Character & Fitness
by Jocelyn

Summary

Finale of Generation K series: Our heroes take stock after Operation Pitfall, face a world who wants answers along with their own demons, and try to figure out what happens after canceling the apocalypse. Epilogue: The surviving Rangers reunite with the pair who started it all - Caitlin Lightcap and Sergio D'onofrio, and decide it's time to break their silence and tell the whole story of the Jaeger Program and Generation K.
Chapter Summary

Chapter 1: Mako and Raleigh both realize that defeating the kaiju doesn't mean defeating their memories.

Chapter Notes

*Author's Notes:* Here it is, dear readers, the final installment of *Generation K!* It's not completely drafted, but I just had to try to get it out before the whole damn thing gets jossed by *Uprising* next month! This is the grande finale of a full four years of blood, sweat, and tears, and joyous world-building, so I really hope enjoy it!

*Canon Note:* Obviously, the relationship between Jake Pentecost and Mako and Stacker doesn't follow where the movie has hinted it's going. I took it a different way, and my retcon of him into the *Generation K* verse is found in Chapters 11-12 of *Tales From The Front Lines!*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Chapter One: Bay 05**

*Hong Kong Shatterdome…*  
*Ten days after Operation Pitfall…*

Mako woke with a strangled cry, grasping for the controls to her weapon and flailing to keep the beast at bay that loomed over her, its stinking maw open wide to swallow her…

Her gaze fell on the shadows of shelves in the dim light of her quarters, the little tea set that she'd tried to match to the ones her parents had used, the sword that had belonged to her father, and reality settled back into place.

She sat up and squinted at the clock: 0300.

Before Operation Pitfall, Mako had been good at training herself back to sleep if her nightmares woke her up. Now she could tell that it wasn't going to happen. With a weary groan, she pulled herself out of bed and went to wash her face.

In the back of her mind was the faint, indescribable sensation of another mind connected to hers. How strong would the ghost drift be if she and Raleigh had had the opportunity to drift for as long as pilots like the Kaidanovskys, the Weis, and the Hansens? Experienced Rangers could figure out each other's locations, sense their moods, and even talk back and forth through the ghost drift. Mako knew she and Raleigh hadn't drifted long enough to build that yet. She wished they had.

Or did she?
She envied the Kaidanovskys and the Hansens...and she'd once envied the Weis, and Sensei and Tamsin.

Thanks to the drift with Raleigh, she now knew what it felt like to lose a partner forever. Chuck still had Herc, but after only one drift, he would never have Sensei again.

Mako shivered. Suddenly, she just wanted Raleigh. Forget the ghost drift; she needed him with her to remind her they hadn't been ripped apart. She got dressed in a rush and left her quarters.

He wasn't in his room, and at that hour of the night, she knew where he'd be when he couldn't sleep. Sure enough, she found him in the gym. He stopped his weight-lifting mid-set and turned, even though she hadn't made a sound coming in, and came to meet her. Despite how sweaty he was, she wrapped her arms around him.

For long moments, neither of them said anything. She listened to his heart beat and felt his nose in her hair. She shut her eyes and just breathed.

Safe. Together. It's over.

Except...

"I thought it would be over when we defeated them," she finally murmured aloud. I thought the nightmares would stop.

"Yeah." Raleigh must have known better, but he hadn't tried to tell her. What would the point have been?

Destroying the Breach hadn't brought back Yancy. It hadn't brought back Mako's family, or Sensei, or all the other Rangers and crew who had died. And it hadn't stopped Mako's bad dreams or let Raleigh sleep easier.

They both needed to stop this train of thought. Raleigh abandoned the weights, and they headed into the Kwoon for the world's clumsiest, most sluggish spar - they were both too tired and distracted.

After an attempted pin sent them both crashing to the floor in a tangle of arms and legs, they just lay there staring at the ceiling. They needed to give it up and try to get some sleep. Raleigh didn't want to end up back in his room alone, tossing and turning all night...but he wouldn't reach for the obvious solution. He'd never been this shy about anyone, and felt stupid for being that way about his co-pilot.

So it fell to Mako. "Stay with me."

They didn't look at each other, just kept staring at the ceiling and listening to each other breathe. "You sure?" he whispered.

She smiled. "I'm not saying we have to get naked tonight." He laughed wearily. "Just stay with me."

It would be a complete lie if either one of them claimed that the thought hadn't occurred...more than once. But Mako wasn't really thinking about love or lust, and she didn't get the feeling Raleigh was in that mood either. She just needed him with her.

They walked in unconscious sync back to Mako's room. Her bed wasn't any bigger, but her room was a little oversized to accommodate an engineer's work table. She and Sensei had privately used
it for tea when they had the chance.

Now Sensei was gone.

They squeezed onto her bed and searched for sleep. Dreams wouldn't bring either of them much peace, but the closest they could come was being here together.

Tendo was in high spirits a few days later. Alison and the baby would be on their way in a few days. Flight restrictions were finally lifting, as reality was starting to settle into the world that the Breach wasn't open anymore. There'd be no more kaiju. People could think about things like travel to be with family again.

With no more Jaegers to power, the Shatterdome energy supply could be devoted to little luxuries again...like hot water for longer than five minutes. When that cry went up, half the population of the Dome went stampeding for the showers. Everyone yelled and jostled and argued and some even pulled rank for first dibs, until Marshal Hansen jokingly threatened to shut it down if they couldn't be adults about it.

So Tendo sportingly waited his turn for the men's showers, and yelled back and forth down the hall that the guys' line was moving faster than the women's, swapping insults with the ladies. (He quit when somebody threw a wet towel at him, only to miss and hit Newt Geiszler.)

"Now this is sweet victory," he crowed, once he finally got himself under a near-scalding spray. The faucet nearest to him was already occupied by Raleigh, who'd been ahead of them in line.

A draft of chilly air kept blowing in everytime somebody opened the door, getting yells of protest from all of them, but most of the guys were considerate enough to move fast and not take more than their fair share of hot water or leave the door open any longer than necessary.

"Man, we don't even need the coolant running full blast anymore," one of the J-Techs complained. "Why the hell don't they turn it off?"

"Can't, until they figure out how to run the fans without running the a/c," said someone else.

"Figures," said Raleigh, making a face when someone opened the door again.

A gale of laughter caught their attention away from growling when the door stayed open longer than usual, and they quickly worked out way: Aleksis Kaidanovsky was not about to let a piddling little wheelchair prevent him from enjoying the spoils of victory in the hot water shower. His oversize wheelchair would rust, but he'd somehow persuaded two burly security guards to slide poles through a regular quarters chair and carry him into the damn showers!

He looked like a damn Egyptian pharaoh or something. Guys laughed, Raleigh applauded, and Tendo bellowed, "Bow low to the mighty Wazir!"

Aleksis improvised a royal wave, and everyone broke up laughing. One of the Chinese crew got a little carried away and started "fanning" him with a towel, only for Aleksis to yell, "Stop that, it's cold!"

"Eh, cold, I thought you are Russian!" the Typhoon crewman taunted, only to get a stream of Mandarin profanity that made all the other Chinese crewmen whoop in delight.

Typhoon's crewman scoffed and departed, making rude gestures at his crewmates, who were evidently declaring Aleksis the winner - then Tendo saw him go for the environmental control
switches. "Oh no!"

"You not like cold, uh?"

"Nononono!"

"AHHHHH!" Lots of very high-pitched screams followed, as the asshole flipped the water source lever back to cold and sent frigid water blasting out of all the faucets. Several people sprinted after the prankster, men leaped out of the water cursing in multiple languages, Aleksis bellowed like an angry grizzly bear, and -

Tendo caught sight of Raleigh as he scrambled out of the suddenly-freezing spray, and his heart lurched. Raleigh had stumbled against the tiled wall, but the look on his face...like after 2020, staring at something haunting and hopeless in the distance.

"Rals? Oh, shit," Tendo hissed. "Turn that off, dammit, turn it off!"

Aleksis looked back and saw the expression on Raleigh's face, and barked a command, sending several guys scrambling back to the water switches, and in a moment, the frigid torrent was gone and steam was rising from the tiles again. "Raleigh? Rals, hey, c'mon." Tendo cautiously put out a hand to his friend, and when Raleigh didn't recoil or lash out at him, he guided him back into the heat. "Easy, buddy, you're in Hong Kong, remember?"

The other guys began to swear more quietly as they worked out what was going on. A couple of them hurried over to pick up Raleigh's discarded shower kit. "Take him out," Aleksis urged. "Get him warm and call Mako."

"Right. C'mon, Rals," Tendo urged. Raleigh let himself be led, but still didn't seem to be quite aware of the present.

Typhoon's crewman watched them with a guilty face. "Sorry," he mumbled. "Sorry."

"Don't worry about it, man, you didn't know," said Tendo, as they led Raleigh into the locker room and dried him off. As they got him dressed, Mako and Sasha Kaidanovsky came barging in. Naked guys yelled protests and dove for cover; Mako absently put up a hand to block her view as she hurried to where Raleigh was sitting, but Sasha just scoffed. Not that there was much chance of Mako looking around; the minute she came through the door, she only had eyes for Raleigh.

She had a towel in her hands that was radiating heat; she must have grabbed it straight from the laundry on the way. Raleigh blinked at her as she wrapped it around him, murmuring in Japanese. He couldn't seem to concentrate. Tendo had seen that look in a lot of Rangers' eyes over the past few years (and most of the crews' eyes, for that matter), but it jolted him to see Raleigh this way again.

Maybe because my Becket boy was the first I ever saw like this. He towel-dried Raleigh's hair and got himself dressed, then helped Mako lead his friend back to quarters.

Raleigh shivered uncontrollably, and once they were back in his room, he abandoned trying to hide it, sitting with his eyes squeezed shut. Tendo wrapped an arm around his shoulders. "It's okay, Rals. It's okay."

Mako dug the thickest of Raleigh's sweaters out of his trunk, and she and Tendo wrestled him into it. Raleigh didn't complain, he was just completely out of it. Tendo decided the best thing would be to just leave them alone. "You good? Need anything?"
Wrapping her arms around Raleigh, she shook her head. "I don't think so. Thank you, Tendo."

He patted her shoulder and let himself out.

"Raleigh?" Her voice seemed far away. His face was cold. There was blood in his eyes...Raleigh squinted and rubbed them. His hand came away clean. But there was a hole the shape of his brother in his soul.

"I was cold," he tried to explain to her, but the words came out as slurred as if he was drunk.

"I know." I felt it. "I'm here." You're not alone anymore.

Raleigh lifted his head and whispered what had been in the back of his mind for...a really long time. "I shouldn't've gone. They were right. I should've stayed."

Mako pulled him into her arms. She couldn't envelop him like Yancy and Antwan or even Tendo...but he was still in her arms, and it felt just as good as when it was Yancy.

"Don't do that to yourself, Raleigh-chan. Everyone understood."

"Except Chuck."

She would have been glad to hear him slip back into irony - if it weren't for the stab of renewed grief that went through her before she could respond. Not thinking of Chuck, but rather, of Chuck's last partner. Sensei...oh, Sensei... Raleigh sensed it and winced, looking her in the face. He'd come out of his own fog of memory only to see her tumble into her own. She pressed her face into his neck; he rubbed his cheek against her hair.

"I think..." she had to pause and swallow hard. "I think now he does." Turning the subject back to people who'd been far more forgiving than Chuck for far longer (or at least recognized how little actually required forgiving), she said, "Sensei... he told your old crew to keep their distance when you arrived, unless it was necessary. He didn't want to make it harder for you than it already would be. But many of them asked about you."

Raleigh sat back and stared. "Some of them - other than Tendo? They're here?"

Mako nodded, running her fingers through his hair. "A few came with the crews." He'd calmed from the flashback, so she stood up, keeping his hand in hers. "I want to show you something." Raleigh wavered, and she said, "They'll wait until you're ready. But there's something here in Hong Kong you should see."

Curiosity won out, and Raleigh got fully dressed and let Mako lead him down the hall. To their shared relief, there were no looks from the personnel in the corridor, just relief on people's faces to see Raleigh up and about again.

There was nobody in the halls outside Bay 05. It hadn't been in use since the fall of Horizon Brave. Mako couldn't find the words to prepare Raleigh for what was inside, so she took the coward's way out and said nothing. Raleigh must have gotten the vibe from her, but it wasn't enough to prepare him for what he found when they came through the doors.

The sight still took Mako's breath too, no matter how many times she entered.

The walls of Bay 05, once lined with computer screens, readouts, and equipment, were now
covered with pictures. The tables along the walls were covered in candles and incense, tokens, even little shrines representing nearly every religion on the planet.

Anyone who knew the Jaeger Program could work out who the bay was arranged: all the memorials were grouped by the Shatterdome where the deceased pilots and crew had been assigned when they died.

"You know that early on, the memorials were in a room or a corridor in their Shatterdome," Mako explained. Raleigh nodded mutely. "As the Domes began to close, the crew who transferred brought the memorials with them to the next post. Nobody wanted to abandon them as long as there was even one Jaeger operating. So in the end, they all arrived here."

Raleigh turned, drawn to the section for the Anchorage Shatterdome like a compass needle, unerringly drawn to point north. Mako kept silent, letting him have the moment to himself, but stayed at his elbow in case he needed her.

The wall pictures reminded Mako of web diagrams. At the center was always the pictures of the pilots. Surrounding the pilots were pictures of their crew who had died in the line of duty. The photos weren't the professional, impersonal headshots that appeared on PPDC documents. Nearly all of them were candid. The image of Yancy was all too familiar from the memories Mako had seen in the drift: he was sprawled on a couch, probably in a Shatterdome rec room, looking up from his tablet with a lazy grin.

Years ago, Raleigh would have pounced on him, or at least seized the opportunity to sit on the edge of the couch and poke him in the ribs, initiated wrestling or just sprawling, depending on how recently they'd drifted. The impulse ghosted through Mako now and made her throat tighten up. She slipped an arm around his waist as he raised his hand to brush a fingertip along the image of his brother's face, careful not to smudge it.

Even through the remnants of a ghost drift lingering from what barely amounted to a day of neural handshake, Mako felt an itching under her skin, the desperate need for someone who was gone and would never come back. She could work out all too well how powerful that ache still had to be for Raleigh. She tightened her hold on him.

From Yancy, Raleigh trailed his fingertips over the thirteen images that surrounded his brother's. Mako didn't know the cause of death for all the crews, but she did know what had happened to the lost personnel of Team Gipsy. Twelve of them had died in a single command chopper crash in the aftermath of Hardship. The last, Valentina Medina, had been a spotter pilot for Team Striker, whose chopper had gone down after the defeat of Vodyanoy in 2023.

Up until 2024, when so many Jaegers had begun to fall, vehicle crashes had been the primary cause of fatalities among the personnel. Then the battles had grown more deadly, both to the pilots and their crews, and radiation had claimed hundreds by the time Sensei had initiated Operation Pitfall.

At the thought of Sensei, both of their eyes were drawn to the even larger and more diverse collection, assembled to represent Hong Kong Shatterdome. Crew from every Jaeger who'd ever served in Hong Kong were memorialized there.

Mako hadn't had the chance to put a picture of Sensei on the wall...but to her and Raleigh's shared surprise, someone had beaten her to it.

Hu Wei was there as well, among the images of Crimson Typhoon's strike troopers who'd been killed in various engagements over the years. No doubt Cheung and Jin had taken care of that. Parallel to the other pilot images was a picture of Stacker Pentecost - also not a professional
portrait. It was a rare casual picture that someone must have taken during shore leave in Hawaii. He was seated on a bench in a garden with Tamsin at his side.

Reunited.

Seeing Hu Wei's picture on Hong Kong's wall, Mako supposed that the remaining triplets had also put Sensei's picture up. Except...where would they have gotten that picture with Tamsin? Maybe Sasha and Alexis had found it.

The answer hit her in the gym that evening, seeing Chuck Hansen coming out of the locker room. He saw her watching him and waited for her in the corridor. "In the memorial bay. The picture of Marshal Pentecost and Tamsin. You put it up?"

Chuck hesitated only a second before he nodded. "It was my dad's." His chin went up a little, as if he thought Mako would be unhappy.

She certainly wasn't. "Thank you. It's a perfect picture of them."

"Yeah, he loved that one..." Chuck trailed off, as if suddenly thinking he'd spoken out of turn - which was ridiculous, because Chuck Hansen had never cared about whether it was his turn in all the time Mako had known him! He walked away quickly.

Mako almost went after him. Then she considered: in those first months, even years after Yancy was killed, Raleigh had barely been able to think of him, let alone speak of him to others without becoming completely overwhelmed. Five years and four months had eased it a little, but for Chuck, this agony was new.

Sensei hadn't been Chuck's family, but they'd drifted, sharing each other's minds and memories for hours, and the only reason Chuck hadn't died with him...it stabbed Mako again to think of it. What those memories had to be doing to Chuck now...the fact that he'd only drifted with Sensei once might mean the pain was less...but Mako doubted it.

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

Coming Soon: Our heroes get the chance from some genuine celebrations of a hard-won war, even as the sharks are circling in the political waters surrounding the last Shatterdome in Chapter 2: Salvage!

PLEASE don't forget to review!
Salvage

Chapter Summary

Raleigh is reunited with some old friends from Class 2016-B, while Mako and Chuck discuss the best-kept secret in the Jaeger Program: Stacker Pentecost's teenaged son. And our heroes finally get the victory celebration they deserve.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Thank you all for the feedback on the first chapter! It's amazing seeing so many readers who've followed this story for the past FOUR YEARS. (I never planned on this series lasting for four years.) As a reminder, a guide to the original characters can be found at the bottom of the chapter, though anyone who's read the previous fics will recognize most of them from *Aurora Borealis* and *Aurora Australis*. Translations from Mandarin are at the end of the chapter.

Canon Note: As a reminder, the relationship between Jake Pentecost and Mako and Stacker doesn't follow where the movie has hinted it's going. I took it a different way, and my retcon of him into the Generation K verse is found in Chapters 11-12 of *Tales From The Front Lines*!

See the end of the chapter for more **notes**

Chapter Two: Salvage

A few days later, the salvage crews brought Crimson Typhoon back to the Shatterdome. Cheung and Jin didn't come out to watch, and Raleigh didn't blame them.

Typhoon was in relatively good shape, which was the reason the crews concentrated on him. But seeing the mangled conn-pod and knowing what had happened inside...Raleigh didn't want to think about it for too long, and knew it had to be ten times worse for Cheung and Jin.

Raleigh left the bay and found the brothers in the officers' lounge, surrounded by a group of their crew. There wasn't anything he could think of to say, so he just went to sit down next to them. The crew moved aside to make a place on the couch for Raleigh next to Jin. Raleigh was surprised, but decided it'd be rude to turn down the honor. So he sat, a few inches separate from the pair. The brothers were pressed into each other's sides like Raleigh'd once been with Yancy, the way he now sat with Mako.

They only looked at him for a few seconds before looking down again. "We should see him," murmured Jin. "It's not right to abandon him. Hu wouldn't like that."

Raleigh dared to say, "Hu'd understand that you need to wait awhile. Typhoon's not going anywhere now." Seeing Gipsy here had been hard enough even with all evidence of damage by
Knifehead gone. Typhoon's scars from Otachi were still all too evident, only weeks after Hu Wei had died in that battle.

There wasn't much else to say. Mako came in a few moments later and lightly shoved Raleigh back into his seat when he tried to get up and give his spot to her. Instead, she perched on the arm rest, leaning over his shoulders with her chin on his head and an arm draped down his chest.

"The inquiries from the United Nations have started," said Cheung. "Who is to blame? Who is responsible? Who is in charge of Jaeger tech?"

Mako trembled against Raleigh's back. He reached up and squeezed her hand. *They'll blame Sensei.* That might have been his memories blended with hers, or maybe he really could still hear her that clearly through the ghost drift. Marshal Pentecost would be an all too easy target for cowardly bureaucrats who now needed to explain to their governments and their people how the Jaeger Program had succeeded with almost no official support.

"Your President wants the weapons," said Jin.

Raleigh stiffened. Then he sighed. Raleigh and the other workers hadn't paid much attention to politics, but Jerald Lunk had been a big supporter of the Wall and "America Protects Americans" and "make America safe again," had been his primary platform during the 2024 presidential campaign, and even showed up to some of the Wall projects, grandstanding that this was the way to handle the kaiju. He'd called the wall workers heroes and saviors - and promptly signed a bill within six weeks of taking office that erased the last few remaining salary protections and safety regulations, leaving Raleigh and the rest working for nothing but rations.

Of course, the posturing bastard would be desperately looking for ways to cover his ass now that the Australian Wall had fallen and the Breach closed by Jaegers.

Then again, what business did Raleigh Becket have complaining about elected officials? He hadn't voted since 2019.

*Just like with everything else, I checked out, and other people paid the price.*

Mako's grip tightened on his hand. Yeah, it didn't do any good thinking this way. What was done was done.

"Marshal Hansen and Sasha Kaidanovsky are responding to the demands on behalf of us all," said Mako. "They're more than capable of handling it." She didn't give voice to the twinge of anxiety and sorrow that reminded Raleigh through the ghost drift of how certain she'd been that Sensei could have handled it.

But one of Typhoon's crew shot Raleigh a reluctant look. "That will not be good enough for the Americans. They will want to hear the word of an American."

Mako glared, and Raleigh nudged her. *Don't kill the messenger. Although...God, debriefing was bad enough.*

Explaining to the Shatterdome engagement investigators what had happened down there, had been hard enough. The events that led up to the loss of Striker and Marshal Pentecost, the last, desperate choice to take Gipsy into the breach...to say nothing of what Raleigh had seen and felt as Mako's consciousness had left the drift and he'd been falling alone...alone...reactor meltdown...

"Raleigh?"
His vision blurred, then focused again. Cheung was sitting up, looking past Jin at Raleigh in concern. What was wrong with Cheung’s...right. His arm. Raleigh shook his head and muttered, "Sorry. Got dizzy." Bullshit. Mako knew he was lying, and maybe they did too...triplets? Were they still the Wei triplets? What'd you call brothers who'd lost one?

What's it mean that I still wake up in the night looking for Yancy? I had a brother but I don't have a brother anymore, right? Or do I?

He just sat there, looking at nothing, trying to sift through the fractured past and present and figure out which was which without anybody realizing he couldn't remember. People talked around him. He didn't think they were talking to him, and he couldn't have answered if he'd wanted to.

Then someone came into the lounge. Raleigh saw her face, and... it was as if the fragments were paper, and they'd all been set on fire, dancing away from him in a whoosh like a torn newspaper he and Yance had tossed over a campfire to watch the embers fly, like little phoenix butterflies...

It was Hien Nguyen. Team Gipsy, Personnel Coordinator of Strike Troop Whiskey Alpha. She'd been there, she'd been part of Class 2016-B. She'd worn Gipsy's uniform, she'd worn a slinky green dress at the crew dance parties, she'd worn a string bikini in the Icebox Challenge polar bear plunge...

...she'd scowled when something made her mad...she'd laughed when Christian Warner and Tendo started punning...but she'd been so quick-thinking and calm during engagements...and she'd...she'd cried, when...

...she'd been crying hard and trying to hide it, sitting next to Raleigh's bed in a hazy, blurry room...then. Last time Raleigh had seen her was...he couldn't remember. All he could remember was that she'd been crying.

In front of him, like the middle of a kaleidoscope, she'd frozen in place, eyes darting from Raleigh to Yance - no, behind Raleigh wasn't Yancy, it was...Mako.

Raleigh turned his face sluggishly to look to the side, then up, and through the ghost drift, he reached through the fog until he found her. She was next to him suddenly, holding him, one hand on his cheek. "Look at me. Raleigh-chan, you can do it. It's August, 2025. The Breach is closed."

People murmured in the background.

"Duìbùqǐ! Wǒ bù zhīdào tā zài zhèlǐ!" she blurted.

"Méiguānxì, Hien, méiguānxì," someone answered.

Hien.

How could Hien be here but also Mako? Hien was...before. Mako was after.

Mako whispered in Japanese. "I told you, you have friends here from before, like Tendo. Hien works in Hong Kong now. She joined Striker Eureka's team."

Striker Eureka? Raleigh looked at Hien, who hadn't moved. She'd never looked at him like this before, even...then. With Mako whispering in his ear, Raleigh focused on Hien's uniform, the insignia of Striker Eureka, on the room around them, Hong Kong, not Anchorage, and gradually pulled reality and the present back together.

His voice was raspy when he tried to make himself talk. "Hey."
Hien opened her mouth, but nothing came out. Maybe Raleigh wasn't the only one having trouble hanging onto...everything. His limbs ran away from him then, and he scrambled off the couch to stand up and face her, and Hien reached out and caught his shoulder, staring at him as if she wasn't quite sure he was real.

"Hey," she croaked and tried to smile. "I missed you." Her face shook and she hurriedly looked down.

Raleigh cautiously pulled her toward him until she was hiding her face in his chest. _She's spent five years, four months wondering if I was dead_, he realized. How shitty had he been, acting like he was the only person in the world who'd lost Yancy?

Mako rose and put a hand on his back. _Stop it_. She didn't have to say it, and maybe she wasn't even thinking it. "There are a few more of your old friends here," she said gently. "We should call them."

_Yeah. It's time._ "Okay."

One of the triplets spoke up behind them. "You had friends who were part of Typhoon's crew. They waited to see you." Raleigh turned around in surprise, and Jin smiled. "Bao and Shan. You were together in the Jaeger Academy."

"Yeah," Raleigh murmured. He hadn't seen those guys since they failed the second cut back in 2016, but they'd kept in touch, via email and vidcomm, up until Yancy died.

Hien let go of him and stepped back, breathing heavy like she was still getting herself under control. "I'll page them. We...didn't want to make things harder, when you got back, but we were all thinking about you."

"Do you want us to go?" Cheung offered.

"No!" Raleigh exclaimed - in chorus with Mako and Hien. "I mean, unless you want to." He sure as hell wasn't going to ask the Weis and their crew to vacate their own fucking officers' lounge. The brothers looked at each other, then leaned back in unison, and the rest of their crew settled in. Incredibly, Raleigh felt a smile tug at his mouth. He vaguely remembered the triplets having a reputation, back in the day, for being wheelers and dealers in Corps gossip - but only on subjects outside their own Dome.

_Some things are like muscle memory, no matter how bad things get._

Within five minutes, nearly a dozen familiar faces arrived in the officers' lounge with Tendo, and Raleigh felt overwhelmed again. After Team Gipsy had broken apart, he learned, the crew had had the choice to either resign or transfer to a new post. A few had gone much in the way Raleigh had, too heartsick to be near a Shatterdome and all its memories. But others had put in for transfers, and gradually, a few J-Techs, strike troopers, and other personnel had wound up in Hong Kong for the last stand.

Among them, Chloe and Christian Warner. Seeing them again hit Raleigh the hardest, and it was a long few minutes before he could talk. For that first meeting, nobody from the former Team Gipsy really managed to come up with much to say. Christian just cried while he and his sister sandwiched Raleigh between them, and Raleigh kept his eyes shut so he wouldn't have to look at anyone.

_After Whiskey Gamma went down, we were suiting up...I saw you cry then too. Then I cried, then_
It was hard not to chase the rabbit right there and drift off into memories.

The funny thing was, though, every time Raleigh said he was sorry, all his former crew and classmates said the same thing: "Don't be. It's okay."

"We understood, kiddo. Everybody understood."

Once the initial high emotions of the reunion had calmed down, Mako left Raleigh alone with his friends and went for a walk outside. Now that Typhoon had been moved into the bays, Scramble Alley was empty again...of Jaegers, anyway.

When she spotted Chuck walking Max along the trampled grass at the edge of the pavement, she waited for him.

Chuck didn't make eye contact with her much anymore. This wasn't to say that he seemed sad or intimidated - perish the thought. He held his head as high as he ever had before Operation Pitfall, but now he seemed...distracted. Or even when he was paying attention, he seemed to look past people, focusing not just on what they were saying but on the implications of it.

Sensei used to do that. Sensei had only made lingering eye contact on a regular basis with a few people. Mako had been one, Tamsin another. Mako had once asked Tamsin about it, and she'd chuckled. "Men deal with things in different ways than women, especially commanders like him. You won't tell, and even if you did, hardly anyone would believe you, but your Sensei's shy, my love. Being formal and strict is a way to hide it."

Mako hadn't believed her at first. She'd never mustered the courage to ask Sensei herself - that was one of the few instances where she'd been unable to do it. But she had come to notice that Sensei didn't socialize with many people, apart from Tamsin and a few of the Mark-1 and Mark-2 pilots. Even then, he tended to be rather formal. He rarely laughed unless he was alone with Mako or Tamsin.

She'd wondered if that should make her sad or not. Mako knew herself to be a little shy. It had gotten better as she grew older and adjusted to life after Onibaba, and that had been good because she'd been terribly lonely. But even some of her friends had been more solitary, reminding her of Sensei, and had insisted that they liked it that way. Introverts versus extroverts.

Watching Chuck approach, his injuries mostly healed but with his gait and bearing just a little different - and familiar at the same time - Mako was struck for the first time in the years she'd known him to wonder if Chuck had always been shy.

Men deal with things in different ways than women. Being formal and strict is a way to hide it.

Being brusque and aggressive could hide things too.

Now she got the sense that Chuck was mustering towards a question of his own, but he wasn't falling back on his old blunt, dismissive manner towards difficult subjects. So she waited.

Finally, he said, "I don't remember noticing during the drift...but there's a boy." Mako couldn't help the way she stiffened, and Chuck looked her in the eye. "I see him now, in drift memories. It's gotta be his."

"What do you see?" she breathed.
Chuck's gaze slid into the distance. "Just his face. Sometimes it's like pictures. He's a kid, young kid. Last I remember of him, he's still young. He saw him grow up... from a long way away. Who is it?"

"You don't know?"

"I don't... no."

Somehow, Mako was certain Chuck was lying. Why he'd lie about that, she couldn't say, but it didn't matter enough to press him. So she told him the truth. "Jacob. Jake. He's sixteen. He lived with his grandparents in London most of his life. My little brother." Sensei's son. She should've finished with that, but it caught in her throat. She was ashamed of that.

Max whined, and Mako and Chuck knelt automatically to scratch him. "I didn't know," he murmured. He looked at her. "Nobody knew, did they?"

"Not many people."

"Not even my dad, until he saw it in my ghost drift."

Mako shook her head. She was a little surprised that Sensei hadn't even told Herc, but of course, Herc would know now through Chuck. "He never told anyone he didn't have to, just as he did with me. Your father never shared a posting with Sens - with Marshal Pentecost. So it never came up."

"Where is he now? Where's he been?"

"With his grandparents." Mako tried to keep the contempt out of her voice. Sensei's relationship with Jake's maternal grandparents had been chilly at best, and tensions had exploded when Jake was fourteen and truly recognized how hard they were working to drive a wedge between Jake and his father.

Jake had chosen to believe in his father. Mako had privately compared Jake's faith in Sensei with Chuck's legendary animus for Herc on many occasions. Now she wondered if she'd been unfair.

In any case, "Jake emailed me the day after we returned from Pitfall. He's started the process of being emancipated. When it's done, he's coming here." She watched Chuck carefully, but to her surprise, Chuck betrayed no reaction.

The crews of Jaegers, current and former, gradually calmed down from the day's distresses, and when Herc arrived in the officer's lounge, it looked like old times. Cheung was playing table tennis against Tendo, and despite Cheung being off-balance due to his recently-lost arm, they were tied. Raleigh and the Kaidanovskys were engaged in a heated debate about regional rule variations in hockey - at least, Herc was pretty sure that's what they were talking about, because they were all speaking French.

Mako had managed to commandeer the Kaidanovskys' boom box to play J-pop instead of the usual Ukrainian hard house, and she was dancing with Christian Warner and a clutch of other crew. Bao Wang and Shan Thou from Team Typhoon were building a robot of some kind with a lot of obscene commentary from the other J-Techs - and Chuck, who was wrangling Max to stop him from starting the robot war early.

Herc waved down the few personnel who started to stand to attention and wove through the various conversations to the Kaidanovskys. "You know that crate of liquor you said you brought to celebrate? I think now's the time to break it out."
Aleksis and Sasha blinked, then grinned, and Sasha hopped out of her chair. "Ahhh, we almost forgot. You, Becket, with me. Stay, Sasha. Keep Marshal company." Raleigh obediently trotted out the door after her.

Within a few minutes, Mako was glancing around in concern, but Herc shook his head at her. "He's fine; he'll be back in a minute."

Upon Sasha and Raleigh's return, curious murmurs at the crate they carried gave way to whoops and shrieks of joy and a stampede of humanity to grab the best bottles. Before long, the party was spilling out into the mess hall and surrounding corridors.

The J-pop from the Kaidanovskys' boom box got louder (and somehow, Mako succeeded in wheedling them not to change it despite the fact that the whole crowd now owed the Kaidanovskys a favor for the booze). Somebody else brought another set of speakers into the mess hall, and a more universally-appreciated mix of J-pop, K-pop, American rock, and various Eurosong contestants soon blared through the Shatterdome.

Most of the pilots were still on medication for one injury or another and probably should not have been indulging in alcohol - ah, fuck it. Herc grabbed a bottle of excellent stout that had been contributed from someone else's stash, and settled himself with the crowd that had turned a football match on the television.

Chuck remained with the robot builders, and soon their creation went skittering across the floor squeaking like a Star Wars droid, and crew threw bottlecaps and wine corks into the basket it carried. (Chuck and Kyrra Taior were distracting Max with food.)

More crew retreated into the mess hall as the officers' lounge seemed to have turned into a dance club. Cheung came wheeling Jin into the mess hall at dangerously-high speed, and several of the bystanders made racecar noises.

Herc roared with laughter when some of the Russians tried (to no avail) to convince Sasha and Alekis to do the same, but they stuck to their guns, now debating something about the contents of their bottle of wine with one of the Italian crew.

*You could almost forget the last year ever happened.*

It almost felt like the last five years, four months had never happened. At least, they were further in the distance than Raleigh could remember.

He and Mako staggered off the dance floor once they knew Mako wouldn't be able to walk for a week if they kept going, and a couple of crew made room for them to collapse on the couch. Mako landed in Raleigh's lap, laughing like he'd never heard, even in the drift. The bottle of sake they'd finished between the two of them probably had something to do with it. The sake probably also had something to do the fact that neither of them could get untangled.

Not in any hurry to climb off him, Mako pulled herself up on Raleigh's shoulders and demanded, "You can fight. You can pilot. But you can't *dance*?!

Raleigh groaned in chorus with whoops of laughter from the onlookers. Christian Warner leaned over the back of the couch to pinch Raleigh's cheek. "Many have tried to get this guy some rhythm, and ain't nobody managed ever it yet!"

Former Team Gipsy personnel started chiming in with stories, and Mako remained draped across Raleigh, giggling in his ear, "Who's Nikki?"
Oh, you're going to try that, are you? "Who's Sebastian?" Raleigh whispered back.

That got them both giggling until they slid off the couch. A little sobering up was called for, so they staggered out of the lounge into the mess hall to find something non-alcoholic to drink, ignoring the ribbing. Eventually, the personnel went back to betting on Max-versus-Robot foot races, and Raleigh and Mako wound up under one of the tables to curl up, eavesdrop, - and occasionally flick stray bottlecaps at people and see who would get blamed.

"Nikki Harris tried to teach me to dance," Raleigh told her. "She was really good, but it never rubbed off on me." A pang of sadness went through him. "She was on Whiskey Gamma."

Mako crawled into his lap again, nuzzling his hair. "I remember that." She'd seen the crew of Whiskey Gamma Strike Troop in their drift; Personnel Coordinator Antwan Ferrier towering over the rest of the crew in his Gipsy Danger fisherman's cap, yelling "Muster drill, muster drill!" during deployment drills. EMT Nikki Harris dancing in her red dress or just in her crew jumpsuit. Brandon Pines, the candidate who'd failed drift compatibility but come back as a support chopper pilot. He'd flown Command Chopper Whiskey Gamma at Gipsy's side for every deployment and drill - and once over one of Romeo Blue's support crews during a prank war, while the crew pelted Team Romeo with glitter bombs and water balloons full of pink paint.

The YouTube videos of that prank war in 2018 had been so worth the demerits.

That had all ended in January 2019 with Hardship. The battle had laid waste to Concepción, Chile, ended the careers of Diablo Intercept's pilots, and nearly pushed Bruce and Trevin to the breaking point.

Just like always, the strike troop command choppers had moved in to help with the emergency relief after the kaiju was killed.

An explosion had torn one of Romeo Blue's choppers apart only a few dozen meters from where Whiskey Gamma had been hovering, waiting to land. Debris had torn through the windows and the rotors, and Whiskey Gamma had spun out of control and crashed.

All hands had been lost.

It'd been the first time Team Gipsy had lost anyone on their own team, let alone a crew of twelve that included some of Raleigh and Yancy's closest friends. Until Knifehead, those first weeks after Whiskey Gamma was lost had been the hardest of Raleigh's life.

Mako pulled him closer. "I know," she murmured. "Sebastian Rojas was an EMT too."

Raleigh winced. He'd tried not to pay too much attention during those five years and four months, but it was hard to miss that a lot of PPDC emergency personnel had died during rescue efforts in the last couple of years. Fighting to hang onto the light mood, he asked weakly, "He taught you to dance?"

"Not dance, no."

Raleigh spat out a mouthful of water. They collapsed in a pile of arms and legs on the floor, gasping with laughter, until Tendo peeked down at them. "You two better not be doing what I think you're doing under there!"

"In your dreams, Tendo," Mako replied pertly. But she had her fist tangled in the hem of Raleigh's sweater...and it'd crept lower towards the edge of his pants without her really meaning to.
At first Raleigh didn't notice, then he looked at her and found their noses practically touching, and suddenly became aware of her hand low on his back and his on her leg. Heat rushed through both of their faces…and kept on going down.

Raleigh seemed paralyzed, but she felt him tremble when her hand slid up beneath his shirt along the muscles of his back. *Tonight…it's time, say yes.*

"You sure?" he murmured.

She breathed against his neck. "Very sure." His head fell back, eyes dark and big in the dim light, staring at her, trying not to let his gaze wander all over her. She bit her lip to hold back a smirk. *Come on. My room. Now.*

With the next rush of movement above, crews exchanging places to get at food or alcohol, people coming into or off of the "dance floor" or slipping out for the bathroom, Mako tugged Raleigh after her and they slipped as discreetly as possible through the throng of personnel off into the less-crowded hallway.

It was probably too much to hope that they'd make it to quarters without somebody seeing them and figuring out what was going on – but damn it, they *almost* made it. If only Newt Geiszler hadn't been scurrying down the hall with a couple of girlfriends of his own, a half-full bottle of whiskey in his head…and the wink he shot the two of them was all too knowing. *Damn.*

The whole Shatterdome would know by morning. To hell with it.

*To Be Continued...*

Chapter End Notes

**Coming Soon:** Team Gipsy enjoys the fruits of victory. The support personnel enjoy the fruits of the will-they/won't-they betting pool. Herc begins making plans for the political onslaught of governments around the world who want their piece of the Jaeger Program in *Chapter Three: Victory Dance!*

**Translations:**

*Duìbuqǐ! Wǒ bù zhīdào tā zài zhèlǐ*—I'm sorry! I didn't know he was here!

*Méiguānxì, Hien, méiguānxì*—It's okay, Hien, it's okay.

**Original Character Guide**

**President Jerald "Jerry" Lunk:** President of the United States. Billionaire hotel mogul who ran on a campaign of "make America safe again" in 2024, proponent of the Wall, now arguing over who has the strongest Jaegers. Likes to use Twitter. No, he's not based on anyone in the real world. Seriously. No, really.

**Hien Nguyen:** Strike trooper formerly with Gipsy Danger, then transferred to Team Striker Eureka after Knifehead and Yancy's death, National Guard transplant, Vietnamese-American in her early 30s.
**Christian Warner:** drivesuit technician, African-American early 30s, classmate of Raleigh, Yancy, and Tendo's from Class 2016-B, close friend of our heroes from the beginning. Transferred to K-Watch to join his half-sister Chloe after Knifehead and Yancy's death, eventually wound up on Hong Kong's staff.

**Chloe Warner:** K-Watch officer, African-American, early 30s, classmate of Raleigh, Yancy, and Tendo's from Academy Class 2016-B. Stationed in Hawaii for most of the war, eventually wound up with the downsized K-Watch personnel in Hong Kong for Operation Pitfall. She and her half-brother drift tested, but were not drift compatible despite being very close.

**Bao Wang and Shan Thou:** J-Tech cousins from Beijing who were also in Class 2016-B. After failing the second cut at the Jaeger Academy, they returned to China to finish their tech degrees and became J-Techs for Team Crimson Typhoon. They kept in touch with their friends and classmates among the Americans over social media, and received leave in 2020 to attend Yancy's funeral in 2020.

**Nikki Harris:** EMT from Whiskey Gamma Strike Troop who had a casual relationship with Raleigh for several years before being killed in action when Whiskey Gamma Command Chopper crashed in the aftermath of Romeo Blue's battle with Hardship. Also from Class 2016-B, she failed the first cut but stayed on for rescue/recovery training.

**Antwan Ferrier:** Personnel Coordinator for Whiskey Gamma Strike Troop, also from Class 2016-B who failed the second cut drift compatibility, killed in action in the post-Hardship chopper crash, very close to Raleigh and Yancy.

**Brandon Pines:** Command Chopper pilot for Whiskey Gamma who fought in combat against Trespasser, remained with the US Air Force after failing the second cut drift compatibility, but joined the strike troopers. Close friend of Raleigh and Yancy, killed in action in the Whiskey Gamma crash.

**Sebastian Rojas:** EMT from Mako's class, 2023-A at the Jaeger Academy. Mako's first intimate partner, they tried but failed to establish drift compatibility, and Sebastian eventually chose to become a Strike Trooper and returned to his native Chile. He died of radiation exposure after Horizon Brave's destruction in Lima.
Team Gipsy enjoys the fruits of victory. The support personnel enjoy the fruits of the will-they/won't-they betting pool. Herc begins making plans for the political onslaught of governments around the world who want their piece of the Jaeger Program.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Thank you all so much for the feedback! Please keep it coming!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Three: Victory Dance

It was only after Mako unlocked her room and practically dragged Raleigh through the door that she felt him hesitating, and had to slam the brakes on her own libido. "Are you sure?" she asked, hiding the reluctance from her voice.

Raleigh gulped, stepping closer to her. This was nothing like she'd seen in his drift memories. Raleigh'd never been unsure of something like this in his adult life.

"I...yeah, I..." Raleigh sighed and closed his eyes, leaning his forehead against hers. "It's just been a long time."

Five years, four months...and change. He didn't want to mess this up. He didn't want to embarrass himself. He didn't want to fail to make it good for her... Mako groaned and slid her arms around his waist. "You won't. It'll be all right."

So she'd had something a little more frenzied in mind...since the first time she'd seen Raleigh Becket without his shirt. But that could wait.

She slipped a hand around his neck, but tugged gently, letting him choose, and she felt when he did. His lips were slow, soft, and trembling when they met hers, and he was the one who moaned when she deepened it. His hips rocked involuntarily against hers, and she pulled at him.

It was as if the drift fizzed back to life between them and she could feel it. He was nervous. It'd been a long, long time since he'd been nervous about being with a woman. She crooned, moving her lips and tongue up his jaw towards his ear. "It's all right. It's all right." Nothing he did would disappoint her. If this couldn't go slow, then they'd go again. "There's plenty of time."

"Maybe not," Raleigh groaned, but he wrapped himself around her, at last, with a little less hesitance and practically lifted her off her feet, heading for her bed.

Mako laughed and wrapped her legs around his waist. Better if their pants were off, but oh well. File that for later. Soon, but not right away. He rocked her down onto the bed, but she
stopped him before he climbed down on top of her. Shirt. Off. **Now.** She'd waited for this one since his first day in the Shatterdome, watching him through his door.

And he knew it, and maybe that bolstered his confidence. He nuzzled her as she slid her hands up from his waist, under the fabric of his shirt, dragging it with her wrists until she could pull it over his head. Feeling his soft stomach and every hard curve of muscle under her hands, she groaned and rolled him onto his back, wanting to taste them. "Mako!" Raleigh gasped. "I can't – I won't – oh God…"

He was afraid he wouldn't last. **Slow down, Mori.** She grinned, moving back up to kiss him properly (but keeping both hands on his chest and waist), letting her tongue tease him, slowly, leisurely, enjoying his hands in her hair. He wanted her shirt off, but held back. She huffed faintly and leaned back after another deep kiss, gazing at him with eyes she expected were as half-lidded with lust as his own, and pulled her shirt over her head.

His eyes got comically wide, and she grinned, coming back down to press her weight on him, and he moaned, throwing his head back while she mouthed at his neck. His hands reached around her back for the clasp of her bra. "Can I?"

She guided him there, giggling as he fumbled at it, but he figured it out and moaned deep as the fabric fell away and she shimmied it off her shoulders, leaning forward to press her chest close, invite him to put his mouth on her. His pants were already bulging under hers as she moved and dropped a line of kisses along the line of his hair.

"Mako," Raleigh breathed against her breasts. "Oh, God…I'm not gonna last…" He squirmed, anxious, and Mako shushed him.

"Then don't. I'm not in a hurry." She smoothed his hair with the back of her hand, reaching down to undo the buttons of his pants, feeling him squirm. It was cute, but she held back from giggling. He was already embarrassed that she was taking him apart so fast. "Relax," she murmured. "We'll take care of each other." *We're co-pilots. It's what we do. I'm not worried.*

"I just…." Raleigh's head jerked back as his hips jerked. Mako crooned reassurances as he groaned apologies, but he was almost there, so she slid her hand down, keeping her touches gentle and kneading through his shorts.

"It's okay. Just let me. Let go," she purred, lifting herself on one elbow to watch his face. He gave in, eyes squeezed shut as his hips jerked, and she felt him come, shuddering, under her hands. He was beautiful. She'd known that, and she kissed him deep and hard to cut off the embarrassed stammer that followed. *It's all right. It's all right. Give it time.* She didn't want him to be humiliated, not ever. He didn't need to be; she knew how long it'd been.

Sometimes there'd been girls near the work sites, looking for money or ration cards in exchange for sex. Raleigh'd taken one up on it exactly once, but he'd been miserable and embarrassed when she recognized him, so he'd rushed through it, paid her more than she originally asked for, and fled back to the Wall. Now and then after working out to near collapse, he'd huddled in any private spot he could find, him and his hand just to take the edge off. Nothing had really felt good.

He wanted to make her feel good. He wanted her like he hadn't want anyone in a long, *long* time. Five years…more than four months.

And she wasn't laughing at him. She'd never do that. She was glad to have him, and she knew why he hadn't lasted. *It's okay. We'll go again.* In the mean time, she held him, kissing him languorously, letting him feel what they'd both imagined more than once and caught each other in
the drift, smiling. *Maybe later. Maybe some day. If we all live through this.*

Well, here they were. And they had time.

His pants were clammy, so Mako slid her hands back down and helped him slide out of them, then settled herself next to him and let him help slide her out of her own. His hands at her waist, sliding down and cupping her…heat built between her legs and she clung to him, moaning. His hands, his hands felt so good. So big, so warm…

Raleigh raised his eyebrows, an offer, and she gasped, "Please…" But she caught him and kissed him before he could go down, lapping at him, the taste of him. She wanted him between her legs, but she wanted his mouth here too, never stopping. He tasted just as she'd imagined.

At last, she made herself let him go, and he rolled her onto her back, making his way down leisurely, his anxieties easing. She gasped and arched when he took her nipple into his mouth, softly, delicately, teasing her. She clutched his head and almost pulled his hair. He hummed at her and she almost spat a curse at him. *Get down there, damn it!*

For someone who'd had plenty of practice, she was losing her patience fast, but he didn't laugh until she did. No, this wasn't exactly the soul-melding love scene of some romance writer's dreams, but it didn't matter. They'd taken care of the soul-melding weeks ago. They'd manage this. They both knew beyond any shred of doubt that they wanted it.

Their legs were stubbly. Neither of them had bothered shaving since they'd been peeled out of the circuitry suits after Pitfall. Raleigh didn't seem to mind as she wrapped hers around his back and he lowered his head between her legs. Mako managed not to shriek the first time she felt his breath directly over her, his tongue sliding into her folds to her clitoris, one finger carefully moving from there down into her. She did buck, and he faltered, afraid he might hurt her, but she hissed, "*yes,*" and grabbed the sides of the mattress once his hair was out of her reach. *There, there, again. More, harder.*

*She wanted him* between her legs, all the way, but he wasn't hard enough yet. It'd wait…it'd wait…her thighs tightened around him, she keened into the back of her hand as his tongue moved, slow at first, than faster, up and down as she swelled. However long it'd been, this he remembered, from his own memories and the ones he shared with her now. His tongue and his fingers switched places; he stroked her clitoris firmly through the surrounding folds, making her throw her head back and pant. His tongue lapped against her entrance, soft at first, then at her gasping command, "*Harder – Raleigh – oh -*"

It was all she could do not to slam her crotch into his face; she clenched her teeth and clutched the mattress again, wanting something to hang onto as he found that spot and pressed hard, deep – she let out a howl, bucking wildly as he shifted to catch her hips and continued – *God*, right through the lights flashing behind her eyelids, she still felt his tongue and his fingers, that glorious pressure, driving her forward in a dive through the drift, turning it into fireworks until she lay on the shore, panting and shuddering, gasping, "*Raleigh, Raleigh…*"

*Here. Now. Fucking come back here.*

He kept one hand between her legs, stroking firmly, but he slid back over her to settle his weight and make her moan even deeper. He was very heavy, but she was more than strong enough, and the pressure was exquisite, every part of him. He stroked the muscles of his back, learning them. At some point she'd find the way to lick every damned one of them. But now she wanted his mouth on hers – he tried to wipe it clean on a corner of the sheet, but she growled at him.
"Doesn't matter. Raleigh, come here."

So he collapsed on her in a frenzied barrage of kisses, and there, yes, there, this was what she'd dreamed of, feeling him growing hard against her thigh, her hands slipping in the sweaty sheen of him, cupping his hard, firm legs, sliding up and down from his ass all the way up to his sweat-damp hair, holding him there to kiss and kiss until they were both panting and rolling their hips.

She finally paused, raising her eyebrows in invitation. Ready now? He managed a jerky nod, feeling the wetness of her entrance, and shifted, letting her hand join his between her legs and guide him – though she had to let go, because the sensation made her throw her head back in a gasping shriek. She never used to be the noisy type.

Now it was Raleigh who purred against her like a big, golden cat. "Doesn't matter." Don't be embarrassed. What was there to be shy about? They'd been naked in the drift. They'd felt each other's fantasies, seen each other with other lovers. There was no hiding any of that.

He moved slow and careful on that first entry, and he did laugh when she growled again and grabbed at his legs, trying to drag him the rest of the way in. He caught her hands, pulling them up and suckling her finger tips. "Wanna feel this," he murmured, eyes heavy lidded, pupils blown so big she couldn't see the blue of them anymore. "Wanna…hang on…just…lemme…"

"Okay." She sloppily licked at his mouth and his jaw as he tickled her wrists, until she couldn't stand it anymore and yanked his face back to hers, their teeth knocking awkwardly until they found their rhythm again.

Finally, finally, he was inside her, entirely hers, so deep…a deep, low moan rose from her throat and he sank against her neck, murmuring in Japanese. She smiled into his hair. Now, this. This was perfect. They lay there for several long seconds, soaking in it, until one or maybe both of them couldn't last any longer, and their hips began to roll together. It was slow at first, both of them humming contentedly as heat built up in her again and she felt tremors rising in him. "Faster," she purred, and he obeyed, just a little, not trying to tease her, just to let it build naturally, coaxing the small flames to a deeper fire, imagining the inferno they'd build up to.

Pace, this was pacing…their rhythm faltered each time one of them sped up, and they waited, holding it until they matched again… in and out…she gulped back a gasp of protest if he pulled back too far. No, need you here, need you inside, stay, stay… Her legs wrapped around his waist again, but this time with him entirely on top of her, and it was delicious. He slid one hand between them, playing with her breasts, and she moaned again.

He jerked to a faster rhythm, and she stayed with him, heat rising and spreading from her crotch up to her belly, her mouth hot and wet with his as their kisses grew sloppier, their movements more frantic. "God…Mako, I'm gonna…"

"C'mon," she panted – then she felt him clench, his entire body, crushing her with his arms, pumping inside her, and she let herself fall – he was still shuddering when she followed him, gasping and seeing stars, her head thrown back, her hands in his hair, gasping his name.

They floated ashore there, shuddering and melting, mouthing each other's lips and chins and jaws and neck. At last, it was Raleigh who lifted himself enough onto his elbow to look at her eyes, and she felt the little twinge of anxiety through the ghost drift. She cupped his cheek and pulled him back for a softer kiss.

Of course, he'd satisfied her. Of course, it'd been what she wanted. Of course, she wanted him to stay. Of course, nothing had changed.
But if he needed to hear her say it, then she'd say it. "Stay," she breathed, running her fingers along his cheekbone. "Always stay."

There was no letting him go. He'd been under her skin from that first day, their first match, their first drift. "You felt it! We're drift compatible."

"We're so much more than that. We always will be."

Raleigh shuddered and slid down to her side, but draped himself across her, nuzzling her neck. She returned to lazily kissing his mouth and jaw and pulled the top sheet across them both. They were too warm for anything else.

"What're you afraid of?" she whispered, feeling him cling to her from more than just satisfaction.

"Dunno," he admitted. "'s like I've just forgotten how to not be."

He was embarrassed again. She crooned against his ear. Nothing he said or did or felt around her should embarrass him. "Don't be afraid. Not with me." The Breach might be closed, but the world wasn't paradise as a result. There'd be plenty to worry about when they left this room in the morning.

But here, now, tonight, that was all far away. He could let go. So could she. There was nowhere in the world they were safer.

Money changed hands thick and fast as word spread throughout the Shatterdome long before breakfast. Tendo was practically dancing with joy, and someone got their paws on a bottle of champagne for "brunch", and everyone in the vicinity gleefully passed it around. "To the shit we all saw coming from Day One!" Newt Geiszler crowed, and even Hermann took a swig from the bottle. "Aww, even you're getting sentimental!"

"I see no reason not to celebrate young love," Hermann replied primly, getting snorts of laughter from the onlookers.

"So Newt saw 'em in the hall, but did they definitely do the deed?" demanded Christian, getting a yelp of outraged protest from his sister.

Tendo winked at him. "I bribed Peng D in J-Tech for the inside scoop – she's Mako's next door neighbor. She wouldn't give me the really good details, but half a dozen chocolate-covered cherries got confirmation. Trust me; we're not celebrating prematurely."

"Here's to Becket and Mori, joining the long, proud tradition of unrelated pilots gettin' it on!" declared Hien.

"And to future little Beckets and Moris," added Christian, getting a chorus of gasps and giggles.

Herc eyed them all when he came in to a burst of frantic shushing and snickering. "All right, what'd I miss?" He eyed the nearly-empty bottle, then his gaze wandered over the crowd, placing that most of them were either former Team Gipsy or very close to those personnel, and a sly grin crossed his face. "So?"

"Team Gipsy's initiated, sir," giggled someone.

Herc feigned disapproval as if he were Marshal Pentecost – but spoiled it by holding out his hand for the bottle. Then he hoisted it into the air to a roar of laughter and cheers and took a deep gulp
before passing it along. "Long live Team Gipsy!"

"Wooooo!"

Raleigh heard the chatter and laughter in the halls when he woke the next morning, and decided this was a day for sleeping in...possibly all day long. He smiled at Mako's mussed hair, her smudged face in the dim light, but hesitated at touching her. No nightmares now. He'd leave it that way.

A few drowsy minutes later, she woke easily. Not that he hadn't watched Mako go to sleep or wake up before, but he smiled. She usually popped back to consciousness and alertness in just a few breaths. Today she was languid, stretching like a cat. She smiled without opening her eyes. "How long have you been up?"

"Not that long; I slept good."

She laughed softly, still not opening her eyes. "I'll be smug today." Before Raleigh could do more than sputter, she pulled him in for a kiss. "You can spend the day blushing," she concluded once she let him go.

"They're gonna give us both hell," Raleigh predicted as they got dressed.

They did. Before he'd drifted with her, he'd have expected Mako to be embarrassed. Now he knew better. She might not be prone to bragging about her conquests (unlike Raleigh might have done five years, five months ago), but she'd been raised not to let others make her feel ashamed.

At least they didn't have to deal with the crews whispering about "will they/won't they" anymore.

We did, now everyone move on!

Herc was nice enough not to pull either of them in for duty – though he did wink at Mako. So they were left to their own devices – and found their way back to Mako's room early in the day to use them.

Herc left Mako and Raleigh to enjoy themselves for as long as they wanted – though he let the crews enjoy themselves at the pair's expense too. The whole Shatterdome had earned it.

Responsibilities would pull one or both of them back to command eventually, but they'd earned a good rest.

In the US, President Lunk was actually bellowing that more Jaegers should be built so that the Americans would have a fleet to wield against "terrorists."

"He is so full of shit," Tendo grumbled. "For going on five years, he was all about the fucking Wall unless there'd been a kill in the last thirty-six hours. Or when the Wall plan blocked the view from one of his hotels."

Herc lowered his voice. "Some scuttlebutt is that that's the reason China rejected a wall: that he bribed the right people to keep his Hong Kong and Shanghai buildings unobstructed."

"Dunno if it's true or not, but do not repeat that around the Weis or their crew. They'll bite your face off."
"I don't blame 'em." Herc glanced around. "I'm more worried he and the UN want to get their claws into all the remaining pilots."

Raleigh, the triplets, Mako. Chuck. All stuck in front of a sea of cameras, getting grilled by the same bastards who'd chewed Stacker up and spat him out over and over again. Not if I can prevent it.

As usual, the Kaidanovskys were a step ahead of him, and popped into his office while most personnel were still goofing off and celebrating the Team Gipsy hookup.

"We must send delegates to the U.S. The media and UN can't be allowed to dictate what happens now, let alone control the narrative of what already happened."

"Yeah, my thought exactly." Herc sat on top of his desk. He hadn't moved into Stacker's old office. He just couldn't. Still, there were plenty of vacant office spaces in a Shatterdome that'd once housed six launch bays. He'd picked the one closest to the bay where Striker had once been docked. "I need to go. I won't have the bloody brass digging their claws into our people."

"We're all under your jurisdiction now," said Sasha. "The UN accomplished that last year with the intention that Stacker Pentecost remain in complete control over the program - and a convenient scapegoat to blame for its failure. We now operate separate and apart from any nation's military."

"We need only China to retain our independence," said Alexis. "Because the Dome is here. For the chance to have Crimson Typhoon restored as the world's only Jaeger, they will accommodate us."

"While Jerald fucking Lunk stamps his little feet and pounds his little fists over in America," Herc muttered. "He's got some pull in both China and Russia through his businesses. And he wants Raleigh to appear at the White House yesterday."

"He will do what Dustin Krieger and the UN tried to do with Raleigh after Knifehead," Sasha warned. It didn't surprise Herc at all that Sasha knew about that, even though he and Stacker had kept the proposal for Raleigh's "publicity tour" as secret as they could. "Not only to Raleigh, but also to Mako, Chuck, Cheung and Jin."

"I won't let 'em," Herc breathed. It was an oath, and Sasha and Alexis knew it. "All five of those kids gave up their youth and lost family in this war. They get to have peace now."

"We will go with you to America," said Sasha. "President Lunk holds no fear for us - and our president holds some fear for him. Perhaps some of the local Dome officials will come, to represent the Chinese personnel, and persuade the politicians that the remaining pilots suffered too many injuries, too much trauma to suit their purposes."

"It'll be a circus," Herc muttered. The real problem would be convincing Chuck and Mako to stand down once the inevitable mud-slinging and scapegoating of Stacker began. Most of the politically-savvy crew had seen the beginnings of it, but once the Jaeger Program delegation came forward, Herc's kid would find out - and go ballistic.

Then there was also the matter of Stacker's other kid. Herc knew Stacker's son had been living with his grandparents in London - though he hadn't learned that until Chuck had mumbled about while half-incoherent from painkillers. All those years, and you still kept so many secrets, Stacks.

To Be Continued...
**Coming Soon:** Even as our heroes are preparing to circle the wagons against a growing political onslaught, a biological onslaught begins, forcing the Shatterdome into quarantine in *Chapter Four: Pandemic!*

PLEASE don't forget to review
Chapter Summary

Even as our heroes are preparing to circle the wagons against a growing political onslaught, a biological onslaught begins, forcing the Shatterdome into quarantine.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Thank you all so much for the feedback! Please keep it coming!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Four: Pandemic

UNITED NATIONS LAUNCHES INQUIRY INTO JAEGER PROGRAM’S FINAL MONTHS

Jaeger supporters call the investigation a blame game against heroes who saved the world that had already turned its back. US Reps and former PPDC nations argue that the Jaeger Program still commands massive resources that need to be reallocated and brought under national control.

US President Jerald Lunk Calls for Congressional Panel on Jaegers and the Breach.

"We paid more than our fair share for winning this war and now we expect compensation from the countries whose asses we saved!"


The Chinese government has refused to enforce the subpoenas delivered by multiple national governments for the surviving Rangers and leaders of the Jaeger Program, and Hong Kong Shatterdome medical staff insist that the pilots who fought in the battle of the Breach are still in recovery.

"How much are we gonna have to tell them?" Raleigh muttered, avoiding everyone's eyes during a briefing on the latest round of subpoenas. "Do they have to hear all about how brain damaged I am?"

"Not if I can prevent it," said Herc. He shot a quick glance at Chuck, but Chuck saw it and frowned.

Mako scanned the room. "What are they saying about Marshal Pentecost?"

Silence fell with nobody willing to meet her eyes. Raleigh tightened his grip on her arm. "Well?"

Sasha admitted reluctantly, "I think it was his plan that he be viewed as having gone rogue, so that..."
any questionable actions were connected to him alone rather than the program as a whole."

"Oh, fuck, no," Chuck growled before Mako had even processed it. "That's not happening. They don't get to stain him after he died for them."

"We will go to the summit in Washington," said Sasha, standing up. "Sasha and I, and Marshal Hansen. We will bring a few of the medical personnel, Dr. Geiszler and Dr. Gottlieb. There will be plenty of information for them to examine, and we will convince them that they don't need the other pilots before them in person." She looked from Mako to Chuck and back. "They will not sully his memory. We won't allow it."

The hesitation in Chuck's voice threw everyone for a loop. "I…I…Dad – I mean, Marshal, I should go with you…"

Herc stared at his son for a long moment, and finally said, "No," Chuck flinched. "The medics haven't cleared you to travel." And even if they had, I still wouldn't bring you. At least, that was what Raleigh suspected Herc was thinking.

"Your presence there would be food for the sharks," said Sasha. "You should not go."

"What do I do, then, just sit on my arse over here?" Chuck muttered.

"That's what we will all do," Jin Wei pointed out. Chuck glared at the table but didn't say anything else.

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**Leave the Rangers Alone, Man!**

*Opinion By Matthew Davis, Harvard University*

Six weeks after drift combat with injuries is next to nothing for Jaeger pilots. How sick that the US government is still treating those heroes as disposable puppets.

