Ivy Growing Downwards

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Ivy Growing Downwards

by singtome

Summary

“You can go if you want to,” Thomas says, squinting against the sun and leaning toward Newt. The light pales the colour of his eyes, reminding Newt of uncut jewels; sharp and striking and beautiful in their raw imperfection. His heart stutters, a dreadful pull of longing he hasn’t felt for a very long time.

(Or: No one ever tells you that when the world is ending, it happens in slow motion.)

Notes

so. flower shop au's, huh? this happens to be one of them.

what started out as a fairly innocent idea of "hey you know what would be cute? a flower shop au" somehow morphed into this, a 65k long journey where I lost myself in the story and characters and the world building and, in short, had no idea what I was getting myself into.

anyway, I hope you enjoy this! and remember, at the end of the day, it's still a flower shop au.

NOTE: I've gotten a startling amount of comments and questions over the past few months about certain aspects of this fic so I just wanted to clear a couple things up
Disclaimer: *Most of the botanical elements of this fic are made up!* Some plants mentioned are real poisonous plants that exist in nature that I've discovered through research, but, overall, the majority mentioned in this fic are entirely fictional, combined, or exaggerated to seem deadlier than they are. This story takes place in a world where plants are far more intelligent and, well, *sentient* than any plant that exists in reality.

I am not a botanist; I’ve never studied botany in my life and, while we’re here, I failed high school biology and dropped the class because I didn’t find it interesting at all. Guess which subject I sucked at the most at? That’s right: *plants*.

Also, I have never been to Manhattan.

So yes. To conclude: nothing is real, I’ve lied to you all and take this with a grain of salt, and just know that I am an australian woman who likes weird shit and fanfic tropes and had an epiphany at 1 a.m. and decided to combine the two.

Since this fic has been up there have been some truely lovely edits made for it!! First is [this fab graphic](#) and the other a super cool [gif edit](#). While you're here, you should totally go follow both these people for top notch tmr content.
Chapter 1

And we danced, on the brink of an unknown future, to an echo from a vanished past.

- John Wyndham, *The Day Of The Triffids*

The bell signalling the front door has opened chirps thrice consecutively, and again when whoever has entered closes it promptly behind them, eager to escape the unfriendly bites of autumn wind. Newt can relate. The best thing about being stuck inside the shop all day is the almost blanketed warmth, though he could do without the greenhouse heat that curls his hair and stabs at his brow. Casually, almost too-slow footsteps tap against the polished concrete as the customer approaches, and Newt barely – albeit, at all – spares a single glance up as he recites, “Morning. Welcome to The Glade, what can I do for you today?” and trims more leaves off his althea, plucking the petals and allowing them to titter down into the ceramic bowl.

The customer waits until they are right up to the counter before attempting to speak. His voice comes out first as an embarrassing croak, and awkwardly clearing it, gives it another go, “I, uh. I found your website online and I know it’s might be a long shot, but, um…”

Trimming the final leaf Newt hazards a look up. The customer, after noticing that he has, now, gained full attention, looks elsewhere, his cheeks flushed from the cold and fists stuffed into his long brown trench coat. He looks everywhere but directly at Newt, with that air of nervousness he is used to seeing on new customers. He bites back a smirk and slips into Customer Service Professional Mode #1.

“You’re looking for something in particular?” He asks, “If you know the name I can point you in the right direction, or if you like I can show you the catalogue and you can scroll through. If it’s recommendations you want I can help with that, too.”

The customer blanches. “No, no, it’s um. I’m looking for a violaceous hedera?”

Newt raises an impressed eyebrow and leans back on the counter. “Scientific name,” he says, “Cool. Most people just waltz in and ask for some devil’s ivy, but I appreciate the extra effort.”

The customer blinks, the compliment quite obviously registering strangely in his brain. Newt hasn’t dealt with any hedera sales in a while, and this most definitely will be a nice change from the simple digitalis.

“We have those, yeah,” Newt supplies upon realising he never confirmed nor denied this. “There are some papers that’ll have to be filled out first, though. Standard protocol.”

He doesn’t look surprised, and Newt ducks behind the counter to search for the correct papers and a pen. He eventually finds them three slots left to where they’re supposed to sit – thank you Minho – and all the pens – the new ones, the ones he’d *just replaced* – are chewed. He suppresses a sigh and straightens his back.

“Well alright. First off is simple enough; can I have your name?”

“Thomas.”
Newt scribbles it down in the appropriate box. “Last name?” Thomas supplies it, as well as his age (24, an I.D. is presented and accepted), email, residential address and best contact number. Newt jots this all down. “Next I need to know if the intent of purchase is for personal use.”

“Uh,” Thomas frowns, unsure, “What does that mean, exactly?”

Newt lets the pen tap against the table and meets Thomas’s eye. This time he doesn’t look away, “It means are you physically going to be planting the hedera or are you giving it to someone else to do?”

“Oh,” Thomas chews his lip, “No, I’ll be planting it.”

Newt nods, checking a box and moving on. Honestly, the paperwork is a hassle, but necessary. “Will this be for external or internal use? If so, would you be needing a pot?” Newt looks up before he can answer, “I’d recommend a pot, as the growth is easier to control that way, and it’s no extra charge.”

Thomas nods. “Internal. So, yeah, I’d need a pot anyway, but thanks for that info.” He smiles kindly, eyes crinkling at the corners. Newt smiles back a moment later before returning to the papers, checking two more boxes.

“Will you be needing more indicators?” Newt asks, “We include four for the price of three with the package, but if you wanted any more they’re $90 each. They’re good to have for peace of mind, but in the end, it’s up to you.”

“Oh, no that should be more than enough,” Thomas says. Newt nods and jots it down. Before he can move to the next section, Thomas pipes in, “Do you get a lot of these sales?”

Newt looks up, surprised. “Actually, you’re the first in a while. The last was, I think, January?”

Thomas raises a smooth eyebrow. In all the years that Newt has worked here, he’s learnt that all the customers who come in to purchase a hedera tend to be of a certain class. It’s easy enough to spot them out; nice clothes, look like they drive cars which cost more than Newt’s apartment. Thomas fits the bill well enough, though his hair looks like it’s missed one or two trims, face a little too pale with a distinguishable restless gleam in his eye. While his hands are buried deep into his pockets, Newt could hazard a guess and say the man’s nails were probably bitten to the cuticle.

“Wow. Sorry for breaking the streak.”

Newt scoffs, “Nah, mate, I love filling out these forms. Felt like a part of me was missing until now.”

This makes Thomas snort, and Newt gives himself a metaphorical pat on the back for at least making him loosen up the smallest bit. With a start he realise that Thomas is, in fact, still standing, and moves to grab a spare stool from the side, chattering, “Why don’t you sit? This is going to take a little while, anyway. Would you like some water?”

Thomas thanks Newt for the seat and graciously denies the drink offer. Newt returns to the papers, “Will the root be at your house or someone else’s?”

“Mine.”

Newt pauses before checking this next box, skipping section 6 and 7. He quickly jots down Thomas’s address and clears his throat before reciting, “I’m legally obligated to tell you that the Bliss is required. The hedera grows fast so two normal doses in an hour before and another during
should be enough to make everything run as smooth as possible. We can’t supply those, unfortunately, you’ll still have to go through a doctor.” He stops and looks at Thomas, who has now grown quite pale, and levels him with a solemn stare, “I’m not obligated to tell you that there are much faster and less sadistic ways to kill yourself, but I am.”

The violaceous hedera is, by poetic standards, quite a beautiful death. The Glade – Newt, in particular – has dealt with these cases more times than he would ever like.

Thomas nearly falls out of his chair. “No, no!” he cries, “It’s not for me, I’m not going to – It’s –” He’s biting his lip now, as if not sure whether to admit this or not.

Newt puts the pen down, the feeling in the pit of his stomach just that slightest bit too strong for the smile he offers Thomas to really reach his eyes. “It’s alright,” he says, “this part is all completely confidential. You don’t have to give me this information if you don’t want to. And also,” he says, “this hasn’t been illegal for decades, so you’re fine.”

Thomas seems to slump in his seat. “I know. It still is in some places.”

Newt nods and picks his pen up again, checking two boxes, sighing, and flipping the page, “Not here. Cross into Upper New York and you’ll be arrested on sight, yeah. Have you lived here long?”

“A few years.”

“Hm. Which direction will the hedera be traveling?” He takes him through the rest of the form, and in due time they’re done, both sighing in relief and slumping back.

“Alright,” Newt grumbles, as he takes the papers and stamps them, and encloses them in a neat little envelope. He doesn’t miss the dread on Thomas’s tired face when he pulls out another sheet, single this time, and can’t seem to bite down the titter of laughter that crawls up his throat, “Don’t worry, you just need to sign this. It confirms that all the information you’ve given me today is correct.”

He slides the paper across the grey marble counter to Thomas, who studies it thoroughly. Giving Thomas a moment to read it all the way through, he digs out a specific pen and hands that over, also. Thomas looks up, incredulous, “That’s it?” he asks.

Newt looks at him, “We stopped the blood oaths about thirty-odd years ago, but if you really want to …”

Eyebrow raising, he turns to stare at Newt and grins. “I think I’m good. So I just sign?”

“You just sign. That you agree to everything you’ve told me today, and the ending price.”

He picks up the pen. “But,” he starts, “I could be lying.”

Newt points forward, “You see that metal bit on the base? It’s a mini lie detector. We’ll know if you’re lying.”

Thomas frowns, staring at the pen in amazement, “Really?”

“No, Thomas.” Newt smirks when the customer’s eyes narrow, “I trust you. Sign the paper.”

He doesn’t mention that punishment for supplying false information, in a hedera case, is fifty to sixty years imprisonment, because everyone knows that.
Thomas signs the paper.

Newt takes Thomas round back to the greenhouse, taking a moment to make sure both their gloves and masks are securely in place. With a quick swipe of his key-card the door shifts open with a low hiss. Regardless of the mask, Thomas’s gasp is still plainly audible. Newt watches his eyes widen in awe, or horror, or both.

The greenhouse houses many high-level plants and well as low, the hedera being only one of them. Black lotuses bloom malevolently across rocks and moss lining a natural stream that runs through the middle of the greenhouse, while bleeding hearts and bloody lavenders peek out from the walls, up and over, creating quite a beautiful canopy of pink and blue, their flowers blooming and hanging downward like crystals.

The most prominent plant in the room sits almost innocently against the far wall.

The hedera instils a sense of serene calm in a way that Newt has never been able to discern from her long, twisting green vines and the dark purple petals of the belladonna flower. The ivy reminds him of a villain in a movie – slow and deadly wins the race.

He tells Thomas to stick close to him and not touch anything. He does, close enough that Newt can smell his nervous perspiration and simple brand name deodorant that smells more like hand wash, but he doesn’t mind all too much.

“Here she is,” Newt announces once they are standing within feet of the hedera, making sure to remain behind the red line. “In all her glory.” Thomas is staring at the metal plate at the root of the plant and says, “My friend named her Jasmine just to be ironic, but I don’t think she likes it too much.”

He catches Thomas pulling at his gloves. “It’s …” he begins.

“Amazing? Terrifying? Unnatural?” Newt supplies some of the many adjectives that have been used to describe Jasmine in the past.

“Like a black hole,” is what Thomas says in the end. Newt looks over at him, startled, “There’s just this emptiness and – and this peace I can’t describe.”

“You’ve seen a black hole, have you?”

Thomas’s eyes turn the colour of sunlight in the greenhouse, pupils shrunk to pins in the harsh light. It catches on his features and accentuates the broken skin at his lips; the clear mask drawing further attention to them, the redness under his eyes and the irritated flush along his jaw one gets when shaving too fast.

Thomas scoffs, shaking his head, “No, but I like to imagine it’s what it’s like.”

Newt looks away when a cloud dims the room. “I understand completely,” he murmurs. Thomas follows him a short distance to the right where all the seedlings and other gardening essentials are kept. He grabs a box off the shelf and begins loading. The box is filled to the brim by the time he gets to the seedling, which he hands to Thomas directly.

“That’s yours,” he says, Thomas holding the packet like it’s radioactive. “One seed only. Plant it in
the middle and do not water it more than you have to. I’ll be giving you a bottle with the exact amount. That’s all you need.”

Thomas meets his eyes. His mask fogs up with breath. “What happens if you over water it –?”

Newt levels him with a deadpan stare, “Don’t.”

With everything finally gathered Thomas follows Newt back to the front counter, patiently waiting as Newt adjusts the price to add a few objects. Thomas, again, doesn’t even blink as he hands over his credit card. Newt watches the pixels spin on the screen, indicating that the transaction is processing, and Thomas meets his eyes.

“How long have you been working here?” he asks.

Newt shifts his balance onto his good leg and answers truthfully, “I actually bought this place three years ago.”

Thomas’s eyebrows raise, impressed. “For real? Shit, man.”

Newt smirks, “It’s been pretty good.” He shifts again. He’s been standing too long; it always takes a while to gather everything, “I get to sign my own paychecks.”

Thomas smirks at that. “Sounds liberating.”

“Oh, it is. I dock Minho’s pay five cents every time he annoys me.”

Thomas’s smirk turns into a surprised laugh. The processor beeps indicating that the transaction has gone through. Neither of them pay it any mind. Thomas supplies, “Yeah, I’ve been in the same place for about … Damn, five years I think.”

“What? Supposing a sigh, Newt slides the machine back.

“Do you enjoy it?” Thomas shrugs, “Sure. Pays well, so there’s that. My grandfather actually set me up with it …”

“You’re close with your family?” The transactions through, all the papers are signed, Newt can drop the ball now. But he’s stalling and he knows it.

“Um, well, it’s just me and gramps.”

Newt suppresses a wince. “Oh. Yeah, it’s uh. Just my sister and I, plus some distant relatives spread out across London and Russia whom we’ve never met. So really it’s just my sister.” Before he can ask any more stupid questions and embarrass himself and/or waste any more of Thomas’ time, Newt asks, “Did you need help getting everything to your car?” and tries not to let his excitement show through when Thomas answers yes, with grateful eyes.

They load the car easy enough (a flatbed truck of all things, not some fancy Italian sports car like Newt’s used to) and afterwards Thomas lingers at the foot of the truck, his keys held in his hand, not making a move to lock it up after Newt jumps down. Newt shoves cold hands into deep, warm pockets and tries not to shiver. The Customer Service Professional mask he wears nine-to-five is slipping.

And then Thomas holds his palm out and says, “Thanks for all your help, man.”

Newt, trying not to appear too startled and not quite sure if he succeeds or not – Thomas gives no indication either way – places his hand in Thomas’, “My pleasure.” Thomas’ fingers are
surprisingly warm, a stark contrast to Newt’s perpetually frosty ones. The sunlight dims again, and neither of them moves until a raindrop lands with a splash on their joint hands.

Thomas swears, squinting at the sky, “I should let you get back inside. Thanks again ... Uh. I never got your name.” He says, as if embarrassed.

Newt raises an eyebrow – *Oh right* – and is sure not to blurt out his first name this time like a fucking idiot, “Newt.”

Thomas smiles, “Newt.”

Before he can talk himself out of it, Newt tells him, “Let me give you my number. If you have any questions you can call me,” and tries not to sound like he’s asking.

Thomas takes his number and sternly orders him back inside before the rain really starts up. Newt jogs back to the store. The distance between them is close enough for him to catch Thomas’s eye in the mirror as he drives away, rain splatters like paint marks on the tarmac left in his wake.

Newt is closing the store, fist gripping his coat tight at his throat as the other fumbles with the keys, fingers stiff and clumsy, almost a week later when he finally hears back from Thomas. The shrill ring of his phone grits his teeth and bitterly allows it to ring out as he finally sets the correct keys in the correct locks, eyes straining against the fog that wrapped the city up like a winter jacket filled with pollen that makes Newt sniffle. He’d only set off toward his car when the beeping ringtone he really ought to change sounds again, loud and piercing in the silence and, with an annoyed groan, Newt answers curtly, “Yes?”

“Uh, hey,” spoke a warmly familiar voice on the other end, laced with awkward hesitation, no doubt at Newt’s tone. “It’s Thomas. Sorry if I caught you at a bad time, I can call back –”

“Hey, Thomas,” Newt mumbles, digging for his car keys, pretending his heartbeat didn’t just fluctuate, “What’s up?”

“Not much. I mean – I would have called the store but I didn’t know if you’d still be open or if I’d missed you, and since you gave me your number I figured –”

“I actually just locked up, so you’re right on time.” Newt supplied, breaking the rambling.

“Oh! Great …” he still seemed to be hesitating, a faint crackle of static muttered over the line, and Newt gently prompts him to continue, unlocking his car and sliding inside, wasting no time to crank the heater. Thomas says, “Listen, I’ve done something really stupid and misplaced one of the indicators you gave me. I don’t know if it fell out while I was driving home, or what, but I can’t for the life of me –”

This information jolts Newt’s heart rate up a couple decimals, and he cuts in, a little hysterically, “Wait. You can’t find it? You haven’t planted the seed yet, have you?”

“What? No, God no! I made sure I had everything I needed before I even began, and since I didn’t, well … Sorry, I should have lead with that.”

Newt sighs and slumps back against the seat, chest hammering. “Yeah, you should have. Don’t do that to me …”
Thomas continues, “I’ve looked everywhere and it’s gone. So I was wondering if you had any spare?”

As luck, that crazy thing, would have it, Newt does. Glancing upward into the rear-view mirror Newt’s eye falls upon the light soft orange glow of the street light off the spare indicators, all six of them that he’d forgotten to carry inside all day.

“I might,” Newt says.

“Yeah? That’s great, could pick it up tomorrow?”

“You could. Or,” Newt begins, rubbing his eyes tiredly.

“Or?” Thomas prompts.

“I’m starving and don’t really feel like cooking, and I know this place nearby. You can meet me there if you want,” he finishes, with a mental kick to the shin.

Thomas sounds surprised on the other end. Surprised, not completely creeped out, which Newt takes as a good sign. “Yeah, okay,” he says, “We can do that. Where is it?” Newt gives him the address and tells him he’ll see him in twenty before hanging up. Newt closes his eyes and allows the filtered heat that probably isn’t any good for his allergies to warm his chilled body. He needs a bath. Not the one he has, but one of those deep soaker ones he can fall asleep in and hopefully not drown out of sheer idiocy.

With a wistful sigh, Newt backs out of the car park.

He spots Thomas by a window booth when he arrives, looking exhausted and frowning at the menu as if he couldn’t understand a word of it. Newt smirks to himself and stifles it upon entry, shrugging off his heavy coat and draping it off the back of the bench Thomas is seated before, who, still perplexed, does not look up until Newt is forced to clear his throat and awkwardly announce his presence.

Thomas, finally, glances up and blinks at Newt once, twice before taking in his features, eyes widening comically. “Hey! Sorry, I didn’t see you come in.”

Newt shakes his head and sits. He asks, “You alright?”

“Hm? Yeah, just tired.” That’s evident, Newt observes, by the dark circles and bitten lips which he chooses not to comment on. “Thanks for meeting me.”

Newt slides the menu toward himself since it’s clearly useless in Thomas’ hands. The shop plays soft house music over the speaker right above their heads, and the little bougainvillea tilts away from it in obvious distaste. Newt almost suggests they turn the volume up. “Technically I asked you here,” Newt points out.

Thomas taps his fingers against the wood of the table, “True. But I made you drag products here when you’re off the clock.”

“First off,” Newt begins, glancing at the menu he knows back to back, “You didn’t make me, Tommy, I wanted to. And second I had them handy, so no big deal.”
“You wanted to?”

Newt raises the menu a little higher, “What’d you want to get?” he mumbles.

“You pick.” Thomas says, “Do you come to eat here a lot?”

Newt returns the menu to its stand and waves Ben down from where he loiters on the other side of the room, chatting up a customer. “Often enough. I know the people who work here.”

“Oh, cool. Do you get discounts?” His voice takes on a humorous lilt.

Ben still hasn’t noticed his waving and Newt rolls his eyes. “Not as much as I should, the bastards. Benjamin!” Ben finally jumps and snaps to attention, but the look on his face is akin more to annoyance than embarrassment. He smiles brightly to the girl he’d been speaking too and promptly shuffles across the room.

Pen and notepad in hand, Ben deadpans, “What do you want?”

Newt snorts, “Nice to see you, too. Just the usual.”

Ben nods and scribbles onto his pad. Then he sees Thomas and it’s like someone’s flipped a switch, and Newt mentally braces himself for the next thirty seconds to one minute, depending on how fast he can get Ben to piss off. “Who’s this?” He asks Newt, though his usual heart-stopping grin is poised in Thomas’ direction.

Newt suppresses a groan. “This is Thomas. He’s a client –” he adds, with purpose “– so hurry up or I’ll take him to Harriet’s.”

“Blasphemy. What’ll you be having?” Ben continues in that sugary sweet tone that makes Newt want to throw up.

“Uh …” Thomas looks between Newt and Ben in a sort of panicked disposition, “I’ll get the same.”

“Sure thing,” Ben hatches two quick marks on his pad, “Two spaghettis and root beers coming up. So how long have you two –”

“Ben,” Newt actually groans this time, pointing his direction to the little pink flower curling itself around Thomas’ index finger. “Tell Gally one of the indicators is on standby.”

Thomas – apparently just becoming aware – jerks back from its delicate grasp. “Shit!” Ben hisses and scampers off immediately, the two-way doors to the back room flapping loudly in his wake.

There is silence for a moment or two before the distinct buzz of an indicator powering up rattles the leaves above their heads. The bougainvillea’s shake a moment before evening out in pulsating waves around the store. Newt wonders if anyone even noticed. They’re lucky they have him.

“Sorry about him,” Newt breaks in, clearing his throat.

“Huh?” Thomas blinks at Newt, turning from where he’d been observing the flowers. “Oh, right. No, it’s cool.”

Newt can’t help a laugh bubbling up his chest, “Okay seriously, man, get some rest. When was the last time you slept?”

Thomas narrows his eyes and thinks, truly, honest to god, thinks about it, “Yesterday morning, I
“You think?”

“Anyway, spaghetti and root beer? Isn’t that kind of cliché?”

“If you don’t like it then feel free to bugger off. You’re the one who told me to order for you.”

“Yeah, because I thought you’d pick something interesting,” Thomas says, the corner of his lip twitching upwards.

“I’ll have you know they serve the best damn spaghetti and meatballs this side of Manhattan.”

Thomas’ eyes widen in mock surprise, “Really? Might just have to tell Ben you said that.”

“Don’t you dare.”

“What time did you clock out yesterday?” Minho calls to Newt from across the room, where he is frowning at a tablet. Newt sighs and swings into the room, the heavy box at his hip thrown on to the counter with much less gentle than it probably deserved. Minho is no doubt confused over the multiple timestamps from when Newt first closed the store, to when he returned to deliver all the fertilisers so he wouldn’t have to do it in the morning and avoid everything that is currently happening. Minho, of course, does not miss a beat.

“Normal time. I forgot my wallet. Had to come back. Don’t you have things to unpack?” Newt snipes, retrieving a box knife from under the counter.

Minho barely spares him a glance. “But you came back twice?”

Newt inwardly groans. That would be to replace the one indicator they were short, having given one to an appreciative Thomas, eyes bright and cheeks flushed when he hugged Newt, briefly, on impulse. “Yeah, I forgot my dick, too. Minho,” he gestures pointedly to the stack of boxes as tall as his friend himself, “the deliveries, please.”

Minho rolls his eyes and drops the tablet back on the bench. “Yeah, weirdo, right away. So what’d you do last night after your various illicit rendezvous with the back room? Anything interesting or just home with the cat?”

“I don’t have a cat,” Newt frowns.

Minho grins before taking the knife off Newt and facing the stack of boxes like a rock climber faces a mountain, “Yeah, I know, but you should get one. Could be good for you. Or a boyfriend, might be better.”

Newt groans, hands digging in foam noodles. “Minho.”

“Or you know, whatever.”

“Minho.”

Minho clicks his tongue and gently coaxes a box onto his shoulder, depositing it beside the tablet
on the bench. “Boxes, uh huh,” he says.

It’s times like this that Newt regrets never hiring more staff, especially ones that he hasn’t known since college. It would save him a fuckton of grief. But then he’d have to pay them properly and, well. Minho is financially good to him. Sometimes, when things are tight, he accepts payment entirely of doughnuts and Gally’s best Focaccia Bread.

All the noodles out of the way, Newt is left to stare down at the most recent order. Minho peers over at Newt’s noise of confusion and quacks a laugh of delight at the sight of them. “Oh yeah! Forgot to tell you about those.”

Minho explains as Newt flips through one of the square colouring books ornamentally decorated in intricate designs of various plants and flowers they stock throughout the store, titled *Botanicals* in metallic gold lettering. Newt’s eye catches on a page where a number of Venus fly traps are protruding out from a brick wall. “Cute,” he says, flipping to the back where an elegantly drawn *B* sits.

“Brenda wants us to display them around the store for the exhibition. I already said yes, hope you don’t mind.” His tone implies that if Newt did, in fact, mind, then he should just hurry up and get over it.

Newt shakes his head and unloads the rest of the books, already clearing counter space for them, “It’s fine.”

Minho snaps his fingers, “Oh, hey, speaking of which. Did you know Teresa called me three times this morning?” When Newt didn’t immediately respond with whatever reaction Minho was hoping for, he turned toward him and stressed, “*Called me,* Newt. *Three times.* I hadn’t even put pants on yet. She’s stressing out. Wants to know if the flowers are ready yet.”

Newt focuses on displaying the books in a delicate helix pattern, complete with Brenda’s business cards, and replies, “Tell her if they wanted everything done fast then Brenda should have allowed for more time before organising an entire art exhibit around the bloody colour pink. It takes a while.”

Minho snorts and moves back to the boxes, “You can tell her that. I said if she had any more concerns she could go to you personally.”

Newt hadn’t expected anything different.

“I did go to dinner yesterday,” Newt admits as they’re packing up for the afternoon. Minho blinks in bored interest. He figures he may as well tell Minho himself before he hears some version of the story from Ben and the entire thing gets blown out of proportion. “With a client,” he stresses *client*, “who wanted more information out his order.”

Minho lifts an eyebrow and immediately shines ten shades brighter, leaving Newt to wonder why he even talks at all.

“Enough to go to dinner?”

Newt shrugs his jacket on and reaches for his keys. “Yes. You know the recent hedera order?”
This gives Minho pause. “Well. Okay. But still.” They have the shop all locked up snug and tight before Minho asks, “So, was he attractive?”

Newt nearly drops his keys. “I didn’t really notice.”

“Hm, yeah, Ben said he wasn’t.”

“Ben’s an idiot,” Newt shoots back, a bit too quick. He realises the trap a second too late.

Minho lights up like a Christmas tree. “So you did notice?” He asks excitedly. Above, a vine dips fast toward them and for a moment Newt’s heart kicks up a few beats, panicked that somewhere an indicator’s broken down, but then the vine settles and reduces itself to swaying gently in the wind around the long neck of the d in Glade.

“Listen,” Newt begins once his chest stops hammering, “First off, it’s nothing. Second, it’s just work, so relax. Third,” he turns on Minho, frowning, “When the fuck did Ben tell you anything about this?”

“I may have stopped by there on the walk here this mornin,” Minho replies – casually, as if that weren’t something he does every morning anyway and Newt is the idiot – while examining his nails. Newt groans and stalks off. Minho catches him halfway to the car. “Seriously though, man, you should invite him to Mania.”

Newt turns to stare at Minho so fast he nearly trips, “Why would I do that?”

His friend shrugs, “Why not? From what I heard you two hit it off.”

Newt yanks open his car door with more force than necessary, seriously debating whether he’d be able to use the voodoo spells his grandmother used to teach him on Ben. “I can’t just invite him to the bloody exhibit.”

“Sure you can.”

“Sure I – No, Minho. Thomas is a client, it’d be unprofessional.”

Minho says nothing about the first name and raises a sceptical eyebrow, “What? After he invited you to dinner?”

Newt’s hesitation must speak louder than words, as Minho’s sounds positively delighted when he says, “Oh well, dude, that ship’s fuckin’ sailed then. You can go for gold.”

Newt settles into the driver’s seat and slams the door. A few moments later Minho joins him in the passenger’s side. “No, look. I’m probably never even going to see him again. Get out of my car,” he adds crossly.

Minho digs his phone out of his pocket and settles, “Okay fine. But if you do see him again, you have to ask him. Deal?”

Newt sighs and, hating himself, says, “Deal. Now out.”

“Could you drive me home?”

“No. Leave.”

Minho promises to bring Newt any boring, non-sugary coffees anytime he wants for two weeks, and Newt begrudgingly drives him home.
Newt’s phone chimes early the following week. Blinking hair and sleep from his eyes, Newt rolls less than gracefully toward the general direction of his bedside table for his phone. He stares, eyes blurry and unfocused, at a message from Ben.

Benjamin

_he looks lonely_

This is followed by an obnoxious string of emoji’s and an image that embarrassingly stutters Newt’s heart – Thomas, slouched in a booth by a window in Gally’s café, idly stirring his coffee and leaning on his palm, the early morning sun bathing him in soft yellow. Pink vines curl inward above his head.

Newt decides he hates everyone.

As the customer busies himself with ignoring the many warning signs in the store and stands too close to a bouquet of weeping widows, Newt idly allows his pen to tap against the counter like a metronome and considers, not briefly, how he could casually ask Thomas to attend an art exhibit with him. It’s a tough cookie to crack, but Newt loves nothing but a challenge. Minho would tell him that it isn’t difficult at all, because Minho was obviously raised in the Stone Age and Newt has things like standards and morals, ones that prevent him from calling up a client he met with once for business purposes and ask him out.

Which. Isn’t what he’s doing, not exactly. Out: meaning outside, not out. To an event, not out. If he tells himself this enough he might even start to believe it. Distantly he can almost hear Minho laughing at him.

(“It’s because you’re so damn repressed,” Minho stated while indolently trimming a sweet bell one day, waving the trimmers about in a way which made Newt anxious, “When was the last time you had a date?”

That, Newt purposely did not answer.)

His thoughts are interrupted by the customer clearing his throat, and Newt starts, rudely reminded he has a job, and immediately slips on his customer-service-smile. The man makes off with his weeping widows, the yellow pops among the black make for a startling contrast.

“For my girlfriend,” he remarks with a grin Newt supposes is meant to resemble a mutual understanding that Newt does not possess. He barely smothered the urge to roll his eyes, politely reminding the man to keep Emergency on speed dial before he is left alone again, the shop door slamming shut with a sweet little chime.

He could just text him. Or – less or more creepy depending on your perspective – stop by the café
and “bump into” Thomas because, as Ben has taken to reminding Newt every single day like clockwork, he spends most of his mornings there.

(The most recent depicted Thomas scribbling on a napkin with a soft smile on his face while talking into his phone, accompanied with the caption ‘Seriously, bro, if you don’t make a move soon I will. He obviously likes blondes so I reason I’ve got a pretty good chance. Tick fucking tock.’)

Newt takes a deep breath and massages his temples, dreaming of a simpler time.

A distraction, however, is blissfully given when Teresa, as per Minho’s request, redirects all her calls to Newt himself. Newt tries his best to reassure her when her calls become steadily more panicked and stressed as the days leading up to Mania fly off the calendar, and swallows down telling her that if they wanted a smoother ride they should have chosen a less demanding theme. He manages to suppress the urge on the grounds that first, he understands what it’s like to be a manager under constant stress and drowning in deadlines, and the second being Teresa would probably march all the way over to The Glade and personally rip Newt a new one. So he keeps his mouth shut and buckles down.

Dying each and every flower pink is not an easy task, especially the black lotus’s and weeping widows, which Brenda has obviously chosen to centre her exhibit around. By the time he’s finished with the second to last batch, Newt is ready to never have to see the colour pink again.

He and Minho’s clothes, skin and hair are coated in a dusty pastel. After they’re done loading all the boxes into Newt’s car he catches sight of his reflection in the mirror and scowls at quite a bright section of his chin. When rubbing at it only serves to make the stain worse he resigns to accepting defeat and revving the engine.

Newt knocks twice on the heavy metal barn door to Brenda’s studio, expertly balancing two boxes atop his knee while the others sit by his feet. He hears Brenda’s, “Come in!” on the other side and leans his weight into pushing the door open, suppressing a groan.

“Special delivery,” he announces, sliding a couple more inward with his foot.

Brenda looks up from where she is seated before a manikin, sewing flowers onto a simple white shirt and trousers in a way that appears artfully scattered, eyes filling with excitement upon spotting Newt. Swiping her hair out of her face she stands, her black overalls dotted with paint splatters and other things alike, Newt notices the tips of her hair around her face, as well as her eyelashes, are dipped in pale pink.

“You look busy,” he remarks.

“Hey!” She greets, moving to take the boxes from Newt’s tired arms, “Yeah, well. Only a week and three days ‘til the show, and a lot still needs to be done. Set those down over there, please.” Newt does, happily. When he turns Brenda has a smirk directed right at him.

“You look like you’ve been working hard, too.”

Newt scratches irritably at his chin, his fingernails coming back pink.

“I appreciate it.” Brenda continues, “Really, Newt, a lot. Thanks.”

Newt shrugs, feeling awkward, “No problem.”

Brenda winks before once again turning her attention to the pyramid of boxes by the wall. “That all
of them?”

Newt nods, “To start. Dahlias, hydrangeas and lilies in there,” he says, indicating the boxes respectfully, “There’s the lotus’s, peonies and the bleeding hearts there.”

“Sweet,” Brenda opens the box of hydrangeas and gasps, singing, “You are amazing,” to which Newt gives a little mock bow.

Somehow Brenda suckers him into staying to play manikin simply because he is supposed to be around the same size as the model who will be wearing it. They chat casually, mainly Newt listening to her talk while she tries her hardest not to stab him with a needle too many times, the white and pink stained shirt draped and fitted over his shoulders and flowers in various shades of pink pooled at his feet. He allows Brenda to stick him twice more before she winces and promises, “After this is over we are all going to get so drunk until we won’t feel our eyeballs, don’t worry.”

Newt frowns, “That sounds terrible.”

Brenda shrugs, pulling the stitch, “Don’t knock it, pollito.” When she is done and the costume is carefully hung where it belongs she moves over to a small set of drawers by the large back window and pulls an envelope from it, presenting it to Newt, who raises an eyebrow in question.

“I forgot to give you these before. They’re VIP tickets. One for you and Min, and there’s a couple more in there if you want to bring anyone.”

She speaks that last part so meaningfully Newt groans. She’s obviously been talking to Minho.

“I’m just saying – you’re a catch,” She smiles innocently. “And I definitely would, even though you have …” at have she waves a hand lazily toward Newt’s crotch.

Newt sighs, “Thank you, Brenda.”

“But seriously, I know for a fact the guy who’s wearing this costume is available, why don’t I –”

Newt makes a show of plugging his ears, and turns. “I’m leaving now,” he says.

He makes for the door and Brenda shouts, throwing her arms about. “Wait wait wait!” She scurries forward and catches his arm, effortlessly keeping him from the exit despite being quite nearly half Newt’s size. When he looks down Brenda is biting her lip like she wants to ask something of him but her eyes reveal she doesn’t know the best way to go about it.

Newt sighs and prepares himself. “Yeah?”

“I kind of need something else …”

“What is it?”

Lip turning white Brenda begins, “So there’s this section I’m thinking to be, like, the grand finale. The big bang, y’know? So I was thinking …”

Oh no.

“I need some devil’s ivy.”

Newt stares, unsure if he’s heard her correctly.

“No, you don’t.”
Brenda looks as if she were expecting this, but is not about to back down so easily, “Dude, imagine it. It would be so cool!”

Newt shrugs out of her grip and moves to find his bag, shaking his head, “I am imagining it and guess what? You’re insane.”

Behind him, Brenda sighs, “C’mon, please? I’ll double what I’m paying you.”

“No, Brenda!” Newt snatches his bag and turns toward his friend, mad, “First off, it’s bloody dangerous, and you need a licence to legally display it in a public venue. Have you thought of that?”

Brenda nods, eyes determined, “I have. That’s why I got my licence last week.”

Newt nearly falls over, “You got – Of course you did. Last week?” He asks, incredulous, “And I’m now hearing about this?”

“I didn’t know if they’d approve it or not.” She shrugs. And, well, fair enough. “Listen, I know it’s a big ask.”

Newt barks a faintly hysterical laugh, mainly due to the fact that his brain has already begun doing the math, “It is a big ask. There’s –” Newt covers his face, “There are so many variables. I’d have to inspect the site and get access to the plans of the entire building and it’ll be fucking expensive, Brenda.”

“Done, done, and I know.” She grins.

Newt squints at her through his fingers, “You’re not worried. At all?”

She seems to consider this for a moment. And then, “Nah. Do you know how many people we’re going to reel in when we reveal there’s going to be a hedera in the show? It’ll make up.”

Newt shuts his eyes. Breathes in once, twice, and remarks, “I suppose you want me to turn it pink.”

Brenda winks and straightens Newt’s collar. Tucking a lock of hair behind his ear, she says, “Yes. But you’re a magician, so I’m not worried about that either.”

As it turns out, chemically modifying the hedera’s colour proves to be a far less complicated fete than Newt had anticipated.

He had stayed up the previous night researching every single law that revolves around modifying devil’s ivy under the sun, and concluded that unless he’s not touching the core DNA to either accelerate or decelerate its growth process, strength or overall size – which he would do so if he were dreaming of a cosy life sentence in prison – he’s in the clear.

The pink spreads across his hand like a fungus to the point where it is beginning to stain other things such as benches, the store’s stationary, other plants, and his god damn clothes. Newt’s dry cleaning bill is already in the triple digits to get that shit out.

He is absently flicks at his fingernails as he strolls through the front doors of Gally’s café, checking his messages for the morning (a couple from Teresa requesting progress reports, a few
from some clients, and a number from Minho – all of which composed entirely of memes climbing the ladder of ridiculousness as they go that he knows will put a smile on Newt’s face; which they do) so distracted by fatigue and general Mondayitis that he nearly walks right into another customer waiting by the counter.

He hears Ben before he sees him, eyes still glued to his phone which he only half sees, or more accurately; hears him stop abruptly from conversing with a customer as he brews their sickly sweet molten sugar– if the strong caramel assaulting his nostrils is anything to go by. Newt pays it no mind, chalks it up to Ben’s general Benisims and rattles off, “Hey, mate, the usual please,” finally glancing up to notice the wide-eyed warning look Ben is shooting right into his thick skull.

He offers a frown and nothing more and continues scrolling as Ben scampers off to fix his coffee until he receives a soft nudge against his arm, and turns to see none other than Thomas grinning at him mere inches away.

“You look busy,” He comments, reaching forward to retrieve his liquid diabetes from a frazzled looking Ben.

Thomas sips his drink without flinching; a vision in a thick black trench coat and hair an absolute disaster. Newt forces himself to speak.

Except what tumbles is a gnarled mesh of, “You look great. I mean you look fine, uh, you. Yes. I am,” and Newt wonders why he ever opens his mouth at all.

Because he doesn’t look great – Thomas looks exhausted, there’s no other word for it. Dark circles line his eyes and his skin is far paler than the last time they met. He looks absolutely terrible, clammy and fatigued, and yet the sight of him sends something warm and bright straight through to Newt’s core.

Thomas’s lips stretch into a tired smile and doesn’t comment. Out of the corner of his eye, Newt notes Ben making a show of rolling his eyes and aggressively chooses to ignore him. Across the room, Gally serves up an order and shakes his head at all three of them. As they wait for Newt’s coffee to finish brewing Newt allows his eyes to roam around the busy café and asks, “You feel like sharing a booth?” and if Thomas’ eyes light up then, well.

They sit at the usual table by the window (the first one they sat at together, the one Newt isn’t supposed to know is Thomas’ usual yet does, courtesy a la Benjamin) and Newt does not miss the way Thomas winces when the bright sunlight hits him square in the face. Newt frowns.

