

Jaeger Pilots Can Sleep Anywhere

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Jaeger Pilots Can Sleep Anywhere

by [chapstickaddict](#)

Summary

"Pick a side, and start packing. Transport leaves in thirty," Chuck told him, pointing a finger in warning. Raleigh really couldn't take him seriously though, since he was delicately wrapping Mako's tiny collection of tea cups in bits of newspaper while he said it.

"Transport?" On the table, Chuck's mp3 player was rigged to a pair of speakers and a women was prompting him to get ready to die.

"Chuck suggested we leave. I agreed," Mako explained. Raleigh could point out the sheer improbability of just packing up and leaving. They had the most recognizable faces on the planet. Between the three of them, they had enough popularity to bedazzle a small European nation.

"Where are we going?"

"Where every solider goes when the war's over," Chuck replied. "Home."

Or

That one fic where Raleigh, Mako, and Chuck run away to Sydney and argue over music and pillow forts.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

They kept calling it Drift Burn. Honestly, Chuck couldn't care less what they called it, all he knew was that it had left his mind screaming in pain as his bones turned to rubber and his vision blacked out. Through all of it, he could still vividly recall the neon blue of Leatherback's electrical surge as the Neural Handshake broken down, dragging him along with it.

He had woken up in medical twelve hours later, fuming and fighting to claw his way back into Striker Eureka, more than ready for round two. But their resident neurologist, terrified into submission by a raging Herc and an indomitable Pentecost, had vetoed that idea ten seconds after it had left the ground.

He had screamed, he had hollered, and he had been told to go back to his room like a disobedient child. He could only hope the black eye Herc now sported for that ached something fierce. He hadn't won the fight though, and the resentment of it all sat like a bad penny on the back of his tongue.

So here he was, perfectly primed and forced to the sidelines, as Pentecost began activating the warhead strapped to Striker Eureka.

The Jeager comms were linked into the LOCCENT bridge. Chuck knew it, Pentecost knew it, and Herc, the fucking self-righteous, *abandoning asshole* knew it.

"You'll always find me in the drift, Mako," Pentecost whispered, his voice kind. The morbid silence across the bridge further emphasized it, every crew member on deck hunching in on themselves so they could pretend not to intrude on such a deeply personal moment. Chuck, his head aching and his jaw clenched hard enough to crack teeth, stared straight ahead and deliberately ignored Choi's worried gaze.

"Chuck. Chuck!" Herc's voice filtered over the intercomm. Don't do this to me, Chuck though viciously. Don't make me go through this. Haven't we done enough to each other?

Nonetheless, his hand reached out, shaking slightly, and pressed down his side of the comm. He didn't say anything though, couldn't work it past the barrier of teeth and tongue and into the open air.

"Don't forget to feed Max!" *It's alright, you can do this*, Herc demanded, his voice harsh and loving, knowing he was there even in his silence. The Drift did that to people, connected them even at their most withdrawn.

"I won't," *No I can't, he forced out*, just barely audible even in the now painfully awkward quiet of the bridge. Chuck refused to acknowledge any of their pitying gazes; he knew he'd break under them, and he couldn't break. Not now, not ever.

"Atta boy," *Trust me, I love you*, his father yelled, even as a roaring sound rumbled in the background. Chuck couldn't help slamming his eyes shut as the explosion echoed across worlds.

*

The Kaiju were gone, and the war was over.

But Raleigh was well aware of the price: Pentecost was dead, as was the legendary Hercules Hansen. The Kaidenovskys, the Wei brothers. Gipsy Danger. Hundreds if not thousands of civilians in Hong Kong. Hell, he shouldn't have survived, because his luck only seemed to go so far. And as they had traveled back in the helicopters, he and Mako mourned them all with silent tears, exhaustion and adrenaline coursing in time through them both.

They still had each other, though. They had drifted together and won on the strength of each other. They had stared down the deep depths of hell and it had spat them back out again, since one could no longer survive without the other. Raleigh clung to that as they landed.

The Shatterdome was alight with activity, stealing even the semblance of calm from Raleigh, and he felt Mako latch onto his hand as they were swarmed by the ragged remnants of the PPDC. She had refused to lose him in a sea of salt and monsters, and she wouldn't lose him in a sea of people, either. Together, fingers firmly locked, they zigzagged their way toward the elevators, greeting and smiling and cheering but never stopping.

Finally, the lift doors shut behind them, and Mako all but collapsed against his side, Raleigh tucked himself into the tiny corner to steady them both, grounding her as her eyes became half-lidded and exhaustion caught up with them both. He had no one to report to, he realized as they flew past floor after floor, no one to debrief; Pentecost had appointed no second-in-command.

He desperately hoped he wouldn't be volunteered. He could barely keep himself together, never mind a highly populated Shatterdome.

The floor shuttered beneath them, and the doors slid away to reveal the long hallway of the Ranger barracks, blissfully quiet and empty.

"Should we speak with--," Mako began, looking torn, though she didn't protest as Raleigh began helping her out of her battle armor.

"We've just finished one war," Raleigh replied, fingers absentmindedly freeing her elbow, her arm, her shoulder, as chunks of armor hit the floor. "Don't go picking another one on me just yet."

"That you believe authority is an enemy speaks to much about you," Mako teased, smile eerily reminiscent of a shark as her own fingers began shedding his chest plate. The solider in Raleigh cringed at the mass of shiny black armor piled hazardously onto the floor of the barracks hall, but it seemed like too much effort to collect it just then.

"Yeah, but you knew what you were getting into," he replied, gently shoving her up the staircase toward her own bunk. "Go sleep. Tomorrow's going to be hell." For a long moment neither moved, and Raleigh felt a giddy surge of joy when he realized they were breathing in sync.

Eventually, they parted ways, though Raleigh could swear he felt eyes on him through Mako's closed door.

However, alone in his barren room, an old problem reared its vicious head. Raleigh hadn't slept through the night since Yancy... If he was lucky, he could manage a handful of hours before insomnia, bleak and devastating, forced him back into consciousness. He once suffered through a full week of work atop the Anti-Kaiju Wall on about an hour of sleep, and had only felt numb.

But Mako had changed that. Even with their disaster of a first Drift, he had managed to sleep a full six hours after, completely uninterrupted. He had awoken feeling like he had five years ago, when Yancy slept sprawled in the bunk above him and the only thing to haunt his dreams was the occasional clown. Now, instead of sleepless nights staring at the wall, he found himself taking quick, ten minute catnaps in any horizontal surface that would hold him and passing out the moment his head hit the pillow at night.

Except..here he was, exhausted, battle-worn, and covered in sea-salt, his mind raced and sparked and promised no sleep.

With nothing left to do but lay back and count the tiles on the ceiling, Raleigh fought to shut down. Breath in, breath out. Relax everything.

In the corner, the digital clock blinked out the time in red neon, mocking him with its relentless ticking. So he knew exactly twenty minutes had passed when a quiet knocking interrupted his staring contest.

Mako looked frustrated, unsettled, and even a little scared when he opened the door, and he was startled by her instant impression of an octopus when he drew her in. Wordlessly, she drove him across the room and crashed them both onto the bunk, driving the breath out of his lungs. Raleigh let her control their movements, feeling unimaginably better with her in his arms, as if the pieces of him that had been missing since Yancy had been lovingly taken and repaired.

They stayed like that for hours, near fully clothed and wrapped up in each other as she drifted off to sleep and he waded in and out of hazy thought, careful not to disturb her. Moving was the furthest thing from his mind.

When awareness once again took hold of Raleigh, it was paired with a high, yelping sound that echoed off the walls of the hull, almost perfectly timed to raise his groggy mind. Next to him, Mako muttered and tossed in her sleep, rolling out of his arms and burying her tangled hair into a nearby pillow to escape the noise.

Raleigh tried to fall back into his own light sleep, reaching over briefly to confirm that Mako was indeed still there, but a full bladder and the consistent yep-yep through the walls kept him from sweet oblivion. Groaning, he slipped out of bed, making sure his feet were well planted on the ground before venturing onward.

The Alaska Shatterdome had hoarded a limited water supply, so most of the crew had made do with large communal bathroom at the end of the barracks. Thankfully, Hong Kong didn't

seem to suffer from those restrictions, and instead used a suite style set up with the bare amenities in a small closet off to the side. His shower didn't appear to disturb Mako in the slightest, but Raleigh kept it as short as possible anyway, washing away salt water and sweat with unscented, highly concentrated soap. But as he dried himself off, the high-pitched yep was still echoing in his ears and rattling his teeth. As much as Mako and his bunk called to him, the noise wouldn't stop.

So he found himself wondering down the hallways of the barracks, he followed his ears until he stopped in front of a regulation door with a Striker Eureka sticker plastered on the front of it and the name Hansen scrolled on the plate. Behind the door Max barked again, desperately scratching at the steel confining him.

"Hansen!" Raleigh yelled out, knocking his fist against the door. "Give your damn dog some attention, will ya?"

No one answered him. Raleigh knocked again, his ears keen to catch any hint of a sound, but all he got was Max's whimpers. He even tried the latch, but it was firmly locked.

He could go back to his own bunk; huddle close to Mako in the dark and count her heartbeats until the world demanded his attendance. He could stop by the mess and pick up something to eat for them both. He could actually go down to medical and get himself checked out as regulation demanded he do after a Drift.

Sighing, Raleigh set out to find the misplaced pilot of Striker Eureka.

He didn't so much pick a direction, as allow his feet to wonder aimlessly. He expected Mako to mourn, in her own way; he had seen in the Drift how much Pentecost meant to her, how heartbroken she was at this sacrifice. And he knew his place was to support her through her grief. But he hadn't considered that Chuck had lost his other half as well. And Raleigh, who had been so alone and traumatized after Yancy, couldn't bring himself to stand idly by while it happened to another Ranger.

They were, after all, part of a quickly dying breed--they were the only three Rangers left standing. And as Yancy once told him, Rangers did one of three things when mourning; sleep, fuck, or train.

Drift Burn... Raleigh had never seen a true case of it, though many of the doctors who had inspected him after Yancy had claimed he had experienced it. And no one was terribly sure what caused it: could be caused by malfunctioning equipment, or a break in the Neural Handshake, or a severe shock to the system. All anyone knew was that it was hours upon hours of excruciating pain for the pilot involved, and recovery time was clocked at around a week or two if no other symptoms presented. And no Drifting allowed during recovery. When Raleigh thought back to those days after Yancy...well, it fucking sucked.

Raleigh found Chuck down in the empty gym, attempting to beat the stuffing out of an innocent punching bag. Even across the room Raleigh could see blood on the canvas. His face, usually so animated and open, now had all the life of a block of wood.

Stubborn idiot Yancy scolded. *You never know when to stop.*

"That can't be good for your hands," Raleigh called, letting his boots ring out against the ground as he approached.

"Probably isn't," Chuck dismissed, landing another punch and wincing. "It's not your problem."

"Stop, man," Raleigh commanded softly, cringing in sympathy as another impact rippled across his shoulders and added more blood to the canvas. "You'll fubar* yourself and be so far out of commission you may as well retire."

