The Castle and the Enclave

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Summary

Fusion-type crossover with *Pacific Rim*, near-future setting. When Agatha turns eighteen, she joins the Jaeger program. Her family has been involved with it from the beginning, but she soon learns that's more complicated than she thought.
'You're too young!' Adam can't speak, not since the shrapnel went through his larynx in their last fight, but he backs up Judy with a look.

'I'm eighteen!' Agatha fires back. 'It's old enough. It's allowed.'

Judy’s lips thin before she speaks again and there's a flash of pain in her eyes. 'Eighteen tomorrow. Agatha, you don't have to do this. You have your whole life.'

'So do a lot of people,' Agatha says hotly. 'Except when they don't. It's getting worse. They need help!' She shuts her eyes for a second, breathing. She loves her parents. Has loved them since before her uncle made them her guardians and vanished. She knows what they're like. She knows how much both the battle and staying out of it have cost them. They probably would have gone back as things started deteriorating, if it hadn't been for her. 'I know it's not wrong to have a normal life. I know we need people who do. And you can't go now, not with Maxinia.' A complete surprise, after everything they'd been through and at Judy’s age, but a strong healthy baby. 'But I can.'

When she opens her eyes there are tears in Judy’s. 'You're very much your father's child,' her mother says, and she doesn't mean Adam. 'Say hello to Klaus for us.'

There's no way any of them are sleeping after that. She's packed and gone by morning.

The Castle is the oldest of the Jaeger bases, named more for its shape than its fortifications. From the air it looks like a flattened chess rook in glass and steel. It’s hard to say how deliberate that was, but Agatha can’t see what purpose the crenelations around the top really serve. The helicopter lands on the flat roof, ruffling the coat of the man waiting for her — less patiently than immovably, his coat is moving more than he is.

When the propellers stop Agatha thanks the pilot and climbs out, clutching her suitcase nervously in front of her with both hands and feeling very young. She’s heard of Klaus Wulfenbach, of course. Commander of this Jaeger base, one of the few still remaining as resources become more consolidated in an attempt to preserve them. He’s wearing a decal of the Castle on his coat, wings rising behind it, an unexpectedly informal note and one reminiscent of the affection Jaeger pilots often have for their machines. He hasn’t been a Jaeger pilot since her father died and her uncle vanished, but she’s heard stories about that, too.

'Hello,' she says, nervously, turning her head so the wind can blow a strand of hair from her mouth. 'I'm Agatha Heterodyne.'

'Klaus Wulfenbach.' He holds out a hand; Agatha detaches one from her suitcase. 'Pilot or technician?'

'Do I have to pick?' It sounds kind of arrogant as soon as she's said it, and she rushes on as she shakes his hand, 'I mean, pilot, but I'm also quite good at the technical side...I read up on the new laser gun designs and I think I can improve efficiency by ten percent, although I won't know until I see them up close. And you may have thought of my idea already... ' She trails off sheepishly.

He's smiling faintly by this point. 'No, you do not have to pick, and despite intensive effort, I cannot actually think of everything on my own. So you'd better come in and have a look at them.'

Agatha grins at him and tries not to bounce on her toes at the thought of seeing a real Jaeger
workshop after all the time she's spent reading about them and looking at virtual ones online.

The workshop is huge, although people are sparser than the size would seem to allow. This is because some of it is taken up with Jaegers, or Jaeger parts. Commander Wulfenbach takes her to a scaffolding along one edge. It holds a slender gun, although it's only slender in proportion to itself, with neat joints to allow it to fold away. It's beautiful. The two people working on it look completely absorbed.

'DuMedd, O'Hara,' Commander Wulfenbach says. 'This is Agatha Heterodyne.'

They both look up. DuMedd puts down his tools and flings his arms around Agatha, much to her confusion. 'Cousin!'

'I've never met any of my cousins,' Agatha says. No one much likes to talk to her about either her father's cousins or her mother, so that's two sides of the family she knows through rumour. DuMedd, though, not Heteroydne. 'On my mother's side?'

'Yeah, my mother was Serpentina. She and Dad went down together about ten years back, so I pretty much grew up here.' He sounds more practical about it than in mourning, and immediately follows with, 'So are you looking to pilot or help us build these babies?'

'Possibly both,' Commander Wulfenbach says for her. 'She'll be tested for Drift compatibility shortly, but her technical ability is proven.' Agatha looks up at him, a bit startled, and he raises his eyebrows. 'I knew your birth parents, your uncle, and your adoptive parents. I rather expected you to turn up.'

'Oh,' says Agatha. She turns back to DuMedd. 'I had an idea to improve the efficiency on those laser guns, but I needed to see one up close. Do you mind if I take a look?'

'Have at it,' says O'Hara, handing her a pair of protective goggles. 'We're getting tougher Kaiju lately. If you can pack more punch into the lasers...' She glances up as Commander Wulfenbach walks off. 'Heh. Well, he'll want to see it afterward. I think it's the only fun he still has.'

It's a lot of fun for Agatha, whether or not it will be fun for Commander Wulfenbach later. She's spent so long looking at Jaegers online, working through schematics, and now she can finally work on something that's going to be a part of one for real. O'Hara and DuMedd are more used to Jaegers than she is, but just as enthralled by the work, and the dinner bell takes her by surprise. She's covered in grease, her suitcase is pushed under a bench, and she has no idea where anything is.

'Grab a change of clothes from that and I'll take you to wash up in the ladies,' O'Hara says practically. 'We can catch up with Theo in the mess.'

Agatha ends up taking a very fast shower with abrasive orange soap, which is almost too refreshing but does get rid of the grease. O'Hara indicates the barracks, gym, and other features of the base in various directions as they walk, leaving Agatha at least reasonably well oriented by the time they reach the mess and get in line.

'It's good food and generous portions, even if it's obviously been cooked with less skill than Judy employs. O'Hara elbows her in a friendly way. 'Impressed? They still want their defenders running on all cylinders.'

Adam and Judy actually get unusually good rations. They were in the Jaeger program near its beginning and they know people. They give most of it away, or make token trades, or invite people over. Agatha only smiles and agrees.

'Hey, guys.' The newcomer putting his food down on the table next to them is tall and broad, skin a
light golden brown, with fluffy brown hair that reminds her of someone she can't place. He smiles at her. 'Gilgamesh Wulfenbach,' he says, holding out his hand. Oh. Commander Wulfenbach's hair does do that. 'And you're Agatha Heterodyne?'

'Yes,' she says. 'It's nice to meet you.' His hand is warm and something about his voice makes her stomach flutter. 'I guess I have a lot of people to meet,' she adds. 'I got a little caught up, this afternoon.'

'She’s redesigned the arm laser,' says O’Hara. 'It’s now —'

A klaxon interrupts them and Agatha looks around, seeing people stand up and wondering whether it’s an evacuation.

'Kaiju sighted,' says Gilgamesh, in her ear. 'We stay here.'

'We don’t,' says DuMedd, pushing his tray back and standing up. 'See you, Agatha.'

He and O’Hara join the groups leaving the mess — techs and pilots. Agatha looks at Gil. 'You’re not a pilot?'

He scowls, twisting his fork between his fingers. 'Not yet. I’m trained, but I don’t have a partner.'

Around them displays light up on the walls, screens Agatha had thought were paintings until their neutral display turned into views of the ocean shot from helicopters, or radar displays of a red dot moving towards the coast. A fin like a knife breaks the surface of the water — it could almost be a shark until Agatha gets a sense of the scale. Code name: Jaws scrolls across the bottom of the screen. On the radar view there are green dots, now, starting to converge. Two blue ones suddenly come in from the side, and Gilgamesh points Agatha to the right screen to see what they signify. Two Jaegers, one with five arms in a circle around its shoulders and digitigrade legs, one with four legs, standing like a centaur, both painted with garish colours and strung around with Kaiju bones.

'The Enclave’s out,' says a voice behind Agatha, female and grave.

'Isn’t that good, if they’re helping?' says Agatha, although she’s heard enough rumours to wonder.

The speaker, when she moves forward into Agatha’s view, is a girl with skin a few shades darker than Gilgamesh’s and hair dyed bright green in a braid. 'They’re pirates,' she says. 'They don’t care about the civilians, they’re after the Kaiju corpses to sell. Boats caught out there when they arrive usually aren’t seen again. It might be the Kaiju.'

'This is my sister, Zeetha,' says Gilgamesh. 'She’s training to be a pilot. Zeetha, this is Agatha Heterodyne.'

'Ah.' Zeetha looks at her appraisingly. 'I guess you know the Enclave, then.'

'Not those Heterodynes,' says Gilgamesh. 'Bill's daughter.'

'I haven't been to the Enclave,' Agatha says. 'Although they do keep sending Christmas cards.'

The screens start showing the Castle Jaegers as their helicopter teams set them down. Two of them to hold back, protect the shore and provide support, one to go forward and take on the Kaiju. Agatha's heart leaps when she sees the name of the one going into the fight scroll across the screen. Demon Punch. A heavy machine, outsize hands closed into huge fists, but with the power to be surprisingly fast when it needs to be, Agatha knows. She's heard a lot of stories. 'That was my parents',' she says.
'Huh?' says Gilgamesh. 'No, Bill's Jaeger was Hero Duo, piloted with his brother, or sometimes with my father.'

'I know that,' Agatha says patiently. 'The people who raised me. My parents, Adam and Judy.'

'...Oh.'

Zeetha laughs, though it's a tense sound; she's holding herself like she'd charge into the screen if she could, Jaeger or no Jaeger. 'I thought you knew all about her, Gil.'

He flushes. 'Not everything.'

'I'm really not sure why he would,' Agatha says, eyes going back to the screen.

In her peripheral vision she sees Gilgamesh unclench a fist (he wants to be out there too) and rub the back of his neck. 'Father doesn't tell a lot of stories from the old days,' he says, 'unless it's part of a history lesson. When he mentioned you were an old friend's daughter I kind of... looked you up.'

Agatha tries to decide whether this makes her more nervous or not. 'Oh. Well—'

The shark Kaiju opens an impossibly large mouth above the water and belches ball lightning at the Enclave centaur. Agatha breaks off to squeak faintly in horror and tries to figure out how it just did that. The centaur staggers in the water, sparks racing across it, and Jaws goes in for the kill. So does Demon Punch, one massive hand uncurling to clamp on the fin, and the remaining fist slams down on what passes for a forehead. Flesh tears and toxic blood pours into the water.

The centaur steadies itself, plants all four feet, and opens fire.

The Kaiju is basically finished at that point, but after the lightning, nobody relaxes until it stops thrashing. Agatha watches critically — there are luckily no civilians on the water this time, but she does think the Enclave Jaegers could stand to be slightly more careful about their aim. The centaur takes hold of the biggest piece of the corpse when it's done, and the five-armed one spreads out something that looks like a fishnet and actually appears to be sopping the blood up out of the water.

Agatha remembers to breathe and leans back slightly. Even if the Enclave are pirates, she doesn’t think there’s going to be an actual fight over Kaiju disposal. After a second she remembers they were having a conversation and says, 'I'll try to live up to expectations.'

'Oh,' Gilgamesh says dismissively, eyes still on the screen, 'I'm sure that won't be hard.'

Agatha sits up again. 'Excuse me?!

He splutters. 'I only meant -- they can’t be that high--! You--'

'Well, I'm expecting great things of you,' says Zeetha, sounding like she might be trying not to laugh. 'What level are you starting at?'

'I need more practise sparring,' Agatha admits. 'I can do some, but I'm better with guns.'

'Want to come and get that practise with me?' Zeetha asks. 'The pilots are going to be too tired to want the gym tonight.' She looks restless, herself, like she needs to burn off the energy from the fight she couldn't be part of.

Agatha glances at the corded muscle on Zeetha's bare arms, and reminds herself the Kaiju don't go easy on anybody. 'Sure.'
The gym is large and well equipped, but all Zeetha's interested in are mats and some staffs rather heavier than Agatha was hoping for. She tosses one to Agatha who catches and hefts it, before getting her legs suddenly swept out from under her.

'Hey!' she says, once she's got her breath back.

Zeetha spins the stick in one hand, grinning broadly. 'Pay more attention.'

Agatha rolls into a crouch and stands up with her eyes warily on the staff. 'Tell me we're starting!'

'We're starting,' says Zeetha, and the staff sweeps in again before she's finished.

Agatha lands on the floor again and this time doesn't try arguing. She lashes out with a growl before she even bothers to get back on her feet, and of course Zeetha skips back, still grinning, and barely gives her time to get up again before rapping her on both shoulders.

Zeetha keeps up a running, challenging, infuriating commentary -- you're supposed to dodge, you're not supposed to let anger drive your attacks, why don't you hit me? -- and Agatha gets back up again and again, counting it as progress every time the sticks clatter together instead of Zeetha's landing on her. But it's good to be moving and she needs to be able to do this and between the teasing she realizes Zeetha's actually teaching her a lot.

And somewhere along the way it's more like they're dancing, even if there's no form of dancing that includes the jarring shock of wood on wood, and she thinks Zeetha's just letting her try out some of the moves she's shown her until she realizes she isn't.

The magic breaks when they clash one last time and Agatha's arms just buckle. Zeetha checks her swing in alarm before the end of the staff can collide with Agatha's skull, spins it down one-handed to plant on the floor and catches Agatha with her freed hand. 'You okay?'

Agatha waves a bit floppily. 'You're in a little better shape than I am.'

Zeetha tows her over to a bench and hands her a water bottle, then takes it back when Agatha can't get enough of a grip to unscrew the cap and opens it for her. 'Were we... she begins, as Agatha gulps water. Agatha lowers the bottle, an incredulous smile spreading across her face. 'Yeah,' she says. 'I think we were.'
Training is grueling. Agatha isn't bad at hand-to-hand compared to the general run of the population, but most of the general population doesn't personally want to pilot a giant robot into combat. She thought she was in shape; Zeetha demonstrates otherwise. And because you can't spend hours every day learning strikes and falls and all the rest without them, she has an ever-changing array of fresh and healing bruises. It's a good thing the pilots do get fed well; Agatha is usually ravenous.

She's never been happier. She's finally doing something about the threat that has loomed over the world since before she was born. And while fitness and combat training are hard, the Jaeger program needs technicians and engineers just about as much as it pilots -- and that part is pretty much pure glory. She's had the immense luck to arrive during the early design stages for a new Jaeger, and before a month is out everyone is taking it for granted that she and Zeetha will pilot the one she's building.

One day they find someone new by their Jaeger. He looks oddly immaculate for a technician, but Agatha's met all the pilots now. Neat clothes, neat pony tail, pince nez perched on his nose. Hair a bright enough red that Agatha can't decide whether it's natural or not. 'Did you come to see our Jaeger?' Agatha asks.

The Jaeger rises above them, not named yet, but Agatha's already possessively fond. Its large body is slightly curved, rounded in a way that should deflect blows. Agatha knows exactly how powerful the engines driving it are, exactly the grace and speed it will move with. There's a vent set on a triangle sloping up from its head, shape echoing the distinctive trilobite shape of Hero Duo's much larger chest vent -- an accident of design that has since become a symbol.

'She's lovely,' the newcomer says, with real warmth, and offers her a hand. 'Tarvek Sturmvoraus. I've been assigned as your technician.' He smiles. 'I help with a lot of the Jaeger design, but they didn't think I was needed on this. I can see why.'

'Oh,' says Agatha. Aaronev Sturmvoraus was -- is -- one of the developers and foremost experts on the Pons System that allows Drift. The other had been her mother, once. 'Agatha Heterodyne.'

'I look forward to getting to know you.' Tarvek looks up at the Jaeger. 'I've already had a chance to start admiring your work.' There isn't much he could have said to win her over faster.

'Uh-oh,' Zeetha says, laughing. 'Agatha, I think he's in love with her.'

'Nonsense. I merely appreciate the chance to work with such a lovely lady.' He's teasing and his eyes linger on Agatha as if he might not just mean the Jaeger. She looks away quickly, unused to this.

And spots Gilgamesh Wulfenbach striding across the floor to them, looking decidedly grim. Agatha braces herself. He seemed friendly enough at first, and at first (well, after a few seconds' thought) she was almost sure the comment about easy to exceed expectations was meant to be a compliment, but ever since then he's been almost sullen around her. She's pretty sure he doesn't think she's good enough to be his sister's co-pilot. And it's true she has a lot to catch up on, but really, if Zeetha and Commander Wulfenbach think it'll work out, where does he get off sulking about it?

'Agatha,' he begins as he reaches her, and then he looks past her as Tarvek clears his throat, and his whole expression changes. Agatha re-evaluates whether he's been sour with her as he levels a disgusted look at Tarvek. 'Oh. It's you.'
'I have a job to do here,' says Tarvek, levelling a very similar look back at Gil. 'I doubt the same could be said of you.'

'Gil's more likely to help with this part than I am,' Zeetha points out. This is true enough. Zeetha will pitch in with basically anything without complaint, but engineering is neither her interest nor her forte. But Gil primarily researches the Kaiju themselves, when the Enclave doesn't make off with all the samples, and Agatha would be less surprised if Commander Wulfenbach showed up to help with the actual building. (Admittedly, this has happened.)

'Well, if he wants to help with assembly he'd better go over the specs first,' says Agatha, turning a screen to face him.

Gil glances at it, barely. 'I'm familiar with them.'

