**Summary**

When monsters came through a rift deep below the Pacific Ocean, the world needed a new kind of heroes. Learning to trust a partner so completely was difficult once. But what set Rangers apart was their willingness to do whatever it took.

**Notes**

This submission is part of HD Smoochfest on Livejournal. The theme this year is Media Remix, which invited participants to "remix" the story from a Book, Movie, Television Show. The author/artist will be revealed at the end of the fest.

This was created for Prompt Number: M36

Original Work Name: Pacific Rim

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Author's Notes: OMG, this fic. It has killed me. I swear it turned into a kaiju and ran rampant. __; I was just going to do something with Harry and Draco as partners, and then I had to go and give them backstory. UGH. I hope you love this, mystery prompter! (And
everyone else.) I want to shower love on my betas: Jane, Lauren, and Lesca. Thank you so much for putting up with this mess of mine and pointing out all the places I wrote stuff in the wrong tense or had sentences that must have made sense at 4 A.M. but didn't at a decent hour. Any other errors are mine and mine alone! A huge thank you also to the lovelies in the HD_Writers Chatzy rooms - I couldn't have done it without your constant encouragement, word wars, and willingness to listen to me whine. ♥ Finally, a huge thank you to the mods for being the most patient beings alive as this thing spiralled out of control to be longer and longer. You guys are completely awesome! ♥
Chapter 1

10th August, 2013 – Year 0 – 9:32 A.M. – K-Day:

“Sirius! You're going to spoil him,” Lily scolded, rolling her eyes. She really should have expected it. He had told her all through her pregnancy that he was going to spoil his godson rotten.

“Can you blame me? I've barely seen you three this past year except for holidays,” Sirius said, putting on an exaggerated pout. “And I haven't gotten him that much, even.”

“That is the fourth toy you've bought him, and you have only been here two days,” Lily reminded him, completely deadpan.

“No, it's the second thing I've bought him. I won the other two of them. At that fair, yesterday.” Sirius beamed as Lily just glowered at him.

“One of which is huge.”

“It's a big, black, shaggy dog. How could I not? If I can't be here in person, then I will be here in spirit. And the little wolf plush for him to sleep with is supposed to be Remus.” He grinned his triumph when Lily rolled her eyes fondly.

“Shall I suppose the stag figurine is James, then? Where did you even find that thing?”

“Of course, and I shall never reveal my secrets!” He made a ‘wooo’ sound and fluttered his fingers like a Muggle magician, making James snicker and Harry clap. He rewarded an over the top bow to his adoring crowd. “But seriously, when does that blo- ah, stupid case of yours finally end?” Sirius pulled a face, though he smoothed it back into a grin when Harry leaned over to poke his cheek.

James scoffed. “If Horowitz has his way, probably never. We've been working this case since we became Aurors, and we have the most evidence against Rotan out of all of the countries he has charges in. He should have been sent back to the British Ministry, but the Americans are still claiming that the trials should be held here since they're the ones who managed to finally catch the slimy bastard.” James sighed, resting his chin on top of his son's head so he could pretend he didn't see Lily's glare at his language. “But honestly, I don't care whose prison he ends up in, just
as long as we can stick him there to rot for the rest of his life.”

“Hear, hear,” Sirius agreed. “And then you can bring this one home!” He lifted his three-year-old godson out of James’s grasp and tossed him in the air, laughing as he deftly caught the boy. Harry shrieked with laughter, curling against Sirius’s side while clutching his newest toy. “But enough shop talk, you said you were going to give me the grand tour today, so let's be off on it!”

“Wait just a little bit more?” Lily chewed her lip, searching the crowds around them. “He might still show up,” she said, trailing off uncertainly.

“I wouldn't count on it,” Sirius grumbled with a sneer.

“You said you would be civil,” she scolded in a long-suffering tone.

“And we will be, love,” James said placatingly, shooting a warning look to Sirius. “But don't forget what he said to you the last time you spoke in person. He still owes you a huge apology.”

“As you both owe him.”

“Yes, all right. So let's hope we've all grown up into proper adults, et cetera, et cetera. Fact remains, if he doesn't show up soon, he...might not show at all. Just be prepared for that, okay?” James curled an arm around Lily's shoulders, kissing the top of her head when she leaned against him.

“Yes, I know. But I can't help but hope he'll come. San Francisco might not be home, but it's still a fascinating city, and I can't help but hope he'll let us show him around it.” She sighed softly. “Look, there's an ice cream place right over there. How about we get some and give him another half an hour. If he hasn't shown by then,” she paused, biting her lip, “then I'll take that as he's not coming at all.”

“As much as I never liked him, even I'm hoping he'll show just to get that sadness off your face, love,” Sirius said lightly as he turned a squirming Harry to hang upside down.

Harry squeaked in delight. “Stop! Stop!” he said, wriggling as he giggled.
Lily rolled her eyes and swept her son up, sticking her tongue out at Sirius when he pouted. She was all ready to make a smart remark at him when they heard the first screams. Gripping Harry tighter, she immediately switched to her Auror mindset. “What direction did that come from?”

“That way, I think,” James said grimly, pointing to the west. More screams sounded, coming closer, and then they heard it.

“SKRAAAAAAAAAAAAAW!”

Lily yelped, ducking her head while covering Harry’s ears. She knew it must have hurt him as much as it did her, but the poor kid seemed more scared than upset. When she uncurled and her ears stopped ringing, she began to hear a distant crunching noise. It was different than how Muggle films usually made it sound, but she still knew it for what it was. “Guys, we should probably run,” she suggested, backing up. Not a moment later, a frantic crowd began to flow into the small square, rushing past them and to the east.

Above the buildings behind them rose a hulking monster that Lily knew she couldn't have conjured in her worst nightmares.

James and Sirius were drawing their wands, looking scared but resolute. “Lily, love, get Harry out of here,” James said in as low of a tone as he could over the din of the crowd.

She wanted to protest, she really did. A terrified part of her wanted to drag them with her, leave this to someone else – anything to protect her husband and pseudo-brother-in-law, her family. The Auror part of her wanted to draw her own wand and stand with them, doing her duty. But the part of her that was a mother was, as always, first and foremost in her mind. She kissed James quickly once and squeezed Sirius's hand, then turned and ran.

She knew she couldn't outrun a creature of that size, especially while carrying a toddler. From the way she had seen it tearing through buildings it was clear that hiding was useless. She could Apparate. But where? Their apartment was by the waterfront, the direction the creature had come from. Most of their usual haunts were in that direction as well. She didn't know the tourist places that they had scouted out to show their guests very well and couldn't bring up an even halfway decent picture of them in her mind. Even if she could there were likely too many people there for a safe transit. She wouldn't risk Side-Along Apparition with Harry like that. The only places she knew well that weren't in the wrong direction were on the other side of the world instead. Maybe she could run in this direction for a little while, and then head north or south, perpendicular to the beast? Controlling her breathing to keep the panic from setting in, she used
the adrenaline to force herself to run faster.

When she came to a bend in the road, she chanced one more look back. She couldn't see Sirius anywhere, just rubble blocking off where he had been. James was throwing every hex and curse he knew, even some she was certain he had learned from the Dark Wizards they usually arrested. Few landed – most didn't seem to have any effect at all. But the monster must have noticed, because with a growl it darted a giant clawed hand forward and slammed it down on top of James. When his scream of terror cut off, she let loose one of her own. Harry's small fingers dug into her shoulders as he began to wail.

Lily quickly turned and began to run again, not even thinking about where she was going, not even able to. She had to get Harry away from that thing. Nothing else mattered now, just him. She strained for even half a memory of some place else, some place within her range, but the panic was making it impossible to catch hold of any one thought.

She felt the sobs tearing through her chest as the sounds of destruction kept getting closer and closer. She wouldn't give up, she wouldn't give up, she wouldn't give up—

Agony raced up her spine. She fell, instinct the only reason she succeeded in curling around Harry to shield him. The chunk of concrete that had knocked her down was followed by a succession of similar debris, the impacts felt all along her body. She screamed out the pain until the cascade ceased. Gritting her teeth, she pushed Harry out from under her. “Baby, you need to run.” Her legs were at least broken, if not entirely crushed in places. Her back felt like it was on fire and was almost certainly broken as well. She couldn't move. But Harry still had a chance.

“Mummy,” he whimpered, pulling at her hand. “Come on. You gotta get up.”

“Oh, baby,” she said through tears. “I wish I could, but I can't. Please, love. Please. I love you so much. Be a good boy, now. Mummy needs you to run. Run as fast as you can.”

“Not without you!” He was scared and crying, dragging at her hand with the single-mindedness of a child, as if he could pull her from the rubble all on his own.

“You have to. You have to go now. Please, before more of it comes. Please!” Her sobs were quickly turning to hyperventilation.

She could hear the cracking all around them. She looked heavenward, ready to pray to any
entity out there for her son's salvation, only to see the monster's massive claw swing overhead and through the buildings on either side of them. “NO!” she screamed.

And then it was over.

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13th August, 2013 – Year 0 – 4:17 P.M:

Private First Class Jenkins could only stand there, frozen in horror for a moment. He’d seen a lot of carnage that day, but this just made his chest feel like it was going to collapse in on itself. Shaking himself out of it, he rushed down the slope of the rubble into the strange clearing.

The kid was dirty, caked in the dust and ash that came from the destruction around him. Here and there were specks of blood where rocks or glass must have caught him, and a particularly nasty gash had smeared blood down his forehead. Tear tracks made lines through the grime on his face, but they had long since dried up. He was doubtlessly dehydrated after three days in the summer heat, and probably starving as well.

And he was holding the hand sticking out from a mountain of rubble.

“Fuck,” Jenkins said quietly, drawing the kid's attention and immediately regretting the swear. He couldn't have been more than a few years old, but his eyes were the sort of hollow that said that he had witnessed more than many of Jenkins's superiors.

“Hey, little guy,” he said, trying to sound reassuring and pretty sure he was failing at it. They hadn't honestly thought they'd find many survivors. Just bodies. “How 'bout we get you out of here, okay?”

The kid just turned back to look at the hand, gripping it tighter. “M'ny.” His voice cracked out of a parched throat that had Jenkins swallowing in sympathy.

Taking his canteen from his pack, he slowly walked closer and knelt to offer it. “Here, drink some of this.” The kid was thirsty, and Jenkins had to keep a good hold of the canteen to keep him from accidentally upending it all over himself. “There, now. What's your name, then?” He tried to sound friendly but wasn't sure it was convincing.
“Harry.”

“Well, Harry, I'm just gonna make a call, okay? I'm just going to be right over there.” He waited for a nod, but Harry just turned back toward the hand – his mother's hand. Christ, Jenkins thought as he went to call for backup.

It didn't take long for the rescue crew to make it there. They had some issues getting Harry to let go of the hand but were ultimately successful when they told him that the men didn't want the rocks to fall on him when they dug her out. Jenkins knew that really they just didn't want the kid to see his mother's mangled body. They barely managed to block it from the cameras when the news vultures rushed in to snap shots of the 'boy who lived.' A few of the workers had to dash to the side to relieve their stomachs as the damage was revealed, but Jenkins made himself search the body for identification out of a sense of duty. He'd been the one to find the kid; he'd be the one to make sure that the boy had the best chance of finding any family he might have left out there.

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14th October, 2015 – Year 2 – 6:28 P.M.:

Uncle Vernon swore when his sitcom was interrupted by the news report. A fifth kaiju was attacking, making landfall in a city called Vancouver, somewhere on the west coast of Canada. Harry stopped dusting the mantle and crawled to sit so he could see the telly. Kaiju attacks were the only time that Aunt Petunia wouldn't yell at him for stopping his chores to watch it.

The news reporter relayed statistics as a helicopter bravely surveyed the shambling monstrosity. Harry prayed for the people in the city. The priest at the church Aunt Petunia made them go to every Sunday said that it would help, and Harry wanted to believe that it could. Even if it hadn't done any good the last three times.

This one had been codenamed Crouch due to its posture. Its back legs were strong, though, as the city learned when it leaped from street to street, over buildings and bridges until it got to the city proper. Everyone seemed prepared for another slaughter. The news casters were debating on how quickly the nuclear strikes would be called in.

Except those weren't fighter jets that were flying toward the kaiju – they were helicopters. The reporters went quiet as Harry held his breath, getting a first look at what they were transporting. It reminded Harry of some of Dudley's toys, but it was huge. The sound of the giant
metal thing hitting the ground when the choppers dropped it seemed to echo around the room.

And then it moved.

Harry crept closer, careful not to block Uncle Vernon's view, but needing to see this as best as he could. The news team erupted into chatter again, but Harry tuned them out. He was too transfixed on the sight of the giant robot thing that was actually fighting the kaiju.

The battle lasted for almost two and a half hours, during which Harry stayed glued to the screen. Whenever the machine – a 'mech' they were calling a 'Jaeger' – faltered, Harry dug his nails into his palms. And when the battle cleared and Crouch was dead, Harry laughed and cheered like he hadn't in what felt like his whole life. When the hatch on top of the Jaeger opened and out crawled a man and a woman wearing odd-looking armour, Harry's breath caught in his chest. There were people in that machine. It was people who beat the kaiju.

Filled with a sense of wonder and awe, Harry didn't even care when Aunt Petunia scolded him for where his nail-damaged hands had bled on the carpet.

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22nd November, 2016 – Year 3 – 11:19 A.M.:

Reports were still coming in, ranging widely from censure to facts to speculation. Lucius tapped his foot as Dobby piled their luggage in the front hall far too slowly. “Faster, you imbecile!”

The House-Elf squeaked in shame, raking his nails over his scalp. “Dobby is sorry, Master! Dobby will pack faster, Master!” He disappeared before Lucius lost his temper.

“Now, now, darling. Calm down. The attacks are months apart, we have nothing to worry about,” Narcissa chided. She brushed a hand lightly down Lucius's arm in what he knew was meant to be a soothing gesture.

“I cannot be calm, Narcissa. You've heard the reports! That–that thing was cloaked. Who knows how long it has been here, waiting and swimming! We're just lucky that it went in the other direction,” he whispered furiously, reining in his fear so as not to embarrass himself in front of his
wife.

The *Daily Prophet* and all of the Wizarding Wireless channels were in an uproar. A kaiju had made it all the way to Chennai, India – completely invisible to all scanners both Wizarding and Muggle. Some were saying that they had detected activity in the portal being called The Breach but the kaiju's readings had disappeared after it came through, meaning that it was impossible to not detect their entry even if the kaiju could evade them afterward. Others were speculating that any number of the beasts could be lurking just off the coastlines anywhere in the world.

Wiltshire might technically be landlocked, but the range of destruction the kaiju could carve was daunting nonetheless. It was becoming obvious that so long as the threat existed that life on an island – even one on the other side of the world from the point of entry – was too dangerous. And Lucius would not stand for his wife and heir to be in such danger if he could do anything about it.

In the beginning, Wizarding colonies had cropped up further inland on the continents surrounding the Pacific Rim. Far back from the water, a dome of powerful magic shields would be raised over small areas, allowing Wizards to live in safety – so long as they contributed some of their magic to powering the spells that held the shields in place. The Muggles had whined, vilifying the Wizards for not allowing them to reside within the sanctums as well. Lucius could only curl a lip at the fools who refused to understand the sound reasoning. The more Muggles allowed to populate the domes, the fewer Wizards there would be to contribute their magic. It was bad enough with the naturally weaker Muggleborns, who were almost certainly not carrying their own weight. To let Muggles in as well would spell disaster for sure.

After the recent attack, more domes were being erected for Wizards evacuating from other coastal areas and islands that had originally been believed safe. Lucius had heard from some of their relatives in France that they and some associates were establishing a dome further inland, in the hills near the country's northeastern corner. It had been the only logical option. He had immediately ordered his vaults transferred and begun preparations for his businesses so that he could command them via owl and Floo. (Just because he was leaving the country himself didn't mean that his workers would be, of course.) Now, all that was left was their personal belongings – if that lazy House-Elf could manage to accomplish that in the next century.

Dobby seemed to choose that moment to disturb Lucius from his contemplation by noisily appearing. “This is being the last of the luggage, Master! All of Master and Mistress and Little Master's things are present. Mitzy and Hatty is securing the furnishings in the basement vault now, sir.” The small creature wrung its hands, waiting for approval.

“Your speed is certainly found wanting,” Lucius said coldly, causing Dobby to whimper. “But there is nothing to do for it now that would not delay us further. Be grateful.” He had to fight to rein in a roll of his eyes, turning his back on the happy blubbery before he changed his mind.
“Narcissa, my dear, would you collect our son? We shall be off presently.”

“Of course, darling,” she said smoothly. “He is being difficult about leaving, but I cannot blame the child too much. This is his home.” She turned to the still-muttering House-Elf. “Dobby, where did you last see Draco?”

“Little Master is being on the second floor in the third alcove, Mistress,” came the obedient reply.

“Very good. We will be down soon. Do be ready, Lucius,” she warned as she turned and glided away.

“Of course, dear,” Lucius said, his jaw tight. Turning a baleful eye on the still-present House-Elf, he motioned to the stack of luggage. “I would suggest you make quicker work of shrinking it than you did of packing it, or I might just leave you here.” Ignoring the wail of distress, Lucius turned and strode to the gardens. He might as well enjoy a pipe while he waited for his wife to drag his recalcitrant son out of hiding.

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30th July, 2021 – Year 7 – 11:43 P.M.:

Harry readjusted himself again, trying to find a way to curl up on his small cot that would still give him enough light to read by. The single bulb in his cupboard was dull as it was, but he’d become accustomed to making do with it. Leafing through the social studies book he would be needing for the next school year, he found the passages near the end that talked about the Kaiju War. If he was going to study to alleviate the boredom of being locked in, he was at least going to study something interesting.

Before he could begin, one of the spiders he often shared the cupboard with dropped down onto his nose. Sighing, he gently transferred it to his knee. “Have you come to help me study, then?” He chuckled to himself when the spider just stayed where he’d set it. “Then perhaps I’ll tell you a story.

“See, most people used to look at the stars and wonder if there was life out there, or if we were really alone in the universe. Turned out that they were looking in the wrong direction. When aliens did come to our world it was from deep beneath the Pacific Ocean – that’s on the other side
of the world from here. In a place called the Mariana Trench, this portal between dimensions appeared; we call it The Breach.

“I was only three when the first kaiju made landfall in San Francisco. I'll never forget the sound it made – it was the loudest thing I’ve ever heard. They say people could hear it from dozens of miles away. I don't remember much, just flashes because I was just a baby and all then. It apparently took three days for the American military to find me in the wreckage. My dad tried to save us, and my mum tried to get us away, but they both died and I was stuck there. I vaguely remember a soldier finding me and then a lot of people talking at me, and then they sent me here to live with Aunt Petunia's family.”

Harry frowned, turning to read from the book in an attempt to block out the personal memories with the impersonal text. “Vocabulary. 'Kaiju: a term taken from the Japanese language that means giant monster. Cultural note: this term used to be used to describe a classic Japanese film genre (example, the Godzilla franchise).’ 'Jaeger: (pronounced yey-gehr) a term taken from the German language that means hunter.’ Muggle, Wizard, Witch, Auror, Breach, blah, blah, blah. Interested yet?” Harry nudged the small spider, making sure he hadn't accidentally injured it when he'd moved it. It flailed its legs at him but stayed put. Shrugging, he picked a paragraph and continued to read aloud.

The first kaiju received the codename Wormtail from the American and British pilots that first engaged it. This was due to the appearance of its powerful tail that it used to break buildings in half, which appeared to be segmented like an earthworm. Other names that were briefly used by the media, who viewed its tail and beak-like mouth as more akin to a rat, were “the giant rat,” “Ratzilla,” and “R.O.U.S.” (a pop culture reference to the film The Princess Bride).

After coming ashore in San Francisco, California, U.S.A., Wormtail then proceeded on to wreak destruction on the cities of Sacramento and Oakland before it was finally taken down. By the time the combined forces of tanks, jets, and three nuclear warheads managed to defeat it – six days and thirty-five miles later – three major cities had been reduced to rubble and poisoned by the kaiju's toxic blood. Tens of thousands of lives were lost during the attack and its aftermath, though reports vary on the exact number. This is in part due to the fact that some are still considered missing as their bodies were never recovered and in part because some of the casualties were amongst the Wizarding population who had never registered with the Muggle governments.

As many mourned the dead and memorialised the attack, a secondary uproar had begun due to the revelation of the existence of magic. Many thought that the uniformed Aurors and occasional Witch or Wizard in civilian attire were part of an invading army wielding strange weaponry. The non-magical populace, whom they refer to as Muggles, seemed to fear the Wizards as much as they had the monster who had forced them to disclose themselves. Many believed that it was the Wizards who had summoned the creature that had wrought such destruction. When it was confirmed that the Wizards indeed wielded magic, suspicions only deepened.
Harry snorted. “I was too young to know what was going on back then, really. It took me a while to figure out why Uncle Vernon would get so angry or Aunt Petunia so scared when odd things happened around me. They’re still scared that the neighbours will find out that I’m a Wizard.” Harry frowned. “At least, I think I am. I mean, I can’t ask them about it, and I haven’t gotten a letter yet like people say you will the summer after you graduate primary school. But...I still think so?” When the spider just sat there, Harry rolled his eyes at himself for having expected a response. He turned the page and began again.

As talks ensued between the Muggle and Wizarding governments, the Wizards attempted to prove their innocence (for more on this topic, see Chapter 8). It was during one of these conferences, nine months after the initial attack, that another kaiju surfaced in Manila. Codenamed Quirrell for its quivery, squirrelly movements, the long-limbed monster used its two mouths to both destroy buildings and consume any living creature it encountered. While the duration of the attack was much shorter, lasting only three days instead of six, the death count was still in the tens of thousands with thousands more injured.

Rescue workers came from all over the world to assist in the effort to rebuild. It wasn't until dozens of them had perished that they discovered that the phosphorescent blue blood the kaiju had left behind was highly toxic. They began to refer to it as ‘kaiju blue’ and scientists raced to find a way to neutralise its effects before many more died.

After the second attack, researchers studying underwater earthquake tremors noted that strong readings had occurred in the same exact area just an hour or two before both attacks. The Japanese launched a probe to observe the deep underwater area and for the first time humanity was able to observe The Breach. Muggle scientists and Wizarding scholars agreed to work in an uneasy tandem, studying the observable rift.

Six months into their studies, the apprehensive teams were united in their panic when the rift activated and a kaiju came through for the third time. Readings taken then – and since then – caused them to form the theory that The Breach was a portal between separate dimensions. Also, given the scientific data, it was concluded that the portal was being opened from the other side. While this served to absolve the Wizarding population of any guilt, it came at a terrible cost.

Despite the advanced warning, they were no more prepared when the third kaiju (codename: Karkaroff) hit Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. Death tolls were actually higher than the previous two attacks due to several factors, including the large tourist population and the political issues revolving around Mexico's initial resistance to accept air support from neighbouring countries.

The fourth attack occurred only four months after that, ravaging Sydney, Australia. At this
point, people were starting to understand that these attacks were not going to stop, and that it was entirely likely that this was just the beginning. When the kaiju (codenamed: Carrow) survived the first nuclear strike and had to be lured away from the city a second time, the governments surrounding the Pacific Rim deemed that we needed a new way to fight this threat – we needed a new weapon.

The world came together, pooling knowledge and resources, and throwing away old rivalries for the sake of the greater good. Where magic had always caused Muggle technology to malfunction in the past, the joint efforts of scientists and scholars from both sides of the line found a way to blend them together. There was certainly some trial and error in their efforts, but they were ultimately successful. Arthur Weasley, a long-time scholar and huge proponent of this joint venture, dubbed the resulting collaboration 'magitech' – which would become the official term worldwide.

From this, physicist Dr. Dougal McGregor and scholar Prof. Minerva McGonagall managed to devise the Jaeger Program. When asked about the reasons behind the programme, McGonagall has simply replied, “To fight monsters, we created monsters of our own.” The endeavour faced multiple setbacks at first from funding, suspicion, and fear of the technology employed. The Jaegers made use of a system that combined neural sciences with magic called Legilimency in a magitech device called the Pons to allow a human mind to interface with the machine's controls.

A friend of McGonagall’s, veteran Auror Alastor Moody became their first test pilot. Unfortunately, the neural load proved too much for a single pilot to withstand and resulted in the pilot experiencing an extreme seizure. The mental strain followed by the two-hundred foot drop left Moody badly injured and unable to continue. Confident in their work and without another volunteer, Dr. McGregor chose to act as the pilot for their second run and official demonstration. When McGregor began to show similar symptoms of strain, McGonagall used the Pons to create a bridge between his mind and her own. This quick thinking saved the life of her fiancé (McGregor) and gained them the funding needed to produce more of the Jaegers.

This resulted in the creation of a dual-pilot system. It was discovered that when two minds interacted in the system, their mental capacity was not doubled but instead multiplied. The process became known as the 'Drift.' By sharing the neural load within the Drift, pilots would be able to handle the strain of moving the several thousand ton mechs.

Seven months after the attack on Sydney, the fifth kaiju (codename: Crouch) attempted an attack on Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada – and it was stopped. McGregor and McGonagall had piloted their Jaeger, named Unity, to victory in front of the eyes of the whole world. In the attacks after that (see page 394), it came to be believed that we were winning. More Jaegers were being built in every country lining the Pacific Rim, stored in an increasing number of deployment centres called Shatterdomes. The Pan-Pacific Defence Corps (P.P.D.C.) was established as an international military unit under the jurisdiction of the Muggle United Nations.
The Shatterdomes were placed at strategic points on coastlines around the Pacific Rim. Whenever a new kaiju was detected coming through the breach, the P.P.D.C. technicians would follow its trajectory and be able to deploy the Jaegers closest to its destination. To date, while a smattering of individual Jaegers have fallen (see page 394) there has yet to be a single kaiju to survive more than a handful of hours.

But the Jaegers are only as good as their pilots, whom the P.P.D.C. refers to as Rangers. Where people had been afraid under the onslaught of the kaiju, they began to revere the brave Rangers who were able to stand against them. This caused many of the pilots to become akin to rock stars or athletes. Enthusiasts would keep records of their statistics, fans wanted to know all about them, and paparazzi captured every moment of their lives that they could. Manufacturers saw profit in this, and toys and clothing based off not only the Jaegers but also the kaiju started to flood the market. The danger started to become governmental propaganda. The urge to present to people that everything was under control only seemed to marginalise the effect of the attacks, making people forget all the lives and livelihoods that had been lost and were still being lost whenever a kaiju made landfall.

In 2018, laws were passed that required people to move to a bunker or safe zone away from the attack or face criminal charges. This was following the phenomenon of spectators who wanted to see or record the fights first hand and the so-called 'adrenaline junkies' who were ignorant of the real dangers...

Harry yawned and turned in time to see the spider finally scurry off his knee. “Yeah, me too,” he said, grinning. Checking the alarm clock he’d gotten last year after Dudley asked for one that played music instead, he grinned to himself when he saw it was after midnight. “Happy birthday to me.” He stretched and pulled the string to turn the bulb off, then settled down in his cot to sleep.

31st July, 2021 – Year 7 – 8:00 A.M.:

Harry woke to a banging on the front door. He rubbed his eyes and groggily tried to make sense of his clock in the dim light coming from under the door. Somebody is going to regret waking Uncle Vernon up this early on a Saturday, he thought to himself morosely. It was very likely that he would also regret his uncle being woken up so early as well.

“Harry! Get the door!” Aunt Petunia yelled from down the hall.
“I can't, you locked my door!” he called back, attempting to sound apologetic. He didn't even know what he'd done that time. Uncle Vernon had just come back from getting the mail and was suddenly in a rage. He'd locked Harry in without supper, grumbling about what a burden he was.

Voices echoed down the hallway – Uncle Vernon's snarl and another, much more jovial voice. Harry couldn't tell what he was saying, but he had a west country accent and sounded like he was possibly just as large as Uncle Vernon. He pressed his ear against the door in an attempt to hear better. Half of it was curiosity, half of it was wanting to know exactly why his uncle would be in a bad mood later. He barely had a second to scramble back when Aunt Petunia came stomping into the space before his door and yanked it open.

“Morning?” he said hesitantly, wincing at the light suddenly flooding in.

Aunt Petunia did not look amused as she stood there in her dressing gown. “You have a visitor,” she said quietly, yanking him out of the cupboard by his arm and hustling him down the hallway.

Uncle Vernon stepped aside, red face at odds with his white and blue striped pyjamas. It took Harry a moment to realise that he was looking at a massive man in the doorway, his red beard the only thing visible above his neck until Harry got close enough. Despite his size, the man had kind eyes and Harry gave him a tentative smile. The man beamed back at him. “Harry! There's a good lad. Just look at how ye've grown. His spittin' image, ye are.”

“Um, nice to meet you?” Harry extended his hand, a bit awed at how it was dwarfed when the man took it.

“Oh! Right. Rubeus Hagrid's the name. I've got somethin' fer ye.” He started rummaging in the many pockets of his coat, pulling odds and ends out before dismissing them and going for a different pocket. Some of the things didn't really look like they should fit into pockets. He pulled a cake out of one of them, looking at it with a bit of confusion before handing it to Harry. “Well, that's for ye too, but not what I was looking for,” he said, trailing off as he went back to his searching.

Harry looked at the cake in awe. It was a bit squished and looked a bit hard and the writing was misspelled, but – it was for him. He'd never gotten a cake on his birthday before, so even with all of its imperfections it was absolutely brilliant. He smiled happily, not really minding that Uncle Vernon would be upset later; this was worth it.
“Aha!” Hagrid said, brandishing a folded up piece of paper. Harry noticed his uncle and aunt both going white when they saw it, and began to wonder. Before he could think about it too much, the paper was being shoved at him.

“Um,” he said, motioning with the cake that was taking up his hands, not really wanting to give it back if he could help it. With a flustered apology Hagrid unfolded the page and held it out for Harry to read.

Dear Mr. Potter,

We are pleased to inform you that you have a place at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment. Term begins on 1 September. If we have not received a reply by 31 July, we will be sending a representative to speak to you and your family as per the Children of Muggle Homes Act of 2017.

Sincerely,

The Hogwarts Headmaster and Staff

Harry just stared at the letter, barely taking note when Hagrid exchanged it for the cake so that he could hold it in his hands. His letter! His acceptance letter to a Wizarding school! It had finally come. But wait, if they were expecting a reply by that day... Harry started to laugh. Of course. That had been why his uncle had been more irascible than usual lately. That was why he'd been shut in his cupboard after the mail had been collected. He had been sent a letter before, but his relatives must have tossed it. He knew that they didn't want the neighbours to find out that he was a Wizard, but to keep him from even getting to go to a proper school... He was angry and elated all at once.

Rereading the letter over and over, making sure it was real, he mostly tuned out the indignant conversation between his aunt and uncle and Hagrid. In the end, Hagrid won out when he told them how it was possible to lose control of untrained magic during a Wizard's teenage years. “Growth spurts an' all, y'see?” It also might have helped that Hagrid indicated the vehicle that he'd arrived in: a carriage pulled by flying horses, loaned to him by a lady-friend. Anxious to get it out from in front of their house before anyone noticed, Aunt Petunia ordered Harry to get dressed so they could go and get him his supplies.

Entering the secret doorway into the Wizarding pub was amazing, as was the hidden door behind it that led out into a place called Diagon Alley. A mishmash of various shops all piled in together, selling everything that Harry imagined a Wizard could want or need. Hagrid bought him
an ice cream from Fortescue's to celebrate his birthday and then got him an owl as a gift. Not only was the owl the first real gift anyone had ever given him – birthday or otherwise – but Harry would bet anything that she'd be the best birthday gift he'd ever receive. Harry couldn't stop staring at her in awe as he followed along behind Hagrid to the book store.

A thought had Harry drawing up short. “Wait, Hagrid. I...I don't have any money. How am I supposed to buy my supplies?” His stomach twisted at the thought. He hadn't thought to ask for any from his relatives, and wasn't even certain they would have given it to him if he had.

“Ah, right. Fergot to tell ye. Bein' an official representative, I was given special access with Gringotts – the British branch of where Wizarding money is kept. There's a fund fer students who cannæ afford their supplies, but lucky fer you we found records of yer parents' old vaults,” Hagrid explained, ushering Harry inside the store.

“My parents had vaults? Like, money vaults? Plural?” he asked in bewilderment as he allowed himself to be shuffled along. He supposed that maybe Aunt Petunia hadn't thought about it, because not even her aversion of all things magic would have kept her from what she would have considered her inheritance.

Hagrid made a noise of affirmation, then pointed Harry toward the book he'd need for Care of Magical Creatures. It took almost half an hour to find all the books he'd require as it was rather crowded. Luckily he had Hagrid, who could part the crowd pretty easily as well as reach the upper shelves that Harry would have had no luck with.

Quills and parchment came next, and then some odd Potions gear. Next were robes, and Harry was both excited and dreading it. On one hand: clothes that fit and were bought specifically for him. On the other hand: standing still and getting poked with pins. Before they could make it to Madam Malkin's, a sign of a different sort caught Harry's eye.

“Hagrid,” he said tentatively. “Do you think we could go there?”

“Hm? Where's there now?”

Harry pointed across the way. He couldn't tell what the storefront normally dealt in, but there was a sign outside that read, “Jaeger Program Compatibility Testing. Enquire Inside to Complete Your Testing Requirements.” Harry remembered hearing about the laws passed that all citizens had to be tested once they reached adulthood, but knew that some got tested earlier as well. While the programme had an excess of people volunteering for it, it was apparently difficult to find individuals who were suitable for piloting.
“Y’mean Ollivander’s? Aye, we need to get ye yer wand, o’ course. I was jest gonna wait ’til after ye’d been fitted and circle back to that side o’ the road,” Hagrid said offhandedly.

“No, um, I meant the one next to it?” Harry paused for a second. “Though I do want my wand, too!”

Hagrid chuckled, then frowned when he read the sign. “A wee bit young to be gettin’ tested, lad. I knew yer folks, an’ I know ye might have a bit of a chip on yer shoulder, but ye should really maybe wait,” he said nervously.

Harry shook his head resolutely. “It’s not that. I just want to help. I don’t want anyone else to—” he paused searching for the words, “to end up like me, I guess?” Hagrid looked uncertain, his bulk making it impossible to conceal his shifting from foot to foot. “Can we? Please? At least I’ll know if I can do it.”

With a sigh, Hagrid gave in. “Fine. But don’t be too heartbroken if it comes to naught.”

Harry grinned at him, taking his hand and dragging him across the road and through the doors. There was a crowd of people waiting already and a sign counting down to when the next group would be taken. A sound went off and a tall woman walked out to address them. She looked familiar, but Harry just couldn’t place her.

“Welcome, participants. In a moment we will take you back and divide you between several stations,” she said in a pleasant Scottish accent. “These trials will all help us discern whether you will be eligible to enroll in the Jaeger training programme. Even if you make it here, it will not guarantee that you will become a Ranger. However, many who do not qualify often choose other means of helping the programme, such as putting their efforts into the J-Tech or K-Science divisions. If you were hoping to join as a support position and not as a Ranger-candidate, please speak to Mr. Hurley over there.” She indicated a squat, smiling Wizard off to the side who gave the group a small wave. A few people wove over to join him.

“As for the rest of you, we will divide you into those who are hoping to join with a partner and those who are joining alone. The exercises may seem daunting, but you will be scored more on method than on completion. Remember, you do not have to be star athletes or the head of your class. What matters the most in the end are two things: being able to hold your own in a fight and possessing the unique skill of being Drift compatible. The former is much easier than the latter, I assure you,” she said with a grin.
Hagrid followed along as Harry joined the group, though he only skirted the edges of the training area so he wasn't mistaken for a hopeful. The tests were a bit odd, and the drills seemed to not make a lot of sense as far as testing went. Harry did his best anyway, though he worried when he usually found himself going a different direction than the rest of the group. He felt a bit of anxiety when the staff who were using a sort of magitech brain scanner kept giving him odd looks. He figured it must have been his age – most of the other candidates were in their late teens and a few who were older were in for retesting.

“This next test should be a bit fun for all of you,” the Scottish woman announced with a grin. “You'll all be given an identical broom and we'll be playing a version of a Seeker's game.” There was a small round of cheers and quiet laughs.

Harry was a bit worried that he had no idea what they were talking about. Hide and seek, maybe? Or some sort of finding game, like the egg hunts Dudley would go on for Easter? But what would brooms have to do with that? He snapped back to attention when she held up a tiny gold object.

“We will release the Snitch into the maze ahead and count to three before you'll be allowed to take off. There will be a time limit of twenty minutes. Some of the obstacles in the maze will move and you must do your best to avoid them. Your first objective is of course to attempt to capture the Snitch before anyone else; however, as I said before, we are more concerned with methodology than completion. Now, grab a broom and mount up.”

Harry did as he was told, watching the other people to figure out what to do. He was almost startled into falling off when the broom suddenly rose beneath him. A few of the people around him snickered and he felt his face heating. He could only give an embarrassed half-smile when the somehow-familiar Scottish Witch stopped in front of him.

“A bit young, aren't you?” she asked kindly. “Have you even had your first flying lesson?”

“No, ma'am,” Harry said with a gulp, wondering if this would disqualify him.

“I admire your spirit, then. You don't have to be the best, you just have to *do* your best. Just follow the Snitch – the winged ball – once we release it. Good luck,” she said amiably before walking off. Harry smiled after her, feeling a bit less nervous.

Keeping his feet touching the ground was a bit difficult and he kept hopping a little, but he must have managed it long enough for them to deem it okay. When the little golden ball was released, Harry laughed in delight at the sight of it flying away. He still hadn't gotten over how
amazing magic could be, finally seeing it first hand. He almost missed the count but still managed to shoot up a second after the others.

He watched them as he trailed behind, figuring out how to weave and turn by adjusting his body. Once he thought he had gotten the gist of it, he began looking for the Snitch. The lights were a bit dim and it took him a moment to see it glinting in the distance. Instead of heading straight for it, he turned to take a parallel route, watching the way it wove as he dodged the moving walls and floating objects. The more he watched, the more a plan formed in his mind.

The main problem for the others was that the more they chased the Snitch the more it ran away. They became too focused on it as they got close and would fall prey to fast turns around blind corners and jumps and dips around mobile objects. It was easy to find a pattern in the way things moved when you weren't flying at them full speed. And Harry knew what he needed to do.

Turning around a different corner, he judged where he thought the Snitch would try to ditch its current followers. He didn't need to chase the Snitch so much as intercept it. Taking one last corner with a burst of speed, he stretched out his hand to catch hold of the tiny ball. It seemed surprised, almost as if it had an intelligence of its own, and tried to backtrack. But it was too late. Harry closed his fingers to cage the Snitch in, keeping them claw-like so that he wouldn't damage the furiously fluttering little wings.

He looped back to the front of the room, a few others already landing before him. It was with a bit of shyness that he presented the Snitch to the woman who was leading the tests. Hagrid beamed at him from where he was standing next to her, obviously familiar with the Witch.

“Oh my,” she said as she gingerly took the Snitch and handed it off to an assistant. “I really don't even know what to say.” She took a breath, shaking herself. “Most of the time we don't even have anyone catch it. Are you sure this was your first time flying?”

“Yes, ma'am,” Harry said.

Simultaneously, Hagrid piped in, “Aye, Professor. The boy's grown up with Muggles, just got his letter today. I was takin' him to get his supplies and he asked to come here.” He turned to Harry and ruffled his sweaty hair with a giant hand. “Y'did good, lad! Hah!”

Something clicked in Harry's brain, then. He looked the aging woman over again, making certain. “You're Professor McGonagall!” he exclaimed, flushing and clapping a hand over his mouth when he realised how loud it had been. “Er, sorry. I just–I didn't recognise you. At first. Um.”
At least she seemed amused, if her smile and chuckle were any indication. “I am indeed. And might I ask what your name is, young man?”

“Harry, ma'am. Harry Potter.” He reached a hand out for her to shake, wondering why she seemed frozen for a moment before taking it.

“I see. The Boy Who Lived,” she said quietly, almost to herself. Shaking her head abruptly, she smiled again. “Might I ask how you thought of that strategy you used?”

Harry bit his lip and looked down. It was embarrassing, but he didn't know if she'd get angry if he didn't tell her. “I, um. See, I. Well.” Sighing and running a hand through his dishevelled hair, he spit it out. “I get chased by bullies a lot, and so, well, I'm fast but I can't run forever. So I got to know the streets in my neighbourhood and then I don't have to always just run. If I can figure out where they'll turn or where they'll go straight, where they'll peek into and where they won't, then I can hide and double back while they keep going. I might be faster than most of them, but you've kinda gotta be smarter too.” He scuffed a toe against the floor, wishing it might just open up and swallow him. Who would believe he could fight kaiju if he had to run away from just normal bullies?

McGonagall made a small noise of sympathy, surprising Harry. “Well then, I pray you won't have to deal with that any more.”

“Professor?” Harry asked hesitantly.

“My boy, you had scored quite highly on almost all of the tests except those that one might need a bit more schooling for. You think outside the box and develop strategies even during high stress situations. You are quite young, and it will take a few years for you to be physically and mentally ready to jockey, but I for one believe you should have a word with the marshal.” She waved her arm off to her right, indicating that Harry should walk with her.

Harry wasn't sure if he'd understood her correctly. “Does that mean I passed?”

She chuckled. “You've shown a competency, yes. And your scans show that you have exceptional potential for Drift compatibility. This way, Mr. Potter.”

Harry felt like his chest was both squeezing in and expanding like it would pop all at once.
He numbly shook hands with the elderly man he was introduced to, Marshal Albus Dumbledore. Harry knew the name—he had been one of the first Jaeger pilots. His partner had gotten injured and he had retired from jockeying to take up the heading of the P.P.D.C. They asked Harry a bunch of questions that he answered on autopilot—until they got to his family.

“Since you are still a minor in the eyes of the P.P.D.C.’s standards, we’ll need one of your legal guardians to sign for you in order to let you join. We would be happy to schedule a visit to retrieve you later if time is needed to settle any matters and talk with your family, or we can call now and have you collect any items you would like to bring later this afternoon. The P.P.D.C. provides all uniforms and learning materials, but if you choose to bring some personal effects then you are welcome to do so,” Dumbledore said, though it sounded like a script he had repeated before. His eyes twinkling behind his glasses told Harry that he knew how mechanical it sounded and was amused.

Harry, however, was worried. His relatives might let him get shipped off to a Wizarding school for the sake of him not accidentally blowing up their house when he hit his teenage growth spurts, but letting him attend the Jaeger Academy was a completely different story. The Wizarding school, though Harry had wanted it very much, was more of a safety precaution on their end. The Academy was something that they knew Harry wanted more than anything, and for the last eight years they had shown Harry exactly what would happen if he actually wanted something.

But maybe...

“If I go to the Academy, do I just stay there? Or do I come back to my relatives for summers and holidays and such?”

“Some of our younger cadets choose to take breaks in their studies, but there are others who choose to remain there. Most of them, however, have family that are in the programme already or do not have any family to return to. Upon graduation into any division we do allow for vacation time during the couple of months after an attack,” he said kindly. “You will be free to return any time you like if you wish—”

“No!” Harry rushed to say, cutting him off. “Um, no. That won't be necessary. Um, can we call them now, please?”

Dumbledore nodded, directing Harry over to a terminal that housed a phone. Harry dialled his home number and for once hoped it was his uncle who answered.

“Dursley household, Petunia speaking,” crackled over the line.
Harry sighed. That was about his luck. “Aunt Petunia—”

“What is it now, boy? Did that giant oaf leave you in London? It serves you right going off like that in that—\textit{monstrosity} he drove. I swear, you had better not be calling to have \textit{us} give you a lift. We have plans this afternoon and they do \textit{not} include going to London to coddle you,” Petunia lectured.

Harry felt a surge of anger on Hagrid’s behalf, but tamped it down. It wouldn't do any good anyway and would probably hurt his chances. He'd apologise to Hagrid after he got off the phone. “No, actually, I'm fine, I was just calling to ask—”

“Who did you say that was, Petunia? Give that here!” Vernon could be heard saying in the background. There was a shuffling noise as the phone was passed over and situated against his face. “What is it now, boy? Why are you tying up the line?”

Harry took a deep breath and tried for patience, even though he now had the person he'd hoped to speak to. “Uncle Vernon, while I was out shopping I found a testing centre and I've qualified. They want to send me to the Jaeger Academy.”

Vernon bellowed a laugh. “Right, like they would take a freak of a shrimp like you. Did you just call to take the piss out of me? Don't lie to \textit{me}, boy, or you'll not be having supper again tonight.”

“I'm serious, sir. I can have the officials speak to you in a moment, if you like. But,” he paused, gulping nervously, “they need your permission for me to attend the Academy.”

He heard his uncle start to scoff. “First there's magic schools, and we tolerated that well enough, all right. If they want you they can take you. But I won't have you going and ruining the \textit{Jaeger Academy} with your freakishness! They are heroes who protect us and I won't have you buggering that up!”

Harry spoke again quickly, cutting him off and keeping his voice quiet so that the marshal and the professor wouldn't overhear. “Listen, no matter what you think of me, they do want me to come. Before you say no, think on this: if I go, you won't ever have to see me again. Even if I don't become a pilot, I can study something else there. I'll be in Alaska, on the other side of the world. You'll never have to see me or hear me or talk to me again. I'll be out of your house and no longer your concern. That's what you really want, isn't it?”
The other end of the line was quiet. Harry crossed his fingers, hoping that his gambit had paid off. When his uncle gave a derisive sniff Harry knew he had won. “What exactly am I going to have to do?”

“I’m going to hand over the phone and they need your okay to finish with the paperwork, and I think after that it'll be brought by for you to sign. Or mailed to you. I’m, um, not entirely clear on that, but I can ask. But that's it, that's all you have to do, and then I'm gone. For good.” Harry held his breath, trying not to let loose any sound of happiness when his uncle finally grumbled an agreement.

Harry turned to hand the phone over to the marshal, surprised to see him standing as close as he was. Harry tried not to react to the sad, kind look in his eyes as he took the receiver and finished the phone call. He was glad when they didn't talk about it and just went through filling out the forms.

“Will you be needing to return home to gather any of your belongings?” Dumbledore asked.

Harry thought about it for a moment and shook his head. He didn’t have anything of note, no trinkets of his own or clothes that he'd want to wear out of uniform. “No, sir, I'm alright. I just have my owl, Hedwig, and she's right here.” Then he thought for a moment. “Is Alaska cold?” He was just in a t-shirt and he didn't want to freeze when he got there.

“In the winter. You should be fine for the short periods you'll be outdoors before you are fitted for your uniforms.” Dumbledore started to turn away, then turned back like he'd just remembered something. “Hagrid informed me about your parents' vaults. I shall have them transferred over into your name before I return to the base myself and have them set so that you may receive a small stipend until you come of age.”

Harry grinned, having forgotten about that. “Thank you, sir. That would be welcome.”

“Of course.” Dumbledore gave him a little nod of his head then walked away to attend other duties.

Hagrid somehow managed to sneak up beside Harry and startled him with a hard pat on the back. “The professor said that I'm to take you to go get yer wand an' then come back here. I'm so proud of ye! Sad I won't be havin' ye in my classes, but happy for ye all the same.”
Harry smiled up at him, letting himself be guided out of the building. “Maybe I could write and you could tell me what you're studying?” He took it as a yes when Hagrid hugged him with a laugh. Over the course of the day the giant of a man had become the closest thing Harry had ever had to a friend. Thinking back on their shopping, though, he had an idea. “Hey Hagrid, since I won't be needing those books and supplies, can I give them to someone else? I mean, I know there's a fund for kids who can't afford their supplies and stuff, but they're brand new and I won't need them any more.”

Hagrid smiled at him brightly. “Aye, that would be mighty good of you, lad.”

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31st July, 2021 – Year 7 – 10:12 P.M.:

Harry finally felt a little less anxious when he found his seat, thankfully next to the window. The space was a bit cramped, but he was small enough that it wasn’t so bad. He stared out at the crew that was shuffling around and the lights in the darkness beyond and tried to calm down a bit. He'd never flown before – or even been in an airport, for that matter. While it was all a bit awe-inspiring, it was also intimidating. He'd been terrified to leave his terminal even to use the bathroom after a member of the staff had shown him where he was supposed to be. Even then he was worried he'd somehow get lost and miss the flight or that he’d end up boarding the wrong one. He wished he could have brought Hedwig on board with him. He might have only had her for a few hours but she was the only source of comfort he could look to.

He turned at the sound of someone flopping into the seat to his left. A ginger-haired boy about his age was stowing his bag down by the floorboard, tucking it against the seat as if afraid to let it slip into the space under the seat in front where it should have gone. When the boy straightened he turned and grinned at Harry.

“Hallo. You flying alone or did I accidentally sit in someone's spot?” he asked in a friendly manner. Harry rather liked him already.

“No, you're fine, just me. I'm Harry.” He extended his hand.

The other boy took it and shook it heartily. “Ron.”
“Are you flying alone too?”

“Nah, I wish. My older brothers are in the seats in front of us,” he said long-sufferingly.

Harry laughed, figured that was why he was keeping his bag where it was.

“Oy! We heard that, Ronnikins!” one of Ron's brothers said, popping his head over the headrest.

“You're gonna make us feel unloved!” a matching voice said as a duplicate head joined his brother's.

Ron rolled his eyes. “That's Fred,” he said, pointing to the left one, “and that's George,” pointing to the right.

“No, I'm Fred. He's George,” said the one on the right.

“Ugh, I can't even tell when they're joking about that,” he told Harry, ignoring them making faces at him. “They like to confuse people, but they'll answer to each other's names so don't worry about telling them apart.”

“Hey!” the twins exclaimed in unison.

“And be glad they're sitting in front of us. At least this way we should see any pranks coming.” Ron paused. “Hopefully.”

Harry hid a snicker behind his hand. “Are you staying on all the way to Alaska or are you getting off in New York?”

“All the way to Alaska,” Left-twin (George?) said.

“We're going back to the Academy after a quick visit with our gran. Ickle Ronnikins is coming back with us to start his first round of training,” Right-twin (Fred?) said, reaching over to
Ron batted his arms away with a huff. “How about you? Are you going all the way to Alaska too?”

Harry nodded. “Yeah. I, um, I qualified earlier today. I thought it wasn't very common for anyone our age to join?”

“It's not, exactly. Unless you have family there already, they usually won't take you so young. They tend to prefer you to have gotten some basic Wizarding schooling in first so you don't go off with accidental magic,” George explained.

Fred picked up talking right after that. “But our whole family is there, almost. Dad's a magitech researcher; our oldest brother Bill is a Ranger–”

“Second oldest brother Charlie qualified to be a Ranger, but left to be a dragon-tamer in Romania.”

“When Muggles found out that dragons were real, there were a lot of problems, and it's always been Charlie's dream anyway.”

“See, some people are afraid of them, some want them as exotic pets, and some idiots manage to mistake them for kaiju.”

“So he's there to protect them and keep them in the sanctuaries and such.”

Harry leaned over to Ron, wide-eyed. “Do they do this a lot?” he asked quietly.

“Only all the time,” Ron groaned back, settling down in his seat. “They're not done.”

“–Right, and the third oldest is our brother Percy. He's a bit of a dick–”

“–By which we mean that he went into politics–”
“–And then there's us, then Ickle Ronnikins, and our little sister Ginny.”

“Oh, and Mum. Mum is...” Fred trailed off, as if uncertain how to explain.

“Mum,” Ron supplied with a shrug. The twins both nodded and made faces that said ‘fair enough.’ Ron grinned at Harry. “You'll meet her when we get there. I think she actually does something in human resources, but she's always there to greet us and the newbies.”

“She's going to love you,” George said cryptically, causing Fred to bury his face into the headrest to laugh.

Before Harry could ask what he meant, the overhead speakers were telling them to buckle in. The twins winked in unison and slid back down to sit in their seats properly. Harry tightened his seatbelt, his nerves coming back as they began to taxi down the airstrip.

“Don't worry,” Ron said as quietly as he could over the sounds of the plane. “If take-off hurts your ears, just pop them. It's not so bad once you get up, though.”

Harry smiled weakly at him. “Thanks. I've never flown before, unless you count the broom I got to ride on earlier.”

Ron laughed. “I figured you were a Wizard.” He was prevented from saying anything more as the flight attendants came over the intercoms to give the safety information. Harry tried to listen to what they were saying, since he couldn't really see over the seats. Eventually the safety brief stopped and the lights dimmed. Take-off was a little nerve-wracking, not knowing what to expect, but in hindsight it wasn't so bad. Harry plugged his nose to pop his ears like Ron had said and the small amount of pressure abated. He let out a little gasp of awe as he looked out the window to see the cityscape. He'd never really thought of cities as beautiful, but seeing it like that certainly was.

When he turned back, Ron was grinning at him. Harry grinned back. They were quiet for a moment, and then Harry's stomach let out a loud growl. He turned red in embarrassment. He hadn't eaten since noon when Hagrid had taken him to eat in the Leaky Cauldron. He knew that there was supposed to be a meal served on board, but he didn't know when.

Ron dove down to the bag by his feet, digging in it until he came up with a couple of
sandwiches wrapped in plastic. “I'm starving too. Gran said I should wait to eat them, but I figure why not just eat it when I'm hungry, yeah?” He removed two of the sandwiches, offering one of them to Harry. “It's nothing great, just corned beef. I don't think Gran remembers that I hate it, but I guess it's food, so.” He shrugged.

Harry tentatively took the offered sandwich. “I, um, I don't have anything to share,” he confessed guiltily. “I figured I'd just eat whatever they served. Sorry.”

Ron waved him off, his mouth full of sandwich. “No worries, mate. Good thing I offered, then, since they probably won't serve the meal for at least a few hours, I think. Maybe until the morning.”

Harry shrugged. “Wouldn't be the first time I went to bed without supper,” he said, then froze when he realised what he'd said. He saw Ron frown, but luckily he let it slide. They ate in relative silence, digging into the sandwiches with gusto. They were a little dry, but Harry thought it was delicious anyway.

“So, what makes you want to go to the Academy? 'Cause your family is there?” Harry asked once they had finished.

“Not really, but it'll be both nice and annoying to have them around, y'know? But I've been following it since I was a kid, watching the battles and taking note of how the kaiju fight and how the Jaegers fight and all. See, the more the K-Science guys find out about the kaiju, the better the J-Tech guys are able to design the Jaegers to fight them. Not that any of the kaiju have been at all the same. Hold on!” Ron dove into his rucksack again to retrieve a binder.

Flipping through the pages, he seemed to find the one he wanted. “See, they came up with ways to compare them, though. The Jaegers and kaiju both get rated based on height, weight, build, weapons, and speed. While the kaiju aren't alike, they still sometimes share characteristics. When you can start predicting how a kaiju will fight, you can better decide which Jaegers would be most suited to fight them.”

Harry peered over at the page. “Is that the fight between White Fang and Dementor?”

Ron beamed. “Yeah! White Fang is the Jaeger my brother Bill pilots with Louis. This is my favourite of their battles, because it was just after they started strategising which Jaegers to send out. They were matched up well. White Fang's speed and manoeuvrability allowed them to not get overwhelmed by Dementor's attacks, despite how fast and slippery it was.”
“You like strategy, then?”

“Yes. My grandfather taught me to play Wizard's Chess when I was little. I think he stopped playing with me when I started whomping him.” Ron and Harry shared a grin. “So when I see good strategy employed, I'm glad. I dunno if I'll make it to Ranger or not, but if I do then it'll be because I can out-think my opponents.”

“I think I might have been accepted as a cadet because I out-thought the Snitch,” Harry confided.

“That's awesome! Who knows, maybe we'll get to be partners. Y'think?”

“That would be cool.” Harry grinned broadly. He had a feeling this was going to be an awesome friendship.

“But our precious baby brother doesn't have one of the fights in his notebook,” Fred singsonged as he poked his head back up over the seat. Or was that George now? Either they had changed places or switched shirts. Harry was starting to understand what Ron meant about them liking to mess with people.

“Oi, shut it, you,” Ron said defensively, his cheeks turning red.

“Aww, poor Ickle Ronnikins,” George (Fred?) teased, reaching over to mess with Ron while Ron batted at him angrily.

“I hate you both!” Ron growled as they sat back down, laughing. A lady from across the aisle shushed them. “Sorry!” Ron loudly whispered back. When he turned back to Harry, he looked a bit sheepish.

“Don't worry about it,” Harry said consolingly, knocking his shoulder against Ron's. “My cousin used to tease me a lot, though your brothers seem less mean about it than he was.”

Ron quirked his mouth into a half-grin. “Yeah, they're not always jerks.” He was silent for a moment before clearing his throat awkwardly. “I, um, I don't have any of the data from the
Aragog fight.”

Harry tilted his head to the side in curiosity. “Why not?”

“He kind of, um...looked like a spider,” Ron said quickly, looking down at his binder like it was so fascinating and he'd never seen it before.

“Ohhh,” Harry said, comprehension dawning. “Scared of spiders?” When Ron nodded, Harry just bumped their shoulders again. “My aunt is terrified of anything with more than four legs. Probably some things with four legs too, actually. I used to have a nest of spiders that lived in my, um, room,” Harry corrected quickly at the last moment. “They weren't so bad except when I sat up into one of their webs.”

Harry laughed when Ron shuddered comically. The twins chose that moment to break out the fake-spider-on-a-string and throw it at Ron, which ended with flailing, shrieking, and several of the people around them shushing them. Ron kicked the backs of their seats as the twins snickered. Sometime after Harry offered to help Ron get them back and before they had decided on a plan, they fell asleep. Around midnight the flight attendants woke them up long enough to eat their meal and then they were out once again, Ron snoring against Harry's shoulder.

Harry jolted awake as the pilot came over the intercom to announce their descent. Shoving at Ron until he opened bleary eyes, Harry motioned for him to put his seatbelt back on. Ron nodded, fumbling with the buckle for a bit before it clicked. Though he was more prepared for the landing than he was for the take-off, Harry still gripped the seat hard and pressed himself as much into the backrest as possible.

The landing went smoothly, and the wait between was boring. They played a few games of cards and Ron tried to teach Harry chess, though it didn't work very well. The twins told Harry a bit about life in the Shatterdome after Ron fell back asleep. When they finally took off again, Harry decided to just nap until the food came around again.

Touching down in Alaska was worse than in New York, as the winds had apparently decided to make it difficult for the pilots. Harry figured that he should just grit his teeth and get used to it, as being transported in a Jaeger was probably a lot worse. He was more than ready to finally disembark once they were allowed to, though the pushy crowd of stale-smelling bodies was possibly less pleasant than the turbulence and cramped quarters combined.

Hedwig seemed to be glaring at him when he collected her at the baggage claim. “I'm sorry, I know that was a long time to be locked in there. We'll find you a nice perch and a few
mice as soon as we get to the Academy, okay?” he said in a placating manner. She seemed to accept his apology, only giving his finger a tiny nip before ruffling her feathers and going back to sleep.

“Is that all you brought?” Fred asked curiously once he realised Harry wasn't waiting for any other luggage.

“Yeah. I mean, they give you all the stuff you need, right?” Harry shrugged awkwardly.

“Yeah, but—” George was cut off when Fred elbowed him in the stomach. They seemed to have an entire conversation of eyebrow movements, eye twitches, and facial expressions that Harry didn't even hope to comprehend. Ron just shrugged when Harry looked to him for translation. Finally, George appeared to understand whatever Fred was telling him. “Oh! Well, right then, you can help us carry ours,” he said to Harry brightly. Harry just shrugged and grabbed a random bag from their pile.

A small bus was waiting for them and a handful of other people heading to the Shatterdome. They piled in, sprawling across the seats, glad for the legroom. Harry wasn't certain how he could feel so tired when he'd slept most of the way. Then again, he wasn't entirely certain how long it had actually been or what time of day it was supposed to be in Alaska or what time it would have been in Britain.

The ride was a bit bumpy and the ferry across to Kodiak Island was rough, but somehow it was infinitely better than the small pockets of turbulence they'd hit in the air. Regardless, Harry was quite ready to get to where he could control his own movements. Maybe flying or driving would be better if he could have have some power over it all, like when he was on that broom and hopefully if he ever got into a Jaeger. For now, though, he'd stick to his own two feet on solid ground if he could help it.

A small party was awaiting them at the compound, consisting of a few people in plain uniforms and one woman who had added a bright floral sweater over her shoulders. From her shock of ginger hair, Harry guessed that this was Ron and the twins' mum that they had mentioned. She looked nice enough – a little anxious, perhaps – but Harry was still a little worried as she bustled over.

“Oh, my word! I swear you boys have grown again,” she cried, inspecting her sons after enveloping them in crushing hugs. Then her eyes lit on Harry where he was only sort-of hiding behind the twins. “And who's this, then? You poor dear, you look half-starved!”
“This is Harry, Mum,” Fred said amicably, patting Harry on the shoulder before shoving him forward. The traitor.

“He kept Ron company on the flight over, and we're the only people he knows here,” George added with an odd emphasis.

“It's nice to meet you, ma'am,” Harry said politely, extending his hand.

