Crash Landers

by carafin

Summary

In which Tsukishima Kei, J-tech mechanic extraordinaire, tries to stop an infuriatingly stubborn Kageyama Tobio from piloting his Jaeger solo. Pacific Rim AU.

“I’m not doing this,” Kageyama snaps, making a beeline for the exit, only to be manually dragged back onto the bed.

“Pilot induction program,” Tsukishima announces, and Kageyama splutters. (It is not one of his prouder moments.) “Now sit down and listen.”

“I’ve been piloting for four years,” Kageyama retorts, feeling personally attacked in spite of himself.

“Which is why this is long overdue,” Tsukishima says, coolly. “Now, pay attention to point number one on the screen. Did you know that, even after controlling for confounding variables, the odds ratio of mortality associated with piloting solo is-”

Notes

Translation into Русский available.

1. firstly!! i would like to clarify that this was a SASO BR 1 fill that spiralled violently out of control; unfortunately, i misread the prompt horribly, which completely distorted the gist of the original prompt. i also only realised my mistake 1.8k words into the fic... so... my deepest
It’s 5 AM on a Thursday morning when Kageyama is awakened by a series of furious tapping on his door, followed by the sound of something crashing, and -

"Listen up, you crazy lunatic," announces the tall, blonde-haired stranger looming at his doorway, impervious as to 1. Kageyama's withering glare, 2. the fact that it is 5 AM in the morning, 3. the fact that Kageyama is wearing nothing but boxers, and 4. any concept of basic human decency and personal space. "I heard the higher ups cleared your request to pilot my jaeger alone."

Kageyama barely has the time to interject with the half-choked sound of an enraged animal before the stranger continues on, in his infuriatingly obnoxious tone, "While I don't particularly care about whether your brain turns into soup, I'll have you know that Delta Lux was built to withstand five point three billion volts of electrical energy, three hundred and twenty-two tonnes of Kaiju waste, but not sheer human idiocy."

It takes a while for Kageyama's brain to process the crazy asshole's soliloquy and the accompanying insult, in no small part because the speech, while impassioned in content, was delivered via a quiet, deadpan monotone.

"Who are - why is - fucking 5 AM," is all that Kageyama manages. He winces.

"Tsukishima kei, because I built Delta Lux, and a good morning to you too," the stranger says, each syllable slow and deliberate and positively oozing vitriol, before breaking into a particularly sadistic grin. When he leaves the room the door slams behind him.

Kageyama spends the rest of the morning in a particularly livid mood, but promptly writes off the incident from his mind by noon. The Tsukishima guy’s probably another crazy weirdo, which is no anomaly because Shatterdome's teeming with them; living in a confined environment, and the incredible pressure of being on constant alert, will do that to anyone, even those in possession of any reasonable degree of coping skills. Not that Kageyama's being a hypocrite about it; if someone calls him bonkers - well, he's never pretended to be anything else.
(He really should've known better than to just write the incident off, though; crazy lunatics are nothing if not perversely obstinate. That’s how he’d gotten the clearance from the higher ups to do solo piloting to begin with, by refusing to step foot into a jaeger so long as it meant working with anyone else.)

(That, and the fact that Kageyama Tobio is the most promising pilot Shatterdome’s seen in five years, and also because the one person he used to be drift compatible with is now gloriously and irrevocably dead. Not that Kageyama blames himself for it, or anything. No, these things happen to the best of them. Every night Kageyama sits in his room, smokes cigarettes after cigarettes, and his hands shake but his eyes do not water.)

The next day, this time at 3 AM in the morning, Kageyama is awakened yet again by the door being flung open unceremoniously.

This time without even knocking. Just how low can this Tsukishima guy sink?

Kageyama starts to splutter indignantly ("but I installed a lock last night!"), to which Tsukishima just looks at him pityingly with a glance that clearly states “a contraption of that calibre wouldn’t be able to stop a cognitively challenged three-year-old toddler, to say nothing of the accomplished technician that I am.”

Before Kageyama has the time to grab the nearest alarm clock and smash it into Tsukishima’s damn face, however, his finds his senses assaulted by a powerpoint slide being projected onto the wall, titled, Why You Should Not Pilot Solo.