He is. Between them he and Tarvek get a lot of work done. While they do it Gil sulks, Tarvek snipes and Agatha keeps looking at her Jaeger's hands and fantasising about being able to pick them up and bash their heads together. Zeetha, for her part, treats it as a show, perched on one gleaming golden shoulder offering commentary more on the arguments than the work. Agatha has a few moments of wanting to push her off, but it does make her smile.

When they leave -- finally -- Agatha counts the relative peace worth the loss of two able assistants. She climbs down and rolls her shoulders, trying to ease out exasperated tension, and wipes her hands on a rag. 'What is wrong with them?' she asks Zeetha.

Zeetha shrugs. 'I don't know the whole story.' She half slides down the Jaeger, managing to land gracefully. 'Tarvek used to be a pilot. Gil's not the only one mad at him for dropping out, although he takes it further than any of the others,' she sounds neutral about it herself, if solemn. 'I think he got assigned to us because you're too new to have an opinion on it.'

'I don't know why Gil even came over here,' Agatha grumbles.

Zeetha looks amused. 'To talk to you? I thought it was pretty obvious.'

Agatha flings her hands in the air. 'He doesn't even like me!'

'Oh, now that one I do know.' Zeetha grins at her. 'He's jealous.'

'Excuse me?' Agatha pauses, chagrined, as an explanation occurs to her. 'Oh -- he wanted to be your drift partner?'

Zeetha sighs at that. 'Well, yes, but we didn't work out.' Her good humour returns, and she nudges Agatha lightly. 'Pretty sure he was hoping to be yours.'

'Oh.' Agatha stares in the direction Gil left in, wondering for a moment what it would be like to be in his head (at least she'd know what was up with him then!) and whether she could let him in hers. Maybe, she decides. With time. She doesn't feel the same immediate connection she felt with Zeetha, and what connection to him she does feel is muddled by irritation. She finds herself blushing slightly at the notion anyway, and isn't quite sure why. 'I'm glad I'm yours.'

Gil's ill temper is visible even from across the hangar, and Klaus keeps an eye on the situation but without plans to intervene. He trusts that Gil and Tarvek won't come to blows as long as they're actually working, and Bill's daughter is keeping them rather effectively busy. As long as they're not interfering with base operations, he generally tries not to meddle with interpersonal issues.
...Oh, who is he kidding? Interpersonal issues can interfere with base operations all too easily, and half the times he avoids intruding it's because he thinks they'll work it out faster without him. (The other half he really doesn't have time.) Too, Gil is his son and he expects everyone else with family there to help with this sort of thing.

So he wraps up his latest interim report and keeps an eye out until Gil leaves to clean up for dinner. Gil glances up a few steps before Klaus falls in beside him, and looks even less happy. 'I'm aware of your ongoing quarrel with Tarvek,' Klaus says anyway. 'Have you developed a new one with Agatha?'

Gil flushes. 'Not on purpose. I thought maybe I could make amends, offer her some help, and then Tarvek was there.'

'Make amends?' Klaus asks. 'What on Earth did I miss?'

'Nothing!' says Gil, and then sighs. 'I just always say the wrong thing around her. And she should have been assigned someone properly, instead of being paired with Zeetha before she'd even been here a day. You never even tested her with anyone else.'

'They were verging on Drift without ever setting foot in a Jaeger,' Klaus says. 'Without the obscuring factors present in your case.'

'I know,' Gil admits, flinging his hands up. 'But I don't have anyone I can pilot with. Still! I'm starting to think it's hereditary.' He looks a bit sheepish at that.

'I--' The sheepishness helps. Klaus catches himself before he can point out, defensively, that in fact he's had four different Drift partners. 'Am fairly sure you can't inherit the reasons for that.'

'Sorry.' Gil starts to reach out and then checks himself -- affectionate gestures between them are awkward at best.

Klaus puts a hand on his shoulder in spite of it, mostly to show he appreciates the thought, but drops it again with a sigh. 'I don't blame you for being frustrated.' He'd give a great deal to go out again himself. Technicians -- and, heaven help him, administrators -- are as essential as pilots and it is significantly easier now that the program no longer consists of a dozen people mostly trying to do all of it at once, but he and Gil are both poorly suited to staying behind.

'My problem is that no one wants to Drift with me,' says Gil, voice rising. 'At least Zeetha tried! You don't like being stuck here any more than I do, and a lot of co-pilots are family.'

Klaus stops walking and exhales sharply through his nose. 'It won't work.'

'Because you won't trust me!'

'It's not you.'

'Just because it's everyone else as well doesn't meant it's not me.' Gil's body language shifts, going from loose, sweeping, agitated gestures to a squared up stiffness he's unconsciously copying from Klaus. Moving from complaining to arguing, trying to convince.

'Generally speaking it's simpler to attribute the explanation to the common factor,' Klaus says drily. He can feel his own shoulders stiffen, as if bracing himself were somehow going to help.

'It's not as if most people can Drift with just anyone,' says Gil. 'It's different when it's someone you...someone you would trust like that and they still won't.'
He's right, bracing doesn't help. Because they were still close enough, three years ago when Anevka Sturmvoraus died and her brother stopped being a pilot, that Klaus already knew that's what Gil thinks is going on there and that he doesn't understand why in either case. 'It's not easy to go back to after losing a partner.'

'But you did once.'

*And look how that turned out.* Actually it went very well... for a while. Klaus's fists tighten. 'It was necessary.'

'I thought all of us were needed.'

As he's said any number of times. 'True enough,' Klaus admits, keeping his voice even with an effort. 'But in this case I mean that the first time, Bill was injured and people were going to die if somebody didn't get out there. There were fewer of us back then.'

'There are going to be fewer of us again,' says Gil, voice full of the frustration of not being able to do anything about it. 'Things haven't been going well lately.'

Klaus can't deny that, either. The Kaiju are getting stronger. They've lost Jaegers and pilots lately, not at the rate of the early days -- not yet, but the trends don't look good. Agatha's work is a relief, combining her family's tendency toward overwhelming force with a refreshing concern for efficiency. Klaus's interim reports are crafted to reinforce the case for his plan, withdrawing and retooling Jaegers as they field more and better ones. He hears at least some of the governments involved are looking at other options, which is fine if they come up with useful ones -- the more ideas the better. Unfortunately, the rumours suggest that somebody's been inspired by the Enclave's fortifications (evidently with no comprehension of how they actually work) to propose ending the Jaeger program and trying to wall off the coastlines.

He doesn't say any of that. It's not something Gil needs to have preying on him. 'I'm working on that.'

Gil's shoulders slump. 'I could help with that, too, you know.'

'I assure you we're making full use of your research on Kaiju vulnerabilities,' Klaus says, which earns him an exasperated look. He pauses to consider the point. Yes, he's digging his heels in on trying to Drift with his son, but Gil can be rather persuasive when he doesn't let his emotions tie him in knots. (That part *might* be hereditary, if not necessarily genetic.) 'Although if you want a crack at editing my progress reports, be my guest.'

'Okay.' Gil actually does look a bit happier about that, maybe because it means he'll get to read the progress reports.

'Good.' Klaus claps him quickly on the shoulder and prepares to leave him to the showers.

Gil's voice catches him. 'And maybe we can at least--'

He rakes a hand through his hair, and frustration leaks into his voice as he turns back. '*Gil*...'

Gil's clearly trying hard not to shout at him. 'Father, you won't even try!'

'It's not personal!' *Isn't it?*

Gil catches that flicker of uncertainty, the hint of a lie, and pounces. 'Oh, really? I'd say that's the *problem*, if it's true, but it isn't. Is it.'
Klaus sighs, gauges the flow of people past them toward the mess hall, and then grabs Gil's arm and steers him to the now-empty showers to clean up. Gil goes, with ill grace, and Klaus scrubs the new coating of grease off his own hands and leans against the wall just outside the stall. 'I am keenly aware,' he says, just loud enough for Gil to hear him over the water, 'that the fault here lies in me. Based on a rational evaluation of your abilities you should be in a Jaeger by now -- and your sister wanted very badly to Drift with you, incidentally, nor is she the only one who's hoped to.'

'But not you,' says Gil. His voice is almost lost beneath the water.

'You do realise,' Klaus says, 'the last time I had any success Drifting with someone, he immediately quit the program.' Tryggvassen reminded Klaus of his youth. The Jaeger program requires the will to fight, but that's a trait that takes a multitude of forms. Klaus prefers the ones that worry about protecting the helpless, even when they're not very practical. Even those aren't always traditional heroes. But Othar seemed to be -- young, grand, idealistic. Klaus slipped into Drift with him by thinking about what Bill used to be like. And Barry. And his brothers... and that was where it all went to hell.

'I do know your history, Father,' says Gil, raising his voice more now. It echoes slightly off the tiles. 'I'm not afraid to face death, or losing someone, out there for real. I'm not afraid to face it in your head, either.'

'That's because you don't know what it's like,' Klaus snaps, and his fist thuds softly against the wall. 'I hope you never do.'

There's a long pause. 'It is personal, then,' Gil says, but softly. His voice sounds close, as if he's moved to lean against the door.

Klaus shuts his eyes. 'I can send you out,' he says. 'I don't doubt you will find a partner. But I can't take you with me.'

'If you don't want me to find out what it's like to lose someone,' says Gil, still stubborn, but more fond than demanding, 'then you're the most indestructible person I know.'

'Teenagers,' Klaus thinks (even though Gil is over twenty), and remembers when death seemed less real. 'Well, at least you're not proposing I'm bad luck.'

'You weren't even here when --' Gil starts and then actually realises it's the wrong thing to say and splutters to a halt. 'Of course I don't think that, it's nonsense.'

'...I know,' Klaus says, after perhaps slightly too long a delay. Of course he knows. There's no such thing, despite the human psychological predisposition to superstition. They lost a lot of people, learning, lost them more slowly over the intervening years. It's unusual that he survived and dragged the Jaeger home -- it's still in service, retooled for the usual two rather than three pilots. There would be nothing strange at all about it if he'd died.

'I wouldn't be more at risk in a Jaeger with you than with anyone else.' But Gil already sounds...both a little defeated and calmer. He knows he's lost this argument and he knows why.

'Quite possibly less,' Klaus concedes ruefully, because if he could get that far he does know what he's doing. 'But I'm afraid sound reasoning hasn't helped yet.'

'I do understand.' Gil's voice moves away as he steps back under the shower to rinse off. 'Do you trust me? I know you won't Drift with me even if you do, but...do you?'

Klaus opens his eyes again, finally, to glance at the door. 'More than anyone except your mother.'
The water shuts off and there's the rustle of clothes being put on. Gil emerges looking rumpled, embarrassed and pleased. 'Thanks,' he says, not quite meeting Klaus's eyes.

'Go get some dinner,' Klaus tells him. 'I'll forward you the progress report.'

Gil nods and walks past him, only to hesitate almost immediately. He half turns back, claps Klaus abruptly on the shoulder and strides off quickly.

Things get better with Gil, although Agatha isn't completely sure why, but only as long as Tarvek isn't around. And Tarvek is frequently around, and Agatha likes him, but he isn't really behaving any better than Gil. He is an excellent technician, though.

Now her Jaeger is complete and beautiful, and Agatha's stomach is flipping in nervous excitement because after weeks of building and training, grease and welding and bruises, she and Zeetha are finally going into Drift for real.

Zeetha's practically vibrating beside her, eagerness a palpable thing in the air, almost the same as when she's watching a battle she can't affect.

'Relax,' Agatha whispers, and gets an incredulous look, as she fits her limbs and head into position and Tarvek calls out updates on the status of the neural bridge.

She doesn't need the final update. She knows -- they know. Tarvek's voice is lost in the sensation of thoughts that aren't hers but feel like they ought to be, of suddenly half-feeling her own as something new. Familiar as a mirror and strange as a recording of her own voice. She knows Zeetha.

Zeetha knows her. The first thing they think of is the shared earnestness of the first day they met, the first time they fought; Agatha feels her own frustration, temper and determination alongside, Zeetha's flash of disappointment that the new girl isn't that good and her delight when Agatha keeps getting back up, the triumph when she gets it.

It's working, working, and the joy in that is touched sharply enough with relief that Agatha can't help thinking why? and looking (she's not chasing the rabbit, they're getting to know each other, she won't go too far); memories of training with someone stronger-faster-better overlay momentarily with the same: Agatha and Zeetha (Zeetha and her mother back home in Brazil (Agatha with Judy teaching her how to disable an attacker and get away)).

Then, something else: Zeetha meeting Gil and her heart leaping; this is the twin brother she barely remembers (Agatha meeting Gil and the flash of attraction (Zeetha doesn't want to feel that one but she's laughing, not revolted)). Training with him and they're perfectly matched, can keep it up for hours, strike and block and counter, so sure they'll end up Drift partners. But they don't. Agatha feels tears prick at her eyes and she'd hug Zeetha but that isn't really possible here.

Uncle Barry hugging her on the porch after a night of listening in on arguments she didn't understand, asking him when he'll be back this time (Zeetha's father hugging her tight while her mother hug Gil) before he tells her not for a long time, be brave (be strong). He looks so haggard, eyes haunted by something he tries to keep from her (grieving for people she never knew and then he scoops her brother into his arms).

Stories -- about her father (about her parents), how the Jaeger program started, death and destruction and finally starting to win. The strangeness of realising the cousins who helped design the first Jaegers and still send Agatha's family presents are the renegades in the Enclave, getting rich off the black market and rumoured to maybe be experimenting on their pilots. Growing up enough to start to
understand the danger.

Leaving home in their turn, Judy and Adam (Zeetha's mother) worried and proud, strong arms hugging tight and letting go.

Time to help save the world.

They don't come out of Drift, but they come out of the memories and back to the present together, steady, guiding each other. Tarvek's still calling out updates -- he might be finishing the same sentence -- but he sounds relaxed and satisfied with the results now, and they turn their heads to each other easily without activating the motor functions of the Jaeger itself. 'We've got it,' Zeetha says, and then, 'What do you want to call her?'

'Melody,' Agatha says, because she feels like she's singing all over. 'Something with Melody in it.' She grabs at Zeetha's nickname for the Jaeger-in-progress and grins. 'Queenie Melody.'
Chapter 3

The first double event was bad, but the Kaiju went in opposite directions and while everybody was rattled and a bit below strength for a while, things seemed to go back to what passes for normal.

This time they erupt from the Rift and head off together. The Castle goes on alert, of course, but everyone breathes a cautious sigh of relief on realising they're headed straight toward the Enclave. Which is either really stupid of them or really smart, going right at the source of the defenders, but everybody's pretty sure the Enclave can handle it.

Agatha's still on edge as she watches the screens, though, and Zeetha grumbles at her a little about keeping her that way too. 'Pirates,' she says.

'Family,' Agatha counters. Not that she knows them. 'Anyway, a second double event is a pattern. The Kaiju are escalating.' She frowns. 'And I think something's wrong with their Jaegers.' She can't put her finger on it, and it could just be because they've never had to fight two Kaiju at once before and the monsters have been getting tougher anyway, but she feels like they ought to be doing more damage. The Castle sent the Enclave her plasma cannon redesigns, after all....

Commander Wulfenbach suddenly straightens, looking at her and back to the screen and then saying with explosive exasperation, as if he's said it before, as if this scene is familiar to him in a way it isn't to her, 'Your idiot genius relatives!'

'What?' Agatha asks, startled. The Jaegers fall back and to the side (one literally falls and flounders upright again in the water), and the artillery on the Enclave wall kicks in... except along one stretch, and the Kaiju head straight for it with the Jaegers in pursuit.

Tarvek winces. 'That must be why the Jaegers didn't spread out. They were trying to make up for a fortifications malfunction.'

'No,' says Agatha, bolt upright, fingers tense. 'They didn't fight hard enough to be defending their home when it's vulnerable.' They'd dodged too readily, they hadn't been thrown aside. 'What are they doing?' She grasps at hope. 'Testing a trap?'

Commander Wulfenbach points toward the hangar. 'Get ready to fly,' he says. 'They're probably trying to capture one.'

Agatha's jaw drops. Beyond him, on the viewscreen, the Kaiju trample the silent wall.

Zeetha's quivering with anticipation, like a hunting dog about to be let off the leash, so focussed on the present Agatha's not sure whether she's managing to ignore the fleeting memories or whether they're barely there, ghost impressions of a forgotten past. Drowning in Zeetha's focus could be as easy (she wants to run, stride straight out to sea, even though she knows the helicopters will get them there faster).

They still get updates during the flight. Accident or failed design, things are going poorly for the Enclave. They were prepared for a Kaiju getting into the town... sort of. The area immediately behind the broken portion of the wall is empty. They deploy weapons -- Tarvek says it looks like they're using tranquilizer harpoons -- and reinforced electrified nets. Things that should stun and immobilize the Kaiju, which might reflect capture plans or just the recognition that they really don't want Kaiju Blue running all over a populated area.
But the Kaiju don't stay down. They land just outside the Enclave. The weapons on the wall are twitching, here and there, but they're not designed to point inwards. The nearest Kaiju has a long, sinewy body, more tree root than serpent, spiked and outsize claws digging into the ground. It shakes off an electric net, mobile spines along its back rattling. Codename: Nidhogg Agatha recalls. One of the Enclave Jaegers swings a clubbed tail at the centre of its back, trying to concuss the less protected secondary brain. The other, vaguely bear like, swipes at its head and dodges as its neck snakes out.