Instead of taking it, she just pulled him into a hug like she had her sons. “And so polite. You boys could learn something from him, to be sure,” she said, shaking her finger at the others as Harry blushed. “Now then, let's see about getting you lot fed. Those aeroplace–”

“Aeroplanes,” the twins chorused.

“Right, whatever, they just don't feed you right. We'll have a nice breakfast and then get you settled in.” She nudged them in the direction of the doors, keeping a comforting arm around Harry's bony shoulders.

Harry found himself wondering just why he had been so afraid. Ron and the twins' mum seemed fantastic! The other people in uniforms grinned at Harry as they went for the baggage, like they completely understood his awe.

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2nd August, 2021 – Year 7 – 09:00:

Harry readjusted his coverall uniform again as he and Ron walked into the training room. At first he had been excited to finally have clothes that were meant to fit him, but he hadn't thought that they'd actually need some adapting to. His shoulders felt confined, and it felt odd to walk without worrying about tripping over his trouser legs or if his trousers would fall down, and his boots were stiff and new. He'd get used to it, but it was actually pretty annoying at the time.

They'd been given a day to settle in and get their supplies sorted. Harry and Ron had ended up as roommates. Harry figured that Ron's mother might have been behind that but wasn't about to ask. It had actually been a bit of a shock when he realised that Ron's dad was the same Arthur Weasley that he had read about in his school texts, but no more than when the twins figured out
that Harry had been the toddler on the news eight years ago, known the world over only as The Boy Who Lived. Harry hadn't known about the nickname and wondered if maybe his relatives had purposefully never let him know. It was a pretty morbid nickname, to be quite honest, and he wasn't sure he wanted to ever be called that.

The group of brand new cadets he and Ron had fallen in with were led past several areas where advanced classes were taking place. Some were as mundane as classrooms with people taking notes as someone lectured. Then there were labs full of kaiju pieces suspended in ammonia or being actively dissected. Various rooms had people doing martial arts, working out, or even dancing. (One of the people they were with explained that it was an exercise in dexterity and balance, which only made Harry look forward to it less.) Two of the last rooms had people doing sparring exercises – one for practising one-on-one fighting, and another for coordinating multiple-on-one fights so that people didn't trip over each other.

Finally they were told to make a semicircle around an odd-looking man in the last room. One of his eyes was clearly magical, spinning to look this way and that, and one of his legs had been replaced with a magitech limb. He surveyed them for a quiet moment, then nodded to himself.

“This isn't summer camp.” he began, his voice like gravel. “If it seems like we're trying to break you, it's because we are. The kaiju won't hold back, so neither will we. We will grind you to dust, and only if we fail to do so will we find the stuff of legend – like the McG's and the Flamels – and all those whose names will live forever for having what it takes to be the knights of our time, standing watch at the edge of our world, ready for the behemoths beyond.”

He gave everyone a moment to digest that, like he was waiting for any of them to turn around and quit. When no one did, he gave them a grim nod. “I cannot begin to tell you how hard it is to drive a Jaeger. It takes almost superhuman wits and stamina. It's like trying to solve a Rubik's cube in the middle of a boxing match while reciting the alphabet backwards. People who have what it takes are rare, and finding just one of them isn't good enough. That person needs to also be best friends with another one of them.”

Harry and Ron grinned at each other.

“Maybe I've forgotten what it was like to be in the academy, your whole tour still ahead of you, awash in hope, undaunted by the storm on the horizon. It seems so long ago.” He paused, and for a moment Harry thought he looked sad before his face turned to stone once again. “I'm Alastor Moody, and you will refer to me as 'Colonel' or 'Colonel Moody' unless I tell you otherwise. I was an Auror in my youth, and while I only got to be in a Jaeger once before it ruined me, I can teach you more about the kind of mental hardiness you will require than half the Rangers that have haunted these halls.” His voice was full of a fierce pride, and Harry was pretty certain that it was well-deserved.
“First, we are going to pump your brain full of so much information that you won't even have the first inkling of where to store all of it. Then, we will work you, physically and mentally, increasing your resiliency to where you might last a minute in a real battle. When you've proven you're ready, we'll move on to tactics, both hypothetically and in the sparring ring. You WILL learn to have constant vigilance! That is the most important thing to remember out of it all.” He waved one gnarled finger at all of them, as if daring them to tell him he was wrong.

Harry had to clamp him mouth shut. He saw Ron's shoulders go tight out of the corner of his eye. Maintaining focus straight ahead was difficult, but Harry was certain that if he and Ron so much as glanced at each other that they would burst into giggles. As serious as the Colonel was trying to be, that last bit had made him seem a bit touched in the head. Someone off to Harry's right murmured, “I'd thought them calling him 'Mad-Eye Moody' was just because of the freaky eye, but now I'm not so sure!” A few snickers erupted in that area, but were quickly cut off when Moody turned to glare at them, having obviously heard what was said.

“If you're all quite finished, I will continue,” he grumbled out. “Right. It will only be after you have mastered these things that you will be allowed to utilise the training Pons. You will do your initial training individually, and then work up to doing it with a partner if you have one at the time. This training will give you a brief outline and then drop you into a simulated battle with a kaiju. Obviously, this is much more difficult with a partner.” Moody hobbled over to sit on the lone stool behind him.

“Finding a partner will be difficult; finding one that lasts might even seem impossible. There are no secrets in the Pons, with your minds linked like that. You might be able to toss up a few Occlumency barriers, but they'll only work so long as your partner is willing to keep their nose out and let you have that privacy. Things will slip into your mind that you've never told anyone, never want to tell anyone. You'll learn things about each other even in the midst of battle. Some of these things will strain the bond, and others will strengthen it. In the end, you either come to terms with the person beside you, or it's over.”

A brave soul off to their left raised his hand. “Colonel, is it true that most of the pilots end up becoming romantically involved? Is that how we should determine a suitable partner?”

Moody shook his head dismissively. “No, not at all, but good question. It is true that many of our Ranger teams are couples, but many of them are simply very good friends. We even have a few teams that are family members – cousins, siblings, parent-and-child. The two things that matter most about the bond are trust and respect. You have to trust the person enough to let them in, and respect them enough to accept everything that you see in them as well. You also have to deal with the fact that no one will ever – ever – know you as well as your partner. The deeper the bond, the better you fight.
“For many of the teams who have reciprocating preferences, this closeness often leads to romance. Even if it doesn't, having relationships outside of the bond can be trying because your lover might become jealous over this person who knows you better than they ever will. Sometimes platonic close friendships can be mistaken for something more than what they are, especially by those who don't quite understand how the bonds work.” He let that sink in.

“But you lot don't need to worry about that just yet. Partnered exercises will only begin sometime after the first cut. Up until then is basic training, and schooling for those who haven't achieved a secondary school diploma yet. It's unlikely to pass above the first cut until you've graduated, so be warned, younglings. If you scrub out before the first cut, you'll be sent home. Any time after that you'll be allowed to pursue a different area of study within the P.P.D.C., if you so choose. Making it past the second cut is a rarity – it's entirely possible that not a single one of you will do so – but that is when you'll get a chance at a Jaeger. If for whatever reason you do not have a partner at even that point, there are a handful of graduates working in the Shatterdomes that we will do our best to try to match you with based on multidimensional tests detailing your personalities and Drift scores.”

Ron shifted on his feet, looking uncertain. Harry knocked their shoulders together gently, giving him an encouraging smile. They'd do this, get through this, and it would be amazing.

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17th September, 2023 – Year 10 – 16:00:

Harry sat on his bunk, looking around at his dormitory wistfully. It had been his first home, and he didn't want to move into the solitary barracks room he had been assigned earlier that day. He'd known it was coming but it was another thing entirely to have it happen. Across from him, Ron was studying their ceiling with a slight frown.

“You know, I'm going to miss you quoting Jaeger facts in your sleep,” Harry teased. He easily ducked the shoe Ron threw at him, laughing quietly.

“Berk,” Ron said without any heat, shooting him a grin.

Harry fiddled with the shoe, tugging at its laces. “I'm sorry you didn't make second cut,” he offered quietly.
Ron shook his head. “Nah, it's okay, I had kinda figured. My Drift proficiency hadn't been very high to begin with, and when it came time to try letting anyone else in my head I just...couldn't. Not even you, mate. Sorry.” He shot Harry an apologetic smile.

“Don't worry about it.” The truth was, Harry was a bit relieved and felt terrible about it. Ron had more of a temper than Harry did, and while nobody seemed to know either of them better than the other they weren't always on the same wavelength. Harry loved him like a real brother and was glad they had been spared the hurt of not syncing up thanks to Ron not testing well enough on the psych tests. “You'll still be around in the J-Tech division. Maybe you'll even make it to LOCCENT.”

“Local Command Centre Mission Control – I can wish!” Ron exclaimed with a laugh.

They lapsed back into silence as Ron's laughter died down. They had been planning on being partners for so long that they were both a bit lost now that it would never happen. Harry knew that Ron was still a bit jealous, but getting mad at Harry or storming off to sulk would only have driven the point home more.

They had fought to advance past the first cut together several months prior. They had worked diligently, training until they could face off against some of their larger classmates and studying until the words all ran together. Since there was technically no break in the school year and only a loose timeline of a curriculum, they had both managed to push their magical abilities a few years above what they would normally have been doing. All of it had been for this one goal, and now it was falling down around their ears.

Harry remembered that morning, when the instructors had reluctantly let him know that he had passed the second cut. He knew that there was a general uneasiness about his age and letting him rank up so young, but his abilities had surpassed those of most of his adult classmates and his willingness was irrefutable. Still, some were worried about exposing someone so young to the horrors that were war. Others worried about the negative PR it could cause, when they essentially allowed a child to jockey. But he’d finally managed to prove himself ready and they had given in. McGonagall had even hugged him, as it was a well known secret that he was one of her favourite students.

He had been so certain that nothing could wipe the manic grin off of his face until Ron had said that the Psych Analysts had vetoed his ability to jockey. They were good enough friends that the awkwardness wouldn't last forever, but it was still pretty difficult to think of anything to talk about just then.

Luckily, they were saved from the silence when someone came to collect Harry. He and two others who had just been promoted were going to be meeting the other unattached Rangers in
the hopes that they might find a connection.

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17th September, 2023 – Year 10 – 17:00:

Harry felt a bit awkward as he walked into what was essentially a meet-and-greet for partner-less pilots. They'd be given an assessment of who the technicians believed would be best suited for them as far as scoring went in a little while, but for now they were told to see if they made any connections naturally. It was clear that most of the people in the room already knew each other, and the two others from Harry's cut had even met a few of the alumni during training. Since Harry had expected to partner with Ron there hadn't been any reason for him to be introduced. Now he was wishing that he'd had the forethought to ask into it.

Proper food, sufficient sleep, and seemingly endless training had seen Harry shoot up several inches and gain quite a bit of lean muscle over the past two years. That didn't stop him from feeling like that tiny little gawking eleven-year-old all over again. This time he didn't even have Ron or the twins to fall back to, though. Everyone around him seemed so much more mature, confident, and physically fit, and he wasn't so proud as to say he wasn't entirely intimidated.

Harry felt someone nudge his shoulder and turned to face a smiling woman with bright pink hair. “Wotcher,” she greeted in an off-sounding Russian accent.

“Oh, um, hello,” Harry responded after a moment. “I'm Harry. Nice to meet you?” he said sheepishly, holding out a hand.

She took his hand with her right and wrapped her left arm around him so that they were facing the room side by side. “Name's Tonks. It's a pleasure, Harry. Heard about you through the grapevine, I think. Your partner didn't work out?” she asked conversationally.

Harry shrugged, confused but not actually minding the casual familiarity. “We matched up well on the physical stuff, but he couldn't relax in the Drift. He really was brilliant, though,” he explained. He didn't want it to seem like he was difficult to work with or that Ron was unworthy in any way.

“Ahh, gotcha. Sucks when that happens,” she said with a sigh. “I get a lot of the same on the physical stuff, but my problem is that people have a hard time syncing with me. They think it
has something to do with me being a Metamorphmagus. I used to think it was rubbish, but it still remains that my Drift patterns are considered a bit irregular,” she explained nonchalantly. Or at least Harry thought it was nonchalantly – her accent made it a little difficult to tell.

Harry searched his brain for a moment but came up blank. “What's a Metamorphmagus?” he asked warily. It was entirely possible that she was taking the piss, with him being a new guy and a kid and all.

Tonks grinned, then suddenly her face shifted and she had a pointier nose and lips that weren't as full and pale blonde hair. A moment later she shifted it back to before, though her eyes were possibly a touch wider and there was now a purple streak in her pink hair. “Ta-da!” she said, snickering at Harry's shocked expression.

Harry couldn't hold back a delighted laugh. Some people might have found it off-putting, but he thought it was the coolest thing he'd ever seen. Tonks preened exaggeratedly when he told her so, but the slight pinking of her cheeks told Harry that she really did appreciate him saying it. The next twenty minutes after that were spent in the corner trying to make the best caricatures of the other people in the room, Harry giving advice when Tonks's version wasn't quite silly enough. She told him about each of the people as they went along, listing their strengths and weaknesses as partners.

Looking for their next target, Harry noticed a man with curly, shoulder-length hair who was painstakingly trying to be polite to one of the other newbies. The newer Ranger had apparently locked onto him and couldn't take the hint from his obvious body language. There was something oddly familiar about his face, making Harry frown. “Tonks, who's that guy?” he asked, pointing discreetly.

She surprised Harry when the corners of her mouth turned down in sadness. “That's my cousin. Well, my mum's cousin. His name's Sirius.”

“Sirius,” Harry said slowly, something niggling at his mind.

“Harry? You okay?”

“No, nothing, there's just something,” he trailed off. “It feels like I recognise him, I guess? But I don't know him. It's weird.”
Tonks tilted her head, eyeing Harry speculatively. “Maybe you should go say hello, then,” she suggested pensively. When Harry hesitated, she gave him a playful shove. “G’won then, off with ya.”

Harry approached slowly, feeling unreasonably shy. The other new Ranger was still talking at Sirius, so Harry waited for him to stop for a breath. Taking that time to gather his courage, Harry dove in at his first chance. “Um, hello,” he said tentatively.

Sirius tiredly turned his head, probably expecting another like the one in front of him. In the next second his eyes went wide, his breath caught in his throat, and he dropped the small plate of food he'd been nibbling off of. “You,” he breathed, sounding gutted.

Harry wasn't sure what he had done, so he did the only thing he could think of: he babbled. “Um, yes, hello. Sorry. I think? It's just, I mean. I don't know but you, um, look maybe familiar but I’m pretty sure I don't know you. Maybe I've just seen you across the way or something. Or maybe I should just, yeah.” He hitched a thumb over his shoulder, backing away slowly when the guy looked like he was about to cry or something. Harry vowed to himself that he was going to kill Tonks later.

“No!” Sirius lunged forward, stopping Harry by grabbing his shoulders. “No, nono, don't,” he practically whimpered, his hands releasing their grip to hover on either side of Harry like he wasn't sure what to do with them.

Harry could feel everyone's attention on them, sending prickles up his spine. “I'm sorry. I'm sorry, did I do something? I don't know what you--”

“Harry!” Sirius finally said, his face splitting into a smile like he'd rediscovered sunlight after years in the miserable dark. Seeming to come a bit more back to himself, he pulled back a little. “I--. You--. You don't have the faintest idea who I am, do you?”

Harry swallowed a nervous laugh and shrugged. “No, sir.” He paused for a moment, then revised. “You seemed familiar somehow, but I don't remember ever meeting you. But, um, should I?”

Sirius sobered up slightly, reaching out and then snatching his hand back quickly. “It would make sense, I suppose. Oh, Harry, the last time I saw you, you were only three – just a few days past it.”
Harry felt his stomach drop. “When, exactly?” he asked with a tremor in his voice.

“I gave you a few things, including a gigantic plush that Lily scolded me for.”

A wisp of a memory surfaced, and Harry used the training he’d received to latch onto it. “Snuffles?” he asked uncertainly.

Sirius laughed, seeming to give in to an urge and just hugging Harry to him. Harry returned it awkwardly. He’d grown used to affection thanks to the Weasley brood and a few of his classmates, but the current situation was just a bit too odd.

“I knew it was you the moment I laid eyes on you. You're just like James, but with Lily's eyes. Oh, Merlin's balls, Harry Potter, you're alive!” Sirius exclaimed happily into his shoulder. Pulling back quickly, he searched Harry's face with frantic eyes. “James? Lily? Did they –?”

Harry gave a quick shake of his head. “No. No, they. They're gone,” he finished quietly.

A look of deep pain crossed Sirius's features. Harry felt guilty for delivering the news. They both startled when a hand clasped each of their shoulders.

“Perhaps we should take this somewhere else,” Tonks suggested carefully, indicating the fascinated onlookers.

Sirius turned an interesting shade of red, making him look almost comical. “Right. Yes, that might be for the best. If, if that would be okay with you, ah, Harry?” he asked, his voice cracking slightly on some emotion.

Harry nodded quickly, curious and wanting to get out of the centre of attention. Tonks linked her arms into both of theirs, tugging them along and out of the room.

So maybe Harry wouldn't kill her later. Maybe.

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Sirius hadn't said much as he quickly led them back to his quarters, but he had turned to stare at Harry every few moments as if to make sure that he was real. Sometimes he would even look to Tonks afterward, as if asking for confirmation that Harry wasn't just some frenzied hallucination he'd conjured up. He ceased only once they had entered the door in order to hurriedly clear a few things off of the couch and table in the common area. From Tonks's grin, Harry guessed that this was fairly normal.

Harry leaned over to whisper to Tonks while Sirius was distracted. “Did you know? When you sent me over?” He wasn't sure it mattered but was curious all the same.

Tonks shook her head. “No. But sometimes some pilots have some sort of sense for someone who could be a good partner. I thought that's what it might be when you said you thought you recognised him but had never met him.”

“Sorry, just a moment, let me just,” Sirius babbled, carrying a few glasses and some rubbish into the small kitchen area.

“Also,” Tonks added, “you were nice.” She shot Harry an infectious grin. “People always thought my cousin was a grim man. He'll joke and laugh, of course, but it doesn't always reach his eyes. It didn't used to at all, but he'd been getting better recently. I think Remus knew why, but,” she paused, “I never asked. I know that a lot of us have lost people; I recognise that look. I figured he'd tell me when he was ready to talk about it.” She smiled sadly, though she quickly masked the sadness with amusement when Sirius bustled back into the room.

“Right, um, do have a seat. Sorry for the, uh, mess. I wasn't actually expecting company,” he said with a slight laugh.

Harry smiled hesitantly, taking a seat on the couch. Tonks sprawled next to him, while Sirius sat on the edge of a nearby chair. Removed from the initial excitement, none of them seemed to know where to begin. Harry looked around instead, taking stock of the place. It was more like a small apartment than the dormitories that Harry had been told about. The decorations and casual clutter made Harry think that Sirius might have been living there for awhile.

Unable to keep quiet any longer, Harry dove in. “What happened? How did you know my parents?” Who are you to me? Harry thought but was too scared to say aloud.
“What do you remember?” Sirius asked tentatively.

Harry bit his lip. “Just flashes, mostly. I kind of remember that stuffed animal you mentioned. I...I saw my dad... My mum was running with me, but we turned around, and.” Harry sucked in a harsh breath, stamping down on the instinctive panic and terror and agony. “I remember my mum laying there, covered in rocks or something, telling me to run and then screaming. Someone helped me. I sort of remember soldiers and medics and reporters after that, but it's mostly a blur.”

Sirius cautiously reached over to touch Harry's knee. Harry knew it was meant to be comforting to him, though the grief written plainly on Sirius's face said that he needed the comfort too.

Nodding to himself, Sirius focused on the rickety coffee table as he spoke. “My birth family was full of purebloods who looked down on Muggles and Muggleborns. I disagreed, and we clashed on it several times before I ran away – though they'd probably have told you that they threw me out,” he scoffed. “Not that it matters now. But James – your dad – he'd been my best friend since our first year of Wizarding schooling. His parents took me in, adopted me. Made me family.” He smiled at the memory.

“Lily...oh, Lily.” He chuckled. “She was something. I think James fell for her the first moment he laid eyes on her, but she wasn't quite so smitten. It took a few years of myself, James, and our friend Remus pranking our fellow students before she really gave him a piece of her mind. There was shouting, there was talking, and then by the end of that day he had the stupidest grin on his face, saying she'd agreed to give him a chance to show her he was better.”

Sirius fidgeted, plucking at the worn cushion of his chair. “Lily gave me a chance, too – not the same kind!” He laughed, his hands coming up as if to shield himself from any reaction Harry might have had. “But as a friend. She became as much my sister as James was my brother. When they got married she threatened James that I was going to be her best man instead of his, haha! But I had been his friend longer, and so Remus and I stood up with him as they said their 'I do's.

“We became Aurors together – James and Lily and I. Remus wasn't really the type, even if they would have let him. He's a werewolf, which stupidly blocked him from a lot of opportunities,” Sirius said scornfully, curling his lip. Harry got the impression that his ire wasn't aimed at his friend being a werewolf so much as how people treated him because of it. Harry didn't really know a lot about werewolves except that popular media had no idea what they were talking about, but Sirius's reaction made him think they might get on just fine.
Turning to finally focus on Harry, Sirius said gently, “When you were born, James and Lily asked me to be your godfather.” He smiled sadly. “When you were two, they got shipped off to San Francisco because of a case they had been working on. They were allowed to hop home for the holidays and such, but it really wasn't enough after seeing them pretty much every day since I was eleven. I guess they felt that it was a once in a lifetime thing that they'd be stationed like they were, though. They invited Remus and I and an old friend of Lily's out there to visit and see the sights. Remus couldn't make it – he'd managed to land a teaching gig and there were meetings that he couldn't miss or risk losing it.”

Sirius went quiet for a minute. “I guess you know how that all turned out.” He sighed, raking a hand through his hair. “I'd just given you some other trinket when we heard it. James got Lily to take you and go, try to get you to safety. I half thought that she was going to stay and fight anyway – she was stubborn like that – but I guess she realised that you needed her more. That thing, Wormtail,” Sirius said with disgust, “it kicked over this building in front of us as we tried to fight it back with just a couple of wands. I rolled to the side and just barely managed to avoid getting crushed by it, but I couldn't see James after that, couldn't really focus on trying to find him with that thing in front of me.

“I'd faced down dozens of Dark Wizards and gruesome criminals as an Auror, but nothing had ever terrified me the way that thing did,” he confessed. “I eventually did get trapped by some debris after something exploded not too far away. A mess of other people got caught in it too, though they weren't as lucky. The military was quick to lay blame for their deaths on me instead of the monster; a lot of Muggles were really afraid back then. I was angry, but I understood. The Aurors didn't even know they had me, or I'd like to think they would have tried to get me back, vouch for me.” He still sounded bitter about it despite his words.

“Then it was proved that we Wizards weren't the bad guys, and they let me go with a terse apology. I tried to find you – all of you – but I kept hitting dead ends. No one back home had heard from Lily or James, and so I figured I had to assume the worst. By that time, there were forces being amassed to fight the kaiju, and I signed up. Part of me wanted to fight the monsters that had taken my family from me, and part of me still hoped that the relief efforts would lead me to a hospital where you all were, just injured or sick or with amnesia or something.” He shrugged. “I applied for the Jaeger Program as soon as it was announced, and qualified shortly after. Never found a partner, though,” he said ruefully.

Harry took a deep breath, trying to soak it in. He glanced over at Tonks next to him, who looked like she might cry or hug either of them or both.

“I tried to find you, I swear I did. I thought you were all–” Sirius cut himself off.

Harry shook his head. “It–it's okay. It's okay now, right? You found me.” He laughed a little hysterically. “We found each other, I guess.”
Silence fell. Harry knew he should talk about what had happened to him, but his relatives were usually a subject he avoided. Instead, he asked, “Who’s Remus? You mentioned him a few times.”

Sirius grinned then. “Remus was James and I’s other best friend. He was usually the one who helped us plan how to not get caught for our pranks. Honestly, he was a bit more like Lily – studious and quietly intelligent. When he found out that I’d survived, he came here. The P.P.D.C. is much more open-minded than a lot of the world, and they welcomed him as a teacher for some of the younger applicants and the children of other people who work here. Usually he, Tonks, and I collect each other and head to the mess hall in a bit, so you can meet him.” Sirius paused. “That is, if you want to stay that long, of course. No pressure or anything!”

Harry grinned. “I think I’d like that,” he responded shyly.

Over the course of the next month, he spent more and more time with the makeshift family of three and their friends. In turn, he introduced them to the Weasleys and a few other acquaintances he’d picked up during training. Sirius laughed at the situation when they turned out to know a few people in common.

Harry slowly learned that Tonks’s mother had been exiled from her family for marrying a Muggleborn, and they’d moved to Russia when she had been offered a research position at one of their universities. Her father had been a newscaster back in Britain, but gave it up to join the university’s staff once he’d gotten a decent handle on the language. Harry thought that maybe that was why her accent sounded so odd before, as it was mostly Russian with a hint of southern English. Hilariously, she said that her accent in Russian sounded even weirder.

The scarred man named Remus looked much older than he was due to the stress of lycanthropy, Harry realised when Sirius said they were the same age. He was also one of the kindest, most intelligent people Harry had ever met. When Harry was working on his studies to actually finish his secondary diploma, Remus was the one he could go to for explanations of complicated material. Somehow Remus always made it fun.

Gradually, Harry found that his life had been integrated with Sirius’s in the most amazing way. The former guest room in Sirius’s quarters slowly transitioned into being Harry’s room. It was smaller than Harry’s barracks room, though he surprisingly preferred it. He’d never really been one to accumulate much in the way of material possessions – other than a ton of pictures – and the smaller space made it seem much less sparse. The common area became littered with little things of Harry’s as well – books, picture frames, and magazines all mixing in together with Sirius’s.
Eventually Sirius asked if Harry planned on just moving in, since he hadn't been back to his own barracks in more than a week. Harry decided not to call him on his forced casual tone, just grinning at him instead. The next day he put in the paperwork to relinquish his room and have his address officially changed.

When Sirius finally found out about Harry's childhood with his relatives, it was all Harry could do to hold him back from getting a portkey there to give them a piece of his mind. Sirius asked him why he would still protect them and Harry shrugged. “We may not like each other, but they're still my family, I guess.”

“Family isn't always a matter of blood,” Sirius said with quiet vehemence. “Sometimes family – *real* family – is something that we *build* for ourselves. It's a decision to care about someone else. It's the opposite of loneliness. Those people might have been your relatives, but they sure as hell don't sound like *family* to me.”

Harry let that soak in. He'd always told himself that people didn't understand, but he realised with a start that Sirius *did.* Sirius had split from his own relatives and been adopted into Harry's father's family. He'd gathered to him Remus and Tonks and now – maybe – Harry too. Sure, Tonks might have been some sort of blood relation, but that wasn't at all the reason that they came to actually care about each other.

Harry's chest tightened in apprehension, but he couldn't stop himself from asking, “Are we family?”

“*Of course,*” was Sirius's immediate, heartfelt response.

A few days later, papers turned up on their coffee table detailing the adoption of one Harry James Potter by one Sirius Black III, awaiting their signatures. When neither Harry nor Sirius claimed to have started the filing, they made bets on whether it was Remus or Tonks's doing. Neither of them claimed it when asked. Tonks did, however, tell them that they were stalling and if they didn't sign it soon she was going to forge it.

In what seemed like no time at all, Molly hand delivered the final paperwork to their door. It was her utter lack of surprise that finally tipped Harry off to the true culprit and he hugged her tightly in thanks.

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Harry bounced on the balls of his feet in nervousness. Their initial practice in the testing Pons had gone well the week prior and they were officially a team. Now it was time to suit up for real and hop into an actual Jaeger for the first time.

Sirius seemed excited, at least. He shot Harry a slightly manic grin, laughing when Harry returned it. Harry figured part of his excitement was at finally having a partner after almost a decade of being qualified.

The Drivesuit technicians were bustling around them, making their last checks on the newly stocked room. In a real situation they would be tasked with getting Harry and Sirius into their Drivesuits fast enough so that the Jaeger could be launched in less than seven minutes. For the moment, though, they seemed more keen on rearranging everything for their own maximum efficiency.

Harry had gotten used to the better fitting clothing of his uniform and the handful of outfits he'd acquired over the last couple years, but the skintight circuitry suit was a different story. It had to lay flat against him in order to better interface his nervous system with the Jaeger. In all honesty it felt a bit silly, like a superhero's spandex. He scowled when he noticed Sirius shaking with laughter at the way he kept shifting around. “Oh, sod off,” he spat, trying not to start laughing too. Sirius just beamed at him and laughed louder.

The technicians must have decided that was a good point to come over, as Harry felt the weight of the battle armour press against his back. The precision-engineered polycarbonate shell was bulky but nothing that Harry couldn't handle. They'd trained with weighted garments in the combat rooms in preparation to the point that Harry was sure he was more coordinated with the extra weight on than without it.

One of the higher ranking officials stood off to the side out of the way with a stopwatch, timing the techs as they fitted each plate and drilled the fastenings in tighter. While they wouldn't be expected to be all that fast the first time around, this would be the time they had to beat next session. Thirteen minutes later, one of the techs took a picture of them with his phone and showed it off to the two of them.

Harry grinned. The red and gold armour had been Sirius's idea. They were apparently the House colours that he, Remus, and Harry's parents had worn in their school days. He'd confided that he sort of wished that Harry had made it to Hogwarts long enough to see if he would have been sorted the same. Harry secretly hoped that he would have been.
The last touches were added in the form of the spinal circuitry and their helmets. One of the techs promised to keep Harry's glasses safe while they were out – his helmet's faceplate had been specially treated to account for his eyesight. It had been explained to him that even if he used a Sticking Charm to keep his glasses on during the fights, his peripheral vision was at risk of being impaired. Also, they were much more likely to crack than his faceplate was. He'd probably be able to compensate for reduced visibility by utilising the Jaeger's sensors, but the real issue would be the hazard associated with broken glass. Either way, it felt odd to not be wearing them.

Stepping into the Conn-Pod was a surreal experience. Harry thought back to his wonder at stepping into the Wizarding world for the first time and felt that same swoop in his stomach.

Sirius ducked in to the right, stepping into the footholds so they could lock him in. “I think I'll take the right side,” he said nonchalantly.

“Hey!” Harry shouted when he realised that would mean he'd have to use the left.

“Oh, come on! You're young. Versatile! Can't teach an old dog like me new tricks this late in the game, you know,” Sirius joked.

Harry rolled his eyes at Sirius's reference to the Animagus form he'd shown off the last full moon, before he went running with Remus's wolf-form. “As long as you keep on two legs instead of four I think I might be able to manage,” Harry snarked back. His feet easily locked into the mechanisms below him and he let the team finish hooking up the rest of the frame.

“Remember, Harry, we're not in a simulator now. Don't chase the R.A.B.I.T. Random-access brain impulse triggers – memories,” Sirius said soothingly. “Just let 'em flow, don't latch on. Tune them out, stay in the Drift. The Drift is silence.”

Harry nodded. He knew that the harder he tried not to think of the more painful memories the easier they would surface, so he tried his best to think of nothing. Around them, the Jaeger's limited A.I. system announced, “Neural interface Drift: initiated.”

Intense. That was the only word that Harry would be able to use to describe it later. He could feel his mind expanding, memories flashing rapid-fire as it did. His mother's laugh. Hiding from Dudley and his gang. His mother's scream. The first birthday he spent with the Weasleys. Hagrid bringing him his letter. Waiting in the airport alone. His father flying with him on a broom.
Soon, other memories that he didn't recognise fitted in between his own. *Sirius and Regulus wrestling while their mother scolded. A hopeless moment rotting in a jail cell. Full moons running spent running as a dog, wolf-Remus and stag-James beside him. Sirius's last fight with his mother before he ran off in the rain. Crying on James's shoulder as they buried his parents. James and Lily's wedding day.*

The memories sped up, impossibly fast, and yet Harry seemed to absorb each of them. He wanted so, so badly to latch onto the ones of his parents, both his own and Sirius's. The only thing that kept him back was Sirius's warning, and the gentle presence he felt slowly merging with his own.

Suddenly, the world snapped back into place. Harry blinked around at the interior of the Jaeger. There were wet tracks itching on his face, and when he turned he could see matching ones on Sirius's. Sirius smiled at him joyfully, and Harry both saw and felt it. He laughed, knowing Sirius would feel it too.

There was a part of his mind that was saying that this should be overwhelming. He could feel his own body, and Sirius's body, and the Jaeger's body. Behind all that was the steady stream of memories and information, images and feelings and thoughts and dreams and knowledge all blurring into each other and yet at the same time perfectly understandable. But he had felt how their minds had expanded when they met in the Drift, and it wasn't overwhelming at all.

“One hundred percent sync, boys!” said the chief technical officer over the comms.

“Good job,” Marshal Dumbledore added on. He sounded proud, and Harry laughed joyfully in response.

“Now then,” the C.T.O. said, much more businesslike. “Let's try a few drills, shall we?”

Sirius looked over at Harry with a cocky grin. “Ready?”

“Yeah,” Harry said, knowing his cheeks would be hurting later from his own wild smile.

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*4th April, 2024 – Year 10 – 22:40:*
Harry cracked his neck as he strolled along. Training that day had left his muscles sore. He wanted nothing more than to curl up in bed and pass out, but experience had taught him that was a bad idea. The first time he'd done just that he'd slept poorly, waking up due to the vivid dreams and nightmares induced by his time in the Drift. And when he'd gotten up the morning after, he could barely move from the stiffness that had set in. Walking around and clearing his head had proven the most effective way to wind down from training.

As much as he loved Sirius and living in the same space as him, he knew that he needed space to sift through the things he'd seen in Sirius's mind. Examine, understand, and then either file or compartmentalise the information away – depending on whether it was something he liked knowing or something he never, ever wanted to think of again thank you very much. There were certain things you didn't want to know about a parental figure.

His own thoughts had to be ordered as well. Memories would flare up from every corner of his mind, some that he easily recalled and others that he had forgotten. He had a different filter with which he viewed the world than he'd had when some of those memories had occurred, and it was sometimes hard to reconcile with the implications. He had never thought of himself as abused or neglected when he was with the Dursleys – his aunt and uncle never hit him and they almost never left him alone. But he'd learned over the past few years. They'd neglected his needs, only focusing on what he could do for them. They'd belittled him, called him names, let Dudley and his friends torment him, encouraged it, made him feel ashamed to be himself and different and everything that he was.

Sometimes it made him angry, sometimes sad. Sirius knew so much of it now and would give him this look after they had gotten home from training, not saying a word when Harry needed a hug or encouragement, just giving it freely and gladly. Tonks didn't really know, but always seemed intent on showering her loved ones with affection, usually hugging Harry or petting his hair whenever he was near enough. Molly doted on him, always trying to feed his skinny frame, and Harry thought he might finally understand what George had meant when he'd said that she would love him. He also thought he might understand the twins' silent conversation about his lack of luggage now.

Of course, there were the happy memories that would surface as well. Older, mostly-forgotten ones of his parents and fresher ones of his new family. They'd make him smile, give him hope – and sometimes annoy him or make him mad. They were family, after all.

The hardest to deal with were actually his own dreams and desires, laid bare in his mind when he entered the Drift. Not all of them crossed the bridge between him and Sirius, thankfully. He was a teenager, and there were some things that would have been very embarrassing to have anyone else see – even Sirius. There were other things that he didn't quite understand, or that maybe he wasn't ready to and shied away from. They were harder to put out of his mind, but he did his best.
Tilting his head back, Harry stretched upward with his arms to loosen the kinks in his back and shoulders. As such, he wasn't exactly looking where he was going as he walked past a cross-section in the hallway and ran right into another person.

*You'd think that all this training would make me more graceful*, he thought ruefully, hitting the floor hard with his shoulder. He'd managed to twist to take the brunt of the fall, at least. Though he regretted it a bit when he was made aware that the girl he'd run into had rather pointy elbows.

Sitting up, he made sure that they were both uninjured. “Sorry! I wasn't looking,” he said quickly.

She just smiled dreamily at him. “Oh, it's okay. I was paying more attention to the trail the Nargles left,” she explained calmly. “It was my fault too.”

Harry pushed himself to his feet quickly, offering her a hand up. He looked her over in curiosity as she took the proffered hand. Her hair was almost unnaturally white-blonde, but didn't have the hints of being dyed that he'd seen on other people. (Then again, he knew someone who could turn her hair rainbow-coloured with a thought, so maybe it wasn't so out there.) She wore mismatched bangles, necklaces, and strangely radish-like earrings in addition to her standard uniform. She wasn't wearing her jacket, which would have given him an idea as to her rank or section. And, oddly enough, she was barefoot.

Her words finally sunk in though. “What's a Nargle?” Harry asked, peering around for a trail of some sort and seeing nothing. Her wide-eyed, far-off stare made him wonder for a moment if she might not be entirely sober, but didn't think anyone would be stupid enough to wander around the Shatterdome in such a state.

“They're mischievous creatures, known to infest mistletoe and steal things. I was sure that some had come by this way, but I haven't found them yet,” she explained patiently.

“Is that what happened to your shoes?” he joked with a grin.

“Hmm? Oh. No, some of the other recruits like to steal my stuff because they think I'm weird. They especially like to hide my shoes, for some reason,” she said with a casual shrug.
Harry blinked at her, wondering at her nonchalance. “Have you reported it? They shouldn't be allowed to keep doing that,” he said indignantly. Maybe she was fine with being mistreated, but Harry knew better now than to think it was okay.

She shook her head. “It's fine. I don't want to cause any problems, and they don't really take anything vital. Ginny usually helps me find my things when I do need them,” she explained.

“Ginny Weasley?” Harry asked carefully. He hoped she wasn't involved in the stealing, or he would be having a word with Molly. Not that he liked tattling, but Ginny actually kind of scared him a little too much to confront directly. Not that he'd admit that to anyone.

“Yes. She's nice. Don't worry, she stands up for me,” she said with a fond smile. “I'm Luna, by the way.”

“Oh! Right. Harry. Nice to meet you,” he said with a smile. “If you're a recruit, why are you at the Shatterdome instead of the Academy?”

“They wanted to show us something from the last battle that was stored here, so some of us in the advanced classes were brought over.” She looked excited about the trip.

“You're not in pilot training, then,” Harry said, looking for confirmation.

Luna looked sad for a moment, though Harry knew when it wasn't a good time to pry. Shaking her head and smiling again, she replied, “No, I'm going into K-Science. My father is a Wizarding naturalist and I grew up around that, which made it really very easy to transition into xenobiology. It's quite fascinating.” She smiled brightly, seeming to enjoy talking about her training.

“Were you talking with one of the scientists here, then?” Harry asked, curious as to why she was wandering around the section of living quarters this late at night. As an afterthought, he realised that there were other reasons that could bring someone to the Shatterdome living quarters and felt himself start fighting a blush.

“Oh, no. I'm actually not quite sure where I am. I might be lost,” she said airily.

Harry couldn't do anything but stand there and blink at her for a moment. “Um, would you
like some help getting un-lost, then?” he asked, remembering his manners.

“That's okay. I'll figure it out eventually.” She smiled in a carefree manner that Harry envied. “But I wouldn't mind company, if you were heading anywhere in particular.”

Harry grinned and shook his head. “Nowhere, really, just wandering.” He cocked his head in a direction and began to stroll along again, glad when she fell into step beside him.

When she asked about Harry, he was more than happy to chat about being a pilot. In return, she talked about her own studies. He found her exceptionally easy to talk to, despite her occasional, strange references to creatures he'd never heard of. They just walked and talked, going nowhere, turning at seemingly random intersections. After a little while, Harry found that he was more relaxed than he usually got on a training night, no matter how long he walked.

Right after he yawned, Luna turned them down a hallway that lead to the main elevators. “Thank you. I think I can find my way from here,” she said happily. Harry looked at her quizzically, not entirely sure if she had really not known where they were or if she was just that lucky.

Coming to a halt in front of the doors, Harry smiled at her. “I'd loan you my shoes to trek back across to the visitor's dormitories, but I don't think they'll fit,” he offered.

She shook her head dismissively. “It's okay. They'd probably just get stolen before I could return them.”

Harry chuckled and shook his head.

“Plus, I think I want to get a pudding from the mess hall before I go to bed,” she said thoughtfully, stepping into the lift.

Harry nodded. “Sounds like a plan. Don't be a stranger, whenever you're over here?”

“I won't,” she promised, smiling sweetly and waving as the doors closed between them.
That night, Harry dreamed of dissecting creatures made of pudding. While he woke up confused, it was also the best night's sleep that he'd gotten in awhile, so he didn't dwell on it too much.

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12th March, 2024 – Year 10 – 13:00:

Ron bit his thumbnail as he watched the screens in the technicians' lounge. Harry and Sirius were out there in their first actual fight, piloting the red-and-gold Jaeger that had been dubbed Mighty Buckbeak. If that wasn't nerve-wracking enough, the technicians up in LOCCENT were doing a terrible job of advising them. Two other Jaegers were already down, one destroyed and the other unable to fight after its leg had been ripped off.

When Buckbeak got thrown through another building, Ron cried out and knocked his chair over when he vaulted to his feet. Luckily Buckbeak looked mostly undamaged as she crawled up out of the dust and rubble. Ron let out a sigh of relief, though his irritation was only growing. When he heard the next horrifically bad call given, he had had enough. That was his best friend out there, his brother, and these idiots were going to get him killed.

Storming out of the lounge, Ron didn't really think about what he was doing as he took the stairs three at a time. He paid no mind to the people he passed in the hall, except to vaguely register that he must look a fright with the way most of them got the hell out of his way when they saw him. Pushing through the doors at the end of the hall, Ron looked around to figure out where to go next.

“Buckbeak, watch your flank. He seems to be trying to aim for your left, so you might want to dodge right next time,” one of the operators said in a wavering voice, as if he knew how bad his information was. Ron was simultaneously glad that it wasn't the C.T.O. on duty and doing such a terrible job, but also pissed that the chief technical officer wasn't there for this. He had probably been stuck over at the Academy, talking to some of the trainees when the attack happened.

Registering that last bit of advice with what he had observed on the screens downstairs, Ron felt the blood drain from his face. Striding quickly over to the panel, Ron screeched, “No! You idiot! Give me that!” He grabbed the mic and pulled it away from the stunned tech. “Harry! Harry, listen to me! Do NOT go right!”

“Ron?” came Harry's shocked grunt over the comm.
“Yes. Harry, going right is checkmate, you understand? Grim is trying to get behind you,” Ron said frantically. “See those claws on his hind feet? If he can get the hooks on his forelegs on your shoulders, you won't be able to get him off as he claws apart your back. He keeps going for the left because it's not your dominant arm, and you're slower turning from that side. If you go right, he'll have the perfect opening to launch himself behind you,” he said rapidly.

“Gotcha!” Harry yelled. On the screens, Buckbeak grabbed hold of the kaiju and used an uppercut to knock it back onto the spires of the bridge next to them. The kaiju screamed, but was on its feet again before Buckbeack could press the advantage.

“Harry, listen up,” Ron said as he looked over their surroundings. “Think of that little blue building on your eight o'clock like a pawn. Next time Grim charges at you, dodge behind it and sacrifice it. If you go left and forward, you should be able to jump onto his back before he recovers.”

“We're on it,” Sirius announced, grunting as they swept back to make the space for the move. Grim took the bait, using the increased room to build up speed in its charge. When Buckbeak moved, the change in direction left Grim off balance and unable to stop from tripping over the shorter building instead of going through it. Buckbeak was able to get on his back before he could recover, damaging his torso with a litany of blows before being thrown off.

The fight progressed much smoother after that. Ron knew how Harry fought intimately and had watched him and Sirius train together multiple times. Whenever he saw an environmental opportunity, he'd call it out – sometimes in the shorthand he and Harry had developed over their friendship and trusting that Harry would translate it in the Drift to Sirius. Twice he was able to see the kaiju from a different angle than they could and warn them of an impending attack.

When at last the battle was over, Ron sighed in relief and collapsed back into the chair he didn't actually remember sitting down in. He scrubbed his hands over his face as his adrenaline started to wane. A hand patted him on shoulder, causing him to look up.

At the marshal. And also to realise where he was. And what he had just done.

“Um. Oops,” he mumbled, sliding down in the chair apprehensively.

Marshal Dumbledore, however, just smiled at him, eyes twinkling with mirth. “You did very well with that,” he said thoughtfully.
“I'm–I'm sorry, sir! Oh Merlin, I wasn't even thinking. I shouldn't have just.” Ron motioned frantically at the door he had initially burst through. “Oh crap, please don't tell my mum?” he pleaded. After all, he had his priorities; the wrath of Molly Weasley was far more terrifying than even getting thrown out of the programme.

Dumbledore just laughed. “Oh, but I would think she'd be very proud of you,” he said playfully. “While the helicopters bring Mr. Potter and Mr. Black back to us, perhaps you and I should talk,” he suggested in a way that Ron knew was actually more of an order.

Ron gulped nervously. “Y-yes, sir,” he managed to stammer out when the marshal seemed to be waiting for a response.

An hour later, Ron stumbled down to the celebration in the hanger in a daze. When Harry's questions about him talking to them lead to Ron disclosing that he might've just earned himself a spot to train in LOCCENT, their collected friends and family cheered even louder than they had been before. Sirius enveloped him in a hug in thanks, joking about how he'd saved their arses. He was pushed aside when Ron's mother decided it was her turn to squeeze the life out of him.

“Oh, my babies are all growing up! Look at you, working in LOCCENT!” she cried happily. So happily that Ron didn't mind how she was slowly crushing his ribcage. Well, didn't mind much.

Later that evening, after the partying had died down a bit, Ron was surrounded by Ginny, Harry, Luna, his brothers, and a few of their other friends as they laughingly made up a theme song for him based on chess. They called it “Weasley Is Our King” (they almost used Queen, since that really was the best piece, but Ron had turned purple with indignation) and Ron called them all a bunch of idiots as they belted out the lyrics.

And he loved every second of it.

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8th October, 2024 – Year 11 – 15:42:

“Go away,” Harry growled at the person knocking on his door. If they'd gotten through the
living room to his bedroom door then he mostly likely knew them, and he didn't feel like talking to anyone he knew just then.

Luna opened the door and came in anyway. She gently sat on the edge of the bed that Harry was currently sprawled across. “What's wrong?”

Harry lifted his face from where he'd buried it in the pillows and snarled at her. When she reached out to put a hand on his shoulder he curled away from her and tugged one of the pillows over the top of his head.

Luna, completely not offended by his behaviour, just used the extra space to stretch herself out. “Sirius said–”

“Sirius can shove it,” Harry grumbled. He knew he was being churlish and that Luna didn't deserve it. It was why he hadn't wanted to talk to anyone in the first place. He just wanted to sulk about his fight with Ron by himself. Then he wouldn't have to think about how he was partly at fault for it and could just be angry.

Luna sighed softly. Harry felt her turn onto her side to face him. “We don't have to talk about it,” she offered.

“I'm not going to be very good company,” he grit out slowly, trying not to be mean to her.

“You're always good company, Harry,” she said simply. “Even when you're upset at people that aren't me.”

Harry felt a pang at that. Luna was good at that – saying just the right thing to knock you off your high horse or calm you down. Or both. Harry let out a sigh of defeat, rolling over to face Luna, clutching one of his pillows tightly to his chest. “Sorry.”

She smiled brightly. “It's okay. I was warned about what I was coming into,” she said blithely.

Harry snorted a laugh at that. “Listen, Luna, I know you mean well, but I'm probably not the best person to hang out with right now,” he warned again. “Not to be rude, but what did you want?”
“I was thinking I could teach you how to play a game,” she said innocently. Too innocently.

Harry narrowed his eyes. He was suspicious, but he knew that she knew that he was intrigued. “What kind of game?” he asked carefully.

“I was thinking Tri-Dimensional Chess. It could come in useful,” she said, still playing innocent.

“I'm not the one who likes—” Harry paused, then started to laugh. Of course, he thought. “As a peace offering?” he asked with amusement.

“As anything you like,” she said brightly, bouncing up off the bed and grabbing the bag she'd left by the door.

After a frustrating half hour of them both trying to figure out the rules from the printouts Luna had brought, Harry gave up. “Where did you even hear about this from?” he asked in exasperation.

“There's an old Muggle show,” she said. “It's about space travel, but the characters like to play this.” She motioned to the multi-platform playing board.

Harry stared at the board for a moment in contemplation. “Perhaps we should watch this show instead. Y'know, to see if we can figure it out better from watching other people play it,” he suggested slyly. Really, anything to get him away from chess.

“Please,” Luna responded, making them both laugh.

Star Trek: The Original Series didn't really shine much more light on how to play, but neither of them particularly cared. Instead they snickered over the way the captain spoke and Luna gushed about wanting to meet those kinds of aliens and Harry just really adored the first officer for reasons he couldn't explain, since he himself was a bit more like the captain. After several hours, they had both drifted off, sprawled across the bed sideways and propped up by pillows.
When Sirius peeked in and found them asleep, he just smiled to himself and tossed a blanket over them. He decided to leave them be, having been in Harry’s head enough to know it was all platonic.

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9th October, 2024 – Year 11 – 11:30:

Ron grinned to himself as he proceeded to utterly *whomp* Harry for the fourteenth time. How had he never heard of Tri-D chess before? It was fantastic! Harry was even being a good sport and humouring him by playing, despite the fact that he was terrible at regular chess and really had no chance.

Then again, he might have just been mollified by the entire pan of Molly Weasley's treacle tart that Ron had wheedled out of her to bring as his apology. Regardless, Ron was pleased.

When he began to set up the board for round fifteen, Harry groaned at him around his fork. Ron laughed, but graciously let Harry go first.

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21st August, 2025 – Year 12 – 18:22:

Harry rocked on his feet, arguing with himself. He needed to man up and just walk out there. She wasn’t talking to anyone, just sitting there reading mission logs. Mission logs were always boring. She probably wouldn’t even mind being interrupted! Biting his lip, Harry peeked around the corner again.

Guànjūn, one of the Chinese Jaegers, had cycled to the Anchorage Shatterdome to substitute in for one of theirs that had been badly damaged in the last fight. With her had come a handful of technicians and her two pilots: Cedric Diggory and Cho Chang. Harry had been briefly introduced to the two as they were shown around, but hadn’t had much of a chance to talk to them since then.

Part of that was his own fault. He was so scared of making a fool of himself in front of Cho
and her crew that he had actively avoided them on several occasions. Frankly put, she was the most beautiful girl he'd ever met, and it made him nervous. She was only a little bit older than he was and already had one win under her belt. He had thought that maybe if he could get her alone that he'd ask if she'd like to let him show her around Anchorage.

And then he had been walking through the hangars to check up on Buckbeak's repairs, only to see her sitting there by herself. It was the perfect opportunity, and he now had no excuse. Swallowing his apprehension, he tried his best to casually walk around the corner.

When he got close enough, he cleared his throat quietly. Too quietly, because she didn't even bat an eyelash. Screwing up his courage, he called out a tentative, “Hey.”

Blinking owlishly, she looked up and spotted him there. After a beat, she seemed to remember who he was and smiled. “Hi.”

“So, um, hey, I was wondering,” Harry began, shoving his hands into his pockets again. “Would you maybe like to see some of Anchorage while you're here? I mean, I'd love to maybe show you around or go for food. Or something.” Harry shut up when he saw her expression twist uncomfortably.
Cho bit her lip gently, looking sympathetic. “Sorry, I...I don't think I could. You see, Cedric and I, we're,” she made a vague motion with her hand. “Together, y'know?”

Harry rather hoped that there was a convenient hole in the hangar floor that he could fall through. Possibly onto something metallic. For the most part, he'd been around teams mostly comprised of family members or close friends. He'd completely forgotten that nearly half of the teams were comprised of couples.

“Oh! Yeah. Right, right. Sorry. I didn't mean to, um. Right. Nevermind, then,” he said, smiling far too brightly for it to be real. “I'm just going to, uh, go, then. I'll, uh, I'll see you around,” he stammered out. He saw her give a small wave and awkward smile before he turned tail and loped away as quickly as possible without looking like he was running.

Well, at least there hadn't been anyone in earshot.

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28th November, 2025 – Year 12 – 20:07:

Harry made a face at the news report he was watching. A recap of the battle in Santa Monica Bay from the previous week was being shown, but that wasn't what was bothering him. It was the smarmy face of Cedric Diggory, schmoozing with the news crews.

Harry had kept a polite distance from the Guàn jùn crew for the rest of the time they were there, smiling benignly when they were all called to some meeting or happened to be using one of the same training areas. Sirius had teased him about his crush at first, but had laid off when he saw in the Drift how much it had embarrassed Harry to get turned down. Good-natured teasing was one thing, rubbing it in was just cruel.

When repairs had been finalised and the Anchorage Shatterdome was back to functioning capacity, Guàn jùn had been transferred to the L.A. Shatterdome. It had been in some ways a relief, not having to see the two of them together, but it also served to make Harry's heartbreak complete. Harry had mourned, but figured that he'd get over it if he didn't have to see her around.

Then, a kaiju had surfaced in southern California and Guàn jùn had been among the Jaegers
deployed to fight it. They'd won the battle in nearly record time, with Guànjūn landing the killing blow. The media was all over it, showing footage of the fight in tandem with pictures and clips of Cho and Cedric together. Everyone was harping on about the “sweet, young couple.”

Harry would grit his teeth and change the channel, knowing from experience that the hype would die down eventually.

However, the breaking point came when one interview had Cedric stating that Guànjūn was the true 'champion' of Jaegers. He'd gone on to say that even though they only had two kills as opposed to Buckbeak's three, that they had almost beaten Buckbeak's record-holding time for defeating a Category II. He'd then smiled at the camera before leaning over to kiss Cho soundly.

Harry hadn't even known that he and Sirius held the record time before that, but the statement positively infuriated him. He knew that Cedric was just taunting him, rubbing it in. He'd gotten a kill, and he had the girl. Harry realised that Cho must have told Cedric about what he'd said, and it was mortifying.

But fine, if that was how Cedric wanted to play it, Harry was game. He had the better Jaeger (Buckbeak), the best technician (Ron), and an amazing partner (Sirius). Cho might have seemed like a decent fighter from what Harry had seen in the combat rooms, but Cedric didn't stand a chance.

Sirius frowned at him when Harry insisted that they step up their training schedule. He didn't want that twerp talking trash about Buckbeak, did he? Harry ignored him when Sirius rolled his eyes and began to lament the stupidity of teenagers. He was just glad that Sirius went along with it (though with a comment about how he was just as stupid at that age that Harry chose to ignore).

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5th May, 2026 – Year 12 – 07:15:

Harry flopped onto the cafeteria table in exhaustion, silently wishing he knew a spell that would make his breakfast march into his mouth of its own accord. Or that he could remember if he was supposed to know a spell like that. Or even if he had the energy to cast a spell like that. That last battle had been brutal and he would have been surprised if he could cast *Lumos*. 
The bench on the other side of the table groaned as someone dropped down onto it with the thunk of armour. Harry tilted his head in time to see Cedric sprawl across his side. A few seconds after his head had bounced off the hard surface, he muttered a plaintive, “Ow.”

Harry snorted. Cedric snickered. Within moments they were laughing helplessly, tears pricking at their eyes.

Guànjūn had continued to hop between Shatterdomes as needed. In February, it had been in Vladivostok when a kaiju had attacked Aniva on Sakhalin Island in Russia. Buckbeak, who had been on a short-term loan to the Tokyo Shatterdome while the new Nagasaki base was being populated, had also been deployed. Later, Harry would wonder if it was a media stunt, sending them both out. At that time, however, he had been glad for the chance to show who was the better Jaeger team after all.

That attitude had lasted all of ten seconds into the battle when a blast of poisonous gas nearly took them both out at the same time. Luck was with them, as they were both able to seal their airlocks quickly enough to prevent more than a tiny bit from seeping in. Still, it had been enough that both teams were compromised with hacking coughs and slightly blurred vision. They’d had to rely on each other to watch their backs until a second set of teams could be deployed, allowing them to retreat back for immediate medical attention. They’d kept an eye on each other’s recoveries, sending something in celebration as each of the four was given the all clear.

Guànjūn had been transferred back to L.A. a month ago, and had been part of the two-prong attack for this latest kaiju. Buckbeak and the twins’ Jaeger, Zonko Wheezer, had been sent down from Anchorage while Bill and his partner Louis had accompanied Guàn jūn in their Jaeger White Fang. They’d intercepted the kaiju just off the coast of British Columbia at 0100 hours and the battle had dragged on until almost 0530. They’d all been exhausted by the time it finally went down, twitching and still trying to squeeze Zonko’s torso into scrap metal with its tentacles.

They’d been geographically closer to the Anchorage base once all was said and done, and a quiet consensus was reached that the two L.A. Jaegers would be welcome to trudge back to Anchorage to rest and recover. They could be shipped back to L.A. later when they weren’t dead on their feet.

After two battles of saving each other’s hides, Harry was ready to call a truce. Cedric, from the way he was grinning tiredly across that table, seemed more than amenable to that. They ate in relative silence, too tired to talk but surrounded by the bustle of the rest of the Shatterdome moving around them. When they’d finished, Cedric had waved his goodbye and slogged away to finally get his armour removed and visit Cho in the medical bay. A nasty blow had knocked them hard enough that she had hit their instrument panel, bruising her ribs. Harry left right after, taking a tray back to his quarters for Sirius, who had begged off of breakfast to collapse in bed, citing ‘old age.’
In the days of recovery afterwards, Harry and Cedric became wary sparring partners. A few weeks after the Jaegers had been returned to their proper Shatterdomes, Cedric had extended an invitation for Harry to visit them in L.A. The first time Harry said no, declaring it to be too hot, but eventually he gave in. Harry let Cedric know that he had an open invitation to come to Anchorage whenever he wished. Cho was nice when they interacted, but she could tell that Harry still wasn't completely over her and made it less awkward for both of them by making herself scarce when he visited. Cedric learned not to mention his relationship with Cho when he and Harry sparred, realising that it made Harry alternately uncomfortable and irritable after Harry almost took his head off with a kendo shinai. (Harry still swore it was an accident and that he'd just forgotten his strength. Honest!)

Slowly, they started to become friends, laughing and joking and sparring in turn. Harry knew that Cedric would never be as close to him as Ron or Luna, but it was still nice to have someone else who understood what it was like to be a Ranger.

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12th September, 2026 – Year 13 – 19:53:

Harry shifted nervously as they prepared for their transport to drop them. He had a bad feeling about the fight ahead. Technically, he and Sirius should have been grounded after participating in so many of the most recent battles. However, the other three Jaegers stationed at Anchorage were down for the count after one of the cases of hydraulic gels had turned out to be infused with a corrosive agent. Authorities were convinced that it was the work of the BuenaKai cultists and were still trying to pinpoint where the contamination had occurred.

On top of that, the technicians still couldn't give a decent trajectory for the kaiju – or even anything more specific than 'north.' Some were worrying that, like the cloaked kaiju from several years ago, it was trying to swim around to attack somewhere not readily protected by the Jaegers. Experts from every Shatterdome were still arguing back and forth about whether the kaiju had enough forethought for that sort of tactic.

Despite the fact that if it did make it that far it would likely still attack somewhere in North America, Harry couldn't help the frisson of worry that it might make it across the Atlantic. Though the only real homes he'd ever known had been in Alaska, he still considered himself British and worried about his homeland. He knew Sirius worried as well, though his partner was trying not to think about it. Every now and then, though, Harry would catch a hint of an image of Sirius's younger brother Regulus. He didn't push it, allowing Sirius that much privacy with his fears.
A call finally came through, letting them know that the kaiju was indeed veering to the east. The Bulgarian Jaeger, Durmstrang Orel, was ordered to return back to Vladivostok, while the French Jaeger, Ailes D'Argent, announced they were heading back to Tokyo. They were too far west and with not enough fuel in their transports to make it all the way across.

L.A. had sent three of its Jaegers, Guànjūn and White Fang included, but they were lagging much further behind. Mighty Buckbeak would be on her own until they could catch up. What was worse was that they had split up, fanning out just in case the kaiju changed direction. Harry was generally aware that the Jaegers had been designed so that they could take a kaiju out solo if necessary. Unity and Philosopher's Stone had done so in the early days before there were enough Jaegers for each Shatterdome to have more than one. But he and Sirius had never had to fight a kaiju all by themselves. Finish off a kaiju solo, yes, but it had already been weakened by their fallen allies.

To make matters even worse, this kaiju was massive. It had been just shy of slipping into Category III territory, but had been hesitantly deemed a Category II. Scans were showing that it had a number of nasty-looking glowing appendages, earning it the name Tournament from the K-Watch officers who registered it coming through. Harry didn't appreciate their attempts at being clever.

As they finally closed in on it, Harry felt his pulse pick up. The dark was decidedly not helpful in downplaying the form of the kaiju below them. The transport vehicles flew a bit ahead of it, searching for a good place to drop Buckbeak for interception. They were confident that if the kaiju tried to go around that Buckbeak could use her own thrusters to account for the change in time. Harry glanced over at Sirius, shooting him a cocky grin that they both knew wasn't sincere.