“You alright?” he asks.

Thomas angles his body inward to the cafe against the sun, giving Newt a sheepish look, “Yeah, I’m fine. Think I’m getting a cold …” He accents this with a sniffle.

Newt wrinkles his nose in pity. “Sucks.”

Thomas sighs and practically curls around his coffee like a cat. “Yes, it does. Can’t really afford a day off, either, and my friend’s on my case to hurry up and immunise because we have this thing in a couple weeks and …” He drops his head to the table with a low groan.

Newt laughs softly and reaches across the table to pat Thomas on the shoulder, “You’ll be okay. Could I, uh, get you anything?”

“An undertaker.” Thomas tells the sanded mahogany.
Newt rolls his eyes and settles back again, his palms itching. His phone chimes in his pocket. He ignores it.

“I’m serious, Tommy.”

“So am I,” He glances up, one eye open, to catch Newt’s unimpressed look, and sighs, “Okay sorry. Really, I’m fine though. Think I’ve gone through a year’s supply of chicken soup this week alone, so I’m good. I hope.”

“You hope.”

“If I’m not dead by next Tuesday I’ll call you.”

Newt raises an eyebrow, the corner of his mouth quirking despite himself, “That’s reassuring.”

His phone dings again. Thomas says, “It better be; I need to finally plant that thing.”

Newt goes still. He says, “You still haven’t planted it?”

Thomas has the good grace to look guilty, “I just haven’t found the time. Work’s been hounding me and I’ve had to do overtime to account for –”

Newt’s phone chimes twice more consecutively and he sighs.

“Are you going to get that?”

Newt sighs harder and reluctantly reaches into his pocket. As predicted they’re all from Minho, wondering not politely where he is, the last being a simple string of question marks. Newt hurries to type back:

Minho

 района????????

Sorry mate, got held up.

Minho’s response is immediate.

Minho

Oh good you’re alive. Where are you!!!

Can you open the store without me?

Uh yeah maybe if I had my keys …

Newt groans aloud. Thomas glances up from where he’s attempting to steam himself with his coffee, eyebrow raised inquisitively. Newt mutters a quick apology and continues.

Minho

Why don’t you have your bloody keys?
Because I forgot and you were supposed
to open up! And you haven’t answered my
question: where the fuck are you?

I’m with a client.

It’s not untrue.

Minho types back:

Minho

It’s 7am wtf dude.

What client????

We haven’t HAD any clients since Ivy Boy.

Relax I’ll be there soon.

With that, Newt sets his phone face down on the table, the abrupt ending punctuated with another chime that Newt can hear he profanity in. Thomas asks, “Everything okay?” and Newt offers his best reassuring smile.

“Yeah, yeah, just a co-worker.” He says, guilt settling into his chest.

Thomas eyes him peculiarly, frowning at the now stiff set of Newt’s shoulders before he gets it.

“Am I holding you up?” he asks.

“No.” Newt assures, so quickly that his cheeks tint in embarrassment. “He can wait,” he adds, pretends warmth does not blossom in his chest at Thomas’ slow, shy grin. However, when his phone chimes again all of a minute later Newt is just about ready to toss the offending contraption out the god damn window.

Minho

Don’t worry gally told me whats up.

I’ll cover you. take your time ;) ;) ;)

Oh, dear god.

Anxiety creeps into Newt’s bloodstream at the thought of Minho breaking and entering his shop. Thomas sees right through the carefully set smile of fake nonchalance, though the incessant tapping of his fingernails against the counter might have been a bigger give away. “Newt,” Thomas begins and hesitates for a moment before reaching across the table to place his hand atop Newt’s,
ceasing the tapping at once.

“You can go if you want to,” he says, squinting against the sun where he has leant over toward Newt. The light pales the colour of his eyes considerably and gives him an almost ghostly appearance, momentarily reminding Newt of uncut jewels; sharp and striking and beautiful in their raw imperfection. His heart stutters, a dreadful pull of longing he hasn’t felt, nor wanted to feel, for a very long time.

Newt’s mouth works against him and he mutters, “Don’t want to.”

Thomas tilts his head, and redeems, “Have to.”

“I …” Newt sighs, defeated, “Yeah, I have to.”

Thomas gives his hand a little squeeze, almost hesitant, before letting go and leaning back into the leafy shadows. Sniffing, Thomas brings his cup to his lips and offers Newt a soft smile, one that wrinkles the corners of his eyes, and quite honestly fuck him.

“Go, Newt. It’s fine. Go save your friend.”

Newt groans aloud at the prospect. Minho is most certainly dangling head-first-ass-up through a window at this very moment.

Newt fiddles with the lid of his coffee a moment before he begrudgingly announces, “Alright, I’m off.”

Thomas smirks, “He’s lucky to have you.”

“He bloody better be,” Newt mutters and stands.

A look of something flashes in Thomas’s eyes as Newt is standing there, preparing to fly out the door. He smothers it almost immediately. Suddenly, standing there, Newt feels wide open and exposed. He looks down at Thomas, small and sick, and Newt hears Alby’s voice in his ear telling him Take a chance, and then he is saying, “Do you want to get coffee, sometime? Without business talk or any interruptions?”

Thomas appears so startled at the proposition that Newt nearly kicks himself and runs for it that very second, and it’s this panic that Thomas must see as he snaps out of it and smiles, wide and reassuring, and says, “Yeah, I would. Very much.”

Newt’s heart all but drops into his stomach. “Okay,” he says a tad too breathless to ever live down.

“You have my number,” Thomas points out.

“That I do.”

As he is walking out, Newt pretends to not notice Ben grudgingly handing a smug Gally $40 in cash.

Hours before Mania is due to begin, Newt has multiple cuts on his fingers and a good 80% of his clothes are ruined, and he is ready for this entire event to be over just as much as Teresa is. The last couple days the texts have become so much more scrambled than the last until finally, the day
before, long messages that require Newt to expand have shrunk into short and to the point bullet lists. Which he is fine with, in all honesty.

As much as it isn’t fun to watch her stress, Newt really wishes she didn’t relay all that stress on to him. Thank god he had Minho – whom, three days prior, took it upon himself to send Teresa a new photo of a puppy with an increasing velocity of fluffiness each time her text tone rang through the shop.

As Newt stands out the front of a large warehouse with a giant sign screaming MANIA at him in bright pink neon, flickering theatrically, all of his bones give a consecutive sigh of relief. Patrons and workers alike mill about the front entrance, two wide open barn doors stretching four metres in the air, ivy enveloping it in waves which fluctuate and pulse with the heavy bass flowing from inside. A white carpet has been rolled from the street and onward through the doors. Newt toes it with his shoes a moment before pulling away to reveal a pink print behind. Seems like Brenda’s thought of everything.

Newt takes a breath, eyes scoping for Minho where he’d lost him through the barn doors a minute earlier, steeling himself to enter, when suddenly a hand curls around his elbow and Teresa is beside him, dressed in a dress so pale pink it’s almost white that does wonders for her legs. Her long dark hair tumbles over her shoulders in rivets, and she says, “The bar’s this way,” and without another word leads him inside.

“Bloody hell,” Newt gasps.

“Oh huh,” Teresa agrees, “We just got all the last pieces in, like, an hour ago.” Newt knows this – Minho gave him the play by play. He, of course, tells Teresa none of this, “Brenda was freaking out that nothing would be finished on time.”


Teresa gives him a look out of the corner of her eye that is long-suffering but tells Newt that she will not hesitate to impale him with her very pointy shoes if he dares bag mouth her girlfriend, and Newt wisely says no more. They make their way over to the bar, situated on the second level mezzanine area that leads out to a balcony, dodging eager photographers left and right. Brenda has, obviously, yet to make her appearance, so the press are busy snapping photos of anyone who looks important enough and they, of course, recognise her PR Manager. Newt tugs at the sleeves of his suit jacket self-consciously, hoping his limp isn’t showing too much. Teresa notices and slaps his hand away.

She immediately deposits him by Minho, bee-lining toward the bar to order them both “something strong”. Newt all but sags against the wall. Minho offers him a raised eyebrow, hair slicked to the side in a way that Newt thinks looks good on him but will never actually say. He doesn’t need the ego boost.

They were told to wear pink to match the occasion, like an item of clothing or an accessory, and Newt considers his pink fitted pants in favour of squinting at, not for the first time, his friend’s flamingo pink suit.

“You okay?” He asks.

Newt nods his head, “Just tired.”

“Yeah, but you’re always tired.”
Newt frowns at him, “These events tire me out.”

“Life tires you out,” Minho says, and Newt can only nod in agreement. Boy does it ever. From the corner of the room, Teresa is returning with their drinks, which Newt accepts gratefully and eagerly.

She spares Minho’s ensemble a single look before clinking her glass against Newt’s, “So listen, we’re really grateful for everything you’ve done to help out with,” she waves a hand toward the jasmine vines curling around dim spotlights, “all this. We can’t thank you enough. Brenda will be thanking you immensely, too.”

“She already has,” Newt grins, thinking back to the overflowing fruit basket and very expensive vintage wine that turned up at the shop 10 o’clock morning, “And I was happy to do it.”

Minho snorts into his beer bottle, no doubt reminiscing on all the complaining and cursing that went down during the past couple weeks. Newt glares and compels him not to say a word. A moment goes by before Newt notices a man with a headpiece waving at Teresa from the doorway, looking visibly stressed, and points her attention toward him.

Teresa groans and immediately downs the rest of her champagne before shoving the empty glass into Minho’s waiting palm. She excuses herself, pausing to squeeze Newt’s hand and Minho’s forearm before disappearing the way they came, her heels clicking across the concrete.

Sometime later Minho excuses himself toward the bar to get another drink and chat up the mixologist, and Newt finds himself alone with his thoughts. Glancing around the giant warehouse he feels a surge of both awe and pride – awe in both Brenda and Teresa for pulling this entire thing off and, yeah, he knows this isn’t their first time in this rodeo, but the results are still stunning. And pride, a little in himself, he has to admit, as half the plants supplied for Mania have come straight from his shop, from his lab. It is unfathomable to see it all come together like this, eyeing the bleeding hearts that fall from the ceiling, delicately swaying to the music.

It is also, not the first time, that he thinks –

“Hey.” A voice startles Newt from his thoughts. He turns sharply to see Gally standing beside him, lips pinched up in the corners as if it physically pains him to be here. Newt can relate.

“Heya,” Newt greets, forcing his heart out of his throat.

Gally joins Newt’s casual lean against the wall, sans drink, donned in a black floral shirt. “So what’s happened is – Oh, sorry, formalities first,” he pauses, clearing his throat, “How’s it going? Hope you’re well and all that bullshit.”

Newt smirks, “Same to you.”

Gally gives a little nod, and immediately launches from where he left off, “So here’s the situation; one of the indicators back at the shop blew up last night.”

Newt chokes on his drink. They turn some heads at the sight that they make – Newt, red-faced and in tears, and Gally thumping him on the back as he coughs up a lung. He calms, eventually, enough to croak out a question to Gally, who is looking at him with a mixture of guilt and embarrassment, lips pressed and eyebrows furrowed.

“I knew you’d freak,” he says.

Newt shakes his head like Well duh.
“What did the owner say?"

Gally’s face turns stony, “Get it fixed. That’s what he had to say to the page long email I sent him.” He sighs, “But yeah, that happened. I’ve sectioned out the area of the café until I get it repaired, but I was wondering if I could borrow one in the meantime?"

“Yes, of course. Come by tomorrow first thing.”

Gally looks like a weight has been lifted from his shoulders, “Thanks, man, I –” his eyes catch Minho by the bar, then, smiling charmingly at the woman mixing drinks, the lights shining off him and accentuating the suit.

“Oh. Wow. He really does nothing by halves, does he?” Gally muses.

“Never,” Newt responds, fondly.

“Uh, yeah so thanks. I have a friend who can come and fix it but he’s not free until next week.”

Newt shakes his head, “That’s amazing.”

Gally is still looking toward the bar, distracted, and hums at Newt’s words, “I know, right? Fucking things cost a fortune you’d expect them to actually hold for a year.”

“No, it’s amazing that you have a friend.”

Gally turns to him sharply, offended, and Newt barely dodges an elbow to the ribs while snickering. “Alright, asshole,” Gally says, pushing off the wall, “I’m going to get a drink. Enjoy your night. Or don’t, I couldn’t care less.”

Newt offers a sarcastic wave as Gally marches toward the bar in ham-fisted determination, left alone once again. Good. Fantastic. Now he can count the minutes until this night is over in peace. The railings are woven with vines and fairy lights. As Newt peeks down over the mezzanine he spots a handful of people wandering around dressed in white, the costumes Brenda had been building when he’d visited her that day; women in long dresses, flowers falling down their fronts and feet bare.

Where is Brenda? Newt entertains a moment of concern that something’s wrong with the inner workings of the exhibition, and judging from the way the stagehand pulled Teresa away earlier, he might not be too far off. There’s a list of possible scenarios; a piece may just not be working. Maybe there’s a technical malfunction in the IT department, projectors or lights not functioning (Newt takes a glance around the exhibit – everything looks fine enough). A costume malfunction, maybe, or a plant doesn’t want to do what it’s told (wouldn’t be the first time), or, even – hopefully not – but maybe – there’s a problem with an indicator.

A shiver passes through Newt.

But, no, if there was a problem with an indicator they would be able to tell. Or, at least, Newt would know about it by now. Everything looks to be going as it should. Newt closes his eyes and takes a deep breath and counts to ten before and opening his eyes again, heart beating calmer now, to see that the room is significantly more dim than it had been some deep breaths ago. From down below the volume of the crowd lowers into an excited, hushed murmur. Newt drains the rest of his drink and moves over to the edge of the mezzanine to peek over the railing.

There is a bright white spotlight dead in the centre of the large floor below, the patrons surrounding whisper to each other as lights dance along the floor and walls until finally a figure appears behind
Brenda is dressed in a deep, blood red two piece suit that should arguably clash with all the many shades of pink surrounding her, but instead it sets her apart; the artist and her creations. He feels Minho saddle up next to him excitedly, Gally to his right, and together they watch as Brenda begins her opening speech.

“Good evening ladies, gentlemen,” She begins, “Friends, and others that I blackmailed into being here.” The crowd titters with laughter. She continues, after a beat, “Your support has been amazing and you have my deepest thanks. Truly.” She sounds incredibly sincere, with an underlying tone of stress that you’d only pick up if you’ve known her for a long time, as Newt has. He raises an eyebrow, wondering once again if something did happen behind the scenes.

She goes on for a couple minutes, summarising her journey from putting on small charity shows in the off-season to being here, making a name for herself and being able to fund such a large event, and Newt can’t help but feel a swell of pride formulate in his chest for her.

Brenda clasps her hands together, “Donations are deeply appreciated and please remember that all funds we receive tonight will be going straight to charity.” Anyone can say this and not mean it, or only mean it a little bit, but Newt knows Brenda well enough to say that she means it one hundred per cent.

“Anyway, I’ve rambled on for long enough.” She gives a quick rundown of the building’s layout, bathrooms, exists, and so on, “Drinks and refreshments are available upstairs, and without further ado, please feel free to wander as you wish, enjoy yourselves, mingle,” how she drawls that last bit earns yet another laugh from the crowd, and Brenda smiles, and says, “And welcome to Mania.”

Music booms through the speakers and lights explode in a flurry of movement and colour, startling an excited gasp from the audience. Smoke machines kick to life, promptly coating the room in a thin veil of fog that curls up and around the room like smog. Performers enter from the corners of the room, hidden in the shadows and behind heavy black curtains during the opening, mingling and weaving themselves in amongst the crowd like phantoms. Some pin pink and white dahlias to patron’s lapels or tuck them behind their ears.

Newt takes a moment to admire the small addition of the smoke (he’d previously had to tag team with Teresa to talk Brenda out of pyrotechnics) and he has to admit he’s impressed with the effect. Minho cups his mouth and whoops loudly, quite nearly blowing Newt’s eardrums out. Gally, too, if his poorly concealed grimace is anything to go by.

Minho eagerly drags them to see the rest of the exhibition and all together they ooh and aah at various pieces of artwork or sculpture that Brenda has somehow magicked into existence. Minho nudges Newt’s ribs like a nascence whenever they find a specific plant or flower that Newt had worked on and provided, and when he begins to take business cards that Brenda and Teresa had provided with Newt’s name on it and slip them into patron’s pockets with a wink and a smart remark, Newt promptly sidesteps behind a smirking Gally, face as pink as the sweet bells swaying at his shoulders.

Newt snatches a business card out from between Minho’s teeth. “Will you stop that,” he hisses. The business card gleams up at him, a glossy black bleeding heart poised delicately above the name of his shop, among matte white. Newt’s own name is printed on the back in block letters.

Minho blinks innocently, adjusting the flower at his lapel – throughout the evening the performers have been elegantly, albeit an ounce creepily, supplying audience members with flowers to slip into their pockets, jackets, and hair (Newt has rejected four so far).
Minho sighs and sags, defeated, “So does that stick up your ass grow like Pinocchio’s nose, or?”

Newt swallows a wince, “I do not have a stick up my ass, thank you very bloody much.”

“You moody because Prince Charming turned you down?” This is Gally’s input. For one glorious moment Newt entertains the idea of slam-dunking his face into a bush of widow’s tears.

“No,” Newt glares, his stomach sinking, “he did not turn me down. He just couldn’t make it.”

It was true: Newt and Thomas had been texting casually ever since their impromptu meeting at the coffee shop – mostly it was Newt updating Thomas on annoying clients, Thomas texting dumb jokes when he was bored in meetings, ones that never failed to make Newt smile no matter how bad they were (and they were very bad), Thomas sending him New York Times’ Botanicals of the Month articles (mostly just to see all the snooty replies he can get out of Newt) and stupid little conversations that were going absolutely nowhere but, somehow miraculously, lasted hours.

But when the time came for Newt to finally kick his pride to the curb and texted Thomas Would you like to come with me to this event tomorrow night? he’d gotten a swift and to the point reply of Can’t tmrw night. Busy. Sorry.

Minho and Gally share a look between themselves that makes Newt’s blood boil.

“What?” He snaps, with more emphasis than intended.

Minho seems to be contemplating the best way to approach the situation, “Listen, I’m sure he’s into you,” – Gally hums around his straw in agreement – “So, hey, don’t get dissuaded.”

Newt rolls his eyes heavenward, wishing he were elsewhere, “I’m not bloody dissuaded, you obnoxious jerk.”

“Good! And besides, why would he be at Gally’s every morning if he didn’t want to hit that? He’s definitely not in there for the coffee.”

“Hey!” Gally barks, offended.

Newt really needs better friends.

“Look,” he cuts in before they start, slipping the card up the sleeve of his jacket, “I just want to get through this night as painlessly as possible.”

“You’re not having a good time?”

“No, of course I’m having a good –” Newt stops, frozen, because that voice did not come from Minho, who is, in fact, staring over Newt’s shoulder with eyes as wide as saucers. Gally, beside him, is watching the scene unravel like this is the best day of his life.

Newt turns to find Thomas smiling at him, looking near unrecognisable in white body paint and the accompanying costume. Newt stares in both horror and wonder because, in all honesty, if Newt hadn’t recognised his voice, he wouldn’t have been able to spot him a room.

They all gape.

Thomas chuckles and soothes a hand over his gelled back hair self-consciously. “Yeah, I know. It’s a lot,” he says, “Brenda has a very committed team. Anyway hey guys, how’s it going?”

Minho and Gally manage a meek wave and a confirming mumble, while Newt just says,
“Brenda?”

Thomas nods, “Yeah.”

“You know Brenda?”

Thomas raises a white eyebrow, “Yes – Well. I know Teresa. And Brenda through her, so, yeah I know Brenda. Why? Oh! This place looks great, by the way. I know you contributed to this because your name’s plastered all over the … What?”

Newt attempts to quell the ridiculous spurt of anger simmering inside of him. He attempts – attempts – to keep a level voice as he says, “Why didn’t you say anything?”

Thomas looks between Newt and the two behind him, confused. “You didn’t ask?” He says.

“I did ask.”

“Oh.” Thomas’ eyes widen, “You were talking tonight?”

Behind him, Minho clears his throat and recites, loudly, “Wow! Hey, Gally, let’s go check that out over there.”

“No way, man, I gotta see this car crash,” Gally hisses.

“Would you just come on.”

Minho tugs a less than enthusiastic Gally toward the other side of the room, leaving Newt and Thomas by themselves beside a giant spider web pulsing and buzzing like neon lights.

“So …” Thomas begins. His toes scuff the concrete, “I’m an idiot.”

“No, you’re not,” Newt sighs and leans against the wall. The concrete is beginning to eat into his feet, his leg starting to ache, “I should have been clearer.”

Thomas shakes his head. He steps closer. The tips of his eyelashes are tinted white, reminding Newt of some of those fairies in folklore with big, black eyes and a mouth full of teeth like needles. But, like, a much cuter version. His eyes darken in contrast.

“I could have been clearer, also,” he says, “And, hey. I wouldn’t have intentionally blown you off, just so you know. If I didn’t have to —” Thomas waves a hand over his new mystical pixie form “– this, I would have totally come along with you to wherever you wanted. Which, I’m hoping is something we could raincheck on?”

His eyes bat once and he’s giving Newt this little smile mixed with a dash of hope and a pinch of fear, and if Newt had any fight in him to begin with it would have dissolved in an instant, pooled pathetically around his ankles.

He rolls his eyes, hoping desperately the low light and general ambience of the entire room is enough to mask the pink flush coating his cheeks. “Yeah, of course,” then he smirks, “Idiot.”

The corners of Thomas’ lips twitch, his eyes filling with relief that warms the inside of Newt’s chest, “Guess I deserve that. Hey, let’s take a look around. Have you been downstairs yet? There’s supposed to be something huge down there but Brenda’s been real hush hush about it.” Then, suddenly, “Oh wait.”

“What is it?”
Thomas smirks and, plucking a pale dahlia from his sleeve he steps closer and secures it carefully behind Newt’s ear, his fingers brushing his hair out of the way first.

“There we go,” He smiles, happy. He is very close. Thomas shrugs, clearing his throat, “I noticed you didn’t have one yet.”

Stunned, Newt merely nods, and motions toward some miscellaneous spot in the room.

Now that Thomas isn’t actually floating around being ghostly and pinning flowers to people’s clothes, it’s like he’s invisible. He and Newt are able to move about the room, up and down the stairs and look at as many pieces as they like and no one even bats an eye. Thomas, who had apparently been behind the scenes for the creation of nearly half the art works in the room, provided insider information as they wandered.

Stopping at a tall glowing ladder tucked into the corner of the room, a bush of thorn daisies surrounding the bottom of it, he says, exasperatedly, as if the ladder had done personal offence to him, “This thing. Brenda had so many issues with this. First, it was too tall, then she said they cut it too short, apparently, then it stood crooked, and then half the fluorescents wouldn’t work. Had to switch to LEDs. This is all set on a timer so it’ll look like actual fluorescent lights. Brenda lost, like, half her hair because of this.”

They approach a small EXIT sign covered in an assortment of hanging flowers covering the glass. Beside the sign read a spray-painted NO. Thomas says, “The point of this is that the vines slowly crack the glass as the night goes on.” As he says this, one vine constricts around the sign and a long fracture cracks across the glass. The leaves tremble in excitement.

When they approach a woman posed dramatically up against a wall, her arms splayed out and wrists bent elegantly as a black honeysuckle (spotted pink, of course. Newt remembers this particular one was a bitch to tint) weaving itself up her naked body, coiling around her neck, Thomas leans over and Newt smells talcum powder, body paint, and some kind of spicy cologne underneath.

“That’s Caitlyn. She works in finance. Brenda came by the office one day to complain that the original model bailed and she volunteered to step in. She’s wearing – get this – she’s wearing a body suit made of tiny indicators! Can you believe it?”

Newt hums. He can believe it, actually. When he first found out that Brenda had commissioned Sonya as the original model for this particular piece he’d taken one look at the design and spent almost two hours on the phone with his sister that very night, convincing her to not to take the gig. About 2/5 of the phone call consisted of shouting so loud that Newt’s neighbour started pounding on his door toward the end.

A cold shudder runs through his body when he imagines his baby sister where Caitlyn is standing, and quietly asks Thomas to move on.

As they begin to walk toward the stairs, Newt suddenly remembers, “Aren’t you supposed to be working?” He asks, confused, “Walking around being all creepy and the like?”

A group of people coming up the stairs as they make their way down push Thomas into Newt as they pass. His arm comes around to his waist to keep balance. Thomas chuckles, “Uh, yeah. Technically. But I’m on break.”

The way he says it tells Newt that isn’t the entire truth.
Newt raises an eyebrow.

“Are you *meant* to be on break?”

Finally reaching the bottom of the stairs Thomas retreats his arm and presses a finger to his white lips.

“What Brenda and Teresa don’t know won’t hurt them.”

Newt rolls his eyes but can’t help but laugh, anyway. “You know they’ll kill you.”

Thomas’ eyes dance with mischief and when he smiles Newt half expects razor teeth. He says, “They’d have to catch me first.”

And then they enter the third room.

Newt stops. The only exhibit in the room is on the far end, where a girl elegantly slouches against the wall. Above her is Newt’s hedera. The plant is a stark contrast against the white walls of the basement, the only light source in the room is a single spotlight set to aluminate the entire wall. For a second, for one ridiculous second, anger flairs in Newt’s stomach because she’s changed the shape.

The vines protrude outward from behind the model where they flair and explode into the shape of giant wings like that of an angel.

Beside him, it is like some invisible force has come down and stolen all the air from Thomas’ lungs and turned him to stone and Newt, admittedly too stunned to look anywhere but straight ahead, watches as the long, spindly thorned vines of the hedera dip and swirl around the model’s body, poised above her head and pointed to her heart menacingly. Newt honestly, quite honestly, has to wonder how much Teresa is paying this girl to do this, and if it is enough.

A choked off sound to his left breaks him out of the trance and as Newt looks over to Thomas he is transported back four weeks, both of them in this exact position, staring up at the hedera in Newt’s shop and admiring the delicate purple blossoms. Except now it is not wonder and awe that paints Thomas’ face; but horror.

“I um –” Thomas’ voice squeaks. He clears it, tries again, “I should really get back to it. Show’s almost over anyway …” and with an awkward nod to Newt he turns and hurries out the way they came, narrowly missing crashing into a couple.

Newt does not leave the room. He finds a bench and plants himself into it as patrons come and go, gawking and gasping at the ivy. He watches as a guy pretends to push his girlfriend closer to the hedera than she is willing to venture. She squeals and they laugh and everyone in the room smirks or glares or shakes their heads snootily, while Newt’s heartbeat had spiked ten-fold.

Because –

“Hey.” A hand claps down on Newt’s shoulder and he all but jumps through the ceiling as Gally sits down beside him, sighing as if, for whatever reason, this night has physically exhausted him, “There you are.”

Newt blinks at him. “Hi,” he looks around, “What’s up?”

“Ah, nothing. Everyone was wondering where you were, is all. Have you been down here this whole time?”
Newt blinks again. How long has he sat here?

Newt turns, remembers he has a dahlia flower tucked behind his ear when its small petals tickle his eyebrow. He plucks it out. “No no,” he says, “Not the whole time. Where is everyone else?”

Gally crosses his legs and leans back comfortably against the wall, checking a list off his fingers, “Brenda’s bouncing around answering questions and getting progressively drunker. Teresa’s trying to reign her in. Minho’s hitting on some chick with face tattoos, and Ben’s by the bar making an idiot of himself and drooling over Rachel, as usual. Oh,” he says, suddenly, “Your sister showed up half an hour ago, by the way. She’s looking for you.”

This information makes him frown. Half an hour?

“Oh,” Newt smooths his hair out of his eyes, wishing he’d brought a hair tie along with him. The air is thick and stuffy down here. One of the attributes of devil’s ivy is it tends to take all the air out of a room. The ventilation is one of the first things Newt had checked. “Yeah, thanks. Guess I should go back up.”

Gally hums, tugging on his tie. The light of the room paints the flowers on his jacket white. “C’mon,” he says, “You look like you can use another drink, and so can I. Come on, up up.”

Newt takes one last look back at the hedera as Gally leads him from the room. The model shifts from her position just slightly, possibly an itch or a stiff neck, and one of the vines, not noticeable to anyone whose job isn’t to study and observe the plant daily, stops and jerks toward her sharply. White hot panic spikes Newt’s heart one awful moment before the indicators do their job and the vine shakes, stills, and resumes its usual undulating, fluid movement as if nothing had happened.

As he is following Gally up the stairs, the thought Newt’s been fighting to keep out of his brain all night surfaces:

If anyone of these indicators fail, or if someone switched them off, everyone in that room would be dead within seconds.

The reach the upstairs again to find Brenda surrounded by a group of art critics asking her questions she looks like she could have answered very well a couple glasses of Champaign ago (What was your inspiration for this show? You’re so young! How do you feel about gaining so much exposure in such a short period of time? Does it intimidate you at all? Why the pink?) but now all filters are thinned out. Teresa keeps a firm and anxious hold of her elbow while she smiles brightly – albeit tensely – at the photographers and encourages the next question to arrive sooner than she usually would.

Newt raises an eyebrow, “She’s doing well.”

Gally snorts, adjusting the rose pinned to his pocket. “She’s doing adequately. It’s her first big show and I’m not too sure anyone told her not to get drunk until it’s over. Or maybe it’s nerves. Either way, Tess’ hosting an after-party at her place – not too wise, if you ask me, some of us still like to party like it’s freshman year at college.” Gally accentuates this with a pointed look to nowhere in particular but Newt can take a wild guess at who he is talking about. “But she’s stocked, like, a fridge worth of alcohol and personally I can’t wait to get the fuck out of here.”

“You’re not opening the shop tomorrow?” Newt asks, confused, and Gally stares at him like he’s
grown an extra head.

“No? Not in the morning.” He asks, incredulously, “Are you opening your place?”

Newt gives a sort of awkward shrug in response, playing off sheepish nonchalance and not wanting to tell Gally out loud that he can’t afford not to stay on schedule, even for a few hours.

“Damn. Well, okay. I mean we’re opening at twelve, so. And I gave Ben opening so he better behave. Ah –!”

At his exclamation, Newt turns to see his sister walking up to them.

Gally pushes him lightly forward, “Special delivery.”

Sonya smiles and winks, “Merci.”

“Welcome, darlin’.” Gally mock salutes before bustling away, probably to go and put a leash on his barista. Sonya’s sweet smile remains perfectly on her face like cherubs painted it on themselves and sealed it with a kiss until the second Gally leaves and she and her brother are alone.

Her tone is like gravel when she glowers at Newt and says, “Hey.”

Newt frowns at her. “Hi?”

“I’m still mad at you.”

Newt rolls his eyes to the ceiling. Maybe he should be getting drunk tonight after all, if not for anything other than pure spite. “Christ, Liz,” he groans, “Did you come all the way over here just to tell me that? Nice of you.”

Lizzy cocks her hip and glares. “No. I wanted to see you, brother dearest,” she hisses, brushing hair that she’s dyed a rosy pink for the occasion out of her face, annoyed, “And to tell you that I’m still mad.”

“Oh for the love of –”

“This was a really good gig, okay! Sarah says it would have been great exposure –”

“Oh yeah?” Newt raises an eyebrow. He can feel his cheeks heating up in slow-building anger, “You met Caitlyn from finance, did you? You saw the fucking vines around her neck, Lizzy? Is your agent okay with that, because I’m surely not.”

Lizzy squints at him and Newt can see a plethora of curses sitting at the corner of her mouth patiently waiting to be unleashed. “Well,” she says, “It’s a good thing you’re not my agent then.”

Newt beams, “Well it’s a good thing you’re a little –”

And then Brenda materialises out of stardust next to them with an enthusiastic shout of, “Hey!” that scares them both half to death.

“Hey!” Newt and Sonya jump to attention; her arm around his waist and his over her shoulders – a practiced dance move they had perfected years ago to avoid one or both of their parents catching them fighting – Sonya’s head tilts to rest against his shoulder, Newt’s free hand slipping into his pocket easily.

Brenda’s tied her jacket around her waist – a usually unprofessional look, considering the night, yet
she somehow finds a way to make it purposeful – and looks like she’s ready to both party until the
crack of dawn and collapse into bed and sleep for a week. Newt zones out as she and Sonya launch
into conversation, eyes roaming the room as the night falls to a close and people finally begin to
file out. There has not been a single creepy fairy in sight for a short while, now, and Newt has not
seen Thomas since he’d left the basement earlier.

He feels a crazy impulse to call him, to apologise for something. What, he has no idea, but
anything to erase the image of the look on Thomas’ face from his mind.

“And you!”

Newt is startled to the present. He’d been in the middle of witnessing Ben tipsily attempt to charm
Rachel with a joke that took a couple seconds the register on her face, followed by delayed
laughter. “Sorry what?”

“This whole night,” Brenda begins, and Newt realises with horror that her voice is shaking, “all the
pieces, they all look amazing and I honestly could not have done it without you.”

flowers. You did most of the work.”

Brenda rolls her eyes at his modesty while Lizzy clicks her tongue and hip-checks him, “Oh, shut
up, idiot. You’re amazing.”

“What are we talking about?” Minho asks, saddling up into talking distance, Gally and Ben
following close behind – Gally’s face is painted with exasperation while Ben’s maintains a tipsy,
love-sick gleam.

“How great Newt is,” Brenda says, smugly.

Minho beams, rubbing his palms, “Ah, sweet, my favourite subject.”

Aris and Rachel decide to join, then, Rachel softly smirking, her long black hair swaying as she
walks with Aris trailing behind her, a flower behind his ear and frowning at something on his
phone. When they stop by Sonya Newt counts heads and frowns, looking around again, and asks,
“Where’s Harriet?”

“Sick,” Sonya responds, sadly.

“I’m your Acting Harriet tonight,” Rachel adds, linking her arm with Sonya’s. She lifts her phone,
“Plus we’ve been pretty much live feeding the whole night to her anyway, so she didn’t miss
anything.”

“Oh hey, Newt,” Minho begins, “How did it go with Prince Charming?”

Dread settles in Newt’s stomach when everyone in their small group stops talking at once and
stares at them, and he wants to just sink into the floor.

Brenda blinks, “Prince who?” looking between Newt and Minho – whose eyes are now widening
in horror at the realisation of his mistake – with growing interest.

Sonya looks at him and says, “Yes, I would also like to know. Isaac,” she smiles, eyes batting,
“What is this now?”

Forget sinking into the floor, Newt has now dedicated himself to the task of setting Minho on fire
with just his eyes. As he glares, and Minho mouths *I’m sorry!* to him and half-twitching like he wants to hide behind Gally, a rushed clicking of heels against the concrete floor accompanied by a new voice fills the space.

Teresa approaches, looking exhausted and one hundred per cent done with this entire building and everyone in it. Next to her is Thomas, looking not too far off. “Brenda,” He says, scratching at his jaw, irritated. His skin comes up pink where he’s chipped away the face paint. “This stuff *itches.* You said it wouldn’t itch.”

“Huh,” Brenda muses, narrowing her eyes curiously, but wildly unconcerned.

Teresa sighs very loudly, “Oh my god, it’s hypoallergenic, Thomas, you’re fine. Stop being a pussy.” Someone, probably Gally, snorts, and Rachel coughs behind her hand to hide a laugh. Teresa turns to Brenda and says, “It’s 11 pm. Permission to kick everyone out?”

“Granted.”

“Thank god,” Teresa sighs and reaches for her com, delegating orders to the stagehands on the other end.

Thomas’ eyes find Newt’s, then, and he gives a small furtive smile. Newt hears the breath catch in Sonya’s throat and he can practically feel the gears turning in his sister’s head as she puts two and two together. Brenda claps her hands once and introduces Thomas to the group, “Guys this is Thomas. Thomas, everyone.”

Casual “hi”s and nods are exchanged, except for Ben, who takes it upon himself to be completely oblivious to his surroundings and mock salutes, “Your majesty.”

Aris chokes on the water bottle he’d been drinking from and Brenda’s eyes turn to saucers. Thomas’ eyebrows twitch in confusion for a moment before shaking it off as a general Ben-ism, and turning his attention to Brenda, “Is it over? Can I take this,” he gestures to his entire self, “off now?”

He’s taken the jacket portion of the costume off and is left in a button down with the sleeves rolled up, showing his skin and giving a strange illusion of white gloves where the body paint cuts off. He scratched at his skin worryingly. Roses pool around his feet.

Brenda remembers herself and waves a hand at him, “Yeah yeah, you’re free to go. What’s the problem?”

“It’s really itchy.”

While Brenda inspects his skin everyone begins disusing transport plans back to Teresa’s apartment when she returns herself, happily announcing that the last of the guests have left and the crew have begun bumping out. At this everyone cheers and Brenda, tired, drunk and emotional, immediately wraps her arms around Teresa and buries her face into her hair, laughing.

They try and encourage everyone to begin heading off, “We’ll meet you guys there. This might take another half hour, at minimum,” but they all seem keen on sticking it out. This is how Newt finds himself sitting on a fluffy white carpet in a makeshift dressing room listening to Thomas and Teresa squabble behind a curtain as she attempts to help him out of his costume which is, apparently, pinned and tied in place to the high heavens, in order for it to actually fit after the original model cancelled.

Every time another flower falls to the ground Minho and Ben *Whoop!* in obnoxious excitement.
Eventually, after ten more minutes or so – ten minutes of Newt stubbornly ignoring questions about Thomas and himself and how they knew each other, not even satisfied when Minho had taken pity and supplied, “He was a client a little while back.” – Teresa finally emerged barefoot with an armful of roses and dahlias and a riled expression.

She says to Brenda, “Why weren’t you helping? It’s your costume.”

Brenda shrugs, “He’s your best friend,” and dodges the rose thrown at her head.

Thomas’ head pokes out from behind the curtain, makeup wipe in hand and half the paint already removed, looking like the Phantom of the Opera. “This stuff is going to take like a week to come off,” he complains.

Brenda groans and leans back against Aris’ legs, “No it won’t, stop being dramatic. Blondie, tell your boy to suck it up.”

Newt feels his ears heating up, and Thomas’ mouth opens and closes once before he is gone, again. Teresa toes her in the calf, and Brenda mouths What. Newt ignores his sister’s eyes on him and wonders if now is the time to announce that he is going home.

He jumps when he feels a tap on the shoulder, and turns to see Teresa gesture to a corner of the room in a distinct I want to talk to you manner. He gets up and follows her. When they’re out of earshot she says, “Hey. Listen, I just wanted to ask, but were you with Thomas tonight at all?”

Newt raises an eyebrow, not completely sure where this was going. “Uh,” he says, “Yeah, for a little bit. He took a break a while in and we walked around together. Why?”

Teresa frowns, “Did you go downstairs?”

Oh.

“Erm. Yeah, we did.”

“Shit,” She curses, face pinched, “I knew it. He was acting off and I knew he saw – Look, I was going to warn him, but everything just got so hectic and –” She pinches the bridge of her nose. “I’m so stupid. Listen, Newt, I know this is going to sound crazy, but Brenda doesn’t know. About Thomas buying a hedera.”

Newt’s eyes widen in shock. How can she not …?

“So none of that was on purpose, I promise. Thomas didn’t want anyone to know about it, so I couldn’t tell her, not without going behind his back. And I couldn’t tell her not to put it in the show as she was so dead set on it.”

“I understand,” He reassures Teresa, because she looks about two minutes away from a guilty panic attack, “I won’t say anything, don’t worry. Customer confidentiality and all that.”

“Thank you,” Teresa smiles and squeezes his hand, gratefully. Suddenly she takes a quick look over her shoulder at the curtain, as if to make sure that Thomas is still behind it, and when she turns around there is something twinkling in her eye that Newt can’t place until she says, “He likes you, too, by the way. A lot. Just so you know.”