"Might as well anyway. It's what you did in my situation. Seems to have worked out well for you, hero," Chuck snarled, but his usual heat was gone, and he didn't even try to meet Raleigh's eye. The fire had gone out of him, the fight and (though Raleigh hated to admit it) but he realized he missed it.

He really should just walk away. He and Chuck were never going to get along. There wasn't anything he could do or say that would help this man, not when he seemed to despise the very ground Raleigh walked on. Not when he bit and snarled at every attempt Raleigh made to have a civilized conversation. He should just turn around and walk away.

But, in everything he was, Raleigh couldn't bring himself to turn away from another Ranger who was suffering through what he had suffered.

"Pain isn't going to fill the emptiness in you," he told the other man bluntly as he reigned down another set of blows. It was like yelling at a brick wall, but Raleigh was nothing if not stubborn.

"Don't you ever shut up?"

"And neither is anger, or hate. They'll only make it worse. Trust a voice of experience, yeah?"

"Seriously, shut the fuck up."

"You lost someone-,"

Chuck's fist veered sharply away from the punching back and straight for Raleigh's jaw. He had to hand it to Chuck; he was an amazing fighter, mixing old fashioned boxing stances with more modern leg checks and the occasional southpaw move inherited from Herc. He even held his own against Raleigh longer than anyone else beside Mako and Yancy ever had, but injured hands and strength born of grief limited him greatly. Holding back, Raleigh could see Chuck was making no effort to hide his moves, and his body broadcasted his intentions louder than a bullhorn. He deflected the first blow, as well as the second and third with relative ease (though he'd have some bruises tomorrow to show for it). He could have grounded the other man by now with all the holes Chuck was leaving in his defense, but if he did he was fairly confident Herc would fight his way back from the dead to beat Raleigh black and blue in return. So instead he played fair, nullifying every one of Chuck's attacks until the man let his guard slip enough for Raleigh to reel him into a giant bear hug learned from Aleksis Kaidenovsky. No matter which way Chuck twisted or fought, he couldn't break Raleigh's hold.

"You lost someone," Raleigh told him again over Chuck's curses and struggles. "And it's going to hurt like nothing you've ever felt before, because he was your father and he knew you better than anyone else on Earth. He Drifted with you. But you're strong. This won't beat you. A fucking Kaiju can't beat you, and this won't either."

"Shut your fucking mouth before I bash your teeth in," Chuck snarled, twisting viciously in his hold and wincing when he put too much strain on his busted hands. Raleigh simply readjusted his grip to ease the tension on them and planted his feet firmly on the mat.

"You'll feel empty and alone, because in a lot of ways you are now. Your right side is gone. But keeping it buried inside and causing yourself pain won't make you feel better. And I know. I know you'll just keep at it until you die or someone pulls you back from the brink, because that's what I did. So here's me pulling you back, Chuck. All you have to do is accept it."

The first sob actually surprised him when when Chuck mashed his forehead into his collarbone, loud and painful. Easing his grip just a fraction, Raleigh allowed the other pilot to beat his fists weakly against his chest as the second and third sob followed even as he fought them tooth and nail. Allowing his fingers to find their way automatically, Raleigh wove them into ginger strands and dragged the other Ranger in closer, letting him muffle his cries in his shoulder. Held secure, something broke inside Chuck and he was crying into the folds of Raleigh's wrinkled uniform, his hands clutching at his torso. Raleigh took small steps back, easing them both away from the mats and punching bags until his back met the cool steel of the wall.

"Fuck him," Chuck choked out. "That bastard, fuck him and his goddamn self-sacrificing *bullshit!*"

"Go ahead," Raleigh muttered, trying his best to wrap Chuck up enough to ignore the rest of the world. "Let it out, he'll hear you."

They ended up on the floor, with Raleigh's long legs stretched out before him and Chuck curled into his side, tears flowing freely. Raleigh would have thought Chuck would be quiet crier, holding in his pain and only letting it slip out one teeth-clenched breath at a time. Instead, he didn't seem very concerned about holding anything in, screaming out his rage and frustration with everything, heedless of his audience. The dam broke and nothing would hold back the flood. Raleigh ran his hand over his hair, offering physical comfort where words wouldn't do.

Nothing could have been said to make the hole Yancy left better and nothing could have been said now. But the undeniable reality of human contact was a soothing balm on open wounds.

The quiet padding of bare-feet across thick mats drew Raleigh's attention up, though Chuck's was too far gone to notice. Mako, her boots dangling from her fingers and the shadows of the day still under her eyes, smiled as his eyes landed on her: she stood like an angel come with salvation in the face of their tragedy. Staying silent, Raleigh held out the hand not buried in Chuck's hair to her, steadying Mako as she eased down on the sobbing Ranger's other side. Setting her boots aside, she curved her body over his own prone one, and placing most of her weight on Raleigh's legs. She added herself as a shield for Chuck's vulnerable back,

whispering in a mixture of Japanese and English as Raleigh continued to run his hands over his hair and neck.

The Drift brought a comfort and a type of peace that was nearly impossible to replicate, and to suddenly have silence at one end was soul-shattering. He knew it, and now Chuck knew it. Raleigh was only glad his knowledge had come less violently.

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By the time Chuck had come down from his grief, Raleigh's legs were numb and Mako looked like a shadow of herself, with her hair lank and tangled around her face and her skin sallow. Chuck seemed comatose. Raleigh took advantage of his uncharacteristic passivity to inspect his hands, which thankfully didn't look too bad; while his knuckles were bloody and bruised, nothing shifted dangerously under Raleigh's probing touch and the delicate nerves in his fingertips were intact as far as he could determine. That was relieving, at least.

Raleigh knew they needed to move. A few sparse hours of sleep didn't seem near enough when it was obvious more was called for. But they needed food, and showers weren't out of the question for his two fellow pilots. Kicking his own tired body into action, Raleigh shuffled them both to their feet (ever mindful of Chuck's hands and Mako's bare feet) and through the passageways of the station, reining them in like a shepherd to sheep. He briefly considered returning to Mako's quarters, but Chuck's were much closer and the whining sound of Max's confined misery drew them in before he thought better of it.

As the other man punched in his access code for the door, Raleigh briefly considered what he would have to do if Chuck refused them. More yelling would be involved, as well as a few of the dirtier moves Sasha had taught him over the years, he was sure. However, it seemed the fight had left the man, and he merely kept a frantic Max aside with his foot as he ushered them in.

Chuck's room, as it turned out, was much larger than either his or Mako's. It took Raleigh a long moment to realize it was because he shared it with Herc, which instantly had him backpedaling. Not good. But Chuck had already begun banging around the sink tucked in the corner, cursing softly as he dug out bandages and disinfectant from a beaten, tin-plated medkit. Was he really planning to wrap his hands himself? Raleigh couldn't help but roll his eyes at the sheer stubbornness of the other man. But Mako was leaning against the wall beside Chuck, smiling at Raleigh while she absentmindedly tidying up the innards of the kit. Raleigh winked in return; Mako had more patience than he'd ever hope to possess. So instead, he busied himself with keeping an ecstatic Max occupied, having no problems rolling around on the floor with the pooch.

He did keep an eye on them though. So he saw when, after Chuck's third attempt to wrap his own hands, he grudgingly released the supplies and allowed Mako to take over. Satisfied that task was taken care of, Raleigh moved to their next hurdle; hunger.

He wasn't a big fan of ration bars, but the mess hall felt miles away. Times like this he missed the lazy convenience of pizza delivery. But Yancy had never grumbled when Raleigh needed something...

"I'm going for food," he told them, only to stumble when Chuck kicked at his boots and tripped him up.

"Don't bother, the mess is going to be insane right now," he replied as Mako tied off the last bandage. "They'll be celebrating down there for the next month at the rate they were going earlier."

"But unless you plan to live off ration bars until then, we're going to have to venture through it," Raleigh pointed out. Though if he was honest with himself, the thought held little appeal. He couldn't begrudge others their celebration, not when the world was out of danger for the first time in over a decade, but he was just so tired. Their jubilation shouldn't be burdened by his recovery.

Chuck ignored him and reached out to activate the intercom imbedded in the wall. Dialing in a number, he leaned against the wall while it rang, inspecting his bandaged knuckles with a critical eye.

"Mess," Came a gruff voice on the other end.

"This is Ranger Hansen. Food for three, brought to the barracks. You have ten minutes."

"Sir, yes sir!" And with that the line went dead.

"That was horrible," Mako declared, though she too looked enormously relieved at not having to deal with other people.

Chuck flashed a grin at her. "But convenient."

Raleigh had to admit he had a point. And the possibility of a quiet meal away from those who demanded his attention was achingly tempting. Thankfully, Mako read the relief in his face, and let the matter drop in favor of helping him clearing away space on the table while Chuck paid Max the attention he was due.

The food arrived in eight minutes, and Mako greeted them with a polite smile and a firm hand, and dismissed the runner, who was not above gawking at the scene of the three Rangers and a dog piled into a small, cluttered table. The boxes he had brought were loaded down with everything imaginable--fresh bread drizzled in butter and honey, crisp snow peas dusted with sea salt, colorful peaches and apples with firm and unbruised skins, pulled pork slathered with brown sugar and barbecue sauce, every box was something different. Raleigh ate ravenously, free from the fear of starvation for the first time in years and he savored every bite.

He didn't notice Mako watching him with sadness and amusement warring in her eyes, or Chuck glancing at him with curiosity, and even a little concern.

Eventually though, the food was all but demolished, and sleep called to them. Raleigh didn't fight its pull, but stubbornness has reared deep in Chuck's eyes, and he watched as the other Ranger strove to shake of drowsiness. Mako couldn't say she was helping, as she kept petting Chuck's bangs away from his eyes in soothing motions until his eyes became half-lidded.

"Bed," Raleigh suggested, gently tugging them both to their feet.

The thought of leaving, even for a few hours of rest, didn't even occur to him. Nor, it seemed, had it for Mako or even Chuck. Silence and solitude never happened in the Drift.

Mako ended up on the top bunk, Herc's bunk. Stripped down to her loose uniform pants and tank top (Raleigh didn't stare. He didn't. Though Chuck may have.), she settled in among the covers and allowed her forearm to trail off the mattress just far enough for either he or Chuck to brush against her if they reached out. Raleigh planned on grabbing a few stray bits of sleep slumped over in the thinly padded chair in the corner but Chuck rolled his eyes at that.

"God, you're worse than the old man," he tiredly snapped before digging around in the footlocker at the end of the bunk. Raleigh watched him with weary curiosity as he pulled out a tangle of net, fabric, and hooks. Stretching up to the ceiling (and having to arch on his toes to get there, which Raleigh very firmly did not think was adorable), he snagged one end of the mass onto a hook imbedded in the ceiling, and the other in a similar hook about eight feet away.

"Will it hold me?" he couldn't help but ask, eying the hammock with open suspicion.

"If it can hold me and Max, it'll hold you just fine."