Sirius shrugged back at him, then braced himself. “I really, really hate this part,” he said tiredly, right before the transports disengaged. They dropped the thirty feet before the first impact from the water, then forty more before the second, harder impact from the ocean floor rattled through them.

“Ow,” Harry stated, readjusting himself in his stirrups.

Sirius snickered as he did the same. “Let's go!” he said in an attempt to sound excited. “Better walk out the stiffness from that journey before we tackle that beastie.”

Harry did laugh then, setting a decent pace through the water. The kaiju either hadn't noticed them yet or didn't care that they were in its way, continuing to barrel straight at them.
Ron came on over their comms. “Ten seconds until contact, Buckbeak. Five, four, three, two—”

Harry grunted as the impact jostled him in the harness. Tournament had tried to run them over to get them out of the picture long enough to escape, but it apparently wasn't prepared for Buckbeak to latch on and grapple him to a halt. Snarling with effort, Harry-and-Sirius twisted as one to pin the kaiju beneath Buckbeak. Tournament thrashed and bucked, trying to throw them off without success. Their left arm did finally come loose, but they managed to hang on with the right.

“Deploying chainsword,” Harry yelled out over the comms, alerting LOCCENT and the incoming Jaegers, as he pressed the button. They were far enough away from major populations to not worry too much about the kaiju blue, but it was important to let the others know so they could seal their Conn-Pods against it.

The links of the sword spat out of the holding shaft, the core quickly pulling taught to lock them together. Harry swung the left arm down, slashing at the tentacles trying to pull them off of Tournament, while Sirius kept the right arm locked firmly around the kaiju's torso. Harry managed to nick most of the writhing appendages, but knew he'd scored a decent hit when the kaiju screamed beneath them. “One down, twenty-six to go,” he growled out with a harsh laugh. He managed to get eight more before the kaiju finally threw them off.

Apparently they had managed to piss Tournament off, as it spun to attack them instead of continuing on its previous course. They held their own against the onslaught, seeming to be dealing more damage than they were taking. Sirius was controlling the magical shields they could deploy to cover a certain area as Harry controlled their attacks, swiping and jabbing at whatever was in range. When Tournament seemed to have stumbled back, Harry wound up for a strike that would hopefully pierce through to the kaiju's spinal column. For a moment, he thought that maybe his anxiety had been for nothing – they were going to beat this thing before the others even got there.

And then Tournament began to spew a thick, yellow substance in their direction. Harry had a second to think that it reminded him of spider webbing before Buckbeak lurched, stopping short. Harry-and-Sirius strained to make their limbs respond, but the substance had coated them and turned instantly hard. They were trapped in place.

Harry felt his panic rising. They were sitting ducks!

“LOCCENT, Jaegers, listen!” Sirius yelled into the comms. “It spits some sort of viscous liquid. We can barely wiggle an inch, but we'll keep trying to break it. Get here ASAP, but watch out!”
“Roger that, Buckbeak,” Cho called back to them. “We’re two minutes out. Hang on!”

“We'll definitely try, love,” Sirius assured, though Harry could feel his confidence waning.

“You heard the lady, old man,” Harry prodded, earning him a momentary glare. “Come on, let's try to at least free one arm!”

“Let's get your left, kiddo. I'll do my best to help while manning the shields.”

Sirius grunted as Tournament smacked into their main shield, but Harry felt him steadily in the strain to move their arm. Harry heard a small cracking noise, like crumbling rock, and took heart. Tournament must have noticed, though, as it simply doused them in more of the fluid.

“Dammit!” someone yelled. Harry wasn't actually certain which one of them it had been.

Tournament reared back and then lunged at them, his massive jaws aimed straight for the Conn-Pod. Before he reached them, Harry saw through their screen a set of giant metal boots stomp his head into the ocean. Guànjūn had dropped down right on top of him. Harry cheered.

“Heard you guys could use some help,” Cedric said playfully as Guànjūn slammed her spiked, mace-like fist down into the kaiju's back.

“You are definitely a sight for sore eyes,” Harry said earnestly. With a thought from Sirius, they renewed their efforts to break free.

“We'll be there to back you up in about a half an hour,” Bill called over the comms. “The transports are getting low on fuel so we'll have to drop down and run the rest of the way to you.” The other Jaeger also pitched in that it would take them about forty-five minutes for similar reasons, but they would have to go along the ocean floor instead of the tundra.

“Hopefully we'll have this wrapped up by then,” Cedric called happily.
“Less talking, more fighting!” Cho yelled at him, making Harry snicker.

Finally getting their arms free, Harry began to hack at the build-up around their legs, Sirius following suit after deploying their second sword. “We're almost out, hang in there, Guànjūn!”

“Sooner is better than later!” Cedric called out, sounding worried.

Harry chanced a look at them and realised that they weren't doing so well. The blue and yellow Jaeger was limping on one side. They swung one of their arms forward, the spiked end releasing into a flail and rocketing forward to slam into Tournament's legs, tripping him up as they reeled it back in. When the other arm tried for a blow to the exposed underbelly, Tournament caught onto the chain. He pulled the arm and the spiked ball in opposite directions, eventually tearing the flail right out of the socket. Cho screamed in pain, and Harry morbidly wondered if it had felt like her fingernails being torn out.

Shaking himself out of his horror, Harry mashed the button on their comms. “Dammit, Guànjūn, you need to retreat! Fall back! Run or it's going to tear you apart!” he yelled over to them.

“We can use the handful of rockets we have to distract it until the others get here!” Sirius added.

“No way in hell are we abandoning you here!” Cedric yelled back, though his voice was strained.

They didn't even need to confirm in the Drift for Harry and Sirius to redouble their efforts to get free. They were almost out, but were having issues where the substance had seeped into the joints of Buckbeak's knees. We're coming, we're coming, hang on, Harry chanted in his head, feeling the gradual crumbling in his own knees. We're almost there, just hang on, please.

They finally felt it loosen enough that they could move, though their range was still somewhat limited. Refocusing on the kaiju, Sirius was the first to notice that Tournament was gathering some sort of crackling blue energy in its tentacles.

“Get down!” Harry yelled, Buckbeak launching over to tackle Guànjūn below the waves. Their shields could maybe keep them from the worst of the blast, but the heavily damaged Jaeger wouldn't stand a chance.
Somehow, Guànjūn managed to roll them, covering Buckbeak instead. Before Harry and Sirius could do anything about it, Tournament fired. Buckbeak's left arm and leg were damaged, but the real jolt came when she was thrown backwards by the explosion of Guànjūn's core. Harry-and-Sirius felt more than heard themselves screaming as they watched the Jaeger erupt into a succession of smaller explosions of fuel and munitions, her limbs spasming until she finally collapsed.

Rage threatened to burn through Harry-and-Sirius as they stood to face their enemy, tempered only by the sickening dismay at losing their comrades and friends. Lunging at the kaiju, they began to batter it with their fists, over and over and over again, heedless of the claws and tentacles trying to shred and crush the rest of them. Harry-and-Sirius thought that they heard the sick, squelching noise when Tournament's lower jaw broke away from his head, hanging limply by damaged flesh. They might have been disturbed by it some other time, but right then it was simply satisfying.

They punched and punched, following the kaiju down into the water – as it stumbled, as it fell, as it sprawled. They kept hitting it with all of their might until they registered that they were just grinding what was left of it into the sand. Scanning for vitals, they found no noticeable heartbeat.

Trying to remember how to speak, how to separate his mind out of Sirius's enough to use just his own mouth, Harry triggered the comms. “LOCCENT,” he rasped out, momentarily wondering what he had done to make his throat so raw. “Is there still a signature?”

The line was quiet for a moment before a subdued Ron answered. “Negative, Buckbeak. There is no signature. It's dead.”

Harry let that sink in, felt it as he and Sirius tried to let that dispel some of the horrible feeling still sinking inside of them.

“Harry!” Ron yelled suddenly, snapping them out of their downward spiral. “I'm getting a signal from an escape pod! It's badly damaged and weak, but there are vitals coming through!”

“Show us!” Sirius demanded, pulling control to force Buckbeak's legs under them until Harry pitched in to help. A small blip loaded onto their radar screens, guiding them to the tiny vessel containing one of their friends. Harry couldn't have said if there was any preference for which of them it was, he was just so happy to be able to carefully lift the pod out of the water and cradle it safely to Buckbeak's chest.
“Was it just the one?” he asked quietly. He could hope, but he'd given up praying a long time ago.

“Yeah, just the one,” Ron confirmed sadly.

“Right. Have medical bay on standby. We're coming home.”

“Roger that. Transport has already started scrambling and will be there to meet you as soon as possible.”

Ignoring their damage and their own injuries, Harry and Sirius began the long walk home. As they made their way, the other two Jaegers caught up and fell in beside them. Never before had the victory lap felt more like a funeral procession.

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15th September, 2026 – Year 13 – 10:32 P.M.:

Draco kept to the shadows as he watched the screen across the coffee shop. Newspapers were all well and good, but he'd secretly enjoyed the Muggles' 'telly' device ever since he had discovered it. The newspapers in the colony always tried to mute the news from the outside world, downplaying their need to worry as they were already safe. Draco had learned that the first time he and his friends had snuck down to the nearby Muggle town and seen an outsider news report.

The battle against the kaiju fascinated and horrified Draco in turn. He'd seen the pictures of the destruction. He'd also seen pictures of the gargantuan machines that stood victorious over the bodies of the defeated. Most of the pilots would give interviews in the wake of their fights, and Draco had soaked in every bit of them. Some were modest while others were cocky – reserved and carefree, shy and confident. They were heralded as the heroes of this new world. Draco could admit to himself that he envied them that.

He knew what outsiders called colonists like himself. 'Coward' was one of the most common insults, but also one of the nicest. Draco liked to think they were wrong. His father had always said that they were just jealous because they couldn't match the feat of the colony shields. Then again, Draco has seen what the outsiders had made – the Jaegers – and how they hadn't
hidden away, how they had chosen to fight to protect themselves and others.

In quiet moments, Draco sometimes thought that his father was wrong.

Every now and then, Draco would daydream. He'd think about being inside one of the massive feats of magitech, laying waste to those who would threaten his family and friends. He'd dream of ending things once and for all and returning home to the place he'd been born. (For all that they had been in the colony in France for a decade, Draco had never really thought of it as 'home.') He would be able to walk the streets in the light, and people would call him a hero too. He would dream, and he would think about not being a coward.

But then, a Ranger would die. The reports would come in for days about it. Montages of their lives would play on every channel. Articles about the family, friends, and loved ones they left behind would fill the magazines and newspapers. Shots of the devastated Jaeger would play as they listed the horrific ways the men and women had perished – explosion, burning, drowning, mauling, internal bleeding, stroke, and even presumed swallowed by a kaiju once.

And Draco Malfoy would mourn them with the rest of the world and curl tighter into his fear.

When the newscasters began to show the image of the young Ranger who had died, barely eighteen, mixed with clips of his crying family, Draco decided it was time to slink back home. He knew it was cowardly, but he ignored that to lend an extra dose of his magic to the colony shields as they closed over him protectively.
14th February, 2027 – Year 13 – 18:45:

When they had arrived back at the Shatterdome, the little blue escape pod had opened to reveal the limp form of Cho Chang. She was badly injured and half-frozen, but alive. The glass on the pod had been damaged, causing lacerations and allowing some of the Arctic water and air to seep in. She said that she had hit her head when Buckbeak had tackled Guànjūn, blacking out. At least, that was the last thing she remembered.

The remains of Cedric's yellow pod were brought in with the remnants of Guànjūn, the body within barely recognisable as human. It was ruled that the damage to the Jaeger had caused a malfunction that prevented him from lifting all the way into the pod before the Jaeger exploded. He had been burned and bludgeoned as the improperly-fitted pod was thrown wide.

Cho had chosen to remain in Anchorage. She haltingly disclosed that it was the closest thing to a home that she had that wasn't completely saturated in memories of her and Cedric. Their quarters in Hong Kong and L.A. were carefully cleaned out, settled into an Anchorage storage facility for when she was ready. The Shatterdome Psych Analysts were helping, but she was clearly depressed for a while after the battle.

Harry had struggled with the loss for the first month, wondering and chastising himself and everyone else involved. What if they had been quicker? If they had dodged the spray? If the other pilots hadn't fanned out? If they had been able to take the hit to their shields like he and Sirius had planned?

The sight of Cho looking so alone as she wandered through the halls was what snapped him out of it. However much he might be hurting over watching his ally – and possible new friend – die, she was going through much worse. And she was doing it alone. Sure, people were offering their condolences and 'giving her space.' The brain-pickers handled her like a patient, as was expected of them. But no one was really talking to her like a person.

So Harry did. He could beat himself up with guilt when he was alone in his room, but every day he would seek Cho out to keep her from doing the same. Part of healing was sometimes needing a distraction, even for just a little while. She could talk in depth about it to the Analysts, but Harry would be her distraction.
Of course, she still talked about Cedric sometimes. Harry felt badly about not really knowing the guy, especially when she would ask him things like, “Do you think he would have liked this place?” But Harry would smile and try to make her smile with his response, and that was all he could ask for.

In the beginning, he'd brought her food and told her stories. When a holiday or party came around, he made sure to let her know she was welcome. Once she was up for it, he had taken her out to see the city. They had gone all over Anchorage, every restaurant and diner that Harry and his friends had scouted out over the last few years. Sometimes they saw films, though it was difficult to find any that weren't love stories or had huge explosions, as both would upset Cho. Other times they'd just walk along and talk about nothing. Slowly, Cho seemed to become more at ease.

Their most recent expedition, however, was proving to a disaster. Harry had tried hard to disguise his split lip from a recent training exercise, but he could tell he wasn't completely successful. (He'd been selfishly grateful when the last attack had occurred further south. Cho would get distressed when she saw him with even a bruise.) But they'd eventually gotten out of the Shatterdome and into the city streets. There were a lot more people out than Harry had expected on a cold Sunday night, but he hadn't really thought about it. He'd suggested the restaurant that he and Cho ended up at most frequently.

Walking in, he'd proceeded to have a small heart attack. There were hearts and streamers and balloons and pink and red and— Bloody hell, he hadn't realised what the date was. He was terrible about dates these days, even forgetting his own birthday the past year until Sirius had teased him about it.

He turned to Cho with a panicked look. He really wasn't looking forward to explaining that it wasn't intentional – taking her to their favourite place on VALENTINE'S DAY. Except she was just smiling and looked like she was trying not to laugh at the expression on his face.

“You forgot the day,” she said quietly, clapping a hand over her mouth to hide a snicker.

“I forgot the day,” Harry confirmed with a sigh, burying his face in his hands to laugh.

The hostess showed them to one of the U-shaped booths, which was covered in a horrific amount of glitter-like cut-outs. Harry was pretty sure that wasn't exactly sanitary. Cho seemed charmed by them, though, so he wisely kept his mouth shut. He might have imagined a handful of ways to make a select few of his friends and loved ones choke on them for not telling him when he said that he and Cho were going out that evening, but no one needed to know that.
The night was going fairly well. They chatted as normally as possible and Harry tried his best to ignore the other couples in the restaurant being cutesy. He was halfway through a terrible attempt at telling the funny story about something Buckbeak's technicians had done when she interrupted him.

“Harry,” she said thoughtfully, getting his attention. “You've been showing me around for months. It's Valentine's Day. We're in our favourite restaurant. And you haven't kissed me yet.” She sounded fondly exasperated.

Harry was pretty sure he was doing a decent impression of a fish. “I. Should I?” he asked nervously. It wasn't that he didn't want to, he just wasn't sure if it was appropriate or would be appreciated or–

She was smiling and leaning toward him. To hell with it, he thought, closing the distance and pressing his lips to hers. Her mouth was soft, wet, and had some sort of sticky stuff half-lingering where the food hadn't yet rubbed it away. It was brilliant, but admittedly a little disappointing.

He hadn't really had a chance for a real first kiss before. Most of the people he was surrounded by had been older than him by a fair amount, ever since the Academy. One girl had surprised him by dragging him into a smooch when he was leaving an interview the year before, but it had just been a quick mashing of faces he'd been too shocked to respond to before security had pulled her off. (Sirius had laughingly warned him about Jaeger Flies afterwards.)

But this was a proper kiss. It wasn't earth-shattering, and he couldn't feel it in his toes. Her mouth felt lukewarm, not scorching hot. His split lip hurt a little at the pressure. A half a thought wondered where he had picked up those frankly ridiculous ideas. He tried not to let them make him feel disappointed, but he was only partly successful.

Then Cho gasped, and Harry took that as a cue to press forward. He tilted his head slightly like he'd seen others do and raised a hand to cup her cheek. Except her cheek was wet. Harry opened his eyes in confusion and sat back.

Cho looked embarrassed as she scrubbed the wetness away from her eyes. “I'm sorry. I'm sorry. It's just, it just reminded me of Cedric, and I. Oh god. I'm sorry,” she whispered out furiously. A glimpse of her face showed it turning scarlet before she hid her face in her hands.

Harry just sat there for a moment, mind whirling. What? he thought. When his brain finally kicked in he was torn on how to react. On one hand, she had been flirting with him and
knew that he liked her and pretty much dared him to kiss her, and now she was freaking out. On the other hand, her partner and boyfriend just died five months before, and he was probably the last one to take her out for Valentine’s Day. Harry was frustrated with her and with himself for being frustrated with her.

Eventually the shock lifted when Cho raised her face to peek at him in mortification. Harry took a deep breath and braced himself, plastering a shaky smile on his face. He could be mad later, when he was by himself. She didn't deserve to have him snap at her, not after everything she'd been through. Right?

Cho smiled back in what seemed like relief. Harry was proud of himself for that.

The rest of the meal passed in quiet conversation, only a touch of awkwardness bleeding through. When they exited to head back to the Shatterdome, Cho slipped her hand into his. Harry returned her shy smile with one of his own.

When he gently kissed her at her door, she didn't mention Cedric at all.

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2nd March, 2027 – Year 13 – 15:35:

Sirius sighed, glancing over at where Harry was absently doing some of the work for his degree. He wanted to feel pride at his godson for continuing his studies without prompting even though he'd already become a pilot. Right then, though, all he could feel was the worry twisting in the pit of his stomach.

He could admit that some of his youthful affairs hadn't been very wise. He'd had his heart broken and had broken plenty of other hearts himself. He'd lived, he'd learned, and he tried not to regret any of them. He well understood how getting your heart torn to pieces could help you grow, but he'd also seen it destroy people who weren't so strong.

He worried about Harry.

This relationship he had begun with Cho Chang – it wasn't exactly healthy. She was obviously still grieving. Sirius never wanted to think poorly of her, but he was afraid she was
clinging onto Harry for the wrong reasons. Nothing so simple as a rebound, no. But there was a certain fear of being all alone – especially after a major loss – that Sirius was well acquainted with. And Harry had been the first – maybe only – person to really be there for her.

And then there was Harry. Harry, who had spent the last several years surrounded by people who were generally much older than him. While Sirius was always thankful for Luna, Ron, and the other younger Weasleys, he knew that Harry still felt the need to fit in amongst his older colleagues and coworkers. It had always been a fear that Harry wouldn't do well when confronted with the tumultuous emotions and hormones that came with being a teenager.

Now, here he was, getting thrown in the deep end. And he was repressing his own emotions to make Cho happy. And Cho was clinging ever tighter.

And Sirius could only see this blowing up in their faces.

Not that Sirius could talk to Harry about it. Merlin, he'd tried! But he could see the very second that Harry's shields would come down, blocking him out. He didn't want to talk about it or discuss it. He got angry when Sirius would start to voice his concerns. Dammit, Sirius had never been prepared to be a parent to a teenager, not really. He'd thought it would be brilliant, that maybe Harry would be just like James or Lily had and they'd be best mates as well as godfather and godson. He took that all back now; he'd conveniently forgotten what little shits they had all been.

Then again, he did owe it to Harry, as well as the memory of his friends, to try to keep the boy from suffering too much. If he could.

Sirius adjusted in his chair and put down his magazine. “Hey Harry–”

Harry sighed gustily, cutting him off. Schoolbooks were shut as he rolled his eyes. “Not this again, old man,” he said, full of exasperation. He checked his watch and stretched. “Anyway, I've gotta go.” He stacked his books and papers in a haphazard pile on an end table.

Sirius frowned. He knew exactly where Harry was going. “Maybe you should stay in tonight. You've seen Cho every afternoon or evening this week.”

“It's just for a walk around the hangar. It's too cold to really go anywhere. I'll be home before dinner,” he promised, as if that was the reason Sirius was worried.
It wasn't. Sirius knew he should put his foot down, should make Harry have that talk. He should weather the storm of the sixteen-year-old's indignant anger, act like a real parent. He'd been too soft on the boy, taken his generally mature behaviour for granted. He'd been too much of a mate and not enough of an authority figure.

“I–” he began. One look at Harry's face told him he was going to fail at everything all over again. He sighed. “Just be careful, okay?” he pleaded.

Harry shot him a quick grin, grabbing his jacket and dashing out with a short wave.

Sirius cradled his head in his hands and silently apologised to James and Lily. Maybe he could ask Tonks or Remus to talk to Harry – they might get through to him better. Maybe.

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6th June, 2027 – Year 13 – 22:14:

Harry could feel his heart hammering in his chest as they stumbled across the floor. For all that he was excited he was also terrified. He'd never done this before, but hadn't hesitated at all when Cho had pulled him across her threshold in lieu of a goodnight kiss.

Her hands were clutching at his back, hanging on and pulling him with her towards the bed. He couldn't stop kissing her, couldn't stop to think or he just knew his nerves would freeze him up. Her hands were tugging now, freeing his regulation undershirt from his waistband and pushing it up until he dragged his hands away from gripping her waist to help. Harry shivered when the air hit his overheated skin, the faint sheen of nervous sweat making it feel like a shock.

Carefully, he reached out to the hem of Cho's shirt. She smiled at him sweetly and lifted her arms so he could pull it off. He kissed her again, pulling her close enough to feel the skin of her stomach and the fabric of her bra pressed against him. He heard a snap and nearly forgot how to breathe when she guided one of his hands to cup her breast under the loosened material.

Heat swept over him as Cho reached for his belt buckle. They fumbled their way out of their trouser fastenings, laughing when it all got stuck around their boots. Harry tipped them sideways onto Cho's bed, happily leaning into the way she pulled him into her kisses as he fumbled with his laces. Somehow hers were easier, coming free after a few deft tugs, allowing him to shove away the last of her clothes.
Cho slowly leaned back into her pillows, her hands stretched out to guide Harry to her. He swallowed nervously, his eyes tracking the curves and dips of her body for the first time as he bloomed red across his face and neck. He wanted to feel, to touch, to explore, to let his hands roam all over her, but he was unsure if she would want that, if he could find the nerve.

Instead he gave in to his other desire, so much simpler and somehow less frightening than the intimacy. He crawled between her parted legs, settling his weight down to press against her. He gasped a breath, his hips jerking involuntarily at the feel of her warm skin where no one else had ever touched him. Her eyes crinkled in a smile and she kissed him gently, tilting her hips back toward him.

A thought had Harry panicking. “I don't—I don't have any—I've never needed—” he stumbled out between gasps at the feeling of the almost involuntary rocking.


“I don't know it,” he whined, pressing his face to her neck.


Harry pulled back slightly so she could reach out and snag her wand. She waved it and murmured the spell, pulling him back to her as soon as she had finished. Harry felt a tingling sensation pass over his skin, making him shudder at the stimulation.

Summoning his courage, he kissed her once and pulled back to line himself up. He choked at the feeling as he pressed in, heat and wetness gripping him. He knew he wasn't going to last very long. His hips jerked and stuttered on the first few thrusts, slowly finding a way of moving that felt correct.

It was far too soon when he felt his orgasm crashing down on him, the sounds of Cho crying out making it far too difficult to rein it in. Finally the shudders passed and he felt like he could maybe prop himself up. “I'm sorry, I want—can I—how do I?” he stuttered out.

Cho guided one of his hands down to her entrance, circling his fingers until he understood
what to do. She gripped him tightly when he tried to pull back, writhing up against him in tandem with his fingers. Harry kissed her until she became breathless, throwing her head back and panting out an unsteady stream of half-words.

Her moans became louder and louder as she began to thrash. “Ah, yes, yes, right, ah!” Harry felt her tighten impossibly around him as she cried out, “Cedric!”

And Harry felt himself go cold, the happy warmth and the gentle relaxation sucked out of him with just that single word. “What?” he asked quietly. Maybe he’d misheard. Maybe she didn't actually–

But Cho's eyes had snapped open, going wide with dread as the colour drained from her flushed face. “Oh no,” she whispered. “Oh no. Harry. Harry, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to–”

Harry had had enough. That was the tipping point. That was the straw that broke the camel's back.

She'd tainted his first kiss with Cedric. She'd brought him up over and over when Harry had done nice things, sweet things, silly things to make her happy. He'd smiled and listened and been supportive and patient. He'd convinced himself that it was okay, that she'd slowly stop.

But this? This was too far.

Harry clenched his jaw and pulled back, trying to ignore the shudder his body gave as he slid free of her. He turned away, refusing to acknowledge the hands that tried to pull him back or the heartbroken pleas that begged him to stay. What right did she have to sound heartbroken now of all times? She had pulled him in here, she had made the offer, and Harry had given her everything. And it still wasn't enough, would maybe never be enough.

He angrily tugged on his pants and trousers, shoving his boots onto his feet and tucking the laces inside. He stood and grabbed his shirt off the floor, hoping that it would warm him up again.

Cho had gotten up, stumbling after him and trying to get him to stop. “Please, Harry,” she begged, trying to catch hold of him.

Harry broke her grip on his back and side by pulling his shirt the rest of the way over his
He straightened his glasses and tried to make himself neat enough so no one else could guess his shame when he left.

He turned to look at Cho one last time before he left, against his better judgement. Tears and snot were streaking down her face, her eyes puffy and red as she stood there, looking so small and fragile and helpless. A pang in his chest made him want to comfort her, to stop her crying, but he knew he couldn't do that again. He still wanted to yell at her, rail at her, tell her exactly how she had broken him, but his very last kindness to her would be to say nothing.

“No more,” he said evenly, giving a sad shake of his head. He turned and left, shutting the door behind him with forced ease.

When Harry returned home to find Sirius watching something on the telly, he was grateful when his godfather just took one look at him and lifted up an arm for him to tuck himself under. He was even more grateful when Sirius made no mention of the tears that occasionally fell to dampen his shirt, letting Harry just curl there and ignore the world for as long as he needed.

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13th June, 2027 – Year 13 – 14:23:

Cho felt the tears welling up again and ducked into the closest niche in the hangar bay. They kept creeping up on her, these bouts of crying, ever since she had picked herself up off the floor the day Harry finally left. They came on suddenly and lasted for a few minutes at a time, but nothing she did could stem the flow prematurely. It was that everything would just come at her at once – Cedric and Harry and the complete and utter loneliness she felt.

She'd tried so hard to get past it. When Harry had come to her, she had thought she could do it. She had thought he'd known Cedric, could talk about him and reminisce about him, could help her get it all out. The good memories and the bad, so precious to her and yet like venom that she needed to expel from the wound left behind. But he hadn't known Cedric, not really. They'd sparred, they'd bantered, they'd fought side by side and worried about the other's health. They'd never talked about the important things, the little things. Harry had even said that they were becoming friends but she hadn't really understood that, hadn't wanted to, maybe.

Harry had been so good to her that it had hurt. Sometimes she had wondered what it would have been like if she'd met him first, always followed by the crushing guilt of Cedric's memory. She knew, deep down, that the idea that crept in was her own doing. That maybe Cedric had died for something and that something was Harry and Harry had saved her. She'd somehow convinced
herself that day Harry had shown up at her door that maybe he could keep on saving her. It hadn't even occurred to her that there was a limit to his understanding.

She thought that Harry had understood what she needed. He'd been patient and kind, never pushing and always backing off when she needed a moment. She knew it bothered him but she had never asked, so focused on herself that she hadn't even thought that it might be hurting him too. She knew that she had messed up, that she'd made a grievous error, and she hated herself for it.

She hated Harry too, though she knew it was unfair. Part of her didn't care. He'd left her there with her tears and her memories and her pain. *Maybe it would have been different if he had stayed,* she had told herself several times before she realised that she didn't really believe that.

A heavy footstep on a nearby grate startled her. Cho looked up to see a sheepish J-Tech mechanic staring at her. His look quickly turned to one of concern as they recognised each other.

“Cho? Are you okay?” he asked, carefully drifting closer.

*Michael Corner,* she thought. He'd worked on Guànjūn whenever she'd been cycled to Anchorage. She gave him a watery smile, but ruined it when the next sob escaped. “I'm-I'm okay. I just,” she trailed off. She didn't even know what excuse to try to give any more. The tears started all over again and she was helpless to stop them.

Michael came over to her, shushing her gently and carefully pulling her in to cry on his shoulder. She couldn't always understand what he was saying as he talked softly to her, but it seemed to help gentle her out of the grip strangling her heart. He'd slowly coaxed her over to a bench, his work abandoned for the moment.

He'd said something, and Cho didn't remember if it was actually funny or not, but it made her laugh for the first time in days. It had felt so natural to tilt her face up as he talked to her, smiled down at her, gently kissed her. She didn't want to stop, to let go of the lightness that he gave her, no matter how fleeting it might be.

But footsteps drew his attention and she followed where he had turned to look. Harry stood there, a clipboard in hand and obviously poised to ask a question. His eyes flicked between them for a moment before his face closed off completely. A dark part of her was glad, wanting to wound him for all the things he'd failed to help her heal, while the rest of her was flooded with even more guilt.
She had come to this hangar to look for Harry. Instead, he had found her, right next to Buckbeak, with someone else.

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13th June, 2027 – Year 13 – 14:48:

Harry had loped quickly across the hangar. He'd holed himself away for almost a week before Sirius had ordered him to go do something proactive, something mindless if he didn't want to have to think or really talk. Having not checked up on Buckbeak since the last battle, Harry had decided it was time he did.

He'd grabbed a checklist and clipboard, knowing that a full inspection would keep him busy for a few hours at least. He was just going to pop his head around the corner to let the J-Techs know that he'd be about and to not make anything move while he was crawling through the circuits. Except then he had seen *them*.

Emotions flashed across Harry's mind, warring for dominance – disbelief, hurt, anguish, guilt, and anger. It only took a second before he hardened his expression against showing any of it. His hands clenched so tightly they hurt and his jaw ached with the way he'd bitten down, but he was good at hiding it. He hadn't felt the need to completely hide his emotions since the last time he'd seen the Dursleys, but his Occlumency training had served to make him even more adept at it.

A thousand things flew through his mind to say to Cho, but in the end he held back from lashing out at her and making a scene. Instead, he turned to the J-Tech she was wrapped around – Michael, he thought – and ground out a stilted, “Good luck.”

With that, he turned and stalked away, flinging the clipboard over toward a work station without care. He did feel guilty about the expression on Cho's face, but what really ate him up was the guilt at being **relieved**.

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13th June, 2027 – Year 13 – 22:17:
That night, Sirius, Fred, and George flaunted protocol in an attempt to get Harry blackout drunk for the first time. Ron had joined in after stating that they had just had an event and that another wasn't due for a few months at least.

Before they had started drinking, Sirius had taken Harry aside to make him promise that they'd have a serious, sober conversation about all of this later. Maybe they would even use the Drift so that neither of them would have to search for the right words and could just communicate. He'd made sure to impart – in a playfully pretentious tone – that getting drunk did not solve problems and was not a healthy means of dealing with one's emotions. However, getting piss drunk with one's mates after a breakup was an important rite of passage that he would not be so cruel as to deprive Harry of the honour of partaking.

Harry had rolled his eyes and cautiously accepted the concoctions the twins were handing him. He was pretty sure he would regret drinking the bubbly, pink drink called a 'Fizzing Whizbee' in the morning, but that was fine with him.

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21st July, 2027 – Year 13 – 12:02:

Ron was visiting the Academy to talk to some of the trainees getting ready to graduate into his career field. J-Techs had many subdivisions amongst them, but those who wanted to work in a Shatterdome's LOCCENT had to be particularly skilled in certain traits. Marshal Dumbledore had said he trusted Ron's ability to pick them out after Ron had unwittingly weeded out those who couldn't hack it in the Anchorage facility. It was an even bigger compliment to Ron than the idea that he was good enough to work there.

Harry had tagged along to keep Ron company and give him an outlet to complain about the people who had no idea what they were doing. As an added benefit, they were getting to eat lunch with some of their friends that were working at or still attending the Academy. Luna was getting ready to graduate, having only one more testing session before being allowed to engage in an internship at a Shatterdome. Ginny and her partner-hopeful, Rodrigo de la Vega, were nearing the end of their studies as well. Oliver Wood had joined them for lunch, surprisingly giving up time training his emergency transport teams to visit with old friends.

Everything had been going well, just chatting and teasing amongst friends and family. Something alerted Ron at the edge of his vision and he turned to see a boy (to be fair, he was probably Ron and Harry's age) peering around the mess hall with wide eyes, looking lost. Ron nudged his sister and motioned to him discreetly. “Who's that?”
Ginny frowned. “Dunno. New guy, from the look of his uniform.”

“Oh, him,” Oliver piped in, pausing to swallow his bite of food. “His name's Neville. Good kid, but a bit skittish. He gets made fun of a lot by the other cadets, from what I've heard.”

Ginny's face darkened for a moment before she and Luna shared a look. Then, Luna stood up and called out, “Neville!” He spooked and nearly dropped his lunch tray, but turned to look. “Over here, come eat with us,” she invited, scooting over so that there was a space between her and Ginny.

Neville cautiously came over and eyed the empty spot. Ron guessed that he'd been tricked by classmates before. “We can make room over here instead if you like. I understand, I think my sister's scary too,” Ron said, grinning and motioning to Ginny. She threw a crouton at his head, but he was easily able to duck out of the way. “You need to work on not telegraphing your moves,” he chided, this time earning him a hard kick to the shins.

Despite Ron's subsequent swearing, Neville seemed to relax enough to sit down. While Luna had been the one to invite him over, Ginny had taken a shine to him and apparently decided to take him under her wing. She drew him into their conversation with a natural ease, asking about him in-between jibes at everyone else. Harry seemed to be doing his best to help her along.

Ron surreptitiously checked the tablet he'd become practically glued to, finding Neville's scores. He tested decently well, ranking as quite talented on individual tests but floundering whenever he had to work with other people. Some of his instructors seemed hopeful that he'd get over his shyness and be magnificent, while others were vocal about how they thought he would wash out before the first cut.

Ron was drawn back to the conversation when the teasing turned to Ginny. He liked to think he had a sixth sense for when it was time to torment his little sister. Neville had apparently cottoned on to Ginny's attempts to adopt him into their circle and Oliver was going at her.

“Aww, she's such a sweet mother hen, isn't she?” Oliver taunted.

“Sod off, the lot of you!” she yelled back indignantly when Harry and Luna laughed.

“No, not a mother hen,” Rodrigo pitched in. Before Ginny could thank him, he tacked on, “Just her mother.”
Even Ron had to laugh at that one. He loved his mother, but he also knew her well.

Rodrigo reached over to nudge Neville to get his attention. “Just don't listen to those naysayers,” he said slowly, minding his Peruvian accent. “They all thought a little girl like Ginny and a pretty-boy like me wouldn't make it either. We're the top in the class right now and considered the most likely to become pilots at the second cut exams next quarter.” He held up a hand, which Ginny dutifully high-fived.

Neville smiled more after that. By the time Ron and Harry returned to the Shatterdome at the end of the week they'd had him laughing and joking like he'd always been their friend. He still blushed whenever Luna smiled at him, but Ron didn't think that had much to do with nerves. Ginny tried to point it out only once, but decided against it after Harry kicked her in the shin hard enough to bruise. Ron just snickered, much to her ire.

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28th August, 2027 – Year 14 – 19:42:

Molly clung to Arthur's hand as the medical team rushed toward them through the rain. Harry was being a dear and holding her youngest back as she sobbed and tried to run to the stretcher, though he looked like he was trying to hold back tears as well. Her children's friends Neville and Luna were holding Ron steady, keeping him propped up so he wouldn't crumple to the floor again.

She'd watched in horror as White Fang had been destroyed not even an hour before. In her position, she'd been among the first to hear the rescue team's feed when they pronounced Bill's partner, Louis Pang, dead at the scene. There had been confusion over the state of Bill's injuries, but he was still alive. She had hoped and wished and prayed with all of her will that her eldest baby would stay that way.

There wasn't time for the medical team to let them see him as they ran past and through the doors into surgery prep. Molly honestly wasn't sure if she would have wanted to see or not. Then Fred and George finally arrived, skidding into the waiting room out of breath, coming to stand by her and Arthur.

A few moments later, a Healer came out to speak to them. “Mr. and Mrs. Weasley,” he greeted solemnly. “We won't know all the details until your son is conscious. We haven't had time
to fully stabilise him yet, but we're hopeful.”

Molly sighed in relief. The Healer's look, however, filled her with trepidation. “What is it?”

“There’s still some uncertainty about their injuries from the fight with the Kaiju. Your son received several injuries from this incursion. We believe Bill was knocked unconscious at some point after that, possibly when the Jaeger was dropped, as there are no defensive wounds.”

“Defensive wounds from what?” George asked incredulously.

The Healer sighed. “It was a well-kept secret – need to know only – that Louis Pang was not a Muggle but had been bitten by a werewolf while on holiday several years ago.” Molly felt herself grow faint. “We believe Louis must have panicked and begun to transform as the Conn-Pod filled with water. Unfortunately for them both, this meant that his helmet was compromised. As he drowned he must have lashed out in fear at the closest thing he could. From the patterns we believe that Bill was unconscious and not even able to attempt a defence.

“Most of the wounds seem to be from claws, but in a place or two we're worrying that the wounds could have been from teeth. There's no guarantee as to what that will mean and we can't risk testing it until Bill has been stabilised.” He seemed to be giving them a moment for that to sink in or ask questions. “I should return to the team,” he said apologetically, heading back through the swinging doors.

Time seemed to be relative after that. Sometimes it felt like an eternity was dragging on. Other times Molly would swear she had only looked away from the clock for a moment, but hours would have passed. Friends, most of whom might as well be called family, came and went quietly, bringing sustenance or running errands. The doors at the end of the hall startled Molly when they flew open and two young women ran in.

It took Molly a moment to recognise Fleur, her pale hair a wet and windblown mess and tear tracks from her make-up painting down her cheeks. Her younger sister, Gabrielle, didn't look much better. “Where is ‘e?” Fleur demanded frantically.

Luckily, Sirius was the one to intercept her. He calmed her in a quiet voice, getting her to sit down while he told her all the updates they'd been given. As much as she generally wanted to comfort someone in need, Molly wasn't certain she could deal with the girl right then.
Bill and Fleur had met in the Academy, though she'd turned down trying for his partner in order to wait for her younger sister to graduate like she'd promised. They’d begun dating then, carrying on a quiet, long-distance relationship from wherever they were stationed. Molly had thought they would have broken it off when she and Gabrielle were assigned to the Jaeger Ailes D'Argent, but instead they had taken time to be together during the lull between every attack.

From her record, Molly knew that Fleur was a skilled Ranger, but also that she had been observed to be opinionated and quite vain. Molly had been scared to rate Fleur any higher than a Jaeger Fly for a long time because of that, wondering if she loved the idea of dating a pilot and not really caring about the pilot himself. With Bill in his current condition – defeated, scarred, possibly a werewolf, and probably no longer a pilot – it was certainly a fear that she might leave him. Coupled with the loss of Louis, that could bode very ill for his mental stability.

Madam Pomfrey came out a short time later to let them know that Bill had pulled through and was now resting. She said she could admit a few of them, but the room wouldn't hold all of them. Molly gathered her children and smiled at their friends as they stood back so the family could enter. Arthur kindly offered an elbow to an anxious Fleur, which she took gratefully and followed them in.

As soon as they passed through the doors, Fleur rushed forward to Bill's side, a pained noise in her throat. There was more of him wrapped in bandages than there wasn't, and a few scrapes and burns had been left open to the air. Fleur lowered her forehead to gently press it against Bill's, murmuring softly. Molly didn't know much of French, but she recognised the odd word enough to understand that Fleur was thanking every deity she could name.

Molly was moved by the display. However, she just needed to make sure. “The Healers said that there is a chance he might develop some werewolf attributes. The two bites were shallow and the water must had washed away the saliva, but he still won't be completely human any more,” she said quietly.

Fleur scoffed and turned to her with tear-filled eyes. “I 'ave been part-veela all my life. Who am I to judge anyone else on not being 'uman?” she asked firmly.

Molly smiled at her then, pulling her into a hug. “Well, we can help him figure out what he can do now together,” she said quietly, petting down one of the flyaway strands of Fleur's normally impeccable hair. Fleur smiled at her weakly before returning her attention to Bill. Maybe she would do for Molly's eldest baby.

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20th October, 2027 – Year 14 – 20:17:

It had taken a little over a month for Bill to be given a clean bill of health. He had never been afraid of Louis, knowing that he could calm his partner through the Drift when he would get close to shifting in the Jaeger. Neither of them had counted on Bill being rendered unconscious. Luckily, the infection hadn't fully taken. He would still get agitated closer to the full moon and his senses were slightly elevated. His meat tasted better a bit rarer now. He could heal at a somewhat faster rate, which the Healers believed was the only reason he had survived his initial wounds. But that was it, and Bill was grateful.

He walked with a slight limp now, unnoticeable when going slowly but annoyingly present when he needed to hurry anywhere. His wounds had been mostly superficial, but he was still left with scarring over twenty percent of his body. Ron at one point said they made him look ‘cool.’ Fleur had countered it with calling them 'rugged' and flashing a perverse grin. Bill had laughed so hard it hurt when Ron had clapped his hands over his ears and loudly exclaimed, “Lalalalala, I don't want to knowww!”

The P.P.D.C. had tried to offer him the therapy and training if he'd wanted to return to piloting. Instead Bill had chosen to retire from that and become part of Ailes's dedicated team. Some J-Techs served a Shatterdome and would work on whatever was housed there, but others would travel with a particular Jaeger. As soon as he had been allowed he had gone with Fleur and Gabrielle back to Lima Shatterdome in Peru, where they were supposed to be stationed.

It had been almost a month since then. His mother was constantly contacting them for updates, much to his amusement. She and Fleur had apparently bonded over him during his convalescence, but that didn't mean they didn't bicker.

This time, though, Fleur was leaning into the video chat screen with a wide smile on her face while his mum was crying tears of joy. “Ze sneak, ’e took me by complete surprise!” Fleur gushed, looking down at the glittering ring on her finger and then up at him.

Bill smiled happily. ‘I was forcefully reminded how short life could be. I didn't want to wait any longer to let her know I wanted to be with her for as long as we have left,” he explained simply. He had to laugh when that resulted in a lapful of affectionate fiancée. His mother was not quite as amused. (His brothers were, from the various hoots and whistles he could hear.)

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Harry sighed and mashed the buttons on his controller in an attempt to keep his character alive. Sirius had finally caved and let Harry buy a console now that his official studies had finished and anything else was just for fun. Ginny was supposed to be helping him break it in. Instead she'd spent half the time complaining about boys and prodding Harry in the side with her toes to make sure he was paying attention. (Or maybe to mess up his game, he wasn't sure. He tended to die when she did that.)

When she hit a lull, Harry took the opportunity. “Y'know, Gin, I'm a boy. Well, bloke. Guy. Male. You get the point,” he said in exasperation.

“Yes, of course. But you don't suck,” she said magnanimously. “It's all the other ones that do.”

“Don't you normally whine about this to Rodrigo?”

“Rod sucks too – in this case both figuratively and literally. He ditched me to go do stuff with his boyfriend. Ugh,” she pouted.

Harry laughed, figuring she was more put out about being ditched than Rodrigo having fun. “Well, fine. I promise I'll even halfway pay attention,” he said generously. She kicked him in the side and his character fell off a cliff. Dammit.

“Seriously, though, it sucks being a female pilot. Fleur was lucky that Mum had trained the sexism out of Bill at a young age,” she said with a grin. “Relationships get to be so draining because guys get all intimidated. They always start to get all 'alpha male' and like they should be above me, even when they're really not. Yes, I am smarter than the majority. Yes, I can kick most of their asses. Yes, I do rank higher than most of them now.”

She sounded both irritated and proud at that last one. Harry figured she deserved to. She and Rodrigo had passed the second cut and were finishing their actual Jaeger training now. They were slated to get one of the next generation of Jaegers as soon as it was finished.

“Speaking of ranking up, when is your baby going to be ready to go?” Harry asked, hoping
“Six to eight months!” she cried indignantly. “They said they have to do some extra safety checks because of the new software integrated with the magitech. I say they're just stalling.” She crossed her arms in a huff.

Harry managed to get past the next two areas before she caught on to his subject change. He grinned as she glared at the side of his head.

“Y'know, once I do actually become a pilot, I don't think I'll bother with relationships,” she said contemplatively. “They're not worth the emotional turmoil they would cause, which would be a distraction. It would be nice, though, to have an outlet. Especially if Rod keeps slipping into my head with all of his fun sexy-times on his mind. I might kill him otherwise.” She chuckled.

“But then I'd have to find someone I didn't have to bullshit with. Wouldn't have to stroke his ego or walk on eggshells to keep him from feeling intimidated. Who cared about me but not about all the stresses of dating,” she said, getting quieter until she trailed off.

Harry began to worry when she didn't say anything after that. He could feel her staring at him like she was waiting for him to say something, but he wasn't sure what. Glancing to the side, he saw that she was looking at him thoughtfully, her head tilted to the side. “What?” he asked warily.

A smirk spread across her face as she slowly crawled over to straddle his lap. She leaned in to press her lips against his like a question.

“Oh,” was all he could say for a moment after she pulled back.

She raised her eyebrows at him in challenge. Harry grinned back. Ginny let out a cry of triumph and tackled him backwards. Harry laughed until she shut him up with another kiss, this one not nearly as chaste.

They were missing quite a few more pieces of clothing when Harry finally growled and dove for his game controller. Ginny sighed as he made the system turn off before returning to her.

“What? It kept yelling out, 'You're dead!' over and over again. Friend or not, I'll hear
enough of that from your brothers if they found out what I'm getting up to with their little sister,” he joked.

Ginny snorted. “Then you better actually get up to something before they do,” she challenged, pulling him back to her with a wicked smile.

After that, they tried very, very hard to keep her brothers from finding out. (Harry suspected the twins might know, but he never could be sure what they were smirking knowingly at him about.)

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29th December, 2027 – Year 14 – 1:25 P.M.:

Draco readjusted the collar of his most casual Muggle clothing. It never seemed to fit quite right, even with alterations done via spells or by the House Elves. Blaise slapped his hand away as they turned onto the main street. In return, Draco narrowed his eyes in a way that promised vengeance. Later, of course.

If he was perfectly honest with himself, as he usually hated to be, Draco was nervous. He'd managed to convince Pansy that it was her idea, but the fact remained that they were still going to get Tested. He'd given it a capital 'T' in his mind and everything. Today was the day that would make that lingering urge in the back of his mind either dissipate or grow bolder.

No one paid them any more notice than any other passerby, but Draco still felt eyes on him. He didn't think much of it, since he'd always felt that way when they snuck out of the colony, but he kept a wary eye out just in case. He'd been told again and again that outsiders didn't take very kindly to colonists and wasn't keen to find out first hand how true it was.

Greg held the door as they all filed into the testing centre. Draco wondered if the others felt as nervous as he did. They didn't look it, but then neither did he. Nervous tics and unnecessary gestures had been ground out of them since childhood. (Except maybe Greg and Vince – their blank stares seemed to come naturally.) Inside, Draco's mind was whirling; outside, he knew he looked borderline bored.

The person that met them in the lobby gave them some spiel about the testing and heroism and fighting the good fight. Draco guessed that it was supposed to simultaneously encourage
participants and assuage the egos of those who would test poorly. After a brief introduction to the examination process, they were led to the first challenge.

Some of the trials looked a bit odd at the outset, but Draco supposed he could see the merit in every scenario. Some gauged speed, others agility and coordination. There were mental tests and trick puzzles. The machine they were hooked up to probably had something to do with their brain waves, maybe even gauging their adaptability to mental magic. Draco generally found it more challenging to keep himself from watching how the others did than it was to actually complete the tasks' objectives. Part of him worried that meant he was getting things horribly wrong – anything that was too easy often turned out that way.

After the testing they were split off to get their results in private. Pansy and Daphne rolled their eyes as they were led off first. Draco tried to seem nonchalant when it was his turn.

Once they were alone, the tester practically beamed at him. He turned out to have snagged the highest scores that particular centre had ever recorded. He'd definitely qualified for Ranger training – or any other section of the P.P.D.C. if he so chose. The tester was trying to let him know that not all who tested well made it past the first or second cuts in the programme, but suddenly stopped short with a concerned look.

Draco was trying to contain himself, but all of his masks seemed out of reach right then. He had thought that he would laugh off the test results, regardless of how they turned out. It was all supposed to have been done on a lark. Instead, he was having trouble breathing steadily. Chances were likely that terror was written across his features. A warm pressure on his shoulder made him flinch.

The tester was still smiling, but it was sympathetic now. She gently squeezed his shoulder again and turned to gather a few papers. Draco thought she might be giving him the privacy to pull himself together and was silently grateful. By the time she turned back around, he was able to return the pleasant smile she gave him. Then she passed over a handful of papers without comment. Draco scanned the first one and saw information about the programme, then shrunk the packets and put them in his pocket.

Mask firmly back in place, he strolled out to rejoin his friends just as Blaise and Theo were emerging. Pansy was already complaining about something and latched onto Draco and Blaise as they came into hearing range.

“Can you believe this? This is absolute rubbish. Look here, ‘Would be best suited for K-Science or J-Tech (engineering). Insufficient scoring for Ranger or LOCCENT positions. Completely unsuited for Psych Analyst positions.’ Are they mad?” she screeched. “Like I would be caught dead mucking about with creatures.” She sneered and threw her results into the bin as
they exited.

“It was better than I got,” Vince said glumly.

“Me too,” Greg added, holding his page next to Vince’s to try to compare them.

“How did you even manage to read it to find out?” Daphne asked with a smug grin.

Draco rolled his eyes. They might be oafs in general but he’d made certain that they weren’t that stupid years ago. He wouldn’t have been allowed to continue his association with them otherwise. “How did you fare, then?” he asked Daphne, raising his eyebrow expectantly.

“I passed,” she said, smiling haughtily. “High end of average, though their cut-offs for pilots do seem freakishly high. Not that I can imagine ever letting someone else inside my head.” She scrunched her nose up at the thought.

“Same here,” Blaise said with gusto. “How could you let anyone have that much leverage on you by choice? Not only is it weird, but imagine having to potentially put your mind together with a mudblood.” He shuddered comically, making the girls laugh.

“The point is that you can trust your partner,” Theo said scathingly. “I highly doubt they would force you to pair with someone you hated.” He crumpled up his results and tossed them into the road. “Flying colours, but like hell would I risk my own arse for the rest of the idiot population.”

“How about you, Draco?” Pansy asked, looping her arm through his companionably.

“Well enough,” he said with a smile. He wasn’t about to pitch in what he thought about it all. “Ugh, all that mucking about has me famished. What say we find a halfway decent place to eat before we head back?”

They took the bait easily enough. Greg and Vince, for all that they were useless academically, could give a full evaluation of every restaurant within Apparating distance of the colony. First they debated over the mid-afternoon meal, then Draco prodded Blaise and Daphne into bickering over what to do for New Year’s. By the time they reached the restaurant, Draco was certain that no one would call him on his non-answer. Theo might have caught it, but the worm
wouldn't exploit it unless he saw a benefit.

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2nd January, 2028 – Year 14 – 11:23 A.M.:

Draco glanced behind them and just barely dodged the flying piece of trash in time. He wrapped an arm around his mother and hustled her around the nearest corner. Pressing her behind him, he drew his wand and waited. When the group rushed into view he spit out the charms and hexes he'd decided on as quickly as possible. One of them still managed to hit him in the cheek with something solid, but at least it was him and not his mother.

When he was finished, the members of the small mob – eight men and one woman – were trussed up, silenced, and hung from their ankles along the alley's fire escapes. Draco panted harshly, catching his breath as he examined his handiwork. Some of the attackers were still trying to spit invective at them despite their inability to make a sound, while a few had figured it out and were glaring murderously at Draco instead.

Draco was still furious. Part of him wanted to keep hexing them, cause them pain, make them afraid. He wasn't certain which one had spotted him and his mother while they were shopping and pointed them out to the others. If he was he might not hesitate.

Somehow they'd been picked out as being colonists, though Draco couldn't fathom how. A group of four had started catcalling and yelling insults, following them and picking up people as they went along. Ignoring them didn't help, only making them angrier. Then one had thrown something and the others took that cue and joined in. When Mum had said to run, Draco had grabbed her hand and taken off, their attackers giving chase behind them.

Draco thought he understood the dangers of 'mob mentality' quite clearly now.

It wasn't even that Draco disagreed with some of the insults that they'd spat at him. He was old enough now, and he'd been tested. He had qualified, and yet he still hid inside the colony's domes like a coward. But when they'd started calling his mother those names... She might have been one of the strongest people he knew as far as personality went, but physically she was thin and dainty and not at all a fighter. A powerful presence in social situations did her little good in times like this. It was why she always had him escort her when she needed to leave the colony. Would-be assailants were more put off by a young male than a pretty woman, sad as it was.
Draco turned when his mother touched his arm, letting her fuss over the cut and bruise that had bloomed on his left cheek. “I'm fine, Mother. It's just a scratch,” he assured.

“Hush and hold still,” she instructed. “I don't want it to get infected. Merlin only knows what that filthy rock had on it.” She cast a spell that sent a stinging sensation radiating out from the cut, across Draco's head and down his neck.

Draco hissed in response, but soon after felt the skin knitting together. “Thank you,” he said, though his mother's expression said all it needed to about how insincere he sounded. Draco successfully fought down the urge to roll his eyes. She'd probably string him up like their attackers if he did.

“I'm glad we were able to shrink our bags and didn't have to abandon them,” she said with a sigh. She rifled through her purse for a moment, presumably checking to ensure everything was still present. “I think I've had enough excitement for today. Perhaps we should return home and find another time to continue our outing.”

“Yes, Mother,” Draco said dutifully.

“What are you planning to do about...?” she trailed off, motioning to the swaying bundles.

Draco gave a measured shrug. “Leave them that way. They're right off of a busy road; it won't be long until they're spotted. Might take off the Silencing Charm before we leave, though,” he said as an afterthought. He didn't want them to not be found at all, just...not for a while.

His mother seemed to consider it, then shook her head. “No, the risk of injury before they could be discovered is too great. While I have no love for these thugs, I don't wish to see you punished should they incur any damage,” she said gently, her fingertips briefly brushing his jaw in affection.

Draco gave her one of his rare real smiles, turned away from their audience as he was. “Very true,” he huffed. He turned to Stupefy and lower them down one by one. They were still bound and muted, but they could figure that out on their own when their senses came back to them.

“Shall we?” he asked, offering his arm to his mother. She took it with a proud smile, then Apparated them back to the dome’s hidden entry point.
10th January, 2028 – Year 14 – 10:34 P.M.:

Draco clenched his jaw and tried to keep a bland expression on his face as he watched his father pace. His mother sat quiescently in the chair beside the fire, but Draco could see how her face had paled. He hadn't expected them to take the news well, but it was different to experience it.

“I forbid it!” Lucius snarled, rounding on Draco again.

His father hadn't taken it very well. Draco had expected that. He figured it was partially due to the fact that Draco had made a decision without his consultation or permission. Most likely a bit that he didn't want his heir in danger. There was a distinct possibility that it was also him expressing his worry, maybe in the only way he knew how.

“I am an adult in the eyes of both the British and French Ministries of Magic,” Draco said slowly, trying to appear calm. “I do not require your permission.”

This only seemed to incense Lucius further. He began again about Draco’s responsibilities as a Malfoy and as a member of pureblood society. Draco once more tuned him out – he'd heard it all before – and looked to where his mother was continuing to sit as still as a statue. His attention was drawn back to his father when he mentioned the word 'marriage.'

“What?” Draco asked, knowing he sounded angry and not caring.

“We've already drawn up the contracts,” Lucius said. “The Greengrasses have promised you the hand of their younger daughter Astoria. She is of a good line and fits the standards of beauty and intelligence required of a Malfoy bride. She's not nearly as brash as the elder daughter, which I can be quite thankful for.” He continued on, his tone indicating that Draco should be pleased by this, not even taking the time to notice the fury building around his son.

“You'll be safe,” Narcissa said quietly, but it was loud enough to interrupt Lucius. “You don't need to prove anything. Not to us, not to anyone who matters. You'll be safe, and you can be happy,” she said, her voice choked with emotion in a way Draco had never heard it before.
Draco felt his fury drain out of him in the face of his mother's quiet plea. He bypassed his father to kneel next to her. “This isn't because of last week, Mother,” he said gently, taking her hands into his. “This is something I had been considering for a long time. I was scared – I still am,” he confessed. “But I need to do this. Not for the people who would call me a coward for staying, but for myself.”

“You're a Malfoy and a Black,” his father seethed quietly behind him. “That should be the only pride you need.”

Draco scoffed. “Sticking my head in the sand and hoping to be overlooked?” he spat. “I would insult both of those noble lines if I were to do that. What is it that you've always taught me? 'The only person you can trust to shape the world you want is yourself,' I think it was. Well, Father, this is me, shaping the world.”

Draco stood and faced his father. “I want to live in a world where my mother doesn't have to be afraid to go into town alone. I want to live in a world where I won't be forced to hide in the same closed off prison for the rest of my life because I'm too afraid to live beyond it. I want to someday be able to go home, to Britain, where we belong.” He took a shaky breath, straightening his back. “And yes, some of it is pride. When we go home I want to be one of the heroes. One of the people who had the spine to stand up and face what most could not. They will respect me not just because of whom I was born to but because of what I did myself. It will be my children and grandchildren who are proud to bear our name, because I will have earned that for them.”

Draco swallowed around the lump in his throat and blinked his eyes quickly. He hadn't realised just how strongly he meant that until he'd said it. Draco dropped his eyes to the rug, unable to face either of them as he spoke. “I am a coward in many ways still. You have no idea how terrified I am. I may even get there and withdraw immediately, unable to stand the pressure. But I need to at least try. I'm not brave. I'm not selfless. But I'm not sure that I could live with myself if I didn't do anything within my power to ensure that both of you remained safe,” he said quietly.

After an excruciating silence that seemed to stretch on interminably, Draco sighed and raised his head. His father wore a look of shock, his mouth parted just slightly and his eyes wider than normal. He was looking at Draco like he barely knew him, like he wasn't certain if he should be proud, insulted, or angry. His mother was worse. Anyone who didn't know her would say she was as calm as ever. To Draco, he could see the pride and heartbreak warring in the depths of her eyes, in the way her lips thinned to keep from trembling.

Draco smiled at his mother, touching the edge of her jaw with his fingertips like she always did to him. He couldn't promise her that he'd be alright, and that pained him. Instead he turned to his father to give her the privacy so that the tears forming in her eyes could fall.
“I'll be leaving the morning of this next Friday,” he informed his father as evenly as he could. “You'll have until then to nullify any contracts you have made with the Greengrasses. I will be happy to sign whatever is necessary to do so, as well as speak on my own behalf should they have any objections. If there are any other matters that require my attention before I leave, please let me know. For now, though, I will excuse myself to my rooms.”

Draco walked away without waiting for an answer, moving as fast as he could without seeming to run away. He didn't think he could bear the sound of his mother's heart breaking for another moment.

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**12th January, 2028 – Year 14 – 2:14 P.M.:**

Narcissa had timed it as best as she could. Draco was with his friends, who had thrown together a going away party for him. Lucius was in his study handling a contract dispute for one of his businesses. They would both be occupied for some time and unaware of her absence.

While she loved her husband dearly, she knew that he would never have the sheer audacity to join the fight. Nor would he have the willingness to let even his own son enter his mind and know his thoughts. But her? She would do anything to keep her child safe. If that meant standing in challenge to nightmarish leviathans, then so be it.

Severus glanced around warily from where he strode beside her. She knew he was uncomfortable with this idea, but he was a dear enough friend that he had agreed to escort her. He and Lucius had the look of Wizards, which was why she normally asked Draco to come, but there was nothing for it this time. She wasn't sure she dared to go alone after the last disaster of an outing.

The Drift compatibility centre seemed to favour function over form. There was something vaguely comforting about its austerity. The staff were bland but kind, keen in their own ways. They were more than understanding when Narcissa informed them about her son, and how she would like to see if she could be compatible with him.

In the end, they broke her heart all over again. She had expected as much, but it still pained her to see it confirmed. While she knew more than her share of nasty curses and helpful spells, she had never much cared for the exertion of physical prowess. She was a noble lady of a wealthy
family, and she'd played the part well. Only now did she regret that, for the first time wishing that she had lived the sort of rough and tumble life that would have been to her benefit presently.