She walks away before Newt’s brain can catch up with his mouth and he could stutter out some clusterfuck of a response, but by then Thomas is stepping out from behind the curtain in a black T-shirt and clear of body paint, hair messy and stiff with gel swept back out of his face. The room
promptly erupts in cheers and wolf-whistles. His eyes find Newt’s from across the room, embarrassed and tired, and Newt, leaning back against the wall, gives him a warm smile in return.

Thomas laughs, shaking his head, when he comes to stand by Newt.

“Hey.”

Newt’s hands tug at the bottoms of his pockets, “Hello. Look who’s all squeaky clean.”

“Ugh,” Thomas groans, rubbing his face, “I wasn’t joking, it’s gonna take a while to wash all this shit out.”

The tips of his eyelashes are still tinted white. His eyebrows and along his hairline, too, all the places he had missed in the clean-up. While the others busy themselves with arranging transport to Teresa’s apartment, Thomas says, “Sorry for earlier. I just wasn’t expecting …”

Newt’s heart constricts, Teresa’s words echoing in his head, “That’s alright. Won’t hold it against you. I mean,” He smirks, “You were being pretty lazy. But don’t worry, I won’t tell Brenda.”

Thomas’ mouth falls open. He starts, “You –” and breaks off, laughing lightly. “Okay, fine. Whatever.” They both look over at the rest of the group as they’re all getting ready to leave. Thomas asks, “Are you going with them?”

Newt shakes his head, biting at a dry bit of skin on his lip, “Not tonight. What about you?”

Thomas shrugs, leaning back against the wall. “I was going to, for a bit. But,” he looks at Newt, and something in his eyes is suddenly shy.

“What?”

“I was wondering if it’s too early for that rain check?”

As they look at each other, holding eye contact as something churns in Newt’s lower stomach and tingles his fingertips, the group has begun to file out of the room. Someone, it might have been Minho, calls out to them and austerely ignored.

Newt says, “Not at all.”

Unlocking his front door, Newt inwardly curses when his phone chimes for the third time since they left the venue. He had stopped checking when, inside Thomas’ truck while he drove them to Newt’s apartment, Newt murmuring directions over the late night radio host chattered over the speakers, he received a message from Devil Spawn that simply said, You better CALL ME tomorrow, broseph, I want DETAILS U ARSE HE’S CUTE WHAT THE FUCK??

And another from Ben which consisted entirely of winky face emojis.

Should have just switched it off then and there, really.

He sighs when the lock clicks and the door pushes open, stepping aside to allow Thomas in first. He shuts the door, turns on some lights, and throws his keys on the table by the front littered with bills, notepads and other miscellaneous crap he couldn’t find any other home for.
“Wow,” Thomas murmurs, eyes scoping the room as he shrugs out of his coat and kicks off his boots, “Nice place.”

Newt shrugs, hanging his jacket and scarf up. His apartment is average to large, covered in the usual NYC accent of wood, brick and concrete; nicer than he’d usually be able to afford, honestly, if the giant billboard shining bright neon into the living room hadn’t hindered the selling market by almost half when he’d purchased it. Nevertheless, it was nothing thick curtains couldn’t fix, and he is lucky to get pretty decent light in during the day, whenever it is that he’s home.

As he watches Thomas scope out the room, trailing by the bookshelf and around the couch Newt gets that familiar itch, as he does whenever he has anyone new over, to rearrange absolutely everything.

“Thanks.” Newt fiddles with his shirt before moving to the kitchen, just for something to do. “Hungry?” he asks, peeking into the fridge, “I haven’t had the chance to go shopping yet, but there’s some snacks. You like dip?”


At the pause in speech Newt turns back to find that Thomas has noticed his line-up of plants in front of the window – some Aloe, a Peperomia, a couple cactus and a small pot filled with a handful of Venus flytraps that has the name Aphrodite written in sharpie on the ceramic (gifted and named by Alby).

He notices Thomas eyeing the flytraps and Peperomia before looking about the room with an anxious gleam in his eye, and Newt immediately knows he is trying to find an indicator.

“They’re docile,” Newt jumps to reassure him, “I take care of them and they just sit there and look pretty.”

“Oh …” Thomas’s shoulders lower in relief. “Really?”

Newt holds up two fingers, “Honest.”

Thomas hums, thoughtfully, leaning down to take a closer look at the array of houseplants, tracing the Aloe and gently poking a cactus, still cautious of the others. Newt leans against the kitchen island and watches him. The billboard light shining through the small gap in the curtains tints one corner of Newt’s living room in a soft cyan and magenta. The colours catch in Thomas’ hair and the bridge of his nose, the curve of his cheeks, and all at once Teresa’s sly statement she’d shared with him quite suddenly comes rushing back.

Clearing his throat and turning away before his thoughts begin to spiral, Newt taps at the counter and begins riffling through the cabinets for snacks. “So,” he calls out, “Did you feel like watching a movie, or something?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah sure.”

Newt closes a door and opens another, “Great. Anything particular in mind?”

“Nah, not really. You choose.”

Newt places some chips and accompanied dip on the coffee table before walking back to grab glasses. “Okay, well, I have to admit my DVD collection is, well. It doesn’t exist. But,” he says, “This place actually gets pretty fast Wi-Fi, which is surprising considering all the brick.”
Thomas hums in surprise, “Huh, cool. Yeah, I mean whatever you want, I don’t – Ow! Shit!”

The pained shout nearly makes Newt drop the glasses, and when he turns back around he sees Thomas backed up against the bookshelf and clutching his hand to his chest protectively. “What?” Newt demands, rushing over to him, “What is it? What happened?”

Thomas is blinking at the row of plants with owlish disbelief, “It bit me?” he says, confused, “I thought you said they were docile?”

Newt permits a quick look back at Aphrodite, sitting innocently and undisturbed in the bowl, “They are docile, but that doesn’t mean you can go about sticking your finger in her mouth, Tommy. Christ. Let me see.”

Cautiously Thomas allows Newt to take a look at his hand, where he finds a small ring of punctures the size of pin-needles beading red with blood. He sighs, “This’ll need antiseptic. Come on.”

Five minutes later Thomas is sat down on a barstool while Newt stands before him, dabbing disinfectant cream onto his pointer finger and eyeing him, amused at his expression.

“And what have we learnt tonight?” Newt teases.

Thomas rolls his eyes, wincing when the cream stings a particularly sensitive area, and deadpans, “Don’t stick your finger in a flytrap because they bite. Even if they’re docile.”

“They all bite, Tommy,” Newt abandons the cotton ball and picks up a towel, “Even if they’re docile. They just don’t bite as hard.”

Thomas squints, “What do you feed that thing?”

“Bugs. Worms. She’s great for keeping away the flies, I’ll tell you what.”

This earns a thoughtful hum. When he looks over to the window again Newt studies his profile and tries not to think too much about how close they are to each other; Thomas’ knees pressed against each side of Newt’s thighs as he stands between his legs, looming above him, close enough to see the bits of stubborn paint clinging to his tan skin, as well a small, long faded scar above his lip left over from childhood. He is warm, the hint of cologne Newt had smelt earlier now gone, snuffed out in paint and sweat, a hint of mint on his breath where his lips are chapped and his eyes are bright with intrigue, blown wide in the low light.

He feels Thomas’ eyes on him still after he breaks contact, his veins beginning to thrum and that swirling in the pit of his stomach urging him to do something stupid. Mentally shaking himself, Newt secures the bandage in place with a soft pat and a, “You’ll live. Won’t even need to amputate. You’re welcome.”

Newt raises his head to find Thomas closer than he had been a moment before, lips parted and eyes intense and searching. Newt’s breath catches in his throat. Thomas licks his lips once before speaking.

“Newt?” The way he says his name is soft and throaty, quiet, almost as if he is afraid to disturb the air itself.

Newt swallows, throat dry, “Yes?”

“Do you actually want to watch a movie?”
With his heart beating fast, no hesitation, “Not at all.”

“Okay.” Thomas nods, “Cool.”

He is not quite sure who moves first, but the next thing he knows Thomas is gripping his waist hard and Newt’s hands are tangling in his hair, angling his head, and Thomas is sighing into his mouth. Newt groans, pushing him harder against the counter. His back must be digging into the hard edge but Thomas shows no indication of caring, however, and when Newt grips at his hair just that little bit harder he shivers with his entire body, and in that moment Newt wants him badly.

With a tug, Thomas unceremoniously pulls Newt into his lap. His hands trace the edge of his pants before slipping up and under his dress shirt, warm palms caressing goose bump riddled skin. It makes him sigh, his head tilting back and exposing his throat to which Thomas wastes absolutely no time in pressing his lips to in slow, open-mouthed kisses.

Newt’s head is dizzy and he is over-heating, gripping the collar of Thomas’ t-shirt so not to slip off his lap and on to the cold tile. It is far too hot, and just as he is considering that maybe he should turn off the thermostat before they perish, he feels Thomas jump beneath him, and with a start, Newt realises that his nails have dug into the soft skin below his neck.

“Crap. Sorry, sorry,” Newt hisses, kissing him again. Thomas giggles (fucking giggles, god) against his lips before he moves to kiss over the row of crescent marks he’d left.

“S’okay,” Thomas murmurs, tracing his fingers over the bumps of Newt’s spine, taking his time to map out every dip and curve, the rough surface of the bandage brushing against his skin pleasantly. He noses at Newt’s cheek, “I don’t mind.”

Newt pauses. Interesting.

Curiously, he nips at his jaw. It is hard enough to sting, and when he is gifted with a small moan Newt is suddenly both desperate to see what Thomas looks like with his head thrown back and moaning, and mentally calculating the amount of time the condoms in his bathroom cupboard have been sitting there, anxiety building in his chest.

They need to move – where, he doesn’t care. Anywhere, because Newt is one second away from dropping to his knees and the hard surface is very bad for his leg – and his back is growing stiff and Thomas’ legs are shaking with the effort to keep them balanced on the awkward height of the barstool.

“Do you,” Newt whispers, his lips quivering against Thomas’, fists clenching and unclenching in the fabric of his shirt, too scared to cross the line but physically trembling with the feat of holding himself back, “Do you. Do you want to …?”

Thomas nods against the column of his throat, fingers toying with the top button of his shirt, “Yes. Uh huh, yeah. Fuck, I do.”

The box is, thankfully, not out of date, and Thomas looks even prettier laid atop Newt’s bed, lips red and hair mussed and sticking up in each direction, his fists gripping the sheets hard enough to tear. He leaves bruises on Newt’s thighs and Newt bites a mark into his collarbone that, later when they’re collapsed, dizzy and coming down, he sees is so vivid that for a moment Newt is shocked that it came from him. When he pulls his face out of the pillow and glances over at Thomas, wrist thrown over his forehead, dazed, lips pulled into a bright, blissed-out smile, Newt sees the bruise added to the afterglow and content simmers in his stomach. It feels something like mine.
Not that he is territorial in any way, oh no.

But.

Well, okay, maybe just a little.

Newt indulges himself for a short while longer before leaning closer – Thomas hums appreciatively when the mattress dips – and pulls his hand away from his face, holding it in mid-air so that he can see the white stripe of paint below his upper arm. Thomas groans, shaking his head in bemusement. Newt laughs breathlessly.

Thomas waves a lazy hand, “Whatever. It can stay there, I don’t care. Come here.”

Newt raises an eyebrow and allows himself to be pulled in. He settles comfortably between Thomas’ legs, Thomas’ ankles hooked over the back of Newt’s knees and arms locked over his shoulders, humming. His fingers trace unconsciously over the tattoo that runs across Thomas’ ribs, and he leans back far enough to say, “You could shower properly now, if you want.”

Thomas considers this a moment, and Newt can sense him weighing the pros and cons of forcing his jelly-like limbs to leave the bed. When he meets Newt’s eyes again there is a twinkle in the corner, and he says, “If I do will you join me?”

He does drop to his knees, after all, but is careful to make sure there is a towel to kneel on first.

Newt wakes to the gentle city ambience of distant car horns and bicycle bells. Languidly, he rolls over, limbs stretching and popping satisfyingly. He feels relaxed and well-rested in a way he has not felt in a long while, and for the first time since he could remember his head is clear, no headache at all. He huffs a laugh, pressing his face further into the pillows, the scent of his shampoo and something else causing the events of last night to come rushing back to him.

There is a scuffling coming from the kitchen, the kind where the one making the noise is trying very hard to be quiet, and when Newt reaches out and cracks open an eye he realises the other side of the bed is empty. He allows himself the small mercy to lie there for a couple more minutes, before rolling over to check his phone.

8:15 in the morning, Newt’s phone is blank save for a lone message from Minho that reads K, sent soon after they had gotten out of the shower, Newt requesting that Minho take the morning shift before passing out.

Swinging his legs over the bed is harder than he would have thought, and shrugging on the closest shirt he can find and tying his hair out of his face, Newt trudges into the kitchen, feet dragging sleepily against the floorboards. He finds Thomas in the kitchen brewing coffee, absently tapping some sort of rhythm on the countertop and humming to himself. He doesn’t notice Newt approach until he is stood practically right beside him, and saying, “Good morning.”

His eyebrows jump up as he launches out from thought, and his eyes brighten when he sees Newt, lips stretching into a smile. He says, “Morning,” and leans in for a kiss.

It sends shivers down Newt’s spine, curling pleasantly around his toes.

“Coffee?” Thomas’ eyes are timid in the way which usually accompanies morning afters, where
everything is still blurry and unsure.

Newt nods, “Please.”

Thomas pours them both a generous amount, the smell instantly making Newt feel more awake.

“So,” Thomas begins, taking a sip. He’s wearing one of Newt’s sweatpants. It rides low on his hips and the bottoms are rolled up over his ankles. “Last night was, uh.” Thomas begins, awkwardly, “Fun. I mean I like hanging out with you. I also liked –”

Newt rolls his eyes and leans in to shut Thomas up with a kiss.

A short time later, when they’ve both finished their coffee, Newt leans back against the counter with Thomas between his legs, languidly making out. And even later, when they’re catching their breath, Thomas loose-limbed under him and, faced pressed into the pillow, Newt plastered against his back and lazily kissing that little bump at the top of his spine, Newt’s phone goes off on the bedside table.

Newt groans at the buzzing and regretfully unglues himself from Thomas to roll over to switch the damn thing off.

“Whatssup?” Thomas asks, voice muffled.

Newt places it back on the table face down, “Gally. Minho was just telling me he’s picked up the new indicator.”

“Oh. Cool. Well, at least that’s – wait.” Thomas lifts up on his elbows, his face suddenly very tense, “What time is it?”

Newt frowns, “Close to nine. Why?”

“Shit,” Thomas hisses, launching himself up, and just like that the whole mood has shifted. “Shit, shit, shit.”

As he’s looking around for his clothes Newt sits up, watching him scramble around the room, “Is everything okay?”

“Got a meeting this morning with my brother’s teacher,” He jumps around on one leg and tugging his jeans up the other, “Completely forgot. He’s going to kill me.”

Newt scratches at his scalp. “The teacher?” he asks.

Thomas barks a laugh under his t-shirt.

Newt swings out of bed and pulls his underwear back on. He resists the urge to say I didn’t know you had a brother and instead goes with, “When’s the meeting?”

“A couple hours. If I rush home and change and maybe go over the speed limit a little,” Thomas huffs, “I’ll just make it.”

As Thomas flutters around the apartment panicking, that cloudy, rose-tinted spell from last night and this morning fade and the real world takes it upon itself to crawl back in. Newt fiddles with his phone, wondering if he should check on Minho and how business is going, find out if they need to do another stationary order, call Gally about the indicator and ask if he knows when it will be installed, if he should text Brenda (if she’s even awake yet, if so maybe Teresa would be a better
“Hey,” Thomas lightly touching his arm jolts Newt back to reality. He’s closer than he realised, shoes and coat on, and he is looking at Newt with a cocktail of emotions swimming in his eyes, too many to lock on to. “Sorry, I really didn’t want to run out like this.”

Newt shakes his head, smiling reassuringly, “It’s fine, Tommy, I understand. Go, before you’re late.”

Thomas grins and locks his fingers behind Newt’s neck, bringing him down for a kiss. His eyes are lidded when they pull away. Playing with the stray hairs at the back of Newt’s head, Thomas says, “I wanna do this again sometime. Not just this this, but maybe if you want to go to dinner, or lunch or something?”

Newt curls his fingers in the lapels of his jacket, and nods, “I’d like that.”

Thomas breathes, “Great,” in a soft tone and pulls Newt in for another kiss, and another, and another, and by the fifth Newt is practically pushing him out the door with a, “Go, Thomas.”

“I’ll call you!” Thomas says before the front door shuts behind him.
Chapter 2

Brenda slamming the tablet down on the counter scares a customer into tipping a pot of bloody lavender all over the floor, and Newt out of his skin. The fountain pen scratches a blue line all the way across the document he’d been in the middle of filling out. With disdain Newt looks up at Brenda’s stormy face, then down at the tablet, and then to the poor customer and decides that Brenda and her tomato red ears can wait.

“Brenda –” Newt sighs, reaching under his desk for gloves.

“Look!”

“Brenda –”

“Look what they said!”

He does look; after the customer is swiftly directed to the wash station and the mess is of course cleaned up and roped off with bright yellow cones. Lit up on the screen is a page of the *New York Times* with the headline *Mania in Manhattan!* printed in bold san serif. The subheading reads:

*The most anticipated art exhibit of the year has finally premiered, much to the excitement of many fans and critics – but is new artist Brenda Despain’s show ‘Mania’ too edgy?*

The article then goes on to talk about socialism and statements that were made, both political and otherwise, that the journalist writing this felt was too “on the nose, leaving no room to breathe”. The entire thing is a classic rendition of journalistic chauvinism, and would (one day) be hilarious to look back on.

Now, however, is an entirely different story.

If Brenda were a tea-pot her steam would be filling the entire store like a fog.

“Too edgy!” She yells, all but screeches, and Newt casts a timid eye over the remaining customers who turn to stare, “They called me *too edgy!* What the fuck? What year is this?”

“Brenda,” he tries again, maybe third time’s the charm.

It doesn’t work. As Brenda begins pacing back and forth before the counter, Newt settles back on to his stool, silently mourning the loss of this morning’s potential sales, and begins scrolling through the article while his friend rants at the top of her lungs.

“And they didn’t just leave it at that, oh no! Distasteful, Newt!” She scoffs loudly, “Like, can you believe it? Brett Whiteley paints a fucking floor to ceiling wasteland of boobs and ass while on crack but *I’m too edgy*?”

With the ring of a bell, the last of the customers leave. Defeated, Newt moves to flip the *back in 15* sign toward the door.

“You know what, fuck it!” Brenda flips hair out of her face haughtily, “I’ll be edgy. I’ll be so tasteless they’ll feel it coming out of their assholes. I’ll find whoever wrote this, and I’ll show ‘em what edgy looks like.”
“Brenda!”

“What!”

Newt holds up two fingers. Looking her in the eyes at this moment is positively terrifying, as if he will burn to a crisp at her fury, but he manages. “Breathe,” he says, “It’s going to be alright.”

She stares at Newt long enough until her jaw loses some tension and her gaze extinguishes some, and she huffs, “Yeah, duh.”

Newt makes them tea and they end up sitting in the back of the greenhouse, quietly. It is only now, the sun filtering through the glass above and outlining Brenda in a soft gold that he realises how upset she really is over this review.

“It was in the Times,” she is whining in a low, miserable drone.

Newt sets his mug down, “Yeah? And? There will be other reviews. Better ones. One journalist’s opinion doesn’t trump everyone else’s.”

Brenda drops her head into her hands and breathes deeply. Newt doesn’t think he has ever seen her this crestfallen. The sight is heartbreaking.

“What if it does, though?” she mumbles, “What if no one else has anything better to say? What if everyone hated it?”

“Hey,” Newt reaches to pull one of her hands away from her face. A brown eye painted honey in the sun blinks back at him miserably, “From the look I saw on everyone’s face that night no one hated it, okay. Trust me. Quite the opposite, actually.”

Eventually, with a sigh, Brenda sets her other hand down on the table and stares at her tea, playing with the little tag at the end of the string. She’s wearing a sweater with fibres interwoven in it to reflect sunlight, casting a spectrum of sparkles along her hands and the table they sit at. It’s too girly for her usual style, and Newt muses that it must be Teresa’s. The thought warms his insides and prompts him to ask, “Has Teresa seen it yet?”

Brenda shakes her head, checking her phone. “Doubt it,” she says, “I’d know if she did. She had a meeting, and then I think a coffee date with Thomas right about now.” Something sparks to life in Brenda’s eyes at the tail end of this sentence and, like the flip of a switch, she is back to normal.

“Speaking of which, isn’t it cute how our girlfriends are bffs?” She says, grinning mischievously over the rim of her mug.

Newt rolls his eyes, “Hilarious.”

Brenda hums, taking a long sip. “How’d it go with Prince Charming, anyway? He finally take you to dinner?”

He had seen this coming from so far away that he can’t even feel embarrassed. Newt scratches at his neck, the skin under his turtleneck itchy from the humidity, growing embarrassment, and a couple stubborn bruises that insist on sticking around longer than he finds polite. “Uh,” Newt coughs, “Not exactly. Not yet …”

Brenda stops drinking. “Wait. Minho said you left together after the show but I thought he just meant left together and not – Oh my god, not left together, oh my god, Newt!”
Newt manages to conceal a wince, “It’s not that big of a deal …”

She punches his arm. “Yeah, it is! I’ve had to listen to T’ complaining about him mooning over you for weeks now.” She does a little bounce in her seat. The sparkles dance frantically across the table, “I’m so proud of you. Get it!”

Newt groans, puffing a stray piece of hair out of his eyes. Brenda looks far too satisfied with herself, but Newt can’t find it in him to feel mad at her at the present moment. Leaning back in his chair, he watches as Brenda perks to her phone chiming from her pocket, pulling it out only to make a face at the screen.

“Well. She’s seen it all now,” Brenda sighs, typing out a quick reply to whatever her girlfriend has sent her before placing it face down on the table. “Kind of a little scared about what she’ll do, not gonna lie. Also a little horny, too.” Newt snorts into his tea. Brenda grins, “She says her and Tommy-boy are on their way over.”

Newt nods slowly, suddenly nervous for some curious reason. Clearing his throat, he asks, “How long have you known Thomas, anyway?”

“Met him freshman year of college. He came as a package deal along with Teresa.”

Newt smiles at this. He can almost see it: a young, bright eyed and bushy tailed Thomas and Teresa waltzing around campus together, nice shoes and tailored coats and stapled to each other’s clothing. He imagines Brenda coming into the picture, messy and eclectic. He imagines Thomas teasing Teresa about her, and proceeding to follow the two everywhere.

She makes a sound which breaks him out of his thoughts, and Newt glances up to catch Brenda looking at him, curiously.

“What is it?” he asks.

“I don’t know,” she murmurs, tilting her head, “You two. Something just … clicks, you know? I can’t explain it. It’s like you fit together.” Tapping her nails, still pink but chipped as if she’s been biting them, Brenda says, “The ancient Greeks believed that early humans had two heads, four arms and four legs, but were split in half by Zeus as punishment and cursed to spend eternity looking for their other half.”

Newt raises an eyebrow. He has heard this story before. “Soulmates? Really, Brenda?” He asks incredulously, ignoring the new, tingling feeling in his chest that had arisen with her story.

Brenda shrugs, laughing, “I don’t know! Maybe! Aren’t half your family, like, gipsies or something? You’re supposed to believe in all that stuff, right?”

Newt does not dignify that with a response.

Instead, standing and brushing imaginary dirt from his jeans, he says, “I should open the shop back up. Minho will be in for his shift and freak out when he sees the till.”

Brenda winces when he says this, “Uh yeah. Sorry about that.”

Newt shakes his head, smiling and rubbing her shoulder on the way out. Fifteen minutes later Teresa and Thomas storm into the shop – or, rather, Teresa storms in while Thomas trails behind here, wide-eyed with a winded, the bell of the shop ringing loudly announcing their appearance. Leaves blow in from the street, and Newt curses to himself as he settles to watch yet another round of customers flee in terror.
While Teresa fumes at a now much calmer Brenda, Thomas makes his way over to Newt. Previously bundled against the chill of the Manhattan streets, he works to untangle his scarf from around his neck, undoing his coat, smiling warmly at Newt who feels his heart embarrassingly stutter.

“Hey,” He says, moving to walk behind the counter.

Newt kicks his leg out to stop him and remarks, teasingly, “Um, excuse me, sir, this area is for employees only.”

Thomas stumbles to a stop, blinking in surprise. A beat passes before his eyes narrow and his smile turns sly, “Oh really? Well, in that case, I wouldn’t want to break the rules.”

Thomas jumps to sit up on to the counter.

Newt splutters, “You can’t sit up there, either!”

Thomas tilts his head, blinking innocently, “But you said I couldn’t be behind the counter and I’m not behind the counter anymore.”

Newt stands, “Look, mate, I am trying to run a respectable establishment here –” Thomas Oohs “– so if you keep this up I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

“Hm, yeah I think I like ‘Sir’ better.”

Newt narrows his eyes, “You are on very thin ice right now.”

Thomas smirks, “You going to kick me out, are you?”

“If it comes to that.”

“What if I made it up to you?”

The corner of Newt’s mouth twitches in the attempt to stay in character, and he says, “Bribery will not help your situation, but I’ll hear you out this once.”

Thomas drums his fingers against the marble, “What would you say if I told you I may have made reservations for tonight?”

Newt pushes at his teeth with his tongue, thinking. “Reservations where?” He asks.

“Restaurant down the street. They have amazing happy hour specials.”

Newt hums, looking Thomas up and down, still seated on his bloody counter. Turning around, he says, “Interesting. I’ll have to see if my schedule is open.”

The immediate sound of Thomas coughing and jumping down off the counter makes him grin. Thomas grabs his wrist, the tips of his fingers pink and frosty from the cold, “Okay, okay,” he laughs as Newt pretends to check a file, gently tugging on his wrist to get his attention.

“In all seriousness,” He says when Newt finally turns back, voice lighter and laced with an endearingly shy quality, “do you want to go out? With me, I mean. And also if you’re free.”

Newt clicks his tongue, “Damn, I was hoping you meant with somebody else.” This earns him a sharp pinch. “Yeah, Tommy, I’m bloody free,” Newt breathes a laugh, “I’d love to. Also, ow.” he adds, rubbing his stinging hand.
Thomas grimaces, “Sorry,” and then, the absolute asshole, leans down to place a soft, lingering kiss on the back of Newt’s hand, eyes gentle and filled with apology, tracing his thumb over the red mark. Newt barely suppresses a shiver before Brenda’s voice brings them both back to reality.

“Well, that was disgusting.”

The girls are now staring at them from across the room, Teresa’s icy expression steadily thawing and Brenda with her arm around her waist, her nose wrinkling.

“Glad we were here to witness that.”

Newt is gifted with the sight of Thomas’ ears turning pink.

The shop bell rings once again and Minho trudges is, shaking raindrops from his hair and blinking at the shop like it’s the first time he’s seen it. Brenda and Teresa direct their gaze elsewhere as Minho drops his bag atop one of the plush, floral print love seats, astonished, and says, “Where the hell are all the customers?”

“And then next week we have this huge seminar I’m going to need, like, three expresso’s minimum to stay awake through, since I’ve got an assignment to submit the night before, but it’s a good chance to meet executives and get to know people in the field and … Newt?”

“Hm?” Newt blinks into awareness, glancing up at his friend staring at him in confusion and all at once remembers where he is. Sucking in a breath Newt straightens out his spine and adjusts the laptop, half titled off the pillow, muttering, “Sorry, sorry.”

Ably holds up a hand, “S’okay, man. Thought I lost you for a second there,” he smirks, “Where’d you go?”

Newt scratches his scalp, messing up his hair even worse, but whatever it’s nearly 2 am and Alby’s seen him looking far, far worse. “Nowhere,” he says.

Alby hums, eyes narrowing for a fraction of a second. The connection glitches and prolongs it. “Kay. How’s the shop?” he asks, and the curl of his lip tells Newt he had wanted to say something else.

Newt drums his fingers on his laptop, “Fine. Pretty good actually. Better, if people didn’t keep driving my bloody customers away.”

Alby scoffs a laugh, “Ah yeah, Minho told me about that. Read the article, too. Sucks, but she’ll bounce back.”

Newt nods, considering. In the time since that initial article had hit, there has been a mixture of response from other journalists and the public, mainly on social media, both defending Brenda and others agreeing with the article. Since then Brenda has gone on record, giving statements and explanations for the show itself and the message and representation she had been aiming to achieve with the exhibition overall. Day four and the poll in Brenda’s favour is steadily rising.

Good, Newt thinks, this city could use someone who isn’t afraid to say what they think, and to build an entire exhibition just to speak those words, bluntly, and without fear.
He just wishes Brenda’s career wasn’t a potential casualty in order for this to happen.

“I actually wanted to ask about that,” Alby is saying, and Newt snaps back to the present for the second time tonight, “How did you feel about it? Brenda’s show? Considering, you know, your line of work?”

The laptop slips a little more.

The question catches him off guard. Newt’s throat makes a funny sound and he clears it, sitting up and adjusting the pillow just for something to do. Truthfully, he doesn’t think about it. Truthfully, Glade Botanicals’ sole purpose is to stock cognizant plants and Newt’s to sell to them to the public. Brenda’s show had highlighted something that hasn’t been spoken aloud on Manhattan Island in nearly 80 years, not since the initial outbreak and especially not since the violaceous hedera had been cleared in government office and half the city’s population fled in the next following months.

Brenda had, intentionally, opened a lot of doors and asked a lot of questions and began conversations she maybe shouldn’t have, and therefor Newt is, intentionally, not thinking about it. He likes to keep business and pleasure strictly separate.

Which, he is aware, is the most ironic statement of the year.

What he tells Alby is, “I’m very proud of her.” He waves a hand, “All that media crap aside, you didn’t see it, Al, you didn’t see her. It was like she was glowing. That entire night was hers and everything in that room had come straight from her mind and it was amazing. How far she’s come in such a small amount of time, it just,” he sighs, “It truly was remarkable.”

By the time he finishes, Alby is quiet on the other side of the screen, smiling softly. “So yeah,” Newt finishes, “That’s how I feel about it.”

And that’s how I will continue to feel about it if it bloody kills me.

Alby shifts in his seat so that Newt is given an amazing view of his extremely messy apartment, blankets piled on top of the bed without a single care. “Good that,” he says, “I mean, I guess it did look pretty damn good.”

Newt frowns, “You mean in the pictures?”

Alby snorts, “No. Harriet sent me a play-by-play of Rachel’s updates,” he says with accompanied air-quotes, “I was in a lecture. Nearly got kicked out. So tell her thanks for me, will ya.”

Newt laughs. “Anyway, what were you saying before? About next week?”

“A seminar, you idiot, but I’m not gonna go on about that and bore you with the details.”

Newt gasps in mock shock, “Bore me with the details? With your post-graduate degree in biochemical engineering and minor in horticulture?” He laughs again when Alby winces.

Behind him, Newt thinks he sees the blanket on his bed move but levels it up to a bad connection and tired eyes. Alby groans, “You gotta string all that out? Every time? Really, man?”

“Don’t pretend like you don’t drop it to every new person you bloody meet, I know you. You probably use it in bars to pick up people way out of your league.”

Alby holds up his middle finger to the camera. “You see that?”
Newt squints, “Huh? What? The connections fuzzy I can’t see anything.”

“Oh, fuck you.”

Newt shrugs, unaffected, “Women love a guy with a big brain. Or so I’ve heard. I wouldn’t know myself.”

“Why, because you don’t have one?”

Newt narrows his eyes, expression souring, “I will fly all the way to up there just to slap you, Albert. Don’t think I won’t.”

Alby throws his head back and laughs. “I’m sorry but you set yourself up with that one!” He says and the blanket in the background glitches again. Newt rubs his eyes. He should probably wrap up the call and head off to bed before he really starts to hallucinate.

Then Alby goes and says, “Speaking of, how’s it going with that guy anyway? The one that, well, you didn’t tell me about,” he gives a pointed glare, “that I had to hear about from Minho.”

Newt lets his head hit the back of the couch and groans, “Oh for fuck – that fucking loudmouth.”

Alby settles back and proceeds to stare at Newt in a knowing way while looking very pleased with himself. “Yep. Good old Min. So, tell me about him.”

Newt groans.

“All about him,” he smirks. “You guys a thing, or?”

Newt lifts his head with a sigh, “Yes. No? I don’t know, maybe.”

Alby hums, “You been on a date?”

Newt picks at a loose thread in his sleep pants, “One, yeah.”

Alby hums again, and says, “Send me a picture of him.”


For a ridiculous moment, Alby looks offended that Newt would even ask him that. “Because,” he says, “If this dude’s gonna be dating my best friend I want to make sure he’s good enough. Not that I judge your taste or anything. Well, actually, that’s a lie. I do.”

Newt glares, insides going cold. “No, Alby,” he says, partly because he doesn’t want to admit that the only photo he actually has of Thomas on his phone is that candid Ben had sent him that one morning.

Alby rolls his eyes, “Whatever, I’ll just get one off Minho. But hey, Newt,” Alby’s voice lowers, turning serious, “Remember that time I told you to stop thinking so much and just go for it? Despite all that, I do also want you to be careful about who you jump into bed with.”

Newt sighs and rubs his temple. He knew this was coming …

“I know, Al,” he says, “This won’t be like last time.”

Alby looks unconvinced, “That’s what you told me the last time. And the time before that … I just don’t want you to get your heart broken again.” Because I know where it left you, goes unsaid but
at the same time, it is the loudest thing in the room.

“No, that’s not –” he closes his eyes briefly, frustrated, “This isn’t – Thomas isn’t. It’s not like that. He’s nice, and he’s sweet and funny and he is the biggest dork I have ever bloody met and I,” Newt pauses before saying it out loud for the first time, “I like him. A lot.”

Regarding him for a moment longer before finally nodding, Alby says, “Okay,” but his tone says many more things Newt isn’t willing to analyse at half-two in the morning.

Alby shifts and the connection glitches once more because the blanket has moved again, and now Newt frowns, leaning forward and squinting at the screen as if he could peer around his friend’s body.

“Alby,” he says, “Do your bedsheets have … feet?”

Alby goes so still for a second Newt is convinced that the connection has frozen until the feet, with comically cartoonish speed, disappears from shot and Newt feels his mouth pulling into a smile. Alby’s eyes dart to the side. “Uh,” he says and nothing else.

Newt raises an eyebrow, a bubbly sort of elation building in his chest, “Well, well, well.”

Scratching his nose, “I got a dog.”

“You’re allergic to dogs,” Newt points out smugly.

“I, uh, I meant to say cat.”

“Pretty big cat.”

Alby swears.

Newt purses his lips and cocks his head, considering, “Who was that girl you worked with that you had a crush on? Miyoko? Or how about that guy you wouldn’t shut up about last month. What was his name again? Rick?”

“Nick,” Alby corrects, too fast, and immediately realises he’s fallen into a trap. He swears again.

Newt is sure he’s beaming by this point. Alby sends a glare to someone off camera and Newt calls out, “Hi, Nick.”

A beat later he is delivered a small, guilty, “Hey.” When Alby glares harder Newt hears an indignant squeak and, “I didn’t think he could see me, I’m sorry!”

Newt laughs and stabs the screen right over Alby’s head with his finger. “You bloody hypocrite!” he yells. Alby groans and slouches in his chair and Newt continues, “Here you were schooling me about Thomas and-” doing a mock impression of his friend’s voice “-oh, I had to butt into your love life through someone else because I can’t mind my own business. Even when it’s not your bloody business and – No, shush – and here you are!” Newt throws his hands in the air, “With your own secret conquests that you haven’t told me about.”

Alby winces, “Okay. Look, fine, just calm down.”

In the background he hears a haughty, “You wouldn’t stop talking about me?”

“Alright! I’m sorry. Fuck.” Alby pinches the bridge of his nose and sighs, “Isn’t it getting late for you?”
“Suddenly I’m not tired anymore.”

“Yeah, well I’m sick of both of you, so I’m gonna go,” Newt snorts and at the same time hears Nick laugh. He waves a hand, “Go get your beauty sleep. Talk to you next time.”

Newt chuckles, “Yeah yeah. You too.”

“Good luck with your dream boat.” And with those flat parting words, Alby ends the Skype call. The screen turns blank and Newt’s own face remains staring back at him.

He smiles softly, and murmurs, “Later, mate.”

“Should we make a toast?” Thomas had said the other night at dinner. He’d taken Newt to a restaurant down the street, much like he said, which did, in fact, have amazing happy hour deals, especially since the place overall was much fancier and a little more expansive than Newt would usually peg for. He tried not to think about this too much, picking up the glass of wine Thomas poured for the both of them.

He lifted an eyebrow, “Are we celebrating?”

Newt noticed then how Thomas had paused, wine glass stilling in the air for a fraction of a second before he recovered, smiled, and said, “Yeah. To our first date.”

The restaurant was round and Grecian themed, and Thomas had looked sinfully good against all the blue and green and white, the light of the booth painting them in a soft gold and Newt, warmth pulling at his lower stomach, had smirked and playfully landed a kick on Thomas’ ankle, raising his glass.

It occurs to him, now, that the time frame given to a member of the public who has purchased a violaceous hedera to plant it is four weeks. Which, by Newt’s calculations, meant that evening marked the cut-off date exactly.

Which meant that Thomas, by law, would have had to have planted the seed that morning, as afterwards they had both gone back to Newt’s apartment and he proceeded to spend the night.

Which meant, that as they dined and drank and laugh and flirted, Newt laughing a little too hard at his jokes and Thomas’ shoe toeing at Newt’s beneath the table, somewhere there was a person dying.

Not at Thomas’ hand.

Because, as the law states and has stated for the past many decades, death at the hand of devil’s ivy isn’t murder.

He meets Thomas’ grandfather on a particularly windy Saturday. Standing at a crossing, coat bundled against the wind and beanie warm on top of his head covering the tips of his ears, pink from the chill, so that his hair flicks outwards and tickles his neck. Buds in his ears muffle the
early morning traffic. Foot tapping lightly and fingernails drumming with impatience against the metal pole, it is by chance – and by chance only – that Newt decides to turn his head 45 degrees to the left to see Thomas talking with an older man.

Talking, to be honest, is a fairly polite way to put it. Arguing would be better.

He’s too far away to tell what about, but whatever it is it looks heated, Thomas’s jaw set and his eyebrows furrowed, hands flying about enigmatically. The man’s shoulders are square and stiff, but he stands his ground as Thomas yells at him, cracking back sure and calmly, which only seems to egg on Thomas more.

Newt isn’t sure how long he stands there, watching the two of them shout at each other on the side of a busy street, but he knows that two sets of lights, not including the ones he initially wanted to catch, have come and gone before Thomas finally looks over and notices him. Surprise and embarrassment are two of the many emotions that flash across his face, and Newt looks back and forth between Thomas and the other side of the street.

Finally, the old man clues into the sudden change and turns his gaze toward Newt. The first thing Newt notices about him is the sharp line of his jaw, as he has lightly traced his hands and pressed kisses over a nearly identical jawline on Thomas’ own face. Tall and intimidating, his eyebrows are pinched and grey, eyes squinting as he sizes up Newt from a distance for a fraction of a second before turning back to Thomas and promptly elbowing him in the ribs, pointing at Newt, who is frozen in place.

Eventually, the man seems to give up, rolling his eyes before turning and beginning a quick and confident stride toward Newt. Thomas does a little jump to chase after him. In the five terrifying seconds that Newt waits for them to approach, he rips the buds out of his ears and messily shoves them in his pocket, fingers twitching with the desire to tidy himself up.