Guns slide from Queenie Melody's wrists, unfolding silver in the helicopters’ spotlights. Things tilt towards Agatha, like shifting weight from one foot to another, as Zeetha lets her take the lead. Agatha's the better shot. Zeetha copies her motions...no, there's enough distance between the hands that that wouldn't make the shot. Zeetha follows her thoughts, moving her own left arm as Agatha moves her right. The Kaiju whips around just as the lasers score across one hind leg, whipping it up with a grace that shouldn't be possible. They've barely scored it -- cauterising the wound as they made it. It flings itself around at them, all of it following its head like a snake strike.

'Retreat!' Zeetha yells and Agatha feels the emotions behind it (not running away, luring it back into the ocean (it won't follow they're not stupid) it might follow far enough.) They back up for room to aim, fire again, step back. Estimating furiously, feigning weakness that they'd better hope isn't as real as the Enclave's. Nidhogg is lethally fast. They don't want to be outmaneuvered but Zeetha's confident they can win if they close with it away from the town. Agatha shares the feeling; the Kaiju are escalating in power but she designed Queenie Melody with that in mind.

The Kaiju flings itself at them and out past what's left of the wall. The bear Jaeger chases after; the other stops in the gap.

The bear Jaeger throws itself on Nidhogg's back, arms closing crushingly around its middle. The head whips back and Agatha fires. The blast hits the side of its head, turning one eye into a blackened mess and knocking it off course. It hits the side of the bear's head, not the middle, crushing the side of the cockpit in a shower of metal and glass. Agatha doesn't see any bodies.

The Kaiju flings itself away from the downed Jaeger and at Queenie, lashes up and around her arms to tie up the guns.

Zeetha grins.

They force their arms to spread.

Metal creaks.

The Kaiju's hide doesn't rip open, but something inside it gives way, and it drops from their arms in weakened coils.

'Both Kaiju dead,' comes the radio report. 'Wait to be picked up.'

Agatha feels the burst of disappointment from Zeetha, even before the relief, that it's too late to help with the other battle now. For Agatha's part the relief is definitely winning, even as she finds herself grinning helplessly simply at having survived, at having taken down something like a force of nature.

Escape pods start to drift from the downed Jaeger, opening on the surface. The first is covered in something blue-purple when his escape pod opens and Agatha can't think what. As soon as the second escape pod opens -- and there's something stuck to this guy's head -- he swims over to the
downed one, scrambles onto the raft and Agatha realises that the first one is injured as well as...whatever else is wrong with him. 'I'm going down there,' she says. Queenie Melody could scoop them out of the water, but she can't apply first aid.

'We'll both go,' says Zeetha. It's not like one of them could run a Jaeger by themselves (I bet you could (Zeetha laughs)).

They make Queenie crouch, extend a hand to give them a platform, and then they pull the headsets off together. Zeetha goes down first and Agatha follows her carefully. Queenie is cold and wet, slippery, Agatha wedges toes into her joints hard enough to bruise them, and winces when she reaches the bottom because she's probably going to have to swim. But two more pilots are in the water now and they push the injured one's raft towards her and Zeetha until it beaches on the hand.

Agatha can see them now. Her first thought is hypothermia, her second is mermaids from the odder sort of tales. Their skin is blueish, pulsating with light underneath, their teeth sharp in a way that is more shark than vampire. One of them has a jagged black horn rising from one side of his head, and their hands are almost claws. One of them, the only woman, has pale and slitted eyes, another yellow ones more luminous than his skin. 'Kaiju,' Zeetha hisses behind her and that is what they resemble. 'They do experiment on their pilots.'

'Only if ve let dem,' says the horned one, and Agatha can't tell if that's an accent or talking around fangs.

She swallows down her fear and steps toward the injured one, only for him to hold a claw up with a grimace. 'Iz toxic to hyu.'

'You bleed Kaiju Blue!' Agatha exclaims, recoiling.

'Not enuff to destroy a city,' says the pale-eyed one, pulling herself up onto Queenie's hand in one easy motion.

'I guess we should have brought hazmat suits,' Agatha says. They have them -- the need to get out of the Jaeger in contaminated water is always a possibility -- but Nidhogg didn't bleed much and they would have made it harder to climb. She feels rather ill. This is a horrifying thing to do, even to volunteers.

'I can get them,' Zeetha says, setting down the first-aid kit she carried. 'I'll radio the 'copter crews, too.' She bites her lip. 'Will you be all right until I get back?'

'I'll be fine,' Agatha says. These Kaiju-esque people are viscerally disturbing but if they're warning her off because their blood is toxic she hardly expects them to attack.

Zeetha sets off back up the arm. Agatha flips open a first-aid kit and takes out gloves and a face mask, then pushes it toward the Enclave pilots.

The pale-eyed one grabs it, dropping down to wrap a tourniquet around the bleeding arm of her co-pilot. The other two pull themselves out of the water to watch. 'Thenk hyu,' says the luminous-eyed one, giving Agatha a considering look. 'I iz Dimo.'

'Agatha,' she replies, sitting down on Queenie's palm. She hesitates minutely before adding, 'Heterodyne.'

They all stare at her for a moment and then the horned one grins, faint light spilling through the gaps between his teeth. 'Oh ho, hyu is the leedle cousin Master Faustus wanted to meet. Master jars her. It's not a rank, it sounds either anachronistic or amoral. In the face of something like this, probably
It crosses her mind to wonder if she shouldn't have said anything, given her relatives' apparent lack of scruples -- but the Enclave has enough problems without adding anything as bizarre as trying to kidnap her. And even the injured pilot looks more cheerful. 'I guess so,' she says.

'Hy iz Oggie,' he adds. 'This is Jenka and Maxim.'

'Nice to meet you,' Agatha says. Good manners or not, this feels slightly inane, and she can't blame him for chuckling. 'Look, I've got to ask -- why do you seem to be partly Kaiju? Does it, um... help?'

'Ve is IJPs,' says Oggie proudly.

Jenka growls slightly, focus still on Maxim. 'No good leaving the explaining to hyu. Interchangeable Jaeger Pilots.'

'Uh-huh,' says Agatha, feeling that Jenka's explanation is only a little more informative. She looks at Dimo. 'Interchangeable? You seem distinct enough to me.' She purses her lips behind the mask. 'You can handle any Jaeger?' No, that was silly. It took some getting used to but changing Jaegers wasn't nearly as difficult as changing--

Her eyes widen.

Dimo's face splits into a sharky grin. 'Ve can all Drift vit each other. Handy, yah?'

Agatha waves her gloved hands. 'Incredible, but how does that relate to the physical modifications? Unless you're going to tell me the Kaiju are a hive mind!'

Dimo and Oggie both grin at her. 'Hyu is a schmot vun,' Oggie says happily. 'Master Faustus vill like hyu!'

Agatha stares at them in dismay, and this time not because of the word Master. 'That's how they're learning about us,' she says. 'They're not just sending stronger ones because they know what's failed -- they're getting a play-by-play of every fight.'

'Who is what?' Zeetha asked sharply, remarkably managing to climb the last of the way to them while both wearing and carrying a hazmat suit.

Agatha grabs the one Zeetha shoves at her. 'The Kaiju are a hive mind. And the Enclave -- the Heterodynes -- have known long enough to be using it in their Jaeger program.'

Zeetha grimaces. 'My Father's going to love this.'

At this point Maxim opens his eyes, blinking stickily, and declares deliriously to Zeetha, 'Hy luff hyu hair.'

They don't get anything else useful out of the IJPs, who all agree that Zeetha's dye job is magnificent, before the helicopters come.

When they get back, the IJPs are transferred first to the decontamination area and then, as they can't precisely be decontaminated, to a section of Gil's lab hastily converted for medical use. Agatha and Zeetha leave them discussing this situation with Gil, who will probably verify their claim to be reasonably nontoxic to their surroundings whenever they're not bleeding, and head straight for Commander Wulfenbach.
He's on a video call with a young man whose bleached hair shows dark roots and whose eyes show dark circles. The identifier at the base of the screen says Vanamonde Mekkhan, Enclave. Commander Wulfenbach appears to be trying to loom at the viewscreen. 'Contingent upon -- You're setting conditions?'

Vandamonde sighs. 'I said our ability to cooperate is contingent on your sending Agatha Heterodyne back here, Wulfenbach.' He stops to gulp from a coffee mug. 'The Heterodynes DNA-locked a lot of stuff and they're pretty much all out of commission. It's like the Kaiju came right at them.'

Agatha barely stops to think before she steps up in range of the camera pickup. 'Well, send over all the information you can, for now. If I'm coming, I don't want to go in blind.'

'Of course,' says Vanamonde, looking relieved.

'Good.'

Commander Wulfenbach ends the call and turns to her, still looming. Somehow it's hard to be intimidated by him right now. She's fought a Kaiju, she's met the IJPs, she still has Zeetha beside her. 'I was not planning to commit you to that without further discussion,' he growls.

'I said if,' says Agatha.

'Not very convincingly,' he says. 'Unfortunately, we may need you there. If the Kaiju know how much they've damaged our defences....'

They sent word back about that at the first chance. 'We need to get them working again before any more turn up,' Agatha agrees. 'And it wouldn't hurt to find out what else they've been hiding.'

The prospect of getting his hands on the remaining Heterodyne secrets does a lot to reconcile Commander Wulfenbach to the plan. Agatha is in the air again the next morning, reviewing the data dump Vanamonde provided. Zeetha is with her, too, and they're bringing Queenie -- at least it guarantees one intact Jaeger on site, even if the local support structure is shaky. The IJPs sit clumped together in the helicopter; Maxim doesn't precisely look well, but he's unexpectedly recovered enough to travel.

'Ve heal fast,' he says when she asks about it. He starts to shrug and decides he's not that healed. 'Is a goot ting ve kill the Kaiju fast.'

'Usually,' Agatha says, thinking of their shaking off electrical stuns and sedatives, and Maxim grimaces agreement.

The Enclave is a place that wears its short history on a rather chaotic surface. It started as a Jaeger base, this one a series of domes radiating out from a larger central one along three prongs. Many of them are broken open like eggshells, now. As the coast became more dangerous the people along it who lacked the resources to move inland huddled closer to the base. It's a shanty town of corrugated iron, mismatched brick and tents, combined with glass and steel that indicate Heterodyne funding. Sometimes for larger, more imposing buildings, but sometimes it looks like they just replaced some random houses with something more durable. Around it, along the coast and curving considerably inland on both sides, is the wall, dominating everything almost more than the Jaeger base. The Enclave Heterodynes are pirates and black marketeers, renegades from the Jaeger program, but from here Agatha can see why people might throw in with them anyway.

As they fly lower they can see few dozen people standing around the helicopter pad, with their skin pulsing blue. The helicopter stops going down.
'Iz hokay,' says Dimo. 'Iz a welcome party.'

Someone -- Vanamonde, Agatha thinks, although she can't see much more than that he's blond -- turns and waves the IJPs away with large gestures. The fact that they amiably step back gives more reassurance than Dimo's words.

'You heard him,' says Zeetha. 'Let's go.'

They land and it is Vanamonde, stepping forward to formally welcome her while the IJPs are surged by their...friends? Co-pilots? It looks like a bit of a rough welcome, but it's both touching and deeply interesting -- it looks like their ability to Drift as a group isn't in spite of not caring about each other. Does the Kaiju blood increase their empathy towards one another? Does it, given that they're pirates, do so at the expense of decreasing it towards baseline humans? They've been friendly enough, Agatha tells herself, she shouldn't invent new reasons to be disturbed by them.

'We're really glad you could come,' Vanamonde says. The relief is in his voice, even shouting over the helicopter rotors and the celebratory IJPs. He gestures for her to walk with him, presumably somewhere quieter, and Agatha and Zeetha both follow. 'You're just in time, too. Master Faustus regained consciousness earlier this morning and I keep half expecting to hear he's bullied somebody into dragging him out of the hospital to the bloodlocks.'

Well, there's an attractive term, and not the one he used when talking to Commander Wulfenbach. To an outsider, Agatha thinks, and reminds herself that she's one too. She doesn't feel at home here, but she feels uneasily like it wants her to be. 'I take it he shouldn't be moving around.'

Vanamonde makes a face. 'He really shouldn't. I mean, yes, we won't last long without the defences operational, but that would only help so much if they all died. Come prove to him he doesn't have to get up?'

The hospital is one of the domes in the Jaeger base. Still the base's original hospital, Agatha guesses, although it's expanded all the way down a wide corridor (now also lined with beds) and through another dome with a town to serve as well.

As Agatha approaches the second dome she can hear an argument going on in one of the screened off private rooms. 'I can't meet Bill's daughter for the first time wearing paper.'

'You are severely injured and will not be moving around in order to get dressed. Nor do I want to have to cut off several layers next time you break open a wound.'

'Cut! Those clothes were imported from Paris.'

'You are severely injured and will not be moving around in order to get dressed. Nor do I want to have to cut off several layers next time you break open a wound.'

'Cut! Those clothes were imported from Paris.'

'Then don't wear them in hospital.' A sigh, then in tones of one making a great concession. 'You may have a t-shirt.'

Vanamonde ushers her in, where she finds an old man with a forked beard lying in bed and looking wounded -- even more wounded than he actually is, he's wearing bandages as much as the contested hospital gown. Another man, just as old, is standing over him.

'Agatha Heterodyne has arrived,' Vanamonde says. 'Agatha, this is Faustus Heterodyne, and Doctor Sun.'

'Doctor,' Agatha says, offering a nod that he returns. To Faustus, she adds, 'I promise not to hold your state of dress against you.'

He smiles at her, a smile that manages to seem just a little shark-like without any IJP enhancements.
'Pleased to meet you, my dear. It is good to have all the family together again.'

'It's nice to meet you too,' she says, not entirely sure whether she means it, and takes an uncomfortable plastic chair by the bed. 'I believe I'm meant to convince you not to run all over town before you're healed.'

'Are you offering to do the running for me? I have considerably more experience not setting off the traps.'

Traps?! 'I just bet you do,' says Agatha. 'But are you sure you should be trying it right now?'

'Well, it's certainly preferable to getting caught in them,' he says slyly.

Agatha resists the urge to facepalm. 'I see I'll have to watch what I say to you,' she says, 'but yes, I was asked here to do the running around town so you don't re-injure yourself. How much trouble are the traps actually going to be?'

He waves a hand, very slightly. Agatha has a feeling he's normally the sort to gesture largely. 'A lot of them can be figured out if you're smart. I'll give you the codes to the ones that can't be. And unless you're an impostor you should get through the bloodlocks just fine.'

Agatha eyes him. 'I'm going to assume,' she says sweetly, 'that you don't want the town destroyed with you in it, so you won't leave me to walk into anything really dangerous.' A brief pause. 'Do you actually get impostors?'

'Not ones claiming to be you. A few claiming to be long lost distant cousins because they liked the idea of going straight to the top of a criminal empire with its own Jaegers, yes.' He smiles. 'We send them somewhere with a bloodlock.'

'Lovely,' Agatha says. 'I'd like to start by making sure I inherited whatever your trapped locks test for, please.' Only half her genes are from one of their relatives, after all, and she isn't even sure if Bill's were included in the design phase.

He looks as if he's thinking about which trap would be most amusing to send her into, but then he shrugs. Agatha hopes he's deciding he really does want her able to fix the town's defences. 'There's a safe room. It's not trapped, but it's bloodlocked. It's the first thing you should check, anyway, and if your blood works there it will work everywhere.'

'Thank you,' Agatha says. Now what? Faustus is somehow almost charming in his unapologetic unpleasantness, but she doesn't want to chitchat with him, and she doubts he should be carrying on long conversations. Do what she came for, then. 'If you give me the codes, I'll go there and then get to work.'

Agatha is rejoined by Zeetha outside Faustus's room. They don't need to leave the Jaeger base to find the safe room, just head deeper in. There are a few traps in the corridors, Faustus only promised her that the safe room would be the first bloodlock she found. But they're more along the lines of things in the corridors you shouldn't touch and there are still people walking around the corridors with tools or folders, casually avoiding stepping on the diamond shaped tiles or brushing against the red stripe on the wall as if it's business as normal. Deeper in the people taper off, and there are a few traps that do require codes before they reach some endless staircases (Zeetha is much less out of breath than she is by the bottom) and finally find the safe room. It has a shiny black door with the bloodlock affixed to the centre of it, huge and imposing with sharp toothed gears sticking out at odd angles, parts that look like they do everything from grind to crush and little blue arcs of electricity darting across bits of it.
'Most of this won't do anything but move impressively,' says Agatha, after a cursory inspection.

'Your relatives have a flair for the dramatic,' Zeetha says, sounding almost approving.

Agatha rolls her eyes and places her hand in the obviously hand shaped indentation (lined with spikes). One spike jabs upwards into her finger, the whole thing whirs in a grisly fashion while Agatha glares it for trying to intimidate her, and then the lock stops whirring and, when Agatha pulls her hand back, the door swings open.

It's dark inside, but the light spilling through the door reveals a large plastic box surrounded by machinery. Agatha steps inside -- her footfalls make no noise -- and finds the light switch. She looks at the other side of the door, finds another blood lock, and leaves it standing open.

'Why,' she asks aloud, 'is there a sensory deprivation tank in the safe room?' She goes over and opens the door.