The best and worst part was when they told her that she was mentally compatible with Draco. There was something calming, soothing, about knowing that her son's mind worked so much in tune with her own. In the end, however, she might have matched his mind but she could not match his ability to fight.

She allowed herself just one moment – just a single moment – of despair. Then she began to put together a new plan. Perhaps she couldn't be there for Draco. Perhaps Lucius could not either, for all that she knew he cared for their son. But there was yet hope for one more person whom she knew would protect Draco with his last breath.

“Severus,” she said calmly, calling him to her side. She placed one hand lightly upon his arm. “Severus, I need you to do something for me. For Draco.” She spoke carefully, knowing that he could hear the quiet pleading in her tone.

He balked at first, as she knew he would, but didn't turn away. She allowed him the time to breathe deeply and examine what he needed to within his mind. He'd always been a cautious man, and she respected that. It was possibly why she trusted him as much as she did. After a time, he nodded solemnly. He patted her hand gently before removing it and stepping forward to be tested himself.

Severus, as she predicted, fared much better than she. His younger years had been complicated, granting him a certain quality of perseverance. He was an accomplished duelist in addition to his sharp intellect. And she knew, though he never spoke outright about it, that he had his own personal grievances against the kaiju.

When he returned to her side, she spoke quickly and quietly. “I am prepared to relinquish any decorum that has ever been instilled into me and beg you to protect him. To guide him and keep him safe if he must do this.”

Severus surprised her then. He folded her hands into his own, squeezing just slightly. “You would never have to beg me, Narcissa, my dear friend. I have been honoured with the charge of being Draco's godfather. I have watched him grow, and he has been as a son to me that I would not have had otherwise. We may not share blood, but I would do anything to ensure the safety of my family.”

“Swear it to me,” she said fervently. “I need to be certain. I need to know that he will be
And so he did. Beyond her expectations he swore an Unbreakable Vow to her that he would protect Draco in any way necessary as he followed this path – with his dying breath if need be.

14\textsuperscript{th} January, 2028 – Year 14 – 7:34 A.M.:

Draco double-checked his pockets as he approached the dome's exit point. His travel bag carried everything he'd need during the journey itself – clothes, books, toiletries, money. His shrunken luggage likely contained more than he would ever require, but he still felt as if he had forgotten something – something important. He chalked it up to nerves and pressed on.

Upon exiting the dome's protection, he was startled to see his godfather leaning against a nearby boulder. "Severus?" he greeted curiously. His mother and father had bid him farewell in their home, where no one would need to witness any emotion that passed between them. He'd been disappointed to not see his godfather there as well, but he hadn't been able to wait any longer or he would miss his portkey.

"We should be on our way if we do not wish to be late," Severus drawled. He held out an arm for Draco to take, which he complied with in his bemusement. Severus spun them and Apparated to a point just down the street from the testing centre.

"Will you be seeing me off, then?" Draco asked. He knew that his godfather had never been overly sentimental, but this was a rather peculiar situation.

"No."

Draco narrowed his eyes. "Father didn't send you to try to dissuade me, did he?"

"No." He didn't offer any more for a long moment, seeming to wait until Draco was ready to burst. "I seem to possess a certain aptitude that matches your own quite well. I have decided to act upon it," he said calmly, as if it wasn't an important matter.
Draco took a few moments to verify that he had absorbed that correctly. His first response was belligerence. *I don't need someone to keep watch over me! I'm a bloody adult!* His second was irritation. *I'm doing this to protect my family, and now one of them is going to be in direct danger!* His third was to be secretly glad, comforted even. *It's Severus. I trust him with my life.*

As an outward reaction, he scoffed and rolled his eyes. Severus smirked at him as they entered the testing centre. Well, at least the flight on the Muggle aeroplane wouldn't be too boring.

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22nd April, 2028 – Year 14 – 18:02:

Despite the best efforts of the press to make the wedding of Officer Bill Weasley and Ranger Fleur Delacour into the social event of the season, they were ultimately unsuccessful in infiltrating the event itself. The only camera flashes were those of the wedding photographer and the various family, friends, and coworkers in attendance. Fleur's dress was simple and white, while Bill's tuxedo was white with blue accents – formal and yet reminiscent of his former Jaeger.

The ceremony itself had been short and sweet. Bill's vows made a number of the attendees cry. Fleur's were in French. While the majority of the audience didn't understand a word, the smile fit to split Bill's face in two gave them a general idea.

The reception was bright and cheerful, full of good food, loud music, and waves of laughter. For once, every person in attendance seemed to forget all about kaiju and the fight for survival, just revelling in the sheer joy of life.

After being nagged by enough people that he should dance at least once, Harry snagged Luna and dragged her onto the floor. She simply laughed and complied, knowing that he hated dancing just as much as she did. Now they could both say that they had danced. A minute later, Neville swept in to steal Luna away, twirling her expertly. Ginny grinned as she grabbed onto Harry, pulling him in the other direction.

“Conspiracy!” Harry yelled over to Luna, making them all laugh. He made sure to step on Ginny's feet on purpose for it until she threatened to stand on his toes while they danced. She did eventually capitulate and find somewhere for Harry to show her how coordinated he could be off of the dance floor.
Sirius snorted at his godson's antics and pretended not to know what he was up to when he left. Instead of thinking about it, he turned to plead with Tonks. “Please? Just one sip?”

“No!” she scolded, holding her glass out of his reach as he tried to grab for it. “It's been months since the last event and you're on call. You can't drink.” She swatted at him good-naturedly as he continued to jokingly hassle her.

Remus sighed and intervened when Sirius grabbed her and lifted her in the air. Tonks batted her lashes and called Remus her hero. “You two are like children,” he commented in amusement. He did, however, accept a sip of Tonks's champagne as a reward.

Sirius narrowed his eyes at them. “I hate you both, you know.” He wasn't able to keep his face straight for long though and they all devolved into giggles.

“You really don't,” Tonks said happily. “Now help me convince Remus that he needs to have a dance with me.”

Sirius barked a laugh. “Love, if I can't get him to dance with me what makes you think I'll fare any better when it's you?” he teased.

“Well, fine. Then I guess I'll have to make do with you,” she said with mock-haughtiness.

Sirius grinned and plucked her glass out of her hand and passed it to Remus. “I suppose you will then.” He wrapped an arm around her waist and spun her out onto the dance floor. Between the two of them and their posturing, it was the most ostentatious and ridiculous dance most of the guests had ever seen. Remus's eyerolls and the laughter and cheering of their 'audience' spurred them on through three songs before they gave exaggerated bows and swaggered away.

As the party wound down, they all toddled off to bed, giddy and giggling even without the alcohol.

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22\textsuperscript{nd} April, 2028 – Year 14 – 23:54:

Harry sprawled onto his own bed with a smile on his face. He didn't know how he'd ended up so lucky, but he was grateful all the same.

Yes, there had been some darker moments along the way. He'd lost friends and allies to various injuries in the line of duty. Cedric's death had hit him especially hard. The whole fiasco with Cho was still an unpleasant memory. Louis's death and Bill's struggle for survival had definitely filled him with a quiet sense of horror.

What he had gained far outweighed all of that, in his mind. He had friends that he adored – Ron, Luna, Ginny, and Neville. He had a family – Sirius, Tonks, Remus, and possibly the Weasley clan as well. He got on well with his team and the LOCCENT staff, and he loved what he did. It wasn't always perfect, but it was completely wonderful.

He was sure that, despite the war, he would remember these days as the happiest moments of his life. Maybe one day he'd be lucky enough to find someone for himself, like Arthur and Molly or Bill and Fleur, and he could tell his children the stories of when their family had fought monsters and won.

That thought soothed him into a contented sleep, a smile pressed against his pillow.

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23\textsuperscript{rd} April, 2028 – Year 14 – 03:02:

“Mighty Buckbeak, report to bay zero-five, level A-dash-four-two.”

Harry jerked awake as the klaxon blared through his room. He blinked his eyes awake and listened as the message repeated.

Popping out of bed, Harry grabbed his glasses and his trousers, shoving both on as he ran for the door. “Sirius! Wake up! Movement in The Breach!” he yelled, banging against Sirius's door. How the man could sleep through this racket was beyond Harry. “Hey, come on! We're being deployed.”

“Right. Fuuuck. Ugh, I'm awake!” Sirius groaned back through the door.

Harry chuckled and returned to his own room for a t-shirt. He didn't need to be fancy, but not freezing on the way to the Drivesuit Room was preferred. He was simultaneously pulling the shirt over his head and grabbing the orange juice from the fridge when Sirius stumbled out.
“Blame yourself, you're the one who jinxed us. Aren't you glad you didn't drink?” Harry teased. “Kaiju's a Category Three. Biggest one yet! Codename: Veil.” He said the last bit in a fake ominous voice, wiggling his fingers.

“How are you so awake?” Sirius whined. “What time is it?”

“Three.”

“A.M.?”

“Yup.” Harry grinned and took a swig of the orange juice. He hadn't really thought in terms of A.M. and P.M. since he'd gotten to Kodiak Island, but it was amusing all the same. “Whaddya say, next notch on the belt?” he asked, holding his fist out. Sirius half-heartedly flailed his fist until they knocked together, fighting a yawn. Close enough, in Harry's book.

“C'mon, you two! Time for the drop!” Tonks yelled through their door, banging on it as she passed down the hall outside.

“Hey kiddo?” Sirius asked from the edge of his room.

“Yeah?”

“Don't get cocky.” Sirius gave a shit-eating grin before ducking through the door to grab a shirt. Harry rolled his eyes and didn't call him on the misquoted Star Wars reference.
23rd April, 2028 – Year 14 – 03:06:

“Let's suit up and kick some arse!” Sirius yelled out as they entered the Drivesuit Room. A few chuckles answered him. They went through their usual routine as the team helped them into their circuitry suits and bolted on their battle armour. Banter, insults, and complaints about the early hour filled the room as everyone moved by rote.

“Good mornin', lads,” Ron said over the intercom, his voice sounding scratchy with more than just static.

“Ronnikins, what's happening, mate?” Sirius called out as they walked into the Conn-Pod.

“How much sleep did you get?” Harry asked, ignoring his partner's antics.

“Not nearly as much as I would have liked,” Ron answered grumpily. “Punch this one extra hard for me, yeah?”

“You got it. Hey, who's going out with us?” Harry asked. He locked his feet into the stirrups and held still so the team could hook him into the rest of the frame.

“Not sure yet. Fleur's gone already, my idiot brothers don't have their Jaeger here, the second on-call team isn't in their rooms or answering their phones, and our other team is still in sickbay with the flu,” Ron said in annoyance. “We've contacted L.A. to see if they can send anyone, but they haven't gotten back to us yet.”

“Guess we'll get all the glory this time,” Sirius said sarcastically. Harry snorted in amusement.

“Engage drop, Mr. Weasley.” Marshal Dumbledore's voice was followed by what Harry guessed was the sound of Ron scrambling at his desk.

“Uh, good to drop, sir! Marshal Dumbledore on deck,” Ron announced, probably to keep
the chatter down over the comms. “Securing the Conn-Pod, getting ready to drop.”

“Release for drop,” Harry confirmed.

“Mighty Buckbeak, ready for the big drop,” Sirius chimed in, appearing to have finally woken up.

“Here we go!” Harry yelled as the Conn-Pod dropped down its shaft to couple with the main body. It had been learned early on that the reactor cores had a tendency to mess with the Conn-Pods' circuitry if left in place too long, but Harry wondered if their predecessors had just enjoyed the ride. It was better than a rollercoaster.

“Coupling confirmed, sir,” Ron announced offhandedly as he worked his controls.


“Engaging now.”

The voice of Buckbeak’s partial-A.I. system reverberated through the Conn-Pod to announce the next step. “Pilot-to-pilot connection: protocol sequence.”

The grinding and clanking of metal and gears echoed around them as the Conn-Pod locked in. A high whine announced the reactor coming fully online. Harry grinned; he'd always loved that sound. He personally considered the hum of the engines to be the sound of Buckbeak's heartbeat. He and Sirius braced a moment before the platforms began to roll the Jaeger out into the open.

“Mighty Buckbeak, ready and aligned, sir,” Sirius announced as he and Harry checked their systems.

“Boys, this is Marshal Albus Dumbledore. Prepare for neural handshake,” came the quick reply.

“Starting in fifteen seconds,” Ron announced, then began to count down. “Fourteen,
“Ready to step into my head, kiddo?” Sirius asked with a grin.

“Please, after you. Age before beauty, old man,” Harry quipped. He chuckled when Sirius scowled at him for the nickname.

“...Three, two, one.”

“Neural handshake: initiated,” the A.I. announced, right before the link connected. Harry felt the familiar sensation of being sucked in. It was like a portkey, but the tug was in his head instead of his stomach. Flashes of memories, both his and Sirius's, blended together until there was just a wide open space stretching between them. A vast, blank canvas for them to spread their minds across. It was the impossible feeling of two minds fitting together seamlessly and melding with the giant metal body encasing them. A flash of perceptions that was Harry and Sirius's own personal thought-language pulsed back and forth in a greeting, and Harry smiled.

“Neural handshake strong and holding,” Ron said, his voice pulling them back into the moment.

Sirius hooked his armoured hand into the control gauntlet, locking his right arm's movements to the Jaeger's. “Right hemisphere: calibrated.”

Harry repeated the process with his left arm, letting the activity of his right be controlled by Sirius's mind as a default. “Left hemisphere: calibrated.” He felt the tingling sensation of Sirius giving over partial control of his left arm as well.

“Transmitting,” came the A.I.’s voice. Harry and Sirius returned the Jaeger's arms to a resting position. “Calibration: completed.”

“Gentlemen, your orders are to hold the Miracle Mile off Anchorage. Copy?” Dumbledore asked.

“Copy that, sir,” Harry said.
“Sir, there's still a civilian vessel in the gulf,” Sirius added as he consulted the HUD's radar.

“Gentleman, you're protecting a city of two million people all on your own. You will not risk those lives for a boat that holds ten. Am I clear?” Dumbledore ordered.

“Yes, sir,” Harry said quietly.

“Man, that's cold,” Sirius grumbled. “You know what I'm thinking?” I got 'protect all the civilians' from that, Sirius thought into the Drift.

“I'm in your brain, I know,” Harry snarked. Yes, I think that's exactly what he meant, Harry thought back, sending the image of a cheshire grin that was all teeth.

Sirius laughed. “Then let's go fishing!” he said excitedly.

Harry let that feeling buoy him as they stepped off the platform and into the waters of the gulf. “Here we go!”

“Come on, put some muscle in it!” Sirius taunted.

“You're not doing this by yourself, y'know, old man,” Harry joked back. Wading was a pain, but it was too close to justify using flight transport to get out there. It would have taken longer to get hooked into the helicopters than it would to just walk it. The storm brewing above them made their short range thrusters unreliable as well.

It was going to be close. If the kaiju got to the boat before they did then the likelihood of survivors was pretty much nil. Harry and Sirius both pushed themselves to go faster. They had trained for years for the strength it took to move quickly in the deep water and they weren't going to have it be for nothing. Anchorage was theirs and those were their people out there, whether they knew it or not.

They approached just in time to see the kaiju's ugly head break the surface and screech at the fishing vessel. They blared their emergency foghorns, distracting it before it could crush the boat. It coiled back, seeming to size them up. Harry took that opportunity to reach out and carefully lift the boat out of the water. They turned quickly and gave the boat a burst of speed as they slid it back into the waves behind them and on its way to shore.
Sensors behind them showed Veil rearing back to strike. Harry was momentarily grateful for the extended range of view the Jaeger gave them. They turned back right as the kaiju charged, using their momentum to intercept Veil's face with Buckbeak's fist.

Veil struck back, his forearms grasping for purchase on Buckbeak's shoulders while his second, smaller set of arms rammed into her middle. Sirius's mind gave the impression that he was glad that their Buckbeak was made for grappling. Harry gave a sharp bark of laughter and then they shoved.

They managed to knock the kaiju to its side, following him down with a barrage of punches. When he tried to stand back up, they lifted both arms and locked their hands together to slam their joined fists down on his pate. Veil managed to get a leg under himself and tackle them backwards anyway. That was fine. If he wanted a brawl, Harry-and-Sirius were more than willing to let him have it.

Chatter echoed across the comms in the background. Evaluations and measurements were fed through to help them gauge their actions better. Ron called out advice at random intervals. They vaguely registered the L.A. Shatterdome promising that backup was on the way. As it was going, Harry-and-Sirius thought that they might not need it. A better advantage was definitely welcome, but they seemed to be gaining the upper hand.

They saw their chance when the kaiju's head snapped back from one of their uppercuts. They communicated their goals to each other half in the Drift and half via partially yelled commands. Harry lashed out to wrap the fingers of Buckbeak's left hand into Veil's lower jaw, trapping his head back. Sirius let the plasma cannon in Buckbeak's right fist charge up, then shot three consecutive blasts into Veil's underbelly at point-blank range. The kaiju was thrown backwards, sinking lifelessly below the surface.

“Discharge, sir! Plasma cannon activated in the shallows seven miles off the coastal line,” Ron announced to LOCCENT so that they could formulate ecological damage percentages.

“What?” Dumbledore yelled in the background. He must have approached the mic as his voice was much louder a moment later. “Buckbeak, what the hell is going on?”

“The job's done, sir. Lit it up three times. Bagged ourselves another kill,” Sirius panted into the comms, his manic grin evident even in his voice. The adrenaline of the physical exertions had them both unnecessarily giddy.
“You disobeyed a direct order! You were supposed to keep to the fight a mile into deeper water,” Dumbledore said angrily.

“Respectfully, sir, we intercepted a kaiju with zero casualties instead of ten,” Harry argued.

“Get back to post. Now!”

“Yes, sir.” Sirius said happily as they turned to walk home at a much more sedate pace than they’d used to get out there. They both knew that Dumbledore was angry for a good reason, but he’d have time to calm down and assess things logically before they got back. It wasn’t the first time that orders had been ‘altered’ by the pilots in the field. Marshal Dumbledore was one of the best at recognizing the merits of improved strategy over blind obedience. The complete lack of casualties would win this round with him for sure.

Suddenly, Ron came on the line, yelling out, “Kaiju signature rising!” After a few seconds of keys clacking he continued. “That thing’s still alive, sir.”

“Buckbeak!” Dumbledore yelled. “We’re still getting a signature. That kaiju is still alive! The boat is out of range, so get out of there. Do you copy? Get out of there and regroup NOW!”

Before they could react, Veil burst from beneath the surface and tackled them. They managed to catch themselves and turn in time to avoid the kaiju's attempt to grab onto them from behind.

“You on it?” Sirius yelled, his right arm barring the kaiju from latching onto them.

“I got this!” Harry replied, starting the momentary charging of his arm's plasma cannon. Sirius’s energy cells were depleted so it was up to Harry.

Before Harry could swing the arm around to aim, Veil had grabbed it and twisted. A calculated blow from the kaiju’s secondary arm sliced through the weakest part of the shoulder joint. The metal might as well have been a thin sheet of aluminium with the way it crumpled and gave way.

Harry’s world exploded into pain. The circuitry suits linked their neural pathways into the Jaeger’s sensors. Right then, his left arm felt like it has been torn from his body. He couldn't do
much other than scream and clutch at his limb as the suit shorted out and his neural receptors went haywire.

Sirius was yelling that they were hit as their HUD flashed warnings. His voice was pained, but he wasn't as linked to the left side as Harry was. Ron could be heard in the background shouting that the left arm had 'gone cold.' The A.I. was talking over itself as it listed their damages.

Veil pressed the advantage. With Buckbeak's left arm gone he was able to shove her down easily. Harry-and-Sirius had enough time to see the loose skin around the kaiju's head peel back to reveal a terrifying set of long, thin teeth. Then he lurched forward and bit down. The needle-like teeth pierced the hull and began to sink deeper and deeper into the Conn-Pod. Harry-and-Sirius had only a second of real time to observe the bite pattern, but that span stretched out in the space of the Drift. They both knew exactly what was going to happen.

Sirius turned his face to Harry. Tears streamed down his face as he panicked. “James! Help me!” he yelled. And then he was gone. His whole side of the Conn-Pod was gone, ripped away with a flick of the kaiju's head.

“Noo! No! No!” Harry screamed. He'd felt it. He'd felt the kaiju's fangs stab into Sirius and tear him apart as if it had been Harry's own body instead. He could still feel the echo of fear and pain rebounding inside his own mind.

Buckbeak slumped down. Electricity and magic shocked into Harry's body from torn connections and malfunctioning machinery. It was excruciating, but at the same time nothing compared to what he felt in his mind. He somehow succeeded in switching the gauntlet controls over to his right hand, his body stiff and his left side barely responsive.

He managed to stand Buckbeak back up, mostly because he felt so much more than the pain. Harry felt lost. Confused. Hurt and angry. He braced as Veil tackled him back into an iceberg. The kaiju's sharp second arms pressed into the chest plate slowly, as if it knew that it would hurt more that way. Harry would have screamed if he'd been able to breathe.

Veil went for Buckbeak's right leg next, pinning her down to strip off chunks of metal with his teeth. Harry grit his teeth and frantically rerouted power. The HUD was barely functioning and half of his controls were gone, but somehow Buckbeak's A.I. still understood him. He set as much power as he could into overloading the right arm's plasma cannon. He swung the arm up and aimed by eyesight through the open Conn-Pod, firing the shot right into the kaiju's eye.

He seemed to float after that, though his body felt like it was made of lead. He couldn't
hear any chatter over the comms and he wasn't certain if the system was down or if they weren't
talking or if he just couldn't hear them over the rushing in his ears. Later, they would tell him that
he had fried the link and that they'd lost Buckbeak's signature at the same time as Veil's. They had
scrambled to figure out what had happened and what to do about it.

Harry wouldn't be certain how he'd managed to limp his way seven miles to the shore. He
would vaguely remember a last minute change in balance to avoid crushing a boy and his
grandfather when Buckbeak gave out and tumbled onto the beach. They would tell him later that
he'd crawled from the wreckage of the Conn-Pod to fall the rest of the way to the ground,
whispering Sirius's name over and over again until he finally passed out.

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7th June, 2028 – Year 14 – 02:45:

The next couple months after the battle were hard – harder than any training, any grief, any
heartbreak Harry had ever felt put together. Sometimes the days blurred together; other times the
seconds felt like little eternities withering him away. He'd always been prepared for dying; he'd
never been prepared for surviving.

He'd suffered an extreme amount of physical trauma. Tiny cuts, bruises, and lacerations
covered him. Magic and electricity had damaged his body in various places; his left arm was the
worst. Pieces of his circuitry suit and battle armour had fused into his skin and had to be carefully
excised. He had scars in the pattern of the neural link strips from his circuitry suit running down
his left arm and right leg. The freezing water, snow, and wind had given him hypothermia. The
doctors and Healers still weren't certain whether it was the cold, the adrenaline, or the shock that
had numbed him to the pain.

Once he was able to leave his hospital bed, the therapists had been set on him. They were
worried about the repercussions that would result from his experiences. Some worried about the
fact that Harry had still been conscious and connected to Sirius when he died. Most pilot deaths
occurred simultaneously with their partners, given their proximity in the Conn-Pod. When only
one died it was either on the operating table or after one or both pilots had been rendered
unconscious. Others were worried about his neurological damage due to piloting the Jaeger all by
himself. Theorists believed it wasn't impossible for experienced pilots to accomplish such a feat,
but only for short amounts of time and under incredible duress. It had only been actively
accomplished once before, but had still damaged the pilot severely.

The physical therapists only seemed prepared to torture him further, though logically he
knew their intentions were to see him able to function normally again. They'd told him that his left
arm might not ever be as strong as before, but that he should regain full functionality of his body otherwise. He honestly didn't care, but endured their treatments for two reasons alone. The first was that Sirius would have wanted him to be healthy again. The second was that the sessions felt like a penitence he deserved for not taking care of his partner.

The Psych Analysts were almost worse, making him wish for the physical pain. They kept trying to get him to open the wounds and let them in. One had told him that, like physical wounds, a psychological wound could fester and poison a person slowly from the inside if it was not treated properly. It had made sense to Harry, but it still didn't make it any easier to talk about anything. As much as he knew that he needed the help, he was terrified to tell them anything. He was afraid of what they would say if he told them that he still felt Sirius in his head, like a phantom limb, a piece of himself that he just couldn't touch.

What would they say if he told them about how he was so sure he'd heard Sirius laughing, calling for him, or singing off-key in the shower? What would they say if he told them that he'd forget that Sirius was gone and start conversations with him, entirely certain that he was being answered back up until the point that he remembered it wasn't possible? What would they say if he told them he was constantly waiting for Fred and George to come to him and tell him that it was all an elaborate, awful prank?

Escaping the therapists to be with his loved ones was even worse in some ways. Tonks couldn't stop crying. Remus would pause and zone out, this stricken expression of gut-wrenching loss on his face. The Weasleys and Harry's other friends were supportive, but he could tell that his grief made them uncomfortable and that only made him feel more guilty. Harry had to admit to himself that he didn't even know how to relate to any of them any more without Sirius. Sometimes it was easier to just keep his distance.

Both surprisingly and unsurprisingly, Luna was the one that he felt most comfortable with. It was almost impossible to make her uncomfortable, but Harry honestly hadn't expected her to understand him like she did. Bill was often a godsend as well. Fleur and Gabrielle had moved Ailes to Anchorage so that he could help Harry. He might not have suffered as much, as he had been unconscious when Louis had died, but he could help with the heartache of having to survive and move on. He knew what it was like to lose the other person in your head.

It wasn't just losing a friend. It wasn't just losing family. It was losing the person who knew you so well that they felt like your other half. If platonic soulmates existed, Sirius would have been Harry's.

Once, Harry had tried to explain to Luna what it felt like in his mind. “There's a special bond between Jaeger pilots, always pulling on your mind. And the further you are apart, the harder it pulls.” Quietly, he'd confessed, “Sometimes I feel like it's pulling me apart.”
It didn't help that sometimes Harry would find himself haunted by the last words that Sirius spoke to him. His stomach would churn with hurt and anger and jealousy. He tried to be understanding that his father had been Sirius's best friend since childhood, had saved him and taken him in at a time when he'd needed it most. Sirius was that for him, after all – more so even than Ron. But he couldn't help the spike of bitter envy that even after four and a half years of being in each other's heads that the person Sirius had wanted beside him in his final moments wasn't Harry.

After weeks of trying desperately to understand Sirius's reasoning by picking at the fragments left behind in his mind, Harry had somehow convinced himself that if he could just connect to one of the training Pons systems that he could make sense of it. He was so certain that as soon as he entered the Drift that Sirius would be right there with him once again. He could feel it, like a whisper in the back of his head that he couldn't quite understand. He could control his mind better in the Drift, finally sort everything out and put it into place.

The issue was that he had been forbidden to use a Pons until the Psych Analysts gave him the all-clear. Harry was sure that he wouldn't be able to be okay if he couldn't sort out the jumbled, fractured mess in his head like he needed to first. So he watched and he waited, and when he knew that no one else would be in a certain lab, he took his chance.

They had locked his own ID card from being able to enter the Pons labs, but they hadn't thought to do anything about Sirius's. Harry left the lights off to deter visitors and locked the physical bolting mechanism from the inside. Turning toward the Pons he took in and released a shaky breath.

Harry began to walk toward the machine, but he was startled when a lighter body connected with his back and sent him sprawling. Harry squirmed furiously, trying to dislodge his attacker. The person was female and physically smaller, not very well-trained but tenacious.

“Harry, listen to me!” Luna panted into his ear. She scrabbled for purchase on his loose clothing, trying to contain him.

Harry snarled and tried to flip her over his back. An unknown entity was frightening; a known one just made him mad. She wrapped her legs around his torso and held on, talking furiously.

“Harry, please, listen to me,” she begged and grunted into his ear. She had her face pressed against his shoulder to prevent him from knocking her silly with his thrashing. “I know. I get it. I really do. I hear them too. I hear them too.” She said it quickly, her voice sad and pleading.
Harry stopped fighting for the moment but still held his body as ready and rigid as possible. The panic and anger and fear were making it hard to breathe in anything but stuttered pants. “What?” he demanded. She couldn't possibly know, could she? He'd never said anything.

“The whispers,” she said softly. “In the back of your mind, you hear the whispers.”

Harry felt his strength go out of him, his body collapsing limply to the floor. He wasn't going to cry. He wasn't. “How?” he whispered brokenly.

“Because I hear them too.” She adjusted her position to straddle his back, keeping her forehead pressed to his shoulder. “When we first met, you guessed that I wasn't in pilot training, and I told you I wasn't. The more truthful answer would have been that I wasn't any more.” Her fingers twisted into his shirt, but Harry thought it might not be as much about restraining him this time.

“I enlisted with my mother. We almost made it to the second cut. But, see, for established partners, they make you test if you have the mental capacity to move a test body before even then.” Luna was silent for a long moment. When she spoke again it was the first time that Harry had ever heard her sound fragile. “She had an aneurysm from the strain the first time we tried it.”

Harry swallowed thickly. “You were...you were connected?”

“One hundred percent sync,” she confirmed softly.

“And you hear it now?” he asked with trepidation. “But you hadn't fought, hadn't forged that bond—”

“She was my mother,” Luna said simply. “We already had a bond. And we were connected, part of each other in the Drift.”

“What happened?” Harry asked, afraid of the answer.

“I still hear her sometimes. Usually when I need her most.” She sounded happy and pained at the same time. “They let me go back into a Pons too soon. It nearly destroyed me. I knew that I
heard her whispering, but then when I thought I could reach for her she wasn't there.” Harry's shoulder felt damp where Luna's eyes pressed against it. “I nearly tore my own mind apart searching for her.”

“But he's there, Luna,” Harry pleaded. He had to believe it, he couldn't not believe it. Sirius couldn't actually be completely gone; not him. “I know he's there.”

“He isn't, Harry,” Luna insisted. She latched onto him again when he made to throw her off. “Harry Potter, you listen to me right now! You are one of my best friends and I will not let you do this to yourself. I will not let you go through what I went through,” she cried, effectively stilling him again.

“He's not there like you think he is. The Pons won't bring you any closer to him,” she said firmly. “I don't know if you'll always hear him. Maybe you will. Maybe it is just an imprint or an echo or a hallucination, or maybe there really is a piece of him that was so much a part of you that it got left behind. But there is no instant fix, especially not in there,” she said, raising her head to indicate the dormant Pons.

“I remember that the whispers were so faint, so jumbled, for so long. It was only when I got the rest of my mind to quiet down, to settle, that they started to become clearer.” She sighed softly, laying down again and hugging Harry's back.

Harry laid there for long enough that the cold started to seep in from the tile floor. He didn't want them to, but her words sunk into him, and he knew them to be true. It was just one more thing that was unfair. Sirius's voice was the one thing he needed most to get past this, and yet it was the one thing he couldn't reach until he'd fought through it alone. He felt himself shudder, then a gasp ripped through him, followed by the increasingly frame-wracking sobs.

Luna sat up and slid off from on top of him. Harry grabbed at her, afraid she would leave him too. But she shushed him gently and pulled him to curl up in her arms. She petted his hair as he cried into her shoulder, clinging to her like a lifeline. Her grip let him know that she would hold him as long as he needed her to.

Eventually he subsided. “You understand why you can't, don't you?” Luna pleaded. Harry nodded, not wanting to talk. He got it, but it was hard.

When he was ready, he pulled back to smile at her weakly. “Sorry,” he said. She just shook her head and nudged at him as she stood. He took her hands when she offered to help him up as well. She kept hold of one hand afterwards.
Harry let her lead him to the door, though he did glance back at the Pons once. Luna unlocked it and lead them out into the deserted corridor, leading him along. A small part of him was amused that she knew her way around much better now, but he couldn’t quite summon a laugh. They didn’t speak as she lead him all the way back to his barracks, not even when she followed him inside.

The sight of Sirius’s door shot a pang through Harry, but he let Luna gently push him toward his own room. He thought she might tuck him in, but was surprised when she curled up in front of him. She wrapped his arm around her, and he sunk his face between her shoulder blades gratefully.

They lay there for some time – thinking, recovering, dozing. When he finally felt ready to speak, he had to clear his throat twice before he could get a whole word out. “I don’t think I want another partner,” he confessed. “Not ever.” Even the thought of having someone else in his head caused him to flinch, his mind giving a violently negative reaction as well.

Surviving pilots were usually offered the chance to try again. Sometimes when their partners left due to injuries or some sort of personal reason, they would take it. Those who’d lost their partners to death almost never did.

“Sirius – he’s still too much in my head. I think even if I could get well enough to Drift again and be okay, it wouldn’t work. I’d probably get lost down the R.A.B.I.T. hole, possibly even drag another person down with me if they were connected.” Getting lost in his own mind would be bad enough. Cursing another person to that fate was unthinkable.

“Then don’t,” Luna said simply. “Maybe one day it would be okay, but until then, just don’t.”

Harry smiled weakly and tightened his arm in a brief hug. Neither of them said anything more after that. At some point he slipped into sleep. It was the first night of halfway decent rest he’d gotten since he’d regained consciousness.

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28th June, 2028 – Year 14 – 10:17:
Eventually, the memories that were tucked into every corner of the Shatterdome got to Harry. As much as Luna and Bill and the Psych Analysts were helping, he couldn't bring himself to stay. If he was to heal then he needed some distance to get it all into perspective.

He'd been careful who he told about his plans to leave. Harry didn't think he could face Remus or Tonks, who had loved Sirius even before him. The Psychs had told him it was an aspect of his survivor's guilt, but he wasn't ready to deal with that bit just yet.

Harry was thankful when, in the end, only a handful of people came to see him off.

Marshal Dumbledore had tried to get him to stay, but Harry just...couldn't. Harry nodded to him where he stood by the doors, looking on sadly. They'd said all they needed to when Harry had gone to officially resign. Dumbledore hadn't actually accepted the resignation, but instead said he would put Harry in the system as being on an 'extended personal leave of absence.' That way, if Harry ever needed them or wanted to come back, he could. He'd also have access to any of the P.P.D.C. Psych Analysts if he felt he required them.

Minerva hugged him tightly, then stepped back and straightened his jacket. Harry had learned over the years that she'd retired from piloting when radiation sickness from the early reactor cores took her husband from her. She'd never had the chance to birth any children of her own, but it was unsaid between them that Harry was to her the son she'd wished she had. He summoned up a smile for her as she left to take a place near Dumbledore, her lips pressed tight to stave off further emotion.

Saying goodbye to Molly almost broke his resolve. She clung to him and cried, telling him that he always had been and always would be family. “You're just another one of my brood. You know that, don't you?” she'd asked, hugging him to her chest and rocking. Harry nodded into her shoulder, emotion rendering him unable to speak. Arthur eventually drew her back gently to cry into his own shoulder. He offered Harry his hand to shake, smiling proudly at him before saying farewell.

Fleur and Gabrielle both hugged him and kissed his cheeks. Bill shook his hand firmly, then gave in and reeled Harry into a hug. “You could always come to another Shatterdome with us,” he offered, though he knew the answer.

Harry smiled sadly and shook his head as he pulled back. “Being around a team that really works well together can only remind you how much you miss it,” he explained.

“Well, I had to try,” Bill said, smiling. “If you ever need me, you have my contact
information."

“Any of us,” Fleur amended, reaching forward to squeeze Harry's hand gently. “You 'ave ours as well.” They smiled at him and retreated to let the next person step up.

Ron had his hands shoved in his pockets and looked like he was at a loss for what to say. Harry felt guilty about that too. They'd been best friends for almost seven years, never spending more than a week or so apart. Though Harry knew that Ron was devastated, he also knew that Ron understood why he needed to go. He might not know what it was like to lose someone he was bonded to, but he remembered well what it was like to almost lose his brother. He was gutted enough by that – and by losing the friend that Sirius was to him – that he had just looked tired and resigned when Harry said he was leaving.

“What will you even do now?” Ron asked tentatively.

“I was thinking of heading up the coast,” Harry replied. “It'll be good for Hedwig.” He motioned over to where the owl was perched. “And we've been hearing about the Wall of Life Program for a while now. They're starting construction a ways north of here.”

The Wall of Life Program, the Anti-Kaiju Wall Initiative, the Coastal Wall Project – whatever they were calling it at the time. Physical walls reinforced with a modified version of the magic that the colonies were using – currently considered the best final solution to the kaiju issue. Since nothing had worked to close The Breach in the almost fifteen years since it had appeared, politicians had decided to wall off the entire Pacific Ocean and give it up as lost. In a way it felt like admitting defeat. Harry hadn't liked the idea much in the beginning, but if it could keep any more of his friends, family, or colleagues from dying in a Jaeger then he was willing to give it a try.

“Even if it's not in a Jaeger, you can't give up the saving people thing, huh?” Ron teased, his mouth twisting into a grin.

“S'pose not,” Harry chuckled, but punched Ron in the shoulder anyway. “Tests always said I was pretty powerful magically. Might as well find a use for it, right?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Ron said. He sighed. “You be careful, mate. And if you won't call then you'd better use that ball of feathers over there to write me.”

“Oi!” Harry said protectively, making them both laugh. Unable to think of anything else to
say, they hugged, slapping each other on the back soundly.

Ginny was next. Her eyes were still red and puffy from crying earlier. “Are you sure you won't stay?” she asked weakly. “I thought you would be here when I finally got my Jaeger.” She smiled at him.

Harry cupped her neck and pulled her into a hug. “I'm sorry. I just can't. Part of me is scared of how much I'd miss it and the rest of me is scared of ever letting you near one of them,” he confessed.

“I'll be fine. Rodrigo will watch my back. We'll be okay.”

“I meant I'd be scared of your driving,” he joked, laughing even as she dug her knuckle into his side.

“Shut up. That was one time,” she groused. Harry smiled and kissed the side of her head gently. “You will at least write, won't you? Even if calling is too much,” she said hopefully. “Don't make me lose one of my best friends completely, yeah?”

“You won't lose me,” he swore. He couldn't actually promise to keep contact with any of them. He wouldn't know how difficult it would be until he was far away from there.

When she pulled back and kissed him, there was no sense of passion or longing. It was just a simple press of lips to lips, a goodbye and a thank you. He cupped her face and pressed back, smiling when she pulled away and walked off to stand with Ron.

Fred and George grinned at him as they walked up, a bit muted but as mischievous as ever. “So, we were thinking,” Fred began.

“–If Harry wants to leave–” George continued.

“–But might still worry about us–” Fred.

“–Then maybe we should make him something–” George.
“–So that he can still keep an eye on everyone.” Fred again.

Harry rolled his eyes at them as George pulled out a bundle of parchment with a flourish. “We've called them the Marauders' Map Collection,” he announced.

“We made our own set a while back to use for pranking people,” Fred explained.

“Just say the key phrase to unlock them.”

“And you can instantly see the positions of every person within the Shatterdome.”

“We made a version for each of them.”

Harry took the bundle and unrolled it carefully. The pages appeared to be blank. “How do they work?”

“Simple. Just tap your wand to the page and say, 'I solemnly swear I am up to no good,' and the image will appear, as so,” Fred said, demonstrating with his own wand. Ink seemed to bleed to the surface, forming the well-known layout of the Anchorage Shatterdome. Harry spotted the dots with their names by the exit.

“To change it back, use the phrase, 'Mischief managed!'” George tapped the page and it returned to being blank.

Harry grinned. “They're brilliant. Where'd you even get the idea?” Harry asked, reverently rolling the pages up so he could store them in his bags.

The twins exchanged a look, then turned to him with sad smiles. “A dear friend of ours,” Fred said.

“He and his schoolmates purportedly made one of the school grounds, in their day,” George said.
Harry felt his heart clench and had to blink rapidly to clear his eyes. He knew exactly who they meant. “Messrs. Moony, Padfoot, and Prongs,” he said quietly. He remembered Sirius telling him about the exploits of Remus, Harry’s father, and himself.

He smiled brilliantly and hugged each of the twins in turn. “Thank you.” They waved him off with their trademark grins, then retreated to stand with their parents and siblings.

Luna was the last, running up to hug him tightly. Harry squeezed back, lifting her off her feet for a moment just to hear her laugh. “Thank you. For everything,” he said fervently.

“Of course.” She pulled back to smile at him. “Oh! I wanted you to have this,” she said, reaching around to unclasp one of her necklaces. It was the one with the butterbeer cork dangling from it. “It’ll help keep the Nargles away from you while you’re up on the Wall. I don’t want them to make you fall.”

Harry chuckled as he accepted it, looping it around his neck and clasping it. “Thank you. I really don’t want to fall either,” he said.

“I’ll see you again, Harry Potter. One day,” Luna promised.

“I don’t doubt that.” He hugged her again and kissed the side of her forehead. “You take care of all of them for me now, okay?” he whispered.

“Of course,” she said again, as if it was never a question.

Harry eventually released her to walk over to the bike. It was much more Sirius’s style than his own, but he loved it anyway. The memory of learning how to ride it still made him smile, so he’d decided he was okay with bringing it with him.

He carefully stowed the maps in one of the saddlebags and checked to make sure everything was secured. He tucked Luna’s necklace into his riding jacket before pulling on his helmet and gloves. “You ready to go, love?” Harry asked, petting Hedwig’s chest feathers. She nibbled affectionately on his gloved hand and gave a soft bark. “Then off with ya. I doubt you actually want to try to hold on to this thing,” he joked.
Hedwig cuffed him with her wing and turned to show him her tail, then took off from the handlebars. Harry grinned at her antics and started the motorcycle. He managed to keep from turning around to look as he drove away, but he still saw his friends waving to him in the side mirrors.

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The Kaiju Gazette

29 June, 2028

“Building the Future of Hope”

by Rita Skeeter

After months of deliberation, the Muggle United Nations and the International Union of Magical Governments finally broke ground on the first site of their newest initiative this past February. The Wall of Life Program now has more than a dozen staging points around the Pacific Rim, and there are plans to initiate three more by the end of this year in order to further expedite the construction.

Spearheaded by the former British Minister for Magic Cornelius Fudge, the Wall of Life Program promises to provide reliable and permanent protection from the kaiju threat. The Wall will also provide millions of jobs internationally with minimal training. In an exclusive interview, British Senior Undersecretary to the Minister for Magic Dolores Umbridge criticized the current system. “Despite the P.P.D.C.’s selective hiring centres and extensive training budget, they have consistently failed to prevent damage to our allies' seaside towns and cities,” she said, citing support for the Coastal Wall.

In the face of the increasing number of destroyed Jaegers and the escalating kaiju threat, faith in the Jaeger program has been on the decline. With no end to the conflict in sight, economists are saying that the billions of dollars spent worldwide to continue to build and repair the Jaegers might be better spent elsewhere. Multiple governments have already cut down on their monetary support of the P.P.D.C. to divert funds into the Wall.

While the Wall of Life Program promises to be a further drain on government coffers, the two-year projected timeline is giving hope to many citizens concerned with [CONT. PAGE 3].

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30th June, 2028 – Year 14 – 16:05:

Draco frowned as he and Severus entered their new quarters at the Vladivostok Shatterdome. As they were both considered adults and had previously attained all necessary academic achievements, their training had only lasted the requisite twenty-four weeks. Their graduation from the Academy had been met with little fanfare, having not made many friends while there. It had been a bit underwhelming, despite Draco's pride and excitement at finally making it through.

The newspapers and televised reports they had been subjected to on the flight overseas had put him in a foul mood. The briefing they had received upon entering the base had left a bad taste in his mouth as well. Draco had known the downturn in support would make the battle ahead that much harsher, but he wasn't ready for the extra pressure that would result from it.

“It is hard, but you must try to take as little damage as possible during your fights,” the Vladivostok marshal had warned, her voice heavily accented. “Every breach or crack takes funds to repair. Your Jaeger is one of the last to be constructed for a while; you must defend her as well as the world.”

Draco was scared that the additional stress might break them. They weren't able to sync perfectly as it was. Severus's secrecy and strength in Occlumency meant that sometimes either information was inadvertently kept from Draco or Draco would get bombarded with memories he hadn't been allowed to see before because the shields slipped. However, Severus wasn't completely at fault. Draco had been taught to keep everything in and to himself for so long that overcoming the block they called a 'modesty reflex' was exceptionally difficult. It wasn't so much that Draco was consciously ashamed of something Severus might see in his head, but that he had spent his whole eighteen years of life before that learning to feel that way unconsciously.

They had two weeks before their Jaeger was due to be delivered to the base and named. Draco had a feeling they would be spending most of that time in the training areas.

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10th August, 2028 – Year 15 – 14:26 – Anniversary of K-Day:

When their Jaeger had arrived, Draco had fallen in love instantly. Even Severus had shown his awe, and him actually showing an emotion other than amusement or scorn was rare. They'd
fought to name her Basilisk in place of some Russian cultural reference that the marshal had wanted to use. In the end, they had compromised, naming her Basilisk Blud in accordance with the normal dual-name parameters. This may or may not have been after someone on their new team told them that the blud were Slavic creatures who would disorient their prey and lead them in circles.

They trained fastidiously with her once they were able to, getting a feel for how she moved and what her capabilities and reaction times were. Basilisk was *fast*, one of the fastest Jaegers ever made. She was a bit more magically reliant than her predecessors, able to use concussive blasts and energy pulses that could temporarily blind or confuse her opponents. There was even an option to disperse carefully cultivated gasses that were poisonous to the kaiju but not to the indigenous populations. Severus seemed to delight in that aspect and began working with some of the K-Science operatives to come up with his own concoctions.

For Draco, Basilisk seemed to remove much of his previous mental block. It was as if by having the Jaeger *there* that it finally became real, so that he *could* finally step off of that precipice to let Severus see everything. Severus, in turn, kept fewer secrets. There were still some things lurking behind his barriers, but they had figured out that a forceful Occlumency barrier was difficult to maintain while training, nevermind fighting. Instead, a simple curtain was kept in Severus's mind, and he had to trust Draco not to look behind it. It worked.

They slowly perfected their neural handshake. All of their hangups were neatly tucked into the edges of their mental space, compartmentalised away or curtained off. Maybe one day they'd be comfortable enough to let it all be in the open between them, but that would take time. For the moment, getting to the point where their personal issues no longer inhibited their ability to reach one hundred percent sync was a feat worth celebrating.

When their first real fight came, they were ready to go. They were sent out with the veteran Jaeger Durmstrang Orel and another new team going by Firecracker Red. There were a lot of nerves for each of the teams, as it was the fifteenth anniversary of K-Day. The whole world would be watching even more than usual and they couldn't make a single mistake.

“Good luck, boys!” sing-songed the voice of Firecracker's female pilot over the comms.

Draco snorted, but felt compelled to add in a quick, “You too,” after one of Durmstrang's pilots thanked her. It wouldn't do to be unnecessarily rude.

The kaiju they faced was massive. It wasn't overly wide, but it was probably taller than any building Draco had ever seen. Draco had originally thought the K-Watch officers were being completely uncreative when they'd named it Tower, but now he understood as it literally towered over them. It was only the second Category III to have emerged from The Breach.
Durmstrang took point, using her strength to knock the kaiju off balance. Draco and Severus kept Basilisk constantly circling them, blinding and poisoning the kaiju to *keep* it off-balance. When they used their energy pulses to confuse it, Firecracker would dart into position to fire off rockets or energy beams into its weak areas while it couldn't hear them coming.

When the kaiju finally fell, the wave of water almost knocked Basilisk off her feet. Exhausted as he was, Draco couldn't stop laughing in sheer joy. Severus even joined in, though much more reservedly. Draco could feel his sense of triumph echoing clearly though the Drift.

The best news, however, was when LOCCENT came over the comms to tell them that their fight had almost matched the record time.

*That's right*, Draco thought, *we'll see how much you doubt us now.*

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*Summer, 2028-Winter, 2033 – Years 14-20:*

Harry received letters fairly often from his friends and loved ones. Sometimes he would remember to check the voice messages on the phone he rarely used. Occasionally he would get a chance to check the email address that Arthur had insisted he create. Letters sent by Muggle mail rarely found him due to the transitory nature of working the Wall, and he'd laugh when he'd get a letter via owl that had returned postmarks on it. He'd usually reply using Hedwig, if he replied at all.

It wasn't that he didn't care. Not remotely. It was just that life on the Wall got busy sometimes and he didn't get a chance. Or occasionally it was that he couldn't find the words to say anything of note. Sometimes it was simply that he didn't have the balls to reply.

He couldn't even bring himself to read Remus or Tonks's letters, nevermind reply to them. He was too scared of the recrimination and heartbreak he was sure to find in them. That didn't stop either of them from writing at least once a month. The unopened letters were kept in a neat bundle, lovingly tied and kept safe in his saddlebags.

Arthur usually sent him emails. Some of them had updates on the family or neat magitech research that he thought Harry would find interesting. Most of them were silly – jokes and lists
and cute pictures of animals, mainly cats for some reason.

Molly carefully packaged and sent him food, which was a godsend. He didn't mind the rations that were distributed at the work sites, but he really missed normal food. He'd made several friends by sharing his spoils, and when he wrote to tell her she said that she was glad it had helped keep him from being alone. She still made him a new sweater every Christmas, and he got in the habit of sending her the correct measurements a month prior, after the first year when it was a bit too small.

Ginny sent him letters often. Some were short notes with no more than a single sentence on them just because she was thinking of him. There were a few that went on for pages and pages. She'd boast proudly about her new Jaeger, detailing how amazing it was every time. She'd complain fondly about Rodrigo. She'd gossip about other Rangers and Officers. She'd gripe about men. She'd tell him she missed him. She'd demand he write back, and occasionally he even did.

Bill would leave him voicemails when he worked, talking about random things that he didn't mind Harry not replying to for the months between when he'd remember check his phone. Every now and then he'd write letters, though he never seemed to know what to say in them other than that he still thought of Harry. Fleur or Gabrielle usually hijacked them partway through or left comments in the margins, much to Harry's amusement.

One particularly cold winter he checked his voicemail for lack of anything better to do. Bill's voice cut through him when he spoke:

*Hey, Harry. I just wanted to let you know. I had managed to salvage Buckbeak's A.I. chip from the wreckage when they brought her in after...after. It was badly damaged and they were originally going to scrap it with the rest, but they let me take it instead. I hadn't wanted to tell you before because you were dealing with so much as it was and I was afraid that it wouldn't bear any fruit. But I kept working on it. Got a lot of help from your old team – they were excited to do one last thing for you and the old girl, y'know? The data was a bit corrupted and some of it was gone for good, but there's still a piece of her left. I honestly have no idea what to do with it now that I have it, or what you would want done with it. I'd thought about asking Dad if he had any ideas, but for now I think I'll just keep it for when I see you next. I really wish I'd thought to do this with White Fang before they scrapped her. Non-pilots don't seem to understand that the Jaeger is as much a part of our teams as we are, and we feel her as much as each other. But hey, I hope this finds you well. I'll talk to you later, mate.*

Harry covered his mouth to keep from making a sound and alerting anyone huddled on the bunks around him. Hedwig, who had been enjoying being nestled at the end of his bed to escape the snowstorm outside, hopped over to nibble at him consolingly. Harry petted her feathers gently in thanks and smiled at her when he was able. He almost never used his phone, but he found himself pulling up Bill's contact information. Thankfully, it went to voicemail, and Harry just left a
simple message that said, “Thank you.”

Luna was one of the two people that Harry actively corresponded with. It was just so easy to tell her all the random things he did or observed without worrying if any of it was interesting. Half of his letters to her had just the occasional sentence or two about something on his mind collected in a largely unrelated list of similar things. He'd send them when there was enough that Hedwig wouldn't get snippy with him when he'd make her fly off. Sometimes he'd sit down and tell her things when it got too much, but those letters were rarer. In return, she would ramble on about anything and everything, stopping at a completely arbitrary point.

...I think there might be a Crumple-Horned Snorkack sniffing around the base. I've set up a few devices that should let me know for certain soon...

...I made a friend with one of the scientists working at the Australia Shatterdome. Her research is fascinating and she seems to enjoy mine as well. We've agreed to collaborate on one of our ideas about how the kaiju manifest. I had wanted to invite her here, but the only time she seems to leave her lab is to visit Vladivostok. She's apparently dating Viktor Krum – he's one of Durmstrang's pilots, isn't he?...

...We met. It didn't go well. I'm not sure what I did, but she did seem upset when I'd said I hadn't read Julia Anton's thesis on kaiju blue. Something about my research methods apparently insulted her as well. I'm really hoping there weren't Nargles (or the twins) playing pranks on her when she said that it didn't make sense. She stormed off when I corrected her that my name is Luna, not Looney. Still not sure if she was suffering from confusion due to the fumes or if it was an actual insult...

...Neville seems to be lacking in perception a lot more recently. I'm not sure if it's my fault or his new partner's or just his. She's nice, though. I like her...

Harry snickered at the mentions of the other scientist and the escalating one-upmanship that Luna eventually sunk to the level of. He felt bad for her whenever she mentioned Neville, as he remembered well how he'd looked at her like she'd hung the moon and never did anything about it, but Luna's cryptic remarks about Neville's partner made him think it might be okay.

Ron was the other person he kept in touch with. Somehow they never managed to run out of things to talk or complain about. Ron kept him apprised of the general idiocy of the other people he worked with and Harry returned the favour with stories about the stupid things people did at the Wall. Harry could complain to Ron about how he missed certain things, like his bed or temperature control or even the mess hall food. Ron wouldn't judge, but would tease him mercilessly instead. Harry quietly appreciated it, though he'd never tell Ron that.
Ron told him about the girl he'd started dating, a Psych Analyst named Lavender Brown. It was cute enough to make Harry gag and he made fun of Ron quite a bit for it. They broke up a few months later and Ron took to telling Harry instead about how she wouldn't leave him alone. Harry still made fun of him for it and swore to keep the letters Ron had written about her to show his children someday. He cackled when that made Ron send a Howler, much to the bemusement of the other workers surrounding him.

...I can't believe it. I'm only twenty! I keep pinching myself, wondering if it's true. Chief technical officer of LOCCENT??! I never thought I'd ever make C.T.O., or that the war would be over long before I had enough experience to qualify. Seriously, I'm so happy I could kiss the next person I see. Hopefully it'll be a pretty bird and not the marshal...

Harry confided to Ron about the few tentative trysts he'd had over the years travelling with the Wall work sites. Nothing had really lasted longer than a few days. Harry sometimes wondered if he'd wanted it to, though he knew he was sad when they walked away after just a night. As if sensing that Harry was a bit insecure about everything, Ron only teased him a little for it. He was a good friend like that.

While Ron's letters were usually moderately long and sprawling, Harry did receive one missive that was especially short. There was no salutation or signature, but he'd know Ron's scrawl anywhere. He was confused until he'd read it, his heart hurting.

Cho Chang was found in her room today. They said she was taking her medication incorrectly and managed to overdose on her antidepressants. It's stated as accidental on the official reports, but everyone is avoiding the subject. I thought I should tell you before the news gets a hold of it so you were prepared for what the vultures might say. I'm sorry.

Harry crushed the note in his hand and sat there for a long while, just breathing. He'd understood a lot more about what Cho had gone through after he lost Sirius, though their coping methods had definitely been different. Though those memories were still tainted, he could look back on them and understand what went wrong with them both. He'd thought about contacting her once after he left, but he wasn't sure if she would ever even want to speak to him again. Now he was regretting it, wondering if he might have helped her.

Thanks, mate, Harry scrawled across a page in the notepad he kept in his pocket. Hedwig must have sensed his mood, as she only glared at him a little when he asked her to deliver just the single slip on its own.
“We're here live at the edge of the safe zone, where dozens of citizens are already gathering to find out when they can attempt to return home. This, in the wake of the latest battle between the Category Four kaiju designated Vanisher and four of our Jaeger defenders.

“This marks the latest kill for the pilots of Basilisk Blud, Rangers Draco Malfoy and Severus Snape. As of now, they are only one kill away from ousting Harry Potter and Sirius Black's Mighty Buckbeak as the top Jaeger team.

“In this clip from the battle, we can see how the Basilisk team turned the tides. They were able to coat Vanisher in an acidic substance, causing no damage to the surrounding buildings while eliminating the kaiju's chameleon-like ability that was making it so difficult to take down. Insiders tell us that the formula was derived by Severus Snape himself, who qualified as a Potions Master in his youth and worked for several years as a teacher in Britain.

“In the wake of the increased governmental cuts to the Jaeger Program in favour of the Wall, I for one am glad that we still have a few brave defenders left to carry on the fight. Back to you, Katie.”

Draco grunted as Basilisk was swept off its feet again. Thankfully they had fallen into water this time. It still jarred them painfully, but less so than the line of metal and concrete buildings or the spiky pier they'd fallen on previously. Severus's annoyance at the situation only served to make Draco that much angrier.
“Would you please try to keep on your feet long enough to distract it?” Ginny griped over the comms.

“Shut it, Rocket Ginger,” Draco growled, purposefully mangling the other Jaeger's name.

“Oi!” she began, but her voice cut out with a grunt before she could snipe back. Draco knew it was wrong to feel a bit vindicated by that, as that meant that the other team had gotten hit. He felt a bit better about it when he realised that Severus's worry was also tinged with amusement.

Righting themselves, Draco-and-Severus barrelled at the kaiju and knocked it off from on top of Firecracker. Rodrigo called out a thanks as they scrambled upright as well.

Basilisk Blud and Firecracker Red were the only ones left to circle the kaiju, unless they could distract him for the seven hours it would take to get another Jaeger to them. Draco and Severus were trying not to think about the fallen Jaeger a few hundred metres to their southwest. That team had found out the hard way that this kaiju was very aptly designated Venom, when the spikes he was spitting breached their Conn-Pod and poisoned them. Severus had quietly turned off the comms connection with them when they were reduced to screaming incoherently with the pain. They were already going to die from being run through, but hearing them suffer was too much.

The battle was not going well overall. None of their usual tactics were proving fruitful. Firecracker's rockets and Basilisk's concussive blasts barely scratched the kaiju's armour, which covered him almost completely. Both of them had been pierced in multiple places by the spikes he shot from his mouth, lowering their manoeuvrability significantly. Basilisk's token gasses and poisons seemed to have no effect at all. The energy pulses had worked to confuse or blind him early on, but he was somehow getting used to them. The only luck they'd had was with the small plasma beams each of them had equipped, but only when they managed to catch him in the small number of vulnerable areas he had.

Venom was flicking his big, ugly head back and forth, trying to keep them both in view as they cautiously circled. Draco knew that if one of them could pin him for long enough that the other could jam their lasers into a weak spot and end it. The problem was that neither of their Jaegers were really built for grappling.

Draco-and-Severus took a step forward to draw Venom's attention. Firecracker at least had bladed arm guards to help dig in and hold on if they leapt on his back. It seemed to work right up until Venom's tail swung and clocked Firecracker hard, noticeably denting in the chest plate. Draco started to swear, but was cut off as Venom dove at them.
They managed to trap his head and keep him from shooting more of those damn spikes into them, but his two sets of forelimbs were coming up to drag at Basilisk's arms. “Firecracker, if you can, now's a good time!” Draco yelled into the comms. “Not sure how long we can hold it like this!” The arm Draco was controlling was slowly being pried away from where it held the creature's bottom jaw.

From the moment the fingers slipped, everything seemed to slow down. Venom twitched his head back to weaken the remaining arm's hold, then swung forward to let loose a volley at the Conn-Pod. Draco knew, with absolute certainty, that two of the spikes were on a path to tear through him. It was almost too fast to feel afraid. *Almost.*

But then a whispered memory bubbled up. “Do you swear to protect Draco and, should it prove necessary, do anything within your power to save him?”

“Even if it costs me my last breath, I swear.”

And then Draco felt the wrenching sensation of Severus taking full control of Basilisk. He felt Severus's urgent *need* to protect him. Basilisk shifted to the left and turned harshly, knocking Draco out of the path of the spikes. Despite this, he still felt absolute *agony* tear through him. It took a moment to realise that it was Severus's pain shoving its way along their bond. The spikes had grazed past Severus's neck and chest, but they'd also sliced through his armour to poison him.

Draco-and-Severus cried out in unison at the shared anguish. Another memory came crashing through, and Draco knew instinctively that it was the only thing that either of them had ever experienced that could even compare to the pain and torment they were feeling right then. The memory hurt more emotionally than physically, but it matched the intensity. It was Severus's, and something Draco had never seen before, something ripped from the depths of his mind, something he normally kept locked away.


And then Severus's Occlumency barrier slammed down, cutting Draco off from the memory. As he jolted back to reality, Draco knew that no more than a couple seconds had actually passed. He couldn't move, the pain was too great, but he felt the lurch of collision when the kaiju was tackled into them. Ginny was yelling something to them over the comms; Draco wasn't certain if it was meant to be unintelligible or if he just couldn't process it. Firecracker's gauntlet came into view, gripping onto Venom's eye-ridge as the bright flashes of her lasers fired repeatedly into his skull.
The battle was over – Draco could discern that much of what LOCCENT was saying. Transport was on its way, the C.T.O. was saying he didn't think they could walk. Ginny and Rodrigo were begging them to hold on. It all sort of blended together with pricks and points of lucidity piercing through here and there.