The man standing in front of him, though, is far different to Mr Stormy from thirty seconds in the past.

“Hello!” He bellows, a wide smile stretched to reveal bright, perfect teeth, “You must be Isaac! If you’re not this is gon’ be pretty damn awkward, and I deeply apologize.”

“Oh for fuck –” Thomas swears breathlessly.

Newt swallows, throat dry, and corrects, “Uh, you can call me Newt.”

“Newt!” He yells again. Newt is beginning to think this is his natural indoor voice. Clasping Newt’s gloved hand in a firm, tight handshake, he goes on, “I like that. Unique, to the point. Thomas here” – he clamps a hand down on Thomas’ shoulder – “has told me a lot about you.” Leaning in, “Though I have to say, I don’ really get what you see in this bozo.”

Newt looks at Thomas, the spitting image of a middle schooler desperately trying to flee an embarrassing family member.

The old man laughs, deep-bellied and unsurprisingly loud. Newt notices a neat, white moustache above his top lip, equal to those of textbook war veterans. “Nah, I’m just kidding. Name’s Alec.”

Newt clears his throat. “Nice to meet you, Sir.”

Alec turns back to Thomas with delight. “I like him.”

This is how Newt finds himself sat in a booth with Thomas and his grandfather twenty minutes
later. Newt taps restlessly on his thigh while opposite him Alec scans the menu, humming to himself as he does, and to his left, Thomas is trying very hard to vanish into thin air. No one speaks, content in the quiet of the early morning, until the waitress brings them their pot of coffee and they in return give her their breakfast orders.

When Alec leans back against the plush bench, lacing his hands together neatly on the table, Newt realises that Thomas has his smile, too.

“So, Newt, tell me about yourself. How did you two meet?”

Thomas sits up straight. “You know all this, I already told you.” To Newt, he says, “He already knows this, he’s just trying to intimidate you. And,” back to Alec, “it isn’t working.”

Alec chuckles, softer now, and raises his palms. “You caught me,” he says. “Anyway, Newt, what do ya do for a living?”

Under the table, Thomas’ knee presses against his, and he realises.

“I’m a florist,” Newt says.

Alec’s eyebrows jump up, “A florist?” he says, “Well now. How does one get into that kind of work?”

“There’s an entire course dedicated to it. Pretty intense, actually.”

Alec nods, humming. “Oh, I bet,” he says, “’Specially in this day an’ age. They grill you a lot there, Newt?”

“Yes, sir.”

Ale points at Newt and looks at Thomas. “You hear that?”

Thomas rolls his eyes, huffing. Newt can’t help but smirk, finding his almost child-like annoyance and exasperation endearing. It reminds him of Lizzy, whenever they are with their parents and their mother says, well, anything. Thomas’ posture and the stiff curl of his lip brings him back to a time nearly a decade before, after his posh, middle-class mother and father decided to ship his sister off to some boarding school for the arts in Boston, on a ballet scholarship he is still not 100% sure was attained traditionally.

Meeting up again after a year of her being in that big city, all alone, he remembers the moment they had all sat in some fancy restaurant drinking high tea and chewing on boring finger sandwiches, his mum had heard to her daughter talk for practically the first time that morning and immediately gasped.

“Elizabeth!” She said, “Darling, you sound so American,” while Newt’s baby sister scowled down into her tea as if that were the worst day of her life.

“So what kind do you sell then?”

Alec’s voice breaks him out of his thoughts. Newt turns back. “I specialise in cognizant plants,” he says. It’s the truth, but he doesn’t have to specify what level.

Alec whistles, impressed, “Business doing well?”

Newt tries not to bite his lip of clear his throat. He says, “Most days I would say so, yeah.”
“I bet. High demand, these days.”

“Sure is.”

“And where’s your place at?”

Thomas very purposefully turns in his seat to stare out over the diner, pushing hydrangeas and some jasmine out of his view, “When’s our food getting here, I’m starving.”

Something happens then. Alec, eyes previously trained on Newt, he notices, cloudy and intense, blink once and soften back to that previous southern gentleman-like cheeriness.

“You’re always hungry, boy.” He says to his grandson, then, turning to Newt, “When this one was a little tyke we used to call him the human vacuum cleaner. Know why?”

Thomas groans beside him. Newt captures his hand under the table, smirking.

“I can take a pretty good guess,” Newt says.

Alec waves a hand, “Whatever his momma put down in front of him would be gone in an instant. Bam! Where’d it go? Down the hatch. We were always amazed. You know how you hear about all those kids that’re picky eaters? Not this guy. Not a crumb left.”

Thomas groans louder. Newt rubs circles into his palm, trying to keep a leash on the huge smile threatening to break free across his face.

Alec continues, “Big sweet tooth, also –”

“Yeah I wonder where I got that from.”

“– Boy’s teeth were rotting by the time he was twelve. Dentist bills a mile long. Got a huge lecture from the doc, too,” he laughs.

Thomas grimaces, “Are we done? Are you good now?”

“But then where did it all go?” Alec says, clearly not done, “This one’s got a metabolism that’ll make you cry. Made me cry.”

“Yeah, well –”

“Has my grandson ever told you he used to run track in high school?”

“You know, Newt really doesn’t need to hear –”

Newt says, “No, he hasn’t told me that.”

The looks of utter betrayal on Thomas’ face could make your hair curl. Newt squeezes his hand and smiles wide.

Alec’s expression is amused as he goes on to tell Newt about all the competitions Thomas has competed in and won, all by the end of senior year. Thomas sinks further into his seat as he goes on, batting the occasional iris away irritably. He is practically on the floor by the time Alec gets to his academic achievements, which are quite impressive.

“He may not look it, but this kid’s got some brains.” Alec touches his chest, “Gets it all from me, of course.”
Thomas huffs a laugh, shaking his head toward the window. Sunlight shines on flushed cheeks.

“His brother, on the other hand,” Alec says, “Polar opposites, those two. Kid’s got creativity coming out of his pores. Takes after his momma, that way.”

Alec’s tone drifts toward the end, and Thomas coughs once into his fist. The penny drops in Alec’s eyes and he claps his hands together. “Right,” he says, “On that note, I gotta run to the little boy’s room.” Standing up, he tells Newt, “Make sure he doesn’t eat all my pancakes, will ya?”

Thomas glares, “Go pee, old man, you’re bladder’s the size of a grape.”

Alec raises an eyebrow, mouth pressed into a thin line, “Respect, Thomas. You could learn a thing or two from this boy.”

After he leaves Thomas’ whole body slumps back into the booth. Newt laughs as he groans into his hands miserably. “I am so sorry,” he says. “He doesn’t have an off switch.”

Newt, fingers still wound around Thomas’ wrist, brings their hands up to the table. “He’s sweet. He … has a screw loose here and there, maybe, but he is bloody hilarious.”

“Oh!” Thomas scoffs, “He’s got more than a couple screws loose. There isn’t one tight screw left!”

Newt chuckles. Leaning back, turned toward Thomas, he says, “He reminds me of you.”

Thomas points, offended, towards the men’s bathroom, “I am not that insane.”

“Well …”

“Excuse me?”

“I mean,” Newt smirks, “The frankly celestial amount of sugar you consume is one thing. I’m surprised you don’t cough sugar cane.” Thomas attempts to splutter out a response but Newt cuts him off, “Don’t even try it! I’ve seen all the syrup you make Ben put in your coffee.” He presses a hand to Thomas’ chest, over his heart, “You okay? Heart beating regular, and all that? You don’t get winded climbing upstairs, Mr Gold Metal Track Superstar?”

Thomas makes a noise of outrage, pushing Newt’s hand away, “Oh, shut up.” But he is smiling, wide and carefree. “We’re not all health freaks.”

“I am not a bloody health freak!”

Thomas levels him with a look of scepticism.

Newt rolls his eyes, pinching Thomas’ wrist, “I am not. Jerk.”

Thomas pinches him back before leaning forward and kissing him, “We’ll see.” When they separate a jasmine brushes Newt’s cheek, making him jump. Thomas bats it away irritably and places his fingers over where the flower touched him. Newt kisses him again.

Someone clears their throat behind him and they break apart, Newt smoothing out his shirt, cheeks pink as the waitress places their food on the table. Alec returns not a minute later.

“So, Newt,” he starts off, like he never left, “Tell me, is your whole family here or is it just you?”
“Ah, shit.” Thomas hisses when the back of his skull hits the door.

“Whoops,” Newt grimaces, kissing his temple in apology. Thomas groans and captures his mouth again, impatient and hungry. Newt sighs into the kiss, pulling Thomas’ body in, closer, harder, and allows himself to be navigated further into his apartment.

Back hitting the soft, worn out plush, Thomas settles comfortably between his legs, hands bracketed on either side of Newt's head. Newt asks, “You have anywhere to be today?”

Thomas shakes his head, lips and nose brushing with only a hair between them. “No. Nothing important. You?” Newt shakes his head, making Thomas hum happily. He asks, “Where were you going this morning?”

Newt rolls his shoulders back languidly. “Just a walk.”

This causes Thomas to pause, lifting up just far enough to that he can see Newt’s face, which is frowning back at him in annoyance over the sudden distance. “A walk? At eight in the morning?”

Newt scoffs, “Not all of us have the luxury of sleeping until noon.”

Thomas narrows his eyes. “I work a fulltime job,” he says.

“You wouldn’t think it,” Newt replies, coyly, and flips them.

Today, with the billboard outside tinting the sunlight on Thomas’ face a pale aqua, it’s different. Or, rather, Newt feels different. Thomas wriggles and laughs and runs his mouth under him like usual, but now Newt is filled with all of this knowledge and bright, warm images of a younger Thomas that it fills him with an affection so strong and overwhelming he feels it in his bones. He takes his time to gather blankets and throw covers, dragging the duvet from his bed into the living room. He kisses down Thomas’ chest slower than he would usually, takes extra care to be sure Thomas is perfectly comfortable with a pillow under his back, that his shoulders aren’t at all stiff. He takes him apart slowly and purposeful, so that Thomas is trembling and stuttering by the time he actually sinks into him, a completely incoherent mess from here on until after they’re collapsed against the blankets, somehow having ended up on the floor during it all. And then later, when they’re sat comfortably against the window pane, still naked with a plate of strawberries and grapes between them, Newt notices the press of Thomas' lips and the slight furrow in his brow.

“Hey,” Newt reaches forward, nudging his chin. “You alright?”

“Hm?” Thomas blinks into awareness, glancing about the apartment as if he were surprised to still be there, “Oh, yeah I’m fine. Just –” he groans, kneading his eyes with the balls of his thumbs, “I keep thinking about earlier. He just completely bombarded you, I’m so sorry.”

“What?” Newt pauses, plucked grape halfway to his mouth, “No, Tommy, it’s good. You don’t have to apologise.”

Thomas groans, his head thumping against the window. “I do, though,” he says, and explains, slowly, “Alec was in the army; a colonel. But he got sick. I think he took the war home with him and never let it go.”

Newt nods slowly, fiddling with a grape stem. “You call your grandpa Alec?” he asks.
Thomas rolls his eyes heavenward, “He *hates* being called grandpa. Says it makes him feel old.”

Newt snorts a laugh. “I mean, I did think he was your uncle or something, at first.”

Thomas nods, a small smile tugging at the corners of his lips now. He takes a strawberry from the plate and begins to pluck the leaves off, one by one. “Yeah, a lot of people do,” he explains. “Mom had me young. She was only sixteen when she got pregnant. The guy who knocked her up bailed after she told him, and she never saw him again.”

Newt snoots closer. “You never met him?”

Thomas shakes his head. “I guess I thought about tracking him down a few years back, but,” he gives a half shrug, “You know. Anyway, mom met Chuck’s dad a few years later and they ended up getting married straight out of college. He adopted me.”

“Your little brother?” Newt asks.

Thomas’ face lights up, and it makes him smile. “Yeah,” he says.

“How old is he?” Newt asks, sipping a grape in his mouth, and another in Thomas’.

“Seventeen,” he says as he chews, “He’s at some fancy art college in upper New York.”

Newt pauses, frowning, “Art?”

Thomas nods, “Yeah. Fine art, dance, music. All that stuff. Why?”

Newt shakes his head, a little astonished. “My sister went somewhere similar.”

Thomas chuckles, eating a strawberry, “Small world.”

Then, Newt goes and asks, “Do your parents live in Manhattan, too?” and immediately wishes he had kept his mouth shut as Thomas goes very still, very suddenly, and a little bit pale as the cold, bleached out sunlight hits his face.

“Uh,” Thomas begins, voice gaining a soft, gravelly tone, “No. They, uh. So there was a car accident a few years back.”

Newt’s body grows cold. Thomas stares at his lap, scratching at a loose thread in the blanket.

Thomas says, “When it happened I wasn’t old enough to legally be able to take care of Chuck on my own, so Alec moved us up from Atlanta to live here with him.”

Newt moves closer to him until their shoulders are touching, and when he says, “I’m so sorry,” he internally cringes at the stiff tone in his voice, the way the words tumble awkwardly from his lips.

Thomas shrugs one shoulder – a quick, jerky up and down that feels detached and cold, but when he lifts his head, finally, to look at Newt, his eyes are sad but warm. “Don’t,” he says, and points down at whatever is left on the plate, “You gonna eat all those, or?”

Newt lets him have the strawberries.

Thomas places one of them between his teeth and eyes Newt, suggestive and expectant until he gets the hint. Newt sighs and leans forward to take a bite out of the remainder. After they’ve pulled away Thomas makes a face, the bridge of his nose scrunching.
“Ew,” he groans, “That was gross.”

Newt snorts. “Well then why did you do it?”

“I don’t know. Movies make it look sexy.”

Upon walking into Glade Botanicals on Monday morning Newt trips on a cluster of vines and falls flat on his face, phone flying from his pocket and sliding halfway across the floor. Whilst lying there, dizzily catching his breath, he decides it might be time to call the annual Pruner.

Hissing in pain, clutching the sore spot on his cheek where his face collided with the hard tile, Newt braces both palms against the floor and attempts to push himself up, only to be met with persistence. Groaning and rolling over, Newt manages to flop over on to his back to find that during all of the thirty seconds he has laid there, the vine has coiled itself around his ankle three times.

Maybe a technician would be a good idea too.

With shaky hands Newt reaches out toward the vine, pushing down the nausea in his stomach when his skin touches the soft, smooth surface of the plant, and begins to tug it away from his leg. The vine is tight and stronger, even under the influence of the indicators, and it is only after the fourth or fifth hard tug that the panic really begins to settle in.

His phone is too far from him and the emergency lock box even further. Minho won’t be showing up for his shift for another few hours still, and despite that it is too early for customers to begin wandering in. If Newt can’t get these vines off of him soon, his best bet will be to wait until someone walks past, just happens to look through the lightly frosted doors for long enough to make out his lump of a form on the floor.

A noise escapes his throat, part whimper part hysterical laugh, Newt lowers himself flat on his back and coves his face with both hands, focuses on breathing. The vines aren’t too tight, but it wouldn’t matter either way.

_That leg_. It had to be _that leg_, of course it did.

Newt counts one, two, three, four indicators in his direct line of sight, all of them operational with their steely while lights glowing and steady, no flickering. The fifth, sixth and seventh ones, however, sit around the corner, by the orchids and succulents, and two in the back room.

It’s fine, Newt tells himself. It’s all fine. He will make a call and book in a Pruner ASAP as soon as he can untangle these damn vines from his leg, rectify his dignity and stand up.

Everything is fine.

He doesn’t even think about the store line until it begins to ring.

Newt nearly cries in relief. Swivelling around as far as the vines will let him, absolutely not making a sound when he feels them reflexively tighten – still not much, not strong, it’s _fine_ – and calls out, “Speaker!” and waits for the affirmative sound, and then, “Answer!”

The phone beeps and a surprised voice chimes in over the other end. “Oh!” they say, “Oh, hello!
Sorry, it’s so early I didn’t really expect anyone to be there.”

Newt rolls his shoulders and tilts his chin, “What can I do for you?”

“Oh, okay. Well,” She states her name and other useless information Newt doesn’t care about, “I’m supposed to have a pickup today.”

Newt rubs his eyes, “Okay, sure. What time was that?”

“Oh, it was around 2 pm, I think,” the woman says.

Running through his mental calendar of all the day’s proceedings until he finds the right one, Newt says, “Those are the gardenias and bleeding hearts, right?”

“Yes!”

He wriggles on the floor. There’s a pebble or a rock or some shit digging into his ass, “Yeah, those are good to go. We’re you just confirming?”

The woman sounds too happy for six o’clock on a Monday morning, “Fantastic! Yes, I was. Thank you so much …?”

“Newt,” Newt says.

“Thank you, Stewart. See you at two!” The dial tone rings out.

Newt groans and lets his head thump once against the tile. He flexes his foot and the vines tighten their grip. He opts to just lie there for a minute or so, focusing on catching his breath and not passing out, and most importantly making sure he doesn’t sound as if he is on a brink of a meltdown when he yells, “Activate voice command!” at the phone sat on the counter.

One beep later a non-robotic robotic voice answers, “Voice command activated.”

“Find bluetooth connections.”

After a minute, “Connection established.”

Clearing his throat and lifting his chin higher, Newt orders, “Call Devil Spawn!”

“Calling ‘Devil Spawn’.”

The phone rings for long enough for Newt to lose hope of his sister actually answering, but right when he is about to give up and try another, the tone stops and her sleepy voice fills the store.

“‘Lo?” She answers like her mouth is full of cereal.

Newt hopes she can’t hear the relief in his voice. “Hey, Liz, how’s it going?”

She makes a neutral sort of noise, and Newt can picture her shrugging a single shoulder and shovelling more honey flakes into her mouth.

“Uh, so I need a favour.”

Newt hears a clink as she puts her spoon down. “What’s wrong?” She says, “You sound more high-strung than usual. I thought all the action you were getting lately would’ve mellowed you out.”
Newt chooses to ignore that, for the sake of his sanity.

“You’re stopping by Harriet’s this morning, aren’t you?”

“Yeah? Why, what is it?” His sister sounds more alert now, recognising the concern in her voice that would have filled in when Newt didn’t take the bait.

“Great,” he says, “Could you come by the shop first? I’ve, uh,” Experimentally, Newt moves his foot again. One of the vines dances its way up his leg. “I’ve just got a small problem I might need your help with.”

After a short, anxious pause, she says, “Yeah, of course. I’ll be there as quick as I can,” and hangs up not a second later, leaving Newt in silence to listen to the early morning urban chatter and traffic outside.

Newt has never been a particularly fidgety person but right now finds he cannot for the life of him keep still, despite the satiny plant curled around his ankle constricting like a boa every time he so much as twitches. He closes his eyes, focuses on breathing and emptying his mind and aligning his chakras or whatever other kind of hippy bullshit his sister is always telling him about.

He counts to one hundred twice, once in Russian, and begins to name all the plants in his store in alphabetical order for the remaining fifteen minutes before Sonya bursts through the door in a flurry, hair messily trapped under a heavy coat and fuzzy ear-muffs. She takes one long look down at her brother – really, truly takes her time to just soak it all in – tilts her head thoughtfully and says, “Oh yeah, I was expecting far worse.”

Newt swallows down a curse and lifts up to his elbows.

“Just help me, please. The locked box over there –” Newt waves an arm over to the far right wall, which Sonya follows with her eyes, “the combination is 45-62-50.”

His sister blinks out of her gaze, staring at the vines constricting Newt’s leg (halfway up his calf, now) with a pinched brow. She rushes over to the red box in an instant, and Newt hears an excited “Oh!” a second later.

“Damn,” she whispers in awe, “You got a whole armoury in here. So hey, you want the long cutters or the machete?”

Newt groans, “Just grab the fucking spray bottle, Elizabeth!”

“Okay! Yeesh, cranky pants.”

Newt lifts himself up into a sitting position and waits for Sonya to approach with the blue bottle, rubbing his eyes irritably. He hadn’t slept well at all last night, and now he’s running the risk of opening the store late if he doesn’t rush and do a speed check of the store, and risk missing something.

Lizzy scuttles up to him, holding out the bottle and looking between it and the vines in confoundment. “Now what?”

“Spray it all over the vines.”

Hesitantly, she gets as close to the plant as she dares and aims the spray bottle at it, giving the tendrils at Newt’s ankle three generous squirts. In an instant, they shake, stunned, and tighten themselves around Newt almost to the point of pain before they recoil. They make no noise but in
Newt’s mind he imagines a high, perilous shriek as the vines turn to brown and finally drop, motionless to the floor.

Newt drags his leg toward him protectively and rubs at his ankle, letting his head drop to his knee and breathing in and out, deeply. When he lifts his face back up a minute later he sees his sister crouched beside him, brow furrowed and biting her lip, green eyes full of concern.

“How long have you been lying here?” She asks.

“Oh,” Newt smooths his hair out of his face, “Half an hour maybe?”

“Half an –” Lizzy cuts herself off, “Let’s get you up.”

With her help – and, he doesn’t know how she can manage this when no one else can, to not make him feel like a complete invalid, holding his arm and walking him to the back room like he is eighty years young – Newt flops back into a soft, plush lounge, sighing in relief. She perches on the arm, her worn black ballet shoes dipping into the sofa cushion, hands pressed between her thighs.

“You alright?”

“I’m fine, Liz,” Newt says, massaging his knee.

Lizzy curls a lock of blonde hair around her finger, nodding. “Okay. You going to open the store now, or?”

Newt sighs. He’d honestly forgotten about that for a second. “I have to.”

Sonya shrugs, “You don’t have to.”

“Yeah, I do have to, Liz,” he snaps, turning his body toward her, “I need to call in a Pruner and a bloody Technician as well, apparently, and for that I need money. So.”

Lizzy sucks her bottom lip into her mouth. Newt closes his eyes and leans back, feeling bad for snapping at her. His sister says, “Shouldn’t the insurance cover all that?”

Newt barks a bitter laugh, “They should. But they don’t.”

She frowns, “Why not?”

Newt becomes occupied with his fingers, cheeks heating. “I don’t know, Lizzy. They just don’t.” He ticks off his fingers, “Competitive market, they’re not getting the money out of me that they want, the amount of indicators and energy it takes to run Manhattan alone is too much, not to mention the Pruners. No clue. Look, it’s fine.”

“Fine?” sona all but screeches.

Newt flinches, “It’s fine, really.”

“Fine?” She growls, leaning forward so that she blocks the light, “Fine? The company that’s supposed to keep your own store from killing you isn’t doing their job, and that’s fine? Glade’s – no, listen to me,” she shushes Newt, who had begun to talk over her.

Sonya continues, “Glade is the main supplier of Cognizant plants in Manhattan, did you know that? It’s true, there are actual statistics online. Most people come to you, which – and I know this will blow your mind because I know you don’t like to think that you’re famous but you are fucking
famous, Isaac,” She says this with emphasis, “So tell me this, why isn’t the city council supporting
the main supplier of –”

“I don’t know, Lizzy!” Newt rises from his seat and begins to pace, angry. He pretends not to
notice his sister keeping a watchful eye on his left leg. “Go make an angry phone call or write a
fucking letter to WCKD telling them all about it. I’ve written dozens.”

Sonya sets her jaw and laces her fingers together sensibly in the distinct way that tells Newt she is
trying very hard not to haul the nearest solid object at the wall.

“Wait wait wait –” Sonya says, holding up a hand, “You contacted WCKD directly about this?
What happened?”

Newt sighs, “They sent someone down to check and he said everything was fine. Nothing requires
updating.”

Sonya hums. “How long ago was that?”

“A couple weeks ago.”

She hums again. Newt sighs in tandem. Then, very slowly while attempting to keep his stride as
straight as possible, Newt walks back over and sits down beside her, lifting her feet over his knees
and taking her hand.

“Okay, look,” Newt begins, softly, as she glares at the adjacent wall, “I know how this all sounds,
but I have it under control.”

Lizzy is quiet for a minute. When she finally speaks again, what comes out of her mouth is not
what Newt had been anticipating. “I saw the look on your face when I walked in. When you were
on the ground.”

Newt’s blood runs cold and his fingertips begin to tingle. He opens and closes his mouth many
times, but no words escape. Regardless, his sister continues.

“Do you remember when I was seventeen? That summer when you didn’t call, or write, or text. I
figured you were busy with college so I just let it go, until school was about to start up again and I
would be stuck in that prissy fucking princess wannabe academy for a whole other semester
without seeing you at least once, so I bought plane tickets to come and visit you.”

Newt lets go of her hands to bury his own in his pockets, deep.

“The next day I called Alby to let him know. I was so excited to surprise you, but then he told me
that you were in the hospital.”

She turns back and looks him dead in the eyes, and Newt isn’t at all prepared for it that he freezes,
locked in position an unable to look away.

“You didn’t tell me when things got bad last time,” Lizzy says, green eyes wide and serious,
“During a time when I thought we told each other literally everything. If –” she waves a hand
around “– this makes it all come back –”

“It won’t.” Newt cuts her off sternly, “That won’t happen again. I have it all under control.”

Lizzy appears weary as she looks at her brother, hesitant but at the same time wanting very badly
to believe him.
I have it under control, is what Newt thinks when he and Sonya are running around like a couple of headless chicken to get the shop open on time, when he steps wrong on his leg and electricity shoots up to his knee, leaving him grinding his teeth and clutching the counter hard enough to break skin. I have it under control, when he is walking to Gally’s that night to meet Thomas for dinner, the early November wind piercing through his body like a knife.

I have it under control, when they are walking home tipsy, arms around each other’s shoulders, and Thomas’ shoe accidentally knocks into Newt’s ankle as they stumble down the street, and he does not catch the cry of pain in time.

“I just … bumped it today. A little sore,” is what he tells Thomas, eyes wide and concerned. Standing in the middle of the street, stale yellow light shining down on them and casting jagged shadows along Thomas’ cheeks, Newt averts his eyes.

Later, he allows Thomas to touch his leg, lets him believe that he is injured, lets him run a hot bath and indulges him in his ridiculousness as he chops up oranges and grapefruits and tosses them into a bowl along with some lavender that Newt keeps in a jar.

Newt raises an eyebrow when Thomas saddles up to where he is sat on the benchtop, glancing over his shoulder expectantly. “What are you doing?” Newt asks, slowly.

Newt scoffs, shoving at him, “I can walk, you idiot.”

Thomas makes a noise, “Not tonight. Hurry up – clock’s ticking. I do have other customers, you know,” he says and Newt groans.

Thomas carries him the short distance down the hallway to the bathroom, balancing the bowl of fruit and flowers in one hand and the other tucked under Newt’s right knee, Newt’s arms looped around his neck. He nibbles on Thomas’ ear because he can. They make it to the bathroom with Newt’s shoulder and Thomas’ elbow only knocking against a wall once, a celebratory fete, and while the tub is filling, warming the room nicely, Thomas makes quick work of Newt’s clothes.

Deliberately being a nuisance because he finds Thomas cute when he is annoyed, Newt mouths at his jaw and asks, “Joining me?”

Thomas leans back to eye the bathtub dubiously. Newt’s bathtub may be small but he thinks they could fit both of them in if they’re determined.

“My legs are too long,” Thomas says.

Newt kisses his nose, “Not that long, love.”

Thomas looks deeply insulted. Newt kisses him again to stop him from leaving, smirking against his neck. Thomas swears at him.

Final button undone, fingers moving across soft skin to push Newt’s shirt off his shoulders, leaving it to dangle by his elbows. Newt has had his eyes closed, enjoying the feeling of Thomas’ hands moving across his skin, hypersensitive from the steam swirling around the room in dreamy tendrils, now opens them to find Thomas gazing at him with dark, lidded eyes, mouth slightly parted with something sitting just on the edge of his tongue, ready to bounce off his lips and escape.

Newt pulls at his belt loops.
“Come on.”

It takes some choreography but eventually they settle in together, more comfortably than Newt would have thought possible; Thomas’ legs bent and over Newt’s hip, one of Newt’s feet resting on Thomas’ thigh and the other pressed against his shoulder, where Thomas rubs soothing, rhythmic circles into the sensitive area above his ankle.

As Newt sighs, head falling back against the rim, a small part of him stabs guilt in his stomach for letting Thomas think he is actually – physically – injured; but the majority of him is too buzzed and warm and serene to care.

He doesn’t need to see Thomas’ face to know that a smug grin is spread across it when he says, “Told you.”

Newt lightly kicks his hip, “Hush, I’m relaxing.”

Thomas laughs softly, planting a small kiss on Newt’s leg. Newt, feeling silly and loose-limbed, plucks a lavender out of the water and balances it on his nose. He takes a deep breath through his nose, the thick, soothing scent filling him with warmth, and he sinks further down into the water – Thomas had also broken off a piece from one of Newt’s bath bombs and thrown that in too, because it was go big or go home apparently.

(After, of course, making fun of him for owning a jar of bath bombs in the first place. Newt plans to send him a whole box of them next week).

Thomas says, “Lavender’s good for muscle aches and stress relief. The citrus cleanses the mind and spirit.”

Newt rolls the lavender between his fingers gently, the pads of his fingertips running over each silky bead. “You know a lot about this?” he asks.

“My mom used to be super into herbal remedies,” Thomas says, finger tracing ripples in the water, “Made me sleep with lavender and quartz under my pillow for years.”

Newt hums, thoughtfully, “Did it work?”

“I didn’t think so at the time,” he says, “But looking back, I guess it must’ve.”

His tone says a million things Newt vows to unpack. One day, though. Not now.

Instead, Newt asks, “How do you sleep now?”

And then Thomas says, “Without you? Awful,” and instantly fills with mortification. “I didn’t mean to say that out loud. Shit.”

A laugh escapes Newt, surprising them both. It sounds a little helpless. Newt hopes he can pass off the flush rising to his cheeks as a fault of the steam.

As they lay in comfortable silence, the only sound in the room is the water splashing against the ceramic bath and around their bodies. Newt’s leg dips below and above the surface, and Thomas hums quietly to himself while spinning a grapefruit slice. Newt watches him silently; long dark eyelashes and hair wet and sticking to his forehead, damp from steam and sweat. He counts the freckles across his collarbone.

Thomas looks up and catches Newt’s eye, grins, and looks back at the water in a shy sort of gesture.
Newt has never seen him make before. He smiles behind his fist.

When Newt’s foot shifts a little too suddenly across Thomas’ hip and he starts, droplets of water flying out of the bath, Newt discovers that he is ticklish. “What was that?” he asks.

“Nothing,” Thomas replies, voice slightly panicked.

Newt smirks, “Didn’t look like nothing.”

Thomas sits up, “Hey now,” and Newt does it again, this time with more purpose, and when Thomas squeaks and jerks, it feels like victory.

“You are!” he shouts.

Thomas shoves at his knee, “Oh, fuck off. Everyone is.”

“I’m not.”

Thomas’ head tilts in intrigue. Newt realises that he is still holding on to his ankle, cradled delicately by his shoulder, about the same time that Thomas does. He feels, forebodingly, like he has made an impervious error of judgement.

Thomas’ grip tightens around Newt’s ankle. “Did you know that the foot has the most nerve endings in the entire human body? Isn’t that interesting?” Thomas says, a glint in his eye.

Newt grips the rim, “Do not.”

And that’s how, after much squabbling and fighting where most of the bathwater ends up outside of the bath and Newt’s floor is now a big fruity mess, Newt ends up in his lap with Thomas’ wrists caught tight in his fists and pinned above the tap valves behind them. Thomas’ head is thrown back and his cheeks are red and flushed as he laughs, carefree and unguarded, and right at that moment, something settles deep inside Newt.

It feels like an epiphany.

This time, when Brenda slams something solid down five inches from Newt’s face, he prides himself in not flinching. Barely even looking up from his laptop, Newt says, “We have to stop meeting like this, sweetheart.”

Brenda falls into the seat opposite him with a huff and a bright smile on her face. He can feel the happiness radiating from her in atomic proportions, as she sits with her hands folded together, fighting to keep still and patiently – “patiently” – waiting for Newt to look up.

(He is frowning at his laptop. The entire morning has consisted of him competing in a game of email tag with the Pruning Company as there has, somehow, been a mix-up and his appointment scheduled for this afternoon has some-fucking-how been double booked. Brilliant.)

Hitting send with a long-suffering sigh, Newt shuts his laptop with a little too much force and looks to Brenda who, as it seems, is about to burst.

Newt blinks. “Okay, what?”
“Guess,” Brenda begins, her palms pressed to the tabletop, “who just got a 4.5-star review from the biggest art critic in Lower New York.”

Newt blinks some more. Brenda is just about vibrating in her seat.

“Are you serious?”

In response, she spins the tablet around on the table to face Newt, and he stares down at the blog post in near disbelief. “But …” He hunches over the tablet, scrolling through the webpage as fast as his eyes could keep up, then stops, sitting straight. “Okay, wait,” he begins, “First of all, I didn’t even know he was there?”

Brenda gives him a flat look, “Well yeah, that’s the point. He goes to everything undercover.”

“Fair enough,” Newt says, “And second – four and a half? I’ve never seen this man give anyone above a three or four.”

Brenda is about to burst through the ceiling and rocket off into space, “I know! He used words like modern and cutting-edge and honestly I don’t know what else, I blacked a little when Teresa was reading it to me and gotta look back over it, but!” She shouts, turning a couple heads – up front Gally offers them one very unconcerned glance – “This is huge, Newt, can you believe it? It’s like that first review never happened. I just gained, like, over a thousand followers overnight, and –”

As Brenda rambles excitedly to him Newt looks over the article closer, starting at the heading Rebel With A Cause, down to where he says that everything in that room was thought about and designed; from the lighting down to the music and atmosphere.

The live installations left want for nothing, he says, a refreshing change from the current scene of today. He goes on to comment about the “walking performance art” which transported the room into, as quoted, A darker dimension.

Brenda taps her nails on the table to get his attention, “Also,” she smirks, “He doesn’t just mention me. Take a look five paragraphs down. See a name that looks familiar?”

Frowning, Newt does as she says and scrolls further down the article and – Oh. Yep, okay. That is his name, right there.

“He calls them your creations,” Brenda says, “Called them magical and perturbing in the most beautiful way. To quote. Did you know he worked with botanicals throughout his career? Says he knows how easy they are to modify, and the answer is not at all.”

The world tilts a little bit.

Brenda kicks him under the table, “Told ya you were a magician. Hey, can you grant me three wishes?”

“That’s a genie,” Newt correctly faintly, eyes scanning the paragraph, lips moving as he reads.

“He said he’ll never forget your name, especially since –” Brenda tilts her head to read off the page, “a man dressed head to toe in pink kept slipping your business cards into his suit in a variety of creative ways.”

“Oh bloody hell.” Newt pushes the tablet away. Brenda laughs. Ben brings them their coffee a minute later, fist bumping Brenda in congratulations and engaging in conversation until Gally taps a spoon against the portafilter three times in lieu of telling him to get back to work.
Newt smiles at her, slouched back in her chair, eyes closed as the sun warms her face. “Told you,” he says. Brenda hums questionably, opening one eye. Newt elaborates, “That one bad review wasn’t the end of the world. That better ones would come,” at better ones he nudges her with the toe of his shoe. Brenda rolls her eyes but is unable to quell her smile.

Downing the rest of her latte and slamming it on the table like a shot glass, she loudly announces, “We’re going out tonight.”

“What?”

Brenda levels him with a tired expression, “Yes, Newt, come on. We’re celebrating. This is important for both of us.”

“But I don’t even know what’s happening with the bloody Pruner, I …” Newt sighs as Brenda’s phone chimes.

She checks it and swears, “Gotta run to a meeting. Hey, 8 pm. Usual place. Be there?” Her brown eyes pierce into his near painfully, until he feels himself crumbling. Newt nods. “Excellent. Bring your new bae. Lord knows he could get some fun in him. See you!” With a quick peck on the cheek and a flurry of moment, she leaves.

Newt watches her run across the street, barely making the lights. Groaning, Newt closes his eyes and lets his head rest against the window. This whole Pruner kerfuffle is giving him a migraine. Today had been the most convenient time possible to book an appointment, so much so that he’d been over the moon when the company told him they had a spot open. The back and forth between the admin representative is just short of actual torture. It has been three hours now, going on four, and Newt is still stuck on “If tomorrow morning’s appointment cancels we can fit you in there”. Which is a lot less helpful than this person seems to think.

Cracking his knuckles in irritation, Newt pulls out his phone and texts Thomas.

____________________ Tommy

BD wants to go out tonight

He orders himself another cup of coffee, ignoring the concerned eyebrow raise from Gally before he receives a response from Thomas.

____________________ Tommy

Sweet what time?

Newt internally groans. Looks like he won’t be counting on Thomas as an excuse not to go after all.

____________________ Tommy

8pm.
Perfect. Oh also, congratulations. Read that review. Ur apparently even more amazing than I thought

Newt’s insides go warm and an embarrassing, slow smile stretches across his face. Before he can respond another message from Thomas pops up:

__________________________ Tommy

See you there. You are coming aren’t you? Say you are, I might have a surprise for you

He reads these words twice over, eyebrow-raising in intrigue even when that cold, familiar feeling of anxiety settles in his chest. He types back:

__________________________ Tommy

What is it?

That’s the surprise Is now a bad time to tell you I hate surprises?

You hate most things, so i’m not shocked. And you’ll like this one. Promise.

Gally walks by his booth and Newt just manages to catch him by the hem of the apron tied around his hips. Gally blinks at his hand, then at Newt, then back at his hand as if in disbelief that this happening right now.

Newt says, “Hey, could I get another?”

And Gally says, “Uh, no?” Incredulous, “You’ve been here over an hour and already had two. I’m cutting you off.”

“I’ll just go to Harriet’s.”
“I’ll call and tell her not to serve you.”

Newt snorts, “She won’t even answer you.”

Gally clicks his tongue in annoyance, “Shit, you’re not getting another fucking cup of coffee, okay.”

Newt raises an eyebrow. He knows he is being childish but riling Gally up channels some sort of repressed asshole inside of him, so it is very hard to resist saying, “I’ll tell Minho you’re in love with him.”

Gally stares, owlishly. “Wow? Caffeine turns you into a middle schooler, good to know.” He groans, deep and long-suffering. Finally, after what appears to be some intense internal debate, Gally glares at Newt.

“One more. **One**, he points a finger straight at Newt’s nose, **Half shot.** And then you the hell out of my shop. I’m not going to be held responsible when you’re all wired and losing your god damn mind. Oh and I’m not, by the way, in love – why am I bothering, you’re not even listening.”

Newt beams at him sweetly, “Thanks.”

Gally mutters, “Fuck you,” and walks away.

Newt’s phone chimes as he does, and he opens it to reveal an email. The Pruning Company can fit him in tomorrow morning. He lets his head thump back against the window. It is better than nothing, he supposes.

Thomas’ surprise turns out to be a couple of day passes to Upper New York, or, more specifically, the Enid Haupt Conservatory. Newt’s initial instinct is to laugh, thinking this all is some kind of joke, that, yes, Thomas did just drag him into a secluded hallway of a crowded bar with all their friends hooting and wolf whistling as they went, to deliver an extremely belated April Fool’s joke. Thomas’ face is blandly amused, hands cupped together behind his back, and waiting patiently.

“You’re joking,” Newt coughs out between chortles.

Thomas leans comfortably back against the wall, crossing his arms and wearing an easy grin, “I’m not.”

They compete in a trifle staring competition until Newt stops laughing and Thomas does not stop grinning – it’s growing actually, the fluorescent purple lighting doing wonders for his smile – and the realisation that he is telling the truth hits Newt like a ton of bricks.

His next instinct is to smack him.

“Thomas!” he cries, “Are you serious?”

“Ow,” Thomas frowns, rubbing his arm, “Yes, I am serious.”

Newt hits him again.

“Why are you hitting me?” Thomas says, incredulously.
“Thomas!” Newt shouts, “Passes up North? Seriously? For a whole day!” Newt couldn’t even afford a couple hours, if he is being honest.