The man inside looks familiar somehow, but she can't quite make sense of the recognition at first. It doesn't help that he got in feet-first so his face is close to her, but upside-down. He flinches at the light, eyes still shut, and an expression of bleak despair settles over his face. She thinks he just woke up. 'You never should have brought me here,' he says. 'Close it. You'll only make it worse.'

Agatha stares at him, disbelieving. 'Uncle Barry?'

His eyes fly open, wide and horrified. 'Agatha?!'
Chapter 4

Agatha's first panicked thought is that he's a prisoner, that he disappeared because he came here and found out what they'd been doing and they'd locked him up to keep him from telling Commander Wulfenbach, that she and Zeetha are going to be trapped too and they're never going to let her leave.

Reason reasserts itself after several frantic heartbeats. Heart. Blood. Locks. The bloodlock on the inside of the door. Oh, theoretically they could have disabled it (and she'd love to know how they're doing a sufficiently detailed genetic analysis that fast), but once you account for their taste in generally alarming trappings this place says refuge more than prison. There's a door off to one side of the room, standing ajar just far enough to reveal a rather nice bathroom, and on the opposite wall is a refrigerator and a number of cooking appliances. There's no lock on the float tank.

This all raises a lot of questions of its own. Agatha goes over and puts her hand in the inner lock, which jabs the same finger (ow) and then rolls out an LED display with the irritable message "Error: Door Open." Agatha thinks about this for a moment and then shuts the door.

Uncle Barry climbs out of the tank with only a little coaxing, although he still looks miserable about it, and goes to shower off the salt. He returns in a few minutes in an elegant red and black robe -- Agatha suspects Faustus of picking it out -- and Zeetha puts a water bottle in his hand, already dripping condensation. After a moment he drinks.

Agatha remembers him haunted, but now he reminds her of a ghost. 'What happened?' she blurts.

'I don't understand what you're doing here,' he whispers, which is not an answer, and then winces and turns away, raising a hand as if to fend her off. 'Don't. No. Don't tell me anything.'

'How about the other way around, then?' says Agatha. She's not unsympathetic to whatever is wrong with him, but she's really confused.

'Been trying not to think,' Barry protests, then hesitates. 'What do you need to know?'

'Why you're here?' says Agatha. 'Why you don't want to think? This is...not what I was expecting.'

'They came and got me.' He shuts his eyes. 'I tried to warn them.'

Agatha looks at Zeetha, who shrugs, and then rubs a hand across her face. 'Faustus didn't exactly warn me of much,' she says. 'So maybe you could?'

'They can see me,' he says. 'All the time. They came -- I knew they were coming, they didn't listen --'

Antecedents. Please. '...Who can always see you?'

He nods, only a little, and looks away from her. 'I think so. I tried....' His voice breaks. 'I saw them come here.'
She wants to ask if he saw Queenie, to say that was her Jaeger, that she'd designed much of her as well as piloting her, to ask if he was proud.

'It's not your fault your relatives decided to let them through the wall,' says Zeetha.

Barry focuses on her, looking completely bewildered but more alert and present than he has yet. 'They did what?!!'

'You didn't know?' says Agatha. 'Did you only see the Kaiju when they were already here? The defences were down, the Enclave Jaegers were trying to capture them instead of killing.'

'I don't think the Kaiju knew that,' Barry says. 'I suppose I can try to forget it, but it may not do them much good anyway. It's not news to me that the family genius consists largely of new and inventive ways to be a complete idiot.'

'Right now whether they did it on purpose or not --' Agatha stops herself. The defences are still down. Do the Kaiju know that? Is it a good idea to risk them finding out in order to ask Barry for help getting them back up?

Barry's eyes go unfocussed for a moment and then snap back to her. 'Agatha,' he says, 'they're on their way back.'

Agatha jumps. 'That's...we've got to call --'

'I'll do it,' Zeetha says. 'The Castle need to know now and so does Vanamonde.'

Agatha nods and opens the door for her, wincing as her finger is jabbed again. Zeetha claps her shoulder and races off up the stairs. Agatha closes her eyes for a moment and turns back to Barry. 'The defences are still down. I've got the codes for the traps and I can use the bloodlocks, but it will go faster with both of us. It's not going to matter what they know if they destroy everything.'

Barry takes a breath and stands up. 'You're right. We'd better go.'

A low buzz sounds, not an alarm, and his father turns sharply to bring up the call. Zeetha appears on one of the smaller viewscreens. 'Agatha's found Barry,' she says without preamble.

His father stares at her, incredulous but... lit up in a way Gil doesn't remember seeing often. 'What.'

'He says he's got some kind of connection to the Kaiju,' Zeetha continues, which is not less unbelievable. 'Two-way. He's expecting another attack here. He and Agatha are trying to get the defences back up.'

There's a silence. Gil's furiously calculating which Jaegers they have left to send to the Enclave, he guesses his father is doing the same.

Another crackle interrupts before they can speak. '...it's giving birth...holy...'

The camera views from the helicopters show shadows under the water, like giant tadpoles. Small compared to Kappa herself, the size of dolphins, maybe. Enough to turn the sea black, spreading out in a fan shape towards the shore. One breaks the surface and Gil can see the legs -- tiny, stunted, but enough to crawl up onto the beaches, towards people. Its mouth opens, a weird gash that seems to take up half its body with serrated teeth, and then it's gone below again swimming as fast as its siblings.
His father's knuckles whiten on the edge of the console. 'We have an ongoing multiple event,' he says. 'Tell them....' He looks back to meet Zeetha's eyes. 'I hope he's wrong.'

Zeetha nods, grim, and the image vanishes. She's gone to find Agatha, to help get the defences up, Gil guesses. His father is barking commands now, getting the remaining Jaegers out. Nets and electricity, these Kaiju are small enough it might work, and far too numerous to kill individually. He puts in a call to the army, to get tanks out on the coast. This is a different kind of threat, it might help. There's nothing and no one left to help the Enclave, which has always been able to help itself before. There's no one left to help Agatha.

Gil strides across the room, everyone too busy to pay attention, and grabs Tarvek's wrist. Tarvek's arm twitches as if he's thinking of pulling it away, and then he gives in, lets Gil tug him outside the control room and turn to him in the empty corridor.

'We have to get out there,' says Gil.

'We can't,' says Tarvek.

'We could,' says Gil. 'What I don't know is why you won't. Even with Agatha at stake?'

'What I don't know is why you think we trust each other that much,' Tarvek says deliberately, but he can't keep his eyes on Gil; he keeps looking back toward the door (toward the screens, toward the Jaegers nobody counts because they're in maintenance, incomplete or untested).

'I trust you.' It's hard to admit, if only because it's not reciprocated, but Gil does. Despite everything he doesn't really doubt Tarvek would have his back.

Tarvek's eyes come back to Gil's and go wide and shocked and vulnerable for just a second, and then he looks down and takes off his glasses to clean off spots that probably aren't really there. 'Your father would just send us in the opposite direction,' he mutters.

Gil shrugs. 'We'll talk him into it. We'll walk to the Enclave from wherever he puts us if we have to, but he'll see the benefit of getting us there quicker.' He can hear the excitement in his voice, no, come on, they won't catch us, this is the best plan, runs through his head and a younger Tarvek pretending to be skeptical only when he's already half convinced, fine with saying I don't want to as long as it's still true. They'd grown up on the base, and until Theo came it had just been them.

Tarvek's skepticism is real now but so is a dread that Gil feels echoed in his own bones. 'Nobody talks Commander Wulfenbach into anything. If he's already abandoning them.... We'd never get there in time.'

'He doesn't want to,' Gil snaps. 'It's going to take everything we've got to keep those things away from the coast. But another Jaeger, one he didn't expect to have anyway...he'll do it.'

Tarvek breaks, yields, and they run. Hero Duo was one of the first taken out of service and is just about ready to go even if the new systems should have gone through more testing. His father's hand falls heavy on Gil's shoulder and spins him around with his own momentum, and Tarvek skids and hovers just out of reach as if they're already tethered. 'Do you really think this is the time to experiment?' his father demands.

'Because the first time you went out with Bill was a great time?' Gil demands. 'Agatha's out there. And Zeetha and Barry. Someone's got to go.'

The hand falls and his father gives him a long look, then glances back at the screen. 'Get on with it,' he says. 'I can monitor the neural bridge for you until they catch up to the... Kaiju tadpoles.'
Gil's seen Hero Duo any number of times. One of the oldest Jaegers and the best known, as well as one sometimes piloted by his father, he'd crept into the hangar to look at her at every opportunity. She's old, bulky, but strong, the distinctive trilobite shaped vent on her chest marking her out. He's never seen her from inside before, standing in her head, connected up ready to Drift. Tarvek's breathing was fast at first, now it's too even, a forced calm. Gil's pretty sure this Drift's going to start out rough and is trying to stay calm himself. Excitement wouldn't necessarily be a problem, but the less either of them take into this the better right now.

'If it helps,' his father's voice says over the speakers, 'the emergency ones actually went fairly well. Engaging--'

The first memories -- the first memories are a relief. Scurrying around the base, the technicians that let them watch, the times when the patterns on the screens were just patterns they didn't yet understand. Times when they can't tell which memory is whose because it was both of them together, and they let it drift, let it go past them as they connect.

Then the storm. It whips up the surface of the sea, turning everything the murky colour of a bruise until lighting turns it blue white and blinding. Tarvek gasps, tries to let it go, pull away or pull it away, but it's Gil who's unable to let it go. He can feel the fear, the guilt (we shouldn't be doing this we shouldn't be doing this (Father says to, so we do)) and the female voice echoing through the memory startles him. Anevka.

Tarvek swallows, in the memory, looks up. 'I know.' They've told the Castle that the storm's too dangerous to move in, no visibility, the helicopters have had to shift back, the Kaiju's already dead they're safe to wait it out. Thunder rumbles. He keeps the pronged needles buried in the Kaiju's neck with his side's hand, both sedating it and blocking its signal, stopping the Castle realising it’s still alive. Kaiju primary brains rot before you can cut through the skull to them, but not if they're alive, they've got hours, he's seen the meteorology reports.

'Stop that, you're making it hard to aim.' Anevka's face is screwed up in concentration. She's always been good with a scalpel, but Storm Chaser, living up to her name tonight, was made for clumsier weapons. Even a scalpel the size of a harpoon isn't easily wielded by a Jaeger.

'What the Hell?' says Gil, not sure if he's talking aloud.

The Kaiju erupts upwards in a whirl of spray and bubbles as if the storm was just personified in it, needles breaking off in its neck, it was faking, at least after a while, not enough sedative, Anevka, and then she's between its teeth and gone and the Castle are yelling that its not dead after all as if he didn't know and he scrambles for the escape pod mind still echoing with her death.

'What the Hell.' Gil repeats it more softly, blankly. 'Why did you even want...'

Aaronev standing, pacing, tanks with secondary brains around him. 'It won't work, it's not enough, I can't get deep enough in. I can't find her.'

Gil gasps, tries to get himself back on track. This has gone well beyond chasing the rabbit, but he's seen everything Tarvek was hiding now. This is why he wouldn't Drift with someone who wasn't as deep into his father's plots as he was. One of their chief technicians has been Drifting with Kaiju, passing on to them everything he knows.

'So much for Barry worrying,' Gil says, and that is aloud, his own voice harsh in his ears and stomach churning and how could they, how could anyone, but Tarvek never did quite believe there was anything worse than ratting out someone you loved.
And then the alarm goes off and the view on the screens splits again to show the biggest Kaiju he's ever seen surfacing. 'If you two are stable,' his father snaps, 'it's time to go.'

If they're stable? But remarkably they are. Gil doesn't know how, after that, with how furious he is with Tarvek, how their emotions can be in any kind of synch at all. He barely feels in synch with himself. But he can feel the bond between them and he tries to shove it all down (feels Tarvek shoving it all down) because Agatha needs them no matter how they feel about each other. Later. Now they fly.

Anything the Kaiju might learn about the Enclave's defence capabilities is secondary to getting them up again now. Agatha gives the codes and the directions to Barry and then they're both off and running.

The first thing to do is get the bloodlocks open and the security codes entered. Some of this security is sensible but did the Heterodynes want their town overrun by Kaiju if they weren't there? She ends up in the room with the mainframe that lets her access the wall and its schematics. The image unfolds across the screen and then into the air and of course they use holograms here. Agatha zooms, calling up equations and descriptions on another screen, eyes flicking back and forth as she cross-references. There's Pons equipment strung all through the wall, little rooms here and there like nodes on a web.

It's a Jaeger. Not a moving one, but it works the same way. The perfectly co-ordinated defence the Enclave has always managed, the way the wall has managed things that you wouldn't expect. This is the main thing the IJPs are for, because the sheer number of minds you'd need linked to control something big enough to enclose a town should make it impossible. It's remarkable and disturbing all at once.

She spends a few seconds wondering why nobody's in any of them before she realises the alarm hasn't actually been given yet. Not that it would have done much good without the activation codes. Nothing's headed for them yet, but she hits the big green button anyway.

She watches the nodes light up as the pilots reach their rooms. Drift is being initiated almost at random, they don't wait until they're all in just jump in as they arrive. It makes Agatha feel a bit sick - she loves what she has with Zeetha, but as she watches the Drift swell to ten, twenty, fifty, she wonders how you could have that many people in your head and still have room for anything of yourself.

'Pons systems not fully connected. You have a break here, and here, and here. Quite a few.' It's Faustus's voice and it makes her jump as points on the trampled part of the wall light up. If he had to program the AI with his own voice, did he really need to make it sound gleeful at pointing out problems?

She pulls up schematics skimming through until she's got the gist -- a break won't stop the wall functioning, but it will split the Drift in two. The wall is currently equivalent to two separate Jaegers, one on each side of the break. It could be worse, but the wall is designed to be run by people with perfect co-ordination. If they can rig a Pons system across the gap...it would be horribly vulnerable, but as long as it lasted the wall would be almost at full strength aside from the break, and they can send someone out in Queenie to defend the gap. Agatha nods to herself decisively, shuts the display down, and runs to find Barry.

She has to guess where to start but it's not hard: she figures either he'll have fled back to the safe room or he's doing what she'd do, trying to fix something. She finds him wearing safety gear over the bathrobe, patching the five-armed Jaeger back together (with only three arms and improvised armor over two shoulder joints that are too mangled to even pretend they might function on short notice)
and leans over a piece of shielding. 'Better idea,' she says. 'Pons link across the gap in the wall. Queenie can take point offshore.'

Barry frowns for a moment, evidently putting together how this could possibly make sense, then scrambles up to the head. 'Help me uninstall this one, then. We don't have a lot of time.'

'We might have time to assemble a new setup. There have to be spare parts. There's an event in progress but it's not--'

And there's the new alarm, as the Enclave's monitors light up with the second confirmed sighting. Agatha joins Barry in cannibalising the downed Jaegers. He looks like he wants to apologise for being right.

By the time they reach the wall with it they've acquired helpers, people in overalls and hard hats who see them carrying a Pons system towards the wall in the middle of an attack and follow. Agatha's happy enough to have them there and doesn't question whether this is their job. The wall's scaffolded on the inside, but that's down over the gap as well. They wind up climbing sharp rubble, stone and twisted metal and dangling wires. The wind howls through the gap, unable to make it off the sea elsewhere and determined to make up for it, leaving Agatha to yell instructions until she's hoarse.

She's found the right place to hook one end, and Barry's insisted on making the dangerous climb, when she sees the Kaiju. Most of it is still below water, but she can see a narrow, triangular head aimed at them like an arrow and a long, scaly crocodile back.

Helicopter rotors beat the air -- good, they found enough intact that Queenie doesn't have to wade out to meet it -- and the guns on either side of them where the wall still stands shift to take aim.

Barry stops climbing and presses his eyes hard against his forearm. Agatha moves over and grabs his shoulder, hoping they're both stable. 'I don't think it much matters what it sees now!' she shouts. 'It's not that.' His voice is strained, barely audible over the wind. 'I'd have done a better job of staying away, except... it started being hard to remember I was human.'

'You're human.' Agatha grips his shoulder tighter. 'And we need to do this. Can you manage?'

He inhales a little unsteadily and picks his head up. 'I'd better.' This is not altogether encouraging, but it gets him moving again.

Queenie engages the Kaiju. Agatha tears her eyes away. She wants to be out there, fighting with Queenie's weapons and powerful limbs, not clinging to broken stone in the screaming wind. She can feel how her Jaeger would move, should move, for her and Zeetha; the IJPs aren't doing badly but they can't have the same feel for it and probably aren't used to the way the neural load feels with only two people.

She keeps an eye on Barry. He doesn't seem to take offence and she doesn't think the Kaiju's injuries are hurting him. They string the system across, building a safe corridor from it to keep the wind from tearing it apart against the rubble, and track down the connection on the other end. At which point the technical side becomes straightforward enough that their helpers ask them politely to get down.

Barry looks a little more glazed once they're on the ground and half sheltered and she nudges him. 'Why,' she asks, because maybe this isn't the time but this is really baffling her, 'were you ever Drifting with Kaiju in the first place?'

'To try to get your mother back.' She stares at him and he adds, 'It was research at first. We thought we could find out... anything. Their weaknesses. What they wanted. How to make them stop.'
'How many of you tried it?' By the time Barry disappeared it was no longer the small group the Jaeger program had started as. But she's thinking of the ones who started it -- Barry, Bill, Faustus, Vlad, Klaus, Aaronev, Lucrezia.