Draco floated in a haze of phantom pain. He knew that Severus was too weak to actively sever the link, but Draco would never, ever leave his partner to suffer alone. He wasn't sure if it was the Unbreakable Vow that Severus had told him he'd taken or if Severus had done it all on his own and the memory was just part of his conviction. Maybe a bit of both. But Severus had saved him and might be dying beside him, and there was nothing else he could do. Pain shared might not necessarily be pain halved, as the saying went, but he would endure it for Severus – his partner, his godfather, his friend, his family.

When the transports finally came and lifted them, the jarring sensation was almost enough to make Draco black out. His vision greyed around the edges, but he still held on. Only once the Conn-Pod was pried open and the bright lights of the Shatterdome flooded in did Draco finally allow himself to pass out, knowing they were safe.

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16th May, 2033 – Year 19 – 10:26:

Draco was mad. Severus seemed to be ignoring the way Draco paced the medical bays as he finished buttoning up his robes. Draco noticed his brief micro-expression of discomfort as he did up the collar and winced in sympathy. He made a mental note to see about getting something a bit looser for Severus to wear later, as the self-sacrificing idiot would never do it himself. It was Draco's job to take care of him too, and he intended to do it.

But Draco was still mad – mad at the entirety of the medical staff, both magical and Muggle. Even with all the advances of the twenty-first century, the effects of the kaiju poison were still ravaging Severus's body. The wounds along his chest and throat were refusing to heal properly because of it. It was exceptionally painful for him to speak, and when he did it came out as more of a rasp than his usual drawl. His nervous system, however, was the main focus of the poison's effects. The damage kept him in constant, low-level pain, and it would flare up with any strained movements – anything fast or requiring even a moderate amount of strength. And Draco worried, because despite all attempts to draw the poison out, it continued to linger and spread.

He'd tried to explain his anger several times over the past week, but Severus kept brushing him off. Finally, he burst out, “But you could still die! It's bad enough that you were injured,
“There are no heroes in a world where heroes cannot die, Draco,” Severus said quietly.

Draco felt his heart break at that and hastily tried to smooth away the brief expression of pain from his features. He knew Severus had caught it, but he was kind enough not to say anything. It was his fault that Severus was even there. If he hadn't wanted to be a bloody hero...

Severus sighed. It was likely that he knew exactly what was going through Draco's head. “That is not to say that it is not an honourable endeavour. Just that one should understand the reality of it before they act.”

Draco scoffed. “I thought I had,” he said, full of self-loathing. “Not that it matters now. You can't jockey, and Basil...she's gone. It's over. I'm done.”

Severus was staring at him contemplatively. “One of the marshals asked me if I would allow them to try to rebuild her, merge her with another Jaeger that was badly damaged but not entirely destroyed.” Draco's head shot up, his eyes wide. “If it means you can pilot her again, would you consider at least trying to work with another?”

Draco could feel his insides clench in distress. On one hand, he could jockey again and get those bastards for what they'd done to Severus. He really, really, really would like to bludgeon a few more kaiju. On the other hand, he wouldn't be able to do it with Severus. He'd have to let some new person in his head, would have to figure out how to exist in theirs. And it wouldn't be his Bas, not anymore, not if they merged her with something else.

“The decision is yours, Draco. I will not begrudge you whatever you choose,” Severus said. He gathered his things and motioned for Draco to lead the way for them to leave.

Draco sighed as they started the trek back to their rooms. “Basilisk wouldn't want to be scrapped if there was a chance she could fight again,” he mumbled. It was easier to acquiesce if it wasn't really his own doing. Severus smirked at him, and Draco ignored it.

He'd remember later that he still hadn't asked about the memory he'd seen. It just hadn't seemed like a good time.
Chapter 3

Chapter by KiraOHara

20th June, 2033 – Year 19 – 14:10:

Ron stood just to the left behind Marshal Dumbledore, while Officer Snape stood to the right. The control room was eerily silent with no one else there, but it was for the best for this farce of a meeting. It was getting more difficult to keep a neutral, respectful look on his face the longer the politicians talked. Dumbledore didn't seem the least bit phased, but even after more than nine years of working in the same space as the man Ron still couldn't read him very well.

The Muggle United Nations had somehow been convinced to let the British Minister for Magic speak for them. Ron was fairly certain that there wasn't any actual Wizarding governmental presence in the P.P.D.C.'s charter, but he thought that would just sound petty if he mentioned it to Minister Scrimgeour as he was passing on the U.N.'s will. It didn't mean he had to be happy about it.

“The kaiju are learning our defences. Adapting, evolving. We're losing Jaegers faster than we can build them,” Scrimgeour said, one part growl and two parts politician sleaze. “Category Four kaiju are now coming through The Breach. I think even you can see, Marshal, that this is no longer a sound strategy. The frequency of the attacks has increased. The Jaegers are not the most viable line of defence any more.”

“I am aware,” Dumbledore said, just the barest hint of scorn coming through. “Those are my Rangers that die every time a Jaeger falls. Which is why I'm asking you for one—”

“Excuse me, Marshal—”

“—Last chance—”

“Excuse me!”

“—One final assault with everything we've got—”

“Listen to me!” Scrimgeour roared. “The Jaeger Program is dead, Marshal. On the other
hand, the Coastal Wall Project is a promising option.

“The world appreciates all that you and your men have done, but it's over. We'll authorise you to take all remaining Jaegers to the last battle station in Hong Kong. We are prepared to fund you for the next seven months, while the Coastal Wall is completed. After that, you'll receive no further support.” Scrimgeour tried to look solemn, which only made Ron wish they were standing face to face so he could punch him.

“You have your answer, Marshal,” the Secretary-General of the Muggle United Nations said, then ended the call.

Ron finally let his mask drop into the enraged expression he'd wanted to wear. “So that's it? It's over?” He snarled and tugged his hands through his hair, then kicked the nearest waste bin across the room. It wasn't like they'd be using the room again before it got auctioned off to a private buyer.

“Suits and ties and flashy smiles. That's all they are, Albus,” Snape rasped out, and for once Ron found they were in agreement.

Dumbledore, now that the cameras were off, just looked tired. His hands shook ever so slightly as he took a worn pillbox from his sleeve and swallowed one of its contents. “We don't need them,” he said, stern and solid and quietly angry. With that, he walked out.

Snape nodded to Ron and then followed after their leader. Ron took a moment more to sit at his desk and remember. He'd grown up in this place, spent about half his life in this Shatterdome alone. He'd hopped between them with his parents when he was young, but this...this was home. He wasn't sure how to just leave it all behind without a backward glance.

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30th June, 2033 – Year 19 – 16:05:

To say that Severus was surprised to be summoned to the marshal's office as soon as he'd been settled in a room would have been ludicrous. He'd heard the whispers floating around. While he never really gave them much credence, he didn't tune them out either.
Dumbledore smiled tiredly – but kindly – as Severus entered his office. “Good afternoon, Severus. Do have a seat. Sherbert lemon?” he asked, motioning to a bowl of what looked like yellow sweets.

Severus gratefully took the indicated chair but steered clear of the offerings. “No, thank you, sir.”

“Are you adjusting to the time change well? I know we had only just brought you back to Anchorage a short while ago. I hope it has not affected you negatively?” Dumbledore asked placidly.

Severus was well-versed in holding in his sighs at the behaviour of his superiors. “I am adjusting. There should be no issues in a day or two,” he replied as evenly as his voice now allowed. As it was, though, he was tired from the travelling and would like to shut himself in his rooms as soon as he could. “Why did you actually call me here, sir?” he asked, getting to the point.

“I’d like to think that since your graduation, despite the physical distance, that we have become something of friends.”

Wary friends, Severus thought, but tilted his head for Dumbledore to continue.

“It is why I tell you this in confidence and, regardless of your answer, trust that you will remain discreet.” Dumbledore sighed, and in a moment he looked much older than he even was. “My days as a pilot left their mark on me, much like they now have on you. The stresses of the job on top of that have...aged me more than I generally like to admit. I often find myself weak or tired, barely having the strength to accomplish my duties.”

Severus thought he might understand where this was going. “But you cannot retire. You’ve been the most powerful of the marshals since early on, and now with the funding being cut you are unable to step down. It would spell disaster, weakening the beliefs of those who have remained. They would think you were giving up, not succumbing to age and old battle wounds.”

Dumbledore smiled sadly. “Precisely. I had a feeling you would understand.”

“With all due respect, why speak to me about this? Surely one of the other marshals—”
Dumbledore cut him off with a slow shake of his head. “Seven of the other eight marshals have chosen to retire and go home to their families. The other is my younger brother, Aberforth, and while I love him dearly I do not believe he would have the discretion necessary for what I will ask of you.”

Severus was quiet for a moment, turning a few ideas over in his head. “You wish for me to...assist you in your position,” he said slowly.

“In a sense, yes. I must bear the burden of actually being Marshal. The speeches, the interviews, the meetings. I am not completely useless as far as the everyday work, but I am not quite as spry as I used to be,” Dumbledore said with a small laugh, his eyes twinkling. “I could use the assistance of a vice marshal, who might take on some of the paperwork and faceless decision-making.

“With your service record and recent inability to continue in most physical positions, I don't believe anyone would even bat an eyelash at the suggestion.” Dumbledore grinned, and Severus wondered if he had always been as wily. It was too bad that he'd been wasted in Gryffindor back in his school days; he might have made an excellent Slytherin.

“As I cannot hold a regular speaking position, it will not be thought amiss if I do not endeavour out of the office on my duties,” Severus said, feeling his throat strain with even the small amount of talking they’d been doing. “Shall I assume that I will have offices of my own?”

“Right next door,” Dumbledore replied happily, waving to a door that separated the rooms. “I trust you'll find them comfortable enough.”

Severus nodded. He'd been trying to find a niche now that the merging of his old Jaeger with another was underway and he was no longer needed to consult. It was a toss-up if Dumbledore was aware of that or if he'd simply thought he had a good idea. There was, however, no point in letting him know how grateful Severus was. “I shall report for duty tomorrow morning. If I may?” he asked, levering his aching body up from his chair. When Dumbledore dismissed him he took his time walking back to his rooms, trying not to let his physical discomfort be seen by those traipsing the halls.

Over the next several months, there was a marked improvement in the appearance of Marshal Dumbledore. He was less tired and spoke with more fire and energy when it was required of him. Severus was happy to fade into the background and have a large say in how the Shatterdome was run. Especially since his new office chair was comfy enough to relieve some of his aches.
28th December, 2033 – Year 20 – 10:42 A.M.:

Harry sighed, finishing off the complicated bit of magic for that section before pulling back and cracking his neck. Work on the Wall was draining, to say the least. He wasn't certain how people who didn't have his pool of magical energy made it through the day. “Well, I guess I'll be using my lunch rations early,” he said to the wind. Hooking himself into the network of support cables, he turned and grasped the edge of the physical construct and slid down. While Apparating would definitely have been faster, it was dangerous with all the raw magic at work around him. Plus, it was a further drain on his magical resources, and that was generally frowned upon.

Harry smiled at the workers in the mess tent as he exchanged his ration tokens. Sometimes being nice and acknowledging that they were people too got him a slightly larger scoop of things, and he wasn't beyond playing that at the moment. He easily found a group of other workers crammed together for a break and joined the fold. Heating spells were also advised against because they were a drain on power, especially in this cold, so huddling together for warmth was a necessity.

A nearby vid-screen was playing the news. The reporters came on to recap that earlier that morning there had been a double event kaiju attack. “We're here in Sydney, where earlier today yet another kaiju attack took place. Not one, but two enormous Category Fours broke through the Coastal Wall in less than an hour. The Wall, which had been deemed 'unbreachable' by its builders, was crushed under the onslaught.”

“Why the hell are we even building this damn thing!” one of the workers yelled out angrily. Whispers of terror and wrath broke out across the crowds of workers that had gathered to watch. Harry felt disappointment dip low in his stomach.

The newscasters continued on, as if uncaring about the shattered hopes they left in their wake. “The world is reeling. As luck would have it, the recently decommissioned Jaegers Herb – piloted by Rangers Neville Longbottom and Hannah Abbott – and Firecracker Red – piloted by Rangers Ginny Weasley and Rodrigo de la Vega – rushed out to meet the kaiju, as they had yet to leave the Sydney Shatterdome.

“Herb was able to take on the kaiju designated Diadem, who sought to wreak havoc on downtown Sydney after breaching the Wall.” A clip showed the final moments before the kaiju broke through to lumber toward the city, screeching in challenge. “Firecracker Red intercepted the kaiju designated Ghost just outside of the Wall, preventing it from adding to the chaos within.
“It shortly became obvious that even Firecracker's ranged attacks were outmatched by the kaiju's surprising abilities when it took off flying. Ailes D'Argent – piloted by Rangers Fleur and Gabrielle Delacour – was reactivated on board its carrier vessel, travelling in nearby waters en route to the Hong Kong Shatterdome. Together, Firecracker and the flying Ailes were able to take Ghost down.” Two more clips played, showing first the aerial battle and then the kaiju as the last rockets crashed into him.

Ginny appeared on screen, looking angry with colour high in her cheeks. “They should never have decommissioned us! And now everyone else knows it as well as we do. Hopefully they'll be forced to get their heads out of their arses now.” Harry couldn't help but grin at her image, though he hid it behind a hand so as to not have to explain. It didn't help that he could see Rod in the background, trying to hold her back from going off further.

The feed switched to Neville, looking solemn as he answered questions. “I'm just glad we were still here, or much more damage could have occurred,” he said.

“The Wall will make a great delaying tactic, but sadly that is all that it is,” said the pretty blonde woman beside him in matching armour, labelled as Hannah Abbott.

Many of the workers around Harry seemed to sag in dejection. Conversations were being muttered and yelled all around as the crowd grew, more people hearing the news and coming down from their work. Some were wondering about what would happen to all of them if they stopped the construction; they'd been promised at least two more months of work. Others were trying to figure out if they should even keep working, becoming distressed when the nearby foremen seemed just as lost. Nearly everyone was affected in some way by seeing the Wall they had sacrificed so much and worked so hard for torn apart like nothing.

Over the commotion, Harry heard the still-familiar sound of an air transport helicopter. He snorted to himself, then broke away from the crowd to go meet it. He had a feeling he knew what was coming and who it was for.

Dumbledore was waiting for him, looking far older than the years should have aged him but strong nonetheless. “Mr. Potter,” he said in greeting.

“Marshal,” Harry returned with a dip of his head. “Looking sharp.”

“Long time,” Dumbledore said.
“Five years and six months,” Harry returned, weariness creeping into his tone.

“Can I have a word?”

Harry smirked and gave the ghost of a laugh. “Step into my office,” he said sarcastically, turning to lead Dumbledore over to a section clearer of people and out of the biting wind. Hedwig hopped over from a nearby drift where she'd been waiting for him to share a few morsels of his rations. Harry obliged, sinking to rest against an unused beam with her on his shoulder.

“ Took me a while to find you, my boy.”

“Well, my position travels with the Wall. Chasing shifts to make a living. Or, at least I did.” Harry shrugged.

“You still have your parents' vaults,” Dumbledore reminded him unnecessarily.

“What do you want?” Harry asked, hoping to cut right to the point. He could feel his weariness from earlier weighing heavier as the day carried on.

Dumbledore sighed. Maybe he had wanted a bit more small talk, but Harry wasn't in the habit of obliging him any more. “I've spent the last six months activating everything I could get my hands on.” He paused as if he was choosing his words carefully, but Harry wouldn't have been surprised to find out that he'd rehearsed. “There's an old Jaeger, badly damaged. You may know her. We recently had the opportunity to merge her with another that was moderately damaged. She needs a pilot.”

“I'm guessing I wasn't your first choice,” Harry said, something dark clogging his throat.

“You are my first choice,” Dumbledore said simply. “Especially since, other than the man I hope to partner you with, all the other experienced, still capable pilots are dead.”

“Look,” Harry said slowly. “I can't have anyone else in my head again. I'm done. I'm still connected to my godfather, and he died. I've gotten better, but I can't go through that again. I'm sorry.”
“Haven’t you heard, Mr. Potter?” Dumbledore asked, morbid amusement in his voice and a small smile curling on his face. “The world is coming to an end. So, where would you rather die? Here? Or in a Jaeger?”

Harry had always found it hard to resist anything Dumbledore had offered him, and this time was no different. He’d taken a moment to gather his things and get them to the helicopter. Figuring out how to shrink a magically modified motorcycle was a feat, but he managed. Getting Hedwig into her cage was actually more difficult. She only relented when he made the point that she couldn’t fly fast enough to keep up.

The ride to the airport was too noisy to talk more than necessary. Harry sighed as he slotted into his seat on the aeroplane, stowing his bag by his feet. He didn't trust shrinking it again with the motorcycle precariously shrunken inside already. Buckling in, he mentally prepared himself for the take-off and suffered through it. He’d been right all those years ago – helicopters and Jaegers were definitely different to travel in. He still hated planes.

Dumbledore relaxed into his seat beside Harry with a sigh. Harry managed to ignore him until he started hacking and coughing. He put a worried hand on Dumbledore's shoulder and kept it there until he was able to relax back into his seat. The dark blood dripping from one of his nostrils was startling and new. “Sir,” Harry said hesitantly, motioning to his nose.

Dumbledore frowned and withdrew a handkerchief from his coat to blot at the blood until it stopped. His worn pillbox made a brief enough appearance for him to take one of the brightly-coloured pills before he tucked it away again.

Harry clenched his jaw for a moment, drawing up the courage. “How sick are you?” he asked, staring at the back of the seat in front of him so he didn't have to make eye contact.

Dumbledore sighed wearily. “We scraped the first Jaegers together in fourteen months. The last thing we were thinking of then was radiation shielding. I ran nearly a dozen missions and stayed under the medical radar for a long time. Last time I jockeyed was in Tokyo. I finished the fight solo, but for three hours, it burned.” He paused, regret heavy in his voice. “They warned me if I were ever to step foot in a Jaeger again, the toll would be too much.”

Something pricked at Harry. “Solo combat? You were the one case they’d had before?” Harry asked curiously. They'd never told him who, just that it had only happened once before him.

Dumbledore nodded. “Not many people know the actual story.” He paused, as if deciding, then began in a quiet, personal voice, “My little sister died in one of the early attacks. My...friend,
Gellert, he convinced me to join up, to get revenge. It was the wrong motivation, but it worked.

“We became partners, as I’m sure you recall. Rangers Albus Dumbledore and Gellert Grindelwald of Deathly Hallows.” Dumbledore snorted in private amusement; Harry guessed that Grindelwald must have chosen the name. “We were good, but eventually not good enough. On our second to last run we went up against Gaunt Rings. No one realised that passing through the middle of the kaiju's appendages – these grotesque things of emaciated flesh – would have an effect. We tried to use them as handholds, and ended up with slight nerve damage in our right hands as a result.

“Then there was Locket. He looked like a giant clam with limbs, and we were understandably afraid of what he could do if he opened up. We tried to keep him offshore, but he threw us off and dove under the waves. We thought we saw him surface and gave chase. We had no idea that it was a decoy. It took us almost half an hour to catch it, as it kept firing a beam at us as it swam in circles.

“Locket used that time to get ashore. It killed thousands, but what was worse was that it managed to raise hundreds of them up like Inferi via some sort of spore. Gellert, when he saw them... I felt his mind crack. It was more personally horrifying than the sight of those former people. He tried to take full control, to wipe them out, calling them all manner of things I'd rather never be repeated.

“It was true, they weren't actually human beings any more. But he was so set on massacring them...it was terrifying. I was almost certain that he wouldn't stop to differentiate between them and an actual still-living person.” Dumbledore was quiet for a long time. His hands gripped the armrests of his seat so hard they creaked. “So I did something unthinkable, and I Stupefy'd him. I alerted the Strike Trooper ground forces about the Inferi-like...things, and then I took on Locket. Not operating at full capacity, I only just barely took him down.”

Dumbledore paused, possibly to let Harry soak that in, but not quite long enough to process it. “Between my existing nerve damage and the strain, I was forced to retire. Which was fine with me, as the darkness I saw in Gellert's mind haunted me still. He was confirmed to be completely mad, and sent to an institution that could hopefully care for him.”

Harry sat there and tried to understand it all. Something fierce and horrified recoiled at the idea of purposefully and forcefully removing a partner from the Drift. Despite the logical circumstances, Harry couldn't see himself ever being able to betray the bond in that way. There was something too sacred, too personal. Non-pilots didn't really understand it, as Moody had warned them so many years ago.

Dumbledore sighed softly, drawing Harry to meet his eyes. “The circumstances were very
different, but you and I are the only two that ever ran solo combat. It's why I sought you out to bring you in.”

Harry nodded hollowly. He understood the unsaid words. *We may need you to do it again.* He closed his eyes and curled away from Dumbledore, pretending to sleep until he finally succeeded.

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30th December, 2033 – Year 20 – 17:26:

When the helicopter that ferried them to the Hong Kong Shatterdome finally set down, there was a small party of three waiting for them. Harry grinned widely at one of them – five years could never make him forget Molly Weasley. He wrapped her up in a hug as soon as he was on the ground, genuinely surprised that he was actually taller than her now.

Dumbledore came to stand beside him when they finally let go. “Mr. Potter, I believe you already know the lovely and talented Mrs. Weasley,” he said in amusement. “This is Dr. Brown, one of our Psych Analysts, who you may wish to speak to for your re-entry evaluations,” Dumbledore said, indicating the smiling blonde woman, dressed in a bright purple coat.

“Please, do call me Lavender,” she said sweetly. Harry hoped he didn't actually blanch as he shook her hand. He *remembered* Ron's stories about a Lavender Brown. That way lay madness. She technically *could* be a different woman, but it seemed rather unlikely. Point in case, the fact that she had yet to release his hand.

Dumbledore, thankfully, seemed to sense Harry's discomfort. “I'm sure he'll be wanting to get settled in before beginning to in-process,” he said kindly. “I'm certain you'll be able to speak then.”

Lavender just smiled brightly and nodded. “Yes, of course. If you have any issues adjusting to the new environment, just ask for me,” she said, then finally released Harry's hand. Harry hoped she didn't see him wipe it off on his jumper.

“Ah, yes, and this is Draco Malfoy, one of our brightest. His Basilisk was the one we were able to fuse with Buckbeak. I hope you will make time to talk as well,” Dumbledore said. He indicated the handsome blond man who had been standing a few paces away from the women.
Harry smiled slightly and extended his hand. “Harry. It's good to meet you.”

Malfoy just flicked his eyes from Harry's hand to Dumbledore's face with a bored expression. Then, in French, he asked, “This is it?”

Harry felt his smile thin, but two could play that game. Fleur and Gabrielle had been friends of his, after all, not to mention the French Canadians he'd gotten to know on the Wall. His accent wasn't quite as perfect as Malfoy's, but his pronunciation was definitely still good. He put on his best innocent smile and asked, also in French, “What were you expecting?”

Malfoy made a face, though not quite quickly enough to hide his surprise. “I just wanted a look at the has-been,” he said. Shooting a glare at Dumbledore, he stalked off.

Harry and Dumbledore both sighed, though Harry guessed it was for different reasons. For Harry, it was that he was going to be asked to work with one of the primadonna arseholes who occasionally cropped up when they let the celebrity get to their heads. Dumbledore was probably just upset they hadn't connected immediately and thus made his job harder.

Molly made a dismissive noise in her throat and dragged Harry back into a hug, making him grin again. He hadn't been touched all that much in years. It was scary how good it felt just to be hugged by someone that he knew cared about him. He had to try hard to rein in his emotions or Molly would worry.

She eventually pulled back with a clucking noise. “Your jumper is all but worn out,” she exclaimed sadly.

“It's cold up there, I get a lot of use out of it. The new one you sent me needs washing or I'd be in that one, promise,” he said warmly. He knew she was pleased by the admission.

Molly wrapped her arm around Harry's and motioned for Dumbledore to lead them inside. Harry revelled in her quiet running commentary about how he had gotten so big and his hair was longer and his glasses were new and he must be starving after that aeroplane food. They stepped into the elevator and were about to head down when two female voices yelled out.

“Wait for us!”
“Hold the door, please!”

The two women ran in, out of breath. Harry grinned as he recognised one of them. “Please stay back,” she panted, motioning toward the tanks of pickled kaiju parts in the back of the elevator. “Specimens like these are extremely rare. So look, but don't touch.” Then she looked up and noticed who she was talking to. “Harry!”

Harry grinned and opened his arms, happy when Luna practically tackled him with a hug. He picked her up and spun her once, but was extra careful to keep from knocking into anything. Friend or not, he knew how protective she was of her work.

Dumbledore chuckled behind them. “Mr. Potter, this is our research team. I believe you already know Dr. Lovegood, but may I introduce you to Dr. Granger?”

“Should I call you 'doctor' now?” Harry asked with a grin.

“Definitely don't call me doctor. It's so stuffy.” Luna turned and called over her shoulder, “Hermione, these are human beings, why don't you say hello?”

Dr. Granger rolled her eyes at Luna and looked up from her notes. She leaned forward to shake Harry's hand, waving him off when he went to introduce himself. “Yes, I've heard about you from Ginny, Neville, and Rodrigo. I worked with them in Australia.”

“She hardly leaves the lab, but she's not completely horrible,” Luna assured Harry placidly.

“At least I don't cover myself in kaiju-inspired trinkets like some sort of kaiju groupie,” Hermione snarked back, then turned to Harry. “She loves them. I'm honestly surprised she hasn't turned them into tattoos.”

Harry took a moment to glance at the charms and pins that dangled from Luna's jewellery and clothes. If the subject matter were different (and there were less of them) they could have been considered somewhat tasteful. Luna huffed and rolled her eyes. “I don't love them, I study them. And unlike most people, I would love to study one alive and up close one day,” she said dreamily.
Harry reeled her in with an arm slung around her neck and kissed her forehead. “Trust me, Luna, you really don't want to,” he said. She huffed again, and he just smiled into her hair at the antics of the two 'professionals.'

“I'm not a groupie, and it's not just that they're fascinating from a scientific standpoint,” she explained tiredly, like she'd said it before but no one understood. “As much as I agree that their deaths are necessary, it does not mean that they are not living beings.”

“You're probably the only one who isn't a BuenaKai cultist that mourns them,” Harry teased her, but not unkindly. It was worth it for the beaming smile she sent him, because he was one of the few people who understood that's just how she was. Enemy or not, they were alive, and their deaths were therefore sad. Harry didn't always agree, but he did understand.

30th December, 2033 – Year 20 – 17:52:

When they finally exited the elevator, Dumbledore convinced Molly to cease fussing over Harry and return to her post. Harry grinned when Dumbledore winked at him about it. Once they were out of earshot of the scientists, Harry let the troubled expression cross his features. “So that was the entire research team?”

Dumbledore sighed. “Things have changed, Mr. Potter. We're not an army any more – we're the resistance.” They passed through the large doors of the main hangar bay. “Welcome to the Hong Kong Shatterdome.”

Harry spent a moment taking it all in. It wasn't much different than the other Shatterdomes he'd seen, but it was definitely larger. He supposed that was an inevitability with it having been the very first of them built. He'd mostly only populated the one in Anchorage, but Buckbeak had been leant to Tokyo once and he'd visited Cedric in L.A. multiple times. It pained him to think that none of those places were in official usage any more.

When he noticed a large set of numbers set into one wall, slowly ticking upward, Dumbledore spoke again. “The War Clock. We reset it after every kaiju attack. Keeps everyone focused. The frequency of attacks is accelerating.”

“How long until the next reset?” Harry asked, parsing that the numbers matched up with the
"Two weeks, if we're lucky; a week, if we're not." Dumbledore sounded worried. "My experts believe there might be a kaiju attack even before that."

Harry frowned, wondering how he'd missed the point when they'd started coming faster than every three to four months. He hiked his bag up on his shoulder as Dumbledore led him through the crush of bodies hurrying to get things settled. They ignored the stairs for a small elevator up to LOCCENT, and Harry wisely said nothing about it. Harry grinned when he spotted a familiar head of red hair. "Ron!"

Ron spun, a wide grin breaking out on his face. "Harry!" Harry dropped his bag to properly return the crushing hug. If Harry had gotten taller, Ron had become a giant. "Good to see you, brother. Just like old times, yeah?"

Harry smiled broadly at him. "Yeah, maybe." He waited patiently for Ron to finish up one more little thing, directing people this way and that with the ease of authority long held. Harry did poke at the various consoles curiously, noting some differences from how he remembered their old set-up. When Ron finished his task, Dumbledore released him to give Harry the grand tour.

They loped down the stairs easily to the hangar floor. "This complex used to have the capacity to launch thirty Jaegers in five bays just like this one," Ron told him. "Now we only have six Jaegers left."

"I didn't know it was this bad," Harry said sadly.

"It is this bad."

Harry let the silence stretch on for few moments. Then he grinned and knocked his shoulder into Ron's. "Oh, hey, by the way, I think I met your ex," he said to break the gravity of the situation. He had to laugh at the expression that caused on Ron's face.

"Oh dear god, stay away. Seriously, mate. She's mental. I don't know how she is a Psych Analyst, because she certainly needs one." He shuddered comically. "I suggest you give a wide berth to my stalker and her friend Romilda. She's got another friend in K-Science named Parvati who was okay, but she still puts up with the crazy, so I can't be too sure."
Harry snorted. He wasn't here to look for a date, so he figured he'd be fine. He had missed Ron's melodrama, though; the letters were a pale imitation. “So, where are we going?”

Ron grinned. “To see the Jaegers, of course!” He skipped a step and turned Harry to face a lithe, white and silver Jaeger with the stylised symbol of a dancing veela on her shoulder plates. “I'm sure you remember Ailes D'Argent. We've upgraded her weapons a touch, but Fleur and Gabrielle mostly prefer it old school.” Ron waved at someone, making Harry look up.

Squinting against the harsh lighting, he saw the sisters waving to him from a platform. Gabrielle seemed excited, but he couldn't hear her over the general noise. Fleur pointed down and to his left, and Harry grinned and waved at where Bill was suspended to work on one of the Jaeger's joints.

After a poor attempt at a conversation via charades, Ron finally nudged his shoulder to get him to move on. Next up was the garishly orange and purple monstrosity of Zonko Wheezer. “No idea where my idiot brothers are. Booby-trapping your room, if I know them at all.” Harry had to laugh at that. “Zonko's got about every type of thing that can explode except a nuke, now. And I wouldn't mention that in front of Fred or George or they might get ideas.”

Next to that was a much lighter, orange and red Jaeger that Harry recognised from pictures. “Firecracker Red, yeah?”

Ron nodded. “Yep,” he said, popping the 'P' just slightly. “Ginny will be mad at me if I give you all the specs. She'll want to gush at you about her 'beautiful lady' herself later,” Ron said long-sufferingly, air quotes implied.

Harry snickered. “Oh, I might have gotten a letter or three. And about three dozen pictures.”

“Only three dozen? She was going light.” They both snickered while they could avoid Ginny's wrath.

“This is Paradigm Shift,” Ron said, coming up to a sleek, black Jaeger with silver accents. There was a small symbol of a full moon with a howling wolf's outline on its chest plate. “The Russians made this one, so the Conn-Pod is built in. That whole 'win or die trying' mentality. It's technically the most secure Conn-Pod, but there's no way to get an escape pod out either.”
Ron pointed to the odd composition of the Jaeger's limbs. “The Conn-Pod is actually part of a gyroscope mechanism. They can rearrange their arms and legs as needed, and can go quadrupedal to increase their speed on land. Probably the coolest thing I've seen, to be honest,” he said giddily, reminding Harry of the kid he'd met on a plane with a binder full of Jaeger statistics twelve and a half years prior.

Harry tore himself away from Ron to study the Jaeger and furrowed his brow. He’d seen her on the telly, but they never gave the names of her pilots. “Who rides with her?” Harry asked curiously.

Ron blinked at him for a moment in surprise, then smiled cryptically. “They’ll probably want to talk to you later and can tell you themselves. Doesn't matter much right now because they're grounded due to a medical issue. They're emergency reserves only and will be for the next several months at least. Hopefully we'll have this wrapped up before then.”

Before Harry could ask what that meant, Ron was pulling at his shoulder to show him the next Jaeger. “This is Herb, though some have taken to snickering and calling her Herbie,” Ron said, motioning to the white Jaeger that was decorated with thin red and blue lines. A small, circumscribed '53' had obviously been added after the design. Harry started to snicker when he got the joke. Ron grinned at him. “Don't tell Nev. He still can't figure out why Hannah calls their Jaeger that. It's sort of a running joke for, well, pretty much everyone else.”

Harry laughed outright at that. He could just picture Neville's confused face. Part of him knew he should feel badly about leaving Neville out of the loop, but if he couldn't find the reference in his own partner's mind then Harry wasn't going to spoil her fun.

“Herb will be running point for us,” Dumbledore said, startling both Harry and Ron when he spoke from behind them. From the twinkle in his eyes, Harry guessed that it was intentional.

In lieu of glaring, Harry took the bait. “Running point on what? You still haven't told me what exactly I'm doing here yet.”

“We're going for The Breach, Mr. Potter,” Dumbledore said. “We're going to strap a three-thousand four-hundred pound thermonuclear warhead to Herb's back – a detonation equivalent of one-point-two million tons of TNT. And whatever Jaeger teams we still have – hopefully including you – will be running defence for them.”

Harry frowned. “I thought you said we were the resistance. Where'd you get something that big?”
“I believe you remember Ms. Tonks? The Russians can get us anything,” Dumbledore said simply. “Now, I must be off for a meeting.” He spun on his heel and began to walk off.

“Marshal!” Harry called, dodging people to catch up to him. “We’ve hit The Breach before. Nothing goes through. What’s changed?”

“I’ve got a plan. I need you ready. That is all,” he said with an air of finality. He started to walk away again, and this time Harry let him.

Ron sidled up and nudged their shoulders together, giving Harry’s questioning look an awkward shrug. “You wanna see the best part?” Ron asked in an undertone, grinning smugly.

Harry felt his pulse pick up, a mix of nervousness and excitement filling him. He let Ron lead him up a nearby staircase and onto a small platform overlooking that last occupied bay. “There she is,” Ron said quietly.

Harry felt something catch in his throat. “Oh. Oh, Merlin,” he said reverently. “Look at her. She’s so beautiful. She looks like new.”

And she did. He had been worried, trying not to expect his Mighty Buckbeak to be standing there in all her glory. There was another Jaeger that her remains had been combined with. It wouldn't be just her. But he wasn't expecting how much it would be like her. There were differences, of course. She was green and gold now, no more of the red or the silver he'd remembered seeing on the other Jaeger mentioned. Some areas were sleeker and less bulky. But somehow he could still see her there.

Ron smiled at him and didn’t even tease him a little for how shiny Harry knew his eyes were. “She's better than new. Solid iron hulls, no alloys. Forty engine blocks per muscle strand and a new fluid synapase system. She's got a double-core magic fusion reactor, using the originals from both Mighty Buckbeak and Basilisk Blud. She's one of a kind now,” he said proudly.

“She always was,” Harry said affectionately.

“Bill even patched in her old coding – it actually meshed surprisingly well with Basilisk's. She's really in there,” Ron said quietly.
Harry felt his smile stretch as far as it could across his face and couldn't help the laugh that bubbled up. His old girl would be in there with him, if he was willing. Harry just stood there, leaning against the railing and basking in her for a moment.

“So, how do you like your ride, mate?” Ron said after a bit.

“I love her. She's perfect.” A thought struck him then. “What are they calling her now? Does she have a name yet?”

“Yeah, the prat the other half came with came up with a few before we found a decent one. We're calling her Seeker Prime, or just Seeker for the most part.” Ron grinned, pointing out the golden Snitch motif on the breastplate. “I figured you'd like that one, so I didn't veto it,” he explained.

Harry grinned. “I briefly met said prat. Dunno how that's going to work,” he admitted.

“No worries, mate. I'm sure you'll figure something out,” Ron said encouragingly. “For now, I've got one more really important place to show you.”

“And where's that?”

“The mess, of course! I'm starving,” Ron said, emphasizing his words by gripping his stomach and making a pitiful face.

Harry laughed and used one hand to shove Ron's face away. “I really should have known.”

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As much as Draco loved his cousin, he rather hated her right then. “You didn't tell me he spoke French.”
Tonks laughed and flicked the tip of his nose. “You didn't ask.”

Draco swatted her hand away and glared harder. It was a fair point, but like hell would he admit that. “I looked like an arse.”

“You are an arse, my love,” she said, shooting him a winning smile.

Draco rolled eyes. “I don't see what's so great about him. Everyone talks about him like he’s the Golden Boy, but he ditched you all the moment things got tough.”

“Oi, don't you dare. You've no idea what it was like. You've still got Sev, but he lost Sirius. He needed time to heal from that,” she chided.

“He didn't even say goodbye to you. He hasn't deigned to speak to you since he ran off. And yet you still love him so much.” Draco honestly didn't understand it. He'd abandoned them, and here she was prepared to welcome him back with open arms.

Tonks looked sad for a moment, which made Draco feel like he'd kicked a puppy. “I understand the 'why's of it. Sirius was so, so important to Remus and I before Harry ever became part of our little family. I could read the way he crushed himself with guilt every time he saw either of us.” She sighed softly. “Honestly, though I've missed him greatly, I'm glad that he chose to leave and deal with things over staying and breaking himself to pieces.”

Draco frowned. “He shouldn't just get a pass for it.”

Tonks snapped back to her usual grin. “Oh, don't you worry, baby cousin. I plan to give him a proper what-for and all that. Y'know, after the hugging. And the crying – damned hormones,” she said, wrinkling her nose in disgust.

“I really hate it when you call me that,” Draco griped.

“You really don't, baby cousin,” she said, then reached over to pinch his cheek.
Draco swatted her away and glared, as little as that would phase her. She was right, of course. He'd acted like he was completely annoyed with her and everything about her from the moment they'd met, but he (not-so-)secretly loved it. Though they were very different women, she reminded him a lot of his mum. It was actually comforting that she didn't let him get away with shit, and called him out when he was being a dick. He thought he might not have been as good of a person without that.

“By the way, we are going to ask-and-or-guilt-trip him into coming to see us this evening, so if you'd like to stop by and actually have a decent chat with him—”

“Really very much no. Instead I am going to go visit the only ginger I can tolerate for more than five minutes and drag him away from his paperwork.” Draco grinned when Tonks lightly slapped at his arm for the sort-of-insult. He darted a quick kiss to her cheek while she rolled her eyes, then left to go break into an office.

He really didn't know why Percy even tried to keep his door locked. It never actually kept Draco out. He waltzed in and smiled brilliantly when Percy glared at him. He sounded extra annoyed when he said, “Unlike some people, I actually have work to do.”

Draco plopped into one of the chairs on the opposite side of his desk and reclined, hands behind his head and feet propped on the edge of the desk. One day Percy would learn that Draco enjoyed his annoyed glares and stop feeding them to him. “Rubbish, you had all the work you needed to do by now done last week. Now you're just showing off,” Draco said.

Percy sighed and tossed his quill to the side. Draco was always amused that he still preferred quills to pens. “Fine. What do you want?” he grumbled.

“Don't front, you love me,” Draco said extra-snottily. As much as Draco loved annoying Percy, he knew Percy enjoyed sassing him back just as much. “But I'm currently escaping my cousin and her love of Saint Potter. Also, I figured you needed to be prodded into eating something and not wasting away in here.”

Percy rolled his eyes. “I am not wasting away. I've got too much to do for that,” he said. “And quit making up horrible nicknames for Harry. They only make you sound much more childish than you are.”

Draco stuck his tongue out at him, though he wasn't sure what point he was proving with it. Percy was one of the few people he relaxed enough around that he didn't over-think every gesture or word. Severus had thought that it might be because Percy had never grumbled about the
colonies or their occupants, having lived in one for a short time.

When the richer and more-powerful people in Wizarding Britain began to migrate into the colonies, Percy had leapt at the opportunity. He'd still only been a teenager at the time, but he was certain that he could rise in the socio-political ranks by rubbing elbows with those who occupied the highest tiers. And he'd actually succeeded – he was a brilliant politician when he found a cause to champion.

But then he'd watched as his brothers fought to save the world and to do more for people than he could ever hope to achieve under the protective domes of the colonies. Though most of the letters he'd received at the time were somewhat stilted, he could read between the lines in the rare parts where his family would speak unguardedly. The P.P.D.C. was always butting heads with the politicians who funded them, their representatives unable to effectively bridge the gap between militaristic practicality and political intrigue. So he'd taken a chance and returned to Britain, calling on his new contacts to lobby for better funding and Jaeger Program involvement.

A few years later, he had become one of the P.P.D.C.’s official political liaisons. He'd fought for them in governmental settings and the media alike. Even when the M.U.N. had passed down the P.P.D.C.’s death sentence, he'd helped secure support and donations from outside sources. His brothers might be on the front lines, but he was behind them ensuring they’d have what they needed until they finished the job.

Draco smiled winningly at him, hoping to keep Percy off the topic of his potential new partner. “I was thinking about maybe heading out and trying some of the local cuisine. Might not get a chance soon, if the geeks are right about the increasing attack rates.”

“Maybe you should go get to know Harry before Ron personally indoctrinates him against you,” Percy said, flipping through one of his reports so he could pretend he was ignoring Draco.

Draco sneered. He and the youngest Weasley male might not have gotten off on the right foot. Apparently bringing up old family blood feuds and making jokes about gingers while in battle didn't amuse him very much. It was his own fault, though, for trying to tell Draco and Severus how to fight in their own Jaeger. Even if that was technically the C.T.O. Mission Controller's job.

“I'd prefer to avoid that catastrophe for as long as possible,” Draco said honestly.

“It disturbs me that I don't know if you were referring to Harry or your eventual meeting. Though I'm starting to agree that is how the meeting will end up,” Percy said, looking over his
glasses judgementally.

Draco smirked. He grabbed the container of paperclips off of Percy's immaculately organised desk just to mess with him. Clacking the contents around noisily, he said, “Maybe I'm just not enthused about potentially getting stuck with the guy everyone seems ready to fall down and worship despite the fact that he ran away.”

To Draco's surprise, that got Percy's full attention. Draco groaned at the other man's scowl. “Oh, not you too.”

“Perhaps you should be less quick to judge people you've never met,” Percy said, making Draco flinch. That one had hit home. “You don't know him or what anything was like for him. He put everything into being a Ranger and he only left because he was an absolute wreck—”

“Well, maybe I don't want to get roped together with a wreck,” Draco shot back.

“He wouldn't have come if he thought he couldn't handle it, I know that much. And the marshal won't force you to partner if you can't form a good battle connection.”

Draco flicked a paperclip at him, then another two for good measure. “If he was so great he would still be piloting,” Draco reasoned.

“Same could be said of you,” Percy growled out. It was a low blow, and Draco didn't want to think about it. “Listen, you don't have to marry him, just trust him enough to punch a few things if necessary. Neither of you are strangers to the Drift; it'll be easy if you can keep your emotions in check. Which is why you should get to know him before they shove you in your giant tin can.”

Draco flicked another paperclip at him in response.

“Stop that!” Percy said, batting at the small projectile. “Now get out of my office and let me work before I hex you.”

Draco rolled his eyes and tossed the paperclip holder to him. He grinned when Percy magically froze it in the air, then neatly plucked it and set it in its proper place on his desk. With a small salute, he fluidly rose from his chair and exited the office.
Draco decided he'd just get that food he'd planned on to-go and bring some back to Severus. Merlin knew that the man was too thin, and Draco worried about his health. In addition, he'd be markedly better company than all of these Potter-lovers.

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Harry let Ron talk about all the things that were going on with the official move and the sale of the last of the other Shatterdomes. It was easier than trying to explain that all he had been up to was work and sleep and talking to Hedwig and occasionally getting his head on straight. The last one was happening a lot less lately, as Harry was pretty settled about it all now. He'd even thought of coming back a few times, but he'd had no idea what he would even do in the Shatterdome any more. At least work on the Wall was consistent enough to lose himself in the routine.

What stopped Harry short was when they started to walk toward a table with their trays of food. He'd known he would probably see all of his old friends at some point, but he wasn't entirely prepared for most of them to be sitting at the table he was going to eat at. The prospect of facing them all was a bit daunting.

They'd aged, and he wondered at the fact that he was surprised. He'd grown a few inches and filled out in his shoulders, so why shouldn't they have? Ginny had her hair messily cropped above her shoulders, and now that he could see Luna without her hair tied back Harry realised that hers was shorter too. Neville had lost any hint of his boyish chubbiness, while his awkwardness seemed to have been replaced by a quiet confidence. Rodrigo's hair was longer, tied in a messy loop at the back of his head. A couple more people had been added to their group, though Harry only recognised Hannah and Hermione. Ron towered over them all as he slipped into a space at the table.

Ginny perked up as Ron sat down, as if she knew exactly what it heralded. She turned around and scanned the crowds before she found Harry. “Harry!” she cried happily, her voice just a little deeper than her remembered. A bright smile bloomed across her face as she ran up and threw her arms around his neck. It was only quick reflexes that allowed him to keep her from crushing his tray between them.

Harry hugged her back with the arm not trying to save his dinner. He felt someone take the tray from him so he could wrap both arms around her and lift, burying his face in her shoulder. She was stronger than he remembered, squeezing him almost as tightly as he was her. It made him
laugh quietly.

When they finally released, Neville handed Harry's tray off to Ginny to give Harry a bear hug of his own. Luna waggled her fingers at him but seemed satisfied with their hugs from earlier. Rod dragged Harry's head down to smush his lips to Harry's cheek with an exaggerated 'mmmuah!' Harry snorted a laugh and allowed Ron to drag him down into the seat next to him.

Ginny was still beaming at him as she chewed a bite of food. She swallowed and pointed her fork at him. “I ought to punch you for not writing back as much as you should have,” she said playfully.

“Oh, give him a rest, he just got in,” Hannah said kindly. She smiled at Harry and reached her hand across the table to shake his. “Hannah Abbott. I was just finishing up at the Academy a bit before you left, so we never got a chance to meet. Nev's told me a lot about you.” She glanced at Neville fondly, earning her a shy smile.

Hermione waved Neville off when he started to introduce her. “We met earlier on the lift. Though admittedly I was a bit absorbed in a calculation and wasn't very sociable.” She smiled apologetically. “I'd been sent straight back to Australia to work the Shatterdome there when I graduated, so we never really crossed paths. These four don't shut up about you, though,” she teased. Rodrigo, Ginny, and Neville all made playful faces at her while Luna just smiled and kept eating. “Either of you, actually,” she said, introducing herself to Ron as well.

After that, talk around the table just seemed to settle into something...normal. Harry wondered if they had conspired to keep from making too big of a spectacle about his return, knowing he hated being the centre of attention, or if they were just naturally wonderful like that.

Within a few minutes, Ron and Hermione were bickering over something. She seemed to get defensive when he called her predictive Arithmancy work 'Divination' and didn't seem to understand that he was teasing her. Luna brandished her fork at Neville every few minutes when he stole something off her her tray while they were talking, Hannah snickering into his shoulder.

After awhile, Hannah had drawn Harry into a conversation about the Academy and which instructors had been the best. When he asked her why she decided to join, she smiled sadly. “At first I hadn't wanted to. I was really self-conscious and didn't think much of myself, despite scoring well and being told I had a knack for it.” She paused pushing her food around the plate. “But then my mum and I were visiting my aunt and a kaiju attacked. My aunt and I had gone out shopping while Mum slept off the jet lag, so we got away, but she didn't.”
Hannah bit her lip and looked down at her plate until Neville wrapped an arm around her and kissed her temple. “Anyway, after that, I sort of found my courage and applied. I wanted to help keep other people from going through that. My best friend Ernie joined with me, but his scores weren't high enough to make the second cut. He's Neville and I's head mechanic now.” She smiled at Harry again. “And of course I met Nev. Don't think I could've done it without him, or that I'd want to.”

Ginny jokingly made a small gagging sound when Neville leaned in to kiss Hannah sweetly. Luna giggled and tossed something at her in retribution. Harry still wasn't sure what the dynamic was there, but he wasn't going to ask. He felt badly enough for making Hannah even temporarily sad without making things awkward for his friends.

Luckily, Hannah didn't seem to hold it against him. She got her own revenge on Ginny by telling a story featuring a chain explosion and a certain redhead. Ginny was torn between getting her to stop and yelling at Rodrigo while he was laughing so hard tears were running down his cheeks.

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30th December, 2033 – Year 20 – 21:07:

After dinner was over and people were drifting away, Luna had informed Harry that Remus and Tonks wanted to see him if he wasn't too tired. There was something really tempting about making the excuse and heading for the room Ron had given him the code to enter. But guilt bubbled up worse for avoiding them when he was here than it did at the idea of them...not wanting him there? He wasn't really sure any more. If they wanted to see him then maybe that wasn't actually the case. Or maybe they just wanted to tell him to leave in person.

To say he was surprised by their reaction would have been a massive understatement. Remus had answered the door, looking older and a little worse for wear, but more relaxed than Harry remembered. When he actually caught sight of Harry, he had teared up and lunged forward to drag Harry into an embrace.

Harry cautiously returned the hug, not entirely sure what to do with Remus's emotional outburst. Then Tonks was crying out happily and wrapping her arms around both of them, bracketing Harry in. He let them drag him into their barracks apartment in a daze. He sat on the couch as Remus got them drinks, taking in his surroundings.

When he noticed that there was only one bedroom it hit him that they were actually
together now. Harry had always wondered. There were times where he had thought that Sirius and Remus were more than just friends. Then again, he'd also had a few moments of confusion while watching Tonks and Sirius, wondering if maybe in Russia they might have been less strict about the 'first cousin, once removed' thing. Remus and Tonks had seemed just as close back then too, but Harry had always thought they'd tell him if something was between them.

Maybe they actually had. Harry thought about the bundles of letters sitting in the bag at his feet. He wondered if they'd gotten married and he'd ignored the invitation. Tonks had always worn a lot of rings. Though none of them looked to be made of actual silver now, neither did any seem like a wedding ring. Remus wasn't wearing a ring either, but that could have just been because of the werewolf thing. Jewellery was advised against in general.

Remus noticed Harry looking and grinned. “Nope, haven't convinced her of that one yet,” he said cheerfully.

Tonks elbowed him in the side. “I don't see a reason to conform to the institution of marriage,” she said. “I'm not even sure if we'd find any sort of practical benefit in it. The international paperwork alone would be a nightmare.” It sounded like an old conversation that they'd had many times before. Remus rolled his eyes and kissed her shoulder.

Harry laughed lightly. “Congratulations anyway,” he said. He wasn't sure what else to talk about, not with them sitting there and staring at him like they were trying to map every change in him. As much as he'd thought the crowd of friends earlier might be overwhelming, he wished for something to take the spotlight off of him. He briefly pondered asking how long they had been together, but had a feeling that would confuse them.

When they didn't seem any more forthcoming with conversation, Harry bit his lip and dug in his bag. He pulled out the two stacks of neatly bundled letters, each carefully tied with a ribbon. It took a moment for them to register that those were their unopened letters. Tonks looked at him in hurt and confusion, but he could only shrug helplessly. “I was afraid.”

Tonks face shifted at that, something sad and loving and heartbroken written across it that Harry could barely stand to look at. She pulled him over into a hug, pressing his cheek to her shoulder as she curled around him. “Oh, little love, you didn't need to be. You never needed to be. Oh Merlin, so that's why... Harry, Harry, you never had to worry about us,” she murmured into his hair.

Harry felt something catch in his throat. He wrapped his arms around Tonks's waist, feeling Remus curl a hand around his shoulder. Remus's gentle voice joined hers. “We never would have blamed you. It wasn't your fault; it was in no way your fault. You hear me? Oh Merlin, we actually made you afraid to face us?” He sounded horrified.
Harry shook his head as fiercely as possible against Tonks’s shoulder. “N-no, I just. You had Sirius even before me. And then he was out there with me. And I couldn't protect him and then he was gone and you were just–. I could see how much it hurt to look at me. Because you'd see me and then remember that he wasn't there, or you'd expect him to be there with me. And it hurt you, don't tell me it didn't. But you only knew me because of him and then I lost him,” he babbled out, trying to make them understand.

Tonks shushed him gently. “Oh, Harry, just because you became family after him never made you any less family.”

Remus let out a watery laugh. “Harry, I knew you because of your parents. I found you because of him – I might have even done so before he did if things had happened differently. I was the teacher for those on base too young for a degree; you would have come to me anyway. And I would have loved you just the same.”

Harry laughed. It seemed like the only reaction his body would accept. All the years and the frustration and the guilt. All the fear and the longing. And it hadn't been needed. He laughed and laughed, until that last tightness in his chest finally unravelled and all he could feel was happy.

“We'll have to read through all those with you at some point,” Tonks said after he had calmed down, motioning to the letters. “Who knows what silly things we've talked about over the years.”

Harry smiled, still resting his head on Tonks's shoulder though he'd pulled back some. She was absently carding her fingers through his hair and he'd missed that. The hugs and the kisses and the casual intimacy of his friends and family had been such a hole in his life for the past five and a half years. “We'll do that,” he agreed.

After a companionably quiet moment, Tonks perked up. “So, you haven't heard much about us in the past few years, then?” she asked, sounding excited. She grinned when Harry shook his head.

“I quit teaching,” Remus said, grinning just as evilly as Tonks. It was easy to forget that he had been just as wicked as Sirius because he seemed so nice.

“What? Why? You loved being a teacher!” Harry said. Sure, Remus didn't seem too upset about it, but still. He'd gone through a lot of schools because of his werewolf status before the
“Ron probably gave you a tour of the base earlier, right?” Tonks asked. “Did you happen to see the Jaeger Paradigm Shift?” She sounded gleeful.

Harry looked at the pair of them, both smirking proudly. He laughed. “No! You? You're–?”

Remus nodded. “I think I was a bit lost after Sirius died as well. I wanted to honour his memory, so I entered the Academy. I was a bit worried about the whole werewolf thing, especially after Louis and Bill,” he said softly.

“When he graduated, I snatched him up to try syncing with him. And lo and behold, it worked! They think that his werewolf nature is what matched my shifting Drift patterns. Dunno about all that, but it worked. And, well, you can only Drift with each other so often before you realise a few things,” she said with a grin.

“They never say your names in the news reports,” Harry said curiously. “I had no idea.”

“That's the point,” Remus said. “You forget that I hate the spotlight even more than you ever did.” He made a comical face of disgust.

Harry snorted. Sirius had been the one who loved the interviews, and Harry had indulged him despite the momentary discomfort. “Paradigm Shift,” he said, laughing out loud as Tonks grinned and Remus rolled his eyes. Something nagged at him, though. “Wait, Ron said that the pilots were grounded because of a medical issue?” He looked at them both with a worried expression, trying to find an injury.

Tonks, however, beamed. “Nothing so bad. Might not get to pilot again if all goes to plan. I mean, it'll be another five months or so before I'm in the clear, I guess, being about four months along and all.”

Harry's eyebrows drew together in confusion for a moment, and then it hit him. His eyes went wide. “Oh Merlin, you're–? You're pregnant?” he exclaimed, looking between their smiling faces and Tonks's abdomen. Her loose jacket made it hard to tell if she was showing at all yet.
“You can't really see it yet, just looks like I'm bloated,” Tonks joked. She took Harry's hands and pressed them to her stomach. It didn't feel very different, but in place of defined abs there was a more uniform hardness. Harry grinned, then prodded her in the sides just to make her yelp and swat at him. Still ticklish, at least.

Remus tapped Tonks on the shoulder to get her to look at him. A silent conversation of eyebrow waggles and facial expressions followed. It made Harry ache slightly at the remembered feeling of being able to know someone well enough to understand each other that way. Finally, Tonks grinned and nodded.

“So,” Remus said casually, “we'd been debating on godparents for awhile.”

“We'd love for you to be one. Say you will?” she asked. “We could definitely have you and my cousin both as godfathers. Who says our kid can't have two godfathers? Probably the same people who say that we're obligated to get married.” Tonks rolled her eyes. “You two will have to get along eventually anyway. It'll be great!”

Tonks might have been the shape-changer, but Harry thought he was probably doing a decent impersonation of a fish. “But I. Really, are you sure? I mean, I haven't been here and, I mean, at least your cousin is family—”

Tonks slapped the back of his head. “You're family too, idiot,” she said fondly. “Don't make me bust out the pregnancy hormone tears to make you say yes.”

Harry laughed, holding up his hands in surrender. It wasn't at all how he had imagined the night going, but he wasn't complaining a bit.

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1st January, 2034 – Year 20 – 10:00:

They had waited a day to give Potter time to adjust to the time zone and climate. Despite the winter chill, he'd still lived more than a decade in the Arctic and it was far warmer in Hong Kong than he was used to. The increased humidity was also a factor, likely to throw off his breathing even after a day or two of exposure.
Draco was okay with delaying this as much as possible, but they'd been ordered to report to the Kwoon Combat Room and to be ready to spar. There were a few other potential matches that had been selected for each of them stretching along the sidelines, just in case they weren't as compatible as their scores apparently showed. The marshal wanted at least one experienced pilot in the Jaeger, and whichever of them found a suitable match would be piloting Seeker. Draco was determined that it would be him, with or without Potter.

A small crowd was gathering at the entrance, hoping to see the results first hand. Draco rolled his eyes discreetly. Potter was warming up a little, looking like he was trying not to acknowledge their audience. As little as Draco wanted to think of him, wanted to think he was enjoying being acknowledged again, he remembered seeing Potter on the telly looking quite uncomfortable with the attention while his partner answered most of the questions.

Still, that didn't mean that Draco wanted to get stuck with someone who had already messed up once. He sidled over to Potter and spoke to him in a muted tone that wouldn't carry. “Look, you're the marshal's bright idea. They seem to like you still, but it's guys like you who brought down the Jaeger Program. To me, you just seem like dead weight. If you slow me down, I will not hesitate to drop you like a sack of kaiju shit.”

Potter turned to look at him, jaw clenching. “Likewise,” he said quietly, then turned to ignore Draco's existence.

They were paired up against their alternates first, swapping the floor back and forth for each round. The fights were too easy, but Draco rather expected that when they were between a veteran and someone who had never actually been in combat. It did give him a chance to observe Potter's fighting style, short as the matches were. Draco went first, which meant that Potter had the last fight with the alternates.

When he'd soundly defeated the last of his opponents with a perfect score, Potter turned to Draco and bit out a frustrated, “What? I thought you helped select them, if it had to be you or me. You don't like them?”

Draco raised an eyebrow. “What?”

“Every time I finish a match, you make this little face.” Potter scrunched up his features in distaste.

Draco sighed and fought the urge to roll his eyes. “It's not their performance, it's yours. You could have finished each of them at least two moves sooner.”
Potter didn't seem to have a problem with rolling his eyes, shaking his head in exasperation. “Fine, you want to criticise how I fight? Maybe you should just try me and stop dancing around the subject.”

Draco clenched his jaw, but tilted his head in agreement. They stepped up to either side of the mat, but took a moment to calm down. Fighting emotionally was a bad idea when sparring and just led to injuries, sometimes to yourself. As they were both Wizards, they were allowed to utilise their wands in addition to any other weapons. Potter had gripped a tonfa defensively in his left hand, so Draco decided to mirror him. He was as proficient with them as anything else in the room, so might as well not lose extra focus concentrating on fighting with mismatched weapons.

Draco stepped onto the mat just before Potter did. Potter seemed to still be shaking out his left arm, jiggling it almost nervously. “Scared, Potter?” Draco asked, quiet enough that no one else heard.

Potter smirked at him then and settled into a ready position. “You wish.”

Draco cracked his neck and rolled his shoulders, then assumed his own ready position. At a normal volume, Draco said, “Remember, it's about compatibility. It's a dialogue, not a fight. Do not, however, expect me to dial down my moves because of that.”

Potter shrugged. “Okay. Then neither will I.”

Once they were both ready, the marshal gave them the go ahead. They just stood there for a few seconds, then Draco darted forward and stopped just short of slamming the tonfa into Potter's collarbone. “One-zero.”

Potter shifted just barely in a move that would have cracked at least two of Draco's ribs if he hadn't stopped. “One-one.”

They backed off slightly, circling each other. Draco feinted with his tonfa, then cast a concussive blast, followed quickly by a spell to knock Potter off his feet. The first spell was blocked, but Potter still fell backwards. “Two-one. Careful,” Draco said smugly.

Potter popped back up, tilting his head and seeming to reevaluate Draco. Then he smiled. He cast two nonverbal spells in quick succession, which Draco blocked and countered, recognising
the wand movements. What got him was the wandless spell that pulsed from Potter's left hand as he swung the tonfa. Draco blocked the tonfa, but not the spell. “Two-two. Better watch it,” Potter said with false sweetness.

Draco felt his lip curl in a silent snarl. They traded blows and spells back and forth, moving across the floor. Finally, Draco saw an opening and flipped Potter onto his back, followed by a downward strike that would have crushed his throat if Draco hadn’t stopped just short. “Three-two.”

“Draco, less emotion,” the marshal warned from the sidelines.