Thomas looks so frightened and confused Newt almost feels sorry for him. Almost. “Why do you look … mad?”

“I told you. I hate surprises.”

“Yeah, no kidding.” Thomas lets out a deep breath and falls back against the wall, shoulders sagging. He has the crestfallen appearance of someone who’s previously bulletproof plan has taken a nose dive, very sudden and unexpected. Newt feels a stab of guilt in his heart for having been the one to put it there. It really isn’t Thomas’ fault he is like this …

Newt sighs and moves to mimic Thomas’ stance. “When?”

“Huh?”

“What day are the passes for?”

Thomas stutters for a moment, a hint of hope filling his eyes. “Thursday,” he mutters.

Newt’s eyebrows shoot up, “This Thursday?”

Thomas nods, quickly, “Yeah, but hey, listen. I already talked to Minho and he says he’s fine with running the store for that day.”

“Wait, what?” Newt cranes his neck to look into the next room but Thomas stops him, pulling him back in.

“Does this mean you’re saying yes?” He asks, eyes bright with excitement.

Newt sighs, letting his forehead touch Thomas’ shoulder. He smells really good tonight, and Newt allows himself to indulge in the spicy cologne he is wearing that for a moment before speaking, voice muffled by the black cotton of Thomas’ shirt, “I never said no, Tommy.” He lifts his head up, “Sorry. I didn’t mean to freak out, I just … Day passes?”

The way he says it, breathy and full of disbelief, makes Thomas laugh.

“Bloody day passes.” Thomas winds their fingers together. “How,” Newt continues, “Did you even manage that? The applications alone take weeks to process and – wait. How long have you been –?”

“Not long!” Thomas cuts in, pre-emptively sensing another freak out on the horizon. He scratches his scalp, messing his hair (Newt’s fingertips itch to smooth it back into place) and says, “I, uh. I know someone who works at the border, and he helped me get the passes sooner.”

“Ah.”

“You still look worried.”

“I just,” Newt pinches the bridge of his nose, “I know those passes aren’t cheap. I don’t want you to think that you have to do anything extravagant for me. I …” Newt takes both Thomas’ hands in his, breathing deeply, “I like you a lot already.”

“I know,” Thomas murmurs, smiling softly, “I don’t think I have to. I wanted to.” He leans forward and plants a lingering kiss on Newt’s lips. Newt sighs through his nose. “Plus,” Thomas continues,
when he’s pulled away, “I knew I could exploit someone into giving me fast tickets and, to be honest, I could use an excuse to get out of this city for a day, too.”

Newt laughs and kisses him again.

“The Conservatory?”

Thomas nods, “It’s old and Victorian and I thought you’d be into it. For some reason, I dunno why,” he smirks. Newt knocks their foreheads together.

“I am into it,” he mutters. “I’ve wanted to make a trip up there for ages. Ever since moving here, honestly, I just,” Newt shrugs, “Never had the time.”

Thomas bumps the tip of his nose against Newt’s. “Now you will.”

He kisses him some more. After a minute of making out in the hallway, getting looks from customers and workers passing by them, Thomas breaks away with pink cheeks, nearly indistinguishable in the dim light.

“We should get back to everyone,” he says, “They probably think we’re hooking up in the bathroom, or something.”

Newt casts an intriguing look over his shoulder to where the glowing rectangular sign that reads MENS sits above a deep plumb coloured door. “That’s not a terrible idea,” he muses.

Thomas looks so scandalised at that moment Newt can do nothing to hold back his laughter. “Never done it in a public bathroom before?” He jokes through giggles. Thomas stutters, and it just sets him off again.

They end up going back – people feel the need to celebrate their return – and Newt flicks Minho in the ear about not telling him about Thomas’ plan, which his friend does not look sorry about at all. Afterwards Brenda shoves shot after shot into Newt’s hand, back to back, and two hours later – full of Ben and Rachel flirting shamelessly and Minho fighting to hold Gally’s attention while Brenda and Teresa make out in the corner – he is far too drunk to blow Thomas in a bathroom stall as he had initially planned.

He ends up in his arms instead, being lead to his car with vague memories of waving goodbye to everyone except for Minho, because he is still bitter and he wanted to make sure it translates.

He blacks out when his butt hits the passenger seat – probably passing out and attractively snoring the whole way home – and wakes up to Thomas looming above him, amused but blurry expression as he pulls the covers down over Newt, who is babbling. The last thing he hears before passing out for the rest of the night is the water running in the bathroom sink, and the sound of Thomas singing.

Thomas’ message reads that he will be there in 5. traffic, sorry. as Newt waits on the side of the cold, busy street where Thomas had instructed they meet, the bitter cold nibbling at his nose and fingertips. He tugs his beanie further down his head until it quite nearly conceals his eyes altogether, half bouncing in place to keep warm. He watches the cars crawl along the busy road with glassy eyes. Manhattan traffic is bad enough now, Newt would shudder to think what it had been like in the Old Days, before the end of the world was put on pause.
Eyes watery, he stifles a yawn.

Ever since that article went live and Newt’s name along with The Glade had been plastered across every social media website ever, the business had increased by nearly 50%. Which, in all honesty, isn’t a bad thing - it’s great, actually - except that more customers mean more sales and more sales means more paperwork and more paperwork means Newt is going to have to hire more employees to help smooth the load and deal with everything that Newt and Minho don’t have time for.

Newt’s heart seizes as arms circle his waist and lifts him from the ground. The panic lasts all of one second before he hears Thomas laughing in his ear as he spins him once before placing him back down. Newt huffs and pinches his elbow, the annoyance failing to meet his eyes, juxtaposed with the smile pulling at his lips.

“Sorry I’m late,” Thomas says, kissing his jaw.

Newt shakes his head, tugging that the collar of Thomas’ coat to pull him in for a proper kiss.

Thomas grins, “Ready?”

*God yes.* Newt could barely even sleep last night, he’s so ready.

The subway ride to the bridge is spent in nervous excitement. Newt’s leg shakes up and down whilst Thomas gives him a rundown of what to do, as he, apparently, crosses the border numerous times a month.

“Because this is your first time crossing into the North,” Thomas is saying, “they’ll need to take your prints at the gate. Nothing to worry about, just standard stuff. Won’t take more than five minutes. They’ve already got mine.” He goes on to explain how there are multiple entrances into Upper New York, how he prefers High Bridge for various reasons, one of them being it is the least intimidating out of all the entrances.

“Once all that processes they’ll give us our passes and we’re free to go,” Thomas grins.

Newt hums, “Great.”

“You okay?” Thomas asks after a minute passes, his hand warm where it sits on Newt’s knee. Newt breaks himself out of his thoughts just long enough to nod and smile in what he hopes is a reassuring way.

He is excited. He also has never been beyond the southern border of New York City, having flown to Manhattan straight from Boston when he moved here over five years ago. He knows what the north likes in theory rather than reality, having only ever seen pictures. Thomas must be used to going back and forth by now, but Newt is left to wonder how the culture shock will leave him. He is both terrified and excited to see how the other half lives, so to speak.

Thomas places a hand over both of Newt’s to stop him from picking at his nails. “It will be fine,” he says.

When they get off at the station the clouds have cleared up, allowing the sun to warm their faces as Thomas leads him up the long, winding path to the bridge. Guards line the road, the small blue dahlias printed on their suit collars marking Manhattan’s insignia, their eyes staring straight ahead as he and Thomas pass. Their launchers, pointed to the ground, do nothing to make them less intimidating.

It takes all of ten minutes for them to scan Thomas’ fingerprints and take Newt’s before they are
handed their day passes. Newt ignores the stinging in his fingertips and tries not to fiddle with the badge all too much – small and round and pinned to his chest, glowing a cold neon blue – hyper-aware of one of the guard’s eyes on them as they are let past the gates, and begin to make their way down the bridge.

Newt swears once they are out of earshot.

“I know,” Thomas groans, “You get used to it. Speaking of, you might want to brace yourself.”

Newt would ask why if he didn’t already have a pretty decent idea of what. Twenty feet in front of them are two of the biggest indicators Newt has seen in his entire life. Large, oval-shaped monoliths that stand as tall as a two-story building and look as if they have been pulled straight out of a science fiction movie. Their electro waves, while usually invisible to the human eye, pulse visibly across the bridge like a silvery-blue force field.

Newt frowns. “I’m used to indicators,” he says, though something inside him turns cold as he says this.

“Not ones like these.” Thomas takes his hand, “Hold your breath, I found it helps a little.”

Ivy winds up in woven tendrils along the bridge’s structure beams, travelling back down towards Manhattan. It looks, in a way, like they are fleeing the border. Newt can’t blame them.

He honestly doesn’t know what he was expecting, approaching the border - maybe some dizziness, some pressure - but the reality is a temperature drop so sudden Newt feels it under his bones, ripping the oxygen from his lungs. He stumbles through the gate less than gracefully, Thomas reaching out to catch him before he could fall flat on his face to the hard stone. He coughs and Thomas rubs his back, soothingly. A guard to his left snorts and covers it with a cough. Newt fights the intense urge to flip him off.

Clutching at Thomas’ sleeve Newt rights himself, chest heaving and skin flushed and hot. Loosening his scarf, he all but wheezes, “How – you. You aren’t even –!”

Thomas, not even a little bit ruffled, smiles sheepishly, “Would you believe me if I said you get used to it?”

“How do you get used to that?”

As he is saying this, the gate pulses once more and a woman walks right through, boots clicking against the stone as she approaches an officer to have her pass checked and cleared, barely batting an eye. Two guards cough this time.

Newt groans.

Thomas tugs him toward a guard who holds up a small, phone-sized device to their passes. The machine beeps once and so do their passes, and the next moment they are being let through, Thomas politely thanking them as they go. The first thing Newt notices, aside from the border security officers uniforms – now stark white – are the surroundings. The clean, neat landscape of the north; uniform and cookie cutter, not a flower out of its place, each one of them docile and unmoving.

And, most notably and what is the cause for Newt constantly looking over his shoulder for the first hour that they are here, not a single indicator in sight.
Thomas holds his arms out and presents the conservatory to Newt like a gift.

And.

It is beautiful.

A tall, white domed building that stretches out on either side of where they are standing; long gravel walkways leading up to tall, intricately designed archways covered in flowers and ivy which don’t seem to give a lick of care to the cool November air. Lilies bob in the ponds and hedges line the way to the entrance where patrons are coming and going, and it is only Newt’s pride which prevents him from running up there like a child.

Upon walking through the main entrance, Newt’s attention is first drawn to not the ten-foot wall of greenery around them, or the statue in the centre covered in vines, but the air. Where in Manhattan there is always this faint humidity that never settles or worsens – It isn’t choking, but it is definitely something to get used to, and enough time spent in the city leaves you forgetting that it is there at all – here the atmosphere is clear and crisp, lighter, and tastes strange where it sits on the tip of his tongue.

Thomas loops a finger around one of Newt’s belt loops and tugs encouragingly, “Through here, come on.”

The entire conservatory is organised chaos, the left wing showcasing more foreign or wilder plants and flowers while the right seems more constructed, flowers clumped into their family group and colour coded to boot, and a forest-like mixture of both in the middle. He drags Thomas into the seasonal exhibit first, stands atop the bridge and snaps pictures of clusters he finds interesting while Thomas points to random flowers and asks questions.

“Is this one spliced?” he asks.

“Nah, I think it’s natural,” Newt answers.

“Where’s this one from?”

“Probably further south, judging by the pattern on their petals?”

“What about this one? What’s this?”

“Tommy, that’s a rose.”

Thomas smirks mischievously and cocks his head over to the right, “Tell me about these ones.” As Thomas leads him around from room to room, asking Newt to give him a brief rundown of each flower’s origin and story, regardless of whether or not he knows it. If he doesn’t he makes it up, each new tale becoming wilder and wilder as they go on.

Thomas, pointing in some vague direction without looking at it, “Where does this one grow?”

Newt, walking on not even sparing a glance, “It grows in the ancient, perilous lands of fuck you.”

He is taking a photo of some chrysanthemums strung from the ceiling in variously sized eggs when Thomas sneaks up behind him, quickly switches the camera view and has just enough time to plant a kiss on Newt’s cheek before he automatically snaps another photo. It isn’t his last offence, however, as Newt finds himself turning around at random intervals to find Thomas smiling happily.
with his phone pointed in Newt’s direction, obviously snapping photos.

Newt reaches for the phone quickly but Thomas is faster. “Tommy –”

“What?” He blinks, mock confusion. Newt raises a single, prominent eyebrow. Thomas grins, “I’ll keep them safe. Look,” and he turns the phone so that Newt can see the image on the screen; Newt standing before the large green wall they had passed earlier, hands in pockets and head turned in profile when his attention had been snagged by something off to the left, like a golden retriever. The pale, overcast sunlight outlines him in silver.

Newt looks back up at him, unimpressed.

Thomas says, “Have you ever thought about modelling?”

Newt scoffs, “You sound like my sister.”

Thomas makes the image his lock screen all without breaking eye-contact. Newt snaps a photo of Thomas leaning over a bridge to look at some waterlilies in revenge. Thomas frowns at the angle and Newt is careful no one is looking their way when he smacks Thomas on the ass on the way by.

No one had been staring that time, however, they have been getting looks all morning. The most notable occurrence had been in the tropical section, a little girl had been watching them pass, the badges on their chest shining brightly as they went, and tugged on her mother’s jeans. “Mommy,” she’d whispered not very softly, “Look, they’re from the South!”

To which the mother quickly turned her child away and told her it wasn’t polite to stare. Later, two teenaged girls whisper to each other as he and Thomas laugh and joke by the orchid display, and a couple eyes their passes with disdain. Newt guesses Lower New Yorkers don’t generally venture up here for field trips that often. He tries not to take it personally.

They make it to the aquatic plants and vines and Thomas stops him before they can venture any further.

“We should see the rest when it gets darker,” he says. “I’m starving. You?”

On queue Newt’s stomach growls, making Thomas laugh, and checks his watch with a shock. He hadn’t realised they have been here for so long already. They make their way over to the café and restaurant attached to the conservatory; a small and modest building matching the style of the conservatory with large open doors overlooking the water.

“You know,” Thomas begins as they are waiting for the waiter to come around, “I don’t think I ever asked you what your favourite flower is?”

Newt squints at the menu, “My favourite flower?”

“Campsis,” Newt answers and offers no other information.

“Trumpet vine?” Thomas says, “That’s … interesting. Kind of ordinary.”

Newt looks up, offended, “Alright, then. What’s yours?”

Thomas shrugs, “I don’t know. A rose?”
“A rose?” Newt smirks, “Now who’s ordinary.”

“Har har.”

When they get their food Thomas’ phone begins to ring, to which he lets go to voicemail. It rings a second time a few minutes later, a text ringing out afterwards. Newt says, “You can get that if you need to.”

Thomas pockets it, “Oh, no, it’s not important. Just work.”

Newt eyes him, “If you say so,” and steals an olive off his plate. Thomas flicks the rest of them toward Newt, too, Newt hissing at him to stop but laughing as each one lands in the centre of his plate, anyhow. One is a little overshot and rolls halfway across the restaurant floor, hitting a waiters shoe. They turn their eyes front at centre and try to repress their amusement.

“How is work, by the way?”

Thomas shrugs noncommittally. “Fine,” he says, “Boring. We’re hiring some, uh, new management and it’s been a headache.”

Newt takes another bite. “I should visit you sometime.”

Thomas coughs around a carrot, “Huh?”

Newt shrugs, “I mean it’s only fair. You come by the shop all the bloody time, I could at least return the favour. Bring you snacks,” he grins.

Thomas waves a hand, “It’s too out of the way, don’t worry.”

“You sure? I bake some mean brownies.”

“I thought you didn’t eat chocolate.”

“I don’t. They’re vanilla.”

“It’s,” Thomas reaches out and takes Newt’s hand over the table. “I really don’t mind,” he says, “I like the shop. It’s … peaceful. And I like how you look when you’re there.”

Newt asks, “And how is that?”

Thomas’ thumb rubs his knuckles, “Gorgeous. Like you’re in your element. Like everything in that place bends and shifts around you.”

Newt eyes him up and down and says, while burning on the inside, “Do you secretly write poetry in your spare time? They’re cognizant plants, Tommy, they bend and shift around everyone.”

Thomas gives him a flat stare, “Can you ever let me seduce you in peace?”

Newt raises his eyebrows, “Oh, that –” he waves a hand between them, “that’s what we’re doing? Sorry, I didn’t realise. Start over, I’ll be good this time.”

“Just eat your damn quiche.”

Newt smiles smugly around his fork. Thomas’ phone does not go off again during the meal. It is near twilight by the time they finish and pay and Thomas suggests they go down by the lake to watch the sunset. They find a lone gazebo by the water and the benches are cold when they sit.
Thomas takes Newt’s hands and puts them in his coat pockets, making Newt roll his eyes.

“I have my own pockets, you know.”

“Yeah, but mine are warmer.”

Newt shifts closer so they’re flush against each other. It is a slow but pretty sunset, the sky bathed in pinks and oranges broken up by small, fluffy clouds. “Nearly time to go back inside,” Newt says.

Thomas hums and rests his cheek against the top Newt’s head, now fallen onto Thomas’ shoulder.

“Better be worth it if you’ve kept me away this whole time.”

“It will be,” Thomas mumbles against his hair, “Trust me.”

_I do_, Newt thinks, so little hesitation that it shocks him. Newt turns his head slightly to see the outline of Thomas’ profile. That _something_ rises in his chest and dances at the tip of his tongue as he watches the sunset reflect on Thomas’ face and gleam in his eyes. It tickles his throat and sits heavy and low in his stomach, toe-curling and breathtaking.

Newt takes a breath and sits up. “Thomas?” he says, voice raw all of a sudden.

Thomas turns toward him, a question in his eyes. Newt bites his cheek, closes and opens his eyes, and kisses Thomas instead. The sun sets, and yellow fairy lights flicker to life above them with a low hum.

They stay there for long enough for Newt to begin to feel hot and flustered, until Thomas breaks the kiss and leans back with a sigh, whispering, “Let’s go.”

When they make it back inside and weave their way through the conservatory, far busier in the evening than it had been during the day, to the final section that they have yet to see Newt understands completely why Thomas had wanted to wait until night.

The entire room is glowing. Floor to ceiling and the entire thirty foot stretch of it. Directly down the centre of the wide room is a shallow fountain, where water spirts up and dances rhythmically in a spectrum of colours. Down the path flowers flow and sway to the music, pulsing in neon blues and pinks and oranges and everything in between. By the far side of the room stands a green wall, tall and proud and like none other than Newt has seen, ivy growing downward from the glass-domed ceiling, blue orchids dwindling like a waterfall. In the centre a statue of a woman stands, some orange vines are woven around her body like a glowing Kintsugi.

Beside him, Thomas breathes, “Wow.”

_My thoughts exactly._

Newt laces their fingers together and they begin down the walkway. As they walk Thomas allows his hand to brush along the blue flowers looping down from the trees and Newt counts the species of plants as they pass, unable to turn the botanist side of his brain off even now, wondering and calculating and hypothesising how they got all of these flowers to glow the way they did. Looping around the path, they make it up to a bridge and stop to take in the whole room as it is, every
“This is so fucking nuts,” is Thomas’ poetic statement.

“It is,” Newt laughs, feeling breathless and a little dizzy, “God, it’s amazing, Tommy, I –” he looks at Thomas, who looks right back. The air turns static between them, and it is like the rest of the room dims, just for a moment. Newt licks his lips, “I …”

“Excuse me, sirs.”

They both jump over the sound of a little girl’s voice. Newt stares down to find her, standing as tall as his hips, holding out a basket. “Would you like one?” she asks Newt, and for a hot second, Newt is very confused until he blinks out of his haze and realises she is indicating to the basket of flower crowns in her arms.

Newt begins to say, “Oh! Um, I uh, it’s ok –” but Thomas, of course, pipes in and cuts him off.

“Of course he would!” Thomas leans down and holds his knees. “That’s so kind. What’s your name?”

“Sofia,” the little girl beams, bouncing on her feet shyly.

“Sofia,” Thomas grins warmly, “Thank you very much,” he says, digging around in the basket and chatting about finding “the prettiest one” while Sofia giggles and helps. Finally, he points one out enthusiastically, and Sofia retrieves it from the basket. She holds out the crown, small and quite pretty, Newt has to begrudgingly agree, jasmine and forget-me-nots interwoven in a blue and white pattern. She seems to be waiting for something and Newt blinks down at her in confusion and unsure as to what until the penny drops, and he kneels down to allow her to place it atop his head.

“Erm. Thanks,” Newt says to the child, and together he and Thomas watch as she grins and runs off happily, Thomas waving goodbye as she goes.

Newt stands, his knee sensitive, and finds Thomas staring at him oddly. “What?” he asks, adjusting the crown, feeling self-conscious.

Thomas murmurs, “You are so damn beautiful.”

Newt pulls him off the bridge and behind the wall of ivy before kissing Thomas so hard their teeth click and it almost knocks the breath out of both of them. Newt wraps his arms around Thomas’ waist and pulls him closer, his crown nearly falling off his head in the process. Thomas manages to catch it before it does.

Behind the ivy turns out to be a small viewing area that remains strangely empty and secluded. It’s possible that they’re the first ones to find it, as pamphlets and postcards advertising the conservatory and various other events sit untouched toward the sides. Light filters through the vines and flowers in patterned shadows but otherwise it is completely private, and Newt has to pull himself back before he does something stupid and reckless without any alcohol to blame it on.

They sit together on a bench, Thomas sat back with Newt lounged between his legs, leaning into his chest comfortably. The area is back-lit with a warm yellow glow to give it a sunny vibe as if it were still sunset. Newt shuts his eyes, enjoying the feeling of Thomas’ arms around him and his warm breath on his neck, the smell of the jasmines on his head intermixing with Thomas’ cologne.

Thomas says into his ear, “Are you glad you let me surprise you yet?”
Newt laughs, feeling bubbly, and playfully elbows Thomas in the hip. Thomas nudges him back, pressing his lips to Newt’s shoulder. Together they watch the light stream in through the gaps in the leaves in dreamy rivets for some time, Newt drawing patterns on Thomas’ sleeve. The something appears once more and he feels it in the space where his back is flush with Thomas’ chest, warm and grounding, and when he turns his head to the side he realises that Thomas is already looking at him.

His face is for the most part relaxed, but something in the faint curve of his brow says otherwise.

“What is it?” Newt asks.

Thomas’ eyes brighten some, at least, and he smiles, “Uh, nothing. I just …” he has a kind of glassy, dazed look in his eyes, lips parted slightly, and he begins, “Newt, I –”

Thomas’ phone goes off in his pocket, shrill and slicing through the atmosphere settled between them, like a knife. “What the …?” he frowns, reaching into his pocket to pull out his phone, staring at it in bewilderment. “I thought I silenced this thing.”

He cuts the call off and immediately receives two messages, in tandem. Thomas frowns harder.

Newt pivots himself a small amount to see Thomas better. “Everything okay?” he asks.

“Oh, yeah. Fine. Just Alec, he’s uh.” Thomas’s lips twitch into a smile, “He’s just texting me, but it’s not important.”

Something in his eyes says that it is.

Newt sighs, “Tommy, for god sake, you can answer your bloody phone.”

But he pockets it, yet again. Thomas says, “No, really, it’s fine. I just … Listen, Newt, I need to tell you something –”

The badge pinned to Newt’s chest beeps once and turns orange.

They both freeze, staring down at the now amber pass in strange, detached shock. Thomas is the first to speak, “What?” he says, confusion flooding his voice, “That’s not right, we still have plenty of time.”

“Um,” Newt is shifting back and holding his arms away from his body as if there is a foreign, poisonous insect on his chest rather than a glowing badge. “Uh, Tommy?”

“We should have three more hours left,” Thomas says, and right on queue his own pass shifts to orange.

Newt jumps up from the bench, panic beginning to settle in, “Well it’s saying we don’t!”

Thomas stands too, and Newt can tell in the still, perfectly straight way he holds his posture that he, too, is holding back the panic and trying desperately to remain calm. “Look, it’s still fine,” Thomas holds his palms up, “Orange is just the warning mark and it’s only a fifteen minute trip to the border, we have -”

Newt’s pass beeps again and turns red. Thomas’ follows a second later.

“Shit,” Thomas swears.

Newt clenches his fists, and grits his teeth, “Please stop saying we have plenty of time.”
“Shit, shit, fuck. We need to go. Now.” The grabs Newt and pulls him toward the exit, barely a care to parting the vines as they push through and nearly knock over a couple who had apparently also discovered the secret alcove. Hand in hand, Thomas pushing through and Newt wading around other patrons, like a pair of fish swimming upriver, they walk as fast as they can through the wings, somehow managing not to break into a run until the front room, and bolting down the stairs.

“Um. Um um,” Thomas mutters, stressed, “Tour bus?”

Newt shakes his head, eyes scoping the brightly lit surroundings. “No time,” he says, catching sight of a taxi stand and wasting no time in pulling Thomas toward it. People shout as they fly past, Thomas instinctively apologizing as they come bumbling by; Newt all ungraceful limbs and a bad leg.

They make it to a cab just as someone is about to jump inside it, and Newt only feels a little bit bad for pushing ahead of them. Thomas shouts a quick, “Sorry!” before slamming the door shut and, panting, tells the driver to get them to the closest bridge ASAP. Newt leans back and attempts to quell is pounding heart. His hand is sweaty where it holds Thomas’ in a death grip, but neither of them is at all willing to let go.

The gritty sound of the tires turning on wet gravel works in calming him, only just, and as they make their way down the long driveway Newt runs it through in his head: Blue is safe. You have all the time in the world. Please enjoy your time in Upper New York and thank you for your stay.

Orange is the first warning, and usually (supposed to) last half an hour.

Red is Final Warning. It is the authorities have now been alerted to your location. Make your way to the nearest bridge immediately.

And if they begin to flash ...

Newt anxiously checks their passes. They have not begun to flash, but he isn’t so confident in the red holding out for the expected fifteen minutes, anymore. From the back Newt can see the driver sneaking furtive, apprehensive looks at the two of them in the rear-view mirror. By around the fifth or sixth time he is met with the full force of Newt’s glare in the reflection and focus on the road ahead of him for the rest of the journey.

The next ten to fifteen minutes is nothing short of small torture, where every stalled car is a quickened heartbeat and a stab of cold panic, and every red light shrinks another year of his life. When the driver takes a turn a little slower than desired Thomas leans forward and asks him, with strained politeness, to step on it and finally – finally – they reach the border.

Thomas is waving his credit card over the sensor and Newt is muttering a quick thanks as they all but tumble out of the cab like one ungraceful four-legged animal, and it is then, in his haste to get out, that Newt lands wrong on the curb, and his ankle twists. Pain shoots right up to his knee, like one quick bolt of lightning that renders him stiff for a moment, off balance and arms reaching out to catch himself on the cement when he falls. The pained cry escapes his lips as the taxi driver takes off without a care or look back.

“Newt!” Thomas shouts, reaching down to pull him up with eyes full of alarm, “Are you okay? What happened?”

“Nothing, I’m fine.” Newt gasps, trying to shake off the jolt, and pushes on Thomas’ shoulder to turn him toward the bridge. They can see it from here, less than sixty feet away, and if Newt thought the mega indicators were intimidating in broad daylight, it is nothing compared to the sight
that they make in the dark.

“Hurry, we don’t have a lot of –”

As if someone were listening to their every breath, the passes begin to flash, both of them repeatedly. And if the continuous beeping coming from the small circular badges pinned to their chests, shrill and incessant, isn’t enough, alarms begin blaring from long speakers surrounding the immediate area. It is loud and somehow more piercing than the passes themselves, accompanied by a robotic voice which tells them to vacate the city, the authorities have been alerted of their presence and are on their way, you are violating a federal law and so on and so forth.

People stare. Some are outright fleeing and others, Newt notes with the highest level of mortification, are pulling out their phones and pointing them at him and Thomas.

They run.

The first step is okay, the next three or four passable, but the fifth step is the one where the electricity returns, and vengeful in the sixth. Newt grits his teeth and focuses all his energy on keeping up with Thomas and not making a single noise as they make their way to the bridge as fast as they possibly can. Up ahead Newt sees the guards begin to speak into their coms, some clench their launchers tighter, eyeing the two of them as they approach with cautious apprehension and Thomas, Newt realises, is shouting something but it is all noise and static to his ears as he runs, knee burning with every second step.

The guards shout at them as they run and Thomas shouts back and he grabs Newt’s hand at the last second, just as they inch closer to the indicators and just as Newt realises he is tilting, stumbling, leg in so much pain tears are beginning to spring alongside the pure stark panic and with one final shout from Thomas they run through the gate.

Newt, amazingly, remembers to hold his breath this time.

His ears pop on the other side anyway and he stands there for a moment, hands on knees and waiting to regain his breath. When he stands up and stretches out his back, feeling his shoulder blades and neck crack, Thomas is still shouting at the guards on the other side.

“Allright, assholes!” he is yelling. The guards wave at them behind a shimmery blue haze, and some of them are applauding. Thomas flips them off broadly, “Yeah you, too!”

Under his chin, Newt’s pass beeps once more for good measure and goes black. Newt rips it right off, half tempted to throw it over the side of the bridge so it can float down into the water below.

“Let’s just go,” he says, voice harsher than he intended. When they get to the way station Thomas all but throws their passes down on the desk in front of the poor unfortunate soul currently on shift, eyes on fire and rage curling in the corner of his lip.

“Sort out your tech,” he says, not kindly, “We had three more hours on these.”

The woman stares wide-eyed between Thomas, the passes and her computer screen unsurely. After a moment she must realise that, yes, they did have three more hours and nearly were arrested for violating the highest level law in the entirety of New York, north and south, over a technical malfunction, as her face grows pale and she begins to stutter, profusely apologising to the both of them. The rest of the workers watch the scene out of the corner of their eyes, tense.

A minute later when they are making their way down the long winding path back to the subway slowly, feet dragging along the gravel, Thomas asks Newt is he is okay and reaches out to take his
hands and Newt –

He snatches his hand away, harshly.

“I’m fine.”

Thomas stops in his tracks for half a second, like a glitch that’s barely there, very obviously caught off guard. And, mostly, hurt.

Newt winces. He knows all that wasn’t Thomas’ fault but the majority of him is angry and in pain and looking for a direction to point that anger. He also knows that Thomas now thinks Newt thinks it was his fault, and Newt is making no move to correct that. He knows he is being unfair and the guilt that stabs at his stomach is almost as painful as the electricity in his leg (only now beginning to subside) but the persistent stubbornness inside of him wins out and he keeps his mouth shut for the remainder of the trip.

His limp is showing and he knows Thomas can see it, judging by the concerned looks he is shooting Newt that he thinks he can’t see. Newt takes a deep breath. He thinks I have it under control as they step on to the platform, and once more upon entering the train.

Thomas’ leg shakes in his seat, two away from Newt’s, for the entire trip.

The half-hour spent in silence has given them both time to think and simmer, and now, as they stand out in the cold night’s air, it is awkward. They hover there for what must be two minutes, hands in pockets and looking everywhere but each other, Newt watching the lights of the cars driving by and counting the seconds as they pass, agonisingly.

Finally, finally, Thomas clears his throat. His voice is low and gravely when he speaks. “Where’d you park?” he asks.

Newt shifts his weight onto his bad leg on purpose, hoping the sharp pain would snap him out of all this. It doesn’t particularly work. He says, “I walked here.”

Thomas shrugs one shoulder in what Newt presumes is the direction of his car, “I’ll drive you home.”

Newt begins to protest but Thomas just looks at him and then to his leg and there is no need to say anything else. Five minutes later Newt is seated in Thomas’ truck and ten minutes after that they are in the parking garage, engine off, sitting in silence. Thomas insists on seeing Newt to his door and once they are up there, Newt’s door unlocked, he realises that Thomas has no plans on following him inside.

“Wait!” Newt tries not to shout, panic surged in his chest when Thomas began to tell him goodnight. “Um, do you want to come in?”

“Uh,” Thomas scratches his nose, “You know, it’s getting kind of late –” it is 8 pm “– I should get going. Erm, see what grandpa wants.”

Newt clutches the door handle. He knows that his eyes are more pleading than his words when he says, “Come inside.”

Thomas lingers only a moment longer before sighing and walking through the door. Newt steps to the side to let him in. Thomas removes his coat and hangs it up on auto piolet, and Newt realises he likes how it looks, filling up the empty space on the wall.
Thomas rubs his eyes tiredly, and tries, “Listen, Newt, I –”

Newt takes a deep breath and begins, “When I was nineteen I tried to kill myself.”

Newt doesn’t always know what reaction to expect from people over this information, the small – very small – amount of them that he has shared this with, but everything in Thomas freezes and he stares straight at Newt, mouth parted and eyes wide and shocked and for some reason Newt thinks okay this is alright I can work with this.

“I …” Thomas breathes, “You – what?”

Saying it aloud, no matter how many times or to how many people or theorists he says it to, always leaves him feeling light and faint, pins and needles in his arms and his toes. He moves to sit on the arm of the couch, leg sighing in relief. Thomas remains exactly where he is by the front door.

“I wasn’t in a … very good place,” Newt says with a small, out of place laugh, feeling like that was the understatement of the century. Thomas snaps out of his frozen shock and slowly makes his way over.

Sitting down on the coffee table, Thomas looks up at Newt and whispers, “Talk to me.”

Fiddling with the cuff of his jumper, Newt begins slowly, “Everything was just too much. Alby had just told me that he’d been accepted into this post-grad program in Montreal and with my sister in another city I felt like I was losing the only other friend I had at the time.” He pauses for a second to gather himself. He hasn’t said this all out loud in a very long time, and it is leaving him breathless. “And, honestly, I don’t want to be the person that blames school for everything but. Yeah. School.”

He continues, “The guy I was dating at the time didn’t exactly understand. He kept on telling me that I was just overreacting, I couldn’t handle life without complaining yadda, yadda. He ended up dumping me and I guess, I don’t know, maybe that was the last straw.”

Thomas’ jaw clenches and his eyes bore into Newt, focused and unblinking. Newt feels a kind of fullness rise in his chest and he realise, hysterically, that he may start crying.

“I just, um,” he whispers, struggling to keep his voice steady, I don’t know, everything just piled on top of each other and I decided I couldn’t handle it anymore. So I found the tallest building I could, climbed up to the roof and just,” he waves his hands, “Threw myself off.”

Thomas looks about the room, mouth opening and closing sporadically, and Newt doesn’t think he’s ever seen anyone truly at a more loss for words. “Newt, I –” Thomas curses, “Fuck, I don’t know what to say.”

Newt shakes his head, “It’s okay.”

“No, it isn’t,” Thomas frowns, “What happened? Wait, you don’t have to answer that if you don’t want to.”

“No,” Newt sniffs, “I, um. I’m still here so obviously it didn’t bloody work.” His attempt at a joke falls very short. Newt sighs, “I was falling and then all of a sudden I wasn’t. I think blacked out for a minute because when I woke up I was hanging upside down in mid-air about thirty feet off the ground, my leg caught on some vines.”

Newt closes his eyes. He can picture that day so clearly in his mind; the world tilted off its axis, swaying there, delirious, for twenty minutes until someone down below happened to look up and
see him there. The orange flowers of the trumpet vine were all that he could see until they got him down. One of them had caught itself on his clothes, wrapped itself around a tear in his jeans, and Newt stared at it the entire way to the hospital.

His leg had been broken in three places.

“It healed as best as it could,” he tells Thomas, “but an injury like that is hard to fix. So it still acts up sometimes, mostly in cold weather or if I do something to stress it.” He looks at Thomas and asks, “Do you remember last week when I told you I bumped it at work?”

Slowly, eyes a little unsure, Thomas nods.

“That’s not entirely true.” Newt explains the situation with the vine upon walking into his store in the early morning, how the entire situation had brought up memories so sudden and intense that they physically made both his leg and his mind ache from it. “That’s actually what happened. How I hurt it.” Newt says, “It’s been so bloody hard to get basic maintenance in lately and the whole place got a little bit overgrown.”

Thomas’ mouth presses into a line and his eyes take on a glassy sheen. “How, uh,” Thomas’ voice is breathy, thoughtful. He asks, “How are you feeling now?”

Newt hums, shrugging unimportantly, “It was a long time ago, Thomas, I’m –”

“No, I mean, like, right now.”

Newt stops, his mouth gone dry.

“You fell out of the cab,” Thomas says, “You hurt your leg. You said that getting tangled in a vine the other week brought all those memories back. After dinner that night, when you were limping, we came back here and we – did you have all that in your head? The whole time?”

Newt’s lips stutter but no sound comes out. It doesn’t even matter, anyway, because it is answer enough for Thomas, who cups his hands together against his mouth, the space between his eyebrows creasing.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Newt frowns, “What? And ruin the whole night? I couldn’t just come out and say it, Tommy, it wasn’t the right time.”

Thomas frowns back, “Wasn’t the right time? Newt, if you were hurting –”

Newt stands abruptly, catching Thomas off guard, who leans back out of the way to let him pass. Newt doesn’t breathe until he feels the cold edge of the kitchen island digging into his palms. Thomas’ shoes squeak against the floorboards as he gets up and begins to approach, and Newt closes his eyes, his throat tight and.

Oh no. Not now. The last person he’d cried in front of was Lizzy, three years ago, when the walls felt like they were closing in and using his entire life savings to buy the shop might have been the biggest mistake he had ever made.

“Do you, erm.” Thomas mutters, “Do you still feel like that?”

Newt scoffs bitterly, “Like throwing myself off a skyscraper? Fuck no.”
“Okay.” Thomas pauses. Newt hears his shoe scuff against the floor, “That’s good.”

“That’s good,” Newt murmurs, nail tapping lightly at the countertop. He failed to realise Thomas has gotten as close as he has until Newt feels the length of his chest against his back, and his hands at his hips, fingers lightly brushing his belt. It’s a cautious touch, all examining, asking for permission, and without even thinking about it Newt leans back into him.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know what to say,” Thomas whispers as his arms circle around Newt’s waist. His palms are flat and warm against his stomach.

Newt places his hand over Thomas’. “That’s okay. I didn’t really expect you to.”

“What made now the right time?”

“I just,” Newt groans, “I owed you an explanation. For earlier, on the bridge.”

With a firm pull, Newt is being spun around to face Thomas, whose eyes are serious, his jaw set into a hard line. He says, firmly, “You don’t owe anyone anything, okay? Especially not me.”

Newt grinds his teeth, willing that rise in his chest to stay way, way down. “Yeah I do, Tommy.”

Thomas, shaking his head, “No you don’t. You –”

“I needed to tell you now so that you would have an out,” Newt says. His voice absolutely does no shake, “Right now, not in two or three months when … when –”

Thomas cups Newt’s face a kisses him, hard and long until they are both dizzy and lungs screaming for air, and when they pull away Newt realises the tightness in his throat is here and ever prominent, chest constricting, and eyes blurry with unshed tears. One of them escapes when he blinks, which Thomas immediately wipes away, soft and slow and he keeps his thumb there afterwards, just caressing Newt’s cheekbone.

“Don’t say that.” Thomas kisses him again, “Ever. Please.” Another kiss, and another, and another until Newt is nodding, hands trembling where they come to rest on Thomas’ shoulders, near whining and kissing back with a new urgency, suddenly desperate.

Fingers tugging and lips almost bruising, he knows he’s making a spectacle of himself but he could not care any less, hands reaching up to thread through Thomas’ head and moaning appreciatively when Thomas’ hands come to grip Newt’s hips, hard enough to leave marks. He thinks Thomas might be speaking, mumbling words against his lips that are lost to his ears, filled with static, his senses nulled and full of nothing but Thomas’ scent and the warmth of his skin and the scratch of his chapped lips against Newt’s mouth, getting softer now, and feels himself descend slightly into madness.