Upon closer inspection, Tsukishima seems to be holding a projector in his hands. It takes Kageyama a few moments to suspend his disbelief because, firstly, do these things still exist?

“I’m not doing this,” Kageyama snaps, making a beeline for the exit, only to be manually dragged back onto the bed.

“Pilot induction program,” Tsukishima announces, and Kageyama splutters. (It is not one of his prouder moments.) “Now sit down and listen.”

“I’ve been piloting for four years,” Kageyama retorts, feeling personally attacked in spite of himself.

“Which is why this is long overdue,” Tsukishima says, coolly. “Now, pay attention to point number one on the screen. Did you know that, even after controlling for confounding variables, the odds ratio of mortality associated with piloting solo is - ”

“What is wrong with you!”

“I’d leave all questions until the Q&A section after the presentation,” Tsukishima informs him loftily. “Unless you’re interrupting because you can’t understand the technical terms, in which case I still do not care. Moving on -”

This cannot be happening.
Fifty five minutes and seventy convoluted slides later, Tsukishima turns off the projector, switches the lights back on, and throws Kageyama a long, withering glance that somehow manages to convey the very specific message of “if Delta Lux gets destroyed because you died while piloting it, it will be entirely your fault, and I will spit on your grave”.

(By now, Kageyama is starting to suspect that Tsukishima’s entire repertoire of expressions can be divided cleanly to either ‘intensely dispassionate’ or ‘oddly specific derisiveness’, with nothing in between.)

Tsukishima then stalks out of the room without a single word. So much for the Q&A section.

Because Kageyama is one more sleep deprived night from being driven well past the point of irreversible insanity, he feels approximately zero remorse in storming into the J-tech headquarters the following day and demanding for directions to Tsukishima’s desk from the first person he sees.

“Tsukishima’s office is on the right, two aisles down,” says the stricken looking boy at the front desk.

So the asshole’s bigshot enough to get an office to himself. Whatever, Kageyama doesn’t care. Anyway, the lesser the audience when he beats the guy into a pulp, the better. He storms down the aisle purposefully and flings the door open.

“Stop breaking into my room every morning, you sick lunatic,” Kageyama begins, brimming with indignant rage, only to realise that he is speaking to an empty room.

Or rather, an uninhabited room. To call the place empty would be a far stretch of the imagination; for someone whose entire persona exudes stick-up-his-ass, Tsukishima’s office is surprisingly messy. There are random jaeger models littered on the floor, volumes and volumes of papers weighted down by an equally alarming number of books, and post-it notes covering almost every inch of wall space possible. The only desk in the room has been delegated to a sad corner, although Kageyama cannot reliably tell if it is indeed a desk or a block of wood that has been scribbled on and covered by a stack of blueprints that probably weighed more than it.

Kageyama is about to leave the room when he catches sight of a photo pinned onto the wall, and his heart stops cold.

It’s Kindaichi.

Or rather, it’s a piece of paper with Kindaichi’s mugshot stuck onto it, along with a photo of the jaeger he’d been piloting when he died. Underneath it are paragraphs after paragraphs of furious scribbles:

>ejection pod JAMMED: backup energy for future models??? alt energ sources? discuss w Y
^date engine model -> DO NOT SACRIFICE STABILITY FOR PROPULSION/SPEED
recalculate/redesign - KIV discuss next meeting
??funding??
KIV - change contractors?? SM
wing material
carbon fiber - durability??
SM contact - LM
That’s when Kageyama realises that the entire wall has been covered with these papers: photos of jaeger pilots who’d died in the line of duty, complete with painstakingly tedious analyses of every possible flaw pertaining to the jaegers they’d flown, and methods for improvement. *Jaegers that Tsukishima had helped to build*. Pages after pages of them, tacked on with a dizzying amount of post-its and increasingly desperate scribbles.

Whatever goes through Tsukishima’s mind when he looks up from his work and sees these reminders on his walls, day after day?

When Tsukishima stormed into his room the other day, said things like, “Delta Lux was built to withstand five point three billion volts of electrical energy”, it wasn’t because he was trying to show off. It’s a startling realisation, Kageyama thinks, not least because this is a very different side to the impervious man who’d rattled off statistics and numbers in that oddly detached tone, just hours ago, as if he were reciting a sales pitch to a blank wall.

It’s a startling realisation, to realise that anyone cares for you at all.