Raleigh shot a baleful look towards Max, now happy digging a fortress out of the blankets Mako had so conscientiously straightened not an hour earlier, before working his way less than gracefully into the slip of fabric and net. Despite his worries, the hammock held apart from a few groans and sways, and he settled back into it under Chuck's smirk and Mako's amused gaze. He didn't squawk when Chuck sent him swinging with a firm nudge but it was a near thing, and he muttered under his breath as the other Ranger shoved Max over to settle into his own covers.

*

Raleigh jerked awake to a wet, rough tongue lapping at his dangling fingers. Max, seeing he had succeeded in waking him up, yipped softly and wagged his curl of a tail hard enough to shake his entire back end with it. Raleigh stared down at him in mild shock--according to the red neon of the clock across the room, he had slept for nearly ten hours. The last time he had managed that, sleeping pills and a hospital had been involved.

On the other side of the room, the battered old TV they had scrapped up a few days ago was still on, flickering light illuminating everything around him. On the table, empty plates from the last five days were piled high and the clean, military-like sparseness of the room had been abandoned for chaos.

They had held their ground in the Hansen's bunk for almost a week now, leaving only for Max's walks and Chuck's mandatory appointments in medical. Mako and Raleigh followed him to his appointments, partly out of solidarity and partly to sign off on their own physicals so that they wouldn't be hunted down like the doctors constantly threatened to do with Chuck, who seemed to take an inordinate amount of pleasure in baiting the staff. Raleigh couldn't say he was surprised.

But after a week of browbeating and testing, the side-effects of the Drift Burn seemed to have subsided, and their grumpy Australian was cleared for duty once again.

"Fat load of good it'll do now," he had snarled once the neurologist told him. "You fuckers couldn't have signed off on that when it had actually mattered?"

Mako and Raleigh had gotten him out of medical before blood could be spilled, but only barely.

Max huffed again, delicately taking the cuff of Raleigh's sweater between his teeth and tugging to reemphasize his point. Raleigh was rather impressed to see his leash already coiled under his paws.

Raleigh glanced over to the bunks where Mako was buried under an alarming amount of blankets and Chuck was doing his level best to strangle his pillow in his sleep. Waking either of them seemed like far too much effort for what amounted to a bathroom run.

He laced his boots up far enough to pass for secure, clipped on Max's thick leash, and eased open the door in slow, quiet intervals. Once it was open far enough for him to slip through, he glanced back to confirm Mako and Chuck were still where he had left them before letting Max drag him into the hall.

Watching the bulldog scamper on ahead slightly, Raleigh followed after his trailing leash and let his body slowly acclimate. The light of false dawn reflected off the sleek exterior of the Shatterdome, giving the world a grayish, gentle hue and making Raleigh mentally recalibrate himself. His internal clock was completely destroyed. At least things were quiet, though he had to be mindful of the occasional sleeping body sprawled across the lawn as he let Max lead him on.

"Raleigh!" Far off the side of the Shatterdome, Raleigh spotted Tendo rising from the designated smoking bench toward him. A pair of dark, reflective sunglasses rested on his nose, and he was passing an unlit cigarette between his fingers in a preoccupied manner. Tendo didn't smoke, Raleigh remembered, but he loved the ten minute breaks he got by claiming he did. Pentecost never called him on it, more amused by the cheat in the system than anything else.

"Hey little man," Tendo reached down, digging his fingers into Max's thick neck folds and scratching. The bulldog's eyes went half-lidded and his tongue lulled out, completely enraptured with the man's attentions.

"And big man," he continued, eyes dancing as they took Raleigh in. "We were all wondering where the heroes of the day went wondering off to. You and Mako okay?"

"Just been recovering. Blowing a hole in an alien planet will really take it out of you."

"Yeah, I've been going through Newt and Hermann's data. Aliens, I couldn't believe it." Tendo shook his head, hair flying this way and that out of its usual slick style. Popping his sunglasses up to rest on his forehead, he grinned cheerfully up at Raleigh. He looked exhausted, but the lines around his eyes and mouth had disappeared, making him look years

younger. "But seriously, where have you been? I sent someone down to your barracks a while ago and no one could find you."

"We're holed up in Chuck's room for the foreseeable future." There was really no other way to phrase it. The room comfortably housed the three of them, and as far as Raleigh could tell none of them wanted to be alone. Plus, the mess staff had become very proficient at the run between the kitchens and the barracks; their time was down to just under six minutes, though Chuck had bet him a vintage Lucky Seven sticker they couldn't get it under four.

"Hansen's room? How the hell did you end up in there and have you killed him yet?" Tendo asked, smiling down at Max when the bulldog yipped for more attention. "What'd you say, pup? Did Raleigh throw your daddy in the ocean and run off with you?"

"He knows what we're going through," Raleigh explained, having no better answer than that. "And us, him. We're all that's left."

"Huh. You really are, you know," Tendo said, suddenly serious. "They shut the Jaeger Academy down two years ago. The Resistance was the last of what we had."

No more Rangers, Raleigh thought. And no more Jaegers. The thought hit him harder than he thought it would, realizing there was no ready way Drift again.

"You got something on your mind, kiddo?" Tendo asked, fingers absently picking at the edges of the cigarette wrapper.

"Are there any Conn-Pods left in the 'dome? Stable ones, I mean. Not Newt's pile of bits and bobs."

"If you or Mako go anywhere near that bucket of scraps, I'll ground you both," Tendo threatened. He had not been amused by the scientist's slap-shod attempt at his own Pon, instantly declaring it a danger to all and sundry and threatening to shove it in a trash compactor at the first opportunity. Raleigh was convinced that was why Newt had begun sleeping in his lab, curled around it fitfully.

"Besides that, all the active Pons were imbedded in the Jeagers," Tendo continued, fingers stilling in their movement. "Why?"

"Were any of them salvageable?" Raleigh asked instead, though he knew the answer already. Drifting now, while not impossible, would be highly unlikely with no sustainable Jeagers.

"Well," Tendo paused, actively unraveling the cigarette now. "Gipsy Danger is gone, God rest her. Marshall Pentecost and Mako dug out every piece of scrap Mark III tech they could get their hands on to rebuild her, and she was really the last of her breed. Chernobyl Alpha was completely gutted after her nuclear reactor was crushed, and I wouldn't want you in that kind of model anyway--not after what Coyote Tango did to the Marshall. Striker Eureka was the first Mark V model, and we don't have the kind of money it would take to recreate her. And she was built with the Hansens in mind, so all that aside we'd have to completely redo her programming if we did get her specs. Crimson Typhoon's Conn-Pod was destroyed along with Chernobyl Alpha's but..." Tendo paused in his rolling litany, eyeing the sunset speculatively.

"But?" Raleigh pushed, eager despite himself. He knew Tendo, knew the man wouldn't taunt him with all this information without some sort of payout.

Sure enough, Tendo's eyes flickered over to him, amused and indulgent, though there was a wariness there as well.

"Crimson Typhoon was the first time anyone had explored the idea of drifting three minds rather than two. Most people thought it was impossible--hell, it's difficult enough to find two people who are Drift-compatible. So they built a prototype first, just to be sure. And it just happens to be in what passes for the Shatterdome's equivalent of a dusty basement corner."

Tendo was now staring straight on at Raleigh, eyes direct and serious. "It needs three to run effectively."

And there just happened to be three pilots in the Shatterdome. This, Raleigh decided, could either be the best thing to happen to them, or a complete disaster.

*

"You want to what?"

Chuck did not look impressed. Mako, actually, didn't either, but she at least seemed to be considering it.

"We'll never get another chance to Drift, not on our own terms," Raleigh pointed out, letting just a bit of his desperation filter into his determination. "All the Pon technology is going to work its way back into the hands of the governments and the private defense contractors and the black market. We'll never be able to do this again, not the way we want to."

"There is no harm in trying," Mako pointed out, her face thoughtful. Chuck glared at her.

"I know you had to sit through Lightcap's seminar on Drifting Compatibility, same as I did. You know exactly what the harm is in Drifting with someone you're not compatible with is."

"Scared, Hansen?"

It was pretty sad how instantly those two words, combined with the exact right tone, seemed to nullify every rational argument Chuck presented. Raleigh grinned as the other man flushed red, eyes narrowed.

"Lead the way, Becket."

The Crimson Typhoon prototype was really nothing more than the bare bones of the Conn-Pod: skeleton-like Pons that spidered across his temples with Relay Gel at the connecting points, and only enough armor to hold the joints and Spinal Clamp together over his torso and limbs. Raleigh slowly flexed his body as Tendo monitored Mako and Chuck suiting up, stressing the more delicate nature of the prototype.

"It wasn't built to take a pounding from Kaiju," he explained. "So don't go moving in it like you're used to because you'll bust it to pieces in a heartbeat."

Mako nodded in understanding, and Chuck seemed oddly silent through the lecture. Raleigh wondered if he was struck in awe in the possibilities around him; he knew he was.

Once suited up, Raleigh took the right side. It seemed impossible for him not to. After a silent debate between Mako and Chuck that Raleigh purposely kept out of, she settled into the left side of the unit while he slid into the gunner's position behind them.

Machines buzzed, lights flashed, and they Drifted.

Raleigh immediately felt crowded and confused. The deep, heady bond he had with Mako from the first was there, still strong and bright. It reverberated with the almost wild energy that had burned through them both during their first Drift, but it felt unexpectedly heavy as well. For all Mako's theoretical skills her practical application was still new, and she held onto lingering embarrassment over her loss of control during their first Drift. He could feel it even now as she fought to relax against the onslaught of not one but two other minds blending with her own.

Raleigh tried to ground himself as much as he could in return, ready to call out to Mako and reign her back in if need be but his mind, not yet fully healed from his solo Drift through the Breach, rebelling from his control. Then Chuck made himself known.

And almost instantly, it was perfect. Chuck's control was absolute and unyielding, forged by years of training under one of the most disciplined minds the Jaeger Program ever produced. Almost absentmindedly, he steadied Raleigh's mind, slipping easily into the holes and cracks within him and soothing away the hairline fractures created by his broken Drift with Mako. He circled protectively around them both, holding them in place until Raleigh was again whole and bright, until Mako knew the past from the present, and until the three of them moved like one.

But, Raleigh realized after they stabilized, Chuck didn't know how to direct a Drift. Herc had never given him that type of control, though it came second nature to Raleigh. Yancy, indulgent and loving, had always let him adapt Gipsy Danger to his body language and then had followed his lead. Mako, quite, polite, wickedly sharp Mako, had done much the same, though out of deference to Raleigh's comfort more than anything else. Chuck though, Raleigh saw it now: he had always been the manic, kinetic energy disciplined and guided by Herc's experienced hand.

So Raleigh took up driving the Drift forward, Mako matching his step breath for breath. And Chuck, iron-willed and stubborn around them, kept them all grounded until the Drift, at first so heavy and awkward, began to flow fluidly and even beautifully. He followed their movements without question and, once the simulations began, adapted his own dirty boxing style with Mako's kenjutsu and Raleigh's street fighter methods, but never allowed either of them to stray out from his firm grip.