Thomas says his name as Newt promptly takes his hand and leads him toward the bedroom, kicking the door shut behind them as soon as he can and reattaching himself to Thomas’ lips in a heartbeat. “Newt,” Thomas whispers as Newt walks them backwards, “Newt. Newt.”

“Tommy,” Newt whispers back, stopping when he feels the back of his knees hit the edge of the mattress. He runs his mouth over Thomas’ cheek, teeth just grazing his jawline. He says, “I want you,” and Thomas groans, a little helpless, as Newt pulls him down on to the bed.

A thousand different emotions and feelings swirl and stagger through his mind, some of them disagreeable and cold which Newt has to push back. Thomas, however, manages to wipe them all away instantly when he puts his mouth around him, careful hands and lips planting soft kisses on
almost every inch of Newt’s body until he is shaking and has forgotten everything that exists in the world but the two of them. His leg amazingly doesn’t hurt when he is riding him, slow, any kind of discomfort smoothed away by kind kisses and even kinder hands, and by the end of it they’re both gasping, Thomas’ face buried into Newt’s neck and Newt gripping at his hair hard enough that it definitely hurts.

They spend the moments afterwards coming down slowly, unhurried as if time had stopped outside and the whole world was just the two of them, Newt lying on Thomas, their knees together and ankles locked, the tip of his nose brushing against Thomas’ as he sighs beneath him, his heart thumping against Newt’s chest in a steady, calming beat, twisting bits of Newt’s hair into a braid.

He isn’t sure when it is that they fall asleep, only that it must have happened sometime after laying his head on Thomas’ chest, wanting to hear his heartbeat, and closed his eyes, as when he wakes it is dark and quiet. Mostly, what wakes him is the feeling of the bed dipping, the sudden lack of warmth against his body, and the sound of shuffling on the carpet.

Newt must make a noise because Thomas is there in the next second, knee on the bed and leaning down, quietly shushing him.

“Hey,” he whispers, lips brushing the soft skin at Newt’s temple, “Go back to sleep.”

He must fall back asleep because the next time he wakes up it is to more shuffling, and this time when Thomas leans down, Newt peeks open tired eyes to see the outline of clothes on his body. “Everything is going to be okay,” he says, “Don’t worry about me.”

The third time Newt wakes it is to early morning sunlight and an empty apartment.
Chapter 3

He doesn’t think anything of it, walking around the apartment in a daze, arms reaching for the cereal bowl with one eye open, feeling happy and sated. Thomas works strange hours so he’s used to Thomas getting up and leaving at ungodly hours of the morning, just as he’s used to hearing a knock at his door late at night, the rhythm telling him exactly who it is, and opening it to let Thomas fall into his arms two steps in, already snoring.

Newt still doesn’t think anything of it later in the day when he is sat in the greenhouse, tapping his foot and humming along to the music blasting through his earphones. He doesn’t notice Minho’s presence or hears his voice calling out to him until his friend is standing only an inch away, looking unimpressed. Newt jumps so hard he nearly drops the syringe he had been holding, ripping his earphones out with a string of colourful curses in both English and Russian (just for emphasis) to which Minho raises a smooth eyebrow at.

“What?” Newt spits, carefully placing the syringe on the metal bench.

Minho frowns, “How loud do you have that? I was screaming out at you like a fucking banshee – pretty sure the neighbours think someone’s been murdered. You know you’re gonna be deaf by the time you’re thirty, man.”

Newt rolls his eyes and coils the earphones around his phone, slipping the lot into his pocket, “Uh huh.”

“No really. Me and Teresa have got a bet going, see –”

Newt taps his nails on the desk, reeling Minho back in, “What do you want?”

Minho’s face does something strange. “Oh, right. Can I, uh … show you something real quick?”

A certain tone in his voice causes Newt pause as something tells him that whatever it is his friend is going to show him isn’t particularly good. “Sure?” Newt says, wearily, and follows Minho into the front room.

Minho ducks behind the counter and digs around in the shelves for a long second before locating whatever it is he is looking for. Minho straightens out and dumps a file so large on the marble bench that it makes a loud thump! when it lands.

Newt eyes the folder. He recognises it; it’s where they keep all their hedera invoices. The file dates back all the way to three years ago when Glade Botanicals first opened. “What about it?” Newt asks, confused as to why Minho’s bringing it out. They haven’t had a hedera sale in months.

Minho presses his palms flat against the folder. It’s beginning to bend and tear in the corners. Newt should probably replace that. Or get a better filing system. Or, he could just leave it to the new secretary to deal with and organise, when they eventually find one, that is.

“This,” Minho begins, “holds records of all the D.I. sales and their confirmation certificates, correct?”
Newt nods, slowly, “Yes.”

“And you haven’t started putting them anywhere else lately, and just not told me about it?”

“Uh, no?”

Minho presses, “Are you sure? One hundred per-cent positive, Newt?”

Newt frowns, still confused, “Yeah, Min, they’re all in there. What is this about?”

Minho opens the book to where it’s marked – i.e. the latest hedera invoice and CC, “Okay, well, if that’s the case then why isn’t Thomas’ in here?”

“What?” Newt asks, incredulous, and leans forward to look at the book, turning it a little to see better. “Yeah, it is. It’s right here, see?” He points to the page, right at Thomas’ name written on the invoice document.

Minho, visibly miffed, spins the book all the way around so that it is facing Newt directly. “I don’t mean his invoice, I’m talking about the CC,” Minho says. “There isn’t one.”

Newt’s insides grow cold. He stares at Minho, blinking like an owl. “That’s impossible,” he says and turns the page to where Thomas’ confirmation certificate should be, the one with the little WCKD logo sitting in the corner. An off white piece of paper that should tell them that this hedera order has been planted and clean up has been dealt with, we thank you for your co-operation, gods be Manhattan but low and behold.

There isn’t one.

Newt flips the page again, hoping that it will just magically appear out of thin air.

It doesn’t.

Newt can feel Minho’s eyes on him, waiting for some sort of response – maybe Newt will turn around and say that this is just a practical joke and he has the certificate hidden somewhere in the store, in a new filing system that he hadn’t told Minho about. Newt doesn’t. He stands there, staring down at the empty plastic film, frozen.

“I don’t understand,” Newt says eventually. His voice doesn’t sound like his own. “It should be right here.”

Hands planted on the counter Minho breathes deeply through his nose and leans forward. His eyes are dark and serious, “Newt – hey, Newt, listen to me. I need you to think about this. Do you remember receiving a CC for Thomas’ order?”

“I …” His mouth is dry, “I mean, we must have.”

“No,” Minho shakes his head, “No, did we or did we not get a CC from WCKD with Thomas’ name on it? Think very carefully.”

“We must have, Minho,” Newt says, finally looking up after slamming the book shut, “That order was two months ago.”

Minho folds his arms across his chest, “Okay then why isn’t it here? Can you explain that to me?”

Newt racks his brain, “Was there a digital copy we just forgot to print out?”
“No digital. I checked the email.”

The hysteria is beginning to rise alongside the confusion and, with it, fear. Newt’s skin feels too hot and his head is fuzzy as his mind reels to come up with an explanation that makes sense. This all combines into Newt’s topmost coping mechanism in times of stress: anger.

“Why the bloody hell were you looking through the files, anyway?” He asks, harshly.

Minho’s eyebrows shoot up, offended. “Why was I look – I’ll tell you why I was looking through the fucking files, Newt. There I was, casually watering the begonias and I thought Hey, you know what we haven’t gotten in a while? A hedera order. And then I got to thinking about how I couldn’t even remember the last time we heard even a single peep from WCKD, and then it hit me that our last hedera order was two fucking months ago, and we haven’t received a fucking CC yet, Newt!” Minho is yelling by the end, “Don’t you get it, man?”

Newt’s palms dig into the counter hard enough to cut, “Get what?”

Minho takes a very deep breath as if he is preparing himself for whatever is about to come next. “No confirmation certificate means there was no confirmation of a D.I. being planted. No CC means no cleanup, no cleanup means there wasn’t the need for one, which only means there was nothing planted in the first place.”

When the words are done coming out of Minho’s mouth all that is left is ringing silence and the occasional brush of leaves. It fills the silence like roaring, white noise. Newt says, “There has to be a mistake …”

Minho presses his palms together and takes a deep, measured breath. “You aren’t seeing the facts, man.”

“Which are?”

“We don’t have a CC,” Minho enunciates. It only makes Newt madder. “Look, did Thomas ever tell you he planted it?”

It’s Newt’s turn to cross his arms, and he says, “No, but I know he has.”

“Yeah? How? Has he told you?” Minho asks again.

“Well, no –”

“So he hasn’t said it out loud? Ever?”

“We don’t talk about that.”

“Why do you talk about, then?”

Newt glowers, “Why am I being interrogated?”

Minho throws his hands up, irritation hitting its full peak, “I don’t know, Newt, maybe because it’s starting to sound like your boyfriend never actually used the D.I. pack he bought months ago! He – No, no, the facts are all here.”

Newt tries to speak but Minho talks over him, checking off his fingers, “No certificate from WCKD, and you cannot have a cleanup without calling a cleanup crew, it is fundamentally impossible. Also, nothing in the newspapers at all, which I honestly didn’t even think about until
now. On top of that, you have no actual word from Thomas himself that he planted the damn thing in the first place, and you’re only going by, what? A gut feeling?”

Newt rubs his temples, taking deep and measured breathes. He says, “It has to have been planted, Minho. It’s the law.”

“Yeah, it is the law,” Minho nods. “A law that, if broken, let me remind you, counts as a capital offence.”

The floor feels as if it is tilting. Newt grabs a hold of the counter to steady himself. His mind is reeling through each and every encounter with Thomas that he can possibly remember, both leading up to and proceeding the official cut-off date. Searching for something, anything that would allude to Thomas planting the hedera. The only thing he can come up with is the dinner five weeks ago, the random toast, when Newt had asked Thomas what they were celebrating and Thomas hadn’t told him what exactly but his eyes had gone cold and something shifted on his face and –

And he didn’t say it outright, but.

It had to have been it.

Like someone else is speaking, Newt says, “He has to have planted it.”

Minho sighs and moves the book back into its place, useless for everything but reminding them of what isn’t there. “Newt, this is serious,” he says.

Newt slams his fist down on the marble. “I know it’s fucking serious!” he shouts, louder than intended, so that his voice echoes around the room. Minho does not even flinch. “There has to be an explanation or some kind of mix-up, I don’t know what!”

Minho moves out from behind the counter to begin pacing the floor. After his fourth round by the green wall, steps careful to overlook the quick growing vines (the Pruner hadn’t done as best of a job as Newt would have liked, and he is beginning to wonder what the hell is happening in this city) he stops and turns toward Newt, now leant against the counter to relieve some stress off his leg.

“Okay, look,” Minho starts, “I’m going to ask you something and I want you to promise me you’ll hear me out and not get mad. Alright?”

Newt smooths his hair out of his face, “Sure.”

Minho says, “How well do you know Thomas?”

Those words are like a brick to the face, harsh and rough and exceedingly painful, and it makes Newt very, very angry. “What?” he spits, kicking off from the counter.

Minho waves a finger at Newt, “Okay now see there – you’re getting mad.”

“Well, of course, I’m getting fucking mad, Minho!” Newt throws his arms up, “What did you bloody except?”

“I expect you to think rationally about this.”

“Rationally? You’re accusing my – you’re accusing Thomas of, what? This is a criminal offence.”
“Yeah, it’s a criminal fucking offence, Newt! One that we –” he waves his hands from himself to Newt “– can also get into huge trouble for if it isn’t sorted out right fucking now. I mean –” Minho laughs, breathless, looking like he can’t believe this conversation is actually happening right now, in actual real life. To be honest, Newt can’t believe it, either, “Seriously, I’m surprised WCKD hadn’t kicked down that door weeks ago.”

Newt groans loudly and pulls at his hair in two large fists. He wants to scream, he wants to tear apart this store until he finds that stupid piece of paper that proves Thomas is innocent, that this was all just one big misunderstanding and they’re freaking out over nothing.

Minho’s voice is much softer now when he speaks, “How long have you guys been dating? A month now? Over a month?”

_Dating._ Technically, they have been seeing each other regularly and going on dates and fucking for a little over one and a half months, now. But neither of them has ever said the words, not officially.

Minho continues, “Where did he go to school?” Newt answers. “What did he wanna be when he grew up? What does he do?” Newt answers again. “Who’s his best friend?” They both know the answer to that, so Newt isn’t even sure why Minho is bringing it up. “What’s his favourite colour?” Black, apparently, as that’s all he ever sees him wearing.

“Where are you going with all this?” Newt finally snaps, having had enough.

“Is this all stuff that Thomas told you? Himself?”

Newt begins to answer, _yes, of course it is_, but then … It was Thomas’ grandfather who told Newt about Thomas’ school life, his talents and interests. What he does for a living was required information for the purchase of a hedera pack, not exactly optional, and they know about Teresa because, well. Teresa.

He knows about Chuck, his little brother who goes to school up north, who is apparently some artistic prodigy, and when he is just about to mention this he realises that this is also something Alec had told him about Chuck, originally, not Thomas. And Newt only knows about Thomas’ parents because he brought them up that day. If unprompted, would Thomas had even shared that information at all? Still, it is a point to add to the leader board.

Only, one truth does not make up a person.

Minho’s eyes are gentle. “Look I like Thomas, I really do. And I … I know how you feel about him, man, which is why it pains me to say that maybe he isn’t as clean cut as you think he is.”

Newt covers his face with his hands, “Please stop talking.”

“I’m just saying –”

Newt lifts his eyes to Minho, “I know what you’re saying, and I am not going to accuse anyone of anything until I get answers.”

Minho nods, slow, and begins to walk back and forth again. “Alright, but what if they aren’t the ones you want … You have to be prepared for that.”

Newt shakes his head, “I … Sorry?”

This time when Minho looks to him his eyes are filled with pity, and it settles like poison in Newt’s chest. “You know it’s our job to report something like this. You remember that, don’t you?”
His blood goes cold.

Of course he knows that, but the fact that Minho is insinuating … Newt sets his jaw, squares his shoulders and says, “Get out.”

Minho frowns, visibly taken aback. “But it’s my shift,” he says, confused.

“Not anymore, I can handle things on my own today. Leave.”

He stands there a moment, both of them glaring at each other, Minho with a look of disbelief and Newt daring him to ask if he is joking. After a tense thirty seconds, ample time for Minho to realise that this whole entire situation is ridiculous, and he scoffs and walks off toward the back to grab his belongings.

Newt is still standing in the exact same spot as he was when Minho left, and he continues to stand there, back against the counter and staring at the streetscape blankly, unseeing. Minho pauses by the glass door, his hand on the handle, and turns to Newt. He says, “I hope you get the answers you want,” and leaves.

The delicate chime of the door closing is piercing.

Thomas isn’t answering his phone.

Throughout the day Newt’s sent him various texts, most of them asking him to call as soon as he could. When the day ended and Newt closed up the store without a single reply he thought screw it and decided to just call himself. Both times went straight to voicemail. He could just be working late, he does that all the time; losing track of daylight when he is absorbed in his work. Any minute now he will glance at his phone and see all the notifications and realise, shit, it’s 9 pm.

When 9 pm does roll around Newt’s phone is still silent. Too wound up from earlier to cook, he orders take out and sits cross-legged on his couch, distracting himself with the first nature documentary he lands on, nibbling on Thai take away. By 9:30 pm he decides to shower, hoping that when he exists the bathroom his phone will be flashing with a notifications. For a second his heart skips a beat when his phone is, in fact, flashing with an unread message, but it is only a Snapchat from Alby, at the zoo, taking a selfie with some penguins.

Newt responds with a blurry picture of the corner of his bookshelf and the caption Cute and switches the data off on his phone.

The radio silence carries on until 10 pm. By 11 he refuses to panic, and at midnight Newt goes to bed convincing himself that Thomas’ phone simply ran out of battery and he will definitely hear from him tomorrow. Definitely.

The morning rolls around with still no word from Thomas. At the danger of looking absolutely fucking insane he calls him again on the drive to work, but again it goes to voicemail. He is exhausted from a night spent tossing and turning and not prepared to waste another morning like this, so he does not even try and fight the frustration from his voice when he tells Thomas’
mailbox, “Tommy, I need to talk to you. Call me back.” Then throwing his phone into the passenger seat.

He blurrily greets customers and makes sales on auto piolet, going about his usual business with a sort of film over his eyes, relying on muscle memory to tell him where the clippers and the watering cans and each and every other grooming tool is in the store, and his mind is elsewhere far, far away. When Newt begins to take orders and immediately forgets to write them down, thus having to call the clients back and ask for specifics, I’m so sorry, I must have misplaced it somewhere. Could you repeat it to me? Again, so sorry, he texts Minho.

He apologises for yesterday and asks if he would still consider coming in today. Not five minutes later he receives a reply of, Yeah, of course, buddy and when Minho walks through the front door twenty minutes later, Newt sighs at the sight of him. He has to physically restrain himself from running up and embracing Minho and completely unloading all his troubles and anxieties and concerns on to his friend.

But when Minho asks if he has met up with Thomas yet, Newt says, “Yeah, yeah he’s just got a lot of stuff going on at the moment, we’re gonna talk tonight,” because he knows how this is all starting to look and he does not want to turn this into something until he has at least talked to Thomas, face to face.

He smiles, hopefully convincing. Minho looks dubious for only a moment before he decides to go along with it, shooing Newt off to the greenhouse for a break.

“Go,” he says, “Be in your natural habitat. And hey, look. Don’t worry, it’ll all work out.”

Newt smiles and nods, wishing he could whole-heartedly believe him when something deep down is eating at his insides, and it feels scared.

The afternoon rolls by and the evening comes and goes and still – still – not a single peep from Thomas. Not a word, not a text, not a missed call. Nothing. Radio silence. His phone doesn’t even go to voicemail anymore; but rings out into eternity. Newt is so past angry and confused that at this point he is doing a trapeze act on the edge of fucking furious, and about to do something he will regret if he doesn’t get a lid on it soon.

He gets home, cooks dinner this time – nearly burning it and having to stand on top of the counter for two minutes swatting at the blaring smoke alarm with a tea towel – he eats with the television quietly playing in the background, because silence, any kind of it, right now will drive him mad.

He calls Lizzy and listens to her blather on about her day, wax poetic about Harriet, complain about the local cat shelter and how it isn’t doing shit, apparently, to help the poor kitties and, most of all, distract him with her high, bell-like voice until his blood pressure simmers into something normal and he no longer has to urge to drive to Thomas’ apartment and pound on his door.

After ending the call with his sister Newt sits there debating for a few minutes before jumping up and pacing back and forth from one wall to the other. Finally, he gives in and calls Teresa.

She answers on the fourth ring, sounding out of breath as if she’d had to run to the phone, “Hello?”

The sound of her voice jolts something awake inside of Newt and he cringes at himself, asking some external entity what he thinks he’s doing. Regardless, he forces himself to speak before he
can chicken out, “Hey, Teresa, it’s Newt.”

“Uh, yes,” she sounds amused, “I know. What’s up?” In the background he hears Brenda’s voice asking who it is, to which Teresa tells her, “Newt,” and Newt hears a loud, “Oh heeeeeey!” in return.

Newt scratches his scalp nervously. How is he even supposed to say this? “Erm, listen, have you, uh – ” Christ he sounds so awkward “– have you spoken to Thomas today? Or yesterday?”

“Um …” Teresa pauses to think, “Yesterday morning was the last I heard from him. But, I mean, it’s not unusual for Tom to go MIA all of a sudden. Why? Can you not get a hold of him?”

Newt ignores the last part and says, “Teresa – and I know this is going to sound mental – but has Thomas said anything to you about the hedera? About planting it?”

Teresa is quiet for a long moment, and for about ten seconds all Newt can hear is muffled shuffling and the sliding of a glass door before he realises she’s moved out on to the balcony.

“Oh,” Teresa’s voice is hushed now, “What is this about, exactly?”

Newt takes a deep breath to steady himself. “Has he told you he’s planted it yet? Or that he was planning on doing it, a while ago?”

Teresa sounds extremely confused, “A while ago? But he couldn’t.”

Newt stops in his tracks. He is almost positive that Teresa can hear how each of his words sounds like a separate sentence, with capital letters and full stops, when he asks, “What do you mean he couldn’t?”

“Well,” Teresa begins, “He couldn’t plant it because the indicators weren’t working.”

Something in Newt’s brain clicks and shatters all at once. On the other end of the phone, the horn of a large truck screeches loudly through the quiet night air, and Newt’s voice does not sound like his own when he asks, “The indicators?”

“Yeah? Remember, they weren’t working and he said he needed to wait to get them replaced … Newt, are you there?”

“Yes, I’m here.”

“Is everything okay?” Teresa asks, and.

She is a smart woman, Newt knows she knows everything isn’t okay, it is very not okay, otherwise why would Newt be calling her at eight o’clock at night asking about Thomas? More importantly, a clientele issue. She explains that Thomas told her that the indicators didn’t work. Newt’s indicators, one he had replaced already, that were absolutely fine when Thomas bought them in the first place – in fact, they were the best working things in that store – were suddenly broken? And have been for an entire month?

Newt says, “Yeah, everything’s fine. Sorry, I made a mistake.” And hangs up.

Okay. Newt presses his phone to his lips and begins to pace again. Okay. Okay.

If Thomas says there was a problem with the indicators, why would he not mention it to Newt? Why would he wait until he was a month – over a month, even – overdue to start doing something
about it? Why? He knows the penalties, the entire city knows the penalties. It’s the first thing you learn before you’re granted citizenship.

Newt paces some more.

Years and years ago, after the initial bill had been passed, there was a case where a man had murdered his fiancé using a hedera. Friends and family became concerned when they couldn’t get into contact with the woman for several days, until eventually someone sent the police over to their house and there it was they found her, in the living room.

The government had tried to keep several details of the crime scene out of the papers, but then one fateful day the official police report had been mysteriously leaked and everyone knew the truth; how she had been left, in her own home, wrapped head to toe in vines for several days. She had still been alive when the paramedics rushed her into the ambulance, but died just short of reaching the hospital.

It was pure, unbridled anarchy.

From that day on New York had divided itself into North and South. The gates had been implemented and the man, whom they found five days later, had been sentenced to a life in prison for murder.

Today the law states that death by devil’s ivy is classified as neither murder nor manslaughter, as the plant exhibits signs of sentience and independent thought – as seen that day, the woman had been exposed to the toxins that the belladonna flowers release but not enough to kill, just to keep her alive until, slowly, death will be reached.

There are rules for possession, however, one of which being that there must be doses of Bliss distributed and the purchaser cannot have the plant for more than four weeks or they will be immediately prosecuted, no judge and no jury. The only thing a lawyer can do for you in this situation is argue how many years you deserve off your life sentence.

Newt collapses flat against the cushions with a deep sigh. His exhausted brain lulls him to sleep without his approval and he wakes up, strangely, with Thomas’ grandfather’s name at the forefront of his mind.

He mutters it as he reaches for his laptop, immediately opening a search. Something about the old man just seems so damn familiar, not only in regards to the family resemblance with Thomas. He thought it on the day in the café – when they first met on the street corner, even – Newt was sure he has seen his face before. Even his name sounded eerily familiar. However, five minutes of searching later google concluded that there is no Alec Murphey, at least not the silver-haired, big wide-toothed smile one that Newt is after. He sits back, defeated.

Maybe he is going a little mad. Newt takes a deep breath, in and out.

He’s probably blowing all this out of proportion. There is a perfectly logical and reasonable solution as to why Thomas isn’t answering his phone, or why they don’t have his CC, or why his own grandfather looks so familiar to Newt.

Newt closes his eyes.

Tomorrow he will wake up to a hundred messages from Thomas with a thousand apologies and excuses and Newt will ask him about his order and Thomas will give him a completely reasonable explanation about it and what he had told Teresa about the indicators, and Newt can contact
WCKD about the missing CC, and –

Newt opens his eyes and types Alec WCKD into the search bar.

And there it is.

The sound of Newt’s phone vibrating loudly in the darkness scares him awake. Half asleep and confused, heart hammering with anxiety and fright, that at first in that moment it doesn’t even register in his brain that it is ringing. Groaning, Newt reaches out with feather-light hands and only one eye open Newt gropes blindly in the dark for his phone and, upon locating it, bringing it to his face and glaring at the too-bright screen with blurry vision.

When he sees Thomas’ name lit up in blue all previous afflictions vanish from his mind and he is immediately wide awake, nearly dropping his phone in an effort to answer it.

“Tommy?” he gasps into the receiver, sitting up and brushing hair out of his eyes. His mind is running faster than his mouth could ever hope to keep up with, and what comes out is a garbled stutter of, “What’re you – what time – where have you been? – I’ve been calling …”

Newt hears breathing on the other end, and it sounds … distressed. Newt swallows, “Thomas?”

It takes almost a full minute for Thomas to say anything, and when he does speak his voice is too-high and full, broken. “I … I’m sorry, I didn’t. I know it’s late and I –” he clears his throat of the lump in it, “I shouldn’t have called you, Newt, but I …” He breaks off and Newt hears only breathing.

Newt sits up fully and pushes the covers away. “Tommy, what is it?”

Newt hears a sharp sniff, and he sounds very much as if he is crying, “Newt, I need you. I need your help. I can’t – I couldn’t –” Thomas breaks off once more.

“Tommy, hey. Shh, it’s okay. Breathe for me,” Newt instructs gently, already standing and searching for his clothes. “Tell me where you are.”

It takes Thomas another full minute to respond, time during which Newt has pulled on pants and a shirt, working on tying his hair back. “I need you to come to my apartment,” he says.

Newt nods even though Thomas has no way of knowing, “Okay. Just … hold on. Stay where you are. Are you hurt?”

This sparks a starling, bitter laugh out of Thomas, and he replies, “No.”

After some more muttered words of encouragement and reassurances Newt hangs up, taking two steps at a time down to the lower ground floor, rather than waiting for the elevator. In the car, speed reversing out of the garage and playing Dodge ‘em with the columns, he winds through the streets of Manhattan until he finds Thomas’ apartment complex. It isn’t until Newt is standing outside the building itself that he realises he’s never actually been to Thomas’ place before.

Honestly, it’s what he expected, back when he first met Thomas and all he saw before him was a rich boy with expensive clothes who probably owned equally as expensive real estate. Newt forces himself to look down away from the shiny high rise, absolutely covered in indicators to keep all the
ivy neat and tidy, and makes his way in through the large doors. He walks right past bellhops on the way to the elevator, and uses to code Thomas had texted him on the way there to get to the penthouse.

The elevator does not deposit him into the apartment as he had expected. Newt steps off into a small lobby area where he finds Thomas sitting on the floor beside the front door, head in his arms and knees to his chest. The light shining through the gap where the door has been left ajar highlights him in gold, and he looks so small that Newt’s heart aches alongside the confusion and dread.

He approaches slow, like Thomas is a small animal and Newt is trying not to spook him, “Tommy, hey, I’m here.”

Thomas does not move until he feels Newt’s fingers brush his shoulder. He jumps, violently, blinking around the small room with bloodshot eyes until he lands upon Newt standing above him. Newt holds his palms up in an Easy gesture and Thomas’ shoulders drop.

“You’re here,” Thomas repeats. He sounds awestruck, as if he hadn’t completely expected Newt to show up.

Newt kneels down in front of him, “Of course I’m here. What is going on?”

Thomas let’s out a shaky breath and throws a hand weakly over his shoulder. Newt squints into the house, but he can see nothing out of the ordinary. “In there,” Thomas says, as two tears spill out of both eyes, “He’s in there. I can’t – I need you to …”

And then he buries his face in his arms again and shuts down. After a minute of trying to get any more information out of him, Newt gives up and stands.

Entering the apartment washes him with the same feeling he gets when looking at a hedera. That cold emotion that settles deep in your chest, makes you feel empty and taciturn, like something foreign has crawled inside your body and settled in for the winter. The air is thick and quiet, and Newt is too aware of his own body, his breathing, his ever quickening heartbeat.

Shaking his head, Newt works to clear his mind and push forward if he ever wants to make it past the front entry. This is fine, he works with these things all the time, and he has one in his own greenhouse. He is used to the feeling and he can do this.

Finding the hedera is surprisingly easy, despite Thomas not telling him where it is. All Newt has to do, really, is follow the existential dread and play hot and cold with his breathing. When it is hard to take in a deep breath he knows he’s found it.

Well, the ivy crawling along the hallway helps, too.

Newt stops before a seemingly unimportant looking door in the hallway, the only thing distinguishing it from all the others is the vines protruding from the gap in the door. One of them curls toward Newt’s foot, just quick enough for panic to stab at his heart and his breath to catch in his throat until the little tendrill shakes and evens out, going back to its dreamy, rippling state. The doorknob is ice cold when he touches it, making him rear back in shock, cursing.

“Ohkay. Okay, come on, you can do this,” Newt whispers to himself before pulling the sleeve of his sweater over his hand and, thinking twice, does the same with the collar over his mouth and nose and, finally, opens the door.

No amount of training or images, or files or videos that they had shown Newt before he obtained
his licence to stock and sell this plant could have prepared him for the sight in that bathroom. Alec
lies in the tub, eyes closed and hands laced over his stomach, reclined back as if he is on a porch
somewhere in the countryside, enjoying the sunlight. Purple flowers blossom from his chest.

Newt trips back over a vine and just barely catches himself against the door frame. Tripping over
his own feet, eyes to the floor, he eventually manages to stumble out into the hallway while
yanking the bathroom door shut. Taking a second or two, hands in his face, to just breathe in and
out before attempting to navigate his way back out of the apartment while focusing all of his
energy on not being sick.

Thomas still has not moved from where Newt left him, the only difference now is instead of
having his head in his arms he is sitting limp, legs down and staring blankly at the opposite wall.

“How long,” Newt gasps, clutching the wall to steady himself. He hadn’t realised how thin the
oxygen had been in that apartment now that he’s out of it, “How long has he been in there?”

“I don’t know,” Thomas murmurs.

know.”

Subtly, so small that it is barely a twitch of the shoulders, Thomas shrugs. “Thirty, I think,” he
says.

Newt nods. “Alright. Thirty minutes … You need to stand up. Can you stand?” Thomas does not
respond. Newt takes off his jacket and deposits it in some nondescript corner, feeling hot and on
edge.

“Tommy?” Newt tries again. Now he receives a faint hum. “Tommy, I need you to stand up.”

For some reason, Newt goes back inside the apartment, stands in the middle of the floor for a
second wonder what it is he’s doing, and running back out to find Thomas still on the floor. Newt
clenches his fists into white-knuckled balls. “Thomas, you need to get up,” he says, “WCKD is
notified within half an hour. They’ll be here soon along with the police and they cannot see you
like this. *Now stand up.*”

His tone is harsh and borderline cruel. Thomas looks up at him with a cold glare and, after a tense
second, complies. They stare at each other, neither of them willing to break eye contact until Newt
sighs and squeezes his eyes shut, groaning.

“Allright. I know this is going to be hard but I need you to go back inside –”

Thomas cuts him off, “No.”

Newt pushes the door further open so more light spills into the hall, “Yes, Tommy. I’m sorry, but
you have to … present yourself a certain way.”

Thomas looks between Newt and the open door for a stubborn second before mumbling, “Fine,”
and walking through. His steps are careful and body stiff so as not to touch Newt, who follows him
into the apartment and leaves the door wide open. Thomas stops by the sitting area, a twelve seater
lounge that looks plush and more than accommodating. Newt takes a quick glance around the
wide, open area from the shiny floorboards and Swedish furniture to the breathtaking waterside
view from all angles, and he can’t help but think that all of this looks like something straight out of
a billionaire model home magazine, and nothing like the Thomas Newt has come to know at all.
Thomas lingers by the edge of the lounge but does not sit.

Newt moves closer to him, as close as can before Thomas tenses up and an invisible wall comes slamming down between them. “Tell me what happened,” Newt says.

Thomas says, “You know what happened.”

“No,” Newt coughs, half wanting to ask Thomas if any of these fancy windows can open to let some air in, “I need you to tell me the truth, right now.”

Thomas sits. Still, he does not look at Newt but out over the cityscape, over the thousands of lights in the darkness. It takes a moment for Newt to realise that Thomas is waiting for him to sit down, also, and quickly moves to do so.

Thomas’ voice regains some of its emotion when he says, “He asked me to. To do this.”

Oh.

Newt’s throat is dry when he asks, “Why?”

Thomas sniffs, “Because he had cancer. It – It was everywhere. He refused therapy, says he didn’t want them pumping all of that poison into him,” Thomas says, using air quotes. “He said he wanted to go out … clean. His own way.”

A thousand different words and sentences and phrases run through Newt’s mind in that moment, but all that comes out is a simple yet unhelpful, “Fuck.”

Thomas looks like he agrees.

Newt scoots to the edge of the couch. “Tommy, I … I know about the indicators. I spoke to Teresa.” Thomas, amazingly, does not look as shocked as he had expected.

He quirks an eyebrow, humming flatly. “Yeah, I thought you might’ve.”

Then Newt says, “And I know who you grandfather is – was.” Thomas looks at him, puzzled, and Newt continues, “I know he’s the CEO of WCKD, and one of the original founders. I thought he looked familiar and I just … couldn’t place it. But then it hit me.”

Thomas closes his eyes, as if he needs to prepare himself before correcting, “Alec isn’t in charge of WCKD. I am.”

All the remaining air in the room drains. Newt stares at Thomas, unblinking, his brain trying and failing in processing this information.

“You – he –” Newt stutters, “What are you talking about?”

Thomas picks at his sleeve, “He stepped down a month ago. They were keeping it under wraps in the meantime.”

Newt frowns, rubbing his temples. He thinks he might be developing a migraine. “Why?”

Thomas waves his hands about the apartment in the form of an answer, and. Well. Yeah okay.

In a way it makes sense. The times that Thomas would disappear from the Earth for hours only to show up out of the blue, looking like the embodiment of exhaustion. The “need to get out of the city for a day”, the dark circles and tired smiles that never seemed to go away. How he would force
himself out of bed before the sun came up, no matter how much he needed to sleep. His muttered half-thought excuses when Newt would reach out with sleepy arms to drag him back down beside him, telling him to take the day off.

From a political standpoint, he understands why the company would want to keep the identity of the person in charge a secret for a little while. He imagines how fishy it would look when a seemingly perfectly healthy man steps down and declares an unknown 24 year-old to succeed him.

Newt groans into his hands. Thomas hums agreeably.

“And this place?”

“His,” Thomas says, then thinks, “Well. Mine now, I guess …”

Newt sees how Thomas has lost his straight-backed posture and now sits hunched over himself, nails picking at and breaking a thread in his shirt, lips parted and eyes glassy, unfocused. He wants to reach over and touch, bring Thomas into his arms, let him lay his head on his shoulder and comfort him until the police have come and gone and then hide him away from the world where no one can hurt him.

Newt reaches out, “Thomas …”

Three loud knocks at the door startled both of them and he turns to see a group of at least a dozen people standing out in the lobby, half dressed in white and the others in beige. The cleanup crew, Newt thinks. Thomas is already standing.

“Come in,” he says. The people let themselves in, and Thomas instructs, “Down the hall. Make a left. Second door.” before anyone can say anything. Newt stands, too, brushing his pants of invisible dirt just for something to do. The cleanup crew walk by, single file, without saying a word.

The small few dressed in white stay in the room, two with Newt and Thomas while the others walk around with tablets. Newt can’t help but notice how they eye the apartment oddly, one even sneaking glances back at Thomas, and wonders if they recognise him. If they work for WCKD there is no doubt they would know the address.

The one obviously in charge ushers Thomas to the side for a moment, where she looks to be asking questions and giving (very brief) condolences while Newt stands awkwardly in the middle of the floor, not knowing what to do. This entire night is so surreal. He has no idea how he got here, how they got here.

Maybe Minho was right, maybe he didn’t know Thomas as well as he thought.

When Thomas is done with the woman he returns to stand beside Newt as she makes her way further into the apartment, in the direction of the bathroom, talking hushed into her phone. Watching her go off Newt suddenly feels exhausted. The giant clock on the wall tells them it is nearly 2 am.

Thomas, when Newt looks at him properly for the first time since they all arrived, is far more alert than Newt thought he would have been capable of just five minutes earlier. Though there are still remnants of it, Thomas seems to have pulled a mask over himself. Newt wonders if he should find it as familiar as he does.

“I, um,” Thomas starts, hushed, “Newt, there’s so many things I want to tell you —”
“And you will. Soon.”

Thomas’ lips are pressed into a line, “Newt …”

Newt shakes his head. He looks Thomas dead in the eye and says, “I am so very sorry about all of this, but also … I have questions. Many. And I need you to answer them.”

The corner of Thomas’ lips twitch, and the mask lifts for a moment. Newt plants his feet to ground himself, to stop him from slapping that thing right off Thomas’ face.

But then Thomas says, “I would love to,” and the mask shifts more this time. The sad, glassy-eyed look Newt sees underneath it is beginning to terrify him.

“Promise me.” Thomas doesn’t say a word. Newt feels fifty emotions rise up inside him and he wants to grab Thomas and shake him. “Thomas.”

Thomas nods, “Yeah. Yes, I promise.”

Over his shoulder Newt spies two WCKD members looking over a file, glancing from it to Thomas each time with growing uncertainty. Newt knows what it is they’re looking at. “They have your files,” Newt whispers lowly, “They know how long ago you bought the hedera.”

Thomas appears strangely unconcerned, “I imagine they would.”

“But you …” Newt grabs Thomas’ arm. “Thomas, they know.”

Thomas just says, “I know.”

Newt nearly outright groans. The two men are beginning to approach. “No, I don’t think you do,” he says, “They are going to arrest you!”

“And it sounds right in his head. It makes perfect sense; of course the CEO of the company who owns the whole fucking city would have some kind of special privilege. Why else would Thomas be so nonchalant, so unfeeling about all this? Why would he risk spending the rest of his life in prison, why would he risk leaving his brother, leaving his best friend, leaving Newt –

But then Thomas smiles and shakes his head. His eyes are sad. He says, “No one’s exempt from the law. Not even WCKD themselves. Definitely not me.”

“Sir, we’d like to talk to you about your papers. We’re afraid there’s been some kind of error.” The men get closer. Newt, horrifyingly, begins to understand.

Thomas’ eyes are scoping over Newt’s face, dropping to his lips for a long second before coming back up. The mask is completely gone now. Newt’s ears ring.

“If it’s any consolation,” Thomas whispers, “I meant all of this. I really do love you.”

The man is saying, “Sir, it says here this hedera has been in your possession for two months.” Then, Thomas is leaning forward to give him one last kiss, soft and heartbreaking, before turning around.
No one ever tells you that when the world is ending, it does so in slow motion.

He sees Thomas square his shoulders, lift his chin, prepare for the words that are to come out of his mouth. He can see the men look at each other in tandem, as the shock and fear and outrage make themselves present on their faces before the first yells into his com and the other reaches for his gun. The room floods with more people than Newt thought were even there in the first place, more men in black with their guns poised right at Thomas and Thomas with his hands up atop his head, who is beginning to kneel.

Newt launches forward, and the words are out of his mouth before he can even think them, “The indicators were faulted!”

The men frown as they finally reach them, blinking at Newt as if only now realising that he is there. In his peripheral vision Newt sees that Thomas is staring right at him. Newt ignores him.

The men look at each other, confused, and then back to Newt as the first man asks, “I’m sorry?”

“The indicators,” Newt says, hoping they couldn’t hear how out of breath he is, “Two of them had an internal fault. As you know a hedera can’t be planted unless there are four perfectly operational indicators on the premises.”

He feels Thomas stiffen beside him. He still ignores it. The man knits his eyebrows, large forehead wrinkling drastically, and he squints at Newt. “And who are you?”

