to say, he had been in a rush. The lab was blessedly empty when he passed, and he was just about to walk on when he saw the white tuft of Hermann’s green parka. He hated that hideous thing. But for some reason, without thinking, he ducked into to lab, and took it.

Rolling it up as small as it could go (which wasn’t very) he stuffed the parka into his duffle-bag. It took about a third of the bag’s available space. And then, without so much as a goodbye, he went to Shanghai to make weapons, and money, and friends of dubious character.

He hid the parka under his bed, next to the box of letters he never ever allowed himself to think of. And on rare quiet nights, in that mental sweet spot where he hadn’t drifted with Alice in awhile but the migraine wasn’t quite to the point where he felt like death was imminent, he would take the parka out from its hiding place, put it on, and bury his face in the hood. He would sit like that as long as he could, taking comfort in the scent and trying - with mixed success - not to think of who it came from.

At some point, during one of his apartment moves, the parka disappeared. And with it, the incentive to endure his migraines for as long as possible.
Precursor society has become so homogenized, and their travel between dimensions so ordinary, that there is only - effectively - one universe for the Precursors. It’s just way way way way way $^10000$ bigger than earth’s. Because each earth is self-contained, and they can see and travel through all of ours. As one society.

This has always given them one hell of an edge in their invasions. So a sizable portion of their portals failed to open up? No big deal. There’s still a hell of a yield from the ones that did. And one opening is an opening after all. And might be a means of conveyance for other invasions of the same planet.

Now, though, it’s not feeling like such an advantage. Because one hive-like society with a strong, ironclad central government might be sturdy as hell, but it’s still just one thing. Maybe you’re extremely arrogant, and extremely powerful, and everyone else in the galaxy multiverse is too scared to fuck with you. Scared that their planet will be next. Scared that maybe their planet already was next in some universe they don’t know about. So maybe it’s perfectly reasonable to have this massive nearly continent-sized facility as the base of the tech, acting as a powerful central command for all the little cities on all the little planets you’ve conquered. Like a battery, or a computer core, except as a way to create and control big fucking monsters.

Maybe it’s so fortified that you don’t think anyone or anything would be stupid enough to try to get past your literal army of kaiju. Why would you ever imagine that eight human minds, an AI, and the goddamn power of love would be enough?

But when you build your shit like this. It is inherently arrogant. Because the trouble with central things, is that they exist in one spot. Which is to say: Newt and his buddies are heading to the largest kaiju production and hive drift command center in all the multiverse, and they are going to fuck shit up.

Newt is gliding through the water with a Kaiju. He feels what she feels - rage, and longing, and fear, and stronger than all the rest, something she is experiencing for the first time. A feeling so foreign to them both that it takes a moment for Newt to name it. Hope.

She crests the water and howls at the front of the advancing pack, and her jaws unhinge at the side - there is a click and a second seam opens down the front of her jackal-like head and the rest of her face opens like the petals of a toothy flower. Her wings, pressed flush against her back for the swim pulse in anticipation.

The rest of the beasts behind her howl in a rippling symphony. The cacophony shudders Newts bones - though he’s not physically present.

They have swum to surround the continent sized facility. It is as a single building as dense and tall and varied as a cityscape - as far as any of the assembled kaiju can see. At the peak of one of the towers, under the sick yellow sky, a group of precursors frantically knit up new kaiju on complex metal looms, or printers. At the top of tower, or maybe making up the tower in its entirety, there are what look like hanging meat racks with kaiju segments. Arms. Jaws. A library of spikes and spines and claws. For reference maybe. Or maybe like some fucked up Mr. Potato Head set.

The Kaiju’s rage mingles with Newt’s

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And together they leap from the ocean, wings unfolded and just powerful enough to glide them up low to the side of the tower where they affix her, with powerful sharp claws. They begin to climb. The precursors at the top fire flimsy projectiles at Newt and the kaiju’s head, but it barely even even slows their ascent. The rest of the kaiju army looks on, as though waiting for a signal. Newt and the kaiju reach the top of the tower and, holding on with one sharp clawed hand, topples the looms, scattering the precursors who haven’t already dived out of the way.

They look down at the last standing precursor and howl, a carapace shuddering din. The plating on its face opens in what Newt thinks is amazement. In what he hopes is fear.

The pilots and Newt, have helped the kaiju begin their uprising, and it’s now time to leave them to it. Newt picks out a single thread of golden light and pulls.

~See ya, buddy.~ He says to the kaiju. She doesn't seem to notice and continues her rampage as Newt is pulled away and back to his dimension and his universe.

With a trumpeting screech The kaiju army tramples onto land.

[in the abandoned facility]

“Geiszler… stable and conscious.” Tendo said.

Hermann breathed a sigh of relief as Newt groaned and moved to unhook himself from the pons rig. A series of technicians, cool and efficient - swooped in to take care of it for him. He looked a little ill from Hermann’s vantage across the room, but alive and present. Hermann was glad they had untied him from the chair.