"Neural Handshake holding strong," Came Tendo's slightly astounded voice over the comms. Raleigh laughed as a blend of quiet smugness (Mako) and cocky self-assurance (Chuck) flooded him.

"Of course, Tendo my man," he called. "What else would you expect from the saviors of mankind?"

"Complete chaos," was the instantaneous response. Raleigh grinned and relaxed as Mako began testing the limits, becoming familiar with the odd new operation of an unknown, unfinished unit. Behind him, he could feel Chuck doing the same, and he was perfectly content to embrace the Drift while his two perfectionists went over every nook and cranny of the prototype.

Let me know when you're done--fuck off--do not rush me

Then, slow, guitar-heavy music began filtering through his ears. Raleigh startled as a low pitched voice cooed about searching for whoever made me feel this way, and felt himself stumble in the Drift.

It's fine, Rals you never done this before?

Through Chuck, Raleigh saw an old habit often indulged in, partly to frustrate his tone-deaf father and partly to clear his head before a fight. Music, phantom but clear, heard sometimes on the radio, or sometimes from speakers by the tech working on Striker Eureka, sometimes on the streets of whatever city they were stationed in, played through his mind and filled the empty spaces of the Drift.

This works He sang the lyrics to a song he had never heard before, but knew by heart all the same. Mako, radiating amused exasperation, poked around Chuck until she understood what he was doing, and just as quickly Raleigh's head was full of blackbirds singing in the dead of night.

He threw in Rage Against the Machine because what was life without a little humor. Then they got to work.

Crimson Typhoon, even the early prototypes of it, was much faster, and more flexible than what any of them were used to. It took quite a lot of practice moving through the simulations and even then they never managed to initiate the Thundercloud Formation as gracefully as the Wei Triplets. But as they learned they created their own formations, their own variations. Crimson Typhoon was still a Jaeger, a hunter at heart, and they understood what it seemed to cry out for.

Tendo, bless him, threw simulation after simulation at them, barely giving them time to breath between takes. This continued for five hours, and it was glorious.

*

"I was always curious, the T-16 Angel Wings-,"

"Absolutely perfect. All the issues Lucky Seven had with balance and boost speed got compensated for, but-,"

"Core balance always had to be maintained, correct? I calculate that Striker Eureka had to divert up to 35% of its power to continuously monitor the hydraulics-,"

"You aren't suppose to know that. The secret part of state secrets, and all that."

"One of the benefits of the Jaeger Program was an end to governmental divisions."

"Temporary end. And when my government spends over a hundred billion dollars on something, information like that becomes classified."

"It cannot be labelled classified when any engineer with a calculator and basic knowledge of Jaeger construction can piece it together," Mako replied dismissively, reinforcing her disdain with an imperial flick of her wrist.

Raleigh listened to their nonstop back and forth with half an ear, more inclined to enjoy the cool, almost biting January air of Hong Kong than debate Jaeger engineering. His knowledge of the subject was slim at best, and he was honestly getting more entertainment out of watching Mako and Chuck duke it out in the late afternoon light.

Tendo had brought their simulations to an end after their fifteenth successful run, overriding all their objections like an unyielding tank and ordering them away to eat and rest. High off the excitement and adrenaline of their successful drift, the three of them had wondered aimlessly (or so Raleigh had thought) until Mako had pulled them onto a small terrace that overlooked the Shatterdome's launchpad and the boundless sea beyond it.

It was quiet, serene, isolated, and Raleigh loved it. He and Mako let Chuck at the intercom again while they rested against the wall, tucked far enough in to be protected against the winter chill which, while no Alaska, definitely left goosebumps on Raleigh's arms.

"Food will be here in ten," Chuck informed them as he settled into Mako's other side. "And it takes way more than a calculator and a pen pusher to understand my girl. She was perfect."

"They all were," Raleigh interjected, letting Mako entwine his fingers with Chuck's on her lap. Gipsy Danger had been the best thing to ever happen to him, and if what they had just experienced had been even half of what Crimson Typhoon had felt like...yes, they had all been perfect.

"But the thrust boosters you got for Gipsy Danger had to have been an unstable compromise-," and they were off again. Raleigh let them go, watching as the two stumbled over their thoughts and finished each others sentences, occasionally letting his vision go blurry around the corners.

Really, with how much Mako and Chuck had in common, Raleigh was amazed it had taken Drifting with his sorry self for them to finally have a civilized, if enthusiastic, conversation. Both were twenty-one, he remembered. Both raised by single fathers, both complete perfectionists with spectacular records, both raised around Jaegers and the front line of the war, both popular symbols of the Resistance in their respective homelands, and both Drift-compatible with him.

Yancy had constantly ragged on him for the wild array of things he always managed to catch while in the Drift, and this time was no exception. Raleigh couldn't find it in him to be ashamed by that.

It took the runner from the kitchen nearly thirty minutes to find them, but thankfully Chuck and Mako were too far gone to notice. Raleigh untangled himself from them and rose to his feet, meeting the runner as he bound up the staircase. He was little more than a kid in a Crimson Typhoon t-shirt and baggy standard issue trousers, all elbows and awkwardness. Raleigh caught him at the top of the stairs, accepting the food and keeping the poor kid far out of the orbit Mako and Chuck had created around themselves.

"Thanks, kid," he said firmly, taking the precariously balanced load from him.

"I--uh," the kid flapped his arms behind him, toward the floor of the loading bay. Raleigh leaned over far enough to see a pudgy shadow lurking at the foot of the stairs. He whistled sharply.

"Max, up here boy!" Even from far away, he thought he could see the look of disgust Max gave the staircase, but the bulldog began climbing them nonetheless.

"Would you mind?" he asked the kid, who nodded enthusiastically. He clattered back down the stairs as Raleigh separated the food, and returned with a much happier Max juggled in his arms.

Loaded down with food and dog, Raleigh dismissed the kid back to the kitchens and returned to his pilots.

"Where'd you go?" Chuck demanded, only to let out a sharp *ouf* as Max collided with his sternum. "Oi, you bugger, what have I told you about jumping?" But he scratched behind his wrinkled ears anyway with the hand not held captive by Mako.

And they continued on like that, with Mako and Chuck jumping from engineering specs to weapons to designs to power sources as Raleigh probed them both into eating every once in a while. Occasionally, a slobbery, affectionate tongue would lap at his fingers, and Raleigh didn't think twice about slipping some of the tastier bits on his own plate down to a grateful Max. It was the most pleasant afternoon he could remember having, quietly watching over three souls he had somehow taken responsibility for.

"Was there a reason you two never tested for Drift-compatibility?" Raleigh found himself asking during a lull as they both realized their stomachs demanded more than a few bites.

"I do not believe we are compatible with each other," Mako ventured, hastily swallowing. "We both, however, seem to share compatibility with you, which allows us to Drift reliably."

"Which makes an argument for universal compatibility-," Chuck interceded.

"Hhm," Raleigh was amazed Mako could infuse so much disdain into one simple syllable. "Universal compatibility is impossible. Humans are complex, emotional, and unpredictable-,"

"Well, some people sure are-," Chuck snarked, only to wince as Mako's heavy boot collide with his shin. He glared at her, but his normal heat had been replaced with a look of exasperated amusement.

"But there is an argument for it," he continued, undaunted. "My father for instance. He had already Drifted with twelve different people by the time we piloted together. And he and Pentecost were able to Drift without so much as a test run."

Three days ago they wouldn't have even brought themselves to mention their missing fathers, Raleigh though. But the Drift brought a comfort unlike anything else.

"Because they allowed no emotions into their Drift," Mako shot back. "And that leads to a weaker Handshake, not a stronger one. Did you ever Drift with others at the Academy, experience other ranges?"

"Nope. I was sixteen when Striker Eureka was finished and the PPDC assigned me and the old man to it. There was no point drifting with anyone else."

Raleigh sympathized. Before Mako, Yancy had been all he knew. In the Jaeger Academy, they had discovered they were Drift compatible, and hostile couldn't even begin to describe how they felt about attempting with others, even for research purposes before they started piloting Gipsy Danger. Yancy had once threatened to beat their drill sergeant if he went through with ordering Raleigh to Drift with someone else. Before Mako, he had only known his bother's brawny, barroom fighting style, and his unhealthy addiction to Oreos. His devastating right hook, and love of redheads with daring personalities, gender flexible. He knew protection, and dirty roundhouse kicks, and an older brother's determined guardianship.

Drifting with Mako though...suddenly, it wasn't the easy rivalry dictated by sibling affection, but instead a calm, quiet fury, driven instead by lose; by long days atop a deadly wall, by shattered streets with broken bodies and building strewn about. By a red shoe, and by revenge. By the cold sea in the middle of the night. But also, a new found devotion, and a loving comfort Raleigh had never experienced with Yancy. Mako was the calm in the center of a raging storm, his constant rock. But he was the same for her as well, her beacon in a dark night, and together they built a foundation out of their broken souls.

And now he knew Chuck, who had a relentless, practically obsessive drive to protect everyone. In the Drift, Raleigh saw that he hadn't been a cause of frustration to Chuck, but rather a symptom of a grievance much, much larger. With the closing of the Academy, no new pilots were being trained to replace those who burned out, forcing pilots far past their prime to continue fighting. He had watched Jaeger after Jaeger fall to those burn-out pilots. No one seemed interested in getting them the relief they needed, but now expected them to die in their Jaegers against threats they were fast becoming too outdated to defeat. The hypocrisy and arrogance was set to constantly simmer inside him, leaving a biting anger on his tongue that never abided.

And Raleigh had been a personification of it all, pulled out of retirement even though it was obvious to Chuck he needed help and was in no condition to pilot, but asked to anyway *because there was no one left*. Could no one see how much pain Raleigh was still in? How he clearly hadn't recovered from his battle with Knifehead? And the worst fault, as Chuck had

seen it, was that Raleigh's pain was effecting Mako, who held a place in Chuck's mind as one of the few competent people left in the PPDC.

If there was one thing Chuck couldn't stand, it was incompetence. Raleigh and Mako, like so many others, had done what they could and now they needed to get behind the line so Chuck could do what he had been trained since adolescence to do--protect them.

There was a deep shame resting in Chuck now, at having to stay behind the line himself during the final battle. It was a twisted and ugly growth hidden deep within him but Raleigh had seen it, and was determined to uproot it. And to show Chuck that, while he wasn't fighting perfectly, he wasn't as broken as Chuck thought him.

Raleigh's mind wondered back to Mako, much as it always did. He wondered what she had picked up in the Drift, and what she had walked away with. Three people...it had been different but oh so deliciously new and thrilling. It shouldn't have worked, shouldn't have been possible for three such different personalities to blend and Drift. But they had, and it had left him breathless and lightheaded in the best way.

He hadn't felt this safe and secure since Yancy.