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**Hansen and Kaidanovskys to attend US summit, but not Becket and Mori.**

Jaeger Program medics are adamant that the three pilots the UN wants to see most – Raleigh Becket, Mako Mori, and Chuck Hansen – are not able to travel in the near future due to injuries they sustained in the Battle of the Breach.

"President Lunk actually pounded on the podium, saying that he wants Raleigh Becket in DC for the first PPDC hearings during the White House press meeting," Chloe Warner reported at breakfast.

"President Lunk can pound whatever shit he wants; I'm not going," Raleigh retorted.

Cheung and Jin smirked at each other. "China will give you amnesty, you know. Our government would love for you to refuse Lunk and stay here instead."

"There's an idea," said Tendo. "If Jerry the Orange really wants to push it, we can all apply for amnesty."

Herc wrinkled his nose at his tablet. "At this rate, he may not even get me; Hong Kong's restricting outgoing travel due to the latest flu outbreak."
"Aw, hell, another one?" Chuck demanded. "Seemed like we were on a streak of not having outbreaks for awhile."

"Because everyone was hiding underground worrying about kaiju attacks," said Newton Geiszler. "Now they're out in public and celebrating in big groups again, shopping, going to visit family – wham. Epidemics in every major population center. This is gonna get worse for awhile before it gets better."

"Ladies and gentlemen, the sunny optimism of K-Science," announced Tendo.

"What, would you rather try and get on a plane with a dozen people coughing and sneezing?"

Herc laughed. "Fair point. I won't cancel off-base passes, but use them at your peril, people, and if you develop symptoms, medical better find out."

Mako and Raleigh were in the infirmary getting Raleigh injected with immunity boosters when Herc shuffled in. At first, they assumed he was just looking in on all the sick personnel.

"Are you all right, Marshal?" asked Sasha.

"'course I'm all right," Herc grumbled.

Startled, Mako and Raleigh turned around. Herc sounded...drunk? No, there was no crew party going on, and as hellish as the past months had been, Herc had never derelicted his duties. Raleigh knew that from Mako's memories, and neither of them believed he'd start now.

They'd gotten the medics' attention too, and Sasha, despite looking ragged herself, got in Herc's way. "Wait a minute, Herc. Wait. Sit down."

"Don't need to. I'm fine."

Mako slipped past Raleigh and put a hand on Herc's face without preamble. He sluggishly pulled away. "I think you have a fever, sir," she informed him.

"Nuh, 's not the flu - "

"I will be the judge of that, Marshal," Dr. Tan said sternly. "Stay where you are. And you two," he pointed at Raleigh and Mako," keep your distance. People are dropping like flies."

They obediently backed off, but didn't leave. After taking Herc's vitals, however, Dr. Tam was puzzled. "Hm. You've got a fever, but only one hundred. You shouldn't be displaying symptoms this bad."

"Maybe it's not influenza," Sasha said.

Herc looked near-delirious, disoriented and unable to focus on the conversation. Raleigh's blood ran cold, wondering what might be causing this if not a high fever - but it was Mako who worked it out. "Chuck. Where's Chuck?"

Dr. Tam looked around for Chuck to materialize at his father's side, then gave a brisk nod. "That's it. Run and find him, will you?"

"On it." Raleigh and Mako hurried from the infirmary.

But the task proved harder than expected. Chuck was absent from his usual haunts: Striker's Bay,
Scramble Alley, the Kwoon, or the mess hall. He wasn't in quarters and neither was Max. "Max will be with him, especially if he's not feeling well," Mako mused.

"Where's Lassie when we need her," Raleigh quipped. Mako blinked and he waved it off, "I'll tell you later."

A survey of Striker's crew also yielded no leads, but at least it turned out half the Shatterdome's healthy residents to join the search. "Hell, the kid hates admitting he's sick," said Kyrra Taior, Striker's chief engineer. "He may be holed up hiding somewhere. Damn. Where's Devi Hassan when I need her?" At Raleigh's startled expression, she grimaced and explained, "Devi and Suze could always smoke him out. Especially Dev."

That gave Raleigh a pang so intense it almost staggered him. Of course, the Hassans had been the other resident of Sydney Shatterdome - of course, they'd been close to Chuck and Herc. They'd talked about Herc and their work a lot before Knifehead, ranted about Scott Hansen, and in hindsight, some of the things they'd said more vaguely, Raleigh now realized had been about Herc's then-minor son. Of course, they'd have gotten to know Chuck well.

Suze had once said Devi missed having Raleigh to fuss over. *I bet she fussed over Chuck even more.*

God, that hurt. He wasn't even sure why.

Mako's hand slid into his, though she didn't betray any emotion or even really distraction from her searching. He squeezed it and forced himself back onto the pressing issue.

In the end, they nearly bypassed Marshal Pentecost's quarters. Mako didn't want to go in there and they both doubted Chuck would be there, of all places. So she entered the code and Raleigh slipped past her for a quick check...only to hear Max whining.

*Holy shit.*

Chuck Hansen sat on the edge of Stacker Pentecost's bed, looking half-confused, half-despondent as Max paced back and forth at his feet.

Raleigh and Mako both stood paralyzed for a few seconds, but Raleigh broke out first and went inside. Mako hesitated a few moments longer before following.

"Chuck?" Raleigh asked.

No real surprise, Chuck stared past Raleigh at Mako. She forced herself to breathe, but couldn't find her voice. So Raleigh spoke for her. "Hey. You're sick. Let's get you to the infirmary, 'kay?"

"I..." Chuck swayed, his eyes glassy and skin pallid with fever. "Where..."

"C'mon, we've got you." Raleigh cautiously took his arms, but while he didn't struggle, Chuck didn't exactly cooperate. Damp heat radiated from him.

"You shouldn't touch him," Mako said. "If you got sick now, it would be very bad."

Raleigh shrugged it off. "I've been exposed by half the Dome; we both know that. I just need to get him down there. C'mon. One...two...three!"

They made quite an entourage stumbling down the narrow corridors, with Chuck staggering on his feet, Mako and Raleigh under each of his arms, and Max alternating between whining and barking
as he ran back and forth in front of them.

Dome and crew personnel exclaimed as the three of them stumbled down the hall towards the infirmary, but Raleigh muttered a refusal to those who asked if they could help. Short of carrying Chuck outright, he and Mako had as many people supporting the kid as they could, and Max needed no encouragement to follow. Raleigh and Mako could hear Max panting as he trotted along behind them.

They could tell just how out of it Chuck was; he would have been a lot more ornery otherwise.

Herc was waiting when they got to the infirmary, though he didn't look much steadier on his feet. All he did was mutter, "Dammit," and slide in to pull Chuck from Raleigh and Mako's grasp, slinging Chuck's arm over his shoulder.

"Out of here, you two," Dr. Tan ordered. After a long pause watching Herc helping Chuck to a bed, they obeyed.

Only a few hours later, Mako dared to push back, and Raleigh found her near the quarantine ward, peering in at Chuck. Herc was asleep in the next bed, while Chuck looked a bit calmer, if still feverish and weak. He was staring at Mako.

"You're confusing him," Dr. Tan scolded her gently. "Ask him his name, you'll get one of three options."

Raleigh put an arm around her waist. It was almost funny the way Chuck stiffened, like a suspicious dad who wanted to ask Raleigh's intentions. He managed not to look too challenging, though his instinct was to smirk. She's mine and I'm hers whether you like it or not. That'd be stupid and mean. Chuck couldn't help it now.

When Chuck blinked at the red-headed nurse and mumbled what sounded like, "Tamsin?" Mako practically bolted down the hall.

Raleigh chased her down. "It'll clear up in his head when his fever's under control," he promised. "Ghost drift fucks you up when you're sick." Fucks you up worse when your last real drift broke and your partner's dead, he thought, but didn't say out loud.

Mako sighed into his chest. "I heard from Jake. He's on his way. He'll be here in just a few days."

It gave Raleigh a funny twinge of anxiety to think of meeting Marshal Pentecost's biological son. Or maybe some of the twinge was just anxiety bleeding over from Mako, as if she was as nervous about seeing Jake again as Raleigh was about meeting him.

However, the damn flu epidemic kept on interfering. Since the night of the crew party, Mako and Raleigh had more or less moved into her room and shared a bed every night (and occasionally during the day).

But that night, Mako told him, "At risk of being a cliche, I have a terrible headache." Raleigh burst out laughing, only managing to stop himself when she winced even as she grinned, and pulled her into his arms.

He brought her an ice pack and even though she felt generous enough to slide her hand into his pants, he smiled and pulled it away. "Go to sleep. I'll live."

Hours later, Raleigh woke up feeling rather sticky and overheated, and wondered if they'd let the
ice pack melt on the bed - no, they'd put it in the bathroom, so what...he put a hand on Mako and figured it out. *Oh shit.*

Mako wasn't burning up, but she was warm and sleeping restlessly. Raleigh fumbled out of bed and debated whether to wake her up or just carry her to the infirmary. He was still dithering when she stirred awake. "Wha's wrong - *oh.*" She rolled over and swore into her pillow. "Don't make me go. Just go back to your room; lemme sleep it off."

"C'mon, be reasonable," Raleigh protested. "It's almost certainly the flu, and it's flattening everybody. You'll get worse."

"Nuh'won't," she grumbled. "Herc's getting better. Lots of them're getting better. I hate the infirmary."

Well, Raleigh didn't know anyone who particularly liked it, but that was beside the point.

"You should go," Mako insisted. "If you get sick, it'll be worse."

"Uh-uh." Raleigh finally found Mako's first aid kit and checked her temperature: 101. "Look, if your fever stays low, I won't make you go, but I'm staying; between you and Chuck and everybody else, we all know I've been exposed."

Mako grumbled something unintelligible, but gave in and rolled back over. Raleigh laid back down beside her, but didn't manage to do more than doze restlessly for the rest of the night.

By morning, her temperature hadn't gone down, but it hadn't gone up either, and she was still adamant. "The medics are stretched thin enough." Raleigh had to wear her down to let him call the infirmary just to report she was sick and staying in quarters. He was a little sorry they didn't demand to see her, but maybe she was right. The medic on duty just told him to keep an eye on her and see if her fever went up. She ate and drank what Raleigh brought her, then went back to sleep.

Tendo called early that afternoon. "*Hey, Jake Pentecost just got into the airport.*"

"Fuck. Mako's sick."

*I know, man, and Marshal just quarantined the whole Dome. Eleven more people are in the infirmary since yesterday. Allison and the baby are staying at the Hyatt. I'll see if I can get him a room."

"That'll work." Raleigh sighed. "I wanted her to come into the infirmary but she doesn't want to. She seems okay, just feels shitty at the moment."

*"Hm. Keep an eye on her. Sasha got discharged; she and Alekis came through pretty well, and so did Cheung and Jin. Herc's fever's stayed steady, but Chuck's still damn-near delirious. This thing can spike really suddenly. And you keep an eye on your own condition, Becket boy. The last thing we need is you coming down with this."

"I promise, I'll turn myself in," Raleigh said. "Hotel for - for Mako's br - I mean - Marshal Pentecost's son - that's probably the best thing right now. She can't have contact with anybody - hell, she keeps trying to get me to leave."

*"You're at crazy high risk, Rals. I don't blame you for wanting to stay with her, but watch yourself."

*I will, I will."*
Tendo ended up arranging for another visitor to detour to the hotel as well. Hermann Gottlieb had come through the Dome influenza with minimal difficulty, but was sniffling and sneezing on top of his usual grumbling - and fretting that his heavily-pregnant wife had taken it into her head to travel to Hong Kong.

"I told her to stay in London! She could go into labor any day now, and the hospitals are filled with influenza patients!"

Much to Tendo's surprise, Newt Geiszler was actually trying to make Gottlieb feel better. "C'mon, man, she's a doctor too. She knows the risk; being on the same damn continent with her husband for the birth of your first kid's special!"

Hermann coughed heavily and cleared his throat - or maybe that was a growl. "I would rather the birth of my wife's and my first child be safe."

Tendo waded in. "I'll get her a room at the Hyatt, and she's already got a doctor booked for when she arrives. She knows what she's doing."

Hermann was still fretting and Tendo and Newt were still trying to reassure him when they spotted Raleigh passing in the hall...carrying someone. "Oh dear," Hermann muttered. "Was that Ranger Mori?"

"Shit!" Tendo bolted into the hall. "Rals!"

Raleigh didn't stop, but the sweaty, blue-streaked head on his shoulder confirmed Hermann's statement. "I need to get her to the infirmary. Her fever's spiked to 104."

Newt and Hermann caught up with them, and Newt ran ahead to open the infirmary doors. Dr. Tan just heaved a sigh when they came in. "Okay, bring her into the flu ward."

Mako was completely out of it, her arms wrapped tightly around Raleigh's neck, and she didn't want to let go when he laid her on a bed. "Îe," she mumbled, clinging to him. "Raleigh..."

"I need one arm," said Dr. Tan patiently. Raleigh managed to maneuver enough to make room for the IVs to get set up, and Newt took the vitals monitors from the frazzled nurse and started running them himself.

"Blood oxygen's good. Pulse and blood pressure are low, but not in the danger zone. Temp's 104...respiration's not great; let's get her on oxygen. This could turn into pneumonia." Raleigh flinched hard, and Newt patted him on the back. "Hey, hey, take it easy, guy. We'll get her through it fine."

"I should've brought her in yesterday," Raleigh murmured, bending over the right side of the bed to press his forehead into her hair.

"We still caught it early. Hermann just coughed and wheezed for a few days, and he's already out of the woods; she'll be fine."

Dr. Tan flapped a hand at them distractedly. "But not so fine that you need to be in here with all these active cases. C'mon, non-essential personnel, out!"

Hermann started to obey, but Raleigh glanced up, and the look in his eyes froze Tendo in his tracks. Uh-oh.
"No. I'm not leaving."

For a few seconds, the present vanished, and Tendo could've sworn it was Yancy at that bedside, not Raleigh. The nurses huffed and started over, but while Raleigh let go of Mako's hand and stepped away from the bedside, his feet were apart, and anybody who spent time around Rangers knew a fighting stance when they saw one.

Fuuuuck!

Newt, surprising Tendo again, came forward. "Raleigh, hey, listen. Dude, you're weeks out of radiation poisoning. Mako's gonna be fine, but you're immune compromised all to shit. This virus is a bitch, it's dangerous. You can't get exposed!"

"I'm already exposed," Raleigh retorted, his voice low and hard. Now Herc was rising from his bed next to Chuck, looking rather unsteady on his feet, but also in full Ranger mode, recognizing trouble brewing. "I'm not leaving her. I can't."

Mako whimpered something unintelligible, only half-conscious, but while Raleigh put a gentle hand on her head, he didn't take his eyes off the medics.

This wouldn't be the first time Tendo had had to drag a distraught Ranger away from their sick or injured partner, but...it felt different. For someone whose mind was undoubtedly swamped by fever dreams in the ghost drift, Raleigh was ready for an all-out fight.

Dr. Tan looked from the other medics to Raleigh to Herc, and Raleigh locked eyes with the ones holding syringes, but Herc spoke up. "No. Let him stay."

"Marshal - " Dr. Tan protested.

"Raleigh's right; he's been exposed already. There's nothing for it. Let him stay with his partner. Better way to keep an eye on him. Go on. The rest of you, go."

But while Newt and Hermann went, Tendo lingered at Raleigh's side as he relaxed - and swayed on his feet. "You sure about this, kiddo?"

Damn, wrong choice of nickname. Raleigh winced, but nodded. When he spoke, his voice was very soft. Again, Tendo could hear Yancy. "I can't, Tendo. Not again. Not ever again. I'd rather get sick."

Still watching, Herc met Tendo's eyes over the top of Raleigh's head and nodded grimly. "Okay."

Tendo patted Raleigh's back (and surreptitiously felt his skin. No fever - yet). "Try and take it easy. She'll feel better if you can stay calm, y'know?" Seeing the medics bringing a cot to Mako's bedside, Tendo stepped back. "Get some rest." Raleigh just sat down on it, keeping a grip on her hand, now oblivious to everyone else. Mako shifted on her bed to turn towards him.

Dr. Tan and Herc were having a hushed argument back by Chuck's bed, and Tendo shamelessly went to eavesdrop - and back Herc up. "We'll risk it," Herc insisted. "He's been separated from his partner too many times. And be realistic; he carried Chuck in here three days ago and he's been in quarters with Mako since she started showing symptoms - and before. He's already exposed. If he gets sick, he gets sick. We'll get him through it."

"Marshal's right," Tendo spoke up quietly. "You know it; it was hard enough getting him and Yancy apart during quarantine before...before Yance died. It's fucking cruel to do to Rals anymore, not after...everything."
Dr. Tan sighed and gave in. "I'll keep him on the immune supplements while he's in here. If he comes down with it, we'll have to hit him with the entire drug regimen."

"Then plan on it," said Herc.

Behind them, Chuck mumbled something in his sleep. As far as Tendo could tell without going closer, he was breathing okay, but he looked like he was in pain and obviously still had a fever. Herc looked back at his son with a soft expression, then told Tendo, "Sasha's in command while I'm in here. Go on before you come down with it. She's short on support personnel."

"Yessir." Tendo smiled to himself and stole a glance at Herc returning to his son's side. Chuck stilled with one touch.

Raleigh was still clutching Mako's hand as the medics worked on her, but he'd calmed down a little. *It's gonna be okay, kiddo. We'll get her through this. We'll get you both through this. We didn't survive Pitfall just to lose any of you now.*

*To Be Continued...*

Chapter End Notes

**Coming Soon:** Jake Pentecost arrives in Hong Kong only to be separated from his sister along with several other visitors, making a lot of reunions different from what our heroes hoped for in *Chapter Five: Family*.

**PLEASE don't forget to review!**

**Original Character Guide**

**President Jerald "Jerry" Lunk:** President of the United States. Billionaire hotel mogul who ran on a campaign of "make America safe again" in 2024, proponent of the Wall, now arguing over who has the strongest Jaegers. Likes to use Twitter. No, he's not based on anyone in the real world. Seriously. No, really.

**Chloe Warner:** K-Science officer, friend of Raleigh and Yancy's from their class in the Jaeger Academy. Drift-tested with her brother Christian but failed the second cut. African-American, mid-30s.

**Dr. Steven Tan:** Chief medical officer of the Jaeger Program, originally at Jaeger Academy, ended up in Hong Kong as bases closed down.

**Kyrra Taior:** Striker Eureka's Chief Engineer, mid-40s, aboriginal Australian, former lover of Vulcan Specter's left hemisphere, Susanti Hassan.

**Devi and Susanti Hassan:** late pilots of Vulcan Specter, mid-30s, killed in action in 2024, close friends of the Hansens, Australians, daughters of Indonesian immigrants.

**Matthew Davis:** classmate of Mako's from boarding school, son of Ranger Tanisha Davis, who piloted Yankee Star, America's Mark-2 (Gipsy Danger's partner against Yamarashi in 2017 in Los Angeles). Chose not to attend Jaeger Academy and was accepted into Harvard, studies art and English, his work is already known in advocacy.
for the Jaeger Program. His mother survived the destruction of Yankee Star in 2023, but was diagnosed with cancer.
Chapter Summary

Jake Pentecost arrives in Hong Kong only to be separated from his sister along with several other visitors, making a lot of reunions different from what our heroes hoped for.

Chapter Notes

Author's notes: I hope you'll all keep reading this fic after Uprising comes in 2 weeks, since it seems less likely than ever that I'll get it finished in time. I make no effort to tie into Uprising beyond making Jake exist, because he's awesome. The main plot of this story is closure from the previous war. Hope you like!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Five: Family

For the six weeks leading up to his departure from London and landing in Hong Kong, Jake Pentecost had spent a lot of time imagining what that landing would be like. Dad was dead. There would be no Dad. But Mako would be there, the one person in the whole world who really understood Jake. She'd be waiting at the airport. She wouldn't want to cry, and neither would Jake; they both hated crying where anyone could see them. But they both just might when they saw each other again, for the first time in this world after war, in this world after Dad.

This wasn't the first time all Jake's imaginings had come to naught, and he doubted it'd be the last. Mako wasn't waiting for him in the airport; she was stuck in the Shatterdome infirmary with influenza, and Jake wasn't even allowed to see her.

"She's going to be okay," LOCCENT Chief Choi reassured Jake on the vidcomm. "She's responding well to the anti-virals, just doing a lot of coughing and being sick because it got into her lungs. She should be over the worst in a day or two; she'll call you as soon as she's awake. And we'll get you over here as soon as the quarantine is lifted."

So Jake was off to a downtown Hong Kong hotel to wait out the quarantine. It was hardly the first time he'd traveled alone on foreign soil (hell, even discounting the time he'd run away and used his PPDC travel credentials to get from London to Anchorage at fourteen), but for some reason he felt more anxious than usual.

But Choi at least told Jake that he wasn't the only one stuck outside the Shatterdome by the quarantine. "My wife and son are staying there too, and so is Dr. Gottlieb's wife. Go say hi to them."

It was even more awkward to meet two women in the nearly-empty lobby, one with a toddler in tow, and the other so pregnant that Jake was surprised she hadn't popped on the fourteen-hour flight from London. "So you're Marshal Pentecost's boy," said Chief Choi's wife. "That's
amazing; none of us knew he even had a kid, adopted or otherwise.”

Jake shrugged, looking at the floor. “My dad was kind of private.”

“I know.” The look she gave him was all too knowing. Mercifully, she changed the subject. “This is Tendo’s and my son, Antwan. Say hi to Jake, Antwan.”

The baby just babbled, but at least it got a grin out of Jake. “I came to see my sister,” he said. “But she’s sick and they won’t even let me into the Shatterdome.”

Dr. Gottlieb’s wife nodded. “The entire Shatterdome is on lockdown for quarantine. This is the worst influenza epidemic since the war began. The only way to stop it spreading is to stop people traveling.”

Jake phone buzzed. He jumped and turned on the video call, then just froze. “M-Mako?”

She didn’t look very well. “Hello, Jake,” she said in Japanese, her voice hoarse. “I’m so sorry I couldn’t meet you in person.”

“You look terrible,” he said without thinking, then winced. "It's only influenza," she insisted. "I've had worse -" That was belied when her voice gave out and she dissolved into coughing.

Raleigh Becket put a hand on her back as she caught her breath, and she shot him a quick look. Then to Jake's surprise, the blond American turned to the vid comm and spoke for Mako in perfect Japanese. "The doctors say she'll be fine. The quarantine will be lifted in a week."

A whole week? He couldn't wait that long. "What happened to my father?"

Mako flinched, and Becket frowned, but then she put a hand on his. There was a long silence, but Jake was sure it wasn't a real silence. "I wanted to be a pilot once. I wanted to be like this, able to talk to somebody and not make a sound...but what happens if you lose the other person like Becket lost his brother or Dad lost Tamsin. Or like Chuck Hansen had lost Dad?"

Swallowing hard, Jake dared to push. "The press said they blew up Striker Eureka with a nuclear bomb. Is that right? That he didn't...have any pain?"

Mako couldn't look at him anymore. He felt a little bad for the tears in her already-red eyes, but held his ground. "He was your Sensei, but he was my Dad. And you at least got to say goodbye to him. Despite Becket's narrowed eyes, after another long pause, he answered, still in Japanese. "No. He didn't feel anything from a detonation that big."

"But Chuck Hansen still survived." That came out more resentful than Jake intended.


"He ejected Chuck against his will," Becket said. "He told us he'd done it. It wasn't Chuck's fault." He glanced at Mako, then went on. "There are a lot of people trying to blame Chuck for Marshal Pentecost's death, but your father knew what he was doing. Don't believe what the reporters are saying; most of them don't have a clue."
Jake sighed. He'd had a feeling they'd say that. There were hundreds of headlines about Operation Pitfall and Stacker Pentecost. Dad was a household name now. But Jake hadn't been able to make himself read any of them.

He didn't want to think about this. He didn't want to talk about it over Skype. It wasn't fair that Mako was only a few miles away. He might as well have stayed in London.

"I'll let you get some rest," he mumbled. Mako's face fell, and Jake put a hand on the screen. "It'll be okay. I'll just...hang out." He forced a smile for her sake, and she relaxed a little.

But there wasn't much reassurance for Jake, left twiddling his thumbs in a hotel room. He tried going out, but promptly got recognized by reporters and ran back to the hotel with strangers waving cameras and microphones and yelling at him.

"Jake! Jake! What do you think your father's legacy will be?!"

"Will Stacker Pentecost's funeral be here in Hong Kong or in London?"

"Have you confronted Chuck Hansen about his role in your father's death?!"

"Do you think your father was reckless with the last Jaegers?"

F*ck you f*ck you f*ck you f*ck you f*ck you all...

He was actually very proud of himself when he got back into the hotel room without either cursing at anyone or throwing a punch. Allison Choi knocked on his door a few minutes later with a big grin. "Way to go, kid. I wouldn't have been able to restrain myself from smashing their cameras."

Jake had to grin back. "Even though I really wanted to?" It gave him a pang. Would Dad have been happy? Yeah, he always wanted me to restrain myself.

Something glinted in Allison's eyes, as if she too was feeling some stab of sadness. To Jake's surprise, she shut his door behind her and said, "Your dad had to reprimand me once, back in 2020. I was on Gipsy Danger's crew; my asshole ex took a swipe at them two days after Yancy Becket died."

Jake felt his eyes widen. "Bloody hell. What'd you do to the bastard?"

"Broke his nose in a bar." Jake couldn't keep the smirk off his face and she grinned. "Yeah, I don't feel much regret, but the PPDC regs frown on that - domestic violence." That was a startling thought, but she shrugged. "Well, I never saw him again, and your dad was a stickler for the rules, so I guess I..." she trailed off, looking at something Jake couldn't see. "Anyway." Her smile didn't quite come back the same as before. "Still, the whole world saw you be restrained and dignified. You did good."

"Did you like my dad?" Jake blurted. Allison blinked. "I mean...it's...uh...funny, I never really talked much about him to his crews."

Her sudden silence and blush was...not promising. "Shite. Your dad...he was a great commander. And he was strong; he stayed with the program and didn't ever stop pulling for us."

Jake pondered what she clearly wasn't saying, but couldn't figure out how to ask her about it. They mumbled their farewells and he stayed off the news networks all night to avoid seeing himself.
In a way, Herc supposed, the influenza pandemic gave the survivors of Operation Pitfall a reprieve. "If there was any justice in the world, fucking President Lunk woulda got it," Chuck mumbled, once he was coherent again.

"At least people're calling him a coward for canceling all his public appearances," Raleigh said.

The most at-risk officer (after Chuck), Raleigh did somehow manage to avoid getting sick despite being glued to Mako's side during her convalescence. By the end of the week, the kids were on the mend, and Herc returned to duties.

Hermann Gottlieb argued daily with his wife and the crews over whether she should go back home or come to the Dome or stay in Hong Kong. Herc wasn't thrilled by the idea of someone going into labor in the Dome infirmary, but Gottlieb was waffling over whether he should stop processing Operation Pitfall data.

As usual, Sasha made the call. "For God's sake - Marshal, relieve him of duty and order him to go be with his wife. She is better off in Queen Elizabeth Hospital when the baby is born, but her husband should be with her."

Herc only needed a few beats to agree. "Yeah, I think that's the call. Breach is closed, Doc. Stand down and get your arse to your family. You." He pointed at Newt. "Enforce my order!"

Hermann was still sputtering when Newt exclaimed, "Aye-aye, Marshal," and grabbed him by the collar. But they only made it halfway out the door before Newt went back for his jacket and pulled it on.

So the two K-Scientists were still there as Mako and Raleigh came in. "Did Dr. Tan release you?" Herc demanded.

"Yes, sir," Mako said, smiling faintly. "He has also released the quarantine. With your permission, I wanted to give...Jake Pentecost a pass to come to the Shatterdome."

Herc was relieved that Chuck wasn't there just then. "Sure," he said.

The pair left, and he felt Sasha's eyes on him. Hermann broke the silence by looking Newt up and down, then exclaiming, "Newton Geiszler, did you just do something sensitive?"

Sasha smirked, while Herc stared. "What?"

As Newt sputtered, Hermann pointed at him. "He never wears a jacket. He hid his tattoos when he saw Raleigh Becket approaching."

To Herc's further astonishment, Newt turned bright red. "Just figured it was kind of mean, y'know."

Sasha folded her arms. "You're one of the few people who drifting has ever given manners. Congratulations. Now be off with both of you." Newt shuffled off with uncharacteristic chagrin, and once they'd gone, Sasha remarked to Herc, "He's been hiding Yamarashi for weeks from Raleigh's sight; this is just the first time Hermann has noticed."

"Just when you think you've got a bloke figured out," Herc mused.

Raleigh was hesitant about being present when Mako met her adoptive brother, but she refused to let go of his hand as they walked out to the main doors. They didn’t go far outside; the swarm of
cameras at the fence surging around the vehicles approaching the main gate was just too much for either of them. But Jake Pentecost was in one of those cars.

When he emerged inside the gate, he locked eyes on Mako, completely deaf to the shouted questions of the reporters and started towards them. Mako and Raleigh retreated just inside the doors so they could close behind Jake Pentecost.

Raleigh tried his best to be invisible. He had a feeling he succeeded.

Mako Mori and Jake Pentecost just stared at each other, silent, dazed, until Mako finally broke through it by falling back on manners. “Jake. Welcome to Hong Kong.”

“Thanks,” the younger Pentecost murmured, still staring at her.

Raleigh felt the surge of pressure up Mako’s throat a second before it showed, and her face broke as she choked out, “You…you’ve gotten taller,” and Jake let out a laugh that sounded equally choked, and they closed the few paces between them. Far closer in height than Mako was to Raleigh, it actually made him a little jealous to see him fall into her arms so easily.

Just like a baby brother ought to.

He took a step away and whispered, “I’ll let you have some privacy.” But to his surprise, it was Jake Pentecost who looked up and protested.


That made Raleigh feel a little warm inside.

As the pair calmed down, Jake looked Mako over. “The medics said you’re better?”

Mako nodded, pulling a handkerchief from her pocket and wiping her face. “Completely clear. Still a bit tired, but I’ll be fine. How…” She visibly slipped into formal mode. “How are your grandparents?”

Obviously that was one hell of a loaded topic, judging by the way Jake stiffened. But Mako was Mako, big on manners, and Raleigh knew she’d feel rude not to ask after Jake’s other family.

But either Jake didn’t know or he really didn’t want to say much. “They’re all right, I guess. Still not so pleased with me, but I stopped trying to make them happy years ago.”

Raleigh recalled flickers in the drift of an older couple, well-dressed, with gentle smiles for Mako but disapproving frowns for her Sensei whenever she met them. There were vague memories of shouts and tears too. Hm. He’d ask some other time. Someday he and Mako would be in the mood to spill their guts about the anger and recriminations in his memory for his parents and the bitterness and confusion she remembered towards Jake’s grandparents. Someday. Not now. They had enough to deal with.

Mako tugged Jake’s shoulder to get them walking away from the door. After a second, he glanced up, and Raleigh felt more comfortable resuming his position at Mako’s right shoulder.

She led Jake to Bay 05, and Raleigh steeled himself to re-enter. He lingered further behind as they went to Hong Kong’s section to look at the memorial to Marshal Pentecost, the picture with Tamsin Sevier beside him.
Jake murmured in Japanese, “I miss her.”

“Me too,” Mako agreed. “I tell myself now they’re together again. He was never the same after she died.”

Had Jake Pentecost understood that? What had it been like to look at his father from the other side of the planet? How often had they seen each other before Operation Pitfall, Raleigh wondered.

A twinge of defensiveness came through the ghost drift; Mako believed entirely that Sensei had done the best he could with Jake. Raleigh stepped closer and took her hand, sending softness back. It hadn’t been a criticism, not by any stretch.

Jake turned suddenly and looked at Mako. “I want to meet him.”

It only took Raleigh a second to realize he meant Chuck Hansen. Despite her apprehension, Mako nodded. “I understand, though…he’s…” she groped for a diplomatic way to explain.

Raleigh stepped in. This meant saying (or at least implying) things about himself that he didn’t want to talk about to a stranger, but if Mako’s brother was open to having her co-pilot here at this moment, it’d be selfish not to trust him. “It’s only been a few weeks. It’s…hard, after a…co-pilot – in the drift.” Well, that was smooth. He looked away.

But Jake answered softly, “…get that. It’s just that he’s…” He went quiet for a long time, then avoided Mako’s eyes when he finished, “Dad’s inside him now, right?”

Raleigh felt Mako flinch again, but he looked at Jake over the top of her head and nodded. Yeah. That’s the way it always works when you drift. You carry them inside you for the rest of your life. If the drift breaks, it’s even stronger.

Of course, Jake Pentecost wanted to meet Chuck. Chuck was smart enough to know it was coming.

Chuck knew it was coming. For a few hours, he actually considered hiding. Hiding from a kid I didn’t know existed six weeks ago. Big brave Jaeger pilot, that’s me.

So he surrendered to the inevitable and played tennis with Max out on Scramble Alley. Better to do this where he’d have some air.

He felt Dad coming and knew they were with him, and deliberately didn’t turn around.

In a way, it gave Chuck a pang of disappointment. He’d kind-of hoped he might sense Marshal’s son. That was stupid, of course. The drift didn’t work that way. Chuck knew that; he’d been a pilot long enough to know.

So why did it still disappoint him?

The minute their eyes met, reality fractured. Chuck wondered if Marshal had somehow suppressed it in the drift, or if it’d just been there and he’d been too preoccupied to notice. Because he definitely recognized Jake Pentecost’s eyes.

Jake’s eyes were wary as he looked at Chuck, not like Chuck remembered them. In the drift memories, Jake had…adored his father. They’d barely seen each other on the same continent twice a year, but Jake had adored Marshal Pentecost. Nothing had been able to change that, not even the subtle degradation of Marshal Pentecost by Jake's grandparents.
Wonder what he thinks of me, the guy who could drift with my own old man but barely have a civil conversation with him. Chuck mentally cringed. Aloud, he mumbled, "Hi. Chuck Hansen."

The kid cautiously extended a hand, and they stared at each other as Chuck shook it. Maybe Jake Pentecost was half-wishing for some sort of familial drift to flare up too.

They might’ve stood there staring at each other for a long time if Sasha hadn’t intervened and come over, tugging at Herc and Mako’s sleeves until they obeyed, still not taking their eyes off the younger pair. After a long final stare, Raleigh went with them.

Then there were two.

Jake dropped his eyes, as if he couldn’t bare the sight of Chuck’s anymore. “You knew my dad,” he murmured.

“Yeah.” Chuck could barely get his voice above a whisper.

“Did he…say anything about me?”

Shit. Of course, that question was coming. Chuck would’ve asked the same thing five years ago – hell, in a way, he had done it, after Scott was…gone. He’d wondered and wondered. Did Scott ever think about me?

But Chuck had never drifted with Scott, only vicariously through Herc. I knew Scott loved me, but that only made it worst.

He didn’t have a right to keep this back, not from Pentecost’s son. “He…he didn’t say, not exactly. There wasn’t much time to talk. But I…I saw you…” You were everywhere, and I was just dim enough not to figure it out. “He was protecting you,” he explained clumsily. “All of us. That’s why he never talked, ‘bout you, ‘bout Mako, or any others.

Now my dad has to take over and protect us. He’s got Sasha Kaidanovsky, but without the war, there’s no way to put them off. Dad’s gonna have to listen them take pot shots at all of us.

Jake just kept studying, and Chuck blurted, “I didn’t leave him.” The younger boy sucked in his breath. Chuck’s chest got tight, but he just had to say it. “I wouldn’t. Never would. I didn’t know what he was gonna do. I’d’ve stopped him if I’d thought…”

The kids eyes grew wet, and he mumbled, “’s okay. Mako and Raleigh told me what happened. Wasn’t your fault. My dad, he…he knew his own mind. He wanted you to live. That’s…that’s good. He knew he could get it done himself without anyone else dying. He was right, ‘n that’s good.”

Max came scampering over and scurried between their feet. Jake knelt before Chuck had the chance to sort his emotions out, scratching the dog. “I’m glad you’re alive. ‘Cause if you’re alive, part of my dad’s alive. Too many pilots never made it home.”

It was a pang of grief that swept through Chuck with such power he could barely breathe. So many hadn’t come home. So many deserved to come home, more than Chuck f**king Hansen had ever deserved it. What was there for Chuck to do now?

Just keep being a pilot, I guess. One of the last who remembers.

Chuck might have made it to the end of the War Clock with his father, but there were so many others – family in all but blood – that hadn’t. Most of all Stacker Pentecost, whose mind Chuck
had shared and who would never, ever leave Chuck again even if Chuck wanted to. And truth be told, Chuck didn’t.

He had a feeling that was why Jake had been drawn here of all people rather than just to Mako. Marshal was inside Chuck’s mind and always would be.

Maybe that wasn’t such a bad thing. Marshal would have someone to stand up for him, who knew what he’d been thinking. Someone who wouldn’t let the other Rangers or their last commander be turned into pawns by governments.

_Dunno if I can fill his shoes. But he fills my memories. That’ll be enough._

_To Be Continued..._

_PLEASE don't forget to review!_

Chapter End Notes

**Coming Soon:** Herc, Sasha, and the K-Sciensts head for Washington and the hot seat. But there are opportunists waiting for the Shatterdome leadership step away so they can get their paws on the remaining rangers in _Chapter Six: Plots Within Plots._

_Please don't forget to review!_
Chapter Summary

Herc, the Kaidanovskys, and the K-Scientists arrive in Washington where many politicians have a lot to gain by bringing Herc's leadership down, and the Hansens soon face an ugly blast from the past!

Chapter Notes

**Author's Notes:** Thank you all so much for the feedback! Please keep it coming! This chapter deals with the events in Aurora Australis Chapters 12-13, although they're not really required reading.

**Trigger Warning:** This chapter discusses rape and murder by a Ranger.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Six: Plots Within Plots

Raleigh was technically the most senior Ranger remaining at the Hong Kong Shatterdome with Herc, Sasha, and Aleksis leaving, but he said no to command so fast that Herc's head spun. Not that Herc was all that surprised. Cheung and Jin were less than thrilled by the prospect either, but at least politics would be on their side if anything happened while Herc was gone, since the Weis had local authorities in their corner.

"Between you and me, I'd put Mako in command if I thought I could get away with it," he confessed.

Chuck was quiet long enough for Herc to hear it coming. "I should be going with you."

*Forget it, kid - no, Hansen, don't put it like that.* "All things being equal, yeah, you should. But ask Sasha if my word's not enough for you. It's a bad idea."

Chuck got between Herc and his suitcase. "Why?! I'm not sixteen anymore!"

Herc fought back the urge to snap at him. "Look. Can you honestly tell me you wouldn't blow a bloody fuse the first time some pompous stuffed American shirt goes off about Stacker being a screw-up?"

Judging by the way Chuck flushed with anger just at the thought of it - *nope!* "Why the hell would you let 'em get away with that?" his kid hissed.

"Because you and I both know Stacker intended it that way," Herc shot back. That, to his astonishment, made Chuck flinch and turn away. He sighed. "You, Mori, and Becket are the ones the suits most want to see, and the Kaidanovskys and I are all agreed it's asking for a disaster to let them near any of you."
"Our brains aren't completely addled - or at least mine aren't," Chuck muttered, sounding more like himself than he had since returning from Pitfall. "I never went solo. I can handle it."

Herc shoved his dress uniform into his case with some malice. Towards the uniform, anyway. "The decision's made, Ranger. You and Team Gipsy stay here with Team Typhoon. No one goes who doesn't absolutely have to." Jerry Fucking Lunk can't have you. Bad enough he and his landowner cronies will get their claws into Stacker's memory. They don't get to make you his stand-in.

Chuck could still hear him. One drift with Stacker and several weeks after weren't enough to muffle the ghost drift. "What are you gonna do, then? You and Sasha? What'll you say for Marshal?"

That part at least was a relatively easy answer. "Remind the fuckers that Stacker's the reason they're not struggling to dig deep enough bunkers. Remind them we've got one Jaeger who just might be functional again, just enough funding to get him up and moving again, and we decide where Typhoon goes and for what."

Chuck frowned. "Do the triplet - I mean, Cheung and Jin, do they know that?" Neither of them'll be able to pilot him again. He couldn't bring himself to say it aloud.

Herc nodded. "Aleksis talked to them. They understand. They're actually more for it than I thought they'd be." As long as he rides, a part of Hu does too. He didn't say that aloud either. But both he and his son knew that was the most likely explanation. Mako told me Raleigh was moved to see Gipsy again. Then again, he'd get to pilot her.

He felt a pang through the ghost drift, a longing for a jaeger who'd vaporized in the Marianas Trench along with Stacker. Who by all rights should've taken Chuck with them - "Hey." Don't think that way, kid.

Chuck couldn't look at him anymore. Herc impulsively put out a hand, but the kid backed away. "Better finish packing then." He hurried out of their quarters.

Herc dropped onto the lower bunk and shut his eyes. Damn it, Stacks. He knew what Chuck was thinking: Both of us would've pitched an epic fit if Striker ended up being piloted by someone else. Hell, if it'd been anyone other than Stacker, I'd have pitched a fit about anyone co-piloting with my kid. There weren't many people Herc would've deemed worthy of Striker, let alone...let alone co-piloting with Chuck.

Only weeks ago, the ghost drift would've rung with Chuck's pride at sensing a thought like that from Herc. Now it wrenched with his disagreement.

"Egotistical jerk with daddy issues." That was nothing compared to what the fucking UN was about to say about Chuck, and everyone knew it. Maybe Herc wasn't doing him any favors by keeping him away.

Maybe he was.

It was a media circus when the delegation from the Jaeger Program arrived in Washington, and President Lunk's inevitable Twitter tantrum only made it worse. "Disappointed to see so many cowardly Jaeger Pilots afraid of Congress!"

Herc went red in the face when one of the reporters read the Tweet out loud to him, and Mako held her breath, but Sasha Kaidanovsky subtly elbowed Herc in the ribs - forestalling the likely
explosion of profanity directed at the President of the United States.

Back in the mess hall of Hong Kong Shatterdome, things weren't so restrained. Jake nearly knocked his breakfast tray off the table as he shot to his feet, cursing Lunk as a "fathead, puddle-of-piss bastard." The Weis scoffed quietly while half their crew roared profanity in Mandarin, Cantonese, and several other languages, and some of Striker's crew hurled food at the screen.

Even as Mako hissed at Jake to calm down, it struck her sharply that the two people she'd have expected to react the most violently weren't making a sound: Raleigh and Chuck.

Not that there weren't a dozen people in the room who knew Japanese, but Mako slipped into it anyway as she leaned toward Raleigh. "You can't take anything that miserable man says seriously; you know that!"

Avoiding her eyes, Raleigh shrugged and lied, "I'm not."

Chuck shrugged and toyed with his food in a manner so similar to Raleigh that Mako wondered if these two stubborn men might've ended up drift compatible. "Don't give a damn what that moron says, president or not," he muttered.

They were both lying. Mako could tell, and from the way some of the crew were looking - half like they wanted to shake Raleigh and Chuck, the other half like they wanted to hunt the president down and stone him - she wasn't the only one who could tell.

Almost as soon as the Congressional hearings began, Tendo and the other crews began chivvying Mako and the other ex-pilots away from the screens. "This is gonna be a shitshow; we all know it. Don't put yourselves through watching it."

A rotating shift of crew soon had Raleigh and Chuck preoccupied in the Kwoon, and the Weis and their crew decided to devote themselves to repairing Crimson Typhoon and pretending current events didn't exist. Mako drifted between the groups and keeping an eye on Jake, who was having almost as much trouble ignoring the broadcasts as Chuck.

Not only are they questioning Sensei's fitness as a commander, they're questioning Marshal Hansen's, she reasoned. Of course this is hard for Chuck to tolerate. I can barely tolerate it.

Hell, the easiest part was when she happened to be near a screen when an American Senator, some pompous windbag who invoked God every other sentence and who all the women hissed at due to his tendency to make misogynistic remarks, brought Mako up by name.

"What about this Mako Mori girl, Pentecost's adoptee? Isn't that nepotism that Pentecost chose her to co-pilot Gipsy Danger with Becket?"

Funny, all the men in the mess hall yelped and dithered in panic, while most of the watching women just sighed. Mako snorted when Tendo made a move to turn the channel. "Don't you dare. I'm fine."

In Washington, Herc glowered. "Marshal Pentecost didn't choose Ranger Mori; she demonstrated drift compatibility with Ranger Becket far beyond any of the other pilot candidates. And since you're wondering whether her relationship to the commanding officer affected his opinion, he was against it for valid reasons!"

"What reasons?"

Herc rolled his eyes. "They're in the records, Senator, and I haven't got them memorized, sorry."
"So you don't recall Marshal Pentecost raising any concern that Mori and Becket were both mentally unstable?"

Amid an explosion of furious words and hisses to be quiet in the room around her, Mako felt like a little island of calm, untouched by anything this callous politician could say. She felt Raleigh sprinting into the room behind her; either he'd sensed she was watching or someone had called him. Jake appeared at her other elbow; she nudged them both gently. She could handle this.

On the screen, Herc retorted, "No, I do not recall him saying either of them were 'mentally unstable' because I don't believe he ever put it like that, as a matter of fact. He had concerns about risks in the drift, which is a unique condition affected by the pilot's individual memories, and yes, as every one of you hear know, Raleigh Becket and Mako Mori both lost loved ones to the kaiju and witnessed it firsthand. Those kinds of memories are dangerous in the drift."

"The Mori girl nearly blew up the Shatterdome because she couldn't control herself, didn't she?"

"PIECE OF - " Jake exploded, and Mako snapped.

"Quiet!"

But behind her, she could hear Chuck, muttering, "Shit," over and over. At her right, Raleigh was rigid and silent. In front of her, Herc kept his temper (barely), and ground out, "We were days away from the next kaiju attack with very limited time to get Gipsy Danger up and running. The accident was caused by the drift going out of alignment combined with a technical malfunction, and resulted in no injuries or damage. And forty-eight hours later, those two Rangers saved the city of Hong Kong."

It was a little gratifying to hear the roar of approval from the spectators in the congressional chamber. It took a lot of gavel-banging from the Senator in charge of the hearing to quiet everyone down.

Another Senator took over the questions. "But two Jaegers and substantial property were lost in the Hong Kong attack because Pentecost held Gipsy Danger back. Doesn't that call his judgment into question?"

"Your mate there just suggested his judgment is questionable for putting Gipsy into combat, Senator - what's it gonna be?" Herc snapped, and got another roar of agreement.

"At least the crowd's with us," said Tendo.

"If they call you 'the Mori girl' one more time…" Jake snarled.

"That's Gill Block; he hates women," said Hien Nguyen. "He used to back Marshal Ketteridge's misogynistic bullshit in Sydney." She glanced past Mako at Chuck and made a face. Mako vaguely recalled Sydney's commander being accused - more than once - of sex discrimination. She couldn't help glancing over her shoulder, and judging by Chuck's scowl, at least part of it was true.

The remainder of the day's questioning was just variations on the same themes: Marshal Pentecost had been unfit. Mako had been unfit. Raleigh had been unfit. Chuck had been unfit. Herc Hansen was still unfit. Despite all evidence to the contrary - namely, the Breach being closed and no attacks since - a whole cadre of politicians insisted there were things the Jaeger Program could've, should've, would've done better if only they had been in charge, and clearly the last Shatterdome and last Jaeger should be under American control.

Herc looked ready to pop several blood vessels by the end of it, while Sasha Kaidanovsky was cool
and unmoved. "It is not up to anyone in this building to decide who controls Crimson Typhoon. The Jaeger and the Hong Kong Shatterdome are China's property, under China's control and command. Since you Americans chose to sell all of your Shatterdomes, you will have to start from scratch."

Crew laughed and jeered in the mess hall, and spectators laughed and jeered in Washington, but the more politically-savvy personnel, especially the Americans, were uneasy. "What's the problem? They're standing up to the assholes!" Tendo protested.

"Yeah, they are," Hien agreed. "And the assholes like those have no moral compasses, so they won't think twice about playing dirty. They know they need to discredit us, and they're going to double down on it by any means necessary. This is going to get very ugly."

Hien was right.

The session had adjourned for the day and Hong Kong Shatterdome was on the night shift when the vidcomm buzzed in Mako's room. Raleigh stirred awake quicker than she did to answer. "Wha's going on?"

It was Jake. Mako awakened fully at the agitation in his voice. "Turn on the news. Wake Mako up."

Mako fumbled for the the Associated Press feed, and her stomach went straight up her throat when she saw the headline:

**JAEGER PROGRAM COVERED UP HANSEN RAPE SCANDAL! COMMITTEE DEMANDS ANSWERS!**

"Jesus fuck!" Raleigh hissed and rolled out of bed. "Where's Chuck?"

"*Talking to the Weis and Tendo Choi. He's completely flipping out, something about his uncle, not making any sense. The press is saying it was his dad that raped someone!*" Jake choked out.

Pulling his clothes on, Raleigh told Mako, "I know what this is about; I was there. Stupid lying shits."

Mako scrambled after him and scanned the dull memories washing through the ghost drift. Manila - Meathead - Horizon Brave and Lucky Seven and Gipsy Danger. Shock and disbelief and disgust, grief and anger - hugging Yancy through it. How could he...how could he...

Raleigh blew past security and barged into Typhoon's bay to join the chaos already building. Some of Typhoon's burlier crew were wrestling Chuck back from the comms - God knew who he was trying to call - and Cheung and Jin were trying with limited success to calm him down. "It WASN'T my dad, it was my fucking, stinking uncle!" Chuck raved, wild-eyed. "HE'S the one who tried to pin it on my old man and it didn't even work, they can't do this!"

Raleigh shoved through the babbling crew and grabbed Chuck by the shoulders. "HEY! Chuck, take it easy! You weren't the only ones there, remember? Your dad's got a billion alibis!"

Mako remembered more: Yancy holding Herc by the shoulders in Raleigh's memories, Herc even more frenzied and desperate than his son was.

"Someone's got to go public and say something," Kyrra Taior, Striker's chief engineer, was spitting. "We can't fucking less this stand."
"Don't the records speak for themselves?" someone protested. "Scott's the one serving life in prison!"

"Not to conspiracy theorists or anybody with an agenda against Herc," sighed Tendo, scrubbing his face. "Chuck, c'mon, flipping your shit's not gonna help. Sasha and Alekxis are on the line for Cheung and Jin."

The Weis quickly moved aside, but the crew decided against letting Chuck go with them. Bao Wang, one of Raleigh's friends on Team Typhoon, insisted, "They've got access to a lot of records. They'll have a better idea of what to do with this so it blows up in the committee's faces."

"I need to talk to my dad," Chuck mumbled, starting to wind down.

"Is he okay?" asked Raleigh. Kyrra grimaced at him. "Well, still, it's a fair request."

"Yeah, I know. Hang on. Herc's not going to want to talk to the whole Dome." Kyrra beckoned them to a side office, muttering, "I cannot believe this is what they're throwing in Herc's face, out of all the filthy shit to dig up!" She buzzed Herc, then scowled at the comm and yelled at it, "Hercules, your son is going apeshit, now be a man and pick up!"

The comm screen came alive slightly off center, with Herc grunting, "All right, all right!" as if somebody'd been shoving him. Satisfied, Kyrra turned and caught Mako's elbow with one hand, Jake's with the other.

"C'mon, let's give them some privacy."

Raleigh nodded to her. "Go. I'll stay a minute."

Mako would've gone, but Herc started talking before Kyrra pulled them from the room. His voice was resigned. "Listen, kid, this is going to be shit, so you may as well prepare yourself. My credibility's shot to hell."

"Hey, do not talk like that!" Raleigh snapped before Chuck could even react. "You were proven innocent! Jesus, you sound like those douchebags who bitched about being scared of Me Too! Just tell the goddamn truth!"

"Ooh, I haven't heard that tone in a long time!" said Tendo from the doorway, but he sounded delighted.

Raleigh flipped him off without turning around, but Mako felt (even with Raleigh's back to her) the temptation to smile. On the screen, Herc looked startled. "Some of them won't believe me."

"Screw the conspiracy theorists. They never believe anyone. You run the program, so you've got access to the classified information - I assume that includes the investigation records after Manila. Shit, nobody even suggested it might be you!"

Herc sighed, and Chuck spoke up. "You're wrong. My uncle did."

Raleigh did a double-take between the two of them, and Mako and Jake stared at each other. "...what?"

" Fucking coward," Chuck growled, not really looking at anyone. "After my dad turned him in, he just...babbled shit, trying to get out of it. Once, he said it wasn't him, it was Herc, and he saw it in the drift. Only once - even his own bloody lawyer didn't believe him, and he admitted it later - Marshal had the records," he explained to Herc, seeing his father's startled expression. "I
"So if the media crucifies Scott, he deserves it twice over," said Raleigh, more gently. Again, in Raleigh's voice, Mako heard Yancy.

Here snorted. "I won't lose any sleep about Scott, believe me. But if I touch those records, they're suspect."

"Sleep on it, Hercules," Sasha ordered from off-screen. "We're all tired. Let them have their frenzy; it will happen no matter what we do. Then we'll decide how to answer before the hearings resume."

"A lot of us were there," said Raleigh, gesturing to himself, Tendo, and Kyrra. "Really there, for the arrest and the first parts of the investigation. Yeah, some stupid shits'll say it's a conspiracy, but they don't have any power."

"More people are still inclined to believe you than trust their officials who abandoned them," said Sasha. "They will see this 'conspiracy' as it is - one by the American government in a desperate effort to take control of the Jaeger Program by eliminating you."

When they all woke up in the morning, Sasha had already acted. This time, Tendo supposed they probably should've realized what she was planning.

_Jaeger Program Insider Leak: Scott Hansen's disappearance explained at last!_  
**Former pilot serving life in prison for 2 counts rape and murder!**

Supporters of Hercules Hansen as Marshal and commander of the remnants of the Jaeger Program feel vindicated this morning after viewing a leak of classified military court records of the investigation, trial, and conviction of Australian former Ranger Scott Hansen for 2 counts of sexual assault and murder! Critics of the Jaeger Program maintain that while the DNA evidence and detailed confessions clear Marshal Hansen of wrongdoing as to the crimes themselves, they reveal a disturbing culture of silence and obstruction within the PPDC regarding crimes by its officers. Women's rights advocates add that the Hansens' home base, Sydney Shatterdome, was the target of a sex discrimination investigation that occurred after Scott Hansen's imprisonment. Former PPDC Marshal Blake Ketteridge received a verbal reprimand for inequity in deployment between male-piloted Striker Eureka and female-piloted Vulcan Specter.

"Sasha strikes again," Tendo sighed. He couldn't bring himself to be as pissed as he'd been about her leaking the Operation Pitfall records. In this case, it had exonerated Herc in a way that prevented Herc from being accused of tampering with the records.

Chuck just looked dazed by the whole thing. Tendo hadn't been in Sydney for the Scott Hansen debacle, though he'd seen the immediate aftermath in Manila. Rals and Yance had refused to ever talk about it and threatened anyone who did with demerits - well, there was that "culture of silence" people didn't like. But, hell, was it really such a bad thing to tell crews not to gossip about a disaster that'd claimed the lives of two pilots and at least two innocent people?! They'd all made their official reports; what else were they supposed to do, just spew their guts to the press so the world could drool and slobber over shit that wasn't anyone's business?

*Then again...I wonder what anyone said to the families of those girls Scott murdered.*

Tendo did remember - vividly - the fiasco that was Marshal Blake fucking Ketteridge's treatment of Devi and Susanti Hassan, culminating in the near-mutiny Herc had led when Ketteridge tried to
deploy Vulcan alone against a Category III almost as big as Knifehead.

He caught Jake Pentecost staring at him as if trying to see into his head, and forced a smile. "Long story, kid."

"Culture of silence?" the kid answered pertly.

*Wow. If Marshal Pentecost and Raleigh's mom had a kid...* that thought made Tendo want to both burst out laughing and hide in a corner.

Raleigh was, fortunately, not looking in Tendo's direction; he was focused on Chuck. "You okay?"

Chuck nodded absently, not even bothering to make a smart remark. *Shit.* "You know my dad saw it in the drift."

"Yeah."

"I saw it in the drift. When I drifted with my dad."

*Jesus fucking Christ.* Of course, it stood to reason, but still...Tendo'd thought the worst fate imaginable was Raleigh living through Yancy's death in the drift. To have been drifting with Scott Hansen and seeing...feeling...*fuck, fuck, no, stop, brain, do NOT want to chase that rabbit!* "What's the committee agenda looking like now?" he blurted desperately.

Hien and Kyrra and the other political-minded crew were muttering over and the political analysis sites, as usual. "Officially, it's not changed much, but you can bet Gill Block and the rest of the fuckers were not prepared for this much information slamming into cyberspace within twenty-four hours," said Hien. She shot a satisfied look at the other Americans. "Lunk hasn't even managed to tweet about it; he's probably still in bed over there."

"HAH!" Chloe Warner let out a triumphant shout as a breaking news alert popped up on everyone's tablets. "Agenda's just changed! Suddenly they're all terribly interested in K-Science!"

Most of the crew laughed, but Raleigh looked worried. "Is Newt gonna be ready to testify on such short notice?"

Everyone who'd spent more than a few weeks around Newton Geiszler scoffed in unison, as if they were all drifting at that moment. Raleigh had to grin, and Mako was relaxing too, sliding an arm around his waist. "I doubt there was much chance of preparing Newt to begin with. He'll say what he'll say - though many of his concepts will be too advanced and incoherent for most politicians to understand. We'll just have to hope he doesn't say anything too controversial."

"Do they know he and Gottlieb drifted with an effing kaiju yet?" Christian Warner asked.

"Yeah, that was in the Pitfall report, though fewer reporters than I expected latched onto it," Tendo mused. "Newt may find himself on the hot seat about whether his first drift prompted the Hong Kong attack."

"Shit," someone muttered.

However, Cheung and Jin were unconcerned. "Our government knows about it. Yes, it was dangerous - stupid, even. But this Shatterdome and Crimson Typhoon are worth too much for them to risk alienating us. Gottlieb predicted it; the double event would have happened in any case, and the kaiju would have gone somewhere. We're all lucky in a way that they came here instead of towards America or Australia or another place with no Jaegers posted. Hundreds died in Hong
Kong, but millions would have died in another city."

Security buzzed Tendo then, and he read their message, then snorted. "Speaking of K-Science, the 'private scientific industry' is lining up thick and fast to get a piece of J-Tech now that the apocalypse is canceled. Better than government goons, but we're gonna have some guests."

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

Coming Soon: A drift science team visits Hong Kong Shatterdome with credentials to begin studying other uses of the drift apart from Jaegers. But they need test subjects. Still doubtful as to whether he's done enough in the final months of the war, Raleigh volunteers. Big mistake in Chapter Seven: The Rabbit Hole!

PLEASE don't forget to review!

Original Character Guide

Senator Gill Block: Midwestern American Senator who represents landowners who had a lot to gain by the kaiju threat driving people inland, now has an axe to grind with the Jaeger Program.

President Jerald "Jerry" Lunk: President of the United States, elected 2020, tweets a lot, used the platform, Make America Safe Again.

Hien Nguyen: Former personnel coordinator for Gipsy Danger's strike troopers, now works for Team Striker Eureka. Vietnamese American, mid-30s.


Kyrra Taior: Chief Engineer of Striker Eurekak, Aboriginal Australian, former lover of Susanti Hassan, late pilot of Vulcan Specter.

Devi and Susanti Hassan: Deceased pilots of Vulcan Specter, which was destroyed in September 2024, close friends of the Hansens.
Chapter Summary

A drift science team visits Hong Kong Shatterdome with credentials to begin studying other uses of the drift apart from Jaegers. But they need test subjects. Still doubtful as to whether he's done enough in the final months of the war, Raleigh volunteers. Big mistake!

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Many thanks to everyone for the awesome feedback! Please keep it coming! The incident of teenaged violence Mako recalls that causes Stacker to train her so hard on control takes place in Chapters 7 and 8 of Tales From The Front Lines. Raleigh and Yancy's relationship with their sister is fleshed out in the first 6 chapters of Aurora Borealis. They're not required reading, but in case anyone's curious. So here it is, the last update before the US premiere of Uprising. Hope everyone keeps reading once this finale becomes a complete and total AU!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Seven: The Rabbit Hole

Hong Kong Shatterdome...

Despite the trauma of her childhood, Mako Mori had never been an especially aggressive person. She didn't act on her frustrations with violence or anger, unlike some. In recent weeks, when someone had made that observation, Raleigh had coughed "Chuck!" and got snickers from everyone in earshot. Now Mako had that in her head whenever she considered her own reaction.

But she knew by the time she graduated the Academy that everyone had a moment where they found themselves on the edge and ready to cross that line. As a teenager in boarding school in Pennsylvania, she'd only crossed it and let her temper take her truly out of control once. She knew that had surprised Sensei and her counselors.

The Psychs talked about that kind of thing often enough. She had always wondered where the line of her temper would fall as a grown-up and what horror of the war would reveal it.

She was a little surprised in retrospect that she didn't find that line again until after the war.

She certainly understood what it was to be angry, even angry at other people, but never had she felt such a burning, all-consuming desire to tear a human being limb from limb with her bare hands. Her consolation after the fact was that she wasn't the only Ranger who went berserk that day.

The inevitable questions went on in Washington about the PPDC's purpose and whether the Jaeger program should still exist. Some of the questions were easier to answer than others. Support for continued construction of the coastal walls hit an all-time low, and funding was being re-routed to
establish a new network of seabed sensors and sonar stations in every ocean.

Naturally, President Lunk and his supporters were not pleased at all.

Dr. Geiszler and Dr. Gottlieb provided much of the data behind that project from their drift with the kaiju, and they warned that although it seemed that the breach had opened up in the same general location each time, the kaiju's instigators hadn't known and hadn't cared whether they were hitting the same spot. Ergo, there was no reason to assume the Marianas Trench might be the only place to worry about in the future.

"Are you really going to tell me it's not worth the expense?" Newt demanded to Congress. "Come on, this was a worldwide project ever since K-Day, and even before that - this same technology can be applied to warnings of earthquakes, tsunamis, eruptions, and oil spills! Multi-tasking, for god's sake!"

"Well, when you put it like that," Mako heard Tendo mutter to Raleigh, getting a soft chuckle.

The entire United States Congress and a small army of international delegates in Washington looked completely befuddled by the time Geiszler was done talking – and then it was the Kaidanovskys turn again.

"Was it really a good idea to turn Sasha and Aleksis loose on that lot?" Chuck wondered aloud.

"Absolutely," said Raleigh. "Cold war sensibilities still aren't dead in the US. Russia's reestablishing its Shatterdome and replacing or restoring Cherno? The US and Europe will have to do at least enough to keep pace with them. That's why we didn't disarm after World War II." The Weis and Chuck raised curious eyebrows at him, and Tendo grinned. Raleigh shrugged sheepishly. "I'm a history buff."

"Ahh, the 'greatest generation,'" snorted Chuck, and waved a derisive hand at Congress. "And there's what they grew up to be."

"Nah, most of the World War II survivors are dead. These guys are the boomers. Well, they are!" Raleigh protested.