He rubs a hand over his eyes again. 'Lucrezia and Aaronev started it. It was before we realised the Drift didn't end cleanly. Everybody thought Bill and I should try it, that we'd try the hardest to understand. There's not much to understand really -- they're smart weapons. They like it.' A rather unnerving laugh. 'Lucrezia was fascinated, though. She said she liked the idea of a hive mind. She always sounded kind of impressed by them. We were worried she thought we were going to lose. And then one day she took one of the science subs out and went through the Rift.'

Agatha's heard about her mother's disappearance before. But not quite like that. 'Did they make her?' she asks, clasping her hands together.

'I don't know,' says Barry. 'She'd been in contact with them a lot, ever since we first got a live secondary brain. She kept asking for more of them. Faustus and Vlad complained she was using them all up. This... what's wrong with me is from once. Maybe after that many times they could make her do it. Maybe when she realised the connection was still there, she thought sacrificing herself would stop it. Maybe she had a plan and it didn't work.' He rakes a hand back through lank silver hair. 'Bill and I Drifted with one of the brains to try to find her. They found us. When I realised they still had me... I knew I had to leave the program. I took you to the Clays and left--' He stops and frowns at her suddenly. 'You're not just asking to keep me grounded. Didn't you know all this? Aaronev was supposed to tell Klaus.'

'What?! I don't think anyone knew anything, about any of this.' Agatha hasn't even met Aaronev yet, has no idea what he's like. But if there's corruption inside the program...what kind of corruption can there even be when they're fighting monsters that just destroy everything?

Barry looks disturbed. 'I knew my relatives were secretive,' he said, 'but I thought Aaronev--'

The crocodile Kaiju coughs ball lightning and Agatha moves as if she were inside Queenie, but of course she can't respond. She's hardened against lightning strikes but this is too much, too fast, and her movements stutter with the waves dragging at her limbs. The Kaiju rushes her and she goes down in the water.

The guns on the wall fire faster, because Queenie's no longer in the Kaiju's way or theirs, but it streaks toward the gap in the wall without seeming to notice.

'I don't suppose you can tell if we're hurting it?' Agatha mutters.

Barry shakes his head. 'Not much.'

The whir of helicopters has everyone looking up. Another Jaeger, help from the Castle at last. Agatha runs into the gap, scrambling onto the rubble for a better look. As the Jaeger is set down in the shallows she can see the shape of it, one of the older ones, and then it turns and the trilobite on its chest gleams in the sun. Hero Duo strides towards the fight.

'Oh.' Barry's voice is quiet under the wind, much closer than she was expecting and more alive. 'That takes me back. Who's piloting her now?'

'I thought you didn't want to be told anything,' Agatha says, and the tears in her eyes aren't just from the salt wind. She shakes her head. 'I don't know. She was down for refitting.'

Barry looks at her sharply. 'I hope they finished. He talks about being careful but it'd be just like
Klaus to show up in an emergency regardless.’

'I don't think he has anyone who could partner with him,' Agatha says. Hero Duo catches up, slams her fist into the Kaiju's head, and grabs the jaws when it turns, holding them together. The Kaiju twists around to grip the ground with its claws, tries to push against the Jaeger, lean on her with its greater weight. The Jaeger moves aside with a startling grace, leaving the Kaiju to fall full length and then slams one foot down on its jaws. To the side Queenie is pulling herself to her feet, guns unfolding.

‘But he--’ Barry gives up on that puzzle while they watch the rest of the fight. The IJPs in the wall do a good job -- stinging the Kaiju whenever they can do it without hitting the Jaegers -- and Hero Duo winds up dragging it back off the beach. Barry grinds the heel of his hand against his eye socket when it finally dies, but he insists he's all right.

Queenie is picked back up by the helicopters and carried to the hangar. Hero Duo staggers back to shore, all grace suddenly gone, and Agatha catches her breath and tries to calculate what damage or malfunction she could have missed.

The cockpit opens and one pilot spills out and takes off at a sprint. Agatha recognises Gil, but the wind carries her shout the wrong way and he's running hard, head down. The other pilot doesn't emerge.

Agatha runs out there, climbs up to the cockpit. She's thinking injury, maybe Gil's running for help, too distracted to see them or think of the best direction to run. The cockpit's tilted, off kilter, and Tarvek's in the lowest corner, out of the Pons equipment but just sitting there with his head tilted back to rest against the wall. He looks exhausted and concern overrides Agatha's bewilderment. He's the last person she would have expected to find with Gil. 'Are you okay?' she asks.

Tarvek lifts his head, slowly, and blinks at her. 'Ever Drifted with someone who hates you?'

'I didn't think that was possible.' Agatha walks carefully across the sloping floor.

Tarvek huffs a sound that may have been a laugh. 'It's not pleasant. But you're all right so it was worth it.'

She kneels beside him, sliding against the wall, still confused, and takes his hand. He latches on as if he could fall otherwise. '...Thank you.'
Chapter 5

Even in the face of the Kaiju's new tricks it's hard not to be elated when the next call finally comes through from the Enclave. They won -- again -- pushed back doom one more time in two locations, and Barry is alive, and Gil has finally made it into Drift and into battle.

It is nonetheless a sober group who greet him, and somewhat perplexingly lacks Gil. Zeetha is briskly distributing almost certainly alcohol-spiked hot cocoa, and from Barry's startled expression after a gulp he's just discovered her habit of using hot peppers.

'Barry,' Klaus begins. 'It's good to see you again, even if there are security issues.' Barry looks rueful. Klaus doubts the question matters much to the Kaiju, so he asks. '--Is Gil injured?'

He hears a door over his own words and everyone turns. 'I'm fine.' Gil stalks into range, as winds-scoured as Agatha and Barry, and Klaus is relieved to see him but he knows something has gone terribly wrong when Tarvek flinches.

'Gil?'

'Should I go?' Barry asks warily.

'Don't bother.' Gil throws Tarvek a look of pure poison. 'Aaronev's been telling them everything all along.'

Barry jumps, cocoa sloshing, Tarvek goes absolutely still. Agatha's eyes are wide and she's looking between Tarvek, Gil and Barry as if she isn't sure who to reach for.

'Report,' says Klaus, tersely. It won't help the emotional damage here, but maybe it will let him deal with whatever Aaronev is doing.

Gil swallows and doesn't look at Tarvek again. 'I got caught up in his memory when we entered Drift,' he says stiffly. 'Anevka died trying to get a primary brain. Aaronev's been Drifting with all the secondary ones -- it's not epilepsy, it's overload. He's still looking for Lucrezia.'

'All this time,' Barry says hollowly, and pushes the cocoa away. Probably because if it stays in reach he might throw it.

All this time, indeed. Klaus pinches the bridge of his nose for a moment, then draws a deep breath and raises his head. 'In light of that problem, I suppose we've been doing remarkably well,' he says dryly. 'I am going to go interfere with this intelligence flow, however belatedly. Tarvek--' He pauses and gives that miserable young man a long look. 'You will stay at the Enclave for the time being. I expect your full cooperation.' When Tarvek doesn't react and Gil looks furiously skeptical, Klaus adds sharply, 'I mean that. If your loyalty were compromised on behalf of the Kaiju I don't believe the two of you could have been nearly as effective.'

'No,' Barry says, looking between Gil and Tarvek. Thoughtfully. Resignedly. 'Family above everything. He'll fit right in here.'

'All of you take care,' Klaus says, eyes lingering on Barry. 'Find out what you can about what your relatives have been up to while they're not in a state to interfere. I'll deal with Aaronev and talk with you again later.'
'You take care too. And we'll get back to you,' Barry says. 'Looks like I've got a lot to catch up on.'

The viewscreen goes dark and Agatha is sort of grateful they don't really have time to sit around being stunned. Especially since it looks like that's what everybody else wants to do.

'All this time,' Uncle Barry repeats, half under his breath, and swallows half his hot-pepper cocoa at a gulp. Tarvek looks away.

'Well, like you said, there's a lot to catch up on,' Agatha says as briskly as she can, getting up and hesitantly putting a hand on her uncle's shoulder. That seems... safe. Gil looks stormy and Tarvek looks desolate and she isn't sure either of them is really up for a hug. 'And even if we get early warnings from you, we'd better start getting ready for the next one now.'

Barry clears his throat and rises. 'Right.'

'I should--' Gil stops and looks lost, which is a debatable improvement. 'I actually have no idea what to do here.'

'They've got some biological research you should probably look at,' Agatha says.

This doesn't quite work out. Her IJPs (of course they're not hers, but she rescued them and she recognizes them) turn up and helpfully hang around in case she needs anything. They also helpfully tell Gil that he can't look at any of their files, because ‘Ve is classified information’. Which they back up by showing off small copyright symbol tattoos.

Agatha can't tell how serious they are, especially since they will keep grinning. 'Can we look?' she asks, gesturing to herself and Barry. She's not sure it's really a top priority for them but better to find out now.

'Sure,' says Dimo, obligingly. 'Hyu is Heterodynes.'

'...Don't they have lab techs?' she asks almost in spite of herself. She's wasting time, really, although then again maybe the procedures are worth knowing.

'Last I checked,' Barry said. 'Not that I'd have been surprised to find out Vlad did everything personally, but he does still only have two hands. How's he doing, anyway?'

'Better,' says Oggie.

'Gkika iz keeping him in bed, though,' adds Jenka.

'For anyone else I'd call that a challenge,' Barry says with a slight grin, and Agatha realises that his efforts not to know anything apparently don't mean he actually doesn't know anything.

'Look, I can go somewhere else,' says Gil, still scrupulously not looking at Tarvek. 'If being declared a lab tech isn't an option. You need repairs done, right? Or a hospital volunteer?'

'You know what, we'll go find something,' says Zeetha, grabbing her brother firmly by the arm. He jumps a little, which betrays how badly he's on edge, and then lets her tow him away.

'You know, he sent us pictures when they were born,' Barry says, watching them. '--Lots of pictures. And yet it's still weird to me that Klaus has kids. Well, let's go see those records.'

The records on Kaiju biology -- and IJP biology -- are more than a little outside of Agatha's area. Although she does gather that while all the Kaiju are clones they are capable of incredible epigenetic
variation. The interaction between Kaiju and human DNA in the IJPs is erratic. Some of the results are noted as "terminated" and it only takes a little reading to realise that was the merciful option. Others died from the Kaiju Blue in their bloodstream. Of those that survived they are, she realises, still in the process of changing. They all have regular check ups, the results of which are fascinating. No Institutional Review Board would ever have approved this, but there are informed consent documents on file anyway. She's left deeply disturbed by her relatives being willing to do this, although evidence more than suggests it was a real volunteer program.

'Hyu is also willing to risk death to pilot a Jaeger,' Maxim tells her.

'Yes, but not before I even get in one!' Agatha answers. 'And it's to protect people.'

He shrugs. 'For uz too. The Enclave needs uz.'

'And you get der good food and good money for hyu family,' says Oggie, flashing teeth.

'You have a family,' Agatha asks.

'Sure, great keeds,' Oggie says. He shows her photos, two girls, ten and twelve. They look well fed and well dressed, it's more than you can say for a lot of people on the coast.

'Agatha,' says Barry. 'Look at this.'

It's a mathematical prediction about the Rift. Plotting the number of Kaiju, their frequency, their size, their threat level. Everyone knew it was getting worse, it's different seeing a graph that predicts exactly how much worse, and how fast.

Agatha bites her lip. 'Can you tell what they're planning?'

'Not in a lot of detail, usually.' Barry stares at the model. 'I said they were weapons, but that oversimplifies it. They're terraformers. Whoever's making them wants our planet, but they can't live on it yet. Damn Aaronev.' He looks up, a little shamefaced, and Agatha suddenly remembers Tarvek is still there -- he's sitting with folded hands, ostensibly not looking at the files. Maybe really not looking at the files; every time Agatha glances at him he's looking at her. 'Sorry.'

'It's not as if I was particularly in favour of his plans,' says Tarvek listlessly.

'I don't blame him for wanting to get Lucrezia back,' Barry says. 'But I think it's long since a lost cause.'

'If he couldn't get her back,' Tarvek says, 'he wanted to join her.'

'Where is she?' Agatha asks. 'She went through the Rift, but the Kaiju's masters, whatever they are, if they can't live on our planet yet presumably we couldn't live on theirs. Isn't she dead?'

Barry rubs the back of his neck. 'Probably. On the other hand, the Kaiju can survive both environments. The IJPs might.'

'But she wasn't...Er. Was she?' Agatha asks.

'No,' says Barry. 'Not when she left.'

Agatha looks at Tarvek, who shrugs. 'I don't think my father knows either. I don't think he even knows what he'd do if he found her or found out where she is. But the Kaiju are the only link he has. Had.' He hunches slightly as he says the last word.
'Look on the bright side,' Barry says. 'Klaus won't let him stay in Drift until his brain fries, or go in after her.'

Tarvek winces. 'I'm not sure what he'll do to himself if he can't.'

'...He'll have to be watched, yes. I can't say I've been especially rational this whole time myself.' Barry sighs. 'I'd sympathise more with the search if he'd told anybody what was going on. The initial damage was already done, going by me. But he knew they were getting information back from him - - he could have told Klaus everything he found but cut himself out of the loop on our side -- I'm surprised the Castle hasn't been under constant attack.' He grimaces. 'Or maybe that's why it hasn't been. If they've been using him. I always wondered if the one that got Bill let me go on purpose.'

Tarvek doesn't answer for a long moment and then says, 'I'm surprised you're not angry with me. Gil hates me for not telling anyone when I knew. But you're talking as if I had nothing to do with it.'

Barry exhales, carefully. 'I have spent the past thirteen years running from this -- trying to stay away from population centres in case they target on me, trying to stay away from anything that would interest them, trying not to think -- and now it turns out to have done no good at all. I hardly even dare think about being angry with Aaronev right now. You--' He stops and rubs his forehead. 'I know a little about being brought up by people whose scruples could use a little work. And I know you don't actually want them to win.'

Tarvek looks startled, wary, for a moment and then nods. Agatha swallows. She's not scared of Barry's anger, but knowing he is is unsettling. Maybe she should be angry with Tarvek herself, she is angry with Aaronev. But that's an extremely impersonal anger when she's never met him. 'It looks like Aaronev wasn't the only one keeping secrets,' she says, instead, gesturing towards the pages she's been reading. 'There are records here of the Heterodynes Drifting with Kaiju. And I don't mean you.'

'That's just what we need,' Barry says, exasperated. 'I expected Aaronev to warn them, too. When, who, and what were they looking for? He comes to read over her shoulder and ends up growling next to her ear. '--So that's how they found me. Let's go yell at Vlad.'

Agatha is not sure why they're going to yell at Vlad, as it seems to have been primarily Faustus's idea. She asks about this on the way back to the hospital.

'He'll hold up to it better,' Barry says.

'But he was in worse shape than Faustus,' Agatha objects. 'He wasn't even conscious yet!'

'Which means he was in really bad shape,' Barry concedes, 'but he's probably more resilient.' He leans in through the door to a hospital room, and a tall IJP woman looms up in response to their intrusion. 'Ah, Gkika. If I promise not to take him anywhere may I argue with your patient?'

She snorts, then grins at him toothily. 'Somevun ought to.'

'Good.' They go in.

The face that turns to them from the hospital bed is lambent blue.

'At least you didn't do anything to them you haven't done to yourself,' Agatha says, out loud and apropos of nothing. It's the first thing she thinks on seeing him, once she's got over being taken aback.
'Ah, Barry, I think our cousin iz perturbed.' Vlad grins toothily at her. 'It vas not prudent, but I do hate being left out.' Maybe it’s the name, but from him, the accent reminds her of a stage Dracula.

'He didn't think enough people wanted to punch him at first sight,' Barry says.

Vlad laughs. 'Oddly enough that vas just hyu. Hyu seem much more lucid now.'

'You brought him back here?' says Agatha. That does explain why Barry came here for help and not to the Castle.

'Faustus did. It vas an interesting arrival,' Vlad says. 'When he did not act like I vas a Kaiju, he vas calling me an idiot.'

'Actually,' says Agatha, sweetly. 'We've come to do that now.'

Vlad levers himself up fully, with a wince, and Gkika frowns at him. He smiles at her, but it's an unconvincing expression. 'Ho, really. Vell, go on.'

'I think Barry wants to yell at you for Drifting with Kaiju,' says Agatha, leaning forward. 'I want to yell at you for Drifting with Kaiju and leaving him in a box because he still thought it mattered what he saw.'

'I did not Drift vith Kaiju,' Vlad says. 'IJPs have a stronger tendency toward Ghost Drift. Ve tried to tell him sensory deprivation vas not necessary, but--' He looks at Barry and shrugs. 'He vas not listening. Ve thought he might take it better after some time to calm down.'

'I don't really remember much of what you said,' Barry admits. 'I'm not even sure I managed to explain what I was worried about.'

'Not too vell,' Vlad says drily. 'Ve might not have said hyu vere wrong if hyu had. Drift and its aftermath are highly variable, after all.'

'I think years might have been enough time to calm down! You could have tried again,' snaps Agatha, then rubs her head. 'What was Faustus doing Drifting with Kaiju?'

'Finding stray relatives vas only a bonus,' Vlad says. 'IJPs have a stronger tendency toward Ghost Drift. Ve tried to tell him sensory deprivation vas not necessary, but--' He looks at Barry and shrugs. 'He vas not listening. Ve thought he might take it better after some time to calm down.'