The third time Raleigh's chin hit his chest, Mako tangled her fingers into his hair and tugged him down to rest against her thigh. He didn't think he was tired, not with how quickly his blood was racing, but his mind seemed to have different plans. He let his eyes drift shut under Mako's gentle touch, lulled by their voices as they debated the differences between advanced photochromic displays and the outdated but more reliable sonar-based displays.

When he awoke, he was covered in something warm and heavy, and felt fur against his cheek. Blindly reaching out, his fingers connected with beaten, well worn leather, and the distinct smell of grease, sweat, and Chuck flooded his nostrils. He cracked his eyes open just enough for the colors of the vivid sunset to illuminate the Striker Eureka logo on the sleeve of the jacket draped over him.

"--always told me to watch my tongue," he dimly heard Chuck say.

"We did almost destroy the Shatterdome."

"Still doesn't excuse it."

"It is understandable that you did not want that kind of turbulence during Operation-,"

"You gonna take the apology or not?"

"There was an apology in there?"

"It was buried deep. Dig a little harder next time and you'll catch it."

"Am I expected to supply the shovel as well?"

"Well obviously."

After a moment of thought, Raleigh closed his eyes and let their voices lull him back to sleep.

*

It had been two weeks since the world hadn't end. Raleigh was honestly surprised it had taken this long.

Chuck was in the shower going on forty minutes now, and Raleigh would have strong words for him hogging the bathroom if Chuck wasn't so agreeable and relaxed after them. It made for a nice change of pace. And since it was Mako's turn to take Max out for his walk, Raleigh was left to entertain himself with the tiny collection of DVDs Mako had collected during her time in Hong Kong. Her odd obsession with B-rated horror movies intrigued him as he watched blood dripping through clocks and a piano eat its musician whole, skimming the subtitles every once in a while. His conversational Japanese had always been better than Yancy's, who preferred French, but the cultural references baffled him. He'd have to pick Mako's brain about it later.

Suddenly, Tendo's voice filtered over the intercom: "I don't care which one of you is currently conscious and functioning, but I need you up here *right now*. Look sharp and be ready for war."

Tendo sounded as close to a panic as he ever got and Raleigh wasted about thirty seconds stumbling into what could possibly pass for a dress uniform among his scant collection of clothes before dashing upstairs. For the last week Tendo had been upholding an unspoken rule throughout the Shatterdome to give the pilots as much space as possible, so having him break it so thoroughly made Raleigh run.

Coming to a halt in front of the LOCCENT bridge, Raleigh took a minute to compose himself, knowing he looked no where near as stoic or put together as Pentecost managed. But he was being called on to be so all the same. He could only hope he proved up to the challenge.

Chill out, little brother Yancy told him, years ago. *Ain't nothing you can't handle.*

Stepping onto the bridge, Raleigh looked straight into the face of the United Nations and saluted.

"Ranger Becket," the first of the floating heads greeted. "Thank you for joining us."

Tendo was sitting at the controls to the far right, shooting him a look of trepidation and fear. It was small, and Raleigh would have missed it if he hadn't known the tech for so long, but it was there. The rest of the bridge was deserted.

"Ma'am," he responded.

"You are dismissed, Mr. Choi. Thank you for your assistance." Tendo looked like leaving was the last thing he wanted to do, but Raleigh smiled at him, calm and confident (even if he really wasn't) and nodded to the door.

"Thanks, Tendo. We'll try to make it to the mess later."

"Doubtful," Tendo replied quietly as he gathered his things. "I think you all enjoy running the kitchen staff ragged too much."

Raleigh couldn't smile, not right now, but a small weight was taken off as he turned back to the floating heads of the UN.

"We were just discussing the future of the PPDC and the Jaeger Program," the next head informed him, jovial and light. His eyes though, bright and menacing, told Raleigh he was anything but. "With Marshall Pentecost's passing, the Jaeger Program has no leader or chain of command. Better it be absorbed back into the United Nations' control."

"With all due respect, General Kreiger heads the PPDC," Or at least he had five years ago. Raleigh was keenly aware he had neither the knowledge nor the political savvy to play this game effectively. "Any discussion of the Jaeger Program should involve him."

"Dustin is...a busy man," the third head conceded. Raleigh ground his teeth to control his response to that. "Better we not disturb him overly much. We are proposing that the Hong Kong Shatterdome be liquidated and essential personnel be redistributed to other areas of need. Pilots, such as yourself, will be reassigned to the Lima facilities for further research on drift technology."

Raleigh felt his body run cold. That was a horrible idea. The Lima Shatterdome was function on a bare bones staffed crew, and rumor was it was about to be sold off to the Peruvian government any day now. But before he could articulate any of this, the heavy thud of boots on steel caught his attention as Chuck, hair damp and rage in his eyes, stepped into the LOCCENT. Tendo must have grabbed him, Raleigh realized as he took the other pilot in.

The look on his face scared Raleigh. He imagined it was the look Chuck wore when ripping Kaiju apart, and if so than Striker Eureka didn't particularly need her missiles and bullets. If Raleigh replaced the water collecting around his temples and throat with blood, he could pass as some heathen god of war, vengeful and unyielding and brutal in the face of his enemies.

He stalked forward, stopping only when he had placed himself in front of Raleigh and perfectly positioned to stare down his nose at a computer screen.

"Ranger Hansen. We are sorry for your lose-,"

"Whatever. We're not going to Lima." Raleigh held back a groan. Objectively, he knew Chuck was one of the premier pilots the PPDC ever produced, was probably one of the most knowledgeable people on the planet when it came to Jaegers and Kaiju, and had been given a lot of leeway because of it. There were things he wasn't used to hearing, rules he wasn't used to obeying, and battles that weren't so much battles but opinions Chuck wasn't interest in. This was going to be one of those battles.

"We will be reassuming control over the PPDC over the coming months-,"

"What a fucking sensational plan that is," Chuck snarled into the stunned faces of the leaders of the world. "Let's give the Resistance up to the people who thought *walls* were a good idea."

"You will remember, Ranger Hansen, just who it is you are addressing."

Chuck's nostrils flared, the corners of his mouth going white. Trying to defuse the worst of it, Raleigh stepped up, putting his back to the heads of the UN and touching his shoulder to the other pilot's.

"Calm down," he hissed, nudging Chuck enough to get the other to look at him instead of the monitor. "We are not going to Lima. I will make sure of that but let me do this."

Chuck looked like he had just sucked on a lemon, but the rage within him banked slightly as he met Raleigh's eyes.

"We're not going to Lima. Let me handle this," Raleigh reiterated, channeling all the strength and protection Yancy had seemed to exude whenever he promised something. Chuck glared at him a few moments longer, as if to impress upon him how intolerable this all was, before turning on his heels and storming out of the LOCCENT while muttering rudely under his breath.

"As you discussed earlier, the Jaeger Program is currently without a Marshall," Raleigh continued once Chuck was far out of earshot, jumping into the silence he had left in his wake before anyone else could. "You cannot expect a military compound to run without a commanding officer, and only a CO could order the reassignment of the largest Shatterdome still active."

"Then we shall promote you."

"With all due respect I am not qualified to act as a Marshall of the Jaeger Program, nor can I accept that station without the authority of General Kreiger." *Calm, be calm. You can do this, little brother.*

"You will be promoted to Marshall, formally, in due time. Until then, you will take your marching orders and proceed to the Lima Shatterdome for further research."

"We're not lab rats," Raleigh defied, keeping his voice level and polite. He had stared down Kaiju--these people were nothing compared to that.

"Of course not. But you are soldiers, and you have your orders."

"Then I hereby tender the resignations of myself, Mako Mori, and Charles Hansen. It's been a pleasure serving the world in its time of crisis."

"You cannot-,"

"Ordinance 6, section 3E, lines 1 through 13 of the Pan Pacific Defense Corp Charter gives me that right." The PPDC had only been allowed to function under voluntary support, that could be withdrawn at any time. It had been how he had walked away after Yancy with no

dishonorable discharge on his record or charges brought against him in court, and he had no compulsions against using it again.

"This is insubordination-,"

"Your resignation is accepted, Mr. Becket," overrode a head on the far left, who until then had been silent. "Go with the grace of God, and good luck."

Taking the out that was offered to him, Raleigh sharply saluted even as outrage broke out among the other heads.

"Where are you going, Mr. Becket?" one called out as he left the LOCCENT.

"Anywhere but here," he muttered under his breath.

*

God, he hoped Mako wouldn't kill him. She had never really planned on what she would do if she ever left the PPDC, and he had all but taken that choice away from her to prove a point. Raleigh supposed she could retract her resignation, but he desperately hoped she would understand why he thought that would be a horrible idea. And Chuck would rather choke on his own tongue than bow to the whims of the UN.

He prayed they didn't decide to make him choose between them. Raleigh didn't think he could survive that, not after this past week. Mako had been the long needed bandage over the gaping wound Yancy had left in him, helping Raleigh hold himself together for the first time in years. And Chuck was the fierce ring of protection against the probing fingers of others while it healed. Losing either of them would be devastating, and the very thought of it pushing him to go faster.

Hurrying down the hall, he was startled to find Chuck's room not only empty but also stripped bare. He briefly considered returning to the bridge to hunt down his wayward fellow Rangers through the multitude of cameras there, the UN be damned, but a sharp bark drew his attention down the hall.

The sight of his battered, standard issue duffel bag, sitting at the base of the staircase outside his room, brought him up short. His room has also been stripped bare (not that he had much). Across the hall, Mako's door was flung wide and a women's voice sang out, almost screaming off the walls and filled the air.

Stepping into Mako's room, Raleigh took in the flurry of movements around him. Her room had always been precise and orderly, but now it looked like a bomb had detonated inside it, with half the room packed away and the other half completely out of order.

"What-," Raleigh was interrupted when a bag came flying at his face.

"Pick a side, and start packing. Transport leaves in thirty," Chuck told him, pointing a finger in warning. Raleigh really couldn't take him seriously though, since he was delicately wrapping Mako's tiny collection of tea cups in bits of newspaper while he said it.

"Transport?" he asked Mako who, while looking distinctly guilty, did not stop quickly packing her clothes in quick, almost vicious movements. Max was curled up on her stripped bed, watching over the proceedings with lazy eyes. On the table, Chuck's mp3 player was rigged to a pair of speakers and a woman was prompting him to get ready to die.

"Chuck suggested we leave. I agreed," Mako said, her voice determined. Raleigh could point out the sheer improbability of just packing up and leaving. They had the most recognizable faces on the planet. Between the three of them, they had enough popularity to bedazzle a small European nation. They'd never make it five miles before their identities caught up with them.

"Where are we going?"

"Where every soldier goes when the war's over," Chuck replied. "Home."

*

Transport, as it turned out, was a loose interpretation of the word. Raleigh felt the inner child within him caw in excitement.

"A Boeing C-17," Raleigh whistled, impressed as he took in the large military cargo plane. "They stopped flying these after 2015. It's in great shape."

Mako was doing her best to be politely impressed with his knowledge, though Chuck couldn't be bothered. He was instead coaxing Max into a sticker-bedecked pet carrier with a mixture of treats, threats, and pleas.