"Bunch of useless talking heads," Chuck muttered, though to Mako's relief (and Raleigh's, she knew) his ire was directed at the pompous old men in question rather than at his usual verbal sparring partner.

Mako had seen memories in the drift of Raleigh's sister calling him a nerd for his hobbies. Only a year apart in age, competitive and hormonal, their fights had been vicious and only escalated when his mother became ill. At its height, Raleigh had saved up for a model spitfire once the family stopped traveling after K-Day. Jazmine had seen the box arrive and stepped on it, then blamed the shippers. Their parents had believed her, and while Yancy didn't, he had insisted that Raleigh not retaliate. (That whole mess had gotten started when Raleigh had mocked her on Facebook for an outfit she'd bought for a date.)

Raleigh looked back on his teen years with a mixture of resentment and guilt. Less confident, less grown, standing between a handsome, talented elder brother and a pretty, popular younger sister (at least in his own skewed view) he'd felt that he had the least of everything, and Jazmine's taunts had cut deep. In turn, he had cut her whenever he could, blaming her for his frustrations just as she blamed him for her own. Yancy had been stuck as the mediator between the endlessly-squabbling pair, which elevated him in their view and made him in turn an object of their competition. For a boy also still in his teens, Yancy's priority had often been not to make peace, but to keep himself
elevated. These were among the many more painful truths the brothers had had to face when they began drifting together.

Chuck had inadvertently struck close to home: Raleigh had idealized the World War II era as so many young men did, believing the legends of fierce patriotism and righteous defense of freedom against tyranny as the driving force. Even in the kaiju war with alien invaders that oozed blue toxin as the enemy, he'd found the reality of his fellow human beings, with all their twisted motives and skewed priorities far less romantic.

The subject of the hearings in Washington, DC and the UN Headquarters also turned to the issue of other uses of pons and drift technology. The PPDC still held most of the patents, but some of the simplest neural interfaces had made it into the hands of commercial enterprises, who were now raring to put their ideas to work. With the threat of kaiju no longer hanging over everyone, backing was starting to come in, and they all wanted Rangers to be their test subjects.

Metacortex Laboratories billed itself as a great humanitarian endeavor for the good of all the world in the aftermath of the war, and came to Hong Kong (conveniently, Mako later realized, while Marshall Hansen, the K-scientists, and the Kaidanovskys were still abroad) with a slew of credentials and backing from powerful operators.

Dr. Patricia Greller talked a good game; even Chuck and the most cynical Shatterdome personnel admitted that. It didn't help that she looked a little like Dr. Lightcap – blonde hair, white coat, glasses, big, earnest eyes as she explained her mission.

She'd made the potential benefits of the pons technology sound far less dry than the witnesses in Washington did - nano-surgeries, rescue/recovery in coal mines and floods, preparing mounted defenses underwater and underground in case the Breach ever reopened. She had appealed so much to the need for the Rangers to make this final contribution in their great service that afterward, with the benefit of hindsight, Mako wondered how deep into Raleigh's background she had delved in preparing her pitch.

Chuck, Jin, and Cheung still weren't cleared by the doctors for drifting at all. Only Raleigh and Mako were. Raleigh was definitely the one Greller wanted most. "It's no more invasive than the initial tests you did in the Academy," she insisted. "We've already been given access to that data, but we need corresponding scans for after you served. And, Ranger Becket, well..." she seemed so sincerely reluctant. "Forgive me for mentioning it, but you're now the only living Ranger who ever piloted a Jaeger alone. That makes data on you especially vital to our efforts."

Raleigh fidgeted absently. Mako could tell he wanted to refuse, didn't want anyone poking around his head again, but feared he would be depriving the world of research that might be needed. "You know I didn't do the brain scan when I mustered out in 2020."

"Yes, and of course, I understand completely," Dr. Greller insisted. "The neural load won't be in any way comparable to a Jaeger. Just a solo drift. The risk is minimal... really, Rangers, I have to say, even the inconvenience is minimal. I don't understand why you're so reluctant."

Chuck folded his arms, eyes narrowing. "I take it you've done it on yourself, then, Doc?"

"Of course!"

"Well, are you really saying you enjoyed it, hooking your brain into machinery?"

Greller looked so puzzled. "I'm not saying I think it has many recreational uses, but I didn't find it
painful, if that's what you mean."

"Well, we did. Drifting is a different can of worms when you've been in combat," Chuck informed her, then headed for the door and paused in the doorway for his parting thought. "Even if I weren't still at risk of brain swelling, I wouldn't do it. I won't blame him if he doesn't either." He gave Raleigh a pointed look, then left.

But Raleigh sighed. "How many of these things do you need?"

Greller held out a placating hand. "Give me ten minutes for recordings. No longer than your first tests. If you don't want to repeat it after that, I will not press the issue."

"Okay." He looked at Mako and shrugged. "What's the worst that could happen, right?"

They let the group set up shop in one of the testing bays off Crimson Typhoon's dock, rather than Gipsy's. "Typhoon's equipment was in best repair," Jin and Cheung pointed out, but they shot Raleigh a dubious look too.

One of Greller's assistants asked Mako to step back into the control room with the others. "Just in case there's any chance of ghost drifting, we don't want to contaminate the results."

Why, why, why were they all so naive? After months and years of listening to gut instinct and little voices warning them in their heads of what was coming from a kaiju, why were they all so willing to disregard that when it came to people?

The neural bridge caps that Metacortex used looked like the first-generation ones from Dr. Lightcap's earliest test vids. Mako reminded herself again and again that the test subjects hadn't run into trouble until they'd tried taking on the neural load of a Jaeger and all its intricate systems.

"Okay," said the man watching the monitors. "Dialing it up in three...two...one..."

At first Raleigh just frowned into the distance, then he seemed to relax, and everyone let their breath out, assuming they'd been worrying over nothing. Greller was making approving noises as she and her assistants muttered over the monitors, and Tendo was looking over their shoulders.

"Well, it doesn't look like he's chasing the rabbit, but with only one set of readings, it's hard to tell...impossible to tell, actually." Tendo made a face at the monitors. "Dude, there's no reference point - shouldn't we have one?"

"Why?"

Mako waved at Raleigh through the glass to catch his eye. He didn't seem to see her. And...something sent a chill down her spine. "Wait."

"It's going fine," Greller said dismissively. The readings looked normal...the drift was established...but there was no way to measure its stability, and that didn't seem to bother the doctors at all.

Tendo cracked first and tapped the comm. "Raleigh, you all right?"

No answer. And something pricked Mako's memory from her drifts with Raleigh - a hazy vision of herself in the conn-pod through Raleigh's eyes, lost in the memory of terror and pain, oblivious to his calls...
She lunged for the door. "Hey, wait, what're you doing?!" protested one of the assistants, and they actually tried to pull her away.

She reacted on something beyond instinct, something white-hot that she tried to keep contained with rigid control, like Sensei and the martial arts coaches and the fightmasters and psychs had all taught her – it exploded back to life and she lashed out like a cobra. Her fist slammed into the first assistant's teeth with terrible form, but all of her substantial strength behind it. The shock and pain that lanced up her arm must have been at least as bad as the impact on him – he flew backward, blood spurted from his mouth.

"GET AWAY FROM ME!" she roared, and that doctor had the sense to freeze and not come any closer. If she had, Mako would have attacked.

"What the f - " she caught a blurry vision of Chuck Hansen grabbing the other in a headlock, and she yanked the door to the test room open –

- the ghost drift flooded out with more power than she would have imagined possible, and she should have fallen back, but she wouldn't, not with him in that room in that torrent. She threw herself forward.

Dark... drowning... alone. Alonealonealone - turning around and around and around - the lights of the conn-pod flickered and he was cold, so cold, lost – ashes falling – hot metal falling – sunlight – darkness – spinning around and around and around...

Blue-white eyes blazed in at him - the deafening roar - Yancy was gonegonegone - the cannon fired and it fell and he was alone and his brain was burning up and crumbling in on itself like the pod walls - darkcoldsilent alone - sunlight and ashes – mama and daddy were gonegonegone and IT was searching for her as she crouched behind a dumpster – darkness and red lights and blaring alarms, water sprayed and Mako was gonegonegone and he was alone again...

Mako was jolted back to reality by the hard floor under her knees as she fell, and from the pressure in her throat, she realized she had started to scream. Raleigh was still blank-faced in the pons chair, eyes distant, but he was in hell, the ghost drift told her, and he was alone.

"Raleigh!" she scrabbled across the floor and pulled herself up next to him, trying to rip the pons unit off him, but someone pounced on her.

She screamed again and clawed at her captor. "Mako, Mako, DON'T! You could kill him!" Only Tendo's familiar voice, full of desperation, made her stop fighting.

"He's fine, he's perfectly fine - "

"SHUT THE FUCK UP! What do we do?!!" Chuck shouted. "Tendo, what do we do?"

"Make it stop make it stop make it stop!" She wasn't aware that she was the one screaming.

There was blood in her eyes...there was ash in his eyes...there was a hole in his soul the shape of his brother...there were holes in the skyline of Tokyo the shape of a monster...there were holes in the conn-pod...a hole in the bottom of the ocean...below her...above him...below...

Alone...

"Give me the other unit - GIVE IT TO ME, YOU FUCKING QUACK! MAKO!" Tendo shook her hard, and she managed to focus on him. "Listen! He's locked in just like you were, but if we just rip it off, we'll hurt him. You need to bridge in, drift with him and calm him down, get him centered so
we can deactivate."

She nodded vigorously, barely able to make more than a grunt of assent, but she fumbled to assist
him in getting the cap on her head. She scrambled back to Raleigh's side even as Tendo counted
down the handshake and the stupid doctor still dithered in the background...

She plunged into the full drift and tuned entirely into Raleigh's mind. Alonealonealone...
YANCYMAKOMAMADADDYSENSEIMAKO! He was screaming no less than she had been. The
memory of those hellish hours in Gipsy had warped still further in his subconscious, and with no
partner to temper and help balance it, he was completely lost.

Reality twisted and warped, sending them both tumbling out of control…onto a Tokyo street full of
falling ash, a little girl and a little boy screaming and fleeing from a giant monster, being ripped
from the conn-pod and torn from his brother, an escape pod carried her away, relief that she was
safe but he couldn't breathe and oh God, he was alone again…

Mako was only vaguely aware of his face under her hands.

"Raleigh! RALEIGH, look at me!"

He was there in front of her in the lab. He was there in front of her in Gipsy's shattered conn-pod.
He stared, bewildered, haunted. Mako couldn't help recoiling when the nightmare reset itself and
Knifehead's claw came through the hull to Raleigh's shout of warning, and Yancy was there again
- "Raleigh, listen to me - " Then he was torn away again and Raleigh screamed and convulsed and
the dark and the terror and the crushing weight of the neural load left him writhing in the harness.
Yancy gone, Mako gone, Raleigh gone, her parents gone, Sensei gone, everyone gone – alone -

She wrapped her metaphorical arms around him in the conn-pod where she had never been, ripped
open and torn in half in the Gulf of Alaska, and shouted at the top of her physical and mental lungs:
"RALEIGH!"

He blinked. He saw her. "Mako?"

"This is just a memory, none of it is real - " he'd said.

But she hadn't believed him before. Why should he believe her now? How could he escape when
he could see and hear and feel this agony? "You're not alone," she whispered, slipping into
Japanese. "I'm here, Raleigh-chan. You can leave this place."

"But...Yancy...M-Mako"

"I know. But he wouldn't want you to stay here." He shivered in the drift and in the chair, and she
could hear voices. Raleigh heard them too and squeezed his eyes shut. She felt the vision
weakening and tightened her grip. "That's it. You've avenged Yancy, remember?"

The conn-pod faded, but they hadn't escaped. Ashes fell and she struggled not to look at the
overturned cars and the red shoe. "We've avenged my family."

He remembered, and the world turned red with warning lights and sparks and the conn-pod was
still half-empty. "We destroyed the Breach. They will never hurt anyone again."

Raleigh sobbed, and the drift dissolved around them as hands fumbled to get the caps off their
heads. There was so much noise - Chuck and Cheung were with them along with several
Shatterdome meditechs, all shouting at the Metacortex doctors, the Metacortex doctors were
arguing, and Tendo was simply roaring at them, pointing at the monitors.
"You all right?" Chuck finally stopped shouting profanity to check on them. "Mako?" He tapped her cheeks, then Raleigh's. "Raleigh? Come on, say something."

"We're - " Raleigh tried to get up, but his legs gave way, and he wound up on the floor in Mako's arms. She held him and pressed her face into his hair. The nightmare might be gone, but the pain wasn't.

It never would be, she realized bleakly. She could drift with him, comfort him and hold him, but a part of him would always be trapped in that place, just like a part of her was always trapped in the ashes clutching a shoe. Even without the renewed ghost drift, she ached along with him, wanting to reach into that gaping, burning hole and find what he'd lost.

In the doorway, she saw Jake. Her brother. Wide-eyed, half shocked, half angry as he tried to comprehend what had happened. But he was still here, and that was such a breathtaking relief after the stabbing, crushing agony of being alone…

Oh, Yancy, why are you gone? He misses you so much.

Tendo and the Weis threw the Metacortex personnel into the brig before Tendo even bothered to get stitches from the gashes to his arm from Mako nearly slamming him through the floor. "That stupid bitch obviously had no clue what was happening in the drift and if her credentials were half as good as her papers say, she'd have shut it down!" Tendo fumed. "There's fraud in here somewhere; dunno who the fuck these fuckers are, but I want to find out!"

"I want to see them," Jake Pentecost insisted. Before Tendo could argue, he snapped, "Yeah, I know they're sedated, just lemme sit with 'em!"

"Okay, okay! Christ," Tendo rubbed his eyes. What a goddamn clusterfuck they'd managed the minute Marshal Hansen was gone! "I'll go with you. I wanna look in on them too."

Jake broke away from Tendo as soon as he found Mako awake – sort-of. She looked doped up, while Raleigh was out cold but still twitching restlessly. "Mako?" Jake sounded not a day over his sixteen years as he seized his adoptive sister's arms, giving Tendo a pang of anxiety. "You know me?"

Mako nodded sluggishly and, to Tendo's further shock, cuddled into his arms. Tendo went to the other side of the bed to check on Rals. Shit, this reminded Tendo way too much of those first hellish days and weeks after Knifehead. He was drugged unconscious, but still twitching in his sleep, fear visible on his face. Tendo cautiously put a hand on his head. "It's okay, Rals. It's okay. Mako's right here."

Yancy wasn't. Yancy would never be, and Tendo didn't need any drift expertise to know that Yancy's final moments had made a brutal appearance during that solo drift. But at least Rals had Mako now – and Mako had him.

Jake coaxed his sister into lying down and cuddling up against Raleigh's side, calming them both a little. Tendo moved away and went to Dr. Tan's side. "How bad is he?"

"I don't think there's actual brain damage – or at least not any more than Raleigh already had," Tan murmured. "This is drift shock, pure and simple, and a major traumatic episode. Mako was able to tell me a little; he saw his own memories as well as hers and they ran together, completely uncontrollable. Call it a hunch, but I don't think solo drift is a possibility for experienced pilots, least of all Raleigh Becket. Without a partner, they can't direct their memories or their
attention, and every bad memory they've ever experienced spirals out of control."

"Shit. So if we thought he was recovering after partnering with Mako…"

"Yeah. This is gonna be a huge setback, and it's more important than ever to keep the press and the politicians away from both of them. Make no mistake -- Mako was in a recovery of her own when she got here, as those dipshits in DC so impolitely pointed out the other day, and she had to climb into hell to get him out."

"Fuck."

Even as the drugs were cut back (for her, anyway), Mako found it hard to give a damn about what was going on in Washington anymore. Crew came in to give them updates, and she tried to pay attention, but between being unable to sleep without drugs and then with her brain a foggy mess of nightmares, nothing else really seemed to matter.

Jake would probably have moved into the infirmary if Dr. Tan had let him, but as it was, he was there every time Mako woke up. Tendo and the veterans of the original Team Gipsy definitely had a rotating shift set up - not unlike what they'd done to be at Raleigh's bedside after Yancy died, she realized with a mental flinch.

"You okay?" Jake whispered to avoid waking Raleigh.

Mako nodded. Liar. They both knew she was exceedingly not okay. She couldn't control where her mind went now even with the drift over. Jake's face...she was twelve and he was seven and Tamsin made them a blanket fort on the hotel room floor, and they stayed up giggling and whispering for hours. She hadn't felt like a child again until that day, more than a year since Tokyo.

She'd been thirteen when she gave into his pleading and told him about Tokyo. He'd been appalled when she said "it's all my fault. I ran away from them, and they were searching for me when they died."

"There was a kaiju!" he'd protested. "It's nobody's fault for trying to run away from it."

It had been years before she believed that. By the time she arrived at the Jaeger Academy, she had understood it, if only because blaming herself might hurt her chances in the drift. It was the kaiju's fault her parents were dead, not hers.

Raleigh'd never reached a conclusion like that. The closest he'd come was drifting alongside it, letting it live in his mind and his heart, because as far as he was concerned, it was a fundamental truth of the universe: Yancy was my fault. My fault.

She hadn't had the opportunity to really challenge him on it yet, so she'd just held him when those thoughts hit harder some days than others, tried to distract him the way he tried to distract himself.

When she could manage to think coherently without spiraling into a crazed combination of Raleigh's memories and her own, she wondered what had gone so catastrophically wrong. "Why did that happen?" she managed to ask Dr. Tan. "I used to use the solo simulator at every chance I had, before..." before Raleigh, before Gipsy, before everything. "It never felt like that."

"The solo simulator wasn't a drift, not like what those quacks set up," Dr. Tan told her. "They based their design on Dr. Lightcap's published work, but there's a lot they didn't understand about the early design of the neural handshake for a solo pilot. Instead of just connecting the pilot to the machinery, they put Raleigh into a neural feedback loop. I think any person would've had a bad
reaction, but someone whose brain was already trained to drift with a partner in a Jaeger and had that drift broken catastrophically - this is about as close to the worst case scenario as we could have gotten."

At least he's not dead. Mako had no doubt that was the true "worst case scenario" that absolutely none of the personnel were willing to say aloud. Or that we didn't both come out with brain damage - more than either of us already had, anyway.

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

Coming Soon: Our heroes succeed in minimizing the public fallout from the drift disaster, but Raleigh and Mako have a harder challenge with defeating the fallout in their minds and hearts, as they and the Jaeger Program try to figure out what happens after canceling the apocalypse in Chapter Eight: Point Me!

PLEASE don't forget to review!

Original Character Guide

Dr. Patricia Greller: An American scientist of dubious credentials and even more dubious ethics who is determined that her company, Metacortex, will pioneer in post-war pons science - and make her a billionaire, of course. She's based on multiple real world slimeballs in multiple nations who've shamed their professions, damaged their fields, and cost lives without a qualm.

Dr. Steven Tan: Chief medical officer of the Jaeger Program, originally at the Jaeger Academy and gradually migrated to Hong Kong as the program closed down. Chinese-American, early 40s.

President Jerald "Jerry" Lunk: President of the United States. Billionaire hotel mogul who ran on a campaign of "make America safe again" in 2024, proponent of the Wall, now arguing over who has the strongest Jaegers. Likes to use Twitter. No, he's not based on anyone in the real world. Seriously. No, really.
Point Me

Chapter Summary

Our heroes succeed in minimizing the public fallout from the solo drift disaster, but Raleigh and Mako have a harder challenge with defeating the fallout in their minds and hearts, as they and the world try to figure out where to go next.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Thank you all so much for the incredible feedback for last chapter! Please keep it coming! My history for Jake Pentecost (which bears no resemblance to his history in the sequel apart from his name) is in Chapters 11-12 of Tales From The Front Lines, including the explosion with his maternal grandparents about his father. The days after Knifehead that Tendo and Chuck remember are in Chapters 16-18 of Aurora Australis.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Eight: Point Me

Mako wasn't sure if the sensations she felt in her mind were damage to her own brain or her partners. The dark places, she suspected, were Raleigh's, not her own. But Dr. Tán had warned her that losing consciousness from oxygen deprivation in combat had broken the drift, and it had left scars in her brain. "You may never experience any cognitive or physical dysfunction, but there was an injury that you need to be aware of."

If I ever pilot again, Mako knew that was the unspoken point. If I ever fight again.

Would Jaegers ever be needed again so desperately? Well, that was the question on the whole planet's mind. While Mako had still been watching, the American Congress and the UN delegates had pressed that question to Marshal Hansen, Sasha Kaidanovsky, Aleksis Kaidanovsky, Dr. Geiszler, both Gottliebs, and every other witness they could get onto the stand:

"Can we be sure the Breach is closed permanently and the kaiju won't come back? Can we be one hundred percent certain?"

The answer had been "of course not" every single time - well, Dr. Geiszler's had been, "of course, not, what kind of dumbass assumes that?!"

As much as Newt's mouth tended to make Mako and Sensei cringe, she'd grinned then as the rest of the personnel in the Hong Kong mess hall whooped and applauded. Newt would be delighted by the memes he'd generated.

Mako was relieved that so far there was no talk of scrapping Crimson Typhoon, and so far the only question should be how many Jaegers should be built now, and to what purposes other than sentries in case of another, future Breach.
And what purpose for me, a Ranger, without a co-pilot?

Like Sensei after Onibaba, Raleigh could never pilot a combat mission again - not if he wanted to survive it. He'd have a fifty-fifty chance if he ever set foot in a Jaeger again, even for a test drive.

So where did that leave Mako?

Her eyes fell on Jake, playing a game on his tablet, and he caught her staring at him. "What?"

"Nothing," she mumbled. How selfish to think this way less than two months after the Breach. She'd all but begged Sensei to be Raleigh's co-pilot - while telling Raleigh to his face he was not right to be pilot of the mission in his own Jaeger - oblivious to what he was putting himself through just to set foot in a Shatterdome again. He'd saved her life when she failed in battle - when by all rights, she'd failed in drift testing with almost-fatal results, as the American Congress had pointed out.

She'd practically dragged Raleigh to her bed. Now she was already thinking of piloting with someone else?

"Hey," Jake put a hand on hers as her eyes welled up. She didn't say anything, and to her relief, he didn't ask what was wrong. No doubt he was imagining it was just memories from the bad drift.

What do I do now? What use am I to anyone now?

Chuck made the call to his old man to tell him what had happened. Herc blurted out, "Fuck!" the minute Chuck said Raleigh had agreed to the experiment. Yeah, Dad knew where this was going. We all should've seen where this was going. We fucking dropped the ball. No matter what those fancy credentials said, we should've told her to get fucked, that none of us were gonna be her guinea pigs.

Why the hell had Becket said yes? What the hell had he been thinking?

"What've you been doin' for five years? Something pretty important, I reckon?"

"Look, they cancelled the Jaeger Program because of mediocre pilots, it's simple as that!"

It sounded like shit those American Senators had been saying. But it wasn't, was it? It was shit Chuck fucking Hansen had said. All weighing on Chuck's mind more than ever.

"Chuck? You there?"

Chuck blinked. Dad was frowning, poking the holocam. Sasha and Aleksis were now behind him. "Sorry. I shoulda stopped it. The whole thing sounded creepy, but when he'd said yes, I figured it was...damn. I shouldn't have let 'em."

Herc looked startled, at a loss for words, and it was Sasha who leaned over his shoulder and said, "You're not to blame for Becket being deceived, Chuck. We must find out what Choi has learned from questioning them."

Chuck got Tendo, who was now officially more pissed off than Chuck had ever seen him - and Tendo'd had a lot of reasons to be pissed off in the five years Chuck had known him. Tendo too was cursing himself. "I should've checked all this shit before we let them anywhere near the equipment, let alone a pilot! All the credentials from Lightcap and Schoenfeld are fraudulent."
Lightcap never responded to their requests for endorsements; Schoenfeld read their papers and told them their theories were half-assed shit. Oh, and Dustin Krieger and Lawrence Taylor may say they're a hundred percent behind us, but I think they're behind whatever makes them money. Their endorsements are legit."

"Yeah, that doesn't surprise me. Krieger and Taylor signed off on anything that'd make them look good before, why should it change now?" Herc growled. "What do the triplets think? Can we get these bastards arrested by the local authorities?"

"They're working on it," said Tendo. "Local authorities just rubber-stamped the documents when they saw all the big names, but Cheung and Jin and their crew have a lot of clout. They think they can get all the authorizations revoked - but once arrests happen, Krieger and Taylor and whichever US bigshots are backing these assholes are gonna scream."

"Maybe," said Sasha, smirking. "Or they may distance themselves and leave Metacortex and its operatives to face the fire. We can encourage that quietly while we're here."

Tendo sighed. "I've actually got some sympathetic press contacts, but not sure if I should use 'em. I don't want to put Raleigh and Mako through a media shitstorm - another one, anyway."

"Yeah, no, don't involve the press," said Herc. "I just want these fuckers to get their asses handed to them and to make it clear that nobody comes swanning in and turns former pilots into guinea pigs for profit, and if they try, they'll fucking pay for it."

"Got it."

"How are they?" asked Aleksis. "Mako and Raleigh?"

Tendo sighed. "Sedated. Tán says there's no full-blown brain damage, but this has triggered both of them all to hell." He tapped the bruise on his neck. "Mako nearly put me through the floor when I stopped her from just ripping the rig off Raleigh's head. He went catatonic; she freaked the fuck out."

"Jesus," Herc muttered. "Tell Tán I want to be in the loop. When they wake up, I want to know."

"Mako's woken up a couple of times. Raleigh's still under. She's coherent, but that's about it. She hasn't said much. Jake's with her, and we're all taking turns looking in on them."

Like after Knifehead. Chuck remembered from Herc's memories, what he'd witnessed in Anchorage. Only then Becket was the one screaming. It didn't matter, really. If a driftmare was scream-worthy, both pilots would scream, just sometimes at different times. Chuck knew that all too well.

After Taurax, Chuck had had driftmares of dragging his son's battered body through Striker's superstructure as water cascaded after them and the kaiju's eyes glared through the torn conn-pod - Herc hadn't screamed at the time, but Chuck had woken up screaming more than once.

They'd both woken up screaming from trying to stop Rakshasa from tearing into Vulcan Specter.

"What else do we do now? If you're not gonna tell the press about this, you can't tell Congress - they'll tell everybody," he said.

"Yeah, it's just two more days 'till they adjourn, though they'll probably call us back," said Herc. "Whatever. The Chinese government wants to back us, Japan and Russia are coming back on board, and the damn French are dreaming about Jaegers for anti-terrorism. The Americans'll
Tendo was expecting a full repeat of the days after Knifehead. Sometimes it took Allison and the baby to remind him that it wasn't 2020.

Somebody from Team Gipsy Version 1 (as the snarkier personnel called it) was always in the infirmary at Rals and Mako's side, accompanied by Jake Pentecost more often than not. When Raleigh started to come out from under the drugs, Tendo tried to chivvy Jake out of the infirmary, but the kid wouldn't have it.

"Listen...after a blowup like that, pilots...can flip out. It's really hard to see," Tendo explained clumsily.

Jake Pentecost gave Tendo a "no shit, Sherlock" look that reminded him half of Marshal Pentecost, half of Chuck Hansen. And a dash of Rals before Knifehead. "I know what drift shock is and what it does to pilots; I'm not gonna faint."

Yeah, fair enough. However much of a surprise his existence had been to everyone, Stacker Pentecost's son was unlikely to panic even if Raleigh and/or Mako did wake up screaming.

But they didn't wake up screaming.

Raleigh twitched awake suddenly, and everyone held their breath, but he wrapped an arm around Mako and looked around with clear eyes. "What day's it?" he mumbled.

"It's been about thirty-six hours," said Dr. Tán. "Do you remember everything?"

Raleigh's eyes lost focus, and Tendo slipped into the past again, because he knew that expression all too well. "Yeah," Raleigh whispered. "I remember."

Mako stirred herself a few moments later, and put a hand on his face. He pressed his forehead to hers and they both shut their eyes.

Neither of them said anything for hours.

They both ate and drank when the medics brought their trays, moving in slow, trembling synch like pilots did after hard combat. Tendo and Jake and the other non-medics hovered and talked to each other and pretended not to be watching closely. Every now and then, somebody'd step over to them, ask if they were okay, if they needed anything. It was always a nod or a headshake.

Chuck Hansen even came in. Well, that alone didn't shock Tendo so much; Chuck always checked in on injured pilots, and no doubt he'd send a report on to Herc. But it was the way he looked at Mako and Raleigh that threw Tendo, with a softness that Tendo hadn't seen...well, ever, from Chuck Hansen towards Mako Mori or Raleigh Becket. Chuck was capable of being gentle, especially in the infirmaries towards pilots and personnel. Tendo'd seen less and less of it during the last year of the war, especially after Team Vulcan and Team Ronin went down.

Then again, the last year of the war'd been so frenzied, Tendo himself had barely had a chance to be around Chuck in the infirmaries at the same time. Indra Hassan had been the one who said Chuck seemed to care less and less.

Maybe the old Chuck was coming back, but...there was something more in his eyes as he surreptitiously watched Raleigh and Mako. Something...different. Concern, no question, but...like...
Marshal Pentecost. He'd never failed to look in on pilots and crew in the infirmary either. Always poised, always controlled, but now Tendo remembered that look. In Marshal's eyes had been something much deeper than just a commander's duty to his people.

Something took a sharp breath, and Tendo turned to see Jake Pentecost staring at Chuck Hansen like...well, like he was seeing a ghost. Chuck blinked, met Jake's eyes, and actually cringed a little, then he was all Chuck again...maybe a few years younger, the teenaged pilot prodigy so unsure and desperate to hide it that Tendo barely remembered anymore.

Chuck backed out the infirmary door and fled. Jake actually started to go after him, but Tendo put a hand out. "Hey, no," he said. Jake – damn, the look in his eyes reminded Tendo of Chuck at sixteen, which made all too much sense. "I get it, I really do, but...remember," he lowered his voice even further, moving subtly as far away from Raleigh and Mako as he could so there was no chance they'd overhear. "He and your dad drifted in combat right before you dad died. There's nothing more catastrophic to a pilot, and these first months, they're really hard. I don't blame you, but give him time, 'kay?"

Jake dropped his eyes, but after a long silence, he nodded. Tendo squeezed his shoulder.

"No!"

At Raleigh's voice, everybody in the infirmary jumped. Rals was leaning away from the nurse who was trying to give him an injection. Dr. Tán dropped his tablet and came around the beds. "What? Raleigh, it's the same med we've -"

"I know! I'm good," Raleigh moved with more energy than anybody expected, hurriedly pushing the bedclothes aside, and Mako went in unison with him, both of them scrambling out of bed. "It's not – we don't need anymore sedatives. I mean," he shook his head and looked at Mako. She nodded. "We'll be okay. We just need some time." She wrapped one arm tight around his waist. "May we go back to quarters?"

Dr. Tán frowned and went back for his discarded tablet, studying it. Jake brushed past Tendo and dared to say what everyone else was thinking. "You up to it already?"

Rals actually mustered a smile at the kid. Tendo hadn't expected that, and judging by the murmur from the others, neither had they. "Yeah. It's not like we've got a kaiju to fight anytime soon." He slid his arm around Mako, the two of them so physically close they might've been melding.

Dr. Tán looked up and announced, "Okay, if you're certain the shock isn't bad enough to keep you from functioning, I'll release you. But," he raised his stylus. "You're to report at the mess hall for meals – take it somewhere else, but you get your nutrition, and report back here every twenty-four hours for a check-up until further notice, and if you miss either, I'll hunt you both down and keep you here until I'm satisfied you're not a risk to yourselves. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," said Mako.

She and Raleigh hurried out of the infirmary, still clutching each other, but steady on their feet. Everyone stared after them. "Are you sure about this, sir?" Tendo asked.

Dr. Tán sighed. "Not exactly. On one hand, there's no physical damage; they're alert and coherent. On the other, they just got mindfucked with what I have no doubt was all of both of their worst memories. I have no idea what that's done to them."
"Look, dude, if you want to gamble your lives, your country's lives, and the whole planet's lives that the aliens who sent the kaiju aren't going to treat this as just a setback, that's on you!" Newt snapped at Senator Block. "I'm telling you, if they were willing to wait it out sixty-five million years ago before trying again, they might just take another shot!"

Herc managed not to grin at the way many of the other Americans were exchanging looks. Some of the politicians were affronted, some...disconcerted, undoubtedly imagining the impact on their polling numbers, the reporters were practically salivating, and the spectators were glaring daggers mostly at the politicians.

"How can humanity trust someone who drifted with the kaiju hive mind?!" exclaimed Block.

Newt raised his hands like claws and, hilariously, half the panel jumped. "Yeeessss, I've totally been possessed, Senator! That's why I'm standing here telling you not to let your guard down, it's all part of my evil plan, I'm just not very good at making evil plans, bwahahahahh!"

"Newton!" Hermann hissed, but there were guffaws and applause from the spectators, and even some of the politicians (the ones supporting the Jaeger Program) were grinning.

"Dr. Geiszler, please, this is a serious conversation," said a Congresswoman who'd spent her time outside her political offices working with attack survivors throughout the war. Herc had liked her, but now couldn't remember her name – oh, there it was right in front of her seat: A. Wyatt. Her voice cracked from stifled laughter, but she went on, "We appreciate your point, but let's have some decorum."

Surprisingly, Newt straightened. "Yes, ma'am, sorry."

There was a long, startled pause among the Jaeger Program delegates and everyone else who knew anything at all about Newton Geiszler. "Well, that was new," Hermann muttered.

"I doubt anyone is going to blame the kaiju for Newt's sudden ability to use tact, love," Vanessa Gottlieb murmured, leaning over Hermann's shoulder. Herc had to look away to his snickering hidden as Hermann blushed.

"How much do you suggest the American government budget for continuing to operate a Jaeger Program, Dr. Geiszler?" asked a Congressman.

"Congressman, I'm a xenobiologist, not an accountant. You've got people you pay for that; ask them."

This time, Herc definitely heard Hermann stifle a snort of laughter. Fortunately, the roar of laughter and applause hid the sound from the microphones.

The session abruptly adjourned – not because Newt had freaked out too many of the panelists. Instead, Herc, the Kaidanovskys, and the scientists joined a crowd gathered around screens watching the Chinese Prime Minister and a group of their military making an announcement. "China's security council has voted unanimously to resume funding for the Hong Kong Shatterdome and support the restoration of Crimson Typhoon, as well as the building of two more Jaegers. We have determined the expenditures are warranted as a preventative for any future threats, and are receiving proposals from private and public organizations for other uses of Jaeger technology for the betterment of our people."

"Way to go, Wei Tang clan," murmured Newt. "Any word on those quacks who fucked up
Raleigh's head?"

"Quietly removed from the Dome today and on their way for questioning by the Chinese authorities for industrial espionage and falsified credentials resulting in injury to persons under government protection. Krieger and Taylor know about it, but they're not exactly running to the press to express their outrage."

"The sessions tomorrow and Friday are canceled so President Lunk can meet with his joint chiefs and security committees," said Sasha with a shameless grin. "Russia is preparing to follow China's lead: the Vladivostok Shatterdome will re-open, and both nations are in talks with Japan for a 'mutual defense' treaty in the event of a future incursion one day."

"So their domestic Jaegers will handle domestic problems, unless it's a kaiju attack," mused Vanessa Gottlieb, as Hermann bounced the baby against his chest. "Then we resume the original deployment procedures."

"Exactly," said Sasha.

"Big question's going to be, what are these 'domestic deployments' gonna look like?" said Herc.

"Where do the rest of us go from here?" asked Newt. "Just back to the Dome and wait for them to figure themselves out?"

Sasha shook her head. "We don't stop simply because they do. We stay ahead of them. They'll look for other ways to get to our people. They'll look for ways to turn Jaeger Tech into weapons of war and domination. We won't allow it."

"Bloody well right," Herc growled. "Let's talk with Cheung and Jin when we get back – away from any ears. China's been good to us, but some in their government may have bright ideas for Jaeger tech that we pilots have a problem with."

"The boys won't stand for it," said Aleksis. "And they have great weight among their people. They'll be with us."

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**Hong Kong Shatterdome...**

It was a little awkward for Jake sometimes being in Mako's room with Raleigh asleep in her bed. Then again, both she and Raleigh looked so wrung-out, Jake doubted getting frisky was anywhere on their minds. (And if he ever got a hint it was, he'd be out of that room so fast the corridor cameras would probably miss him.)

"He doesn't sleep easily," Mako said at one point, sitting on the opposite end of the bed working on something as Raleigh dozed. "When he does, I let him even if it's the middle of the day. When things are bad, he can't sleep for days. I was afraid that would happen again now."

Jake had been surreptitiously reading the Chinese government's translated recruiting announcement for their new official Jaeger Program. There'd be three Chinese Jaegers, counting Crimson Typhoon once he was repaired, and they'd need pilots. The Chinese had always had a mini-Academy of their own not far from their Shatterdome. Now it would be their own, and they'd train pilots of their own, but they weren't limiting it to their own nationals.

"I used to think about...going for Academy, when I was old enough. I knew Dad wouldn't let me 'till I was close to eighteen like he did you, but once the U.S. closed the Academy..."
Mako smiled, if sadly. "You'd make a good pilot. He thought so."

"Remember when they let me have a go in the fighter simulator?" Jake asked, hoping to cheer her up. "Don't be so sure."

It'd been a very realistic flight simulator for jet fighters at one of the Royal Air Force bases Jake begged to visit when he was thirteen. Dad had once been stationed there with Jake's Mum, Aunt Luna, and Aunt Tamsin. Gran and Gramps had been against it, but Jake had been just tall enough to meet the minimum height requirements, and Dad had enough clout for the men in charge to let him have a go.

He'd thrown up. Gran and Gramps had been appalled, Dad had been reassuring that it happened often, and Mako'd tried to be sympathetic but couldn't stop giggling. "Maybe I wouldn't throw up in a Jaeger," he'd suggested, only for Gran and Gramps to look even more appalled.

"The pons simulator can make you throw up too," Mako had warned him.

After the explosion with Gran and Gramps over Jake "following your father's violent ways," Jake had been determined that even if he couldn't pilot a Jaeger, he would become a pilot of something. I'm not like Chuck Hansen. I don't turn on my Dad, he'd thought.

Weird, and really uncomfortable to remember that now. "What're you going to do now?" he asked his sister. He didn't show her the recruiting announcement. Mako was already part of the Jaeger Program, and Jake really doubted the Chinese would be in a hurry to kick her out just because she wasn't Chinese. Hell, from what he knew of the Wei brothers, they'd throw a royal fit if that happened.

Mako sighed, moving to a chair next to her bed so she could rub Raleigh's arm as he tossed in his sleep. He calmed down just from her touching him, like a restless cat. "I keep thinking about that. I don't know. I want…I don't think I could leave and be a civilian. Not now. Maybe not ever, as long as the Jaeger Program exists in some way. But I feel there are other things I should do now, now that I have time. I'm just…not sure."

"Like what?"

It was a very long time before Mako managed to answer, and when she did, it was so quiet he could barely hear her. "I want to go back to Tanegashima," she whispered. "I haven't seen it since my family died."

Jake inhaled slowly against the sudden churning of his stomach. Like Jake, Mako still had a few blood relatives left. Her father had had a brother, a sister in law, a few uncles and aunts. But none of them had taken Mako in after Onibaba. She'd confided in him once that they'd never liked her mother, and had been disappointed when Mako, a girl, was the only child born to her father. Dad had pulled considerable weight as pilot of Coyote Tango against Onibaba – something he did not like doing – just to secure a few things for Mako to inherit, and all of them were in this little room. A 16th century traditional Samurai sword, a tea set, a hanbō, a few toys and books. A faded poster of a J-pop children's band Mako had loved. A threadbare pusheen cookie plush that she used to sleep with who still had a place of honor next to her mother's tea things.

All of what Mako had left of her blood family could fit into one small box. One of the few times Jake had seen Dad really angry (naturally, when he'd been hiding and eavesdropping without Dad and Mako's counselor knowing), was one of the first times Jake met her in person in Lima. They'd not been sure how they'd get along, only to run each other ragged to the point that Mako had needed a nap and Jake had needed a bath to get all the dirt off him.
He'd heard Dad talking to Mako's counselor with an ease that he never seemed to have towards Gran and Gramps. Jake had been a little jealous, even if Mako was wicked fun, and slipped into a crawlspace to spy on them. "You know there are limits to the amount of personal property you can bring to a Shatterdome," Dad had been fuming, pacing back and forth. "Most of the crews really struggle to cull their belongings enough, even when we stretch the rules. I don't have to stretch the rules for Mako's things – she's a twelve-year-old girl who should have armloads of toys, music, decorations, and I should be having to rein in her spending habits, but she owns next to nothing. With her clothes, she fills half a child's sized trunk. It's bloody obscene."

"Have you tried to interest her in more things?" The counselor – what was her name? Dr. Schneider, had asked patiently.

"Of course. She likes music. I bought her an iPod with the highest level of storage, hoping it would tempt her. She has added to it. She likes the music here in Lima when we take her out. K-pop seems to interest her now, but I know there were bands she liked at home before the attack. She won't buy them. She has one poster from before."

"It's been less than two years, Marshal. You're going to need patience and so is she. It may be some time before she's ready to face all she left behind."

Jake blinked back to the present, wondering if Mako'd noticed, but she was staring off into space herself. He cautiously came around the bed, careful not to wake Raleigh, whose sleep had calmed again, and touched her shoulder. She blinked. "You okay?" When she nodded, he pressed, "Are you sure? I mean…don't take this the wrong way, but from what you told me, I'd say none of those people back there deserve to see you or call you their family."

"I've thought that," she admitted, her eyes narrowing. "Raleigh thinks the same." On cue, he sighed in his sleep. "His father left him, his brother, and his sister after their mother died – days after their mother died. Only Yancy was of age. He simply deserted them. Raleigh was afraid he'd come back seeking fame after Yamarashi, but it turned out he had died months before. They never knew quite what to think about it."

"Sounds like that's a git who got exactly what he deserved, Jake thought, but he swallowed it. If Mako got upset, Raleigh'd almost surely wake up.

"Whatever the PPDC decides to do, it's gonna take at least a few months to sort themselves out," Jake said carefully. "You should do – both of you – you should do stuff for yourselves for awhile. You've earned that much."

Mako sighed. "But in the end, I must choose where I'll go and what I'll be. I want to be with the Jaeger Program, if not as a pilot, at least as part of it. Raleigh may not want to be surrounded by this anymore. He came to save the world."

Raleigh mumbled, "He came to save th'world, but he stayed with you. He's not goin' anywhere if you're not, and he's just fine with that."

Mako huffed and ruffled his hair. "How long have you been eavesdropping on us?!" she demanded.

"Bout thirty seconds, tha's all." He did look bleary-eyed when he opened them and looked at her, but the way he looked at her. Damn, Jake wanted someone to look at him that way someday. Mako slid her hand into Raleigh's, and Jake knew he was invisible but didn't mind so much, because he'd read a few stories, seen a few movies about soulmates, but never really sat next to them and got to see the way they looked at each other.
"So you would put up with all this noise and chaos if I wanted to stay?" Mako asked. Her voice was playful, but there was something dead-earnest underneath it that even Jake could hear.

Raleigh shifted, shaking off the last of sleep and didn't break eye contact with her. "Yes." There was no hesitation in his voice. "I want to stay with you. I don't care where." Never mind hesitation, it was almost desperation. Jake fidgeted, sensing there shouldn't be an audience for this conversation, but not sure how to get out without being rude.

Mako stroked back his mussed hair. "I won't leave you, Raleigh-chan. Ever. We'll decide later where we'll go and what we do." She wrinkled her nose. "Once we know what the options are."

**To Be Continued...**

Chapter End Notes

**Coming Soon:** They may be physically recovered, but the drift disaster has triggered painful memories, and Mako forces Raleigh to confront what he's been carrying inside since Knifehead in **Chapter Nine: Listen To Me!**

**PLEASE don't forget to review!**

**Original Character Guide**

Dr. Steven Tán: Chief medical officer of the Jaeger Program, originally at the Jaeger Academy and gradually migrated to Hong Kong as the program closed down. Chinese-American, early 40s.

President Jerald "Jerry" Lunk: President of the United States. Billionaire hotel mogul who ran on a campaign of "make America safe again" in 2024, proponent of the Wall, now arguing over who has the strongest Jaegers. Likes to use Twitter. No, he's not based on anyone in the real world. Seriously. No, really.

Senator Gill Block: United States Senator from the plains states, was pro-Wall and backed by inland real estate owners, now part of the joint committee investigating the Jaeger Program and debating America's future with it.

Congresswoman Andrea Wyatt: United States Representative from the Pacific Northwest states, pro-Jaeger Program throughout her career, now part of the joint committee.
Listen To Me

Chapter Summary

They may be physically recovered, but the drift disaster has triggered painful memories, and Mako forces Raleigh to confront what he's been carrying inside since Knifehead.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Thank you all so much for the reviews! Please keep them coming! This chapter contains the big reveal of theories I've had since I first saw Pacific Rim and started this series four years ago! The conversations Mako remembers took place in *Aurora Borealis*, Paul Terrence's perspective of Raleigh's time on the Wall is Chapter 9 of *Tales From The Front Lines*, and he appears in Chapter 30 and the last few chapters of *Aurora Australis*.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Nine: Listen To Me

Mako woke up alone. That by itself wasn't enough to panic her; she could still feel Raleigh. He was in the Kwoon, putting himself through his paces with the hanbō like he always did when he couldn't sleep…but somehow this was different. This was…more like a memory, of something he used to do at the Wall. She got up, threw on some clothes, and stalked off down the hall.

She nearly plowed into Tendo Choi as she approached the Kwoon door. "Oh, thank God, I was just about to call you," he muttered. "He's been at it six hours; that's a bit much even for him." They could hear the hiss of the hanbō in the air even through the door.

Mako swore under her breath in Japanese – not that using Japanese did much good, because Tendo just muttered his agreement, also in Japanese. They stormed into the Kwoon where Raleigh, who must've heard them coming, didn't even break his rhythm. He was sweat drenched and had a look in his eyes (to say nothing of how he felt in the ghost drift) like if he wasn't trying to go until he dropped dead, he wouldn't be particularly sorry if he did drop dead.

"What the hell are you doing, man?!" Tendo exclaimed.

Ratego didn't turn around. "Yoga, what's it look like?"

Tendo started forward, but Mako caught him shoulder and pulled him back. She shook her head. *Let me handle this*. She went for a hanbō of her own and charged into the ring, and their staffs crashed together in a full-blown volley. Raleigh should've been exhausted by now, but he was in the rhythm and Mako wasn't – she also hadn't stretched. It was fast, physical, frustrated, and on the edges of her peripheral vision, Mako saw Tendo wincing at how hard their blows rang down the bōs.
Mako knew what Raleigh was looking for: numbness until exhaustion dragged him under. No. No more of that. You've ground yourself and your heart under for too long. You can't start again. Even those brief thoughts earned her a lot of hits, but she and Raleigh weren't counting tonight, and her job here wasn't to win the match or even establish drift compatibility.

God knew they'd taken care of establishing drift compatibility.

She found her balance again and hammered into him, driving him back – his teeth bared, eyes starting to flash as if his opponent was Chuck Hansen, and he rallied, furious at being denied the escape into emptiness he sought. She practically growled at him. No. You're not going. Fight me.

The hanbōs struck each other so hard, Mako felt it in her teeth, and they hit each other hard enough to leave bruises when the momentum wouldn't let them stop in time for a point.

"Mori-san, motto seigyo shinasai," Sensei had said. More control.

She was in control this time...but unlike last time, she was doing all in her power to drive her partner out of control. What would Sensei think about that?

That drift of attention earned her some painful hits, and she forced Sensei from her mind and surged forward to pummel Raleigh back in a hard volley, taking full advantage of her greater speed and his exhaustion.

Under other circumstances, she'd never do this to anyone, try so hard to drive them straight into the ground until they couldn't fight anymore. That was dishonorable and humiliating. Yet she was doing it to Raleigh, her Raleigh.

But how else could she make him stop doing what he was trying to do to himself?

Even now, Raleigh Becket was too proud to run away from a fight, though there was no way he could fail to know her intent. Tendo wavered at the edge of the ring, maybe wondering if he should go, and Mako let herself take a swipe that knocked her off her feet so she could mouth at him, Stay!

Mako had been in Raleigh's mind and memories, but she hadn't been there in the days and weeks after Knifehead, or in the years before when Yancy had been part of his life in the flesh. Tendo had. And Mako had no doubt Tendo understood what was happening here.

The racket of their hanbōs and their bodies hitting the floor drew some attention from other crew, who peered into the Kwoon, but Tendo sent them away. It took a little persuasion for some of the Team Gipsy personnel.

It might have been hours or minutes until Raleigh's technique grew noticeably sloppier, as Mako wore him down, and something began to show in his eyes: desperation. Something almost like fear. He didn't want to go where she was taking him. Mako didn't want to force him to go there.

But the alternative was to let him sink back down into that place he'd spent five years, four months. Not again. Not again.

Raleigh-chan, stop. Stop running. Let go. Let go, love.

Finally, there was no mistaking it: when she threaded a foot between his ankles and her bō snagged his arm, he dropped his staff and let himself fall. They crashed to the ring floor in a tangled heap, and he curled instead of trying to roll back to start position, half towards her, half to hide his face, and she felt the first sob surge through him as hard as the blows they'd been exchanging.
She tossed her bō aside, rolled against him and pulled his face towards hers. Tendo hesitantly came forward, and she beckoned with her free hand, panting as another sob wracked through Raleigh. Then another.

Tendo knelt, putting a gentle hand on Raleigh's back as he and Mako lay there. "Let it out, kid. C' mon, just let it out. Just like before."

"Don't - " Raleigh made a noise that was some mix of a gasp, a sob, and a cough. "Don't want – like before!"

"I know. This isn't like before. You've got Mako."

Raleigh let out a moan and finally reached for her, clutching at her, and she let him bury his face in her neck and give into wracking sobs. Combing her fingers through his sweaty hair, brushing the sweat from her own eyes with her free hand, she rocked them where they lay. "I'm here."

"You said it," Raleigh choked out. "Day we met." Mako frowned, not sure what he meant. "I was my fault."

It went through Mako like an electric shock, and Tendo's eyes darted to her, blazing. "What?!"

"Raleigh, I never – what are you - "

Raleigh released her and rolled onto his back, staring at the ceiling, as if oblivious to Mako and Tendo's shock on either side of him. She pulled herself to her knees and put a hand on his neck, fearful he'd try to get away from them. But he didn't, and as fast as the breakdown had come, it was fading back into that numbness she'd been trying to keep him from.

But he spoke, his voice going dull like a confession. "You know it. He knows it. I said it. Must've been on the black box. It was my idea."

"Kiddo…" Tendo leaned over him. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Raleigh's eyes drifted towards him, red and wet and tears sliding free. "The boat. We went after the boat."

Mako looked at Tendo in confusion – she knew about the Saltchuck – but Tendo said slowly, "Yeah, you saved the boat."

Mako looked at Tendo in confusion – she knew about the Saltchuck – but Tendo said slowly, "Yeah, you saved the boat."

Raleigh closed his eyes and murmured, "Saved the boat, yeah, but I got Yance killed."

Mako was completely unprepared for Tendo's reaction. He wrenched back, stalked a few paces away, grabbed one of the nearest fallen hanbōs and hurled it into the wall. "Jesus, FUCK, Raleigh, is that seriously what you've got in your head?! That's complete bullshit!"

Even Raleigh was startled, and he started to sit up, but Tendo bodily yanked him the rest of the way into sitting position so he could get into Raleigh's face. "You listen to me, kid. Listen!"

Stunned and disarmed, Raleigh nodded. "I spent four years watching the two of you in the sim and in the pilot cradles, seeing what was going on in your heads even if I wasn't in there with you. For fuck's sake, is this really what you've believed all this time!? Dammit, don't answer that." He released Raleigh and rubbed his eyes, visibly trying to calm himself down.

Mako seized the opportunity to break in. "I wasn't there then, but I've lived your memories. You can't hide them from me." Raleigh lowered his eyes. She kept petting his hair. "You and your brother were good partners by then, the best team in the world. You always took risks to minimize
collateral damage – together. If you hadn't said it, Yancy would have said it; you both planned to go after the boat. You both chose to take the risk. Before I was a pilot, I didn't understand that – you told me and you were right!"

She could feel him resisting her. Argh, this was going to make her mad again, and getting mad at him wasn't what she wanted to do. But when he mumbled, "I lost my arm, then I was completely useless," she nearly roared at him.

"And Tamsin seized, but if anyone suggested she was useless, I would smash their face – and so would you!"

"Amen," Tendo growled. "Pilots take hits; it's not anybody's fault except the fucking kaiju – Rals, you know that! Why the fuck are you doing this?!" Raleigh sobbed, and Tendo bodily yanked him into his arms. "C'mon, Becket boy, stop this," he said more softly. "It's not fair to you or to Yance." Raleigh sobbed harder. "Look… I dunno what, er…" He shot an oddly hesitant look at Mako, "I dunno what anybody said to you, or what you've been saying to yourself, it was not… your….fault. We all were blaming ourselves after. The twins were basket cases, 'cause they didn't push harder for a lift to Anchorage rather than going home after Knifehead passed the California miracle mile. Chloe Warner and the K-Watchers were out of their minds that they didn't forecast its track better so you'd have backup; they thought he'd pass Anchorage and keep running north because of the storms 'till he went for the Siberian Wall. Pentecost, well - " he faltered again, looking at Mako.

Someone in the doorway said, "Whatever you lot thought about Pentecost's what he wanted you to think."

All three of them jumped. It was Chuck Hansen.

Mako drew breath to ask him for privacy, but Raleigh wearily put a hand on her arm. He didn't care if Chuck saw him like this. "You know now, I guess," Raleigh told Chuck. "Marshal was right; we disobeyed orders. He knew we'd fucked up even before Yancy…"

Chuck was quiet as he came closer. "It's not like that. He never blamed you." Raleigh looked puzzled. "He blamed himself. He knew you two wouldn't abandon any civilians, and he was kicking himself for not paying better attention when you went out. And…" He pulled a wry face. "I know about the deal."

Tendo blinked. "Deal?"

Mako worked out what he meant, and cringed. Raleigh closed his eyes and leaned against her. "Doesn't matter anymore. Doesn't have to be a secret."

Chuck was silent for a long time. "You're right. So you should know too. There was stuff he didn't tell you." Raleigh opened his eyes. "He wanted to stop you from killing yourself, and protect you from the bloody propaganda vultures. Doing what you asked him to do – that'd take care of it. The brass would be afraid of a scandal if it got out."

"Yeah….yeah, I remember," said Raleigh. "What're you saying?"

Tendo put a hand on Raleigh's shoulder again. "We were all flipping our shit, Rals, that'd he dismissed you. We couldn't understand why, but he kind of hinted to me that there was…another reason than just him being a stickler for the rules."

Mako's stomach lurched as it fell into place. "You mean he… I remember, I didn't understand
either...because he never seemed to really blame Raleigh. I thought he didn't have a choice."

"Oh, he had a choice, a lot of choices," Tendo muttered, betraying a resentment Mako hated to think of being directed at Sensei. But he frowned at Chuck, then caught the stricken look on Raleigh's face. "So what don't we know?"

"Tendo," Raleigh whispered. He shot Chuck a desperate look, and Chuck shrugged as if to say it was up to him. "He dismissed me 'cause I asked him to!"

Tendo rocked back, his face turned red, and Mako pulled Raleigh to her in anticipation of Tendo shouting again. But he didn't. He turned away instead. Raleigh trembled in her arms until Tendo turned back. "Kid...why?"

"'cause...you know why, I thought it was my fault, an' I wanted out." Raleigh was choking the words out. That calmed Tendo's fury better than anything could have, and he came back to their side. This time, Mako let him pull Raleigh from her and into his own arms.

"Oh my God, Rals. Kiddo...Jesus."

"There's more to it than that," said Chuck quietly. "More to it you didn't know; you were too out of it then. Pentecost...he was trying to give you want you wanted, keep you safe, and keep you away from backlash. That's why he swore you to secrecy -- so everybody'd think your being discharged was his idea, and they'd blame him for instead of you. Everyone fell for it except my dad," he added bitterly.

Tendo hugged Raleigh tighter. Mako could see that now Tendo was crying. "I never meant for it to be like that," Raleigh whispered.

"He knew that," said Chuck. "He blamed himself for everybody we lost, especially the ones on his watch. It's not your fault. He knew what he was doing. If he'd had a chance, he'd have told you himself. Just didn't have a chance. There's, uh..." Chuck hesitated, and they all looked at him anxiously. "You remember that supervisor who was always at the Wall with you? Paul Terrence?"

Raleigh stared at Chuck, mouth half-open. "What?"

Now Chuck smirked, with a pride not for himself, but for Sensei. Mako had never felt warmer to Chuck Hansen than at this moment. "He wasn't there by accident, mate. They were friends. Pentecost sent him to look after you, make sure you were always safe."

Raleigh slumped between Tendo and Mako, drained and stunned. "I remember Paul. He did...look after us. Not just me. But...Marshal said he had trouble finding me..."

"Nah, he was bullshitting; he always knew where you were," Chuck gave Mako a wry smile...that was desperately sad. "He told me he carried nothing into the drift. I never got the chance to call bullshit on that."

A sob burst out of Mako, and she clapped a hand over her mouth. This time Raleigh pulled her into his arms. "You saw all that?" she asked Chuck in amazement.

"Not like...a lot of other drifts. Not as powerful. But he wouldn't let it control him or control me, even though he knew I could see. The last thing I remember...he was saving my ass whether I liked it or not, because he wanted to save someone at the end. He was tired of watching Rangers die. He knew I might not thank him for it. He cracked, and he knew it. He didn't care."

Wiping his wet face, Tendo said, "Y'know, Chloe – Chloe Warner, K-Watch, she and her brother
Christian missed the second cut in our class by a hair. She worked with Major Bingham a lot at Hilo Headquarters on the Big Island. He'd fought in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, his family'd been in wars all the way back to World War I. He gave her leave after – after Knifehead, and when she got back, he said that we're soldiers and this is war. In war, soldiers die, and that will always be true no matter what anyone does. Our only choice is to keep fighting."

Raleigh flinched hard and dropped against Mako again, burying his face in her neck. She kissed his sweaty hair and didn't think to be embarrassed by Tendo or even Chuck's presence. Raleigh whispered, "Tendo…what he told me…at the end…what he told me…I know."

"He…at the end…" Tendo looked baffled. Then he went pale as it dawned on him. "Yance? You mean Yancy?"

"Raleigh, listen to me, you have to - "

It rang in Raleigh's memory night and day, and as a result, in Mako's. She'd heard it loud and clear again and again in that disastrous experiment only a few days ago. She'd seen Yancy's desperate, urgent eyes, heard his voice break into a scream as he was torn from the pod – worse, she'd been Yancy, looking at his baby brother's confused, frightened eyes, so desperate to tell, to say –

Like every thought in the drift, it came to life in the mind before it ever passed the lips. Raleigh could heard it because Yancy had been thinking it even before Knifehead struck that final, killing blow. It'd echoed even as he was torn away, because Yancy had known. He'd realized what was coming, and that knowledge had shattered Raleigh even before it happened, because all Yancy had wanted was to say…

"Raleigh, listen to me, you have to" –
- you have to keep going, no matter what happens, you have to go on! Don't give up! Don't, kiddo, don't don't don't –

Mako flinched as hard as they'd done in the conn-pod during the first test. She'd heard it then, and it hurt just as much now, the terror - not even so much of the kaiju or of death, but of having to go on…alone.

Tendo put a hand on Raleigh's head, gentle, brushing tears away with his thumb. "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

Raleigh did want to. He'd held it inside too long. And…"You told me…the night I left, you were scared – I'd – kill myself." Tendo swallowed hard at the memory, but nodded, and moved his hand to squeeze Raleigh's as tight as he could. "I wouldn't…cause – he – Yance – he told me whatever happened, not to give up, to go on. So I couldn't…couldn't ever…no matter how bad I wanted… couldn't…"

"Oh, Rals," Tendo whispered.

"Couldn't say no to him. Couldn't…throw away what got stolen from him, not when he told me not to."

"Raleigh." Mako couldn't stand it anymore. He sobbed brokenly, but she held onto him until he met her eyes. "I felt it. I know. We both know it was so much more than that." She put her hands on his cheeks. "Everytime we've drifted, I've felt it. Raleigh-chan, I know how much you loved him."

Raleigh sniffled, giving her a flash of memory from a perspective that was neither his nor hers,
regarding Raleigh as baby brother. It hurt, but it made her smile too. She didn't let go and made him keep looking at her. "And...I know how very much he loved you." Raleigh sobbed harder and collapsed into her arms.

Tendo looked dazed, tears falling without him seeing to notice them as he rubbed Raleigh's back and stared at Mako. "I don't...my God, are you saying Yance knew Raleigh could pilot alone?"

Even Chuck looked shaken by that idea.

Mako and Raleigh shook their heads in unison. But Raleigh couldn't say it, even now, couldn't speak it, so Mako gently did. "Yancy knew what was about to happen. A person...at that moment, they wouldn't think so impersonally. Yancy just wanted Raleigh to live, to try, not to give up. Because he loved him. Because Raleigh..." She looked at Raleigh and pondered how she'd seen him when the echo of a second young man in the drift took control of her memories. When she missed Yancy, it was for Raleigh's sake, or because being Raleigh was part of her memories. It occurred to her now that she, along with Tendo and the rest of their crew, could miss Yancy Becket for his own sake, one of so many brave people, who lived and loved, cut out of the world too young and leaving a hole behind. "You were everything to him. Everything in the world worth living for and fighting for. You were his hope." Raleigh couldn't look at her, but when she petted his head and whispered, "You know I'm right," he nodded.

"I love you, baby brother. I should be able to say that outside the drift. I love you so much."

"Sometimes," Raleigh murmured dully. "I think he'd have been jealous if he could see me now. But when I was on the Wall, I just thought he'd yell what the shit was I doing and tell me to get my ass back to a Shatterdome."

Mako found herself giggling, and Tendo grinned. "Yeah, he used to be possessive of you, but we all saw him getting over that. And maybe he never..." he lost his smile and shut his eyes for a second before going on. "None of us ever imagined...what would happen, but we knew for a long time pilots could...lose each other. The Jessops, the Shindos. It happened. Yance was smart; he'd have thought about that."

Raleigh stiffened and sat up, looking at Chuck. "He told me...Pentecost he said something. He said Yancy asked him."

Chuck slowly nodded. "After...I dunno when exactly, it was after a fight. Yancy told Marshal he'd better make sure you were okay if anything happened to him, not to let them use you like they used Duc Jessop and Hayase Shindo."

"When did you become a fucking fatalist?"

"It's not fatalism, it's realism, kid!"

They'd fought about it once, Mako recalled. After Rangers died, Yancy'd dwelled on it to the point Raleigh'd been frightened, and they'd argued. They'd been...very young then. Gipsy hadn't even launched. They'd come to terms with it by assuring themselves and each other that if they ever went down, at least they'd go down together. Mako winced and felt Raleigh flinch beside her.

"My dad was there, you know. After Knifehead. You probably didn't see him," said Chuck suddenly.

Raleigh shook his head but Tendo said, "We saw him. We were really grateful."