Draco mentally chastised himself. He'd let Potter get to him. As a penalty to himself, he waited until Potter was fully up and balanced before attacking again. Potter wove and dodged, getting up close and stepping to the side to try to catch Draco off balance as he turned. He definitely had more of a brawl-and-block style than Draco, but Draco had agility on his side. Eventually, Potter got lucky and tripped Draco up as he turned. Draco fell to his hands and knees, feeling the barest touch of the baton to the back of his neck.

“Three-three,” Potter said quietly near his ear, then backed off so he could stand.

The next point would declare the winner, and Draco was determined to claim it. This time, he tried not to let Potter use his speed to get in close. They were both fast. *A Seeker’s build*, Draco’s mind supplied unhelpfully. They gained and lost ground, stole and lost the advantage. Potter had stronger blocking spells, but Draco knew more counters. Potter spun the tonfa to jab forward with it, and Draco realised that it was similar to how the swords built into the arms of some Jaegers worked. One misstep had Draco getting knocked off balance.

They twisted as they fell, each bringing their wands to bear. Potter had Draco's throat pinned, his wand almost jabbing into the jugular vein. Draco, however, had his wand pressed to Potter's ribs, right in line with his heart. Neither moved. Draco wasn't sure how they counted a draw.

“Enough!” the marshal declared, ending the match.

Potter slowly got off of Draco, his expression thoughtful. Draco ignored the hand he offered and stood on his own, swiping at potential dirt.
Draco had to admit that they were pretty evenly matched. Potter had a bit more raw magical power, but Draco had learned that if he utilised his own magic smarter that he didn't have to use quite as much of it. They were both lithe and fast, though Potter was a bit stronger and Draco a bit quicker. Draco had to admit that just because Potter had been on the Wall instead of in a Jaeger didn't mean that he wouldn't have been in shape. Draco had seen footage of the way the workers had to scale up and down the metal supports, as well as reports about fights breaking out over ration books.

That didn't mean he was any more optimistic about letting Potter in his head. “Fine, you did well enough here,” he said lowly, “but that doesn't mean I'd trust you in a Jaeger. We might both be partnerless, but at least mine is still alive.”

Draco could tell the exact moment that he'd crossed the line, but he couldn't have taken back the words if he'd tried. Potter's rage was more of a knee-jerk reaction, the uncontrolled magic blasting into Draco before he could even think about moving. Potter's face morphed into horror not even a second after his momentary loss of control.

Draco clutched at his chest where it felt raw and too warm. His hand came away from his torn uniform with a streak of blood. There was yelling all around them as the officials tried to clear a path for the medical team and disperse the spectators. Draco just stared back at Potter's wide, terrified eyes.

1st January, 2034 – Year 20 – 13:15:

The medical exams hadn't taken overly long, but every second had felt like an eternity. In the end, they announced that the scratches were superficial. Harry had pulled his magic back quickly enough to not do any real damage.

Harry had never lost control quite that badly before. Sure, he had a few bouts of mostly harmless accidental magic here and there. The couple times that guys on the Wall had thought he was easy prey due to his youth or how the bulky clothes had made his lean frame look scrawny, he had just shielded or knocked them back slightly. Even those who had said something to him about Sirius had never really gotten to him. He thought it might have to do with the fact that, as a Ranger, Malfoy should have understood. The fact that another pilot had said it had cut deeply.

Not all of the blame could be heaped on Malfoy, though. It was Harry who had lost control, after all.
Now he was standing in the hallway outside the marshal's office and trying to ignore everything. People were trying to discreetly peer down the passage at him, failing horribly for the most part. Malfoy was complaining loudly inside the office. Though the wall between them muffled most of his actual words, a few things were intelligible.

Purposeful steps coming closer drew Harry's attention. Hermione was walking down the hallway, focused on a data tablet. When she reached for the door handle, Harry warned, “I wouldn't go in there right now if I was you.”

Hermione spooked, turning to Harry as she flushed in embarrassment. She opened her mouth to say something, then seemed to register the commotion going on inside. She sighed and threw up her hands in exasperation. “Always when I have something to ask about.”

“Pretty sure it's my fault this time. Sorry,” Harry said with an apologetic smile.

“Draco Malfoy complaining is usually just his own fault, from what I've gathered,” she said with a grin.

“I might have accidentally hit him with some uncontrolled magic when he said something pretty awful,” Harry said.

Hermione seemed to think on that for a moment. “I could see how the blame would be shared in that situation.” She grinned, making Harry chuckle. “I'd ask if he's okay, but if someone can rant that long without taking a breath I'd say they're fine.”

Harry snorted. “Point.”

Suddenly, the room went silent. Or at least no one was speaking loud enough to be heard through the wall any more. The door opened and Malfoy walked out, still looking livid. A tall man that Harry recognised from news reports as Severus Snape leaned out after him, glaring. “Stay there. I will be just a moment,” he rasped out, sounding like he really was not done with Malfoy yet.

The moment the door was closed, Malfoy rounded on Harry. “You're a bloody disgrace,” he spat. “You're gonna get us all killed, and here's the thing, Potter, I want to come back from my missions. I quite like my life. So why don't you,” he prodded one finger into Harry's chest and
pushed, “just do us all a favour and disappear. Again. It seems to be the only thing you're good at.”

“Stop it. Now,” Hermione said protectively. Harry pulled her back when she made to step between them. She was brave, he'd give her that, but he wasn't going to let Malfoy make her a target as well.

He was too late anyway. “Yeah, that's right, just hold back your little Jaeger Fly, or whatever they'd call someone who goes for failures. At least one of you bitches should have a leash,” Malfoy said maliciously.

Before Harry could say a word in Hermione's defence, she had swung and punched Malfoy in the jaw. Malfoy reeled backwards, barely catching himself on the wall as he stared in shock. Hermione looked like a mixture between furious and smug. Harry made a mental note to never get on her bad side and find out just how hard she could hit.

“Apologise. Now,” Hermione said quietly. People were being less discreet about watching them, but she was courteous enough to not intentionally give them a show.

“Screw you,” Malfoy slurred, still cradling his tender jaw. His grip on the wall seemed to be the only thing to have kept him from falling and knocking himself unconscious. More's the pity.

Harry narrowed his eyes and clenched his fists. He could feel the slight crackle of magic sizzle down his arms and hoped it hadn't been visible. He stepped closer to Malfoy, looming. “She deserves an apology,” he growled out.

Before another word could be spoken, the door to the office flew open and Dumbledore appeared. “Just what is going on out here?” he bellowed.

Snape followed behind him, glaring. “Stop this immediately. On your feet. All of you.”

Harry snapped to attention, as did Hermione beside him. He noticed she put herself between him and Malfoy. Malfoy was a little slower to move into position, though it was more out of physical pain than being insulting.
Dumbledore didn't ask for any explanations, and he seemed angry enough that Harry wasn't going to risk speaking out of turn. “You are a heartbeat away from active duty,” Dumbledore seethed. “Not anyone gets this chance. Not everyone knows what it's like to have someone to watch their backs. And you would just throw it all away, for what – pride?

“The Jaeger isn't what makes you feel three hundred feet tall. It's the bond. You should both know this,” he chastised. “You turn away from it and I promise you the world will be a darker place. And you'll always wonder if together you could have made the difference.”

“Sorry, sir,” Malfoy said quietly, his eyes flicked over to Harry and Hermione before looking down.

“It won't happen again, sir,” Harry said firmly. He wouldn't let Malfoy provoke him like that again, not with so much riding on them.

“I expect not,” Dumbledore said, straightening to tower over them despite their height. “I've seen what I needed to see. Report to the Shatterdome Friday morning at 0800. Both of you. Until then, I suggest you think on what you are hoping to accomplish here. Dismissed.”

Dumbledore turned and stalked back into his office. Snape stayed a moment after to glare at all three of them, then followed and shut the door behind him with a clang that made them all flinch. Harry tugged on Hermione's sleeve and jerked his head to indicate they should walk in the opposite direction of where Malfoy was standing. She nodded stiffly and followed.

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1st January, 2034 – Year 20 – 19:38:

Harry hissed as Luna pressed the ice pack against the area she'd just salved. Harry may have kept in shape, but he'd definitely forgotten the aches associated with a decent sparring match. After a few hours the bruising had started to make itself known and he'd suffered through dinner with the soreness and stiffness. The other pilots had alternated between smirks (Ginny and Rodrigo) and pitying looks (Neville and Hannah).

“I think that's the last of it,” Luna said softly, flopping down beside where Harry was sprawled on his small bunk.
“Despite that feeling like torture, you're an angel, Luna,” Harry said gratefully, burying his face in his pillow.

“It was nothing. I like helping,” she said simply.

“Today was a disaster,” Harry said. The pillow muffled his weary sigh.

“If I was still up to physical standards and didn't think I'd lose myself in the Drift, I'd offer to be your partner, Harry,” Luna said.

Harry turned his head to smile at her. “And what would we call our Jaeger, do you think?” he joked.

Luna tapped her chin thoughtfully for a moment. Finally, she said, “Thestral.”

Harry raised his eyebrows sceptically. “Why 'Thestral’?”

“It's a type of carnivorous horse with a skeletal body and wings like a bat,” she stated. Then she turned to grin at him. “It can also only be seen by people who have witnessed a death.”

Harry scoffed and shook his head as much as he could in that position. “I've missed your oddly morbid sense of humour,” he told her.

“I wonder how funny the others will think it was how you went to the wrong room,” she said in a considering voice.

Harry briefly ignored his aches and pains to pop up and glare down at her. “Don't you dare.”

When they'd been walking back to his barracks room, Harry had hopped up the two small steps and tried the handle. After three tries of telling him he had the wrong code, Luna helpfully pointed out that it was Malfoy's door, and Harry's was down the hall. Harry had panicked, not
wanting to deal with any more bullshit that day. He grabbed Luna's hand and dragged her along as he ran to the correct door. They had just gotten in the door when they heard the one down the hall open.

Luna started giggling all over again at the memory, and regardless of the fact that it hurt to laugh, Harry joined her.

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2nd January, 2034 – Year 20 – 11:23:

Severus glared down at where Draco sat in his desk chair, his expression torn between contrite and mutinous. He hadn't gotten to talk to Draco the night before, but his godson was not escaping that easily.

“Even if you are afraid of having another partner, what you said and did was out of line,” Draco started to protest and Severus cut him off with a gesture. “You said you were willing to try, but when given the chance you acted like a spoiled child.”

“But he let–”

“What if I had died, Draco?” he asked, effectively shutting him up. “How would you have felt? Think of the agony you shared with me, and how much worse it would have been if I'd been just ripped away instead.”

Draco paled.

“What would you have done? Would you have stayed, unsure of your place, walking the halls we walked together and seeing my echo everywhere around you?” Severus asked coldly. “Or would you have gone home to your parents, left your cousin and your handful of friends and tried to pretend it had never happened? If not for your guilt, then for your sanity?”

When Draco just sat there frozen and didn't reply, Severus continued. “Would you have come back when you were called, because they said they needed you to try again?”
“Would you even want me to?” Draco finally snapped. “Just let the marshal snap his fingers and come scurrying back like an obedient little lapdog?”

“It's not obedience, Draco. It's respect. Something I wonder that you have yet to learn despite your age,” Severus seethed.

If anyone had ever told him that one day he'd be defending a Potter and honouring the memory of Sirius Black, he'd have hexed them. Maybe even cursed them. Draco had never paid much attention to that set of memories, thankfully.

Severus could tell that underneath his defensiveness Draco was remorseful. He knew that he'd crossed the line and gone too far. He likely even knew that the greater fault lied with him and not Potter. He hated admitting to being wrong, but Severus wasn't going to let him wriggle out of it so easily this time.

“You're a Ranger, for Merlin's sake, Draco. It's time to start acting like one.”

Draco nodded slowly. “I'm sorry.”

Severus raised an eyebrow, making sure Draco understood that that wasn't the only apology that was due. When he felt the point had been made, he nodded his acceptance and relaxed enough to sit on the edge of Draco's bed. “Good. Now come here and let me tend to those bruises. You two did not go very easy on each other.”

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3rd January, 2034 – Year 20 – 14:06:

Luna kept scraping an intestine sample for study as Ron, Marshal Dumbledore, and Vice Marshal Snape – the 'Big Three' in charge of Shatterdome operations – walked in. If they wanted to speak to her, then they could do it while she worked. She had a feeling they weren't there for her, though.

Hermione greeted them, thanking them for taking time from their busy schedules to speak with her. Luna rolled her eyes and cut the next section away with a squelching sound.
“Have you got something for us with your Divination?” Ron asked innocently. Luna grinned, recognising the way he teased her as flirting. From the corner of her eye she thought the vice marshal looked amused, but he was very good at covering it up.

“It is not that Divination crockery,” Hermione said, sounding completely affronted. “It's predictive Arithmancy, as I have told you four times now. There is a very, very large difference. Mainly that one is a science and the other is complete rubbish.”

Dumbledore cleared his throat to get her attention. Hermione blushed, stammering out an apology and turning away to compose herself.

Motioning to the scribbles on her blackboard that were indecipherable to anyone but another mathematician, Hermione began her speech. The one that she had been mumbling around the lab for the past two days. “In the beginning, the kaiju attacks were spaced at an average of twenty-four weeks. In the past few years, this number has dropped, first to twelve, then six, and then they were two weeks apart. The last one in Sydney was just over a week. In less than ten days we could start seeing a kaiju coming every eight hours until they are coming every four minutes.”

She motioned to another section of scribbles. “Marshal, we have already witnessed a double event. The next may very well be a triple, and a quadruple after that.”

“Dr. Granger, I'm about to drop a three-thousand four-hundred pound thermonuclear bomb. I need more than a prediction,” the marshal said plaintively.

Luna took this as her cue to chime in. “Well, that's a problem then, because she actually can't give you anything more than a prediction.”

Hermione scowled, marching over to kick at the intestines that had slipped off of Luna's worktable. “No kaiju entrails on my side of the room! You know the rules. Every bloody day since we've met—”

“Ladies! On point,” Vice Marshal Snape said, effectively snapping Hermione back into a professional.

“Numbers do not lie,” she said. “Politics, poetry, and promises – these are lies. Numbers
are as close as we get to the handwriting of God.”

“If you believe in one,” Luna muttered impertinently.

“Would you give me a moment!” Hermione growled at her. Then she returned her focus to their guests. “There will be a triple event, and then shortly thereafter four, and–”

“And then we're dead. We get it,” Ron said.

“But this is where the good news comes!” Hermione said excitedly. “Here is our universe.” She drew a circle in the air with her wand. “And here is theirs.” She drew an identical circle about a foot below the first. “And this is what we call the 'throat' – the passageway between our worlds.” She sculpted a surprisingly accurate rendition of the approximated appearance, linking the transparent illusion between the two circles. “We know that it is atomic in nature. I predict that the increased traffic will force The Breach to stabilise and remain open long enough to get the device through and collapse its structure.” A pulsing circle dropped through the jagged tube, which glowed brighter before the whole thing dissolved.

“And that is where I must chime in,” Luna said. “Because I wouldn't want to go in there with that limited amount of information.”

“Luna, don't embarrass yourself,” Hermione said dismissively.

“Just hear me out for a second. Please,” Luna added, addressing her superior officers. “Do you know why we judge the kaiju on a category system? It's because each one is thought to be completely different from the next, right? One will look like a shark, then the next like a fish–”

“Dr. Lovegood, just get to the point,” Marshal Dumbledore said wearily.

“The point is, I don't think they're all completely different after all.” She shuffled over to her freezer and took out two identical samples. “These are some of the samples I've collected. This one here was harvested in Sydney. And this one was harvested in the Philippines. Six years ago. They have the exact same DNA. They're clones.”

“And this is the point where she goes completely crazy,” Hermione muttered.
Luna ignored her, carrying on. “There's still so much more to the kaiju than we currently understand, even after twenty years of study. We've really only scratched the surface.” She paced over to tap on one of her fluid-filled observation tubes with kaiju organs suspended in them. Small tentacles tipped with suction cups flailed out to stick to the glass next to her. It was a bit sweet.

“This is a piece of a kaiju's brain. Unfortunately, it's damaged. It's a little bit weak. But it's still alive.” She turned back to face the Big Three. “Now, I think I can tap into it, using the same technology that allows two Jaeger pilots to share a neural bridge. Think about that. I could tell you *exactly* how to get through The Breach yourselves,” she said excitedly.

“You're suggesting that we initiate a Drift...with a kaiju,” the vice marshal said sceptically.

“No, no, not a *whole* kaiju. Just a tiny piece of its brain,” Luna corrected. Drifting with a whole kaiju would probably be a bad idea even if it wouldn't kill you first.

“The neural surge would be too much for the human brain,” Marshal Dumbledore said.

“I agree,” Vice Marshal Snape said, nodding minutely.

“I don't agree,” Luna insisted, ready to press her point.

“What about Legilimency?” Ron asked, apparently trying to offer her an opportunity.

Luna frowned and shook her head. “Tri...tried it already. Apparently not having eyes matters.”

“Dr. Granger, I would like your data on my desk as soon as possible,” Marshal Dumbledore said. He carefully levered himself up off the stool he'd been resting his weight against and nodded at them politely before leaving.

“Thank you, doctors,” Vice Marshal Snape added, following.

“But this is the most amazing thing—!” Luna stopped short, accepting that they were
already gone. Ron shrugged helplessly at Luna and gave Hermione a quick smile before he left as well.

“I know you're desperate to be right so that you have not wasted your life being a kaiju groupie,” Hermione said long-sufferingly, “but it's not going to work.”

“It is going to work, Hermione! Fortune favours the brave and all,” Luna argued.

“You heard them,” Hermione said, waving wildly in the direction their superiors had gone. “They won't give you the equipment, and even if they did, you'd kill yourself!”

“Oh I'd be a rock star!” Luna countered. Hermione just threw her hands up and stalked out of their lab, apparently unable to handle Luna's company any more.

That was fine with Luna. More space to stretch out those intestines without her partner whining. She spared one last look for the brain-fragment that was still trying to find what had tapped on the glass with one of its suction-appendages. “I wish Vulcan mind-melds were a thing,” she told it sadly, then returned to her work.

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4th January, 2034 – Year 20 – 15:17:

Not even a week had passed, and already Lavender Brown was the bane of Harry's existence. She insisted on popping up to evaluate him all the time. Frighteningly, it had happened every time Harry had tried to spend time with Ron. He wasn't sure if she was using his presence to try to talk to Ron or if Ron's stalker comment had a bit more truth in it.

He'd sat down with her at one point, hoping to get her off of his back so that he could speak to his best friend in peace. They hadn't been talking ten minutes when she cut him off. “I think you're unpredictable. You have a habit of deviating from standard combat techniques. You take risks that endanger yourself and your crew. I don't think you're the right man for this mission,” she'd said resolutely.

Harry had resisted curling his lip at her, but just barely. “Thank you for your honesty. You might even be right. But one day, if you ever get inside to pilot, you'll see that in combat, you
make decisions. And you have to live with the consequences of those decisions. That's all I'm trying to do.”

“Vengeance is an open wound,” she'd told him. “You just can't take that level of emotion into the Drift.”

Harry tried to explain to her that it was about protecting the people that were still here, not avenging the ones that had already been lost. She didn't seem to get it. He wasn't surprised that she'd never become a pilot if she couldn't understand that much. Harry had gotten up and left without another word. If Marshal Dumbledore wanted him to get a psych eval, he would get it from someone who had a scrap of human decency. Which was probably anyone in the base other than her.

Now, he was dashing through the hangar bay as fast as he could without looking like he was running, trying to avoid her and pretending he didn't hear her calling behind him. He knew it was skirting childish territory, but he really could not stand her.

He skidded around one of Seeker's legs and nearly ran into the two J-Techs standing there doing maintenance. “Hide me. Please,” he begged, not caring how pathetic he seemed.

“Harry!” Lavender called, getting closer. The two J-Techs' eyes widened and they quickly pulled apart some rigging hoses for Harry to duck under. Harry peeked out from a hole in his hiding place, watching as Lavender rounded the corner and looked around in confusion. The J-Techs pretended to keep working as normal, fidgeting with a wire and polishing a wrench.

After she left, the two men laughed and helped Harry out of the hoses. They patted him on the back in solidarity. “I see ye've met our resident psycho,” one said, his voice full of a thick Irish brogue.

“He's Seamus,” the darker-skinned man said with the nasally accent of the north-eastern U.S. “He's not allowed near any sort of explosive anything. Ever.”

“That jerk is Dean,” Seamus said, making a face. “He doesn't let me play with the fun stuff. Ever.”

Dean rolled his eyes heavenward and groaned. “Sometimes I wonder how I'm still sane after all this time with you,” he said. Seamus just beamed at him.
Harry pretty much adored them instantly. He spent the rest of the afternoon handing them tools as they worked in perfect tandem, laughing as they bickered. When it was dinnertime, he invited them to join his group of friends if they wished.

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6th January, 2034 – Year 20 – 07:48:

Luna double-checked the connections of her makeshift Pons, making sure everything was connected correctly. She might have gone into K-Science, but she'd spent the last decade around just as many J-Techs as K-Scientists. It might not have been as sleek or impressive looking as a standard Pons, but it would work just as well.

Picking up her tape-recorder, she hit the record button. “Human-kaiju Drift experiment: take one,” she said evenly. “The brain is a segment of the frontal lobe from the kaiju designated Diadem. Chances are the segment is far too damaged to actually establish a Drift with.” She paused the recorder in order to hook the neural spike into the kaiju brain fragment.

She hit record again, letting it go as she worked. “Science aside: Hermione, if you're listening to this, well, I'm either alive and I've proven that what I've just done works – in which case: HAH, I won – or I'm dead, and I'd like you to know it's all your fault. It really is. You drove me to this. In which case: Hah, I also won.” She paused and made a face, “Well, sort of.”

Placing the modified helmet on her head, she made sure all the straps were done up tight enough to keep it from slipping and potentially frying her brain. One last check that all systems were set, and then she picked up the switch she was using to activate the Pons. “Okay,” she said shakilly. She was still afraid of Drifting, but if she couldn't get anyone else to believe her then she'd do it herself. “Going in three, two, one.” She squeezed her eyes shut and pushed the button.

Alien at a control desk. Precursors. Alien scientists working on a much-larger kaiju body. PRECURSORS. Assembly line of kaiju bodies, all with slightly different variations. PRECURSORS. A giant eye, staring right into her and searing into her brain and–

Luna collapsed into a minor seizure and went unconscious. Luckily, her finger slipped off the activation button.
“Luna?” Hermione said, walking into the lab. Her eyes widened in fear when she took in the scene before her. “Luna! Oh God, what have you done?” she screamed, running over to check her partner's vital signs. Her heartbeat and breathing were faster than normal, but strong; one of her eyes looked like several of the blood vessels had burst; and blood was dripping out of her nose. Gingerly, making sure the machine was off, she stripped the Pons gear off of her friend. Luna seemed stable, but Hermione's doctorates were not really in the correct fields to know for certain. Petting Luna's hair gently, Hermione prayed for her to wake up.

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6th January, 2034 – Year 20 – 08:00:

“Seeker Prime field test commencing in twenty minutes,” said a familiar A.I. voice, making Harry smile despite his nerves.

“Hey, old girl,” he mumbled under his breath. He strode into the Conn-Pod, taking note of the differences in the design. The Drivesuit team had gotten him suited up fairly quickly, though Harry wondered just how they had gotten armour that would fit him on such short notice. It was probably best to not ask.

Punching in a few codes on the nearby panel, he was glad that some things were so etched into his memory that he'd never forget them. “Setting system to test mode,” he said over the comms. “Waiting for second pilot.”

Malfoy walked in and seemed to be looking around and getting his bearings. “Second pilot on board,” he said absently, apparently still used to the routine as well.

Harry hesitated, but walked over to the right side controls. “I'm gonna take this side, if you don't mind. My left arm's kind of shot,” he said, trying to make it sound off-handed. He'd noticed Malfoy staring at the circuitry suit scars that still curled around his left arm as they'd stepped into their new suits. He was staring again now right at where the scars would be.

After a moment, Malfoy seemed to think he needed to respond. “That's fine. I'm left-handed anyway.” He started locking his feet into that side's stirrups. “Were you left handed before...before?” he said quietly, not quite meeting Harry's eyes. He seemed significantly less abrasive and more subdued than previously. Harry wondered if someone had given him a dressing down and felt only a little badly about it.
“No, always been a righty. Sirius, he, uh, he always tried to convince me that it was to my benefit to learn to be ambidextrous. I always rather thought he just didn't want to learn with his left,” Harry said with a small laugh. There was still sadness attached to those memories, but it was getting easier to talk about them. Malfoy was about to be in his head soon anyway, so he should get used to sharing.

Malfoy snorted a laugh beside him. They were mostly silent as the crew hooked them into the rest of the harness. When they left, Draco muted the comms from their end. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly through his nose. “I'm sorry,” he said quietly. He sounded surprisingly sincere.

Harry nodded. “I won't say it was okay, but...thank you. I'm sorry too.”

“Anyway, quick couple of things to expect when jumping in my head,” Malfoy said, seeming eager to change the subject. “Father's an arse, mother's wonderful, Severus is my godfather and he's kind of a jerk sometimes, but I still love all of them dearly. Tonks is my cousin—”

“Wait,” Harry said, world tilting on its axis, “you're Tonks's cousin?”

Malfoy's brow furrowed. “Yes. What of it?”

Harry just laughed. “Nevermind. She mentioned you but I didn't know it was you she meant. Carry on,” he said, motioning with his hand.

Malfoy looked unamused. “Right...well. Born in England, raised in a colony, joined at seventeen, graduated at eighteen. There will probably be a strong memory of when Sev got injured – there was a lot of pain. It's been awhile since I've jockeyed but I'll try to keep from chasing the R.A.B.I.T. about it. I think that's about all,” Malfoy said thoughtfully.

Harry nodded, using a long exhale to gather his thoughts. “Okay. Don't remember being born in England, Auror parents were in San Francisco for a case, have a vague memory of them dying, but it was never a problem before.”

Malfoy turned and narrowed his eyes at Harry. “You are not the Boy Who Lived,” he said incredulously.
Harry shrugged and let out a sheepish laugh. “Uh. Guilty. I guess. Jagged scar on my forehead and all,” he said, flailing one hand in the direction of his face. He snorted a laugh when Malfoy just smacked his own helmet with his palm and shook his head. “Anyway, yeah. Right, Mum's relatives sucked, joined at age eleven, graduated at thirteen, found Sirius – who was my godfather – and he adopted me. If he hadn't, I'm pretty sure Molly was tempted to by then.”

“Molly Weasley, I assume?”

“The one and only,” Harry said affectionately. “Um. Was there when Cedric Diggory died. Disastrous relationship with Cho Chang. Sort of thing with Ginny, and if you use any of that knowledge to tease her I will kill you myself,” he said with false amicability.

Luckily, Malfoy just snorted a laugh. “She'd probably kill me first.”

“Then I'd help hide the body.” Harry smirked when Malfoy glared. “Right, yeah, then there's...Sirius. He was still in my head when he—.” Harry cleared his throat of the blockage he felt there. “I really don't know how I'll react with that, to be honest. I should still have enough control to keep out of the R.A.B.I.T. hole about it, at least.” He pondered for a few seconds. “The Wall was mostly boring, I guess, so that's probably it?”

Malfoy nodded. “I'll try to disengage us if you start to get sucked in by it,” he promised.

“Good. Thanks,” Harry said, his nerves coming back ten-fold.

Malfoy unmuted them as Ron came over the comms from LOCCENT's end. Harry tried to let the distant familiarity of procedure ease him through the transition. It was likely still going to be a shock to find someone in the Drift who wasn't Sirius, but he would cope with that. He had to.

“Initiating neural handshake,” Ron said calmly.

Harry felt his mind connect to Seeker for the first time, and it was both foreign and familiar at once. He smiled as he locked his mind to Seeker's right side. “Right hemisphere: calibrated.”

Malfoy went through the same motions, and Harry felt the hairs on his left arm and leg stand up. His limbs tingled as Malfoy slipped into main control, and Malfoy's right hand became tied to his. “Left hemisphere: calibrated. Ready to activate the Jaeger.”
“Okay, Seeker, lining up nicely so far,” Ron said encouragingly.

Harry was too nervous to try to banter like he always used to. He took a deep breath to relax that feeling, not wanting to let it skew the Drift. Seeker's A.I.-voice was in the background listing processes as they were initiated or completed.

“Right, calibration complete. One-hundred percent sync with the Jaeger. Time to go under, boys,” Ron said, then must have flipped the switch to connect them.

There was less disorganisation than Harry recalled from the first time he'd drifted with Sirius. A few childhood memories, mostly happy with a few sad ones brushed over, and they were settled. Harry breathed a sigh of relief as the Drift expanded between their minds easily. He looked over to his left and nodded to Malfoy – Draco? – then looked to his right and came face to face with Sirius.

Sirius grinned at him. “Focus, kiddo!” And then he was ripped away, screaming. “James! Help me!”

“Warning: out of alignment,” Buckbeak said. But it wasn't quite Buckbeak.

“Seeker. Seeker! You are out of alignment!” Ron's voice yelled from a distance.

Harry felt the breath being sucked out of him as he tried to reach for Sirius, tried to follow him. He fought it, fought the pain and the loss and the longing. And then, he pulled back, breathing harshly but still himself.

“I'm okay, just let me control it,” Harry said, his throat feeling dry and raspy.

He looked over to apologise to Draco and almost panicked again. His memory had triggered Draco's memory in a cascade effect. Pain raced through their veins, threatening to overwhelm them. All Harry-and-Draco could think about was how they couldn't lose Severus. They had to hang on. They had to–

“That was me. I'm good now,” Draco said, though his voice was drifting away oddly.
Something formed – a memory that wasn't Harry's or Draco's – and it slammed into Harry like a brick wall.

“You're stabilising, but Harry's way out!” Ron's voice was muffled.

He remembered. Mummy and Daddy and Uncle Sirius were laughing, and there was a man, standing by a tree, looking at them. Harry started to wave, but got distracted by Uncle Sirius turning him upside down.

“Potter?” Draco asked cautiously.

The noise, the noise, the noise! It hurt. Mummy was scared and they were running and why weren't Daddy and Uncle Sirius coming with them? He was scared! Mummy turned to look behind her, and Daddy screamed.

“He's starting to chase the R.A.B.I.T.!”

Was Daddy hurt? Where was Uncle Sirius? Why was Mummy crying? Harry started to cry too. He wanted to go home.

“Potter, don't get stuck. Can you hear me? Stay with me. Stay in the now.” Draco's voice was so tempting, but he couldn't quite get there. “Potter. Harry! Listen to me!”

Rocks were falling and the monster was chasing them. Harry was so scared. So, so scared. Mummy fell down and screamed. Harry hated the noise as the rocks fell and the dust made it hard to breathe.

“Mummy,” Harry whimpered, pulling at her hand. “Come on. You gotta get up.”

“Oh, baby,” she said. Why was she crying? “I wish I could, but I can't. Please, love. Please. I love you so much. Be a good boy, now. Mummy needs you to run. Run as fast as you can.”
“Not without you!” Harry dragged at her hand as hard as he could. Mummy had to get up!

“You have to. You have to go now. Please, before more of it comes. Please!” There was a loud cracking noise and Mummy looked up. A giant claw tore through the buildings above them, sending debris cascading down.

“NO!” Mummy screamed.

“Harry, this is just a memory. None of this is real.” Draco sounded gutted.

“Protego!” yelled the man, the man he’d seen looking at them. Severus. Bright lights erupted around them. Some of the rocks broke through and some of them turned to dust.

Severus knelt next to Harry after the rocks stopped falling. “Where is she? Where did she go? Where is your mother?” he said frantically. He was crying just like Mummy had been. Harry reached for him, the little stuffed doe toy Sirius had given him hanging from his hand limply.

Severus ignored him, crying out and reaching for a hand sticking out of the rubble toward Harry. “Lily?” he asked softly, his voice breaking. “Lily, no. No, no, NO!” He bowed over the hand and pressed his forehead to it, rocking back and forth.

Harry grabbed at his sleeve and Severus returned his grip with one hand for a moment, clearly in shock. Then he was stumbling to his feet, still muttering to himself, in a daze. He tripped over his feet as he backed away from the clearing in the rubble, hyperventilating and crying. Harry lost his grip, though his toy was still caged in Severus's hand.

Harry cried, reaching for the man. Where was Mummy? Please don't go. I'm scared. Please don't leave me!

Draco was with him. He could feel all the pain and the horror and the fear and the hunger and the anger of Harry's three-year-old self. Two and a half days passed, Harry reaching out for where Severus had gone, crying and alone. He would look over to his mummy occasionally, as if to ask why she wasn't talking to him.

Harry screamed and reached out.
Hermione dashed into LOCCENT, breathing harshly. “Marshal! Marshal!” she yelled, scanning the room until she found him.

He was serenely looking out at Seeker Prime, and she vaguely recalled that today was the first run. He acknowledged her with a dismissive nod. “Not now, Dr. Granger. I'm sure you can appreciate how important this moment is.”

Hermione tried to sigh in exasperation despite her breathlessness. “Luna created a neural bridge from garbage and Drifted with the kaiju,” she said quickly.

Marshal Dumbledore turned to look at her in shock for a moment. “Severus, you're in charge,” he said.

Hermione started to back toward the door as his long strides caught up with her. “Show me,” he ordered. She nodded quickly and then turned to walk swiftly to the lab, trusting that he was following.

Panic erupted within LOCCENT when Potter went under. Severus was trying to keep an eye on the various readings. If Potter fell down the R.A.B.I.T. hole then there was a chance he could drag Draco down with him. The further they went, the harder it was to come back. Severus was worried.

“Don't go!” Potter's voice yelled over the comms, full of tears. “Don't leave me! Come back!” Severus swore, knowing that Potter was so far into the memory that it was manifesting physically for him.
Then Seeker's arms were raising, reaching out toward LOCCENT. “Don't go,” Potter said again, sounding so small and child-like.

Severus froze. “Shit,” he hissed out under his breath. He knew exactly what memory Potter was reliving. He'd hoped that Draco had let go of the fragment that had bled across when they were injured, or that it had been wiped from his mind by the trauma. Then again, Severus was never that lucky.

“Why did you leave me?” Harry cried quietly. Seeker's arms stretched out toward Severus, both in the memory and in the present. Severus could feel his heart constricting, regret and remorse washing over him.

Then Weasley started to swear in terror.

“Engaged. Plasma cannon: powering up,” said an A.I. voice that was just a touch sweeter than Basilisk's had been before.

“Oh no...” Severus said, panic rising once again. The position of the arms coupled with Potter's unconscious need to strike out in childish fury were activating the weapons systems, like a defence mechanism.

“Weapons systems engaged!” Weasley was yelling out to the whole room. “Go to the failsafe!” he ordered.

“Failsafe not responding, sir! There's a problem with the neural blocker! The connection's way too strong!” one of the LOCCENT-Techs responded fearfully.

Severus felt rooted to the spot, unable to assist with the chaos around him. How could he, when this was his fault to begin with? Potter was too far under to hear him even if Severus tried to coax him out of it.

The cannons began charging, energy crackling as a blue glow began to shine through. “Everybody out!” Ron ordered. “Get out of here!” He grabbed Severus's shoulder, jolting him out of his frozen pose. “Except you, you help me,” Weasley panted out quickly.
Severus shook himself and dashed after the younger man, ignoring the way it made his pain flare up. He copied Weasley as they began to furiously unplug everything from the back panel of the control board in the hopes that something would disconnect the neural relays.

Weasley was snarling as they worked. “Should never have been connected. Who the fuck set it up so they'd be doing a test run with the weapons LIVE AND ONLINE!” Dumbledore came running into the control room panting harshly just in time to hear Ron’s last sentence.

Severus's brain seemed to kick back in then. “The power line! The power line! Get the main power line!” he growled as loudly as he could.

“Take them offline!” Dumbledore ordered, his upper body shoving over the top of the control panels. “Take them offline!”

Weasley finally worked a difficult plug out of a socket and held it aloft triumphantly. “I just did!” The sound of the systems draining of power echoed around them as the panels all went dark.

Severus stood with the assistance of Weasley's proffered arm. The three of them turned to look out of the windows in time to see the Jaeger’s arms lowering on automatic systems.

“Weapons systems: disengaged,” the A.I. said calmly.

Severus let go of the breath he'd been unaware of holding, finally starting to feel his cold sweat and shaking limbs. He rested his forehead against the glass and readied himself for whatever the results would be.

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6th January, 2034 – Year 20 – 08:40:

“Harry!” Draco yelled, twisting out of the harness as quickly as possible. He managed to catch his partner as he sagged bonelessly, held up only by his own connections to the Jaeger. Draco fumbled them free, grunting as the full weight of the unconscious form in his arms dropped. He propped Harry against his chest and wrestled his helmet off, pushing the wild, sweaty hair back.
“Neural bridge exercise: invalid. Drift sequence: terminated. Would you like to try again?” Seeker said dutifully, her voice echoing around the Conn-Pod.

Harry – Potter? – Harry roused, blinking his eyes open and clumsily sitting up out of Draco's embrace. He rubbed his forehead wearily then looked up to speak to the comms, his voice thick with leftover emotion. “That was my fault, my mistake. I went out of phase first,” he said, full of resignation.

“No, it was mine,” Draco said, surprising himself. Harry turned and blinked at him in confusion. “I triggered it. I started the cascade effect.”

“No, it was my mistake,” Marshal Dumbledore said over the line, sounding tired. “I should never have let you two in the same machine. I was warned it could be too much, but I had hoped.”

“So, what? You're grounding us?” Draco asked angrily. They didn't see! They didn't know!

“For now,” was the marshal's final response.

Weasley sighed over the comms. “Right, so. You're grounded until further notice at the marshal's discretion. It would probably be best to return to your quarters quickly if you want to avoid the crowd that's gathering,” he said awkwardly. He didn't seem very enthused about the situation either.

The images from the memory were still flashing through Draco's mind. Part of him wanted to believe that Harry had taken the image of Severus from his own mind and transferred it onto the half-remembered face of his saviour. Logically, though, he knew that wasn't the case. He was kicking himself now for never taking the opportunity to ask Severus about the disjointed memory he'd gotten six months ago.

Harry seemed to just shut down as soon as they received the news. “Permission to be dismissed, sir?” he asked quietly.

“Granted,” Ron said, sounding heartbroken at Harry calling him 'sir.'

“Harry,” Draco said, trying and failing to catch his partner's arm as he walked out of the
Conn-Pod. His posture was dejected and his facial expression said that he was broken inside, but he just took the glasses one of the crew offered and shuffled away.

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6th January, 2034 – Year 20 – 10:00:

Albus had just wanted to slip away to his quarters after the multiple fiascos that morning. However, he knew there was one more thing he had to accomplish as marshal before he could take a moment for himself. He could keep up his façade of strength for that long, he hoped.

The medical bay was mostly empty, thank Merlin. Dr. Granger intercepted him as he walked in, falling into step as they headed to Dr. Lovegood's bed. He'd only had enough time to get her to sickbay before he'd been urgently called back to LOCCENT.

“I found her in sort of a daze,” Dr. Granger explained. “Well, more than usual. I don't know exactly how to describe it.”

Dr. Lovegood was trying to sit up in bed, quietly arguing with the similar-looking man who was fussing over her. When she caught sight of Albus, she beamed tiredly. “I told you it would work.”

Albus nodded in concession. “Yes, you did.” He lowered himself carefully onto a stool by the bed. “Well, what did you see?”

“It was only a fragment of a brain, so, really, all I was able to get was a series of, uh, images or—or impressions. You know, like when you blink your eyes over and over again, all you really see are like frames of—. It was emotional and—.” She let out a small growl and pulled on her hair. She was obviously frustrated with her inability to vocalise her thoughts.

Albus reached out to soothe her hands away from where they tugged. “Shh, okay. Luna. Luna, look at me,” he said gently. “Now, I want you to take your time. As much as you need. But be very specific.”

Dr. Lovegood nodded rapidly, her head bobbing up and down for several seconds. “Okay. Okay.” She squeezed her eyes shut and breathed, her jitters calming slightly. “Well, I got the
feeling that they're not just following some kind of animalistic urge or hunting and gathering instinct. I think they're attacking us under orders.”

“That's impossible,” Dr. Granger scoffed, though she sounded more scared than dismissive.

“Is that impossible, Hermione? Check your statistics.”

“Impossible,” Dr. Granger said again, jutting her chin out stubbornly.

Dr. Lovegood pulled at her hair again, seeming to be fed up. “You know what, why don't you–!”

“Silence!” Albus demanded, gratified when they both quieted immediately. Their antagonistic friendship was amusing on most days, but he was tired and he needed answers. “Luna, please keep talking.”

She nodded nervously again and licked her lips. “These being, these masters – they're colonists. They overtake worlds. They just–they just consume them, and then–then–then they just move on to the next.” She closed her eyes and took a steadying breath. “They came here once before, sort of a trial run. The dinosaurs. But the atmosphere wasn't conducive. So they waited it out, and they waited it out, and now with ozone depletion and carbon monoxide polluted waters, well, we practically terraformed it for them. And now they're coming back, and it's perfect.”

Dr. Lovegood sighed and rubbed at her eyes. “See, the first wave? That was just the hounds. Category One through Four, they're nothing. Their sole purpose was to aim for the populated areas and take out the vermin. US!,“ she said emphatically. “The second wave, that is the exterminators. And they will finish the job. And then the new tenants will take possession.

“See, the reason I found the identical DNA in two separate kaiju organs is because they are clones. An entire cloned army,” she said, her voice wavering at the end.

Albus sighed softly as he took a moment to think. That information changed everything and nothing at once. It was somehow more terrifying to know that there was method in the madness, but that didn't affect their intended plans at all. “Luna, I need you to do it again,” Albus said firmly. “I need more information.”
Her eyes got wider than they normally were. “Wha–? I can't do it again. I mean, not unless you have a fresh kaiju brain lying around.” She paused for a moment. “Do you?” She squinted up at him as if he might be keeping one in his pockets.

“Unfortunately, no, I do not,” Albus replied with a sigh.

“If I may,” said the man beside Luna's bed. Given his age and the resemblance to Dr. Lovegood, Albus guessed that he was her father. “Xenophilius Lovegood – hello. I decided to come in with Luna when she transferred to Hong Kong,” he smiled at his daughter, patting her hand gently.

“Now, though many of us in the naturalist community frown upon them, there are certain individuals whose business is the procuring, preservation, and exploitation of hard to find plant and animal specimens...and their parts. Including kaiju remains.” His lips thinned in disapproval.

Dr. Lovegood seemed to catch on. “You mean the black market dealers, right?”

Xenophilius nodded quickly. “They're usually in and out of a site in a matter of hours. They found a way to neutralise the acidic factor of the kaiju blue so that they can harvest what they need.”

His hands fluttered as he turned this way and that until he located a travelling case. He pulled out a data tablet and hit a few buttons. When he turned it around, it showed a gritty Muggle photo of a man standing with his back to the camera. A half-disassembled kaiju corpse was in the background. “This man, his name is Apollo Stone. He runs the kaiju black market here in Asia.”

Albus nodded. “Yes, I know of him. He had a representative contact us when we came here. When our funding started to run out, he offered us a bit of...help,” Albus said delicately. “In return, he would officially be granted exclusive rights to all kaiju remains in the region.”

“You did that?” Dr. Granger asked, sounding scandalised.

“We're in the last days of war, my dear,” Albus said placatingly. He turned back to Dr. Lovegood as he dug in his pockets. “I have a card of his. I had hoped never to have a use for it.” He located and pulled out a small, orange square of rubbery paper stock. When he shone a certain type of light on it with his wand, a stylised kaiju face luminesced.
“There is a storefront located at the corner of Fong and Tull. If you show them this card with this symbol, they will bring you to see him,” Albus explained. He handed the card over to Dr. Lovegood with no small amount of trepidation.

“If you do go to find him, Luna,” Xenophilius said, “then a word to the wise: do not trust him.”

7th January, 2034 – Year 20 – 10:02:

Severus sighed and straightened his already impeccable uniform. Albus had been worse off than usual that morning, his depression at the failed test run evident in every line of his body. It wasn't just that his plan hadn't worked, but that he felt like he'd failed both of the young men he'd tried to partner up. Draco had been storming around angrily, not really talking to anyone as he seemed to be searching for something. Severus guessed that it was him, but he was not keen on discussing things with his godson while he was in a mood. Potter, on the other hand, had refused to leave his quarters for any reason.

Severus knew it was time to 'face the music,' as it was said. The part of him that felt like he owed an explanation had warred with the part of him that didn't feel like he owed a Potter anything. The latter had lost, and now he'd been standing in front of Potter's door for five minutes without knocking. He was glad that no one had walked by to notice yet.

He finally convinced himself that it was better to just get it over with already and rapped his knuckles on the metal door. There was a weak acknowledgement from the other side, so he pushed the unlocked door open.

The main lights were off, but the desk lamp and the dim running lights a foot off the floor were enough to be manageable. Potter was curled up on his bed, facing the wall with his back to the doorway. An owl blinked its eyes at Severus from where it had perched next to Potter's head. Severus briefly wondered how it had gotten in the windowless room, but doubted he would ever get the answer to that and let it go. He quietly closed the door behind himself.

“Mr. Potter,” Severus said quietly, though his voice seemed inordinately loud in the still room.
Potter's head whipped around to look at Severus. He slowly picked up his glasses from the desk and slid them on. Not for a moment did he look away as he did it, as if afraid that Severus would disappear if he did.

*Or leave him again,* a mean voice in Severus's head taunted. He ignored it.

“I am quite certain that we both know what I am here to discuss,” Severus said. “May I sit?” He indicated the chair at the desk.

Potter nodded slowly, sitting up fully and turning to put his bare feet on the ground. He opened and closed his mouth several times, but couldn't seem to figure out what to ask. He ran a hand through his messy hair, making it stick up worse and sharply reminding Severus of his father. Finally he just seemed to get frustrated. “How? What? Why?” he spat out, then stared at Severus as if he was a puzzle.

Severus sighed. He really hadn't wanted to talk about it, but he apparently had no choice. “In our youth, your mother and I were friends. Along with Sirius Black, I had been invited to visit them in San Francisco.” He paused. “I had not decided if I was going to make my presence known when the kaiju appeared.”

“Why? If you and–and my mum were friends,” Potter said quizzically.

“Because I was not friends with your father or Black,” Severus said, unable to keep the barest hint of dislike from his tone. He didn't care to mention that the last time he and Lily had seen each other, they'd had a terrible falling out and he'd called her a Mudblood for it. He'd regretted it for years and had been hoping to be able to apologise, but he had never been that lucky.

Potter clasped his hands where they hung between his knees. His jaw clenched and unclenched as he looked down at them. Severus was content to wait him out.

When he finally spoke, Severus just barely contained a flinch at his words. “You left me.”

“I did,” Severus admitted. “I also regretted it later, but there was nothing to be done about it at that point.”

Potter looked at him incredulously. While normally he looked so very much like his father,
his expression was all Lily. Of course his angry expressions would be Lily's, if only to torture Severus further. “You saved me, and then left me there. I was there for three days. If that soldier hadn't spotted me then I would have died anyway,” he grit out through clenched teeth.

“I had failed to save her. That was all I could process,” Severus admitted again, though this level of sharing was starting to bother him.

Potter stood and began to pace, his anger building and giving him energy. “What the fuck kind of excuse is that? Who the hell would leave a toddler like that? I was only three!” he screamed, turning to glare at Severus. Then his face just seemed to break. “Why didn't you take me with you?” he asked in a pitiful voice as he came to hover next to Severus's chair.

Never being one to enjoy people looming over him, Severus stood and put a more comfortable distance between them. He didn't have much of an answer for any of the questions put forth. Or any sort of one that he would ever say out loud to anyone, especially not a Potter. How did you explain that you'd just watched the woman you loved die and nothing else mattered? How did you explain that for you the world had ended right then, and that the kaiju could have killed you and you wouldn't have cared? How did you explain that even though Harry Potter was her son, you didn't even think about saving him because she was gone and nothing mattered any more?

You didn't, and so Severus remained silent.

Potter seemed to get angry at his silence. “I'd ask if you were that cruel, but I saw into Draco's mind and know you are not,” he said quietly. After another pause, he stepped into Severus's space and snarled, “Are you even listening?!”

Severus narrowed his eyes. “Do not let my calm demeanour fool you, Ranger,” he growled, his damaged voice only cracking slightly.

“You LEFT me! And you didn't even think to find me, to make sure I was okay, to talk to me now,” Potter cried, his hands latching onto Severus's upper arms in desperation.

The tight grip sent waves of pain through Severus's battered nervous system. It wasn't that it was too hard, just that any touch at all produced at least a low level pain response now. Severus grit his teeth and shoved Potter away, breaking the connection. “One, don't you ever touch me like that again,” he panted. “Two, don't you ever touch me like that again.” He straightened and glared at the younger man.
“Now, you have no idea who the hell I am or where I've come from, and I am not about to tell you my life story,” he snarled.

“I already know,” Potter said quietly, keen gaze seeming to note his pained reaction to the touch. “I was in Sirius's head for years. I hadn't put it together before, but I do know.”

“Not all of it,” Severus said, a lump of emotion trying to form in his ravaged throat. “And I need neither your sympathy nor your admiration for any of that.”

He straightened his stance, trying to look like the vice marshal he was. “Right now, all I need to be to you and everybody else here is a fixed point. Dumbledore is the one who needs to be seen as the last man standing, the old hero who lead us into battle, and I have to be here to keep it that way.” He paused, taking in the tilt of Potter's head. “You are more perceptive than most people are aware, I think. You can see Dumbledore as he is. He is old, and tired, and sick.

“Right now, all I need is your compliance and your fighting skills. If you cannot give at least that, then you can go back to the Wall Dumbledore found you crawling on. Do I make myself clear?” Severus said.

“Fine,” Potter said, nodding his head in a jerky movement. His eyes looked wet and defeated. “Then leave me be, just like you did before. Just like they all left me too.”

“Fine,” she said, her eyes wet and defeated. “Just go then.” The memory of Lily came up unbidden, from the very last time they had spoken.

Severus sighed quietly. Reaching into his coat pocket he removed the trinket that he'd carried with him every day except when he was in his armour. He held it out to Potter as an offering. He seemed ready to smack it out of Severus's hand, but then stopped cold when he recognised it.

His tears finally fell as he gently took hold of the small stuffed doe.

“I am not a very emotional man, Mr. Potter,” Severus said quietly. “At least not outwardly. I am sorry for every way that I failed both you and your mother when I walked away. Perhaps one day there might be a time when I could attempt to make it up to you, but this is neither the time nor the place for me to try.”
Severus gave a stiff nod, then turned to reach for the door.

“Call me Harry,” a small voice said behind him. When Severus turned, he saw that he'd clutched the small toy to his chest. His gaze was calm, even if the rest of him was not. “I'm not my father. None of the good or the bad. I'm just me, so...Harry.”

Severus nodded again, then quietly left. He could tell that what Potter had needed more than anything was some sort of physical comfort, such as a hug. Severus hadn't ever been very good with affection, even before every touch excited his wounds unbearably.

He convinced himself it was pure happenstance that had him checking in on the research lab on his way back to his office. It was only polite to nod to Dr. Granger. If his greeting to Dr. Lovegood had included an offhanded remark about Potter's (Harry's?) emotional state and need of company, then that was just a coincidence. She had been observed as one of his closest friends; she might have asked anyway. He in no way understood why she was giving him a knowing smile, for he hadn't done anything of note. Naturally.

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8th January, 2034 – Year 20 – 15:23:

Draco guessed the code into Severus's office on his third try. He was a complex man, but Draco had been in his head for too many years to not understand a few basic things about how he worked. He had been hoping to find Severus locked in his office and ignoring the world but no such luck. Severus continued to evade him.

Draco understood that Severus's new position as vice marshal kept him quite busy, but this was going too far. He knew he was being eluded on purpose now. Draco stalked around to flop into Severus's chair, settling in to wait. He would have to come back eventually. It was more likely to find Severus in his office than in his room, these days. And when he did come back, Draco would be waiting for him.

Until then, Draco availed himself the use of Severus's computer system. Nine password guesses had him frowning, then he had an idea. The woman in the memory... Draco typed in 'Lily' and the computer unlocked. He sat there for a moment, realising how sad that was. But he was on a mission, so he put it out of his mind for the moment.
It wasn't too difficult to find the database of files on P.P.D.C. employees. Draco had been forced to learn a dreadful amount about computers and other Muggle technology during his time at the Academy. He would admit that it had become quite useful in the years since, but that didn't mean he'd enjoyed being a technological idiot before then.

Draco brought up Harry's file, hoping to find some further context for some of the things he had seen. It wasn't like he wouldn't eventually see any of it in the Drift – Harry left his mind wide open with no secrets. And they would Drift together again, Draco was certain of it. The strength and depth and breadth of the immediate bond had been too breathtaking to walk away from forever, even if Draco had only been able to observe it for a few moments before they cascaded. Thus, he felt no remorse at all about snooping.

Some of it confirmed what Harry had briefly said. He was born in a small village called Godric’s Hollow in the West Country of England, a little under two months after Draco. His parents – James Potter and Lily Potter née Evans – were both from other parts of Britain. Their birth dates put them in the same Hogwarts year as Severus. *Interesting.*

Draco skimmed over the reports on their deaths, having seen it first hand and not really wanting to dwell on it. He'd thought Harry had gone straight to Sirius after that, but apparently he'd been sent to his mother's sister and her family first. *Mum's relatives sucked,* Harry had said. When Draco saw the Psych files from Harry's early years he thought that the evaluation was a hell of an understatement. Petunia and Vernon Dursley were horrible people and had made Harry's childhood hell. No wonder he'd joined up so young – probably just to get away from them.

Draco hadn't thought about the fact that an eleven-year-old might not have many opportunities to make friends at the Academy, but it made sense when he thought about it. It was no wonder that he'd become so closely tied to the handful of people that he'd gathered around himself, why they had loved him even after he'd left. He didn't even meet Sirius until he'd graduated the second cut and had to find a partner. They'd apparently made a bit of a scene when Sirius recognised him. Harry's mental health had improved drastically after that, losing most of the self-esteem damage the Dursleys had inflicted.

Reading about Harry's rocky start of a friendship with Cedric Diggory was painful, mostly because Draco knew the other pilot was dead from the start of it. The relationship with Cho Chang was cringe-worthy. The girl had obviously had some issues; coupled with Harry's teenage naivete, that was a nightmare in the making.

Finally, there was the documentation surrounding Sirius's death. It interested Draco to note that Harry hadn't been kicked out of the programme at all, but had been placed on 'extended unpaid personal leave.' He'd left due to overwhelming survivor's guilt and had chosen to work on the Wall as a way to still help protect people. *Way to go, Draco. Of all things you had to needle him about,* Draco thought to himself sarcastically.
Draco hadn't expected to be amazed. Harry had been so young when he'd joined. That he had the wherewithal to Drift at all when he was that age was impressive. How much will had it taken to not fall into his memories or emotions back then?

There wasn't a single mention in the file about Severus saving Harry as a child. Given Harry's age, he might have forgotten it normally. Or it might have been something he'd repressed due to the traumatic nature of it. Draco felt guilty for bringing back the painful memory if that was the case. Harry had managed to function perfectly well as a Ranger even with all the other crap in his life. He probably would have been fine if Draco hadn't tipped him over the edge with his own freak-out.

When Draco had read all there was in the file and Severus still wasn't back yet, he switched over to reading the file on Sirius Black. When he searched online for the interview pictures and videos of the two of them together, he realised how differently he saw them now that he was a Ranger himself. The way they smiled the same, their little expressions and gestures they used to communicate without words, the way they looked at each other like they were the best thing to ever happen in their lives.

They were family, just like Draco and Severus were, even if they had only been together for such a short time. It made so much sense in a way it hadn't when Draco was younger and hadn't been a part of a bond like that himself. Knowing Harry's history now, it made even more sense. Sirius had saved him, had taken him in, had loved him. And then Harry had lost Sirius and believed that he had lost everything.

Draco spent the rest of the afternoon thinking about that as he sought out more videos and replayed the ones he liked. He'd never fill the same shoes – he didn't even really want to – but he kept wondering how he could try to compare. Harry would do the same for him, he was sure.

He drifted off to the sound of Harry and Sirius's laughter, while Sirius was trying to tell a funny story. Severus found him there, asleep in the chair. Draco didn't feel as much of a need to interrogate his godfather when he came back to wake him up, this time bearing dinner. He'd ask later.

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10th January, 2034 – Year 20 – 22:33:
Hermione had been worried ever since Luna had tried to Drift for the first time. They had let her out of her hospital bed far too early, as far as Hermione was concerned. Now she was getting ready to do something completely stupid and try to get an *even bigger piece of brain* to Drift with. Hermione had attempted to stop her, but in the end had somehow agreed to accompany her instead. Luna Lovegood was a force unable to be reckoned with when she wanted to be.

They had taken a van with an *actual* Pons system (plus a couple of modifications to work with a kaiju) loaded into it. Luna had said that it would be better to move the machine than to try to move the brain, which Hermione could appreciate. Kaiju parts usually began to dissolve as soon as the kaiju died. Any unnecessary jostling would be a bad thing.

They found the corner that Marshal Dumbledore had told them about and parked nearby. It was raining heavily, but Hermione was just grateful to get out of the van. She'd grown up with Muggle parents, so it wasn't that she was averse to riding in automobiles. It was more that Luna drove crazier than most of the people on this side of town – and that was saying something.

Hermione was thankful that most of the road signs in Hong Kong were written in both Chinese and English. Other than the handful of phrases in Bulgarian that she'd learned while dating Viktor, Hermione had never really taken much time for languages that didn't relate to mathematics. They wove back to the corner of Fong and Tull, looking around to spot any indicator of their destination.

Luna lit her wand tip with the ultraviolet light that caused the card to luminesce and waved it around. She almost missed the barricade with the symbol, but Hermione pointed it out. There was a matching stylised kaiju face, with an arrow underneath it that pointed to a staircase. The stairs led up to the second level of shops.

The very first one had a couple of rougher types hovering by the doors having a smoke. Hermione eyed them cautiously as Luna found the kaiju symbol on the pillar next to the door. Holding in a sigh, Hermione followed Luna inside. As she brushed her wet hair away from her face, Hermione noticed that the thugs had followed them halfway in. They looked more curious than menacing, thankfully.

“Psst,” the guy behind the counter hissed at them. He motioned them closer, speaking in a hushed tone. “You looking for some...kaiju bone powder?”

“Some...bone powder?” Luna asked curiously.

“Uh, no? Why would we want that?” Hermione asked after her. She had a feeling she
didn't actually want the answer, but that had never held back her pursuit of knowledge before.

“Male potency,” the guy said, then grunted and gave a small thrust of his pelvis. “Make your boyfriends better. I take it myself.” He leered at Hermione, and she thought she might be sick.

“Oh, no thank you,” Luna said airily. “We're looking for Apollo Stone.” She waved around the small orange card.

The guy ignored Luna, leaning closer to sniff at Hermione. She did her best not to curl her lip and shove him away. Part of her abhorred allowing the creep to get away with his behaviour, but she understood how important getting the brain was. If he tried to touch her, though, all bets were off.

Realising the card was not going to get them in as it should have, Hermione sighed. “Tell you what,” she said with mock sweetness. She untied the pink scarf that was coiled around her neck and dangled it tauntingly. It was a risk, but one she was fairly certain of succeeding. “If you point us in the right direction...”

The guy's eyes lit up gleefully. “Come,” he said excitedly, walking to the end of the store and swishing his wand to move the shelves blocking the entry. Hermione dutifully handed over the scarf and tried not to shudder when their fingers brushed. “Apollo Stone, huh? Good luck,” he said, his grin showing off the poor state of his teeth. Hermione followed Luna quickly as she strode off through the new doorway.

As soon as they were on the other side, Luna took off to the middle of the room, staring around herself in awe. “Merlin! Oh Merlin, this place is heaven!” she squeaked, geeking out more than the time Hermione had brought her an intact kidney. “That's a lymph node from a Category Two! And what are you working on here?” she asked, rushing over to one of the tables lining the room. “Is this a cuticle? In mint condition?”

She switched to a different table and something making a pitiful screechy-clicky noise. “Is that a kaiju skin parasite? I've never seen them alive before! They usually die as soon as the kaiju falls. I thought you couldn't keep them alive!”

“You can if you soak them in ammonia,” a smooth voice chimed in from across the room. His handsome, oddly familiar face was smiling, but Hermione got the feeling there was a hint of cruelty underneath it. He swaggered toward them slowly, his deep burgundy suit and gold-plated shoes setting him apart from the modestly dressed workers. “What do you want?”
Before Luna or Hermione could answer, he'd turned his attention to the creepy guy from the shop. “Scabior, what the hell are you wearing?” he sneered. Hermione turned enough to see that the guy – Scabior – had tied her pink scarf around his own neck. The garishly dressed man waved it off, as if not wanting to deal with the ridiculousness. “Whatever, nevermind.”