"Come on, buddy. It's only for a bit now," he grunted as he pushed the reluctant bulldog's rump through the door and secured it. Max let out a pitiful whine, nails scrapping against metal in an attempt to avoid the carrier. With one last shove, Chuck got him in and quickly secured the latch.

"Sorry, Max," Chuck muttered, poking his fingers through the grate to reach Max's long face. "I'll let you out as soon as I can." He looked about as miserable as his pup sounded though.

Whenever Yancy got like that, Raleigh remembered, he would just throw Oreos at him until his brother either punched him or ate them. Since that wasn't a viable option for Chuck (yet), he settled for ruffling his hair in the most irritating manner he could manage, forcing the other man to stumble onto his knees to stay balanced. The glare he got in return was soul-melting.

"They're waiting for us," he said mildly, slinging Chuck's pack over his shoulder. His own was already strapped across his chest.

Cursing Raleigh, Chuck hefted Max's carrier into his arms as Mako grabbed her own bag and another that held all the things they had deemed important from Herc and Pentecost during their three minute raid of their belongings. Raleigh had been heartbreakingly impressed by their speed--it had taken him a month to go anywhere near Yancy's possessions after the fight with Knifehead.

The cargo bay of the plane was nearly empty, its crew part of Striker Eureka's auxiliary support whom Chuck had spoken to for ten hushed minutes, his stance aggressive and unquestionable. Now, they all moved with the same quick, almost brutal efficiency that characterized the Hansens to a point, prepping the plane and keeping their gaze to themselves. It was a novel change from the Shatterdome, where he could constantly feel eyes watching his every move.

Raleigh stowed their gear in one of the holds near the front of the plane, then stepped aside and allowed a twitching Mako to redo most of his work. Really, he couldn't expect anything less from an engineer, no matter how perfect she was for him. Grinning, he pressed a quick kiss to her temple and settled in next to Chuck, who had placed Max's carrier in the empty space under his own seat, his heels tapping against it in reassuring rhythm.

It was only then that the boxes caught his attention.

"Is that what I think it is?" Raleigh asked, pointing toward the series of large boxes carefully packaged and wrapped in the plane's loading bay.

"If you're thinking it's a prototype Conn-Pod, then yeah, it is," Chuck replied casually.

"Did you clear it when anyone to take it?" Raleigh asked, eying the carefully strapped down boxes with uncertainty. Guilt flooded Mako's face but Chuck seemed unashamed as ever.

"I told Choi to box it up for us, if that's what you mean."

"And what about the brass?"

Chuck met his gaze dead on. "Who are they to tell me no?"

It was, Raleigh thought, Chuck's motto in life right there.

*

"I'm not listening to that."

"It is a good song."

"I don't care, take it off the list."

"Raleigh likes it."

"Queen was sent by the devil in revenge for Nick Cave. Take them off and we'll find something else he likes that doesn't crush my soul."

"Alright, but add Aira Mitsuki. I like her."

"...I can agree with that."

Raleigh wasn't sure when he drifted off, but the bright light of a computer screen slowly flooded his vision as he cracked his eyes open. Next to him, Chuck and Mako had their heads

bent over her laptop, and Chuck's battered mp3 player in her hand.

"What are you doing," he croaked out, sleep still thick on his tongue.

"We're not done yet, go back to sleep," Chuck commanded even as Mako reached out and gently brushed his hair away from his face, her touch soothing him back into unconsciousness.

*

Raleigh was fully prepared to admit he loved hammocks. He had never felt so utterly relaxed.

The little apartment building they found rented on a weekly basis, and Raleigh was rather in love with it as well. Well, he was in love with the wide, wrap-around balcony that circled the unit, which more than made up for the tiny kitchen, nonexistent living room, cramped bathroom, and single bedroom. It had taken a surprisingly little amount of cajoling to get Chuck to hang the hammock on a pair of sturdy studs, and with Mako taking the bedroom and Chuck sprawled on the couch, they had all easily fallen into place.

Raleigh was even able to admit, after only a week, that he loved Sydney as well. He knew they would have to move on soon or risk the wrath of the UN, but he was fairly sure he'd be leaving part of his heart behind. Sydney had a beautiful coastline, even with the Anti-Kaiju Wall impeding most of it, and had none of the cramped, crowded feel Raleigh got in most large cities. The sunsets were like something out of a dream, and as a city just taken off rations the markets were booming with fresh meat and produce through the ports. And for the first time in recent memory, he had woken up to warmth and sunshine instead of ice and gloom.

One thing he was not in love with, however, was the billboards. They had spotted the first one less than five minutes after leaving the airport. It had been risen high among the skyscrapers, simple black lettering on a white background.

R.I.P. Our Valiant Defender. Hercules Hansen 1980-2025

And there had been others. Striker Eureka's logo slapped all over the place, along with photographs and memorials to Herc on almost every street corner. In fact, if Raleigh tipped himself sideways at just the right angle, he could make out another billboard across the way, just behind the adjacent building.

He Killed The Monsters For Us! Now Tear Down The Wall For Him!

Raleigh really wouldn't mind them all so much if they didn't make Chuck look so small and beaten after seeing them. Chuck, who Raleigh was discovering to be protective and steady and even affectionate, at least where he and Mako were concerned. The past week had proven that, with his nighttime guardianship against Raleigh's nightmares and his watchful support of Mako's constant exploring. He touched them both more, which Raleigh could admit he only noticed because he had touch-starved himself for the past five years. Granted, Chuck was still surly and brattish and insufferable when the mood struck him, but Raleigh's own

tolerance for that had grown as well. Mako seemed to think he was nothing more than a pouting teddy bear now, and enjoyed the bright red shade he turned when she mentioned it.

The Drift could do that; replaced hostility with intimacy.

Raleigh was so heavily lost in thought that he didn't notice Mako until she laid gentle fingers across his forehead. Tilting his head up slightly, he grinned at her, carefree and relaxed.

"Hello, darling."

She didn't smile in return, but the minute lines between her eyes eased. She knelt down until she was eye level with him, her demeanor solemn. Raleigh could see the nervousness on her face as clear as day.

"What's wrong?"

"I wanted to ask...if I took a-a gamble. A risk. Would you have faith in my decision?"

"Would I back you? Of course." What a silly question. Of course he would. She was Mako, the order to his chaos, and the balance to his instability. He had gone with her to hell once already, and would gladly do it again.

She nodded, pressing a quick kiss to his knuckles, and rose to her feet. She didn't look any less nervous though. Leaning up, Raleigh returned the kiss to her forehead, mirroring her touch earlier. Then, with a grin that would have set Yancy on edge instantly, he jerked her forward into the hammock. She stiffened for one terrified moment as she waited to see if the whole thing would collapse on them, but after it held strong she punched at Raleigh's good shoulder, cursing in Japanese.

"This thing is amazing," he told her, unruffled. "You need to experience it." He poked and prodded until she was curled up next to him, enjoying the extra heat she radiated. She grumbled some more, but stayed with him all the same, drawing lazy patterns into his shirt. Raleigh lost track of time after that, content to let his mind wonder and his eyes slide shut. Something still felt off though.

"We're back!" Chuck yelled out from the front door, Max already waddling across the living room to the balcony with his leash trailing behind him.

"Good walk?" Raleigh asked, more to fill the space than anything.

"Well, I didn't get recognized this time, if that's what you mean. Your turn next, you lazy sod." Chuck tossed his cap aside, unclipped Max's leash, and dropped it unceremoniously onto Raleigh's chest. Days ago, they had placed one of the battered chairs near enough to the balcony that Chuck could lounge in it while still being in arms reach of Raleigh's hammock, and he settled into it now with a lazy grace.

They didn't speak much, but it didn't feel necessary. Raleigh fell asleep under their reassuring presence.

*

"How did every pillow in Sydney find its way into the living room?"

Chuck and Mako, in the midst of a sea of feathery, fluffy warmth, stared up at Raleigh like puppies caught roughhousing among the china. Adorable puppies, but still. There were piles higher than Mako's head, for God's sake.

"The last tenants left it behind when they left," she told him, all innocent wide eyes and cute smiles.

"So of course the only reasonable thing to do was to pull it all out," Raleigh dryly agreed, skirting around their fluffy edges.

"The couch wasn't big enough for Chuck," Mako explained, throwing a thick pillow at him. They had both managed to change into pajamas while he was away, and looked significantly more comfortable than he felt.

"So you decided a pillow fort would fix that?" he replied, tossing the pillow back to Chuck. The younger man caught it easily and added it to a stack on his right. Raleigh did have to hand it to them: it looked like one of the most well constructed pillow forts he had ever seen.

"What alternative did we have, Ranger," Chuck asked, straight-faced.

Raleigh could think of quite a few answers to that, but they were staring up at him with such identical expressions of charm and deviousness that the words died in his throat.

"None come to mind."

Chuck grinned, and the only warning Raleigh got was a quick glance between the two of them before they lunged forward in unison. He tried to backpedal, but his shin and thigh were quickly captured and he was dragged down among the blankets. He squeaked as his shoes, belt, and sweater were yanked off, but he didn't fight as he was bundled up in enough blankets to make him into a human burrito.

"Um," he started, but Chuck dropped a pillow on his head.

"Shut up and stay there. We're not done yet," he ordered as he and Mako began construction on the back corner.

*

Raleigh had to admit the massive pillow fort, while cumbersome, was also extremely comfortable. He lay spread across a low pile of blankets, half-lidded eyes watching Chuck as the other Ranger stripped down one of the cheap mobiles they had picked up during their last outing. Beside him, Mako's sleek computer (the one piece of PPDC property they walked away with) clicked and whorled. Chuck had already taken the thing apart down to its bare bones and stripped it of anything even remotely suspicious.

Through its speakers, a powerful voice sang out to fight to win. He was sure the song was meant to be more intense, but Chuck had the volume turned down low, humming under his breath now and then.

He was also explaining what he was doing as he went, but Raleigh couldn't understand a word of it. He could dismantle and rebuild any of Gipsy Danger's parts in an afternoon, but fuck if he knew what those parts were called. He had told Chuck and Mako, more than once, exactly how far his high school education had taken him, but they both seemed to think constant exposure and explanation would instill the knowledge nonetheless. While he wasn't as confident in the strategy as they were, he appreciated the attempts.

"We'll have to trade the SIM cards out when we move again," Chuck continued as he did something to the circuit board of the mobile. "And reconstruct the GPS blockers. Don't try and use any of the map functions on this thing, either."

Raleigh hummed quietly and scratched at Max's neck scruff. The bulldog was curled loosely into his side, snorting in his sleep every so often. Behind them, he could hear Mako moving around the kitchen, making dinner. She put her foot down after their third day of takeout, and had insisted on a real meal, meager as their supplies were. Raleigh had offered to help but had been promptly expelled when he admitted to once burning spaghetti.

"I was fifteen," he had laughed as she all but frog-marched him back to the living room.

"All the same, you will stay out," she commanded, shoving him toward Chuck. "Keep him here."