"He was pissed at the medics for..." Chuck looked reluctantly at Raleigh. "For bringing you back.
He thought it was cruel. He always wondered how you were able to pilot alone."

Raleigh shrugged. "I don't know. I don't really remember."

"I worked on the engagement reports for every godforsaken one of our losses by the time we got here to Hong Kong, kiddo," Tendo told him. "If we lost one pilot, the other usually…didn't make it. If they were lucky- or unlucky, really, they seized and the Jaeger shut down, and they survived because the kaiju took off."

It was Mako’s turn to flinch as she realized where Tendo was going. Raleigh caught the way they were all avoiding his eyes. "What else? What aren't you telling me?"

Tendo sighed. "You…nobody who wasn't in the program at the time knows…about the twins."

Raleigh stiffened and Mako wrapped her arm around his chest again. "Bruce and Trevin?" he asked in a small voice. Chuck and Tendo nodded, still not looking at him. "Seattle…what happened? All I heard was they both…"

"They both…yeah, but not at once," Chuck said. He shut his eyes. "The chest fin failed and went straight into the left side; bloody thing took Bruce out before he ever knew what hit him. Trevin… it didn't touch him. We were all watching. He just…died. No biological reason for it. Two minutes after Bruce, Trevin was gone."

Tendo hurriedly caught Raleigh’s arm to stop him from curling up into a ball again. "There were a lot of horrific fights, where we thought something like that might've happened – wasn't until Seattle we ever really saw it happen, had proof. And we damn well weren't publishing news like that. It's classified." He patted Raleigh’s cheek. "I'm no pons scientist or anything. But I've got a feeling… you're here because Yance had one chance to tell you to stay."

Raleigh pulled away from them both, but sprawled on his back to stare at the ceiling again. His face was wet, his eyes were wet, but he didn't look…empty, like he'd been trying to be before. "'s not right," he murmured, jerking his head towards Chuck. "People thinking Pentecost kicked me out. He didn't. I…I begged him. Almost threatened, if he didn't, I'd…." he shut his eyes. "I'm sorry."

"We'll tell the others," Tendo said gently. "Nobody ever blamed you, and nobody ever would have blamed you; I think that's the part Marshal didn't get – no offense," he added to Mako and Chuck.

Mako sighed, but Chuck shook his head. "He knew the crews wouldn't. They'd understand. It was everybody else he was worried about, the same fuckers who're going after all of us now. And… well…no offense, but he had this feeling that if you lot thought it was Raleigh's choice, you'd have gone chasing after him, trying to change his mind."

Tendo grimaced, his sheepish expression admitting to the truth of it, and Mako laughed softly – if a little hysterically. Even Raleigh smiled. She slid herself down next to him again.

"If the medics find you two asleep on the Kwoon floor, you're in for it," Chuck pointed out. Mako flipped him off before Raleigh had the chance, but they both dragged themselves upright.

She found herself unwilling to be separated from him even for a few minutes, so she made Tendo check and see that no one was in the men's showers. "You're going in there with him?!" he demanded. She shot him a withering look. "Okay, but I'm timing you!" This time Raleigh flipped him off.

They got cleaned up and slumped against each other's sides back to quarters, drained, exhausted…
but somehow lighter. Or at least Raleigh felt a little lighter. How long had he been carrying the weight of all that guilt around?

*Five years, five months, two weeks, three days.*

"It'll get better," she whispered to him once they were back in her bed. "You're not alone anymore. You never will be again."

*To Be Continued...*

Chapter End Notes

**Coming Soon:** *Our heroes take the first steps to reveal the truth and clear Stacker Pentecost's name, and Mako and Raleigh take a risky step in search of further truths in Chapter Ten: Find Me In The Drift!*

**PLEASE don't forget to review!**

**Original Character Guide**

**Paul Terrence:** A neighbor of Stacker's parents who took Stacker and his sister Luna in after their parents' deaths. Black, British, late 50s at the time of the movie.

**Chloe Warner:** K-Watch officer, African-American, early 30s, classmate of Raleigh, Yancy, and Tendo's from Academy Class 2016-B. Stationed in Hawaii for most of the war, eventually wound up with the downsized K-Watch personnel in Hong Kong for Operation Pitfall. She and her half-brother drift tested, but were not drift compatible despite being very close.

**Major James Bingham:** A former British Army officer in his 60s, the senior Response Tactician of K-Watch, he tracked the kaiju and presides over forecasting where they were heading when K-Watch was headquartered in Hawaii.

**Jiro and Hayase Shindo:** pilots of *Tidal Dragon*, Japan's Mark-2. Foster siblings from Nagasaki, Japanese martial arts teachers in their mid-30s who helped develop Jaeger Bushido. Tidal Dragon had only one engagement (Razorfin in mid-2018) because her reactor design was unsafe, and exposed the Shindos to high radiation. Jiro died less than a year later, and Hayase was paraded as a propaganda tool along with Duc Jessop until her death two years after her brother.
Find Me In The Drift

Chapter Summary

Our heroes take the first steps to reveal the truth and clear Stacker Pentecost's name, and Mako and Raleigh take a risky step in search of more truths in the drift.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Thank you all so much for the amazing feedback! Please keep it coming!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Ten: Find Me In The Drift

Hong Kong Shatterdome...

Jin Wei needed another surgery in his hip, but put it off until Herc and the Kaidanovskys were back to keep the Dome under control. "There are factions within our government with ideas for this program we don't like," they told Herc on a secure line. "Our supporters know you and the Kaidanovskys. They trust you, and will listen to you even if we're not available."

It was an unspoken acknowledgment that neither Jin nor his brother would be capable of making decisions, much less handling a crisis, while Jin was under sedation.

"It's not urgent, then?" Herc asked sharply. "You sure it can wait without risk to you?"

"Yes, I'm in no danger. It's just the first surgery to try to repair enough so one day I'll walk again."

Cheung was quiet and tense through that conversation. Not that the Wei brothers hadn't experienced the unpleasantness of one being under for surgery before. But this was the first time any of them would be completely alone while a brother was under.

"How are things coming with Typhoon?" asked Herc, sensing the tension and changing the subject.

"It goes well. We..." Jin trailed off suddenly, eyes going distant, and everyone in the conference room froze. "The...conn-pod..."

Shun Thou, one of their J-Techs from Tendo and Raleigh's class at the Academy, came to the rescue. "We're preparing the new conn-pod for two pilots, Marshal. It will be simpler for establishing compatibility. So Typhoon 2.0 will have only two arms, unless we're fortunate enough...ahem, if it becomes necessary, we can upgrade to a third pilot more easily than downsizing to a second."

"I get you," said Herc softly. "Any, ah...any applicants?"

"Hundreds," said Cheung with a weak smile. "We have said he's not ready for testing yet."
"Agreed. Let's get the preliminary work done first."

"And should the first pilots not be experienced?" Jin added. Herc blinked. Jin glanced at Cheung, who nodded, and he pressed, "We thought you and Chuck. Or Sasha and Aleksis. Maybe the Tanaka sisters from Echo Saber when they've recovered. A team who can teach inexperienced pilots."

Herc and Chuck looked at each other through the holovid, but neither seemed quite sure how to answer.

Alison brought the baby to hang out with the crew once the command conference was over, then Tendo surreptitiously called a meeting of all former Team Gipsy personnel. Raleigh was there with Mako, of course, but apart from her – and the baby – nobody who hadn't been crew for Raleigh and Yancy Becket was in the room.

She'd been nervous about telling Rals the baby's name was Antwan, let alone telling him how close she and Tendo had come to naming him Yancy. He'd been misty-eyed, but never lost his smile. "Either one would be great. I'm glad."

Despite Raleigh scooping Antwan into his arms and bouncing him on his knees, making the baby giggle, Raleigh was pale and quiet. All Tendo had told Alison was that there'd been a meltdown the night before, and Rals wanted the crew to know something, but didn't want to have to have the same conversation fifty times. Yeah, she couldn't blame him for that, whatever it was.

To Alison's amusement, Mako Mori was among the crew who went a little green at the prospect of holding a baby. Though she smiled and cooed at Antwan, she definitely didn't go out of her way to interact with him. (Alison wasn't offended; she hadn't exactly been a baby person herself before she decided to have one, and even now it felt like Tendo was the natural rather than her, gender norms be damned.)

Once Chloe and Christian Warner, Hien Nguyen, and the rest of the former Team Gipsy had gathered, Raleigh kept his eyes on the baby and said, "There's something...you guys need to know. Last night, Tendo told me - you all got the wrong idea, about what happened when I left."

Alison had held her tongue before in Jake Pentecost's presence, knowing he was just a kid, but this was another matter. "Marshal shouldn't have dismissed you, Rals, even if you blamed yourself - "

Raleigh, Mako, and Tendo flinched, and Tendo desperately shook his head at her, so she caught herself. It was a few seconds before Raleigh could go on, still without making eye contact with anybody. "He didn't want to," he said, barely above a whisper. "He did it...'cause I asked him to. Only - only 'cause it was the only way he could get me to promise not to..." He squeezed his eyes shut and couldn't finish. He didn't have to finish. They all knew how that sentence was supposed to end.

The whole room was silent. In the part of her mind not buzzing with emotion and confusion, Alison wondered in a daze if this was what a bad drift felt like.

Tendo dared to come closer and touched Raleigh's shoulder, getting the kid to meet his eyes, "Want me to..."

Raleigh started to shake his head, then gave up and nodded, and Mako slid against his side, putting her arms around him.

His voice only a little steadier, Tendo finished for them. "We talked a long time last night, and
Chuck Hansen...he knew it from drifting with Marshal Pentecost. Marshal did it to protect Rals. He didn't want to. The brass were gonna drag him off on tour like they did Duc Jessop and Hayase Shindo - "Christian Warner let out an inarticulate snarl, and Hien hissed and covered her mouth. "And Rals was...well, you know. We all do. 'Not in a good place.'" Even Raleigh chuckled weakly at the depth of the understatement. "There was gonna be blame for Raleigh leaving. Marshal was making sure everyone would blame him, not Rals."

Christian stared, still indignant. "He played us?"

"Chris!" his sister hissed, jerking her head at Mako, but Christian wasn't ready to relent.

"Look, Mako, I'm sorry, but I'm not okay with that." Though Mako's eyes were wet, she met Christian's gaze steadily. "Raleigh was our Ranger, and we - sorry, Rals - we lost Yancy too. D'you have any idea what it did to us, thinking you'd been kicked out and just...thrown to the wolves? I know you were...in a bad place - kiddo, it wasn't your fault, and whatever you decided, I don't blame you for. But Marshal's different - he could see what kind of shape you were in, and he shouldn't have just let you wander off!"

"So what should he have done, lock me up?" Raleigh snapped. Almost everyone winced, and he sighed, closing his eyes again. "Sorry. Look, I was fucked in the head, but not so much that I didn't know what I was doing. I couldn't face anybody, and not just...not...just...shit...'cause I blamed myself. Seeing you - seeing anybody - was too much." His voice choked off again, and he handed Antwan to Alison so he could wipe his eyes.

Tendo spoke up. "And Marshal didn't just let him leave alone. There was someone keeping an eye on him."

"Huh?" Alison blurted.

Breathing hard, Raleigh muttered into his hands. "There was a guy, a supervisor, when I was working the construction projects. First the bunkers, then the Wall. There were a lot of guys who kinda...went with the flow of projects, and I never thought - never noticed...Pentecost sent him. I didn't know 'till Chuck told me. He protected me. Most of the time I didn't even notice that either. 'Til now."

Hien slid down the wall to the floor, pulling her knees up to her chest. "Holy shit," she whispered.

Christian sighed and sat back. "So...Marshal telling us to keep our distance when you got here, it wasn't..."

"You know how I reacted when I finally did see you all again. You tell me," said Raleigh, a little calmer. "When we tested Gipsy, I went out of phase before Mako did. That test could've gone even worse."

The room fell into uncomfortable silence. Alison would have bet every one of Raleigh's old crew was thinking exactly the way she was. For five and a half years, we've cursed Pentecost. Yeah, toward the end he kind of redeemed himself, especially bringing Rals back, but I doubt any of us ever forgave him.

It was Tendo who finally dared to say it. "Guys. Marshal did what none of us could've done; he let Rals make his own decisions. None of us have to like it, but it wasn't what we thought. It's not fair to blame Pentecost."

"Did you like my dad?" Jake Pentecost had asked Alison.
Well, he was a great commander but I thought he was an asshole for what he did to Rals? She hadn't let herself say that to a kid, even though she'd kind of wanted to. Only now she knew...there'd been so much more to Raleigh's leaving. It was Raleigh's choice. If we've got a problem with that, we have a problem with Rals, not Marshal.

Having a problem with Raleigh Becket for anything he'd done after Yancy died in 2020 was just...unthinkable.

Alison wasn't staring at Mako, but some of the other Gipsy crew were, and Raleigh looked up and caught them. His eyes flashed, and he straightened. "No, she didn't put me up to this. I'm telling you – and everybody else after this – 'cause I want his name cleared. Marshal Pentecost deserves that and more!"

There were a few embarrassed mumbles of "sorry," around the room, but Mako let out a slightly hysterical-sounding chuckle. "How is it more of you weren't drift compatible?

A shaky giggle escaped Alison too, and Raleigh and Tendo grinned. "Well, it wasn't like this back at the beginning when we were all strangers. Four years with this kid as our pilot, Mori-san, four years! We got to know our Becket boys reeeeal well. We've got stories to tell you that even he doesn't know!" Raleigh's indignant sputtering was probably put on, but it started to break the tension in the room, and Mako grinned back at Tendo while Christian and some of the others started chiming in.

Alison laughed – and Antwan let out a squeal. That got them all laughing. "Is it muster drill time?" demanded Chloe.

Mako laughed harder. "That, I know about!"

Raleigh's impulsiveness was apparently catching. Or Mako picked it up in the ghost drift. They were in Typhoon's lab, having a calm enough conversation with the crews putting everything back where it was supposed to be and resetting it for drift tests that would eventually match new pilots, when Raleigh sensed her mind wandering.

"What?"

"I've been thinking…after Clawhook, the medics helped you and Yancy recover from the broken drift by a full drift." Mako eyed the pons units, then looked at Raleigh. "Maybe that would help us now."

Typhoon's crew were startled, but Raleigh couldn't fault the logic. Yet there was something else prompting her, something she'd suddenly remembered.

As they put the caps on – hurrying because somebody would call Dr. Tan and/or Tendo and/or the Weis any minute – Raleigh murmured, "What else? What is it?"

She whispered, "What Sensei said, right before he died. He said, 'you can always find me in the drift.'"

Raleigh stared at her. Then he couldn't get the system keyed up fast enough either. Ranking officers (at least until Dr. Tan and Herc demoted them both), they ignored the protests of Typhoon's crew.

3...2...1...
Reactor meltdown…

"Don't chase the rabbit…"

"Raleigh, listen to me, you have to - " Yancy broke off in a scream of pain and shock as he was torn away, but it echoed in Raleigh's mind even as Raleigh screamed denials:

"You have to keep going, no matter what happens, you have to go on! Don't give up! Don't, kiddo, don't don't don't - "

Raleigh gasped and jerked in the drift - but then Mako's hand, her physical hand, grabbed his, hard. "Raleigh," she choked. "I'm here."

Mako...Mako, I can't - too strong -

We're stronger. Stronger than any of it...

The monster charged after her as she ran through the debris, screaming sobs, searching for a place to hide - Mako whimpered, but now Raleigh held on.

"I've gotcha."

"Rangers, please, we should shut it down!" someone said.

"No! No, we've got it!" Raleigh gasped. Tendo was there, hazy through the blue of the drift, so was Dr. Tán, both of them ready to spit granite.

"Please," Mako breathed. "Just...let us..."

"You can always find me in the drift."

"They're stable, sir. Neural handshake one hundred percent, strong and clear," said Tendo.

Dr. Tán huffed, then nodded to them. "Okay."

Okayokayokayokay...

They surrendered to the blue wash of the drift, cool and soothing...

After Clawhook, the drift washed over Raleigh and Yancy, cool and soothing, smoothing away the ragged edges of their broken drift like rocks polished by waves on the shore...

Waves had polished the rocks smooth on the shore, and Mako slipped down them and over them, faster than Jake, who yelled at her to wait up, and Sensei and Tamsin, who yelled at them both to be careful...

There was no terror in this memory, just laughter and tenderness and peace...they drifted into it willingly...

Mako got stuck. She'd climbed up a high pile of boulders, but suddenly they seemed too steep, too treacherous to climb down. She was more embarrassed than scared, to admit she'd gone too far. Jake huffed and puffed and grunted at the base, but he didn't have the reach to join her.

"Maaaakoooooo, no fair!"

Raleigh's laughter bubbled through the drift, but the blueness of the drift itself faded as she let the memory take her, and Raleigh didn't try to stop it either.
She was fourteen. Jake was ten. She’d grown almost three inches in one year, now she was all knees and elbows, and Jake was outraged by how much taller than him she was. "Daaaad!"

Lord, Jake was whiny. Mako grinned to hide her discomfiture at not knowing how to get down. Sensei came over, giving the two of them That Look (or the "dad look" as Tamsin called it), that he was going to break it up one way or the other.

"I want up!" Jake wailed.

"No, you are not going up, and Mako is coming down," Sensei told him, stern but gentle. They were squeezed a little tight on the line of rocks that Mako had used as stepping stones to reach her goal, and Sensei pointed. "Tamsin's found starfish in that tide pool."

The redirection worked, and Jake stuck his tongue out at Mako before scampering off to join Tamsin. Mako wanted to look at them too, but that'd mean admitting she was stuck. "I want to stay up here, Sensei! I like it! I can see so far!"

With two steps and a few long reaches, Sensei was suddenly beside her on the flat rock, seating himself. Mako was impressed; she'd seen Sensei fight in the Kwoon or exercise in the gym, but she didn't know he could climb. He certainly didn't chase her up trees.

"Hm. It is a nice view." He turned and shot her a sly smile. "And now you just have to figure out how to get down."

Mako pouted. Of course, Sensei was onto her. She didn't want to ask for help; that would mean admitting it.

"Mako-chan, you can always find me in the drift."

She was twenty, not fourteen. And her Sensei was older too. He looked as she’d last seen him, in his dark gray Coyote Tango drivesuit, ready to pilot Striker Eureka - for the first and last time.

A lump rose in her throat, and Sensei tweaked her chin. "I'm so proud of you, my Mako. Your mother and father would be so desperately proud."

"H-how...how is this possible?" she breathed. "How did you know? How are you here? You and I never drifted with each other."

"No, but you don't have to drift with a person to know them. That's what memories are for. I'm the Sensei who lives inside you." He brushed his thumb along her cheek. "You know you proud I am, my brave girl. How grateful I am for every moment I had with you. But I don't want you to live in the past forever."

He suddenly looked past her and smiled, and without looking, Mako could feel Raleigh behind her. In the drift, he was close to her back, warm and big, even though she knew he was next to her in the drift test lab. "Aishitemasu, Mako-chan," he whispered. "I know you and Jake will be just fine, and I'll always be there for both of you. Joy has been in short supply since this war began, but the two of you gave me more than I ever imagined."

Stifling a sob, Mako tried to bow to him, but he pulled her in for an embrace instead. Sensei held her tight, and she relished how real it felt. He told them both, "Look after Chuck for me? Make sure he knows he's not alone."

"Of course," said Mako. Even if it hadn't been Sensei who'd been Chuck's copilot in the end, that promise would be easy.
"Thank you, sir," Raleigh whispered behind her. "For everything. Especially her."

"I'm proud of you, Raleigh. You're a fine pilot, and a good man." As he released Mako, Sensei's smile was a little sly. Drift or not, she felt herself blush. Sensei grinned more broadly than he ever had in Raleigh's memories as he looked from Mako to her copilot. "I know your brother feels the same."

Raleigh swallowed hard, the world around them shifted into blue, then to the black and white metal and plastic of Gipsy's conn-pod - but not the conn-pod where Mako had been pilot. This one, she had only ever seen intact in pictures. It had been destroyed on that horrific night in 2020.

Both of them shivered, but the pod was completely quiet, the equipment at rest.

And they weren't here alone. "Hey, kiddo."

Anxiety flooded the drift, and Mako shifted her drift form closer to Raleigh as he turned to see Yancy, in his off-duty jumpsuit as if they were just poking around the conn-pod during downtime like they used to do.

Mako had seen him so many times in the drift, but tears burned her eyes and her throat tightened along with Raleigh's, because it felt like so very, very long since either of them had truly seen him. Raleigh took a hesitant step forward, hand outstretched, and when Yancy touched his, Raleigh flew into his arms while Mako half-laughed, half-sobbed at the joy of it.

How had Harry Potter gone? Yes, this was all in their heads. But why should that make it any less real?

It felt so real, to Raleigh, and through the drift to her. Mako basked in it, the warmth of Yancy's arms, the feel of his fingers combing through his baby brother's hair, the sense of utter safety. Of course, Raleigh had run away from the world after Knifehead. Losing this had felt like the end of everything.

Yancy cast of a soft, gentle, big-brotherly smile over Raleigh's shoulder at Mako as he gently pulled his brother back to look at his face. This time, his voice was soft as he said the words that had echoed in Raleigh's head for five years, five months, two weeks, and six days. "Raleigh. Listen to me." Raleigh sobbed, and Yancy shushed him. "You have to keep going, no matter what happens. Don't you dare give up, kiddo. Don't. There's still so much out there."

"I know," Raleigh choked out. "I know. I didn't."

Yancy let Raleigh sink into his arms again and smiled at Mako. She smiled back through her own tears, and dared to step closer. He held out his hand, and she took it. She'd never touched this man in her life, but his hand felt so intimately familiar. She knew this hand. "He didn't give up, you know. He never did." It'd taken courage to do what Raleigh had done for those lonely years after such a complete devastation. She hadn't that realized until they drifted.

"I know," Yancy agreed. "So does he." Raleigh looked up and smiled, and his brother finished. "I'll always be here for you, kiddo." He winked at Mako, and she blushed - again. Even drift memories were teasing them! "It's a good match. The best." He pressed a kiss to Raleigh's forehead, let Raleigh cling to him for a few moments longer, then they let each other go.

Raleigh came back to Mako's side, though he didn't take his eyes off Yancy. "I'm sorry," Mako sighed. "I wish I'd had the chance to know you before."

But Yancy grinned, and it surprised both her and Raleigh at how easily they could return it.
"C'mon, you know everything you need to know. You know all the best parts of me." There was no mistaking the sly, crooked quirk to that grin. "You kids have fun. Go enjoy the world."

"I love you, Yance," Raleigh breathed.

"I know, baby brother." Yancy came closer and brushed his fingers across Raleigh's cheeks. "So do you. We both always knew. It's okay. No more tears."

Mako closed her hand around Raleigh's, and the world felt lighter, as if they were floating - of course, they were drifting.

Mama made tea while Mako watched, singing to herself...Daddy let her sit on a stool in his workshop while he worked on a sword, explaining his tools and his techniques as Mako listened and watched, fascinated...

Mama paused from her singing and beamed at the grown Mako. "Look at you, my darling. Just look at you. I knew you'd be beautiful and brilliant as a grown woman, but even then, you've amazed me."

"We're so proud of you, my little warrior," said Daddy, suddenly behind her. "You're the finest credit to any father and mother in the world."

"I only wish we'd been with you," Mama sighed.

Mako gulped back a new surge of tears and shook her head. "You were always with me. You were."

The drift rushed up around them in one last surge of blue, leaving the after-image of Mako's parents' eyes and their smiles, so bright and so proud, looking just as they'd been when she was eleven but knowing who she'd grown up to become.

Mako blinked at the sudden sight of so many grave faces - Tendo and Dr. Tán, Jin and Cheung's deep frowns. "Are you guys...okay?" asked Tendo.

Laughter bubbled up from her throat - bittersweet, and maybe there were still a few tears despite Yancy's plea, but it felt good, and she just shifted her whole body sideways once the pons cap was off.

Raleigh caught her, pulling her half into his lap, his face in her hair, but she could feel him smiling through his tears. "We're okay," he told the others thickly. "We're good. We're good."

The nightmares wouldn't stop. Mako knew that. The ache of missing her family, of missing Sensei, of missing Yancy would never leave either of them entirely...but they could live with that, because it meant Sensei, Yancy, and her family would always be here for them.

The monsters and the Breach and grief for so many friends and family who hadn't lived to see the end of this war, those scars would take a lifetime to heal. But it's our lifetime. We have a lifetime now. Whatever follows, we'll face it together.

Washington, D.C...

"What the bloody hell is it with you people and experimenting with the drift unsupervised?!" Herc exploded when Chuck called – though he directed said explosion at Newt and Hermann.
Hermann raised a finger and said tentatively, "In our defense, Marshal, the results did prove useful."

"Yeah, except for that fuckup last week with Raleigh and Metacortex," Herc scoffed, then went straight for the jugular. "And the fact that two Category IV's came charging into Hong Kong looking for someone and killed one of Team Typhoon and God knows how many more!"

Newt actually winced. More astonishing, Hermann straightened, leaning forward on his cane. "Marshal, that was uncalled for!"

"Returning to the more pressing matter, are Mako or Raleigh injured?" Sasha asked loudly.

They all looked at the holovid screen. Chuck was watching their shouting match with a bemused expression, but said, "No, thank God. Actually...sorry, Dad, this is another one in the 'success' box. The medics and Tendo aren't happy how they tried it either, but they admit it seems like they're both doing a lot better."

Herc heaved out a sigh. "Well, that's something, but they're both on the carpet when we get back. We're working on travel arrangements as we speak - "

"- ahh, Marshal? Maybe not!" Newt pointed at the television.

**Breaking News: Joint Committee on Jaeger Program to Reconvene - President Lunk to Attend in Person!**

They all just stared.

"Dad? What's going on?" Chuck demanded from the holovid. Then obviously someone in Hong Kong was watching Breaking News too, because he finally groaned. "Shiiiiiit!"

"Well, Marshal," said Hermann. "I think I agree with Ranger Hansen."

*To Be Continued...*

Chapter End Notes

**Coming Soon:** Political maneuvering for control of the Jaeger Program reaches its climax as the President enters the fray, and Herc gets fed up with the exploitation of Rangers by PPDC Secretary General Krieger in Chapter Eleven: Stand For Us!

**PLEASE don't forget to review!**

**Original Character Guide**

**Bao Wang and Shun Thou:** J-Tech cousins from Beijing who were also in Class 2016-B. After failing the second cut at the Jaeger Academy, they returned to China to finish their tech degrees and became J-Techs for Team Crimson Typhoon. They kept in touch with their friends and classmates among the Americans over social media, and received leave in 2020 to attend Yancy's funeral in 2020.

**Antwan Choi:** Tendo and Alison's 1-year-old son, named after one of Gipsy Danger's
original crew who was killed in action in 2019.

**Hien Nguyen:** Strike trooper formerly with Gipsy Danger, then transferred to Team Striker Eureka after Knifehead and Yancy's death, National Guard transplant, Vietnamese-American in her early 30s.

**Christian Warner:** drivesuit technician, African-American early 30s, classmate of Raleigh, Yancy, and Tendo's from Class 2016-B, close friend of our heroes from the beginning. Transferred to K-Watch to join his half-sister Chloe after Knifehead and Yancy's death, eventually wound up on Hong Kong's staff.

**Chloe Warner:** K-Watch officer, African-American, early 30s, classmate of Raleigh, Yancy, and Tendo's from Academy Class 2016-B. Stationed in Hawaii for most of the war, eventually wound up with the downsized K-Watch personnel in Hong Kong for Operation Pitfall. She and her half-brother drift tested, but were not drift compatible despite being very close.

**Dr. Steven Tán:** Chief medical officer of the Jaeger Program, originally at Jaeger Academy, ended up in Hong Kong as bases closed down.

**President Jerald "Jerry" Lunk:** President of the United States. Billionaire hotel mogul who ran on a campaign of "make America safe again" in 2024, proponent of the Wall, now arguing over who has the strongest Jaegers. Likes to use Twitter. No, he's not based on anyone in the real world. Seriously. No, really.
Chapter Summary

Political maneuvering over the Jaeger Program approaches its climax as the President enters the fray and launches a direct attack on Stacker Pentecost's memory. This will not stand.

Chapter Notes

**Author's Notes:** Many thanks to everyone for all the reviews! Please keep them coming! This chapter wound up so long that I split it in two. Hope you like political maneuvering and deep philosophical discussions!

**Canon Note:** According to the extended canon, Hermann's wife Vanessa was pregnant with their first child at the time of Operation Pitfall. I arbitrarily made the baby a girl, since Tendo had a son, and named her Evaline. Travis Beacham described her as a British model - I kept that but added that she's also a vulcanologist who switched from studying supervolcanoes to studying the Breach.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Eleven: Nothing To Say

*Hong Kong Shatterdome…*

"My old man's in a complete panic," Chuck told the others as news spread. He saw Raleigh's puzzled expression and elaborated, "Putting Geiszler *and* the Kaidanovskys in the same room as Lunk…?"

" – Fuck," Raleigh concluded.

"And Lunk being able to ask them questions under oath; ohhhh, man, boys and girls, we are in trouble," Tendo agreed. "Or Lunk is. Depends on who he decides to question."

But Hien Nguyen kept shaking her head. "You guys aren't getting it; Lunk *can't* do what he's talking about doing! This is a Congressional Committee hearing – the President doesn't get to ask questions. Our guys are the witnesses; they answer questions from the committee and only the committee and nobody else. Lunk can strut in and hand over a list of questions, but he doesn't get to take over the panel!"

"That is what all the political experts seem to be saying," Mako mused, reading an article on her tablet. "Oh… Look at this!" She brought up a new breaking report on the nearest screen.

It was clearly a leaked video. Those were always fun – and it looked to be inside the White House. *Sir, you can’t -*
"Why not!? Why not?! Why not?!" someone who sure sounded like Lunk was demanding over and over like a toddler. "I'm the President! I'm in charge, why can't I ask questions!"

"Sir, there are rules for Joint Committee hearings - "

"Why not? I'm the President! Change the rules - "

That was all. Everyone pondered it. "What do you think?" Kyrra Taior from Team Striker mused. "Fake?"

"Real," said Hien without hesitation.

"Nahhh, fake," said Tendo. "Nobody'd get a camera into the White House to film the president."

"He just fired another Press Secretary and hired a bunch of new staff, whose only credentials are all that they're bloggers who like him," Hien countered, grinning. "His security is busy trying to stop him from getting himself shot when he's posing for pictures. This White House leaks like a sieve. It's real."

"Ten bucks?"

"You're on!"

Raleigh burst out laughing. Chuck noted the delight in Mako's eyes as Raleigh shook his head at Tendo. "Some things never change."

Tendo blew him a kiss. "You in the pool, Becket boy?"

"Nah, I've barely got ten bucks to my name."

"So back to subject," said Kyrra, turning to Chuck as all the Americans started placing bets. "Is Herc seriously going to let Newt Geiszler answer questions from Jerry Lunk?"

"I dunno; I'm almost more worried about Hermann," said Chloe Warner.

"Wow." Chuck hadn't thought of that. "That much intelligence and that much…whatever's under Lunk's hair…it'll be like matter and anti-matter."

To everyone's intense relief, cooler heads prevailed among the Americans and whoever had written the insanely-complicated rules for the United States Congress had enough jargon about "separation of powers" that not even the President of the United States could just waltz into a committee hearing and start asking questions.

Chuck's old man looked like he needed several drinks. "But they appeased him by letting him give an address to the whole bloody Congress this evening. Now I have to decide whether I offend literally all the Americans by us not showing up, or take the risk of us sitting there in the gallery while that bloody moron runs his mouth."

"They can't make you just come listen to his speech, right?" Chuck protested. It wasn't like he was an expert on American politics, though Hien and a few of the others who paid attention to that sort of thing had given everybody a crash course in one afternoon.

"No, the subpoena doesn't cover a Presidential speech, but again, that's not the only factor," Herc huffed. "Us coming to that speech'll be a sign of good will, but not coming'll be a snub in front of the whole world. I'm not sure we can afford that, but I'm really not sure we can afford Sasha and
"Aleksis listening to Jerry fucking Lunk shooting his mouth off!"

"Hey, he loves the Russians, though!" Chuck said.

"He loves the Russian bigwigs. Sasha and Aleksis don't, and the bigwigs know it. I don't think that'll count for much, and I'm also not sure Newt or Hermann will be able to keep their mouths shut."

Chuck thought of something else, not that he wanted to add to Dad's stress. "There's also…shit, Vanessa Gottlieb in the same room as Jerald Lunk?" The U.S. President's misogyny and womanizing were legendary.

To his surprise, Herc found his humor again. "I was, for a minute. Newt already thought of that, but Hermann just laughed at him and said Vanessa will handle herself. She's got a lot of experience dodging sleazy men."

"I bet she does, but if I were her husband, I wouldn't like it."

"Well, she says it's not up to her husband. She's got a point; it's 2025, and she's got three Ph.D's. She doesn't need anyone to look after her."

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**Washington, D.C.**

"Another thing I don't understand: why do all his supporters chant 'Jerry' over and over?" Hermann demanded while Herc paced around the hotel room.

The Kaidanovskys looked amused, and Newt shook his head. "Seriously, Hermann? You're telling me you've never seen or heard of Jerry Springer?"

"Who?"

Sasha laughed quietly before bringing up a montage on her phone of Jerry Springer talk show clips. Hermann was predictably appalled. Sasha smirked. "As you can see, the sort who voted for Jerry Lunk also find the comparisons to Jerry Springer flattering. I think Springer is the more intelligent of the two."

"Hell, yeah, Jerry Springer is fucking Socrates compared to Jerry Lunk," said Newt.

"…is this what the United States is reduced to?" Hermann breathed.

Herc tried to come up with a diplomatic answer, but Sasha just replied: "Yes. And some of his supporters will attend the speech tonight; he enjoys it when they chant. He makes Vladimir Putin look modest and dignified."

"Ouch," muttered Newt.

Herc was on the phone with some former Jaeger Program lawyers and public relations agents – none of whom officially represented the Jaeger Program anymore because Stacker hadn't been able to afford to pay them during the final months. With the apocalypse nigh, who'd cared about potential lawsuits, let alone public relations?

"Well?" Sasha asked once the call finally ended. "What do they say?"

Herc sighed and went looking for some alcohol. "What we already figured out: there's no legal way for force us to show up for this speech."
The two Russians, the German, the Brit, and the sole American in the room – and the newborn of aforementioned German and Brit – exchanged glances. "'But'" Newt guessed.

"Yeah. If we no-show, Lunk and his supporters will take it very personally." Herc took a long pull of a bottle of bitter and closed his eyes. "America's gonna build Jaegers now either way." He shook his head in disgust. "They didn't want to spend the money when the world needed them and they mighta saved lives, but now with the chance of being big and dramatic, sure, now they've got the money. Not just the U.S. either, mind. A lot of other countries are going down the same road. But if we start making enemies, that increases the risk the next generation of Jaegers are all pointed at each other."

An uncomfortable silence fell. Evaline cooed, and Hermann settled next to her bed to let her tug on his fingers. "I fear what you're saying is, all factors taken into account, we must go and grit our teeth."

Herc sighed. "Yeah." He shot Newt a warning look.

"What's everyone lookin' at me for?!" Newt protested.

Hong Kong Shatterdome...

"They're going!" Chuck announced, charging into the mess hall. "Speech is at 8 am our time, 8 pm theirs. Dad says they're all right across from the President in the chamber gallery.

"Dude, if anybody else were President, I would be jealous," said Hien Nguyen. "I hope somebody's handy to sit on Geiszler!"

Chuck smirked. "Dad says he and Sasha and Aleksis had a long chat with Newt and Gottlieb about keeping a grip on themselves no matter what Lunk says."

"Do we know what Lunk's actually gonna say?" demanded Jake Pentecost.

"Probably same shit he always says," said Christian Warner. "'murica first, we've got the biggest Jaegers, we're better than you, everybody should give me money, I'm the smartest president in history."

Everyone scoffed. "What we've gotta worry about is if he starts throwing shit at – at – well - "

Jake Pentecost was a perceptive kid, they'd all figured out very quickly. "At my dad. Or at his dad."

He gestured to Chuck. Pilots and personnel scowled, but nodded.

Cheung way settled his brother's wheelchair at the table before looking reluctantly at Raleigh.

"We've heard warnings from our people. He will say something about you."

"I don't care what he says. His opinion isn't worth anything to me." He slid his arm around Mako's waist, trying to ease her tension. "Let him say what he wants and let PR fight it out. Better me than people who…can't defend themselves." He suddenly stiffened, his eyes going distant, and Mako – and every other Team Gipsy officer in the room – looked sharply at him.

"…that…fucking…fucker…better not," Chuck breathed.

"Hey, hey," Tendo held his hands up, while Team Striker converged on Chuck and Team Gipsy
converged on Raleigh, Mako, and Jake. "Let's not all freak out in advance, okay? If there's one thing Jerry Lunk does, it's wacky shit that nobody expects when there's a microphone in his face. For all we know, he's gonna ramble for an hour about how we should all have walls after all and try to start a war with North Korea again. Or his speechwriters will have actually put some thought into what he says and drop some happy pills into his drink so he sticks to the script and goes all feel-good. 'kay? Deep breaths, guys. Until tomorrow morning, we don't know."

He and other crew, especially the more politically-savvy Americans, did manage to calm everybody down for the time being. Raleigh and Mako were making the rounds to some of the other crew who'd been his friends at the time of Knifehead, and by judicious eavesdropping, some of Chuck's crew learned what was up.

"He's telling them about Pentecost," Kyrra Taior informed Chuck, her eyes soft and all too knowing. "You remember how pissed everyone was about Pentecost kicking Becket out for insubordination during the Knifehead engagement?" Chuck nodded, hoping she wouldn't notice the look on his face. "It was Raleigh, not Pentecost who made the call to make it a dismissal instead of a medical discharge. Poor, fucked-up kid. He blackmailed Pentecost into doing it in exchange for not killing himself, and Pentecost turned around and blackmailed the brass so they'd leave Raleigh the hell alone after." Then she and a few of Chuck's other crew finally looked at him, and…well…Chuck had never been good at poker. "Aw, hell, kid, you knew, didn't you?"

Chuck looked down and mumbled, "Only since Pitfall. Marshal gave Raleigh what he wanted, then set the whole thing up so everyone would blame him instead of Raleigh. Pentecost protected all of us when nobody else would."

Kyrra and the rest of Team Striker looked stunned. "Damn. So…what Raleigh's doing…"

"Clearing Pentecost's name, like he deserves," Chuck finished. He saw a few pairs of eyes avoiding his. Yeah, not everyone in the Corps had been thrilled by Pentecost being the last man standing in command – though nearly everyone in Team Striker had accepted him as Better Than Ketteridge. That would have to change, and Chuck planned to be as forceful about it as Raleigh Becket was being. "He did what he had to do, and unlike the majority of the brass, he put us first. Best everyone remember that – and remind anyone who forgets."

Kyrra nodded, smiling faintly. "Yes, sir." The "sir" part wasn't even sarcastic.

The next morning, the entire off-duty population of the Hong Kong Shatterdome were crowded into the officer's lounge, mess hall, and nearby offices watching live coverage from the United States. (Everyone on-duty had it on the nearest screen.) The reporters started dithering as soon as the Jaeger Program delegation arrived, chattering and trying to interpret every move they made.

"Hercules Hansen is shaking hands with Secretary General Dustin Krieger – there doesn't seem to be much warmth there on his part or his Rangers or the K-Scientists, though Krieger's being very effusive."

"President Lunk canceled several conferences today in order to prepare for tonight's address, according to White House insiders, and several more staffers were fired from his speechwriting department."

"Oh God, this is gonna be a nightmare," breathed Christian Warner. He reached past several other crew to clap Raleigh's shoulder. "He's gonna do nothing but talk shit about you, Rals."

Raleigh snorted. "Believe me, buddy, if I'm the only one he talks shit about, I'll be a happy man."
Raleigh was to Mako's right, Jake Pentecost to her left, and Chuck found himself on Jake's left. So he ended up facing them when Raleigh shot Marshal's adopted and blood offspring a grim look. Yeah. They'd have gotten off easy if Raleigh was the only one Lunk went after tonight.

The press dissected every interaction Chuck's father and the rest of the Jaeger Program delegation had with anyone. Well, it probably didn't help that out of the entire group, only Vanessa Gottlieb was either willing or able to hide her disgust towards the stuffed shirts who came shmoozing up looking for a photo opp.

"Where'd Sasha and Alekis get those dress uniforms?" someone muttered. "I didn't know the Russians had 'em."

"Dunno, but they still look like they're about to beat somebody's ass, and that's awesome," mused Tendo, as a Senator everyone recalled as a Wall-humper started towards them - then froze as Sasha cast a toothy, red smile at him. Said Senator then made the visible decision to go shake hands with someone else.

A collective chorus of growls and laughter rang through the room. "Her husband's bigger but she's scarier," Jake pronounced.

Chuck couldn't keep a smirk off his face. "Wait'll you get to know them. They're both terrifying...and they know it."

The group made it up into the gallery of heroes, as the Americans called it, without incident. Chuck's dad looked pretty damn dignified next to the sneering Kaidanovskys and the scowling scientists - well, Vanessa Gottlieb wasn't scowling. She and Herc were the only ones managing not to look like they desperately wanted to be somewhere else.

Chuck didn't know whether he hoped Dad would break his poker face or not.

When Lunk made his entrance, most of the Americans groaned. It was really cognitively dissonant to hear some dignified guy in a suit pronounce, "Mister Speaker, the President of the United States" only for a bunch of people in the gallery to start chanting, "JERRY! JERRY! JERRY!"

Yeah, the guy who swaggered down the central aisle pumping his arms in the air and giving high-fives and pausing for selfies looked more affiliated with the talk show chanters than a national government.

"How the fuck did we manage to elect that jackass?" groaned Tendo to Hien.

"Uh...the voters thought the world was going to end before his term did?"

"Good answer."

Some of the cameras focused on Herc and the Jaeger Program delegates, others focused on Lunk as he took his place on the podium - so all of them caught the way Lunk took his measure of Herc's group. Herc and the three scientists were standing; the Kaidanovskys weren't.

"Uh-oh," said Chloe. "That's really rude."

"He can't give them shit," insisted Christian Warner. "He brags about not standing for anybody else's dignitaries even when he's the guest on foreign soil!"

"Hate to break the news to you, Chris, but Jerry Lunk has absolutely no qualms about being a hypocrite," said Hien. "He will absolutely bitch and whine about how disrespectful they are."
Dad, Geiszler, and the Gottliebs gave visibly cool and polite applause as Lunk's groupies acted like footballers until somebody finally shut them up. Lunk started off innocently enough, welcoming everyone in celebrating "our victory against the kaiju menace," and applauding "the courage of our bravest Americans."

Then reality simply slid out of existence as he got louder. "This was an American victory from start to finish! America founded the PPDC, America started the Jaeger Program, America invented the Jaegers, America pioneered their fighting techniques and their drift technology, and an American pilot closed the Breach!"

"Hùnzhàng!" spat Jin Wei.

"Anybody would think we didn't close our Shatterdomes a year ago," grumbled Alison.

"Shh!"

Then Lunk looked straight up at Herc and actually pointed at the gallery, half the watchers in Hong Kong hissed, "oh shit!" and the President of the United States puffed out his chest and squawked, "So WHERE ARE our Americans tonight?!"

Lunk's loyal cheerleaders bellowed in response - then Newt stood up. Chuck sucked in his breath, but Newt raised his hands and said something that looked suspiciously like, "What am I, chopped liver?"

Whatever it was, it actually cut off the Lunk-nuts and gave the American President a startled pause. "Oh my God..." Raleigh muttered.

When the cameras panned the American Congress, there were an awful lot of people grinning. Lunk looked...befuddled, but went on with his speech. It quickly became clear that the speechwriters had opted for passive aggression. Rather than calling Raleigh out by name for not showing up, just lamenting the lack of Americans was a major theme - and whoever had written the speech had forgotten that Dr. Newton Geiszler was American.

So everytime Lunk thundered "where are our Americans?!" and "why don't I see any Americans up there?!" Newt waved his arms over his head, pointed to himself, or otherwise made his American presence known in an increasingly mocking manner. The second time Lunk said it and Newt responded, the two Kaidanovskys pointed at Newt too. Chuck could see even Hermann Gottlieb fighting not to smile.

On the third or fourth repetition, Herc cracked and started laughing into his hand. That broke the Hong Kong Shatterdome population's shock, and people started snickering.

"Yeah, we're laughing now, but this means Lunkie's gonna go off-script any minute," Hien Nguyen warned. "And he's gonna say nasty stuff."

He did. He started rambling after ten minutes about how much he'd supported the Jaeger Program and how he'd always known "we'd win" - "but I'm telling you, we'd have won a lot earlier if the Jaeger Program had listened to me! Now listen, listen, I don't wanna speak ill of the dead, but let's face it, Stacker Pentecost made a LOT of mistakes!"

To Chuck's right, Jake and Mako stiffened, and the laughter in the mess hall died. So did the amusement of everybody in Washington. Lunk, of course, didn't notice and rambled on. "If he'd've talked to me, we could've had a better plan, better defenses - I had the best plans, the best defenses for our ports that woulda protected our cities and our Jaeger pilots, and maybe so many of 'em
wouldn't have died!"

"Seriously - all those pilots, all those brave, brave men, every one of 'em would be alive today if you'd elected me in 2016 instead of Matt Santos! I mean, Santos, talk about Obama 2.0, it was pathetic! Pathetic! I was the kind of leadership we needed, and Stacker Pentecost shoulda known that! Bad judgment! Hey!" Someone in the chamber had actually started booing. "Don't you boo me - security, throw them out - I'm just telling it like it is - " Lunk looked up at the gallery and made the mistake of making eye contact with Herc and the Kaidanovskys - and he completely lost his train of thought.

Hell, every single one of the Jaeger Program delegation was sitting rigid in their seats, eyes blazing with anger. Chuck's Dad looked like he might leap over that balcony railing and take a run at Lunk any minute - and the Kaidanovskys would be right behind him.

The spectators seated around them were looking between them and President Lunk, and there was no mistaking that even Lunk's cheering section looked a little dismayed.

There was a shuffle at the podium; people jumped, Tendo muttered, "what the hell..." then Vice President Royce had actually come scrambling down from his seat with a frantic-looking smile, and he yanked the microphone from in front of Lunk.

"I - I know we all share a lot of - uh, gratitude to the brave men and women of the Jaeger Program!" Vice President Royce blurted, while Lunk just blinked and sputtered.

Hien broke the dazed silence in the mess hall by snickering. "Someone's typing into the teleprompter in real time."

Royce hastily repeated thanks to Herc and his team for being there...Herc and said team just stared him down, unsmiling, then Lunk practically elbowed his way back to the microphone to give the obligatory, "God bless America!" closing.

Almost nobody applauded. Not even Lunk's die-hards could muster their enthusiasm, though he tried to rev them up as he went back down the aisle. "I wonder if this means he's finally shot someone on Fifth Avenue," Tendo murmured.

"Huh?" Chuck shot the same puzzled look at him as all the other non-Americans.

"Nothing. Not important." Tendo's smile was a little grim as the cameras focused again on Herc, the Kaidanovskys, Newt, and the Gottliebs. "Marshal looks ready for a beat-down." He turned from the screen to Jake and Mako. "You guys okay?"

Neither said anything; Mako just nodded, and Jake shrugged. Raleigh had an arm around Mako; Chuck caught a glimpse of his face...yeah, Dad wasn't the only one dreaming of a beat-down.

To everyone's disgust, Secretary General Krieger and Representative Taylor - and a lot of the other current and former PPDC brass - were happy to pose for pictures with President Lunk, laughing and chatting with him in front of the cameras as if he hadn't just spent an hour shitting on the Jaeger Program.

There in the mess hall, a lot of the Americans wound up gathered on the floor and crowded onto the seats and tables around Chuck, Jake, Mako, and Raleigh. "This is gonna backfire in Lunk's face so hard," Hien insisted. "People all over the world are going to be defending Marshal Pentecost. Y'know," she cast a look at the other Team Gipsy personnel, "we probably should say something."

Raleigh cringed, and some of the crews started arguing, but then Jin Wei called them all to order.
"I have a message from Marshal Hansen. He says no one is to speak to the reporters about this. He says Sasha Kaidanovsky has a plan."

They all exchanged looks.

"Yeah, what else is new?" said Tendo.

Jake was so quiet after the speech that Mako shot Raleigh an apologetic look when everyone finally wore down their ranting and disbursed for quarters. "You can stay in my room if you want," she murmured in Japanese.

Raleigh shook his head. "Stay with him. I'll be fine."

He was lying, of course; this would be the first night they hadn't spent together in weeks. But she knew he understood what had just happened; Mako's teenaged (now orphaned) brother had just had to listen to the President of the United States mocking his father in front of the whole world. Mako doubted she'd get much sleep tonight either.

It was gratifying how many crew trailed after Mako and Jake just to reassure Jake personally. "Don't let that get to you, kid. Jerry Lunk's full of shit, and the whole world knows it."

"Take it from the 'muricans, son. That shithead was the biggest mistake we as a country ever made!"

"Lunk didn't know the first thing about Marshal Pentecost until after Pitfall!"

As they reached Jake's room, Mako spotted Chuck hovering a few paces down the hall. Jake looked back and forth between the two of them, uncertain, so it fell to Mako to nod, beckoning him to come with them.

It was crowded in the little bunk room with three people and Sensei's ghost. "I know Lunk's full of shit," Jake pronounced.

Mako and Chuck had to smile. "The one and only time he ever said a word to your dad was to shoot off an email demanding Gipsy Danger back after she moved to Hong Kong," said Chuck. "'American property,' never mind the American PPDC reps had all signed off on the transfer."

Mako growled under her breath without thinking. She'd forgotten about that amid the chaos of the consolidation during the spring, and Sensei hadn't said much. All Mako had been able to think at the time was that all her work would come to nothing if the Americans took Gipsy back. She hadn't realized until then how proprietary she'd become. She met Chuck's eyes inadvertently then, and for the briefest second, she could see Sensei giving her that same look, trying not to be amused at her expense.

Jake didn't notice. "What'd he say? My dad, did he answer?"

"Nah, he ignored it. Lunk didn't even notice; somebody probably told him how expensive a Jaeger is to maintain - sorry," Chuck added to Mako.

It's moot now, isn't it? Gipsy Danger is vaporized in another dimension, or at least on another planet. I only hope she took a large number of the kaiju and those...Precursors, whatever they are, with her.

"Mako?" She blinked back to here and now, and found Jake staring at her in alarm. "What?"
"Nothing - " she began, but at his irritation, she amended it, "I'm okay." She forced a smile. "It's a side effect of drifting. Our minds wander."

That was a massive oversimplification, and Chuck knew it, but he was polite enough not to say...*since when?* A few months ago, Chuck Hansen would've sneered something like, "*Maybe your mind wanders, Mori.*"

"How much do you know about my dad now, after drifting with him?" Jake asked Chuck bluntly.

Mako winced, but Chuck didn't seem bothered. "It varies. Drifting...it depends on what you're paying attention to. Weeks on, I remember things and realize they're not my memories. I..." He suddenly looked uncertain in a way Mako couldn't ever recall seeing - not in the eyes of Sensei or Chuck Hansen. "I didn't know one drift could do that. I mean, I ghosted a little with my father from the very beginning, but we kept on drifting."

"It's the same with Raleigh and me," Mako confirmed. "I don't know if the drift is always this way; Operation Pitfall was...a very long drift, with long combat. The truth is, for all my time in the simulator, I didn't often think about how drift compatibility might truly feel, or how it changes the pilots."

Chuck couldn't seem to come up with a response to that. "What'll happen now?" Jake asked. "Is that it? That pillock in the US gets the last word?"

"It better not be," Chuck muttered and pulled out his phone. "Hm. My dad says some of their friendly members of Congress are telling Sasha they want to go back into session tomorrow - so Lunk doesn't get the last word. That'll mean letting the unfriendly ones get another crack at us too, but at least then our people can bloody answer!"

Mako leaned against the wall and pondered it. "I'm not very familiar with American politics or their journalists...but after tonight, I think there would be even more attention on the committee testimony if they do have another session. Maybe Marshal Hansen and Sasha could use that to defend Marshal Pentecost."

Within a few hours, despite it being close to midnight in Washington, DC, the breaking news headlines changed again: *Joint Committee on Jaeger Program to Re-Convene Friday!*  

*To Be Continued...*

Chapter End Notes

*Coming Soon*: On the final day of testimony, Herc and the rest of the Jaeger Program have had enough of Stacker's memory being smeared by politicians and join forces with other veterans to turn the tables and take control of the narrative in *Chapter Twelve: Stand For Us!*

*PLEASE don't forget to review!*

"*Hùnzhàng!*" - (Mandarin) Bullshit

*Original Character Guide*
President Jerald "Jerry" Lunk: President of the United States. Billionaire hotel mogul who ran on a campaign of "make America safe again" in 2024, proponent of the Wall, likes to use Twitter. No, he's not based on anyone in the real world. Seriously. No, really.

Vice President Lionel Royce: Vice President of the United States. Slightly more dignified than Lunk, but rode Lunk's coattails to the White House because he couldn't get elected on his own anywhere else due to his bigotry. No, he's not based on anyone in the real world either. Really.

Hien Nguyen: Strike trooper formerly with Gipsy Danger, then transferred to Team Striker Eureka after Knifehead and Yancy's death, National Guard transplant, Vietnamese-American in her early 30s.

Christian Warner: drivesuit technician, African-American early 30s, classmate of Raleigh, Yancy, and Tendo's from Class 2016-B, close friend of our heroes from the beginning. Transferred to K-Watch to join his half-sister Chloe after Knifehead and Yancy's death, eventually wound up on Hong Kong's staff.

Chloe Warner: K-Watch officer, African-American, early 30s, classmate of Raleigh, Yancy, and Tendo's from Academy Class 2016-B. Stationed in Hawaii for most of the war, eventually wound up with the downsized K-Watch personnel in Hong Kong for Operation Pitfall. She and her half-brother drift tested, but were not drift compatible despite being very close.

Kyrra Taior: Chief Engineer of Striker Eureka, Aboriginal Australian, former lover of Susanti Hassan, late pilot of Vulcan Specter.
Stand For Us

Chapter Summary

On the final day of testimony to Congress, Herc and the rest of the Jaeger Program have had enough of Stacker's memory being smeared by politicians and join forces with other veterans to turn the tables and take control of the narrative.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Thank you all so much for the feedback! Please keep it coming! This chapter references several pivotal events in Aurora Australis as well as my theory behind the backing for the Wall of Life in the movie. (Oh, and Raleigh's explanation of Captain America: The Winter Soldier is oversimplified for the listeners who aren't superhero movie fans.) It also references the ultimate fates of the Shatterdome commanders who are my original characters. See my Tumblr, 3Fluffies, under my Generation K tag for little biographies of all of them and a timeline of pre-movie major events including every kaiju engagement (why yes, I am that big of a dork that I wrote it all out, how'd you notice?) The U.S. Representative to the PPDC in Pacific Rim is identified only as "L. Taylor," so I picked Lawrence (Larry).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Twelve: Stand For Us

Washington, D.C…

Both Sasha and her allies among the Americans warned Herc that the final day of testimony wouldn't be easy. This is the last chance for all of us to get our last word in, to control the narrative. Lunk made a fool of himself last night, so his allies need to make up ground fast. That means they'll come at us with everything they've got.

Both the warnings and Herc's own intuition were very, very right.

"Who vetted you as Marshal of the Hong Kong Shatterdome, Marshal Hansen?" Senator Block sneered at Herc.

Herc could almost feel the scowls of Sasha and Aleksis singeing their way past his head, and fought the temptation to throw an elbow. "Marshal Pentecost appointed me when he stepped down."

"How is that possible? You weren't ranking officer; both Rangers Kaidanovsky had higher seniority than you."

"Marshal Pentecost had discretion to choose."

"What military protocol for promotion was Marshal Pentecost following?"
"The PPDC's protocol for Shatterdome Command structure," Herc replied, and couldn't resist adding, "Which anyone who can read English should know was drafted to ensure a designated commanding officer had a designated successor at all times due to the extreme high risk to bases in combat zones. Marshal Pentecost discussed it with all the Rangers who weren't piloting the mission; the Kaidanovskys turned it down. So did Cheung and Jin Wei, since they hold comparable rank," he added. "They were severely injured, but they're recovering, and in command now." Wouldn't hurt to remind these suits that the Wei Tang Clan might be down, but they weren't out, and currently in command of the world's one and only remaining Jaeger.

Congresswoman Wyatt took the floor back, to Herc's intense relief. While her line of questions wasn't any easier to hear, she was at least sensitive about it. "I understand Marshal Pentecost's death is a difficult subject for everyone under his command, Marshal Hansen, but this panel does have some concerns. Why was it necessary for Marshal Pentecost to pilot this mission as your replacement - I understand you were injured and couldn't pilot Operation Pitfall. But wouldn't it have been a better transition for Marshal Pentecost to remain in command and control and have a different co-pilot in Striker Eureka?"

Yeah, Herc supposed these were fair questions, but how the hell was he supposed to explain this in a way that a bunch of suits who knew jack shit about drift compatibility could understand?

Suck it up, Hansen, that's why you're in charge. "Stacker Pentecost..." His voice broke, and he stopped and swallowed hard. Damn, sorry, Chuck. "Marshal Pentecost had been a drift instructor at the Jaeger Academy for years, in addition to being a combat Ranger and Shatterdome commander. We couldn't...couldn't just put anybody in the conn-pod and expect them to be able to drift, even with an experienced co-pilot like my s - like Chuck Hansen. Stack - Marshal Pentecost had known us both for decades, and how to control the drift even with someone he'd never partnered before. He wasn't only our best chance of keeping Striker Eureka in fighting form, he was probably our only chance, and he knew it." He cast a long glare down the panel, particularly at the ones who looked skeptical. "Stacker also knew what getting back in a Jaeger would cost him - his chances of survival of Operation Pitfall were zero. You get that? No...bloody...chance. But he knew he could drift with my son, he knew he could hold out long enough to get Striker and the bomb to the Breach, and he was right on every count!"

An eruption of noise interrupted Herc, and he blinked over his shoulder to see the packed chamber galleries a blur of motion - all the civilians who'd wrangled their way in to watch were on their feet, applauding and cheering.

Oh. Well, that's gratifying. When he turned around, it startled him still more to see almost half of the panel applauding, even several of them rising to their feet. That's more like it.

"Well done," Hermann whispered, and Newt clapped Herc on the back.

But Senator Block wasn't going to admit defeat. "You were very close to Marshal Pentecost, weren't you?" he asked as the noise died down.

This'll be interesting. "Of course. We knew each other before K-Day, trained together for the Mark-1 Jaegers, then I saw a lot of him as a commander," Herc replied. "So I had plenty of opportunity to see his judgment in action."

"Are you saying he was never wrong?"

Herc let himself roll his eyes. "No, I'm not saying that. I don't know a human being on this planet who never made a bad call - I think I've seen a few headlines questioning the judgments of your Congress now and again."
Okay, that was probably unnecessary, but the burst of laughter from all around the room and even the grins on some of the panelists' faces did a lot to improve Herc's move. Block, however, just scowled.

"Why did Marshal Pentecost resign from command of Anchorage Shatterdome after the Knifehead disaster?"

Shit. Herc had known it was coming, but his stomach still twisted. "Marshal Pentecost had taken command of the Anchorage Dome after Marshal Gagnon had a heart attack. They split their duties: Pentecost commanded the Shatterdome and deployments, and Gagnon handled the Jaeger Academy. By summer 2020, Marshal Gagnon had recovered and was able to resume full command of the Alaska protection zone."

He couldn't deny it having anything to do with Knifehead without lying outright - and the Jaeger Program's detractors knew it. Block leaned forward. "So to your knowledge, Marshal Hansen - and I remind you that you're under oath - did Marshal Pentecost's departure in 2020 and subsequent...looks like, six months without a reassignment...have anything to do with the deployment of Gipsy Danger against the kaiju Knifehead where Yancy Becket was killed?"

...Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Please don't let Raleigh be watching this. Seconds ticked by as Herc struggled to put words together that were both true and non-inflammatory. "Officially, no. But Marshal Pentecost confided to me that he suspected his actions to protect Raleigh Becket afterwards had something to do with it."

Even as Block and his allies had tried to tarnish Stacker's memory, some of the committee had looked bored, sifting through papers or looking at their phones. Some of the media reps had been letting their cameras do the work and not really listening.

Now Herc had the undivided attention of every politician and reporter in the room.

"What exactly did Marshal Pentecost tell you? What did he do to 'protect' Raleigh Becket that Secretary General Krieger and the PPDC delegates would deem punishable?" Block pressed.

To Herc's relief, Congresswoman Wyatt intervened. "Statements made confidentially between military officers shouldn't be casually made public."

"Why not? There's no legal privilege," said one of Block's allies. "Not unless Marshal Hansen is claiming he was Pentecost's priest."

Herc fought not to react to the snide laughter that rippled among the detractors. Fortunately, there were a few familiar faces among the military witnesses, and one of them, former Marshal Ana Ramirez, spoke up. "There are other privilege and confidentiality provisions at work for disclosure of military information, Senator, and the Jaeger Program delegates don't have counsel of their own."

Congresswoman Wyatt frowned as if just now noticing that. "Marshal Hansen, where is the Jaeger Program's attorney?"

"We don't have one," Herc replied, trying not to sound sarcastic. "No budget for one - all the funds we did have went into trying to prevent the apocalypse." That got him another round of applause.

Block called on Secretary General Krieger. "Is there any reason Marshal Hansen can't testify as to what Marshal Pentecost told him about the Knifehead incident?"

Krieger, of course, had a lawyer to whisper in his ear. At least he had the grace to look
uncomfortable - nah, whatever Krieger's uncomfortable about, grace has nothing to do with it, shameless bastard. "Er, no, Senator. Since the investigation is closed, none of that information is classified."

Block smirked. "Then, returning to subject, Marshal Hansen, what did Marshal Pentecost tell you about why he was removed as commanding officer of Anchorage Shatterdome?"

Through gritted teeth, Herc said, "Pentecost wasn't 'removed.' He resigned by agreement with Marshal Gagnon. He suspected his superiors - now he allowed himself a snide look at Krieger and Representative Taylor, - made funding decisions in retaliation against him. He thought it would be better for the Jaeger Program and everyone under its protection if he stepped away."

A murmur rippled through the room, and Krieger and Taylor both went pale, as did several of the other PPDC reps in attendance. So, they knew exactly where this was going.

But every bloody one of the PPDC brass had a lawyer of their own, and every bloody one of them jumped up and objected at almost the exact same second...but if that doesn't lend a little credence to Stacker's theory, what else does? Herc thought. While he stepped back from the microphone to let the lawyers and the committee argue, he saw every one of his fellow delegates giving him intense looks.

"What?"

"Be careful," Hermann whispered. "I'm all for implicating those louts, but doing so may mean exposing far more of Raleigh's suffering than anyone has a right to know."