'And you didn't think the Castle might need to know this?' Agatha shouts at him. 'You are stupid. Did you plan to stop them alone? Did you get as far as having any plans at all?'

'Ve planned to tell the Castle if ve actually found out something they could help vith!' Vlad snaps back. 'They have all the same data on past Kaiju attacks. But the Kaiju are... tools. And the secondary brains provide a connection but are not, ve think, much involved in reasoning. Not the easiest vay to look for strategic information.'

'That's why you wanted a live one,' Tarvek says, and Vlad nods.

'We'll have to manage without,' says Agatha. 'Because the Enclave can't take another of your attempts.'

'Wait, the tadpoles,' says Tarvek, in the tones of someone who's just had a revelation. Agatha looks at him, wondering what on earth could be wrong with him. He's been acting half in shock since he came out of Drift with Gil, but sudden incoherence is new. 'Don't look at me like that, the other
Kaiju gave birth. It's why the Castle couldn't send anyone but us. They're not big enough for their brains to be that hard to reach.'

Vlad and Barry exchange an alarmed look. 'Trying to populate the new territory,' Barry mutters, troubled.

Vlad nods agreement, but he looks interested. 'I haven't been able to get any updates worth speaking of yet. Did the Castle make capture efforts? Did either of you check our messages for sales offers?'

'We had more things to worry about than Kaiju on eBay,' Tarvek says. 'They were taking nets out, but mostly because killing them individually would take too long.'

Vlad snorts. 'Ve usually get word of private captures. Gkika, stop hiding my phone in the hope of using it to keep me still later.' Phone reception is spotty on the coast, but Agatha isn't really surprised if the Enclave is protecting a cell tower somewhere nearby.

Gkika hands over the phone with a threat that this may mean she has to resort to keeping him still by 'more interesting methods' later.

Vlad gives her a sly smile, uses the fingerprint scanner on his phone -- Agatha can only assume he had trouble finding a commercial supplier with blood testing installed -- and begins browsing. 'Hah. Dozens of offers, probably at least six credible. If the Castle won't share, that is.' He looks up and meets Barry's eyes, all teasing gone as if he flipped a switch. 'Faustus iz not vell yet,' he says, and Agatha can hear real worry there. 'And ve do need more information.'

'You want me to do it,' says Barry.

'Not if you are going to go crazy over it again. But that was worry and isolation, not the Kaiju mind itself, wasn't it?'

'Being able to feel it all this time didn't help,' Barry mutters. 'But yes, mostly.'

'I could do it,' says Agatha and it's a stupid offer. She's a pilot, she can't risk being messed up towards the Kaiju the way Barry was on the wall, but she can't let him tip back into that again either. Someone has to do it and there's no one else she has the right to volunteer.

'No,' everybody else says at once. Tarvek sounds terrified, Barry and Vlad sharp, Gkika just stern. Barry comes over and hugs her, the first time since she saw him again, and Agatha suddenly wants to cry. She doesn't. 'I don't think we need to add anybody new to this,' Barry says ruefully. 'It's not going to be comfortable, but he's right, the worst of it wasn't the contact itself. It was trying not to think about anything important, and not being able to think about anything else.'

Agatha nods, against his shoulder. 'You won't be alone this time,' she says and thinks maybe it's a demand as much as a reassurance.

Klaus is seriously considering the possibility that everyone involved has lost their individual and collective minds, including him. He just got through having Aaronev locked up for irresponsibly Drifting with the Kaiju (and put him on suicide watch because searching for Lucrezia for thirteen years by secretly hooking his brain up to seizure-inducing toxic aliens does not suggest he's likely to take this well). Barry's been in hiding for years out of terror that they could use his thoughts as a targeting system. And now he's promised not to have Vlad and Faustus Heterodyne arrested (not that he would anyway, they need the Enclave and Agatha and Barry could hardly stage an effective takeover after that) if they come over so Barry can Drift with a monster tadpole.
The first two off the helicopter are Faustus leaning heavily on an IJP whom Klaus identifies, after a double-take, as Vlad. Gil and Tarvek manage to disembark at the same time while looking as if they're trying to avoid each other, and then Agatha shepherds Barry off. Zeetha follows them, catches his eye and smiles wryly. *What can you do?*

Barry stops and looks at him, and Klaus stares back for a long moment before saying, 'Welcome back. You utter *idiot*. How did disappearing help?'

'Clearly, not in the slightest. You've done a good job, though,' Barry says, and then comes up and hugs him with a sigh. 'I missed you too.'

Klaus hugs him back hard and is spared answering by Vlad complaining, 'Hey, I didn't get a hug.'

'I didn't actually miss you,' says Klaus. It's not quite true. Vlad and Faustus weren't friends but they were interesting co-workers, and there's something oddly appealing about their lack of respect for the rules. Any rules. 'Welcome back from your life of piracy.'

'Oh, that's still ongoing,' says Faustus. 'We're merely taking a short break.'

'Come and make yourselves useful while you do, then,' Klaus says.

He walks to the Drift area -- formerly part of Aaronev's lab -- shoulder to shoulder with Barry, the two of them falling into step automatically. It's the same way Agatha and Zeetha walk and Gil and Tarvek are...out of step, but not out of one another's awareness, hovering at a fixed distance as if they can't get too far away or too close to one another.

The area is huge and dominated by a reinforced tank containing a tadpole the size of an orca. It's wrapped in chains, holding its long slit of a mouth closed, and chained to staples around the bottom and top edge of the tank to hold it still as it thrashes. Around the tank technicians are setting up Drift equipment.

'I'm still not sure I see how this works,' Klaus says, frowning. 'It's hard enough to manage with humans -- why is it possible to Drift with a Kaiju at all? You can hardly expect to establish a rapport.

'Believe it or not we tried that first,' Barry says ruefully. Klaus believes him. And if it could have worked for anybody.... 'Before we switched to more direct methods.'

Vlad strolls over and takes a piece of equipment from an unsettled technician, then unsheathes the spike. 'Hyu could probably Drift vith any human if hyu stuck this in their brain,' he says. 'Briefly. Not much of a partnership, though.' Klaus has to agree with that.

'It still might not work as well,' Faustus muses. 'In some respects this is more like drifting with a Jaeger. Including the risk of neural overload. I'm not sure they precisely have any psychological defences.'

'We think we can get you into Drift with it while it's still alive, the skull isn't as thick and we can keep it still enough to get the equipment on,' says Klaus, deciding to abandon the comparative discussion, although he's still mulling it over as he speaks. 'The tank can also be flooded with tranquiliser if anything goes wrong.' There's a sudden crack, like ice at the start of a thaw, and robotic arms sweep down to replace the damaged chain at the command of the AI. 'But we'd better do it quickly, it's strong for its size and I'm not sure how long we can hold it. Go and check the rig, you two have experience with this.' *Like a Jaeger.* The implications catch up with him. 'Set it up for two people. We'll get further avoiding neural overload.'
'What?' Gil asks.

Tarvek looks shocked, Zeetha thoughtful, Agatha... hopeful and a bit relieved.

'I don't think that's a good idea,' Barry says, off guard and unsettled.

'I think it might be,' Agatha says, looking worried but still grateful.

'We were going to avoid having anybody new linked to them,' Barry points out. 'Especially someone who--' He breaks off, and Klaus pounces.

'Knows too much? We already established that as a non-starter at this point. Might still go out in a Jaeger? Not likely without you.'

'You--' Barry stops, probably realising why that makes sense. '...Can't readily be cut out of knowing all our new plans,' he says after a moment. 'But that would be hard to get around with Faustus, too.'

'Yes,' says Klaus. 'And while the Kaiju doesn't have a chance to resist Drift, that's not true for the other person in the link. Could you Drift with Faustus?' Maybe Barry could, and Klaus has no reason whatever to feel a bit jealous at the thought. He never minded when it was Bill.

'Er,' says Barry. Faustus looks over at them expectantly. Barry looks back. 'I doubt it. And he's still injured.'

'Not that badly,' Faustus says irritably.

'Oh, yes hyu are,' Vlad mutters.

Faustus glowers at him. 'And we already have enough of a ghost connection that I could find him.'

The Kaiju thrashes. Faustus glances up at it and concedes, 'But given the circumstances, perhaps we should go with the sure bet.'

The equipment is set up to connect the two humans in the link first. It's been a long time, they want to check they're stable before adding a Kaiju, although the sooner they reach stability the better. Klaus watches the yellow drain from his helmet and then the connection kicks in. It's not easy, but it's still like coming home.

There's the jolt of his brothers' deaths, both still in harness, one tusk going through both of them, tossing their bodies away, Klaus grabbing that tusk in one Jaeger hand a moment later, determined to fight for all three of them while barely able to think through shock and pain. Barry rolls with it, he knows this memory. It throws up one of his own now, mandibles ripping Bill in half, but they share the pain and grief without drowning in it. Barry's always been disciplined and he's spent the last decade and more training himself not to think about things (his regret for that echoes too).

'Synchronisation achieved. Bringing in the Kaiju,' says Vlad.

The Kaiju hits like acid. Alien, focussed with an absoluteness that would be madness in a human. It thinks like a gun, like a bullet, target and destroy, and its thoughts are bigger than it is, spread between more and more and more (steady, steady, I know it's hard (I'm okay)). The Rift...DNA scanners, the Heterodynes really do have a lot in common with the Kaiju, no wonder Vlad went IJP (hey, those are my relatives, but Barry's laughing in his head). Plans, tactics, they're near the final push. If they're not stopped, shut down hard, it's going to be too late.

Someone's shaking him, them, they're fighting, trapped -- (no! come back) -- Klaus realises that's the burning alien mind and refocuses even as he grasps at its strategic awareness. Only the shaking is
actually real, and Faustus is yelling at them to 'Get out, get out, get out!'

They pull back from the Drift with the Kaiju just before two of the tank supports give way at once and the whole apparatus tips. Tarvek mashes the tranquiliser control, but too late. The chains catch, creak, strain, break, and everyone scatters. The tank hits the floor and the Kaiju wallows amidst broken plexiglass. Sluggish, not precisely fighting, instead it appears to be growing more limbs.

Klaus is feeling sluggish himself, not transmitted from the Kaiju (he doesn’t think) but the inside of his head feels raw, and he’s moving slower than he’d like. The memories surrounding him now are of collapsing, of being dragged out of the Jaeger with circuitry imprinted lividly on his ribs; Agatha takes him and Barry both by the hands and guides them toward the door. Zeetha’s half-carrying Faustus.

Gil is halfway to the Kaiju, teeth bared. Klaus reaches even though it’s too far, wants to cry out and can’t -- Tarvek catches up and lunges for Gil’s arm, hauls him back, and Klaus breathes again (the air reeks of ammonia).

Vlad charges past unencumbered. He leaps on the Kaiju tadpole with a war cry and drives a harpoon improvised from a long shard of the tank into its head next to the spike.

They all slow, still. Klaus rubs his head and watches the trickle of blue blood from the Kaiju -- less than he’d have expected -- warily. 'You could have waited for the stun nets.'
They're cleared out of the lab for decontamination (everyone has to leave shoes behind, especially Vlad), and Commander Wulfenbach and Uncle Barry demand an immediate war council even though Agatha thinks they look like they should be put straight to bed.

Commander Wulfenbach calls Commander Zanta Rainha, waking her up in the middle of the night, and starts trying to catch her up. She looks a lot like Zeetha and she looks like she questions whether she’s actually awake yet given the weirdness of what her husband is saying. Agatha really can’t blame her.

Tarvek quietly goes to make a pot of coffee during this and Zeetha stops him. 'Cocoa.'

'For a meeting?' Tarvek protests.

'Agatha and Gil can't have coffee and it might be hereditary.'

'I'm sure I've seen Gil and Commander Wulfenbach drink coffee,' Agatha says, bemused. She thinks Zeetha makes too much of it, but she was kind of bouncing off the walls after she first tried espresso.

'We do,' says Gil. The entire younger generation is at this point clustered around the coffeemaker despite Gil and Tarvek's attempts to maintain distance.

Zeetha rolls her eyes. 'You both try to stop sleeping whenever anything important happens. Mother would with any less self discipline. And I think all the Heterodynes are wired enough as it is. Tarvek, you can have coffee if you want it, I'm making cocoa for everybody else.'

'And you're not wired enough?' Agatha teases. Under the words she knows Zeetha's worried about everybody, especially her father and Barry after the Kaiju.

'Hey, I'm having cocoa.'

'I really don't care what we're drinking,' calls Commander Wulfenbach, having by this point explained to Commander Rainha that Barry turned up (somewhat unnecessary as it's a teleconference and she can see him, Agatha suspects he is still excited about this) and that Drifting with Kaiju has become a renewed source of excitement (there was some swearing in Portuguese). 'Get on with it.'

They have cocoa. Vlad manages to look vaguely surreal, pouring mouthfuls between his fangs.

'The bad news,' Commander Wulfenbach resumes, rubbing the side of his head, 'is that the Enclave's predictions are too optimistic.'

'We get that a lot,' Faustus says under his breath, but he looks serious enough.

'Not like this. Your calculations assume they're widening the Rift, which is accurate, but also that they're using it at full capacity to do so... which is not.'

Barry takes it up in the next breath. 'They have an approximate idea of our current strength and intend to overwhelm us,' he says. 'They have enough Kaiju to do it. They do not -- quite -- have the Rift as wide open as they'd like.'

'Ve could extend the wall,' says Vlad, 'But not fast enough.' And they’d need IJPs to run it, Agatha
thinks. Which Vlad probably doesn't regard as a downside.

'Can we close the Rift again?' Gil asks.

'I think we'll have to attack through it,' says Commander Wulfenbach.

'I thought you tried that at the start,' says Zeetha.

'Yes,' says Commander Rainha. ‘And everything just bounced off.' Her eyebrows are drawn together, but she doesn’t look disapproving, she looks like she’s waiting for Commander Wulfenbach to explain why he thinks it makes sense to try something that didn't work before.

Commander Wulfenbach smiles. Just a little bit. It's not exactly a nice expression but Agatha finds her heart pumping a little faster and her hands curling into fists. 'We couldn't get very close before in manned craft--' He inclines his head to her slightly. 'But we have tougher Jaegers now.' He looks toward Faustus and Vlad. 'And now we know it opens for Kaiju DNA.'

'Oh ho,' Vlad says. 'So that is why they putrefy so fast. Not only terraforming but security.'

'Would it open for IJPs?' Agatha asks, curious, and then winces. Did she just volunteer them for a suicide mission?

'Ve could try.' Vlad looks worryingly intrigued. 'It would depend on the scannink mechanism--' His phone goes off and he answers. (Commander Wulfenbach rolls his eyes.) 'Yez? -- no, I am not in bed -- hyu should come pilot with me, sveethot, ve might go invade the Kaiju. Or pin a bomb to a very fresh corpse. Or possibly a whale.'

'A whale?' Barry asks, bemused.

Vlad waves him off, listens for a moment, and then hangs up the phone looking smug. 'Gkika vill be comink to join uz.'

>Please tell me she isn't bringing a whale,' says Commander Wulfenbach.

'No, no whale,' says Vlad. 'I don't think ve haff time to make enough serum. Or that it woudl vork.'

'I think it would implode,' Agatha points out.

Vlad waves a hand. 'Zo, ve go for the fresh corpse?' he says, sounding rather eager.

'That sounds the simplest and probably the least suicidal,' says Commander Rainha. 'Although it would require being very near the Rift when the Kaiju emerge, apparently several at once.'

'And we can't just throw everything at the Rift,' Zeetha says, hands clenched around her mug. 'Because we still have to stop them making it to shore.'

'Yes.' Barry exchanges a look with Commander Wulfenbach. 'We're going to need every functional Jaeger in the field. And given the very limited support available on the ocean floor... probably the strongest at the Rift.'

'That's us,' says Zeetha. She's grinning now, although it's the kind of grin Agatha usually sees right before Zeetha pounces her for training.

Barry's eyes linger on Agatha. 'Yes, I thought it might be.'

Commander Rainha's shoulders go back, and Agatha sees her breathe, measuredly, through her nose
before she says, to Zeetha, 'Go with all my love and honor.' She looks at Commander Wulfenbach. 'I suppose you and Barry will be with them, if you've finished the upgrades, and leave me to handle the coast.'

Commander Wulfenbach looks up at the screen and nods slightly. 'In fact, given the... risks of the ghost connection, I think we'd better leave you as much of the coordination as possible. We'll pass you any useful information we obtain, of course.'

'Will Barry be all right, after everything?' Gil asks, and he sounds genuinely worried but his father's raised eyebrow is enough to make him duck his head.

'Barry and I have a proven compatibility,' says Commander Wulfenbach. 'This is no time to test something new.'

'Gil and I will come as well,' says Tarvek, looking studiously at his cocoa.

Gil starts and stares at him. 'You can't be serious.'

'You're not the only one that wants to help,' Tarvek says.

'You can't --' Gil starts.

Tarvek meets his eyes and it's Gil that looks away.

Agatha thinks Barry being okay was a good question and she wants to ask it about Gil and Tarvek, too, but... it won't help. They're going to need everybody somewhere. Uncle Barry's seemed steadier since he reunited with Commander Wulfenbach, anyway, even after the Kaiju. And Tarvek is determined, maybe to make up for his father and maybe just to save the world.