Driven by two-parts curiosity and one-part something he can’t quite name, Kageyama Tobio slips into the HR office later that day, and discovers a few things about Tsukishima Kei:

1. Tsukishima Kei is the youngest jaeger engineer to ever join Shatterdome, but he has spearheaded more than six major projects in an equal number of years.
2. Tsukishima Kei specialises in making jaegers that feature heavily in defense, especially against Kaiju Blue. Delta Lux, his newest creation, has an additional novel function of detoxifying Kaiju waste.
3. Before he became a technician, Tsukishima Kei had trained to become a pilot for a year.
4. Tsukishima Kei’s brother, Akiteru, used to be a jaeger pilot. He died in battle six years ago.

When Kageyama drops by Tsukishima’s office in the evening, he finds Tsukishima glaring pointedly at a life sized blueprint of what looks like a design of the jaeger’s driver seat, with a sort of single minded ferocity that would likely induce a secondhand headache in Kageyama if he stared for ten more seconds.

“I - I went back to Ops,” Kageyama blurts out, and is promptly awarded with the rare (and oddly satisfying) sight of Tsukishima startling before he whips his head around and *stares*. “Told them I changed my mind. They’re gonna start finding drift compatible partners for me starting tomorrow.”

Tsukishima looks at him for a long, unnerving moment, his face impassive.

“Good for you,” he finally says, as if this isn’t the intended outcome he’d spent two days tormenting Kageyama for. He turns back and continues to glare determinedly at the blueprint without another word. Kageyama almost goes up to shake him and maybe yell really loudly, or something, but decides to exercise extreme self-restraint and keep his mouth shut instead.

There’s a few more seconds of radio silence, and then -

“You know, if you could adjust the - the design of the seat to allow it to withstand the pressure during acceleration and deceleration, it would help a lot. Not so much for the impact when we launch
but more like - when we exchange blows with the Kaiju and the impact sends us crashing into things, especially in cities or mountainous terrains - ”

Tsukishima turns to stare at Kageyama again, but this time his gaze has sharpened with renewed interest.

“Anyway, I’m just gonna - get going now,” Kageyama continues, hastily, as he inches towards the door. “Just don’t come barging into my room again tonight -”

“No,” Tsukishima says just as Kageyama is almost out the door, causing him to almost reel back in surprise. “Tell me more.”

Kageyama blinks. "You mean tell you more about the design?"

"No, I meant tell me more about your horoscope," Tsukishima snaps. Jerk.

Kageyama scowls. “I mean, it’s like when you’re turning and the jaeger goes ZNNNG and then you’re like BAAAM and -”

“Are those even human words?” Tsukishima interjects, looking two parts aghast and one small, tiny part almost amused. Kageyama is beginning to realise that Tsukishima is, in fact, capable of conveying expressions other than complete apathy and/ or derision.

“I’m trying to be realistic,” Kageyama retorts, sounding a lot more annoyed than he actually is. “What, do you need me to do it in a powerpoint?”

It earns him an unexpected smirk from Tsukishima. He's wildcard, this Tsukishima guy. “You know, that would be great.”

It’s going to be another long night, but this time Kageyama thinks that he doesn’t actually mind.

(Sometimes Kageyama catches Tsukishima staring at the rows of photos on the wall, an unreadable expression crossing his face; and then Tsukishima will notice Kageyama staring, and hastily look away. Kageyama doesn't say anything, doesn't have anything to say, but the knowledge settles, quietly, like a deep layer of dust on his heart.)

It takes them five months to find Kageyama a drift compatible partner. Hinata Shouyou’s a wild, inconsistent thing, runs on too much pure instinct and too little restraint; drifting with him is like wielding a razor thin blade without a hilt. Kageyama, on the other hand, has precision down to a fine art. It is a recipe for an unthinkably disastrous outcome, and they really shouldn’t work out but they do.

Above and beyond all else, however, Hinata is malleable. Kageyama has witnessed pilots bending and breaking under the sheer pressure of the battlefield, even during simulations and before stepping into an actual jaeger; Hinata might bend, but no matter how despairing the circumstance he will always remain forgeable. In their field there are few qualities more important than resilience.