Sasha shook her head. "The time has come to expose their machinations. Millions of lives were lost because so much funding was diverted in 2020, and those decisions stemmed directly from Stacker's refusal to allow Raleigh to be used as a propaganda toy, and his obstruction of their efforts to do the same with Chuck when he was still a child. They should answer for it. The boys will understand. Raleigh's already making efforts in Hong Kong to clear Stacker's name."

"Mm?" Herc blinked. Chuck hadn't mentioned that, though he'd told Herc vaguely about a late-night meltdown in the Kwoon that'd led to Mako and Raleigh's decision to drift again.

"Don't you remember the efforts we all went to after Christmas 2020, to reinstill faith in Stacker so he could take command after Vincent Gagnon was forced to retire? That loss of faith was caused by the Corps' assumption - as Stacker intended - that Stacker had dismissed Raleigh for insubordination and abandoned him. You and I know that isn't what happened, and Raleigh is now correcting his friends' beliefs on that score."

Herc was stunned, completely deaf to the politicians' debating behind him. He'd never forgotten Stacker's confession after Raleigh was dismissed, and he'd cautiously helped push the Hassans into supporting Stacker's reinstatement as Anchorage commander months later. "I know...there were parts Raleigh didn't know. Stacker had someone looking after him; he never said who."

"Chuck told Raleigh. Stacker's intentions were pure, but he did deceive Raleigh too as to his reasons, so Raleigh wouldn't realize Stacker was taking all the blame and recriminations onto himself, including the retaliation of those cowards there," Sasha said, smirking as the brass sweated while their lawyers tried to prevent further testimony. "Until Raleigh's departure, Striker Eureka would have been the first of more than one Mark-5, and Stacker would never have had to resort to black market deals to repair Diablo Intercept, Silver Lion, and Horizon Brave. Many battles after Knifehead would have ended differently, especially in the last two years, if they'd continued to fund us rather than drain our funding away."
Herc hesitated. None of this was really news...but hearing it put in those simple, blunt terms by Sasha made him want to say to hell with it and roar out everything he knew in front of this committee, point at those conniving, corrupt bastards in front of the reporters and let the wrath of the entire world come down on them...but what would come down on Raleigh along with it? He could implicate Blake Ketteridge at last, about what the bastard had done to get Chuck into the conn-pod...but what would Chuck feel about being treated as a victim now?

Or would Chuck think it was worth it to bring justice for Devi and Susanti for what Ketteridge had done to them? Would Raleigh think it was worth it to vindicate Stacker's memory and expose the bastards who'd tried to exploit him at his darkest hour?

No way to know...unless I ask them.

When the panel called for a break to mull over all the brass's objections, Herc made up his mind...partly. He dodged reporters and Krieger and Taylor (no doubt they were desperate to try to persuade Herc to drop the subject), along with the Kaidanovskys, the Gottliebs, and Newt until they were back in their private conference room. And he vidcommed Hong Kong.

"I need Raleigh and Chuck - actually, get me all the Rangers. We need to talk now."

Tendo didn't ask questions, and in a matter of minutes, Raleigh and Mako, Chuck, Cheung, and Jin were assembled alone in a room. "What're you gonna tell them?" Chuck asked. Undoubtedly they'd been watching.

"That's what I have to decide. The brass are shitting their pants because Stacker knew they cut funding in 2020 at least in part to retaliate for him getting you out of their reach," Herc told Raleigh. "They also know I've been holding my peace for five and a half years about what they did to get my sixteen-year-old into a conn-pod."

"This is not only about you," Sasha put in. "Krieger, his supporters, and your government have a cause in common: to keep control of this Program. They know it means they must take control from Herc and us, the surviving pilots. To do that, they must discredit us as well as Stacker Pentecost's memory. They've already tried, and they will continue as long as they have any credibility themselves. We know enough to end that game."

The Weis looked at each other. "You could tell them what was done to Shaolin Rogue, when Fei-Yen became pregnant. It would damage the faction here in China who see us as only propaganda props."

Mako opened her mouth, then shut it again, shooting an anxious look at Raleigh - who wasn't looking at the vidcomm. Herc sighed and confessed, "Raleigh...there's more about what happened after Knifehead that you never knew. Stacker went to huge lengths to keep the brass's claws off you, but yeah, it'll mean talking about the condition you were in."

For a few moments, Raleigh didn't answer, and when he finally spoke, he didn't look up. "I...in a way, I didn't leave Marshal Pentecost any choice. I know he blackmailed the brass, but he may've had to do that, 'cause I blackmailed him." With a deep breath, he explained, "I threatened - not outright, not really, but I hinted...if they tried to send me on a tour like Duc Jessop, I'd kill myself first. He offered to dismiss me like I wanted as a bargaining chip, so I'd promise not to." Now Mako looked away, but Herc could tell she was holding Raleigh's hand.

Sasha turned the pressure on Chuck. "Remember another bargaining chip your father's superiors used - not merely you, but Scott. They would not agree to prosecute him for a life sentence unless Herc agreed to your application."
"I remember," Chuck murmured. He wasn't looking up either, but he looked far less distressed than Raleigh, more...thoughtful. Like Stacker Pentecost when he was pondering a set of unpleasant choices, trying to figure out which would do the least damage. But the moment passed, and when Chuck sharply looked up and met Herc's eyes, he was all himself, angry and frustrated. "I remember when that Morton bitch and her cronies turned up the heat, Ketteridge threw you under the bus, said it was your idea for me to go to Academy at sixteen, when he'd been the one leading me on through the whole bloody application." His fellow Rangers looked startled. Yeah, apart from Sasha and Aleksis's uncanny ability to find out everything, most of the other pilots would've had no idea what manipulations had gone into getting Chuck into the Academy - except Devi, Susanti, and Stacker. "Do it," Chuck concluded. "Tell them everything."

Raleigh slowly nodded. "There's...not a lot that can really hurt me now. I can't pilot again. Everyone knew I was fucked in the head from...Yancy dying in the drift, nobody whose opinion matters'll be that surprised to find out anything I said or did. If they...well, better they know what I'm responsible for instead of blaming Marshal Pentecost."

"You and Marshal Pentecost were left with no good options," Mako countered. "If Secretary General Krieger and the UN representatives had truly cared for you or any other pilot's welfare, it would never have come to that. They should be held accountable. They cut funding for the Shatterdomes, the Jaegers, the pilots, and the crews, but paid their own salaries to the very end - they are still paying their own salaries from the PPDC budget," she added, scowling. "Every one of them bought property in the central United States mountains and Asia while Rangers were dying, and the poor living in coastal regions had no chance of affording inland homes anywhere. Sensei told me," she explained, seeing the others' curious (but unsurprised) looks. "When Tamsin was still alive, sometimes he ranted." She smiled sadly.

Herc looked around at his companions, then back at his pilots on the vidcomm. "Are we agreed, then? Time for the great reckoning?" All of them nodded. "Right." Except... "Now someone who knows a bloody thing about politics tell me what I do next."

Well, at least it lightened the mood; every one of them broke up laughing. "Leave this to me, Herc," said Sasha, and swaggered out the door with Aleksis at her heels.

Raleigh elbowed Mako. "Called it!"

Cheung and Jin exchanged bloodthirsty smiles. "All this time, they've paid nothing for abandoning us all to die. Make them regret it now."

"And make Jerry bloody Lunk regret getting his picture taken with them last night," Chuck added.

A few minutes later, Sasha and Aleksis returned - with former Marshal Ana Ramirez in tow. "We've spoken with an aide to Congresswoman Wyatt and one of the Senators friendly to us," Sasha announced. "We've told them there are many things we wish to tell this committee about the last years of the Jaeger Program, and they should reconvene as soon as possible."

Ramirez was staring at the vidcomm - at Raleigh. Oh. Oops. Gipsy Danger had been stationed in Los Angeles for a long time. Even the personnel stationed there who weren't part of Team Gipsy had been devastated after Knifehead. Ramirez had always shown herself to be one of the C.O.'s who'd put her Rangers and crew first; Herc had seen that when he'd deployed from L.A., and Stacker had trusted her.

Raleigh said hesitantly, "Hi, Marshal."

It was a few seconds before she could find her voice, then she answered roughly, "Not Marshal
anymore, Ranger Becket. But my God, you are a sight for sore eyes."

"Good to see you too."

She took her eyes off him with an effort and turned to Herc and the Kaidanovskys. "So? What's in the works that I can help with? Raining hell down on Dustin Krieger and Larry Taylor, I hope."

"I knew there was a reason I liked you," said Chuck.

The others laughed, and Raleigh said, "Hey, you guys all seen The Winter Soldier?" Most nodded, but at the few blank looks (Hermann and Mako), he clarified. "Second Captain America movie, 2014. The Department of Defense was infiltrated by Nazis all the way to the top, so Cap and his team expose everything online, from top to bottom. Every decision, every secret gets revealed. It has to be rebuilt from the ground up."

"And it's the Russian who does it," Jin Wei put in, and they all laughed harder. Sasha was downright smug.

"I'm flattered. And the Hollywood precedent is sound." She smirked at Ramirez. "I take it you are in?"

"Ohhh, yes."

"Let's do this," said Herc.

He'd never imagined being this excited about walking back into that suit and reporter-filled committee room. It's time, you corrupt bastards. Maybe the mistake we all made was being silent too long.

Hong Kong Shatterdome...

"Which commanding officers are even left?" Raleigh asked the others after the call.

They all started counting on their fingers. "General Liang died in May," said Mako. "He was commander of Hong Kong until we consolidated here in December last year."

The Weis exchanged a look. "He was a good commander...in many ways. Most of the time. Some of his choices, we found very wrong, like allowing the propagandists to make a fetish object of Fei-Yen Wang. But he did defend the Jaeger Program against the supporters of the Wall."

"Admiral Yamamoto died right before Pitfall, after Tokyo Dome closed, but Colonel Okita's still alive and kicking – and heading up the reinstated Japanese Jaeger Program," said Chuck. "Ketteridge is still around, but that bastard deserves to rot with the rest of the brass. He's gonna be one of the ones my dad has things to say about."

Something in his eyes made Raleigh ponder all he'd heard. The stuff about Chuck's unorthodox entry into the program and Ketteridge's manipulation of Herc about Scott was not big surprise, but...all that sex discrimination stuff...the only female pilots ever assigned to Sydney were Devi and Susanti Hassan. What the hell had that son of a bitch done to them?

Still, this wasn't the time. They were looking for allies, and it sounded like Ketteridge would get his. "We know we've got Ramirez. She was great."

"Yeah, but the US tossed her and put a Wall-humper in charge of Los Angeles Shatterdome after
Yankee Star went down," said Chuck. "That's when Dad knew the screws were turning for good, and we couldn't count on American help. He was surprised we got to keep Gipsy."

"Marshal Quijano from Panama City was always with us," Mako mused. "They forced her into retirement after she denounced Panama's de-funding of the Jaeger Program in favor of the Wall. I don't know where she is now, only that she retired to the U.S. I went to school there with her grandchildren. I'll try to contact them."

"Sasha and Alekis will call Colonel Rabinov if they aren't already," said Cheung.

"Gabe Morais was C.O. of Lima after Pentecost went back to Anchorage," Raleigh recalled. "Yance and I only worked with him when he was head of the Southern Hemisphere J-Tech, but the guys stationed in Lima after us said he was good."

Chuck sighed. "I think he's still alive, but he got radiation poisoning after Horizon Brave went down in Lima – damn near everyone at that Dome did. So I dunno what kind of health he's in now."

"Still, that is at least four former Shatterdome commanders who can speak for us along with your father," said Cheung, as Jinn tapped away on his phone. "Sasha probably knows, but we're reminding her."

Mako let out a genuine snort of laughter from something on her phone. At Raleigh's startled look, she handed her phone over; it was a text from Herc: Krieger and Taylor are knocking on the door wanting to talk. Sasha just told them to fuck off.

"HA! What I wouldn't give to be a fly on the wall in the brass's offices right about now," Raleigh crowed. "Retribution's coming, and those fuckers know it!"

Chuck grinned nastily at his phone. "Ramirez already has Quijano and Okita in touch; Sasha's on the phone with Colonel Rabinov They've all got documents they're gonna release – today. And they're all gonna go straight out and start giving interviews. Hey, Mako, guess who Sasha just tapped for Herc's up-close-and-personal interview?" At her curious expression, he said, "A… Matthew Davis, Harvard undergraduate? Ring a bell?"

Mako actually squealed. "Ex-boyfriend?" Raleigh teased.

"Actually, yes," Mako replied smugly. "But more important, there is no writer more friendly to us – given that his mother is Tanisha Davis."

Raleigh rocked back in surprise. "Seriously? That's Tanisha's kid – wait, you dated Tanisha's son?!"

She poked him. "We were only a year apart. He came to my school after the press began hounding him at his grandmother's home in Los Angeles. We went to prom together."

What a mental image. "How did Marshal Pentecost and Tanisha react to that?" demanded Cheung.

Mako blushed and shrugged, but Chuck knew the answer: "I think they made a deal: he wouldn't threaten Matthew if she didn't threaten Mako." All of them burst into laughter. "Don't be too smug, Becket. Another name on the 'friendly reporter' list is that Jaeger Fly you and your brother brawled over in 2016 – Naomi Sokolov."

It probably wouldn't have hurt at all if Raleigh didn't ache for Yancy again, but he smiled. "Yeah, I've been seeing her name on a lot of the pro-Ranger press since Pitfall. Tendo said she interviewed
him and Marshal Pentecost and wrote a really strong piece in favor of us back when they were closing down the Domes and Pitfall was still top secret."

As if on cue, Tendo pounded on the door. "Guys! The session's re-starting in ten minutes! Get this – Krieger and the brass and all the Wall-humpers tried to adjourn, but they lost the vote! A bunch of the 'neutral' committee members voted with our supporters – they're going until the end of the day!"

Rangers and crew streamed back into the mess hall and officers' lounge. "What the hell do your old man and Sasha have in the works?!" Kyrra Taior demanded of Chuck.

Chuck winked at Jake Pentecost, who was re-claiming his usual spot at Mako's left side. "They've had enough being on the defensive, for Marshal Pentecost and all of us. Time for Secretary General Krieger and the rest of the PPDC brass who sold us out to answer for it."

_To Be Continued..._

Chapter End Notes

Coming Soon: Retribution rains down on the PPDC brass and politicians who sold out the Jaeger Program during the war! The world learns the truth behind the decline and fall of the Jaeger Program, and many fallen and still-living heroes finally see justice done in Chapter Thirteen: Character Evidence!

PLEASE don't forget to review!

Original Character Guide

President Jerald "Jerry" Lunk: President of the United States. Billionaire hotel mogul who ran on a campaign of "make America safe again" in 2024, proponent of the Wall, likes to use Twitter. No, he's not based on anyone in the real world. No, really.

Senator Gill Block: United States Senator from the plains states, was pro-Wall and backed by inland real estate owners.

Congresswoman Andrea Wyatt: United States Representative from the Pacific Northwest states, pro-Jaeger Program throughout her career.

Marshal Ana Ramirez: former Commanding Officer of Los Angeles Shatterdome, 50ish, Mexican-American, US Army officer. She was in command when Gipsy Danger and Yankee Star defeated Yamarashi in 2017, but after Yankee Star was destroyed in 2024, she was replaced by an unsympathetic, anti-Jaeger Program general who closed the Los Angeles Shatterdome soon after.

Marshal Blake Ketteridge: former Commanding Officer of Sydney Shatterdome, mid-60s, former Air Vice Marshal of the Royal Australian Air Force. Lost his daughter and grandchildren in the nuclear bombing of Scissure, but also misogynistic and bigoted.

Devi and Susanti Hassan: late Rangers of Vulcan Specter, Australia's Mark-3, first generation daughters of Indonesian Muslim immigrants, they were not who Marshal Ketteridge had in mind, and he never got past his sexism or bigotry. Graduated Jaeger
Academy Class 2016-B along with the Becketts, they were very close until Yancy's death, but also very close to Chuck and Herc during his childhood and after he became a pilot. Killed in action in September 2024 with a record unmatched until Striker destroyed Mutavore.

Fei-Yen Wang: late Ranger of China's Shaolin Rogue, the beautiful Chinese woman seen briefly during Pacific Rim's opening montage, she was used as a propaganda figure by Chinese PPDC authorities throughout her life, required to keep her relationship with her rather plain co-pilot, Huan Che, secret.

Tanisha Davis: Ranger of Yankee Star, America's Mark-2, former U.S. Marine under the command of Bruce Gage. Her son, Matthew, lived with her mother in Los Angeles until media harassment forced her to enroll him in the higher-security Nittany Valley Preparatory Academy, where he meant (and briefly dated) Mako. Matthew chose not to attend the Jaeger Academy but was admitted to Harvard and pursued his passions of art and writing in vocal support of the Jaeger Program.
Character Evidence

Chapter Summary

Retribution rains down on the PPDC brass and politicians who sold out the Jaeger Program during the war! The world learns the truth behind the decline and fall of the Jaeger Program, and many fallen and still-living heroes finally see justice done.

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: My sincerest apologies, dear readers, for the unexpectedly-long wait! Work really slammed me and hasn't let up, so updates will be coming on weekends. I'll try to keep them reasonably consistent. (Don't become lawyers, boys and girls. Seriously, if you're considering that career path...don't. I haven't slept in 15 years.) This chapter's a little short, but contains a LOT of information, and is written in epistolary style, a favorite tool of mine.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirteen: Character Evidence

BOMBSHELLS ON FINAL AFTERNOON OF JAEGER COMMITTEE TESTIMONY!

Marshal Hercules Hansen reveals pattern of corruption, exploitation, and abuse by PPDC Secretary General and UN Representatives!

As testimony resumed before the Joint Committee on the Jaeger Program over the objections of the same members of Congress who initially called for its formation, Marshal Hercules Hansen finished his testimony on the subject of Marshal Stacker Pentecost's fitness by declaring Pentecost was forced to dismiss Raleigh Becket from the Jaeger Program in May 2020 by Becket himself! Faced with a forced publicity tour only weeks after the death in combat of his brother and co-pilot, Yancy Becket, Ranger Raleigh Becket threatened suicide if Pentecost did not dismiss him from the Jaeger Program.

Secretary General Krieger and PPDC UN Representative Lawrence Taylor attempted to disavow any involvement with such tour, only for Sasha Kaidanovsky to turn over nearly 1,000 pages of documents showing how injured and retired Rangers, including Duc Jessop, Hayase Shindo, Raleigh Becket, and others, were targeted as propaganda tools by their superiors with little regard for their welfare. Those documents included e-mails and messages between Krieger, Taylor, and the other senior PPDC officials planning these publicity tours over the objections of the Rangers and their commanders.

ROTTEN AT THE TOP: How Corruption Among PPDC Senior Officials Spelled The Downfall of the Jaeger Program and Millions Under Its Protection!
Audits are being ordered by multiple nations of PPDC officials accused of siphoning funds from promotional activities conducted by the Jaeger Program that should have gone towards its maintenance and support of its personnel and equipment. Documents released by several former Shatterdome commanding officers and Jaeger Program staff suggest budgets devoted to advertising and promotional appearances could have built and maintained more than ten additional Jaegers and the crew who operated them.

Part of the problem, according to financial experts, is the unique formation of the PPDC. Because it was not administered and financed by any one nation and operated as a military rather than civilian organization, budgets were classified and often only accessible by the most senior officials. Even the commanding officers who oversaw the deployment of the Jaegers only had access to their particular Shatterdome’s budget, while the promotional budgets were handled by entirely different departments.

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**RANGERS EXPLOITED AT THEIR DARKEST HOURS!**

Naomi Sokolov, Associated Press

As testimony grew more emotional before the Joint Committee on the Jaeger Program, Marshal Hansen and Rangers Kaidanovsky spoke of pilots being forced in the immediate aftermath of injury and death of their partners to participate in propaganda tours for PPDC officials. Hansen confirmed earlier reports that the most famous of these pilots, Duc Jessop, felt coerced into touring after the death of his wife and co-pilot from cancer, and was forced to continue even after he himself received a terminal diagnosis.

Ranger Hayase Shindo, pilot of Japanese Tidal Dragon, lost her brother and co-pilot to radiation poisoning 9 months after the Razorfin engagement in 2018 and also toured until she was too ill to travel. Colonel Sanae Okita, former commander of Nagasaki Shatterdome, released documents that the publicity tour was ordered by the PPDC over the repeated and vehement objections of Tokyo commander Admiral Yamamoto and Shindo herself.

Rangers Cheung and Jin Wei released a statement that the most famous face of the Jaeger Program, Shaolin Rogue’s Fei-Yen Wang, was likewise forced into a propaganda role by her superiors, who controlled everything from her hairstyle to her public relationships, and prohibited her from making her romance with her co-pilot Huan Che public. More stunning are documents revealing Wang became unexpectedly pregnant in late 2020, something assumed impossible as nuclear Jaegers were thought to have rendered their pilots sterile. The Kaidanovskys and Rangers Pang So-Yi and An Yuna of Nova Hyperion have all confirmed on the record that Wang and Che went absent without leave from the Hong Kong Shatterdome out of fear she would be forced to terminate the pregnancy.

Chinese officials are calling this a lie and a stereotype perpetrated by Westerners, but what is known is that Wang and Che abruptly announced their previously-secret marriage after the Atticon engagement in November 2020.

Hansen testified that in spring 2020, he and Marshal Stacker Pentecost were driven to desperate measures to save then-21-year-old Raleigh Becket from a similar fate after Yancy Becket was killed in the Knifehead engagement. This was a unique and terrible event in the history of the Jaeger Program, as until then, prevailing pons science theory was that one pilot would not survive the death of the co-pilot while drifting. Documents now reveal that this theory was debunked and Raleigh Becket did experience his brother’s death mentally and emotionally, suffering irreparable brain damage made worse by the neural load of piloting Gipsy Danger to shore alone. Despite
Becket's grave injuries and incapacitating grief, memos show Secretary General Krieger himself was requesting that Becket sit for official interviews within 10 days of his brother's death.

Hansen and Pentecost considered many options for protecting Becket, then the youngest combat pilot in Jaeger Program history at age 18 when Gipsy Danger took on Yamarashi in 2017. Hansen even proposed keeping Becket active as a potential co-pilot for Australian Jaeger Striker Eureka, for which Hansen himself was the front-runner.

This testimony set off a flurry of new questions from the Committee, and Hansen confessed his motives weren't entirely selfless; he considered Becket, at age 21, an alternative to his son, then-16-year-old Chuck Hansen, who is now revealed to have been placed in consideration against his father's will.

Former Sydney Marshal Blake Ketteridge has already been subpoenaed by the Australian government and an official military inquiry is under way regarding Ketteridge's actions. He has made no comment, but Chuck Hansen, now 21, has spoken to press briefly to confirm his father's testimony: Chuck Hansen's entry into the Jaeger Academy was at the behest of Ketteridge, not his father, and indeed, kept secret until after the Manila disaster when Hercules Hansen discovered his brother had raped and murdered two teenaged girls.

Hercules Hansen testified about an emotionally-charged confrontation after Christmas 2019, in which Ketteridge threatened that if he did not sign off on his underaged son's application to the Jaeger Academy, Ketteridge himself would help the boy become emancipated. Ketteridge and senior PPDC officials also threatened that Scott Hansen might not be fully prosecuted if Herc Hansen didn't agree to test with his teenaged son as co-pilot.

"Before you say anything about Stacker Pentecost's judgment, you better recognize he was the one person during those months who tried to do right by all of us," Hansen testified. "I admit I wasn't in a good place when I came to Academy that winter, and the few people who ever knew I wanted to test with Raleigh said it was a dangerous idea. Hell, I owe Becket an apology; he doesn't know any of this. I'd lost my own brother, my son had been taken from me, I'd just had a front row seat to the most unforeseen tragedy in the Jaeger Program; my judgment was off. Stacker Pentecost's wasn't. He was doing the best he could for all of us with damn little support from his superiors, and when the heat came up, he took the fall for all of us."

Show Me a Ranger and I'll Write You a Tragedy: How Humanity Failed Its Protectors

Matthew Davis, Freelance, Harvard University

Nearly every civilization on Earth pays lip service to showing gratitude to its servicemen and women, but when it comes to practice, there's no better example than the Jaeger Program of how often actions fall far short of promises.

From its inception, the Jaeger Program had enemies and embezzlers who undermined the efforts of its personnel and drained funding and support whenever possible.

The first five years of its existence are – mostly – a story of humanity's triumph over its greatest adversity, the setting aside of old rivalries to create weapons powerful and adaptable enough to combat the harbingers of Armageddon. The early PPDC recruited military and civilian personnel with competitive salaries and benefits, pouring financial support towards the building and staffing of Jaegers and Shatterdomes.

The world knew these war machines would be costly – so was the death and destruction that
accompanied every kaiju, to say nothing of the nuclear detonations it took to bring them down before Jaegers were invented!

How quickly we forgot.

The first Rangers and PPDC Strike Troops who fell in battle were given the heroes' memorial they deserved. Injured pilots and crew received the best medical care available along with mental health care. But within a few years, voices began complaining that the costs of the Jaeger Program were too high, and a cheaper, simpler defense might be found in simply building a wall around the entire Pacific Coast.

Armchair quarterbacks, naysayers, kaiju worshipers, and inland real estate owners jumped on this as the new miracle option, and as early as 2019, funds and resources were being diverted from the Jaeger Program.

Kaiju experts warned that the creatures had the power to break through or simply scale any wall that could be built with the technology humans had available, but this was disregarded by the Wall's supporters, who amassed fortunes, political offices, and grant money in the process. PPDC Secretary General Dustin Krieger himself is under investigation for connection to purchases of over 80 square miles of formerly-public inland property in Canada and United States PPDC Representative Lawrence Taylor has likewise been exposed as one of the backers of a scheme that acquired over 300 square miles of grassland in Mongolia. President Jerald Lunk made no secret that he was buying up land in the U.S. plains states and Rocky Mountains while defaulting on financing for some of his coastal hotels and casinos.

Amid this wheeling and dealing, Jaeger pilots and crews were suffering and dying, and every setback was touted by the Wall proponents as evidence without regard for the feelings of the front-line fighters or their families. Pilots forced to retire due to injury or radiation poisoning were paraded around their home nations and the world until their deaths by the same senior officials who were quietly investing in the Wall and inland real estate.

The Knifehead engagement – while touted as a victory in many ways – was a tragedy for the Jaeger Program and illustrates the forces coming together to undermine the Rangers and their supporters. Knifehead killed only a handful of civilians at deep sea before being destroyed by Gipsy Danger, but at the terrible cost of Yancy Becket's life and devastating physical and mental injuries to Raleigh Becket. PPDC senior officials were quick to point the finger at Anchorage's commanding officer, but they would like the public to forget that weeks prior to the attack, a Program-wide directive was made to cease pre-deployment of all Jaegers unless their protection zone came under red alert. This shortened the warning time for Jaeger deployment from 24 hours to 6, and in the stormy conditions in the North Pacific, the group deployments that had saved so many Jaegers and cities could not be prepared in time. As a result, Gipsy Danger went into the Gulf of Alaska to defend its coastline alone.

After the Knifehead engagement, Shatterdome commanders staged a minor mutiny and began making the decision to pre-deploy their bases earlier despite the command edict against it – and no Jaeger was sent against a kaiju alone again until there were simply no Jaegers left.

The story of Chuck Hansen is another tale of triumph mingled with tragedy as well as infamy, as the sordid truth of blackmail and exploitation of a vulnerable teenager has now come to life. Hansen himself has confirmed the worst of his father's testimony that his entry into the Jaeger Program was accomplished by coercion of Hercules Hansen only weeks after the devastating revelation of Scott Hansen's crimes and the deaths of pilots Jing and Min Li in the Meathead engagement.
"Marshal Ketteridge played me completely, then threw my dad under the bus when the press heat turned up," Chuck Hansen told Chinese media after his father finished testifying. "I wanted to apply, but my dad had said no, not until I was at least 17. After Lucky Seven went down and Scott was out, Ketteridge came to me. Of course, I jumped on it. I was a stupid kid with something to prove. Ketteridge proof-read my bloody application, then swore me to secrecy so he could choose the right time. They had me come swanning into a meeting without any warning to my father who was already going through hell over what'd happened in Manila. He blamed himself for not realizing earlier what Scott'd done. Truth be told, I'm amazed my dad and me could drift at all. We fell completely out over it."

Commenters will be quick to point out that Chuck Hansen's record as a pilot should vindicate Ketteridge and Krieger's actions, but Chuck himself disagrees. "They never gave a damn about me. I was a means to an end, and that end was not the bloody defense of mankind, whatever oath we took. I don't regret that I'm a Ranger, but you bet I regret ever listening to them. My dad warned me. He pointed out how Ketteridge treated the Hassans and how stupid it was to trust him."

Devi and Susanti Hassan, late pilots of Australian Jaeger Vulcan Specter, held the record for the most engagements and the most kills until Striker Eureka destroyed Mutavore in 2025 one week before Operation Pitfall. But their tenure in Sydney was marred by allegations of sexual harassment and discrimination gone unaddressed – and instigated – by Marshal Ketteridge.

"He never wanted them there," said Chuck Hansen. "He hated that they were Muslim, that they were first generation, that they were women. He treated every woman in the Dome like crap – he bloody said it in front of a camera, remember? He tried to deploy Vulcan alone against Spinejackal in 2022 – he was gonna leave Striker sitting there in Sydney with a Category III almost as big as Knifehead running at Melbourne. My dad nearly had to mutiny to stop it. Ketteridge thought Devi and Susanti were expendable at best – he tried to get them off the roster permanently at worst. Bastard needs to answer for it."

Ironically, the Mutavore engagement broke another record – the myth of an unbreachable Wall of Life. The Sydney Wall fell in less than an hour and exposed it for the mirage that it was – but not before its proponents had made themselves obscenely rich and ascended to unprecedented levels of political and economic power as the Jaeger Program and humanity's first responders suffered and died fighting the kaiju.

More than half of the brave men and women who ever piloted a Jaeger are dead. Nearly all of those still living suffered permanent physical injuries, and all surely carry the mental scars. A third of the Strike Troopers who ever served as first responders under the Jaeger Program are dead, and nearly three-quarters of those still living also face permanent effects on their health.

Most of the Jaegers were either left to rust and decay where they fell or were transported to Oblivion Bay, formerly Oakland, California, a graveyard of nuclear waste left by the passage of Trespasser in the first kaiju attack in history, August 13, 2013. Only one remains operational: Crimson Typhoon in Hong Kong, though it is being refitted as a two-man Jaeger, since Hu Wei, one of the fabled Wei triplets in the only three-man Jaeger ever built, died defending Victoria Harbor three days before Operation Pitfall.

Looking back on the last 12 years, humanity can find a great deal to celebrate. But we should also recognize the many wrongs committed behind the shield of general war, and that humanity's protectors are the ones who suffered most.

PPDC POLITICAL CARNAGE: KRIEGER OUT, ALL UN REPS OUT!
Multiple senior PPDC officials now targets of criminal investigations!

Secretary General Dustin Krieger's resignation was rumored to be imminent, but the PPDC general assembly decided not to wait as the Second Seoul Conference convened on September 30, 2025! Former Marshal Gabriel Morais of Brazil, now a PPDC delegate, moved for Krieger's removal as soon as the session opened, and the motion passed with over 75% in favor.

United States Representative Lawrence Taylor and the other five members of the PPDC Security Council soon suffered the same fate, and other officials named in the growing corruption probe rushed to deliver their resignations.

Pundits are calling this a day of reckoning for the PPDC in the wake of Operation Pitfall and the triumph by the handful of remaining Jaeger Program pilots and crews when these same officials abandoned them at the cost of millions of lives in the second half of the Kaiju War.

In the US, a special prosecutor has been appointed to investigate President Jerald "Jerry" Lunk and his cabinet's ties to the Wall of Life program and its funding, and the investigation may be expanded to include multiple members of the United States Congress. Similar investigations are taking place in multiple nations.

Amid massive public pressure, the U.S. has ended its demands that Raleigh Becket and other surviving American Rangers appear before the Joint Committee on the Jaeger Program.

The Chinese government is reportedly in negotiations with all experienced Rangers still capable of piloting to serve as the successor pilots of Crimson Typhoon, which will be deployment ready by the end of October. Surviving pilots Cheung and Jin Wei declined the rank of PPDC Marshal, but have agreed to stay on as drift and combat instructors at Hong Kong Shatterdome. This puts China far ahead of all other nations trying to reboot their Jaeger Programs.

President Lunk Tweets:  "I've been saying for months we should leave those Jagger [sic] pilots in peace!"

The Question on Humanity's Mind: Why Continue the Jaeger Program?

K-Scientists worldwide have the answer: Are you prepared to gamble on not continuing it?

Media outlets polled the myriad scientists from all disciplines who've committed their skills to studying the Breach, its creators, and the monsters that came out of it beginning in 2013. The response has been nearly unanimous, spearheaded by the warning given by Drs. Newton Geiszler and Hermann Gottlieb before Congress's Joint Committee on the Jaeger Program in August: the Precursors, the beings that opened the Breach and sent the kaiju, made two attempts with 65 million years between them to colonize Earth. There is no reason to think they won't try a third time.

Veterans of the Jaeger Program have called it a bitter irony that funds are being devoted to Jaeger Programs now that might have saved lives during the height of the war. They're calling Operation Pitfall a lesson and a warning that humanity might not survive making the same mistake twice.

What form will this new Jaeger Program take? It may be too early to say, although experts are predicting that it will be plural: Jaeger Programs, operated by individual nations or a few regional alliances, rather than a single, centralized organization as before. However, the PPDC's formation treaty will remain as a guide should the kaiju ever appear again.
FIRST ARRESTS FOR JAEGER PROGRAM CORRUPTION!

Sources in multiple countries say officials who enriched themselves at the expense of the Jaeger Program will be made an example of!

Former PPDC Secretary General Dustin Krieger turned himself in Tuesday after a grand jury indicted him for embezzlement of government funds, tax fraud, and other charges in connection with corruption while leading the organization. These charges are strictly in connection with financial crimes using American funds and offices, but the governments of Japan, China, Australia, and Peru – nearly every nation that housed a Shatterdome – are considering remedies from extradition to lawsuits against the U.S. government for Krieger's misappropriations of funds those countries contributed for the maintenance of the Jaeger Program.

Senator Gill Block, R-MO, resigned Tuesday amid growing reports that he too will be among the government officials charged with corruption in connection with the Jaeger Program. 4 other Senators and 17 Representatives, nearly all from inland states, are also under investigation for bribery, insider trading, and corruption-related charges stemming from the diversion of funding from the Jaeger Program to the failed Wall of Life.

ENDURING JAEGER PROGRAM MYSTERY: What Happened to Caitlin Lightcap?

She has been called the savior of humanity, the Tony Stark of our time, the mother of dragons. She invented the neural bridge that brought Jaeger technology to life – literally – allowing human pilots to control the giant mechas in combat against the largest, most deadly enemy humanity has ever seen.

In the final six months of the Kaiju War, however, she vanished, along with her husband and co-pilot, Sergio D'Onofrio.

Sources share rumors that she suffered a mental breakdown, or worse, committed suicide after the devastating battle between Romeo Blue and Harbinger in Seattle that left Bruce and Trevin Gage dead on January 8, 2025. The beloved Gage twins were among the founding pilots of the Jaeger Program, and even amid dozens of pilot deaths during the war's final year, their lost was especially painful. Lightcap and D'Onofrio attended every pilot funeral after Brawler Yukon was destroyed in October 2024, but they did not attend the Gages', or any subsequent services. This has fueled rumors that Lightcap is dead.

If so, it's yet another heartbreaking casualty of the callousness, corruption, and opportunism that undermined humanity's strongest defense and left thousands of servicemen and women in the Jaeger Program dead, along with millions they were trying to defend, before the War's end, while PPDC senior officials and the government and military officials who should have supported them skimmed money and power.

Lightcap's former partner in inventing Jaeger Tech, Jasper Schoenfeld, refused to comment to the media about her.

To Be Continued...
Coming Soon: Cheung and Jin make an unexpected nomination for Team Typhoon 2.0, and our heroes get to demonstrate the future for Jaegers in the post-kaiju world in Chapter Fourteen: Less Talk, More Action!

PLEASE don't forget to review!

Original Character Guide

President Jerald "Jerry" Lunk: President of the United States. Billionaire hotel mogul who ran on a campaign of "make America safe again" in 2024, proponent of the Wall, likes to use Twitter. No, he's not based on anyone in the real world. No, really.

Marshal Ana Ramirez: former Commanding Officer of Los Angeles Shatterdome, 50ish, Mexican-American, US Army officer. She was in command when Gipsy Danger and Yankee Star defeated Yamarashi in 2017, but after Yankee Star was destroyed in 2024, she was replaced by an unsympathetic, anti-Jaeger Program general who closed the Los Angeles Shatterdome soon after.

Marshal Blake Ketteridge: former Commanding Officer of Sydney Shatterdome, mid-60s, former Air Vice Marshal of the Royal Australian Air Force. Lost his daughter and grandchildren in the nuclear bombing of Scissure, but also misogynistic and bigoted.

Marshal Gabriel Morais: former Commanding Officer of Lima Shatterdome, mid-60s, Brazilian engineer, now PPDC delegate, suffered radiation poisoning from Horizon Brave's destruction in Lima in 2025.

Devi and Susanti Hassan: late Rangers of Vulcan Specter, Australia's Mark-3, first generation daughters of Indonesian Muslim immigrants, they were not who Marshal Ketteridge had in mind, and he never got past his sexism or bigotry. Graduated Jaeger Academy Class 2016-B along with the Becketts, they were very close until Yancy's death, but also very close to Chuck and Herc during his childhood and after he became a pilot. Killed in action in September 2024 with a record unmatched until Striker destroyed Mutavore.

Fei-Yen Wang: late Ranger of China's Shaolin Rogue, the beautiful Chinese woman seen briefly during Pacific Rim's opening montage, she was used as a propaganda figure by Chinese PPDC authorities throughout her life, required to keep her relationship with her rather plain co-pilot, Huan Che, secret.

Hayase Shindo: late Ranger of Japan's Mark-2, Tidal Dragon, which had only one engagement in which its unsafe design exposed the pilots and crew to severe radiation. Her co-pilot and foster brother, Jiro Shindo, died within months, and Hayase was used as a propaganda tool until her death two years later.
Less Talk, More Action

Chapter Summary

Cheung and Jin make an unexpected nomination for Team Typhoon 2.0, and our heroes get to demonstrate the future for Jaegers in the post-kaiju world.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: My deepest apologies for the long delay! I didn't like how this chapter turned out and was trying to rewrite it amid several work crises. Been a very rough couple of months. Thank you all for the amazing feedback and for sticking around!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Fourteen: Less Talk, More Action

Hong Kong Shatterdome…

Everyone who could immure themselves in the Shatterdome did so in the weeks after the Joint Committee on the Jaeger Program ended. The first thing the returning delegates did was have a meeting and work out a list of all the journalists who were trustworthy – and all the ones they knew of who weren't. Then a lot of coins got flipped and a lot of games rock-paper-scissors ensued for the job of actually giving statements to the reporters.

"We must do at least some speaking," Sasha told them. "We must maintain control of the narrative."

For the most part, Mako and Raleigh were able to delegate the job of giving interviews to the other crew, who took written statements from them so they didn't actually have to be on camera. Cheung and Jin were willing enough to remain the public faces of the program, though every Ranger alive probably noticed them sometimes looking around for their third brother.

Raleigh knew at some point, he should probably give an actual interview. So did Mako. He just… wasn't ready.

With Herc back, Jin and Cheung went off to the hospital for the first of Jin's many surgeries. To Raleigh's surprise, Jin approached them shortly before leaving. "Come with us. Stay with Cheung while I'm under."

It might have been surprising, but Raleigh didn't have to think twice before answering. "Sure. How long're you under?"

"About twelve hours, they say. Chuck is coming too. I don't want Cheung to be alone."
Raleigh got it all too clearly and managed not to shiver. The Wei triplets had taken some nasty hits in the past that certainly would've meant surgery, but they'd probably never had to be alone in the waiting room without at least one other brother.

It wasn't fun fighting their way through a swarm of reporters to get into the hospital, but once in the waiting area, security kept the place clear. Raleigh tried not to pay too much attention as Jin and Cheung said goodbye before Jin was wheeled off into the surgery unit. Mako was tucked under his arm, her arms around his waist. Chuck stayed a little closer to Cheung.

Their aunt Lui was there too, so the group of them camped out in an empty lounge that the hospital staff obligingly provided. Obviously, Hong Kong's civilian medics were very familiar with the special needs of Rangers when a co-pilot was in surgery.

Raleigh could tell when Jin was under, because Cheung got confused and emotional. He curled up into a ball on the couch and talked more than Raleigh could ever recall from him - and a lot of it was talking to himself. Lui sat with her arm around him, rubbing his shoulders, and Chuck sat on his other side, a little more hesitant. Raleigh couldn't follow much of anything they said, and even Mako, whose Mandarin was pretty good, looked baffled at times.

Recalling his and Yancy's experiences with sedation, Raleigh figured Cheung probably wasn't making much sense even in his own language.

But Cheung murmured Hu's name over and over, and it was all Raleigh could do not to run out of the room.

He made himself stay. People did this for me once, and I barely remember. I owe it to him.

Once Cheung turned tearfully to Raleigh and choked out something in Mandarin. Lui wiped her eyes and said, "He asks...how do you live?"

Raleigh swallowed hard and pulled his chair closer to the couch. "One day at a time," he said. Lui translated. "One hour at a time. Sometimes one minute at a time."

Cheung blinked, frowning to himself, then slowly smiled. "I remember," he murmured in English. "You told us." Raleigh nodded. "One second." He looked up at the clock on the wall, and they all watched the seconds tick by. He sighed. "No basketball allowed here. No dogs." He and Chuck exchanged a rueful smile. "I don't like it."

"It will pass," Mako promised.

Cheung was asleep in his aunt's lap, and Mako and Raleigh were dozing, squeezed into one armchair together (Mako was mostly in Raleigh's lap) that evening when a nurse slipped in and whispered, "They are finished. All went well."

Chuck nodded, texting his dad confirmation. "How long 'till Jin wakes up?"

"A few hours more. Let him sleep." Chuck nodded.

An hour or so later, Cheung woke up, and the nurses gave approval for him and Lui to join Jin in his recovery room. "Thank you," he told Chuck, Raleigh, and Mako.

"Anytime," Raleigh said. "You want any of us to stay?"

Cheung shook his head. "It's okay now." But he paused and looked back at Chuck. "You and
"Herc...you should take Typhoon."

"What?"

Cheung still looked a little drugged, but there was something determined in his eyes that Chuck hadn't seen since before Hu died. "We talked, my brothers and me. We want you and Herc in Typhoon. We want someone who remembers."

What he meant by remembering, Chuck wasn't quite sure, and couldn't bring himself to ask. So he just said carefully, "I'll talk to my dad, then." Cheung nodded, and let Lui and the nurse usher him out.

After the three of them got back to the Shatterdome and gave the obligatory report that Jin was fine and Cheung was already calming down, Chuck hunted his dad down. Sitting on the floor with Max, he told Herc was Cheung had said. "He was still kind of out of it, but...it sounded like they've been thinking about it a lot."

Herc nodded, leaning down thoughtfully to scratch Max's head. "A few of Typhoon's crew have come to see me. Since Alekis isn't likely to be mobile enough to pilot again either, they want it to be us. They want it to be pilots who rode during the war, that knew their brother."

"You can't be commanding officer and an active-duty pilot at the same time, as those dipshits in the U.S. pointed out."

Herc snorted. "I'd be a happy man to give this job up and get my old one back - well, preferably without kaiju laying waste to cities again, but you know what I mean." Chuck grinned. His old man smirked. "Y'know, Raleigh may have the last laugh - a big area the national programs are thinking about for Jaegers is construction aid."

"Gaahhh!" Chuck threw himself backwards, only to have Max come slobber all over his face. "Is that the best they can come up with?! Shit, Ray'll never let me hear the end of it!" Herc just laughed. It was the easiest, fullest laugh they'd both had in...a long time.

It felt good.

"Yeah, well, if it's a choice between that and Jaegers fighting each other, sign me up to build walls," said Herc. "I'm tired of war."

Funny. Chuck supposed he'd known that for a long time too, but Herc had loved fighting in Striker even as the war had gone bad. Of course, it'd been a couple of months since they'd drifted, with Stacker Pentecost as Chuck's partner in Pitfall and the drift broken...memory crashed down, and Max crawled onto Chuck's chest. Good old Max doesn't need the drift. He always sensed when Chuck was getting upset.

Herc was silent for a few minutes, then asked, "You up for it?"

Drifting again? Piloting again, a Jaeger other than Striker? Not having kaiju to fight, just...lifting and carrying things? Maybe search and rescue - that was appealing. Saving lives more directly than they usually could during the war.

If not piloting, then what? Herc was old enough to retire. Chuck was twenty-one. He'd have to figure out something to do with the rest of his life. I've actually got a "rest of my life." Even when I was giving Raleigh and Mako shit about it, I never really believed that. It'd seemed impossible to fathom an "after."
But just to walk away and leave the Jaeger Program behind, just as it was going through a transition like this? When Cheung and Jin had asked for Herc and Chuck to take Typhoon on, to be the first post-war pilots?

No. I couldn't just walk away from that. Even if I really wanted to. If it still felt hard to wrap his mind around this new world of "after," he didn't really want to run out into it and find something different. Maybe...later. Not now. "Yeah," he murmured, wrapping his arms around Max while staring at the ceiling. A Shatterdome ceiling full of pipes and concrete was more familiar than the sky. "I'm up for it."

With the surviving Wei brothers and Typhoon's crew at their backs, getting approval from the Chinese government for Herc and Chuck Hansen to take over as Crimson Typhoon's pilots took less time than they anticipated.

It was a little weird - some combination of nostalgic, happy, and painful, being in that red conn-pod for tests. But there was another outpouring of public rejoicing like this was the best outcome anyone could hope for.

"Who will take command of Hong Kong Shatterdome?" a reporter asked at the press conference.

"Cheung and Jin Wei will be Marshals of the Shatterdome and the Hong Kong Jaeger Academy," said one of the Chinese officials proudly. "Hercules Hansen and Chuck Hansen will pilot Crimson Typhoon!"

That caused an explosion of questions that Mako and Raleigh were glad they didn't have to face. Herc and Chuck stood stoically in front of all the shouting and let the Chinese spokesman field the questions. Naturally, some people protested: they wanted Chinese citizens in a Chinese Jaeger, not a couple of Aussies. But Cheung and Jin stood by the Hansens as their choice, out of the few remaining experienced pilots who could still get back into a conn-pod.

Mako and Raleigh watched from the twins' side as Herc and Chuck got into another conn-pod. "This'll be Herc's third Jaeger," Kyrra Taior mused. "Chuck's never been out of Striker."

Raleigh looked startled. "Didn't you guys do sims in other mechs than your own?"

"Oh, yes," Jin said. "Chuck liked riding Typhoon. He and Herc used to take turns with Devi and Susanti so they could have three and do thundercloud formation."

Mako felt Raleigh's heart skip through the ghost drift. "You rode with them many times. I remember, reporters called you, Vulcan, and Coyote Tango the dream team." From the way they looked down, and the way Raleigh cringed, nobody was in the mood to reminisce today.

"The new pod will still take some getting used to," Kyrra said quickly. "And now we'll see if Chuck is predisposed to Jaeger-head."

Cheung and Jin hissed in unison along with Raleigh. "Aw, come on, you two wouldn't have gotten it," Raleigh said lightly.

"Most of our battle group did," Cheung retorted, grinning.

It was weird, testing in a new conn-pod. The testing itself went fine, apart from the entire Dome placing bets on whether (or when) Chuck would come down with Jaeger-head. Typhoon and Striker's crew had to disable some of Typhoon's neural pathways that had needed a third pilot to


operate, like the third-axis rotation, but the pod itself was rebuilt for two.

There was a lot less red in this pod than the one the triplets had occupied. Chuck couldn't help noticing there was also a lot of khaki – homage to Striker and the Aussies’ colors. He knew enough Chinese lettering to work out the little homage to Hu Wei painted in an inconspicuous part of the wall.

Typhoon's former crew were in the habit of touching it when they passed while working in the pod. Chuck and Herc started doing the same.

Chuck had never felt awkward taking Striker outside for maneuvers before, but the first time they went down Scramble Alley with Typhoon, he wished they'd closed the Dome grounds to the public. All those people, all those cameras watching, some cheering, some quiet. It mirrored the churning morass of emotions in Chuck's mind.

All these years and he'd never not been proud to be out in his Jaeger. Now all he had was ambivalence. Maybe because this wasn't his Jaeger and never would really feel like it.

You all right? Herc asked in the drift.

Chuck sent back a mental shrug. Fine. Not much more than fine – Herc couldn't miss that in the drift, so Chuck didn't bother pretending. I'll get it done. Whatever "it" was in a world without kaiju to fight.

They'd been training for four months and winter was well and truly setting in, bright and crisp, when the earthquake hit.

In Hong Kong, it was little more than light shaking and shouts of "Woohoo!" through the Dome halls. Cheung and Jin and most of the locals agreed: "That wasn't us. It may have been somewhere else. We should be on tsunami watch."

Then the thought occurred to everyone at once. "What's the Breach doing?!"

Oh, shit, shit, shitshitshitshit, it's not possible we only got a reprieve of a few months. But as the crews and Rangers crowded into LOCCENT, Tendo breathed, "Breach is still inactive. No seismic activity at all in the Marianas Trench outside normal parameters."

"Could a breach open somewhere else?" demanded Mako.

"There is absolutely no reason to discount that possibility," said Hermann Gottlieb, and he and Geiszler rushed off to the K-Science lab. "I need a line to Liling Gáo at K-Tracker Industries!"

"Should we go to pre-dep?" Herc asked the Weis. The brothers only needed a second before nodding and sending the base onto yellow alert.

"Even if it's just an earthquake, maybe Typhoon can be helpful," said Cheung.

Most of their simulations had involved things like ocean rescues and building collapses. Chuck had been bored, but...the idea of the Breach reopening – anywhere – wasn't exactly making him happy. I have no idea what I want. Watching the crews bringing Typhoon online and preparing the strike troop choppers always sent adrenaline rushing through him before. Now it was like a dull memory.

Gottlieb called while Herc and Chuck were hanging out in the war room with the Weis, Mako, and Raleigh. "No Breach. This appears to be a garden-variety earthquake, though I use the term
loosely. It was a category 8.2 on the Richter scale and the epicenter was just north of Shanghai."

Cheung and Jin cursed in unison. "You want Jaeger support? Or should we just send a first responder squad?" Herc offered.

Regular media coverage was coming in, and for the first time, seeing elevated roads fallen and several taller buildings looking disturbingly off-balance, Chuck felt his heart rate start to rise. Cheung and Jin looked at each other, then at the Hansens. "Send Typhoon and all available strike troops for civilian first responder aid. Deploy."

"Yes, sir!" Herc moved faster than Chuck. "Team Typhoon, we're go for deployment. All first responders, to your stations!"

By the time they were suited up and in the conn-pod, the first orders were coming in. "Yangpu Bridge has experienced major damage. Waibadu Bridge is partially down."

"Got it," said Chuck. "Have we got trapped civilians on either?"

"Waibadu Bridge evacuation still in progress – there are trapped civilians and vehicles still trying to get off Yangpu. That bridge is long," said Jin. "Start with Yangpu."

It had to be stupid to be this nervous. There was no kaiju laying waste to the smoking city ahead of them. But you can't fight an earthquake.

"Says who?" asked Chuck's old man.

Chuck had seen bridges break before. Striker had held roadways up before so the cars and drivers could get clear, often while looking over their shoulder for the approaching kaiju. They'd caught buildings in danger of falling.

We can do this.

Some of the massive steel cables suspending the bridge had already snapped and were waving like snakes above the buckling roadways. People scrambled like ants across the surface, but the bridge was long. They'd need to buy at least a half-hour for the stranded drivers to get to safety on foot.

The HUD pulled up a schematic of the bridge, marking the weakest points that'd make the bridge fall in less than ten minutes unless Striker - no, Typhoon - could shore it up.

Left hand under the girders...right hand under the south tower - that'll put the weight back down the supports long enough to get everyone off.

They charged forward and stretched their arms out, lowering Typhoon's body to become a new weight carrier, taking the sagging bridge's midsection through their iron arms, torso, and legs into the riverbed. It left them directly at eye level with the road; stunned travelers scurrying from their cars stared directly into their face before running through the snarled mess of traffic for the nearest shore.

As the minutes ticked by, the bridge creaked and metal groaned as even Typhoon's support wasn't enough to keep the cables from fraying under the strain. Herc swore as one of them snapped and whiplashed past his face. "Good thing Typhoon doesn't have ears, or we'd have lost one. LOCCENT, how're we looking? This fucker's not gonna hold much longer!"

"I'm not seeing any more occupied cars," said Chuck, scanning with his instruments.
"We've got a few left on the far end, but you should be clear within five minutes!" Tendo reported. Then he added, "And you'll want to get clear really fast after that, because the whole superstructure's going to come down hard as soon as you let go."

"Yeah, noticed," said Chuck. The HUD was picking up the last few people running for their lives, but more and more cables were snapping free, ripping out supports and lashing at the remaining pillars as they whipped in every direction.

Time hadn't flown by so bloody fast since Herc had flown a stolen Bell Kiowa to Chuck's school. Time had never seemed to matter so much in any of their engagements in Striker. But those poor pedestrians seemed to be moving in slow motion as cable after cable snapped and the concrete and steel in Typhoon's arms turned to gelatin.

"She's gonna give out!" Tendo yelled. "Typhoon, you need to back off!"

"Are all the civilians clear?" Chuck demanded.

"...almost."

Fuck. "We're staying!" they chorused. They'd been thrown through bridges before, and so had Typhoon in more than one fight. They'd survive. They turned Typhoon's face away, tilting their head so the thickest part of the pod helmet was aimed toward the bridge.

With a series of sickening cracks, the shriek of bending and warping steel, and the crumbling of thick concrete, the enormous bridge finally failed. Huge slabs bent and broke on the section opposite the bridge's central support from Typhoon - but then the whole northern tower tilted and collapsed in a series of thuds, almost straight down. The south tower tilted dangerously towards Typhoon. "Fuuuuuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!" The bridge was screwed, so Chuck pulled back; Herc planted his foot and they threw themselves backward, falling into the river as the south tower came down sideways right where they'd been.

The remainder of the bridge went down with it, shattering as pieces collided, and Chuck managed to get his arm up in front of their face, spitting profanity as cables and bars and chunks of road bit into their body.

"LOCCENT, LOCCENT, is everyone clear?!" Herc panted. They twisted and crab-walked backward. Even with only two pilots, Typhoon was more flexible than Striker'd been, they had to admit.

"Looks good, Typhoon! Some debris casualties, but everybody got to shore!"

"Right." They got to their feet and staggered out of the water. "What's next?"

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**THE JAEGER PROGRAM LIVES!**

*Chinese authorities hailed Crimson Typhoon as savior of as many as 2,000 lives in the aftermath of the 8.3 magnitude Hangzhou Earthquake!*

Veteran pilots Hercules and Chuck Hansen inherited Typhoon with the blessing of former pilots Jin and Cheung Wei, and spent twelve hours after the quake assisting in rescue and recovery operations, most notably holding up the Yangpu Bridge for more than thirty minutes after engineers expected the entire span to collapse.

"There were as many as 500 people traveling on that bridge when the quake struck, and vehicles
were stranded by the shaking and road damage and panic. Every one of them made it to the shore including those who left their cars at the very center of the bridge!"

After Yangpu Bridge fell, Crimson Typhoon moved on to several smaller bridges in the river and even managed to reinforce one with debris long enough for emergency services to extract a trapped family from their partially-crushed car. The Jaeger and his valiant pilots also caught several multi-story buildings in danger of immediate collapse, and held them up until victims inside could be evacuated.

Thirteen hours in the drift and not a kaiju to be seen. Strange. Herc and Chuck were dog-tired by the time the LOCCENT said, "Stand down, guys. That's about all the heavy-lifting that can safely be done, and the search and rescue wants to get in deep. Come meet the lift crew on the river docks."

They were less than a mile from the riverbank, absently watching only for helicopters or stray civilians when Chuck's tired mind wandered back to the edge of the Breach.

"You can always find me in the drift," Stacker had promised Mako.

And Mako and Raleigh had hinted it was the literal truth after their illicit post-Breach drift.

*It is true.* Chuck turned in the drift so sharply that Herc had to pull back hard to keep Typhoon from copying the move. But out of the corner of his eye, he saw him: *Stacker? Good God - no - wait -* "Chuck, no," he said, reaching out physically to catch his son's arm. "Not here. We're still deployed."

*But...* Chuck could hear/see other faces in the drift, faces he missed, and he wanted...

*It's okay, boyo.* Herc's heart lurched. *It's okay, we'll wait. You've got a job to finish.* It'd been over a year since he'd heard their voices, and even longer since he'd heard Angela's...

*Not now, Herc. Go home first. We'll be here.* There was Stacker too, reminding him of his job, and Angela even though she'd never lived to see a Jaeger, let alone know her baby would pilot it.


*Shit...* "Yeah," Chuck croaked, and they turned their back on the memories. "We're good, just tired. On our way to the lift point."

*Dad...when we get back...* 

*I know, kid. We'll see then. If the medics really think there's no harm...* Then they could see everyone they thought they'd never see again.

As they disconnected from the drift, Herc heard Stacker's voice again. *We'll be waiting.*

*Jesus Christ. Talk about a ghost drift.*

*To Be Continued...*
Coming Soon: Chuck and Herc drift back into their past, hoping for the same closure Mako and Raleigh had with the many people they left behind, and find Stacker’s promise to Mako, "you can always find me in the drift," holds equally true for Herc and Chuck in Chapter Fifteen: Those Words I Said!

PLEASE don't forget to review
Chapter Summary

Chuck and Herc drift back into their past, hoping for the same closure Mako and Raleigh had with the many people they lost, and find Stacker's promise to Mako, "you can always find me in the drift," holds equally true.

Chapter Notes

**Author's Notes:** Many thanks to everyone for the feedback! Please keep it coming! We're heading towards full circle for all of our heroes! The drift sequence is necessarily a little wishy-washy - like Raleigh and Mako, Herc and Chuck are surrendering to memories which flow from one to the next due to the slightest shift in attention.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Chapter Fifteen: Those Words I Said**

*Hong Kong Shatterdome...*

Kyrra was confused at first by how agitated the Hansens were when they got back to base. They both vanished into a private room with Dr. Tán, and nobody got a word out of them - except when Chuck raised his voice. " - bloody knock it off with the prevaricating, can we do it or not?!"

Whatever "it" was, Dr. Tán said yes. Then Herc ordered the pons crew to the test lab - and nobody else. "Private test, that's all."

Kyrra knew full well he was lying. Judging by the looks on their faces, so did Mako and Raleigh. They, along with Kyrra, intercepted Chuck and Herc outside the lab.

Chuck shot Mako and Raleigh a challenging look. "It worked for you, didn't it?"

Mako slowly nodded and the pieces fell into place. Kyrra burst out, "Look, whatever the drift shows you...it's only memories and imaginations, right? You can't change the past by chasing rabbits."

Raleigh blinked, but Herc smiled ruefully. "Figured it out, have you?"

"You know you're not supposed to do this," Kyrra pressed.

"Not supposed to do it in simulations or deployments," Check countered. "We need...look, you won't understand."

*Oh, do not play that Ranger card with me, boyo. "There're people you can talk to who can actually speak for themselves, you know," Kyrra said. She had to stand her ground when Chuck stiffened...*
and Herc took a step towards them both, eyes narrowing. "My mum wants to see you. Indra Hassan and the rest of the family are in Coober Pedy. Greg Oliver and his family are in Alice Springs. Talk to them, not ghosts."

There weren't many people who could make Chuck Hansen break eye contact before Pitfall. The number had grown since, but even before, Kyrra had used that power sparingly, knowing she was among the few who understood the agony that burned behind the kid's hard, abrasive exterior. It took some work (and fighting ghosts of her own) not to retreat when he looked away.

*You think I don't understand what you want and why? I miss them too, boyo. In some ways, we know I miss at least one of them more.* Kyrra'd had to work hard up to and even after Pitfall not to dwell too much on memories of Susanti Hassan. Rabbits weren't only hazardous to people who drifted. *I loved her. She loved me. Another time, another world, I'd have married her if she'd have had me. I never asked because I wasn't sure she would.* It was probably just as well that Kyrra Taior had never been drift compatible with anyone, or she might've tried drifting into memories in search of the answer.

Mako interceded and broke the deadlock. "It isn't...exactly what you think. They're not ghosts. Sen – Marshal Pentecost told me at - at – the end – that I could always find him in the drift. He wouldn't have said a thing like that by accident." She started to look at Chuck for confirmation, but caught herself – too late.

Chuck had seen. "He didn't," Chuck mumbled, still not looking at anyone. "He knew...this was possible. Something like closure for anyone who survived the end. He was drift instructor for years. Lightcap knew too. And I drifted with him. Things've come out that I didn't know I knew. That alone would be reason enough."

Kyrra sighed, recognizing she was rapidly losing ground, and looked at Dr. Tán. He said cautiously, "There didn't seem to be any bad effects – but Mako and Raleigh weren't active duty pilots anymore. You two will have to drift again if you want to stay active, and there's a lot of political capital at stake if this breaks you."

Herc and Chuck looked at each other. For Kyrra, it was suddenly like chasing another rabbit, only just the two of them over five years, side by side, so often at odds but so connected, studying each other, saying so much but speaking no words. Judging by the soft intakes of breath from the other Team Striker veterans, she wasn't the only one who felt it. When had he gone from a gangly teenager to this so-strong but so-haunted man? Why did it hurt so much to recognize what winning this war had cost, even though their boyo had come out the other side alive?

"This won't break us," Herc said. "It won't."

Kyrra had the distinct impression that Herc had said something like this before with the same unbreakable resolve. But as for when, she couldn't guess.

---

Dr. Tán and Tendo insisted on staying with the pons crew while Chuck and Herc were in the simulator.

Chuck tried to argue, but Tendo pointed out, "Hey, we saw Raleigh and Mako pull this, remember? We know what you're looking for, and we know what to watch for if it goes south."

*What if it does go south? What happens then?* Chuck didn't know why he was so nervous. It wasn't as if he was trying to solo drift like Raleigh had; Dad was right here, so it'd be just like any other drift. *Except...we've never actively tried to chase a rabbit.*
Rangers might've all tried to use the drift to communicate at one point or more during their careers, but it was drilled into everybody's head: don't go looking for memories. *You'll get lost, and every drift after will be that much harder.*

Was this a stupid risk? After all, Raleigh and Mako wouldn't be piloting again, while Herc and Chuck had just proven they could *and* that Jaegers still had a place in the world, with or without kaiju.

"*You can always find me in the drift!*"

There'd been so much Chuck had wanted to say to Marshal, to say nothing of...everyone else. He found his dad watching him, waiting to let him decide. So he swallowed hard and nodded. "Let's do this."

When they plunged into the drift, they landed in Striker's red-lit conn-pod, at the bottom of the deepest part of the Pacific Ocean, next to Stacker Pentecost. "**Well, my father always says, he says if you have a shot, you take it! So let's do this! It was a pleasure, sir.**"

Herc was the one who gasped and flinched as the memory swept over them. Chuck had been scared. So, so scared...