Newt steps forward. “My name’s Newt. I’m the one who sold the hedera, and those were my indicators.”

The man eyes Newt up and down, slow and dubious, for a moment before asking for identification, which Newt hastily provides, fishing out his wallet. The man looks over Newts name, stumbling over his last name the way that everyone does, and eventually hands it back with a, “Yeah, I’ve heard of you. Why’re you here? Hope you don’t mind me asking but it is very early in the morning, and I don’t know how many suppliers would do a social visit at this hour.”

“I’m … a friend of the deceased.”

“Huh.” The man stalls for half a moment longer before handing Newt back his card. Newt wonders if he saw the kiss. He asks, “You said there was something wrong with the indicators?”

“Yes.”

“And you sold them anyway?”

Newt tries not to flinch, “Not on purpose. It’s been quite hard to get basic maintenance and regular check-ups from your guys that I mistook them for being perfectly functional when, in fact, they weren’t.”

The man’s eyes resemble slits, forehead wrinkle intensifying the longer he stands there talking out of his ass. He asks, “When were the replacements supplied?”

“Uh,” Newt pretends to glance at Thomas asking for confirmation (he is staring at the floor), “That would have been about two or three weeks ago.”

“I’m going to need to see some paperwork.”

Newt smiles. Customer Service Professional Mode #1. “Of course, Sir. I’ll get that to you as soon
as possible.” The man hands Newt a card with the instructions to email the paperwork to the specific address and, with one final look between him and Thomas, eyes scoping like a hawk who is ready to catch even a glimmer of a lie, he finally walks off.

All the breath in Newt’s lungs leaves him at once. Thomas reaches out for the back of the couch to steady himself. Newt instinctively reaches for him as well when he nearly stumbles, but his hand is batted away, quick and firm. Newt bites his tongue and pushes down the hurt. Now is not the time.

When the people in white appear again they are pushing along a stretcher. A chill shoots up Newt’s spine and he has to fight with everything inside him not to look away as the image from before flashes into his mind vividly. When they pass Newt looks down to Thomas and sees that he has now turned completely white, the blood drained from his face, and he taking deep, shaky breaths. Protocol is that the contaminant must be taken and contained as soon as possible, so no final goodbyes are, unfortunately, allowed. Soon they are gone and the house is quiet once more.

The air is clearer and that heavy, pulsing atmosphere has been cleared. The only people left are Newt and Thomas, and that first woman. Newt is able to see her properly now. She’s younger than he thought, maybe in her thirties, with short blonde hair.

Her eyes are mostly trained on Thomas though they dart to Newt every now and again. Eventually, she walks forward, purposefully, and lays a hand on Thomas’ shoulder. Halmost doesn’t flinch when she touches him. Her eyes are sad as she says, “I’m deeply sorry for your loss.” Then she leaves.

The sound of the heavy oak door clicking shut is like a trigger, as whatever tourniquet that had been holding Thomas up snaps in half and he immediately doubles over with a pained cry, burying his face in his hands. Newt keeps his hands to himself this time and opts for kneeling down a careful distance away instead.

“Thomas …”

“Don’t!” He snaps, voice muffled, “Why did you do that? You shouldn’t have done that …”

Newt sets his jaw, “I wasn’t about to let you kill yourself.”

Thomas’ eyes are harsh and cruel when he finally looks at Newt, and he says, “I don’t want to throw myself off a building.”

Unrelenting, Newt responds, “Yeah, you do. You almost just did.”

Thomas looks like he’s been slapped. He blinks at Newt in shock, mouth opening and closing but no words make it the full way out. Newt becomes too aware of all the lights in the apartment and how bright they are, how Thomas is blinking rapidly over a little more than just to keep the tears from falling, and he stands, knees cracking.

“Come on.”

“What?” Thomas deadpans.

“We need to get out. It’s not good for you to stay in here for too long.”

Thomas shakes his head, “I’m not leaving.”

Newt leans down. “You’re lucky I’m not driving you to the hospital right now. Who knows what kind of toxins you’ve been exposed to? Now, come on. You need fresh air.”
They find themselves in an insomniac café five blocks from Thomas’ apartment, far enough from anywhere that could possibly recognise them. Newt slumps back in the booth, his posture screaming at him. On the opposite end Thomas has his hands on the table, occasionally picking at a nail and watching the 3 am traffic coat the windows in bright neon. Neither of them speaks as they wait for their coffee order, Newt occasionally sneaking glances at Thomas. A vine curls by Newt’s cheek and he doesn’t care.

“Talk to me,” Newt murmurs gently. He uses the coffee mug to warm his hands.

Thomas twirls his spoon, string at it with dull eyes. “I don’t even know where to start.”

The skin on Thomas’ knuckles are cracked and weather-beaten. Newt wants to wipe them away.

“Start wherever,” he says.

Thomas sits back and stretches out, the gears turning in his head as he tries to come up with a good starting point. Eventually, he goes for the beginning; “Okay well I already told you he is – was.”

Thomas cuts himself off, “He was sick. When we found out it was like … something just changed. In that moment he was a completely different person. Chuck used to stay with us every second weekend as a break from school. Not anymore. Keep him as far away as possible. Said it was because he didn’t want Chuck to see him how he was, but honestly I think it was him. I think he looked at Chuck and saw too much of his daughter and he … couldn’t handle it anymore.”

Thomas traces his finger along the rim of the mug. “I begged him for weeks and weeks to just take the chemo, it’s not like it was back in the day anymore, it’s better now, but he wouldn’t listen. It all made sense one day when he brought me a picture of a hedera and said ‘This is how I want to go out’. But I … I couldn’t do it.”

Thomas wipes his hands down his face, sighing deeply, before continuing, “I knew time was running out but I just couldn’t do it, so I kept putting it off and putting it off until finally the deadline came and I … I didn’t care.” Thomas stops swirling and pushes the cup and saucer away from him. Elbows on the table Thomas touches his fingers to his temples and takes a deep breath, in and out. “I know what you’re thinking. This sounds insane.”

Newt nods, “It does sound insane, yes, good that we’re on the same page here, Tommy.”

Thomas slams his fist on the table, making the few other people in the café jump. They get dirty looks from the barista, whom Newt smiles to in apology.

“Look, I had a plan.” Thomas says, “I had everything mapped out – everything. But I didn’t …”

Newt waits for him to continue. When he doesn’t, he leans forward. “You didn’t what?”

With a groan, Thomas forces himself to meet Newt’s eyes, “I didn’t plan for you, okay?”

Newt asks, robotically, “What do you mean you didn’t plan for me?”

Thomas gives his a ridiculous look, “You know what I mean.” He signs, finally picking up his mug and draining the entire thing in one long gulp. It’s a little impressive. “You know,” he puts it back in the saucer so that it makes a sharp clink! “Life’s a lot easier knowing you’re going to be in prison in a few months when you don’t go and fall in love. Like an idiot.”
Newt asks, “With me?” stupidly.

Thomas rolls his eyes, which Newt thinks is quite uncalled for, “No with that young bellhop in the lobby, he’s pretty hot. Yes, with you, Newt.”

They fall quiet after that. Thomas picks at a bit of paint on the handle of his mug that is beginning to chip off, and Newt sips his coffee with his mind reeling. Deep down, he knows he feels the same. The something nibbles and jabs and pulls at his heart at any odd occasion from when they’re flirting shamelessly, not caring who hears, or when they’re just lounging around and doing absolutely nothing. When the light catches in Thomas’ eyes and turn them into gemstones, and when he smiles, small and quiet, like the whole world belonged just to them.

One day he’ll say it back. Not now, though. Now, he has to ask, “The indicator?”

Thomas glances up at Newt, his cheek in his hand, “I had to tell Teresa something.”

“No, I get that. I mean the first one? When you called me and said one of them wasn’t working and we had dinner at Gally’s?”

Thomas actually blushes, and it is the most out of place thing Newt has ever seen in his entire life. “Oh,” he mumbles, “that. Uh, that was just – I wanted an excuse to see you again and that was the only thing I could think of.”

Newt blinks. “The only thing?”

“Erm. Yeah.”

*Christ,* this man. “What did you do with the other one?”

“I gave it to a local shelter. Sorry, I know that doesn’t excuse anything.”

Newt nods, slowly processing this information. He huffs hair out of his face, leaning back into the seat. “Right. Well, nice to know all of my products aren’t complete garbage. Like they bloody are now.”

Something happens then, where Thomas winces and tries to pretend like he hadn’t, but it was too late. Newt already saw it.

“What is it?”

Thomas leans over the table, “No secrets. That was Alec, stopping the store from getting the maintenance it needed.” Thomas fumbles to explain, when he sees Newt’s expression, “It was because of me. He got madder and madder every day that I didn’t plant the hedera so he would … he would do things to try and egg me on, to make me plant it. As well as …”

Newt, previously staring blankly at the table, asks, “As well as what?”

“That night at the conservatory when the passes malfunctioned. You know how I kept getting those phone calls? That was him, trying to get a hold of me. He was getting impatient with me, and when they started to play up … I knew it couldn’t have been a coincidence.”

“Your –” He takes a moment to compose himself and, feeling his forehead throbbing, starts again, “Your grandfather turned off our passes and nearly got us arrested for trespassing?”

Thomas says, “Not him, he would have gotten Mark to, I don’t know, send a signal to the passes
and turn them off. He would do things like this all the time, to punish me for not doing as he said.”

Newt says, “Punish you?” before he can stop himself.

This time Thomas does flinch. “Like I said, you were never supposed to be a part this.”

Newt wants to leave. He wants to walk out and not look back and refuse to ever see Thomas again. But just as the range is strong inside of him, the same goes for all the other feelings, the ones that make him feel sick over even the thought of doing that, the ones that make him want to lean across the table and kiss him, right in the middle of the café at three o’ clock in the morning, the insane part of his brain that is just a little bit crazy for him.

Newt taps three nails on the plate, slowly, one two three, clink clink clink, and he tells him, “Well I’m here now. So what happens next?”

The funeral arrived quick. Whiplash-inducing quick. Where it had happened Saturday the funeral had been booked for the Monday. Turns out Alec had everything pre-organised and all the loose ends you could think, tied up.

Newt couldn’t imagine it; planning your own funeral. Picking out the casket and flowers and headstone. If he had succeeded that day and wasn’t standing here now, he wonders how it would have gone. Would his mother have organised it, or would she have been lost in an alcohol-induced haze, too incapacitated to do anything? His father would have no doubt gone away suddenly on an “emergency business trip” to Singapore or Stockholm or wherever it was he had that second wife.

Would it have all been left to Lizzy to deal with? He’s almost positive Alby would have been the only one to help her. They had no one back then but each other.

Newt shuts his eyes tight and banishes the thoughts from his head.

Snow crunches beneath his feet as he walks leisurely down the aisle of tombstones. In the distance he makes out Thomas’ figure by the burial site, conversing with the priest and the undertakers. He watches how Thomas will occasionally take the break in conversation to look over his shoulder. Newt knows he’s keeping an eye out for his brother, who is running late. The last Thomas had heard from him was three hours ago before they left, where he’d replied to a four-sentence text with a simple K.

Newt wipes snow off the grave beside him, taking a quick moment to read the name carved into it before he makes his way over to where Teresa stands off to the side, next to a tombstone of a beautifully carved angel which towers over her.

“Hey,” he says when he approaches, making her jump.

“Sorry,” Teresa gasps, touching his arm, “You scared me. Didn’t hear you coming.”

Her attention had been elsewhere, but Newt is unsure if she is staring at Thomas or at Brenda and Minho who stand together a little ways behind him. Newt presses against her, shoulder to shoulder, and asks, “How’s everything going?”

“Uhh,” Teresa tilts her head, brushing inky black strands out of the way, “She isn’t taking to me right now. She’s angry that I didn’t tell her about the whole, you know, Thomas buying a hedera
and not telling her. Letting her put one in her show. She thinks she rubbed it right in his face.”

“Bloody hell.” Newt whispers. Teresa nods, taking his hand. “How are you doing?”

“Uhh,” she says again, this time quickly wiping away a tear away from her cheek, “I’m okay.” She doesn’t sound okay. “I knew it was going to happen for a while, so.”

Newt squeezes her hand, and Teresa lets her head rest against his shoulder. They remain in silence for a few more minutes until Teresa sniffs and says, “I’m gonna go see if Chuck’s here yet.” Newt kisses her on the top of her head and watches her walk off, up the hill through the snow. A quick observation tells him Brenda is also watching her, but she is too far away for Newt to make out her expression.

Thomas has finished up with the people he had been talking to and is now left alone. Newt kicks off the gravestone to join him, his stride awkward and jerky from the slope of the hill and the cold in general. Thomas must hear his crunching against the ground as when Newt is within talking distance he turns to watch him approach.

“Hey there.” Thomas offers a small smile, immediately reaching out for Newt’s hand.

“Everything good?”

Thomas nods, thumb rubbing circles into the back of Newt’s gloved hand, “Yep. As soon as Chuck and the rest get here we’re good to go.”

Call it an inkling or pure intuition but Newt can tell that Thomas is trying very hard not to ask about the forged documents he sent off to WCKD in the early hours of Saturday morning. He hasn’t told Thomas how or when he had done it and plans to keep it that way.

(In reality, it was writing up the form as normal but backdating it three weeks and taking a copy of Thomas’ invoice with his signature over to Aris’ apartment, waking him up, and paying the guy $50 to transfer the signature. It was kind of cute, how Aris blinked at him in shock and spluttered like Newt wasn’t supposed to know he specialised in fake IDs back in college.)

(Lizzy had told him, once, after one too many mojitos.)

“Whenever that’ll be. Fucking traffic, I’m freezing my –”

“Thomas?”

They turn toward a voice Newt doesn’t recognise to see a boy about eighteen years old standing behind them, with pink cheeks and snow caught in his curly hair. “Chuck,” Thomas gasps, moving past Newt to engulf his little brother into a hug, “Chuck. Hey.”

Newt steps back to give them some space. Across the way, he spots Brenda and Newt now looking at them with interest, and Brenda squeezes Minho’s arm before beginning her trek down the small him toward them. On the other side, Teresa is speaking with a man and a woman. They both keep their distance. He notices that Thomas and his brother are speaking in hushed tones now. Then, Chuck shakes his head and Thomas is saying his name, almost disappointed, before Chuck makes off up the hill to meet Brenda halfway.

Thomas groans and presses his thumbs to his eyes.

“Everything okay?” Newt asks, awkwardly. Thomas gives a brief, tense smile in return that doesn’t really say anything.
“Fine. I’m gonna go tell the priest we can start.”

The ceremony itself is short and sweet, military honours. As the men and women carry the coffin to the burial site, sleek and white and draped in a flag, slowly, Newt mind drifts and he doesn’t watch the funeral per say, but rather everyone around him. There are many people here today, half of them in uniforms and half not, many crying and others brave-faced and steely-eyed. It occurs to Newt that he never asked if Alec had a wife, or where he was, if she was even still alive.

Close by are Brenda and Minho, the former also having trouble concentrating as her attention keeps darting over to where Teresa stands with Chuck, hand in hand, tears in her eyes which she furiously bats away – a perfect juxtaposition to Chuck, who simply looks on with a blank face and even cloudier eyes. Beside Newt, Thomas’ face is nearly identical.

Finally, it is over, the grave filled and a beautiful assortment of white flowers are placed down the entire length of the dirt patch, Alec’s name printed in white stone above it. Thomas is then handed the flag by a man in uniform, they salute – Thomas doing so with a much shakier form – and before either of them know it guests have approached the grave for a final goodbye and begun filing out.

Thomas lets out a deep, long breath he must have been holding in and says, “Did that go on forever or was it just me?”

Newt places his hand on the back of his neck. Before he can give any words of comfort a voice calls out from the left, and they both turn to see the man and woman from before, the ones with Teresa, approach. The woman’s face looks slightly worried and Newt understands why when he feels Thomas go completely ridged at the man’s approach; as if he has been turned into a statue. When they get closer and Newt is finally able to get a good look at her face he realises that she’s the blonde woman from the night at the apartment, who had lingered behind to speak to Thomas. He hadn’t thought anything of it until now, watching her approach.

“Thomas,” he begins. “Thomas, listen, I just uh ...” he trails off when he sees Newt standing there, “Can we talk for a sec? In privet?”

Thomas says, “That isn’t a good idea.”

The man looks like he was expecting this reaction. “I know how you must feel.”

Thomas raises an eyebrow, “Do you?”

The woman tugs at his elbow, and whispers, “Just leave it.”

Finally, the man decides to acknowledge Newt’s presence and turns toward him, offering a smile that, while friendly and polite, doesn’t quite make it all the way. “Hi. You must be Newt, we’ve heard a lot about you. I’m Mark, this is Trina.” He holds out his hand to shake.

The name sparks a sudden memory, and in his head, he hears Thomas saying He would have gotten Mark to send a signal to the passes and turn them off.

Newt reaches out and threads his fingers through Thomas’. “Nice to meet you.”

Mark looks to be getting impatient, “Tom –”

“Heeey!” Like a bullet comes Chuck barrelling through and inserting himself directly between Thomas and Mark. He throws his arms around both him and Trina and, somehow, turning them around in the process, and saying something like “You said you knew a shortcut to the hotel, right?
Can you show us, it’s freezing out here and I would love to get there as fast as possible.”

Thomas, once again, lets out a deep breath.

They make it in one piece to the hotel where the wake, compliments of WCKD, is being held. For the most part, Newt sits quietly off to the side with Minho, and Brenda and Teresa on occasion, mostly one at a time. Unlike the ceremony itself, Newt hasn’t been able to get Thomas alone and resides to watching him from a distance, standing by his brother, being approached but various people or a wide range of ages. With some, he sees the light of recognition in their eyes and is greeted with more enthusiasm than the others, who they smile big and polite at, the gleam in their teeth charming and professional.

And then there are the few that Newt sees, the set of their shoulders and the length of their stride that just screams WCKD.

Beside him, Minho sighs and takes a long sip of champagne. “How the heck did we get here?” he asks while squinting at a woman who stands by the window, the diamonds on her necklace and earrings nearly blinding when they catch the light. “Oh right,” Minho says, “You’re sleeping with WCKD royalty. Guess we know how Prince Charming was able to take his god damn time, huh? Mystery solved. Good job, Scoob.” Minho elbows Newt playfully for a moment, then mellows, “Speaking of. I feel kinda bad for accusing the guy of espionage.”

Newt nods, stiffly, and takes a sip of his own drink. He’s let Minho believe that Thomas did, in fact, get off because of special privilege entitled to WCKD, and will continue to do so as long as he can help it.

“Don’t worry about it.”

Brenda flops down into a chair on the other side of their table, heavy-limbed and a little flushed. “Shit,” she says worryingly, “I’m already getting drunk.”

Minho smirks and raises his glass in a toast, “This is rich folk territory, babe. No skimping out for the cheap, watered down shit.”

Brenda rolls her eyes and taps her fingernails against Minho’s glass in lieu. Newt half listens to them chatter on about nothing for a while until Minho decides to get up and grab another glass, Newt snapping at him to grab some food on his way back, and he is left alone with Brenda. In the quiet she stares at her hands, picking at the polish on her nails and biting the corner of her lip, eyebrows furrowed.

Newt places his hand above hers to stop her. “You should talk to her.”

Brenda clicks her tongue and frowns harder, “I know I should. And I know it wasn’t her fault, I just. I feel sick every time I think about it. How I made him have to see that basement piece when he was planning …”

Newt winces, “It was … unfortunate, yeah, but I he doesn’t hold anything against you.”

Brenda pinches her nose tiredly. Newt’s phone buzzes, then, and he looks down to see a message from Thomas that reads, Free now. Pls come. Newt squeezes Brenda’s shoulder once and leaves her with Minho, now returning.
He finds Thomas in a small room along with a select few others along with his brother and what he assumes is the more close family and friends, Mark and Trina included. “Hey,” Newt murmurs, joining him where he is leant against a wall.

“How long’s it been?” Thomas asks, expression tight.

Next checks his phone, “About an hour.”

Thomas swears.

Chuck appears out of nowhere, walking past them to the buffet and plucking a pastry between his fingers, popping into his mouth without a second thought. He turns to Thomas and says, “Don’t worry, I’m sure you’ll find a way to kill time.”

Beside him, he feels Thomas grow ridged. He isn’t the only one to notice this, it seems, as across the room Mark calls out, low and warning, “Chuck.”

“What?” Chuck says, “Am I killing the mood? The already dead one?” The room does not go completely quiet, but the conversations hush. Chuck barks a laugh, leaning back against the arm of a chair, “Hey, man, I’m not the one who needs to learn how to take a hint. If it wasn’t for me Thomas would’ve murdered you back there.”

The room goes completely silent now. One man and a woman make some excuse and leave the room. Thomas goes pale but his eyes light up with fury.

Chuck blinks innocently, taking a drink. “What? Death at a funeral joke. Too soon?” He elbows Newt in the ribs with a wink before kicking off the armchair and making his way over to the buffet table, sticking a cheese stick in his mouth.

Heat rises to Newt’s cheeks and he averts the eyes of everyone in the room. They, at least, pretend not to notice the implications in Chuck’s words or actions. Thomas, however, is having none of it and approaches his brother by the table, jaw tight and eyes dark and stormy.

“Tip it out,” Thomas glowers.

Chuck shrugs, grabbing a pastry without a care in the world like his older brother isn’t towering over him looking ready to put him in a headlock. “I don’t know what you’re talking ‘bout.”

“Yes, you do. Tip it out.”

“It’s lemonade.”

Thomas scoffs, “Bullshit it is. Now, Chuck.”

Chuck straightens his spine and squares his shoulders defensively, turning so that he and Thomas are nose to nose. It shocks Newt suddenly as, at this angle and if Thomas were to slouch down a bit, from a distance it would be virtually impossible to differentiate from the two. He sees how, like Alec, Chuck and Thomas also share the same eyes.

Chuck says, “You wanna make a scene, Thomas?” voice low and antagonistic in the way that only a teenager can truly master.

Thomas tilts his head, “You’re already making a scene.”

Chuck scoffs and shakes his head, staring at his brother in disbelief. “Maybe you should have
thought of that before you invited him.”

It takes Newt a strange out-of-bodied second to realise that Chuck is pointing his finger right at him. The room is so silent now you could hear all the remaining occupants breathing – except for Newt, of course, who has stopped. Chuck is watching his brother, waiting for a response or a reaction, but Thomas is only stunned and at a loss for words.

Eventually, Thomas stutters, “Chuck … That’s not …”

Mark pipes up, “Hey now, that isn’t fair.”

“Oh my god, shut up,” Chuck says, leaning around Thomas. He narrows his eyes, and Newt has the sudden urge to bolt. “Do you think I’m an idiot? You really think I didn’t know?” Chuck huffs, “It didn’t even cross your mind that as soon as you told me about this I didn’t go and look up all the major suppliers in Manhattan? Well, guess whose face was the first to pop up.”

Newt winces. In his head he hears Lizzy say, Glade is the main supplier of Cognizant plants in Manhattan. You are famous, Isaac. Chuck continues, “On top of that, Brenda’s show? With his name plastered all over the website? God, you just – I can’t believe you.”

Thomas whispers, “Chuck, please. Let’s not do this here.”

Chuck shakes his head. “No. I don’t want to do this anywhere, Thomas. Not while you’re sleeping with the guy who killed grandpa.”

“I killed him!” Thomas all but roars, making Chuck jump and Trina, still in the back, rush to slide the door closed. Thomas’ fists are clenched into white balls, trembling with the effort of keeping himself under control, “I killed him, Chuck, okay? Me. Not Newt. Me. So if you’re looking for someone to blame and someone to hate, that’s me.”

Newt sees the words hitting home in Chuck’s wide eyes, just as he sees them leaving Thomas molecule by molecule, and also sees how he means it. In the corner someone, probably Mark, swears. Before anything else can happen or more harm can be caused, Newt says, “I’ll leave.”

Thomas swivels around and stares at Newt with a shocked expression. Even Chuck looks surprised. Thomas quickly takes Newt’s elbow and leads him a little ways off to the side. He says, “No, you don’t have to.”

Newt sighs, “Yeah I do, Tommy. I …” he stalls and forces himself to meet Thomas’ eyes, which are wide and desperate, and Newt forces down the hurt that lurches into his throat, “I can’t come between you and your family.”

He wants to badly to lean forward and kiss Thomas in that moment, but that would have made it too hard.

Newt makes it all the way to the front door of the hotel and halfway to his car before he hears Minho call his name, running after him. It’s funny, that dropping his keys on the ground and looking up and seeing the pile of fresh indicators he is meant to deliver to a client tomorrow morning sitting innocently in the back seat of his car, is what finally sets him off. Newt cries into Minho’s shoulder, beside his car in the middle of the street.
Newt crashes at Minho’s place for three days after the funeral, and then his sister’s for one. He only is at Sonya’s for a measly amount of time as she has no qualms or hesitation about kicking her brother out and giving him some tough love in the form of a swift push out the door and a sweet smile, telling him to go home. He knows she’s right. He can’t avoid life forever. The late November air tastes sweet on his tongue as he walks the streets back to his apartment.

His mailbox is, as he assumed, filled to the brim with junk mail intermixed with actual mail. Mostly junk, though.

Newt waves politely to neighbours who catch him as he walks through the building’s front doors but doesn’t talk, making a beeline for the elevators as fast as he can. He doesn’t know what he had expected. Maybe his apartment would look different, somehow? Maybe he’ll see little pieces of Thomas everywhere, or the air will feel thicker, or there will be vines crawling and lapping at every available surface of his home, but.

Nothing has changed. It all looks exactly as he had left it; the plates and glass cups beside the sink that he washed but didn’t have time to put away. The book he left dog-eared on the coffee table, his laptop on the island bench. Everything is exactly the same.

“Hey, blondie,” Minho calls over to him, muffled through the mask, “Text from your sister. She says to turn on your damn phone, and some other things I’ll leave out.”

Newt clips the stem off of another bleeding heart and sighs, laying it on the dry pad next to him. Newt looks up at Minho’s expectant expression and says, “I will,” knowing full well that it is a lie.

Minho sighs, breath fogging up the mask which he removes a second later, along with the gloves and walks up to the counter. “You still haven’t turned on your phone, man? It’s been a week.”

Newt winces. He picks up another bleeding heart, lightly tracing its soft, curved outline. “I know, I know. It’s just …”

He’s scared of what he might see when he does.

Minho picks up a fresh pair of gloves and pliers, picking up a bleeding heart. “Listen,” he begins, gently separating a heart from its stem, “You can’t keep torturing yourself like this. And you don’t have to tell me exactly what happened, but.” Minho places two more hearts on the cloth. Newt watches them, shining like crystals in the light. “I’m always here if you need to talk about anything. You know that.”

Newt goes to wipe his nose, remembers the gloves, and used his elbow instead, “Yeah I do, Minho. Thanks. And I’m not torturing myself.”

Minho raises a dark, pointed eyebrow, “Really. Is that you’re keeping your phone locked in the car all hours of the day? You know if clients need you specifically they have to go through me, now.”

“Oh,” Newt wraps up the hearts and moves them off to the side for later. Taking off his gloves he turns to Minho, determined, “I’ve actually been meaning to talk to you about that.”

Minho frowns, “About what.”

Newt says, “I want to put your name on the lease and make you part owner.”
Minho blinks at him, confused, and stutters as his brain works to catch up with the words that just came out of Newt’s mouth. “But. You – This is yours. You built this from the ground up, you love it.”

Newt smiles, “You love this place, too. It’s yours as much as it is mine and has been for a long time.”

When Minho’s cheeks flush and he just stands there for a moment, floundering in a number of overwhelming emotions he sees flash across his face, one by one, Newt is filled with such warmth and fondness for his best friend he feels like he might burst.

“I don’t know what to say,” Minho mumbles, blanking at thin air.

Newt rounds the counter and nudges him in the hip, “Say you’ll sign the papers.”

“I …” Minho drops his face into his hands, “I mean. I guess?”

Newt laughs for the first time in a while, the noise almost feeling foreign, and envelopes Minho into a hug.

He lied. His home doesn’t look like nothing has changed. It looks like everything has changed. Or, rather, that someone has been cut out, crudely, with a jagged edge knife and left for Newt to stare at and agonise over until it nearly drives him mad.

The first time he opens his closet and finds a black shirt which doesn’t belong to him hanging there, minding its own business without a care in the world, Newt shuts the doors hard and fast and decides he can make do with the miscellaneous items of clothing he can find around the house. When he is cleaning the bathroom one day and sweeps up a lone piece of lavender tucked out of sight behind the bathtub, the once purple, feathery flowers now turned coarse and grey, he throws that straight in the bin and doesn’t look back. When a book on his bookshelf sits out of place he remembers how Thomas had meticulously gone through each and every book on that shelf and judged them while Newt laughed at him from the couch and called him a snob.

He fights with himself not to call or text Thomas every single time he finds something. The last time is the finals straw. He didn’t even know he still had this; the light pink dahlia flower Thomas had given him at Mania. Left on his chest of draws behind a bottle of cologne he rarely uses it sat, untouched. Newt prides himself in his work and always uses the best combination of chemicals for preservation, twice as long as any other seller in Manhattan as even now, after all this time, when he picks up the flower and runs the pad of his finger along the curved petals, the flower is unwithered and flawless.

Turning his phone on for the first time in a week and a half feels stranger than he expected. Even the screen lighting up and the name of his phone provider yelling at him in bright letters is nearly startling. For a moment nothing happens, and then everything happens, and Newt has to leave his phone on the table for a minute while it does its thing. Finally, when the last buzz goes off he can hear his phone crying in relief as the room is silent again, and Newt picks it up.

Sorting through the work messages first, of course, he tells himself he is being responsible and not just delaying the inevitable. Then he sifts through the more personal messages, mostly from that day, messages from Brenda that consist mainly of question marks against Teresa’s concerned texts
and his sister’s angrier ones, as the days went by and she realised that Newt still isn’t answering. A few from Gally and a couple from Ben. None from Minho, who knew it was futile to try.

And then.

And then.

Three missed calls from that day alone and a couple in the days proceeding as well as a number of texts. Newt scans through them quickly, reading things like, Where are you? and Please just call me back and Newt please can we talk???

Finally, he reaches the very last message, dated three days ago, which simply reads, It’s okay. I’m sorry.

Newt throws his phone at the wall so hard it breaks into three pieces.

Newt gets very drunk on Sonya and Harriet’s living room floor, passing out. When he wakes he has his head pillowed in his sister’s lap, Harriet rubbing his arm soothingly and whispering Shhhh, which Newt didn’t understand what for until he realises that he is crying.

The next day, leant over a very tall glass of water waiting for the aspirin to kick in, he tells Lizzy, “You know he said he loved me twice. I never once said it back.”

Newt ignores his sister’s words of concern and walks out onto the fire escape before he can start crying again. Bare feet and he scarcely feels the chill.

The sim card’s fucked and he has to buy a whole new phone, naturally. For a moment Newt had considered not getting one at all, but Minho had given him a look and ended that thought as soon as it started. Newt manages to keep his number in the end but loses Thomas’.

(He knows he hasn’t lost it completely. He can just go up and ask Teresa and Brenda and even Minho for it. He can look it up in the store files and. And then what? He’s already dug himself too deep in a whole and filled it over himself. No digging out of this one.)

Anyway, maybe it’s for the best.

“Do you think they’ve changed a mechanism, or something?”

Newt looks up at Minho’s question, glancing over to where he stands by the coffee machine. He previously he had the brilliant idea to make Gally teach him how to brew “a perfect macchiato” and Gally had gone along with it, for some reason.

(Well, no, he knows the reason; so he has an extremely valid excuse to be all up close and personal with Minho for an extended period of time.)
Gally appears just as confused. Ben, where he lies flat across a table, tossing a ball of rubber bands in the air over and over, is unconcerned. Gally squints at the machine, “It’s the same one we’ve had for two years.”

“What? Oh, no I don’t mean this,” he points to the opposite wall where the indicator sits, doing its thing. “I mean that.”

They all look over. Newt tilts his head. It doesn’t seem any different. All the buttons and valves are in the same place they’ve always been. It pulses magnetic waves every few seconds which are usually invisible, but ever since that day that the border, passing through those gates, Newt sees the pulses clearer than ever.

“What about it?” Newt enquires, minimising the webpage.

“It’s,” Minho waves a vague hand, “Different?”

From three tables over Ben’s nasally voice pipes in, “Is this another Mandela effect thing?”

Gally and Newt both snort as Minho squawks in offence, “No, dickbag. I’m talking about the machines. They make a noise now.”

“Noise?” Gally frowns, confused. “I haven’t heard anything. And you –” Gally points at Ben, “I told you to start putting up the damn holiday decorations half an hour ago.”

Ben just throws the ball again.

Minho laughs, turning a dial on the machine as instructed, “Well yours might not make any noise but ours does. Right, Newt?”

“Uh … Enlighten me on this noise?”

“You haven’t heard it?” Minho stares at him like he’s crazy, “Are you kidding, it’s driving me fucking insane!”

Newt shakes his head, “I haven’t heard anything, Min.”

Minho points at him with the metal mug, “Told you! You’re going deaf, man.” Newt rolls his eyes and Ben scoffs. “Don’t roll your eyes at me! Look out for it tomorrow.”

Newt leans back and opens his phone. While responding to a recent text from Alby, half paying attention, Newt asks, “What is it I’m looking out for?”

“It’s like – ah, shit!” Minho spits, accidentally leaning on a piping hot area of the machine, followed by Gally’s swift, “Be careful!” Minho continues, “Like a continuous click. Like you can hear the gears turning inside it.”


“You don’t believe me.”

“It doesn’t matter if I believe you, Minho, but whether or not it’s important.”

Minho slaps a tea towel over his shoulder and huffs indignantly. Gally tells him to push a few more buttons for various type of froth. As Minho copies his instructions, he says, “Fine. We’ll see tomorrow if our store blows up.”
Gally sighs, eye roll practically audible, “It’s not gonna blow up, genius – wait. *Our* store?”

Oh right. They haven’t told anyone yet. Minho had wanted to keep it under wraps until all the paperwork had been finalised, in case they ran into any sort of drawbacks. They received confirmation just the other night that Glade is now a co-ownership and celebrated at the local bar, just the two of them. After all that they both must have forgotten to mention it to anyone.

“Oh, right.” Minho grins broadly, teeth gleaming like a cartoon, “Guess who’s now co-owner.”

“No shit,” Ben laughs joyously, sitting up, “Congrats! Hey, Gally, when are you making me co-manager?”

Gally grumbles, “When hell freezes the fuck over.”

Newt Snapchat’s Alby a quick video of Ben tossing the rubber ball at the wall by Gally’s head, and Gally’s outraged yelp in return. Newt resides himself to sitting back and making himself comfortable, demanding tea from Minho who mimics his voice and accent back at him, three octaves too high. He pretends not to notice Gally’s hand settled comfortably on the small of Minho’s back or the soft smile Minho gives him in return.

The affectionate gesture sends a sting right through Newt’s heart. He shakes himself before another bad mood can arise out of thin air and he’ll have to deal with his own brain for the rest of the night, arguing with it for hours before finally falling into a fitful sleep and wake up on the wrong side of the bed tomorrow.

Newt sighs quietly to himself and before he can chicken out, hits confirm on the webpage.

When Gally straight up begins to guide Minho’s hands like they were playing golf and not making a hot beverage, he ends up sharing an amused look with Ben, anyway.

Newt hears it.

The damn clicking.

It took a while, around about two weeks of Newt thinking Minho was going crazy and weeks of Minho telling Newt that he’s booked him in for a hearing aid fitting, only half joking, but. Yes. There it is.

And Minho was right, once you hear it you can’t un-hear it. A whole day has somehow gone by, Newt suffering through the rough clicks every twenty seconds or so, just long enough for your ears to rest but too long for them to become desensitised to the noise. It does sound like there’s something stuck. Newt sighs. He’s going to have to call a technician first thing in the morning.

With a groan Newt rips the goggles off and throws them carelessly on the bench, pressing the heels of his palms into his eyes hard enough that sparks light up behind closed eyelids. It had been a busy day, the busiest in a long time, everyone decided to do their Christmas shopping literally hours before the holiday itself. Because that’s always a good idea. Newt cursed each and every one of them who had walked in and out of his store in the past eight hours. By the time the last customer left he was just about ready to cry in relief.

Minho hauled himself out of the store virtually right after, with swift instructions that Newt does
not stay in too late, it’s Christmas Eve, god damn it. Newt had smiled bright enough to convince Minho that he would do just that. Two hours later and he’s still here, splicing lavender like it’s the middle of the day and he has nowhere to be.

He doesn’t, but that’s beside the point.

Newt is about to slip the goggles back on when he hears the bell ring in the front room. Newt waits for Minho or someone to call out, but when he hears no voice he groans audibly, meaning some moron has just walked into a store at 11 pm, all the lights out with a Closed sign hanging on the glass.

“We’re closed!” he yells out into the silence, voice bouncing from wall to wall. Seconds pass and nothing. Newt tries again, “Unless I know you come back in two days! We’re closed for Christmas.”

Nothing once again.

Newt rips off the goggles and stands, swearing as he makes his way into the front room with the purest intentions of going full Scrooge and giving the intruder a piece of his mind.

The dream dies as quick as it grows, as when Newt enters the front room, profanities at the tip of his tongue, he finds Thomas standing in the middle of the floor. The world stops and time stands still as Newt suddenly forgets how to breathe. The only light in the entire room is a small desk lamp sitting on the counter, the warm yellow light passing through a green wall and bathing him in jagged, leafy patterns. Thomas’ eyes are wide as he stares at Newt struck in the doorway, limbs frozen.

They stand there like two statues of flightless birds with no heads for who knows how long, numb and tongue-tied, or at least Newt is. Thomas seems to have broken out of the trance first and now rocks on the balls of his feet, awkwardly, and scratching at the space behind his ear.

And for the first time in six weeks, the first time that Newt hears Thomas’ voice in what feels like forever, he says, “I shouldn’t have come in, I’m sorry.”

Conflicting emotions rise up in Newt, as the panic and terror of Thomas walking back out that door opts him to want to scream No stop don’t leave while the other side of him, the one that usually has to push and beat the first away with a metal bat says No it’s too soon I can’t do this please leave.

Both simmer into quiet background chatter when he realises that Thomas isn’t moving a muscle. Click.

“I, uh,” Thomas mutters, “I just. I was walking past and I noticed the lamp, and I remembered you left that on when you were working late and …” Thomas breaks off, cringing at his own words. “God, I don’t know why I came in here. Shit. I’ll go.”

Click.

Something snaps inside Newt, and he impulsively calls out, “Don’t!” and Thomas freezes, half of his body turned toward the door.

For the first time in his life, ever since That Moment Way Back When Newt has absolutely no idea what to do. Half of him wants to tell Thomas to leave while the other half couldn’t bear it. He feels utterly lost.
Thomas looks expectant for a fraction of a second before his eyes cloud over and that carefully constructed mask falls over his face.

Newt clears his throat, “I don’t know what to say.”

Thomas nods slowly, eyebrow quirking, “You know what’s funny?” he chuckles humourlessly, “I did. I had this whole entire speech planned for weeks. And then the minute I step in here it’s gone.” Thomas mimes a poof gesture. “Just completely fucking gone. So, yeah.”

*Click.*

Newt grabs the edge of the counter to steady himself. “Thomas …”

He pretends not to notice how Thomas winced when Newt said his name. “Look,” Thomas sighs, “You don’t owe me anything, Newt. You did a lot more for me than I ever deserved, so if you want me to leave –” *Click* “– I’ll leave.”

*Click.*

Newt frowns. The clicks are coming more frequently.

“If you don’t even want me to speak anymore I’ll go, but Newt …”

Newt steps forward, his ears straining, “Thomas.”

*Click.*

“I promise, just – Can we talk for a second? Please?”