"Nice to know you've learned ordering works better than asking," Chuck commented, attention mostly on his work. Taking care to avoid the scattered pieces of plastic and wire, Raleigh found a comfortable spot next to Max and watched the other Ranger work.

Raleigh couldn't help but notice how nimble Chuck's fingers looked flying over the old keyboard they had scrounged up. He supposed he could blame the thought on his half-asleep brain.

"You have an email address?" Chuck asked distractedly.

"Nope," Raleigh commented, eyes heavy. These pillows really were comfortable, and Max made for an amazing heater.

"Good. I'll mock up a dummy one for you, but only use it if we get separated. I also swapped out the battery cells with more durable hardware, so they should last us-,"

Sometime later, Raleigh awoke. He was starting to become disturbed by how easily he was falling asleep, after five years of constant insomnia. Truthfully, he was only roused this time by a soft clicking sound off to his left, just as it sounded again. As his senses returned, the fresh smell of tempura and grilled salmon wafted over him, and he cracked his eyes open enough to see Mako to his right, creating a tight triangle between the three of them as she ate.

"I thought you did not want us to use the phones features," she said. She seemed to have dispensed with utensils and was picking out parts with her fingers. Chuck let her make her selection before grabbing for his own pieces.

"I didn't say shit about the camera. Think we can find a permanent marker?"

"Only one way to find out."

*

They would need to move on soon. Raleigh couldn't escape that looming fact, even he looked out over Sydney's skyline and let the hammock swung in slow, lazy arcs. They may have made it out of the Shatterdome, but that had mostly been due to their reaction time and infighting among the floating heads. But they were never going to be allowed to just walk away. Running was going to become a fact of life for all of them for the foreseeable future, as much as Raleigh dreaded to admit it.

It wouldn't be bad, he told himself. He had been on the constant move for years, following the Wall south in pursuit of ration cards and mind-numbing work. Chuck and Mako had been serving the PPDC for so long that temporary housing was all they knew.

But...the happiness they had found there was a tempting alternative, danger aside. Raleigh was more than a little reluctant to give it up.

A muted crash echoed from Mako's room, and Raleigh glanced over his shoulder in concern.

"Everything alright?" He called out. Chuck wasn't in the living room, though Max had made himself comfortable in a thick pile of blankets. No one answered him, and Raleigh felt concern rising in his chest as he eased forward and out of the hammock.

"Mako? You okay? Chuck?"

He heard another muffled thud and, God was this what Yancy felt like every time he didn't know what Raleigh was up to?

"Guys-," he started, sticking his head in the door of Mako's bedroom only to get the shock of his life. Mako had Chuck pinned to the wall next to the door, her hands in his hair, his own up her shirt, and their lips locked tight together. They broke apart at the sound of his voice, staring at him with curiosity and amusement, and slight embarrassment on Mako's part. Not much though, he noticed as his blood rushed to his face and his body overheated. Flight or fight instincts were kicking in, and he was shamefully aware how overwhelming the former was.

"I am so sorry," he stuttered out, mind racing a mile a minute because why hadn't he seen this coming, was he really that stupidly clueless, was he in their way staying here? "I'll get out and-,"

"Look what you did," Mako interrupted, swatting at Chuck's arm harder than necessary.

"You're the one who threw me against the wall, women!" Chuck snarled back. Raleigh felt his heart drop to the floor even as he started backing out.

"I'll just-," Chuck's hand shot out and curled around the collar of his shirt just as Mako's cupped the side of his face.

"Raleigh," she called, soft enough to get his attention. He paused in his stumbling, which proved to be his downfall since the next thing he knew, he was on his back across the bed. Mako appeared on her stomach next to him and before he could move any further, Chuck slid up his chest, caging him against the bed with his hands planted on either side of Raleigh's head.

"Mako was right, you do look good like this," Chuck commented, and the smirk on his face lit something within Raleigh.

"The fuck do you think-,"

"Remember what you said," Mako whispered into his ear, the knuckles brushing against his jaw.

"About what?" Raleigh's mind was flying a mile a minute, but it wasn't helping; it was like he was skimming over water without actually absorbing any of it. Mako's fingers had moved further downward to the collar of his shirt, tugging it down to reveal his collarbone and the hollow of his throat.

"About backing her play," Chuck commented, between absentminded kisses he dropped onto the skin Mako exposed. Raleigh's breath stuttered to a halt under the assault. "Which apparently involved sticking her tongue down my throat."

"You enjoyed every minute of it," Mako shot back, her fingers wondering upward to tug at Chuck's ginger bangs. Chuck's mouth left his throat to nip at her fingertips. "I know you were going to be easier than Raleigh about this."

"Wait, what?" Raleigh tried to make sense of it all, but Chuck cut him off.

"Oi, what makes you think I'd be the loose one?"

"Would you like that list categorically or alphabetically?"

"Let me up," Raleigh commanded, letting an authority Drifted into him by Yancy (him), Stacker (Mako), and Herc (Chuck) seep into his voice. "Now."

Grumbling, Chuck rolled off him, but the slant of his shoulder and the glint in his eye told Raleigh he wasn't letting him off the bed, so he didn't even try. Instead, he settled cross-legged into the middle of the duvet and regarded them both.

"Now, what's going on?"

"It was Mako's idea," Chuck explained. "I just went along with it because...well, it sounded like a good one."

Raleigh stared at him for a moment, but Chuck only smirked and stretched, blatantly putting his body on display. Writing him off as a lost cause, (and trying hard not to stare) he turned to Mako.

"What is he talking about?"

Mako smiled gently, easing forward and letting the strap of her tank top slide down her shoulder. Again, Raleigh had to fight very hard not to stare. She rested her hand on his inner thigh as she came into his personal space.

"We work," she whispered. "In every way. We fight. We Drift. We listen to each others music. This is just the next step."

"This is-," Raleigh paused, not sure what he could say to that.

"This is us," Chuck finished. Raleigh had once seen a jaguar in Mexico after a drop with Matador Fury, and Chuck's graceful slinking around him suddenly reminded him of it. He wondered if the sea turtle it had been stalking had felt as pinned as he did.

Chuck slipped in behind him, one hand going under his shirt to rest against his bare stomach, and the other covering Mako's hand high on his inner thigh. He hooked his chin over Raleigh's shoulder, comfortably encasing him in warmth and affection.

"And it will always be just us," Mako said, drawing his attention back to her. The blue streaks framing her face were a shocking contrast to the deep red of her kiss-bruised lips and Raleigh was utterly captivated. "We were made for each other."

"... You could have told me sooner," Raleigh muttered, but he already knew he had lost. Or won. It was suddenly much harder to tell one from the other.

"I had to work on this one," Mako replied, swatting lightly at Chuck's nose even as she smiled dazzlingly.

"Hey now-," Raleigh cut off Chuck's complaints by reaching back and running his fingers over the sensitive skin at the base of his hairline. Chuck instantly quieted, slumping forward into Raleigh's touch and muttering. He did retaliate though, by running his fingernails over Raleigh's abs and toying with the band of his underwear.

"So what do we do now?"

"We enjoy the rest of our afternoon," Mako suggested immediately, maneuvering them all until she could settle comfortably in Raleigh's lap. Their kiss was slow and gentle, and it felt like Drifting with her all over again. And as soon as their kiss ended, a large, confident hand tilted his chin to the side and oh, Chuck's kiss was so different. Full of bite and promise, of burning, and Raleigh was dizzy with it all when he was finally released. Watching them meet over his shoulder, he marveled that he could see such similarities in them, their determination and single-mindedness, as well as their differences, Mako's precision against Chuck's passion. It set his blood alight in a way he had never experienced, and left him breathless.

Protests still simmered in the back of Raleigh's mind. They were a few steps away from being wanted fugitives, probably physiologically damaged in ways they hadn't even begun to understand, and hadn't even known each other two months ago. This was insane.

But, he realized as he helped Mako shed her shirt and Chuck started to nip at the delicate skin just below his ear, he had never claimed to be sane.

*

Mako was the first to wake.

Chuck, she decided lethargically, was part octopus. Even with Raleigh between them, he had somehow managed to entwine himself around her as well, and she took delicate care to untangle herself as she rose.

A lifetime in the service had made it impossible for Mako to sleep past the sunrise. Or be conscious for longer than fifteen minutes without coffee.

But she apparently wasn't careful enough because as she tried to ease out of bed, Chuck's eyes cracked open, eying her with sleepy suspicion. She smiled at him, and leaned forward to press her lips against his hand where it now rested on Raleigh's stomach. He gently tugged at the blue streak in her hair in return.

"Don't go far," he ordered drowsily, already dozing back off. She thought about biting him in response, but he had already tightened his hold on Raleigh's still sleeping form, and she disliked the idea of waking him. Instead, she carefully leaned far enough over to press another kiss to Chuck's forehead.

"Go back to sleep," she responded in the same tone. She pressed one last kiss to Raleigh's cheek, causing him to mumber unintelligibly and burrow deeper into Chuck's twining grasp. They looked lovely together. Having them both seemed greedy, she knew, but Mako had been generous her whole life, sacrificing her family, her soul, her heart, everything she had to give to others. Now, finally now, she could afford to be greedy.

Max, resting at the foot of their bed, stretched and padded after her as she headed for the kitchen in search of coffee.

Cracking open the closest window, Mako was instantly hit with the smell of fresh rain on concrete, and the cool bite of a storm in the air. The sky that stretched before her was gray and thunderous, with the light of the dawn fighting its way forward. She stood braced against the counter as the coffee maker whirled away, taking simple pleasure in the unbridled contentment she felt.

She had avenged her family. She had saved the world. And she had her boys, both perfect for her in such different ways, warm and safe a room away. She never considered her life to be so close to perfect before.

It was only after she had poured herself a brimming cup of coffee did she discover a problem. She ransacked the shelves, but knew it was useless. Of course they were out of sugar. Mako stared at the steam rising from her mug, seriously contemplating consuming it black and bitter. She had done it before...

Lacing up her boots, Mako paused only to hook a sturdy leash to Max's collar, throw on Raleigh's sweater, and jam Chuck's cap over her hair before venturing out into the gray, drizzly dawn.

She wasn't sure if dogs were allowed in the grocery store down the road, but no one tried to stop them as Max waddled through the door after her. Sugar had been relatively easy to find, but then a rack of peaches caught her eye and set her mouth watering. It hadn't been until Drifting in Raleigh's memories that she had understood true starvation, and the careful count of ration cards against days, and her stomach remembered inexperienced pain as she stared at the tempting fruit. And Chuck would do almost anything for peaches.

Half way through the store, Mako resigned herself to getting a cart. Max, overjoyed beyond belief at so many new smells, rode in front with his front paws propped up on the side, sniffing everything within reach.

"Ma'am," a voice called out behind her as she paused in the dairy aisle, inspecting a carton of eggs for cracks. "Ma'am, I believe you dropped something."

Mako's first glance was to Max, who was almost dangling off the side of the cart to reach the cheese section, and then to her wallet, still tucked deep into her pants. Nonetheless, she still had everything she had come in with.