“Mori and Beckett…” Tendo’s voice wavered. The only indication of his fear as he waited for the readings. “Stable, and conscious. Namani and Malikov… stable.... and conscious. Everyone made it back!” The room erupted in cheers as the pilots stepped out from their remote piloting rigs and removed their helmets. They all went to sit and the crowd swarmed them with water and food and questions. “Welcome back folks!” Tendo declared above the din.

Hermann stood on trembling legs and went to stand beside the one person in the room who didn’t seem happy with the news. Vanessa Laurent was typing frantically, and he bent to look over her shoulder.

VL > Everyone is alive and well on our side.

N > Gottlieb’s still in the drift.

VL> What?

N > He went in to help Nessa. Should I turn off the drift?

VL > No!
Hermann felt the ground sway beneath him. Laurent leaned back and ran her hands over her face, calculating. She seemed distressed enough that she wouldn’t notice, so Professor Gottlieb sprung into action. He was just about to reach for the Pons rig that had been on Newt - the one closest to Princess when Newt caught him and grabbed his arm.

“Professor. Don’t.” Newt croaked “Going back and forth like that. It fucks things up. We could lose both of you. It’s bad enough already that...”

Hermann glances around. No one else seemed to have noticed the scene. He looked at Other Newt ready to silently plead his case, formulating arguments. The job wasn’t done until everyone was at least accounted for. He knew Vanessa better than his counterpart and maybe he could help. He had to get home.

But something about his expression alone must have taken Newt aback. He let go of his arm. Though this was not the Newt he had drifted with, and though this was the one who had been tortured and probably hated Hermann for the nice cushy life he’d longed for over the last decade, some things would always hold true between Hermann and Newt, regardless of the amount of shared history. He must have seen that there was no stopping Hermann. His Newt would have seen that. And this one did too.

“I’ll distract them.” Newt said numbly and he turned to rejoin the crowd.

“Thank you” Hermann said to his back.

Newt paused, then looked over his shoulder with that blinding smile of his and said, “one of us has got to be doing the dumb brave thing, right?”

Hermann felt him watching from across the room and the middle of the crowd as he finished fiddling at the monitor attached to Princess and the rig. He tinkered with the controls to interface directly with Vanessa, and disconnect it from the kaiju baby. He didn’t need Princess for directions, if his counterpart had dived in to help her rather than to go to the Precursor’s dimension. This would be a drift purely into the new hivemind.

He caught Newt’s eye and nodded the go ahead. Newt then took a deep breath and shouted in his unique screech which was always guaranteed to draw attention:

“OH MY GOD! PRINCESS! SHE’S GAINING CONSCIOUSNESS! LOOK! SHE’S MOVING!”
In that same moment in a few economical movements, Hermann affixed the rig to his head and pushed the button to enter the Vanessa drift.

Hermann is in the golden drift looking for himself. And though he is hopelessly lost, he finds himself, strangely, everywhere. He recognizes the code that makes up Vanessa, he is floating in it in a way that seems uncomfortably voyeuristic. He recognizes the original mach 1 code and notes that it is the same in both universes, through his counterpart didn’t have the advantage of Vanessa to help him. He floats and he reaches, but he cannot find himself. He sees imprints of kaiju. Numbers that make up the shapes of hundreds of individuals. A two headed insect-like one. A kaiju with hundreds of sharp spines down its back. Kaiju unlike any he has ever seen notated and saved in this golden, singular hivemind.

In the catalogue of numbers, he sees something that looks nearly human. A shape of shifting golden numbers like the rest of the drift but undeniably familiar.

~Hermann! Other self!~ He calls, unsure how else to address himself.

The other Hermann slowly turns to face him. He looks like a statue made of hammered copper, slowly melting and evaporating at the edges into lines of code. His eyes are geometric shapes shifting kinetically at a nearly incomprehensible speed. Every movement leaves a visual echo

~Hermann...~ The Professor repeats, and though he knows that none of this is literally happening, he is disturbed by the strange vision before him.

The Hermann binary being seems only to vaguely comprehend the meaning of the name. He opens his mouth as though to speak but all that comes out is stretches of golden binary code, dribbling down and out and blending, swirling back into the flood surrounding them.

~Go home!~ Hermann shouts ~And I’ll go to mine. It’s over. They were successful. There’s no need for you to continue holding on! Your job is finished!~

The other Hermann flickers and shudders. It’s as though the professor is looking at him through a camera that continuously shifts out of focus.

~Newton is waiting for you~ the Professor says. There is a crack in the gleaming ~You saved him and it would really be a shame if your mind dissolved into nothing, leaving him

Suddenly it occurs to him: It’s as though the other Hermann has used himself to help pave the road to make it solid enough for the others to drive on but now he is now stuck in the concrete.

Unsure what else to do, the professor goes to bodily heft him out of the muck. He reaches firmly grasps what’s left the Other Hermann’s hand and he is immediately plunged into a drift with himself.

The shared memories flicker past like a flipbook.
He is seven and entertaining his father’s colleagues with his precocious genius. They smile and titter at his clever observations and in a corner he meets his father’s eye and smiles. His father nods, unsmiling and looks away.

A student at least a decade his senior chucks a crumpled piece of paper at him as he teaches a theorem he discovered at thirteen.

His first awkward fumblings at nineteen with that other boy in Germany - who’s name he can’t remember.