'You'd better be okay,' she mutters, and gets a quick startled look and not-quite-smile from Gil and Tarvek in unison, which is at least sort of encouraging. She looks over at Zeetha, which always is encouraging, and doesn't need technological assistance to know she's thinking We'll get them.

The rest of the meeting is details. Important details, like repair status and deployment numbers, and the conclusion that urgent as the situation is, the mission has a far higher likelihood of success if the pilots get some sleep first.

When they break, his mother blows him a kiss and wishes him well, and Gil tries not to wish he could go back and see her in person. Waste of fuel, waste of time, not that he feels like he could sleep anyway.

Everybody else leaves except he can feel Tarvek stopped in the doorway. Gil goes and deliberately makes two more cups of cocoa.

'You don't want to Drift with me again,' says Tarvek, behind him.

'It's not that,' says Gil. 'You didn't want to Drift with me for long enough. We did it to save Agatha, do you really want to go through that again?'

'There's nothing left to hide anymore.' Tarvek's voice is quietly bleak and Gil's hand shakes as he stirs the cocoa, rattling the spoon against the side of the mug. It's so typical, really, for Tarvek to be willing to Drift now that there's no one to protect by refusing. Tarvek had been willing to risk the world to protect his father and only risked his father to protect Agatha -- and Gil's still angry about that -- but does Tarvek ever protect himself?
Gil thrusts a mug at Tarvek without looking up and then fidgets with his own nervously. 'I don't want to Drift with someone I'm hurting.'

'I don't think you'd rather watch the world end.'

'...No.' He wants to say they'll manage, one Jaeger won't make that much difference. But it could. He doesn't want to sit on the sidelines again. 'But I don't want to...' He scrubs at the back of his head as if it might knock thoughts loose. 'Why did you...I know you didn't want to hurt him, but what good was it doing even him? We could have all been killed if the Kaiju had come for him the way they did for the Heterodynes and we wouldn't have had the slightest idea.'

'It wasn't going to be any harder to stop them coming here than in any other direction,' Tarvek says. 'And he always complained that he couldn't get enough contact. I didn't think it was really making things worse and I was afraid he'd die if he couldn't anymore.'

'You do realise it did make things worse?' says Gil harshly. Maybe it's unfair. What good does it really do to guilt trip Tarvek, especially when he's going to get a front row seat to everything Gil thinks about him shortly? But for heaven's sake, how can Tarvek say that now?

'Now, yes,' Tarvek says, then irritably, 'You realise he also contributed a lot to figuring out their vulnerabilities, too, don't you? You don't have to act like we were trying to help them!'

'I know you weren't. I don't have a clue about your father when he was in love with someone who ran off to try and become one!' Tarvek scowls and looks away. 'He wanted to help her.'

'Regardless of whose side she was on?' Gil looks away too and takes a sip of cocoa. It's sweet, he doesn't have Zeetha's habit of putting peppers in it, and soothes him a little.

'He loved her. It wasn't about being on a side.'

'And you're no different,' says Gil, glaring at the side of Tarvek's head. 'Who do you love? Him? Agatha? I'm pretty sure it's not humanity you're fighting to save.'

'Both of them, yes,' Tarvek says, glaring. 'Do you care more about an abstraction than people you actually know?'

'They're not an abstraction,' Gil snaps. 'They're people too.'

'You wouldn't really sacrifice Agatha for people you didn't even know.'

'And you wouldn't leave strangers to die if you could actually see them doing it.'

'Of course I wouldn't,' Tarvek snaps.

Gil shakes his head. 'Even when you can't see them, they're still there.' He can't really imagine not getting it. What they're fighting for, who they're fighting for. Why being a pilot matters. But he knows, and his voice is softened with that knowledge, that once they're in Drift Tarvek would fight as hard as he would to stop a Kaiju getting to anyone. Once it's real to him.

'I never said they weren't,' Tarvek says, frustrated. 'I wasn't trying to hurt anybody.'

Gil closes his eyes. He's tired. 'I know. I don't want to be angry with you. Especially when --'

Tarvek gestures with his cocoa, nearly spills it, and hastily drinks some. '...Well, I wouldn't mind if
you weren't."

Gil snorts. 'But you're not going to change your mind about Drifting with me if I am.'

'Of course not. You're the one talking about having to save the day even if it means hurting someone.' Tarvek doesn't say someone you care about but the line ends suspiciously abruptly, and he looks uncertain, vulnerable.

Gil hides his face in his mug for a moment. 'That's not --' But it is, of course it is, and his arguments don't make any sense if he can still mean not when it's you.

Tarvek swallows. 'If it bothers you, you can't hate me that much.'

'I don't hate you, you idiot, I'm just mad at you. And if I was angry enough to want to hurt you I'd just punch you and get it over with.'

Tarvek takes a drink after the first sentence and nearly spits it out a second later trying to laugh. Gil goes to thump him on the back and he sidesteps. 'You'd try,' he says, when he stops spluttering. Then, 'Actually, let's go hit the mats, I can't sleep like this.'

That sounds like a good idea, wound up as they are. Gil gulps down the last of his cocoa, nearly burning his tongue, and says, 'Sure.'

Agatha sits alone in her room in the dark for a few minutes before calling her parents. It's late, but they answer immediately. 'Hi,' she says. 'I thought I should tell you--'

And then she stops, because there's so much. Judy peers into the camera, Adam leaning over her shoulder. 'Did the Enclave work out?'

Agatha laughs shakily. 'They were very glad to see me and I found Uncle Barry hiding in a sensory deprivation chamber because he was afraid the Kaiju could see through them after he Drifted with one years ago.'

They both blink. Judy says, 'Oh, dear. I knew he was concerned, but not....'

'It actually gets more "Oh, dear" than that,' Agatha says with a sigh. 'It's... actually, it's kind of complicated. We've found out there's going to be a much worse attack. Not because of that. But we've also found out how to get past the shielding on the Rift so we're going to go attack it tomorrow.'

There is silence for a moment, and then Judy says, 'You're taking point, aren't you?'

'Yes.' Agatha smiles a little. 'I guess this is the kind of thing you were worried about when you didn't want me to go, huh?'

'Well, not exactly,' Judy says. 'But yes.' She closes her eyes for a moment. 'Agatha. We're so very proud of you. --I wish we could be there.'

'I think we've actually got pilots for all the working Jaegers now anyway,' says Agatha. She's kind of glad they'll be safe. If we win. 'Love you.'

'We love you too,' Judy says, and Adam signs. 'We'll see you soon.'

Agatha showers before bed, hoping the hot water will relax her. She's certainly tired enough. When she gets back to her room Zeetha's sitting on her bed, chewing her lip. 'Nervous?' Agatha asks.
'Of course not,' says Zeetha. 'We're finally taking the fight to the bad guys.'

Agatha smiles at her. 'I'm glad it's us too.' Despite everything, she's more worried about the others going out with them than she is about them. Barry and Klaus, Gil and Tarvek, they all have their own problems. And Zeetha's related to half of them to Agatha's quarter.

'Yeah,' Zeetha says softly. She grabs a hairbrush and gestures Agatha to sit.

Agatha does and Zeetha begins brushing at the ends, not entirely gently. Agatha's hair is thick and somewhat unruly, and Zeetha is occasionally ruthless with tangles, but she doesn't really pull. The light tug of the brush is soothing and, despite how anxious she is, Agatha finds herself yawning. 'Do you think they'll be all right?' she asks.

Zeetha sighs and pats her shoulder. 'I think we'll be looking out for them. It's all we can do.'

'Uncle Barry...on the wall, he had a hard time remembering he wasn't one of the Kaiju, I think,' says Agatha. She pulls the pillow onto her lap to cuddle.

'He's a warrior,' says Zeetha, firmly. 'They all are. We'll have to trust in their strength.'

Agatha smiles, slightly, drowsily. 'Thanks, Zeetha.' It's not enough to stop her worrying, but Barry's faced a lot. She has to believe he won't break now. Zeetha puts the hairbrush down and hugs her, suddenly, resting her face against Agatha's shoulder. It's only when Agatha feels the slight dampness there that she turns and wraps her arms around her friend. 'You're right, they are,' she says, trying to be comforting in turn. 'Commander Wulfenbach won't let anything happen to him or Barry, he's famous for not letting things stop him. And you saw how well Gil and Tarvek did yesterday.'

'I know,' says Zeetha. 'I'm not used to them going out, Gil never had the chance and Father was a pilot before I was born.' Agatha nods and the two of them hold onto one another until Zeetha pulls back and swipes a hand over her eyes impatiently. 'We'd better sleep, anyway,' she says, practically. 'We'll need it.'

Agatha squeezes her hand. 'Goodnight, Zeetha.'
Agatha jolts awake to the klaxon screaming and flings herself into her clothes. Uncle Barry intercepts her as she tears out the door. 'Whoa there. We're not going out yet.'

She stares at him blankly. The first thought that crosses her mind is they got to him, but that doesn't make a lot of logical sense. 'What?'

'Klaus and I both woke up when they came through the Rift.' He looks grim but determined, not haunted. 'This is only the first, ah, non-psychic confirmation. Zanta's known for hours.'

Agatha rakes a hand through her hair, snaring it in new sleep-tangles. 'Then it's already starting! Why didn't you wake us up?'

'Because these are already out, it should still take some time for them to push more through, and we have the best chance of stopping them for good if our team is rested.'

'You're not.'

'Wasn't much to do in the float chamber except worry and sleep. Go take a shower and eat breakfast first. Don't let Klaus run you over -- we shut down the screens in the mess hall and he's been pacing there at high speed.'

Presumably Barry had or has similar conversations with Zeetha, Gil, and Tarvek, because Zeetha is in the women's showers and the boys show up in the mess hall. Gil narrowly avoids being plowed into by his father, who is stalking violently around the tables, occasionally with his eyes shut.

Gkika and Vlad enter together, Vlad with a spring in his step and Gkika fluorescing lightly. 'I hope we are not late,' Vlad says genially. 'Gkika vas insistent that I get a medical check-up before going out.'

'You're fine,' barks Commander Wulfenbach. 'Eat something.' He goes back to muttering to himself.

Vlad looks from him to Barry. 'I vas not expecting hyu to be the calm and rational von.'

Barry gives him a wry look. 'I'm afraid my first impulse was "try not to listen or let on anything". Klaus's was "they know where they're going, can we express that in a way that helps Zanta coordinate?" I think I've grown too used to sticking my head in the sand.'

'Probably,' Vlad agrees, just when Agatha's taken too large a bite to do more than huff through her nose. He looks amused at her. 'Hy think Bill got all the initiative. And that hyu should both come home with us.'

Agatha swallows and clears her throat. 'How does that follow?'

Vlad grins toothily at her. 'Hy can hardly call us uninvolved.'

'Hardly, but I'm not sure I want you providing all the initiative!' says Agatha.

'Hy might be pushy enough hyuself,' Gkika says cheerfully, and Zeetha nearly chokes on her eggs laughing.

It occurs to Agatha that the Enclave survives on black market Kaiju sales with a bit of opportunistic
piracy on the side and they are -- hopefully! -- about to remove the first source of income. 'I'll consider it,' she says.

'Neither of you strikes me as the pirate type,' Zeetha remarks, eyebrows rising.

'Oh, they're not going to keep that up,' Barry replies, but he's looking at Vlad. 'They'll still have Jaegers, of course, and some goodwill from this, but the Wall won't be enough if the rest of the world seriously decides a small, heavily armed pirate stronghold is too much of a menace to put up with.'

'Ve haff vays to deal vith that,' Vlad says, and Agatha is fairly sure his eyes literally coruscate. Then he leans back and concedes, 'But ve're not stupid. And Faustus and I are getting old.' He glances at Gkika. 'At least... Faustus is. And ve may need a spokesperson who does not look like a Kaiju.'

'At least Faustus is?' Barry echoes. 'And here I was worrying you'd fall apart on us or something.'

'Maybe vhen Hy die, but then I vill not be too vorried about it. So vill hyu come?'

Barry smiles faintly. 'After we survive this, I'll think about it.'

'Good!' Vlad says, exactly as if Barry had agreed, and smiles back like a very happy shark.

Barry looks exasperated, but there's fondness in it, and then he goes a little pale and nearly bends his fork. Commander Wulfenbach swears. Gil nearly jumps out of his chair. 'What happened?'

'The first of the Kaiju engaged,' Barry says tensely. 'Klaus, sit down. Even if you were talking to the pilots you couldn't actually give them all a play-by-play in advance.'

'How long until we need to go out there?' says Gil, leaning forward.

Tarvek raises an eyebrow at him. 'They're watching the Kaiju, not seeing the future.'

Gil rolls his eyes. 'I know, but once the main wave is headed for the coasts the faster we go the better. They can see that.'

Commander Wulfenbach sits so reluctantly that he looks less at rest than when he was standing. 'The rest of them are still only seeing open water.'

'They're close, though,' Barry says, concentrating and looking a little revolted about it. 'There's a sense of... nearing their purpose. Give it twenty minutes, maybe, before it's too late for them to intercept us if they turn around. We can probably go ahead and start hooking the rest of you in, if you want -- Klaus and I should go last. Maybe try to lure them off.'

'We can go now,' Commander Wulfenbach says, standing up again abruptly. 'Our helicopters are faster than you remember.'

'Do hyu feel it when they die?' Gkika asks unexpectedly, and Agatha feels her stomach twist.

'The Kaiju?' Barry's expression suddenly reminds Agatha of Vlad, even without the fangs. 'Yes, but I don't mind that.'

Death and loss and fury are at the start of Drift as they always are, and this time Klaus remembers, jarring, that Gil and Tarvek must be going through the same. So much for not inflicting it on his son, he thinks ruefully; and Gil's still bothered by it, but this was more practical, something they knew would work (so try it with him later (what?) you think the systems will all evaporate when this is over?) and Barry's thinking of the Enclave again, Pons systems privately held by people who will
basically let him get away with anything. It makes it hard to argue about frivolity, and this time the
ragged pain smooths into amusement and hope and a clean ferocity that Klaus remembers and
welcomes.

The flight out is almost fun -- they're all eager to end this, and he and Barry actually bait two of the
remaining Kaiju into turning back in a (hopefully) futile effort to interfere.

It's when they try to move the Jaeger that they run into problems. The helicopter lets them drop, and
Klaus tries to bring both arms up compactly for the fall -- and the neural load tilts, spreads, a burn
like torn muscle and the taste of blood. They start to slip out of sync, the pain turns searing, and he
can't think what's wrong--

'Klaus!' Barry shouts, which probably means he tried to communicate through the Drift and they
weren't deep enough. 'Klaus, let go, I'm right here.'

'I don't--' Klaus forgets what he was going to say, because in contravention of almost everything they
ever worked out about Drift, Barry makes a deliberately forceful grab for control, to bring himself
closer to Klaus's mindset -- and Klaus only knows that because it actually works. Neither of them
can move any part of the Jaeger at all now, but the fire in his mind starts to recede.

'Klaus,' Barry says again, still aloud, more quietly. 'We're working together on this. Right?' And he'll
ease back as soon as Klaus does. He knows that.

It's been a long time since he wasn't in charge, since he was the youngest of his brothers, the person
who could act as back up to Bill and Barry, husband to Zanta while she was the one with more
responsibility. He isn't that person any more, it just didn't show until he and Barry had to do more
together than be. (You're still you) oh, there's the Drift, and it's faint but...he tries to be the first to pull
back, to tell himself that it doesn't matter if Barry's the one more in charge for a moment. He's not
going to screw things up irreparably in a few seconds (oh, thanks).

A triangular nose breaks the surface, like a glowing blue manta ray or a backlit iceberg, and then
emerges further to show the circle of teeth just below it.

Barry's shocked Where did that one come from?! rings in his head as clear as a bell, and the flood of
adrenaline and facing a live Kaiju actually makes it easier to fall back into old habits, old ways of
fighting. They straighten and reach out with both arms to grab the Kaiju as they plunge into the water
and let their momentum drag it down.

It flips -- it really is shaped like a ray, and they're holding the leading edge of one fin -- following
them down. It nuzzles against one leg, almost invisible underwater, seeming to blend with the sea the
further away it gets until it's just a cloud of glow and darkness, and the grinding whirl starts as its
teeth begin to rotate. Klaus feels the flash of feedback pain from Barry, sharply suppressed. They let
go of the fin and unsheathe the arm blades, jabbing them down. They're still a touch wobbly, not
moving perfectly together, and one blade strikes early and clumsy, below the eye rather than through
it, while the other lags just enough to be left trailing over the skull. The first one, though, tears loose
skin and muscle all the way down to the teeth, and the water clouds with Kaiju Blue.

A sharp violent strike knocks the body of the ray against them -- a punch from Vlad and Gkika's
mantis shrimp-styled Jaeger -- and apparently does some severe internal injury.

'Vell vell, a fresh ticket in at the gate. Are hyu two hokay over there?' Vlad asks as they jointly
wrestle the ray, his movie vampire impression more effective than ever now that he has actual fangs.
(Barry smothers laughter at that despite the tension.) 'And Hy thought hyu said they wouldn't catch
up!'
Barry's amusement whiffs away like a blown-out candle. 'They haven't,' he says grimly. 'They've started sending more through.'

'Hero Duo reporting, we're under attack.' Gil sounds almost happy about it, whatever's attacking them, they're winning.