Then Stacker's arm lashed out like a snake, too fast for Chuck to grasp despite their drift, and the pod lurched and grew blurry as shock and confusion and complete panic flooded him. "**HEY! What the hell - " Oh my God, no, no, can't leave, won't leave, not like this, don't leave, I'm a Ranger, can't leave my co-pilot no, no - "NO! No, I'm not going, you can't, I'm ...**"

Their surroundings faded to black until only Stacker was still there, watching Chuck slip into unconsciousness. Stacker knew he'd never see his own son again. At least Herc would have a chance of seeing his.

They were outside the lift heading for Striker's conn-pod. "**That's my son you've got there.**" Herc choked out to Stacker. "**My son.**"

*I know, old friend. I know.* Stacker stood, outwardly calm waiting for Chuck to join him in the lift. You'll see my son soon, and you'll know I understand. Which of us has it worse? Letting our children go or leaving them behind?

*He turned and looked Chuck in the eyes, and it was no longer just a memory. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry I did that to you, son."*

*Stacker Pentecost had never addressed anyone other than his own son that way – hell, he'd hardly ever addressed Jake that way. Chuck swallowed hard. "Don't be. Not anymore."

*Egotistical jerk with daddy issues...Stacker smiled, like Chuck had never seen him smile before. Herc had, years ago, before they realized the world was about to end. "You know I was telling you what you wanted to hear."

*"Yeah, I know." Marshal had been telling Chuck what Chuck already believed. Egotistical jerk with daddy issues who shits on dead pilots and crew...*

*Stacker put a hand on his shoulder. Chuck stared. Marshal'd never touched him, or anyone other than - briefly - Mako, even in in his memories as a commander. There'd been a thick physical wall between the Marshal and his crew, at the best of times and the worst. "I never said you were the only one with issues."*
"Amen to that," said Herc behind him.

"Yeah, your old man would know," said the voice of someone who'd been gone nearly a year before Operation Pitfall.

When Chuck turned around, he was sixteen, and they were back in Sydney Shatterdome, in Vulcan Specter's bay. And Vulcan was there, intact and undamaged, with Devi and Susanti leaning against his foot, with that magnetic chessboard they'd played so many games on.

He darted forward before he had a chance to think about it, and only caught himself at the second before he reached Devi, but she finished the distance between them...and she felt real. Really real.

The noise Chuck made was a lot like the noise he'd made that night outside the Kwoon when he collapsed into Herc's arms for the last time in the war. So many people had died after Vulcan went down, Rangers who'd been Chuck and Herc's friends, but they had never hugged again.

From behind, Suze put her hand in his hair. "Damn, we were afraid of that. That's why we told him to stay with you."

"I'm sorry," Chuck whispered. How could it feel so real now when it was just the drift?

"We've both hugged you before, boyo. You remember it. You know how proud of you we were."

He flinched. "Even after what I turned into?" Such an arrogant, mean-spirited shit.

They didn't deny it, but Devi said, "Even then. No matter what you did or said, neither of us ever stopped loving you."

He believed her. She wouldn't be saying it in the rabbit if he and his dad didn't both know it. And Chuck had still shut her out when he realized she loved his dad, never mind everything she'd given him. He wouldn't give her the one thing she'd wanted for herself: his blessing for her to be with Herc, like she'd wanted. "I'm sorry. I was such a selfish bastard - "

"No," Devi held him at arm's length to make him look at her, like she'd have done pep-talking him early on. "You were seventeen. What you felt is what you felt, my love. I had a choice too, and I choose to prove that I loved you both." She looked past him at Herc, and Chuck felt Herc's throat tighten, for what could've been and for what all of them had chosen. "You know I did love you both, to the very end."

"The things I said," Chuck looked down. "After Sydney..."

Susanti snorted. "Yeah, you should apologize for that one, boyo." But she came to her sister's side and tightened her own grip on him, letting him know she knew why.

"I didn't mean it. I never meant - I just - everyone was dying, and it - was just too bloody much."

"I know, kid. I know. It was too much." There were more people behind them now, but Chuck couldn't face them, knowing what they did. Knowing what he'd done. "Don't do that to yourself, Chuck. We're not ghosts, we're just your memories. This is all in your head."

"And my dad's," Chuck insisted.

"Yeah, well..." Herc's emotions washed against Chuck like a wave on the beach, like waves against Striker's feet as Vulcan disappeared under the waves for the last time. Chuck flinched, but felt his dad touch his head, like he hadn't touched Chuck since that night. "We both did our share of
fucking up. But it's true. Dr. Tán and Team Gipsy told us; apart from Stacker, we're just talking to our own memories."

Devi huffed. "Way to make it impersonal, Hercules." Chuck felt his dad blush and laughed. Apart from Dr. Dahari, Devi and Suze were the only people who'd ever called Herc out on behalf of Chuck (or at least the only ones who ever did it in front of Chuck).

"Sorry." Herc's smile was sheepish when Chuck looked at him in the drift, but his dad's after-image suddenly wavered, and Herc was staring at Chuck far more intensely. "I'm sorry," he whispered. He wasn't talking to Devi and Susanti.

They were in LOCCENT. "They're gonna detonate the payload," said Tendo.

Herc had been leaning over the tactical display, but he had his eyes squeezed shut. Seeing Vulcan disappear had been bad enough. Now Striker...his son...my son... Chuck grabbed his arm. "Dad, hey, I'm here."

The sling vanished from Herc's arm, and they were alone again, and he was holding onto Chuck with all his might, chanting like a prayer, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." I don't want to regret all the things I never said -

" - Dad...you don't need to. I told you, I know 'em all. I always have. Not your fault I didn't want to hear."

They were on the trampled grass along Scramble Alley in Sydney. Chuck was thirteen. Max was still barely out of puppyhood, sprinting after tennis balls to the delight of the new crew from Vulcan Specter.

Herc and Devi stood a few yards away, watching Chuck and Susanti play with Max. Then he was twenty-one and Suze pulled him into her arms. Herc could hear him clearly. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

We could've been family, a family again with my dad and Devi and she loved him and I wouldn't let her -

Herc flinched from his kid's self-loathing. Devi eyed him. "Be a father, Hercules."

" He is!" Chuck said defensively. "It wasn't all his fault, it never was! He did the best he could."

Blame me for that one. "You could still be a git," Suze informed Herc.

But Herc chuckled. "Yeah, I know."

Releasing Chuck, Devi said, "You should do what Kyrra said. Not everyone's gone, and it's not too late. Go talk to Indra, Marian Taior, and the others. More of them will understand than you think, what you were going through after that last fight. More of them will forgive you than you expect."

Chuck couldn't resist looking at Herc. Was it really their memories of Devi and Susanti talking, or just wishful thinking? "Dunno," Herc admitted.

" Does it matter?" Susanti pointed out.

Yeah, that was a fair point. "You've got time now, boyo," said Devi, and kissed his forehead. "Go enjoy your life."
"You did the right thing."

Herc gasped, and they were in family housing at the Sydney base. Chuck was eleven...Angela'd been in a rush to get him to school on her way to work, practically mowing Herc down. Suddenly, she stopped and met her husband's eyes...and Herc was older than she'd ever seen him become, and their son was next to him, twenty-one years old.

"You did the right thing," she repeated. Herc's breath caught and it took all his strength not to sob aloud. He held out a hand, and felt her fingers mesh with his, and felt his son silently crying as he remembered what it felt like to be held by his wife.

"You knew it was the right thing," Angela murmured in his ear. "You always knew. I'd never have forgiven you any other choice."

"I...Chuck..." Herc couldn't speak straight or think straight in this drift anymore about anything except that Chuck had never forgiven him.

"Y-yeah I have," Chuck choked out. It surged through the drift, the truth of it. Strange that Herc hadn't realized that sooner. He couldn't see when; Chuck wasn't quite sure when. Before now but not long ago. Maybe it was finally as they were leaving for Pitfall, he'd finally understood all Herc had given up and let himself know what he'd felt in the drift for ten years.

Even if Herc could have done it all over again at the very worst of times in the war, he'd still have taken that Bell Kiowa to get his son. And Chuck's mother would never have accepted any other choice. They both knew that to the marrow of their bones.

Angela released Herc and held out her arms for her son. "Come here, baby. Let me see you."

Chuck was more hesitant, but let her touch his face and hold him. "Mum, I...love you."

"I know, baby boy. You know I'd be proud of you." She pulled back and grinned at him. "Your father had a few rough edges all the time I knew him. Stacker Pentecost was right. You're your father's son."

"I'm yours too."

"Yes." She cupped his cheek, studying him, thoughtful as she saw all she'd never had the chance to see. "Yes, that too, but you both never stopped trying. We're a family of stubborn bogans, multi-generational. You got it from both of us."

They had to laugh, but then someone flickered into existence in the drift who wasn't welcome. Trying to push him out was impossible, but Chuck and Herc knew well enough now to let him fade away again. Not part of their family. Not ever again.

"He loved you once," Angela acknowledged. She sounded a little uncertain, either because that was how Dad remembered her or because neither Chuck nor his dad were quite sure how she'd feel. "He threw it away. I'd never forgive him for betraying you, even if what he did to anyone else was forgivable. But you're right; enough about him." She shook her head at the two of them. "And despite all that, you made it." She seized Herc with a ferocious kiss and Chuck groaned in dismay like he was eleven again. Well, he sort of was...and wasn't, in this place.

"I love you," Herc breathed against her lips.

She put her hand to his chest plate. "I know. You've both said it in so many ways, every year since Sydney."
The ring around each of their necks, the name etched in between the plates of their armor over both of their hearts, the connection that had somehow let them be drift compatible even when they were at bitterest odds. Yeah, it all did come back to this, didn't it?

We can't stay here. We can't come back like this, not unless we want to get trapped. It was one or both of them who thought it, but Angela smiled despite the pangs of renewed grief that swept over them both.

"You've got all you need: each other. Your crews, your friends. Those girls were right; go find the others. Fix what needs fixing. You have time now. You've given ten years of your lives to winning this war. Make the most of the rest."

"We will," Chuck whispered. "We will, Mum."

I'll do better. I promise.

You won't be alone.

Then they let go, and the drift rushed away enough for Herc to croak, "Disconnect."

"Disconnecting neural handshake," said Tendo.

Dr. Tán watched them both as they removed the pons caps with trembling hands – and noted that neither man was quite able to stand up yet. "Well?"

"We're fine," Chuck muttered, avoiding his eyes.

The pons crew, Tendo, and the medics all peered at the monitors, and Dr. Tán agreed slowly, "You look okay. But guys…seriously, no more of this. Even if it is relatively harmless, it's not healthy. You can't live in your memories."

I know. We know.

"Go find the others."

"My mum wants to see you."

Marian Taior had practically raised Chuck since Herc and Scott had first left for drift testing in 2015. She'd been yet another person there all Chuck's life since Scissure only to be left behind before Operation Pitfall, with all too likely the possibility she'd never see Chuck again. All her children except Kyrra had died in Scissure's attack, and she'd watched dozens of Rangers and hundreds of crew die from Sydney Shatterdome's small family housing section.

To say nothing of Indra Hassan. Would he really want to see Chuck again?

I think he will, said Herc. If he hadn't cared, he wouldn't have said goodbye to you the way he did.

Yeah, true, he'd known by then what Chuck had said after Mutavore, but he'd still given Chuck something to remember Devi and Susanti by, that chessboard –

- Memory slammed into Chuck with more emotion that had ever accompanied anything he carried from Stacker Pentecost before. Herc choked, and Tendo and Dr. Tán exclaimed, "What is it?!"

Herc just grabbed Chuck's shoulder, steadying him as Chuck stared into the past.
That chessboard was in Stacker's memories too…but not just in the hands of Devi and Susanti Hassan. No...these memories were older. Stacker had seen it in Sydney Shatterdome before and it had given him a pang that had never showed in his face. No one had known what he knew except maybe Team Gipsy, but no one had ever said.

Chuck had noticed the Hassans had switched from an old Lego set to an old magnetic set after he returned from the Jaeger Academy, but it hadn't ever occurred to him where they might've gotten it.

No one...no one had ever told Chuck...who that chess set had belonged to.

"Oh my God," Herc breathed. He pushed Tendo and Tán away. "It's nothing, it's nothing, just a – a memory. Something we hadn't caught before; let it be." You didn't know. They didn't want you to know. It's not your fault you didn't know.

Chuck's mind raced through every minute since arriving in Hong Kong...thank God, he'd never brought that chess set out. Hell, who was there left to play...well, ironically, the one person who might've...

It's not mine. It shouldn't be, not now. They always hoped he'd come back. They loved him.

They'd used a private investigator to track him down once. Stacker had known that, but hadn't been able to dissuade them. He didn't know what they'd said to him, but Paul Terrence told Stacker they'd seen him. They'd never seen Raleigh Becket again. He'd never seen them again.

Chuck shook off his father and the other personnel and stumbled back towards quarters. He had a debt to pay.

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

Coming Soon: An old chess set is reunited with its owner and Chuck Hansen and Raleigh Becket acknowledge their deepest common ground. Our heroes make plans to tie up loose ends from the war in Chapter Sixteen: Those Left Behind!

PLEASE don't forget to review!

Original Character Guide

Kyrra Taior: Striker Eureka's Chief Engineer, Aboriginal Australian about Herc's age, met Chuck immediately after Scissure and went to Anchorage to drift test along with Herc and Scott in 2015. Was long-term lover of Susanti Hassan, but never quite managed to talk marriage due to the all-consuming drift bond between Susanti and her sister.

Marian Taior: Kyrra's elderly mother, lost all of her children and grandchildren except Kyrra when Scissure attacked Sydney. Became Chuck's long-term guardian while Herc and Scott trained as Rangers and took care of the Sydney Shatterdome children for years. Stayed in Australia when Team Striker left for Hong Kong.

Devi and Susanti Hassan: late Rangers of Vulcan Specter, Australia's Mark-3, first
generation daughters of Indonesian Muslim immigrants, they were not who Marshal Ketteridge had in mind, and he never got past his sexism or bigotry. Graduated Jaeger Academy Class 2016-B along with the Becks, they were very close until Yancy's death, but also very close to Chuck and Herc during his childhood and after he became a pilot. Killed in action in September 2024 with a record unmatched until Striker destroyed Mutavore.

Indra Hassan: Devi and Susanti's elder cousin, Vulcan Specter's LOCCENT chief until their deaths in 2024, when he switched to being Striker Eureka's. Very close to Chuck and Herc throughout their career. Moved to inland Australia with his and his cousins' family before Operation Pitfall when Sydney Shatterdome closed.

Dr. Stephen Tán: Chief medical officer of the entire Jaeger Program throughout its history, went to Hong Kong as chief medic for Operation Pitfall. Chinese-American, early 40s. Spent a lot of time trying to stop Rangers from doing stupid shit, didn't always succeed.
Those Left Behind

Chapter Summary

An old chess set is reunited with its owner, and Chuck Hansen and Raleigh Becket acknowledge their deepest common ground. Team Gipsy and Team Striker return to Australia to reunite with friends and family they left behind.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Dear readers, my deepest apologies for such a long wait. This may not have been the worst six-month period of my entire life...but it was probably among the worst, and I had to take a mental health hiatus from writing. Now that things are better, I'm hoping to resume regular updates.

Canon Note: This fic draws from some very extended canon comments by Guillermo del Toro and Travis Beacham that Mako's father's family didn't like her mother and were very unhappy when the marriage only produced a daughter, and ultimately none of them adopted her after she was orphaned.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Sixteen: Those Left Behind

Hong Kong Shatterdome...

Raleigh was not expecting Chuck and Herc to seek him out first out of all the things they might've done after that drift. "Where's Mako?" asked Herc.

"In Typhoon's Bay – on her way here, now," Raleigh corrected. "What's going on?"

The Hansens looked at each other, then Herc said, "She oughtta be here for this."

Raleigh considered what everyone knew Herc and Chuck had been up to in the pons lab. "Found something?"

"Sort of." Chuck was clutching a cardboard box in his hand, not making eye contact with anyone.

When Mako arrived, Jake was with her. Oddly enough, Jake was the one Chuck managed to look at. "Hey…no offense, you mind if we…talk alone?"

Mako blinked, but Jake shrugged, and at her nod, he left again. Chuck looked mutely at his father as if unable to come up with what he was supposed to say. Since Pitfall, he'd looked older than his age. Now, for the first time, it really reminded Raleigh that Chuck Hansen was only 22.

From what they both knew of Herc, he'd have insisted Chuck do whatever he wanted to do himself. Instead, also avoiding their eyes, Herc explained quietly, "After…Knifehead, Tendo and some of
the other crew divided up...some keepsakes, I guess. For all your friends."

Mako's hand clutched Raleigh's arm, but he managed not to flinch. "I – good. Good, I'm glad. How'd..." It wasn't as if he'd known Chuck back then.

Chuck finally found his voice. "After we lost Devi and Suze...Indra...gave me this. Didn't realize...till today...this is yours."

He opened the box and held it out.

Reality fractured at the sight of that old, beat-up chess set, the pieces lined up so neatly in their magnetic pockets along the sides, the scuffs and gouges from being carried in suitcases and duffels for...how long?

*Yancy...* He'd found it in a little game shop in a Beijing Mall when he was nine. All their board games tended to lose pieces and parts every trip. Not this one, though. It'd stayed intact and went with them for every posting after they made Ranger Ready.

It'd never occurred to Raleigh to take it with him after Knifehead.

He tried to say something, but his voice didn't work. Mako asked softly, "How?"

"Tendo," Herc repeated patiently. "He knew you and the Hassans used to play, so he gave them your set. After...after Devi and Susanti...Indra gave it to Chuck. They used to play him."

*I remember something...Suze said Devi was teaching chess to one of the Dome kids. Chuck would've been...a kid then. Too young to pilot.* Chuck held the chess set out, and Raleigh took it in trembling hands.

"Didn't realize," Chuck muttered. "Not 'till I saw it in Marshal's memories. He remembered you and your brother playing."

Marshal Pentecost used to look relieved when he saw Raleigh and Yancy at a work table or a pile of boxes with that chess set; it meant they weren't getting into trouble. Crew who didn't play were always baffled by the profanity that would explode from one or both Beckets amid such a quiet, intellectual game.

*When we ghosted that night in Lima, we spent the rest of the night playing chess. It was all draws, all night. We could handicap him or handicap me and we still always ended up in a draw.*

After hard combat, they'd curled up together in their bunks or infirmary beds with the game balanced between them. The pieces didn't slide off thanks to the magnetic board. They'd fallen asleep mid-game sometimes.

"Thank you." He had to whisper it; there was no trusting his voice. It felt so familiar. For a second, he could almost imagine the hands that gave it to him where his brother's.

There were other things he should say. *I'm glad they had it. Glad they played with you. Glad Indra gave it to you after they...died...*

Six pilots had played chess on this set. Now Raleigh Becket and Chuck Hansen were the only ones left.

*It's not fair.*
To his surprise, Chuck was mustering up something else too. "We...my dad and me, we're going back to Australia. Not for long. To see Indra and...their family."

_Devi and Suze?_ Herc nodded. "You oughtta come with us. Indra'd be glad to see you."

Would he really? After Raleigh had disappeared?

Did he knew Devi and Susanti had found Raleigh in Mexico? Did he know they'd said it wasn't goodbye, but that it had been?

"They understood," said Chuck. Raleigh stared. "They always did. Indra too. Even when I didn't, they did." He jerked his head towards Herc. "Ask him. I was in Academy. They talked to him."

_So he was there for them while I was wallowing like the only person on Earth who lost Yancy - _

"Stop that!" Mako exploded. Both Herc and Chuck jumped. She blushed, but rallied herself and asked them politely, "Please excuse us," then bodily hauled Raleigh for the nearest empty room. "Stop doing that to yourself! Yancy would be furious if he knew it and you would be furious if Yancy or I were the ones!"

Raleigh cringed and looked away. Of course she was right. The only person who'd ever really taken that attitude other than Raleigh himself was – Chuck, before. Before Pitfall, before everything changed. That chess set in Raleigh's hands was proof of just how much had changed.

Mako started to pull the pieces out and put them into place, but Raleigh stopped her. She didn't like chess; she and Jake never had, even though Sensei and Tamsin did. She'd be playing through Raleigh's memories and Yancy's ghost. Raleigh wasn't up for that.

So she led him back to her room and they curled up on her bed together, Raleigh still clutching the set to his chest, Mako stroking his hair.

Why did it still feel like this? The war was over, the truth was out - he'd even had the chance to say goodbye...sort-of. Mako was here. He wasn't alone.

Why did it feel like some of those moments back at the Wall, when exercise didn't help anymore and Raleigh would just lie helpless in his bunk, unable to move from the weight of it, wanting his brother so badly it was crushing him and he couldn't breathe...

Mako murmured into his ear. "You're allowed to miss him, love. Always. Just breathe. I'm here. He's here too. We've got you."

Half of him wanted to shout, _It's not enough! I want him HERE, all of him, not just a drift ghost, I want my brother! I need my brother!_ The other half of him hated himself for being so selfish.

"You're not selfish." She was so certain, it was hard not to believe her. "He's your brother. You were his co-pilot. I never wanted to replace him. I know I couldn't if I wanted to, and I don't. You don't need to forget him. No one has a right to say you can't mourn."

_He told me to stop._

"Because he loves you and doesn't want you to be in pain, you American oaf!" she exclaimed, and he had to laugh as she flicked his ear. "You'd do the same, even though you both know it'd be unrealistic." She pulled him closer until they were wound around each other and murmured, "Sensei raised me for nearly as long as I lived with my parents, but I've never stopped missing them. He understood that. So did Jake - well, not always, at first."
He pressed kisses to her neck and felt the near-panic and pain finally starting to lose its grip.

You're not alone.

For the next few hours, they distracted each other completely from anything other than the present. Nobody came knocking on their door.

At last, lying further apart to cool off, Mako brushed a hand through his sweaty hair. "We should go with Chuck and Marshal Hansen to Australia. You should visit Indra Hassan and their family. I know how close you were."

Raleigh gazed at her, less anxious about the idea than before. "What about you? You wanted to go back to Tangeshima."

"I still do. We can do that after." She propped herself up on her elbow, and Raleigh trailed a lazy hand along her hip and waist. If they weren't both still so overheated, he'd have more for her. She smirked at him, but went on, refusing to let him distract her again. "I want Jake to come with us to Tangeshima. He wants to see where I was born. Where my parents lived."

"Do you think your family'll… accept you? Have the decency to apologize? He couldn't figure out how to word it, so he just let her draw the conclusion.

"I don't know. I've wondered that for years."

It'd take some incredible gall for them to give you grief after Pitfall, he thought sourly.

"Maybe, but they had no qualms about turning me out of my father's house after my parents were killed. Who knows." She shrugged. "If I'm not wanted, then I won't stay long. But I have a right to see my own home."

Cheung and Jin didn't ask what Team Gipsy and Team Striker wanted in Australia. Jake, to everyone's surprise except Mako's, suggested, "I reckon I should stay at the Shatterdome and study for the entrance exams, if that's okay."

That surprised the Weis, but they were happy to extend family privileges to Jake Pentecost even while Mako wasn't around. Raleigh gave in to curiosity and asked, "You don't want to come?"

Jake shrugged. "I kind of do, but this part's… who you're going to see, it's not really for Mako. She's going to be there for you. I'd be rude to try and get her attention. I'll go with you when you go to Japan, for her."

Raleigh smiled. Quite a kid Pentecost raised. His manners reminded Jake half of Pentecost, half of Mako. Raleigh wondered what Jake's mother had been like, or those grandparents Mako had such lingering ill feelings for.

"Indra and Devi and Suze's parents are in Coober Pedy," Herc told them. "We'll go there first if you like. After, Chuck and I are visiting some of our… old crew."

Raleigh and Mako both got the feeling they were being asked not to join that leg of the trip. "That's fine," said Mako.

Coober Pedy, Australia...
At one point on the flight to Australia, Mako asked Herc, "Is yours as nervous as mine?"

Herc couldn't help a rueful smile. "I doubt mine is less nervous. The last time he saw Indra Hassan was the day after he shot his mouth off in Sydney."

She frowned. "But Indra gave him the chess set. Surely he wouldn't have done that if he was...that angry about it."

Herc started to answer, but caught himself. *No, but of all people in the world, the Hassans were the ones whose opinions mattered to him the most, and that wasn't the first time he'd shit on other pilots.* Chuck wouldn't want him saying things like that, not even to Mako. Maybe especially not to Mako.

So Herc said nothing else, and Mako gave him a keen, Stacker-like look that said she knew what he wasn't saying. Hell, the Hassans had adored Raleigh and Yancy, and Herc had never seen or heard any indication it wasn't mutual. Maybe Raleigh and Chuck really were feeling the same about seeing Indra again.

In a weird way, they did look a little similar, forcing themselves to keep pace with their partners on the walk up to the house in Coober Pedy.

Raleigh looked young again, but uncertain in a way Herc couldn't ever recall, and for the first time, Chuck was starting to look his own age again. Out of all the ways the boys would react to reuniting with Indra Hassan, Herc hadn't expected this. *Maybe I should have.*

The door flew open before anyone could reach it, and Herc felt Chuck hold his breath. But the figure who burst out onto the terrace wasn't Indra - too small and slight. Judging by Raleigh's gasp, he'd never met the Hassans' parents. Either that or he'd forgotten just how much their mother resembled Susanti. Mrs. Hassan caught Chuck in a tackle of an embrace, arms around his neck, sending him stumbling back in shock.

The girls' father followed, tears in his eyes as Chuck stammered, and next came Indra, who started towards Chuck and Herc - then spotted Raleigh Becket and stopped in his tracks. "Rals?" he whispered.

"Oh my God, kiddo..." Indra closed the space between them in two strides and hugged Raleigh as fiercely as his aunt was still holding onto Chuck. Herc felt a pang of envy through the ghost drift.

"But even though there was no way Indra Hassan could've caught Chuck's reaction, he held out a hand sideways. "Boyo - c'mere, God, we thought we'd lost all of you."

Devi and Susanti's mother released Chuck, and he hesitantly approached Indra only to be yanked into an embrace no less fierce than the one Raleigh was still caught in. Indra wasn't that big; Herc was baffled as to how the guy could hang onto two men the size of Chuck and Raleigh at the same time, but Indra was managing it.

But that left the elder Hassans without a distraction, and their eyes inevitably turned to Herc. He held out a hand, but their father ignored it in favor of seizing his shoulders, eyes full of tears, and Herc's throat tightened in reaction.

Behind Herc, Max barked, and Indra released the boys with a grin. "Hey, Max! Been a long time!" Max needed no urging to rush into Indra's arms, and he grinned up at Chuck. Herc could feel the
tremor behind Chuck's smile.

It hadn't been that long. Less than six months since Chuck and Indra had said goodbye in Sydney.

Chuck was pretty good at hiding his feelings. Then again, Indra Hassan was among those who knew him far better than most. He looked up from Max and frowned. "What's wrong, boyo?"

Mako sensed the tension and tugged Raleigh away as a few of the Hassans' extended family came out to meet them. So they were out of earshot - or at least pretending to be - when Chuck looked Indra in the eye and said, "I'm sorry."

Indra looked genuinely puzzled. "What for?"

"Sydney. What I said...after."

It was only a second before Indra connected the dots, and judging by their expressions, Devi and Suze's parents did too. They all hesitated, and Herc could feel Chuck holding his breath.

Their father spoke up first. "We know you didn't mean it."

Chuck swallowed hard. "I didn't, I swear."

Indra looked down, but said slowly, "That last year was hell. We all know that. Everyone was losing it, one way or the other. You weren't the only one who ever shot off your mouth."

"It was still a shitty thing to say," Chuck mumbled. "I - I thought you - "

He caught himself, but now Indra looked up, startled. "What? What'd you think?"

Chuck couldn't meet his eyes anymore, but forced himself to explain, "Why you didn't - y'know - go to Hong Kong..."

Devi and Suze's mother made a choked noise, and the stricken look on Indra's face dispelled that idea, to Herc (and Chuck's) intense relief. "Aw, shit. That's what you thought?" He straightened and seized Chuck's shoulders. "You listen to me, boyo. I've known you and your moods since you were thirteen. Nothing you said would've made me turn my back on you, understand?"

Disarmed completely, Chuck nodded. Then Devi and Suze's father nudged Indra lightly. "Tell him the rest."

Indra sighed and finished, "There was only going to be one LOCCENT chief for the mission. And I...figured it was a suicide mission. Tendo was willing, and I just...couldn't do it again." Chuck didn't even resist when Indra pulled him in for another hug. "You meant too much to me. The world was ending, and I couldn't watch the last of you die, not you. I was..." He squeezed his eyes shut and trailed off.

Herc dared to step closer. "What?" he asked quietly.

It was Devi and Susanti's mother who finally spoke. "We never thought, until then...it was better they're gone." It went through Herc like a K-Stunner, and Chuck actually sobbed. "Seeing you go to your death would have destroyed them both."

There was a low noise from behind them - probably Raleigh, but Herc couldn't turn around. Of course, they were right. He'd known Devi and Suze too well to doubt it. The Hassans had adored Chuck; they'd been Herc's friends, among the closest ever, but they'd loved Herc's kid on another
If they’d still been here, they’d have brought Vulcan to Pitfall. But that doesn’t mean they’d have survived. Look at the fate of Hu Wei and Stacker Pentecost, of Cherno, Typhoon, Striker, and Gipsy. The odds of Devi and Susanti surviving both Victoria Harbor and Operation Pitfall would’ve been weak at best, even with their skills. They’d have been no more able to watch Striker and his pilots die than Herc and Chuck had been to watch Cherno and Typhoon go down.

And they hadn’t even known about Gipsy Danger. To see Raleigh return only to plunge into the Breach...but they could’ve lived to see this: both of them still alive.

Would they have made it?

Indra finally got himself under control and said, "We all said shit we didn't mean that last year. The world was ending. I forgave you for it before you even got back to the Dome."

Herc forced his own emotions under control and smiled. "Does that mean you'd consider coming back to Hong Kong with us?"

Indra looked thoughtful, and his aunt and uncle grinned. Then he saw the hopeful look on Chuck and Raleigh's faces, and he grinned. "I think I might."

"Good," Raleigh said. "It's not the Jaeger Program without a Hassan."

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Alice Springs, Australia...

Chuck had a feeling the next family he met wouldn't be so forgiving. But he'd made up his mind, so he didn't falter walking up to the row house in Alice Springs where Greg Oliver had taken his family after Tacit Ronin fell.

Someone either tipped them off or saw Herc and Chuck from the window, because Greg Oliver came out to meet them. Chuck gulped but made himself keep walking.

Greg threw his arms around Herc in an unrestrained bear hug that Herc returned just as fiercely. "How are you, mate?" Herc asked.

"Better than six months ago, what with the world not ending." Greg let Herc go, but to Chuck's shock, he sidestepped and seized Chuck. Chuck hesitantly returned the embrace. Greg must've caught on and let him go, grinning sheepishly. "Sorry, boyo. It's just bloody great to see you." He considered Chuck. "How've you been?"

His throat got humiliatingly tight, and Chuck shrugged. I miss him - I'm sorry - I should've - I didn't - I need to...

But Greg went on, "I didn't think I'd ever see you again," in a rough mutter. Dazed, Chuck almost asked why Greg Oliver would've wanted to, but a mental tug through the ghost drift stopped him. Greg leaned back and saw the shock on Chuck's face. "What?"

"You..." Dad, a little help?

"We, ah, just came from the Hassans'," Herc tried to fudge. "Was a bit overwhelming."

Movement behind Greg caught Chuck's eye, and he saw Greg's wife on the stoop, and a girl who looked a little familiar… Oh, hell, that's Emma. Danny's little sister. She was still a tween in
Chuck's memory, but she'd been well into her teens when Danny died. For the first time, she looked it.

She'd been the youngest of three in Sydney. Then Greg's oldest daughter, Karina, had died of radiation poisoning after two weeks of rescue missions into the ruins from the nuclear blast that had killed Greg's parents and siblings. Emma had experienced childhood in Sydney Shatterdome. That childhood had probably ended altogether with back in February when Nocnitsa destroyed Tacit Ronin, taking both Danny and his partner Evie Nakano's lives off Wakkanai, Japan.

Greg's wife came down to meet them, and Chuck blurted, "I'm sorry." Why didn't I say it before? I should've at least said it before you left after Danny died. Or had word of Chuck's ranting and raving got back to them? Obviously not, because Danny's mum hugged him. He couldn't imagine either of them hugging him if they'd known he'd called Danny and Evie stupid within hours of their deaths. "He was my friend. I'm sorry I didn't…"

"I know, love, it's all right," said Danny's mum, without letting Chuck go.

"I thought he was just a 'mediocre pilot, simple as that,'" said a cold voice.

"What? His words, not mine!" She scowled down at Chuck from the steps, and it was like looking back in time – into a mirror. Never mind that Emma was a girl. Chuck knew that look. He'd worn it on his own face for years. Emma Oliver turned on her heel and stalked into the house.

Greg sighed, and his wife muttered, "She'll apologize," but when she started after her wayward daughter, Chuck caught her arm.

"No, it's okay. She doesn't have to." Danny's parents stared at him, and he swallowed hard. "She's…she's right. I'm he one who said that. It was a…I never should…I didn't mean it," he finished weakly. Didn't mean any of it. I thought I did, but I didn't. Anyone who heard me would've thought I meant it, but I didn't. "But I still said it."

Greg blinked, and his wife turned away. Chuck braced himself for recriminations – and so, he was wholly unprepared to hear Greg stifle a sob. Herc wavered, unsure of whether to try to comfort Greg or not. It was Danny's mum who managed to speak first. "Love…you weren't the only one who said ugly things those last months."

Chuck shrugged, trying to keep his own emotions under control, like a dam had broken at hearing Danny's parents cry. "I'm…still sorry."

"Yeah, we got that part." Greg joked. "We're saying we forgive you, son. Our boy would've wanted that, and Danny was a lot like you, especially…toward the end. He was lucky no cameras ever caught him. We couldn't turn on you any more than we could his memory."

They insisted Chuck and Herc stay for lunch. Chuck noticed with a pang that unlike Indra, Greg didn't broach any idea of returning to Shatterdome life. Emma Oliver left the house rather than be forced to sit at a table with Chuck.

Even without Emma there glaring holes in Chuck's forehead, it was an awkward meal because none of them could bring themselves to talk about the reincarnation of the Jaeger Program, or Herc and Chuck's assignment as the reincarnated Crimson Typhoon. That gave Herc a lot of pangs; he'd never had an awkward conversation with Greg Oliver before.

Lunch was winding up when they finally started talking about the work the Olivers were doing,
building infrastructure and getting other refugee families from the coast settled. It seemed a lot of people still weren't ready to live in sight of the ocean.

Chuck saw Emma outside, sitting on the wall in front of the houses. He mumbled an excuse and left to try and talk to her again.

She heard him coming but didn't turn around. When he sat on the wall next to her, she said, "I don't recall inviting you to join me."

"Sorry," Chuck said, but he didn't leave.

After a long, awkward silence, it was clear Emma wasn't going to do anything else to break it, so Chuck mustered his scattered thoughts. "He was my friend."

Emma snorted. "When?"

"At…Academy. We tested compatible, and…everything changed. Then after. Until…"

"Until he died, and you shit all over him and the others," Emma finished. Chuck knew it was coming this time, so he managed not to flinch again.

"I didn't mean it. I'm sorry. I didn't mean any of it."

Emma finally looked him in the eye, and he braced himself. "You think that makes it all right?"

Chuck shook his head. "I know it doesn't. I just wanted to say it anyway."

That surprised her, judging by the way she looked down. Swinging her feet irritably against the wall, she muttered, "Pentecost really must've been something, to make you finally grow up."

It was a few seconds of struggling to get his breath before he could answer her. "Yeah, he was." "You're an egotistical jerk with daddy issues…But you're your father's son. So we'll drift just fine."

And somehow, we did.

"Did you know Mum's mum had a problem with Danny being gay?" Emma suddenly asked. Chuck stiffened, and she rolled her eyes. "There he was, second-youngest active Ranger in history, and Gran lecturing him every chance she got that he should do 'the proper, decent thing' and marry Evie." She fixed him with a piercing stare. "The rest of us had no problem with it, but the only time Danny yelled back was when Mum said he could do better than you." It hit Chuck like a fist to the gut, what she was getting at. "That's how we knew it wasn't just a Ranger-on-Ranger booty call."

…Danny? To Chuck's complete mortification, his throat closed. He had to look away, but saw the triumph in her eyes before he did. Danny'd been handsome. He'd never lacked for partners. …so why was it he'd nearly always picked Chuck when they were at the same post?

However vindictive Emma was feeling, she wouldn't make things up about her brother just to get at Chuck. And it all made too much sense. Too much horrible sense. "I didn't know," he muttered hoarsely.

"Yeah, we all noticed. You never noticed anything that wasn't about you."

He almost argued. Then he stopped himself. "I'm sorry."

"Good. Mum and Dad already forgave you." Evie suddenly sighed, but when Chuck looked back
at her, she was looking away, suddenly hunched over like Chuck was, arms folded defensively. "Danny probably would too, no matter what you did." She wiped her face, and Chuck had to look away again. "Well, Danny was better than me too. I guess we've got that in common. I don't forgive you. I never will. I'd have dealt with it if you and he'd really gotten together when he was alive…but I'm glad you never did. You didn't deserve him."

"I know," Chuck croaked. **There's so much I didn't deserve --**

- and so much you did, came Herc's voice in Chuck's head. **Quit letting her thrash you. It won't bring him back. It won't even let her feel any better. She'll just end up regretting it if she goes on.**

Gulping, Chuck stood. 'I'll go. 'm sorry. I…he did deserve better. They all did. 'm sorry." Then he gave up and retreated back to the house, but not before he heard her breath hitching. Danny's parents were scowling out the windows when Chuck got to the door, but he got in their way when Danny's mum would've stalked out to yell at her. "Let her be. It's okay. She had a right." They both stared at him. "I won't forget him. Ever."

That took all the strength he had left, and he didn't say anything else at all. Herc said all the goodbyes, and on the ride back to the airstrip, Chuck still couldn't speak.

He'd expected yet another trip to Sydney to see Marian Taior and the remaining Dome kids, but instead, Kyrra and Marian were waiting at the airstrip. "She wanted to come meet you here," Kyrra explained.

Damn it, just looking at Kyrra's old mum made Chuck's throat too tight to talk. Marian jerked her head at Herc, and he and Kyrra walked away. That old Aboriginal woman who'd been Chuck's guardian for six months while Herc and Scott were at Academy always knew him better than anybody else up until Chuck drifted with his dad. So she didn't look shocked when Chuck sobbed into his balled fist, just came over and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Emma had words for you, didn't she?" Chuck could only nod as he fought to get a grip. "You know what it is to lose someone and be displaced from everything you know. She's mad at the world, boyo."

"I know," Chuck managed to choke out. "But…at me too. She thought Danny…wasn't just a…hook-up, y'know?"

Marian sighed. That she didn't scoff or laugh was all the confirmation Chuck needed. "Remember that one gave as good as he got when you were boys."

"He's dead!" Chuck snapped. "He's dead, and I'm not!" Then he belatedly remembered Marian had once had other kids than Kyrra, even grandkids, and Chuck had never met any of them because they'd all died in Sydney. "Sorry." He dropped onto the pavement. Even sitting down, he was tall enough for Marian to easily have her hand on his head. "No matter what, I still manage to shoot my mouth off."

"Maybe. But you didn't used to manage to apologize for it." She tugged his chin to make him look at her. She'd never been all that gentle with him. As a kid, he'd liked that about her, thinking too many people petted and coddled him when what he really wanted was a fight. Somehow, now, they were both different. "You do deserve to be alive, lad. Every Ranger we ever lost would agree on that. Stacker Pentecost did the right thing. Of course you've got regrets for things you said and did in war. We all do, and none of us can take 'em back. You won't help him or even her hating yourself all your life."
He was out and out crying now, and there was no way to hide it. Marian could tell, just rubbed his head. "She won't forgive me. She said so."

"Maybe not. Whether she forgives is up to her, and nothing you do or say changes that. Love, I'm saying you'll know when you're ready to forgive yourself. And your Danny, Evie, and all the others...they'd be glad of it when you do."

He gulped back another sob and looked up with her, too tired to care about his wet face. "Will you come back to the Hong Kong Dome with Kyrra and Dad and me?"

Marian scoffed, "Live out my old age in another noisy, dirty, oversized garage?!" Chuck blinked... and she smirked. "What do you think I'm doing here, lad? Kyrra already asked me. I said yes."

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

Coming Soon: It's Mako's turn to settle her past, as Team Gipsy (plus Jake Pentecost) head to Tangeshima, Japan to see the place where Mako was born, and the family who left her to an orphanage after Onibaba in Chapter Seventeen: Can You Ever Go Home?

PLEASE don't forget to review!

Original Character Guide

Devi/Susanti Hassan: Rangers of Vulcan Specter, Australia's Mark-3 Jaeger. Sisters, ages 34 and 32, first-generation daughters of Indonesian immigrants to Australia who graduated Jaeger Academy's Class 2016-B along with the Beckets, Kennedy LaRue, and Stephanie Lanphier. Killed in action in 2024.

Indra Hassan: Devi and Susanti's cousin, age 43, went through the Jaeger Academy with them but wasn't drift compatible with anyone, so trained as their LOCCENT Chief.

Kyrra Taior: Chief Engineer for Lucky Seven, then Striker Eureka. Aboriginal Australian, Herc's age. Youngest and sole surviving daughter of Marian Taior, an elderly aboriginal woman who occasionally looked after Chuck when he was younger. Susanti Hassan's long-term girlfriend.

Marian Taior: elderly Aboriginal Australian, mother of Striker and Lucky's Chief Engineer, she was Chuck's guardian in family housing while Herc and Scott went to Jaeger Academy in Alaska, and later became minder/teacher's aide for many of the Sydney Shatterdome kids, including Chuck Hansen and Danny Oliver.

Daniel (Danny) Oliver/Evelyn (Evie) Nakano: Pilots of Tacit Ronin. Danny, Australian-Polynesian, was Chuck's classmate in school and they frequently clashed prior to entering Jaeger Academy. Evie is Japanese-British. The three found common ground through sexual experimentation and later jokingly called themselves frenemies with benefits. Killed in action in early 2025.
**Greg Oliver**: Herc's comrade and fellow chopper pilot from before K-Day, then a support pilot for Lucky Seven and Striker Eureka. Like Herc, he joined the Jaeger Program in the wake of Scissure. He lost his parents and his oldest daughter, Karina, in the attack. His son, Danny, was accepted into the Jaeger Academy after four tries despite lower academic scores than Chuck, and became pilot of Tacit Ronin, but was killed in action in early 2025, leaving Greg and his wife with only one living child, Emma.

**Emma Oliver**: Greg Oliver's youngest daughter, 5 years younger than Chuck.
Can I Ever Go Home?

Chapter Summary

It's Mako's turn to settle her past, as Team Gipsy (plus Jake Pentecost) heads to Tangeshima, Japan to see the place where Mako was born, and the family who left her to an orphanage after Onibaba.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes:
. I wrote a short ficlet in Chapter 13 of Tales From The Front Lines, covering Mako's correspondence with two of her cousins in the aftermath of Onibaba up until she started school. Be sure to read it for help recognizing some of what went on with Mako's family. This chapter draws heavily on Guillermo Del Toro's early biography of Mako, where he describes her Great Aunt Genya's cruelty to her in Tokyo and her father's family's rejection of Mako and her mother.

Cultural Notes: I'm not Japanese, so my preemptive apologies if I handle any subject matter insensitively. I did a lot of research into the etiquette of visiting relatives, family reunions, and honoring graves, but also drew from an article I read a few years ago about millennial culture shaking up old traditions in Japan, just like everywhere else. In particular, teens and young adults being more willing to challenge elder generations and traditions they felt were oppressive. That influenced my writing of Mako's cousins a great deal, in their steadfast support of her and correspondence with her in defiance of their parents' wishes.

Technical Issue: The website seems to have borked up this chapter more than usual. I think I've found all the places where words and phrases got erased at the ends or beginnings of sentences (some issue with punctuation for some reason) but let me know if I missed any.

The Chapter Seventeen: Can I Ever Go Home?

"Nobody will come for you. Nobody. You were the end of your father and the end of the Mori bloodline both."

Great Aunt Genya's words still rang in Mako's head with perfect clarity after nine years, and now they rang in Raleigh's head too. The handshake had wavered from his shock before they even went out of alignment back in that first test in Gipsy, a lifetime ago. Strange how it felt like so long ago, Mako's first meeting with Raleigh's mind, yet now her last departure from Tanegashima seemed like yesterday.
On the flight back to her family home, it was Mako's turn to be nervous. The day before they left, she dyed her hair back to its natural color, taking out the blue. Several of the crew - and Jake - did double-takes at breakfast the following morning, and she felt Raleigh's startled reaction, but neither her lover nor her brother questioned her.

Seeing the beaches and Space Center from the air again was incredibly strange. The one and only time she'd flown to or from Tanegashima had been that last morning, on the way to Tokyo with her parents.

No kaiju had come ashore there. It seemed despite the Space Center's presence, the island was just too small with too little runoff to draw a kaiju away from the pollution trails leading to enormous cities like Tokyo or Osaka.

They came in to land on the island so low that Mako had a clear view of the famous waves and surfers just offshore. Japan had worked very hard to clean its waters of Kaiju Blue and now reaped the rewards - the fishing and water sports industries were coming back here faster than anywhere else in the Pacific.

During Mako's first few years as Stacker Pentecost's daughter, Jake had wanted to learn to surf. He'd loved the big waves off his father's Pacific postings, and as long as there was no Blue alert, Sensei had indulged him. But Mako had never gone, despite his entreaties for her to join him as a fellow novice partner.

Tamsin and Sensei had intervened, gently explaining to Jake that the ocean frightened Mako, and he'd eventually let it go.

He'd never realized Mako Mori, if she'd been able to bring herself to go back into the ocean, was not a novice surfer. Every child raised in Tanegashima knew how to surf at least a little bit. Mako had learned that from her mother - one of many qualities in Masao Mori's wife that had caused his family to regret their marriage, along with Mako's sex. Sumako had scandalized her husband's family with her behavior, and they'd blamed Sumako when Masao had educated Mako in the art of swordmaking instead of adopting a nephew or male cousin as his apprentice.

Great Aunt Genya had endlessly wailed that the Mori bloodline would end with Mako even before Masao died, but she and the rest of Masao Mori's family still vastly preferred a boy without the name of Mori to be Masao's apprentice than a girl with the name of Mori.

Sensei had never told Mako exactly what they'd said when he visited them to explain he was seeking to adopt her, though both she and Jake had asked more than once. Tamsin used to turn red when they tried to appeal to her, but agreed with Sensei that it wasn't worth going into "difficult details," suffice it to say that none of her father's family had made any objection to the adoption.

As she'd grown up, Mako had come to realize that she had her answer. She'd dared to tell Sensei so once during a visit to Nagasaki Shatterdome, shortly before she started at the Jaeger Academy. "Great Aunt Genya was right. Nobody was coming for me. They didn't want me. They must have told you that you were welcome to me. Or good riddance."

Sensei's eyes had darkened with anger, but not at her. He'd covered her hand with his. "I spoke with some of your teachers from school and a few of your playmates' parents during my visit in 2016. They all spoke of how dearly your parents loved you, Mako-chan. They disapproved very strongly of your father's family's actions and felt your father's memory had been dishonored. If you ever want to go back, I'll go with you."

Mako had shaken her head. At the time, she'd had Academy and her plans to think about, and knew
Sensei was distracted by the Jaeger Program's struggles. "I would like to see Tanegashima again someday. But...I don't know how I could without seeing them."

If Mako's mother had had any living family, things might have been different. But Sumako's family had been very small. Mako vaguely remembered having grandparents who doted on her, despite any disappointment they might have had about Mako not being a boy. They'd come to her school recitals and once to a swimming race at the beach, settled under umbrellas in the best chairs waving her school flags with the other grandparents. They'd both been gone by the time Mako was ten.

Mako's father had once scoffed at the old monster movies and gently argued with his in-laws about letting Mako watch them. "You'll frighten her away from the ocean, and then who will swim and surf with Sumako?"

"Are you afraid, little Mako?" Mako's grandmother had asked.

"I am not!" Mako had exclaimed, outraged.

The adults had laughed. "She's a fearless girl, like her mother. The movies are fun, but remember, little Mako, they come from much older legends. Every legend has some truth in its roots."

Mako had been more delighted than scared. "You mean there really were sea monsters?!

"Of course not, there's no such thing as monsters," Masao had insisted.

"No," her grandfather had conceded. "But legends of monsters were our ancestors' way of reminding us to respect the ocean. It gives us life, but it can also bring death. Never take safety for granted."

In 2011, watching the horrific images of the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunamis, Mako had whispered, "That's what you meant when you said the ocean can bring death."

Her grandfather had nodded.

Two years later, watching Trespasser emerge from the sea to tear into San Francisco, Mako's mother had whispered, "I'm glad my father is no longer here to witness this."

After that day, Masao had never again said there was no such thing as monsters, and neither Mako nor any of her cousins and friends could stand to watch the old kaiju movies anymore. It had been all too real, and even the youngest, most sheltered of them had known it was only a matter of time.

"Things are different now," the adults had reassured them all. "There are submarines and sonar detectors being placed throughout the ocean. There will be plenty of warning if one of those...creatures approaches Japan. Soon we'll begin practice drills for evacuation to Kyushu, and also for receiving evacuees from other islands here."

After the third attack, work had begun on the kaiju bunkers in most cities, even smaller towns and villages in Tanegashima. They'd been finished on Tanegashima by the end of 2015. As a result, it had never occurred to Mako that the bunkers in Tokyo might not be finished by May 2016. Of course, even if they had been, Mako's parents wouldn't have known where those bunkers were.

She'd tucked herself tighter and tighter under Raleigh's arm without realizing it. His little spike of irritation brought her back to the present, and she saw where it was directed: some tourists trying to aim cameras at them. On her other side, Jake was scowling, trying to push himself into the way as much as he could.
The Weis had offered to pull strings to send Mako, Raleigh, and Jake to Tanegashima by chopper rather than commercial flight. Mako half-wished she'd taken them up on it. Even the passengers who weren't trying to aim cameras were whispering and staring eagerly.

Mako's tablet buzzed; she glanced at it without thinking and winced. "The entire island knows we're on our way. My...father's family has contacted the Shatterdome, to invite us to stay with them."

She felt that little twinge through the drift that she'd come to identify as Raleigh restraining himself from cursing aloud. He hadn't had to do that until returning to the Shatterdome. It did make her smile. "You could say no. We've reserved the hotel," Jake murmured.

It might have been a very long time since Mako had stayed anywhere outside a Shatterdome, but she still remembered the dance of etiquette her birth family had taught her. Please tell them we don't wish to inconvenience them on such short notice. We're happy to stay at a hotel.

Less than ten minutes later, the reply came, and she sighed. They say it would be a great honor. Your father's cousin now lives in your old house and has no children. His parents say it would be an honor to have you stay there.

Raleigh was shamelessly reading over her shoulder, and his anger spiked in the ghost drift. Where the hell did they get off inviting Mako to be a guest in the home they'd stolen from her?! "Shh," she murmured. Starting off indignant wouldn't help anything. They'd all known this would probably happen - that was why Mako had scheduled only three days for the visit.

"Don't worry, we'll behave," whispered Jake.

Great, now she had two puppy-dog faces to look at, one on each side of her, and it was impossible to maintain a bad mood. She laughed quietly and texted Jin back. Please tell them I'm happy to accept if they are sure it's not an imposition.

Maybe she was worrying too much. There had been talk during her childhood that her father would take his cousin's son as apprentice - her father had been agreeable but scandalized the family by insisting Mako would be his apprentice alongside her cousin, Haku.

At least she remembered Haku as nice, only three years older than her, bewildered by all the expectations heaped on him as the only boy of their generation. His twin sister, Emica, had corresponded with Mako against her parents' wishes for years, and that had only waned as the war plunged into true crisis and left Mako with no time for anything other than work. She had no idea whether the family's fortunes with sons had changed in nine years.

If Jake weren't so very aware of how nervous Mako was and how badly she wanted to make a good impression, he would probably have been in a far more belligerent mood. As it was, he was glad that he wasn't the one with a ghost drift with Mako today, because she kept shooting quick little warning looks at Raleigh. Yeah, Becket probably felt much the same way as Jake - maybe more, since he would've seen into Mako's head just how she felt about her dad's family leaving her in an orphanage.

Jake's dad had flatly refused to speak of what Mako's dad's family had said when he visited Tanegashima with the adoption paperwork. All Jake or Mako knew was that her only remaining blood relatives had all signed off and gave her almost nothing to remember her parents by.

Jake had tried to pump his dad for information a few times, once in the presence of Tamsin. But
they’d both held firm...only Tamsin had flushed with anger and Jake’s dad...he was always so good at self-restraint, but Jake had seen it in the set of his jaw, the hard glint in his eyes as he looked into the distance. And Jake had known.

As the plane landed, Mako whispered, "They're waiting for us at the airport."

Jake and Raleigh exchanged a long look over Mako's head. "All of 'em?" Jake asked. She nodded.

So, the very ones who hadn't lifted a finger to help her were here now, rolling out the red carpet and hanging onto her coattails. *Even in Japan, I guess the best defense is still a good offense.* Still, he reminded himself - repeatedly - that Mako would be humiliated if Jake was even the slightest bit less than gracious. *Not to mention, Gran and Gramps would shake their heads over in London and huff that I really do take after my dad.* So he'd get a lot of practice at biting his tongue.

So he braced himself, and judging by their pinched expressions, both Raleigh and Mako were doing the same, expecting gushing and grandstanding.

...they were all wrong. It was bowing and apologizing. Even crying.

The oldest woman had to be Mako's grandmother on her father's side. Some of the reporters looked shocked to see all these people, clearly Mako's elders, denouncing their own behavior for having let her go to an orphanage and be adopted by a stranger. Jake was still reeling in amazement at hearing the kinds of formal confessions reserved for government press conferences when Mako's grandmother abruptly switched her attention to him and began bowing to him.

"*Please forgive me, I meant no disrespect to Marshall Pentecost. He was a very great man, and we are in his debt, for saving our civilization and for doing what we failed to do for our daughter.*"

Jake gulped and mumbled noncommittally, "*I'm not offended.* *Not on my dad's behalf,* anyw..." Though he had to admit, he'd wondered what the Moris had thought about the man who'd adopted Mako.

"*Does Ranger Becket speak any Japanese?*" asked one of the younger adults, a man about Mako's age. "Only a few of us speak fluent English."

Mako smiled, relaxing just a little, and raised her eyebrows at Raleigh. There was a funny quirk to Raleigh's return grin as he bowed to the group and answered, "*Yes, we both do.*"

The family exchanged surprised smiles and bowed back. "*Welcome. We are so honored to have you visit.*"

Children pressed forward from the onlookers, wanting pictures and autographs, but their parents tugged them back, scolding gently to let Ranger Mori visit her family without interruption. Mako grinned at them and whispered, "*Later, I promise. I want to show Raleigh and Jake the whole island.*" Several kids squealed, and Jake had to grin too.

Mako's family had hired cars to drive them to her village, which meant Raleigh and Jake didn't even get the drive to really form a game plan with her. Raleigh kept his smile bland and focused on minding his manners, not wanting to stress Mako any more than she already was by thinking or feeling too much. He'd barely managed to keep a straight face when Mako's great-aunt Genya welcomed her, remembering the bitter, cold woman's words in Tokyo.

They were ringing loud in Mako's mind through the ghost drift already, so he had to not dwell on them. He handled digging through the gifts they'd brought to pick out what would be best for their
host and hostess, reserving some nice ones for Mako's grandmother and great-aunt as etiquette required for the family elders, and a few cute trinkets for the kids so Mako didn't have to worry about those things.

"Did you learn Japanese from drifting with Mako, Ranger Becket?" the grandmother asked.

"Not entirely. My family made extended stays in Japan when I was young, for my – my father's work," Raleigh stumbled, trying to avoid any mention of his own father. "My brother, sister, and I attended local schools." He didn't mention his time here working on the Wall. "Drifting with Mako has made me more fluent."

"The Space Center is hoping you will visit," said Mako's cousin, Haku, the man who'd inherited her father's work as a swordsmith – and, it seemed, his house. "They believe drift technology could change space exploration and navigation."

Just as long as they don't want Rangers as test subjects, Mako thought at Raleigh with a weak smile. He managed not to shudder.

"All of our extended family are coming for dinner this evening," Mako's grandmother went on. "You must join us."

Raleigh felt Mako's mental sigh, but her voice was bright. "We would be delighted, but we don't wish for you to go to such trouble."

"Of course, it's no trouble! Having you here is so important. We must earn your forgiveness," Mako's grandmother insisted. Mako's great aunt sat with her shoulders hunched, as well she might if she remembered what she'd said to her eleven-year old grand niece before abandoning her in Tokyo.

Mako tugged both their minds off thoughts like that and answered, "If you're sure, then we're honored to join you." Still, however sweet and gracious her voice, her reluctance came through the ghost drift loud and clear.

On the other hand, the rush of getting ready for dinner at the nicest restaurant in the area at least served as a distraction. There was no time to do more than glance around the house where Mako was born and lived to age eleven before digging out their dress uniforms and a suit Mako had insisted on buying Jake in Hong Kong before they left.

Mako's hands were shaking as she tried to help organize the gifts. Raleigh jerked his head at Jake and tugged Mako into the bathroom under the pretense of her helping him with his tie. Instead, he just rubbed her hands. It's okay. I'll be okay. She shut her eyes and leaned against him. He could feel the tightness in her throat through the drift. Her facade was already starting to crack, and they still had two full days to get through... "Hey, hey," he whispered aloud. "Breathe."

She wanted him to hug her until both of them had bruised ribs, but it would rumple their uniforms. We'll make it, love. We'll make it, he vowed silently.

Dinner was both easier and harder than Mako feared. It was a tremendous relief to be introduced to all the cousins and second-cousins who had been her age or younger - or not even born yet - at the time of Onibaba. Jake found himself at the center of a small army of teenagers, all of whom seemed to develop crushes on him in record time (including Akiara, the only boy other than Haku).

Mako's memories of her extended family weren't all bad. Her cousin Emica, Haku's twin sister, had sent her actual handwritten letters first at the orphanage, then care of Sensei at whatever
Shattered Dome he was posted, assuming correctly that Mako knew why her father’s family had cast her out. Emica's eyes brimmed as she met Mako's gaze the first time, and Mako could barely speak for a few moments. Raleigh sensed it and politely redirected conversation for a few seconds, asking who was related to Mako and how.

More shocking was finding Emica had a baby – a boy. Mako looked around for a husband or boyfriend, and Emica blushed furiously and said, "A donor. He's mine and…my partner's."

Mako choked…then couldn’t keep the grin off her face. Emica would have said "boyfriend" even if she wasn't married yet, and the family would have invited the boyfriend with an eye to getting them married and passing it off as simply jumping the gun a little. But if Emica's partner wasn't here…"I hope you'll introduce us tomorrow," she said, at last able to talk without afraid her voice would break. Emica beamed. Great Aunt Genya and Grandmother looked like they'd swallowed wasps, and Emica's parents looked like they wanted to crawl under the table.

The younger generation promptly mortified their elders yet again when Mako asked, "Is Cousin Shion still living in Tanegashima?"

More strangled noises, and Haku grinned almost as broadly as his sister. "Yes, but she couldn't be here tonight. Their twin boys have been sick. Aito is a propulsion specialist at the Space Center."

So, it seemed the Mori family curse of few sons was broken not only by Emica and the woman she loved, but also by Shion – who was still estranged from the family by her rage on Mako's behalf. Shion was ten years older than Mako, but she'd written on occasion after getting married and safely out of her parents' home.

The elder generations of the Mori family became strangely reticent for the rest of dinner, and Mako was somewhat ashamed by how relieved she was that it left her to catch up with cousins once-removed and second cousins without much interruption. Little Rei who'd been eight when Mako last saw her, was now finishing high school and preparing to go to university to study metallurgy – thanks in no small part to Haku's stubborn insistence on teaching her the art of swordmaking over the previous generation's objections.

Mako's uncle Chiharu, the only Mori who might have really been able to take control of the craft, had died six years ago, leaving Haku the only one with any knowledge of the family's traditions and skills, and Mako found she was glad of that.

Little Kaede was now sixteen and an astonishing beauty, but she proudly told Mako she was winning martial arts championships on a regular basis. (However, for all the parents and grandparents joked that she'd become such a tomboy, she was very flirtatious with Jake, to the point that Mako and Kaede’s parents shot both of them warning looks.)

"How do Americans say?" Emica asked Raleigh slyly, and pointed two fingers at her eyes, then towards the teens.

Raleigh laughed."Yeah, but which one should we give it to?"

"All of them," Mako replied, and switched to Japanese. "You watch yours, we'll watch mine."

It was funny seeing how everyone reacted to Raleigh and Jake, especially the surprise on their faces to see Raleigh's confident skill at eating with chopsticks and Jake's fluent Japanese and gracious manners. Mako was proud of them both.

Yet sometimes she inadvertently met the eyes of her grandmother, her great aunt, or her aunts and
uncles, and the past slammed into her guts, turning the excellent meal into ashes in her mouth. "$\text{Nobody will come for you. Nobody.}$$

More than once Mako found herself the one being slightly bad-mannered by staring fixedly at Great Aunt Genya, unable to stop wondering if she could remember those words so clearly, and if so, whether she really regretted them or if she was simply trying to save face in light of Mako's accomplishments.

Raleigh discreetly brushed his hand against hers, tugging her back to the present, and she distracted herself by asking for a refresher of whose all the assorted little ones in the newest generation were. Some of the other elder cousins who simply hadn't known Mako that well were now married with children, ranging from infants to early grade school. Mako then had to endure pictures being taken with assorted children in her lap or babies in her arms, but at least it passed the time.

By the end of the meal, Mako supposed there would be pictures all over the Internet giving the impression of nothing more than a happy family reunion in which all was forgiven and forgotten. Well, that would save face all around, and maybe it would make Mako's parents happy. Maybe.

Still, she felt as exhausted as if she'd just gone three rounds in the simulator after a double-shift in the repair bays, and judging by the murmurs of Haku and Emica that they should let their honored guest get some rest after her trip, at least a few of her cousins could tell. She kept a bright, cheerful smile on her face for the farewells for the evening and handed out the little gifts for the children, getting squeals of delight.

One rather brash six-year-old daughter of a second cousin looked from Mako to Raleigh and back before demanding, "Are you in love?"

Her parents were mortified – hell, \textit{Mako} was mortified – but even as half the family stammered scolding words, Jake couldn't keep from laughing, and soon Emica and Haku broke too, and Mako was beet red. A few sidelong glances confirmed, so was Raleigh. At least it broke the ice a little further, even if they both blushed scarlet all over again when Kaede squealed that she'd caught the whole thing on her phone. So Mako and Raleigh just gave up and laughed too. It was pretty funny.