“I'm looking for Apollo Stone,” Luna interjected, drawing the attention back to herself. She held up the orange card. “We were told he was here.”

“Who wants to know?” the handsome man said, his voice oily.

“I really can't say,” Luna said apologetically.

When it looked like the guy might draw his wand on Luna, Hermione budged in-between them and smiled. “Albus Dumbledore sent us. So I take it you're Apollo Stone. Am I right?”

He backed off, seeming appeased. “You like the name?” he said smugly. “I took it from my favourite god and my second favourite ice cream parlour.” He struck a pose, as if waiting to be told how clever he was.

Hermione furrowed her brow. He looked so familiar like that... And then it clicked. “Wait, I know you! You're Gilderoy Lockhart!” she blurted out, eyes nearly bugging out of her head.

He scowled and looked around as if to make sure no one else heard her. “How did you know that?” he seethed.

Hermione looked at him in confusion. “You'd written a dozen books about your feats and adventures, and then you just, well, disappeared,” Hermione explained.

Stone/Lockhart sighed. “When the kaiju came, no one really cared about those tiny little adventures any more and it ceased to be profitable. I mean, I wasn't going to go and actually fight a kaiju myself – have you seen what those helmets do to your hair?” He shuddered. “Just no. So I found a new niche.” He waved around himself with a prideful smile.
“Now tell me what you want,” Stone said coldly. “Before I gut you like pigs and feed you to the skin louse.”

Hermione and Luna exchanged a look. While this wasn’t wholly unexpected, it was still not a situation they had been hoping for. Luna cleared her throat and smiled. “Is there anywhere we can discuss a transaction?”

Stone seemed intrigued by that, at least. “This way, ladies,” he said, turning in an exaggerated movement and leading them to a balcony. He waited until they had followed him outside before sighing at something below them. Hermione peeked over the railing and saw a stream of BuenaKai adherents filing into one of the Kaiju Churches they had fashioned from a fallen kaiju's skull.

“Look at 'em,” he said in disgust. “They believe the kaiju were sent from heaven. That the gods are expressing their displeasure with our behaviour. The silly bastards.” He scoffed.

“And what do you believe?” Luna asked curiously.

“I believe that kaiju bone powder sells for five-hundred bucks a pound. Now, what do you want?”

“I need to access a kaiju brain. Completely intact,” Luna said, as if it was entirely simple.

Stone was shaking his head. “No, no, no. The skull plate is so dense, but the time you drill into it—”

“The brain's rotted away. I know,” Luna said, waving her hands dismissively. “But I'm talking about the secondary brain. Now, we both know that kaiju are so large they need two brains to move around. I want to get my hands on that.”

“Hm,” Stone grunted in thought. Then he rounded on Luna, seemingly irritated. “What the hell do you want a secondary brain for anyway? I mean, every part of the kaiju sells. Cartilage, spleen, liver – even the crap! One cubic meter of crap has enough phosphorous in it to fertilise a whole field! But the brain? Too much ammonia,” he said, motioning to his wrinkled nose. “So what's the deal, little miss?”
“Well, that's classified,” Luna said sweetly. “So I couldn't tell you, even if I wanted to.” She paused and bit her lip. “But it is pretty cool, so I might tell you.” She sounded uncertain. Hermione rolled her eyes and just leaned over the balcony so she could at least try to ignore the breach in protocol. “Okay, I'm gonna tell you. I figured out how to Drift with a kaiju,” Luna said excitedly.

“Are you funnin' me?” Stone said incredulously. Hermione straightened back up at the hint of anger in his voice.

“It's fascinating how their minds work,” Luna carried on, gathering steam. “Every single kaiju, it's mind is connected. The species has like a–like a hive mind.”

Stone cut her off by darting forward and pulling her left eyelids further open than they usually were. “Holy jeez. You've gone and done it, haven't you?”

“I did it a little bit, yeah,” Luna said, staring at him awkwardly while he still held her face.

“You goddamn moron,” Stone said, releasing her face and turning away as loud sirens began to go off nearby.

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10th January, 2034 – Year 20 – 23:07:

Ron was meandering back to his post, having left to grab a snack. He'd eaten plenty at dinner, but night shifts always made him want something to nibble on. He had a large bagel in his mouth and two more resting on top of the four cups of coffee he was carrying. A lesson learned early on: people don't mind you running off for a snack if you bring them back something too.

“Movement in The Breach,” announced the computer terminals around him. Ron carefully took the bagel out of his mouth and turned toward the sensory receivers. The printouts were recording massive seismic activity. The computer impassively carried on, “Triple event. Three signatures. Dilation indicator: Category Four.”

Ron turned to slowly face the main display, his eyes widening in horror. They had been told it would happen, but he had secretly wanted to believe that the predictions were wrong. “Just
as she calculated. Damn you and your beautiful brain,” he grumbled under his breath.

Rushing toward his station, he set the food and drinks on the first available surface he could find along the way. He could eat later when his stomach wasn't in knots. His mind frantic and his voice calm, Ron made the announcement and urged all teams to their positions and all pilots to LOCCENT.

The crowd had gathered in less than five minutes, which gave Ron a small stab of pride. He quickly dismissed it when the marshal motioned for him to brief them. “The Breach was exposed at 2300 hours. We have three signatures, all Category Fours. Codenames: Bella, Cupbearer, and Nagini. They'll reach Hong Kong within the hour.”

Dumbledore stepped forward to speak next. “Evacuate the city, shut down the bridges. I want every single civilian in a refuge right now. Zonko Wheezer, Ailes D'Argent, Paradigm Shift – I want you to frontline the harbour. Stay on the Miracle Mile. Herb, Firecracker Red – I want you to stay back and look after the coastline. We cannot afford to lose you, so do not engage except as a final option.”

“Yes, sir!” came various voices from around the room, pilots and evacuation personnel alike.

“Sir,” Malfoy said, stepping forward. “You should send us out instead of Paradigm. They're grounded for a much better reason than we are.” It didn't sound like it was meant to be insulting, which surprised Ron. Then he remembered that Tonks was Malfoy’s cousin and he understood.

“I agree,” Harry said, stepping up beside Malfoy in solidarity.

Surprisingly, it was Snape that shot it down. “In a situation like this, we can't afford a single mistake. Any lapse in control could be hazardous to the other pilots. I recommend that Seeker remain grounded until we can give you another – proper – test run.” Malfoy looked at him in betrayal, but Snape just raised a withering eyebrow at him and turned to Dumbledore.

Dumbledore sighed and shook his head sadly. “I'm afraid I must agree. You two, stay put.” Then he turned to the larger part of the room and clapped his hands. “Let's go!”

Harry rushed over to Tonks and Remus, catching their sleeves before they could leave.
“You can't go out. What about the baby? What if they kill him or her along with you?” he pleaded.

Tonks shook her head, looking miserable but grimly determined. “It's starting to look like either I go out there and maybe die, or I don't and maybe we all die. I can't have that on my conscience, even if every instinct I have is telling me to run and run and don't look back.” She cupped Harry's cheek and reached for Malfoy's hand as he came closer. “I don't want to, but I have to. Doing what we have to is part of what set us apart as Rangers.”

“Remus, please,” Harry said, sounding defeated.

“I hate it, but we have to,” he said, pain in his voice. “I'd run if I thought that would keep her and the baby safe and out of harm, but I know Tonks. She'd hunt me down and drag me back. I can't deny her anything, even though I really wish I could this one time.” He gave a watery smile and clapped Harry on the shoulder. He held out his hand for Tonks to twine her fingers into, then they walked quickly away to where their crew was waiting. Harry and Malfoy shared a look of misery before retreating to the back wall to get out of the way.

Ron frowned and sighed, but spun to face his station with determination. He might not be able to help them much from a tactical view, given the dark and the rain, but he'd sure as hell try.

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10th January, 2034 – Year 20 – 23:39:

“LOCCENT, Firecracker's got the ball and we're on a roll,” Ginny said over the comms as they took up their position a few hundred metres in front of the Shatterdome.

“Herb and Firecracker are in position,” Neville announced calmly.

“Awaiting your orders, sir,” Hannah added.

“Remain in the Miracle Mile and engage at your discretion,” Dumbledore ordered. “To all of you: Rangers, keep your eyes open. These Category Fours are the biggest we've ever seen both in size and weight.”
He sounded worried, and that was never good. Fred and George gave each other a look of apprehension.


“Ailes is dropping now,” Gabrielle added a moment later.

George nodded to Fred to make the announcement as they reached their position. “This is Zonko, we're ready at point.”

The first of the kaiju – Bella – was rushing toward them, aiming for their left. Probably attempting to get past them to the city without stalling. Fred-and-George smirked and smashed their fists together, creating a spark that jump-started the spinning blades of their hand weapons. When the kaiju got in range, they leapt.

They scored two long lines against the kaiju's back, hearing it scream in pain. It tried to elbow them, but Zonko's dense physical and magical shielding ensured that the attack barely had an effect. As the kaiju stumbled away slightly, they opened the rocket launchers embedded in Zonko's wrists and fired. They giggled, remembering all the times they had joked about their Jaeger having 'a few tricks up her sleeves.'

The missiles connected, knocking Bella down. They ran towards the kaiju, preparing a strike to the back of its neck. They didn't even have to deliberate on it – they'd always been connected, even before they'd ever entered the Drift. Twin barks of triumphant laughter erupted from their throats as they went for the killing blow. If they could take this one out quickly, it would greatly increase the group's odds against the other two.

Before they could connect, Bella rolled over and spit a dark, thick, ink-like substance right at their main sensors. “Fuck,” one of them said, retreating a few steps now that they were unable to see. “Watch this one, he spits!”

“We're blind but not immobilised. The rain and spray of the waves isn't helping much in clearing it.”

Ginny's voice crackled over the comms. “We've got our ranged weapons focused around you, but the kaiju has submerged and seemed to be heading our way.” Then a moment later, she
yelled, “Shit, you're on fire! That stuff's flammable! Shut down your hand weapons and get under the water!”

Submerging in the shallow water seemed to be their only choice, despite how vulnerable it made them. “Roger that.” They weren't too worried about the pollution – the kaiju blue that was going to flood this area would render it toxic for a long time as it was. They wriggled along the sand to help scrape the ink away. They'd be useless in the fight until they did so, their explosives just as likely to light them up as the enemy if they were to fire. If the flames got to any of their other ammo, they'd be nothing but a firework.

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10th January, 2034 – Year 20 – 23:45:

Fleur-and-Gabrielle felt something wrap around their left leg just before Ailes was picked up and hurled. Nothing had registered on their sensors before that, which worried them. When they straightened, they noticed that both of their energy swords had been dislodged from their grip.

Fleur swore colourfully in French. Gabrielle snorted, amused for half a second. No one but Bill believed her about her sister's foul mouth while fighting.

They scanned the area around them, trying to get a visual or a heat signature. A sudden blow to their back had their Jaeger stumbling forward to her hands and knees.

“LOCCENT,” Gabrielle called worriedly. “I zink zis one might somehow be cold-blooded.” She and Fleur shared an uneasy feeling in the Drift, their eyes splitting the visual field to try to find their foe.

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10th January, 2034 – Year 20 – 23:49:

Paradigm dropped to all fours to charge at the kaiju approaching their position. Their sensors flared too quickly for them to block the second attack from their side, knocking them off balance.
As if to add insult to injury, Bella used their back as a springboard to launch itself closer to the shore. Tonks swore as Remus growled his displeasure. They scrambled back to their feet, hoping to at least be upright and balanced before Cupbearer reached them.

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10th January, 2034 – Year 20 – 23:50:

Hannah spotted the roiling coils coming up on their right. “LOCCENT, the front line is in trouble and the enemy is in our sights. We're moving in.”

“You are to hold your ground. Do not engage,” Dumbledore ordered. “We need you to carry that bomb. Do you copy?”

“We can't just sit here and let it past. Come on!” Hannah said angrily.

“Screw this,” Neville spat, nodding to her. “LOCCENT, we're moving in now.”

They moved Herb into Nagini's trajectory, bracing to grab the slithering kaiju. “Ailes, come here to us. I think we've got your cold-blooded one,” Hannah said. When he was about a hundred metres away, Nagini sprang forward, fangs bared. Hannah-and-Neville caught him by the side of his jaws and held fast.

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10th January, 2034 – Year 20 – 23:51:

Paradigm had just finished resetting her limbs as bipedal when Cupbearer knocked into them. Remus-and-Tonks just barely managed to keep her upright, sliding one leg back as a support. They latched on, using their indignation at Bella just bowling them over to fuel their strength. Tonks took advantage of her abilities and morphed her arms and shoulders into something more muscular. Remus had his extra burst of werewolf strength even when still human, which worked for them quite well.
Cupbearer jumped, apparently intending to crawl over them and break the Jaeger's arms off. Remus-and-Tonks grinned, mechanisms switching to reverse their joints and swivel the internal portion of the Conn-Pod to face the new direction. Shoving down, they heard the kaiju scream as they broke his wrists.

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10th January, 2034 – Year 20 – 23:58:

Molly stood on the fortified roof of the Shatterdome with the ground forces, watching what she could through infrared goggles. Even with sight-enhancing charms, she couldn't see much further past Firecracker.

She'd nearly panicked when her daughter had said that Fred and George were on fire. But her crafty boys had been fine and she knew she needn't have worried. Now, though, the kaiju was barrelling straight for her youngest baby and she was afraid to even take a breath.

Firecracker intercepted Bella, twisting to avoid getting coated in the same ick as Zonko. They got in several good blows, including a few slashes from the blades along Firecracker's forearms. Bella was fighting back, though, and unfortunately not doing so bad at it. The kaiju got a particularly good shot in at Firecracker's leg, crushing through the armour as Ginny and Rodrigo cried out in pain.

A few good blows to the kaiju's head dislodged its jaws and forced it away. It came right back for more, slamming into Firecracker and shifting her back a few paces. They were stuck arm to arm in a grapple, Firecracker's leg slowly causing them to buckle. Then, the kaiju's secondary arms began to spread out from the flaps of skin along its sides. Instead of claws, they were more like the legs of a praying mantis – resembling large serrated knives.

If they stabbed into Firecracker's sides, they could sever the entire lower half and potentially set off a chain reaction of explosives in the chest. Molly saw red, and it had nothing to do with the infrared goggles.

Molly dashed over to the closest missile launcher and glared at the soldier. He scrambled out of the seat so quickly he fell to the pavement. Even those who had never been under her care had heard the stories and knew that you didn't mess with Mama Weasley.
Molly slipped into the seating and lined up the sights, exceptionally careful to make sure she wasn't going to hit Firecracker by accident. Right as the kaiju reared back, Molly pressed the triggers. “Not my daughter, you \textit{bitch}!” she snarled out, watching in satisfaction as the missiles impacted.

The kaiju's scream of pain and rage could be heard even at their position on the shore. It fell back, flailing, and right into the resurfacing Zonko's grip. Molly knew her boys would take care of their baby sister after that. They proved it the next moment by grabbing onto the secondary arms and kicking Bella in the chest, tearing the knife-like appendages clean off. The kaiju writhed, losing its balance between the two Jaegers.

Both of them opened their rocket launchers and fired.
Chapter 4
Chapter by KiraOHara

10th January, 2034 – Year 20 – 23:59:

Ailes was in range, but was having issues getting a good shot off. Nagini had coiled himself all around Herbie, slowly trying to tighten the coils to crush the sturdy Jaeger. Fleur-and-Gabrielle were not going to let that happen, but without their swords they weren't going to be much help in a close-quarters fight.

Finally, Herb managed to shove a section of the serpentine kaiju away. Fleur-and-Gabrielle didn't waste a moment, opening the beak-like structure below their Conn-Pod and letting it crackle with energy. They fired the energy beam as soon as it was ready, watching as it connected with the kaiju's soft underbelly.

Nagini spasmed and unravelled from around Herb. Fleur-and-Gabrielle cheered as their friends shouted their thanks. The kaiju wasn't dead, but it was definitely injured now.

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11th January, 2034 – Year 20 – 00:02:

As soon as the sirens had started up, Stone's frown had deepened. He had walked back inside, starting to shout orders to the people who were now frantically rushing around instead of steadily working. Luna and Hermione followed behind him, unsure of what exactly was going on. Hermione was hoping that those sirens didn't mean what she thought they did.

The room cleared out fairly quickly, pieces and by-products tucked away into secure boxes and sturdy vaults. After about twenty-five minutes of packing, the chop room was bare except for the residual puddles of ammonia and kaiju blue. Scabior walked with a quick lope-shuffle gait to approach Stone, consulting a clipboard in his hand. “Boss, we've gotta get out now,” he said hurriedly.

Hermione grabbed Luna's hand and started to back toward the entrance. Luna resisted, eyeing Stone and Scabior in confusion. “Excuse me, what's going on?” she asked. Hermione rolled her eyes and mentally vowed to kill Luna later.
Stone rounded on them in irritation. “There are three bloody kaiju heading straight for Hong Kong City,” he snarled.

“Nonono, there's never been three before,” Luna argued sensibly.

Hermione's free hand clapped over her mouth as she whispered, “Like I predicted.”

Stone glared at them both. “Maybe it's because nobody had ever Drifted with one before, genius!” He threw up his hands and paced a few steps in each direction before facing them again. “When Jaeger pilots Drift, it's a two-way street. A bridge. It makes a connection – BOTH WAYS!” He sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “A 'hive mentality,' you said. Maybe those kaiju are trying to find you.”

Hermione froze and Luna's eyes went wider than normal. “Oh Merlin, what--what are we going to do?” Luna asked, comprehension of the fact they had all missed dawning across her features.

“I am going to wait out this shitstorm in my own private kaiju bunker,” Stone said haughtily. “But you are going to a public refuge. I tried it once. Once,” he said menacingly, petting the side of his face. “If it wasn't for the wonders of modern Muggle plastic surgery, the world would have lost my spectacular good looks forever.” He sounded like he thought that was truly a travesty, and Hermione was regretting ever idolising Gilderoy Lockhart.

Stone seemed to come out of his reverie, sneering at them. “Now get the hell out of here,” he said. A half dozen people in suits – bodyguards most likely – aimed guns at Hermione and Luna as he said it.

Luna was letting Hermione pull her back toward the door now. Scabior stepped forward after them and smiled creepily. “You can stay,” he said to Hermione.

Hermione shuddered. “Ew, no,” she said frankly, then turned and fled. When they got out on the ledge of the second story market, a rush of people barrelled into them. Hermione lost her grip on Luna's hand as they were swept in opposite directions by the crowd.

“Luna!” she cried out frantically, trying to fight her way back. “Looney, answer me!” When people began knocking into her hard enough that she realised she'd have to flow with them
or get trampled, Hermione let loose a rare swear.

Trying to get down a stairwell as the mob flowed on was proving to be impossible. All of them seemed to be blocked with people trying to descend, but they must have been cut off by the crowds in the street below.

There was the deafening screech of a vehicle losing control at high speeds. Along with a loud crunch, the whole balcony jerked and knocked people down or into each other. A section of the balcony collapsed right in front of Hermione, taking people the thirty to forty foot drop to the ground. Hermione flailed her arms as she tried to regain balance and not fall after them.

Everyone behind her seemed to be caught between being pushed forward by the unwitting flow and trying to force their way back to a safer descent. Hermione felt herself begin to panic as she teetered on the edge. A few people were shoved over the side, yelling as they fell.

While the floor had mostly fallen away, there were bits of broken wood still sticking out from the storefronts. Tears of fear pricking at her eyes, Hermione stepped across and leaped for a doorstep. She slipped, but managed to catch onto the sign secured to the wall. She screamed as she dangled there, tears flowing freely. She knew she was hyperventilating, but she tried to ignore it and blink away the tears as her right foot sought out the first piece of fractured wood.

When she finally was able to stand on something approaching solidity, she hugged the wall and panted out a frantic laugh of relief. Behind her, she heard the balcony crack again, and turned her head just in time to see another section crumble under the stress. She quickly turned back toward the wall and gulped, trying not to listen to the screams of the falling or the heavy thuds and wet crunches that cut them off.

Going as fast as she dared, Hermione edged from protruding plank to splintered board, grasping the detailed areas of the storefronts for security. She slipped a few times and almost fell twice when a piece of the weakened wood broke under her weight. “Sorry! I'm sorry!” she mumbled in apology to the vacated shop owners as she smashed the windows, using the framing as handholds.

When her feet finally reached a solid area of the balcony, she cried out in relief. She wasted no time in running down the nearest flight of deserted stairs. Dodging the still flowing— but much reduced—masses, she ducked into a doorway and slumped to the ground. She let the tears and the shivering take over then. She’d made it. She did it! She'd always hated heights, and this was so, so much worse, but it was over now and she never wanted to leave the ground again.
That was, of course, when the ground rumbled and the balcony above her started to collapse. She scrambled backward and flattened herself against the door, finding it locked. When it seemed like it was done falling, Hermione turned around to assess the situation. She was trapped between a sturdy, locked door and a mass of broken and splintered wood. And the kaiju were still coming.

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11th January, 2034 – Year 20 – 00:11:

They were locked hand to hand with Cupbearer when his tail swung up in their peripheral vision. Remus-and-Tonks braced themselves for a blow from the knobby end, not able to back off to avoid it. Instead, the tip turned out to be hollow – structured like a cup. When it swung toward them, instead of connecting, it spewed a bright blue liquid down their front.

Pain raced through their heads and chests. The acidic substance quickly ate through the thick metal and complicated connectors. “We're hit!” Remus yelled over the comms as Tonks just kept saying the word 'shit' over and over again.

As they stumbled backwards, the kaiju forced their weakened and all but severed right arm to give. “Paradigm Shift has been hit with some kind of acid from Cupbearer's tail! The hull has been compromised. We need backup immediately!” Remus screamed out, his panic rising. Unable to match the kaiju's strength with only one arm, Paradigm was pressed underwater.

Alerts sounded all around the Conn-Pod. The A.I. was talking over itself as acid-damaged systems were made worse with the addition of the cold salt water. Water started to flow into the bottom of the Conn-Pod, cracks in the armour preventing the airtight seals from holding.

“Water is coming in,” Tonks said fearfully, trying not to let her mind reach the only logical conclusion to the scenario. At least they still had their suits intact – they still had enough air to hopefully find a way out. The next alert, of course, caused her to despair. “Oh no. Water is reaching the reactor!” She screamed as she felt the first explosion rattle through the Jaeger.

Power flickered with every impact as Cupbearer rained blows upon them until their power source fully ruptured with the largest explosion of them all. All systems went offline as the Jaeger just ceased to function. With the power generators offline, Remus and Tonks's oxygen reserves ceased flowing. The comms were dead, along with every other support system. There was no way to call for help.
Tonks mentally cursed the Russian design that didn't allow for escape pods. Not that they had the power to activate them now, but they might have been able to jettison before all hope was lost. Remus tugged her out of the harness, yanking her upward. The small LEDs on their helmets were still functioning on battery power, at least.

They surfaced in a small air bubble that had been trapped by a portion of intact hull. “Still oxygen in suits. Use it before this,” Remus said quickly, trying not to waste his air with speaking. Tonks nodded, taking stock of their corner. The mangled door to the Conn-Pod was submerged eight feet below them. From the direction of the air bubble, if they could even get it unfastened it would probably open to the sandy ocean floor instead of freedom. They were trapped.

If asphyxiation didn't get them, hypothermia probably would. They could both already feel the cold seeping in from the water surrounding their suits. The metallic plates of their battle armour were keeping them insulated for the moment, but once they started to chill it would make things much worse.

Remus was starting to breathe heavier in his helmet. Tonks motioned for him to remove it, but he shook his head. His eyes darted down to her abdomen, then back up to stare at her. She shook her head. Don't even think about it, she thought, wondering if he knew what she would say even without the Drift connecting them.

She grabbed at some of the dangling, dormant wires and began to fasten them around Remus. She could feel parts of her body going numb and knew that they wouldn't be able to tread water much longer. He held her up as she fumbled with wires for herself, her stiff fingers not working quite as well as they usually did.

They dangled there, unsure of what was becoming of the world around them. Remus cupped her face and kissed her gently, trying to hold back tears. Tonks smiled at him. “I guess I should have married you,” she said quietly.

Remus huffed a small laugh. “I had you, and we had our family. That's all I really needed,” he assured her.
Trying to control their breathing, they waited until the LEDs' batteries ran out, and then they waited until the darkness came.

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11th January, 2034 – Year 20 – 00:12:

It was difficult to watch his siblings out there fighting against the kaiju. It was even more difficult to switch to focusing on the other fights every now and then, despite them being his friends and family as well. Ron felt a pang of relief when he switched back to the view of Zonko and Firecracker fighting Bella and saw that the two Jaegers were still standing.

However, no matter how much of a beating or a blasting that the two Jaegers rained upon the kaiju, he just kept coming at them. Ron wasn't sure if the beast was insane or just didn't feel the pain.

When Bella went to spit its ink again, Zonko shot a flare right into its throat. The stream caught fire mid-air and swept quickly back onto the kaiju. Bella screeched and clawed at itself, trying to wipe the burning substance off of its skin. Zonko was gearing up some of her larger explosives to finish the kaiju off – and then Bella charged straight at her.

Yells of panic crowded the comms as the twins tried to keep the flaming kaiju away for long enough to close their weapon ports. Their efforts proved unsuccessful when first one missile exploded, causing those around it to do the same, starting a chain reaction across the whole Jaeger. Ron frantically activated the escape pods remotely, feeling his heart constrict every time Fred or George cried out, “I'm hit! I'm hit!”

The final blast annihilated the main body of the Jaeger, the Conn-Pod 'head' going flying before Ron could get confirmation that the escape pods had ejected. That one second seemed to stretch on for an eternity, freezing Ron in place at his console. Then Ginny screamed and charged the kaiju, snapping him out of it as they tangled together.

“We've just lost Paradigm and Zonko, sir!” one of the other J-Techs reported. Ice settled in Ron's chest at that, realising that they'd lost even more than he'd witnessed.

He could do nothing but watch as Firecracker laid into Bella, punching and slicing at him with her bladed armguards. The kaiju thrashed underneath the onslaught, but Ginny and Rodrigo's
wordless yelling seemed to embody the primal rage that had taken them over. When the kaiju lay in pieces, Ron opened the comm channel. “It's dead, Gin. Rod. It's gone.”

Crying could be heard across the comms as Firecracker just collapsed down to her knees in the water. Ron tried to hail the twins, hoping that somehow they had made it out, that maybe they'd just been knocked unconscious. Firecracker got up just enough to wade over to the wreckage and try to sift through it.

A warm hand on his shoulder had Ron turning to see Malfoy's grim face leaning over him. He gingerly cut off the feed of Ginny's crying from Ron's station. When Harry reached out a shaking hand and clutched at Ron's other shoulder, Ron snapped back into reality. There were still two kaiju and two Jaegers active. Firecracker might have been physically able to continue fighting, but her pilots were out of the fight.

Ron cut Firecracker's comm feeds off from the remaining pilots and re-routed them to the desk of one of his subordinates, who only nodded at him grimly in acknowledgement. She'd keep watch over Ginny and Rodrigo for him so that he could worry about his friends and sister-in-law.

Using one hand to operate his controls, Ron reached the other up to grip at Harry's on his shoulder. They'd both lost family, even if Ron was still hoping for a miracle or four. Five. *Oh Merlin, the baby,* Ron thought with a pang. Out of a morbid need to know, he switched his screen to where Paradigm had fallen.

He furrowed his brow at the image presented. “Wait. What is Cupbearer doing? It's just sitting there,” he said, trailing off apprehensively.

“Sir! I'm getting a massive energy reading building around the kaiju!” one of the other J-Techs yelled, right before everything went dark. 

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11th January, 2034 – Year 20 – 00:14:

Hannah-and-Neville were too locked onto their own fight to pay much attention to the screaming coming in over the comms. It was a horrible feeling, knowing something bad had happened to some of the others and not being able to check on them. Nagini chose that moment to barrel into them again, almost knocking them off balance.
They were getting low on energy. Building a Jaeger that drew a large portion of its power from sunlight had seemed like such a great idea at the time, but often put them at a disadvantage when fighting at night. They were usually back-up during those runs, not wrestling with a powerful Category IV for extended periods. Ailes was doing wonders to keep Nagini away when he managed to actually knock Herbie down, but their Jaeger wasn't built to take a hit like Hannah-and-Neville’s was.

“I'm getting something off to our right flank, about three hundred metres back,” Hannah said, giving Neville's mind the visual. When Nagini lashed out again, they dove and rolled for the object. Nagini's tail caught their leg before they completed the manoeuvre, trying to drag them back toward him. They had fallen just short, but Neville quickly deployed the vine-like cables in their right wrist and latched onto the object.

They had just secured the grip before Nagini was using his tail to toss Herb through the air and closer to the shore. Hannah-and-Neville grunted at the impact, feeling it through both the Jaeger's sensors and the areas where they were jostled against the harnesses and consoles. Hannah reeled the vines in quickly, giving a cheer when their prize turned out to be what she'd hoped. Neville smiled grimly and spun the energy sword Ailes had lost in Herb's right hand so that it was aimed correctly, then activated it.

This time, when Nagini charged, they were ready. They sidestepped neatly to the right, using their momentum to turn and bring the sword down across the back of the kaiju's neck. The body flailed uselessly as the head was cut clean off.

Hannah looked down at the severed head shrewdly. “'Y'know, they say a snake's head can remain active for a few hours after it's cut off,” she said.

“Better be safe, then,” Neville replied, laying into the head with the sword until it was too mangled to do anything else. Their peripheral sensors told them that Ailes was lighting up the body nearby.

“LOCCENT, this is Herb, reporting in as successful,” Neville said with a grin. “Nagini is down and destroyed.” Instead of confirming, someone in LOCCENT was babbling about an energy reading.

A bright blue light, different from the white beam Ailes had been using, drew their attention back to the water. Neville turned them to see Cupbearer, crouched alone and unchallenged, and the ball of energy gathering on his back. “What the–?”
“EMP!” Hannah yelled, just before the light set off and slammed into them. All of their controls went haywire and they screamed, the electricity pushing through them from their suits. Herbie sagged in position around them as they panted.

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11th January, 2034 – Year 20 – 00:17:

In the half-second after everything went dark, every person in LOCCENT seemed to spring to action. Muggles took out lighters or keychain torches and magic users lit wands or conjured balls of light. Harry tried to stay out of the way, casting a few hovering globes near the Muggles so they could have both hands free. Everyone sitting at a terminal or running between them began frantically checking their wires and connections.

Ron was no different. He had immediately ducked under his console and started barking orders, receiving replies as people checked things. His face looked livid as he swore, even in the dim light. In-between bouts of oaths, he took the time to sit up and say, “EMP. The blast, it jumbled all the Jaeger's electrical circuits. Knocked out everything. Firecracker, Ailes, and Herb are likely all dead in the water out there. *Fuck!*” He buried his hands in his hair, pulling harshly as he ducked back under the console.

“They're adapting,” Dumbledore said, his voice wavering just slightly. “This wasn't a defence mechanism, it was a *weapon.*”

“I can get our controls in here running again in a mo', but it'll take me two hours to re-route the auxiliary power on the Jaegers. They're all fried,” Ron said, sounding pissed off and distracted at the same time. Harry would have been impressed in a different situation.

An idea hit him, then. Harry stepped up to where Dumbledore and Snape were hovering over Ron. “Not all of them are fried, Marshal,” he said to get their attention. Dumbledore and Snape looked at him sceptically.

“Listen, LOCCENT has power cords that lead to outside sources – that's why it shorted,” he explained. “The rest of the Shatterdome is structured to act like a Faraday cage in defence of something *just like this.* I remember Moody telling us that there had been worry about BuenaKai cultists sabotaging us that way.”
Draco stepped up beside him, having caught on. “Seeker was inside the Shatterdome and not connected to any external power sources. In addition, Buckbeak and Basilisk both ran off of magical cores developed by the scholar Ollivander – they'd probably have been less affected than normal because of that anyway.”

Harry nodded quickly in agreement, then turned back to their superiors. “Seeker should still be able to run.”

Dumbledore and Snape shared a pensive look. Nodding in acquiescence, Dumbledore sighed. “Go suit up,” he said grimly.

Harry and Draco glanced at each other for only a moment before taking off at a run. Behind them, Dumbledore cast a Sonorous Charm and called for J-Techs to report to Seeker's bay.

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11th January, 2034 – Year 20 – 00:18:

Fleur-and-Gabrielle screamed in pain as the electrical current shot through them. They both managed to tear off some of the wires connecting them to the Jaeger before they felt the impact of crashing into the shallow water. They had been hovering still, trying to avoid backsplash as they neutralised Nagini’s body. Without power, their rocket wings had ceased to function.

“I 'ave never seen zat before,” Fleur said, sounding agitated.

“LOCCENT,” Gabrielle called, trying to press all of the comm-related buttons on their dash to no avail.

“Oh no,” Fleur said fearfully, making Gabrielle snap her head up. They could still see out of the translucent front panels. Cupbearer was charging at them. The impact knocked them on their side, partly braced by an arm that could bend due to the weight at any moment. There was a scraping, tearing noise, and when they saw Cupbearer again, he was flinging away a piece of their rocket wing structure.
Sharing a horrified look, they were just glad that they weren’t still connected to Ailes to have felt that.

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11th January, 2034 – Year 20 – 00:20:

“It’s fried,” Hannah sighed. She was still pressing buttons despite the futility.

“I’m gonna try something else,” Neville said, disconnecting himself from the harness so he could go for one of the panels in the wall.

“No, wait, don’t disengage the–” Hannah was cut off as the Jaeger was jostled, throwing Neville into the opposite wall. Something small had collided with them with brutal force, clanging as it ricocheted off.

Hannah struggled to free herself from her own harness when Neville didn’t immediately get up. “C’mon, get on your feet,” she encouraged. “It’s gotta be right outside. We have to get out of here now!”

Neville shook his head fervently and stood, cradling one of his arms. “We’re not going anywhere,” he said calmly. “Listen. I don’t know how the others are faring, but their Jaegers will be just as dead as ours. You and I are possibly all that’s standing between that ugly bastard and a city of ten million people. Now, we have a choice here. We can either sit here and wait for our turn, or we can take those flare guns over there and do something really stupid.”

Hannah stared at him for a moment, terror written plainly across her features. Then she gave a harsh swallow and nodded. She limped over to the flare gun panels, which thankfully still opened on the non-electrical hydraulics, while Neville struggled to open the hatch.

Once Neville had climbed up and out of the Jaeger, Hannah handed the flares up to him. It was difficult to climb with an injured leg, but Neville had made it with an injured arm. She grit her teeth and dealt with it.

“How’s the leg?” Neville asked, the teasing tone sounding forced.
“Just give me the gun,” Hannah grumbled at him, taking position beside him.

Cupbearer wasn't all that far away, though it seemed to be focused on dismantling Ailes's wings. Hannah thought she might know what that clang had been now. Beside her, Neville snarled and then called out, “HEY YOU!”

“OVER HERE, UGLY!” Hannah joined in.

“You think you're gonna kill us? You and what army!” Neville screamed, pointing behind them at the mangled corpse of Nagini.

It took a few more calls before Cupbearer perked his head up at the noise and noticed them. They fired at his eyes, though the flare guns weren't overly accurate, especially at that distance. The kaiju roared and began to gallop toward them.

“I think we just pissed it off,” Hannah shouted fearfully.

“Get ready to jump clear!” Neville yelled back, trying to brace himself for the inevitable impact. Their best chance of surviving would be to get away from the Jaeger as it fell. Twenty or thirty feet of water didn't seem like enough when leaping off of a three hundred foot Jaeger, but it was their only choice.

Seconds before Cupbearer would have connected with them, a loud sound like a foghorn blared and stopped him in his tracks. Hannah and Neville looked off to the side and laughingly cheered. The choppers dropped Seeker nearby, and she immediately rammed Cupbearer away from Herbie.

“Come on, Seeker!” Hannah cried, not caring that they couldn't hear her.

“Kick his arse!” Neville added, turning to grin at her. Hannah kissed him soundly. Despite their injuries, they were laughing as they pulled apart.

It wasn't quite as funny when the brawling pair knocked into the prone Ailes and Seeker got tangled. Cupbearer turned and took off for the city, seeming to be determined to destroy what the
other kaiju had failed to reach.

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11th January, 2034 – Year 20 – 00:32:

Luna had called for Hermione as they got separated, giving up only when she knew the flow of the crowd wouldn't let her go back. She'd been practically pushed down the first flight of stairs, frantically grabbing onto other people to avoid going down and getting trampled. The nearest bunkers were already full and sealed, the result of having waited so long to get out of Stone's area of operations.

Finally Luna was part of a crowd that flowed into the underground shelter. They were packed in there with barely enough room to not be touching – for the most part, at least. Silence fell as the doors were sealed, as if everyone was too afraid to even whisper and alert the coming creatures to their presence.

Then the ceiling started to shake. Luna knew it was the kaiju, recognised the sound of the toe-claws scraping before the sole set down. It paused, preventing her from pinpointing where it was.

Luna wasn't an engineer or an architect, but she knew kaiju abilities. If that kaiju wanted down here, those flimsy layers of brick and treated wood weren't going to do a thing to stop him. “This isn't a refuge, this is a buffet line,” she said to herself, feeling helpless. The girl next to her turned to shoot her a horrified look. Luna felt guilty for taking away her false hope of safety.

Then the kaiju hammered down on the ground, cracking the roof of the bunker. “It's right above us!” someone yelled out, terrified. It whipped the other inhabitants into the beginning of a frenzy. The kaiju struck again and at least two dozen people screamed.

“Oh Merlin, it knows I'm in here,” Luna said, her voice trailing off as she looked at all the people around her. They were going to get hurt, because of her.

The girl who had given her the horrified look before leapt away and pointed. “It's after the blonde girl!” she screeched out, trying to press further away from Luna. Various cries of 'what?' followed her as the crowd pushed and shoved and backed away, pressing up together along the walls to get away from the perceived danger. Luna was just grateful none of them had turned
violent; she could defend herself well enough but she didn't like to fight.

Then the roof split open, part of the ceiling caving in as the kaiju clawed his way through. When he caught nothing in his claws, he turned his enormous head to peer down into the hole. Luna stepped forward, fascinated. If she was going to die, then she was going to do it seeing the subject of so many years of work up close.

The kaiju turned again, shoving his muzzle against the hole and unfurling his tongue. Instead of a singled, slippery appendage, it split open like a three-petaled lily. The bioluminescent interior split in three again, the edges peeling back to reveal three long feelers that oddly resembled the stamen of the flower. Luna marvelled at it. It would be her death, but it was also beautiful.

Right before the feelers could locate and wrap around her, there was another thud of feet and the distantly familiar sound of a foghorn. Luna smiled, and then the kaiju was torn away from the hole.

11th January, 2034 – Year 20 – 00:34:

“Alright, Draco, this is for real,” Harry said, shooting his partner a grin. The kaiju was shaking it's head and twisting around. It seemed to be pretty angry at having been tossed.

Draco smirked back at Harry, then looked forward seriously. “Get ready!”

Cupbearer rushed them but was easily thrown aside. Draco-and-Harry jabbed at him quickly, then followed it with Seeker's other fist. Cupbearer lunged at them, tucking down so that his shoulder sent them flying. Before they could stand, the kaiju was swinging them by the foot and tossing them even further.

They kicked down their left leg and Seeker rolled, putting her feet under them as they continued to skid backwards into a shipping yard. The kaiju came charging after them. They jumped forward quickly, smashing Seeker's fist down on Cupbearer's head. When he tried to lift up again, Harry swung a haymaker with the right arm, followed quickly by Draco's left uppercut.

“Elbow-rocket!” Harry called out, activating the process without taking his eyes away from
the battle to push buttons.


“Now!” Harry yelled. Draco grabbed the kaiju by the head as he was still falling backwards, making the perfect target as Harry guided the rocket-propelled punch right into Cupbearer’s face. Part of it the bony faceplate seemed to crack, but it wasn't over. Seeker was shoved back as the kaiju flailed.

Looking around them, Harry grinned and improvised. Picking up a nearby cargo ship, they dragged it while stalking back to where the kaiju was shaking his injuries off. Draco-and-Harry swung it up to wield it like a shinai. As soon as they were in range, they swung. They landed three hits before Cupbearer struck it with his tail, melting the ship in half with the acid. Draco-and-Harry let it go and fell back in order to avoid getting hit themselves. The pieces flew away, tearing into nearby buildings.

When they righted Seeker, the kaiju seemed to have disappeared amidst the skyscrapers.

“Can't pinpoint it,” Harry growled, switching rapidly between their different sensors.


“Chopper, do you have a visual? Over,” Harry said, hoping that the eyes in the sky could help them.

There wasn't time for a reply as Cupbearer erupted out of the building beside them, shoving them through the next row of high-rises. As the debris fell away, they saw the kaiju bringing his tail to bear. They dodged the first spray, but there was enough of the phosphorescent blue liquid gathered for another. Seeker's right hand shot out quickly, grabbing just at the base of the cup-like tip when it came back in range. A few drops sloshed out to hiss against the armguard.

“I'll hold it! Vent the coolant on the left panel!” Harry cried, gritting his teeth as Cupbearer struggled. Draco speedily complied, punching in the code without having to think twice.

“Coolant: venting,” Seeker confirmed as the liquid sprayed out at the tail. The coolant rapidly coated the limb, freezing it solid. With a quick jerk, the whole appendage shattered down
to just below the kaiju's main body.

Enraged, Cupbearer ripped off the top of the crane it had stumbled into. It lashed out at Seeker, clubbing them with it. Draco raised their arms up to block, activating the energy shields in the armguards. Draco-and-Harry grit their teeth, being slowly forced back by the blows. Seeker stumbled and fell, which Draco-and-Harry took as an opportunity to grab two handfuls of shipping containers. They ducked into Cupbearer's space, too close for the makeshift club, and smashed the containers on either side of his head.

Screaming in pain and rage, the kaiju leapt at them and latched onto Seeker's upper arms and thighs with his claws. Draco-and-Harry were expecting him to strike at them with his secondary arms. Worse than that, two giant wings unfolded from Cupbearer's back. Flapping them powerfully, the kaiju began to lift them into the air like a bird of prey. He dragged Seeker through several buildings, using his superior leverage to smash her down every few. When they took off upward, Draco worried.

“Arms are trapped, plasma cannons useless,” Harry reported frantically. The flight thrusters on their back were held closed by the claws digging into the release panels.

“Temperature's dropping, we're losing oxygen,” said Draco. “Poisons appear to be ineffective. We're out of options!”

“Half of this is Buckbeak, right?” Harry asked, getting a mental confirmation from Draco. “Then we have one more option!”

Harry twisted their fists toward the kaiju. “Chainswords: deployed,” Seeker confirmed as the two chainswords shot out.

The force of the deployment caused them to pierce into the kaiju's sides even before the central chain locked the pieces straight. Catching on, Draco helped manoeuvre them to shove both swords into the kaiju's abdomen. The front claws released Seeker's upper arms, and Draco took it as a chance to slice into the kaiju's wings. Cupbearer screeched and dropped them completely. Seeker started falling back toward the ground, accelerating as they descended.

“Altitude actuation: off balance. Fifty thousand feet until impact.”

“Rockets, now!” Harry commanded. The flight thrusters tried to deploy, but the mangled
release panels had damaged them. They could get a few bursts, but they'd have to time it and land upright.

Ron's voice crackled over the comms. “Seeker, listen to me! Use the gyroscope to right yourselves. It's your only chance!”

Harry fumbled with the buttons to work the gyroscope to keep them balanced. Draco had taken over the calculations for their rocket bursts, numbers and mathematical symbols flying across the Drift as he worked. Each burst was precisely timed to slow them down as much as possible without tearing them apart.

It didn't seem like it was going to be enough as the ground swiftly approached. “We're still coming in too fast!” Draco cried.

“Brace for it!” Harry yelled back, readying himself.

Every single bone in their bodies felt as if it had been jostled when they hit. Dirt and debris shot up around them like an explosion. Cupbearer landed nearby, stunned by the fall.

“Plasma cannon! Now!” Draco snarled, readying his side.

“Plasma cannon: engaged,” Seeker confirmed.

“Empty the clip!” said Harry, who was promptly obeyed. Draco shot three blasts into the kaiju's chest. All life signs disappeared from their sensors.

Draco was starting to turn them to leave, but Harry stopped him. “Wait.” Flashes of Remus and Tonks and Paradigm and the word 'baby' flashed across their connection. “I think this guy is dead, but we should check for a pulse.”

Draco bared his teeth in a menacing mockery of a smile. “Okay.”

They fired the remaining shots in Harry's arm, destroying the kaiju's head completely. “No pulse,” Harry said grimly.
Apollo Stone adjusted his cufflinks as he waltzed from his personal shelter. His aides had gone ahead to verify that the building was still secure. Lesser members of the staff were trickling back in as they found a way back from the public refuges.

Scabior returned with his clipboard. “Everything's still standing, boss.” He flicked the page on the clipboard, though Apollo had no idea what he even kept a list of there. Not that it mattered. The man might be offensive to the eyes and nose alike, but he was certainly efficient.

“How are the kaiju?” Apollo asked, hoping for a good report.

Scabior frowned, which didn't bode well. “One was dismembered about a half mile off the coast; the tide will have taken a good portion of it, if there was even anything useful. The second was killed right offshore, but again it's in pieces and badly charred. The third was killed in the city; parts of it are badly damaged but there should still be a good haul. Also, that one had wings, which are always a good seller.”

Apollo made a small sound of distaste through his nose; he was not so crass as to grunt. “Well then, let's start with our best bet and go from there.”

“Yes, boss,” Scabior said, then whistled to get the crews' attention as they walked into the main workshop.

Apollo cleared his throat when he had the workers' attention. “We're going to harvest the skin, the talons, and the wings, first and foremost. They're going to go nuts for that stuff. You there, let me see that map.” An underling rushed forward. “Here is where the kaiju fell. So here,” he pointed at a marker for a clear route, “is where we will concentrate our efforts.”

“You got it, boss,” Scabior said, then started yelling to gather teams.

Suddenly, the layered shelf cases that separated the shop from the workshop shuddered and
flew violently apart. The idiot young woman from earlier was standing there. Apollo took a step back. She was covered in dust with pieces of brick still sticking in her pale hair, a few small abrasions dotting her skin. But what was more frightful than her appearance was her expression. While earlier she had looked dreamy and completely serene, now she just looked like the embodiment of fury.

“Hello. Guess who's back,” she said calmly, though there was an edge to her voice. “You owe me a kaiju brain.” She pointed to him with her wand, not overtly threatening, but not completely innocuously either.

Apollo gulped and plastered on a smile. He had a feeling she would hex him before he could get off a Memory Charm.

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11th January, 2034 – Year 20 – 03:51:

Luna was livid. “I still can't believe what you did to us,” she snapped for what felt like the tenth time in the last half an hour. Hermione was really rubbing off on her. Luna hoped that she was okay and she'd turn up so they could bicker about it later. “We could have been eaten!”

“Well, that was definitely the plan,” Stone said with a small, regretful sigh. “Lucky for you that didn't happen, hm?”

Luna pondered hexing him for the hell of it, but chose to refrain until after she got her brain. “Yes, thank you so much. You're so kind. And I really do appreciate all of your help,” she said testily. She was really channelling Hermione. Merlin, don't let her actually be channelling Hermione... “But would you mind telling me what is taking so long for your workers to get to that brain? The kaiju is halfway missing!”

Stone sighed. “Well, they have to pump the cavity full of CO₂, just like any other laproscopic surgery.”

“Yes, I know, the CO₂ will delay the acidic reaction,” Luna said.
“And that allows us to harvest. But my boys need oxygen pumped into their suits, so they move slowly.” Stone looked like he’d rather be anywhere except there talking about anything except this with anyone except Luna, but she wasn't about to let him leave. As if to at least escape talking to her, he took out a walkie-talkie. “What's going on in there, boys?”

“We've reached the upper area. Moving to the vertebrae. Even through the suit, boss, it smells like dead catfish in here,” the head crewman complained. There was static across the line as Luna listened in, but no more talking for a few minutes. Then the crew's voices cut back in. “Boss, the secondary brain, it's damaged.”

Luna felt her heart sink. There was no chance that the other two kaiju were intact enough, and with neither the primary nor the secondary brain intact, she was out of luck. This had been her big moment – she would be able to provide all of the information the P.P.D.C. needed and she'd finally completely understand the kaiju, her life’s work till now. And now it was all gone. She tried not to be angry with Harry and Draco, because logically she understood. Feelings were not generally logical. If only she could be more like Spock.

“Wait, wait!” the crewman said over the line.

Luna spun and stepped into Stone's personal space. “What did he say? Why wait?” When Stone tried to wave her off, she snatched the walkie-talkie from him. He snatched it right back with an affronted glare.

“Did you hear that?” the crewman said. “It's like a heartbeat!”

Luna grabbed the radio again and started walking away to keep it from being reclaimed. Stone followed her, shouting, “Give me that!”

“Wait, wait, shh-shh-shh! Listen, listen! Listen to that,” she said softly, her ear pressed to the speaker to listen to the soft thumping. Luna didn't even fight as Stone snatched the walkie back again. She was too busy having her world turned pear-shaped. Her voice full of quiet awe, she said, “It's pregnant.”

Over the line, the crew could be heard starting to scream. Stone turned white as a sheet and slowly turned and started to run away. A few seconds later, the screeching fledgling burst out from the sliced open work area. It was easily thirty feet tall and looked like an exact replica of his mother. The crowd of workers scattered, screaming as they ran.
Luna watched in frightful fascination, unable to tear her eyes away. Until, of course, the fledgling started making a beeline for her. She squeaked as she turned to run, getting only a few dozen metres when she tripped over a loose rock and fell. She scrambled at a crawl and then flipped over, scrabbling backwards as the newborn kaiju caught up to her.

Then suddenly the fledgling pulled up short, the umbilical cord wrapped around his neck acting like a choke leash. He kept trying to press forward, swiping at Luna and making it worse for himself. Then he gave out, collapsing only a few feet away. Luna tried to cure her hyperventilating by taking in a few deep gulps of air, standing slowly. The body didn't even twitch as she slowly reached out to touch it.

Stone seemed to pop out of nowhere and startled her, trying to look confident and nonchalant. Luna didn't believe him for a second, but she guessed some people were easily deluded. “I knew it,” he said, snapping his fingers and waggling one at her. “Gone!” Luna knew Hermione would have rolled her eyes. Luna would have done it in her honour, but she was still a bit too unnerved to do more than stand and breathe at the same time.

“Its lungs weren't fully formed, umbilical cord tied around its neck. No way it could survive outside the womb for more than a minute,” Stone said, as if bragging to an adoring audience who would believe him. Who hadn't seen him turn tail and flee in terror. She tried to ignore him, but he just kept going. “One look! That's all I needed. I knew he wouldn't make it.” Stone shot off a quick spell at the corpse, as if proving his point.

“Ugly little bastard,” he said, curling his lip and turning back to Luna. “Anyway–”

The kaiju shot forward and engulfed him, shifting to flick him around to be ingested easier. One of his gold-plated shoes flew off and almost hit Luna. The fledgling swallowed Stone seemingly whole, then turned his gaze back to her.

Luna scrambled backwards again, though this time she was at least still on her feet. The newborn pushed himself up and tried to take a few steps after her. Then he gave one last death wail and collapsed again, his giant pupils dilating as they relaxed. Luna picked up the golden shoe and stared at the kaiju. She hadn't liked Stone, but getting eaten was a bit harsh even for him.

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11th January, 2034 – Year 20 – 04:23:
Luna was setting up the last piece of equipment when Hermione came jogging around the bend. “Luna!”

“Hermione!” Luna threw herself at the other woman, hugging tightly, glad to see her alive. She had a fair number of scratches and a few splinters stuck in her hair, but seemed to be otherwise okay. “Where were you?”

Hermione sighed and made a face that said she didn't want to talk about it. “Trapped and temporarily forgetting that I'm a Witch out of fear. Got it sorted with a few Reductos, nothing to worry about.” She waved it off and subtly hugged Luna back.

“I went back to Stone's and he had his guys bring along the Pons equipment,” Luna explained. Before Hermione could ask a million questions they didn't have time for, Luna pointed to the dead fledgling. “I’ve named him Cup, since his mother was named Cupbearer and, well, he did bear Cup.” Luna shrugged and grabbed the neural spike, trying to find the best place for it to enter the Cup’s brain.

Hermione just stood there for a moment, her eyes closed and mouth not quite forming words. Finally, she seemed to latch onto something Luna had said. “Wait, can the kaiju be female? We always call them 'him' so I thought there weren't any. Is this one different?”

Luna shook her head. “No, actually, they're all functionally intersexed.” When Hermione just looked at her and blinked, Luna huffed and tried to explain. “You see, it's like... Well, the Jaegers don't have any gender identity or genitalia, but we refer to them as 'she' and give them female voices. We tend to do that with all sorts of mechanical devices and things we consider beautiful – cars, boats, mountains, forests.” She kept feeling around Cup's head as she spoke. “Things that we think of as monstrous or completely unknown tend to get referred to as 'he' or 'it,' as we do with the kaiju.”

Hermione seemed to accept that, just giving a small, “Oh.” She looked like she was gearing up for another question and Luna knew they didn't have time for that.

“Hermione, we haven't exactly had a good day thus far. I've got about five minutes before brain death occurs here. I don't have time to explain or talk about theories.” Luna finally found a suitable place in the still-soft skullplate. She deftly pushed the three foot spike into the kaiju's brain, securing it in place with a few clamps. “Hopefully we can argue about any mistakes you might have made in your predictive model in the future, but in the meantime, the neural interface is way off the charts. If you want to help, help me set up!”
“I know that my theories are not wrong,” Hermione said as she helped set up the Pons, “and there is only one way to prove it. And that is to do this together.” She edited the program to include a second person in the Drift. “I’ll go with you. That’s what the Jaeger pilots do, right? Share the neural load.”

Luna looked at Hermione in wonder. “You're serious. You would do that for me? Or, rather, you would do that with me?”

Hermione was doing her best to look annoyed instead of smiling, though she wasn't much good at it. “Well, with worldwide destruction a certain alternative, do I really have a choice?”

Luna beamed. “Then say it with me: we're gonna own this bad boy!” She held her fist out for Hermione to tap with her own.

Hermione sighed, but went along with it. “By Merlin, we are going to own this...thing...for sure!” She didn’t seem to understand the idea of a fist-bump and just shook and patted Luna's fist. Close enough.

They strapped on their helmets and double-checked the calibration. Luna picked up the controller for the Pons, hovering her thumb over the large red button. “You ready for this?” Hermione just gave a little nervous laugh. “Okay. Initiating neural handshake in five, four, three, two, one!” And then Luna pressed the button.

Happy childhoods. Luna's father telling her about wondrous animals and beings. Hermione's parents giving her apples instead of candy. Luna's mother dying. Late nights studying. Invalid theories. Trying to gain the respect of peers so much older than them. Being misunderstood. And then they were in sync with each other, ready to integrate the kaiju.

This time, there was the full picture of the assembly-line process used to craft the kaiju. They saw everything that the Precursors had planned, everything the aliens had done to other worlds just like their own.

Luna gasped as she shot back into just her own mind. Hermione was shuddering next to her, nose bleeding. Luna had a feeling hers was dripping again as well. Neither of them could get the helmets off fast enough. “You okay?” she asked.

“Yes, of course. Completely fine,” Hermione responded. She then promptly ran over to a
random toilet in the debris and puked violently. Luna rolled her eyes and held out an only slightly soiled handkerchief for Hermione to wipe her mouth on when she was finished. Hermione looked up at her with bloodshot eyes. “The Drift. You saw it?”

“Yeah,” Luna confirmed, nodding her head so quickly she thought her brain rattled.

“Did you?” Hermione demanded, fear in her eyes.

“Listen, we have to warn them,” Luna said, reaching out to drag Hermione to her feet. “The Jaegers. The Breach. The plan.”

“It's not going to work!” Hermione cried out, low-level panic bleeding through.

Neither of them had an intact mobile phone on them. Luna always forgot hers and Hermione's had been damaged. Even if they could get one from someone else, neither of them knew the number for this LOCCENT.

Their van had been too damaged to drive, even if the roads were clear enough for it. Taking a cab was out for the same reason. Hermione lamented the Anti-Apparition Wards surrounding the Shatterdome. Neither of them had been stationed here before, nor had they left the base since their arrival, so there wasn't even a nearby landmark to focus on.

They both looked out over the rubble-strewn streets with worried faces. They were going to have to run across more than a dozen kilometres of destroyed city, through blocked streets and unsteady buildings and rescue workers 'helpfully' blocking people from passing. Compound that with no sleep, no food, injuries, adrenaline lows, biting cold, and shoes not made for running. They both let an obscenity slip free, then started on their way.

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11th January, 2034 – Year 20 – 07:43:

Harry and Draco were physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted, but they couldn't stop moving yet. Their Conn-Pod was finally detaching and lifting away from the main body. When the doors opened, they stood there limply as the crew removed their armour and circuitry suits. Pulling clothes back on seemed like such an insurmountable task, but they needed to go to
public places, so clothing was necessary.

Firecracker had found Fred and George's escape pods and carried them back to base while Seeker was fighting. Paradigm had already been airlifted back by the time the battle was over. Harry and Draco had insisted that Herb and Ailes be taken in first, their pilots wounded and the Jaegers needing emergency circuitry repair. The Jaegers that had been hit by the EMP were still functioning on auxiliary power, their main lines fried or fused.

They did their best to avoid the 'heroes' welcome' everyone in the Shatterdome seemed to want to give them upon their return. Without saying a word, they headed straight for the medical bay.

The twins' capsules had both been badly damaged – Fred's being much worse. They were both in surgery, hanging on but still in danger. Remus and Tonks had been found inside their Jaeger, tied to the side and soaked through. Neither of their heartbeats could be felt. When the medics gave a cursory examination, they were uncertain if it was the hypothermia or asphyxiation that killed them. They'd do a thorough autopsy later, but Fred and George were their main priority now.

Harry was just stuck on the fact that Remus and Tonks had still been alive. Possibly for a while. If they had thought to cart the Jaeger in earlier or even just lift the submerged Conn-Pod above water, then maybe they would still be alive now.

Draco retreated elsewhere when they were told that they couldn't see the bodies yet. Harry sighed and looked around for a place to wait. The twins were practically family too, and he owed them that much. He flopped down on a bench between Ron and Bill, sighing heavily.

Harry heard the sound of a woman quietly sobbing that didn't sound like Molly or Ginny. He looked around until he saw a black woman tucked into the corner of the waiting room by herself, puffy eyes and slightly dripping nose giving away how long she'd been crying. She was staring at the doors that led to the surgery with a look that somehow mixed grief and hope and terror. He nudged Ron and motioned to her.

“Her name's Angelina. She's Zonko's head J-Tech engineer,” Ron explained in a soft murmur. “She's been dating one of the twins, but I'm really not sure which. I still can't tell them apart.” He trailed off at the end, swallowing heavily around the lump in his throat.

Harry patted Ron's shoulder, then got up to speak with Angelina. Part of him hated seeing another person alone and in pain, but part of him also knew that he could forget his own pain for a
bit if he focused on someone else. “Hi,” he said tentatively, returning her watery smile of thanks.
“You, um, you're dating one of them, right?” He said it carefully, not sure what would set her off.

“Both, actually,” she croaked out. Her voice cracked as another wave of tears threatened to overflow. Harry didn't really know what to say to that, so he just wrapped an arm around her and let her curl into his shoulder to cry.

He must have passed out like that for a few hours, but the sound of the doors opening roused him immediately. The doctors led them in to see George, who was awake and smiling weakly. He had some heavy bandaging on his arms and the left side of his head.

“Ange?” he said feebly, trying to lift his arm to reach out. She was there in an instant, wrapping his hand in both of hers and pressing it down to the bed. George looked around at the faces of his family, panic building. “Where's Fred?”

Madam Pomfrey stepped forward to explain. “He's still in surgery, but he was worse off than you. They expect he'll be comatose for a while yet, if he survives” she said sadly. “The head Healer thinks there's only about a thirty percent chance of him pulling through, but I'm staying hopeful.” She seemed to debate on something before giving in and saying it. “We'll be contacting the best specialists we can find once we have a better idea of what is needed. He isn't braindead, but we can't be sure of what the full extent of his injuries are until he's awake.”

The news devastated every person in the room, but none could match the strength of the emotion showing on George's face. He turned his face toward Angelina and just let her pet back his hair as he cried.

Angelina curled up along the side of George's hospital bed, careful not to press against any injuries. “I almost lost you,” she said quietly, though her words echoed in the silent stillness of the room. “I thought I had lost both of you. Oh Merlin, we can't lose him, George. We can't!” Her renewed flood of tears set everyone else off again, not ceasing until Madam Pomfrey shooed everyone except her out so George could rest. She was only allowed to stay because of the way he clung to her when they told her to go.

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11th January, 2034 – Year 20 – 12:09:
“Ah, Harry, my boy. Do come here for a moment?”