*Click Click.*

“Tommy, shut up,” Newt hisses, holding out an arm.

The name makes him pause. Thomas looks from Newt’s arm up to the urgency in his eyes and the tense, frightened direction the mood has shifted. “What? What is it?” he asks, now standing very still as Newt follows the path of the clicking to find its location, eyes scoping the room with a terrible hunch, ears straining, until finally, he allows himself to look up to a wall of ivy that he knows an indicator sits behind.

*Click. Click click. Clickclickclick.*

The clicking is coming from the machine. And it is breaking down.

With the hairs on the back of his neck standing, Newt hisses, “Tommy, get behind the counter.”

Thomas frowns, glancing to where Newt is staring, nervously. He moves closer to Newt. “What’s going on?”

*Click! Click! Click! Click! Click! Click! Click! Click! Click! Click! Click!* The indicator screams at them in a low click, and with one final pained whirring, everything stops, and so does Newt’s heart.

He reaches forward and grabs a fistful of Thomas’ coat, pulling as he yells, “Tommy, get behind the counter now!”

Thomas’ eyes are wild, “Newt –!”
They both jump, whirling around in the direction of the loud, dull thud. It happens again, and again, and again, and with his stomach sinking to the floor, Newt knows exactly which indicator had failed.

“What is that noise?” Thomas whispers, hand held tight on to Newt’s elbow, pulling him closer.

Rhythmic, like the clicks, over and over again until finally the slow, chilling sound of glass beginning to crack in spiderweb like fractures, coming from the greenhouse.

Newt grabs Thomas’ hand and screams, “Run!” just as the blood-curdling crash of a twenty-foot tall glass shattering to pieces fills the silence. They make it halfway to the counter before the room explodes into a canopy of brick, glass and plants, flying through the air at bullet speed. Newt is still yelling as they hit the floor, Thomas sliding and Newt falling practically on top of him.

Thomas is shouting his name and Newt feels something cut his cheek but all he hears is roaring in his ears and the chilling, otherworldly screech of vines growing and twisting and extending around themselves as the hederas tear through the room like a tsunami. Newt frantically searches around under the desk for the emergency box, heart seizing for a moment when he can’t find it.

Sweat beads at his forehead and drips down his nose, eyes unblinking and straining in the darkness. Where is it where is it? If Newt doesn’t find it soon he hypothesises that they have mere seconds until the hederas stop ripping apart the store and finds them, and then it is all over. And then –

And Thomas is saying, “Newt, Newt.”

And.

“Here!” Newt cries, too loud – too, too loud, oh god – and the hederas stop. What is most probably the front door crashes to the ground, bell and all, and Thomas stops everything, freezes in place as Newt fumbles with the latch, fingers trembling and sweaty, not helping matters one bit, until finally – finally!

“Thomas!” Newt grabs Thomas and pulls him to his chest, wrapping his arm around his shoulders, tight and protective, as the other grips the portable indicator in his hands, slamming the on button. A wave pulses out of the machine and nearly knocks the air from Newt’s lungs and, as if his brain is now somehow tuned into the invisible magnetic waves, he watches the movement of the blast in slow motion just as dozens of thick, needle-sharp tendrils are descending on them, and then.

And then it stops. Like a live photograph the hederas’ vines pose above them in an arch, the mini indicators pulses acting like an invisible dome above their heads, securing them in.

All becomes quiet again.

They sit slouched and huddled together in the dark, breathing heavily and hearts pounding as the hederas looms above them. Newt keeps his eyes shut, focusing on the sharp stab of the shelf against his shoulder blade and Thomas’ arm where it is wrapped around his torso, almost too tight. Newt isn’t any better, though, half leaning over him and crushing Thomas to his chest, the indicator held above his head. He squeezes it tighter, feeling the gears digging into his palms hard enough to
draw blood and pushing against the shelf, focusing on their sensations to keep him grounded.

Eventually, Thomas makes a noise and shifts a fraction against Newt and he sighs, shaky. The alarm had been triggered, thank goodness, and it shouldn’t be long now until help arrives. Slowly, slowly, Newt releases his hold on Thomas as he does the same and they both lean back as far as they dare.

As soon as Thomas’ eyes rise to his face he gasps and reaches out with trembling fingers to touch Newt’s cheek. “You’re hurt,” he says, and Newt breathes out a shaky, bordering on hysterical laugh because Thomas has blood down one side of his face and cuts across his lip and nose, and his clothes are torn in multiple places.

“I’m hurt?” Newt breathes incredulously because he feels absolutely fine. A little sore and most likely sporting a cut or two, but otherwise fine.

Thomas’ lips move but Newt doesn’t hear what he says. Later Thomas is looking up and pointing. Curiously, Newt follows suit. The sight above them, despite the situation at hand, nearly takes his breath away. The hedera circles above them like a tornado in slow motion, caught in some kind of loop as it moves from indicator to indicator, lost in their cycles. Once making one full circle around the room it dips toward Newt and Thomas for one heart-stopping second before the smaller one clutched in Newt’s arms forces it back upward, and the cycle continues.

He isn’t sure how long they sit and watch it only that it feels like forever and his head is beginning to pound. Newt must pass out somewhere between Thomas furiously pressing his sleeve against Newt’s face and the next the reinforcements have arrived and, okay, maybe he’s not as fine as he thinks he is.

Out of sight members of WCKD in white HAZMATs are rushing around like mad to secure the hedera and create a path for it back to the greenhouse. Newt and Thomas are instructed by a paramedic to remain where they are until they get the all-clear from the men in white. She covers them both in a thick woollen jacket that instantly irritates Newt’s nose while the other places masks over his and Thomas’ mouths.

Detached, Newt remembers that the air is now poisoned. That would explain the strange, floaty feeling. Or maybe that’s the concussion. Or both. Probably both.

Newt blinks and he is somewhere else, sitting atop a gurney with a paramedic checking him thoroughly for injuries. The transition frightens him and Newt blinks wildly. She must sense his panic as she instantly stops bandaging his wrist to try and calm him down but Newt ignores her, looking around for Thomas. For one horrible moment all he can see if just rubble, broken walls and shattered glass, large holes dug out of the floor and tile everywhere and all of his flowers, ripped apart and scattered haphazardly. Petals fall from the ceiling above like coloured snow.

Then, finally, someone moves to reveal Thomas behind them, in a similar state to Newt. His face has been cleaned up and the cut above his eye bandaged. He’s bruised and battered but otherwise doesn’t look to be in any further distress. Newt watches as a golden petal falls into his hair and down his cheek.

Thomas’ head turns in Newt’s direction. Their eyes find each other and hold.
The illusion of sound is a strange phenomenon, Newt garners, as the moment Minho and Sonya run through the door of the shop, the one that sits a little ways away and bent in half, he hears the bell ring.

“Newt!” They shout in unison, rushing toward him just as Teresa appears a fraction of a second after them, and triggers the bell, also. Lizzy throws her arms around her brother just as Teresa does the same with Thomas, seated beside Newt.

“Are you okay?” Lizzy gasps into his ear.

“Yeah, Liz, we’re fine,” Newt replies, spitting out a lock of long blonde hair before receiving an arm full of Minho straight after.

“Shit,” Minho swears once he leans back. His face is pale and eyes are wide. He looks from Newt to around to store in a combination of awe and horror. “What the fuck happened?”

Newt winces, “Indicator broke and the hedera got out.”

Minho looks like he is about to pass out. “The what did what?”

“My god,” he hears beside him and turns to see Teresa release Thomas from an intense embrace, leaning back to cradle his face in her hands and check him over. “Thank goodness you’re okay,” she says, voice thick with unshed tears. She turns to Newt then and crushes him in a tight hug, too, shocking the air from his lungs. “Oh, Newt.”

“Wait, wait,” Sonya holds her palms up, “So run me through. Tell us what happened. The ivy got out? The indicator broke?”

Newt nods, “You know that clicking you were hearing, Minho?”

Minho’s face drains of all colour. “That’s what it fucking was? It was dying? What the shit was up with all the maintenance checks, then! They didn’t catch that?”

Thomas’ head snaps up. He says, “They must have missed it,” and waves over a member of WCKD walking out from the back room. He looks very confused, eyeing them huddled in the corner covered in blood and scabs, Newt with a bandaged arm and Thomas sporting a nice black eye, but obliges anyway.

“What can I do for you?” he asks.

Thomas jumps right in, “When was the last maintenance check done on this store?”

The man looks taken aback, “Uh, I’m not sure.”

“Can you find someone who does? I want a full check done on the remaining indicators in this store tonight before anyone leaves.”

The man looks at Thomas as if he thought he inhaled too much nightshade and is about to call over a paramedic to give him another check-up. Newt watches what happens next with a strange sort of amusement mixing with the cold, ugly feeling eating at his stomach when another member, who had apparently caught on to the conversation, rushes up behind his friend and whispers something in his ear.

The man’s eyes go wide, and scrambles. “Of course, sir, right away!” When he begins to apologise, Thomas offers one awkward wave and a tight smile, and it might be Newt’s eyes playing tricks on
him but he swears that his cheeks begin to flush.

Lizzy and Minho turn to Newt with the look of two people with headaches on the horizon. “What the shit,” Lizzy says, flat.

As Thomas walks around softly giving out orders to individual members in black suits with Teresa following him around like a doting big sister who is making sure he won’t fall on his face, Newt remains on the gurney and focuses on holding himself together. He can’t help but allow his eyes to move around the room, completely taking in all the damage, and he wishes he never came out from behind that counter.

Minho sighs and runs a hand through his hair before moving to lean against the gurney as Sonya jumps up beside him. “Okay,” Minho begins, “So Thomas is here. But why is he here?”

Newt glares, “He showed up right before it broke.”

Lizzy swears through her teeth, and it sounds like a sigh of relief. “Thank god. If he hadn’t shown up …”

Newt’s stomach fills with rocks, “What do you mean?”

Lizzy looks at him with tears falling down her cheeks, “Well. You were in the greenhouse, right? That’s what you do when you work this late. Thomas had shown up and you came out here to see him. If he hadn’t, and you stayed in the greenhouse …”

Newt doesn’t need her to finish that sentence. He knows how it ends.

If Newt had stayed in the greenhouse he wouldn’t be out here with them.

He would have been dead.

Rubble ricochets off of his boot, skips across the floor and disappears into the void. Newt clenches his fists and takes deep breaths. In the end, WCKD had taken the hedera for safety reasons and, just as Thomas had instructed, all the indicators in the store were checked and replaced, if needed, before everyone began to file off the scene. Newt had watched, numb, as the onlookers he didn’t even know were there left also, ushered away by the police. It took a good twenty minutes for him to convince Minho, Teresa and his sister to leave without him. Eventually, begrudgingly, they did after wrangling a promise out of Newt that he will call a cab to get him home, and not drive.

Newt picks up a stone and hauls it at the wall with a roar.

“Whoa!” Thomas covers his head and yells, flinching against the outburst.

He hadn’t left with them.

Newt wishes he had.

The marble slab of a counter is the only thing in the store that remains standing apart from the four walls, and even they’re hanging on by a thread. The only fault with it is a fracture tear down the middle, but besides that, it remains as it was. With a loud groan, Newt reaches behind it to pull out the pack of cigarettes and accompanied lighter he had stolen off his sister once in an attempt to get
her to stop smoking. Newt jumps up on top of the counter and lights one up.

Thomas settles next to him. “Sharing?” he asks.

Newt raises an eyebrow dubiously, lighter poised, “You smoke?”

“I was about to say to same about you.”

The cigarette between his teeth stops Newt from saying something bitchy like \textit{You look like you’ve never had a smoke in your life.} He bites it down and hands one to Thomas anyway.

Outside it has begun to snow, and Newt is sure midnight had hit over an hour ago. From an outsider’s point of view, he can’t imagine how ridiculous it all must look – here Newt is sat in the middle of a wrecked store with police tape baring it off as the snow begins to blow in, smoking with the guy he ghosted for six weeks, in the exact spot they met back what felt like forever ago. All this in the very early hours of Christmas morning. He could laugh.

“What now?” Newt mutters.

Thomas blows out a puff of smoke. “I don’t know,” he murmurs, lowly, “Never really thought this far ahead. Figured I’d be in jail by now.”

Newt pinches his nose. “This is a nightmare.”

He feels Thomas move to touch him, freeze at the last second, and return his hand back to his own lap. Newt watches it. “It’ll be okay. It … might take a while but you’ll get this place up and running again.”

He takes in the words. The insurance will cover the costs to rebuild the store, yes, even from the ground up, but that’s only the structure. Not the flowers.

“There are thousands of dollars’ worth of plants in here, Thomas. Ones that we now have to replace. And most aren’t easy to get. Some need to be imported! Do you know how long it takes to approve the paperwork for those?” Newt groans.

Thomas’ shoulders hunch. Neither of them are smoking anymore, rather sitting there and letting it burn to the filter. Thomas says, “This is just temporary,” he indicates to the store, in all its remaining glory, “It’ll all be fixed as fast as possible. Don’t worry, you’ll be here to watch it all happen.”

Newt closes his eyes, and says, “No, I won’t.”

After a brief pause, “What do you mean?”

“I’m leaving, Thomas,” he whispers, nails digging a row of crescent shapes into his palm, “I applied for a visa a few weeks ago and it just got approved. I’m leaving next week.”

“Oh,” Thomas murmurs, “For, um. For how long?”

Newt rips a rise sized piece off the filter. “I don’t know.”

They are quiet for a long time. Newt doesn’t know what he wants Thomas to say, or say anything at all. He doesn’t know what he wants. Nails dig harder into his skin.

Eventually, Thomas clears his throat. “Wow. That's great, I’m happy for you.”
Newt very well does not flinch.

“Thanks.” Don’t do it don’t do it don’t do it. “How are you?” Damn it.

Thomas says, “Fine.” and offers nothing else and, well, Newt doesn’t know what he expected. A detailed account of the last one and half months, maybe, like a delusional fool. He can’t expect anything from Thomas, especially not now. Not anymore.

The silence is deafening. He can’t take it. He wishes Thomas would say something so that he didn’t have to.

Thomas pulls his coat tighter around his shoulders, and Newt shivers. It is freezing now, his hands are stiff and the tip of his nose is numb, Newt’s scarf and gloves are still in the greenhouse, now taped off and secured away for no entry. The cigarette has gone out, ash sits on the toe of his shoe. Newt pushes his hands between his thighs for warmth.

Thomas notices. “Should probably go,” he mumbles.

Newt sniffs. His nose is freezing. “You’re right.”

They jump down. Newt’s foot lands on a pebble, off centre. Before he can’t talk himself out of it, he says, “Thank you.”

Thomas looks confused. “What for?”

Newt grimaces, “If you hadn’t shown up when you did I would have still been in there when, uh. When it happened. It would have gotten out into the street. So. Thank you.”

Thomas’ eyes widen, and he makes to step closer. “Newt –”

“Goodbye, Thomas. Merry Christmas.” Newt says this to the broken tile at his feet, and leaves.

Taking a cab like he promised, Newt garbles into his home like a drunken man, feeling like he is seeing everything through thirty party eyes. Upon making it to the bathroom Newt takes a look at himself in the mirror and barely recognises himself. Bruised cheekbone and cut lip swollen red, startling under a light dusting of freckles, and eyes bloodshot. His face is dirty and his clothes are ripped. He looks like he’s run through war.

Newt finds three jasmine flowers tucked under his collar, and one in his hair. The contents sitting on top of the counter go flying.

Newt sleeps at Sonya’s for most of the remaining days leading up to New Years, except this time it’s upon her request. Newt says she just wants to keep an eye on him, to which she replies that she just wants to spend as much time with her big brother as she can before he goes off to fly around to world for who knows how long, only half a lie. Of course, she is keeping an eye on him and Newt, crazily enough, doesn’t find he minds all that much. Plus, living with the girls isn’t that bad. It’s quite nice, actually, reminding him of a time many aeons ago when things were simpler and they still insisted on sharing a room even when their father got that big promotion and they could finally afford a house with two bedrooms.

Harriet is great conversation and she bakes like a goddess, and Lizzy jumps in and interrupts skype
calls with Alby, teases her brother and embarrassing him in front of his best friend like they’re teenagers.

New Year’s Eve is a quiet and tight get together at Gally and Ben’s that Newt only partially remembers through a drunken haze, vague recollections of Ben and Rachel dancing atop a table and maybe, and he could have very well dreamt this part, Minho and Gally locking lips in a darkened corner of the hall. Brenda had arrived an hour into the festivities with Teresa in tow which encouraged everyone to cheer, a little too loud and enthusiastic than necessary. When Newt tracks their movement, counting one too many heads than there are, he subtly excuses himself to the patio for some fresh air.

Newt wakes to his head pillowed against someone’s thigh and a splitting headache, the ball drop an extremely slurred phone call with Alby both vague memories.

Reconstruction of Glade begins right into the New Year. Somehow, seeing all those people and equipment in his and Minho’s store only makes it even more real, yes, all of that really happened. He really did almost die that night, and that counts two brushes with death involved with plants, now. Two too many, and enough to last a lifetime.

His last days in Manhattan are happy ones, yet sombre in the sense that no one wants to say it out loud. Newt himself struggles. It’s unbelievable. He has lived in New York for over five years and has only once left the island, but never for an extended period of time.

He almost backs out last minute, too, hunched over bills and reports and pamphlets scattered over the entire length of his kitchen island with Minho, head in his hands and muttering, “I’m not going anywhere.”

Minho hadn’t hesitated, barely looking up from the letter he was reading, “Yes you fucking are. You didn’t waste all that money and weeks of your life – that you’ll never get back – I might add, for nothing.” He looked Newt right in the eyes. “You’re going.”

He’s going.

He makes it through an entire suitcase before the agoraphobia comes creeping in and the panic curls itself around his bones like worms crawling beneath his skin, making him hot and itchy. His breath comes in short and before Newt knows it his face is in the toilet and he’s throwing up. Tears stream down his face as he sits against the cool tile and waits for the wave of nausea to subside, willing himself not to start up again. He is shaking, badly, and his skin feels stretched and wrong, too tight. Ghostly cold fingers run through his hair and down his spine, and Newt bites his fist until he draws blood and the pain overshadows everything else.

The minute he can stand Newt reaches a trembling hand out for his phone and dials Alby on autopilot, barely looking at the screen, walking to the living room. He doesn’t know what time it is in Canada and he feels a twinge of guilt over waking Alby even if it feels like his skin is currently on fire, but Alby sounds completely alert when he answers.

“Newt? What’s going on?”

Newt paces along the window in his living room, the curtains fully wide and allowing the billboard to wash his apartment in blue and pink. “I think I’m making a mistake,” he says, voice wavering.

Alby sounds understandably confused, “What do you mean, buddy?”
“I am making the biggest fucking mistake of my life, Alby. I know I am, but I – I don’t know what to do, I don’t know how to fix any of this – I –”

He is hysterical and sounds like it, too, like he has finally cracked and lost his mind. The air is too thick and the earth spins far too quickly. The last time he was this close to an edge he did something crazy and Alby was the only one who had been able to talk him down.

“Whoa whoa, man, slow down. Breathe, Newt, okay?” Newt, eventually, does. “Good. Now tell me what’s going up there.”

In his head. Newt grips the sofa cushion. “I can’t leave.”

Alby asks, “Why not?” and it sparks a laugh out of Newt, high and breathy.

“But I can’t leave! Not now, I can’t, I…” Newt trails off, hopelessly.

A moment later Alby says, “You can’t leave him,” and Newt remembers, even hundreds of miles away, that Alby still knows Newt better than he knows himself.

Newt hears rustling on the other end and when Alby’s voice returns it is clearer than it had been before. “Talk to me, man.”

Tears fall from Newt’s eyes and he furiously wipes them away. “I screwed up,” he says, “I made a decision and I thought it was the right one, but it wasn’t.”

“Why wasn’t it?”

Because I’m miserable. Because my skin doesn’t feel like it fits right anymore and it’s driving me crazy. Regret is eating me alive. He tells Alby none of this yet, somehow, he hears it all the same.

“Newt, listen to me,” he begins, “I want you to think for a second – and think really hard because this is important. Okay?” Newt nods even though he can’t see, and Alby asks him, “What do you want? Fuck the city and everyone in it – hell, fuck the store even – and tell me deep down, what do you want?”

The question is one that he hadn’t even anticipated in any sort of scenario, and it catches him completely off guard. On the other end, Alby is silent, and Newt knows him well enough to say that he will not speak again until Newt answers or hangs up the phone. It shocks him into steadier breathing and dries his cheeks, and even his heart is beginning to slow to its normal rhythm as his tired mind reels.

What do I want? Newt thinks, like there is a simple answer.

I just want things to be easy, he thinks. I don’t want to have to think I just want everything to just be. I want the shop to be okay and I want us to get it back up and running with no lasting drama. I want to leave Minho with it and not have to worry that I’m just dumping the entire thing on him and running.

I want to sit on a beach. I want to look over the horizon and just see water and nothing else. I want to stand in a field of wildflowers and not feel like I’m going to die.

I don’t want to do it alone.

Slowly, he recounts all this to Alby, walking in circles around his apartment until his head clears and Alby seems satisfied. “Okay,” he says, quiet voice full of warmth. “There you go.
Newt’s flight leaves in five hours and he is meant to be meeting everyone in thirty minutes for a farewell brunch. He should be on his way to Teresa’s apartment, except he is sitting on the edge of a fountain out the front of the WCKD main office, freaking out. This is crazy. This is by far the worst idea he’s ever had in his life and Newt, to be fair, has had a decent number of bad ideas. People walking in and out of the building give him a single, mostly unconcerned glance as they pass.

Fiddling with his phone, Newt groans. This is stupid. What does he expect is going to happen, honestly? The minute he opens his mouth the entire speech will evaporate into thin air and he will be left standing there like a fool. Best case scenario is Thomas doesn’t even give him the time of day, and Newt can walk away and stew on this for a short while but eventually move on with his life until that gaping hole in his chest closes for good.

He forces himself not to think of the worst-case scenario.

Newt takes a deep breath and wishes for sweet apathy. Eyes closed he allows his senses to fill with the feeling of the cold wind on his face and the roar of the fountain water at his back, juxtaposed with the slight irritating texture of his scarf. He counts to ten, slowly in both English and Russian, and opens them just in time to see Thomas walking out of the building. It’s ludicrous, really, how his heart speeds up at the sight of him.

Newt stands because he doesn’t know what else to do and he’s looking enough like a trespasser as it is, having been sitting there for close to half an hour like a lunatic, and waits for Thomas to notice him, while simultaneously telling himself he won’t.

He notices him.

Thomas has stopped in the middle of the courtyard and is staring at Newt like he’s seeing a ghost, a bagel half hanging out of his mouth. He blinks, and then blinks some more, looking left to right and then straight back to Newt as if confirming that yes, he is standing there and Newt, taking a long deep breath, walks up to meet him. Now or never, he thinks.

The previously prepared speech he had been practising over and over before he left the house this morning does not dissipate from his mind, but he does choose to bench it. “I screwed up,” is what he leads with.

Thomas, still shocked but the bagel has been removed, does not say a word. He still has a bandage over his eyebrow but his face isn’t spotted with that deep purple and red any longer; the bruise, though still ugly, has faded into a dull yellow. Newt’s very own bruises have done the same.

“I’m sorry,” Newt says, feeling like an idiot.

Thomas gapes for a minute longer before speaking, and his voice comes out in a broken croak. He clears it and tries again, “Newt, I … What?”

Newt sighs, “I’m not asking for an apology and I don’t expect one, either. But I just needed to tell you.”

Thomas’s face dots with a pink heat flush where the temperature inside is obviously yards warmer than out here, and his skin hurries to cool down. His eyes are as piercing as ever, framed by dark, thick eyelashes and he is wearing a blue collared shirt, Newt’s favourite shade of it, too. The sight of everything mixing together is practically unbearable.
Thomas looks around again like he’s lost. “I don’t understand, I thought – I mean, I thought you. I thought I got rid of you.”

And.

Oh.

Right. Of course.

Newt’s heart lurches into his throat and chokes him. It must show on his face because Thomas’ colours to the shade of regret and he furiously backtracks, “No no no! I mean – fuck – that didn’t –” he groans very loudly, “That didn’t come out right. What I meant to say was I thought I drove you away. For good.”

Newt’s body feels light. “What?”

Thomas adjusts the strap of his shoulder bag, “When you. You didn’t answer any of my calls, or texts. I was mad at first, I’ll be honest, but I mean. I couldn’t blame you, could I? After all of that I would high tail it, too. I got the hint eventually, so. And then when you walked away, after the store ..”

“I lost your number,” Newt mumbles. Thomas gives him a look. “It’s true. I broke my phone. See?” Newt waves new his phone at Thomas, who blinks at it slowly, “The sim card was crushed, and …” He is very aware of the ways in which him losing Thomas’ number on his phone didn’t actually hinder him from getting it back, not even slightly. Thomas must also realise this because he grips the strap of his bag tighter and turns his shoulders to the left, just slightly but enough to indicate he very much would like to leave now.

Newt steps forward, “Tommy –”

Thomas outwardly flinches. “Don’t – god. Don’t call me that, please. I can’t – I can’t handle it.”

Newt balls his fists and presses his lips into a tight line. Swallowing hard, he says, “You didn’t ruin anything.”

“Well then. Why are you here?”

Newt bites the corner of his lip. “I’m leaving today,” he says.

Thomas sets his jaw determinedly. Burying his hands deep in his pockets, Newt feels his phone buzz against his hand and ignores it. Thomas is staring through the air above Newt’s left shoulder. “Okay. You came here to say goodbye, then?”

Newt groans. “I came here because. Because –” Oh fuck it. Just fuck it all. “I bloody came here, Tommy, because I realised I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t go without seeing you.”

Thomas looks exhausted, “Why?”

Newt steps closer until the toes of their shoes are touching and he can taste the mint on Thomas’ breath. He reaches out, fingers just barely touching the cuff of Thomas’ sleeves, and says, “Because I love you.”


Newt smiles sadly, “I know. You told me. I never said it back.”

Thomas’ other hand twists and catches Newt’s index finger around his. The shock of his skin, even such a small touch, after so long sends electricity down his spine. Newt says, “This is crazy.”

And Thomas laughs, “Yeah it is.”

And Newt then says, “Come with me.”

And silence. Then, blinking with confusion, as if he genuinely thought he hadn’t heard Newt properly, “What?”

Newt shifts his weight to his good leg, “I mean. You can. If you want, erm, if you have time, that is. It would be really great if you did.”

Mouth hanging open like he is trying to catch flies, Thomas is a vision of disbelief and Newt begins to feel bad for him; for doing this to him. “I …” he whispers, “It would be weeks before I’d get permission to even apply for a ticket, Newt.”

“Ah.”

“Because of,” Thomas cocks his head at the building behind them, “It’s not simple.”

Newt begins to nod, heart sinking, “I understand, it’s –”

“I’d have to get a hell of a head start. I don’t know if I can do it today, we have a meeting with some lady from the branch in Alaska. I’d literally have to run to the embassy to request an application right before their offices close, and –”

“Wait,” Newt stops him before his head begins to spin, “You’re serious.”

Thomas frowns, “Yeah, I’m serious. We’re you not serious?”

Newt stares at him. “I – Bloody hell.” With one quick tug, Newt pulls Thomas in by his collar and kisses him. When they break apart, lungs screaming for air, Thomas lets out a quiet, helpless moan and pulls him back a second later, and Newt falls into something he doesn’t think there is any way out from.

They’re making a display of themselves but he doesn’t care. Thomas’ mouth against his and Thomas’ skin under his fingers feels like coming home, like finally finding something you have been missing your whole life not realising it wasn’t there until you find it and suddenly it is, Oh. There you are. How I’ve been looking for you.

Thomas leans back some so he can speak, in theory, but doesn’t actuary go anywhere. “As much as I really don’t want to, I have to go.” He whispers against Newt’s lips.

Thomas’ eyelashes are tickling his cheek and Newt sighs through his nose, forcing himself to move, however difficult it may be (and it is; a lot). “Go,” Newt smiles, giving Thomas a little shove.

“This is, uh,” Thomas stalls, shifting his stance from foot to foot, “This is the last time I’ll see you for a long time. I just want to …” He reaches forward a tucks a lock of hair behind Newt’s ear, that
same hand following the curve of it. A knuckle continues down over his cheekbone and curves toward his jaw, thumb tracing the shape of Newt’s lips so light that it tickles.

And then, too soon, Thomas is pulling away and walking backwards. “See ya later.”

Newt grins, “Rain check?”

This makes Thomas laugh. “Yeah. Rain check.”

The crowd is fairly kind to Newt that morning, allowing him a clear view of Thomas as he walks away, casting glances over his shoulder as he does so, making Newt laugh, high and bubbly and breathless. He stands there by the fountain, eyes focused on Thomas until the large glass doors close behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Okay! Nearly there. Just one short epilogue to go. I'd like to say a quick thanks to everyone who has made it this far! I love you very much x.
Rhode Island is hot.

There was once a time, Newt considers as he stands there sweltering, a gloriously long time ago where the seasons worked as they were supposed to. This was before the epidemic of ’39, of course, when the plants decided they could do whatever they wanted with the Earth and its atmosphere and were very well going to do this and continue to do so until the end of time, and humans had no choice but to adapt.

But that was a long time ago, and there is no use lingering on the past.

Right now, sweat beads atop Newt’s lip and he places a hand on the back of his neck, grimacing at the sweat building up. He sighs. Not even the airport’s air conditioning is enough to save him today. This is when Minho would call him something insulting and bring up his heritage, and Newt would rebate with something equally as offensive, and they would laugh about it. Newt smiles softly to himself. He misses Minho.

It has been a total of five months since he left Manhattan. And it’s been … good, actually. Really good. It hadn’t been the sudden cut-off from everything he knows, his life and everyone in it, like the fears that were plaguing Newt’s mind that day, scratching at his brain as Lizzy had clung to him that day at the airport. But no, Minho had been giving him updates on the shop not even 24 hours after he had landed in Montreal while Lizzy sent him awful memes she knew he’d scoff at, and Teresa was complaining about some new client, also.

It was like he hadn’t left, really.

Meeting Alby in the airport that day is crystal clear in his memory, walking through the terminal and looking over a crowd of heads to see Alby standing on the other side of the large room, holding up a sign that just read Newt’s last name, purposely misspelt as always, grinning like a maniac. “Missed you, man.” Alby had whispered in his ear, arms enveloping Newt in a too-tight hug, and Newt had instantly started crying.

Living with Alby was nice, reminding him of old times back in college. Nick was that just right level of sarcastic asshole that Newt finds charming, one of those people who speaks to everyone they’re his best friend, and they clicked instantly.

After that, once the weather had begun to warm it was off to Washington, and from there back home to London, which he had lasted a total of two weeks before he had gotten into a screaming match with his father after his mother had asked him if he were Done with the boys yet?

He told them all about Thomas in spiteful detail; a little more than was necessary, in hindsight, and
he packed up and left the next morning. On the phone to Lizzy she remarked, “That’s a new record,” in a commemorative yet bored tone as if she were filing her nails with the phone clamped between cheek and shoulder.

They were in constant communication, he and Thomas, since the day he left New York. This is how he knows that Thomas had gone and filed an application two days after (when Thomas shared this information with him something blossomed in Newt’s chest, fast and overwhelming, which he later realised was because, deep down, something had been sure Thomas would change his mind). It is also how he found out that because of Thomas’ profession, granting him permission to leave with a visa would be much, much harder than it had been for Newt.

A few masochistic weeks were spent in California. It was then, lying on the beach and staring up at the stars, Thomas’ voice like golden syrup in his ear, he felt truly alone.

“Tell me what you see,” Thomas said. He sounded sleepy.

Newt’s finger traced patterns into the sand while he squinted into the night sky. “The night sky.”

Thomas sighed, disappointed. “No, like what stars can you see?”

“I don’t know constellations, Tommy. Tell me what to look for.”

It was an entire month later when Thomas sent him a text containing a single image – a picture of a passport, blue dahlia stamped on the front and Manhattan written in silver font above. A plane ticket was peeking out from the corner. A date and time popped up in the little green bubble a second later. Newt’s elbow slipped and he fell out of bed.

The date and time is today, thus; sweltering.

Checking the time for the fifth time since arriving at the airport Newt concludes that, yes, it has been only seven minutes since he last checked. Newt groans, tugging at his t-shirt and wringing out his wrists. He doesn’t remember the last time he has ever felt this nervous. After all, it’s just Thomas.

It’s just Thomas, who he hasn’t seen in five months, who he loves and who loves him back.

And it’s been five months.

Suddenly, an excited cry alerts Newt of the notice board above their heads telling him that Thomas’ flight has just landed. Sure enough, here comes the onslaught of people in various states of fatigue, some meeting family and some meeting well-dressed men with signs, and other’s meeting no one at all, eyes roving around the silver and white-washed large interior with awe. Butterflies and moths simultaneously flutter around in his stomach as he waits; a disquieting amount of time because Thomas is, naturally, the last one off the plane.

The feeling in his bones when he sees Thomas standing there on the other end of the terminal is indescribable. The distance isn’t much but it may as well have been miles all over again as he watches Thomas crane is neck around the room like an ostridge, trying to find Newt. The moment he does something connects in the back of Newt’s mind, and he thinks he finally understands what Brenda had been talking about.

Newt watches as Thomas’ face breaks into a huge smile and he starts over, and so does Newt, and the next thing he knows he is running and Thomas is also running, slower and held down by luggage that is on the floor by their feet. In the next second Newt is in Thomas’ arms, legs locked around his waist and gripping his shoulders as Thomas holds his tight in his arms, laughing
breathlessly in his ear. Newt does the same, fists clenching around fabric and face pressed into the side of Thomas’ neck, breathing in the smell of his skin and the shampoo in his hair.

“Hi,” Thomas is laughing, and Newt feels the rumble of it against his chest.

“Hey,” Newt breathes and kisses him finally, finally.

“You look good,” Thomas says much later once they’ve parted, faintly awestruck and a little delirious, but the latter might have been Newt’s fault. “You look really good. Fuck, I missed you.”

Newt smiles against the skin above Thomas’ nipple, planting a small kiss there, “I missed you, too.”

Thomas rolls them so they are lying side by side, facing each other. “This took way too long,” he whispers. Newt clicks his tongue and reaches up, tracing his fingertip over Thomas’ bottom lip. He has a scar above his eyebrow, now, and a smaller one under his jaw, faint and out of sight. Newt presses his mouth there.


Thomas pulls him up to his lips, whining, “Newt, please.”

With all the hurry and impatience from before gone he focuses on drawing it out, memorising and every noise Thomas makes and cataloguing each reaction. They re-familiarise themselves with each other’s bodies while learning it all anew. He watches the look on Thomas’ face as he sinks into him, feeling the tickle of his eyelashes fluttering closed against his cheeks, the soft drag of Thomas’ fingers trailing down his spine, one vertebra at a time. First, it is slow and then fast and then slow, again; perfect, making him feel dizzy and weightless and completely lose the concept of time, as when they come down and return to this plane of existence it is dark outside.

Thomas is groaning into his shoulder. Newt lies on top of him, boneless. “Did I mention I missed you?”

Newt laughs, belly deep, and groans along with him. Eventually, Thomas mumbles that his back is hurting and their bodies, sweaty – though sexy in the afterglow – is beginning to make Newt feel a little gross. He goes to shower while Thomas orders food for them, and then Thomas showers while they wait for it to arrive. They replenish their energy and stand on the balcony to overlook the city for a few perfect minutes and, uselessly, fall to the plush carpet together not long after.

“Things have been good, actually,” Thomas says later, to the ceiling. Newt lies on his stomach beside him, shoving fires into his mouth. Thomas continues, “Lived with Chuck for a while, when he finished school. He, uh, he had enough credits to graduate early. He’s interning with Brenda, now.”

Newt nods around the end of a fry. “Yeah, she told me. You must be proud,” he says, poking another fry at the tip of Thomas’ nose which he bats away, grinning.

“Very. He’s a good kid. He, uh,” Thomas looks at Newt, “He says he’s sorry. For what happened at the wake. If it’s any consolation he likes you. He’s actually the one who convinced me to come and see you that night.”
Newt’s eyebrows rise. “Well,” he says, “I owe him my life, then.”

Thomas kisses him and they stop talking about anything for a while. After, Thomas asks Newt about the shop and Newt tells him that it will officially be back up and running the first day of next month, and Minho is over the moon with excitement. He waddles into the bedroom to locate his pants and take out his phone to show Thomas pictures of the interior. Thomas whistles lowly as he flicks through the photo album. Then Newt asks about WCKD and Thomas lies down flat again.

“So – okay, backstory; what Alec did by naming me his successor was technically illegal, mostly because he didn’t consult anyone before he did it. So, in the end, we had to do it the proper way. Like, the council has to name the new CEO. But technically it still was my job, so it was up to me to make the final decision. That didn’t really go down well with all the older members, lemme tell you.” Thomas grimaces. “That’s what was happening that day you left, by the way.”

Newt hums. “Did you find someone?”

Thomas nods, sticking a fry in his mouth. “Yeah,” he says as he chews, “Her name’s Ava. She’s cool enough, I guess.”

Newt can’t help but snort at his tone, “So where does that leave you now?”

Thomas weaves his fingers through Newt’s, “Uh, director. Technically. I mean I’m pretty much back to where I was but Ava seems to think that because of Grandpa I’d want to have more involvement with the company. I didn’t know how to tell her no.”

Newt smiles and smooths hair off Thomas’ forehead.

Thomas sits up and rolls his shoulder blades so they pop, and Newt follows suit. “Hey,” Thomas says, “Let’s make a deal.”

Newt frowns, curiosity poking at him. “About what?”

Thomas brings his hand into his lap, “The next week, month, year it’s just you and me. We just. We just live.” His eyes cloud with seriousness, “I don’t want to think about the past, Newt. Anything that happened back there, we leave it at the door. I ... I want you to know I never lied to you, but I didn’t always tell you the truth. And I should have, because I waited too long and everything blew up, but.” Thomas pauses. His thumb rubs circles into the back of Newt’s hand. “I thought, for the first time in my life, I finally found something good. So why ruin it?”

Newt takes a moment to fully ingest his words. While it’s true that, in the end, things weren’t all sunshine and daisies and if he could, Newt would go back and do things differently. However, in saying that, doing so would change everything. It would change the things they did, both together and not – it would change who they are now. Butterflies are dangerous things and sometimes, Newt thinks, you just have to let life take its course. It isn’t something he would have understood before, but now things are different.

He moves closer to Thomas so they are seated chest to shoulder. Newt lets his nails trace lightly up and down Thomas’ back, humming. “I get it,” he says eventually, “Trust me.”

Thinking back to the day he met Thomas, seeing him walk through those doors at the ring of a bell, backlit in sunlight. He remembers how he stood there, awkward and unsure, completely out of his comfort zone. He hadn’t fallen in love with him then, but later, gradually over time, in those little moments where Thomas took off the mask he hid behind and Newt truly got to know him and realised he loved all the scars and bruises and mistakes and imperfections and every single little
thing that made up the man sitting here with him.

It only took a while longer to realise how much he couldn’t live without him.

“Deal,” Newt says, in the end. “Let’s go wherever we want, do whatever we want. Just you and me.”

Thomas presses his forehead against Newt’s. He takes a deep, long breath. Newt opens himself up completely, hands over his heart with no intention of ever taking it back for the very first time, and feels Thomas do the same.

“Just you and me,” Thomas hums, lips feather light against Newt’s. “Let’s go.”

* 

Chapter End Notes

well! that'd be that, then! this fic was, let me tell you, an effort. what began as a simple, yet kind of weird, flower-shop au spiralled into something i honestly didn't have any control over, and about 20k in realised what I was in for. 60k later and here we are. thanks to everyone who made it this far, it really means a lot to me!!!

come yell with me about tmr on tumblr here.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!