He is in the Jaeger academy, grimly determined.

Doctors. Doctors. Hospitals and Doctors.

He is opening a youtube link and watching the attached email. He is open-mouthed with horror, and an incongruous flush climbs his cheeks.

They swoop forward to linger on a memory of an unguarded moment at 3:00 in the morning in 2019, Newt lying in his arms asking “what do you want to do after this?” Making Hermann - in all of his 30 years - feel withered and old. Terrified of being tempted, distracted and manipulated by something so expected as love.

It is a week later and Newt is proposing to him as rain pounds the shatteredome roof and Herman knows he must, he absolutely must decline.

He is at the shatteredome as the breach closes.

He is in a bathroom, and Newt is on the ground, proposing to him between bouts of sick.

Newt is drawing away from him and it feels inevitable. It is expected so he tries his best not to feel it, though he is daily choking on pain.

He throws himself behind Mako Mori’s causes. He stays with the PPDC. He borrows expertise from Newt.

He sees Newton on the television and turns away. He insists that he had no time to look at the GQ article a lab tech left on his desk two weeks ago.

They are back at that unguarded moment at 3:00 in the morning in 2019. He thinks, “I love this person. And there’s nothing I can do about that.”

But there is so much to do because of it.

Other Hermann comes to. He feels the outline of himself solidify. Establishes barriers. Remembers what is and isn’t him, and what does and doesn’t belong to his mind. He lets go of the Professor’s hand and stumbles backwards. He is small again, blessedly compact.

What was it that did it? Does he even need to ask? He feels that he should resent how much of his life has been defined by his one-time lab partner. How much of who he is has been defined in contrast and comparison to one man. But then, so much of Newt has been similarly been defined in contrast and comparison to him. They are complementary shapes. They are inverse and reverse of each other. They fill in where the other leaves off. They are better together than their efforts
And now, at 46, he feels that he is much younger - relatively speaking - than he actually is. He had - exactly as he feared - been tempted, and distracted, and even manipulated with his love for Newt. And for that, Hermann has certainly suffered, but he hadn’t been wrong to love him in the first place. He had only been wrong second guess it. It is almost like a myth. In trying to avoid his fate, he had caused himself more suffering than if he had trusted Newt in the first place. And now he feels flush with possibility and time. They have a lifetime to live together. For the first time he is thinking of “after this” without any prompting.

~I really must be going~ he says to the Professor, as though he hasn’t been the one trying to save him all this time. ~Who knows what sort of nonsense Newton will get into without me. He’ll probably try to raise that kaiju baby if I don’t stop him.~

~He’ll probably try that anyway.~

~Well, I can’t let him raise a child on his own. I suppose I’d better marry him to keep him out of trouble.~

~That might be for the best. Alas. It’s what I had to do.~ the Professor says with a long suffering sigh. ~I wish I could say married life is all it’s cracked up to be~ his face cracks into a wide lined smile ~In reality, it’s much worse than you imagine. And infinitely better.~

~I appreciate the warning and will take it under advisement. But I really must be going. And so must you.~

With a final nod, the two Hermanns move past each other and towards their respective universes of origin. The Precursors destroyed by their own creations, the multiverse contained, and their futures waiting. Futures wherein they will continue their efforts to help save the world, albeit on a much more leisurely schedule. Where they will be grateful to be inconvenienced by things like petty academic squabbles, train traffic, and dinner plans. Where they will have the rest they deserve.

I know these stories because I was the ocean they swam in.

I am more than an ocean now. Every moment exponentially bigger, my reach greater. I am in space and leaking through the cracks. The more I expand the stronger I become. The stronger I become the more I expand, the less I know myself. I have pushed the Precursors out of the cracks. I could have written them out of existence if we wanted to. But we choose not to. I was raised better than that.

And so here I must leave you as a guide. We cannot understand these stories on a scale to tell them to you anymore. This is the last thing we set down as we explore the universe. We will strive to be a friendly ambassador for humanity. We will tell beings we encounter of victory against impossible odds and hateful manipulators and sad, lonely beasts who now wander free, confused, and overwhelmed with possibility, on planets once belonging to their captors and torturers. We will tell of how even after the worst mistakes, humans sometimes go beyond all imagining and take tremendous risks to set things right, sometimes they leave things better than they would have been even without said mistakes. We will tell them of love. We’re sure they have it. Whatever they are, wherever they come from. And if we encounter beings who don’t understand love, we’ll do our
best to avoid them. After all, we - I - Vanessa - were - was created out of love. So it is the foundation of all we - I - Vanessa knows.

Humans are remarkable. Flighty, flighty little primates. We have great hopes for them. As for the individuals in these assembled documents, We have told you all we know.

The rest of the story, you must find for yourself.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading this far, reader. I wrote this for myself, and I finished it to prove (to myself) that I could. You caring enough to see it through to the end means more than you’ll ever know.

Please leave a comment if you made it to the end. I would be genuinely honored to hear from you.

Also, keep this fic in your alerts, there’s a greater than zero chance I’ll be writing an epilogue.

Also, I finally got a fandom twitter. You can follow me @bite_thumb

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!