Harry was trying to sneak back to his room to pass out, so of course Dumbledore managed to catch him. He just barely managed to hold back a groan. Draco was approaching with Snape from the other side of the hangar. Neville and Hannah were supporting each other and had obviously been speaking to Dumbledore already. Rodrigo was hovering around their group; Ginny was still back with the other Weasleys. People from around the bay were gathering, and Harry really didn't feel like a hero right then, so he didn't want this scene to happen.

“Seeker Prime, Firecracker Red, Herbie,” Dumbledore greeted them by team, his voice carrying in the silence that had fallen. “In all my years of fighting, I've never seen anything like that. Well done. I'm proud of you. I'm proud of us all.” He looked up to encompass the crew members, transport pilots, and other miscellaneous personnel who kept the Shatterdome operational.

“But, as harsh as it sounds, there is no time to celebrate.” He paused, sighing before looking up sternly. “We lost two crews. And yet, there is no time to grieve for them either.” He turned to address the technicians near the hangar doors. “Reset that clock.”

It was, thankfully, not as much of a hero speech as Harry had been dreading. It was somehow even worse. No time to be thankful, no time to mourn. Repairs were already under way to get the Jaegers ready to go out again. They wouldn't be perfect, but they'd be functional.

As Dumbledore finished addressing the crowd, Harry noticed a drop of dark blood dripping from his nose. Harry motioned at it, miming wiping at his own nose. Dumbledore touched the drop briefly before wiping it away with a handkerchief from one of his coat's many pockets.

Dumbledore gave a dismissive nod to the people around them, then stalked away. Harry exchanged a worried look with Draco, then drifted away through the crowd to clean up and sleep.

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11th January, 2034 – Year 20 – 18:12:

Draco heard a door slam closed and footsteps coming down the hall. He looked out the peephole in his door, watching Harry approach. Then he shied away and stepped down off the small set of stairs. He took a deep breath and squared his shoulders, stepping up to knock again.
And back, and forth, several times over. Draco leaned against the door, faintly amused and definitely not going to make it easy on him.

Finally, when Harry looked like he was actually going to knock that time, Draco swung the door open. He leaned against the frame and smirked as Harry scowled, though the reactions were somewhat muted from both of them.

“You knew I was out here,” Harry accused.

“Maybe,” Draco said, shrugging and stepping inside to flop back into his desk chair. He'd slept for a short while, but he couldn't stand the tossing and turning. Harry followed him in, shutting the door more gently than he'd done with his own. He looked like he had slept was still weary. With Draco in the chair and nowhere else to sit, Harry tentatively perched at the end of Draco’s bed.

Drifting was easy; talking was hard. They hadn't actually taken the time to hang out or talk before this. Harry tentatively went first. “I should have warned you better,” he said. “That first time we Drifted. You weren't just tapping into my memories, you were tapping into Sirius's too. When he was taken, we were still connected. I felt his fear, his pain, his helplessness. And then, he was gone.”

Draco nodded. “I felt it. I know.” He paused, chewing his lip, then admitted, “I don't know what I would have done if Severus had died.”

The corners of Harry's mouth twitched into a small smile. “You live in someone else's head for so long, the hardest part to deal with is the silence. To let someone else in, though – to really connect – you have to trust them. And today, the Drift was strong.”

Draco let go of a hint of a smile, tilting his head in acquiescence.

“I'd forgotten what it was like. Jockeying,” Harry said fondly. “It's like...we're always told that there are things you can't fight, so-called 'acts of God.' When you see a hurricane coming, you have to get out of the way. But when you're in a Jaeger – suddenly, you can fight the hurricane. You can win.”

Draco grinned at him. “Didn't suspect you for a poet, but I think you pretty much nailed it.” Harry gave him an actual, though brief, smile in return.
Draco knew that they were both still reeling from earlier that day, trying to find solace in the one person who had been inside their heads and would hopefully just understand. Draco did get it. When they had Drifted, he'd sought out scenes and places in Harry's memories where his file had been sparse or the details unsatisfactory. He'd peeked at what the last five years had been like for Harry, and had been a little surprised.

Harry didn't seem to care about shielding his mind the way Severus had. He wasn't even ashamed to share the bad or embarrassing things like Draco had been at first. Amusement was the predominant emotion concerning Draco seeking out his files; the only admonishment was that he'd done it without permission. Draco wondered if it had anything to do with his first partner being someone he trusted implicitly and Drifting with him from such a young age.

Harry had poked back at Draco's memories while they were helping the others get hooked up to transport until it was their turn. He'd graciously avoided the curtained off areas, seeming to instinctively know that Draco wasn't ready to share those things. He'd still caught on to some of the things that Draco hadn't thought to protect, but there was no judgement in his mental presence at all.

Perhaps talking now was so difficult because they'd already gotten to know each other better than any conversation could have helped. It was such an odd feeling. They had only met less than two weeks ago – even if Draco had been told about Harry before that – and they hadn't spoken for most of that time. Regardless, Draco had never known anyone so completely. Not even Severus.

A thought crossed Draco's mind, settling in and terrifying him completely. Somewhere in the last twelve hours he'd decided that when they Drifted again to escort the nuke he would let Harry pull back those curtains. He'd willingly show him the places that he'd kept hidden for so long – things that not even Severus had seen, in some cases.

Draco realised that Harry was staring at him, mapping his face and his idle movements. He seemed to be looking for something to say, but debating on whether to say what he was thinking. Draco raised an eyebrow at him, hoping that he would already understand that was permission to just say it.

He did. “You're not a coward, Draco. You never were,” he said softly.

Draco felt something inside of him break on those words, and he couldn't decide if it was a good thing or a bad thing. “I really was,” Draco said, shaking his head. “I was too scared of dying to question, to do anything. Even once I knew that I was capable.”
“You were young,” Harry said with a shrug, as if it was that simple.

“So were you,” Draco argued.

“I saw my parents die to a kaiju and then went to a family who hated my very existence. I didn't really have anything else but repressed anger and a desire to make sure other people didn't have lives as crappy as mine,” Harry said frankly.

“Until Sirius,” Draco pointed out.

“Until Sirius,” Harry agreed, smiling softly down at his hands. Draco wondered if it hurt less to talk about him with Draco now that he'd seen it, felt it, been one with the extra parts that had taken residence in Harry's mind.

They were quiet for a long while after that. It was comfortable at first, but became less so as time dragged on. Harry's frustration was palpable. Draco could sense it somehow, even if it hadn't been present in every line of Harry's body or the way he gripped and twisted his hands together.

Draco knew what Harry both wanted to talk about and wanted to deny had happened, mostly because he was in the same boat. He also knew what they both needed: to simply forget, just for a little while. Making the decision, Draco stood and walked the two steps that separated them. He shoved Harry's shoulders back and climbed on the bed straddling his lap.

“What—?” Harry said, sounding panicked.

Draco cut him off, explaining, “We both need a distraction.”

“A distraction,” Harry said dubiously. His hands, however, had come up to hover on either side of Draco's hips, not yet touching out of caution.

“You and I are both far from virgins. You've seen the romps I've had, I took a stroll through the memories of those blokes you'd met on the Wall,” Draco said pleasantly. Harry blushed a surprising shade of red when it was spoken about out loud; Draco filed that interesting
fact away for further investigation. “And despite our initial...problems,” he got a snort and a glare from Harry at that one. “We're both attracted to each other and unattached, so it would be no hardship for either party.”

Harry closed his eyes, taking a nervous, shaky breath. When he opened them, he was practically pinning Draco with his gaze. “You won't be off about this after? As much as I would like to agree to this plan – enthusiastically, even – I will not jeopardise the coming mission because of something we're both perfectly capable of compartmentalising instead.”

“You've been in my head, Potter,” Draco said playfully. “What do you think?”

Harry smirked up at him, his hands latching onto Draco’s hips as he ground up against him once. He tilted his head so that his nose and mouth were teasingly hovering just below Draco's. “I think you should get this shit off.” He tugged at Draco's waistband just enough to push them together teasingly, then shoved Draco backwards.

Draco caught himself by tightening his thighs and glared, eyeing Harry's smug smirk. He'd known that Draco had that kind of bodily control. And he liked it. Draco felt a grin slowly spreading over his features.

Stripping off his jacket and uniform t-shirt quickly, Draco leaned forward to roughly drag Harry's shirt over his head. He kissed Harry then, a promise and a punishment for shoving him away, pressing the heat of their torsos together as he held Harry's head in both hands. Harry shuddered and moaned, flicking his tongue out just slightly. Draco chased it with his teeth. A dark chuckle rose from his throat when Draco failed to catch it. In answer, Draco sealed their mouths together and stole Harry's breath.

When Draco started to shuffle backwards, Harry whimpered and tried to pull Draco back in by his hips. Draco bit Harry's lip and stood, shucking his trousers and pants in one go. Harry leaned forward to lick a stripe along Draco's mostly-hard cock and then followed suit, laying back to shimmy his own fatigues off. Draco bit his own lip to keep from pulling Harry forward to continue. Harry chuckled again, making Draco raise an eyebrow in question.

“Our boots,” Harry said, indicating the tied menaces preventing them from undressing fully.

Draco shrugged. “Leave them on. Never know when you'll need it,” he teased.
Crawling back on top of Harry was slightly more difficult with his feet bound together, but Harry shoved his trousers over them enough that Draco could spread his legs. The first brush of their cocks was amazing, making them both moan at the sensation. Draco cupped Harry's jaw with both hands and kissed into his mouth again.

When Harry's fingers ran along Draco's cleft teasingly, Draco pressed back, granting silent permission. Draco gasped when the fingers returned slick and warm, feeling his cock twitch at the idea that Harry had done that both wandlessly and wordlessly.

Draco reached back and guided Harry's hand, immediately pressing two of the fingers inside himself. Harry groaned and rested his head against Draco's collarbone. He let Draco set the pace with the gentle pressure of his hand as Harry moved his fingers in and out, stroking and scissoring. “Three,” Draco demanded, and Harry complied. It was a bit of a stretch still, but Draco wasn't entirely in the mood for patience.

Draco slipped one hand into the hair on the back of Harry's head, keeping his face pressed in the crook of Draco's neck. Draco's other hand gently wrapped around them both, stroking just enough to stimulate but not enough to need lubrication. Harry whined into Draco's neck, then crooked his fingers to make Draco cry out.

“Four, dammit,” Draco growled, trying to guide Harry's hand into going faster. Harry complied, though he slowed down at first so Draco could get used to the stretch. Draco couldn't help the small noises coming from his throat now. Harry's fingers felt amazing; his cock was going to feel even better.

When Harry's fingers slid freely, Draco pulled his head back by his hair and kissed him. “Now, Harry,” he panted, pressing down against the fingers until they were removed completely.

Draco whined at the loss, but contented himself with looking down between them to see Harry slicking his cock. The thickness alone was going to feel amazing, as well as the way it seemed to be pulsing and twitching with want.

When Harry looked slick enough, Draco nudged him backwards and crept forwards on his lap. Draco lined them up and slid down slowly, moaning at the sensation. Harry threw his head back and made this sound, too rough and scraped to be a whine. It took a few strokes until Harry was fully sheathed, despite the lube.

Harry leaned back on his elbows, letting his hips twitch up into Draco. Draco ground down, trapping Harry's hips and feeling amazing as his cock was pressed to different areas. Harry
moaned and looked up at him pleadingly, his hands gently gripping at Draco's knees.

Draco began to rock, sliding just a little bit of Harry out at a time, teasing them both. He kept his hands on Harry's shoulders for balance, but also to keep him pressed back. Harry was panting underneath him, making these small noises that Draco wanted to just lean forward and swallow and keep. Instead, he rose up just a little, then rocked back down and swivelled his hips. Harry called out then, which was enough incentive for Draco to do it again. And again. And again.

“Please, Draco,” Harry pleaded, sounding wrecked from just this. Draco wasn't afraid of him being close – he'd seen too much in Harry's head to know that he wouldn't let himself go before Draco did, no matter how close he was.

It was two parts taking pity and one part impatience that had Draco gradually increasing the height that he would slowly rise to, sinking down hard and fast to grind their hips together. Harry writhed under him, his short nails biting ever so slightly into the skin of Draco's knees. Draco wondered what it would take to make him grip tighter, to leave a particularly odd set of bruises behind.

As Draco began to rise and fall faster, Harry tossed his head back and began to babble in half-formed sentences that mostly consisted of 'fuck' and 'please' and Draco's name. Draco brushed his hands over Harry's chest, down from his shoulders and back up again. When Draco's rhythm started to falter, Harry planted his feet more firmly and started to thrust up again. The harder impact had Draco crying out with every gasped breath.

The small flush of warmth that paired with a gradual tightening of his muscles spread. Harry had lifted his head, watching them join, but also watching Draco's cock as it bobbed just out of his reach. If Harry moved either of his arms from where he leaned back on his elbows, he wouldn't have as much leverage to thrust upward, but he still looked tempted. Draco couldn't have that.

Draco reached behind himself and slid his hand along his cleft and Harry's cock and balls, gathering some of the excess lube. Harry writhed at the fingers ghosting over his testicles, and Draco filed that away for later. Keeping time with their thrusts, Draco stroked his own cock twice for every time he and Harry collided. It didn't take long for the extra stimulation to tip Draco over the edge.

“Ah, Harry, fuck, I'm–!” His body seized up and he came hard, splashing over Harry's chest, falling just shy of his chin. Draco got the feeling he wasn't the only one disappointed about the near miss, making his cock twitch with the desire to try again.
Now that Draco had climaxed, Harry shoved up into him with even more force than before. Draco kept his pace as best as he could, his legs burning. Harry had ceased babbling his name, his frenzied breathing not allowing him to speak at all. Harry's hands dug into Draco's knees as a cry tore itself from his throat, rising in volume until Harry released inside of Draco.

Before Draco could pull off, Harry sat up and wrapped his arms around him. It pressed their chests together, smearing Draco's come between them. Aftershocks of Harry's orgasm made Draco gasp when he twitched. Harry slowly ground them together, both of them shivering at the slight overstimulation. When he tilted his head up for a kiss, Draco couldn't have denied him.

Draco licked into Harry's mouth, clutching at his shoulders and his hair. One of Harry's arms kept them pinned together where it was wrapped around Draco's waist, but the other trailed gently over Draco's back and arse.

Harry smiled into the kiss, which set Draco off smiling as well. Their kisses turned sweeter, more playful, nips and licks and quiet laughter. Draco cupped the back of Harry's head with both hands and rested their foreheads together, letting them both catch their breath.

Of course, that was when the call to report to LOCCENT came in.

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11th January, 2034 – Year 20 – 20:09:

Harry and Draco rushed into LOCCENT, the last of the pilots to arrive. Harry's face heated when everyone turned to look at them, but seemed to sigh in relief when they all looked away again. Most people likely thought that the crumpled look of their uniforms was a result of sleeping. Draco thought that Severus was eyeing them a bit more shrewdly, but he pretended not to notice it. For Harry's sake.

Dumbledore cleared his throat as a call for order. “We will be suiting up to deliver the nuclear payload immediately. We want to get there before any more kaiju come through, as Dr. Granger predicted. Right now, in the wake of the last event, is the best time for that.”

“Sir,” Harry called, waiting to be acknowledged before speaking again. “How are we
supposed to deliver the device? Seeker and Ailes are too lightweight. Firecracker probably still can't take the weight with their damaged leg, even if it's been patched up a little. The only two that had been heavy enough were Zonko and Herbie. But Neville's arm and Hannah's leg put them out of commission, and the twins are...not able either.” Harry's face gave a flicker of the emotion that triggered, but he smoothed it away.

Draco saw Harry's point. “There aren't any experienced pilots who could handle taking the payload,” he said in agreement.

“Actually, there are,” Severus said cryptically. It took a few seconds for the implication to set in, but Harry seemed to realise at the same time as Draco just what they meant to do.

“Sev–SIR!” Draco protested. “You can't, if you do–!”

Harry had turned to Dumbledore, his pleading much less enjoyable than earlier. “No, sir. Please. If you get in a Jaeger again, you will die.” He sounded heartbroken. Dumbledore had been the one to accept him into the program, who had mentored him for so many years.

“Getting back in that Jaeger will kill you,” Draco reminded Severus at the same time.

Dumbledore smiled at them sadly. “Not getting into one will kill us all. Listen, you are such brave young people, and I am so lucky to have seen you grow. If we're going to do this, we need you to protect us. Can you do that?”

Harry looked torn, his eyes flicking to Draco as if asking for any valid arguments. But Draco was floundering just as much. He frowned at Harry and then turned sad eyes to Severus. They both nodded their assent, along with the four other pilots around them.

Dumbledore reached out and nudged Harry's chin up, as if to tell him to stay strong. “We've made our decision. It is the only way.”

“How do you even expect to match up in there?” Ginny asked tentatively.

“I carry nothing into the Drift,” Dumbledore said solemnly. “No memories, no fear, no rank.”
Severus nodded. “And what I cannot put away completely I *can* shield in my mind with Occlumency barriers.”

Dumbledore gave a wry smile. “Works for me.”

With the important reveal of the briefing complete, they had a few moments before the technicians would have a breakdown of the finer details. Severus split off from the group just slightly, the look in his eyes saying that he expected Draco to follow. Draco did. He had a feeling he knew what Severus was going to say, but he didn't want to hear it if it gave him the closure to _die._

“I know,” Draco said, encompassing all of the emotion between them somehow.

The corner of Severus's mouth ticked up slightly. “When you Drift with someone, you feel like there's nothing to talk about sometimes. I just don't want to regret all the things I never said out loud.”

“Don't.” Draco blinked his eyes rapidly. “You don't need to. I know them all. I always have.” He turned back to where Dumbledore was passively standing by, likely able to hear them despite his age. “Marshal, that's my family you've got there with you. My _family._”

“If all goes according to plan, we won't have to do anything more than have a few hour stroll and then press a button. The three of you on protective duty shouldn't have to worry about more than us tripping,” Dumbledore replied.

“Only if it all goes according to plan,” Harry said miserably. “You _know_ how our plans work: we come up with one, we show up, all hell breaks loose.”

“And then we improvise,” Dumbledore said, eyes twinkling in amusement.

There was nothing else to argue about, so when Ron approached with a grim expression and a handful of technical data, they were forced to accept it and carry on.

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Once they were fitted into their Drivesuits, they all met up downstairs. Dumbledore looked so odd in the tight armour, his hair and beard bound to keep out of the way. He wouldn't have a good seal on his helmet, but no one was about to tell him to have a trim.

Dumbledore sidled up to Harry and Draco, looking upset. “I don't remember it being so tight the last time I wore one of these,” he complained quietly. Despite the circumstances, both of them couldn't help a small chuckle. Severus looked pained. The old loon smiled and winked, then ascended a small stack of cases so that he could be seen.

“Everyone!” he barked loudly. “Listen up. In all our eons, we humans have seen continents frozen and the sun blotted by ash – and we're still here. More than two decades after K-Day and we're still here. I've never believed in the end times. We are mankind. Our footprints are on the moon. When the last trumpet sounds and the beast rises from the pit, we will kill it.”

He paused, looking around at the assembled people. Rangers, J-Techs, K-Scientists, Mission Controllers, and the other varied personnel who had stuck around for this one last hurrah. He looked so proud, proud of every single one of them. Harry felt his chest swell and his eyes water, and knew he was far from the only one.

“Today...today. At the edge of our hope, at the end of our time, we have chosen not only to believe in ourselves, but in each other. Today, there is not a man or woman in here that shall stand alone. Not today,” he said fervently. “Today, we face the monsters that are at our door, and bring the fight to them. Today, we are cancelling the apocalypse!”

Cheers rang all through the Shatterdome, from every corner and every tier. From the ground of the hangar bay, up through the levels of people watching from the balconies, all the way up to LOCCENT. If there was ever a time that a group in humanity could all feel three hundred feet tall, it was in that moment, right then.

Dumbledore nodded at them all, then turned to descend from his makeshift platform. Harry and the other pilots fell into step behind him. It was time to begin ending this war.

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Transport dropped all four Jaegers several miles off the coast. Dumbledore sounded over the comm link. “How are we doing, Mr. Weasley?”

“Neural handshakes have all been confirmed, sir.” There was the sound of clicking keys and pressed buttons. “All four neural handshakes functioning at one hundred percent.”

“Very good. I’m leaving you in charge of LOCCENT until we return. Aberforth will be in charge of all other P.P.D.C. command chains, and is considered acting marshal. He’s already been informed of this and should be joining you shortly.”

“Thank you, sir. You honour me,” Ron said, sounding taken aback.

“The honour was mine, having you in my control room,” Dumbledore said kindly. “Please keep me updated if there is anything of note.”

“Yes, sir.”

Harry smiled, letting procedure wash over him, even with the major changes that were actually happening. If all went well, this would be his last time jockeying. Then again, it would be if things went downhill as well.

“Bulwark: sealed. Ready to submerge,” Seeker announced as Draco pressed the buttons.

Harry turned to give his partner a soft smile. “Y’know, Draco. I’ve spent so many years living in the past. I never actually thought about the future. Until now.” He chuckled as Draco gave him a wry look. “Yeah, I never did have very good timing.”

As they walked on, the pilots and the J-Techs back home occasionally shared a bit of banter or light hearted stories to distract them from the task ahead. Draco revealed things to Harry through the Drift, things he’d never told or shown anyone. Harry smiled at him when he realised the intent, thinking that maybe Draco was starting to think about the future too.
Luna and Hermione ran into LOCCENT, panting wildly. “Please tell me they haven't detonated anything yet?” Hermione pleaded, blinking to keep the faces around her in focus.

Ron came into view, frowning in worry. “No, not yet. What happened to you?”

“We got caught civilian-side when the last kaiju hit,” Luna explained wearily. “We only just now got back.”

Ron winced, then offered them his coffee. Luna gratefully accepted, but Hermione didn't think she could stomach it without food. “Okay, why is it important that they don't blow up the bomb yet?”

“Because it won't work,” Hermione said seriously.

“What do you mean? What about it isn't going to work?” Ron asked.

“Just because The Breach is open does not mean that they can get a bomb through,” Hermione explained.

“The Breach genetically reads the kaiju like a barcode, and then it lets them pass,” Luna added.

“They're going to have to fool The Breach into thinking they have the same code.”

“How are they supposed to do that?” Ron asked seriously.

“By making it think they are a kaiju,” Luna said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. Which, technically, it was, but Hermione knew how Luna-think worked so it was possible
she was exempt from judging.

Hoping to clear it up, Hermione continued. “They'll have to lock onto a piece of kaiju and ride it into The Breach. The throat will then read the kaiju genetic code and let them through.” Hermione blinked a few times, trying to stay on track. Ron helped her to sit in his chair. “Sorry, thanks. Right. If they don't do it that way, the bomb will deflect off The Breach like it always has and the mission will fail.”

Luna was nodding perhaps a little too exaggeratedly. “They'll need to grab a carcass before they make the leap.”

Ron looked distressed. “They've already gone, and they weren't thinking about lugging along a hunk of dead kaiju.” He sighed. “Being so soon after the last attack, they'll probably run out of air before another event occurs.”

Luna and Hermione shared a guilty look. “Yeah, about that.” Hermione explained how her predictions had been correct, but when she and Luna drifted with the kaiju brain, the Precursors had shortened the timetable. “A quadruple event will occur very shortly – time flows differently between the two dimensions, so that was about as accurate as I could get.”

“Can the Arithmantic Theory of Inter-Dimensional Alignment account for the discrepancy and allow you to formulate even a rough timetable?” Ron asked, leaning past Hermione to type into his console.

Hermione tilted her hand back and forth as a maybe. “I could try, but without prolonged exposure and verification the margin of error is still exceptionally high. Though what I've learned has already shown that that theory needs adjustment in the principle of – WAIT!” she yelled, sounding scandalised. “You actually understood me all those other times, didn't you!” she accused.

Ron grinned at her. “Gotch’a.” He then tried to go back to typing, but Hermione punched him in the arm. “OW!” he yelped, rubbing it like it actually hurt. She hadn't done it that hard.

“If you two are done flirting now, perhaps we should inform the people in the Jaegers,” Luna said off-handedly from where she lounged against a patient technician's desk.

Ron and Hermione blinked at each other for a few moments, turning red. “Right, yes, let's
do that.”

Ron rolled the chair Hermione was in to the side and knelt to speak into the microphone. He'd just finished relaying the information when the seismic activity sensors began making a significant amount of noise. The other systems all clicked on and began the stream of information. He swore, grabbing the mic again. “Guys, we have a problem. Possibly also a solution, but not to itself.”

“What is it?” Ginny asked, sounding exasperated with him.

“It's happening. We're getting three signatures and unprecedented dilation. Forty metre spikes,” Ron said.

“What categories?” Gabrielle asked.

“We're checking the ratios still, but they all look like Category Fours.”

“Where are they headed?” This time it was Harry asking.

“That's the thing. They're not heading anywhere. They're hovering just above The Breach.” Ron chanced a glance at Hermione and Luna. “I think they might be protecting it.”

Hermione buried her face in her hands, while Luna sighed and looked at the floor. If they got all of that information about the kaiju and the Precursors from their hive mind, it was likely that the reverse was also true. They might know about the bomb.

Dumbledore's sigh was recognisable over the comms. “Alright. Firecracker, Ailes, Seeker, on alert.”

A subordinate pushed a page at Ron, full of information. He leaned toward the mic to relay it. “Three active kaiju, still in circle formation in the largest quadrant of The Breach. Codenames: Diary, Fiendfyre, and Greyback. All confirmed as Category Fours.” Away from the mic, he added, “How do the K-Watch guys even think of these names. Ugh.” It made Hermione laugh a little, despite her crushing guilt.
“Roger that,” Snape said. “It's still a long way to The Breach. We'll figure it out.”

“We'll distract them, you just deliver the bomb,” Rodrigo assured.

“Visibility is zero. Switching to instruments,” Draco announced, probably as a suggestion that the others do the same.

Something struck Hermione then. She blamed it on the lack of food and sleep. “Wait, three? There are three signatures in The Breach, not four?” She furrowed her brow. “It should be four...”

“Maybe you got this one thing wrong and you should be grateful?” Ron said carefully, seeming to know how protective she was of her work. Wow, how had she missed that?

“No, I'm not wrong. There is, however, something here that I have failed to understand. Yet,” she promised.

Ron nodded. “Well, for now we'll just have to wait.” He looked between Hermione and Luna. “I know you won't sleep now, but why don't you both go have a shower and grab some food. It'll be a bit yet before there's any further action, and I'll have someone come let you know if I'm wrong on that.”

As much as Hermione wanted to stand watch over the consoles like a hawk, she knew it was a good idea. Her stomach was starting to feel a bit sick and she was probably borderline delirious. She let Luna drag her out of the chair and off to the mess hall without complaint.

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12th January, 2034 – Year 20 – 03:33:

Poppy was making her rounds again, checking up on their critical patients' vitals and peeking in to see if the few others in sickbay were fine. After that, she always checked in on the other areas of the medical bay. Healer Strout sometimes fell asleep in her office if Poppy didn't shoo her back to her quarters, and Dr. Pye was known to work on case files all night if she didn't kick him out as well. Nurse Wainscott smiled at her from the reception area, then returned to her magazine.
The offices were clear, as was the filing room. Break areas were deserted and tidied up. The waiting room was empty, as were all of the supply closets. No one was in any of the patient rooms that shouldn't have been. The only place left was their small, but unfortunately necessary, morgue.

Poppy expected to just walk in, look around, and leave. She hadn't expected the banging noise. Fearfully, she crept up to the cooler units and opened the door, her wand at the ready. She'd been exposed to far too many 'zombie' films after the magical and non-magical worlds had melded.

When she opened the door and rolled the stretcher out, she noticed that the body was still, but part of the zipper had come partly undone. She carefully unzipped it a bit and peeled back the plastic. On a whim, she reached out to feel for a pulse. The moment her fingers touched his neck, Remus Lupin convulsed and gasped, his eyes flying wide.

Poppy jumped back in fright for a moment, then realised that he was shivering violently. “Shh, shh, sweetling. It's okay, you're going to be okay now,” she soothed. Turning, she yelled, “Nurse Wainwright! Get the other Healers in here stat!”

Taking in Remus's condition, there was a horrible sinking feeling in her stomach. Hypothermia could reduce respiration and heart rate an extreme amount. It also lowered metabolism, which would stave off hypoxia for a much longer time, so they might not have asphyxiated! If the medics who brought them in had only checked their pulses and not cast any spells, giving their attention to the noticeably alive twins...

Poppy tore open the door next to Remus's, rolling Tonks out as well. She was just barely shivering, possibly in the last stages. Poppy cast a few spells to check her status and almost cried when she found two life signatures. They were weak, but still there.

Calling to mind every procedure she knew that dealt with severe hypothermia, Poppy set to work. She tasked out the other Healers and doctors who responded to the call when they came, staring in varying degrees of horror and awe.

*Please*, Poppy thought. *Maybe today, no one will die.*

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“Firecracker, you've got movement on your right. Three o'clock,” Ron warned.

“One hundred foot radius: clear,” Firecracker's A.I. told them.

“Right flank's clear. I got nothin',” Ginny replied, studying her sensor panels carefully.

“Left now, and moving fast!” Ron said back.

“We don't see anything,” Rodrigo said. “He's moving too fast.”

Dumbledore cut in. “Eyes on the prize, Rangers. We're eight hundred metres from the drop.” Various acknowledgements followed.

“Quit biting your nails like I know you are, Ron. We're bringing up the rear, and we'll handle it,” Ginny said calmly. Her tone was a bit more worried than teasing, but no one called her on it.

“Yeah, yeah. Just be careful,” Ron grumbled. “Shit, Firecracker, coming straight toward you!”

The kaiju designated Fiendfyre slammed into Firecracker's side, knocking them down. Ginny-and-Rodgrigo grunted at the impact, but used a small rocket thruster to quickly turn and slam the kaiju into the ground. “We've got this; keep going!”

Shoving the kaiju away, Firecracker activated four of their main missiles to detonate at close range. Fiendfyre managed to catch one of them and deflect another into a rock face beside it, but two hit dead on. As the bubbles cleared, the kaiju shot straight toward Firecracker, looking like it hadn't taken much damage at all.

“What the ever-living fuck?” Ginny-and-Rodrigo said in unison.
They caught the charging kaiju, somehow remaining grounded. Struggling in the grapple, Fiendfyre kept snapping forward, as if it was trying to take a bite out of Firecracker's hull. Ginny made a triumphant noise when they managed to get one of their bladed armguards embedded in the back of the kaiju's skull. Struggling the whole way, they gradually dragged his head over to a nearby volcanic vent, intending to let it sear right through him. He caught fire instantly.

Fiendfyre cried out, but he didn't seem to be in pain. He threw Firecracker off of him and darted away, his face unmarked. A strange chemical seemed to distort the water around him as he stood still.

Luna, who had been watching the monitors from Firecracker's feed, scrambled to get on the line. “Firecracker, I don't think heat-based attacks are going to have any effect! They might even make this one stronger. From the readings I'm getting off your sensors, that chemical he's secreting is flammable. If he were on land he would probably be wreathed in flames – naturally!”

Ginny swore in six languages. That was the majority of their attacks. They caught the kaiju when he rushed them again.

“Would plasma work, do you zink?” Fleur asked.

“It might. It does use heat, but it's more of an energy weapon than a thermal weapon. The heat is usually just a welcome side effect,” Hermione confirmed.

“Then would you get your lovely arses over here and slice him up for us now?” Rodrigo ground out. They were just as strong as the kaiju, but they didn't have an equivalent kind of aquatic mobility. Fiendfyre was trying to overpower them by swimming up.

“On it!” Gabrielle said. They activated Ailes's still heavily damaged rocket wings to get there faster, spinning slightly as one side was firing stronger than the other. Being careful not to hit Firecracker, they activated their energy swords and sliced Fiendfyre into three from behind.

Their cheers drowned out the sensor warning until it was too late. Greyback had slipped up nearby and charged while they were distracted. Before Firecracker could bring her weapons to bear, Greyback had already tackled Ailes and twisted both of her arms clean off. Even underwater, his roar overpowered Fleur-and-Gabrielle's screams, right before he sunk his fangs into Ailes's main body.
The kaiju was massive and heavily muscled, easily curling around the damaged Jaeger to worry at her with his crushing jaws. Firecracker fired at his back, both rockets and their small energy beams. Greyback roared in pain, but went right back to tearing into Ailes. Both legs suffered the same fate as her arms, though this time in gradual pieces.

“We're coming!” Harry called. He and Draco ran back to the scene of the battle after checking that the last kaiju was still by The Breach and not coming at Herbie.

Seeker fired their pulse weapon at the kaiju, making him clutch his head and thrash around as the confusion set in. What was left of Ailes sunk to the ground, momentarily forgotten. Fleur-and-Gabrielle were both crying at the pain they could feel through their Jaeger's sensors, as if their own limbs had been torn off as well.

“Eject your pods, now!” Draco ordered, hoping to break through to them before the kaiju's confusion wore off. Two small, white ellipsoids jettisoned successfully away, going around a rock pillar as they rose to safety. As soon as they were clear, Firecracker unloaded half of their inventory at the kaiju.

“I'm sorry, I'm sorry,” Fleur repeated over and over again, still half-delirious from the mental echo of the pain.

“No need to be sorry, just be safe,” Dumbledore said to them as their pods gradually rose. It had to be slow to allow for pressure adjustment from this depth, and he hoped that they would be calmed by the time they got to the surface.

The pain from the impacting rockets cleared Greyback's confusion quicker than Draco-and-Harry would have liked. They darted in behind the kaiju before he came fully back to his senses, coating him in one of the poisons they still carried as a leftover from Basilisk. Greyback screamed as it burned, weakening him with the nerve damage the toxin caused.

Firecracker darted in as the kaiju lost the ability to more than scrabble at her. “This is for Ailes,” Ginny-and-Rodrigo snarled. They pried open Greyback's maw and fired an arsenal down his throat, the internal impacts causing the body to bulge unnaturally. When they were done, Ginny-and-Rodrigo turned Firecracker's gauntlet to gesture rudely at the corpse.

“No signature detected, kaiju is down,” Ron confirmed grimly. “Fiendfyre and Greyback are out, but Diary is still – shit, he's not hovering, he's gone!”
Draco barely registered the thin, white projectiles until it was too late. “Red, move back!” he yelled.

Firecracker shoved back as forcefully as they could with the water resistance. The limb they were using to make the obscene gesture was severed mid-arm, but they were otherwise undamaged. Ginny-and-Rodrigo grunted in pain, clutching at the stump. A few choice phrases left their mouths and Ginny didn't even care if her mum was listening in.

“Firecracker, coming up on your twelve o'clock!” Ron warned. “Get out of the way!”

Diary let loose another volley of sharp, fin-like projectiles from his core, where they looked like pages of large, flat teeth. Firecracker managed to boost out of the way just in time, leaving Seeker and Herb to dodge the slowing weapons more easily. Seeker used their shields to deflect most of them, batting them away as they floated harmlessly nearby. One of their legs had gotten hit, part of the right ankle joints torn through.

“Dammit,” Harry growled. They set off their foghorn noise – it was muted underwater, but the amphibious kaiju heard it fine. Diary squared off against them, as the intention had been.

Firecracker stepped up behind him, focusing their energy weapons on the kaiju's spinal column. They'd used most of their explosives against Greyback and were hoping to keep the last few as possible distractions. Diary seemed to sense their intention, releasing a red cloud of ink all over them right as they fired.

Luckily, it wasn't the same flammable kind that had coated Zonko. Unluckily, it more closely resembled Cupbearer's acid. It began to eat away at the hull almost instantly. The acid worked more slowly, seeming to be meant for dispersal into water instead of direct attack. If they had been fighting in shallow water, it would have incapacitated their legs before they would have even realised it.

“Mierda, it's eating away at the seals. Water is starting to flow in,” Rodrigo said, as they were trying to wade out of the cloud. “I'm not sure if we can stick around.”

“Use your boosters to get fully out of the cloud and eject, but be careful in case it has eaten through some of those lines,” Dumbledore ordered.

“It would be worse if you drowned instead of left,” Snape added, sounding almost
“Be careful not to let it get on your escape pods.”

“Yes, sir,” Ginny said.

Firecracker used their small rocket thrusters on low, jerkily jetting away from the cloud, as the systems actually were partially damaged. When they were out, the red and orange pods were quickly jettisoned.

Diary turned to go after them, but Draco-and-Harry weren’t going to tolerate that. “Chainsword: deployed,” Seeker said. Using their more powerful thrusters, they connected with Diary before it got far and drove the sword through his centre. Combined with the wounds from Firecracker’s beams, the kaiju screamed once and then went limp.

Diary bled both kaiju blue and the corrosive red ink from his injuries. Seeker disengaged and moved away quickly, detaching the damaged and deteriorating sword from their right fist. It was over, and now it was time to deliver the bomb.

Two hundred metres and closing,” Dumbledore announced. They had resumed their trek as soon as the kaiju had been defeated, and now they were getting close.

Everyone in LOCCENT was in high spirits, except Hermione who was worrying quietly. They had defeated the kaiju. Herb was dragging along a chunk of Fiendfyre’s corpse to use as their ‘key’ and soon the threat would be over. Everyone there knew not to take things for granted, but they couldn’t suppress the hopeful excitement of the end being so near.

Of course, that was when everything tended to go wrong.

The klaxon started to go off as the sensor outputs around the room started reporting furiously. “Sir, I have a fourth signature emerging from The Breach!” someone yelled out.
Ron felt his heart sink as he scrambled to his station. “Fourth signature, emerging from The Breach,” he warned the two teams left.

“A quadruple event,” Luna said quietly.

“God help us, I was right,” Hermione lamented softly. “Never have I been more upset about being right...”

“How big is it?” Dumbledore asked warily over the comms. “What category?”

Ron paled when he saw the reports flash up on his screen, the measurements and toxicity levels all pointing to one conclusion. “Category Five,” he said shakily. “The first ever.”

Everything seemed to go silent for a moment as LOCCENT absorbed the implications of that. There was a Category V coming and all they had were two Jaegers – one damaged and the other piloted by men unqualified to fight any more who were needed to drop the nuke.

Ron cleared his throat, trying to regain some of his professionalism. It had been a long few days, and this was the breaking point. He had to hang on and keep things in control there in LOCCENT. “The kaiju has been designated Voldemort,” he informed the Rangers. He didn't even get his usual kick out of wondering what the K-Watch guys were on when they came up with these names.

“Herb, we see him,” Harry said calmly. “We're right behind you, about a hundred metres.”

“We're a bit hobbled and moving slowly, but we're going to try to come around your three o'clock and flank him,” Malfoy added. “Standard two-team formation.”

“Just keep him busy for two minutes,” Harry said.

Ron's secondary grid-screen had started beeping, and he realised why far too late. “Seeker, watch out! Greyback's not dead!” He heard a yell from Harry as the kaiju collided with them.

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Greyback had hit them from the side before they could react. Seeker slammed into the nearby rock wall, cracking the main viewscreen on the Conn-Pod. Water wasn't coming through yet, but with the pressure at this depth that was only a matter of time. Harry was glad for their solid iron hull, or they would have been torn apart like Ailes.

Harry and Draco both felt the breath get knocked out of them. It jarred them enough that they were forcefully ripped out of the Drift. Harry felt an instant headache bloom pretty much everywhere in his brain.

Draco's arm found the control console to make sure the comms were intact after only a little flailing. “We're out of sync!” Draco yelled out for the sake of the other team.

“We need to calm down and push past the pain,” Harry strained out.

“More, just, it's...confusion,” Draco growled out, clutching at his head.

Despite the kaiju slamming them into the rock wall outside, Harry and Draco both tried to calm their physiological responses. If they couldn't, they wouldn't be able to re-establish the link. Without it, they were dead, and so was everyone else.

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As Voldemort rose from The Breach, Albus-and-Severus knew that they were doomed. The kaiju was huge – easily three times the size of Herb. Trailing behind him were a mass of tentacles, each crackling with a sickly green energy. He focused on their Jaeger, undulating forth so that he was blocking their approach to The Breach.

They marched dutifully forward to meet their fate. Seeker was down for the moment, possibly for good. They needed to destroy The Breach. There was nothing else for them to do. Albus might be old and they both might be injured, but they were still Rangers. As Tonks had said,
the willingness to do what had to be done was what really set them apart.

Voldemort swam into range of them, circling just out of reach, sizing them up. All the experts' arguments about kaiju intelligence could be put to rest in that single, solitary moment. There was an insane, savage enjoyment of the destruction that had been bred or programmed into the kaiju, but there was an intelligent mind turning the gears behind those eyes as well. He stopped right in front of them, his crackling tentacles swirling and gaining speed and growing brighter.

“Brace yourself,” Severus rasped out.

The physical blow sent them flying back a few dozen metres, damaging them as they bounced across the volcanic rock. What really hurt, though, was the energy. It shuddered through the Jaeger systems and across every connection into Albus-and-Severus. It felt like being crushed, like being pulled apart, like someone trying to rip the very souls from their bodies. And it felt like that all at once and so intensely.

Severus didn't remember screaming, but from the way his voice was scraped raw he knew he had been. Albus felt every one of his years and his scars, taking far too long to stand and not sag in his harness. Herb's monitors were on the fritz, only a few of them showing steady images. The A.I. voice was too distorted to understand. What was perfectly clear, displayed right in the middle of the dashboard, was that they could no longer detonate the nuke remotely. It would have to be manual.

“The release is jammed,” Albus informed LOCCENT. “We can no longer separate the payload from the Jaeger.”

“We're still online, but the hull is compromised,” Severus added. “Half of our systems are offline. We can try to override the–”

Voldemort tackled them back again, pushing them even further from The Breach. They deployed the spade-shaped blades from Herb's wrists and slashed shallowly across the kaiju's throat. Voldemort dragged his claws across Herb's torso, as if he knew they could feel it. In response, they dug the blades into the soft flesh of his underarms, twisting them just so in an attempt to dislodge the joints.

They might not be prime pilot material any more, but there was one thing that they did have. They understood pain. They understood how to deal with pain. How to ignore it, how to set it aside, how to take step after step despite the agony that wanted to overtake them. Voldemort
couldn't hurt them because they had never let pain stop them before, and they weren't going to start then.

Voldemort let out a high-pitched scream that resonated across the landscape, agitating the loose stones and the steam seeping from the volcanic vents. He backed off and kept twitching back as Albus-and-Severus began to slowly walk Herb forward again.

"Herbie, Greyback abandoned Seeker and is converging on your location now!" Ron informed them. "You've got thirty seconds. He's moving fast."

Albus-and-Severus stretched time inside the Drift. They knew they couldn't make it all the way to The Breach now. Not with both kaiju, wounded though they might be. There wasn't enough time and they were too damaged.

"What can we do, sir?" Severus asked, though his voice held no hope.

Albus looked over sadly. "We can clear a path for the lads."

Severus nodded once, accepting their fate with dignity. "As I always told Draco: if you have a shot, then you take it."

Draco's voice crackled over the comms. "Hang on, Herbie! We're coming to you!"

"Seeker, do NOT come for us. Do you copy? Stand down!" Albus ordered.

"Hang on!" Harry plead.

"Fall back as far as you can!" Severus seethed at him.

"We can still reach you. We're coming for you," Harry said stubbornly.

"No, Harry, listen to me," Albus said, his voice breaking slightly. "You know exactly what you have to do now. Seeker's cores. Head to The Breach."
Herb's A.I. filled the silence with the slurred message, “Structural damage: eighty percent.”

Harry sounded reluctant, but he respectfully complied. “We hear you, sir. Heading for The Breach.”

Severus sighed and spoke quickly. “Draco, listen. You can finish this. I'll always be there. You can always find me in the Drift.”

Albus smiled. “I have never been more proud of either of you, but I have always been proud of you. Never forget that.”

Harry’s voice shook as it came over the line. “Goodbye...sir.”

“NO!” Draco yelled, but that was the last they heard before Albus disconnected their comms.

Albus turned to regard Severus, looking fond. “You've always been such a brave man. It was an honour.”

Severus let a rare smile show. “And you as well. But we both knew this was a suicide mission.”


“What—?” Severus began in confusion, catching on a fraction of a second before he was rendered unconscious.

He left behind a sharp tinge of betrayal in the Drift, but Albus smiled anyway. It had been no small task to keep that idea hidden from Severus. He'd known what he would do as soon as the device had become stuck. It went against everything that he himself had taught his Rangers, that was inherent in the bond the Drift created between two people. But if it meant he could save even one more person, Albus would do it.
“Goodbye, my friend,” he said gently as Severus was lifted into his escape pod. There wasn't much time for him to get out of range. Albus would hold off as long as possible, but he knew there was a time limit on how long the kaiju would circle him. When the time came, he prayed that his partner was far enough away and activated the thermonuclear device.

*I'm coming, Ariana, little sister,* he thought happily. And then it was over.

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12th January, 2034 – Year 20 – 05:59:

Draco-and-Harry finally re-established their link just in time for the concussive blast to push outward. Quickly unsheathing the chainsword, they stabbed it into the rock below and hung on. All of the water pushed out past them, leaving the area dry. Wordlessly, they got up and started running as swiftly as Seeker's damaged leg would allow. They managed to cover a good amount of ground in the scant few seconds before the water came rushing back and propelled them toward The Breach.

Draco-and-Harry grit their teeth as the churning water tossed them end over end. Finally they came to a rest, settling down to the bottom and panting. The crack in the translucent faceshield of the Conn-Pod grew several new spidery branches thanks to the pressure changes. They hoped it would hold.

“Systems are critical. Fuel's leaking. Right leg's crippled,” Harry listed. Then he turned to Draco, looking sombre. “Let's finish this.”

Their shared pain and loss was making the bond between them stronger. Emotions could be dangerous in the Drift, but they could also be powerful. They tried to calm themselves numb, saying they could mourn when this was over. That didn't stop the tears from streaking down their cheeks.

“All systems: critical. Code red,” Seeker said, and even she somehow managed to sound sad.

“LOCCENT,” Draco said, his voice cracking and forcing him to clear his throat. “The
primary nuclear device has been detonated.”

“Then all is lost. The Breach remains open.” Draco recognised Aberforth's voice from his brief assignment in Sydney, choked as it was with emotion now. Though they weren't close to the man, neither Harry nor Draco could bear to refer to him as 'Dumbledore.'

Draco-and-Harry shared a look both physically and in the Drift. Draco quietly said, “Our cores can act as major explosives, given the correct incantations.”

“We're the magical equivalent of two walking nuclear reactors. Removing the shielding will cause them to react to the proximity of each other and go critical,” Harry continued. “One spell to sever them from the safeties, and then meltdown.”

“We can close The Breach,” Draco said. “If my calculations are correct, our dual cores would cause an equivalent amount of damage as the nuke. Possibly more.”

Quietly, they could hear Hermione say, “Yes. You're right.” She sounded like she didn't want to say it, like maybe there were people staring at her and hoping she'd say no.

“We might be able to eject in time, before The Breach fully closes,” Harry said, though he knew he didn't sound overly confident.

Draco reached over and grabbed Harry's hand, giving a squeeze that Harry returned. They could feel each other's fear, but also the steely determination underneath it. They were going to do this. They would complete the mission. Maybe not for themselves, but for Dumbledore and Severus, for those who were no longer alive because of this war. For every other person on the planet, current and future.

After a moment, Ron came on the line. “Do it. But you had better come back, do you hear? I'm not losing any of my brothers today, Harry. And bring the prat back with you; he's the only one that challenges me at chess.”

Draco-and-Harry both had to laugh, thankful for the break in the tension. “I'll do my best,” Harry promised.

As they neared the rift, they found a chunk of Greyback somehow lodged in a rock
formation. They collected it to use as their key. It would only be fitting. “LOCCENT, we have the kaiju carcass. We're heading for The Breach now.”

Starting their final descent into the Mariana Trench, they began the incantations needed to remove each of their core's magical shields. Harry handled Buckbeak's. Draco focused on Basilisk's. Each layer they stripped away caused more wild magic to gather around them, making the air thick enough to choke on it.

Thirty metres from the final ledge, Voldemort dropped down between them and The Breach. He was badly damaged, covered in cauterised wounds and half of his head missing. There was an air of utter and complete derangement about the kaiju – a potential result of the pain and losing half of his primary brain.

“Let's get this son of a bitch,” Harry said darkly, dropping the chunk of Greyback.


They shot forward, wrapping Seeker's right arm around Voldemort's torso to trap him. They used the left arm to shove their remaining chainsword through his secondary brain as they tipped back into The Breach. Voldemort struggled and thrashed through his death throes, damaging them as they dropped.

“Malfoy's oxygen's down! Half capacity,” Ron said over the comms.

“Can you re-route it?” Aberforth asked from next to him.

“I'm trying, sir!”

“Hold on, Draco!” Harry said encouragingly.

As they approached the bright light of The Breach, Draco-and-Harry held their breath. *Please work. Please work. Please work*, they chanted in unison. And then, they were through.

“They're in!” they heard Ron say, though his voice was quiet as if the reach of the signal
was too far. “It worked!”

The inside of the rift was strange, and yet hauntingly beautiful. Neon purples and electric blues swirled around them, forming an odd structure as the walls of the throat.


Harry unhooked his and Draco’s oxygen valves, switching them. He could just barely hear Ron swearing and saying, “Harry's giving Malfoy his oxygen!”

Harry smiled. “It's okay now, Draco. We did it. I can finish this alone.” He reached over and caressed the side of Draco's helmet, wishing that it wasn't in the way but not being stupid enough to remove it. “All I have to do is fall. Anyone can fall,” Harry whispered softly, knowing that in some way, somehow Draco heard him.

“Harry, your oxygen levels are critical!” Ron yelled, still quiet but discernible. “You don’t have much time. Start the core meltdown and get out of there!”

Harry initiated Draco's ascent into his escape pod, watching to make sure it worked correctly.

“Do you hear me?” Ron demanded. “Get out of there now!”

Draco's escape pod ejected, floating back up through the rift above them. Harry worked at unlatching his harness so he could finish his work.

“One pod is ejected.” LOCCENT chatter formed a strange background noise, helping Harry feel grounded as the lessening airflow threatened to make him light headed. “No detonation yet.” There were swears and groans of frustration following that.

Harry held back a chuckle, not giving in to the giddiness from his oxygen levels. “If you can still hear me, I'm initiating core overrides now,” he panted.
“Malfunction. Manual activation required,” Seeker said. He wondered if he only hallucinated the sound of panic in her voice.

“What's going on?” Aberforth yelled.

“The trigger's offline. He has to do it by hand,” Ron explained, the sound of him whipping around his station audible even at the low volume. Or maybe Harry just thought he could hear that too.

Harry stumbled away from his stirrups to the access panel he needed. The shifting gravity of the rift made him slip, almost falling to the ground into the gears below. He struggled to pull himself up, getting back to his feet. Opening the panel, he gripped the main rod within and twisted. It allowed him to channel his magic into triggering the switch, much like a wand would have.


Seeker began to count down every five seconds. Harry hurried back to his harness, fumbling at the connections to hook himself back in. A small panel in the control console shot outward, a data drive inside. Harry took it, not entirely sure why, just somehow feeling he should. Then he activated his own escape pod.

As he lifted, Seeker announced, “Evac pod: engaged.” She sounded happy this time.

Harry grunted as the pod jettisoned back up through the portal. Seeker continued to fall down onto the cloning facility Harry had only seen at a glance. As he rose back up and his world began to grow fuzzy around the edges, he still heard Seeker's voice.

“Five, four, three, two, one. Core reactor meltdown.” The explosive wave that followed knocked his escape pod hard enough that Harry finally let go of consciousness.

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12th January, 2034 – Year 20 – 06:41:
The entire Shatterdome was waiting with bated breath as they tracked Seeker's progress, but the inhabitants of LOCCENT most of all. A small crowd of people who didn't work there had gathered, mostly along the back wall. A few were crowded around Ron's desk, Aberforth not seeming to have it in him to order them away. It was as if they were frozen in some horrible tableau of hope and pain and fear.

Hermione clutched at Ron's shoulder, his hand tangled with hers as they watched. Luna had claimed Hermione's other hand, while her other hand was wrapped in Neville's as she clutched at his shirt. Hannah was curled over Luna's shoulder, as if she wanted to hide into her neck and not watch but couldn't look away, the hand of her good arm clenched with Neville's free one.

Aberforth stood tall next to Ron's chair, quiet grief written in the lines on his face. Minerva looked stricken as she stood beside him, one hand resting on his arm while the other was clasped over her mouth. Along the back wall, Percy stood pressed shoulder to shoulder with Bill, who had his hand on Molly's shoulder, while she clutched at Arthur. They were all ghostly pale as they watched on.

The Breach fluctuated ever so slightly, then began to collapse in on itself, closing rapidly. “Direct hit! The Breach is collapsing!” Ron shouted out, followed by an eruption of shouts and cheering.

Ron looked over at Hermione. Suddenly, they were lunging for each other, kissing forcefully.

Luna gave a cry of laughter and hopped in place a few times. Then she spun and reeled Neville in to kiss him. He seemed stunned, but before he could say anything Luna had rounded to pull Hannah in for a snog next. Then she wrapped them both in a tight hug, laughing into their shoulders. Neville and Hannah looked at each other bashfully, then joined in the laughter and hugged Luna back.

Minerva threw her arms around Aberforth's neck in a firm hug, his arms folding around her and lifting her up. They were both still sad, but there was a certain joy in knowing what they had fought for for so long was finally over.

Molly cried happily into Arthur's shoulder while he grinned from ear to ear. Bill yanked Percy into an unexpected hug, laughing and slapping each other one the back in jubilation. Ginny, Rodrigo, Fleur, and Gabrielle – who had been forced to listen while being unable to watch – cheered over the comms, their tinny voices echoing around the room.
“To the choppers,” Ron ordered. “Evac transport, get to your choppers now!”

Ron was grinning like a loon as he pulled away from Hermione to send along the exact coordinates to the teams. Then he noticed that only one of Seeker's pods had vital signs, and the smile dropped right off his face. He checked through several screens frantically, drawing attention from those around him.

“Visuals on first pod. Tracking solid, vital signs are good,” he muttered.

“Okay, where's the second pod?” Aberforth asked, and a few more people around them got quiet.

“I...I'm tracking it, but I'm getting no vital signs,” Ron said helplessly.

Hermione clutched his hand in hers. “It could just be that the sensors aren't working,” she said hopefully, but also fearfully. “We can't be sure.”

Ron nodded, wanting to accept her explanation more than anything.

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12th January, 2034 – Year 20 – 07:01:

“Malfoy. Malfoy can you hear me?” Weasley said, his voice gradually becoming less fuzzy as Draco regained consciousness.

Draco looked around the confined space, discerning that he was in an escape pod. The sun was shining through the clear panel on top, so he ejected it and gingerly sat up. His pod floated on the calm waters of the ocean surface. He had no idea how he'd gotten there. The last thing he remembered was falling into The Breach and...

“Dammit, Harry,” he grumbled. Shading his eyes from the sun, he found and switched on the microphone in his pod. “I'm here, LOCCENT. I read you,” he said tiredly. He rested his head on the top of his pod and just breathed, wondering if he could doze until transport got there.
“Malfoy! Harry's pod should be nearby. We need you to check on him – we're not getting any vital signs,” Weasley said frantically.

That woke Draco up, suddenly and entirely. “Harry?” He scanned the waters around him, searching out the golden capsule that matched his green one. “Harry!” he yelled out, wriggling his legs out of the confined space.

Harry's pod was about fifty feet away, bobbing innocently in the morning light. Draco dove into the water and hoped that any sharks would keep away from the area between their two pools of repellent. The heavy battle armour of his Drivesuit weighed him down, but Draco didn't have time to fight his way out of it. He'd make do.

Hoisting himself out of the water in the heavy suit was difficult, but he eventually got a good enough hold to pull himself up. He straddled the capsule and punched in the release code printed next to the keypad. The panel that took up half of the top flew off to float nearby. Harry lay there, completely silent.

Draco hastily removed his helmet and checked his vitals. He switched on the comms microphone. “I can't find his pulse. I don't think he's breathing,” Draco said shakily. Silence was his only answer.


Unable to continue due to his own hyperventilation, Draco just dragged Harry up and clung to him tightly. Tears started to fall and he didn't even care. “No. No! Don't go. Don't go...”

“You're squeezing me too tight. I can't breathe,” Harry complained weakly into Draco's shoulder. When Draco started and released him, he smiled dazedly.

Draco sat back and simply looked at Harry for a moment, his relief bubbling up in his throat as laughter. Then he lunged forward, dragging Harry into a kiss that he enthusiastically returned.
“Malfoy? Is he...?” Weasley asked again over the comms that Draco had been ignoring. “Guys? Oh, come on, really? Are you snogging?” He sounded absolutely and completely done with them. “Harry, I'm so glad you're alive, but I hate you so much right now. You have no idea.”

Harry laughed against Draco's mouth at Ron's miserable babbling. They broke apart when a new voice came over the air. “Announcing on all channels. This is Marshal Aberforth Dumbledore. The Breach is sealed. Stop that clock!” Cheering could be heard in the background.

Ron came back on, sighing in fond annoyance. “We have your position. I've sent Hooch and Shacklebolt's choppers out to get you. I know you're ignoring me, but I feel compelled to tell you not to let the ejected lids float away.”

Harry and Draco dissolved into a fit of giggles at that. “I should probably say something,” Harry said. “He sounded worried. I think he thought I was dead.”

“I thought you were dead, you arse,” Draco growled, nipping Harry's lip in punishment. He did sit back after that so Harry could talk to his friends.

Something caught Draco's eye, floating not far off. It looked like another escape pod, but the others should have been hauled in by now. Tapping Harry, he pointed over at it. Harry stopped chattering and looked, then shook his head. “Sorry, without my glasses or the helmet I can't see,” he apologised.

Draco rolled his eyes. “LOCCENT, I think I see another escape pod nearby,” he reported. “Is there anyone else still out here?”

“There shouldn't be,” Ron said. “What does it look like?”

“It's white. I can't say much beyond that, it's too far.”

Draco was surprised when Neville's voice came over the line. “Is there a little line of red or blue? It might be one of Herbie's!” he said excitedly.

Draco felt his chest seize up, hope and the fear of false hope warring. He turned to Harry
with wide eyes, seeing his sad smile.

“We both know who it would be. Wouldn't be the first time Dumbledore did it,” he said quietly, tapping his head.

Draco remembered seeing that conversation now. He looked between Harry's weakened form and the other pod, surprisingly torn.

Harry made a shooing motion. “Go on.”

“But–”

“I'll be fine. He needs you too. Probably more than I do right now if he's still sealed,” Harry said reasonably.

Draco darted in and kissed Harry soundly, then dove back into the water. His cold, tired, aching body protested more at the longer swim, but he ignored it and pushed harder. As the pod came into his sights, Draco noticed a dent and a few scorch marks. Once he was on top of it, he saw cracks in the glass that water had seeped through.

The automatic ejection mechanism of the lid stuck after Draco unlocked it, forcing Draco to pry it the rest of the way off by force. Severus was inside the damaged pod, lying in a shallow pool of water that just came up to his ears. Draco carefully tilted up his faceplate to check for vitals, terrified of any spinal injuries due to the state of the capsule. His breathing and his heartbeat were there, but very weak.

Severus was *ALIVE*.

Draco cried out in joy. Fumbling with the inside of the escape pod, Draco found the comm system and gingerly turned the mic on. “LOCCENT? Can you hear me?”

“Loud and clear, Malfoy.”

“It's Severus,” he said, only realising he was crying when his voice shook. “He's–he's
badly injured and needs emergency care ASAP.”

“Merlin!” Weasley shouted. “Right, I'll send Wood with the medical chopper. They'll be there as fast as they can fly.” Muffled shouting could be heard as Weasley did as he'd said.

Draco silently thanked Dumbledore for being a crafty, sneaky, wonderful, evil old man. Severus might possibly never forgive him, but Draco would just forgive him enough for them both. He sat there and held Severus's cold hands until the medical team arrived. If he'd cried a few tears before then, well, nobody had to know.

Despite their fatigue, neither Draco nor Harry could sleep on the helicopter ride back to the Shatterdome. It was over. They were free. Draco felt a little lost now that there wasn't anything left to fight. But he had Harry and Severus, and the medical team had given him the news about Tonks. They'd figure out where to go from there.

Instead of sleeping, Draco held Harry's hand and smiled at him. Harry smiled back, resting their foreheads together. They'd finally found a good time to think about the future.

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12th January, 2034 – Jaeger Day – 8:17 A.M.:

In the absence of their boss, the crews had been unsure of what to do about the baby kaiju. Its parts were just as valuable, but an aide pointed out the market for a tiny kaiju replica. They'd neutralised the toxicity of the blood and were awaiting orders until the boss returned. It wouldn't be the first time he had disappeared with a few ladies to celebrate being alive after an attack.

When the kaiju's body began to twitch, the workers had backed off or hidden. They'd been sure it was dead, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

Suddenly, a line was sliced through the side of the kaiju's abdomen. Apollo Stone crawled far enough out to pant in the moderately fresh air. When his subordinates cautiously approached, he only had one thing to say.

“Where's my goddamn shoe?!”
Fin!

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