But silence crashed down in the car as Haku and his wife Tamami drove them back to Mako's parents' house. Now they didn't have the rush of preparations to distract them, and Mako felt like she was in a strange dream seeing her childhood home in the moonlight next to the workshop.

Mako's hands were shaking again as she handed Haku and Tamami the gifts to thank them for hosting her and murmured her gratitude. But to her surprise, Haku was almost as nervous as she was.

"You will always be welcome. Mako...this is your home. You have more right to be here than me." He gulped and waited until she met his eyes. "I'm so sorry for how we treated you. We should have done more."

Raleigh and Jake had discreetly stepped away with Tamami, pretending they weren't all listening. "$\text{You were children too,}" Mako told him. "$\text{I never blamed you or Emica or Shion. You had no power to make your parents or our grandparents take me in, but Emica told me you all never stopped speaking for me. Even the littler ones, Rei and Kaede did. I didn't want you to be punished, but I will always be so grateful. If you hadn't...I don't know if I could have come back at all.}"

Haku sighed. "$\text{Grandmother is truly sorry. When we saw your name as the pilot of Gipsy Danger}$$
who saved Hong Kong, she cried and begged Uncle Masao and Aunt Sumako to forgive her at the family shrine. When we learned of the battle at the Breach and no one knew if any of the pilots had survived, she collapsed. We all were afraid…” Mako winced, and he cringed. "I don't say that to make you feel guilty. Only that I think she does finally see how badly we wronged you."

Unable to quite keep the acid out of her voice, Mako asked, "And Great Aunt Genya? What does she say?"

"She…she didn't agree with Grandmother about any of this. She thought it would make us all lose face. At last, my parents came around too and said we deserved to lose face for what we'd done, and so did most of the others. Great Aunt Genya had to give in to Grandmother and the majority, so she went along." Haku eyed Mako. "I know she went to Tokyo after…after. But Emica and I never knew what happened."

Nobody will come for you. Nobody.

Mako blinked rapidly, trying to keep herself out of the rabbit. Nobody had told her that rabbits would start to pull her out of reality even when she wasn't in the drift! Why hadn't anyone told – Raleigh was just behind her, not touching her like he would in the Shatterdome, but his proximity still helped. Mako still wavered on what to say. She doubted Great Aunt Genya would have ever admitted to exactly what she said in Tokyo to anyone other than Grandmother and maybe a few of Mako's father's generation. Haku and Emica probably didn't know.

Would it be right to tell now, to drive yet another wedge into all that was left of Masao's family when so many of them were in turmoil? Emica, who undoubtedly had her own battles to fight in defense of the woman she loved and her beautiful son, was it right to give her another reason to resent her elders? Would Mako simply be telling out of malice?

In the end, she avoided Haku's eyes and murmured, "I suppose it's of no use to speak of it now. If she has no regrets, nothing any of us say will change her mind."

Tamami said delicately in English, "It has been a long day for you. We should get your room ready so you can go to sleep. Tomorrow, we will drive you anywhere you would like to see."

Mako gratefully fell back into more mundane matters. "I don't want to inconvenience you. We can take a bus. I think I still remember the routes," she added, smiling weakly at Haku.

He smiled more easily and said, "Tamami has tomorrow off from work, and I won't work either. We'll enjoy it very much. Shion is hoping you will visit her and Aito before you leave."

"I would love to."

They prepared the guest room – the very room that had once been Mako's and seemed so spacious when she was little. Now it was a little tight with three futons prepared, and Mako wondered if Tamami or Haku were at all embarrassed by having Mako share with two men, neither of whom were related to her by blood. But it was that or have them spill out into the living area, which would be a nuisance in the mornings, and neither Mako nor Jake nor Raleigh wanted that.

At last, they were alone in the dim light, made bluish like a drift space, and it pulled at her, spinning her around like a whirlpool, trying to drown her… Raleigh quietly slipped from his bed and over to hers, gathering her in his arms and pressing his lips into her hair. Mako clung to him with one hand and pressed the other over her mouth to avoid making any noise. But silent sobs began shaking her whole body and tears were falling and there was nothing she could do, right there in front of Jake. She heard him leaving his bed too, felt Raleigh nod to him, then her brother's
hand rested cautiously on her shoulder.

It hurt, it hurt, it hurt, she didn't know how to make it stop...Raleigh wrapped himself around her from behind, his voice silent, but in the ghost drift, he pulled up a soothing J-pop song she liked to play when she was upset. She could hear him in the drift, gently singing along with it.

*I want to go home...but where's home? This was home.* The memories were distorted by time and trauma, dreamlike now. The posters she'd had one her walls, the toys on the shelves, a little dull-bladed sword Daddy had taught her to forge when she was eight, over the mock-protests of Mama. The little jewelry box Mama's grandmother had made for Mako, carved so delicately with kittens and butterflies and painted with her favorite colors...most of the jewelry in it had been little costume bits from her friends and family over the years, but there'd been a few nice pieces. Chief among them, a pretty little clip made of silver and real garnets and pearls that had been Mama's when she was little. Pearls were Mama's birthstone, but she'd loved garnets, so Mako's grandparents had bought the clip for her as an extravagant present when she was seven. Mama had worn it at special occasions and given it to Mako when she was seven.

"I think our ancestors must have known I would have a little girl one day born in January." Mako had loved it and learned to polish and care for the metal in jewelry as well as swords.

That clip hadn't been among the things Sensei salvaged for Mako after adopting her. She hadn't thought about it for years – until one day at school, choosing a dress for her first dance at age first one she'd liked was dark red, and she'd been almost ready to buy it when her best friend Liling had insisted on looking at accessories first. "Do you like garnets?" the nice lady at the shop had asked. "What about some pewter and garnet combs for your hair?"

They had been very pretty and hadn't really even looked much like the one Mako had left behind in Tanegashima – but one of them had little pearls in it too. Mako had frozen...and started to cry. Liling and the other girls from school had rushed her back to campus, and it had been days before she could explain why she couldn't stand the thought of wearing something like that in her hair.

In the end, she'd picked royal blue and a sparkly gold headband and earrings.

*Blue...* Why had she taken it out of her hair? How weak and pathetic to crawl back here looking for the approval of such cruel people.

Raleigh's grip tightened on her. "Not true," he whispered in her ear. Mako shivered and huddled against him.

"Should we leave early?" Jake whispered.

Mako winced and shook her head. That would be a slap in the face, and if Mako was feeling distinctly unfilial towards her elder relatives at this moment, Haku and Tamami didn't deserve that, nor did Emica and Shion or the little ones. She still wanted to get to know them and be able to email them all without having to resort to subterfuge like she and Emica had had to do.

Still, despite tossing and turning, sleeping was simply impossible. Mako cursed herself for it, because with her in this condition, no way would Raleigh be able to sleep. She eventually managed to shoo him and Jake back to their own beds, but occasionally she and Raleigh exchanged weary, knowing smiles in the darkness.

Raleigh had had his share of nights like this, and thanks to the drift, Mako knew how it worked. There would be some very tired moments during the day, but as long as they kept busy, they could hold it back. Then there'd be just one more night here to get through. At worst, they'd be in Tokyo
Shatterdome forty-eight hours from now, back to semi-familiar ground among people who understood, and they'd be able to sleep easy again.

Or as easy as Mako Mori and Raleigh Becket ever could sleep.

She huddled in her bed trying and failing to sleep, soothed only when Raleigh crawled out of his bed and settled beside her to stroke her hair or hold her. At least she could tell Jake had managed to sleep.

In the morning, Mako employed the only makeup she used on a regular basis to hide the shadows under her eyes. Before Pitfall, she'd used it to hide the exhaustion of double shifts and the signs of tears each time another Jaeger fell. After Pitfall, she used it to conceal the marks of nightmares.

She and Raleigh and Jake smiled and lied to Haku and Tamami that they'd all slept very well. "For some reason, I remember that room as being much bigger," she joked, and their hosts grinned.

It was strange and eerie again, seeing the workshop. Haku was very nervous as he told her about all her father's techniques that he still preserved and followed, and he almost cut himself once. They both had to laugh weakly. Then he showed her the first sword he'd made on his own, now displayed beside the ones her father and grandfather and great-grandfathers had forged. The koshirae contained not only the Fujimoto family crest, but also the Mori, and on the kashira was a kestrel, and simply the word, Daughter.

Mako was speechless. "Kaede and Emica designed it. They thought it would suit you. Your father's forge will always have a part of you," said Haku. In with the other weapons displayed, there was the hanbō her father had given her when she was seven. "I hope you'll take it with you. It belongs to you. Rei and Kaede and I have kept it for you."

Raleigh and Jake stayed at a discreet remove throughout the "tour" and for Mako's visit to her family's grave. Though especially at the grave, she could feel Raleigh fighting the urge to go closer to her as she fought the turmoil inside. Here were her parents' ashes. She hadn't been able to take part in any of the funeral rites or honor them properly until now. Was that wrong? Should she have asked Sensei to take her here earlier to pay proper homage to her family?

Was it enough that she'd forged a Jaeger's sword and taken revenge on the kaiju?

She shook a little as she washed the grave and placed fresh flowers and incense, and carefully removed the grass and weeds. Not there was much encroaching weeds or rubbish blown in the wind. Obviously the family grave was well maintained. Folding her hands, she murmured the traditional prayers, and added, I hope you would be proud and approve of what I've done in your honor. If I've failed to properly honor you, please forgive me. I love you so much. She bowed, then gathered the things she'd brought and just before she turned away, the sun came out from behind a cloud, bathing the grave in light.

The wet stones sparkled, reminding her of her mother's hair clip, and the flowers seemed to glow. Mako smiled.

The visit got easier after that. Emica and her wife, Masumi, invited them to have dinner, which Mako was unreservedly happy to accept. "We may have been foolish to have a child at such a terrible time, but I thought we should have something to hope for," Emica explained. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you I got married. We decided to have Kamin just after the terrible battle on May Day, and I...wasn't sure..."
Mako could guess all too easily how appalled the family must have been, even if Japan had recognized same-sex marriage in 2022. Many families outside the urban areas were still very resistant to such radical changes. And Emica was right: everyone in the Jaeger Program had been very distracted at the time. Mako hadn't sent many more emails to Emica after the May Day disaster, and Emica hadn't responded quickly. Well, now Mako knew why.

"I'm very happy for you both." She cooed at the baby now bouncing in Haku's lap. "Tell me about Shion? I take it the family hasn't forgiven her – or has she not forgiven them?"

"Both," Emica said grimly. "Uncle Genkei said horrible things about Aunt Sumako after…Shion was so angry. Even then, Grandmother said he was dishonoring the family by showing such disrespect to the dead. Shion never forgave him, and she told Aito why when they were dating, even before they got married. Aito's family was horrified to find out what our family had done to you, and Uncle Genkei and Grandmother lost so much face. They deserved it."

Jake might not have the ghost drift, but he could tell Mako was far more at ease with her cousins than with the relatives from her parents and grandparents' generation. They had dinner with Mako's cousin Shion, who was ten years older, and were introduced to her husband Aito and two little boys. Twins, pretty impressive. They were four, scampering around at the adults' feet asking Raleigh and Mako questions about being Rangers and showing off their Jaeger action figures.

One of them had a bunch of the Ranger figures too, including Yancy Becket and Jake's dad, from back when Dad had been pilot of Coyote Tango. He tried to give Yancy to Raleigh and Pentecost to Mako, and both of them got choked up and couldn't speak. Shion gently assured the boys that it wasn't necessary and sent them to put the figures away. Jake had to lead the conversation for awhile so Raleigh and Mako could focus on keeping their composure.

Eventually, it passed, and Aito peppered Raleigh and Mako with questions about drift tech, building on the conversations they'd had at the Space Center earlier that day. The Space Center was really cool, full of fascinated kids who actually got distracted by things other than the two Rangers in their midst. They'd all been more at ease there than anywhere else on the trip so far. It made Jake wish his Dad could have seen it. He'd have loved it.

"I bet Aunt Tamsin, Aunt Luna, and my mum would've loved it too."

He sighed inwardly.

That night, despite being calmer than the night before, Jake could tell that Mako and Raleigh couldn't sleep again. They saw him looking at them, and Mako whispered, "You don't have to stay awake with us. One of us should get some rest."

The next day, they toured the beaches, and Jake had glimpses of the kid Mako had been before Onibaba tore her world apart. The younger kids for once gave up scampering at Mako and Raleigh's feet in favor of donning swimsuits and racing into the water, some grabbing surfboards. Jake was startled by how many kids surfed, both boys and girls. "Did you ever surf?" he asked in surprise. Mako hadn't liked swimming in the ocean as far as he could remember.

"Oh yes, Mako was very good. Her mother was a great surfer," said Shion, laughing.

Mako's smile was a little sheepish. So, Aunt Tamsin and Dad had fibbed when they said she didn't know how to surf back in Lima. Or maybe they hadn't known. Well, he'd been too young to understand how she felt about the ocean.

Neither she nor Raleigh went into the water, so Jake stayed with them and the adults, calling encouragement and caution to the younger kids as they swam and played. "It's because of you our children are able to swim and surf as we once did," Shion's husband told Mako and Raleigh.
emotionally.

The beaches were really beautiful. The sand was soft and white, with beautiful hills and rock formations rising above them. They walked to some of the tide caves that weren't swamped, and Mako and Emica showed Jake and Raleigh one of the caves where they used to hide and tell scary monster stories when they were kids.

Some of the adults yelled at a group of boys acting out a kaiju rising from the ocean with a blow-up costume, but Mako and Raleigh laughed and said it was okay. Jake had a feeling they were hiding any discomfort they really felt. Still, it was a nice afternoon. Haku and Tamami brought them to a small beachside restaurant that had stubbornly stayed in business after the first kaiju attacks, and they had lunch in the outdoor seating area.

The owner was beside himself at having the great Mako Mori, Tanegashima's pride and joy, as a guest and was so effusive everyone kept giggling hysterically because Mako seemed perpetually red. Jake took her picture, getting a mock-ferocious glare and growl of, "Traitor," which set everybody off again.

Still, the food was great, the weather was nice despite it being November – unseasonally warm, actually – and everyone had a good time. The kids eventually got hungry and came up to join them, but the parents all claimed there was no food left. Then the owner got into it and informed the kids solemnly that there was no food left in the restaurant, and finally someone cracked and started laughing. The kids did get fed.

Jake thought Mako might actually not be feigning her reluctance when it came time to think about catching the ferry to Kagoshima. She hadn't wanted to fly off the island even if it was faster. She hadn't explained why, but Jake would bet every penny he had that she and her parents had flown from Tanegashima to Tokyo on that terrible day. During the flight in, she'd alternated between staring out the windows in fascination and leaning away from them, clinging to Raleigh.

So they'd take the ferry to Kagoshima first, then fly to Tokyo.

It was awkward to say her formal farewells to Grandmother, Great Aunt Genya, and everyone from Mako's father's generation. "Thank you for such wonderful hospitality and going to so much trouble."

"It was our honor," Grandmother really did look sad. "We did a terrible thing to you and dishonored the memory of your parents. Our grandchildren and great-grandchildren will all know that you are the savior of the entire world despite our shameful treatment of you. We will honor Marshal Pentecost's sacrifice and hope to earn your forgiveness some day."

She really meant it. Haku and Emica had said as much, but Mako hadn't been sure whether to believe it. She did now.

…it's still not enough.

Was she terribly spiteful to feel that way? She just murmured something noncommittal but reassuring. After all, Grandmother was very old and in increasingly poor health. The likelihood of seeing her again was slim.

Great Aunt Genya, on the other hand, muttered noncommittal agreements to her older sister's sentiments and sulked. Mako was coolly courteous to her in saying goodbye and felt far less guilty about hoping she would never see Genya again.
Saying goodbye to Haku and Tamami, to Emica and Masumi, and Kaede, Rei, and Akiara was
genuinely hard. Mako did accept her old hanbō and promised Kaede a spar during the next visit.
She realized there would be a next visit even as she said it. It might be some time later, but she did
want to have it. Maybe on that visit she could get away with avoiding all the previous generations
by keeping it just a visit to Haku and Emica, casting it as not wanting the family to go to all the
trouble of arranging another huge gathering and standing ceremony, disrupting everybody's routine.

She hoped Haku would understand if she stayed in a hotel next time. Or maybe she'd accept Emica
and Masumi's invitation instead, to keep things equal.

"You'll always be welcome with any of us," Emica promised."All of you. We're very glad you
came, especially knowing how hard it was."

Yes, Emica had never really said in her letters or emails, but Mako had no doubt Emica and Haku
understood what she had felt, both in those first years after being adopted by Sensei and now,
returning to the family an international hero, hailed as savior of the world, who forged a sword for
a Jaeger in her father's honor and slew no less than three kaiju with it and closed the Breach.

_I have nothing to be ashamed of. Nothing._

_Believe it_, Raleigh answered in the ghost drift. They smiled at each other.

A small army of schoolchildren gathered at the ferry pier, and the three of them had to run a
gauntlet of selfies and autographs and shouted questions all the way to the boat. Mako's cousins
laughed and stayed to watch the tableau, and Mako felt rather giddy, posing for pictures and
laughing at the kids' antics. Jake and Raleigh hammed it up too, and for the first time, Mako mused
that maybe being a celebrity wasn't so bad.

When they were finally on the ferry, the weight of the last three days came crashing down. Mako
wanted to look out the windows as they embarked, but could barely keep her eyes open. Raleigh
abandoned the polite reserve of the last three days and wrapped an arm around her. She fell asleep
on his shoulder.

While Raleigh hadn't gotten any more sleep than Mako, he was at least more experienced at being
conscious for almost seventy-two hours. Mako felt far worse when she woke up as they came in to
Kagoshima, and Raleigh murmured, "Hang on. We'll get to the plane, then you can go back to
sleep."

Mako wanted to cry at the thought of sitting in an airport lounge for over an hour. "Maybe they've
got those little sleeping rooms," Jake suggested.

"They're not that big; they're for commuters," Mako mumbled. Raleigh kept an arm around her
during the transfer to the airport, and she fought to stay awake. _I don't want to see them again. Only
my cousins, not them. I can't – I can't just –_

"I know, I know," Raleigh murmured in her ear aloud. "You don't have to." _They were right about
one thing: it was indefensible._ Great Aunt Genya's words thundered louder than ever in the ghost
drift. _Even if you'd been a complete nobody for the rest of your life, it'd still be indefensible._ Mako
wanted to claw at her scalp to make Great Aunt Genya go away. "Shh. It'll pass. It will."

Jake tried bringing her some food, but the smell made her nauseated, and she could barely drink
water. She nodded off more than once on Raleigh's shoulder, feeling worse every time she woke
up.
I hate her. Raleigh, I hate her.

She deserves it. They all do. Maybe they regret it now, but they can't undo what they did to you by gushing all over the place. They can't take it back. You don't have to let them.

"I miss Sensei," she mumbled. "So much."

Maybe that really was the material difference. When she'd had nothing and been nothing, Sensei had chosen her. Emica and Haku and Shion, even Kaede and Rei, as young as they'd been, they'd chosen to stand by her and braved the displeasure of their families. Tamsin and even Jake in his own way had chosen her, to be her family.

Raleigh had chosen her. Everyone in the Jaeger Program had chosen her, pilots and crews, even the ones who'd wondered about her relationship with Marshal Pentecost had still worked with her and came to recognize her skills and her devotion. They'd all grieved together for every Jaeger who fell, for every strike trooper who lost their life trying to save others.

Mako had forged Gipsy Danger's sword for the ones who had chosen her, not the ones who'd abandoned her.

For my family...

My family...

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

Coming Soon: Our exhausted hero and heroine arrive at Tokyo Shatterdome to recover from their emotional trip, and face new emotional struggles with the reminders of all they and the Jaeger Program lost as they depart again for Anchorage in Chapter Eighteen: When I See You Again!

PLEASE don't forget to review!

Original Character Guide

Emica Fujimoto - Daughter of Mako's father's cousin, three years older than Mako. The two girls' casual friendship becomes deeper when Emica is sickened by their family's complete rejection of Mako in the wake of Onibaba's attack that left her orphaned. Before Mako's parents died, Mako's mother taught both her daughter and some of the younger cousins to surf, and Emica continued learning secretly in her surrogate aunt's honor.

Haku Fujimoto - Son of Mako's father's cousin, twin brother of Emica, only boy of
Mako's generation in the entire extended family. He was reluctantly tapped by Mako's paternal grandparents to become Masao's apprentice in sword-making, and unlike his parents, Haku was happy to share that apprenticeship with Mako. Like his sister, Haku is horrified by the injustice to Mako, though he's less willing to challenge his family openly on the subject. But he quietly rebelled by teaching his much younger female cousins, Rei and Kaede, about sword-making and fighting, and even trains them with Mako's hanbō in Mako's honor. A design on the hilt of the first sword he forged also paid homage to Mako, as he considered her the true heir to the family craft.

Shion Nakamura nee Ueda - Daughter of a second cousin of the Moris, ten years older than Mako, but fond of her younger cousins and old enough to be even more outraged by her father Genkei’s treatment of Mako. Became engaged to Aito Nakamura after high school and married him in her early twenties, and broke her own family’s unspoken vow of silence about Mako to her fiance almost immediately - and embarrassed her own family by revealing their shameful treatment of Mako at her wedding reception. Shion struck up an intermittent email correspondence with Mako after marrying, and ultimately couldn't cope with what her family had done and became estranged from them. She remained in illicit contact with Emica and Haku.

Rei Domen - Daughter of a second cousin of Masao Mori, three years younger than Mako, she's a rowdy and curious little girl still young enough to get away with those things - but old enough to sense something very wrong was done to Mako, so she asks about Mako at every opportunity. Her cousins, unlike her parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents, are willing to tell her and make their feelings clear. She's curious about sword-making and fighting, and as her cousin Haku takes on a greater role in upholding the Mori family tradition of swordsmithing, he secretly teaches Rei about it in Mako's honor.

Kaede Saito - Daughter of another Mori cousin, four years younger than Mako, she's more interested in becoming a martial artist than swordsmith, but Haku teaches her as well.

Akiara Saito - Son of another Mori cousin, brother of Kaede. Jaeger pilot enthusiast - a little too enthusiastic about male pilots for his conservative family's taste. The only other boy born to anyone connected by blood or marriage to the Mori family, Akiara, like his older cousin Haku, is under a lot of pressure.
Our exhausted hero and heroine arrive at Tokyo Shatterdome to recover from their emotional trip, and face new emotional struggles with the reminders of all they and the Jaeger Program lost.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Thank you all so much for the amazing feedback! This chapter brings in a few more of my original character Jaeger pilots and Shatterdome commanders. As a refresher, Colonel Sanae Okita was commanding officer of the Nagasaki Shatterdome, but left out of a job when it closed. She's landed a promotion and now in charge of Japan's reborn Jaeger Program after the war.

Headcanon Note: As a refresher, in Chapter Six of Aurora Borealis, Raleigh and Yancy returned home for their mother's funeral only to discover their father was leaving them and their seventeen-year-old sister Jazmine. Yancy reluctantly refused to take over her guardianship, so their neighbor, Diane did, but Jazmine cut all ties with her brothers.

CONTENT WARNING: Explicit sex in this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Eighteen: Our Personal Truths

Tokyo...

Thank God for being back among PPDC personnel. On the flight to Tokyo, Raleigh got a message from Herc. The Weis are offering to have a chopper pick you up and take you to the Tokyo Shatterdome.

Mako was sleeping fitfully in his lap, but he knew from experience she'd be even more miserable when she woke up. An hour or two of sleep at a time wasn't enough to make up for almost three days without. As it was, Raleigh was feeling pretty ragged himself. He'd tried and failed to doze a little on the flight once Mako was asleep. He texted Herc back, Tell them thanks, we'll take them up on it. We're all pretty tired.

He didn't quite go so far as to admit neither of them had slept in almost seventy-two hours, but he hoped Herc would get the message and pass it on to Major General Okita at Tokyo Dome. He doubted he or Mako would be able to get through another evening of formal dinners and questions without passing out and/or having meltdowns.

To his relief, she was just too groggy to really ask questions, and went where Raleigh and Jake led her, to the chopper pad rather than the train station, and fell asleep on Raleigh again the minute
they were in their seats. "Did you have a good time, sir?" the pilot asked.

"Uh…" Caught off guard and really freaking tired, Raleigh couldn't dissemble at all. "Uh…"

Jake rescued him. "Sure, they're just worn out. They need some sleep."

"Don't worry, General Okita thought as much. You're to go straight to quarters and get some rest. She said no meetings until after lunchtime tomorrow, if even then."

Raleigh could have hugged Major General Okita when she met them at the pad. "No ceremony," she assured them after exchanging bows. "We have quarters for you in the personnel section. Mr. Pentecost, you're also staying there with them, but you'll have your own room."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Jake politely. Yeah, just like every other Shatterdome, Tokyo had plenty of room in the pilots' quarters section.

There was a lot of work going on inside. Obviously they were still very much embroiled in getting the place ready to reopen. General Okita handed Raleigh, Mako, and Jake over to the quartermaster to be escorted to quarters, and that was it.

Jake folded his arms in a very Marshal way upon receiving his room, and admonished, "I better not see either of you two until at least lunchtime tomorrow."

Raleigh chuckled and nodded. Mako was so out of it she didn't even answer. "Night, kid." He put an arm around Mako and led her into their room.

It was clearly a pilots' shared room with a double bed rather than bunks. Apparently somebody had tipped the Tokyo staff off – Mako tossed her bags aside and shoved Raleigh against the wall with a kiss that knocked the wind out of him.

"Mmf! Mako!" He was so incredibly tired, she was barely coherent, but when he managed to catch his breath, her hungry eyes flashed at him. He vaguely remembered doing weird shit when Day Three of sleep deprivation really hit, but this wasn't… "Mako, Mako, no!"

"Why not?!" she demanded, practically clawing at him. "Raleigh, I need you! I need you now!"

"You can barely remember your own name," he said, trying to be gentle with his kisses. "You need to sleep."

Mako growled at him. "I need you, Raleigh Becket. I need this…now, right now. Please, make me forget so I can sleep?"

Well, shit. Raleigh sighed. Not that she wasn't incredibly hot like this, but the thought of doing anything she couldn't really consent to, or that she'd even regret was intolerable. "Are you sure you're up for this? That this is really what you want?" I'll do anything for you, you know that, but you've been through the wringer in the last three days even without being sleep deprived!

Mouthing at his neck, Mako made herself pull back and looked him in the eyes. Her gaze was strangely clear. "Yes, I'm so very sure." I need to remember who I am. Please, let me have this. "Please, I'm not drunk. I know what I want. I won't regret it. Not at all, not the smallest bit." You can feel it. Feel me in my mind. I know what I want.

As exhausted as they both were…obviously she'd gotten a second wind. Raleigh could hang on long enough to give her what she wanted. He relaxed and relented. "Okay." He kissed her more fully and surrendered to the sensation, feeling his pants already getting tight. "Then tell me what
you want. Anything you want.” If she wanted this before she could sleep easily, then he wouldn’t deny her.

"Here, now, like this." Mako climbed him like a tree, wrapping her legs around his waist to keep herself against him. "I need this."

"Jesus." Raleigh was going to set a record if he didn't get a grip on himself. Tonight wasn't for him at all. Mako hissed a denial, but he shushed her with a kiss, finally getting his balance as he leaned back against the wall and wrapped his arms around her back and waist. This was for her, just for her, all for her. *I'm yours. I'll make you forget…*

But she panted into his mouth, and again, her eyes were clear, if heavy-lidded with lust as she looked at him, and her voice was strong in the ghost drift. *No, not forget. I didn't mean it like that. I need this to remember. I want to remember who I am and where my home really is.*

"Your wish is my command," he murmured and reached through the ghost drift to try to envelop her with his mind as well as his body. To know what she wanted…he felt it, and turned, spinning them around so she had her back to the wall and leverage to stay wrapped around his waist while he shucked his shirt in record time. Mako tried to shift to pull her shirt off, but Raleigh caught her hand; the concrete of the wall was rough, so if she wanted it to be like this, she should keep it on.

"I don't care," she hissed and hauled her shirt off.

Okay, but don't blame me if you get road rash. He grinned and pressed her back again so he could attack her neck, and soon had her moaning. He had to let her slide off him long enough to get rid of their pants, then she practically jumped onto him again. She was so beautiful like this, completely out of fucks to give, wild and unrestrained. She laughed as he panted, sliding his fingers between them to stroke her, then she threw her head back and gasped.

Yes, yes, this was good, this was better, this was her home. He grinned and moved his mouth along her jaw and neck. He would’ve loved to go lower, but couldn't manage it without putting her down, and she did *not* want him to put her down. His dick was trying to get ahead of him, and he made her laugh again by growling at it. He wasn't coming before her.

But it wasn't easy to keep himself under control, with her breasts pressed against his chest, her eyes glassy and pupils blown huge with lust, her hair falling into both their faces, her mouth open as she panted into his hair or his mouth when he managed to stop working on her jaw and neck, the feel of her thrusting against his fingers, hot and wet – *DOWN, Little Becket, you are NOT go for launch!*

Mako let out a shriek of laughter and hastily clapped a hand over her mouth – but Raleigh seized on that and pressed harder, and he had her, her laughter giving way to gasping moans as she came. She pulled at him in the ghost drift, telling him she wanted him now while she was still moaning and shuddering, and she was ready, so he shifted her to get the angle right, still pressed against the wall with her legs around his waist, and let her sink down onto him.

*God,* that was glorious, but this was still about Mako, only Mako, all for her, and he started moving as she wrapped her arms around his neck, lips slamming down on his. "Raleigh, Raleigh, keep – oh! Yes," she gasped, feeling him pressing against her walls, still hypersensitive from her first orgasm. She knew what she wanted, and he would give it to her, fighting for control of his own reactions so he could see and feel her again first.

To his delight (and relief), it didn't take long to bring her there again from inside, and when he felt her break around him, it broke him too, both of them shaking and gasping.
When he stopped seeing stars, she was looking at him, finally calming down, the desperation in her eyes easing to something no less beautiful. It was an ache to withdraw from her, but he wasn't sure he could hold her up much longer. Mako slid down him and started to put her feet on the floor, but no, he didn't want her to, and swept her into his arms to carry her to their bed. She laughed but wrapped her arms around his neck again, nuzzling his hair.

He laid her on the bed, but she pulled him down on top of her. She liked his weight. It made her feel safe. Raleigh was vaguely astonished when she put her hand around him and started stroking. "Seriously? Are you going for a marathon?"

Mako snorted and nipped at his mouth. "You only came once. I want you to come again."

"Dunno if I've got it in me," he admitted, but groaned into her neck.

"We'll see." They were more leisurely about it this time, and he did get hard again, sinking into her at her urging. Incredibly, he could feel her heating up again. "It's – ahhh – okay, this time is for you - "

"Shh. Both of us," he murmured. He thrust slowly, and both of their caresses grew more languid. He just watched her, and if their previous climax had been like an explosion, this was the slow flare of a fire, lasting and heavenly and slow enough for him to keep watching her, taking in her face as she came yet again. She held onto him after until they both stopped shuddering, reluctant to let him go. "Better?" he whispered, combing his fingers through her sweat-damp hair.

She smiled and nodded, then kissed him, long and deep and content, eyes heavy again from tiredness. "I love you," she whispered.

He almost answered, "I know," and she grinned, ready to start tickling him if he dared it. Well, they were both too tired from three days of sleep deprivation topped off by absolutely mind-blowing sex. So he looked at her and told the truth, even though she knew it from the ghost drift. "I love you."

Finally, sleep came easily for both of them.

The next day, Mako and Raleigh were sluggish and groggy, but the Tokyo personnel (and Jake) were polite enough to pretend not to notice as they headed into meetings.

"Nagasaki will reopen as strictly an assembly and repair facility, not a launching Shatterdome," General Okita told them. There was a bitter quirk to her mouth as she pulled up the new budget. "Japan is now beginning work on two new Jaegers, and the current plan is for Tokyo to house five."

Yeah, everyone at the table was probably wondering the same thing as Mako and Raleigh: What a difference five Japanese Jaegers might have made in the last year of the war, to say nothing of Operation Pitfall. Maybe it wouldn't have saved Sensei, but other Rangers might still be alive.

Raleigh and Mako weren't the only former Rangers at the table. Ami and Rena Tanaka of Echo Saber and Pang So-yi and An Yuna of Nova Hyperion had joined them. Both pairs had suffered massive injuries when their Jaegers went down and were still recovering, but So-yi and Yuna might be able to ride again. Ami and Rena probably wouldn't, but they were likely to be back up and walking in a few more months.

"I'm glad you came back," Yuna told Raleigh. "You deserved to be here with your family, whatever happened."
Raleigh's distress slammed into Mako through the ghost drift. He hadn't been prepared for this; he hadn't known Team Nova or Team Saber well before Knifehead, but obviously they too were under the impression that he'd been unjustly discharged. Mako seized his hand under the table.

"It…thanks, but…it wasn't what people thought," he mumbled, staring at the table.

General Okita tried to rescue him. "Ranger Becket, you don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

"It's okay. I do want to. Because…I want people to know the truth." He took a deep breath and made himself look at them. "Marshal Pentecost only dismissed me because I asked him to. I threatened to kill myself otherwise." He almost shrank from their stunned expressions, but managed to keep meeting their gazes.

Ami Tanaka sighed. "I don't blame you. No one should." She cast a stern look around the table at the younger pilots and crew, but they all nodded, though their expressions were desperately sad. "We knew Duc Jessop very well, and saw what it did to Hedy Keres to lose Peter Lepp after Eden Assassin went down. We understand as well as anyone can."

"And we don't wish to understand entirely," Rena Tanaka said weakly.

Mako and Raleigh had to smile weakly themselves. "Yeah, that's not something I'd wish on anyone," Raleigh murmured. "But I want people to know the truth – what I didn't realize was that Marshal Pentecost swore me to silence so people would blame him instead of me. The war's over now. He deserves to have his name cleared. He had a friend tailing me when I was working the Wall and the bunkers, making sure I was safe."

General Okita's eyes were full. "We'll tell our crews, if that's what you want." Raleigh nodded.

The rest of the meeting itself was less emotional. Team Nova and Team Saber were planning to stay on with the Jaeger Program in whatever capacity they could, and it was a credit to them that nearly every person on their crews had come back when Tokyo Shatterdome reopened. However, after the meeting, things got emotional again, because Raleigh wanted to visit the memorials for the teams who hadn't lived to see the end of the war.

Both Mako and Raleigh had wet eyes and tight throats as they laid flowers and incense before the memorials for Team Tidal Dragon, Team Katana Eagle, and both Teams Tacit Ronin and Coyote Tango. Neither of them would have said it, but So-yi worked it out. "Command wanted to do to you what they did to Duc Jessop and Hayase Shindo, didn't they? That's why you threatened…" Raleigh nodded. She scowled. "I hope they all go to prison. It should never have come to that."

Even though Sensei and Tamsin weren't physically here, Mako knelt and touched their names on the memorial anyway. She felt Raleigh fighting tears as he did the same for Vic and Gunnar Tunari. "We miss them too," murmured Rena.

Mako managed to say past the lump in her throat, "They danced for me once. It was less than six months after my parents were killed. I found them in the mess hall at the Academy, and they danced for me. It was the first time I had laughed in months."

So-yi smiled weakly. "You must have been very little."

"Yes, I was eleven. They were the first pilots I met other than Marshal Pentecost and Tamsin Sevier." Sensei and Tamsin. "I didn't realize they were Coyote Tango's new pilots until long after."

She felt Raleigh stifle a sob and stood up to wrap an arm around his waist.
At least their fellow pilots understood completely. Yuna was wiping her eyes furiously, but her tears kept coming. "We loved them. Everyone did. They taught us all so much."

"Same here," Raleigh whispered. Something tugged at his thoughts in the ghost drift, and Mako looked at him curiously. "Do you…does anyone know what happened to Dr. Lightcap?"

So-yi sighed. "She's alive. But when Romeo Blue fell…it broke her. She lives in Canada now, at Marshal Gagnon's ski lodge. He died in 2021, but he and his wife left it for the Rangers, so they would have a safe place to go. None of us tell anyone who aren't Rangers," she said, and Mako and Raleigh nodded. "We want to go and see her when we've healed enough to travel, the four of us." She tilted her head at Raleigh and Mako. "You should come too. It might ease her feelings, to see you again. I think…what happened to you and your brother," she grimaced apologetically at him, but although Raleigh tightened his grip on Mako, he didn't break eye contact with So-yi. "It was very hard for her too. No one knew that…that could happen."

Raleigh couldn't answer, but Mako sensed what he was thinking in the ghost drift, so she spoke for him. "We will go to her with you. Maybe we should ask the pilots still in Hong Kong if they would like to go. She should know she isn't to blame for anything that…went wrong. Those hearings have begun to show who's to blame," she added grimly.

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_Hong Kong Shatterdome…_

When they returned to Hong Kong, Raleigh and Mako weren't at all surprised that every pilot and former pilot was entirely on board with going to Whistler to see Dr. Lightcap. "We must be careful," Sasha Kaidanovsky told them. "She has been very unwell since Bruce and Trevin were killed. I doubt she has improved much even after Operation Pitfall. I will contact Sergio and decide on the best plan. It cannot be right away; many pilots are still not well enough to travel."

If it weren't for drifting with Mako, I don't know if I could remember who's left, Raleigh thought. Mako elbowed him. No, thinking that way wouldn't do any good.

"I will call Hedy," rumbled Aleksis. "We know she will want to come, but she is still healing from her injuries, and she has Sophia now."

"Sophia?" Raleigh asked.

"Pete's daughter," said Herc sadly. "She's fifteen. Hedy's the only mother the kid ever knew, but there was some resistance to confirming her as custodial parent after Eden Assassin was destroyed and Pete died. I think the Russian bigwigs had the idea of turning Hedy into the next Hayase Shindo." Mako and Sasha growled in unison. It would've been funny if it weren't so damn serious.

"I hope the Russian bigwigs got disappointed," said Raleigh.

"Oh, yes," said Sasha, scowling. "We would not allow it." She returned to the subject of Dr. Lightcap. "Many crew will want to pay their respects, but only Rangers should go. She will be easily overwhelmed."

"Yeah, I can understand that. Though…" He fell into a rabbit and out of the present.

_Some of our crew are here from the old Team Gipsy, but not all of them. Especially the ones who left after Yancy…I want…I need…_

Mako put a hand on his arm. "What is it?" she asked softly.
"There's...something else I want to do," he murmured. "I need to go..." Back. Back to them. And not just to the team, I need to go...all the way back.

Where was she now? What had happened to her?

Mako sucked in her breath as she understood what he was thinking.

He was in a sort of daze after the Ranger meeting, and Mako just let him go where he wanted. His feet took him to find Tendo. "What's up, Becket boy?" Tendo asked in concern, seeing the look in Raleigh's eyes.

"I'm gonna go back," Raleigh murmured. "Back home. I need to see the others. And...my sister. I need to find her."

Tendo smiled and pulled Raleigh into a hug. "Hey, take it easy, kiddo. They'll all be glad to see you. Beyond glad. You should know that."

"I...yeah, I do, but...well, they might be, but...how much do you know about what happened when my mom died?"

Tendo sighed. "Enough. Dunno if you saw it in the drift, but Yance cried on my shoulder once when he was drunk."

A laugh burst out of Raleigh, but he had to wipe his eyes in a hurry. "Nah, I never saw that. He must've been really drunk."

"Well, you'd passed out by that point – it was on the victory tour after Grindylow, after that liquor store opened up for us in Ecuador and we decided to 'make it worth their while'." Tendo grinned sadly as Raleigh groaned. "Yeah, I think you both blacked out the ghost drift. But yeah, he told me about what happened with Jazmine. Maybe now, after everything that's happened, she'll understand a little better."

"I was shitty to her, Tendo."

"Well...maybe she'll be ready to forgive you."

Raleigh closed his eyes and couldn't help feeling Mako's cringe in the ghost drift. Why should she? You weren't ready to forgive you family who abandoned you. You were a boy, love. You were both boys. It's not even close to the same thing. She wrapped her arms around him from behind.

"You'll go with him, right, Mako?"

Mako poked her head out from behind Raleigh in outraged disbelief at the suggestion of any possibility of her not doing so. "How dare you?!"

They all had to laugh as Tendo backed up hastily, raising his hands. "Just checking, just checking!" Mako mock-grumbled that she'd let him live this time. Tendo considered him and figured out what Raleigh was trying...and doing a very bad job of asking. "You want me to go with you too, kiddo?" Raleigh nodded.

Mako spoke for him again. "Not so much to see Jazmine, but to see your old crew. And...Raleigh's never been back to the Anchorage Shatterdome."
Tendo's eyes filled. "You know they're gonna reopen it?" Raleigh nodded. "Of course, I'll come. Hell, we'd all come, if you want. Just say the word."

That was a little intimidating…but maybe it was still the right thing to do. "You know where everybody is?"

"Yep. Every one of them. And…you know, kiddo, there's more than one memorial there. There was the official one on the Shatterdome grounds, but…there's another. The crew of the Saltchuck made it. I've seen it. It's really beautiful."

Raleigh had never known that fishing boat's name until he'd seen it in the ghost drift with Mako. He nodded mutely.

"I'll put the word out. Everyone can come meet us in Anchorage."

Raleigh stiffened and shook his head. No, that was too much. Seeing Jazmine again – assuming she was willing to see him – would be hard and intimidating enough. Seeing Yancy's memorials for the first time…that'd be brutal.

"No…don't tell them to come to me. I'll come to them. All of them."

_To Be Continued..._

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**Chapter End Notes**

**Coming Soon:** Raleigh Becket returns to Anchorage with Mako and Tendo to face his sister Jazmine nearly ten years after he and Yancy left her and see how his hometown honored Yancy in _Chapter Nineteen: When I See You Again!_

**PLEASE don't forget to review!**

**Original Character Guide**

**Major General Sanae Okita:** Second-youngest Shatterdome commander after Stacker Pentecost, early 40s, former Colonel in the Japanese Air Force, commanded several elite wings before taking command of Nagasaki Shatterdome.

**Ami and Rena Tanaka:** Pilots of Echo Saber, Japanese Mark-4 Jaeger. Sisters, mid-30s, Ami, a robotics engineer, is 4 years older than Rena, formerly a professional gymnast. It took them three tries to pass the Jaeger Academy’s first cut because Ami kept failing at the physical standards and Rena struggled with the technical material, but they persevered. Both were severely injured when Bagiennik destroyed Echo Saber on July 16, 2025, but they managed to kill the kaiju with the help of Eden Assassin.

**Peter Lepp and Hedy Keres:** Pilots of Eden Assassin, Russian Mark-2 Jaeger. Estonian Air Force pilots in their early 30s who fell in love while attending the Jaeger Academy and married in 2018. Spent a lot of their time fighting to protect themselves and Peter's young daughter, Sophia, from the media and unscrupulous Russian profiteers. Eden Assassin was also destroyed by Bagiennik, and Peter died of his injuries a week later. With the support of the Kaidanovskys and their commander,
Hedy was able to win custody of her stepdaughter and took her back to Estonia.

**Marshal Vincent Gagnon**: Former Commander of the Anchorage Shatterdome who traded off with Stacker Pentecost several times. Lost his two sons in the pre-Jaeger Program fights against kaiju attacks, and one of the earliest Western supporters of the Jaeger Program. Devoted to the pilots and crews' welfare, he helped orchestrate the Anchorage conspiracy to spirit Duc Jessop out of the public eye to his family's ski lodge in Whistler. After Yancy's death, he proposed the same for Raleigh, who turned it down. Suffered two heart attacks while commanding Anchorage Shatterdome and retired to Whistler, passing away in 2022. His wife maintained the ski lodge for any other retired or recovering pilot who needed a safe place off the PPDC brass's radar.
Chapter Summary

Raleigh Becket returns to Anchorage with Mako and Tendo to face his sister Jazmine nearly ten years after he and Yancy left her and sees how his hometown honored Yancy.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: This chapter was a little late due to the holidays and because I really, really wanted to get it just right. It's a reunion I've been planning since the very beginning of Aurora Borealis. The details of Raleigh and Yancy's estrangement from their sister are dealt with in Chapter 6 of Aurora Borealis.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Nineteen: Candle on the Water

Hong Kong Shatterdome...

Jake stayed behind. "The first screening tests are in six weeks, so I need to study. I want to make it on the first try."

Mako grinned. "You're only sixteen, Jake, you don't have to rush."

"Nah, it's not rushing, really, I just..." Jake looked down and shrugged. "I want to...y'know...make him..." Mako put a hand on his shoulder. She might never have drifted with her little brother, but she could finish that sentence easily. "And anyway, I shouldn't go on this trip. He...y'know..." He shrugged again. "He'll need you."

Mako threw her arms around him. He yelped, then whined in protest, but she laughed and wouldn't let him go for several beats. "We may not be back before you start testing."

"That's okay. The tests last almost a week." Jake grimaced. "I'm not gonna want to talk to anyone."

"Oh, you will, before it's over," she countered. "I thought the same, but in the end, I couldn't stay isolated for that long. Liling and I cried on each other's shoulders by the fourth evening, and it seemed like the entire applicant pool filled up the local bars the evening testing finished." She pointed at him. "However, as I was not yet old enough to drink, I drank water and tea, and I expect you to do the same, Mr. Pentecost!"

Jake mock-groaned, then they both started laughing.

Anchorage Shatterdome...
Almost a year since closing, Anchorage Shatterdome hadn't fared as well as Tokyo or the other Domes that'd closed only a few months earlier. It hit Tendo hard to see it again, with whole sections demolished and gutted, stripped of much of its metal to feed the Wall. At least the Wall was coming down even faster. The rumble of demolition equipment had been loud and gratifying near the Anchorage airport.

Raleigh stopped in his tracks when he saw the Dome and didn't make a sound. Tendo and Mako just stayed on either side of him and waited.

"Will it…will it come back up?" Rals whispered. His weak voice made Tendo want to cry.

"The Academy is reopening," said Mako, her arm around his waist. "Also the Assembly Building and Proving Grounds at Kodiak Island. No decision has been made yet about the American Shatterdomes, but either this one or Los Angeles will probably be reopened."

The section that'd housed Gipsy Danger was gone, along with the pilots' quarters. The room where Yancy and Raleigh had last lived was gone. Not that there was anything left of them in that room; the crews had cleaned it out, unable to bear leaving anything inside. But Raleigh might've wanted to see it again.

Eventually, Raleigh managed to start walking.

Tendo was pretty sure Raleigh had never seen the Anchorage Shatterdome Memorial by the fence, a giant tablet of stone inscribed with the name of every pilot who had launched from here or been stationed here, their Jaeger, and the date of their death.

*Kaori Jessop, Tacit Ronin, November 10, 2018*
*Jing and Min Li, Horizon Brave, December 16, 2019*
*Yance Becket, Gipsy Danger, February 29, 2020*
*Duc Jessop, Tacit Ronin, July 7, 2021*
*Andrés Alcazar and Daniel Moreno, Matador Fury, March 6, 2022*
*Victor and Gunnar Tunari, Coyote Tango, November 6, 2022*
*Alejandro Quispe and Sunya Flores, Solar Prophet, May 1, 2023*
*Juliette and Nathan Girard, Cascade Victor, May 1, 2023*
*Elida Morales and Nicho Conte, Rio Sentry, May 1, 2023*
*Kenneth Gould and Robert Kanda, Mammoth Apostle, October 4, 2024*
*Bruce and Trevin Gage, Romeo Blue, January 8, 2025*
*Caleb Mitchell, Yankee Star, April 17, 2025*
*Ilisapie Flint and Zeke Amarok, Chrome Brutus, May 4, 2025*
*Peter Lepp, Eden Assassin, July 19, 2025*
*Stacker Pentecost, Coyote Tango, Marshal and Commanding Officer of Anchorage Shatterdome, July 31, 2025*

*Yancy Becket…*

Raleigh knelt, and Tendo and Mako stayed on either side of him, hands on his shoulders. Tendo fought to keep a grip on himself as he felt Raleigh quietly sobbing. "He'd be so proud of you, kiddo. They all would." Mako had turned her face slightly so Tendo couldn't see it, but he had no doubt she was telling Rals the same in the ghost drift.

There was spray paint and other obvious vandalism on the lower areas of the Dome walls that nobody had bothered to clean off. Even this monument had been hit by vandals more than a few times that Tendo had been at the Dome in 2024 and 2025 – but even when there'd been no money to replace it, the public had stepped in and taken care of it almost overnight.
Raleigh must have noticed the dozens and dozens of flowers, bouquets, cards, and candles along the nearest part of the fence. Many of the flowers were fresh, and there weren't many that were dead or wilted. So the people of Anchorage were making sure that whatever else happened, their pilots were being honored.

He discreetly wiped his own eyes. We've brought him home at last, Yance. He's gonna be okay. I can't promise your sister'll understand, but we'll take care of him, no matter what happens.

It took Rals a couple of tries to get to his feet, and Tendo hauled him into a fierce hug. "It's okay. It's okay," he murmured into Raleigh's shoulder.

"I can't…" Raleigh glanced toward the remains of the Dome and shuddered, turning away.

"Come on," Mako urged, sliding neatly under Raleigh's arm. "This wasn't your fault, you know that."

Tendo nodded and waited until the kid looked at him, then slapped Raleigh's cheek gently. "Let me take you down to the docks. I'll show you how you and Yance are remembered in this town."

Raleigh trembled, eyes wide, wet, and anxious, like that sweet, innocent kid Tendo barely remembered anymore, grieving for his friends in Whiskey Gamma in 2019. Finally, he closed his eyes and nodded, and Tendo and Mako ushered him back out of the gate.

The docks weren't far, so they just walked, hoping the cold, damp air would clear Raleigh's head a little. A couple of times, Rals faltered, and Tendo wondered if he'd change his mind – and if it would be okay to push him to see this through. I really think you should see this, kid. It might help you heal a little more.

But there was no way it could fail to be overwhelming. Maybe it would be too much when Raleigh's real goal was to try and reconcile with Jazmine.

In the end, Tendo didn't have to persuade him; Raleigh kept himself going. Just like he always has, our passionate, stubborn Baby Becket.

They made it all the way to the docks before anyone recognized him. Actually, it was Mako who a couple of sailors' wives recognized, her blue tipped hair standing out in this world of gray slush, gray skies, gray smoke, and gray fish. The two women, their ruddy features and gray knit caps blending in equally gray to the surroundings, gasped, and before anyone could think of what to say, their eyes traveled to Raleigh.

Connection made. A couple of fishermen noticed him next and also turned into statues. A third stuttered, half-turning further towards a dock. "The – the - "

Tendo helped them out. "Is the Saltchuck in?"

"Y-yeah. You wanna…?" the guy croaked at Raleigh.

Raleigh just nodded. Tendo left Mako with him and trailed after the fisherman as he stumbled down to one of the boat slips.

The Saltchuck was in, unloading a catch. They had to be busy, just calling, "Hey, man!" at Tendo's escort.

Then one of them said, "What's the problem?", half-laughing at the guy's slack-jawed shock. Then he saw Tendo.
It was Colin Stuart, the first mate. Tendo remembered his face all too clearly. And obviously Colin remembered Tendo, because he froze completely.

The other crew noticed the sudden paralysis – and they too recognized Tendo. The semi-organized chaos of the unloading halted, with the dock crews wondering what the hell was going on and crew from neighboring boats wandering over.

Colin was the one who managed to voice the question. "Is he…?"

"He's here," Tendo said.

"Oh my God," someone muttered.

"Who?" a bystander hissed, but more shell-shocked fishermen were arriving, having recognized the familiar stranger further down the docks.

"It's Becket, guys. Raleigh Becket. He's here."

The captain shoved a clipboard into a random dock worker's hands and jumped onto the dock. The whole crew followed. To their impressive credit, some of the other fishermen from other boats promptly boarded the Saltchuck and took over handling the unloading of the perishable catch.

Some kids and wives followed. A few of the crew tried halfheartedly to shoo them away, but one of the wives retorted, "It's because of that boy I'm not a widow. I've waited seven years to set eyes on him."

"It's okay," Tendo said awkwardly. "Just…take it easy, y'know?"

"Yeah, no autographs," someone added.

Unlike his co-pilot, Raleigh Becket would've easily passed for belonging in this place. Cold and twilight gloom – and distress - had leeched color from his face, and he'd donned the old coat Tendo remembered him wearing the day Pentecost brought him to Hong Kong. Except he didn't have the same worn, dull expression. Now his eyes were huge as he stared at the men walking closest to Tendo, at the small crowd of women and kids trailing after.

"It wasn't for nothing, kiddo. I know Yance would agree. Even though we lost someone so precious who can never be replaced, look who you saved. So much more than just ten guys."

The captain went first, addressing Raleigh in a low, gentle voice that made his wife stifle a sob. "Ranger, I'm Captain Roger Stevens. We're so grateful to get a chance to meet you." He held out his hand, and when Raleigh took it, he closed the free hand firmly. "God bless you and your brother, son. Nobody here'll ever forget what you did or the price you paid."

Tendo had no doubt Stevens had been composing that speech for a long time.

Raleigh said almost nothing. It was Mako who thanked each of them as they shook his hands and murmured their gratitude and their condolences for Yancy.

Only nine of Saltchuck's crew were still around. The tenth had died of cancer two years earlier. His wife arrived while introductions were still going on. "I promised Jerry I'd find a way to thank you some day."

"I'm sorry for your loss," Rals murmured. Tendo kept a tight hand on his shoulder as he first shook the woman's hand, then hesitantly stepped closer to hug her.
That set a lot of people off. One of the Saltchuck's men had a brother from another ship. The brother broke down sobbing as he told Raleigh, "It's because of you and your brother that I didn't lose mine that night." Raleigh squeezed his eyes shut and tears slid down his face, but he hugged both men.

Kids thanked him for their fathers' lives. Wives thanked him for their husbands'. Both Raleigh and Mako were soon wiping tears away in between handshakes and embraces, and Tendo silently sobbed into his hand.

Finally, the first mate asked, "Have you seen, uh - " He gestured to the point of golden light on the dry land near where crews and workers parked. It too seemed out of place in this gray, dirty world. Tendo knew it, of course. He'd spent a lot of time there during the restoration project.

Raleigh shook his head, and the group started walking. Nobody said anything.

When they got close enough to make out what it was, Raleigh faltered, and Mako's breath caught.

It was a stone lighthouse, or a model one, anyway. Seven feet tall, six sides made of fine granite, with a thick glass and stone lantern that burned with an actual flame. A few paces away, the Saltchuck's crew and Tendo stopped to let Raleigh approach it alone. Only Mako stayed with him. Tendo was glad for that. If she hadn't stayed, Raleigh might not have managed to stay upright. God knew Tendo had collapsed the first time he'd looked at it.

Ranger Yancy Charles Becket, November 7, 1995-February 29, 2020. Yancy's picture was below his name on one of the sides, beautifully framed and behind more thick, clean glass. Beneath the picture was a stone and metal plaque.

On these docks moored the fishing vessel Saltchuck, which on February 29, 2020 came face to face with a kaiju in the Gulf of Alaska. The ten souls on board were saved by the intervention of Jaeger Gipsy Danger, piloted by Rangers Yancy Becket and Raleigh Becket. This heroism came at the cost of Yancy Becket's life. From these docks a search and rescue mission was launched involving more than 80 vessels and more than 400 men and women. Yancy Becket's body was never found. On these docks, the crews and families of the Anchorage sea industry raised funds for this lighthouse, in memory of the man who died in defense of one vessel and ten lives. Let the light of his sacrifice burn here eternally, that all who sail from and visit these docks may know and remember.

In the lantern's glow, Tendo could see Raleigh shaking. He reached toward Yancy's picture, then pulled his hand back and clung to Mako. Tendo went closer and put an arm around him from the other side. Finally, Rals mustered himself and turned back to the fishermen and their families.

"Thank you," he whispered, no longer bothering to wipe his tears. "This is…beautiful. Thank you."

"Thank you," said one of the wives. "We all take care of it, and our boys still come check on it after every trip. We've even got a few Jaeger flies who make sure it stays clean when they're at sea."

Raleigh actually chuckled. "He'd really love that." Amid the stifled sobs, there were other weary laughs too, including from Tendo.

He's gonna be okay, Yance. It hasn't been easy, but we're all gonna be okay.

Raleigh felt completely wrung out by the time that afternoon ended, so he let Tendo and Mako persuade him to go back to the hotel and get some rest before trying to contact Jazmine. Tendo had found her address. She lived in Glennallen, about two hundred miles from Anchorage and over a hundred miles inland from the nearest coast, through mountains from any direction. It'd gone from
a population of less than five hundred to ninety thousand as people fled inland.

Her name in the phone books was Jazmine Saunders. She'd formally changed it. Tendo said hesitantly, "Maybe it was just so the press wouldn't harass her."

Raleigh doubted it.

The next morning, he told them, "I should do this alone." Tendo sighed and nodded, but Mako bristled. "Look, I just think -"

"– I'm going with you," she said curtly. "You're not torturing yourself by facing this alone. Yes, some of her grievances are legitimate and you should apologize, but you aren't to blame for your estrangement entirely, and certainly not for Yancy's death."

Yeah, Mako knew all too well what Raleigh was imagining Jazmine might have to say. He gave in, even though he could also imagine Jazmine's opinion of Raleigh showing up hiding behind his co-pilot.

"Raleigh!"

"I know," he sighed and buried his face in her neck. "Sorry."

He also chickened out and let Tendo make the phone call. After a few minutes, Tendo confirmed, "She said yes. You can go to her house."

Here goes nothing.

The guy at the car rental place nearly had a stroke when he recognized Mako and Raleigh, but got a grip on himself when he saw how tense they were. Raleigh wondered if she'd moved here before or after the inland housing boom started. Jazmine's neighborhood was fancy, modern-looking townhomes, far newer than where they'd grown up, but bigger than a lot of the inland housing that'd been built when the war really started going badly. In fact, this townhouse was about as unlike the house where the Beckets had grown up as it could be. He wondered if that was deliberate.

When their family's house had sold, Yancy'd said the price was only okay, due to the house's age and lack of some modern features. Still, their dad had paid it off years ago, so the sale price was all theirs. Yancy had sent the proceeds – all of it – to Diane Saunders in trust for Jazmine. Raleigh hadn't disagreed, even though Rangers' actual salaries weren't all that big.

I figured, what did we really need? We weren't going to college, but Jazmine might want to. We didn't pay rent or most meals, we had healthcare covered for damn near anything short of nose jobs (hell, if we'd gotten our noses broken in an engagement or training, then it would've been covered!). We both figured that might make up a little for leaving her.

Yeah, that'd been a fantasy. Raleigh'd sensed it more than once in the drift, Yancy hoping she was okay and that the money would help.

When he saw a face at the townhouse window, he froze. Memory nearly hauled him out of the present. Mako squeezed his arm and snapped him out of the rabbit.

She left the window – like she did in 2016 – and opened the door. Raleigh walked mechanically, half in the present and half in the past. We came in, and Yancy hugged her. He hugged us both, and we cried.
She didn't try to hug him now. They came into the house just far enough, then Raleigh and Jazmine stared at each other.

She looked so different. No shit, Sherlock, it's been nine years. They'd been teenagers then. Now she was an adult – hell, that's an engagement ring. Her hair was darker. She'd been the only Becket child to inherit their mom's wavy dark hair. She wore it short now.

In the end, Mako broke the silence. "I am honored to meet you, Miss Becket. Thank you for seeing us."

Jazmine blinked as if just realizing Mako was there. "You too, I guess?" Before Raleigh could be relieved, she looked at him and blurted, "I didn't think you'd ever come."

"I…I…" Smooth, Becket. "Were you okay?"

"What kind of question is that? I lost everybody, while you were off being a rock star, I lost everybody!"

Raleigh gulped. "Diane?"

"I was nineteen." Jazmine took a heaving breath and turned away. A lifetime ago, Raleigh would've assumed she was being melodramatic. Now he knew she wasn't. "I'd just…started getting on a good track. Then there was a car accident."

"I'm sorry," he murmured. It would've been 2019. Either in the aftermath of Hardship or the aftermath of Clawhook – or maybe we just were too busy with our own lives like usual and it never occurred to us to check. Even Yance, who sometimes worried, hadn't ever quite been able to bring himself to try to reach her again. "You were…okay?" She shot him a look. "I mean – you had anything you needed?" He couldn't quite make himself say money, but she knew what he meant.

"Yeah, I had the money from the house, and I was Diane's only family. Enough to pay for a metric shitload of therapy when I could only manage to work as a temp. I still have bad…times." She looked away. "I can't hold a full-time job."

"I'm sorry." He really did mean it, even if it felt hackneyed and pathetic against the enormity of everything. "He…"

Jazmine's eyes flashed. "'He' what? Don't try to tell me Yancy gave a shit!"

That lanced through the haze of shame and awkwardness, and Raleigh snapped, "You know he did! He tried calling again and again, and you never answered. He tried sending you stuff, you sent it back. You either blocked him on every social media account you ever had or you deleted them all! How long was he supposed to go on trying?"

"The last time he tried was less than six months after Mom died," she retorted. "Don't try to canonize him to me. I was a fucking basket case, but no, you were so easy to deal with, so he picked you, and you were so smug about it!"

"I wasn't…" Raleigh trailed off.

"Bullshit. You were like a limpet with him before you ever started drifting."

"And you weren't?" he exploded, like he'd vowed he'd never do. Yancy'd died five years, nine months ago, and Raleigh and Jazmine were still fighting over him.
But where he was chastened, Jazmine was unrepentant. "He chose you. Deal with whatever baggage that gives you. God knows I've had to deal with the baggage that gives me, for a lot longer than you."

"I know," he mumbled, looking down.

"You both treated it as a zero-sum game," Mako dared to say.

"Hey, don't," Raleigh said. *Let me deal with this myself.*

But Jazmine scoffed. "No, let her. Hell, you go. I can't even deal with you. I'll talk to her. I've got no problem with her, I guess, her bad taste notwithstanding."

Shit. Raleigh didn't like the idea of Mako being left alone for Jazmine to dump all her venom on…*but she has a point, I guess.* Mako gave him a nod towards the door. Yeah, Mako could handle anything. Maybe she could handle this better than Raleigh ever could.

So he relented it and went back outside.

Mako waited until Raleigh had gone, not that it mattered since their ghost drift was still enough to pick up the gist of anything that was said. "Do you hope to accomplish anything?"

Raleigh's sister stared her down. "Why should I? He came to me, remember?" She paced away, tugging at her sleeve, and Mako noticed scars on her wrist. She felt a stab of anguish through the ghost drift.

Yes, Raleigh and Yancy had suspected their sister had some kind of mental illness or disorder even before their mother died – a teacher had even approached Yancy on the subject – but the teenaged boys had had little real help or understanding of what to do. Their parents would never have acknowledged it, let alone helped get their sister into treatment.

So Mako cautiously asked, "Was there something you wanted to know from me?"

Jazmine looked at her thoughtfully. "Are you two sleeping together?"

That was abrupt, but Mako saw no reason to cringe or prevaricate. "Of course."

"Yeah, I've heard about drifting. They say it makes pilots inseparable."

"Yes, that's true, but the drift isn't the only factor. Most pilots are close and connected before they ever drift – that's the reason they're compatible. Raleigh and I…hadn't known each other long, but it worked that way."