'Queenie Melody reporting, so are we,' says Zeetha, a moment later.

'We were trying to take them out before they reached Mantis Strike, but we missed one,' Agatha adds apologetically. 'Eep!' she adds, un informatively.

'We're about to miss another,' Zeetha says grimly. 'Get over here quickly.'

The ghost-Drift with the Kaiju isn't nearly as corrosive as the direct connection was, but a shivery ache still goes through them when their current opponent dies. It floats limply upward and they let it go -- they are clearly not going to be short of Kaiju material. Barry turns their attention outward (with surprising expertise for someone who spent thirteen years trying to avoid it (yes, yes, okay)) to the rest. Mantis Strike surges toward the Rift as they grab the one that got past Queenie Melody; two more die, one to each of his children, and another slips away from Agatha and Zeetha (were they fighting three?! (how would any get away otherwise?!)).

The trouble is, they have to grapple; the Kaiju are more agile underwater, and the second escapee eels straight for Mantis Strike. Which Vlad and Gkika might have handled, but Klaus feels Barry's breath catch in horror, and not at the new set of tentacles now squirming through the rift. They aim and fire in desperation as the last two from the first wave come back in at speed, wounding one, and then have to tackle their own second opponent before it gets loose to join the dogpile.

'Change of plan!' Vlad announces. 'Somevon else take the bomb!'

'Give it here,' Klaus and Barry demand, and now they're in perfect sync --

-- But Hero Duo is closest to the Rift --

Mantis Strike releases the bomb, still unactivated, and hurls it through the water.

Hero Duo reaches up as the bomb glides through the water at them, deceptively fast, both hands closing around it and pulling it back against her chest like a goalkeeper catching a soccer ball (playing in the labs and Sleipnir always kicks it hard enough to sting). 'Yesss,' Gil hisses, triumphant. They're amazing. They've been slipping, sometimes, catching at emotional rough edges and he knows Tarvek's been bearing the brunt of them. But when they move they move together, instincts in a fight perfectly matched.

They turn, bull forwards. Jägers aren't made for running, not really, although they're fast for their size, and the water pressure holds them back (like running in a nightmare, always something close behind you and somewhere you need to be, and too slow) and the triumph of battle fades a bit, lets uncertainties leak back. 'Hero Duo reporting, we have the bomb,' Gil says to the radio, to drown out the rabbits flickering by in the back of his head.

'Unfortunately they noticed,' his father says, breath rough and voice snapping with tension. 'You'll need a piece of one to -- look out!'

They jog a step to the side and the Kaiju misses, darting past them, something like one giant octopus tentacle with teeth flexing independently all over its hide. It checks, coils back around, and they fire on it and keep going (can't lose momentum), charge into it center mass and fire again, point-blank.
Then they grab hold of it and keep moving and lift as it tries to grab at the ground for leverage.

They can't carry it high enough to prevent it reaching the seafloor entirely, but it can't get much of a grip either. It can stop trying and twist down around them, tangling their limbs, slowing them down. He hates being unable to move freely in a fight (he can feel Tarvek hating it). The radio chatter says everybody else has the rest tied up for now (Gil hears Zeetha yelp "Grab its tail!" which probably doesn't mean him), and they're actually doing stunningly well for being outnumbered but it can't last.

They stumble and go down, with the head almost under their knees. Tarvek slams a fist hard down into it and they stagger up and run again with the limp body.

Barry shouts a warning that one's getting away, Agatha says Queenie's coming to help, and they feel the shockwave as someone's guns fire underwater. They're being chased.

But they're right on top of the portal. It gapes open, a refulgent wound, and the blood that clouds the water all flares actinic blue in response. All they have to do is throw the body in with the bomb.

Their Kaiju starts to squirm.

Thunder rumbles around them, lightning flares blue. Anevka's knife cuts, but it's clumsy in Stormchaser's hand and there won't be time.

'Not now, you idiot,' Gil snaps. 'Get it together.' He's angry, frustrated, they're almost there and they need to act fast before the Kaiju comes around properly (it should be out, under the scalpel, but every moment feels like too great a risk and they shouldn't be doing this).

'It's going to--' Tarvek begins, and Gil knows anger at the memory isn't helping, is almost as bad as getting caught up in it, but they can't.

'We're not trying to hang onto it!' Gil shouts. 'We have to--'

'Throw it!' His father's bellow blasts over his own words.

Their Kaiju writhes and they nearly lose it, get their arms around it again just in time, and it curls around to try to crush them. How they're going to attach the bomb like this Gil doesn't know.

A glowing blue eye opens and looks over their shoulder.

They both feel the scrape at the middle of their back.

No time.

They look at each other and dive.

Everything is glowing blue murk and for just this minute Agatha could almost, almost envy her uncle the ability to simply know where the Kaiju are. She and Zeetha abandon the melee to chase the whipcord tail that just whisked away from them, boosting their run sparingly with vents rerouted to jet from the feet, and Zeetha's fist closes on the tail as the Kaiju checks unexpectedly. Through the blue haze they can just see Hero Duo plunge into the Rift.

"Did they just--" Commander Wulfenbach sounds stunned, disbelieving, and Agatha feels the same way (Zeetha's thinking it makes sense but she didn't really expect to lose him and the grief is like claws in her chest (no we're not losing them)).

They're going in to get them; it's only a matter of having enough time. It used to take hours to take
down a Kaiju, even on land where the Jaegers were at less of a disadvantage. They've learned from that and even with the intelligence leaks they're winning faster, at least in this last-ditch fight. But now they don't even have minutes.

"We need some help here!" Agatha shouts over the radio. When Mantis Strike looms out of the cloud, Queenie lets her have the Kaiju.

They plunge down, surrounded by eye-searing blue light. The control panel blinks readings at them, the same as if they were still on the ocean floor. Pressure, gravity. Part of Agatha's mind is immediately trying to turn over why. Is it the same gravity, or is something sucking them through at, remarkably, the same rate? Zeetha doesn't care, as long as she knows what they're up against. Is more concerned with the fact that they're falling, sinking.

It's no easier to see in this endless light than it was in the murk of the ocean. They can't see Hero Duo. 'We need to catch up with them,' Agatha says. Zeetha nods back and they vent again, pushing themselves down faster, deeper into the Rift.

Hero Duo looms out of the light, falling tilted on her side, a spiked tentacle wrapped around her. One arm is dangling loose, the tentacle wrapped around the top of it tightening as splintered metal and wires continue to spill out. The tentacle loops around the neck, its other end wrapping the other arm as they watch. The arm holding the bomb. A moment later the bomb lights up, tumbles free. (Those idiots have armed it already (they didn't see us) they didn't have time for anything else.)

They throw all the power they have into venting, diving at Hero Duo as she falls like a drowning corpse.

They're so focussed on catching up that it's a shock when the radio comes to life and Tarvek's voice squawks, 'What are you *doing* here?'

'Coming to get you!' Agatha shouts back. Which is going to be tricky. 'Can you eject?'

She's not surprised when Gil says, his voice taut with pain, 'It's got the escape door wrapped up. You'd better get out of here.'

Zeetha raises her arm and activates the sword, which extrudes and rattles into existence, a katar-style blade designed to punch through armor. Agatha feels her own mouth spread into a grin that echoes Zeetha's. 'Give us a minute.'

The Kaiju lets go of Hero Duo as the sword slices into it, both ends whipping around to try and tangle the wrist before the sword can strike again. Hero Duo's working hand punches one end of it and it stops for a moment, long enough for the second strike to go right through it.

'Go,' says Tarvek. 'We'll eject.'

'Maybe we should too,' says Agatha. 'We're running low on fuel.'

'No!' snaps Gil. 'If you've got any fuel at all, go.'

'How much time is left on the bomb,' Agatha and Zeetha say together.

'Not enough,' says Tarvek. 'Go!'

They dive instead, wrapping Queenie's arms around Hero Duo from behind. If Gil and Tarvek were sure floating escape pods could outrun the bomb they wouldn't be arguing.
What are you doing, you can't carry --' Tarvek begins.

Agatha talks over him. 'Vent from the chest. Everything you've got.' She and Zeetha are using Queenie's jets to pull them into position, Hero Duo face down. The blast a moment later shoves them up, the displays flashing indignantly as their speed increases the pressure. Agatha holds her breath, she doesn't know how much fuel Hero Duo had left.

When the bomb roars below them they're flung up by the blast still faster, around them the world warps and metal groans under the pressure of two worlds coming apart. The light goes out. Water starts seeping in through cracks in the cabin and it's the first Agatha knows that they're out, that they made it, and now they loosen their grip on Hero Duo and go for the escape pods.

It seems to take forever to surface, with nothing left to fight, nothing to do besides cooperate with the pods' automated decompression routines. But they finally break through to sunlight and open air over ocean too deep to guess at the battle below.

Agatha's halfway through opening her escape pod when someone else pulls it open. She's expecting Zeetha and for a moment the sight of Gil is completely disorienting. He pulls her into a sitting position while she's still staring. 'I'm fine,' she says.

A moment later Tarvek scrambles onto her escape pod and says, 'Is she? ... oh, good.'

Agatha says, 'Ask me, not Gil, and you were the ones closer to the blast,' and then throws an arm around each of their necks and hugs them close. Zeetha manages to throw herself out of the water and into the hug with such enthusiasm they nearly overbalance and Agatha starts laughing from sheer, giddy relief.

They're whisked up by one of the helicopters. Several hours later and back at the Castle, everyone has showered, dried, and been served cocoa by Theo -- which is even more alarming than being served it by Zeetha -- and caught up on the progress of the fights around the world.

They have time to start worrying about the remaining Jaegers at the Rift before one of the helicopters calls in a sighting and, not too long after, there's a crackling feedback shriek over Vlad's 'VOOHOO!'

'I take it you won,' Commander Rainha says, relief in her voice. 'Where have you been?'

'It vent a little slower after the keeds skipped out on us,' Vlad says, then, 'Are they all right?'

'Yes. All of them. They’re back at the Castle. Are all of you--?'

'We’re fine,' Commander Wulfenbach puts in, and he sounds exhausted. 'Relatively speaking, anyway. We just made the mistake of letting Vlad get to the radio.'

'Gkika pulled him off,' Barry adds, and Agatha goes a little wobbly with relief at hearing him.

'Hy think all the boys here need a nap,' Gkika throws in.

'And you don't?'

'Hy'm the toughest von here!' Agatha can almost hear the toothy grin. 'But it wouldn't hurt.'

'I think everyone here needs a nap too,' says Agatha. She certainly does, now that she's not anxious for the ones left fighting.
'Well, thanks for calling in before you dropped off,' Gil says, leaning in on her other side.

'You,' Commander Wulfenbach says. 'Don't ever do that to me again.'

'We had to!' Gil protests. 'We were a little tangled up!'

His father sighs, too close to the pickup so it crackles in their ears. 'I know.'

'We won though,' says Gil.

'Dot iz de important part!' Vlad puts in, having apparently reached the radio again.

Gil snorts and grins. 'Yeah, after you threw a bomb at us.'

'It wasn't armed yet!'

'You did a fantastic job,' Barry says, and he sounds tired too but like he's trying not to laugh and not doing very well at it. 'All of you. Good decisions under pressure and it worked.'

'You were certainly effective,' says Commander Wulfenbach. 'Well done.'

Gil lights up, even though it's less effusive praise than Barry's, and when they're too tired to keep the conversation up much longer they all go to bed still glowing with accomplishment.

Agatha wakes up this time to the beat of helicopter rotors and runs out. Uncle Barry comes off the helicopter limping but he still lifts her off her feet when she hugs him. Zeetha races up to her father while Gil hangs back a little, but Commander Wulfenbach is sufficiently overcome, or possibly still so in tune with Barry, that he hauls Gil in and hugs them both.

Vlad grabs her and Barry in spite of having spent the past several hours on a plane with the latter and when they let go, he keeps an arm slung over both of them. 'Zo,' he says. 'Vhen can hyu move in?'

'We said we'd think about it!' Agatha says, laughing.

They do, though. In the aftermath of closing the Rift most of the Jaeger bases are shut down, including the Castle. There's still research to be done (as Commander Wulfenbach points out, they don't know the Kaiju's Masters can't open a second Rift), but there's no need to keep a standing rotation of Jaegers. It's the only home Gil and Tarvek ever knew, so when Commander Wulfenbach decides to come with Barry and Zeetha decides to come with Agatha, they decide to come with everyone as well.

Commander Rainha deciding to move in with them is more surprising, but she’s had highly successful careers in both politics and the military and when she says she wants to spend time with her family she definitely means it literally. (She and Commander Wulfenbach are incredibly sweet together — it’s very disorienting when Agatha catches them at it.)

The move does not altogether thrill the nations of the world -- that many of their heroes clumping together in a pirate stronghold -- but Barry is good at being reassuring when he isn't panicked himself. Faustus is not -- Agatha isn't sure he's ever tried -- but despite mostly recovering he looks frail next to Barry and doesn't argue with his plans in public.

There's a lot to do. The Enclave revolved around maintaining Jaegers and butchering Kaiju, which means the people in it have some very specific technical skills which actually do transfer well to other types of industry. It just takes some convincing to get them to try. The citizens themselves are
almost as bad as Faustus for finding lucrative but illegal angles to everything introduced, but no one really seems to mind when Agatha and Barry find their loopholes (she's starting to suspect that's half the fun).

Agatha takes time to see Adam and Judy again first, but they wait out the most hectic part of the transition before they actually come to visit her at the Enclave. Only they decide to surprise her, which results in Faustus acting all mysterious and Agatha, suspicious, follows him out in time to see them disembark. They hear her shriek all the way across the landing pad and look up -- she can see Adam grinning -- and Faustus appropriates Maxinia on the excuse of leaving Judy's arms free for Agatha.

Agatha hugs them both, hard, and Judy says, 'You look well.'

Agatha grins at her. 'Zeetha won't let me slack off on training just because the Kaiju are gone. She's opened a dojo so she can terrorise all the local kids, too.'

'I suppose the rest of you are busy making scientific discoveries?'

'Yes!' Agatha practically bounces. 'Want to come and see?'

She makes a brief and futile effort to get Maxinia away from Faustus (he is fond of small children, even if his idea of appropriate toys is alarming) and then leads the way to the lab, where Gil and Tarvek are arguing happily over a wiring diagram, and Barry looks up from the notes he's reviewing and immediately lights up.

They both rush to him, and Judy steps back a moment later to look him in the face. 'Well, you look better than last time we saw you.'

'Yes.' He smiles wryly. 'Head's clearer, in more ways than one. Thank you for looking after Agatha when I couldn't.'

'That wasn't actually a hardship,' says Judy. Adam nods.

Barry grins over at Agatha. 'She's easy to get attached to.'

Gil and Tarvek leave their diagram and come over to introduce themselves, Tarvek slightly sheepish. The fact that Hero Duo got the bomb into the Rift means Aaronev's disgrace has hardly touched him, but it's a little different around people who actually knew his father.

'We got so many baby pictures of you,' Judy says, and Gil goes red. 'Don't worry, you were cute.'

'That doesn't really help,' Gil points out, while Agatha tries not to giggle.

Judy turns to Tarvek and takes his hand. 'Agatha tells us you're a good friend,' she says. 'Now, I think she mentioned some AI work...?'

Tarvek smiles at her. 'Yes, I was hoping that a sophisticated enough AI could replace the need for the IJPs on something like the Wall. I've been working with Faustus.' Which is even funnier and more argumentative than when he works with Gil.

'And one day Vlad may forgive them both for it,' Barry puts in. Vlad doesn't seriously mind -- the process is still dangerous and unsettling enough that getting enough people involved to cover the whole threatened coastline is never going to be likely. And not even a great idea unless the Kaiju come back. But he enjoys trying to give Faustus a hard time about it.
They get everybody together for dinner -- old friends and family. The agricultural recovery is going
to take a few seasons to really kick in, but it's good anyway, and Judy and Adam don't balk this time.
They like Zeetha -- of course they like Zeetha.

They find out overnight about the internet-enabled beds Faustus sponsored and in the morning that
Barry put a timer on Commander Wulfenbach's so he wouldn't try to work all night, and they tease
both him and Commander Rainha about this until Zeetha is laughing too hard to eat her breakfast and
Gil, bright red, begs them to stop.

'Your father used to be that easy to embarrass,' Judy says.

'I was not,' says Commander Wulfenbach, finally looking embarrassed.

'He was,' says Barry.

Agatha and Zeetha spend the morning showing them around the town. It's doing well, more
ramshackle houses replaced with more solid buildings. There are new factories, too, and some labs
that aren't attached to the base. 'State of the art,' Agatha tells them, proudly. 'We've had people
moving in to work here. There's some friction -- the people who lived here during the Kaiju
invasions really felt pretty abandoned by their governments. By everyone except the Heterodynes.
They can be really insular and...well, they don't mind stealing from or conning outsiders. Even ones
who've moved here.' She bites her lip. 'Van's handling it, but I don't think the Enclave ever had laws
before. We're working on changing that.'

'You're doing a remarkable job,' says Judy. 'Listen to you, talking about how to run a town.'

'You grew up so fast,' Adam signs.

Agatha laughs a little, feeling proud and almost like crying for reasons she can't name. 'I'm still
learning,' she says.

Judy smiles and brushes hair back from Agatha's face, leaves her hand there. 'Oh, Agatha,' she says.
'We all are.'