She couldn't ignore him. Turning, Mako smiled politely at the man coming down the aisle, silently hoping he wouldn't recognize her.

"Sorry, Ma'am, but I couldn't help but notice you may have lost this."

It took Mako a long moment to realize she was holding her PPDC ID badge. Jerking her gaze up, she felt the bottom of her stomach drop down to her boots as she met the steely gaze of General Dustin Kreiger, Secretary-General of the Pan Pacific Defense Corp. Fumbling for thoughts, she bowed low and took the opportunity to compose herself. She had filed her resignation, along with Raleigh and Chuck's, on the flight down with Raleigh asleep beside her and Chuck side-seat driving over her shoulder the whole time. They had returned all their equipment and security licenses, but she was also acutely aware of the Conn-Pod prototype boxed up in their living room. They had decided not to reconstruct it until they decided exactly where they'd be relocating to. And then there was her laptop, which she had been reluctant to part with, even as it sent a twinge through her conscious.

"At ease, Miss Mori," General Kreiger dismissed, spying her discomfort. "I'm not here on any official capacity."

"Then with all respect, sir, what do you want?"

"Imagine my surprise," General Kreiger intoned, reaching over to scratch Max's chin before the pup face planted into the floor trying to reach him. "When I awoke two weeks to the news that, so soon after our rouge Jaeger Program managed to defeat the Kaiju threat and close the Breach, my three remaining Rangers had all resigned en masse and disappeared. Nice job hiding, by the way. I knew Sydney would be my best bet but it still took me quite a while to track you down."

That had been the topic of a very quick, but very vicious fight between her and Chuck as they had scrambled to get his room stripped and packed. She had wanted to go somewhere unexpected and untraceable, while he had argued that, when in hiding, it was better to know

the lay of the land and be on good terms with the locals. With speed being imperative and knowing it would not be the last time they argued the subject, Mako had allowed Chuck to win that round.

They should have moved on days ago, but Raleigh had fallen in love with Sydney, and Chuck had become so at ease back in his homeland. She couldn't bring herself to force the subject.

"The apartment looks cramped though," General Kreiger continued. Mako met his gaze head on, even as she felt her face begin to burn with embarrassment.

"It fits us fine," she replied, placing the carton of eggs in the front of the basket, well out of Max's way and continuing down the aisle. General Kreiger ambled after her. Mako thought about shaking him off, but the general was a great deal taller than she was...

She pointed to the top shelf the next aisle over, where the row of honey rested just out of reach. Smiling slightly, General Kreiger selected the bottle she pointed to and handed it over. Mako tossed it into the cart next to Max and moved on, the general falling into step beside her.

"I watched the recording of your Drift with your boys. Very impressive," he mentioned after she made him grab a bag of crisps she knew Chuck would inhale. Mako resisted the urge to purse her lips at the news. She wasn't surprised there was video--J-techs recorded every moment of a pilot in their Jaegers. Tendo probably hadn't thought twice about flipping on the camera.

"We don't wish to be studied," she settled on as she eyed a pack of Oreos.

"I wasn't suggesting you should be," he replied, grabbing the Oreos and dropping them into the cart with Max. "But I also now see my plan for three new Jaeger teams stationed along the Asian Pacific coast was a fantasy at best. You three will never drift with anyone else, will you?"

"No, sir. Sorry, sir."

"Shame. Oh well, no use crying over spilt milk."

Against her protests, he paid the grocery bill. The clerk had taken one look at her scowling face, the battered brim of her cap, and the incredibly warm but extremely threadbare sweater wrapped around her person next to General Kreiger's clean shaven, well tended but ordinary suit, and took his card without question.

"I will pay you back," she told him firmly as they left, Max's leash tight in her hand. It kept her nails from biting into the skin of her palm.

"Why? I won't miss it. And when I face Pentecost and Hansen in the afterlife, I would like to tell them I looked after you three the best I could. It will be all they would have accepted from me."

Her sensei had always spoken of this man with such quiet respect, she remembered. And she knew he had pulled every connection he possessed tight to allow her sensei run the Resistance with as little interference as possible in its final months. His presence was easy-going and pleasant, but his will was iron-clad and undeniable.

She didn't protest when he began loading everything into his car, but only because memories of Pentecost had begun to arise within her. She was alone now--Raleigh and Chuck were almost a kilometer away and couldn't help her combat the flood of emotions bubbling up. She took deep, steadying breaths to center herself and fight against the black depression that had been weighing on her, on all of them, threatening to swallow them whole. Instead she concentrated on the rich smell of Raleigh imbedded in the wool around her, on the tiny Kaiju heads Chuck had drawn on the inside brim of his hat, and the heavy weight of Max all but sitting on her feet. That was her reality.

"Why did you come?" she asked as General Kreiger finished loading everything into the back seat. The words were hard to form but it gave her something else to focus on. "The UN made it clear what they wanted done with us."

General Kreiger didn't so much roll his eyes as exude an air of exasperated affection.

"The UN, and the parties comprising it, are made up of hundreds upon thousands of opinions and thoughts. What your Mr. Becket and Mr. Hansen experienced was a small faction of those voices."

"They sounded loud enough."

"They weren't. The world isn't out of danger just yet, Miss Mori. Many believe that, even though the Breach is closed, it can be opened again. And it's my duty to be prepared if it does. Did my plan involve you three? Yes, of course. Will it survive you leaving?" he shrugged, ushering her into the passenger seat and setting Max on her lap. "Pieces of it will. I'm nothing if not adaptable."

The ride back was short and silent, and Mako spent most of it with her face buried in Max's thick neck rolls, duty warring with intuition under her skin. She didn't raise her head when the car stilled under her, afraid that if she did she'd say something not only she, but Chuck and Raleigh, would regret.

General Kreiger's large, warm hand came to rest on the back of her neck.

"Find a home, a good home, that fits you all," he ordered softly. "Settle down. Enjoy this. Love them as much as you possibly can. Honor your fallen. And know, when you're ready for it, that there's a place with me for you and your boys. Understand me, soldier?"

Mako nodded desperately into Max's fur.

"Good. Now get going. I'm sure they're missing you."

As she climbed the stairs, Mako refused to look back, but it wasn't until she reached their apartment door that she heard a car engine kick back on. Smiling slightly, she set down her

bags to unlock the door, thoughts returning to the bitter cup of coffee she had been forced to abandon.

Oh.

Mako had to admit she approved of the sight she walked in on. Both of her boys had risen in her absence, though they hadn't gotten far. Chuck, always wide awake from the onset, had a much sleepier, less coordinated Raleigh pinned against the kitchen counter, taking his mouth in a series of deep, deliberate kisses. Raleigh murmured and sighed, but didn't fight as Chuck touched and kissed as he pleased, confident in his right to explore Raleigh at will.

And neither seemed aware of their audience. Moving the groceries inside the door, Mako realized she could have stayed right where she was and enjoyed the view if Max hadn't chosen that moment to leave her side. He barreled into Chuck's leg, determined to get attention.

"Oi, mutt. Seriously?" Chuck groaned, pulling far enough back to glare down at the bulldog happily lapping at his bare leg. Looking around, he snatched up a stray bag of dog treats on the counter and tossed a few into the living room, watching with unconcealed amusement as Max scampered away in pursuit.

"Hey you," Raleigh greeted her, his eyes half-lidded and drowsy. Mako smiled at the sight; Raleigh seemed bound and determined to catch up on all the years of insomnia he had suffered, and she found his pre-caffienated self to be absolutely adorable. Combined with Chuck, who was protective and assertive from the moment he opened his eyes in the morning, and she felt powerless to resist the driving hunger they lit in her.

Groceries could wait, she decided as she closed the door behind her.

"I told you not to go far," Chuck grouched, glaring at her half-heartedly as she came forward, shedding boots, hat, sweater, and belt along the way. Raleigh nipped the underside of his jaw with sharp teeth at the same moment Mako laid a pointed pinch to his boxer-clad ass in retaliation, causing him to jerk back and momentarily freeing Raleigh. She quickly weaseled in behind him, hopping the counter and settling her legs around the older Ranger as Chuck swooped back in to reassert himself. Content with her new position, she rested her forehead on Raleigh's spine and wound her arms around his broad shoulders, hands idly resting on Chuck's bare chest. Metal knocked against her fingers as Chuck leaned back in to capture Raleigh's mouth, and she deliberately threaded the chain of his dog tags through them.

"We needed sugar," she said lightly, tugging. Chuck's only response was to squeeze the hand he had arranged on her torso, a reaffirmation of her presence with them even as Raleigh did the same where his palm rested on her thigh. She pressed a kiss into the skin right above the collar of Raleigh's sleep shirt, and gave another tug to the chain around Chuck's neck in response.

Mako wasn't sure how she felt about Raleigh's shirt. She knew he was self-conscious about the burns and scars the circuitry suit had left on his body after Knifehead, and as a result was over-dressed for the occasion in a threadbare tee and long sleep pants. Chuck, on the other hand, was supremely confident in his body and was giving her a lovely show of muscles,

tight boxers, and bare skin. For a brief moment, their eyes met over Raleigh's shoulder, and a decision was made.

As they hustled each other toward the bedroom, Mako decided not to tell them about the General and his offer until later, when Raleigh was made more awake by coffee and Chuck made more agreeable by sex. They would both be elated by the news that they could stay in Sydney though, and she looked forward to their joy.

She spared a final thought for her coffee, probably stone cold on the counter where she had left it, before falling into bed with the very warm, very welcoming bodies of her boys twined around her.

They could not live in solitude and isolation forever, she knew. Eventually, the real world would beat down their door whether they allowed it or not. But they still had time, to recover, to explore, to simply be, before any of that.

She didn't plan to waste a moment of it.

End Notes

*fubar or FUBAR- military term, stands for Fucked Up Beyond All Repair
(Recognition/Relief/Redemption)

The movie Raleigh is watching out of Mako's collection is "House", made in 1977 and directed by Nobuhiko Obayashi. It is by far one of the weirdest movies I've ever seen, and Raleigh agrees with me. Here's a link to the trailer: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WQ_Yo06kIIA

Songs:

Mako mentioned having Shibuya-kei Pop on her mp3 player in the novelization, which was partially influenced by 1960's pop music. Hence, the Beatles crossed over into her playlist as well.

Aria Mitsuki's "Yellow Submarine", which I can promise you Mako subjected the boys to: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dn5bBjL_q5Y

And Chuck created himself a playlist on my iPod. This is part of it.

The song Chuck played when they Drifted was "Lay it Down" by The Rubens. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eKrVHMTcEuc>

The song Chuck and Mako are listening to while packing is "Get Ready To Die" by Magic Dirt. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mfYki9ddI9Q>

The song Chuck played in the living room while fixing the mobiles is "Fight to Win" by Goodie Mob. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iKH4hJWlMaY>

I do apologize if Chuck's Aussie sounds tainted with American. While the internet can teach me lots of things, it cannot make me proficient in an entire cultural dialect.

Feedback is greatly appreciated, especially on their personalities :) Enjoy!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!