“We’re gonna be kept off duty for a while,” Kageyama tells Tsukishima the night after his first
successful drift with Hinata. They’re lounging in Tsukishima’s office (when did this become
routine?), although it’s not so much lounging as it is perched precariously amongst haphazard
islands of blueprints and engine models. “Hinata’s gonna need six months’ worth of intensive
training, and then we’re gonna pilot Delta Lux.”

Tsukishima snorts, and doesn’t look up from the stack of notebooks he’s scribbling furiously into.
“He can wait that long?”

“He’s busy being ecstatic over the fact that he’s found someone drift compatible,” Kageyama
acknowledges begrudgingly, and Tsukishima lets out something between an amused snort and a
dismissive tch before diverting his complete attention to his notebook.

Kageyama’s not jealous of a few pieces of paper, don’t be ridiculous.

“What about you? Are you glad?” Kageyama asks, not sure as to why he’s asking, but does so
anyway out of sheer curiosity. “That I found someone drift compatible, I mean.”

This time Tsukishima doesn’t turn to face him, but the hand holding onto the pencil hovers,
momentarily, in mid-air. “Don’t ask ridiculous questions,” is the reply. “You were gonna have to
find a co-pilot eventually.”

A pause, then: “We’ve finalised the pilot seat design based on what you told me the last time. If I
harass the team frequently enough, they’ll be able to make the changes by the time you pilot the
jaeger.”

And even though it is not quite the answer he is looking for, Kageyama smiles anyway.

Kageyama doesn't know how, much less why, he ends up spending most of his free time lounging in
Tsukishima's office, but it happens anyway. Sometimes they discuss jaeger designs; other times they
engage in something that almost approximates small talk. Mostly, though, they go about their own
work in a comfortable silence. If Tsukishima was initially resistant against the idea - "stop hovering
around, you're distracting me" - his resistance against Kageyama's presence dwindles considerably
as the days go by. Kageyama even makes friends with Tsukishima's colleague, Yamaguchi, whom
Tsukishima is surprisingly tolerant (and perhaps, shockingly, even fond) of; sometimes even Hinata
joins in the fray, and Tsukishima will throw a half-hearted hissy fit about how disruptive everyone is
being, he's going to kick everyone out of the damn office, but for the most part no one takes his
threats seriously.

(One day, too tired caught up in training for his daily round of hovering around Tsukishima's office,
Kageyama returns to his dorm room way past midnight and crashes into his bed. When he wakes up
there's a large carton of milk on his dressing table, and a familiar neon green post-it note, the blue ink
smudged from coming into contact with condensation: collected this from breakfast drink BEFORE
11AM or it WILL SPOIL. Kageyama laughs in spite of himself, takes a long swig, goes back to bed,
closes his eyes, sleeps.)

Kageyama will, much later, learn to look back at these days as one would an Indian summer: fondly,
and wistfully. Always with nostalgia.
As it turns out, they end up piloting Delta Lux two full months ahead of schedule, before Hinata can complete his training program. The Kaiju’s been attacking more frequently and with greater intensity, smashing through entire cities like they were made of paper mache; the general consensus was that nobody could wait that long.

Right before he sets off, Kageyama stops by Tsukishima's office. Partly out of habit.

"I'm leaving now," he tells Tsukishima, who's perched atop a mountainous pile of blueprints, fiddling with an engine model and a particularly nasty looking screwdriver. On the surface Tsukishima looks like he's going about doing his work as per normal; yet every so often the mask will slip, and his gaze will fall, inevitably, on those photos pinned onto his wall. "Just thought I should tell you."

"See you," Tsukishima says, simply, and it is testament to how far they've come that Kageyama picks up a bestseller between those two words.

Kageyama turns to leave the room, but stops abruptly in his steps.

"You'll take them off when I come back, won't you?" Kageyama asks. "Those notes and photos of the ex-pilots on your wall."

And Tsukishima Kei, being the fucking wildcard that he is, breaks into a smile (a smile smile, not a smirk or a sneer), says, "it's a deal."

Addendum:

As promised, the photos and notes and post-its are removed five days later; the wall is empty for approximately two days, until Hinata decides to decorate it liberally with photos of the four of them.

End Notes

"There is a book
living inside your chest
with dilated instructions
on how to make a safe landing.
It was written
for crash landers.
Thank you.
I am coming home to listen."
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!