"Some people said…" She trailed off and paced away, shoulders hunched, like Raleigh when he was anxious but resigned…

*Oh. Mako realized where this was going. Yes, some people had *said* many things over the years about Jaeger pilots, latching onto the strange clinginess of the Rangers, even those who weren't romantic couples but rather relatives. The gutter press had made a great deal about it more than once.*

Rumors of incest even rippled through the Corps from time to time, but most pilots and crews had reacted with rage at the indecency of such allegations. And yet…strange things had come through the drift, memories of thoughts and impulses that had frightened and disgusted Raleigh and Yancy
at the time. Mako had found herself not immune from strange and frightening intrusive thoughts even though her only drift partner was Raleigh.

So no, nothing physical had ever happened between Raleigh and Yancy or any other related pair they knew of, but...many pilots had wondered.

Still, Jazmine's long silence gave Mako time to brace herself and decide on her answer, to simplify entirely an issue that was far too complicated for any non-Ranger to understand, let alone Jazmine Becket with a massive (and not entirely-unjustified) grudge against her brothers.

"People said related Rangers had to be doing incest," Jazmine blurted, very fast. "Did they ever?"

Mako didn't hesitate. "Of course not. It's true that Rangers are very tactile people. It's a side effect of the drift. But no, there was never any truth to those rumors. They were started by people seeking sensationalism."

Jazmine shuddered. "I...yeah, that makes sense, I just...sometimes wondered. The two of them were best buddies all my life, and I didn't think it was possible for them to get closer. But in the news, they were. It seemed weird."

"Our world is a weird one," Mako admitted. "I never met Yancy when he was alive, but I have many of his memories now. He did love you. He never stopped even though you hurt him."

Jazmine wrapped her arms around herself. "Did he know how much he hurt me?"

"Yes. He didn't know how to be what you asked of him and also be a Ranger." Mako considered defending him more, arguing that Yancy had a right to want something for himself after all he'd had to do for his family when his parents failed, but she bit it back. Though she shared Yancy's memories, it wasn't her place to speak for him. After all, Mako herself had been deserted by her family, if with far more malice than Yancy had ever felt towards his sister even at her worst. What right did she have to argue that Jazmine should forgive?

"Did they ever tell you what was wrong with me?" Jazmine asked.

"What? What do you mean?"

Jazmine scoffed, still not looking at her. "You must know they thought I was crazy."

"You're mistaken," Mako said with complete confidence. "They didn't think that. They thought you might...be suffering from a, er, a mental condition, but nothing so crass as that." She didn't mention what Jazmine's teacher had told Yancy. It would probably only upset her.

"Borderline personality disorder, at least that's the primary diagnosis. I guess it's what happens when your parents are shitty and your brothers are perfect and you're not, and it gets worse when your mom dies, your dad runs off the minute she's in the ground, and your brothers bail. You're nobody's problem, except the one person who thinks otherwise gets killed."

"I'm sorry," said Mako. Her feelings – drawn from Raleigh and Yancy's feelings in the drift – about Diane Saunders were mixed. Diane had been unsympathetic, even cruel about Yancy's decision, and that was hard for Raleigh to accept. Yet she had stepped in without hesitating to be surrogate parent and guardian to Jazmine, defending the youngest Becket fiercely, and both boys had been grateful for that.

They were only boys. Yes, perhaps they did not handle it the best way, but they were boys. They'd lost their mother and father too. Raleigh was seventeen. Yancy was twenty, still carrying more
weight than a boy his age should ever have had to carry. His childhood had ended when he was still a child, when he understood his father's notion of taking care of his family involved providing money and a home and nothing more.

Raleigh still tried very hard not to see Yancy's memories of that night before their mother's funeral, when Yancy had tried and failed to reach a compromise with his sister.

"Jazz, I can't...until I'm done with the Jaeger Academy, I can't be a guardian." Jazmine had pulled away from him on the couch and buried her face in her arms. "What I thought we could do is ask Diane, until I either graduate or get cut. Hey, come on, either way, it's a good career, and I need to have an income especially for taking care of you. I'll be over at the Shatterdome, but they've got a good family leave policy."

Jazmine had scoffed, "You mean over at the Shatterdome taking care of Raleigh. What's the point of even pretending you give a damn about me?"

"I do, and you know it!" Yancy had exploded.

"Then prove it! You can get a job where you'll actually be here!" his sister had demanded. "Instead of kicking me out of my own house and making me stay with Diane, fucking be my brother and stay with me! You were more of a dad to me than Dad for the last decade anyway!"

He'd known that last part was true, and it had only made everything more painful. Worse, he'd suspected before even starting this conversation that his sister would try to make him choose. When it came to it, he'd already made up his mind as to what the choice would be. "If you make me choose, you're not gonna like my decision." She'd sobbed, but he'd held firm. "Please don't make me choose. You're my sister, and I love you, but I can't live only for you and nothing else." He'd grabbed her arm and pulled her back when she tried to get up and walk away. "Listen to me! And before you go blaming Raleigh, this is my decision, not his. Jazz, for the first time in my life, I feel really good at something, like I might actually really succeed. It's hard, it's stressful, it's scary, but I love it! Can't you at least try and understand that? I've spent the last decade giving up on everything I really wanted so I could pick up Mom and Dad's slack!"

"Oh, so I'm slack."

"That is not what I meant, and you know it!"

Jazmine had shoved him away and wrenched free of his hands. "Fuck you! Make up your mind, Yancy! Me or Raleigh?"

"Jesus." He'd rested his elbows on his knees, face in his hands. She really was going to force it down to that. It wasn't the Jaeger Program she hated – well, not only the Jaeger Program. Jazmine had hated anything and anyone that might make Yancy take his attention off her. She'd wanted to be his first choice, first over everything. Otherwise, she would want nothing to do with him.

But Yancy had made his mind up, and forced himself to look at her. He'd supposed it was the least he could do as he broke her heart. "I choose me, Jazzmine. I'm not giving up everything I want just to prove something to you. Not Raleigh or my career. I'm going back to the Jaeger Academy at the end of the week. Diane can be temporary guardian or permanent. It's up to you."

She'd been sobbing quietly as he said it, but he'd kept his eyes on her. She hadn't answered, just ran out the door and across the street to Diane's.

"Uh...hello? Are you okay?"
Mako blinked back to the present. The adult Jazmine Becket was hesitantly waving a hand in front of her face. Mako swayed and granted, "I apologize, that – that can happen. We forget where…" *Where we are. Who we are.* "I – because of the drift, I remember things."

Jazmine folded her arms again, but like she was chilled rather than belligerent. "You mean…you remember him?"

Mako nodded. "Every memory he had, Raleigh has. Now I have them too. We're not always aware of them…right away, but they come back." Maybe it was Yancy and Raleigh's lingering defensiveness that broke through her own self-edict not to intervene in this. "I saw…the night you and Yancy talked, before Mrs. Saunders became your guardian."

Now Jazmine was defensive. "Then you know he didn't choose me."

"I know he didn't want to choose at all, and told you so. You demanded that he choose you over everything else, abandon everything else to *prove* something. That was terribly cruel."

"I was six. teen!" Jazmine hissed.

"I know," Mako sighed. Absolutely nothing productive would come of quarreling with this woman. Jazmine Becket wasn't *Mako's* sister, however powerful the memories and emotions of being her sibling were. "Do you want Raleigh to stay a little longer?"

Jazmine stared at the floor, pondering it. That made Mako a little hopeful. But then the older woman shook her head. "No. I want him to go. I'm not ready for…anything."

Mako managed not to flinch, but felt Raleigh's tug on the ghost drift. He'd respect his sister's decision. "As you wish. But if you ever want to see him, you can contact us through the PPDC. He'll answer. Thank you for seeing us."

At first, Jazmine didn't answer, so Mako went to let herself out. But as she opened the door, she heard Jazmine say very softly, "Nice to meet you."

Raleigh wasn't all that surprised. He tried not to let himself be disappointed, *I don't know what I expected. But why should she just get over it? We left her. Yeah, she told us to, but she was only sixteen. We could've at least tried. Yancy wanted to, but I didn't. I'm probably the reason he didn't keep trying longer than six months. She probably figured that much out. I liked the fact that he chose me.**

Mako drove them back to Anchorage, occasionally reaching to rub Raleigh's neck without taking her eyes off the road. The car rental guy didn't question them when they returned the car. Raleigh knew he probably looked like death warmed over, and Mako wrapped an arm around his waist as soon as they were out of the car.

Tendo picked them up, but instead of going straight to the airport to get their tickets, Raleigh said, "Can we…go back to the docks?"

He didn't look up, but heard the emotion in Tendo's voice. "Sure."

*Saltchuck* was still there, probably getting ready for another run, but Raleigh didn't go see the crew. A few of them still came down to check on him, but they left him alone to make his way back to the lighthouse.

*I tried, Yance. I'm so sorry. She seems like she's okay, though. She's engaged. No idea to who.*
Maybe some day she'll call. Resting his forehead against the stone next to his brother's face, Raleigh kind of doubted that. He held onto the stone and pretended it was Yancy and let himself silently cry.

Then there was a faint commotion, some men hurrying down the walk. Sound echoed further over the snow and noise of the docks in the biting December cold. "Uh, miss, honey, hang on, this isn't a good time!"

Some Jaeger fly was approaching, Raleigh figured. He didn't lift his head or look around. He didn't want to be a picture –

A lance of emotion came through the ghost drift from Mako, and Raleigh jerked back. Mako was looking at where the men were talking, trying to dissuade someone from coming to the lighthouse now.

It was a woman, a scarf around her hair, carrying a bucket with cleaning supplies…where the golden light of the lighthouse met the colder light of the docks, her face was perfectly clear. It was Jazmine.

The protesting men fell silent as they saw Raleigh staring, the shock also on Jazmine's face. Mako approached them to intercede. "It's all right. She…she's all right." He felt her look at Jazmine, but Jazmine didn't take her eyes off Raleigh.

What was she thinking? Here I am, still clinging to Yance even when he's gone.

He made himself back away. So it wasn't just Jaeger flies keeping the memorial clean. She must not have ever told any of the locals her name, and nobody had recognized her. All those years, we were rock stars, and then he was gone and this was all she had left of him.

He swallowed back the sobs he'd been trying to purge from himself and turned to go, on a wide path so she wouldn't even have to be close to him unless she wanted. Then her mouth moved. He heard her cough in the cold wind, and then her voice. "W-wait. Raleigh? Wait."

It was Mako's hope that swept over him, overwhelming, while he just felt dull and empty and lost. But he stopped. Jazmine came toward him, unsteady on her feet. She slipped on an icy patch and would've fallen if Raleigh hadn't caught her. She dropped her bucket and held onto him instinctively.

He felt her body seize in a sob. She couldn't talk, just pulled at him, and he picked up the bucket for her as they returned to Yancy's lighthouse.

She didn't let go. He hesitantly put his arm around her, ignoring the murmurs of the onlookers and the gentle scolding of Saltchuck's crew and the others who'd been here last night. "Hey, come on, quit gawking. Give 'em some privacy."

"Sorry, sorry – I always thought she was a Jaeger fly, she's here at least once a week!"

"She'll have had her reasons, now let 'em be. C'mon, back to work – hey, boss, Colin and I are gonna go up to the lot fence, try and keep the reporters out if they come sniffin' around again!"

"Good deal! Barny, are you all about done? You wanna hang around the public entrance and make sure nobody gets a camera in?"

"I'm on it!"
When they were kids, Jazmie always cried aloud. Now she barely made a sound, but he could feel the sobs shaking her as she put her free hand next to Yancy's face, mirroring Raleigh's. As it was, Raleigh had to whisper, and his own voice still gave away his own tears. "He did love you. He did. He never stopped."

She sucked in her breath, but not to deny it. To ask a question. "They say...did he suffer?"

She wasn't trying to hurt him, but somehow that question cut deeper than the meanest, nastiest words she'd ever said even when she was trying to hurt him. But he had to answer her. "He...I...yeah, but it was — over fast. Seconds." His voice cracked completely and he had to cover his mouth to keep from dissolving into wracking sobs.

She released the lighthouse so she could hang onto Raleigh with both hands, like she was barely able to keep herself upright. "I hated you, y'know," she muttered roughly.

Incredibly, a weak, teary laugh escaped him. "Yeah, I know. 's okay. I guess it was kind of mutual. We tore each other apart trying to 'win' him."

"Uh-huh. Now we're each all the other has left who really remembers him. Well..." She heaved a sigh. "You are, I guess. You've got your crew."

Something softened the hard edge of the hole in his soul, like nothing and no one could — not even Mako. Amazing. "Not entirely. They knew us since 2016. But they don't remember growing up with him. Monkey in the middle."

She let out a half-laugh, half-sob. "Ice skating."

"Remember those birthday cupcakes we tried to make for you?"

"Hey, those were good."

"Sure, as 'deconstructed cupcakes' go." His throat closed completely, and he couldn't talk or laugh anymore.

Jazmine pulled away from him, but instead of leaving, she bent and started pulling brushes and cloths out of the bucket she'd brought. She showed him how to clean salt and grit off the stone and off the glass without scratching it. There wasn't much there. She must have been doing this regularly.

"When are you leaving?" she startled him by asking.

"...you want me to stay?"

He felt her shrug against his side. "I didn't, at first. I couldn't forgive you. Or...or Yancy." That made him ache, but he bit his tongue. She felt how she felt. She had a right to it. Yancy had understood that better, even though it'd hurt him. "Maybe I never can. But I don't want to forget him. Or you."

"Me either. I-I tried to forget everything. It never worked."

They stood there for a long time, no longer crying, just together in front of Yancy's picture and his light. *So here we are, Yance. It took a long time, but somehow we made it after all.*

Well, that made Raleigh nervous all over again. He felt Mako's amusement ripple through the ghost drift. "Okay."

It was actually funny. Jazmine Becket would never have expected anything about her first reunion with Raleigh to be funny. She'd spent the morning leading up to her only living brother's arrival in a frenzy, storming around the house oscillating between wanting to call Tendo Choi back and tell him she'd changed her mind and composing speeches she wanted to give to both her brothers. After all, Raleigh was sort-of Yancy too now if the stories about drifting were to be believed.

Almost as soon as Raleigh and Mako had gone, Jazmine had regretted how it had gone. She'd been hysterical when Alex had returned home, and he'd agreed almost immediately to go to Anchorage and try to clear her head.

She and Alex had been together almost five years, and he still didn't know exactly what she did on those trips to Anchorage to "clear her head." But he respected her privacy and her boundaries – even when they abruptly changed.

So he was waiting in Resolution Park after Jazmine called and said she was bringing her brother to meet him.

Alex knew Saunders wasn't Jazmine's real surname. But he had no idea it was Becket.

And judging by the look on his face, he really had had no idea that Jazmine was sister to Raleigh Becket, savior of the human race. It was funny. His eyes darted from Raleigh to Mako and back to Jazmine and his mouth kept moving without making a sound.

Jazmine took pity on him. "Raleigh, this is my fiancé, Alex."

Raleigh was a little hesitant, holding out his hand. Apparently Alex wasn't the only one who got nervous. But to Alex's credit, he'd known well that Jazmine was estranged from her brother and had never asked why. So as shocked as he was, he didn't fall straight into hero-worshiping and quickly grew cautious. "Ranger, I'm, uh, honored. And you, ma'am. Thank you both. I'm, uh...okay, I wasn't expecting this." He smiled weakly at Jazmine as she slid an arm around him. "Then again, as awesome as you are, maybe I should have."

Raleigh's smile was actually shy, and sad. "Believe me, I can't take credit for her being awesome. She got that way all on her own steam." But he was looking at Jazmine when he said it, and Jazmine knew he meant it.

Maybe we can feel like a family again. Better late than never, I guess. We've got baggage that we're gonna carry for the rest of our lives, but I guess we just keep dealing with it. That'll be okay, right, Yance? It'll be okay.

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

Coming Soon: Generation K reunites - Team Gipsy with their wayward Ranger, and Raleigh and Mako with their former fellow pilots in Chapter Twenty: When I See You Again!
Original Character Guide

Liling Gáo: Mako's best friend, her roommate from prep school in Pennsylvania. Chinese, granddaughter of Hong Kong Shatterdome's late commanding officer, General Liang. Sadly unable to qualify as a pilot due to severe asthma, but graduated Jaeger Academy and worked in K-Science.

Diane Saunders - a friend of the Raleigh and Jazmine's mother who babysat them as children, then agreed to become Jazmine's guardian after their mother died, their father left, and Yancy refused. She was disgusted by the brothers' refusal to stay with Jazmine and never forgave them. Died in 2019 in a car accident.

Roger Stevens and Colin Stuart - captain and first mate of the Saltchuck, the Alaskan fishing vessel saved by Gipsy Danger.
When I See You Again

Chapter Summary

Generation K reunites - Team Gipsy with their wayward Ranger, and Raleigh and Mako with their friends and former fellow pilots from throughout the war.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: My dear readers, my deepest apologies for yet another long dry spell. This past year really has been brutal in Real Life, but at long, long, LONG last, this five-year series is coming to an end. Here follows the last full chapter, with only the epilogue remaining. I'm leaving on a much-needed vacation in 10 days, and so in gratitude to all of you who've stuck with this series for so very long, the epilogue will be up this weekend.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Twenty: When I See You Again

PPDC Assembly Building, Kodiak Island, Alaska...
December 21, 2025...

The next marathon began at Kodiak. Herc and Chuck had arrived just before Mako and Raleigh, and only smirked a little as Priya Katwal collapsed on Raleigh and cried like a baby. Raleigh did smirk when Priya tackle-hugged Mako next and babbled, "I knew you could do it, I knew!"

Waiting a few paces away was a tiny woman Raleigh's age, whose face was vivid in Raleigh's memories and Mako's: Dr. Lea Franklin, second in command of J-Tech after Jasper Schoenfeld had left the Jaeger Program. She'd attended the Jaeger Academy with Raleigh and Yancy in Class 2016-B at age seventeen, actually a few months younger than Raleigh.

She'd had a crush on Yancy for a while, until Yancy awkwardly gave her the "I'm just not that into you" talk after they all graduated. Raleigh sometimes wondered if she'd been outright in love with him.

Mako had been surprised to see in Raleigh's memories how agonizingly shy Lea Franklin had been all those years ago. Mako had only known her as an adult – quiet and introverted, not unlike Mako herself, but Mako had been nowhere near as timid as Lea had apparently once been. Mako hadn't known until Raleigh and Yancy's memories told her that Lea too had lost her family to a kaiju. Trespasser had taken not only Lea's parents and siblings, but also her entire community in San Jose.

She had a smile for Mako and the Hansens, but it was Raleigh she'd clearly been waiting for, and she embraced him without hesitating. Raleigh choked out an apology, but Lea whispered, "Don't be stupid. You've got nothing to be sorry for. Everyone understood."

By nightfall, nearly every PPDC officer and staffer at Kodiak had made their way to the Assembly
Building to reunite with Raleigh and Mako. Raleigh and Chuck told them all about Sensei, backed up by Tendo. A lot of the stunned crew murmured apologies to Mako, for all the ill will they'd borne Sensei for so many years.

"We won't forget him," Priya said. "Even when we thought he had...made the wrong call with Raleigh, we knew he was someone who cared about the Program. We'll make sure everyone else knows what he did, and what he took on himself."

"Thank you," Mako whispered around a tight throat.

At one point, Lea asked Raleigh, "I don't know if...did you know Ranger Hansen was there... after?"


Raleigh was looking at his knees. Mako slipped past the others to put an arm around him. "I don't...Tendo told me, but I don't...remember." He closed his eyes and leaned against Mako for several moments. Then he opened his eyes and looked at Herc. "I'm still really grateful."

On their way to Seattle, the group decided to stop in Sitka. The Wall of Life that had been rising when Sensei had found Raleigh was now being pulled down, by the same men who'd been building it.

Mako found herself wishing Jake had come with them after all. "You think he knew Paul?" asked Chuck.

"I'm not sure," she admitted. "But it's possible. If we find him, we should ask."

She knew Raleigh was afraid Paul wouldn't be in Sitka. If he wasn't, it meant he could be anywhere. Mako held out hope that this man who'd known Sensei as a boy would stay where he was, in the hope of reuniting with the former Ranger he'd protected and the other Ranger who now carried Sensei's memories.

All chance of making a discreet entrance was shot to hell before they were even at the gate. The first scuffy workman to spot them completely lost his mind and started yelling and pointing; all hell promptly broke loose. Mako lost her breath at a stab of near-terror from Raleigh in the ghost drift, and he flinched back hard, practically hiding behind Herc.

At least Chuck wouldn't taunt Raleigh for it, because Chuck was doing the same. "You two all right?" Herc asked them.

"Shit...shit..." Chuck muttered, turning his face away as workers aimed their phones.

"You want...I dunno, I could go up and try to find him," Tendo offered, ever protective of his pilots.

Breathing hard, Raleigh croaked, "No, no, it's okay. Just...sorry, I wasn't prepared for that."

Some men started shouting, "Hey, Miles, come check who's payin' a visit?" Others began roaring with laughter, and not at the visitors.

At last, Raleigh's pride flared back to life with no small amount of smugness. "Then again, I wonder if I'm about to be arrested."
A rather smarmy-looking character peered through the crowd, took one look at Raleigh, and promptly bolted, to more laughter from his peers.

Raleigh grinned. Chuck eyed him, and Mako couldn't hold back a snicker. "What's this?" Herc demanded, but he was grinning, all too glad to get the younger men out of their panic.

Mako leaned toward the others. "I'll let one of those gentlemen tell you the story. I'm sure you'll approve."

That got them all calmed down, and they resumed walking toward the gate. The crowd of construction workers began cheering and shouting, clapping and pumping their fists. "BECKET! BECKET! BECKET!"

Several men spotted Mako and joined it with, "MORI! MORI! MORI!"

"HANSEN! HANSEN! HANSEN!"

Well, a few wolf-whistled and catcalled at Mako, but others roared them down before Raleigh even collected his thoughts to snap at them.

Then both Raleigh and Chuck faltered as the gates opened, and Mako finally set her own eyes on Paul Terrence. He didn't look much like Sensei, apart from his race. He was much older and clearly no blood relative…but there was something in his bearing and expression – pleased to see them but reserved, betraying little. It reminded her painfully of Sensei.

"Rangers." He smiled. "This is a surprise, but a welcome one."

Mako's heart lurched in unison with Raleigh's in the ghost drift. Paul Terrence might not look much like Sensei, but his accent was exactly the same as Sensei's. Through the ghost drift, she knew Raleigh had only known this man to speak with an American accent. He'd dropped that now.

But her lover rallied himself and approached Paul warmly. "I doubt you're that surprised." The two men met in the middle with a strong handshake. "Thank you, Paul, for everything you did."

"You're very welcome, Ranger. Hell, we're the ones who should be thanking you."

"Amen to that," said someone. "I've never been so happy to rip my own project down!" Many of the workers laughed and voiced their agreement.

"You're very welcome, Ranger. Hell, we're the ones who should be thanking you."

Paul's eyes fell on Mako, and she swallowed hard. He doesn't look anything like Sensei. Why does it feel like this?

But her lover rallied himself and approached Paul warmly. "I doubt you're that surprised."

"I'm sorry I never had the chance to meet you properly before."

"My boy, Damon…he flew with Luna and Tamsin's squadron." Paul didn't say what had happened to his son. He didn't have to. A murmur went through the watchers as tears stung Mako's eyes. She saw Herc tremble, looking not at Paul, but at Chuck. I wonder how old Paul's son was. Aunt Luna and Tamsin were twenty-five. Sensei was twenty-
eight. She didn't have to wonder what was on Herc's mind to make him suddenly go pale and shift like he wanted to touch his own son.

Paul abruptly returned to the subject of Jake. "I'm not sure your little brother'd remember me. How is he?"

"Very well," Mako said, relieved to return to a less-emotional subject. "He's preparing to take the screening tests for China's new Jaeger Academy."

Paul smiled sadly. "He'll make it on the first try, of course."

"That's his goal," said Mako.

Raleigh asked, "What'll you do now?"

Paul looked to one side at a group of men who were at a remove from the eager onlookers. There was definitely something about them – they were all younger than most of the other workers. Then Raleigh followed Paul's gaze and a surge of emotion in the ghost drift nearly made Mako gasp. Raleigh went to them without hesitating, and Paul followed.

Mako trailed after them but stayed a few paces back with Herc, Chuck, and Tendo. Raleigh definitely knew these men. Only one embraced him, but all seemed glad to see him and murmured greetings and gratitude. Paul looked at her. "Your Raleigh may have been the only Ranger, but he wasn't the only soldier here. They looked after each other; I looked after them."

"Thank you," said Herc.

"I wish I could've saved more of them."

"Saved?" asked Chuck.

Paul sighed. "These projects are bloody dangerous, worse during the last year of the war. We'd no oversight, almost no safety equipment, starving and exhausted men, never mind the burdens on soldiers' minds. I tried to keep them safe, but…we lost so many."

Chuck lowered his eyes. But he spoke with such confidence that Mako could easily hear Sensei behind his voice. "You did everything you could. Be sure of that."

"Thank you, son." The warmth in Paul's eyes said he wasn't only talking to young Chuck Hansen.

"Thank you."

The triplets arrived to meet the others in Seattle, along with Sasha and Aleksis as well as all of the Hong Kong crew from the former Team Gipsy. "Who the hell's minding the Dome?" Herc demanded, though he was mostly joking.

"All the engineers," said Jin. "The government thinks we're preparing for a major testing run. Pang So-Yi and An Yuna are on their way with Team Echo Saber and Hedy from Eden Assassin."

"Any word on Team Diablo Intercept or Puma Real?" asked Herc. Those teams wouldn't want to miss Seattle. They'd both run with Hydra multiple times and shared a Shatterdome.

"They'll be here tomorrow," Cheung confirmed.

So just over a day later, a small army of former and current Rangers as well as surviving crew gathered at a private park in Ravensdale to the southeast of Seattle where many evacuees had
moved. A large number of crew from Team Hydra Corinthian had settled there, to be near their Rangers.

Nova Hyperion's girls were especially emotional to reunite with Kennedy and Stephanie, and Kennedy and Stephanie's family was equally emotional meeting So-Yi and Yuna. If Nova hadn't managed to skewer Shelim through the head (twice), there probably would have been no saving Kennedy and Stephanie.

But the girls were elated to see Raleigh again, and cried helplessly as they hugged him. Raleigh was quieter, but Herc could see the way he was shaking. Chuck also held back, until Kennedy looked up. "Oi, get your Aussie ass over here!"

Raleigh grinned weakly over his shoulder as Chuck obeyed. The girls – well, hardly girls anymore, they were both nearly thirty! – reacted to Chuck's whispered apology for his behavior in Sydney and before much in the way Herc expected. "Don't worry about it. We knew you didn't mean it. Everyone was coming unglued."

Herc and Chuck stepped away so Team Gipsy, Team Hydra, and the rest of Class 2016-B could reunite. One of the crew who'd left the PPDC after Raleigh's discharge had settled in Seattle: Cady Spencer. The guy was closer to Tendo's age, but he threw his arms around Raleigh and sobbed, deep and hard. There was a guy with Cady who Herc didn't recognize, who sheepishly extended a hand to Tendo. "Hey, I'm Sean – Cady's husband."

"No kidding!" Tendo exclaimed. "Good to meet you, man! When did that happen?"

"July, right before the last Jaegers went to Hong Kong." Sean shrugged. "We figured if the world was gonna end, we better put a ring on it now or forever hold our peace."

Raleigh turned delighted (if wet) eyes and released Cady with one arm to shake Sean's hand. "That's fantastic. Congratulations."

"We were their groomsmaids of honor," said Kennedy proudly. She caught the way Raleigh was looking at her wheelchair and beckoned him to sit next to her. He sat on the ground so she could ruffle his hair. Herc had no doubt she'd done that before. "Don't get depressed about it, Baby Becket. I can still swim."

"Yeah?" Raleigh brightened.

Eventually, Team Gipsy, Team Hydra, and many of their crew and friends formed a huddle around Mako, Raleigh, and Chuck. Herc kept himself at a slight remove, but didn't want to get too far from his son. Chuck's emotions were surging in the ghost drift as he and Raleigh told their friends the truth of Raleigh's departure and what Pentecost had done to protect him.

Kennedy and Stephanie, along with many of the former Team Gipsy, broke down in tears again. "Dammit!" Cady hissed, trying and failing to stop crying. "Why the fuck did he have to keep everything such a secret?!"

Herc winced, stealing a glance at Mako, but to his relief, she was calm. Chuck was the one who answered. "He was trying to protect Raleigh and, well…" He shot Raleigh an awkward look, so Raleigh finished.

"He was trying to protect me and give me at least something I wanted. Guys, if you're gonna blame someone, blame me." The hisses of denial said none of Raleigh's friends were prepared to do that. "I was so fucked in the head, I couldn't…so close to the edge. I threatened him, if he didn't let me
out, I'd…you know." He was seated on the ground between Cady Spencer and Kennedy LaRue, holding her hand while draping an arm around Cady, who was losing it all over again.

Hell, the sight was killing Herc all over again, remembering Cady's grief after Knifehead, even before Raleigh had fled.

"Were you…okay? Out there?" asked Steffie.

Raleigh nodded. "There was a project supervisor. Paul. A lot of us just…went from project to project. He did too; I never noticed. It wasn't until Chuck told me after Pitfall…Marshal Pentecost had sent him, to keep an eye on me. I got sick sometimes; someone always gave me medicine even though I never bought it. Once I had pneumonia and…and…Bruce and Trevin showed up, took me to the hospital. I was too out of it to ask how they knew where to find me."

"Was he the man who gave ou his trailer, when Devi and Suze came to see you?" asked Indra Hassan.

Raleigh shuddered and nodded, no longer looking at anyone. Mako settled on the ground behind him and put her hand on his shoulder. Kennedy and Stephanie looked at each other. "They found you?"

"Yeah," said Indra. "We hired an investigator after Vic and Gunnar were killed. They were desperate to see you, just once to know you were okay."

"I'm sorry."

"Aw, Rals," Indra knelt in front of him and pulled the younger man into his arms. "It wasn't a criticism!"

"I should've - "

"Hey, no." Chuck broke in, to Herc's surprised pleasure. "If we all start on shoulda, coulda, woulda, we'll all be doing just what the brass and the vultures want. Not to mention hating ourselves for the rest of our lives." He shot both Indra and Raleigh a weary, wry smile. "Devi and Susanti would smack us on the heads for that."

Raleigh burst out laughing, if tearfully, quickly joined by the others. Herc smiled to himself as the kids – well, ranging in age from twenty-six to almost Herc's age – pulled into an even-tighter group around their Rangers, starting to share stories of the Academy and the early years, laughing and crying.

Stacker, I really hope you can see this. You did it. We did it. Not everyone made it, but the ones who did, they'll be okay.

Chuck looked over his shoulder, eyes red and wet and so much like the last moments before Pitfall – Herc took an impulsive step closer and touched his son's head. A casual ruffle of the hair was all it would seem to the onlookers – he hoped – but the ghost drift surged with the awareness that it was so much more. My son. My son.

We'll all be okay.

December 24, 2025…

Shady Point, Oklahoma…
A few pilots couldn't make the reunion in Seattle or Canada. Tanisha Davis was nearly bedridden and forbidden from traveling. So Raleigh and Mako went to Oklahoma with a few other veterans to reunite with her.

Neither Raleigh nor Mako were quite sure why they were surprised to be so emotional at the sight of Tanisha and Matthew on the front porch of a small house. Every single reunion with their fellow pilots and friends had been both wonderful and desperately painful. Raleigh had cried more in the past week than he had in the past five and a half years.

What does that say about me?

"Don't do that," Mako scolded him, squeezing his hand as they walked up to the house.

Raleigh managed to at least not collapse from the sight of how thin and frail Tanisha Davis had become. But sitting in a rocking chair with Matthew at her side and her former crew as well as some red-headed, freckled strangers who were undoubtedly relatives of Caleb, she still had that some indomitable expression. Raleigh and Mako were both shaking through the introductions to Caleb's parents, brother, and several nieces and nephews.

But Mako broke first. "Hello, Matty, I - " It shocked even Mako when her breath seized.

Matthew Davis, who Raleigh remembered only vaguely as a picture of a little boy in Tanisha's quarters, broke away from his mother and threw his arms around Mako. His voice was rough as he chanted at her, "You did it! You did it!"

Penny Jefferson, Yankee Star's old Support Chief, bodily pulled Raleigh to Tanisha's side, but he could barely talk. "Do I look that bad, kid?" Tani asked. Raleigh couldn't answer, just shook his head. "Bullshit, we both know I've got one foot in the grave. Take it easy. It ain't your fault. It's nobody's fault."

Typical Tanisha, straight and blunt to the point. Raleigh got himself under control and said roughly, "I'm sorry anyway."

"Don't be," she said. "This ain't the way I would've picked to go down, but there's nothing anyone can do about it. You know Caleb..." Now she had to pause. "...the day after we got the news the Breach was closed. I swear, he was just holding out to know."

I should've come so much sooner. I could've gone to his funeral.

Before even Mako could argue in the ghost drift, Brady Harris, Yankee's old public relations rep, spoke up. "You never would've been cleared for the funeral, we know that. Less than forty-eight hours after Pitfall? I dunno exactly what kind of condition you were in, but I bet it wasn't pretty."

Well, yeah, radiation poisoning, oxygen deprivation, decompression sickness, and a smattering of internal injuries and massive bruising, but... "Should've called," Raleigh muttered.

Tanisha put a hand on his head. "Quit it, kid. You saved the fucking world. Before that...Caleb's been gone six months, and..."

Now she couldn't finish. Raleigh met her eyes, and they both knew she didn't have to. Raleigh Becket knew. He knew all too well. Is it any different if you weren't in combat and saw him die of cancer by your side? I doubt it. I doubt it a lot.

Sunlight glinted off the ring on her left hand - wait, what?! Raleigh blinked, and Tanisha laughed. He managed not to wince at how fast she got winded doing it. "I wondered if you'd notice." She
actually took pity on him rather than let him sputter. "Caleb." Then the whole crew laughed at Raleigh's complete confusion. "Nuh, he wasn't bisexual. Turns out sexual orientation'll make an exception for a drift partner. We tied the knot after the diagnosis, after he and his family reconciled."

"Where's..." Raleigh had to swallow another lump in his throat. "Is he buried...nearby?"

Brady was the one who answered. "No, he's buried in L.A."

Raleigh blinked again, and Tanisha explained, "That's how we worked it out. My old neighborhood's not really livable and not gonna be for awhile. But LA was our home for a decade, mine all my life. So we spend the end of our lives here with his family and mine, but we spend eternity there."

"We promised," said Caleb's father. "Tanisha's family and their crew all got a share of our land. And we'll bury them together in Los Angeles." He smiled sadly. "Least we could do. If any of y'all want to move inland, you call us. Land's yours."

Raleigh was too dazed to answer, so Mako murmured, "Thank you." She still had a hand on Matthew's shoulder.

Tanisha looked from Mako to Raleigh and grinned. "Matty always said it'd work out, but I wasn't really expecting this. I'm happy for you, kids. Listen." She leaned forward. "You know...Stacker Pentecost always had reasons for what he did, even if they didn't make sense to you...in 2020."

It hit Raleigh in the guts all over again when he'd just started feeling in control of himself. The rest of Team Yankee murmured agreement as he leaned dropped his head, but Mako came back to his side, putting a hand on his shoulder. "We know. Raleigh and Chuck Hansen are setting the record straight with everyone in the Corps they can. Raleigh's...dismissal from the Corps wasn't Marshal Pentecost's wish."

Raleigh straightened himself up and met Tanisha's eyes. "It was mine. I demanded - I threatened to kill myself if he didn't fire me."

It was so damn hard, seeing the shock and grief in their eyes...even worse was the understanding in Tanisha Davis's. "Aw, kiddo," she murmured. "You were in a bad way, weren't you?" He could only nod.

Brady said quietly, "Nobody blamed you, Rals. We still don't. Remember, by then we'd lost Kaori Jessop and Jiro Shindo, with Duc and Hayase left behind. They'd trained us; we saw what it did to them."

Penny Jefferson nodded. "Some of us were amazed you survived at all." Some of the civilians looked appalled, but Raleigh smiled gratefully. He got it. Rangers and crews could talk about things like this without batting an eye - well, if not without shedding a few thousand tears.

"There's more," Raleigh said, taking a shaky breath. "He did what I asked, but only to a point. I might not've survived if he'd...I ran, I didn't want - dammit..." Why the hell was it still so hard to say out loud even after he'd said it a few dozen times?!

Mako stroked his hair and took over. "Any contact with the Corps was a reminder. But Marshal Pentecost had a friend who worked in the construction projects. He asked him to look after Raleigh, and he did. Raleigh became very ill once. Marshal Pentecost sent the Gages to help."

There were a lot of sniffles audible among Team Yankee's crew. Even Tanisha could only whisper
now. "Your Sensei was one hell of a man, Mako Mori. You know that, right?" Mako nodded, wiping her eyes. "How's his boy, Jake? I saw in the news he went to Hong Kong."

Everybody was relieved to shift the topic. "He's still there," Mako said proudly. "He's preparing to begin the Chinese Academy screening tests. We've no doubt he'll pass, but he's taking it very seriously."

"Sounds like Pentecost's kid. Biological or adopted," chuckled Brady. "What a legacy."

"Amen to that," said Tanisha. She regarded Mako. "You know he went down the way he wanted, right?" Mako sat down on the steps next to Raleigh so he could put an arm around her, but she nodded again. "He deserved that. Hell, I - well."

"What? Please, go on," said Mako, though she was having trouble wiping her eyes fast enough.

Tanisha sighed and dropped Mako and Raleigh's gazes. "I envy him," she admitted. Raleigh supposed neither he nor Mako could really argue with that. Tanisha went on, "The doctors won't clear me to travel, and these guys talked me out of trying. It probably wouldn't do Caitlin no good to see me like this. But if she's up for it, you call. I wanna tell her myself she's the reason we're not all living in bunkers preparing for the end of times. Caleb wrote her a letter before he died. Nobody got to talk to Bruce and Trevin at the end, but remember, we and them were real close. We used to talk about hypotheticals. She did the right thing for all of us, especially Bruce and Trev."


Brady handed the sealed envelope to Raleigh. "She'll get it," Raleigh promised. "If she's...I'll give it to Sergio, if he needs to find the right time. But we'll make sure she gets it."

"You going straight there from here?" Tanisha asked.

Mako answered, "No. We're making one more stop."

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December 25, 2025...
Boulder, Colorado...

Tendo and every living former Team Gipsy officer rendezvoused with their Rangers at the hotel. "Carolina knows we're coming, right?" asked Hien.

"Yeah, I had her oldest daughter tell her first before I even got on the call," Tendo said. "Didn't want her to have a heart attack."

"How's she been?" Raleigh murmured.

"Okay...only okay," Tendo admitted. "She loved Bruce and Trevin, that hit her hard, but she loved you and Yance like her own kids. Losing him..." He sighed. "Yeah. I wonder if anyone other than Raleigh felt it as deeply as Carolina did. And that's really fucking saying something."

Carolina Olivares had looked far too young to have granddaughters entering their teens back in the days of the original Team Gipsy. Only after Yancy died had she started to look her age. Now she looked even older.

Raleigh had broken down in tears a lot during reunions with the old gang (not that Tendo minded - let alone that Tendo could complain, having cried buckets himself in the last couple of weeks). But when they saw Carolina hurrying out of her house to meet them, Raleigh was calm.
Carolina started to sob the minute she saw Rals, but she ran to meet him, and Raleigh caught her and held her, kneeling to let her bury her face in his neck and cling to him with all her might. Tendo felt his own breath going uneven and heard Mako's as well.

The rest of Team Gipsy as well as others from Class 2016-B gathered in a tight knot around Rals and Carolina, first patting shoulders and heads...eventually, they all gave up and were just a massive, tearful group embrace. Tendo heard Mako and Carolina's adult children laughing weakly as they introduced themselves.

"We can't bring Yance or any of the others back," Tendo murmured. "But it's over, guys. We won. The whole world won because of them."

Now Raleigh, surprisingly, was the only one in the whole damn crowd not crying. He just held Carolina, rocking her the way she'd once done in those miserable days after Yancy died. Tendo's Spanish wasn't great, so he could only pick up bits of what Raleigh was murmuring to her. He was here, he was sorry, he loved her. Yancy loved her.

Tendo hastily wiped his eyes and put a hand on Rals' shoulder.

"Uh...'scuse me, I'm so sorry to interrupt..." Tendo looked over his shoulder and jumped: they had attracted an audience.

Crap. At his elbow was none other than Naomi Sokolov, the reporter who'd written so honestly about the Jaeger Program and Rangers time and time again, even advocating for them in her opinion pieces. "Hey, uh..." he began, trying to pull his scattered thoughts together to ask for privacy.

Naomi wasn't looking for an interview; she made a small jerk of her head towards the passers-by now aiming phones and cameras. "Just wanted to let you know."

One of Carolina's daughters said, "Let's take this inside."

"Can we all fit?" asked Christian Warner with a weak laugh.

"We'll manage."

"Thanks," Tendo said to Naomi.

She smiled, but cast an intense look at Raleigh. It didn't seem to be a reporter's avidity at a big scoop.

As young and dumb as she was, she did know them when they were our babies. I wonder if she wrote anything after Knifehead.

As he was getting to his feet, Raleigh glanced up and saw Naomi. He stiffened, and she shot him a nervous nod and walked away. Mako murmured a reassurance in Japanese, and Raleigh and Cady led Carolina into the house.

There was hardly any walking space in the living and dining room with so many PPDC personnel on the floor around the Christmas tree. Somehow, though, it seemed appropriate. They reserved the couch for Raleigh, Carolina, and one of Carolina's granddaughters. Shit, last time I saw those kids, they were skinny little preteens. Now they could be Academy cadets!

Having calmed down from the initial blast of emotions, Carolina was back in Team Mom mode like the last almost-six years hadn't happened. "I'm glad you're going to visit Caitlin and Sergio.
She shouldn't be another casualty of the war. It won't cure her." She squeezed Raleigh's hand. "No more than any grief can be cured."

Everyone nodded, knowing all too well what she meant. "They say it was...after Seattle."

"Yes. Bruce and Trevin..." Carolina trailed off and shut her eyes. Tendo belatedly recalled Carolina had been PR liaison for Team Romeo before Team Gipsy. "That was when...from January through July, I went to confession many times for the sin of despair."

Raleigh didn't approach the subject of vindicating Marshal Pentecost as directly with Carolina as he'd done with the others. Tendo wondered if he was more ashamed. Rals had had to shout at Carolina to get her to let him go.

"After I...left...Marshale Pentecost had someone following me. I didn't know until Chuck Hansen told me. His name's Paul. He was keeping an eye on me the whole time." Raleigh looked at some spot on the floor. "Pentecost's parents died when he was a kid, and...Paul Terrence raised him."

Carolina stared. She couldn't seem to find the words, but one of her daughters said hesitantly, "Sure he could have...found a place for you."

Seeing the rest of the crew cringe, Carolina rallied herself. "Yes, there were many places you could have gone and been safer than on those work crews. I was always afraid that's where you would wind up." She caught Raleigh's chin with gentle fingers and raised it to make him look at her. "What don't I know, my love?"

Raleigh couldn't hold her gaze and ducked away, trembling. She didn't force the issue, just petted his hair as Mako leaned against his knees on the floor. "He...he tried...so many different things - he tried to convince me - I wouldn't. I couldn't - I just wanted out. And I wanted - wanted...shit..." He sobbed quietly into his hand.

Mako rose, and Carolina's granddaughter made way for her, switching to Carolina's other side as Raleigh's grief brought Carolina to tears too. But where Mako might have taken over the story, Raleigh tugged on her hand and shook his head. Finally, he whispered, "I thought it was my fault. I wanted him to fire me." Carolina sobbed, but Raleigh managed to look at her. "I threatened to kill myself. He gave me what I wanted - to stop me. So I'd promise - he promised to let me get away. I didn't realize - he set it up so everyone would blame him, so nobody'd blame me."

Carolina shut her eyes and pulled Raleigh against her, but she reached past him toward Mako. "God forgive me for my judgment of him."

Mako took her hand. "There's nothing to forgive. You and everyone else believed what he wanted you to believe, to keep the pressure of Raleigh at...his most vulnerable. It..." she shot Raleigh an apologetic look, but he smiled at her. "It may have saved his life."

Carolina sighed and opened her eyes, stroking Raleigh's cheeks. She never had a son, only a son-in-law, Tendo recalled. Raleigh thought it was only Yancy she loved. He was so wrong.

"Then I owe your Sensei for more than the world."

After, Tendo and some of the crew wandered out of the house to give Rals and Carolina some space. Before long, he spotted Naomi Sokolov again in a park with a dog. "Waiting for us?"

"No," she said.
"Then what are you doing here?" asked Cady suspiciously.

"I live here!"

"...oh. Sorry."

They all had to smirk. "Almost ten years, and we're still protecting our pilots," Tendo admitted.

"I'm glad," said Naomi. "They were way too unprotected for a long time. Don't worry, I'm not recording you. I'm just glad you're all together again, or at least the ones..." She looked down. 

*At least the ones who're still alive,* Tendo mentally finished it.

"I've been really grateful, you know, for the things you've been writing. Especially before Operation Pitfall. We didn't have many advocates."

She looked only a little smug. "My editor thought I was nuts, but I had enough cred by then to convince him to let me run with it. I wish the responses had been a little better, but at least it got attention."

"It meant something to us," Tendo told her. She smiled. "And God knows, we needed to know some people got it, leading up to Pitfall."

Some of the crew murmured nervously, and Tendo looked over his shoulder to see Mako and Raleigh exiting the house. Carolina wasn't with them. Tendo broke away from Naomi to meet them. "What's going on?"

Raleigh said, "Carolina's thinking about going back to Hong Kong with us. I'm...not sure if she should. Team Gipsy doesn't really exist anymore; Mako and I'll be trainers and administrators. I just...it was already so hard on her, and her kids and grandkids don't want her to leave again."

"She talking to them now?" guessed Cady. Raleigh nodded. "Okay. It is her decision, guys, when all's said and done."

"Yeah, I know." Raleigh looked past Tendo and Cady at Naomi.

"You don't have to talk to her if you don't want to," said Cady.

Raleigh looked thoughtful. "I think I kind of do, though."

They both looked a little shy when they shook hands and Raleigh introduced Naomi to Mako. But then they all laughed sheepishly. *Yeah, the shit we got up to when we were kids. Why should our Rangers be any different? Why should any kids be any different?* Naomi Sokolov couldn't have been much older than Raleigh; Tendo vaguely remembered she'd turned eighteen just a few months before Rals did (at least preventing Yance from facing the further complication of having slept with an underage girl! Thank God Yance had been scrupulous on that front if no other!)

*Oh, Yance. If you could see them both now.*

Awkwardness had given way to a more earnest conversation, and the reporter and Rangers were soon sitting at a picnic table as Raleigh and Mako scratched Naomi's dog. "Are they seriously giving an interview?" Christian Warner muttered.

"Dunno. I doubt it, not without her having a notebook or dictaphone handy..." Tendo mused, but the group soon had their phones out. "Maybe they're thinking about one, though. The public's being
bitchy because Rals and Mako are the only team who haven't given one. They could do a lot worse than her."

"True."

A few minutes later, the group said an easy farewell, and Rals and Mako rejoined the crew while Naomi left with her pooch, who looked like he wanted to stay with the Rangers for more scritches. "After Whistler," Raleigh said carefully. "We're coming back. People want to hear from us, and...I don't really blame 'em. At least she's honest."

Tendo and the others all put hands on the pilots' shoulders. "You know we'll support you, whatever you decide."

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

Coming Soon: The surviving Rangers travel to Whistler to reunite with the pair who started it all - Caitlin Lightcap and Sergio D'onofrio, to try to put Caitlin on the same road to recovery, and Raleigh, Mako, and Jazmine decide it's time to break their silence and tell the story of Generation K in the Epilogue: War and Remembrance!

PLEASE don't forget to review!

Original Character Guide

Dr. Priya Katwal - Senior Engineer of the Jaeger Program, early 60s, Indian ancestry. Once designed space station living quarters for NASA, moved on to conn-pod life support systems. She moved up to the head of J-Tech after Jasper Schoenfeld admitted defeat in the final months of the war.

Dr. Lea Franklin - Second in command of J-Tech, six months younger than Raleigh, once the youngest cadet in Class 2016-B. She was traveling abroad with a school group at age 13 when Trespasser struck San Jose and wiped out her entire family and community, leaving her with PTSD and intense social anxiety for years. She was also the unwitting trigger for Herc's discovery of Scott's crimes - Scott had slimed her just before Lucky Seven launched against Meathead in Manila, and Herc traveled from that memory to the horrific discovery that Scott had raped and murdered two young girls.

Paul Terrence: A neighbor of Stacker's parents who took Stacker and his sister Luna in after their parents' deaths. Black, British, late 50s at the time of the movie, he drifted after his son Damon was killed by Trespasser along with Luna. At Stacker's request, he secretly kept watch over Raleigh throughout his time in construction after Yancy's death. Raleigh only learned of his relationship with Stacker from Chuck Hansen's drift memories.

Cady Spencer: former Gipsy Danger LOCCENT Technician, Filipino-American, age 35 from Portland, Oregon. Devastated by Yancy's death, he resigned from the PPDC in despair after Raleigh was "fired", moved to his hometown of Seattle and eventually married a man named Sean.
Devi and Susanti Hassan: late Rangers of Vulcan Specter, Australia's Mark-3, first generation daughters of Indonesian Muslim immigrants, they were not who Marshal Ketteridge had in mind, and he never got past his sexism or bigotry. Graduated Jaeger Academy Class 2016-B along with the Becketts, they were very close until Yancy's death, but also very close to Chuck and Herc during his childhood and after he became a pilot. Killed in action in September 2024 with a record unmatched until Striker destroyed Mutavore.

Indra Hassan: Devi and Susanti's elder cousin, Vulcan Specter's LOCCENT chief until their deaths in 2024, when he switched to being Striker Eureka's. Very close to Chuck and Herc throughout their career. Moved to inland Australia with his and his cousins' family before Operation Pitfall when Sydney Shatterdome closed.

Tanisha Davis/Caleb Mitchell: Rangers of Yankee Star, America's Mark-2 Jaeger. Former US Marines in their 30s. Tanisha is African-American from Los Angeles, Caleb is from rural Oklahoma. He was estranged from his family for years due to his homosexuality, but he still married Tanisha, consumed by their drift bond. Caleb developed cancer in 2024 and died the day after victory was declared from Operation Pitfall, but not before reconciling with his family who welcomed Tanisha, her family, and Yankee Star's former crew to own portions of their land. Tanisha is also suffering from cancer and in hospice care.

Matthew Davis: son of Ranger Tanisha Davis. Mako's age, he lived with Tanisha's mother in Los Angeles until she reluctantly relocated him to the higher-security Nittany Valley Prep to protect him from media harassment, where he met (and dated) Mako. The two went on different paths after high school, but remained close friends.

Penelope (Penny) Jefferson: Yankee Star's former support chief, African-American from Los Angeles, formerly Tanisha and Caleb's superior officer, 40s. Moved to Oklahoma with her pilots at the invitation of Caleb's parents.

Brady Harris: Former Public Relations Representative for Yankee Star, America's Mark-2 Jaeger. African-American, early 40s, he lost his cousin's daughter, Nicola Harris, when Gipsy Danger's chopper Whiskey Gamma was destroyed. Nicola Harris and Raleigh Becket had been in a casual relationship at the time, leaving Raleigh and Brady with an enduring friendship.

Carolina Olivares: Gipsy Danger's former Public Relations Representative who resigned in protest after Stacker Pentecost "fired" Raleigh in the aftermath of Knifehead. 70s, Mexican-American from San Francisco, widow who came out of retirement to join PPDC after K-Day.
Epilogue: War and Remembrance

Chapter Summary

The surviving Rangers reunite with the pair who started it all - Caitlin Lightcap and Sergio D'onofrio, and decide it's time to break their silence and tell the whole story of the Jaeger Program and Generation K.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: So here it is, dear readers, the end of 5 years, 4 months (ironically) of labor and love in the Pacific Rim universe. In another strange irony, Herman Wouk, author of many sprawling, seminal works about World War II including the two novels who influenced me so much, The Winds of War and War and Remembrance, for which this epilogue is named. Thank you all so many times over for your feedback, your patience, and your support through some very difficult times. Please let me know your thoughts on how the whole series played out!

Epilogue: War and Remembrance

December 26, 2025…
Whistler, Canada…

It wasn't even 5:00 pm, but it was already getting dark when 19 Jaeger pilots arrived at a remote private ski lodge in Whistler, Canada: Raleigh Becket and Mako Mori, Herc and Chuck Hansen, Kennedy LaRue and Stephanie Lanphier, Cheung and Jin Wei, Carlos and Jordana Chen of Puma Real, Ben Gonzalez and Felipe Jara of Diablo Intercept version 1, Sasha and Aleksis Kaidanovsky, Hedy Keres of Eden Assassin, Pang So-Yi and An Yuna of Nova Hyperion, and Ami and Rena Tanaka of Echo Saber. Only one living pilot hadn't made it: Tanisha Davis of Yankee Star, but Raleigh carried a letter from her and a phone number. (Scott Hansen, while reportedly alive, did not count in anyone's mind.)

All gathered to reunite with the two pilots who began it all: United States Air Force Captain Sergio D'onofrio, and Dr. Caitlin Lightcap.

Caitlin and Sergio knew they were coming; Sergio had prepared her as much as he could.

Caitlin didn't break, but she was hesitant, too consumed with the awareness that of the sixty-seven men and women who had ever piloted a Jaeger in combat, forty-eight hadn't lived to see this day.

Sergio knew all the surviving pilots were aware of that. It was the Mark-1 survivors, Herc, Sasha, and Alexis, who addressed it directly. Sasha put her hands on Caitlin's face and said firmly, "Were it not for you, none of us would live today."

Herc nodded. "We'd still have fought in the war. Pilots, volunteers, first responders, any way we could. We'd have died. Billions would've died, because humanity would've lost."
The Weis, her surviving golden boys, approached next. "Hu would agree. He would beg you from the grave not to blame yourself. We knew the risks we took."

Caitlin sobbed and pulled both men into her arms. She'd aged so much; Sergio had seen the hastily-concealed shock on some of the pilots' faces. She was only forty-one, but she looked some ten years older. After the twins' deaths nearly a year ago, her hair had rapidly grayed. Now it was nearly white, and grief and horror had lined her face. She looked frail.

So did some of her pilots, of course, there was no getting around that. Carlos and Jordana were both wheelchair-bound, holding their own against cancer (for now, anyway), but the ravages of illness and chemotherapy showed. Felipe Jara and Kennedy LaRue were both paralyzed from the waist down from combat injuries to the spine. Jin Wei might walk again some day, as might Ami Tanaka.

It was Aleksis who dared to say it. "Bruce and Trevin would be grateful, for the choice you made in January. You made the decision that none of us had the strength to make. Even Illisapie and Zeke agreed."

Caitlin shuddered, and the huge man enveloped her in his arms. "Did they really?"

"They spoke of it to many of us. They never blamed you. None of us did. You knew Bruce and Trevin as well as any of us." He nodded to Sergio. "Seeing so many pilots lose their partners," Caitlin sobbed again and he squeezed her, "they never wanted to end that way. They would have chosen as you did. We all know that. In the end, Trevin couldn't bear it."

But Caitlin abruptly looked at Raleigh, then winced as he went pale. "Sorry," she whispered. "'s okay," the younger man said softly. He trembled as he came closer. "I...no one could hear what - what Yancy told me, in the last second. He didn't say it aloud, he was..." His breath seized, and it was a moment before he could speak. Caitlin released Aleksis, and to Sergio's intense relief, she was steady as she went to Raleigh, putting a hand on his shoulder. Raleigh finished, "He wanted me to live, to go on no matter what happened. That's...probably the only reason I didn't..." He couldn't finish, and Caitlin wrapped her arms around his neck, then freed one arm to reach for Mako, who joined them.

"I know the truth, about you and Stacker afterward, you know," she told him, surprisingly calm.

"We all do now," Kennedy LaRue confirmed. "Raleigh and Chuck told us everything. They've cleared his name."

"Good," Caitlin sighed. "Stacker deserves that."

"I lied to him," Raleigh admitted, eyes on the ground. "I threatened to kill myself, but...I wouldn't have. Yancy told me not to."

"Oh, kiddo," Caitlin said, cupping his face. "Nobody will ever blame you for anything you said or did, not all of us knowing what you were going through. We all took it for granted that...that wasn't possible. Even when we found out we were wrong..."

"None of us would've chosen it," Sergio confirmed, and every one of the others nodded in unison - many tighten their grips on their co-pilots. Sergio and Aleksis had their arms around Hedy Keres now, but even Hedy nodded, tears sliding down her face.

"I know," Raleigh murmured. But he forced a shaky smile and squeezed Caitlin's shoulders. "But it's true. Yancy would never have blamed you. Even if it'd...been me instead of him. He never
would have. You gave us all a fighting chance. You gave the world a fighting chance. You've got nothing to be ashamed of, Caitlin."

"Amen," many of them murmured.

Caitlin cried and cried as she found herself at the center of a massive group embrace, but for the first time in nearly a year, she was smiling too.

"Come now," Sasha said. "Bruce and Trevin would tell you to be happy again, Caitlin. Every one of them who is not here would want that. You were the earth's salvation."

"Vic and Gunnar too," said Hedy. She laughed weakly. "If they were here, they would dance for you."

They all laughed. "So would Maria and Miguel," Sasha agreed. She pointed at Herc and Chuck. "You must make Typhoon dance again. And we must all make sure the tradition is kept."

Raleigh and Mako nodded, all seriousness. "I can feel Pentecost scowling from the other side," someone said. A few hissed, but Mako giggled.

"He softened to that eventually. Vic and Gunnar danced for me in the Academy mess hall, only six months after Sensei adopted me. I didn't realize they were Coyote Tango's new pilots until weeks later. They only said they were Rangers."

"Yeah, he was mostly putting it on after that to give Tamsin a hard time," Chuck confirmed. Herc gave his son a funny look then that Chuck answered with a quirky half-smile. What secret they were sharing in the ghost drift, Sergio couldn't guess. *I wonder what it was like for our ferocious little bulldog, drifting with Stacker? Only a co-pilot would ever know unless Chuck chose to say. Sergio and Cait would never have expected to find Chuck Hansen mellowed as a result, but he did seem calmer. Maybe peace just agreed with him.*

They spent that night crowded onto beds and floors and couches in guestrooms and living rooms and sun rooms, drinking, telling stories, dissolving into crying jags followed by animated talk of the future. That night was the first night in over a year that Caitlin Lightcap had let herself think of the future. She and Sergio still had a strong enough ghost drift for Sergio to know that.

Duc Jessop wasn't buried in Whistler; his ashes had gone back to Japan to mingle with Kaori's. But in the morning, Sergio and Cait showed the pilots where Andrés Alcazar and Daniel Moreno of Matador Fury were buried, safe and free where they'd died, out of the clutches of an ungrateful, grasping government. "We should let that truth get out now," Caitlin remarked. "They had no family. There's no one at risk if we expose what we had to do to protect them."

Raleigh straightened after he and Mako laid flowers on the grave. "Mako and I are...we're giving our first interview in a few days. I...I know I wasn't there then, but..." he hesitated, but several of the others scoffed and nodded to him. "We could tell it now. Andrés and Daniel's story."

"Who is the reporter?" asked Yuna.

"Naomi Sokolov."

"I like her," Cait said immediately. "She understands us, even if she didn't when she was a kid." Raleigh blushed, and she grinned. "She interviewed me once, a few years back. She reminds me of you, even."

Raleigh blinked. "Really?"
"She understands the value of preserving history. It made me think of you and your World War II map."

Looking thoughtful, Raleigh murmured, "I was thinking...it'd just be about Mako and me, but maybe...maybe not interviews, but we should all tell our stories." Everyone nodded.

"You trust this reporter with all this?" asked Sasha. Raleigh, Mako, and Caitlin nodded along with several others.

"She kept her word to Duc about keeping the things he said off the record until after his death. And she has defended us," said Cheung Wei. "We have written much about Hu, and we wrote even when he was alive, knowing the risks in this line of work. It was a way of preserving our memories, of our lives and our fellow pilots in Hong Kong. We wrote about Jing and Min Li, Xichi and Lo Hin, Chane and Maina Siddha, Yan-Jie and Fang, every pilot we ever rode with. Much of it is on social media, but it should be compiled in one place." He smiled and put his sole arm around Caitlin as he told Raleigh and Mako, "We will give it to you to take to her. Maybe it should become a book."

"She's interested in writing a book, if there's enough material," said Mako. "Do any of you know Tanisha's son Matthew? He also wants to write one. They may collaborate."

Chuck and Herc exchanged a long look, then Herc nodded. "We're in. We didn't exactly document like you kids, but we'll sit for interviews, if they want us."

Caitlin was quiet through the murmurs of agreement of the other pilots, but slowly said, "You're right. We should tell our story. Everyone's stories. How soon do you see her again?"

"Next week, but compiling all this will take months or years," said Mako. "There's no need to rush."

Raleigh nodded. "We're visiting my sister first."

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December 31, 2025...
Boulder, Colorado...

"This isn't inconvenient on New Year's Eve, is it?" Mako asked when they joined Naomi at her apartment.

"I'd have done this on Christmas Day if you wanted," Naomi said. "Matthew Davis and I've signed a contract to write a full biography and history of the Jaeger Program. He's working remotely from Oklahoma." Her traitorous yellow lab promptly parked himself in front of the two Rangers and Raleigh's younger sister with her fiancé. "I'm really glad to meet you." Naomi told Jazmine Becket. The younger woman kept one hand clutching her fiancé's and the other petting the dog. "Thanks, I...I dunno if anything I can tell you makes me look very good."

Naomi smiled ruefully. "If it makes you feel any better, I'll probably have to confess to propositioning one of your brothers only to go out with the other." Jazmine gaped, then they all started to laugh. "If there's one thing I've learned from journalism school and in practice, it's that there aren't any saints in the real world." She looked at Raleigh and Mako. "Not even among the heroes."

"That's a fact," Raleigh agreed, though he too had fixated on the dog. "Though as far as Jazmine was concerned, I was never a hero."
Jazmine quietly scoffed. "Don't be stupid. I knew different after Yamarashi. I just never admitted it. Until a few weeks ago, anyway."

He and his sister didn't look physically very alike, Naomi mused. But their mannerisms made up for it. It was a little different from the acquired shared mannerisms between the pilots. Interesting to see both right before her eyes in the same room.

"So?"

Raleigh met her eyes. "So...uh...where do we begin?"

Naomi got that question a lot, and she knew the answer: "At the beginning."

Mako and Raleigh exchanged a long look, then Mako raised her eyebrows at him, giving a small nod to whatever beginning he was considering. Taking a deep breath, Raleigh began:

"When I was a kid, whenever I'd feel small or lonely, I'd look up at the stars. Wondered if there was life up there." His sister smiled and put her arm around him.

"*Turns out I was looking in the wrong direction.*"

~Fin~

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